Missing Lois

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: Lois and Clark consummate their relationship the night before he departs for New Krypton, leaving Lois pregnant, cursed, and alone. H.G. Wells shows up and suggests an alternate solution for her and baby Kent's survival, which turns her life upside down and changes alt-Clark's destiny.

Author's Note: This story is my idea of what Seasons Five and Six could have looked like if Hollywood had had the guts and imagination to continue this terrific show. Everything from Seasons One through Four happened (or will happen) and should be considered incorporated into my story. I have changed a couple of canon facts, moved an episode or two to their correct timeline spot, and shifted a few dates to work better with the story. I note when/where these changes differ from the show at the beginning of the chapter in which it applies. I apologize in advance for any mistakes I may have made.

Disclaimer: This story starts out with a scene written by Eugenie Ross-Leming and Brad Buckner in the Season Three finale episode *Big Girls Don't Fly*. For a full disclaimer, please see the end of the story.

Set: This story begins shortly before Clark/Superman/Kal-El leaves with Zara and Ching for New Krypton.

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Chapter 1 — Bye-Bye Baby, Goodbye

Lois wandered around her apartment, slowly picking up items to add to a box for Clark. Her mind was not focused on the task on hand, but rather filled with thoughts of the past, where their lives were to have been joined. A knock at the door abruptly brought her back to the present. Carrying Clark's brown v-neck sweater with her, she tried in vain to wipe the dampness from her eyes before opening the door.

"Hi," Lois said, letting Clark inside.

"Hi." He enclosed Lois into his arms. This was it; their final goodbye.

Lois pulled away from the hug and attempted to fold the sweater again. *Don't show Clark how much you've been crying*, she thought to herself. *Be strong for him*.

She started to babble. "Your sweater. You lent it to me that time we flew to Bangkok for Thai noodles. I thought you might need it." She placed the sweater into the box. "Who knows what the weather's going to be like on New Krypton. It might be… a…" She realized she was rambling again. "I don't know what to do here. I could pack some cookies or… uh… darn some socks… uh… I can't even write you."

"I don't know if I can do this," murmured Clark.

"You can." Lois's sniffles told him she wished it were otherwise.

"What I want to do is take you in my arms and fly away."

"From what? Yourself? Your destiny?" She wanted the same things he did, but knew it was too late. He had already made his choice. "I will be here waiting for you, Clark."

The pain in Clark's eyes stabbed her soul. He had always hated leaving her alone. Unprotected. At all. She had to be the strong one this time.

"And if you can return, you will," Lois continued with all the strength she could muster.

"You have so much faith in me."

"Oh. Well, that's all I have. I think that's what is keeping me standing here. 'Cause when I let myself imagine a tomorrow without you I start to shake." Her lips started to tremble with these words.

"Lois, if there was any way I could take you with me, I would." He meant that, she could see it in his eyes.

"I know." Lois caressed his face. "I know." How was she going to live without seeing those brown eyes every day. How had she ever described them as muddy? Glancing over his shoulder, she saw the little square jeweler's box she had put on the coffee table. "Oh!" She had almost forgotten. She picked it up and opened it. "I never got a chance to wear my wedding ring." She took the ring, hanging on a silver chain, out of the box and returned to Clark. "I was hoping you could keep it for me." She placed the chain around his neck.

She could see that her gift left him speechless. Finally, he found words. "I will keep this as safe as I keep my love for you. Lois, I have loved you from the beginning…"

She smiled; he had said that to her a thousand times. "And I'll love you 'til the end," she told him.

"In my heart, I am your husband."

"And I'm your wife."

"Always."

They stared at each other. What more could be said? All that was left was goodbye and neither wanted to speak those words.

Lois glanced over at the window. "So…" They moved to look up at the night sky. "Which star is yours?"

"I don't know if you can see it." He pointed at the brightest star in the sky. "There."

"I see it. I'll watch it every night," she promised, turning to him. He was only inches away and she could not resist any longer. Neither could he. Clark dropped the curtain and they embraced. Slowly, their kisses brought them to the floor.

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Yet, it was not on the floor, but on the bed that they found themselves as dawn approached. Lois snuggled up against Clark's bare chest for one last cuddle. She knew that when dawn arrived, he shouldn't be there. She took a deep breath and said what she had been dreading since the night before.

"Clark."

"Hmmm."

"It's almost dawn."

"I know." He ran his fingers through her hair. "I need to go."

"Clark." She sat up straighter and placed both hands on his chest. "You need to forget this night."

"What?!" Clark was clearly stunned. "I can never…"

"Understand me, Clark. This never happened. Do not think about it even for an instant, especially when you miss me the most; when you are at your weakest. You cannot," Lois's voice shook with the words, but she knew she had to continue. She had to convince him. "The New Kryptonians can read minds."

Clark blanched, realizing where she was headed. "I'll encase my thoughts in steel—"

"No," Lois interrupted him. "They are much better at reading thoughts than you are at locking yours up, Clark. If you were to think about us…" She indicated the bed. "Here. Even for one moment. All could be lost. You must forget everything that happened last night."

Clark stepped out of the bed, wearing only her ring on a chain around his neck. Instantly, he spun himself into his clothes. He picked up his glasses from the nightstand and put them on. Leaning down, he kissed her once more. "I'll hurry back, Wife, now that I know what I'm missing."

"You don't know anything!" Lois glared at him and pounded her fists on the bedspread. Then she smiled as she realized he was

teasing her. Two could play at that game. Her smile turned demure. “Remember, Husband, we were saving ourselves for our official marriage night.”

“I can’t forget you, Lois.”

“You’d better not!” She socked him in the arm.

He pulled her into another kiss. “Can I remember kissing you?” he whispered.

“Uh-huh,” she murmured, melting as he kissed down her neck. She pushed him away. “Clark!”

He grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, it might be easier to forget if you weren’t so…”

She glanced down to her silky camisole top and grabbed her robe from the end of the bed. “It shouldn’t matter, you can…” She mimicked him pulling down his glasses and x-raying something. “… anyway.”

“I’ll be good,” he said, smiling.

Lois stepped into her robe and slippers and then wrapped her arms around him again. “That’s what I like about you, Clark. I know I can trust you.”

He whispered in her ear, “I’d die… a virgin… before ever breaking that trust, Lois.”

His hot breath tickled down her spine and she needed to take a step back. She took both his hands in hers. She bit her lip as it started shaking again. “Come back to me, Clark.”

Clark placed one last kiss upon her lips. “Always, Lois.” Then he was gone.

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The days dripped by in Metropolis. The sunny blue skies and chirping birds of summer felt like the gloomiest of winters for Lois.

She knew life was tough for Clark on the New Krypton ship, surrounded by strangers, learning their customs, all the while far from home. Back at the Daily Planet, Lois felt like she was the one on a different planet. She not only had to do her job — top investigative reporter — but in order to keep up Clark’s cover story, she had to do Clark’s job as well. So, during the day she worked on her stories and, at night, she researched and wrote his. She knew Clark could only be gone so long before Perry would start to wonder if he actually had disappeared off the face of the Earth. Even if Clark were deep undercover with Intergang, Perry would still expect him to turn in a story once in a while.

It was difficult writing as Clark. She would put on one of his shirts and smell his essence and try to capture his upbeat, positive spin on humanity. More often than not, Lois would end up crying herself to sleep on her laptop.

At first, Perry hadn’t bought her explanation that Clark was still adjusting to undercover work. Finding stories for her to write as Clark Kent unfortunately became easier as Intergang grew and became bolder with every day. Luckily, Perry gave Clark some slack and she got better at faking his writing style. She hoped that Clark wouldn’t mind so much when he got back.

Lois’s emotions were all over the map. She missed Clark with every fiber of her being, and was completely drained from doing two jobs with no emotional support and no one in whom she could confide. She did speak with Martha at least once a week, but she felt like she was bringing the upbeat woman down every time she did. Everyone at the *Daily Planet* missed Clark and she was forced to make up imaginary conversations with him to Jimmy and Perry. It took weeks before they stopped asking on a daily basis if she had heard from him. All the while, the world was mourning Superman.

Lois pulled herself out of bed. Another night of tossing and turning, of searching for Clark in her dreams. The circles under her eyes were becoming too dark to hide with concealer, and people were beginning to notice.

Lois squeezed some toothpaste onto her toothbrush with dread. Please, don’t let it happen again. How could cleaning her teeth upset her stomach so much? Please, let her go to work with fresh breath for once. She had changed toothpaste brands three times. She had changed toothbrushes twice. She had cut out acidic foods. She had cut out fried foods. Even cut out pastrami sandwiches and coffee from her diet, but nothing helped. Something about the act of brushing her teeth made her gag every morning and every night. Her body was rebelling against her.

She put the brush in her mouth and started scrubbing. It was okay. She was going to make it today. Yes, today would be the day. Then the world turned sideways and Lois’s head was over the toilet again. Damn. She grimaced, wiping the vestiges of vomit off her face.

She rinsed out her mouth and went to eat her breakfast of yogurt and bananas. It was the only food that didn’t upset her tummy. She had even told Perry that she was eating bananas and yogurt as a way to lose weight before her next wedding to Clark. At least she wasn’t gaining a hundred pounds on her usual chocolate ice cream depression feast. Strangely, she hadn’t been interested in chocolate after the first week Clark left.

Lois ducked past Star’s apartment. She missed her friend, but the woman was just too in tune with the universe. Last time they talked, she asked when Clark had gone off planet. Lois didn’t have the answer for that one.

She got to the Daily Planet with less than a minute to spare before the morning meeting. Perry and Jimmy were heading out on another fishing trip that weekend and she wanted to avoid an extra assignment. Maybe she could get some rest for a change. She had even told Perry that she thought Clark might be able to sneak away for a night. Sitting at the conference table, she thought for a moment about her last night with Clark. Her eyelids were heavy with sleep when something Perry mentioned sent bells off in her head and a chill down her spine.

“Could you repeat that, Perry?” she asked, suddenly fully awake. She realized she was no longer at the conference table, but at her desk. When had the meeting ended? How had she gotten back to her desk?

“I said that the new teenage pregnancy rates came out this morning and it looks like Metropolis went up another three percentage points in the last year. The so-called experts want to put it down as a post-Superman blip, which is just horse hooey if I ever heard it.”

“I agree, Perry. He…” Lois tried not to use the “S” name whenever possible. “He has been gone for months. It doesn’t explain why there would suddenly be a boost in teenage motherhood. Unless they think fear of the future without… without Superman would cause teenagers to suddenly stop using contraception. That’s ridiculous. These so-called experts aren’t suggesting that Superman himself impregnated…” She couldn’t finish that sentence. What in the world was she saying?

“Faster than a speeding bullet, Lois,” Ralph hooted, brandishing both hands as pistols.

Lois stood up and pointed at Ralph. “Take that back. Superman has been gone a few short months and you already are turning him into a joke. He’s not a joke. He has saved your life and countless other lives, over and over, without ever asking for anything in return.”

Ralph held up his hands. “Sorry.”

Jimmy leaned over the partition between the desks and whispered, “I know it feels like forever, Lois. But I don’t think Superman’s been gone months. Clark went undercover about the same time; how long has he been gone?”

Lois glanced down at the date on her agenda. “Thirty-four days.” She sighed. “Three hours.” She counted from the moment he left her apartment that last night. Wait a minute. Thirty-four days? One month? Almost five weeks? “That can’t be right. Has it been that…?” She flipped through her agenda.

“Excellent, Lois, you take the pregnancy thing,” Perry said,

continuing on to another topic, but Lois's mind was stuck on what he had said. Pregnancy? No. No. No. No. No.

"Great shades of Elvis, Lois, you look like you swallowed a June bug. Are you all right?" Perry said, causing the entire room of staffers to look at her. She stared at Perry in consternation.

"What? Huh?"

"Jimmy, help me take Lois into the conference room to lie down."

"Right, Chief," Jimmy took Lois's arm and she stumbled into the conference room with his help.

Perry looked around the bullpen. "Back to work!" He shut the door.

"Lois, you fell asleep at the morning meeting. That isn't like you. Are you feeling okay? I know I shouldn't come between a woman and her food, but, honey, you've got to eat something more than yogurt and bananas. Clark loves you just the way you are."

Clark. Clark. Clark. His name echoed in her head. Gone. Gone. Gone.

"Jimmy, get Lois a cup of water." Perry lowered his voice. "When she snaps out of it, take her home, will you? She's finally cracked."

Lois's head tilted to the side. Why did Perry think she had cracked? And why did she keep hearing Clark's name echoing through her head?

"Clark. Clark. Clark. Clark." Lois realized at that moment it wasn't an echo. She was saying his name over and over.

"See if you can reach him on his beeper," Perry continued to Jimmy.

"No!" Lois gasped, pulling herself together. She grabbed the cup from Jimmy and swallowed a gulp of water. "It wouldn't do any good." She reached into her attaché case and brought out Clark's beeper. "I've got it." She forced her lips into a smile. "Deep undercover, remember?"

Perry knelt down beside her. "Lois, you said that Clark arranged a night off with you this weekend. That isn't true, is it?"

Lois shook her head.

"When's the last time you heard from him?"

"It's been a while," she admitted.

Perry patted her on the back. "I'm sure he's fine. He's a great reporter and knows what he's doing. Go home. Take the weekend off. Get some sleep, Lois. I'm sure he'll call you this weekend."

She nodded feebly. She could just hear the conversation in her head.

"*Hi, honey. I've arrived on New Krypton with my wife, Zara. It's pretty barren here. How's Earth? Miss me?"*

"*Hi, Clark. Guess what? Remember that night I told you to forget. Well, I'm pregnant."*

"*Faster than a speeding bullet, Lois."*

"Tell me about it," Lois mumbled, pulling her head off the table. When did she put her head on the table?

Jimmy pulled her to her feet and asked, "Tell you about what?"

Perry called out through the conference room door, "Ralph, you're up on the teenage pregnancy story."

Lois shook her head. Those poor teenage mothers.

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The door to Lois's apartment swung open and she stumbled over to her couch.

Jimmy set her keys on the table next to the door. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" He sounded concerned.

"I'll be all right, Jimmy. Perry's right, I just need to sleep. Clark would hate for you to miss your fishing trip on my account."

"Lois, Clark would have me cancel my own birthday if he thought you needed help," Jimmy reminded her.

"He would, wouldn't he?" Lois sighed with a smile. "But I wouldn't, so go on your trip. Have a great time. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure you don't want me to call someone for you? Your mother, perhaps?"

"My mother?!" A shiver ran down Lois's spine. "Heavens, no. I'll be fine, Jimmy. And thank you." She shut the door behind him with a shudder. "Mother."

Lois walked into her bedroom and opened her closet. Sitting in the back of the closet were the bags she had packed for her honeymoon, all those months ago when she was supposed to marry Clark — the first time. She hadn't touched them.

A part of her kept hope alive that she might need to leave on that honeymoon at a moment's notice. She took a deep breath and pulled out the largest suitcase, plopping it on the bed. She ran her fingers over the flower print pattern and with a heavy sigh, she opened the suitcase. She pulled the inside zipper on the top flap open and felt inside, removing a rectangular white and blue box. She sat down on the bed and stared at the box.

Lois remembered buying the box and the reason behind it. With all his super human strength, she had wondered if Clark's little swimmers might have any problem whatsoever busting through the thin skin of a condom. It wasn't something she and Clark had discussed. She knew he wanted children. And nothing would thrill her more, she realized, to have a part of him growing inside of her. Motherhood was a completely different issue, however, and she detoured away from any thought of it.

As it turned out, on that night in particular, they hadn't thought to use contraception. Between the clone, and her amnesia, she had completely fallen off her birth control regimen. They hadn't thought about anything that night except needing to be together. Partly to prove to each other that they actually were husband and wife even without the paperwork, partly to say goodbye.

Okay, she admitted to herself, there had been a little thumbing her nose at Zara and the New Kryptonians on her part. Clark was hers and she was going to have him first. She shuddered. And last. Including, hope beyond hope, all the days in-between.

Well, she sighed, this was the moment. She was a journalist. She needed cold, hard proof that what she already knew in her gut to be true was, in fact, true. Then with the facts in hand, she could figure out what in the world she was going to do. Time to go pee on a stick.

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Lois sat on her sofa wringing her hands. The proof was in. It was definite. She had to tell someone or she would go insane. If she only knew how long Clark was going to be gone, she could probably hang on for another week, or even another month It was the not knowing that was killing her.

The longer her pregnancy went on without Clark, the more questions would be asked. By Perry. By Jimmy. By her mother. They would want to know where Clark was. Why he wasn't returning from his deep undercover work when she needed him the most? She could only cover for him so much, before their good opinion of him would start to change. She could hide the truth for another three, maybe four months max. If he were gone longer than a year… She shivered. She couldn't do this alone. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Martha! Hi." Lois tried to sound cheery.

"Lois. Hi. Is Clark back?"

Lois had sounded too cheery. Mistake. "No, Martha. I've got a huge favor to ask."

"Yes?" Martha sounded concerned.

"Do you think Jonathan could live a weekend without you? I could really use some company," Lois said.

"Of course, dear. This must be especially hard on you, keeping the home fires burning by yourself."

"Well, yes. I kind of had a meltdown at work today. Perry sent me home. I haven't been sleeping well and if I could have someone to talk about it with…"

"Of course. Of course. Get all those feelings off your chest, dear," Martha agreed with her. "Bottling it all up is sure to make you explode."

Lois's heart filled with warmth. No wonder Clark was such a wonderful man. "I'll buy you a ticket and have it waiting at the airport. You don't know how much this means to me, Martha."

"Anything for you and Clark, dear."

They spoke for a few more minutes before ending the call. Lois called the airline next and ordered the ticket for Martha. It was nice, this feeling that she was no longer alone. She felt almost like everything was going to be okay. Lois would tell Martha her news when she arrived the next day and they would solve her dilemma together.

A knock on the door shook Lois out of her reverie. She looked through the peephole in her door and saw a diminutive man wearing a bowler hat.

Lois opened the door. "H.G. Wells. You're just the man I need."

"Good morning, Ms. Lane. May I come in? I have some news for you."

Lois stepped away from the door. Her prayers had been answered — he would have news of the future. He would be able to tell her how long she would have to wait before Clark would be back.

H.G. Wells sat down on the sofa and glanced at the newspaper in his hand, before closing it again. "I hate to be forward, Ms. Lane, but could I have a cup of tea?"

"Of course, Mr. Wells." She ran into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

Clark had taught her that a proper cup of tea should never be heated up in the microwave. She searched the cabinet and took down a box of Clark's favorite tea. Oolong. They had bought it that time Superman had been blinded and stayed at her apartment. How had she never noticed that both Superman and Clark liked the same tea? No matter how long she knew Clark and Superman were the same man, she still was discovering clues that she should have picked up on years ago. Some investigative reporter. What was Tempus's favorite joke? Oh, yeah. *Duh.*

Lois called to H.G. Wells from the kitchen. "Please, don't tell me that Tempus has escaped, Mr. Wells. I don't think I could take news like that today. Especially with Clark being gone."

"No. No, Ms. Lane. It isn't news about Tempus that I bring." He sounded distressed.

Lois clung to a strand of hope, but felt more and more like it was about to swing her against a brick wall. "Is everything all right?"

"Let's have that tea first, shall we?"

She made the tea and set it down on the coffee table in the living room.

"Are you not joining me, my dear?"

Lois shook her head.

"Something hot might just be the ticket." He took a sip and exhaled into a slight sigh. "You don't have any ginger tea, do you, Ms. Lane?"

Her brow furrowed.

"Never mind. I hear ginger settles an upset stomach."

Ah. "You know."

"Yes, my dear. I'm afraid I do." He set his hand on the newspaper that he had brought with him, but he did not to pick it up.

She could not hold her question in any longer. "When will Clark return, Mr. Wells? I don't know if I can do this without him. Without knowing. If it had just been me, I could wait forever, but now…"

H.G. Wells glanced down at the newspaper again. "Ms. Lane, the future has changed."

Lois stood up and started pacing. "It's those New Kryptonians. I knew there was something untrustworthy about them."

"No, I'm sorry, Ms. Lane. The future changed because you and Mr. Kent…" He cleared his throat and looked away.

She sat down again. "Mr. Wells, you told me that the future included Superman and our children. This shouldn't change that."

"Yes, it shouldn't. The Utopian future formed by you and Superman certainly included your children. I cannot explain what happened. Unless it was a matter of timing."

"Timing?"

"Perhaps." He cleared his throat again. "Your night together was not supposed to happen at that time. Your first time was to happen later. After…"

Lois got a bad taste in her mouth and her lips pursed. "I don't need a lecture on morals please, Mr. Wells. What's past is past. I cannot change that."

"Ah." He smiled. "But I can."

"You want me to go back in time and stop that night from ever happening?" She looked at him with disbelief.

"If you don't, Superman will never return."

The news hit her like a bucket of ice water. "Never?" Icy rivulets trickled down her spine.

H.G. Wells looked uncomfortable and gazed fleetingly down at that newspaper once more. "Superman, yes."

Lois noticed his glance and her curiosity was piqued. He was withholding information. "What about Clark?"

When H.G. Wells's focus went to the newspaper, yet again, Lois snatched it from him. "Ms. Lane, wait!"

Lois opened the paper. The photo on the front page of the *Daily Planet* was Clark bent over a grave, drenched in rain. He looked like he had lost his best friend. The headline read *Lois Lane's Funeral Held Today*. She swallowed as her hands began to shake. Quickly, she scanned the article.

Lois Lane had died due to complications during childbirth. Her body, and that of her child, had disappeared shortly thereafter. Clark Kent had arrived back in town that same day, just in time for the funeral, and claimed not to know anything about Lois's pregnancy. She could tell from Perry's article that he didn't believe Clark's protestations of innocence. Even the photo of a despondent Clark was taken by Jimmy Olsen.

"No one in Metropolis believes his story. He not only loses you, but all his friends and his job. He returns to Kansas a broken man, Ms. Lane. He takes over his father's farm and never leaves Smallville again. That is a photo of the death of Superman."

Tears dripped down her cheek. "He would never forgive himself if something happened to me while he was gone."

"No, he does not."

"Is this true? What Perry writes about what happened to us? About what they did?"

Mr. Wells looked away, unable to look her in the eye. She swallowed. It was true. She felt ashamed for the human race, to have done something so wrong… And to a baby… her baby… their baby… to her. Clark would never forgive the people of Earth for this.

"And did his father really…" She looked at Mr. Wells. Not Jonathan as well.

"After he heard about what Bureau 39 did to you, he had a heart attack, yes."

Lois closed her eyes, her heart breaking; a tear dripped down her cheek. It was her fault. Her death would crush Clark Kent and kill Superman. But if she went back in time and stopped that night… she placed a hand on her stomach. She couldn't do it. There had to be another way. She needed time to think. Lois pulled herself together and wiped her eyes.

"Are you ready, my dear?" H.G. Wells stood up.

"I think I'll have that cup of tea, now."

He wavered, unsure of the proper etiquette. Finally, he went into the kitchen. She heard cabinets opening and closing. Eventually, he returned with another mug of tea.

Lois took a sip. That did make her feel better. "If I go back, can you guarantee me that the future will be as it should be? That Superman will return and we will live happily ever after?" She stared him straight in the eyes.

H.G. Wells swallowed and looked away. "There are no guarantees in life, Ms. Lane. Even with time travel, the outcome is not certain."

"Then, no, I am not ready. We will have to find another solution."

"Another solution?" H.G. Wells stammered, sitting back down on the sofa.

"You are asking me to choose certain death of one for the probable death of another. I am sorry, but I cannot make that choice, Mr. Wells." She took another sip of her tea.

He blanched. Clearly, he had not thought about it in that manner. "You are correct, Ms. Lane. We will find another solution."

Neither of them spoke as they drank their tea.

"What if you went back and told Clark not to go with the New Kryptonians?" Lois suggested.

"What would you have me say to him? 'Should you leave, Ms. Lane would surely die, but should you stay, thousands of New Kryptonians will die.' Do you want him to have to make that choice?"

Lois picked up the newspaper and re-read the article. "Whatever we decide, it must be our decision. We can never let Clark see this story. He can never know." She set down the paper. "I'd find out what Rapunzel felt like, if he were to ever see it."

"Do you think that Superman would lock you up and throw away the key, Ms. Lane?" H.G. Wells asked skeptically.

"If he thought it would save my life…" She sighed. "We have roughly eight months. Surely with our resources, we can research another way to have us survive the complications due to…" She could not speak the word. "We need to find out what exactly went wrong — why we don't survive. If we can find a way to save me… us… we will save Superman in the process."

"Yes, that is true." H.G. Wells set down his mug. "Well, Ms. Lane, I'm afraid that kind of research can only be done by me. I will travel into the future and see what I can learn. Thank you for the tea."

Lois shook his hand. "Anytime, Mr. Wells." She smiled. "Thank you for giving me back my future. Our future."

"Do not thank me on that just yet, my dear," he replied with a slight bow. He let himself out the door and Lois settled down on the sofa to read the rest of the newspaper from the future.

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Lois spent the rest of the day sleeping off and on. She ordered take-out (stir-fried chicken with ginger) for dinner and was glad when it did not make a repeat visit. By morning, she felt one hundred percent better. She decided to forego teethbrushing in lieu of a stick of strong cinnamon gum. She figured if she had an appointment with death, there was no point in worrying about dental hygiene.

As she stepped out of the shower, the phone rang. It was Martha, informing her that her flight had been delayed an hour due to stormy weather. As a result of H.G. Wells's visit, Lois had completely forgotten that she had invited Clark's mother for the weekend. She was sitting on her bed, wondering if she should still tell Martha her news, when her phone rang again.

"Ms. Lane?"

"H.G. Wells!" Lois was relieved. "What news do you have?"

"It's too complicated to share over the phone. Can we meet somewhere private? I have a visitor with me who should not be seen in Metropolis." His words were cryptic.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Wells?"

"Just fine, my dear."

"We could meet at Clark's apartment. I have the key."

"Yes, that's good. As soon as you can come."

Lois grabbed her purse and ran out the door, straight into Star.

"Lois!"

"Star! I'm sorry, but I'm in a terrible hurry right now." Lois sputtered. Not now.

"Okay, Lois, we'll talk later." Star backed up against the wall, so Lois could pass. "Tell Clark hello from me."

Lois stopped dead in her tracks. "Clark?"

"Isn't that who you're going to meet?" Star tapped and shook her head.

I have a visitor with me who should not be seen in Metropolis. Clark! She hugged her friend. "Bye, Star. You're the greatest." Lois almost floated down to the stairs.

"Bye, Lois. We'll talk about your secret later. I'll pick up some pickles," Star called down the stairs. "I don't know what I was thinking, Lois. Not Clark. Sorry. His twin brother."

The reporter's feet hit the ground with a thud. Not Clark. The Clark from the alternate dimension. She waved up at Star. How could her friend see the difference? At least Lois had a heads-up.

Lois arrived at Clark's apartment with a heavy heart. Could she face the other Clark when she missed her Clark so much? Especially after H.G. Wells told her that she would never see her Clark again. She pulled his key out of her pocket, but the door was already unlocked. Slowly, she pushed the door open.

"Hello?"

"Sorry, Ms. Lane, we left the door open for you," H.G. Wells called from the living room. "I should warn you that I brought…"

"Where's Clark?" Lois asked. She walked hesitantly down the steps.

The other Clark stepped into view and he smiled at her. "Hi, Lois."

Her heart skipped a beat. They really were identical. She grabbed on to the railing to keep herself from rushing into his arms. "Hi…" She swallowed. "Clark."

"How did you know?" H.G. Wells gasped.

"I've got my sources." Lois smiled. "Anyway, who else would have a key?"

"And we were so careful, too. I knew that it was a mistake bringing you here," H.G. Wells said to the other Clark. "But after he heard what was to happen, he insisted on helping."

"It's okay," Lois replied. "At least you didn't bring Superman. That would have caused a riot."

"I've been warned, Lois." The other Clark grinned, holding up his hands. "I left the blue suit at home. I was allowed to visit only if I promised not to help anyone… except you."

Lois really couldn't resist being so close to him any longer. She walked up and hugged him. He was not Clark, she told herself. Not Clark.

"Congratulations," he whispered in her ear. "I'm so happy for you and your Clark."

"Thank you." Lois stepped away from him and sat on the other side of H.G. Wells, away from Not Clark. "What did you learn? Can we stop it?"

"Unfortunately, it's not at all easy, Ms. Lane. First, it turns out that you were right about taking you back in time, but for different reasons. It would cause a bigger worldwide problem. It's seems a woman in your condition brought back in time to stop the same condition from happening to herself would cause what is called a time loop, eventually tearing the fabric of time as we know it."

Lois released a breath she did not know she had been

holding. She had already ruled out that answer to their problem. "Okay. Now, what?"

"While I was researching time loops, I may have discovered the reason for the shift in your future." H.G. Wells paused with a glance at the other Clark. "Which is why I asked this Clark here for his help."

"We need Superman to fix something?" Lois asked, confused.

"The easiest way I can describe the problem is to say that your love with Clark has been cursed."

"Well, that explains a lot," she mumbled.

"Unfortunately, I have to make more inquiries on how to fix it, if indeed I can."

Lois looked between the two men. H.G. Wells appeared a bit embarrassed and Not Clark seemed uncomfortable. Something was obviously missing from this explanation. She waited and when they did not supply the answer she stated, "What are you not telling me?"

"Your soul and Clark's soul seem to be tied together through time."

This surprised Lois. "Me and this Clark?"

"No, sorry, your Clark. You are soul mates. And somewhere along the timeline someone cursed your love. Until we can figure out how to break that curse, one of you is destined to die every time you…" H.G. Wells paused as his cheeks turn red.

She was lost again. "Every time we what?"

The other Clark murmured, "Become intimate."

"Oh." She and her Clark had definitely become intimate. "Oh." Their baby was the living proof. She placed a hand on her tummy. "You said that this Clark could help, how?"

"If you go to this Clark's dimension the curse may no longer affect you."

She swallowed. "You want me to leave my dimension? For how long?" *Please, don't say forever.*

"Temporarily. Possibly for the term of your lying-in period. This Clark would be there to help should any of the foreseen complications arise." H.G. Wells looked at Lois with a satisfied smile. "We would need to lift the curse before you could return to this dimension or you would still face dire consequences."

"Wow." Lois looked over at Clark. "You would do that for me?"

Clark smiled sheepishly. He looked just like her Clark when he smiled like that. She shook her head. Not Clark.

Lois stood up and started pacing. She stopped and picked up a photo of the two of them — her and her Clark. "What about Clark? My Clark? I mean, what would my Clark think if he returned home and I wasn't here? That I had disappeared off the face of the Earth while he was gone. I cannot do that to him. I mean, I *really* cannot do that to him. I'm covering for him at the Planet. If I were to suddenly disappear, it would be like both Lane and Kent vanished into thin air. Which I guess would be okay. People would think we ran off together, until eight months from now, when he reappears with no knowledge of my disappearance. I mean, what would he do?" She turned to the other Clark. "What would you do?" She took a deep breath.

Not Clark mouthed 'wow' to H.G. Wells. "You talk a lot."

She brushed away his concerns with her hand. "Only when I'm nervous. I think verbally."

"She does bring up a good point. Clark, what would you do if your Lois disappeared?"

"I've never met her," the other Clark replied. "She's dead."

"Vanished without a trace, I believe, was the official report," H. E. Wells corrected.

"But if she weren't dead and I felt for her what you and your Clark feel for each other, and she disappeared without a trace…" He stared at Lois. "I wouldn't stop searching the world until I found her again, even if it took eternity."

"Precisely. This plan is not going to work." Lois went into Clark's kitchen and started opening and shutting cabinets. "I might be saved, but Superman would be too busy searching for me to be any good to the world and Clark would still be crushed. The curse wins." She found some Ding Dongs and tore open the package. "Anyway, how could I temporarily disappear only to suddenly reappear…" She indicated a huge belly. "Or…" She rocked an imaginary baby in her arms. "How exactly would I explain that to him or anyone?"

Lois sat down on the sofa again next to the other Clark, biting into a Ding Dong. She offered him the other cupcake, but he declined. Out of habit, she rested her head on his shoulder with a sigh. Then realizing what she had done, she jumped up and started pacing again. "Not going to work."

"Ms. Lane, calm yourself, please. Let us think about this rationally."

"I'm sorry. I know you're only trying to help, but my emotions have been all over the place recently." She gestured wildly with her hands, before taking another bite of her Ding Dong. Suddenly, a stillness came over her. "Now I know why." She pulled one of the dining chairs into the living room and sat down.

"And to think your Clark is going to miss this." Other Clark raised an eyebrow towards H.G. Wells.

Lois sighed. "Yeah. How am I going to explain to him that I spent my entire…" She was still not ready to say the word out loud. "… with his twin brother?"

"Twin?"

"Brother?" Clark smiled. He seemed to like the description.

"Something a friend of mine said." She waved her hand dismissively.

"Twin? Hmmm." H.G. Wells paused in thought. "It might work. Ms. Lane, what if you didn't vanish into thin air? What if we left someone here to take your place?"

"If you say clone, I'm out of here."

"Clone?" Clark looked confused.

Lois waved her hand again. "It's a long story."

"On Lois and Clark's wedding day, she was kidnapped by Lex Luthor and replaced by a clone, who Clark then married instead," H.G. Wells explained.

Okay, maybe not such a long story.

"Now I understand the curse," Clark replied.

"Stupid frog-eating clones. It's why Clark and I aren't married now," Lois snipped, taking another bite of her cupcake.

"Who is Lex Luthor?" Clark asked and then just as quickly, "You're not married?"

"Not officially." She turned to Clark. "You don't have a Lex Luthor in your dimension? Interesting."

"No, my dear, I was not thinking about clones," H.G. Wells finally responded. "I was thinking about an earlier version of you. A pre-conditional you, let's say."

"Excuse me?" Her jaw dropped open and she quickly shut it.

"A you from a couple of months ago before the Kryptonians arrived," H.G. Wells clarified.

"So there wouldn't be any of these time loop problems?" she asked.

"Exactly. I wouldn't be replacing you with someone else, it would still be you," Wells explained. "And when this curse is resolved, we can put you both back where you belong: her in the past and you in the present."

Lois thought about this solution for a minute. "Well, there is the me who had amnesia. So when you put that me back, I would naturally not remember anything." Lois leaned back in her chair. "That would be convenient, since I was pretty out of it when I had amnesia."

"So, the plan is back on?" the other Clark inquired.

"Yes. This just might work. Oh, wait, Mr. Wells. Who is going to teach non-cursed Lois about what's been going on in my

life since the clone incident? I can't do it, because she'll think I'm the clone who's trying to kill her."

"The clone tried to kill you?"

"Long story." Lois shook her head.

"After discovering that Clark Kent was Superman, the clone fell in love with him and tried to kill off the competition. In other words, Ms. Lane here."

"I have that effect on women, too," Clark said sympathetically.

Lois smiled. She loved the way Clark teased her. The smile slipped off her lips with a clunk. Not Clark. Clark was on New Krypton with Zara. This was not Clark. How was she going to spend eight crazy months with Clark's twin?

"I don't know if I'm comfortable with this," Clark said. "It feels like we would be lying to Clark."

"Do you think I feel comfortable about lying to Clark and putting a replacement in my spot?" she asked him, her voice starting to shake. "Do you think I'm just coming to your dimension for fun? I have to leave him, my job, and my friends without knowing if I may ever be able to return. Clark and I promised to always tell each other the truth. If he were to find out that I deceived him on purpose, no matter the reasons, he might never forgive me. So, if you have any better solutions, this would be the time to bring them up." A tear crawled down her face. "Clark is my whole world. I don't do this to save just myself… us. I can't have that photo Mr. Wells showed me come true. No matter the consequences. I cannot kill Clark's spirit and I cannot cause the death of Superman. I cannot ever cause him that kind of pain. Ever."

The other Clark knelt down next to her and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Lois. You are so strong, I forgot how difficult this would be on you. If this works, he will have no choice but to forgive you. I know I would under these circumstances."

"Thank you," she murmured, holding on to him.

"You will have to write a journal describing the past few months of your life for the other Lois to read when she arrives here, Ms. Lane," H.G. Wells suggested. "Also, I would refrain from mentioning your condition. That might complicate things."

Lois's cell phone rang and she jumped up, knocking the other Clark down. "Sorry, Clark. I've got to go. That's Martha. Call me tomorrow morning. I just thought of a place to make the old switcheroo." She opened her phone. "Hello, Martha?" She covered the phone with her hand. "Lock up when you leave." She ran up the steps to the door. "You're going to catch a cab to the city? Sorry, I meant to pick you up at the airport." She ran out the door with a wave of her hand.

"And I thought Lana was intense," Clark said with a shake of his head.

"I believe it is that intensity that her Clark loves most about her," explained H.G. Wells.

"I can see why. It's quite overpowering." Clark lowered his glasses and watched with his x-ray vision as Lois ran across the street to her car.

***

Lois and Martha strolled down the street. They had just finished lunch at a little café she and Clark had always loved.

She sighed, taking another bite of saltine. She had grabbed a handful of the crackers before leaving the restaurant. The nausea seemed to hit her twice as hard once she acknowledged the reason behind it; plus the smell of fish at the nearby seafood restaurant hadn't helped.

Lois was ready to enlist Martha's help with their diversion. She needed someone in this dimension who knew about the baby, someone who could tell Clark if they never returned. As soon as Lois made her decision, a strange feeling crept down her skin. She glanced around, suddenly paranoid. She grabbed Martha's arm and turned her into the lobby of a skyscraper.

"Lois, where are we going?" Martha asked as they headed through an 'employees only' door. Lois pushed the button of a service elevator on the other side.

"I want to show you something," Lois explained, digging through her purse for a set of keys. They stepped into the elevator and she unlocked a secret compartment under the buttons. She plugged another key into the secret compartment and pushed the button that suddenly appeared. "Lex Luthor showed me this underground bunker he had made out of an old bomb shelter." The door closed and they started to descend.

"Lois?"

"He wanted me to hide away here as his special guest but I couldn't." Lois shivered. "I needed to be up top where the action was. Where the story was. Where Clark was." She smiled as she thought of how lost he had been with amnesia. "I didn't acknowledge it then, but I was already falling for him. Clark, that is."

"Lois?"

The elevator clunked to a stop and they stepped into a slightly dusty concrete hallway.

"The old bomb shelter was lined with lead," Lois said, walking down the hallway. She stopped at a door and turned the knob. The door opened onto the apartment that Lex had made for her.

Lois stepped inside and Martha hesitantly followed. It looked slightly like Lois's apartment. "Creepy."

"He wanted me to have all the comforts of home." She sat down on the sofa.

Martha stood in the doorway, unsure she wanted to enter any further. "Lois, why are we here?"

"I wanted to tell you something and, out of the blue, I got this feeling like I didn't want to be overheard." Lois shivered.

Martha sat down next to Lois on the sofa. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm okay."

"Lois, why do we need to be in a lead-lined room? Only Clark can hear through walls."

Lois reached into her purse and took out another package of saltines. Tearing the package open with her teeth, she explained, "Kryptonians have the same powers as he does. And I don't trust them. I have this sinking feeling that they are going to double-cross Clark and I need to tell you something that they can never know. That they would use against him, if they knew."

Martha raised a skeptical eyebrow at this information and glanced at Lois's trembling hands. "Aren't they across the galaxy heading towards New Krypton?"

"Yes." Lois bit into a cracker. "I know rationally that that is where they are, but still…" She shivered. "I can't shake this feeling."

Martha put her hands on top of Lois's to stop them from shivering. "Sweetie, you're cold as ice." She placed a hand to Lois's forehead; it wasn't hot. "Are you sure you are all right?"

"Just a little nausea." Lois beamed. "It's expected, I think, in the first trimester."

Martha stared at her for a moment and then blinked. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes, I'm pregnant." It felt like a load of bricks had been removed from her chest, speaking those words for the first time. "Five weeks." She smiled weakly.

Martha swallowed. "That's still pretty early. Are you sure?"

Lois held up the saltine. "Little blue lines don't lie."

Martha hugged her. "Oh, Lois, this is so exciting. Clark will be thrilled."

Lois's lips began to quiver. "I can't tell Clark," she whispered.

"I know, sweetie, but he'll be home soon enough. And what

exciting news you will have for him."

"No, Martha, I cannot ever tell him. If the New Kryptonians find out about this, they will think he deceived them. That he wasn't serious about the wedding with Zara."

Confusion clouded Martha's eyes. "But when he comes back, he'll be back for good. What will it matter to the New Kryptonians then?"

Lois's hands trembled. "I don't know. I don't know." She stood up and started pacing. "It's just a feeling I cannot shake. Like when he comes back, he won't be alone." She took another bite of her saltine. "And this nausea thing isn't exactly subtle and it's getting worse. Someone is going to notice. Either Clark or Perry or Jimmy or one of the New Kryptonians that follow Clark back. They'll use it against him. I can feel it."

"Now, Lois, you are sounding a little paranoid," Martha said.

Tears sprung into Lois's eyes. "You don't think I know that? Sound, rational Lois has gone off into lala land. Martha, in my mind I know he won't — shouldn't — be back for months, but in my heart, I'm afraid that it might be only days. I don't want to leave."

"Leave? Lois, sweetie." Martha took hold of Lois and brought her back to the sofa. "Why would you have to leave?"

"So the New Kryptonians don't use me against him."

"Where would you go?"

Lois took a deep breath. "Martha, I want you to think back to the day you and Jonathan found Clark."

"What?" Clark's mother was stunned by this abrupt turn in their conversation.

"Please, Martha, it will be easier to explain this way. Close your eyes and think back to that day."

Martha raised her eyebrows and shook her head skeptically, but she closed her eyes.

"That afternoon, before you saw Clark's ship shoot across Shuster's field, you had a couple visit you in your kitchen. I want you to picture them in mind. The man was handsome with brown hair and glasses and he drank an entire cup of your buttermilk. The woman—"

"Oh, goodness!" Martha's eyes flew open. "She was you. And Clark. How is that possible?"

"Last year before that crazy man kidnapped you and Jonathan to blackmail Superman, Clark and I met a little man in a bowler hat. His name is H.G. Wells."

"The writer?" Martha gasped.

"Not only did he write about a time machine, he actually built one. He took Clark and I into the past, because some lunatic from the future was bent on trying to kill Superman as an infant."

"Poor Clark. Why didn't he tell us?"

"Well, Clark doesn't remember the trip. I learned about Superman's true identity while in Smallville and it wasn't at the right time or in the right way. So, when H.G. Wells returned us to the present, he returned us at the moment we left, making us to forget the journey. He refreshed my memory this past spring, when that same lunatic kidnapped me and Mr. Wells again, and dropped us into a parallel universe."

"A what?" Martha was sitting at the edge of her seat.

"A parallel universe. Another dimension, where people's lives are similar, but different. In that dimension, Lois Lane is dead and Clark Kent never become Superman."

"Oh, my."

"Well, he didn't become Superman until I taught him how," Lois modestly explained. "And, let me say, Martha, I have never respected you more than when I tried to recreate Clark's blue suit. I am no seamstress," she laughed.

Martha joined in the laugher and patted Lois on the leg. "You should have seen some of those early costumes we tested. A green suit with a wing logo. A hot pink suit with orange shorts. Leopard print."

They laughed for a minute.

"H.G. Wells visited me yesterday, after I spoke with you on the phone. He says the only way to save Clark — Superman — is to disappear. He's going to hide me in that other dimension. That Clark has volunteered to watch over me and the baby until we can return." Lois swallowed, putting her hand over the other woman's. "We will come back, Martha, if we can."

Martha looked pale. "Why are you telling me this, Lois?"

"I need someone to know. Someone who will look out for Clark. To tell Clark, if we never can return, that we did this to save him," Lois explained.

"Oh, Lois, I can't…"

Lois's lips shook as the tears crept down her cheeks. "Martha, don't worry. I'll give you a letter for him, explaining everything. And when we come back, you can burn the letter. No harm, no foul."

Martha hugged her, her eyes damp with tears.

"There's more."

Martha leaned out of the hug to look Lois in the eyes.

"While I'm in the other dimension, we're going to borrow a non-pregnant me from a few months ago to replace me in the present day."

Martha looked at her like Lois had grown a second head. "Huh?"

"Well, if I just disappear into thin air, when Clark returns…"

Martha nodded. "He'll worry himself sick."

"Right. So, Mr. Wells is going to go back in time and take me from a couple of months ago, before I got pregnant, and bring that me here to replace preggers me, so I can go hide in the other dimension."

Martha looked cross-eyed for a moment before shaking her head. "That's confusing."

"Yes, it is. Tonight, I'm going to write up a journal about the past few months. I need you to give this new me the journal and tell her why she can't remember any of the last few months. Oh, and I'll give you a diskette of the stories I've written. Both as Lane and as Kent. Kind of catch her up on what's going on. Answer her questions, but don't tell her the real reason why. Then Monday morning, if it all works out as planned, she'll go into the Daily Planet for me and be me until I…" She stopped herself. She was no longer a singular person. "…until we can return."

"Lois, this seems a bit extreme for only a suspicion…"

"We are talking about the word of a time traveler, Martha."

"Oh, right."

"I know I'm asking a lot of you. But I also know you would do anything to keep Clark safe." Lois took a deep breath. "Even not share this — any of this — with Jonathan."

This startled Martha. "But I share everything with my husband."

"Please, not this. I know that is a lot to put on your shoulders. We are speaking in a lead-lined bunker, Martha. I am a little paranoid. But trust me that this is the best way to keep Clark safe. To keep your first grandchild safe."

Martha looked defeated.

"I'm sorry, Martha. I really am. If there was any way that I could stay, I would. I really wish I had better news." Lois hugged her almost mother-in-law.

"Dear, you just told me the best news. When we get all this crazy stuff ironed out, I'm going to be a grandmother." Martha laughed. "I do feel a little young for that title."

"You think you feel a little unprepared. Wait until my mother finds out. She still thinks she's too young to be a mother." Lois rolled her eyes. She stood up. "Do you have any more questions? Or shall we go?"

"We're not going to talk about this up there?"

"Once we leave this room, it's like this conversation never happened. You okay with that?" Lois asked her.

"Is this what your life with Clark is always like?"

Lois smiled. "You have no idea."

***

They left the bunker and did a little shopping, before returning to Lois's apartment. Lois looked drained, despite the modest activity of the afternoon. She told Martha that she hadn't been sleeping well and excused herself to take a nap. Sure enough, when Martha went in some fifteen minutes later to check on her, Lois was passed out on her bed. Martha pulled a blanket over the woman and turned off the lights.

Clark's mother went into the kitchen to make herself some tea. There wasn't much in the way of food in Lois's apartment, except bananas and yogurt. In the cabinet over the fridge, Martha found Clark's stash of junk food. It was a good location for him, being that he was the only one of them who could levitate. She grabbed Lois's keys and went to the grocery store to buy the ingredients for dinner. She stopped by a phone booth to call Jonathan, but he did not answer. She was worried about Lois's mental health.

Martha had been watching her son's fiancée since she arrived that morning. Lois was plainly overworked and exhausted. Her hands shook throughout lunch and she could not stop nibbling on crackers. Lois glanced over her shoulder and became more jumpy with every passing car and pedestrian. Something was bothering her, plus she looked sick. When they walked past the fish restaurant on the next corner, Lois had literally turned Kryptonite green and bolted across the street. She looked worse than she had after Clark rescued her from Lex Luthor and ended up in the hospital with amnesia. She even looked worse than she had after being frozen, then resuscitated by Clark when that man had kidnapped them last year. Something was definitely up.

Maybe Martha should have been less surprised when Lois announced her pregnancy. So much had happened to Lois and Clark over the course of their relationship, Martha knew it could be anything. But a baby! That almost seemed too normal for the couple. She had been overjoyed that it was something so ordinary. So human. She was thrilled for Clark, because she knew he had always wanted a large family, having felt so alone all his life.

Yet, the stress of discovering she was pregnant on top of all the strain of the past months had pushed Lois over the edge. She was seeing ghosts where none existed. Her paranoia had become quite acute. The woman was sure that Clark was in danger, even though he was thousands of miles away, trying to stop civil war from developing on New Krypton. Martha shook her head. Poor Lois.

When she returned to the apartment she checked on the still sleeping Lois. In the kitchen, she began to make chicken soup — fresh veggies and chicken broth would do Lois a world of wonders. How long had the woman survived on bananas and yogurt? As the soup cooked, Martha started to straighten up the apartment. She doubted Lois would mind — or even notice in her current state of mind — and Martha could think better with her hands busy.

Lois was so sure that H.G. Wells was going to turn up the next day and take her into this other dimension, if it even existed. What would happen to Lois if these events did not happen as she hoped? Martha wiped down the coffee table and fanned out the magazines there. What would a psychologist think of this fantasy of Lois's, of being cared for by a Superman in another dimension —a dimension in which that Lois Lane was dead? It was almost too convenient.

Martha wondered what she herself would do if they did exist. It still seemed so surreal. Lois's explanation of hiding in the other dimension seemed a bit extreme, a bit of an overreaction. Could Clark really be in danger from the New Kryptonians, who had come to him for help? As Martha straightened the pillows and blanket on the sofa, she felt crumbs. Off came the pillows and out came the hand vacuum that Martha found in the closet. An obvious addition to the apartment by Clark. He had inherited her tidiness. She wondered if Lois had noticed when it suddenly appeared, as Clark was smart enough never to give such a gift directly to his girlfriend.

She vacuumed up all the crumbs on top of the sofa and then knelt down to get under the sofa. She found a folded newspaper there and tossed it onto the glass coffee table. When the sofa was back together, Martha needed a break. She made that cup of tea she had wanted before heading to the store, and then sat back down on the sofa. The peace and quiet did her a world of good.

Martha picked up the newspaper to see what was new in the world. As she opened the folded paper, her mug slipped out of her fingers and crashed to the floor. Martha could not stop looking at the photo on the cover of the paper. Clark at Lois's grave. She heard Lois's footsteps, bringing her back to the present, and she quickly threw the newspaper back under the sofa.

"What was that?" the woman gasped.

"I'm sorry, Lois, I didn't mean to wake you." Feeling guilty, Martha stepped carefully over the broken pieces of ceramic and hot liquid. "I dropped my tea." She ran to get a towel.

"Everything's all right?"

Martha leaned against the counter, out of sight of Lois, and took a few deep breaths. "I made dinner," she said as she returned from the kitchen. "It will be ready in a few minutes."

Lois chuckled. "You found food in my kitchen?"

"I had to go to the store." Martha said, as she knelt down next the coffee table and started to blot. "I hope you don't mind."

"I never mind a home-cooked meal." Lois leaned against the wall. "Clark makes the most wonderful spaghetti. I could eat in with him every…" The smile died on her lips.

"I made sure one of his chores was to be my prep cook. Plus, the super speed helped in dicing veggies."

"I bet."

Martha took the wet towel toward the kitchen, when Lois held out her hand. "Here, I'll throw it in the laundry basket." She handed the towel to Lois. "I hope you don't mind me disappearing into my room again, but I have a lot to accomplish tonight."

"Of course. I'll call you when the soup's on."

"This can't be much fun for you, Martha. Please know, I do appreciate all your help."

Martha stuck a smile on her face. "My pleasure. I knew when you called yesterday this wasn't going to be a vacation." She winked at Lois. "Anyway, you need to get your rest."

"Thanks Martha," Lois said, returning to her room.

Martha waited a full minute before returning to the sofa and taking the newspaper out again. She read the whole article. Clark would not return until after Lois had died. It was obvious — to her, at least — that Perry did not believe Clark's ignorance. She took off her glasses and wiped her eyes. The death of Lois and their child would destroy Clark. She had never seen a man more in love. Martha winced. It would destroy Jonathan too.

Setting down the paper, she glanced over at Lois's room. Martha could see why Lois had withheld this information from her. This was the real reason she was running away. This was the future from which she was trying to rescue them all.

***

Lois had no idea how to pack for such a trip. The other Lois would need all her possessions at her disposal. She would have nothing but whatever she brought with her. There wasn't a closet full of clothes she could raid once she got to the other dimension.

She emptied her largest flower print honeymoon suitcase. Basics first. Underwear. Bras. Socks. Nightgown. Toiletries. A spare pair of shoes, flats. Loose fitting clothing. No suits. No jeans. A picture of her and Clark from the Kerth awards. He had

looked so handsome that night. A photo of her, Clark, Jimmy and Perry at a football game. They all had looked so happy. Would they ever be that happy again? A photo of her with her parents from last Christmas.

She would have to leave her laptop, which bothered her to no end. She grabbed a few notebooks from her desk, putting all but one back. She could get notebooks in the other dimension. She grabbed a stack of loose photos that Jimmy had taken of her and Clark that she had never gotten around to putting in an album. Soon, she would have all the time in the world.

Lois looked down at the suitcase and was surprised at how empty it was. Normally, she took three to five suitcases with her on a simple vacation. It amazed her how little she needed to pack to leave this life that she loved behind. She went into the closet and brought out another pair of shoes, a couple of sweaters, and a jacket. None of her favorite clothes that the non-cursed Lois might miss. She found her favorite book and a romance novel she had bought and never read.

In the other room, she could hear Martha murmuring on the telephone with Jonathan about their day. Or actually, not really about their day, since Martha didn't mention to Jonathan that they had looked at baby clothes. They had lunch and did a little shopping. Martha had gravitated towards some baby items in one store and Lois had laughed, chiding her, because she and Clark weren't yet married. Chagrined, Martha had moved away. But Lois would not be surprised to find a box of baby clothes available at a moment's notice when she and the baby were able to return. They had then returned to Lois's apartment.

Lois zipped up her suitcase and as she set it next to her bedroom door, Martha knocked.

"Soup's on," she said.

Lois did not know how she would have survived this crazy weekend without Martha. She was definitely the best woman Lois had ever known. No one's mother-in-law was supposed to be this likeable. She had been lucky. But how could she not love the woman who raised Clark?

When she returned to her room after dinner, Lois took out several sheets of her stationary and sat down to write the most difficult letter of her life. She started by pouring out her heart to Clark, telling him how she wished their destiny could have been different. Then she launched into the apology and explanation portion of the letter. She told him of the curse and their fateful outcome had they stayed in this dimension. Of his probable future, she only mentioned that in the current scenario he would arrive home too late to be of assistance. She then explained her hope in realigning their futures. She apologized for not being able to fix this one problem without him. She ended the letter by telling him how much she missed him, and would always miss him, and some of her favorite memories of the two of them. She kissed the letter and sealed it. She wished she could save him the pain of knowing their destiny, but it did not feel right to lie to Clark at the end, if all else failed. She only hoped that he would never have to read her letter.

Lois pushed the sealed envelope to the far corner of her desk and started to work on her journal. She took the notebook she had saved from packing and started describing all she could remember of the last few months. She started with the insanity of Lex Luthor, the clone, and Wanda Detroit. It was still painful to remember Dr. Max Deter and her bout with amnesia. She had caused Clark so much pain. Lois promised herself she would never knowingly or unknowingly cause him pain again. Then she described her disastrous high school reunion and how mini-Superman had tried to leave her for her own good. *Again*. Just as they were readying their second wedding plans, Sarah, aka Zara, and Ching arrived. She relived her decision to let Clark leave.

Then Lois arrived at the fateful night. She described their last goodbye using their exact words. She deleted only the eight hours of bliss they had shared. She ended by stating their mutual decision, no matter how tempted they had been, to save themselves until they were married. She reiterated this point on several of the following pages. On how it gave her hope for the future. She definitely did not need this non-pregnant self to activate the curse with any impulsiveness.

She ended the journal entries with a description of her last five weeks. Working two jobs, the lack of support, and endless longing for Clark. She finally mentioned her breakdown at work on Friday and then calling Martha for help.

Lois had just shut the journal when Martha tapped on her door.

"Could you use a break? I've got tea and shortbread in the kitchen."

"Oh yes, that sounds good," Lois said. "I just finished." She sighed and picked up the sealed letter. "Burn it as soon as you can," she whispered. "Don't forget."

Martha blanched at what she was given, but only nodded.

Lois hugged her. "Thank you. I wish there was another way."

Martha swallowed. "Me, too."

***

Martha offered to make scrambled eggs for Lois the next morning, but the thought of it seemed to make the woman's anxious stomach rebel. She was cleaning up the dishes from Lois's bananas and yogurt, when the phone rang. Thinking that Lois was still in the shower, Martha had picked up the extension in the kitchen. Only she had been a moment too late.

"Hello?" Lois's voice could be heard on the line.

"Ms. Lane?"

"Mr. Wells." Lois sighed in relief. "I'm ready."

"Good. Good. I wish we could have found another solution to the curse, Ms. Lane, but in this instance, time is not on our side."

Curse? Martha mouthed to herself.

"I wanted to talk to you about that, but…" Lois hesitated. "… at the meeting place."

"You said something yesterday about a change in rendezvous ," Mr. Wells reminded Lois.

"Oh, right. Are you familiar with the old Lex Towers?" Lois asked, then plowed ahead without waiting for his answer, describing the bunker built underneath. "Do you think you'll be able to meet us there? It's more private."

"I believe so." Mr. Wells paused. "Us?"

"I told Martha, Clark's mom, everything," Lois explained. "She'll be the… contact… here."

Martha could tell Lois was still afraid to go into detail. Was her paranoia not just a diversion, then?

"Do you think that wise, Ms. Lane? The more people that know…"

"Martha is trustworthy and we need her," Lois's voice was firm. She wasn't going to budge. "I need her."

"As she already knows, there isn't much we can do at this point, short of traveling back in time." He sounded resigned.

"Precisely," Lois said. "Ten o'clock, then?"

"All right, Ms. Lane. One hour at the rendezvous point. Good day, Ms. Lane."

Mr. Wells hung up, before Lois responded, "There's nothing good about it." Then Martha heard her hang up the phone, before she herself hung up the extension.

Martha continued with the dishes until Lois came out to the living room with her suitcase a few minutes later. Her hair was still wet and she was dressed simply. Shorts, a tank top, and sneakers. Gone was her suit, makeup, and attaché case. This was not a Lois Lane others would recognize on the street.

"Going undercover?" Martha laughed.

"That bad, huh?" Lois asked, looking at herself in the mirror behind her Kerth Awards.

Martha went over to her. "No, sweetie, just different," she

reassured, touching her arm.

"I discovered I really don't need all that stuff." She put her hand against the wall and then up to her ear.

Martha raised a skeptical eyebrow. Was Lois saying that the walls have ears? She hoped this other Clark could handle Lois's growing paranoia. She nodded for Lois's benefit and she returned a smile.

Lois looked around the room. "How does one hug an apartment, I wonder?"

Martha watched as Lois walked around her apartment touching every little thing. Her books, her awards, her laptop, her photos of family and friends. She stopped and picked up one of Clark, staring at it as if speaking to it with her mind. Her bottom lip started to tremble and her eyes were damp, when she finally put the photo down.

"Let's go," she whispered. "While I still can."

They took a taxi to the old Lex Towers and quietly stole inside. Neither of them felt the need to speak.

As they stood in the elevator descending towards the bunker, Lois finally broke the silence. "Lex would have hated how lax the security has become in his building. Twice we went through those doors marked 'Employees Only' without a peep from the guards." The elevator stopped and the doors opened. "I'm rambling again."

"It's okay, dear." Martha patted her on the arm as they walked into the passageway. There directly in front of them was Herbert George Wells and his sleigh of a time machine. "Oh, my!"

"Martha, I would like for you to meet H.G. Wells. Mr. Wells, this is Clark's mother, Martha Kent."

The two smiled uncomfortably at one another before shaking hands.

Lois set her suitcase onto the sleigh and turned back to Martha. "The journal is a notebook on my dresser. I've left a diskette of my stories and the ones I've written for Clark in my laptop on my desk." She took off her purse and handed it to Martha. "This is the last of it. My purse. My keys and Clark's apartment keys are inside." She pulled a second set of keys from her pocket. "Here are the bunker keys. This one operates the elevator."

She took a step back as if suddenly dizzy. "I've just thought of something, she will have no idea what these New Kryptonians look like. She should look through the newspaper archives tomorrow when she goes to work to refresh her memory. I believe there is a photo of Superman with Zara and Ching at the Daily Planet. Oh, I hope this works." She sat down in the passenger seat of the time machine.

H.G. Wells turned to Martha. "I will return in what will seem like a minute or two with Lois's replacement. I will drop her off so she sees me as little as possible. Are you ready?"

Martha swallowed. "I guess so."

"No!" Lois jumped off the time machine.

"Lois?" H.G. Wells stammered. "Have you changed your mind?"

"I need to use the restroom. I'll be right back." She went through the door of her copycat apartment and disappeared.

Martha took his arm. "Now that I've got you alone for a minute — please, tell me about the curse."

H.G. Wells blanched. "Lois didn't explain?"

"I overheard on the phone this morning and I saw the newspaper article. Tell me."

He looked down and lowered his voice. "Lois and Clark have a love that is so good and so pure that it has tied their souls together for eternity. Somewhere, at some time in history, someone has cursed this love, so that one of them dies a horrific death after they first…" He cleared his throat.

"Consummate their relationship?" Martha guessed.

"Consummate. Yes, precisely the right word. Thank you." H.G. Wells smiled in gratitude. "By taking Lois into the parallel dimension, I am hoping to negate this curse and buy us the time to rid them of it. Once we find the cure. Meanwhile, the other Clark — she did mention the other Clark?"

Martha nodded.

"The other Clark can hopefully keep her safe," H.G. Wells finished.

"She has been acting strangely since I arrived yesterday. Extremely paranoid. Despite knowing that Clark won't be back for another eight months, she thinks the New Kryptonians are only days away. This is why she wanted us to meet in this lead-lined bunker," Martha informed him.

"Days away. Interesting." H.G. Wells thought about this.

Lois emerged from the apartment. "Sorry."

"Ms. Lane, tell me about these paranoid feelings you've been having lately," he asked.

Lois looked at Martha, who blushed in embarrassment. "I want to say that it is nothing, but it's not. Since we met yesterday morning, I've had this feeling of dread hanging over me like a black cloud. I realize that Clark's not due back for months, but I know in my heart that he's close. But he's not coming back on his own. The New Kryptonians are coming with him. The world — Earth — is in danger, but most of all, I feel that Clark himself will be double-crossed by the Kryptonians." She shook her head. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Ms. Lane, I believe what you are sensing are new memories."

Martha's jaw dropped.

Lois shook her head. "Huh?"

H.G. Wells took her arm and sat her down at the edge of the time machine. "When we met yesterday, you decided to go to the parallel dimension and bring another you from the past to replace you here. When you made that decision, time started to create a new future to compensate."

"So, I don't have to leave?" Lois looked at him hopefully.

"No, Ms. Lane. For this new future and these new memories to solidify, you must continue on the path you have decided upon."

"Oh." Lois appeared despondent as her chin started to quiver. "Do these horrible feelings of dread mean that something will happen to Clark?"

"Possibly. But Ms. Lane, for it to be a memory, at some point your replacement will have to return to her own time and you to yours."

Lois wiped her eyes. "These memories mean I will return." She smiled with hope. "We will survive. It won't all be for naught."

"Oh, Lois!" Clark's mother gasped, hugging her. "Good luck."

"Thank you, Martha. I'm depending on you. And I miss you already." Lois stepped back on to the time machine. A minute later Martha was standing by herself in the passageway.

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Lois waved as Martha blurred from view and was replaced by the alley behind Clark's apartment.

"Clark, we're—" H.G. Wells started saying before he was interrupted by a rush of wind announcing Clark's arrival. He landed next to them, dressed in his Superman suit.

"I thought I might have missed you," Superman said, taking her suitcase from the time machine. "There was a nine car pile-up on…" He saw the dampness in her eyes as she stared at him. "Never mind."

"Sorry," Lois apologized with a shake of her head. "It's been awhile since I saw Superman."

"But it was only yesterday that we met at my… your Clark's apartment…"

She put her hand on his chest.

"Oh, you mean, the suit." He smiled with a little embarrassment. "I forget sometimes that I'm two people now." He flew off with her suitcase and less than a minute later, Clark jogged down the alley towards them wearing slacks and a t-shirt. "Shall we?"

Clark opened the door to his apartment. It looked pretty much the same as it had several months earlier, when Lois had told him about Superman. Only a few photographs had been changed. Gone were the pictures of Clark and Lana, which she personally wouldn't miss. He had replaced them with a photo of Superman, Perry, and Elvis.

"This is going to take some getting used to. Charlton Heston is president and Elvis is alive."

"Elvis died?" Clark was visible shocked. "Perry must be heartbroken."

Lois smiled as she borrowed one of this Clark's favorite lines. "It was a long time ago."

He walked around the corner towards his bedroom. "You'll be staying here."

Lois hesitantly followed. "Where will you…?" but as she made the turn, she saw the spiral staircase to the loft. She had completely forgotten about the loft until that moment. "The loft?"

Clark nodded his confirmation. "I know it's a bit cozy, but since you will be here only a short time, it would be ridiculous to rent and furnish another apartment for you. This way I can keep a better eye on you. I'm sure that's what Clark would want."

Lois didn't think her Clark would want her this close to his twin — living with him right above her — but she didn't say so out loud. What lengths would her Clark go to, in order to keep her and the baby safe? She knew him to be a jealous man. But this Clark had obviously gone through a great deal to accommodate her. They could speak about it later.

"Thank you." She sat on the bed. She ran her fingers over it, thinking of it as her Clark's bed until she remembered that his bed was in another dimension.

H.G. Wells peered in through the doorway, before he stepped back in embarrassment. He cleared his throat and she realized that he thought it improper to enter her bedroom. Lois took one last glance around the room and followed the men back into the living room.

"We should give you a little time to settle in. We need to go borrow you from the past. Mrs. Kent is waiting."

"Mrs. Kent? Martha Kent? My mom?" Clark looked excited.

"Clark's mother. It's probably best if she doesn't meet you just yet."

The other Clark tried to hide his disappointment, but Lois noticed it. Like her Clark, she could read him like a dime store romance. "Of course," he replied.

"So, Ms. Lane, unless you have anything else to say, this will be goodbye."

H.G. Wells's words brought her out of her silence. "Goodbye? Aren't you coming back?" Lois might have this Clark, but without H.G. Wells, she felt somehow abandoned in this other dimension.

"I will be returning Clark to you, but then I'd like to check on your future. See if it has settled enough for me to visit. I had some trouble locking onto it since yesterday's conversation."

"Like my memories." Lois rolled her eyes.

"Yes. I have to find a way of tracing your souls down and ending the curse." H.G. Wells contemplated something for a minute. "Tracing the movement of souls? I wonder."

"Will you be all right, Lois?" Clark asked, almost hovering. She could tell this situation was as unnerving for him as it was for her. "There's food in the refrigerator."

"I'll be fine," she reassured him. "I'm a big girl." She shooed them away with her hand. "Now, don't you have a beautiful damsel in distress to rescue?"

They both stared at her in confusion. This was going to be a long year, she sighed. "Me."

"Oh, right," H.G. Wells answered. "Wait, Ms. Lane. I'm afraid there is one more thing you forgot to leave with Mrs. Kent." He held up her hand with the engagement ring on it.

Lois covered up her hand. "But, surely that Lois will have her own ring."

"Luthor gave it to the clone when he kidnapped her."

"Oh." Lois gazed down at her hand, her lip starting to tremble again. Slowly, she slid the ring off her finger and handed it to H.G. Wells.

Mr. Wells slipped it into his pocket. "Goodbye, my dear. Take care."

Lois pulled the man in for a hug, which he clearly was not expecting. "Thank you."

While she was hugging H.G. Wells, she noticed Clark step into the closet and reappear as Superman. That was different.

"I'll be back soon," Superman told her with one last smile. A moment later, they were gone.

Lois wiped the dampness from her eyes. She would get the ring back. With a sigh, she started wandering around the apartment. She noticed little things that were the same as her Clark (such as his taste in wine) and the stuff that was completely this Clark (like the lack of junk food). He had real food and real ingredients in the fridge and cabinets. Not a Twinkie, donut, or bottle of Yoo-hoo to be found.

She saved the bedroom for last. He had emptied the dresser and closet for her. Where would he keep his suits? Then she checked out the secret compartment, which her Clark only used for his blue suits; this Clark had also put in his work suits.

The reporter in her knew that a check of the apartment would not be complete without a trip up to Clark's loft. She tread lightly onto the metal circular steps, knowing full well that they were unnecessary for a man who could fly. She stopped at the top step and surveyed the area from there. Clark had not installed handrails and it was quite nervewracking to view the vertical drop to her new bedroom. He had enough space for a full-sized bed, a dresser, a bookcase, and nightstand with a lamp.

She saw that he had two photos on the dresser, which she had not noticed in the apartment on her previous visit. The first was a couple similar in looks to the Kents, only altered. The parents he lost when he was ten — a long time ago, he had told her — but the pain still there. Had it been Lana's suggestion that he not display the photo before, or had it been here and she hadn't noticed it? Maybe it had been up here in the loft.

The second photo appeared to be of her and him. She took a couple of steps closer. It definitely was a photo of them, she realized with a cold chill descending upon her. It was of when they had arrived — her in his arms — to the mayoral debate that past spring.

Lois sat down on his bed to catch her breath. This could not be a good sign. She was not only an engaged woman, but pregnant as well. This arrangement was not going to work if this Clark became obsessed with her.

How much experience with women did he have? He had dated Lana since high school. Had he ever dated anyone else? Probably not. Lana did not seem the type to let him off her rope during college. And then suddenly last spring, she swooped in with a kiss and made him a hero. Great.

What was her Clark always telling her? "*Lois, I have loved you from the beginning…"* She would need to find something to keep this Clark's mind off her.

She did not want to think about how strong her willpower would be if he turned on the full Clark Kent charm. She glanced over the side of the loft and released another held breath. At least he could not watch her sleep from his bed. She didn't think she would be able to get a wink of sleep if that had been the case.

This was hard enough on her as it was.

Thankful she was in her sneakers, Lois carefully descended the spiral staircase.

Kicking off her shoes, Lois started unpacking her suitcase. She placed the photos of her friends and family on her new dresser. The one of her and Clark at the Kerth Awards, she placed next to the bed, where the photo of this Clark and Lana used to be. The last item she removed from her suitcase, before sliding it under the bed, was a t-shirt belonging to her Clark. One that still held his scent. She slid it over one of her pillows and lay her head on it, breathing in his essence as she cried herself to sleep.

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Clark and H.G. Wells walked in silence back to the time machine. Usually Clark hated to walk in the Superman suit — it was so conspicuous. Superman flew; Clark Kent walked. But on this day, his mind was so full of Lois Lane he didn't even think about what he was wearing.

He could hardly believe it when H.G. Wells arrived on his doorstep the night before last and told him that only he could save Lois from death. Then he had dropped the bomb — Lois Lane was pregnant, or *with child* as Wells had put it. Wells believed that Lois and Clark's love had been cursed and he thought if he removed her from her timeline — bringing her to his dimension — it would keep her from dying in childbirth.

Clark had saved himself for his one true love and believed the same of her Clark. He proposed to Lana more because they had dated so long — and she knew and tolerated his secret — than out of desire. He thought he loved Lana until that morning several months ago, when the most beautiful woman he had ever seen called his name and then *kissed* him, like she had done it a thousand times before. Something about the kiss set his nerve endings to tingle. He had never experienced a feeling like it before or since.

It was the most amazing kiss he had ever experienced, but at the same time, he knew it was wrong. He was engaged to Lana, who just happened to be standing right next to him. Her voice had been like a cold shower to that kiss, which he had stopped anyway. He hadn't known Lois, and beautiful women didn't usually kiss him.

Well, they didn't until he donned the blue suit. Men admired him; women chased him down the street. He hadn't expected that.

Lois Lane had changed his life from the first moment she walked into it. Yet, he also knew that she did not belong to him. Firstly, because of Lana, then later, when he learned about her Clark.

It was like he was a contestant on one of those game shows his foster mother used to watch incessantly. *Let me show you the grand prize — no, sorry, you've only won our parting gift. So close!* The grand prize was the other Clark's life: Superman, Lois, and a secret identity with a great job. Not to mention having parents who were still alive, who still loved and adored him. And, if it all worked out, a family of his own. But then again, it wasn't much of a grand prize if it was cursed.

Clark sat down, but as H.G. Wells reprogrammed the time machine, placed his hand on the man's arm to pause his actions. "What's our plan?"

"There is a moment in time when Lois escapes Lex Luthor, sees the clone arguing with Superman, and then runs across the street to flag him down, only she is struck by a car, hits her head and gets amnesia. That is the Lois we want. Oh, and Lex has paralyzed her vocal chords, so she cannot speak. You need to grab her after she is struck by the car, but before she hits her head. She will naturally be thrilled to see you, believing that you are her Clark. Bring her to me, and I will transport her to the future where Mrs. Kent awaits her, then I will return for you."

"Poor Lois. This actually happened to her?"

Wells nodded. "About ten days after you first met her. Two days after her wedding was supposed to have taken place."

"I can understand rescuing her at that moment, but must we put her back there later? It seems unjust."

"If we do not return Lois back to the precise moment we borrow her, it would alter her entire future. It would change the Lois sitting your apartment so that she would no longer exist. Horrible as it is, it is her life, her history. We are changing her future enough already," H.G. Wells explained. "And yours too, my boy. Let's just hope we are changing both futures for the better."

"I am not comfortable with this decision. How can I to continue to be Superman, representing truth and justice, if I'm party to kidnapping?" Clark's lips pursed together.

"How is it kidnapping if Lois herself suggested the time and place for the removal?" asked Wells.

"It will feel like kidnapping to the Lois we remove."

"It will feel like a rescue to her, Clark, as it should. No one is in more need of a rescue than that Lois."

Clark nodded. "I have one last question, Mr. Wells. How are you ever going to convince that Lois to return the worst point and time of her life?"

Wells's eyes widened, clearing his throat before he answered. "We all make sacrifices for the greater good, don't we, my boy? Her Clark gave up marrying the woman he loved to stop civil war from breaking out on a planet he had never seen. Lois left everything to come and live with you, just for a chance to save her Superman. And you gave up your comfortable existence to help the woman who showed you the potential within yourself. Perhaps you should have Ms. Lane contemplate the answer to your question over the next few months."

"It will be Lois's decision, then. That seems fair." Clark released the mechanism. "I am ready to assist you."

Wells released a deep breath and pulled the lever down.

The time machine reanimated itself on a rooftop opposite the *Daily Planet* building. Clark stepped off the time machine and looked down off the edge of the building. He could see the subway beneath The Planet start to smoke. Lois's Superman arrived and sucked up the smoke, only to be interrupted by someone looking like Lois in a hot pink suit.

"That isn't Lois, is it?" the other Clark asked with confusion.

"No, that is Luthor's clone. The one that Clark married."

Clark listened to the conversation between the clone and Superman. "How could he even think that was her?"

"By this time, he has serious doubts."

He then saw a woman in a pale pink silk pantsuit stumble to the corner opposite the newspaper. She called out to her Superman, her mouth moving but nothing came out.

"I can't hear her and I'm listening for her."

Wells patted his throat. "Paralyzed vocal chords, remember? Luthor was an evil genius. Thought of everything. Delusional in thinking that doing anything to have the woman he loved was better than not having her at all." But by this time, Superman buzzed past and the other Clark had leapt to rescue Lois.

Clark reached her after the car hit her but before she bumped her head against the lamppost.

"Clark," Lois moaned in a barely audible whisper, kissing his neck. "Oh Clark, you did hear me. It's over. This bad dream is over." She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and murmured into his ear. "Take me away. Take me far away."

Clark zoomed above the clouds, where he let her kiss him as only Lois could. She made his nerve endings tingle again. It hadn't been a fluke. He knew why her Clark would do anything for her. She was a dangerous drug that he would be addicted to if he did not put a stop to it soon. He shifted his hold on her so that she was cradled in his arms, releasing her lips from his.

"Take me home, Clark. I want to change out of this godawful

suit Luthor had made for me." Her entire body shivered.

"Are you cold?" Clark asked, wrapping her in his cape.

She shook her head and leaned against his chest once again.

"I'll take you home," he murmured. "You relax."

"Home," she whispered, shutting her eyes. "Take me where it's safe. Where you are." A minute later she had fallen asleep.

Slowly, he descended from the clouds and landed next to the time machine.

"Clark," Wells scolded with a shake of his head.

Clark cleared his throat as he set her down in the passenger seat of the time machine. "You warned me that she would be grateful. I should have taken into consideration how grateful." He cleared his throat again. "She said that the suit she's wearing was a gift from Luthor, so if she wakes up in the future still wearing the suit, she'll know something is up. We should take the suit with us into my dimension, until we need to return her… home." He frowned.

Wells started warming up the time machine. "Clark, stay here. I will be right back. Do not save anyone. Do not let anyone see you, especially this dimension's Clark. Do not intervene. Remember, this is history." He moved the lever, and he and Lois disappeared fifteen seconds later.

Clark went to the edge of the building and looked down at the corner where he had rescued Lois. A man ran up to that corner from the same direction Lois had come. The man wore dark glasses and a fedora hat pushed low over his brow. What caught Clark's attention was that the man was muttering under his breath, "*Where did she go? I knew I should have knocked out more than just her—*"

A limo pulled up next to him and he hit the roof of the car before yelling at the driver. He sent the driver in one direction as he went in the opposite one.

That's Lex Luthor, Clark realized. Anger built up inside of him; he suddenly was tempted to pound the man to the center of the earth and leave him there. Clark took a step back. Wells had told him not to change history more than they already had. But he was sure the other Clark wouldn't mind, much.

Instead he pushed that anger down and followed the man by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. Lex stopped in an alley; the clone was there, too. Clark hovered above, watching them. She pulled a gun on him. Lex goaded her on, not believing she could do it; Clark hoped she would. This was better than TV. Finally, the gun went off but she had missed Lex, Clark could tell. Clark exhaled in anticipation, causing the bullet to hit Luthor's arm.

"You shot me!" Lex was shocked. Clark was delighted. Then he heard Wells calling to him. He glanced back in to the alley. Lex had fallen into the garbage; he pulled off his sunglasses and yelled again, "You shot me." Clark studied the man's face. He had never seen a man resembling Lex in his dimension. The clone picked up her shopping bags and sashayed out of the alley. Good for her.

Wells called to him again; he had better go. Time to go home to Lois.

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Martha felt foolish standing alone in the concrete hallway of Lex's underground bunker. Should she wait in Lois's creepy copy-cat apartment? She hesitated. Mr. Wells had said it would only take a minute or two. She stood with her back against the passageway wall and before she knew it the air around her appeared thick as jello. POP! The time machine was back. Lois looked to be asleep in the chair next to Mr. Wells. Martha stepped forward.

"Change of plans," Mr. Wells called to her. "Hop on."

Martha's jaw dropped, stepping back. "Excuse me?"

"We need to take Lois back to her apartment."

"Is she all right?" Martha glanced between Mr. Wells and Lois.

"Please, Mrs. Kent. I will not be transporting you through time, just across town to Lois's apartment," Mr. Wells explained, indicating where she should stand.

"Is it safe?" Martha asked, getting on to the time machine and standing behind him.

"I do not usually travel with more than one passenger, but it is perfectly safe." He turned a couple of knobs and pulled the lever. The air around them again appeared thick and a moment later, the passageway was empty.

They reemerged in the living room of Lois's apartment. The furniture in the apartment seemed to anticipate their arrival and the time machine was able to fit in the room with ease.

Martha quickly disembarked. "Now, what exactly is going on?"

"Unfortunately, we forgot one little detail in the planning of our caper today. Apparently the outfit she is wearing today was given to her by Lex Luthor. If she wakes up in these clothes, then all is lost because this Lois will know that she couldn't have just lost her memories from the last several months because she would never have worn this suit again."

Martha took a closer look at the Lois next to H.G. Wells. Gone were the shorts, tank top and tennis shoes. This Lois was wearing a pale pink silk pantsuit that Martha had never seen before. "Oh, dear. What do you want me to do?"

"Clark suggested disrobing her and removing the clothes to his universe for safekeeping." H.G. Wells seemed more upset at that suggestion than Martha felt, although the idea was preposterous.

"How exactly are we going to do that without Superman's help?" she asked him with a raised brow.

Mr. Wells was shocked. "Mrs. Kent! That Clark is not her Superman. It would be…" Words failed him. "Wrong."

Martha sighed. "I meant, how are we going to carry her into her bedroom without waking her up, without Superman?"

"Oh." He grinned in embarrassment. And then her words sunk in and his face turned pale. "Oh." He looked at Lois and then back at Martha. "I haven't the foggiest idea."

"Wait." Martha bolted down the hall. She entered Lois's bedroom and pulled back the sheets of Lois's bed. She set Lois's keys and purse on her dresser. Then she returned to the living room, leaving Lois's bedroom door open.

H.G. Wells was thinking through the lift with his hands. "You are certainly right, Mrs. Kent. Clark would have been a great assistance to us here."

Martha surveyed the dilemma again. "You need the pink suit. So, it's probably best if we remove the jacket before we take her into the bedroom." She bent over and started unbuttoning. "How asleep is she?"

"Exhausted, I presume. She spent the last day and a half as Lex Luthor's prisoner. I doubt she slept there. Before that, she and Clark ran around working on the clone president story."

"Yes, I remember Clark mentioning something about that at the reception." She leaned Lois slightly forward and gently pulled on the cuff of her jacket. "You do realize that I did not sign up for this."

H.G. Wells chuckled, holding out his hands should Lois lose her balance. "Neither did I, Mrs. Kent."

The pink jacket was draped on Mr. Wells's seat and they again faced the problem of moving Lois.

"Come on. Together, we should be able to lift her to a sitting position." Martha suggested they each take one of Lois's arms around their shoulders and then hook their other arm under her knees. "Clark's the planner in this relationship. Lois is more of a jump-in-with-two-feet-without-checking-the-depth kind of gal."

"I'll keep that in mind," Mr. Wells said as they lifted Lois and slowly brought her off the time machine. Neither of them mentioned out loud how happy that they were that Lois weighed

less than one hundred twenty-five pounds. Steadily they made it to Lois's room and as gently as they could muster, set her on the bed.

"We did it!" H.G. Wells was thrilled and then noticed where he was standing; he quickly withdrew from the room.

Martha exhaled, resigned to the task of undressing her future daughter-in-law. She closed the bedroom door. This would be a great and funny story someday, if ever there was someone to whom she could tell it. Jonathan and Clark would be in stitches.

A few minutes later, she returned to the living room with the pale pink pantsuit and blouse neatly folded in her arms. She set the white shoes on top.

"Do you have a bag?" Martha asked.

Mr. Wells had been pacing behind the time machine. "A bag?" He seemed confused.

"Here." Martha handed him the clothes and went into the kitchen. A moment later she returned with a plastic grocery store bag. She took the clothes from him, placed them in the bag, and set it on the passenger seat of the time machine.

H.G. Wells cleared his throat. "Well, Clark is waiting for me."

"Is he really like my Clark?" she asked, dying of curiosity.

"In many ways, yes. Sadder, perhaps; not as hopeful. Difficult though your Clark's life may be, he has experienced much more joy and love than the other Clark," Mr. Wells explained. "I hope…" He shook his head. "I must be off. Thank you again for your assistance, Mrs. Kent. We certainly could not have done it without you. Good luck with the task ahead."

Martha smiled at him, not wishing to think about what was going to happen when this Lois woke up. "Good luck with yours, Mr. Wells."

She stood back as H.G. Wells sat down in the time machine and turned some knobs. A few moments later, she was again alone in the living room. A crazy day, she thought to herself. Even if she did tell Jonathan about it, he might not believe her.

With a sigh, Martha went into the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of water from the fridge. She returned to Lois's guest room and closed the door. Jonathan was expecting her home on the first plane in the morning, but who knew how long Lois would sleep after the last few days she had?

What if Lois did not wake up until morning? Martha would have to warn Jonathan that she would be late and see if she could postpone her trip. What would Martha say to Perry, if she had to call in sick for Lois? What would Lois do when she woke up only to find herself months in the future with Clark thousands upon thousands of miles away? She had better call the airline now. There was no way Lois would be psychologically ready for her to leave tomorrow morning. Jonathan would not like it, but he would have to deal.

Martha took a gulp of water and dragged herself off the bed. As she picked up her purse from the dresser, she knocked the newspaper onto the floor. When she went to retrieve it, she realized that it was the newspaper Mr. Wells had brought to Lois on Friday. She had taken it into her room the night before, while Lois was writing her journal. It was still folded in half and she could not stop herself from checking the headlines.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for that horrible picture of Clark at Lois's grave again. She opened the paper and quickly scanned the front section in its entirety, but did not see the photo.

Was this the wrong paper? Martha set the paper down on the bed and scanned the front page again. No, it was definitely dated late February of the following year. The top headline was an exposé by Lois Lane and Clark Kent about some impeached presidential candidate named Doe. Strange, she hadn't ever heard of him and the election was less than six months away. Then again, all politicians sounded the same to her.

Could it have worked? Did taking Lois into the other dimension really change the future? Save Lois and the baby? What a crazy weekend. Now she felt like she was the one falling off the deep end. Would it end up being a dream?

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Clark landed next to the time machine. H.G. Wells was looking at him with pursed lips. Clark smiled innocently. "Hi. I'm ready to go home."

"What did you do?" Wells didn't believe his naiveté.

"Nothing. I just did some research." He picked up the bag and sat down. "I found Lex Luthor."

Wells winced. "I told you not to intervene, Clark. He dies for good when his underground lair collapses." Wells started turning knobs and flipping switches. "And Lois survives."

"I didn't do anything. I just wanted to know what the man looked like. I was curious if I had ever seen him."

"Had you?"

"No." Clark glanced inside the plastic bag in his lap. "Any problems?"

"I wish I had brought you with me after all."

"Mr. Wells, really, I didn't do anything." He smiled. "Like stop the bullet that the clone fired at him."

"Were you tempted to?" Wells asked as he pulled the lever that brought them into the future and over to his dimension. The time machine was once again parked in the alley behind Clark's apartment.

"To save him? Lex Luthor? The man who kidnapped Lois away from her own wedding and left a clone in her place for Clark? Not in the least." Clark grinned. "Actually, it felt good to let that bullet hit him." He sighed, flicking a little dust off his golden S. "I know, ironic, how unlike Superman of me. But you told me not to intervene. And in this one instance, I was happy to oblige."

Then Wells replied with the strangest statement. "That kiss really affected you. It made you angry at Lex Luthor. Angrier than you had ever been before."

"No, it didn't make me angry at Luthor. If anything, it made me more protective of Lois." Clark was starting to doubt his own words; he could hear the defensive tone in his voice. Why had Lois's kiss made him angry at Luthor? "I didn't like how frightened she was when I rescued her. How relieved she was that I found her."

"That *her* Superman had found her. That the man she loves rescued her, not you. Remember that, my boy. Or this next year will be quite trying for you." Wells started turning knobs and flipping switches again. "And you might want to ask Lois about her relationship with Lex Luthor. There is more to the story than I think you know."

Clark stepped from the time machine, holding the plastic bag, and feeling like a fool. "Should I have wanted to stop that bullet from hitting him in the arm?"

"I don't know, Clark. Even her own Superman fought the urge to rescue Lex Luthor when he jumped from his penthouse to his death. Then again, Lex Luthor had locked him in a Kryptonite cage when he was marrying Lois Lane so that Superman could hear him exchange vows with his beloved." H.G. Wells pulled the lever. "Perhaps he was just too drained to help."

Clark's jaw dropped open as Wells disappeared. Lois Lane had been engaged to Lex Luthor? They had had a wedding? No wonder Luthor had wanted to ruin Lois's wedding to Clark.

He realized he was standing in the alley, in the Superman suit, holding a plastic bag. What was he doing? A moment later, he entered his living room through the window. He dropped the bag with Lois's suit in the secret compartment. He would hang it up later.

Glancing through the bedroom door, he gazed at Lois. She was sound asleep on his bed. He shook his head. No. Her bed. It

was not his bed anymore.

Clark checked the clock to see how long he had been gone. Time travel messed with his head. One hour, although it felt like much longer. He should really go make a check of Metropolis. He had made too many trips to the other side recently. He glanced in on Lois again, before flying off to protect his own world.

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Lois ran into the street. "Not her! Me! I'm Lois Lane. Superman! Here!" She waved her arms, but her voice would not work. A car turned the corner just as Superman took to the skies. "No, don't leave," she tried to scream, running into the street. "Help me, Superman!" The car bumped into her and she started to fall. Suddenly, she was in the air, high above the clouds. Superman! He had heard her.

"*Clark," Lois moaned in a barely audible whisper, kissing his neck. "Oh, Clark, you did hear me. It's over. This bad dream is over." She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and murmured into his ear. "Take me away. Take me far away."*

Lois's lips sought out his and for a short while they were one. Superman shifted his hold on her so that she was cradled in his arms, releasing her lips from his.

"*Take me home, Clark. I want to change out of this godawful suit. Luthor had it made for me." Her entire body shivered.*

"*Are you cold?" Superman asked, wrapping her in his cape. She loved being wrapped in his cape. She shook her head and leaned against his chest once again.*

"*I'll take you home," he murmured. "You relax."*

"*Home," she whispered, shutting her eyes. "Take me where it's safe. Where you are."*

Lois smiled. "Clark," she murmured. He had saved her. How wonderful it was to be in love with a superhero. Clark said he would bring her home and here she was lying in her own bed.

She stretched and felt the coolness of the sheets on her skin. That was strange. Why was she lying in bed in her underwear? She smiled. That naughty Clark. She rolled over and felt the other side of her bed. No Clark. It was cold. He had not lain down next to her.

She sat up. The other side of the bed was still made. Always the gentleman. She pulled the sheets up to her chest. Where was Clark? She couldn't imagine he would leave her like this, this of all days, unless… She sighed.

Sometimes, Lois wished Clark was just Clark. Wouldn't fly off with only a moment's notice, if that. She leaned back down and thought about having her man to herself uninterrupted for three days. To have all his attention on her. That would be nice. Hawaii. Maybe they could still finish their honeymoon. After the week she had just experienced, she could use a couple of weeks in Hawaii, though she'd settle for three uninterrupted days.

With another sigh, she grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed. As she headed to the bathroom for a much-needed shower, she heard a tea kettle whistle.

"Clark! Clark," she called, sprinting into the kitchen. Only he wasn't there; his mother was. "Martha?"

"Good evening, sleepyhead. I was beginning to think I would need to call a doctor. Tea?"

Lois shook her head. "I was tired. I was afraid if I fell asleep in that chair Lex had me tied up in, I wouldn't know where I'd wake up." She sat down on one of her barstools.

Martha looked at her with a strange expression. "Lois," she said slowly, as she sat down in the chair next to her. "Lex died months ago."

"Didn't you hear, Martha? I'm surprised that Clark didn't tell you. Lex Luthor was brought back to life after he jumped off Lex Towers. He got arrested some time back, when he killed off his lawyer, murdered his doctor, and kidnapped me. He was the one behind the cloned president who pardoned him. Then he replaced me with a clone—"

Martha put her hand on Lois's shoulder. "I know that, honey. That's the Lex that I was talking about."

Lois grabbed the counter as the room began to spin. "Lex is dead? Really and truly dead? He's not going to come after me anymore?"

"Yes, he's really dead this time," Martha reassured her. "He died when his underground hideout collapsed. He tried to kill Superman."

"Clark's okay?"

"Of course, honey. The weapon Lex tried to kill him with was aimed at a support beam during their struggle. Then, I think Clark said that you were knocked to the side as the clone and Lex fought over the weapon. They were both dying by the time the ceiling collapsed. He barely had enough time to escape with you."

"May I have a drink of water?" Lois gasped, her throat suddenly dry. She had been there? She didn't remember any of it. Martha handed her a cup and Lois took a big drink of water. "And all this happened months ago?"

"Yes. Don't you remember?"

Lois's eyes grew wide as she shook her head.

"None of it?" Martha looked worried.

"The last thing I remember was Superman rescuing me after I escaped from Lex. It feels like that just happened this morning."

Martha put her hand on Lois's forehead. "Lois, Clark didn't find you until some man called the *Daily Planet* and said he saw you at some bar down at the docks, singing under the name of Wanda Detroit."

"Wanda Detroit?" Lois laughed. "That didn't really happen, Martha. Wanda Detroit is a character from a novel I wrote before I knew Clark was…" Her hand went upwards as if taking off like Superman.

"Really? I didn't know that. Clark said that when he got to the bar and introduced himself, a couple of men tried to beat him up for treating Wanda so badly. That when he finally tracked you down, you sent him away."

"Oh, no. I wouldn't. But if I thought he was the Clark from my book…" She took another drink of water. "Martha, I made Clark the villain in my novel because I was so mad at him for always disappearing on me. And if I thought he was that Clark… But I figured it out in the end, right? Wait, you said Lex died where he had hidden us away. Martha, what happened, exactly?"

"Maybe you should read your journal," Martha said, taking a sip of her tea.

"Journal? I don't keep a journal."

"The one your therapist suggested you keep when you regained your memories after the amnesia."

"I had amnesia? Is that why I thought I was Wanda Detroit?"

Martha nodded.

Lois looked around her apartment; it seemed different. "Martha, how long was I asleep just now?"

Martha looked unsure of what to say. Finally, she said, "After you got hit by the car this morning, you seemed kind of out of it, so I…"

"I was struck by a car?"

"You saw a man you thought looked like Clark on the other side of the street and before I could stop you, you just darted into the street without looking."

Lois took another sip of water as she thought about what she had just heard. "Why are you here? Where's Clark?"

Martha suddenly looked tired, sad, and older than Lois had ever seen her. The light went out of her eyes.

Lois held tightly on to her hand. "Where's Clark?"

Martha swallowed. "New Krypton."

Lois paled. "Where?"

"Shortly after you got your memory back, while you and Clark were planning your new wedding, Clark was visited by two

people. They turned out to be from a colony of Krypton called New Krypton — some rock out there." Martha waved her hand towards the sky. "They needed Clark's help to stop a civil war."

Lois hugged Martha. "And we both know Clark can't say 'no' to someone in need." Tears streamed down her face. "When is he coming back?"

"As soon as he can come back. It's been only five weeks."

Lois's heart hit the bottom of her stomach. In the course of an hour, Lois went from kissing Clark to losing him again. Only five weeks. Was Martha trying to warn her that he could be gone months or longer? She no longer wanted to be in her kitchen. She wanted to crawl back into bed, dreaming of Clark rescuing her from Lex. That Clark felt so real. She stood up.

"He still wants to marry you."

Lois glanced down at the engagement ring on her finger. "I know. Clark's love is the one thing I can count on in my life. The one constant I can trust."

Martha's expression seemed to falter and Lois realized that there was more she wasn't sharing.

Lois couldn't hear any more. She went into the bathroom and took a long hot shower, avoiding the journal with all the answers. She found a large bruise on her thigh and her body was stiff, which corresponded with the car accident story. She got dressed in her fleecy pajamas even though, according to her calculations, it was sometime in the summer.

All Lois wanted to do was crawl back into bed and sleep until Clark came back. She was still exhausted, despite having slept so long she had worried Martha. Had she bumped her head during the car accident that morning, or was it so similar a traumatic event that it reminded her of when she was hit by that car as she chased Superman after escaping from Lex?

Martha knocked on her door and wouldn't let her go straight back to sleep. She hadn't eaten all day and as it was dinner time, she needed to eat. Martha had made chicken soup. Just what Lois needed to warm her bones up. She had felt cold since hearing that Clark had left the planet. New Krypton. Just the sound of it made her shiver.

She had taken him a bit for granted. Never again. She would saver every moment… any moment, she had with him if he returned… No! *When*, when he returned.

They sat in silence over dinner, Lois not wanting to hear more. She had had him in her grasp, so close, too many times and he kept slipping away. Not by will, but by design.

"Do you think Clark and I are cursed, Martha?"

Martha coughed into her napkin. "What makes you think that? I've never seen two people more in love."

"But there is always something. Whether work or disasters or crazy people or my ex-boyfriends." She shook her head. "It just feels like we're cursed."

"I'm sure when Clark gets back, you'll have a time when you feel blessed."

"We're certainly due," Lois laughed, taking a sip of soup. "By the way, what day is it?"

"Sunday."

"Ugh. I have to go to work tomorrow. How can I be a reporter, if I don't know what day it is?"

"Lois, do you want me to call you in sick? I'm sure you could use an extra day to get your sea-legs back. I've already called Jonathan to explain I'm staying longer."

Lois grinned. "Do I have any sick days left? After amnesia…"

"Perry will give you the day, if you need it," Martha reassured her. She seemed so sure. "We can always tell him about the car."

"No!" Even Lois was surprised by her vehemence. "I can do this. I'm resilient. That's why Clark loves me."

Martha ate a spoonful of soup. "I think Clark loves your stubbornness more."

Lois laughed. "Oh, yes, I do excel in that. He'd be the first to admit it. Thank you, Martha, for being here. You never did tell me why you were here."

"You invited me." Martha smiled. "You've been covering full-time for Clark with no one to speak to about it. Perry sent you home early on Friday because you had some sort of meltdown."

"Obviously, I'm having a meltdown; I am missing months of my life. But to crack up at work enough for Perry…" Lois interrupted herself. "Where is this journal you mentioned?"

Martha looked blank. "Clark only mentioned it in passing. How a therapist mentioned any stress could cause a relapse, recommended you keep one just in case."

Lois jumped up from the table and was looking around. "That's ridiculous. Stress wouldn't cause a relapse of amnesia. Could it? My life is stress." She moved to her computer. "Password? Oh, please, tell me I haven't changed… Oh, yes, I'm in…. No…. No…. No. It's not in my computer." She closed her laptop.

"Your bedroom, perhaps," suggested Martha.

Lois ran into her room. She found clothes on the floor. Slacks and a blouse. Had she just come home after the accident, pulled off her clothes, dropped them on the floor and crawled into bed in her underwear? That accident must have rattled her good and well. She picked up the clothes and tossed them on her chair. She would deal with them later. Her purse and keys were on the dresser next to a notebook. She didn't leave her notes just laying about. She picked up the notebook and turned to the last entry.

Yesterday, at work I was so exhausted I fell asleep during the morning meeting.

"No!"

I found myself an hour later at my desk with no recollection of how I got there.

"Oh, that's not good," she said.

Then Perry said something to me about Clark and I just snapped. I started repeating Clark's name like a broken record.

"Oh, no, no, no."

Perry got me to admit that I lied to him when I said Clark would be visiting me this weekend for a night off from his deep undercover work with Intergang. And how I hadn't spoken with Clark in awhile. It was nice not to have to lie to Perry for once. But I may have led him into believing — no matter how inadvertently — that Clark had gone missing.

"Oh, no."

Perry had Jimmy drive me home. I knew I needed back-up and had no one local I could call. There was only one person I could talk to about my dilemma. Clark's mom flew out this morning and together we are trying to restore my sanity, so I may face Perry and Jimmy Monday morning as usual.

Lois ran out of her room and found Martha still sitting at the dining room table. "Did I tell you about this?" She held up the journal.

Martha shook her head. "Not in detail. I figured it had to be bad if Perry sent you home."

"I couldn't stop saying Clark's name."

"You talk about Clark…"

"No. I was just babbling Clark's name."

Martha's jaw hung open. This was certainly news.

"I know!" Lois continued, "I led Perry to think Clark went missing from his assignment. If I don't go into work tomorrow like I'm one hundred percent, or at least close to it, and let him know that Clark contacted me, Perry is going to send me back to a shrink. And I hate shrinks. Can't trust them."

"I can imagine. After what happened with your amnesia doctor—"

"What happened?" Lois grabbed Martha by the shoulders.

"Lois, maybe, you should read the journal. Anything I say is just third hand. A good reporter — as Clark says — always goes to the source."

Lois smiled. "I taught him that."

Martha raised a skeptical eyebrow at her.

"Okay. He might have learned that in journalism class first," Lois conceded. "It's just past seven-thirty. I've got to read through my journal and everything I've worked on for the last few months before the morning meeting."

"And you need to sleep, Lois," Martha reminded her.

Lois dismissed that idea with a wave of her hand.

"Okay, it's your decision. I personally wouldn't want you to fall asleep at the meeting again. You might also want to check out archival copies of the *Daily Planet* sometime tomorrow to see any photos that might accompany your stories."

"Good idea, Martha. I can do this. It's only a couple of months, right? I can fake it. No one needs to know that I lost my memory again." Lois took a deep breath to steel her nerves.

An hour later, Lois returned to the living room with her purse over her shoulder and her journal grasped to her chest. Martha glanced up from where she was reading on the couch. Lois pulled out her wallet and handed Martha a twenty-dollar bill.

"I just called the local grocery. They'll be making a delivery in a half-hour. That should cover the tip." Lois sounded like she had been crying. "I guessed I was out of ice cream and ordered some more. Three gallons enough, you think?"

"Lois?" Martha took her by the wrist and led her to the couch.

"My life sucks," Lois said as her bottom lips started to shake. "He doesn't love me. He left me for that Sarah… Zara… person whatever her name is. He said he would come back to me, but he's marrying her. He's already married to her." The tears dripped down her face. "He knows her two weeks before he agrees to run off and marry her and save her civilization. Me, we're engaged for how long and we still aren't married."

"He loves you and he would never do anything to betray that love. You know that," Martha reassured her.

"Of course he would say that. He's Clark. He always says and does the right thing. He is Superman. He doesn't get amnesia and run off with his crazy ex-girlfriend, breaking my heart in the process. No, he's too good to do any… wait…" She laughed with a shake of her head. "I guess, this time he did run off with his crazy ex-girlfriend and break my heart. No wonder I'm having meltdowns at work. I'm amazed it took five weeks." Lois wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Serves me right, having treated him so badly. Did I really fall for that Dr. Deter character? Ugh." She shuddered. "He'll never come back to me."

"That was hard on Clark too, sweetie. But he stuck by you. He never gave up on you. You need to have faith in him."

"What I need is chocolate, chocolate, chocolate ice cream with broken Double Fudge Crunch Bars on top."

There was a knock at the door.

"That was quick." Lois glanced through the peep hole. "This will be interesting," she warned Martha, wiping the dampness from her eyes. "Stay on your toes." She opened the door.

"Hi, Lois," Star said in her happy sing-songy voice. "I had a feeling that you needed me."

Lois looked over at Martha. "No. I'm fine, Star."

"Oh, sorry," Star apologized. "Not me." She brought her hands out from behind her back. She was holding in one hand a quart of chocolate brownie ice cream and in the other a jar of sweet dill pickles.

Martha's eyes almost popped out of her head.

Lois laughed and let her in. "I'll take the ice cream, but you can keep the pickles."

"Win some, lose some. Whoa!" Star grabbed her head. "Lois, what has happened? I'm dizzy just looking at you."

Lois led her to the table as Martha went to get bowls. "I've had a trying day."

Star shook her head, before focusing on Lois. "I'd say you have. Lois, have you done something different to your hair? You look younger."

"Thank you," Lois beamed, touching her hair. "Not that I know of."

"You look just amazing. Quite a whole year younger."

Martha dropped a bowl in the kitchen. "Sorry. I seem to be all thumbs."

"Oh, hi!" Star greeted her, noticing Martha for the first time. "Have we met before?"

"Sorry, Star. This is Martha Kent, Clark's mom. Martha, this is my neighbor, Star. She's psychic."

"You can say that again," Martha mumbled under her breath.

"Clark's mother. Oh, that's where I've felt your presence before. Martha? I thought Clark's mother's name was Lara?" Star tapped her head.

"He was adopted," Lois explained.

"Oh, adoption. It always messes with my head."

Martha scooped out three bowls of ice cream, doubling Lois's portion and emptying the whole quart.

"Lois, I just have to say it again. You look amazing. What's your secret?"

Lois was speechless at the additional compliment.

"Time travel," Martha suggested, digging into her ice cream.

Lois looked shocked.

Star giggled. "Oh, that's hilarious, Martha. I can see where Clark gets his sense of humor. Time travel, really."

Martha raised an eyebrow, but didn't respond. Lois looked quizzically at her.

Star pushed her untouched bowl to Lois. "Still dizzy. It's like you're moving so fast your future is still shifting to catch up."

Martha coughed, taking a sip of water. "Can you really see the future?"

Star gazed at her with her head tilted. "You need to return to Smallville soon. Jonathan will need you."

"Wow," gulped Martha.

Star blinked. "Who is Jonathan?"

"My husband."

"How will he need her?" Lois asked, concerned.

"To help Superman."

Martha's spoon stopped outside her mouth and her jaw hung open.

"Lois, I just realized why your future is shifting. Superman will soon be back, earlier than expected. Oh, my," Star gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

Lois turned to Martha, her eyes aglow. "Superman is coming home."

"What's the matter, Star?" Martha asked.

"I've got to go." Star stood up. "On Friday, I told three people that they were about to die horrible deaths. Now they are going to survive because Superman's coming home. I've got to call them and let them know. This changes everything."

Lois grabbed Star and gave her a hug. "Star, you are simply the best."

"Thanks, Lois. You're always saying the nicest things to me."

"And you were right. I did need to see you tonight, and not just because of the chocolate brownie ice cream. Thank you."

"Nice meeting you," Martha called from the kitchen.

"I'll leave the pickles," said Star, passing through the doorway with a wave. "Just in case."

Lois laughed, shutting the door. She shook her head at Martha, continuing to laugh. Then she danced into the kitchen and hugged Martha. "Clark's coming home! I found him and lost him and got him back all in one day."

"She's amazing."

"You're amazing. Time travel, really, Martha." Lois laughed.

"She bought it. And it was better than saying you lost your memory again."

"Oh, right. I've got homework to do." She kissed Martha on the cheek, then danced out to the living room, carrying her bowl of ice cream and her journal. "Clark's coming home. Clark's coming home. Clark's coming home."

There was another knock at the door, but Lois was already back in her bedroom. Martha opened the door. It was the delivery man with a couple of bags filled with ice cream and Double Fudge Crunch Bars. Martha smiled and handed the man the twenty-dollar bill.

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Chapter 2 — The Twilight Zone

Lois awoke to the murmured sounds of a television. She blinked her eyes. Where was she?

She looked around and realized she was at Clark's. Then she noticed the spiral staircase to the loft. Her Clark had the same staircase at his place, but for some reason this one looked different, felt different, reminded her that she wasn't in Kansas anymore. Not that she had come from Kansas, but Metropolis. But she wasn't there anymore. Well, not *her* Metropolis, anyway. Not her Clark's apartment either. The *other* Clark's apartment. Her new life. With a yawn and stretch, she walked out to the living room.

Clark was sitting on his couch watching baseball, munching on carrot sticks. The volume was low, but as soon as he saw her, he turned it off. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No. It's all right, watch your game." She shook her head, trying to wipe the strangest feeling out of her head. She sat down at the dining room table trying to remember that dream. Clark was there. Her Superman. She sighed. He had saved her from Lex and the clone. She closed her eyes to see if she could feel Clark's lips pressed against hers again. This dream was so fresh, so clear.

"Are you sure you are all right?" Clark asked, pulling her out of her daydream. He hadn't turned the game back on. He sat down next to her, worried.

"I'm fine. I just had the strangest dream. It felt so real. Clark was there," Lois realized that she was talking to a Clark. "*My* Clark. Instead of me going all Wanda Detroit crazy, Superman rescued me. And he flew me over the clouds and away from it all." She sighed. "Far away."

This Clark had the strangest expression on his face. Somewhere between shocked and dismayed and delighted, like he couldn't decide how he felt about what she had just told him. What had she just told him? Had she said that out loud?

"I'm so sorry, Clark. I promised myself I wouldn't moon over my Clark in front of you and we haven't been together five minutes…" she started apologizing.

"It's okay," he said, placing his hand over hers. They both looked down at his hand and he moved it away. "Sorry. We both need time to adjust."

"It's just that this dream felt so good. That was a difficult time in my life, as you know. And there was something about this dream. It put me at peace with myself again. In balance." She sighed again. "It felt so real."

Clark continued to stare at her, not speaking, and then he looked down. Her heart sank.

"It was real. It wasn't a dream at all, was it?" Lois leaned back, away from him. "And it wasn't my Clark." She put her hand to her mouth. "It was you."

He nodded. "I didn't think you would know what happened with the other you. I'm sorry for the confusion, Lois, but the other you needed to feel rescued, safe, to make the transition go smoothly."

"I know. It was my plan. I just didn't know I would remember…" Lois's eyes grew large. "I remember. It didn't happen to me, but to the other me. And I remember!" She hugged him and then jumped up and did a little dance. "Do you know what this means?"

Clark didn't answer, probably still in shock from her bouncing ball of emotions.

"I remember! I have the other me's memories. Whatever happens in my dimension, I'll know about. I'm not out of the loop. Woo-hoo!" She danced around some more.

"So you're not mad?" he said softly.

That was just what her Clark would have asked. She patted him on the shoulder. "Not today, my boy, you caught a break." And she realized it was true. She wasn't mad at him. She could have been furious, but she wasn't. She couldn't come down off this high of having memories of the other Lois's actions.

Lois had feared that having a substitute her would be like having the clone take over her life again. She hated the idea of Clark having a life with the younger Lois that she didn't know about. This was going to be better than surveillance. And if these pesky feelings about Clark returning early came true, she would have memories of that as well. Her eyes slipped closed, relishing the thought that if Clark and the younger Lois kissed, it still would be happening to her. Like that kiss above the clouds. Her eyes snapped open and she looked at the other Clark. "Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned as she continued to dance around the room.

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Lois ate another piece of baguette. She felt bad that Clark had gone through the trouble of making spaghetti from scratch and then she bolted for the bathroom after only a few bites. "I really am sorry, Clark. Why do they call it morning sickness, I wonder? It happens all day long."

He raised his hand in a typical Clark manner as if to say he had heard enough.

"It really tasted good."

"Please stop saying the word 'really,' Lois. It really isn't like you," Clark said with a smile, taking a sip of his red wine.

Lois laughed. "Got you to smile though. See, you've forgiven me."

"Always, Lois."

Lois tried to keep the smile on her lips, but when he spoke in her Clark's words and using his voice, it was hard. Really hard. She took a deep breath and changed the subject. "So, any idea on what we should do tomorrow?"

Clark wiped the crumbs from his hands and grabbed a pad of paper from the coffee table. "I've been making a list of all the things we need do to while you're here."

Lois groaned. "Can't we play it by ear?"

"I don't think you should play pregnancy by ear," he reminded her.

"Score one, Clark. Go on."

He opened his notebook. "First, we need to get you an obstetrician. I can ask someone at work for a recommendation."

Lois made a sound like a buzzer. "And what exactly are you going to say? 'Hey, I've got this pregnant woman living in my apartment, so can any of you women recommend a good doctor?' That might raise a few eyebrows at the Daily Planet, don't you think, *Superman*?"

"Oh, right. That would be bad," Clark concurred. "Agreed, we'll brainstorm more on that one."

"Plus, I don't know if I can go to a regular OB/GYN. We know I can have complications, dire ones. Did Mr. Wells ever tell you what kind of complications they were?"

Clark shook his head.

"Me either. That would have been helpful. Thanks a lot, Mr. Wells," she called out to the universe. *Good going, Lane*, she told herself. She should have thought to ask. "What we don't know is

if they are super complications or regular complications. I've got a super baby here, so I think I need someone with extra super skills, if you know what I mean." Lois took a sip of her ginger ale. Clark had gone out and bought her some to settle her stomach, after she made her trip to the bathroom earlier. "Any ideas?"

Clark shook his head again.

"Who's your doctor?" Lois asked.

"I'm never sick," Clark reminded her. "I don't have one."

"Right," she replied. "But that's not quite what I meant. My Clark goes to see Dr. Bernard Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs with any questions he has about his super abilities. Do you see anyone like that?"

"No, Lana never wanted me to talk to anyone about my powers, so I stayed clear of scientists. But I know Dr. Klein. He's a good man. Brilliant. A little strange, but still brilliant. Reliable. Perry sent him Tempus's Kryptonite chunk for safekeeping." Clark actually looked excited by this suggestion. "What kind of questions has your Superman asked him? Does Dr. Klein know about his secret identity?"

"No, that's still just me and the Kents. Clark goes to him as Superman. Let's see, there was the time he was affected by Red Kryptonite…"

"Red Kryptonite?" Clark blanched. "There's more than one kind?"

"Yes, while the Green Kryptonite can kill Superman, the red kind sends his senses reeling. Clark had several different reactions to Red Kryptonite. The first time we dealt with it, it was before I knew he was Superman, and it affected him psychologically. It made him a bit apathetic. He ended up going to see a therapist. And the second time, some women blasted him with a Red Kryptonite laser which transferred his powers to me for a while." She laughed. "You are looking at the former Ultra Woman."

"Ultra Woman?" He looked skeptical.

"I know. Me, who has 'Help, Superman' as my ringtone. Martha made me a lavender jumpsuit and mask. It was horrible," she said with glee, before catching herself. "I learned firsthand that it takes more than having your powers and a cape to be a super hero. You have to have a good strong heart, and an iron resolve, because there is still so much you cannot stop. Some people will die no matter how hard you work or quick you fly. It was too much for me. I happily gave Clark back his powers and retired Ultra Woman."

"Wait a minute. The Red Kryptonite laser transferred his powers to you. As in, he no longer had powers? How did it work?" Clark seemed both frightened and intrigued by this possibility.

"When he saw the laser beam heading towards us, he shielded me — as he usually does, when weapons get aimed our way — only this time, the beam passed through him stealing his powers and transferring them to whomever was on the other side of him. Luckily, it was me. When Dr. Klein fixed the laser we were able to shoot the powers back into Superman, using the process in reverse."

Clark was making notes on a separate page of his notepad. "What other things has Dr. Klein helped your Superman with?"

"Superman got contaminated with radiation from a nuclear blast and Dr. Klein and S.T.A.R. Labs helped contain him until we could find a cure."

"How do you cure that?"

"He flew close the sun and used its gravitational pull to extract the radiation fragments from his body," Lois replied with a shrug.

"Wow. I see I could use someone like Dr. Klein on my side."

"Let's see, what other things does Dr. Klein test?" She thought for a minute. "He's tested his strength, his visual powers, his speed, the effects of Kryptonite — they're searching for a cure, something to do with how our yellow sun recharges him."

"What? I didn't know that. I mean, I always felt better in the sun, but… Wow! Good to know."

"You know, I bet there are a lot of things I could tell you about my Superman's powers. Why don't you add that to our to-do list?" Lois suggested, pointing to his list. "While I'm in town, we'll make a comparison of all the bad guys you've taken down and all the ones we've taken down. Let's see where there are overlaps and where there aren't. Maybe we can stop some major disaster from happening before it happens. Along with that, you'll learn all that I know about what my Superman has dealt with concerning his powers. And I'll feel like I'm putting a dent in repaying your hospitality."

"Good idea. I wish I had thought of that. And, Lois," he said with a smile. "My hospitality is my pleasure."

Lois took another bite of bread and looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"That sounded wrong. Even though I've had these powers all my life, and they are now out in the open, it certainly is nice to have an expert to talk to about all of this."

"Watch it, Clark." Lois pointed at him with a hint of a smile. "Flattery will get you everywhere. What else is on your list?"

Clark looked back down at his notepad. "Back to getting you a doctor. We could talk to our Dr. Klein, but I think you still need a medical doctor."

"You're probably right about that. The thought of sitting in stirrups for Dr. Klein…" She shivered. "But maybe we could get him to look at it as a scientific hypothetical. What if you asked him what would happen if you were to settle down with a human woman?"

"Why me?" Clark's eyes widened. "I'm not the father."

She found his discomfort hilarious for some reason. "Technically, no. But you are the father's twin brother."

"Why do you keep saying that?" he asked with a shake of his head. "We've never even met."

"But that's what it feels like to me. You are just like my Clark in almost every way, but not my Clark. It's like you were twins separated at birth. Plus, it helps keep the line clearer in my mind."

He looked back down at the list. "Ah, the line."

Lois didn't know how to respond to that. She stated her feelings as clearly as she could. She knew he was attracted to her as she was attracted to him, but also knew neither of them should or could ever act on those feelings.

"It would be nice having a brother." He smiled. "Okay, if I'm to think of your Clark as my brother that would make you… his hot girlfriend?"

"Clark."

"Fine. You are my extremely unattractive sister-in-law."

Technically not, but Lois didn't want to correct him. "Family," she suggested.

His smile grew into a grin. "I'd like that."

Lois hit herself on the forehead. "Family! My dad's a medical doctor. An exceptional one, too."

"Sam Lane?" Clark raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"What's with the disbelief? He cured Superman last Christmas from a raging viral infection."

"Superman doesn't get sick, Lois," Clark reminded her.

Lois sighed, remembering. "Mine did."

"Oh."

She pointed to his notepad. "So, put it on your list to find Sam Lane."

"Okay." Clark looked down at the list and jotted it down. He looked like he wanted to say something more, but didn't. Instead, he looked up and to his left.

"We'll finish going through this later," Lois said, taking the

list away from him.

"I've got to—" he started to say.

"I know." She patted him on the chest as he got up.

He looked back at her as if he wanted to say something, but stopped himself. He walked into the closet as Clark Kent and stepped out a moment later, dressed as Superman. Lois shook her head. That was going to take some getting used to. At least, he didn't spin into the suit like her Superman did.

"Lois, I'll be back…" he started to say.

"When you can be," she finished. "I know." She glanced down at the list and realized he was still there. She looked up at him, questioningly.

"I'm glad you're here, Lois. It's nice not to be alone in this anymore."

"I'm sorry you've felt alone, Clark. Soon, you're going to miss that feeling very much." She shot him an evil grin.

He returned the smile, but his was genuine and kind. "I doubt that." He stepped out onto the balcony and disappeared.

Lois sighed and then glanced back down at the list in her hand.

1. Obstetrician. Next to that he penciled in 'Sam Lane' with a question mark.

2. Pregnancy Research. Books. He added in 'Dr. Klein.' At least he had been listening.

3. Hobbies and activities. Lois rolled her eyes. He penciled in 'bad guy list/problems with powers.'

4. Secret identity. He wanted her to have a secret identity?

5. Money/Job. Next to that he penciled in three question marks. Hello, top investigative reporter. Investigative reporting was not a hobby. And then she realized that if he wanted her to have a secret identity, he wasn't expecting her to show up at the Daily Planet and ask for her old job back. She sighed again and set down the list. She couldn't look at it any more.

Lois walked to the window. Looking up into the night sky she found the star Clark had pointed out to her on their last night together. "Clark, I miss you," she whispered. Tears welled up in her eyes. "I miss you so much. You know I love you, don't you? Come back to me. Come home."

Suddenly Superman was there with his arms around her, holding her. She cried onto his shoulder.

"I miss Clark so much."

"I'm right here," he whispered, tilting up her chin.

He looked just like her man, only he wasn't. She stopped herself a moment before they kissed. "My Clark," she said, stepping out of his arms. "I miss *my* Clark."

"I heard you calling my name. Asking me to come home," Superman explained.

"I'm sorry. I was alone. I was talking to him." She wiped the dampness from her eyes.

"Lois, this is confusing for me. Clark this and your Clark that. Please, can't we call him something else while you're here?"

"His name is Clark Kent, just like yours. What do you want me to call him? Other Clark? You're the other Clark."

"Fred?" he suggested. "Jerome?"

She had never liked Clark's middle name. "Superman?"

He held out his arms to show her he was still in the blue suit. "Taken."

Lois understood she was confusing him. It was just as confusing to her. She hated to admit it, but she needed this Clark and did not want to alienate him. He knew this dimension and all its quirks; it would be harder to survive here without his help. She also couldn't have this Clark wrapping his arms around her every time she called out to Clark. She knew there might come a day when she lost the ability to step away. She didn't want to, but on this one matter she would compromise. "I could call him by your Kryptonian name, Kal-El. It's not one of my favorite names. The New Kryptonians not being high on my list right now."

"I know," Superman whispered, cupping her face in his hand just like her Clark. "Thank you." Then he stepped out the door to the patio and was gone again.

Lois went to the couch and curled herself up into a ball and cried. He didn't realize how much of a sacrifice this one change would be for her.

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Superman flew over Metropolis once more. He felt guilty. He shouldn't have asked her to give up her Clark's name; not then, not when she was at such a moment of weakness. She had already given up her home, her dimension, and her fiancé. Asking her to give up calling Clark by his name would be something that would eat at him for a long time. It had bothered him, the confusion over having the same name, but not that much.

It had only taken a few minutes to rescue that couple from a mugging and apprehend the mugger. He had been on his way to do a fly-by over the city when he heard Lois calling to him. Not Superman. Clark. It felt so right. He had dreamed of hearing Lois Lane calling to him, long before this Lois first appeared.

Clark had never told this Lois, but one of his first assignments from Perry upon joining the Daily Planet had been to find Lois Lane, who was then — and still currently — missing in the Congo. He quickly became obsessed with the spunky, no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners woman. He read all her articles, spoke with her colleagues and family… and he had continued looking for her despite being forgotten by everyone else. He hadn't told anyone; especially Lana.

A year ago, Lana had asked the dreaded question: *where was their relationship headed?* He understood. She was getting older and he still hadn't proposed. A part of him — a part he didn't understand —still held out hope he would find Lois Lane. But Lana had been right, he concluded. He could either marry the woman in front of him, or he could pine away for a dead woman he would never ever meet. So, he had proposed. And for a while, it seemed like the right decision.

Until this Lois walked into his life and kissed him. She didn't know about his secret crush on his dearly departed Lois Lane, nobody did. And he wanted to keep it that way. This Lois couldn't know that she was everything he had hoped his Lois would be and more. A living, breathing, sweet-smelling… He shook that thought from his mind.

That she was in love with him — well, her Clark in her dimension — didn't surprise him. The blue tights, yes. The undeniable attraction between them, no. And what H.G. Wells said in passing about Lois and Clark being soul mates — something that had mystified him deep inside suddenly made perfect sense.

It clarified why he was in love with a woman he had never met and would never meet. It also explained why he had jumped at the chance to babysit what was essentially his Lois's twin sister. He figured it was as close as he would get to know his Lois Lane.

Clark hadn't known it would feel like torture: to have Lois so close, relying on him, telling him her secrets, laughing at his jokes and yet not desiring *him*, not wanting *him*. And this was only the first day.

Nothing was happening in Metropolis. Clark wanted to fly to New York or Gotham City and see if they needed his help there, but he knew would have to face her eventually. He landed on his patio and peered in his bedroom window. The lights were still on. Lois was asleep on his couch, curled up in a ball. His heart ached, because it looked like she had tried to wait up for him. He hadn't thought about that.

He came inside and picked her up. Slowly, he floated her into their bedroom and set her on the bed. He covered her up with a blanket, then flew up to his loft. He took his pjs with him into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

As he passed her on the way back to his loft, she mumbled. "Clark?"

He hesitated. Was she speaking to him or her Clark? "I'm here, Lois."

"You just getting in?"

"Everything's okay, Lois. Go back to sleep."

"Okay," she murmured. "Good night, Clark."

"Good night, Lois."

She pulled the blanket up to her chest and her breathing deepened. She had gone back to sleep. He flew up to his loft and sat on the edge, looking down at her. Sometimes the torture was worth it.

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Dear Clark, Lois wrote in a blank notebook she had stolen from Clark's desk. *I know it must seem strange that I am writing you a letter I cannot mail to you, but I needed to talk to you. I miss you. And it confuses this Clark, let's call him Kal, when I speak your name aloud. I miss you more here than back in our dimension. You seem farther away. Unreachable. Untouchable.*

Mr. Wells was right on one factor though. Moving me here seems to have changed history; stopped the curse. At least for the moment. I have memories from the younger me, the one I borrowed from those amnesia days. I'm sorry about leaving her with you. I hope you understand that she's not a clone, she's still me. What she does and people say to her, I can feel and remember here in this dimension. Not right away, which is good. That would be just too freaky. But when I sleep, I relive her day in my dreams.

Last night, I dreamed that Star came over with chocolate brownie ice cream to calm down the hysterical younger me because I had just read about you leaving for New Krypton with your new wife, Zara, in the journal I left her about my life since the clone incident. (Can we say run on sentence, Lois!) Star told me that… actually, she told your mother that Jonathan needed her help back in Smallville to help Superman. Superman returns! YEAH! If Superman is allowed to come home, so too is my Clark.

I don't know why or how, but once I moved to this dimension, you were free to return home. I don't care what the reasons behind it are; although, for some strange reason, I still don't trust those New Kryptonians. I still feel like they are going to double-cross you. I worry about you. I know that the younger me will love you and take care of you as I would, but I wish it could be me, directly.

Mr. Wells thinks my paranoia has to do with the younger me's memories. I lived her life, so I can subconsciously remember something that has not yet happened. It's confusing, to say the least. But the excuse I gave your mother about why I came over to this dimension still holds true. I think those Kryptonians would use our baby against you somehow. I don't understand this uncertainty, this fear. But I could not have you learn about becoming a father from someone else using it against you.

Yes, you heard me right, Clark Kent. I am pregnant and you are the father. Remember the night I told you to forget? Well, my body remembers. I'm about five weeks pregnant as I write this letter to you. I only learned about this miracle on Friday and today's Monday.

Mr. Wells delivered the bad news about the curse Friday night (about how the curse would keep us apart and miserable until one of us died). I couldn't let that happen. We came up with this solution on Saturday morning and, presto chango, I've been in this dimension a whole 24 hours now. I wish I could be back in our dimension, trying not to throw up on Jimmy and Perry, buying baby clothes, calling my parents… what am I saying? I don't want to tell my mother this news. I still have no idea how to break it to any of you, when we are finally allowed to return.

Kal and I have decided that our relationship is that of in-laws. Although you and I never actually got married, we are pretending that he's your twin brother and I'm your wife. He's thrilled about the idea of having a brother. He's like you in that respect — the more family the better.

You'll be excited to read that he's a little overprotective of me. Then again, he's just getting to know me and understand my limits. He wants me to have a secret identity, though I don't understand why. I've already introduced myself to this dimension, back when Tempus kidnapped and dropped me here, as the formerly-late Lois Lane. It probably has something to do with the baby. He probably doesn't want me to resume my career as investigative reporter. I bet he thinks it's too dangerous for the mother of his future nephew/niece. I hope you wouldn't be so sexist in your beliefs about me and my career as to believe the same. I'll ask him why the next time I see him. He was already at work by the time I woke up this morning.

It's strange how much sleep I've gotten this weekend. More than in the last six weeks all together. I've heard that pregnant women get exhausted more easily from all that energy we burn creating new cells and all, but am I going to turn into Sleeping Beauty here? We'll see. I wonder if I'm burning more energy creating cells because they're super cells. Not only is this whole pregnancy thing new for me, but — don't freak out when I say it like this — I am carrying an alien child. Will this pregnancy last nine months? Will I be able to give birth normally?

Oh, my gosh. I just pictured myself giving birth. Oh, Clark, how am I going to do that? Especially without you? What in the world was I thinking? Oh right, I was thinking about how much you would love a child of your own and what a great dad you'll be. Okay, I'm better now.

Back to the topic of carrying a half-human, half-Kryptonian child, Kal and I don't know what to do to solve that dilemma. I'm trying to convince him to go to his Dr. Klein and see if they can run some tests about the possibility of him becoming a father. Then, maybe we could introduce me. I think the idea scares him a little. Lana put such a fear of scientists into him. Of course, it might not have anything to do with that… perhaps like most men, he doesn't want to think about becoming a dad until he's actually faced with the extra blue line on the pregnancy test.

I'm going to track down my father — well, technically, the father of this dimension's Lois Lane — Sam Lane and see if I can somehow convince him to be my OB/GYN. I know that's not his specialty, but we need someone we can trust implicitly. Kal's secret identity may have been blown by Tempus, but I don't want everyone here to know I'm carrying Superman's baby.

I just figured out why he wants me to have a secret identity. Someone who would get a little less media attention than the Lois Lane who has been dead for three years. I wonder who I should be? It'll come to me; it usually does. Well, I'm starving, so I'm going to find something to eat that doesn't upset my stomach. I miss and love you, Clark. More later. LL

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Lois was still asleep when Clark went to work that morning. She slept through his shower, him cooking his breakfast, and him humming to try to wake her up. He wanted to apologize for the night before, about asking her to give up her Clark's name. He also wanted to speak to her about the rest of the to-do list. But he couldn't miss the morning meeting at the Planet.

He sighed. He wished Mr. Olsen would find a better editor to replace Perry. He missed Perry's Lois Lane stories, Elvis references, and Southern charm. The new interim editor had none of those and wasn't as lenient towards Clark's other job. He had even told Clark that he couldn't cover a story if Superman was involved. It would be like writing about himself. Clark could see his point, but it certainly limited the scope of stories on which he could work.

Clark had finally convinced him to bend the 'Superman Rule' as he called it, to allow him to write about the horrible

devastation in Fiji after the tsunami that had hit the week before. Superman had gone to help locate people and bodies, but the story wasn't about Superman; it was about the destruction in Fiji. He could see the benefits of Superman being anonymous.

Around nine, Clark had been at the break area getting more coffee with Jaxon, whom Mr. Olsen had hired to revamp the website, when he heard Lois calling for him. He hadn't thought he would be able to focus on her voice so clearly from so far away.

Clark? Clark? He set down his drink and started to loosen his tie, when she continued. *Oh, it's nine. He's at work. Sorry, Clark. Never mind. I was just wondering where you were. Don't rush home.* He chuckled and straightened his tie.

"Something up?" Jaxon asked.

Clark shook his head. "Wrong number." He continued to chuckle, before picking up his coffee. That Lois sure was funny.

Jaxon looked at him strangely and then wandered back to his desk.

Several hours later, Clark was ironing out the wording of his latest article when in clomped the most un-Lois looking woman he had ever seen. She was wearing sweatpants, a t-shirt, and clogs. She carried a big bag of books. She wore no makeup and her short hair parted in a new way, clipped by her ears with ugly barrettes. But the most noticeable, non-Lois part of this new look, was the pair of John Lennon-style frames resting upon her nose.

She parked herself against the edge of his desk and snapped her bubble gum. "Hi."

"Hi."

"I thought we could do lunch and discuss some things. You free?" She spoke with a strange accent. He thought it might have been slightly southern, slightly Texan. It certainly wasn't her born and bred Metropolitan accent.

Clark scanned through her bag that she had slightly raised with her question. A couple of pregnancy books, a romance, and a history book of the past century that had just come out. She had read his to-do list.

"Sure, let me just finish this up and turn it in to Ralph."

"Ralph?!" He watched as Lois searched the bullpen and caught sight of Ralph — sexist, Neanderthal, moron of a reporter Ralph — sitting behind Perry's old desk.

"Yes, he's our new interim editor."

"Did a plague hit all the news reporters in this dimension, so that he was the best they could find to replace Perry?" she whispered under her breath.

A hint of an agreeing smile graced his lips. "Perry is irreplaceable."

"Obviously." She shook her head. "No chance of getting my old job back now, is there?"

"Nope," he replied.

Clark continued to watch Lois as he typed. She looked around the bullpen at his co-workers, probably checking on who else she knew. How many of his co-workers were the same in both dimensions? Her eyes stopped when she reached Jaxon and she started to cough unexpectedly. Jaxon came up to Clark's desk and dropped a folder in his inbox.

"Are you okay?" Jaxon asked her.

"Fine," Lois answered, still coughing, her hand at her mouth. "Swallowed my gum."

The young man held out his hand to her. "I'm Jaxon."

"Lucy." She coughed again. "Sorry, Lucy El." She held out her hand.

Clark raised an eyebrow at this exchange.

Jaxon hesitantly shook her germy hand. "Lucy L.? Like the letter 'L'? Like Lucy Lane, Lois Lane's little sister?"

"*Who?* No. El as in E-L," she corrected. "Clark and I went to Kansas State together. Go Wildcats!"

Jaxon seemed to accept this answer. "You in town for a visit?"

"For now. Unless Clark here can get me a job in research." She batted her eyelashes at Clark. He shook his head slightly to shut her up. It didn't work.

Jaxon looked nervous. "I also dabble in research, Lucy. We're full up."

Lois held up her hands. "Sorry, Jaxon, I wouldn't dare presume I could replace you. I know I could never compete with your mad computer skills. Clark mentioned he doesn't know how you can squeeze these boxes like lemons and get the lemonade you do."

How had she known about Jaxon's computer skills? He must be the computer guru at her Daily Planet as well.

"This true, Kent?" Jaxon seemed pleasantly surprised by the praise.

"Sure is, Jax. You're a godsend. But Mr. Olsen said I could have anything I wanted to make life easier, so we're going to see if that includes my own research assistant. To help out during those times when I've got to fly off."

"No offense, Ms. El, but I would more than happy to be your sole researcher, Clark."

"I know, Jax." Clark patted him on the shoulder. He was amazed at how some of his co-workers were dying to work with his other personality now, when half of them didn't know his name at the beginning of the year. "But you are too valuable to the entire team. Especially working the website. Lucy and I go way back. She knows me so well, it's like she can read my mind." Clark glared at her and hoped she would guess his thoughts.

"Sorry, Clark. I know I let the cows in the cornfield when I stopped by unannounced. I just had to see it for myself." She gazed around the newsroom like it was her first visit and sighed. "The Daily Planet."

"Please, Jax, don't say anything to anyone. I wouldn't like the others to think I'm getting special treatment, because of… you know who."

"Of course. Of course, Clark. My lips are sealed." Jaxon pressed his lips together and rushed back to his desk.

"What are you doing?" Clark growled under his breath. "Cows in the cornfield? Really, Lucy."

"At lunch, Clark," she whispered and then glanced nervously back at Jaxon's desk. He was on the telephone. "Is he keeping his lips sealed?"

Clark's brows came together as he listened a moment to Jax's conversation. Printing out his article, he pointedly did not answer her question. He handed the article to Ralph, before grabbing her elbow and escorting her to the elevators. As they waited, Clark started in on her. "I cannot—"

"Not here, Clark," she hissed. Something was amiss, she was spooked. The doors opened and they stepped inside. As soon as the elevator doors closed, Lois collapsed against him.

"Lois!"

"It's Lucy, now, Clark. Please remember that, especially here. Do you think you can get me that job? Did Jimmy really make you that promise?"

"James Olsen owns this paper, Lucy. We'll see. What's wrong?"

She took a deep breath, but before she could answer the elevator stopped. "At lunch, Clark. I'll tell you at lunch."

The doors opened and there, waiting to enter, were the two men Clark least wanted to see, Mayor White and Mr. Olsen.

Lois paled. Clark, still holding her elbow, led her out as she casually covered her face.

"Chief. Mr. Olsen." Clark nodded as they passed.

"Clark! Just the man we wanted to see. Take lunch with us."

"Thank you, but I've already—"

Lois glanced up at their former boss at that moment and Perry

noticed her. “Oh, sorry, Clark.” He grinned, tipping an imaginary cap. “Miss.” His eyes widened as his voice dropped. “Lois?”

She made a noise that sounded like an “Eeeppp” and made a swift shake ‘no’ with her head.

“Clark, what’s going on here?” Mr. Olsen asked as they all stood in the middle of the lobby.

Things were rapidly spinning out of control until suddenly Lois took things in hand. “Actually, gentlemen, Clark and I were just on our way to find you. Do you think we could go somewhere private to discuss this over lunch?” She gave a quick apologetic glance to Clark, before turning the full force of those chestnut eyes on Perry and Mr. Olsen.

“Of course, little lady,” Perry stammered, his old newshound curiosity piqued.

“Let’s go to my penthouse. We can order up something,” Mr. Olsen suggested, leading the way.

Lois shook free of Clark’s grip and hooked her arm through his, whispering so low that the others could not hear, “Follow my lead. I know what I’m doing.”

He wanted to believe she did, but he couldn’t see how.

When they arrived at Mr. Olsen’s apartment, which was the entire top floor of Lois Lane’s former apartment building, Clark was still in the dark about her plan.

“You are full of surprises,” Lois said to Mr. Olsen, in awe at the simply decorated, yet stylish and comfortable apartment. “No skyscraper. No private chef. What kind of multi-millionaire are you?”

“Quite forward of you, Ms. Lane. I have what I need. I tried the party lifestyle at first. It didn’t suit me.”

“Lois,” Clark growled under his breath. “He’s my boss.”

“I ordered some sandwiches from the deli,” Perry announced, hanging up the phone. “You still like pastrami, don’t you, Lois?”

Clark watched as the thought of pastrami turned Lois’s face a pale green. Just how was she going to get out of this one? He sat down to enjoy the show.

“Well, actually no, Perry. The truth of the matter is I’m not your missing Lois Lane.”

Clark straightened up; he wasn’t expecting the truth.

“Great Caesar’s ghost!”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

They focused their attention on Lois.

“My name is Lucy El; that’s spelled E-L, for the record. Clark and I went to Kansas State together.”

Great, she was dragging him down this rabbit hole with her. His former boss and his boss’s boss looked at him and he smiled back weakly, but kept silent. He had no idea where she was headed.

“Aren’t you the same woman who showed up in my bullpen a couple of months ago and announced you had just woken up from a coma in a Congo mission?” Perry asked.

“Yes, that was me,” she replied.

Mr. Olsen leaned toward Clark. “I’m lost.”

“One day, Clark and I were discussing your missing reporter, Lois Lane,” Lois said. “He speculated that if someone knew something about her disappearance, the best way to flush out the culprit would be to have Lois suddenly reappear. If she had been killed, then the person would want to verify that this new Lois wasn’t the one he killed. If she was in hiding, which we both doubt, it might make her mad enough to reemerge. And if she had been kidnapped, the kidnapper would wonder who the imposter was. Either way, Clark figured it was the best way to get a new lead on the story.”

Clark had heard about the great Lois Lane in action. Now, he knew what they meant. She was amazing.

Perry laughed, clapping Clark on the back. “You just hate leaving a story unfinished, don’t you, Kent?”

“It was a puzzle, Chief,” Clark said.

“So,” Lois plunged on. “After Clark showed me a photo of Lois, I realized there was more than a passing resemblance between us. I decided to surprise Clark and put his theory into action.”

“I was certainly surprised, Lucy.” Clark chuckled. “Not as surprised as Lana was.”

“How many times do I have to apologize for that, Clark? If I had seen her there, I wouldn’t have kissed you. I know how jealous she gets… got.”

Mr. Olsen raised an eyebrow and exchanged a look with Perry.

“Then Tempus messed up the plan by kidnapping her and dropping her off a building,” explained Clark, joining in.

“And Superman was born,” Mr. Olsen finished.

Clark nodded. “Lucy and I go way back. With my abilities, I couldn’t just let her die. Tempus knew that.”

“I’d like to know how Tempus learned about you in the first place,” Mr. Olsen said.

Lois and Clark exchanged a glance before Clark answered. “He must have seen me fly at some point and done some investigating of his own. Perhaps he figured he could win the mayoral election through fear.”

“He didn’t count on you being such a super guy,” Perry said with a laugh. “Too bad we never could lock him up.”

Lois and Clark caught each other’s gaze again. This time Lois answered, “Someday, somewhere, Superman will catch him.” She smiled. He already had; Tempus was in a maximum-security insane asylum in her dimension. “Well, we thought our Lois Lane theory got lost between Tempus, the election, and Clark’s arrival…”

“Didn’t it?” Clark was stumped. Now, she had lost him.

Lois stood up and started pacing. “Tell me about Jaxon Xavier. When did he start working at the Daily Planet?”

“Jaxon?” Clark and Mr. Olsen asked in unison, both surprised. “Why?”

“Ever hear of Lex Luthor?” she inquired.

Perry and Mr. Olsen both shook their heads at the seeming non sequitur.

Clark felt like his head was about to explode. “No!”

“Jaxon’s full name is Jaxon Xavier Luthor. He’s the illegitimate son of Lex Luthor, but there’s enough of a family resemblance to believe it.”

Perry glanced at Clark. “Who’s Lex Luthor?”

Clark’s hands fisted in anger and he was relieved when Lois replied, “He’s an ostentatious, egoistical, super rich tycoon who is bent on taking over the world by destroying everything in it that is good and pure, piece by piece, especially if it means more money for himself.”

Okay, maybe Lois was a little bit biased.

“Uh-huh.” Perry rolled his eyes at Clark. “You’d think I would have heard of him.”

“Lucy doesn’t like him much,” Clark said.

“It was pretty big news back home when he ruined my wedding,” Lois snapped. “It was payback for Clark and I ruining his wedding with a damning exposé. His bride-to-be didn’t want anything more to do with him after that.”

“Clark?”

“Long ago, before I came to Metropolis, Chief.” Clark shot Lois a warning look. “Then Luthor disappeared. Lucy has been trying to track him down since.”

“Lex pretends he’s a charitable do-gooder, but it’s all a disguise. He’s completely untrustworthy. But all I have on him is rumor and hearsay, no cold hard proof.”

“There’s the rub,” Perry said, falling in line. “Without the facts, you just have conjecture, nothing printable.”

“Tell me about it,” Lois said, sitting down next to Clark. “Jaxon appearing on the scene is the closest Lex has come to

making a mistake in years. When did he start working at the paper?"

"Well, I found Jaxon about two months ago at a computer conference," Mr. Olsen told her. "He has mad skills. Better than mine. I was shocked when he jumped at the chance for a lowly research position at the Planet, but then he suggested a new format for the website that just blew my mind. He could be running companies of his own, but he said he wanted to do some good."

"So, he convinced you to hire him after the election?" Lois inquired. Clark could see where she was headed now.

"Fairly shortly after, why?"

"Do you think Lex Luthor is behind Jaxon being at Daily Planet?" Clark asked. "Behind Lois Lane's disappearance?"

"From what you know about Lex Luthor, Clark, don't you think that it is a possibility?"

"For his sake, he'd better not be," Clark groused under his breath. Lois set her hand on his arm to calm him down; strangely, it worked.

"So, you figure this Lex Luthor person knows what happened to my Lois?" Perry asked.

Lois looked at Clark and then at Perry, before speaking, "There are three scenarios. One, the fake Lois drew Lex out. Two, Superman coming on the scene drew Lex out. Or three, a combination of both. My guess is that Jaxon was sent here to spy on Clark, aka Superman. Lex is a big fan of Sun Tzu and does research on all his potential enemies before he acts. He probably sees Superman as the perfect foil against his villainy. He will try to test you in a manner of ways. I'm sorry to say it like this, Clark, but it probably saved Lana's life, her leaving you. He hurts the ones closest to you first."

Clark paled, taking her hand. "Then you aren't safe."

"Not as long as I'm staying on your couch. Thanks for the hospitality and all, but I think the sooner I get a job and a place of my own, the better. I'm sorry, Clark."

"Not as sorry as I am, Lo…Lucy." Clark sighed. It was for the best, anyway. "So, Mr. Olsen, do you think you could give Lucy El a job as my research assistant? I want someone I can trust, and who also has the brains to keep an eye on Jaxon."

"If she wants the job, it's hers. And she doesn't have to spy on Jaxon. I'll have him fired by morning." Mr. Olsen picked up his cordless phone.

"No!" Lois, Perry, and Clark all said at once.

"No?" Mr. Olsen asked, putting down his phone. "If he's a spy at my paper…"

"There isn't any proof that he is a spy," Perry reminded them. "That's one big lawsuit for wrongful termination, Jimmy." He turned to Lois. "Do you think this Jaxon fellow knows what happened to my Lois?"

"When I introduced myself to Jaxon earlier, he automatically asked if El stood for the letter L, like Lane, Lucy Lane. His exact phrasing. He wanted to know if I was Lois's little sister."

"That's circumstantial, sweetie."

She sighed. "That's all Lex ever gives me."

"If Jaxon's let go, Lex will know we are on to him," Clark explained to Mr. Olsen. "And we'll lose our only lead."

"I guess there is more I need to learn about the newspaper business."

"If I were still running the *Daily Planet*, I'd see if this Jaxon character has planted any bugs around Clark's desk. And check to see if anyone has accessed his computer," Perry suggested.

Mr. Olsen grinned, rubbing his hand together. "Now that's something right down my alley."

"Does your father still work at the NIA?" Lois asked her new boss. Clark's jaw hung open. She did not understand the word 'boundary', did she?

"How…? What? I have no idea what you're talking about," Mr. Olsen stammered.

Perry laughed. "Jimmy, you just hired yourself the best researcher out there. Luckily, she's on Superman's side."

"She is trustworthy, Clark, isn't she?" Mr. Olsen looked at Lois suspiciously.

"I'd trust her with my life," Clark answered.

"Can't get a better referral than that, can you, Jimmy?"

"Don't call me Jimmy, White, please. James." Mr. Olsen looked Lois over one more time. "Next time, Ms. El, remember where your paycheck comes from. I'm not a bad guy."

She smiled endearingly at him. "I know."

The doorbell rang and Mr. Olsen went to answer it. Clark pulled her to the side. "Don't smile at him like that. He's a highly eligible bachelor. We wouldn't want him to get the wrong idea."

"Jealous much, Clark," she teased him. "I'm taken, remember? Anyway, I tried to make myself look as horrible as possible; are you saying he'd be attracted to this?"

Clark looked at her ridiculous outfit from head to toe. "Some of us can still see the beautiful you."

"Don't try to charm me, Clark Kent." Lois patted him on the chest. "Jimmy's a sweet puppy, nothing more."

"Mr. Olsen is now your boss, Lucy."

"Jimmy is one of our best friends. I always smile at him that way."

"I just realized I've been misspelling the word 'stubborn' all this time. It is spelled Y-O-U." Clark threw up his hands.

Lois laughed.

"We'll talk about this later," Clark informed her.

She continued to laugh with a slight salute. "Yes, boss."

"Hey, you two, lunch," Perry called from the dining room.

Lois grabbed Clark's arm. "Thanks for getting me the job."

"I didn't; you did. That was some pretty amazing investigative work in there, Ms. El."

Lois sat down at the table and looked down at the pastrami sandwich Perry had ordered for her. The scent must have hit her nostrils, because seconds later she bolted from the table with her mouth covered.

"Down the hall and to the right," Clark called to her.

"What in heaven's name…?" Mr. Olsen asked.

Perry leaned over to Clark with his eyes on where Lois disappeared into the bathroom. "Clark, is there something you failed to mention between you and Lucy?"

Clark pasted an innocent smile on his face. "I have no idea what you mean, Chief."

"Son, I wasn't born yesterday and I didn't become editor because I can yodel." Perry held up his hands. "But if you're not ready for any announcements… fine by me."

Clark looked over at Lois's pastrami sandwich. "Mr. Olsen, you wouldn't happen to have any fruit in the kitchen, would you?"

Mr. Olsen waved him on. Clark took the sandwich into the kitchen. While cutting fruit in the kitchen, he overhead Olsen and White discussing him and Lucy.

"Fireworks, White?"

"Oh, definitely. I miss the newsroom, Jimmy. Something's always happening."

Clark returned a minute later with a cereal bowl filled with cut fruit. He took a sip of iced tea and a bite of his club sandwich before Lois returned.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that. Thank you, guys." She beamed at them.

Mr. Olsen looked at Perry as Perry looked at him. They both turned and looked between Lois and Clark and nodded. Lois was oblivious. He had to do something to cauterize this wound.

"Lucy, are you okay? Don't tell me you've got the stomach flu?" He looked directly at Lois and then cut his eyes toward Perry.

Her face went white. Good; she understood.

"Oh, no, Clark. Have you forgotten? I'm a vegetarian. Just the sight of meat…" She shuddered for good measure.

Perry raised a skeptical eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

Clark sighed in relief. Lois reached under the table and squeezed his hand. He knew she was just trying to thank him for the warning, but she was acting as if he was her Clark. He let go of her hand, patted it, and placed it back on her leg. Her eyes went wide for a split second before she winced, keeping her gaze focused on the fruit salad in front of her.

"Hey, Jimmy, does the paper still pay for Lois Lane's apartment here?" Perry asked out of the blue.

"Yeah," replied Mr. Olsen. "Automatic payments the first of every month, White. Were you thinking we should cancel the arrangement? It's a draw for me. I don't mind holding on to her stuff until we find her, especially if it seems we might have a new lead."

"Excuse me, gentlemen, did I hear you right? The paper pays Lois's rent? Her apartment downstairs is just as she left it, waiting for her to return?" Lois's eyes clouded over.

"Sure. It was the least we could do since she disappeared on assignment," Perry said, taking a bite of his potato salad. "And when Jimmy here took over the paper, I suggested he buy her building, too."

"Wow." She smiled, blinking slowly. Clark could see that her eyes were sparkling with tears. "That's very nice of you, Perry. Mr. Olsen." Her voice broke as she sniffed.

It appeared to Clark like Lois wanted to reach over and hug her old editor. He took a sip of his iced tea, ready to fly the two of them out of there if she tried. The moment passed and he relaxed.

"I was just thinking it's a shame about that apartment sitting there and you needing a place to stay," Perry continued. "It's been… what… three years."

Lois seemed too excited by the prospect of what Perry was on the verge of suggesting.

"Oh, Chief. That's kind of you to suggest, but Lucy can stay with me until she finds something she can afford," Clark said. "I'd hate to think what Lois would do to you, should she return and find you sublet her apartment with all her stuff in it to a total stranger."

"Clark!" Lois gasped. "Don't listen to him, Perry. What were you saying, before he so rudely interrupted?"

"I've stayed on your lumpy couch, Clark," Perry reminded him. "She needs some place better to stay. I know how little a research assistant gets paid and how high rents are in this town."

"As mayor, you should do something about that," Clark proposed.

"Hey! I pay a fair wage, White," Jimmy interjected.

"I'll take it under advisement, Clark," Perry retorted with a chuckle. "And this isn't a discussion about Metropolis's minimum wage, Jimmy. In the meantime, this little lady needs a nice place to stay, instead of a rathole in Suicide Slum with a half-dozen roommates. Don't you think she deserves better, Clark?"

The Chief smiled the smile of a matchmaker and Clark knew he was sunk. Perry didn't buy the vegetarian plea one bit. His old boss was doing this for him. Mayor White thought that he — innocent Clark Kent from this dimension — had knocked up his 'old friend' from college, who just happened to look like Lois Lane. Had he known all along about Clark's crush on Lois? Nothing got past Perry, but he couldn't tell him the truth.

"Yes, Chief, you're right. I would never let her stay in a place like that." Clark sighed as his former boss grinned in triumph.

"Well, Jimmy, what do you think? Should we let Lucy stay at Lois's until she gets back on her feet?"

If Mr. Olsen was hesitant about the proposition, he hid it well. "I didn't know Ms. Lane, White. None of us did. If you, as her boss and landlord, think she would be fine with it, I see no drawbacks if Clark here vouches for Lucy. You aren't a vandal or a thief, Ms. El, are you?" Mr. Olsen asked her, clearly knowing she was not. Clark couldn't believe it; she had charmed all of them.

"The only time things get broken in my apartment is when Clark visits." She laughed.

Perry raised his eyebrows toward Clark.

Clark cleared his throat. "Because of the super strength."

"Oh, right." Perry nodded.

"Would you like to see the place?" Mr. Olsen volunteered. "I've got the key somewhere."

Lois nodded. "Would I ever."

They all got up from the table and Clark volunteered to clean up, while Mr. Olsen searched for his master key. Lois helped clear the dishes.

In the kitchen, while they were alone, Clark whispered, "Stay with me. I can protect you."

She smiled and patted his arm. "No, you can't, Clark."

"Excuse me?"

"Even Kal knows that Superman is too important and busy to be any one person's bodyguard. He would want me to take some of the responsibility on myself. Lois's apartment is a good option and it's only temporary."

It was the first time Lois had referred to her Clark as Kal. It even sounded weird to Clark. He sighed; he hated to admit it but her reasoning was correct.

"Perry," Clark asked, drying his hands on a dish towel as he returned to the dining room. "Has anyone been in there, since she disappeared?"

"Sure. Sam and I took her fish tank to my house. And then Alice and I returned to clear out her fridge."

"I bet that didn't take long," Lois mumbled.

"Oh, Lois used to throw the most wonderful dinners. She's a gourmet cook. Had to learn after her mom left."

Lois dropped to the sofa and stared at the Chief. "Mom left?"

"Oh, yes. She was about eight or ten at the time. Her mom ran off to L.A. with some plastic surgeon and took her little sister, Lucy, with them. It crushed Sam, so Lois said; but I'm sure it crushed her too. Neither she nor Sam has seen them since. That was when he started drinking, although he was on the wagon when Lois disappeared." Perry shook his head. "Her disappearance ruined him. He quit his practice, started drinking full time, and working on strange experiments in his garage until the bank took his house. She was all he had left. Where was he when you last spoke with him, Clark?"

Clark felt like an animal facing down the barrel of a shotgun. He was never so glad that he was the one with the heat vision; the daggers her eyes shot at him would have been deadly.

"Clark?" Perry repeated.

"The homeless shelter on Fifth, Chief," he mumbled.

Lois grabbed the arm of the sofa, her eyes filled to the brim with tears. "That's horrible."

Clark sat down next to her. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She brushed off his apologies. "Later."

He nodded, understanding why she would not want to discuss this revelation here.

Mr. Olsen appeared at that moment, dangling keys from his upraised fingers. "Are we set?"

Lois wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded. After the other two had left the room, Lois socked Clark on the arm. "You should have told me."

"I was meaning to…"

Perry looked back to them. "Coming?"

"Just have to get my bag," Lois said cheerfully, grabbing her sack of books.

Clark took a deep breath and slowly released it. He wished he

had known about Lois's apartment being available during his search for her two and a half years ago. He was both excited and apprehensive about what he would find inside. Despite knowing he and the Lois Lane of this dimension were destined for each other, he was afraid that what he was about to learn would change how he felt about her.

***

Day 5

Dear Clark:

Wow! What a day! Where to begin? I guess I should begin at the beginning. I found my father…well, this dimension's Sam Lane, or what's left of him. He was still living at the shelter on Fifth. Actually, to be honest, I found him several days ago. But today I got up the nerve to talk to him. He's a shell of the man you and I know. I've got to get him sobered up. The brilliant doctor I know and love and need is still in there, but it's like someone killed his hope. My secret identity of Lucy El is working so well that he didn't recognize me. It hurt; physically hurt, Clark. It was as if someone had pulled his soul out. Like Jimmy's photo of… never mind. I brought him lunch. Pastrami, his favorite. This time, I was able to make it through lunch. It's hard to breathe through only your mouth when your nose isn't stopped-up. Well, you wouldn't know much about stopped-up noses, would you?

I tried to bring Kal — this dimension's Clark — with me to introduce me to this Sam Lane, but he refused. Do you what excuse he gave? "Sam doesn't like me." I have yet to meet a person who doesn't like Clark Kent, either of you. Even those who would swear that you (or Superman) are their dire enemy still *like Clark Kent. There is just something inherently decent about you that everyone likes. And if it takes the rest of my life to figure out your secret, so be it. I actually saw what I could only describe as fear in Kal's eyes when I suggested he come with me to talk to Sam. I wonder if it has to do with… No, I'll hold my verdict on that until I have more details. I've been doing my own private research on that front. Okay, now I'm just confusing you. I just don't want to write anything without all the facts. You know how I hate to rescind my theories.*

I moved into my old apartment last night. Kal wanted to make sure it was spotless before I moved in. He was worried the dust might upset my health. He even did most of the cleaning himself. I was beginning to think he wanted some time alone there before I cluttered up the place with my *Lois-ness. It wasn't even really dirty, just dusty. It was weird being 'home.' It didn't feel like my apartment. The clothes I'm sure would have still fit (for the moment at least — thank you, morning sickness, best diet I've ever been on) but Clark boxed them up, along with all her private papers. Like I would have…*

What am I saying, of course I would have. I rifled through Kal's papers. I'm an investigative reporter who has been put on a leash. I hate it.

At least I have my pet project of looking for this dimension's Lex Luthor. I know it makes your skill crawl thinking of me working on this task, but he doesn't know I'm Lois Lane. As far as I know, this Lex doesn't even know who Lois Lane is. I'm just sloppy, sweats-wearing, gum-chewing, glasses-wearing Lucy El, lowly researcher at the D.P. (the Daily Planet) Lex makes my skin crawl too, Clark. But if we can dig up something on him before he actively starts to ruin this world, I'll feel like I accomplished something other than being an incubator while I'm here.

Remember how I mentioned finding Jaxon working at the D.P.? Well, I started my job in research this morning and my desk is right next to his. Hopefully I'll be able to learn something being so close to him. Kal told me that Ralph threw a fit when Jimmy (I've really got to remember to call him Mr. Olsen) told him he'd hired me for Kal's research assistant. Kal says Ralph's an okay editor, but that he's a much better guy since he got married. I know. I couldn't believe anyone would marry him either. Did I tell you how he hit on me the day after you ent undercover (i.e. you left on your trip to New Krypton)?

I miss you. I wish you'd come home. I dreamed about my younger self last night. She's obsessed by what Star told her the other night about you coming home soon. I'm really proud of her… myself. I hit the ground running at the D.P. one day after being pulled three months into the future. There were a few hiccups, like not knowing Jimmy's girlfriend's name is Isabelle. I know that, so the younger me should have known it, too. Part of me is worried that that's the reason they broke up, because L.L. didn't remember her name. My gosh, does the world always circle around me?

Anyway, this younger me sees you in every brown-haired, bespectacled man she sees. It's like the first days after you left again. Perry's thrilled that she's eating pastrami once more. He really blamed my yogurt and banana diet on my breakdown. If he only knew the truth…

Back to my big day in this dimension. Day one at the D.P. as Lucy El. Nobody likes Ms. El. I think it's because Kal and I are so chummy — I mean, friendly. And everyone else would kill to work that closely with the man in blue. Poor Kal, I hadn't realized how hard it is to merge S.M. and C.K. into one public entity. I'm so glad my C.K. is still my secret S.M. or is it the other way around? My S.M. is my secret C.K.? Either way, I'm glad you're mine.

Come home soon. L.L.

***

Clark knocked on her door again. Where was she? He had told Lois that he would escort her to work.

What had she said? "*I'm a big girl, Clark. I don't need a babysitter."*

Lois opened the door, rubbing her hair with a towel. "Sorry, I overslept." Grinning, she stepped aside to let him in. She seemed almost bubbly. He hadn't seen her that happy since she had her first dream about the other dimension. "Kal's home! He was waiting for me on my front stoop when I got home from the Daily Planet. The younger me thought he was a mirage, but it was really him." She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Lois, the staff meeting," Clark reminded her.

Startled back into this reality, Lois ran to the bathroom. She returned a few minutes later, her hair still damp. She grabbed her purse and headed toward the door.

"Are you up for work today, Lois?" he asked.

"Of course." She glared at him.

He tapped his glasses and her eyes went wide again as she felt her face, then dashed back to her room.

"How do you remember all these things?" She laughed at herself with a shake of her head, double-checking her appearance in the mirror.

"Practice," he said as they stepped into the hall. "Tell me about Kal. I know you're dying to. Might as well get it out of your system before we get to work."

"I will never get Kal out of my system," she retorted. "Any more than you'll get her out of yours."

Clark's brow furrowed. "Her who?"

Lois smiled knowingly. "You know who."

He sighed. Oh, *that* her. "I've never met her; she's dead, remember?"

"If you say so." Lois grinned.

"If you don't tell me about Kal now, you won't get another chance."

"Right. Kal's back." She sighed wistfully. "He missed me as much as I missed him, and he still loves me and still wants to marry me."

Clark rolled his eyes. "And?"

She pouted. "Just as I suspected, he didn't come back alone."

"Brought the new wife?" Clark said without thinking. Lois hit him in the bicep. "Sorry, Lucy, that was uncalled for."

"Be nice to me, Clark Kent," she mumbled under her breath as they walked down the street. "I know how to kill you."

"I don't doubt it."

"The Kryptonians came back with him. And he was gone again after a minute." She sighed with a pout. "At least it didn't take him eight more months to return." She groaned, taking his arm. "It's exhausting living two lives. Especially one in disguise."

"Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"Same old same old."

Clark knew what she would say in response, but he couldn't avoid the subject much longer. "Did you call any of those doctors in the phone book?"

Lois slowed her gait. "You know I didn't."

"Why not?"

"You know why." She kicked a nonexistent rock. Then she glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Did you speak with Dr. Klein?"

Clark groaned.

"You said you would do anything to help," she reminded him.

"It's not exactly the easiest topic for me to bring up, Lo… Lucy."

She patted his arm. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No!" Clark shook his head. That would be worse. It was bad enough that Perry thought Lucy El was carrying his love child. He didn't want her anywhere near S.T.A.R. Labs.

"Will you come with me to the Fifth Street Shelter?" she asked quietly.

Wily woman. There was no way he could face Sam Lane. Not after all the horribly true accusations the man had lobbed at him. "Just let him be, Lucy."

"She would never forgive you if you do, Clark."

Direct hit, he winced. Stopping at the doors to the Daily Planet, he said, "She's dead, Lucy. Give it up." He continued inside, leaving her under the big metal globe.

"He's my father and she's my sister. I'll never give up. And neither will you."

Clark stopped just inside the lobby; she knew how to use his super hearing to her advantage. He rubbed his face and sighed, waiting for her to catch up. When she was standing next to him again, he murmured, "I'll stop by S.T.A.R. Labs after work today, okay?"

"Thank you." She smiled with a little skip in her gait as if she had won.

"But you need to stop all this sister talk. Jax already half believes you're Lucy Lane," he said in the privacy of the elevator.

"My sister!" Lois struck herself in the forehead with the palm of her hand. "Why didn't I think about that?"

"Lucy!" he warned as the doors opened. "Don't do anything rash."

She grinned at him with an innocent expression he didn't believe. "Who? Me?"

Jaxon ambushed Lois as soon as she sat down at her desk. "What was that about?"

Clark kept an ear on their conversation.

"He accused me of cheating at cards."

Clark sighed. That woman could lie on a dime.

"You two spend a lot of time together," Jax continued. "At work and not. Is there something going on there?"

Lie, Lois, lie, he silently urged. And then he realized that if she did lie, she would say they were involved. He glanced over to find her staring at him.

"Jaxon," she said, turning her back on Clark and lowering her voice. "Jaxon. Jaxon." She shook her head. "Do you think I would ever speak about my friend Clark here at the office? Especially when he's standing less than thirty feet away."

Jaxon gulped. "Oh, right."

Clark chuckled to himself. Super hearing, score one.

"Anyway," she continued. "I don't date."

"Oh?" Jaxon's curiosity was piqued.

What was she up to? Clark wondered, his brow furrowing.

"I gave it up for Lent."

Clark cracked a grin. Lois was too hilarious.

"You did?" Jaxon seemed shocked.

"No." Wearily, she raised a brow at him. "Jaxon, was there something you needed?"

"I just thought…" He looked nervous. "That we could maybe have lunch sometime, Lo… Lucy."

Clark couldn't believe the man had just asked her out. Lois didn't seem overly surprised. Was there more to the Jaxon Xavier story in her dimension that she didn't mention?

"I eat lunch. You eat lunch. I'm sure someday we'll eat lunch together, Jaxon. But not today; I have plans."

"With Clark?" Jaxon whined under his breath.

"No, not *with Clark*. With a source." She grabbed her notepad and headed toward the conference room. "Some of us here still talk to them."

Both Clark and Jaxon followed her with their eyes. How had she heard Jaxon? He must have spoken louder than Clark thought, but Jaxon had the same startled expression on his face.

As Lois passed Clark's desk, she whispered, "Stop it. I don't need you listening in on all of my conversations. You're acting like a stalker ex-boyfriend and it's creepy."

"Sorry." Clark grabbed his notebook and followed her into the conference room. "How did you hear him say, 'with Clark'?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "He was standing right next to me."

"Right." He tapped his pen to his notepad. "Who are you having lunch with today, if it isn't me?"

Lois turned and faced him directly. "If you must know, I'm meeting with a doctor."

He smiled. Then Clark wondered if she would want him to go with her. Before he could ask her, she continued, "Alone."

"Right."

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Ralph entered the conference room. Lois still couldn't believe he was their editor. Clark suddenly turned his head to the left and looked up as he listened. Strange, she could hear it too. Security alarm. He stood up and Ralph looked at him questioningly.

"Sorry," Clark apologized, grabbing his stuff. "First National Bank of Metropolis is being robbed."

Ralph waved him off. After Clark left, he pointed to another reporter. "Barry, go cover the robbery."

Barry grabbed his stuff and rushed off after Clark. That must be hard on Clark. To always be the first one on the scene and not get the scoop. But on the other hand, nobody would ever try to steal the Daily Planet from James Olsen with Superman's alter-ego on the payroll; Lois wagered it was a money-making machine.

Ralph continued, staring straight at her, "So, research assistant, what's Clark working on?"

Lois gulped. He had finished a story about the president's upcoming visit yesterday. She had no idea if he had another story in the works.

"Nothing. Great. Glad he convinced the higher-ups that you were worth it." Ralph's sarcasm struck her across the face. Lois wasn't going to let her mistake damage Clark's career.

"Actually, sir." She threw the 'sir' in for good measure. "Clark and I have a source about some employees or former employees at S.T.A.R. Labs doing some dangerous and illegal experiments on the side. Clark said he wanted to go to S.T.A.R. Labs to confirm the story with Dr. Klein." She and Clark hadn't

had time to compare their lists of names, but she bought him some time and got him an excuse to talk to Dr. Klein. She would get a name off her list, if it took all day. She would even put off talking to Sam Lane for another day.

Ralph looked surprised. “Have Clark check in with me after he talks to Dr. Klein.”

“Will do.” Lois made a note on her pad. She started writing down names of all the former crazies she could think of off the top of her head. She would check the archives after the meeting. She had been reading all of Clark’s stories from the past year until late last night and already had his preliminary list started.

When Clark returned, Lois noticed that he went directly to his desk without even a glance her way. He quickly wrote up his notes about the bank robbery and then he dropped the legal pad on Barry’s desk. Not Clark’s notes, she realized; Superman’s notes. It pained her to see Clark forced to be such a team player. He obviously was resigned to the fact.

Lois gave him a few minutes to unwind and check his messages, then she grabbed her notes and purse and headed to his desk.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” He glanced up to her and smiled for the first time since returning from the robbery.

“You want to talk about it?”

“I’m okay.”

“I’m available if you ever need to talk, Clark. You know that, don’t you?”

He glanced up at her with love, not desire or longing, but love. No, it couldn’t be love, it must be appreciation. “Thanks.”

“We need to talk.”

Clark winced. “I’m sorry about this morning, Lucy,” he started to say before noticing the slight shake of her head. “What’s up?”

“Have you heard back from Mr. Olsen since our lunch the other day?” she asked casually.

“No, why?”

This Clark did not pick up on her clues like her Clark. But then again, her Clark had three years of practice under his belt. “Take me out for coffee.”

He looked at her curiously. “You shouldn’t be drinking coffee.”

Lois shifted her weight, crossed her arms, and stared at him. Clueless. “Then take me out for a fruit smoothie.”

The light bulb turned on in his eyes and he grabbed his jacket. “Did you eat breakfast?”

“No.”

“You can’t be skipping breakfast anymore, Lucy,” he said as they walked to the elevator. “Your blood sugar will get too low and you’ll pass out.”

That sounded familiar. “You skimmed my books.” It wasn’t a question.

Clark smiled with guilt. “This is all new for me, too.”

Lois shook her head. “If I promise to eat three squares a day, will you promise to lay off?”

“Kal will thank me, even if you don’t,” he said as the elevator doors shut.

“Great. Now it’s like having two of you against me. I’ll never win another disagreement,” she groaned.

They argued until they sat down at an outdoors café table to drink their fruit smoothies.

“Mmmmm,” Lois sighed. “That’s good.” Her drink was gone within a minute.

Clark just stared at her and handed over his cup. “Is your appetite back?”

“Not really,” she said, taking his drink happily. “You’re right, though. I’m starving.”

“So, what’s up?”

Lois brought forth her notes. “Work. We never touched base on your current stories, so when you…” She motioned upward with her hand. “… at the meeting this morning, I didn’t have an answer for Ralph about what you were working on.”

“He couldn’t wait until I returned?” Clark shook his head.

“He was gunning for me,” Lois replied.

“Why you? You’re new. He’s usually gunning for me.”

“He doesn’t like the idea of me — that someone else made him hire me — and threw me a curveball to make me look bad,” she told him.

“I’m sorry. Do you want me to talk with him?”

“No, I don’t want you to talk with him. I doubt it would do any good anyway. But I jumped the gun trying to stay on his good side.” Lois took a big sip of his smoothie and explained what she had told Ralph at the meeting.

“You really want me to talk to Dr. Klein, don’t you? I don’t know what the rush is, we know what the outcome of his tests on me will be,” Clark said, indicating her stomach.

“True. But you need to get a rapport started now, in case we need to consult with him later… should complications develop.”

“Okay.” He held up his hands in surrender. “You win. You always win, don’t you?”

She smiled and showed him her notes about the dangerous people she and her Clark had come across in the three years they had been working together. “See if any of the names seem familiar. The ones you’ve put behind bars can be marked with a star. And we’ll cross-reference the rest with S.T.A.R. Labs employee files when we get back to the office.”

“Wow! This is quite a list.” Clark glanced at the list. “What are the plus signs for?”

“The ones I put away before or independently of Kal, who came after me when released or escaped.” She finished off Clark’s smoothie and tossed the cup in a nearby trashcan.

“Do you want another?” he asked.

“Probably shouldn’t push my luck.”

“The quickest way to get results would be to pass this list to Jaxon,” Clark began.

“You are kidding, right?”

He sighed. “Right.” He stood up.

“I wouldn’t give him more than three names at a time. See what he comes up with before we give him more.”

“You’d still give him names off our list?”

“Sure. You promised to give him computer research to do, and as long as we don’t let anyone see the list as a whole or both our lists…”

“True. We could give him three names off the Lois Lane pluses that correspond with my Lois’s stories.”

She grinned. *His* Lois. “Good idea, Clark.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll try to star as many of the other names as I can. Which will leave us with everyone else.” Lois ignored the red traffic light, only to be pulled back by Clark. “No more jaywalking.”

“Nobody’s coming.” She gestured at the empty intersection.

“It sets a bad example.”

“For whom?” Lois asked, her lips pressed together. “Superman?”

He glanced down at her tummy. “You know who.”

“Oh.” She scowled. “I’m a role model now, huh?”

He nodded. “To someone you’re super…”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Ultra Woman. And she doesn’t jaywalk.”

“No, she leaps over intersections in a single bound,” Lois murmured.

“Truth and justice…”

“I penned that phrase, you know.” She shot him grin.

“Regretting it now?” he asked as the crosswalk light changed to green.

"Not yet."

Five minutes after they had returned to the office, Clark handed back her notebook with the list of names. He had already starred his names. Strangely, there weren't that many stars. She wondered if it was because Superman had only been around in this dimension for four months or if it was the absence of Lois Lane. Was she a magnet for crazies? Lois thought about her ex-boyfriends and decided she might be. She remembered her Clark even called her a jinx once.

Clark might be fast, but she had already decided on two of the three names she would have Jaxon check out. The Prankster and her old Irish friend, Patrick Sullivan. She would come up with a third eventually, after the latest crisis was resolved.

Most of the bad guys on her list were old Lex Lab employees who went solo after their boss took a nosedive off Lex Towers. In this dimension that event never happened; something stopped Lex Corp from developing here in Metropolis. She wanted to do a search for the name Lex Luthor, Luthor Industries, Luthor or Lex anything, but it was all but impossible to do without Jimmy's help and without alerting Jaxon. When she got back to her dimension, she would insist that Perry give Jimmy a much-deserved raise. His job wasn't easy.

By noon she had one firm name to give to Clark: Dr. Alfred Carlton. He was a neuroscientist who had formerly worked for S.T.A.R. Labs, and had been forced to leave under some kind of cloud. He currently held a job as the doctor at the Beckworth School. She pulled Clark into the conference room and told him about Mentamide 5 and the Beckworth School. The story would be perfect for Clark's style: it dealt with abandoned and orphaned children. Nobody brought someone to action or tears like Clark when he wrote about neglected children. From what she had read of this Clark's stories, he might have an even stronger edge in that department than her Clark.

"This is great, Lois," Clark told her. "After lunch, I need—"

"Lucy," she corrected him.

He blinked. "What?"

"It's nothing, Clark. What do you need?"

"You said this Beckworth School stuff happened soon after you and Kal started working together, right?"

"Yes, two… two and a half years ago."

"Why do you think it hasn't been exposed before now?"

Lois explained to him her missing Lex link-in-the-chain theory. "Many of the names on my list once were funded by Lex Labs. Remove Lex's funding and those experiments either don't happen or don't happen as fast."

Clark nodded. "I need you to check the Beckworth School's records for any unexplained or unusual deaths since Dr. Carlton started working there, while I go talk to Dr. Klein."

"And I'll also see if I can find out who is funding his research now." She hesitated a moment and then plowed ahead with her question. "Do you know what you're going to ask him? Dr. Klein?"

"Probably best to approach him about routine stuff first. Feel him out." Clark paused, glancing at his watch. "Hey, you want to grab… Wait, when is your doctor's appointment?"

Lois shifted her gaze to gathering her notes, so she wouldn't have to look him in the eye as she lied. "One o'clock."

They headed out of the conference room. "Why don't I grab us some lunch?"

She turned to face him. What was she going to do with him? He needed a hobby. Something to distract him from following after her like a puppy. "What you need, Clark Kent, is a girlfriend."

Clark stopped dead in his tracks.

Ralph was passing by when she said this and he started chuckling. "You can say that again."

"Very funny," Clark said, not amused.

"You would think with all the guns Tempus put on the streets of Metropolis that you would be too busy to count my calories."

Clark winced. "I'm sorry. I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

She nodded.

He grabbed her elbow and led her over to his desk. "I can't help it, Lucy," he said, speaking softly. "I worry about you."

"And I appreciate it, I do." She placed a hand on his chest. "Which is why I think you need a girlfriend to distract you from me. You worry too much."

His face fell. "It's not that easy."

"I bet women are throwing themselves off bridges to get a date with a charming, handsome guy like you."

"Exactly." He plopped himself down in his chair.

"Oh." Lois had forgotten that everyone else knew he was Superman, too. "Well, just think about it. Maybe a name will jump out at you."

"There is only one person I'm interested in, Lucy, and she's unavailable," he murmured, looking away.

"I know, Clark. I feel it too. Another reason you need a distraction."

He looked up at her. "I don't feel comfortable discussing this with you."

"Tough." Lois grinned, heading back to her desk. "You don't have a choice. If you are going to meddle with my life, I'm going to mess with yours." She grabbed her purse, dropped her notebook inside it, and headed toward the elevator with a wave of her hand.

She could hear him chuckling behind her.

***

Clark was unsure exactly how to approach Dr. Bernard Klein. It wasn't everyday that he went up to a scientist and asked him to poke and prod him and delve into his deepest physical secrets. He had spent half of his life fearing and avoiding such an occurrence. Lois said that Kal went to his Dr. Klein as Superman, but he couldn't ask him questions about Dr. Carlton for his article as Superman. He decided to stick with his Clark Kent persona.

He found Dr. Klein in his lab mixing up a turquoise blue liquid in beakers.

"Ah, Clark Kent," Dr. Klein greeted him with enthusiasm. "What can I do for you? Any more trouble with Kryptonite?"

"No. I had some questions about Alfred Carlton." Clark had decided to lead with the story first and then go back to the personal stuff later. He pulled out his notebook and asked the scientist about his former colleague. Lois had been spot on. Dr. Carlton had done some experiments that violated the S.T.A.R. Labs policy on human experimentation. He had developed Mentamide 1, 2, and 3 while at S.T.A.R. Labs, but then was let go when he circumvented protocol and started testing Mentamide 3 on human subjects instead of primates. Luckily, no one was hurt.

"He left here roughly four years ago, Clark. Why all the sudden interest?" Dr. Klein swirled the blue liquid around and then smelled it.

"Off the record?"

The doctor nodded.

"I've got a source who thinks he might be using Mentamide 5 on children. How dangerous would that be?"

Dr. Klein's eyes widened. "Extremely. When testing a new drug on humans, children are the last subjects we would ever use. Their bodies and brains are still developing, and introducing a new compound could do damage at a cellular level. As I told you earlier, Mentamide was supposed to be an intelligence-boosting formula, and children's brains are still learning and developing. It could backfire on him and turn them brain-dead. Don't quote me on that. Without data, this is all conjecture. I wouldn't want to jump to any conclusions." He shook his head and took a sip of the blue liquid.

Clark looked at him with concern.

The doctor chuckled. "Decongestant."

"Oh." Clark folded up his notebook and thanked the doctor for his time. He hesitated, not quite sure how to broach the next subject. He liked the man well enough, but his abilities had always been his own private business.

"Was there something else?" Dr. Klein asked, glancing up and noticing that Clark was still there.

Clark looked around the lab room to make sure they were alone and shut the door to the hallway. "I don't know quite how to ask this…"

Dr. Klein quietly waited for him to find his words and continue.

"I need a doctor."

The scientist looked at him in dismay. "I don't know who to recommend, Clark. You aren't quite like any other human I've ever met."

"Exactly." Clark nodded. "I'm not human, I'm Kryptonian. I need a doctor with more knowledge than a regular medical doctor."

"What's seems to be the problem? Maybe I can help."

Clark smiled. Obviously, modesty was not in Dr. Klein's vocabulary. "Well, I'm not in need of a doctor at the moment, per se…" He paused again, trying to find the correct term.

"Should we discuss this in my office?"

"Thank you."

A half hour later, Clark was on his way back to the Daily Planet with an extra skip in his step. He had the beginning to his story and he had a doctor. Dr. Klein had been humbled and excited that Clark had thought of him to test his physical abilities and limitations. They discussed what tests they would run first and, more importantly to Clark, privacy. Dr. Klein agreed to keep all their conversations and his findings confidential under doctor—patient privilege. He would be working for Clark, not S.T.A.R. Labs or the city of Metropolis.

Clark did not bring up the possibility of him ever becoming a father. That would just be too much, too soon. They did set up an appointment for the following week to start on his tests. And they agreed if they were going to be testing his super abilities, it would be better if he came as Superman. Dr. Klein had him sign some liability paperwork. He listed Lucy El as the person to contact should anything go wrong. She was as close as he could get to next of kin.

He stopped at a phone booth to call her, but only got her voicemail. Strange, he assumed she would be back already from her doctor appointment. Then he remembered something she had said that morning. She hadn't called any doctors from the phone book. Which doctor was she referring to when she said she had an appointment? He got a cold chill down his back. She wouldn't. He grimaced. Stubborn, stubborn Lois. He knew that the doctor she had been referring to was his Lois's father.

Clark wanted nothing more than to fly down to the Fifth Street Shelter and drag her out of there, kicking and screaming if he had to, but he didn't. If she wanted to chance her and her baby's survival on some drunkard's ability to be the doctor he once was, that was her decision.

Lois was right. He had been interfering too much. Let her deal with the consequences of this decision. He knew she was going to drag him down with her. He sighed, resigned.

There was no way Sam Lane was going to believe that Lois was his daughter Lucy. Clark had met Lucy while interviewing everyone in Lois's family; she was an actress in Hollywood with shoulder-length, wavy brown hair and the opposite of Lois, personality-wise. And Sam Lane would once again blame him. Even if Sam fell for Lois's story, he still would never forgive Clark, especially when he found out about the baby. Oh no, Clark was doomed. He flagged down a taxi and headed back to the office.

"Clark! Clark!" Lois waved him down outside the Daily Planet, after he sent his cab on its way.

He paused and waited for her to catch up. "How was the doctor?"

"My mistake. My appointment was tomorrow, not today."

"Great. I can come with you. I am Kal's substitute, you know."

"Oh, I don't think that's such a good idea, Clark. If I show up with Superman on my arm, too many questions will be asked. We would become front-page news on every tabloid in the… Well, every tabloid. I'd better go alone."

"Whatever you say, Lucy."

She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "You know I lied, don't you?"

"Yep."

"Do you know what I did instead?" she asked.

"How is Sam?"

"He's fine. Actually, he's going to come and stay with me for a while, so I won't be alone. Isn't that great?" She smiled in triumph.

Clark groaned. "Did you tell him that you're working at the *Daily Planet*? Did you warn him not to contact you here? Did you tell him why? Did you mention that your only other friend in this dimension is the one man he hates?"

"No. No. No. And no, he doesn't hate you. I thought we could explain the Lois Lane trap plan thingy to him over dinner tonight. Together." Lois looked at him hopefully.

"Not we, darling. You. This was all you. You deal with it. Don't be surprised if he doesn't want to have anything more to do with you. I'm hands off, remember." He turned and entered the building.

"Clark!" She caught him by the elevators. "You're mad at me."

He ignored her.

"I don't like it when you're mad at me."

He got into the elevator. She followed and stood behind him.

"Please, Clark. I need you."

He smiled. It was nice that she admitted it, but he wasn't going to cave. Not on this.

"At least tell me how your interview with Dr. Klein went."

The elevator chimed.

"Too late, Lucy. Another time." The doors opened. "And Lucy, I need that information on the Beckworth School." He returned to his desk.

She returned to her desk and sat down with a huff. "I'm sorry, Clark," she whispered.

He turned away so she wouldn't see the smile on his lips. He pulled out his notepad and flipped through the phone book. "No, you're not, Lois," he mumbled under his breath. "Not one bit."

He glanced up at her gasp. Lois was staring at him, her eyes wide with shock. It looked almost like she had heard him. He shook away that feeling. There was no way she could have heard him. She was at least six desks away and the bullpen was loud and noisy as usual. He glanced around to see if anyone else could have heard him. Nobody had been close enough. Even Jaxon was at the coffee machine on the other end of the room.

Clark found the number he had been searching for and jotted it down on his notepad. Then he glanced back at Lois. She was still staring at him, almost frozen. When she caught his concerned expression, she shook her head and started typing on her computer. That was strange. Wonder what spooked her?

***

Day 6

Concubines, really! Clark, what am I going to do with you? But you do look regal in those black tights. You can bring a pair of those back home when we… sorry, you finally get rid of Lord

Nor. Oh, how I hate him. And what's up with these Kryptonians? Have they never heard of privacy? Knocking? Tell me again, how these people are civilized? Well, at least we are together. Even if I'm on a leash, Lord Kal-El. It was Ching's idea to make me your concubine, but you figured that out, didn't you? Or did you send him to me?

The horrible day I had yesterday seems to pale after dreaming about yours. Kal isn't speaking to me. I went behind his back and told Sam Lane that I was his daughter, Lucy Lane. I hated lying to Sam, but how else was I going to get him to trust me. I know what you're thinking, Clark. 'Lois Lane, how are you ever going to have anyone trust you by being dishonest?' Well, you're the expert on that, why don't you tell me?

Sorry, that was nasty of me. I love and miss you so much. I feel more alone in this world than ever. I need a doctor I can trust. And not just any doctor. I don't want to worry you, but I don't know who else to tell. I'd discuss this with Kal, if he were speaking to me… I know you'll think I'm being paranoid. It's hard to live this life during the day and the younger me with you at night in my dreams. I wake up more exhausted than rested. Now I'm hearing things. I could have sworn I heard Kal muttering across the noisy bullpen yesterday afternoon. Am I going crazy? And I don't have you to hold me and tell me everything will be all right, except in my dreams.

Well, time to get up and eat breakfast. Let's hope it stays down. Kal is worried that I'm not eating enough for two. Sometimes he's an insufferable mother hen. I've decided to get him a girlfriend. Any recommendations? Don't answer that! I don't want to know.

Miss you, Clark. Stay safe. Yours always, LL

Lois set down her notebook next to the bed. Six o'clock. Ugh. Morning meeting was at seven o'clock sharp, so she needed to shake her tail feathers. She ran and took a quick shower.

It was Friday, again. Exactly one week since she had found out she was pregnant. She exhaled, pulling a comb through her hair. And what a week it had been. She looked at her stomach. It was still as flat as it had been a week ago, if not more concave. Maybe Clark was right and she needed to eat more. She pulled out the toothbrush he had given her and sighed. She didn't want to do this.

She missed this Clark. He was the proxy for her Clark. Not seeing this Clark made her miss her Clark more. She quickly brushed her teeth, without toothpaste, and was able to make it out of the bathroom without praying to the porcelain god.

She got dressed in her last clean outfit. Time to either go shopping or do laundry. The money Clark gave her on that first day had been quickly been depleted by books, bananas, yogurt, and secret-identity costume items. She wondered when she would get her first paycheck. How, in the course of one week. had she alienated the one person she needed in this dimension more than any other? She had to figure out a way to get Superman on her good side again.

Lois went into the kitchen and found Sam Lane sitting at the dining room table, drinking coffee. She wondered where the coffee came from; she hadn't bought any. Had he found it on a shelf from his Lois's stash? Ugh. Three-year-old coffee. She convinced him at lunch that she was his daughter, Lucy Lane — not too difficult given her obvious similarity to his Lois. Perry had been correct. He hadn't seen Lucy since the age of seven. She convinced him to move in with her at Lois's old apartment. He was shocked that it was still intact, just as she and Clark had been.

Actually, Clark wandered around the apartment on that first visit like it had been a shrine to his Lois Lane. Trying not to touch anything, but unable to resist examining everything. He had picked up a picture of Perry on skis and correctly identified it as the ski trip they had taken before she disappeared. He knew more about his Lois than he let on; Perry had mentioned on her previous visit to this dimension that he talked about Lois daily.

She was beginning to suspect that she was a stand-in for his one true love, as well. It would explain his removal of all of the other Lois's personal items before she moved in. He didn't want her wearing his Lois's clothes, going through her papers, looking at her photographs.

Lois touched Sam on the shoulder on her way to the refrigerator. "Good morning, Daddy."

Their conversation the night before had gone weirdly. At dinner — cheap microwave TV dinners — Lois told Sam that she was working undercover at the *Daily Planet* with Clark. He hadn't been happy about that. He did not want her to have anything to do with "that man."

Maybe Clark was right; he had gotten on Sam Lane's bad side. She wondered how. Sam told her, to her relief and amazement, that despite appearances, he actually had been sober for four months. He said it was seeing Lois at the debate that had jolted him out of his complacency.

With tears in her eyes, Lois admitted that it wasn't his Lois that he had seen on the TV that night, but her. Then she watched as the little flicker of hope that she had lit in his eyes died again. She kindled that hope by admitting that there was a man at the *Daily Planet* who they thought might have information about Lois.

It was a lie, but it was the same lie they had told Perry White and James Olsen. It was the basis of Lucy El being in Metropolis and for her getting the job at the paper. Why should Jaxon have any information on Lois? She figured he was really there to spy on Clark. Lex would consider Superman the only real rival he had. Lex would have no idea that he wasn't even a blip on Clark's radar, hiding out wherever he was. But Superman posed a challenge that Lex had never been able to resist.

Lois had told Sam that nobody in Metropolis except Clark knew her real identity, and they wanted to keep it that way. So, he was not allowed to call her at the paper unless it was a dire emergency and even then, not to reveal his identity to whomever answered the phone.

She pulled a vanilla yogurt out of the fridge and as she turned around found a bag of groceries on the counter.

Lois was surprised; she thought Sam was as broke as she was. "Did you go shopping, Daddy?"

"No," he answered tersely. "It was sitting on the counter when I came in this morning."

Ah, Clark. He must have known they would need more food and were short on cash. That was where her father had found the coffee. She saw the can sitting on the counter next to the coffee machine. She unpacked some granola, crackers, orange juice, baby carrots, and more yogurt. She poured two glasses of orange juice and put one in front of Sam.

"Does that man have a key to this apartment?" her father asked.

Lois sat down next to him at her breakfast bar. "No, Daddy. He comes in through the window."

He turned and looked at the six-foot tall windows that lined her living room. "I don't like this, Lucy. That man is not trustworthy. You shouldn't let him into this apartment at all."

She cut up a banana into a bowl and covered it with yogurt and granola. "I trust him, Daddy. He would do anything to find Lois. And he has my best interests at heart. Look, he brought us food." She pushed the bowl towards him and started preparing another for herself.

"Anything to find your sister? Like run around in tights? Like marry that blonde woman? Like expose you to that Tempus fellow? I don't see how we are any closer to finding Lois now than we were two years ago, when he promised never to give up searching for her."

Lois nicked her thumb with the knife. “Clark promised you what? When?”

Sam glanced over at Lois. “You cut your thumb, Sweetie.”

She glanced down at her thumb and stuck in her mouth. “It’s nothing, Daddy. What were you saying about Clark?”

He frowned at her. “Where’s your first-aid kit?”

Back in her dimension, she had one in every room in her apartment. Human jinx. But here? “Try the bathroom.”

Sam returned a minute later with a bandage. He led her to the kitchen sink and washed her thumb, dried it, and covered it with the band-aid. He then kissed her on the forehead. “There, all better.”

Lois wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. “I missed you, Daddy.”

“And I missed you, pumpkin.”

She sat back down at the bar and finished preparing her breakfast.

“I spoke to Mike yesterday, after you went back to work.”

Lois froze. She had forgotten about Uncle Mike. “You didn’t tell him about me, did you? The less people who know, the better.”

“Then why did you come looking for me?” Sam asked, digging into his yogurt.

“When Clark told me that you were at the shelter, I couldn’t leave you there.”

He scowled. “That man.”

“Okay, Daddy. Enough.” Lois put down her spoon and faced Sam. “Clark is good, decent, and hard-working, and he also happens to be the most caring person in Metropolis. What exactly do you have against him?”

“He’s a liar.”

Lois laughed. “Not Clark.”

“He gave up on Lois.”

Lois’s heart sunk down to her knees. That was why Clark did not want to get within a mile of her father. He had promised to never give up looking for her and then a part of him had when he agreed to marry Lana. He had not only broken her father’s heart, but also his own. That was why Clark was always telling her that the love of his life was dead; he felt that by giving up on her, he had killed her. Poor Clark. It must have been agony to have her doppelganger show up as she had, bringing up all those old emotions.

“He brought me here to help him flush out her killer,” she whispered.

“Don’t excuse his behavior, sweetie. You know in your heart that it’s true.” Sam covered her hand with his. “And your sister isn’t dead.”

The phone rang and Lois picked it up.

“Tick-tock,” she heard Clark’s voice on the other end.

“Are you coming to pick me up?”

“No.”

“Chicken.”

Sam looked at her with a curious expression. She covered up the mouthpiece and whispered to her father, “Clark asked what we would like for dinner.”

“Liar, liar,” he said on the other end of the phone. She pressed her lips together.

“I’m not eating with that man, Lucy,” Sam replied. “I’d rather eat at the shelter.”

“See, I told you.” She could hear Clark’s heart breaking.

“This is ridiculous. We’re all on the same side,” she said to both of them.

“Don’t forget your glasses.” Clark hung up.

Lois sighed and hung up the phone. “I’ve got to go.”

“Finish your yogurt.”

She downed her breakfast and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m going to be late for work.”

“Should I eat at the shelter tonight?” he asked.

“You aren’t homeless anymore, Daddy,” Lois said. “Clark respects you too much to come if you don’t want him here.”

“Good.”

Lois rolled her eyes and went to grab her stuff. When she returned, she found her father washing the breakfast dishes. “You never told me what you and Uncle Mike spoke about.”

“I told him that I moved into an apartment. So, he said I could come by and pick up some clothing if I wanted to. And no, I didn’t mention you. I thought it would be a great surprise for him.” He sighed. “Maybe some other time.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Some other time. Definitely. You can tell him that you spoke to me on the phone and that I send my love.” She checked her appearance in the mirror by the door. “Why didn’t you move in with Uncle Mike when you lost the house?”

“He agreed to hold on to my stuff for me until I sobered up. But you know your uncle… no, I guess you don’t. Mike expected me to take some responsibility for myself before he would agree to help me out. He refused to help someone who wouldn’t help himself.”

Lois nodded and bit her tongue in agreement with her uncle. The real Lucy Lane hadn’t seen her Uncle Mike in almost twenty years, she wouldn’t remember what he was like.

“Get going, Lucy. You wouldn’t want to be late.” He practically pushed her out the door.

“Bye, Daddy.” She waved, hurrying down the hall.

Clark was waiting for her at the end of the block with a strawberry smoothie.

“Who’s the liar now?” she asked with a grin, taking the drink from him. “Does this mean you’re talking to me again?”

He contemplated that for a minute. “Perhaps.”

“He’s sober. Four months.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Thanks for the groceries.” She lowered her voice. “I missed you yesterday.”

“Don’t. Lucy, please,” he asked, looking away. “Any news from Kal?”

She grinned. “Guess who is the new concubine for the leader of the Kryptonians?” She looked at him over the top of her drink.

“Concubine?” He threw his head back and laughed. “Get out of here!”

“I know. Some civilization you’ve got there, Clark.”

“She’s not going to activate the curse, is she?”

“I hope not.” Lois’s eyes widened. “She’d better not. Anyway, he’s technically still married to Zara, but it’s just a political sham marriage.”

“So, why have they come back on Earth?”

“Lord Nor has taken Smallville captive,” she informed him.

“And he is?” Clark asked. It was almost like she was recounting the details of her favorite TV show that he didn’t follow.

“The big bad guy on New Krypton. The one Zara would have had to marry if Kal-El hadn’t returned with her.”

“I’m sorry. Is everyone all right? Kal’s folks?”

“I don’t know. Martha called yesterday morning, but then the phone died. I have been trying to get a hold of her since.” She took the last sip of her smoothie and then dumped the empty cup in a trash can. “I only found out when Ching made me Kal-El’s concubine.”

Clark shook his head.

“Did I mention that I’m on a leash?”

This time, he couldn’t stop himself from laughing.

“I know.” She giggled. “If it wasn’t so horrible, it would be hilarious.”

He stopped laughing. “What’s so horrible?”

“Lord Nor and his men have turned the people of Smallville

into slaves. He has them penned up and isn't feeding them or giving them water. His men are using them as target practice. Kal and I infiltrated the slave community and he built them a well."

Clark stopped and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, Lucy. I'm so sorry."

"Nor has threatened to take over Earth, starting with Metropolis. He wants to be a god."

"I wish you had contacted me." He looked down, distressed. "I could have taken Kal's place."

"That wouldn't have stopped Lord Nor from wanting to be a god. Kal has everything under control." She took a deep breath. "When he vanquishes Lord Nor, then we can send the Kryptonians back to New Krypton and Kal and I can go back to our lives. And get married. Then I can worry that she'll reactivate the curse."

A shadow passed over Clark's face. "I just thought of something, Lucy. Tempus was right."

This time Lois stopped cold. "Excuse me?"

"The Kryptonians did come and try to take over the Earth. He was right. Not about me, but he was right."

"Well, Tempus was from the future," Lois explained. "A future where Superman is revered as the Father of wonderful utopia."

"Nice." Clark shot her an uncomfortable grin as he looked around. There were still too many people walking the streets with guns; less than during the election, but still more than there ought to be. "Something to look forward to."

"Sorry, my dimension. I don't know your dimension's future. Anyway, Tempus probably knew all about this New Krypton invasion and how Kal stopped it. The guns he sold here wouldn't have done much good against an army of Kryptonians, would they?"

"True." They had reached the Daily Planet building. "Good intel, by the way, on the Beckworth School. I turned in my story to Ralph last night. Detective Henderson is coming by today to discuss the details of an arrest warrant. Let's hope we can stop Dr. Carlton before any more kids are hurt. I'm sorry about Amy Valdez. Did you know her?"

Lois nodded as they stepped into the elevator. "She was a good kid. Reminded me a bit of myself. I had been hoping that in this dimension, her mother wouldn't have had to give her and her sister up."

"I don't think my world is the one with the silver linings." Before the doors opened, Clark continued, "Stop by my desk after you drop off your stuff and I'll give you a short list of my current story ideas in case I have to dash. We'll make it an everyday occurrence, okay?"

"Thanks." They stepped off the elevator and Lois caught his arm. "Clark, a world with Superman always has hope."

Clark cupped her jaw in his hand and smiled, then walked to his desk. She released a breath she hadn't known she was holding and grabbed hold of the railing. Her body ached to its core. He needed to stop touching her like he was her Clark.

***

After the morning meeting, Lois and Clark were sitting at his desk discussing the next name to check out on their lists, when Clark leaned back in his chair. "So, am I bringing chicken for dinner?"

"No." Lois pouted with a sigh. "You were right."

Clark's eyes glowed. "I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that."

She pressed her lips together. "You were right. I was wrong. Happy, now?"

His smile spread a little wider as he laced his fingers behind his head. "Slightly."

"He doesn't want you there. We'll have to make do with my cooking."

"I hear Lucy El is a gourmet cook." He winked at her.

"Not in my dimension," she murmured. "I can burn water."

"Ouch."

"I eat a lot of takeout and microwave meals," she said, standing up and grabbing her notepad.

"Tsk-tsk," Clark said with a shake of his head. "You should really learn to cook. It's healthier."

She glared at him. "I'll add it to my to-do list. Maybe I can learn by osmosis." She turned away to return to her desk, when she noticed a blonde woman in a dark suit stepping out of the elevator. She gasped as her face went white and her knees changed to jelly.

"Whoa there, Lucy," Clark said, catching her. "You okay? You look like you saw a ghost."

Lois raised her arm and pointed. "Mayson Drake."

Clark set her down in his chair and returned a moment later with a cup of water.

"She's dead." Lois took a sip of water.

He glanced over his shoulder at Mayson standing just outside the elevator staring at them. "No, she's not."

"I saw her car blow up. She died right in front of us."

"Calm down, Lucy," he whispered. "In this world, she's still alive."

Lois took another sip of water and a deep breath. "I'm okay now. It was just a shock. It happened right after our first…" She took a gulp of water and her eyes lit up. Turning to look Clark straight in the eyes, she said, "I just thought of who you should ask out." She nodded toward Mayson.

"No. Lucy. No." Clark shook his head. "Remember our conversation yesterday. Mayson's a big bridge-jumper."

Lois stuck her index finger into her mouth and lightly bit it. "Really? The Mayson Drake I knew couldn't care less about Superman."

"What?!" He glanced between Lois and Mayson, who was coming closer by the second.

"But she was gaga over Clark Kent," Lois murmured, standing up and hitting him in the chest with her notebook. "Think about it." She walked back to her desk with a grin.

"No. Absolutely not," he sputtered.

"Everything all right?" Mayson asked, suddenly next to him.

"Ah, fine." Clark swallowed. Lucy had completely knocked him off balance. "Hi, Detective Drake."

"Clark, I've told you. You can call me Mayson." She smiled at him. "Henderson's knee was bothering him. I hope you don't mind that I came to discuss the Beckworth School with you instead."

His voice got caught in his throat. "I don't mind."

"Who's that?" Mayson asked, glancing over toward Lois. "She looked quite sick."

"That's… uh… Lucy. Lucy El, my new research associate. An old friend from college." Clark offered Mayson the seat just vacated by Lois and sat down in the other seat. "You reminded her of someone she used to know."

"Old friend, huh?"

"Just friends." Clark couldn't believe those words came out of his mouth. He wanted to bite his tongue.

Mayson gave him a large smile. "Really?"

Was there some truth to what Lois said? He couldn't ask Mayson out. He was in love with Lois. Not the Lois who had just left his desk, but the one who had disappeared three years earlier. And Mayson was one of the biggest Superman fans he knew. Wasn't she?

They had been thrown together a half-dozen times in the six months since she had become Henderson's partner. She was always friendly with him, but three months ago she started hitting on him in earnest. After he became Superman, but also after he had removed the photo of Lana from his desk. Was Lois right? Did Mayson like Clark Kent better than Superman? Intriguing.

He realized he was staring at her when her smile became an ear-to-ear grin.

"Sorry." He shook his head. "Here's the information I have on the Beckworth School, and most importantly, Dr. Alfred Carlton." He pulled the file off the top of a pile on his desk, when he suddenly heard the radio across the room.

We are receiving reports of an airplane that has lost contact with ground control just outside of Cleveland, Ohio.

He stood up and grabbed his tie. "Mayson, I'm sorry. I've got to fly."

She looked concerned. "What's the matter?"

"Missing airplane outside of Cleveland."

"Oh." She looked more disappointed than excited about the prospect of him becoming Superman.

"Can you come by later and we can discuss it in more detail over dinner?" Had he just made dinner plans with Mayson Drake? What was the matter with him? It was Lois. She made him do it. How could she turn his world upside down so quickly? How could he do this to the Beckworth School students? "You can talk to Lucy, too. She knows everything I do."

"Go!" Mayson shooed him off with a grin. "I'll see you tonight."

***

Clark walked Mayson to his front door. He wasn't quite sure what to do at this point in the evening. "Should I walk you home?"

Placing her hand on his chest, Mayson smiled. "I drove."

"Oh."

She leaned towards him and lightly placed a kiss on his lips. "Thank you for dinner." She kissed him again. It was nice.

"Thanks for giving me the heads-up on the arrest this afternoon."

"Thanks for the information on Carlton. We like to keep scum like that away from kids." She opened the door. "See, you don't need a blue suit to be a hero." She stepped through the door with a wave.

"Bye." Clark stood in the door for a moment and watched her leave. She thought he was a hero. Clark Kent. He smiled and shut the door. Then, from a distance, he heard a scream.

Duty called. He stepped into his bedroom and was back a moment later dressed in blue. But he wasn't only Clark Kent anymore. He flew through the living room window and was gone.

Deep into the night, he returned. He had saved the high school girl from that man in the alley behind the cinema. Stopped the jewelry store robbers before they had gotten any further than breaking the window. Prevented the drug dealers from picking up that shipment at the docks. Saved four people from a grease fire at the diner. Helped that woman who tripped crossing the street from almost getting hit by a car. And caught the drunk who fell off his high-rise balcony. He hated Friday nights. He took off the blue suit and climbed into a hot shower.

After changing into boxers and a t-shirt for bed, he washed his blue suit. With a little zap-zap of heat-vision, it was dry and ready to be put away in the secret compartment. The cape slipped off the hanger and, as he bent down to retrieve it, he found the plastic bag with Lois Lane's pale pink pantsuit. Should he wash it? He took the soft fabric out of the bag and sniffed.

Suddenly, his mind transported him back into the clouds over the Daily Planet building and Lois was kissing him. These weren't the soft, gentle kisses of Mayson, but the passionate, nerve ending-exploding kisses of Lois. He dropped the suit and found himself floating above his living room. He exhaled and floated back to the floor. He picked up Lois's suit and hung it up in his closet. He would think about washing it another day. His mind and heartbeat were racing with thoughts of Lois. It was as if she were part of his bloodstream. He could even hear her calling his name.

"*Clark! Where are you? I need you. Clark!"* She was calling to him and she was crying.

***

Dressed in his black Kryptonian uniform, Clark stepped into the gold cage. "They'll kill you if I escape." He stood there stoically as the executioner turned the knob and he faded into gold dots. Lois screamed.

"No, Clark!" She was awake, tears streaming down her face. Clark's body was being disintegrated. "Clark!" she called. She needed him. "Clark! Where are you? I need you! Clark!"

A gust of wind blew through her apartment and a moment later, Superman was holding her. "I'm here."

She pulled him closer. "They executed Clark." She choked back a sob. "They separated his molecules and spread them over several galaxies." Tears poured out of her eyes, dampening his blue suit. Neither of them noticed. "Hold me," she whispered.

"I am holding you, Lois."

She shivered. "I can't feel you. I'm so cold."

He held her tighter, running his fingers through her hair.

Lois grabbed his cape and draped it over herself. "He's gone. Just like that. He's gone." She glanced up into Clark's eyes. This Clark was here. He was warm, caring, and he loved her. He wanted her, she could see it in his eyes. "Clark," she moaned, pressing her lips to his.

For a moment he allowed the kiss. "No, Lois." His voice broke.

She pushed him away, but he didn't move.

"You don't want me." He swallowed, choking out the words. "You want him."

"So?" she murmured, kissing down his neck. He tensed for a moment and then melted.

He took a deep breath. "You'll regret it in the morning."

Lois didn't care about the morning, she just wanted to feel something other than this pain. She started crying again. "Don't leave me. Stay with me tonight. I don't want to be alone."

"Of course," he said, running his fingers through her hair once more. She placed her head on his "S" and cried herself to sleep. He continued to hold her all night.

***

"What's going on here?" Sam Lane's voice crashed through Clark beautiful dream, waking him. He was still in bed with Lois. Her arms were wrapped around him, her head still on his chest.

Clark placed a finger to his lips and he gently moved her head to the pillow. He swung his legs off the bed and covered her with a blanket. He walked out of the room and shut the door.

"What are you doing with my daughter?"

"Lucy had a nightmare and called me," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. He was never going to earn this man's trust at this rate.

"I can't talk to you in that getup," Sam said, waving a hand at the blue suit.

Clark had forgotten he was still dressed as Superman. It was becoming like a second skin to him. He stepped into the front hall closet and returned dressed in slacks, a t-shirt, and glasses. "Better?"

Sam pointed a finger in Clark's face. "I don't want you anywhere near her. Leave us alone."

Clark stood his ground. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't do that."

"Why in the blazes not?"

"Because I made a promise to keep her safe," Clark answered. "And I don't break my promises."

Sam scoffed. "To whom did you make this promise?"

Clark hesitated. "How much about her life did Lucy tell you?"

Sam's face grew red. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Well, that answered that question. "I promised Kal that I would watch over her."

"Who is Kal?"

"Her husband," Clark stated.

Sam Lane staggered backwards and sat down. "She's married? How long?"

"Not long." Not at all, actually. But he knew that Lois would rather be thought of as a widow than an unwed mother. "She called me last night, because she had a nightmare about Kal being blown up and didn't want to be alone."

"Where is this husband of hers? Why isn't he watching over her?" Sam's world view was crumbling.

"He's protecting the innocents caught in a civil war."

Sam looked up at him from the sofa. "Berkistan?"

Berkistan was nowhere near Smallville, but it was still on Earth. It would do. "Yes."

"Why does Lucy need looking after?"

"Because I'm pregnant," Lois answered from behind them.

Sam crossed over to her and wrapped his arms around her. "Sweetie, why didn't you tell me?"

Lois looked at Clark over her father's shoulder and mouthed a 'thank you' to him. "Well, Daddy. It was a lot of information for one day. I didn't know how much you could handle."

"I'm sorry, I should have been there for you. I've been selfish."

"We're all guilty of being selfish, Daddy," she sighed with a quivering voice.

"How far along are you?"

"Six weeks."

"That's pretty early. Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Do you have a good doctor?"

Clark went into the kitchen to make coffee. He wanted to leave, but he couldn't — not with last night unresolved.

"Do you remember me mentioning that everyone is selfish?"

Clark grinned. At least she was being honest for once. He looked through her cabinets and fridge. They really did need more food. He snuck out the front door. Ten minutes later, he returned with a grocery bag full of food.

Lois and her father were still talking in the living room. He put the croissants in the oven to warm. He plucked a couple of bananas off the bunch and diced them up with the fresh berries.

"I still don't understand, Lucy. Why would Kal want to involve *him*?"

Clark sighed. He was still the bad guy in this scenario.

"Kal would do anything to keep me safe. Even call in a favor from a stranger," Lois tried to explain. She sounded tired. It must be hard for her to talk about her Clark after learning he was strewn across the universe.

"Yes, but that's what I don't understand, sweetie. What are you to this man? What kind of hold does Kal have over him? Can we trust him?"

"One hundred percent, Daddy. Clark is helping me out for one reason and one reason only: Lois. He would do anything for her. He told me that much after he returned me home after the election. The whole impersonating Lois idea was mine. Not his. I showed up without his knowledge. I broke up his relationship with Lana. I convinced him to use his superpowers for good, and to put on the blue suit as a secret identity. Me. Me. Me." She sat down next to her father. "I'm the one who ruined Clark's life, yet he still promised me that if ever I needed anything, anything at all, I was to call on him. He loves Lois that much. So, after Kal left on his assignment and I found out I was pregnant and alone, I called. Clark dropped everything. He got me a job and this apartment. He makes sure I have enough to eat and that I'm taking care of myself." Lois was in tears. "Kal doesn't even know I'm pregnant, Daddy. I can't contact him."

"Oh, sweetie."

"So when I had a nightmare last night about Kal dying, I called the one person I trust more than any other to come and hold me and tell me it was just a bad dream. Someone I knew I could depend on to always do the right thing." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "Last night when it felt like Kal had died, I couldn't cope. Today, by the light of the day, I know Kal's still alive. That we will be together again someday." She glanced over her shoulder to Clark.

A chill shivered down his spine. So her Clark wasn't dead after all. Everything she had just told Sam was true. He wanted to hold her and comfort her, but knew he couldn't do that. Not anymore. This Lois belonged to Kal-El. She would always belong to him; she always had. And his Lois was gone, long gone. He gazed out the kitchen window, not able to look at them anymore.

Sam lowered his voice and leaned toward his daughter. "No offense, Lucy, but it sounds like he has a crush on you, not Lois."

Clark rolled his eyes; he could not catch a break with that man.

"Don't be silly, Daddy. He knows I love Kal."

"Don't you find it a little creepy, Lucy, that he's in love with someone he's never met?"

Great. A creepy stalker in blue tights. His standing with Sam Lane was going downhill fast.

"I think it's romantic." Lois smiled with a sigh. "He was assigned by the paper to investigate her disappearance. The more he learned about her, the more he wanted to know. Until one day, he realized that our tough-as-nails Lois was the one person in the world that could make him feel whole. So he dedicated his life to finding her. When we find Lois and bring her back home, I just know he's going to sweep her off her feet. You know what an incurable romantic Lois is. She's going to love him at first sight."

Sam shook his head. "You might not want to build up so rosy a future in his mind, Lucy. She might not like him."

Lois laughed. "Daddy, everybody likes Clark."

Her father stood firm. "I don't."

"Of course you don't like him. He's in love with your little girl. No man would be good enough for you. For heaven's sake, Daddy, he's Superman! You're not going to find a better man than that for Lois."

"What about this Kal fellow? Would I like him?"

"Kal is my Superman. He's such a good man, he gave up his honeymoon to stop a civil war. But let's not talk about Kal or I'll be crying all over the place." She patted Sam on the leg. "Let's have breakfast. It smells like Clark has fixed something tasty." She grabbed hold of Sam's arm and whispered, "Now, be nice."

Sam looked at her with a sour expression. "How about this, Lucy. I'll be nice, if you promise to call *me* the next time you have a nightmare."

Lois glanced at Clark and saw him nod. "Agreed."

They entered the dining room.

"Clark," Sam said tersely.

"Sir."

"I'm just going to wash up. Excuse me," said Sam, leaving the room.

"Sorry, Clark. He promised to be nice."

"Trust me. He was." Clark placed a smile on his face. "So, Kal's back in one piece."

Lois sighed. "For the moment. He got a reprieve. He has a one-on-one battle with Lord Nor at noon today. Winner takes all." She sat down.

"I'm sure Kal will be victorious."

"He'd better be. I don't think I could go through that again."

"Neither can I," Clark whispered.

Lois winced and looked at him leaning against the kitchen counter. "I'm sorry, Clark. Please forgive me."

He held up his hand. "Just don't let it happen again."

"I promise, if you do."

"I do," Clark replied.

They stared at each other and then glanced away, awkwardly.

Lois noticed the bananas on the counter behind Clark. "Wow! Clark, are we expecting King Kong?"

"I needed some air."

"Oooh, croissants. Are they from that boulangerie in Paris you love?" She grabbed one and put it on her plate.

Wrong Clark. He had never brought her croissants before. She didn't even realize her faux pas. "Yes. I needed lots of air."

"How was your date with Mayson last night?" she asked as casually as if she were asking about the weather.

He looked down the hall with his x-ray vision. Sam Lane still hadn't returned. "None of your business."

"Is that good or bad?" She took a bite of her croissant.

"I'm not going to talk to you about Mayson," he whispered.

"Are you going to ask her out again?"

Clark dropped into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

Sam returned, and after taking one look at Clark, turned to Lois. "Lucy, sweetie, are you channeling your sister?"

"Huh?"

Clark sat up, pretending that she had not just been torturing him.

"Lois used to drive her boyfriends crazy with her incessant questions. I know the look."

Clark grinned. "I guess you're taking your job as investigative researcher too seriously. It needs to be something you can turn on and off."

Lois glared at him and when Sam turned to fill his coffee mug, she stuck her tongue out at him. Clark smiled.

Sam sat down and filled his plate. "So, sweetie. We need to get you a good OB/GYN."

She placed her hand over his. "Daddy, I told you I don't want just any doctor. I want you."

"I haven't practiced medicine in years and my specialty was Sports Medicine. I haven't dealt with many pregnancies in that line of work."

"Still…" She batted her eyelashes.

"I guess I could speak with your Uncle Mike and see if he held onto my microscopes, stethoscope, blood pressure monitor, and ultrasound machine."

Lois reached over and hugged him. "Thank you, Daddy."

"But if we discover any complications, promise me you'll see an expert."

Lois and Clark shared a look over the table. "Sure, Daddy. An expert."

***

Day 9

Dearest Clark, you're alive! You're alive. Thank God, you are alive. The last 48 hours of you bouncing between life and death have been sheer torture. Please, promise me that you won't die on me ever again! I couldn't take another weekend like this one. I guess you couldn't either. I'm glad to hear that Lord Nor will no longer pose a threat to Smallville and Earth as a whole. I did a dance around my living room this morning after learning that the Kryptonians were going home and leaving you here with me. About time. I don't think Earth could survive much longer with all those Kryptonians destroying everything.

Well, now we can concentrate on our wedding, our future. I hope H.G. Wells comes up with a solution to save us from… well… our honeymoon curse. I'm looking forward to officially being Mrs. Clark Kent. Personally, I'm getting sick of Lucy El. It's getting especially confusing over here, because I told my father that I'm his other daughter, Lucy. He knows about you… kind of. He knows I'm married to a man named Kal-El, who left our honeymoon to help save innocent people from being massacred during a civil war. He thinks you are in Berkistan. And once you, my stand-in, and H.G. Wells fix the curse, I can say goodbye to this dimension for good. And come home.

I still haven't gained any weight. Actually, my dad weighed me yesterday morning and I've lost three pounds. Don't worry, he says that's normal with some pregnancies — especially people with sensitive stomachs like me. Anyway, if we can fix this curse, maybe I can return to you right away. I know Kal's itching to be rid of me. I'm driving him nuts. More on that later. I miss you so much. I just want to be held in your arms and never leave.

I slept most of the weekend. Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep Friday night when they disintegrated you. I've informed my father of my condition and he has conditionally agreed to be my doctor. Thankfully, he's been sober since seeing me on TV during the mayoral debate. He thought that his Lois was alive and well, and it shocked him enough to give up booze. One of the reasons he dislikes Kal so much is because he didn't contact him after Lois Lane showed up at the mayoral debates.

Oh, I didn't tell you. Kal is totally in love with Lois Lane. HIS Lois — not me. Even though he's never met her. It seems that Perry assigned Kal to the initial team he sent to the Congo to look for Lois after she disappeared. He searched everywhere for three weeks and found nada. Not that the locals Lois had been speaking to about the gun running story would talk. I had a horrible time getting them to speak with me at first, too. Did I ever tell you that after I found a shipment of guns (supposed to be destroyed by the UN) actually being shipped elsewhere, I tried to smuggle myself into a crate along with the guns, and only ended up getting caught and deported back to Metropolis? But that's another story.

Anyway, when Kal got back home, he kept up with the story. He read and reread all of her old articles. He interviewed her family, friends, colleagues, and even a few of her old sources. (How he discovered who they were, who knows? I guess he's quite the investigative reporter. I mean, of course Clark Kent is a terrific investigative reporter — even without Lois Lane. Love you. Think you're wonderful.)

Perry used to tell him Lois Lane anecdotes like our Perry tells Elvis stories (did I tell you that Elvis used to be president here and is still alive and well?). When the story seemed dead, the previous owner of the paper used Lois Lane's "death" as extra publicity. Perry, Sam, and Kal were the only holdouts against placing the tombstone in the graveyard. Kal promised Sam at that point that he would never give up looking for Lois. He had fallen in love with me… I mean, with THIS dimension's Lois. And you know what a promise from a Clark Kent means. It means forever.

Then another year passed and still no new leads. Kal continued to work on the story on his own, but then — and I'm guessing here, because I wouldn't dare presume to ask Kal — Lana gave him the old relationship ultimatum, so he caved and proposed. In a way, by agreeing to marry Lana, he was giving up on HIS Lois and it shattered him, his hope. Not to mention, it ticked off Sam, who thought that Kal had given his daughter up for dead. Then I showed up, when Tempus kidnapped me, and all those old Lois Lane feelings started blowing around again. Lana gave him the 'it's me or Superman' ultimatum. She really likes things her way, doesn't she? I don't think she liked me much or how much Kal listened to me, either.

You know, Clark, it is really hard to write to you about this, because I don't want you to be jealous of Kal. I want you to know what I know. I don't want you to think I have any secrets from you. Kal is a sweet man, but when I look at him, I don't see you anymore; I see your twin brother. You know that, don't you? I bet I could tell you two apart even if you were standing side-by-side. There's a slight difference around the eyes and I don't mean that he wears completely different glasses… well, he does, but that's beside the point.

So, to make a long story even longer. After I got here, this

time, things were awkward at first. I love and miss you and he looks like you. He loves HIS Lois and I'm as close as he's ever gotten to his Lois. I told you before, he's become quite the mother hen. He needed something to distract himself from taking care of me. Because he was driving me bonkers. So, I decided that he needed some more experience with women. I could be wrong, but I think Lana was the only woman he's ever dated.

You'll never guess who walked into the bullpen on Friday. You'll never guess, so I'll tell you: Mayson Drake. It gave me quite a fright. But then I remembered the chemistry between the two of you. And personally, it was quite disturbing how easy it was to convince him to ask her out on a date. Not too surprising how quickly she accepted. If I recall correctly, she made the first move with you, too. Or did she? I'm going crazy, wondering what would have happened if she hadn't died in that car explosion. Clark, I am being crazy, right? Being jealous of a dead woman. I wasn't a consolation prize, was I?

Lois reread the words she had written to Clark. It was just awful. She couldn't give him that letter. No matter how she worded it, it sounded bad. Either it sounded like she liked the other Clark too much or he liked her too much. That wasn't the feeling she wanted to convey to Clark. Especially not in the letter where she was telling him how thankful she was that he was alive. She still felt terribly guilty about betraying him the other night with this Clark. She was only too thankful that this Clark had stopped her. She could tell he hadn't wanted to stop, but he had anyway.

She tore out two pages of the notebook. The first page describing the other Clark's love of his Lois she wadded up and tossed at the trashcan next to the dresser. It bounced off the rim and fell behind the can. The second page, describing her efforts at matchmaking and how they had backfired on her, actually made it into the can. She reread the letter, ending with her description of her father sobering up after seeing her and Clark at the debate. She continued writing the letter from that point.

Kal promised never to stop searching for Lois and then he forgot to contact Sam Lane when she showed up. At least that's how it looked to Sam. And you know what a promise from Clark Kent means… it means forever.

Marry me, Clark. Marry me, so I can come home to you. I miss you with my whole being. I promise you my heart forever, Clark. Yours always, LL

***

The week passed uneventfully. Clark walked Lois to work. Sam acknowledged Clark's existence and even called him by name. It was an improvement from 'that man,' but Clark felt he was still on probation.

In Clark's eyes, Lois had started to glow. She still couldn't hold down much food and he had to cover for her a couple of times when she bolted from the room. But, strangely, everyone at work seemed to take it in stride. As far as they knew that was just another facet of her weird personality.

Clark stepped off the elevator and stood at the railing, holding Lois's smoothie. He had trouble keeping his eyes away from her recently. He wondered if she seemed to glow from the pregnancy or because she was so happy that she almost floated on air. Kal and the younger Lois were once again planning their wedding in her dreams.

This morning, she hadn't heard a word he had said; her mind was elsewhere. On Kal. She was even humming. He had never heard Lois hum before. Was that even usual for her? He recognized the tune, but couldn't place it.

Lois floated by, humming, and took the smoothie from Clark.

"Thanks, Clark. Hiya, Mayson." She continued to her desk, humming.

Clark turned, noticed Mayson, and smiled. "This is a surprise."

"I thought I'd take you to lunch as an apology for bolting from dinner the other night."

His smile grew into a grin at her words. "Duty called. I understand."

When he had grumbled about it to Lois yesterday morning, she had laughed and laughed.

"*Turnabout is hard, isn't it, Clark?"*

"*What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.*

"*Oh, gee, her beeper rang and she had to run off without notice, with a lame excuse or without explanation at all? I wonder what that's like?" She laughed louder. "It's not like you ever disappear without a moment's notice when duty calls." She slugged him in the arm. "And what kind of investigative reporter are you? She's a detective and she gets called away unexpectedly, shouldn't you follow her to see if there's a story there? I guess some investigative reporters need to turn it* ***on*** *when they're off duty."*

"I'd love lunch," he said to Mayson.

"I thought Lucy was your assistant. Why are you fetching her drinks?"

"We're colleagues, friends, and I was out anyway…"

"And I thought you had super hearing," she teased. "Didn't you hear me calling for you to hold the elevator?"

Clark gulped. He hadn't heard her. He had been thinking of Lois and wondering how long before she was going to disappear back to her dimension.

Mayson followed his gaze to Lois. "I see." She stepped between them, so Clark couldn't see Lois unless he used his x-ray vision. "Where were you last night? I tried calling."

Clark blinked, surprised by the question. "California. Forest fire."

Mayson relaxed. "Oh, I thought…" she cut herself off, glancing over her shoulder at Lois, who was happily typing at her desk.

"Thought what?"

"That maybe you and Lucy had taken in the revival of *My Fair Lady* with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michelle Kwan."

He guffawed. "Why would you think that? Do I seem like the musical theater type?"

"Well, Lucy was humming, 'I'm getting married in the morning'…"

He jerked his head to look at Lois. "Well, she was always quirky like that." He placed a light kiss on Mayson's lips. "Shall we go?"

She nodded. Once they were standing in the elevator, she asked, "What was that for?"

"What was what?"

"The kiss." She raised an eyebrow. No slipping anything past Mayson.

"Oh, that." Clark smiled weakly. "For telling me the name of the song she was humming. It would have bothered me all day." He pulled Mayson into his arms. "And this one is for you." Clark pressed a deeper kiss on her lips. No fireworks, but still nice.

Mayson was in high spirits when the doors of the elevator opened. He needed to forget about Lois, even for an hour. He needed to focus on his life and people who cared for him.

A half-hour later, Clark set down his last French fry and tried once more to get Mayson to reveal where she had gone the other night.

"No, Clark. You've got your secrets. I've got mine. Now, let's talk about something else or I'll think it was just a reporter agreeing to lunch."

"Sorry." He truly was. So much for focusing on his private life. "So, tell me about Mayson Drake."

Clark really tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but he felt a change in the air. Like it was thicker, like time or history was shifting and through this sludge, he could hear Lois's voice

softly echoing, growing fainter, calling to him.

"Lois?" he murmured.

"What?" Mayson asked and time slammed back into focus.

He could hear Lois clearly now. "I've got to go," Clark said, kissing Mayson on the cheek. "Lucy's in trouble."

Mayson stood up, reaching for her purse. "I'll come—" she said before a strong breeze knocked her back into her seat. Clark was gone. "—with you."

***

Lois glanced up and saw Clark watching her. He looked dejected. She was sorry about that. Here she was on the verge of having all her dreams come true and he was going to lose Lois once again.

Oooh, he had brought her a smoothie. What a sweetheart. He looked too distracted to deliver her drink, so she decided to get it herself. As she stood up, Mayson arrived. And poor Clark was oblivious to her.

"Thanks, Clark," Lois said. "Hiya, Mayson." She took the smoothie and continued to hum back to her desk. That should wake Clark up.

"I'm getting married in the morning," Lois hummed.

It was so nice of Jimmy… James to invite her to the opening night of *My Fair Lady*. She couldn't resist what she was sure was going to be a catastrophe. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michelle Kwan? They both sang and danced beautifully. And there was even a melodic British accent emerging from Arnold's mouth. She felt like she had stepped into *The Twilight Zone*.

Lois had only agreed to go with Jimmy because he said his date — April Stephens — had canceled at the last minute. Lois would only go under two conditions: first, they were to go as friends, because she didn't date the boss, and secondly, she was allowed to call him something other than Mr. Olsen. He had tried to renegotiate the first point and lost. For the second condition, she negotiated for 'Jimmy,' but they had settled on 'James.' No matter where she went or how she dressed, men crawled after her begging her to go out with them. She was beginning to think she was cursed in more ways than one.

She had another reason to be happy besides her upcoming wedding. Jimmy had informed her that there had indeed been a bug in Clark's phone and on his computer, and one on hers, as well. Her theory of Jaxon being a spy had been proven true. Ten points to the visiting investigative reporter!

Jimmy, whom they thought had been absent from the newsroom, apparently was doing some of his own investigative work on his computer. The bugs had been removed a day after she started work in the newsroom. Currently, Jimmy was checking into Jaxon's computer and his programs to see what he was up to. Her boss's boss was still slogging through the mountains of data he had collected from Jaxon's computer, but nothing concrete had appeared. It still seemed random. Lois had volunteered to help him and Jimmy lit up. She wondered if it was because she had validated his research project or because misery loved company. She didn't want to even consider the other, probably more obvious, reason.

She glanced back at Clark and Mayson by the elevators. Clark reached over and kissed Mayson, and her heart sunk. He wasn't her Clark, she reminded herself. Her Clark still loved her and was planning a wedding for this very afternoon. Any minute now. This Clark had no Lois, but he had Mayson.

Her phone rang. "The Daily Planet, Research."

"Where's Clark Kent?" The woman demanded.

"Lunch. Can I help you with something?"

"Who are you?"

"Lucy El, Clark Kent's research assistant," she replied.

"He has his own research assistant?" the woman asked snidely.

Lois took a deep breath. "How can I help you?"

"Take a message. Tell him that there is a Hurricane in Singapore and she needs his help."

That was a strange message, but she wrote it down. "Singapore is in the Pacific Ocean and has typhoons, not hurricanes, but I'll pass on the message. Can I tell him who called?"

The line was dead.

"Hello? Hello?" Lois shrugged and hung up the phone. Odd.

She picked up the phone to call his beeper and happened to glance up at the TV running in the corner of the office. It showed that the weather in Asia was hot and clear, no typhoons. What in the world? She hung up the phone, shook her head, and tossed the note into a box designated for Clark. He got the strangest messages.

"*He just left with Mayson Drake,"* Jaxon was saying at the next desk.

Lois stiffened. Who was Jaxon talking to? What was their interest in Clark and Mayson? She opened her purse and pulled out a compact. Using the mirror she watched him talk on his cell phone. He was talking softly, but she could hear him clearly. This super hearing she had developed sure came in handy.

"*So?"* came the reply on the other end of the phone. It didn't sound like Lex Luthor.

"*I told you, Junior, he's not dating Lucy El. They are just friends. Call Trask and cancel the test."*

Lois felt a chill go down her spine. What test? Did this test have something to do her? Who was Junior? She hadn't come across a Junior related to Lex. Someone new?

"*The Neuroscanner stopped working when he appeared. She was looking at his face. He will tell me who that imposter is or I'll kill everyone he loves."*

"*I don't care if she's messing with your invention. Call the sharpshooter off. It has nothing to do with Lucy."*

Lois felt dizzy. This Junior character was going to try to kill her. Clark could not stop bullets when he was across town. She closed the compact and scanned the newsroom. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Wait, sharpshooters worked from a distance. She needed to put something between her and the windows.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Kryptonians were telepathic. Maybe he could hear her if she tried hard enough. "Clark! Help! Clark!" she called out with her mind. Nothing. Her hands were twitching in anxiety.

She stood up. Where should she go? Maybe they wouldn't shoot her if she was too close to Jaxon. She sat back down and rolled her chair closer to him. He pointed to his phone, but she rolled even closer.

"Jaxon, I'm starving. Want to do lunch?"

His jaw dropped and he nodded, holding up a finger.

"Okay. Okay." She waved. "Some other time then." She felt strange. She rolled back to her desk. Light headed. Weak. Dizzy, again. Maybe Junior wasn't hitting her with bullets. She grabbed her smoothie, she needed something cool to drink, but she couldn't pick it up. It was too heavy. She tried to pick up her phone to dial Clark's beeper, but her hand wasn't working.

"Clark," she whispered. "Clark, help!" She held up her hand and it was transparent.

This wasn't Junior's doing. Something was happening to her younger self. She was being erased from time. She had seen it happen once before, when they had visited Clark as a baby.

Lois stood up and called, "Clark!" She couldn't tell if she was being loud at all. "Clark! Help, Superman!" As the room started to spin, she heard the crashing of glass and something grazed her shoulder. Someone yelled behind her and she collapsed. The world went black, but she could still hear echoing sounds as if through a long tunnel.

"*I've been shot! That idiot Trask missed her and shot me, you bungling birth defect!"*

Suddenly, there was a rush of air and she was flying. Was she dead?

"Lois? Lois?" Clark was whispering to her.

"Clark." She reached up and caressed his face. "You came." Then she passed out.

***

Sounds returned first. Her whole body tingled, ached. Oh, yeah. The Wedding Destroyer had electrocuted her. Her mouth was dry. Where was Clark?

"Clark?" she whispered.

She felt the floor shift and realized she was lying on a bed, not the church floor. He squeezed her hand.

"I'm right here, Lois."

"Did you catch her?" Her voice felt rough.

"Who?" He sounded anxious.

"The Wedding Destroyer."

He made a sound, but Lois didn't catch its meaning.

"I'm jinxed, aren't I? My first wedding to Luthor… Did I ever tell you why I didn't go through with my wedding with Lex?"

"No."

"I got all the way up to the altar and I realized I loved you. And I couldn't marry him if I loved you, could I?"

"Um… Lois…"

"Then of course, Henderson and Perry barged through the door with arrest warrants for him and he ended up jumping to his death. Then the whole clone wedding mess. And, now, strike three: electrocuted by the Wedding Destroyer with my own wedding ring. I'm jinxed, I tell you. I'm never going to have a happily-ever-after."

"Sure you will, Lois. And it will be a beautiful wedding."

"So, do you still want to marry this jinx?"

Clark paused. "Uh… Lois…"

"Fine. You're having second thoughts. I can understand that." She rolled over in bed, putting her back to him. "While you are thinking about that, let me tell you about my bizarre dream. You'll get a kick out of this." She felt Clark wipe a tear off her cheek.

"I was in the alternate dimension with the other Clark. He's a really great guy, but it wasn't like being with you…"

"Lois."

"Because he didn't love me like you do. He did love me, but more like a sister, like family. He's in love with his Lois and I was a watered-down version, I guess. Same great taste, less filling."

Clark chuckled.

"Oh, that sounded bad." Lois laughed softly to herself. "Anyway…"

"Lois," Clark tried interrupting again.

She turned back over and placed her fingers on his lips. "Hush." His face was damp. "Did you take a shower?"

"No, Lois."

"Your face is wet. Is it raining?"

"No, Lois." He took a deep breath. "I was worried about you. I was afraid…"

"Oh, Clark." She pulled him down for a hug. "I'm okay. I ache, though, especially my shoulder." She touched her right shoulder.

"Did something happen to your shoulder?" She could feel him examining her.

"I was electrocuted, remember?"

"So you said. Tell me more about what happened in the dimension with the other Clark." His voice sounded funny, odd, nervous.

"I was working as a researcher at the Planet. You know, Jimmy's job."

"Uh-huh."

"We really need to have Perry give him a raise."

"What happened at the Daily Planet, Lois?"

"Oh, right. I set the other Clark up with Mayson."

"Uh-huh."

"Mayson Drake."

"I know who she is, Lois."

"Of course you do. In my dream, she was a detective, not an Assistant D.A., and she was still alive. Nice as ours, but still didn't trust me. I tried to keep an open mind, you know, but it brought back those old feelings, seeing them together. Though he's not you and she's not her, I can't help but wonder what would have happened if she hadn't died. Would you have chosen her instead?"

"Lois, don't you worry about such things. Your Clark loves you."

"I know you do." She squeezed his hand.

"Lois, did something happen at the Daily Planet?"

"Oh, right. Jaxon Xavier was there. You remember him." She shivered. "I still cannot believe we had our most intimate conversation in his virtual reality machine. How you admitted that I'd be your first…"

"Lois!" Clark gasped.

"Sorry. I wonder if the other Clark had waited, too. Or if he and Lana…"

"Lois!" This time his voice squeaked.

"You're absolutely right, Clark. None of my business."

"Yes. None of your business," Clark agreed.

She chuckled, patting his hand. "Now, don't be jealous, Clark. It was only a dream."

He cleared his throat. "Tell me more."

"Well, today… I was there in the other dimension a long time. Several weeks. How long was I passed out?"

"A couple of hours," he whispered. "I couldn't wake you."

"Wow. I must have been tired; dying really wears a girl out. Where was I? Oh, right, after Mayson took Clark to lunch, I overheard Jaxon talking on his cell phone."

"Overheard him? Was he being careless?"

"No. I think because of the pregnancy I developed super hearing. Some defense mechanism, huh? Didn't you tell me about some animals that …"

"What?!" He seemed startled.

"Oh, right. I didn't tell you that part. The reason I'm in the other dimension is because the night before you left with the New Kryptonians, we made love and I got pregnant." She sighed. "Mmmm. That was the best part of the dream."

"Lois."

"Just thinking about our honeymoon, Clark." She moaned.

Clark cleared his throat. "Ah… Lois."

"I know. I know. Have to get married to have a honeymoon." She sighed again. "Let's get married tonight."

"Lois! You're making me a bit uncomfortable here."

"I know, Clark. I can't help it if I find you irresistible."

"You've had enough excitement for one day."

Lois yawned. "Yeah. Electrocution can zap the energy right out of a girl. I wouldn't want to fall asleep on you."

"That would be bad."

"Yes, it would." She yawned again, shifting farther away from him. "Come and hold me."

Clark hesitated. "That's all, Lois. Don't try anything." He lay down next to her.

"You make me sound like a tease."

"Lois," he whispered in her ear. "What was Jaxon saying on the phone?"

With his warmth against her, Lois relaxed into drowsiness. "Oh, Jaxon was talking to someone called Junior. They were planning some kind of test for Superman and Jaxon was trying to convince him to stop it."

"Really? Why?"

"I don't know. I think Jaxon had a crush on me. Junior was convinced I had something to do with some invention of his that wasn't working right. I didn't understand what they were talking about. Anyway, I guess there was a sharpshooter aiming at me…"

Clark stiffened.

"And Jaxon was trying to convince this Junior guy I was the wrong target because Clark, the other Clark, was dating Mayson, not me."

"Mayson?!" Clark sat up.

"Clark, is everything okay?"

"That's some dream, Lois. Why don't you get some rest."

"Okay, Clark. Promise me you'll marry me when I wake up."

"Maybe I'm marrying you right now in your dreams."

Lois snuggled deeper into the blankets. "Yeah. Marry me in my dreams, first."

Clark kissed her cheek and then she heard the rush of wind and he was gone.

"Marry me in my dreams, Clark Kent," she murmured before she fell back asleep.

***

Superman flew up to one of the giant windows overlooking the newsroom at the Daily Planet. A yellow crime scene tape surrounded the research desks of Lucy and Jaxon. Mayson stood there talking with a crime scene tech. A bullet hole had penetrated the big window next to Clark. He swooped in and hovered next to Mayson.

Startled, Mayson glanced over at him with chagrin. "Well, look at who decided to join us."

"Hi, Mayson."

"Don't touch anything, Superman. I wouldn't want you to contaminate my crime scene."

Clark closed his eyes and sighed. "Mayson, I need to talk to you."

"I can't talk to you right now. I'm working." She turned away from him.

"Mayson, please. It's important."

"Important, huh? So, I should drop everything that I'm working on, because none of this…" She held her arms out to the crime scene. "… is important?"

"Of course this is important, but…"

"Really? Because you don't treat my work as important, Superman."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You swooped in here, rescued Lucy and took her *where* exactly? Do you always rescue one victim and leave another bleeding on the floor? How super of you."

Clark looked confused. "Someone else was shot?"

"Jaxon Xavier. He's over at Metropolis University Hospital with a nice hole through his shoulder. Not that you care, Superman. Where's Lucy?"

"Resting. Jaxon was shot? I didn't know, Mayson." He had been so completely focused on Lois that he hadn't even looked around when he flew in and out earlier.

"That doesn't surprise me. When it comes to Lucy, you have tunnel vision." She glowered at him.

"Mayson, that's not fair."

"Fair? Don't talk to me about fair. Where have you been? Have you been searching for the shooter? Well?"

He swallowed as he took a breath. "Mayson, I'm here now."

She waved her hand in the air. "Thanks for coming, Superman. But you can leave now. I've got work to do."

Superman landed next to her, imploring, "I need to talk to you."

Mayson stared him directly in the eyes. "Get out of my face, Superman. If you want to talk to me send Clark Kent. From him, I'll accept an apology."

What was it with people hating the blue suit all of a sudden? Superman stepped back as Mayson went back to surveying the trajectory of the bullet. He looked at the angle of entry the crime scene tech had indicated. He scanned through the window and saw that it ended at a building across the way. Scanning the building, he saw something metallic covered by a tarp on the roof. He looked back at Mayson with pursed lips, before flying out the window he had entered. Superman returned a moment later with a flak jacket, which he handed to her.

She looked down at the bulletproof vest with confusion and then at him.

"Put that on and let me fly you over to the building where the shooter was positioned." He crossed his arms over his chest as she stared at him. "Please."

"Superman, I don't need…"

"For Clark," he asked quietly.

With reluctance, she put on the vest. "We could just walk."

Superman cradled her in his arms. "This is quicker," he said, lowering his voice. "And Clark would like to have some time alone with you tonight."

A hint of a smile flashed across her mouth. "I don't know about this," she said as they lifted into the air. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Trust me, Mayson."

She squeezed her eyes shut tight as they passed through the open window and flew to the building across the way. He landed and set her feet down. Her eyes were still closed and she still held tightly around his neck.

"Mayson?"

She expelled a rough breath and loosened her hold on him. "Sorry."

"Wait here," he said and stepped behind a large air conditioning unit, then returned dressed as Clark Kent.

Mayson smiled, holding a hand out to him. "Thank you for changing, Clark."

Clark took her hand, and as she stepped away toward the edge nearest the Daily Planet building, he tugged her back. "I still need to speak with you, Mayson." He pulled her to him and kissed her.

"Clark! Everyone's watching," she murmured, embarrassed, trying to step out of the kiss.

"Everyone who, Mayson? We're on top of a building." He held his hand on her back and deepened the kiss. Her knees failed her and she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him back.

"Forgive me," Clark whispered a minute later as he let her go. "I was worried about you."

"Me?" Mayson coughed, stumbling over to a vent to sit down. "I'm fine."

"I just wanted to let you know how important you are to me. That I care."

"Clark, we've had two dates," Mayson reminded him.

"Three."

"One whole and two half dates," she corrected him.

"I don't date much," he said, crouching next to her. "You mean a lot to me and I worry."

Her brow furrowed. "That's the second time you've said you worry, Clark. What haven't you told me?"

"Lucy overheard something. She thinks the gunman shot her because he mistakenly thought she and I were dating."

Mayson looked confused. "You and Lucy aren't dating?"

Clark shook his head. "But you and I are."

"Oh." Mayson touched his cheek as his words sunk in. She glanced down at the bulletproof vest. "Oh!" Standing up, she looked around at the nearby buildings and stepped closer to him. "Why would anyone want to harm your…" She could not speak the word she wanted and searched for another term. "Friends?"

He wrapped his arms around her, protectively. "To test me."

"Test?"

"My speed. My hearing. My abilities. I don't know."

"Oh. Right." She looked down. "Superman."

"It's no secret, Mayson, that we're the same person."

"I know," she whispered. "But you seem so different in the blue suit. There's something intimidating about Superman."

He couldn't resist the smile that slipped onto his lips as he tugged on the lapel of her navy suit. "I could say the same about you."

She returned his smile. "Clark is personable. Funny. A good kisser."

He laughed. "I've never been called that before."

Mayson walked to the edge of the building and took off the tarp covering the rifle. "Why would someone just leave the gun?"

Clark pointed, not wanting to incur her wrath by touching evidence. "See, here, a laser guided telescopic video camera. And here, a remote control."

"The shooter wasn't on the building."

"I should take this to S.T.A.R. Labs and see if they can back-track the location of the signal."

She gazed back at the Daily Planet building. "How did Lucy overhear the shooter?"

Clark didn't answer as he bent over the rifle. His head tilted to the side. Tick. Tick. Tick. He quickly scanned the rifle and found a bomb located next to the remote control switch. The analog clock with a digital flip display countdown read four seconds. He grabbed Mayson and zipped back to the Daily Planet.

"What the…" she started to say as the shockwave and explosion hit.

"Sorry," he whispered, setting her down next to his desk. "I should have noticed that sooner."

"No. No. That's quite all right, Superman," she replied, quite breathless, stepping away from him. "That was soon enough."

"Will you be okay?" he asked.

She nodded, placing her hand on the butt of the gun at her hip. Her eyes never left his.

"I've got some errands to run. Call me when you get off duty and I'll escort you home."

She stepped after him as he took off. "Where?"

"I should be home by then."

"Home?" She looked confused. The blue suit or the explosion had knocked her senseless.

Superman landed next to her. "Clark's."

"Oh, right." She shook her head. "Sorry."

"Stay safe," he said, disappearing out the window.

***

Returning to Clinton Street, Clark found that Lois was still sound asleep. He sighed. Most likely still dreaming of her and Kal's wedding. If he had been in Kal's shoes, he wouldn't have waited another day to make Lois his own.

Clark looked her shoulder over again, but still didn't see any wound. There was a hole in her shirt, so obviously a bullet had hit her. There was even a little blood around the hole, indicating she had been shot. But the only mark on her was something that looked like an old scar. Round like a bullet hole, but well-healed. He shifted her shoulder and saw a duplicate mark on the back of her shoulder. A through-and-through shot.

"Oh, Lois, what is going on with you?" he whispered, kissing her hand. How in the world was he going to explain her lack of a wound to her father? Much less to Mayson.

What was going on with her? Then Clark remembered something she had told him earlier when she thought he was Kal. The super hearing! He placed a hand to her stomach and listened. He could hear the super fast heartbeat of the little Kent. Had she developed some Kryptonian abilities when she got pregnant? The super hearing was a good defensive skill for a new mother. The fast healing — not impenetrable like him, but definitely faster than human — to ward off broken ribs and internal bleeding when this super baby started to kick.

He needed to talk to Dr. Lane. He should have called him first thing upon bringing Lois here, but he couldn't. Lois had been fading, literally. How could he have explained to the doctor that his daughter was transparent? And then when she had been back to normal, he hadn't been able to wake her. She was right. Being shot and electrocuted on the same day took a lot out of her mentally. And if she was developing super healing, was it was raising her metabolism? She would need to eat more. Much more.

The phone rang.

"Hello."

"Where is my… Lucy?" Sam Lane asked. "I heard about the shooting on the news. I need to speak with her… And to you."

Clark winced. "She's here. Resting. She's had quite a day."

"You should have brought her straight to me or to a hospital."

"You're right, I should have." But he hadn't. He had his reasons and he didn't feel like arguing. "She's fine."

"She wasn't shot?" Sam sounded amazed. "But on the TV…"

"News reports have been known to be wrong." Clark hated to state that fact about his profession. "The bullet passed through her shirt, that's all." He swallowed his pride. "I'm sorry I didn't call."

"It's okay, Clark. I wasn't here. I took the bus to my brother's to pick up some more supplies. I just heard the news report." Sam sounded tired and distant, but friendlier than he had the entire previous week.

"Is everything all right, Dr. Lane?" he asked.

"Can you bring her home? I need to speak with you."

"She's asleep," Clark stated. He glanced over at her through the doorway. "Yes, I believe I can fly her home. Can you open the window for me?"

"Of course. See you soon." Dr. Lane hung up.

As Clark set down the phone he noticed that there were lots of messages on his machine. The first call was an old message from Mayson he had missed earlier that afternoon asking him to call her immediately. She needed the status and whereabouts of her victim and witness, Miss Lucy El. Ooops. No wonder she had been so angry with him.

The second call had been from Mr. Olsen asking after Lucy and asking him to call him at his earliest convenience. He had also asked if Lucy had had a chance to discuss with Clark the information he had passed on to her the night before. No, thought Clark, she hadn't even mentioned the meeting with Mr. Olsen. He pursed his lips.

Thirdly, editor Ralph had called. He had wanted to know where his 'star reporter' was; whether his story would be on his desk in time for the late edition, and to make sure Clark went to Metropolis University Hospital to interview Jaxon for his article. Already on Clark's to-do list. Not word one about Lucy.

Next, Mayor White had called, also worried about Lucy, and asked him to call him back. My, had Lois become popular within two short weeks! Everyone was worried about her.

Surprisingly, the last call was from Jaxon, himself. He had woken up after surgery. He had seen Clark pick up Lucy earlier and asked how she was. Strangely, he hadn't wondered why Superman had completely ignored him.

Clark wanted to go first to Jaxon's hospital room, but he knew that Sam Lane was waiting on him for that special delivery. Not needing to change, as he was still in his blue suit, he carefully covered Lois with a blanket and scooped her up into his arms. She seemed slightly heavier, despite her rail thinness. He wondered if her molecular density had also changed with the baby. It had been a long day already and he felt completely drained. He took off from his living room window and shortly thereafter arrived at Lois's apartment.

Sam waited for him in the living room. He nodded curtly to Clark as he and Lois passed through. Surprisingly, he didn't follow Clark into Lois's room. Clark set Lois on her bed and covered her with blankets.

"Clark," she moaned and hugged the pillow covered by Kal's t-shirt. She was having a good dream.

Clark sighed. He would leave her alone. He returned to the living room.

Sam stood near the window, looking at a piece of paper.

"I'll check in later with you, Dr. Lane. I've got to interview a colleague who was also shot. He's out of surgery."

"… Um… Clark, before you go," Sam said, sitting down. "I need to know something."

"Sure," Clark said. "Hold on a minute, I'll go change."

"It's okay, Clark. You don't have to change this time."

"All right." Clark hesitated, a bit surprised. Sam Lane hated to talk to Superman.

Sam looked as if his heart had been broken. Miserable. "Who is she?"

"Who is who, Dr. Lane?" Clark was confused. Had Sam found out about Mayson?

"The woman impersonating my daughter."

"Oh."

"You don't seem too surprised by this news, Clark. I was hoping you might be. That I wasn't the only person she had lied to." He looked down at the paper again.

"What's that?" Clark asked, nodding at the paper.

"The results of the initial tests of Lucy's, or whatever her name is, blood. She's definitely pregnant, like she said, and she doesn't have any diseases detrimental to the fetus."

"That's good."

"Yes. Yes, it is. But her blood type is O-, same as my Lois. My Lucy is AB+."

"Are you sure?" Clark asked, surprised that he would remember that.

"It's not something a doctor forgets about his children, Clark."

"Oh."

"So, can you tell me who she is? Is she my Lois?" Sam asked, hope filling his face.

Clark did not want to tell him the truth. He had hoped that he and Lois could keep this secret between them for her entire visit. But she needed Dr. Lane now more than ever. With her body changing in new and different ways, she would not be able to go to a regular medical doctor. Clark was not sure what to say to the man.

Sam stood up and moved to the dining room table. "The reason I ask, Clark, is because I went through her room after I found out she couldn't possibly be my daughter Lucy, and I found this." He held up the photo of Lois and Kal from the Kerth awards. "And this." He held up another photo Lois had brought of her with her friends at a football game. "And these." A pile of photos of her and Kal, which he threw across the table to Clark. "I know you said that you never met my daughter Lois. But I was at a loss as to what all this evidence against you meant, until I found this photo." He held up the photo of Lois with her parents — both Ellen and Sam — from the previous Christmas. He fell into a chair and stared at the picture. "How is this even possible? And who in the world is she, Clark?"

Clark sat down opposite Sam. "I'm sorry, Dr. Lane. We never meant to hurt you." He gathered up the pile of loose photographs. "The man in these photos is her Kal-El, essentially my twin brother."

Sam's jaw hung open. "That's not you?"

Clark shook his head and pointed to the photo of Lois with her parents that Sam still held. "And the woman in these photos is not your daughter, Lois, but this Sam Lane's daughter Lois."

"How is this possible?" Sam was dumbfounded.

"What I'm going to tell you may seem strange and crazy, Dr. Lane, but it's true. Lois — the woman you know as Lucy El — comes from another world, a parallel dimension, where she is married to that dimension's Clark Kent. Her Clark, whom I call Kal to lessen the confusion around here, was adopted on Earth by the Kents, just as I was. He met and fell in love with a colleague of his at the Daily Planet, a spunky reporter by the name of Lois Lane. That's the woman now asleep in your Lois's bed."

Sam raised a brow at him, crossed his arms, and looked like Clark had just fed him a lemon. Okay, he didn't believe him. That was understandable; it was a difficult concept to accept. He hadn't believed her the first time she told him, either.

At Sam's silence, Clark continued with his explanation. "Shortly after they got married, a couple of people from the planet of New Krypton, a colony of the planet where Kal and I originated, found Kal and asked him to return to New Krypton to help them stop a war."

"The civil war you mentioned."

Clark nodded. "Do you remember Tempus's threat that we were going to be invaded by aliens?"

Sam nodded, wide-eyed.

"Well, in her dimension it actually happened. Some bad Kryptonians found out that on Kal's planet they could live like gods, so they came to colonize Earth. They started by enslaving the people of Kal's hometown of Smallville and using them for target practice. Lois had just found out that she was pregnant with Kal's child and fled here to hide from those evil men."

"That doesn't sound like Lois. She's not the hiding type; she's the stand-up-and-fight type."

"Yes… well, she is, normally." He had to agree with Sam there. "But she had more to think about than herself this time, Dr. Lane. Kal was still on New Krypton, she had no one to protect her from the invaders and if they were to find out she was Kal's wife and carrying his child…"

"Oh, I see." Sam nodded. His eyes had glazed over a bit, though.

Clark exhaled. Good, Sam seemed to buy that version of events. He didn't want to explain the real reason Lois was here. At least that could remain secret.

"How did she get here?" Sam asked.

"We know a man, an inventor, who built a machine that moves through time and space. Tempus stole this machine and adapted it to travel through dimensions. He then kidnapped Lois and stranded her here last February during the mayoral election."

"Why?" Sam seemed mesmerized by the story.

"Tempus hates Superman. And this dimension had no Superman. Tempus brought Lois here to turn me into her hero, so he could destroy me and win himself an election."

"Wait a minute. That Lois is married to Superman?"

Clark was beginning to understand how Kal was able to keep his secret identity secret for so long. A little subterfuge went a long way. People kept forgetting he and Superman were the same person. Take off the glasses, put on a blue suit and a red cape, and suddenly he was treated differently, because people thought of him differently. Even people who knew full well that he was both Superman and Clark Kent kept forgetting.

"She said so, didn't she? Everything she told you last Saturday was true." More or less.

"Really?" Sam stammered.

"She loves you. You remind her of her own father. So, again, Dr. Lane, I apologize that Lucy and I lied to you, but I hope you can understand why we can't go around telling everyone the whole truth."

"But she's not Lucy, she's Lois."

"Yes, sorry. You're right. But Lucy El is her secret identity while she's visiting us," Clark explained.

"But why does she need a secret identity? If she is a Lois, why didn't she just pretend again that she's my Lois?"

"Well, when she was here before, it was a quick visit; she hoped to get home right away. She thought our Lois was dead and borrowed her identity to gain access to me. This time we knew it would be a much longer visit. We have no idea when Kal will return and expel the bad Kryptonians from Earth. If she had returned as Lois, then all those questions about her missing three years would be asked over and over and it would have put a spotlight on someone we wanted to blend in. She needed to be a nobody, so that when she did leave, possibly spur of the moment, not many questions would be asked. Lois Lane attracts attention with her aggressive, no-holds-barred reporting style. Lucy El is just a research assistant."

"A nobody."

Clark nodded. "Also, she's pregnant. If we can't hide her pregnancy for her entire visit, then people would start asking more questions. Who is the father of Lois Lane's baby? It would be a whole media mess. And I could not do that to Lois, either from my dimension or hers."

A half smile appeared on Sam's face. "No, Lois wouldn't like that. Not one bit."

"Exactly. She's not our Lois Lane. I asked her not to be Lois Lane again, for you and Perry and all of us who haven't given up on our Lois and want her to come home. I couldn't pull the rug out from under you a second time, Dr. Lane."

"Thank you, Clark; I appreciate that," Sam said with a wipe to his eyes. "I hope I can live up to that trust."

"Stay sober and uphold your doctor-patient confidentiality, and you will. Nobody outside this apartment knows what I just told you and we need to keep it that way. Okay, Dr. Lane?"

Sam nodded. "Then I think it's about time you called me Sam, Clark." He held out his hand.

Clark stood up and shook it. "Thank you, Sam. I hate to fly, but Ralph wants an article about the shooting for the evening edition. And I still have another interview to conduct first."

"I'll check on Lucy."

***

Sam watched as Superman flew out the window. He went to check on this other Lois. The bed looked rumpled but it was empty. He checked the bathroom. It was also empty. Where did she go? He had been responsible for his patient for a whole thirty seconds and he'd already lost her.

His mind rushed over the information that Clark had just shared with him. Lois, but not his Lois. And he just realized something else: she was carrying Superman's child. What effect would such a fetus have on a human woman? How in the world was he supposed to see this pregnancy through to the end? He really needed a drink.

***

Ten minutes earlier, Lois had rolled over and hugged her pillow. "Clark?" That wasn't Clark. She blinked her eyes and realized she was back in her apartment, only not her apartment. The other dimension. So, it hadn't been a nightmare after all.

At least she was Mrs. Clark Kent. Finally. A real beautiful wedding. Clark had promised her she would have one and thanks to Mike, she did. Who was that Mike man anyway? Her guardian angel? Hopefully, Mr. Wells would arrive any minute and tell Clark and her stand-in how to get rid of the curse. Then Wells could fly over here and pick her up for her journey home. Home.

Her super hearing picked up voices in the other room. Clark and her father. They were discussing her.

"*Yes. Yes, it is. But her blood type is O-, same as my Lois. My Lucy is AB+."*

"*Are you sure?"* Clark asked.

"*It's not something a doctor forgets about his children, Clark."*

"*Oh."*

"*So, can you tell me who she is? Is she my Lois?"* Sam asked.

Lois couldn't listen to them anymore. As the men moved into her dining room, she snuck down the hall and out the front door. She needed some fresh air. She didn't need to deal with her substitute father learning the truth about her. She couldn't be the one to break his heart. Clark could clean up her mess himself; they don't deserve any better, talking behind her back like that.

She tiptoed down the stairs towards the lobby. As she reached the bottom step a voice from behind stopped her in her tracks.

"Lois? Lois Lane? As I live and breathe, what are you doing here?"

Lois reached up and felt her face. Somewhere along her journeys, she had misplaced her John Lennon glasses. She cleared her throat. "Sorry, you must have me confused with someone else." She took another step.

"Oh, that's right. In this dimension, you prefer Lucy El, don't you?"

She turned around and standing up at the top of the stairs was Star, only not any version of Star she had ever met. Her hair was pulled into a neat knot at the back of her head and she wore a tasteful and not inexpensive fuchsia business suit. "Star?"

The woman walked down the stairs and hooked her elbow with Lois's. "Dear, you are in no condition to be walking the streets of Metropolis."

"I'm not?"

"Of course not." She led her back up the stairs. "So, you can either go back into your apartment or you can come hang out with me."

"You," Lois croaked. She wasn't ready to face Clark and her father.

"Okay, then." Star walked them back to her door. "Let me just do something first." She opened the door to her apartment and held her hand up to Lois to wait. "Mrs. Lake, you don't want to divorce Mr. Lake, now do you?"

"No," sobbed the blonde woman in Star's living room. "But he's cheating on me. I just know it."

Lois peeked through the crack in the door. A tastefully dressed woman in her mid-forties sat crying on the sofa.

Star placed a hand on the woman's arm. "Your husband is not cheating on you. But he has started placing bets at an off-track betting arena."

"What? Why?" Mrs. Lake appeared truly shocked.

"You have a decision to make. Do you truly love you husband or do you love all the gifts he gives you? If you love him, tell him so. Tell him you don't need gifts to be happy with him and he'll stop gambling away your fortune. If, on the other hand, you decide you cannot live without the gifts Mr. Lake lavishes on you, you can come back to me. We can bicker with his divorce lawyer for the next three years over every little item in your collection. Either way, you'll end up with nothing. What you must decide is whether or not you want to be poor with Mr. Lake or without him."

Mrs. Lake sobs stopped and she grabbed her purse. "Well, I never!" She stomped out of the apartment. Lois hid behind a nearby potted plant. She recognized the woman. It was the same person who, with her husband, had kidnapped her and Superman this past year for their one-of-a-kind collection. Small world.

"Come on in, Lucy," Star called.

"You seem different, Star. A different kind of psychic than back home."

"Oh, that's because I'm not a professional psychic," Star called from the kitchen. She re-entered the room with a fairly large banana split.

Lois laughed. Some things never changed.

"Eat. Eat. For the first time in your life, you don't have to worry about counting calories. Enjoy it."

Lois looked down at the ice cream and wondered if it was a good idea. Her stomach gurgled that it was hungry, and she dug in.

"I'm a divorce attorney." Star handed her a card. "For later."

Lois gulped down her bite of ice cream. "I am not getting divorced. I just got married."

Star sat down next to her. "Yes, you did. Congratulations to you and Clark. If he's anything like this Clark, you are one lucky lady."

"You know Clark?" This somehow surprised Lois.

"I will."

Lois pushed her card back across the table. "I won't be needing that."

Star pushed the card back. "Of course not, sweetie. But I do also take referrals."

Lois picked up the card. Moonbeam Mayhem, Attorney at Law. Divorce.

"Moonbeam?"

"Oh, yes. I meant to correct you earlier. In this dimension, I'm Moonbeam, not Star."

Lois shook her head. "How is it that you aren't the same? Everyone else here is essentially the same person, same basic career objectives, more or less, but you're so different."

Moonbeam smiled. "I'm essentially the same as the Star you know. But the same life choices, no. What would be the fun in that? What can I say? I like variety."

Lois laughed. It was good to have a woman she could talk with here.

"You've had a busy day so far, Lucy. Let's see, you were shot, married, and almost faded away from electrocution."

"Shot?" Lois looked down at herself. "I was shot?"

"The sharpshooter at the Daily Planet. I heard about it on the radio. Plus, you have blood on your shirt."

Lois jumped up and ran into the bathroom. She saw the hole on the right shoulder of her shirt. She pushed back her shirt and looked at her shoulder. It looked fine to her. Maybe Star… Moonbeam was wrong, this time. Lois pulled her arm completely out of her sleeve and looked closer. She felt a bump she didn't remember. That was strange. It looked like she had been burned by a cigarette on her shoulder. She would have remembered that, wouldn't she? The scar looked old and well-healed. She put back on the big flouncy shirt that was Lucy El's style. Sticking her finger through the hole, she felt for that round scar. It matched the hole in her shirt perfectly.

She felt lightheaded and sat down on the closed toilet seat. What in the world was going on? Had Clark cauterized the wound with his heat vision? Yes, that made sense. She sighed in relief. She wasn't going crazy after all.

Lois returned to Moonbeam and the banana split, but the ice cream no longer looked appetizing. All those colors and textures swirling together into one gooey mess. She felt sick to her stomach.

"Lucy, you look green."

"Can I lie down?" Lois didn't wait for an answer and lay down on Moonbeam's sofa.

The lawyer brought a damp cloth for her forehead. "The nausea will ease about mid-September."

"Good to know." Lois groaned. Only two months left of this torture. If she survived that long.

"Your hard day isn't over. Clark and Lois still want their honeymoon."

"I know." Lois groaned, again. She felt dizzy, nauseous, and lightheaded. She looked at her hand. It seemed to be getting fainter. "Get Clark."

Moonbeam was standing at her window. "I can't. He just left. And he won't be able to help anyway. You'll just worry him."

"Clark." Lois moaned. "Clark." Her voice grew softer. Her hand became more and more clear.

Moonbeam sat down next to her. "Lucy, I want to tell you a story. Close your eyes and focus on my voice."

Lois nodded, she could do that. The world around her faded…

***

There was a knock at the door. Moonbeam opened the door to the older balding man on the other side.

"Excuse me," he said. "Have you seen this woman?" He held up a photo of Lois; he had folded Clark out of the photo.

"Yes," Moonbeam replied. "She just disappeared." She pointed to the empty sofa. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "She'll be back in awhile. A half-hour, maybe less. Would you like to wait? Or should I send her home then?"

The man looked at her like she was nuts. "Yeah. Thanks. That would be great." He turned to go.

"Dr. Lane, hold on."

Sam stopped. "How did you know…?"

"Lois isn't dead."

"That's good."

"Your Lois, I mean. She's alive. She's fine, but darkness surrounds her. I don't understand that. Hmmm."

Sam's step faltered. "Pardon?"

"Maybe you should come in."

"I need a drink," he muttered.

"Lucy needs you. Why don't you wait here for her?" She closed the door as he stumbled to the sofa. "Don't sit there!" Moonbeam warned.

"What? Huh?"

"Lucy is sitting there."

He looked at the empty sofa and staggered back to the door. "You're crazy."

"You don't really believe that, Dr. Lane. Now, sit over there." She pointed to an armchair across from the sofa. "And let me make you some tea."

"Lady, I need something stronger than tea. The day I've had…"

"You can call me Moonbeam. I keep forgetting to introduce myself. Your daughter will need you when she returns, Dr. Lane," she called from the kitchen.

"She's not my daughter," he mumbled, running a hand over his damp forehead. He heard the kettle whistle.

"I put the water on when Lucy came in," Moonbeam explained. "And she wasn't the daughter to whom I was referring. Honey or sugar?" She smiled.

"You know my Lois?" he gasped.

"I will."

"Huh?"

Moonbeam closed her eyes and held out her arms from her sides. "Clark will save her. But he'll need Lucy's help. And she'll need your help, Dr. Lane. You daughter will return to you greatly changed, but in essence the same. You have raised a good and strong daughter. She will need you to see the light." She put down her arms and opened her eyes.

Sam's jaw hung open, then he snapped it shut. "Thank you."

She held out a cup. "Tea?"

He took the cup without another word. A few minutes later the cup started rattling in his hands. There, on the sofa where Moonbeam had told him not to sit, Lucy slowly rematerialized.

"Oh, good. Mr. Wells was in time. Lucy returns to us."

"Clark," Lois murmured. "Clark, it happened again."

Sam set down his teacup and knelt beside the sofa. "Lucy?"

"Daddy?" She reached out to him with her transparent hand.

"Where did you go, sweetie?" he asked.

"I don't know. I just disappeared into a fairy tale."

"Something almost happened in Lucy's dimension which would have made it impossible for her to return, thereby erasing

her existence," Moonbeam explained. "All better now."

Sam turned to her. "Who is Mr. Wells?"

Lois sat up. She was almost back to full color again. "Was he here? Did I miss him?"

"No. Not here, Lucy. Your dimension. He arrived in your dimension in time. I made you some ginger tea. It's a little strong, but it should settle your stomach."

"Thank you, Moonbeam."

"It's not over yet. I sense you might disappear on us once more before too long. So, drink up."

Lois's eyes bulged from their sockets.

"Disappear again?" Sam gasped.

"It isn't a science, Dr. Lane, changing one's past lives. Canceling a curse. Sometimes it takes a few tries. But it's well worth it, don't you think, Lucy?"

Lois nodded, not wanting to say more on the subject in front of her father.

"Curse? Did you say curse?"

"Lois and Clark's love was cursed centuries ago. But they're fixing it now. Everything will be just fine. Wait and see." Moonbeam smiled and, turning to Lois, set a hand on her arm. "The next two weeks will be hard for you. You'll want to sleep the whole time. But you can't live in your dreams. You need to eat to keep your strength up. Clark will need you."

"Clark needs me? This Clark or my Clark?"

"Both, of course. But I was referring to this Clark. Oh!" Moonbeam clapped her hands. "Let's not tell him. Oh, yes! Let's let it be a surprise." She ran into the kitchen.

The more time Lois spent with Moonbeam, the more she was reminded of Star. Lois turned to Sam. "What is she talking about?"

"I'm not quite sure. But I think she's referring to something she said earlier. She said that Clark will find my Lois, but he'll need your help to do so."

Lois nodded. "Yes, I definitely don't think we should tell Clark. He has enough on his plate for the moment." She lowered her voice. "He probably wouldn't believe us anyway. Star… Moonbeam takes some getting used to."

Sam nodded.

Moonbeam returned. "Ginger snaps. I bought them a couple of weeks ago, but I forgot. They go great with tea." She held out the plate.

"Thank you," they said, each taking a cookie.

Moonbeam sat down. "He's been so sad all his life. She'll make him happier than he's ever known he could be. You'll forgive him, of course," she said, turning to Sam.

"Of course," replied Sam. It was easier just to agree with her.

"Oh, I do love happily-ever-after stories, don't you?" She sighed.

Lois grinned. "I do."

Moonbeam handed Lois her card again. "Now, don't forget to refer me. I live for referrals."

Lois took the card and her heart sank. Who did she know that was going to need a divorce attorney?

***

Superman landed outside the hospital, between two parked and empty ambulances. He landed as Superman and stepped out as Clark Kent. He went to the information desk, got Jaxon's room number, and headed upstairs.

Clark took a deep breath outside the room. *Don't get angry*, he reminded himself. *Stay calm.* He knocked on the door and peered inside. "Jaxon?"

Jaxon was sitting in bed, a bandage wrapped around his left shoulder. "Clark! How's Lucy? Is she okay?" He looked anxious.

Clark stepped into the room. "She's fine."

Jaxon sighed in relief. "I was worried. Superman zoomed in, grabbed her, and disappeared. And then nobody heard from either of you. I was afraid she'd…"

"No. She'll be fine." Clark thought he should add more, though he didn't want to. This man was in contact with the shooter and gave him Mayson's name. But Jaxon didn't know that Clark knew; he had to keep his cover. "I'm sorry; I didn't see you."

"I understand." Jaxon attempted a smile on his face before it fell. "It's all my fault."

Clark's gaze narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"If I had just gone to lunch with her…"

"What?" That wasn't what he was expecting.

"I was on the phone when she asked me to lunch. If I had just hung up and gone, she wouldn't have been shot. Of all the days for her to finally agree…" Jaxon's face turned to ash.

"Jaxon, Ralph wants me to interview you for the story."

"I know. He told me."

"Can you describe everything leading up to you being shot?"

Jaxon's eyes went wide before darting around the room. "Ah, okay." Clark could tell he was trying to think what he should say. "I was on the phone with my brother," he finally admitted.

"Brother?" Clark sat down in the chair next to his bed. So, Junior was Jaxon's brother. He couldn't believe Jaxon let that slip. Lex Luthor, Jr.? Oh, dear. Lois wasn't going to like that.

"Yeah. Lucy was fixing her makeup at her desk and then she rolled her chair over to my desk. She asked if I wanted to eat lunch with her. I held up a finger, telling her to hold on, because I was on the phone. She must have misunderstood, because she went back to her desk, saying 'maybe some other time.' Do you really think she meant that?"

Clark shrugged a noncommittal shoulder.

"Hmmm. Then she started to act all weird-like. If she were in my VR, I'd have called it a software glitch, but—"

"VR?"

"Virtual Reality. You should really come over and try it out sometime. It'll blow your mind." Jaxon seemed a little loopy and Clark wondered how much pain medication he was on.

Clark remembered Lois saying something about Jaxon kidnapping her and Kal while they were in his VR machine. On how Jaxon was using it for some kind of mind control. "No, thanks. I prefer my mind in one piece."

"Okay." Jaxon looked slightly disappointed, but not surprised by Clark's response. He shook his head. "Lucy is human, right? Not a hologram or a robot or a cyborg or from Krypton or something strange like that, is she?"

Clark raised an eyebrow at that question.

"Not that being from Krypton is strange in the least. Gosh, I'm sorry, Clark."

"She's human, Jax," Clark reassured him.

Jaxon released a breath in relief.

"What do you mean by acting weird?" Clark asked, hoping he was wrong about Jaxon's analysis.

"Well, her color was off… I mean way off. She was so pale, she was grey. No, she was almost transparent. I mean, she couldn't have been transparent, right? She doesn't have the power to be invisible, does she?"

Clark looked at him skeptically. "I doubt it." It wasn't in Lois's nature to be invisible.

"Yeah, that would be weird. So, her color was off and she looked completely out of it, like she was about to pass out. No, wait, before she looked like she was about to pass out, she stood up and started calling your name, like she was looking for you, but her voice kept getting softer and softer. Then she looked like she was going to pass out. I was on my way to help her and bang! That's when we were shot. The bullet passed right through her like… like she was air… and right into me. I'm not air; I stopped that bullet good."

"She's flesh and blood, Jaxon. The bullet hole in her shirt and

her shoulder will prove that she isn't air."

"She got shot in the shoulder? Just like me." He shook his head. "You know, when you see something crazy, you begin to wonder if you're really crazy or if you saw what you think you saw." Jaxon stopped rambling at Clark's expression. "Do you think she would say 'yes' if I asked her out, again?"

"No," Clark said automatically.

Jaxon looked crestfallen.

"She doesn't date."

"Oh, right. She mentioned that. Do you know why?"

"She has her reasons."

Jaxon sighed. "There's just something about her."

Clark must have unconsciously given him a cold glare, because suddenly Jaxon looked uncomfortable.

"Sorry, Clark. I know Lucy's your friend and all, but, I mean, there isn't anything going on between you, right? I mean, you're dating Mayson Drake, the detective that was in here earlier." Jaxon whistled. "Now, she's…"

"Let's not spread that around, Jaxon," said Clark, trying to keep a cool head.

"Okay, you don't want anyone to know. I understand that. Tabloids hounding you night and day. Mum's the word." Jaxon locked his mouth with a pretend key. "But, Clark, if you don't want people to know, I recommend you stop kissing her at work. Everyone in the bullpen was talking about it."

Clark rubbed his forehead. He didn't know someone wanted to kill his girlfriend when he had kissed Mayson at work earlier. But Jaxon was right. Clark should have at least remembered he was tabloid fodder. He looked down at his notepad. "Let's finish up the interview, okay, Jaxon?"

"Sure."

"Do you have any enemies?" Clark queried.

"Me?" Jaxon gasped.

"Yes, you. Unless you think that Lucy was the main target of the shooter."

"Of course Lucy," Jaxon sputtered. "Why would anyone want to shoot me? I was a mistake."

"Why, indeed?" Clark raised an eyebrow. "For that matter, why would anyone want to shoot Lucy?"

"I don't know. I hardly know the woman. She works next to me, that's all." Jaxon's heart rate rose. They could both hear the beeps on the machine increasing. "You would know better than me who her enemies are."

"As far as I know, she has no enemies."

"Maybe some jealous ex-boyfriend. It could be why she doesn't date."

Clark pretended to consider this. "She does have some nasty ex-boyfriends. But I doubt any of them would want to kill her." None of them knew she existed in this dimension. "Maybe it was just a random shooter. A crazy guy who doesn't like the editorials at the *Daily Planet.* Or someone who thinks the sports reporters favor one team over another. Or the restaurant critic was too picky about a review."

"Maybe someone knew she's a friend of yours?" Jaxon smirked.

Clark laughed and laughed, so hard he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "You don't think anyone would be stupid enough to pick on Superman's friends. Do you, Jaxon?"

Jaxon echoed Clark's laughter uncertainly.

Clark stopped laughing and leaned forward, staring straight into Jaxon's eyes. "I mean, if someone were to try to finish the job on Lucy, or go after my friend Mayson, or even you, Jaxon… I mean, *we're* friends, aren't we?"

Jaxon nodded, swallowing hard.

"That would be bad. Very, very bad. Unforgiveable, really. Don't you think?"

He swallowed, again.

Clark waited, staring at him, swinging his glasses around and around.

"You know, Clark. If I tell you something, off the record, could you promise not to tell Detective Drake? I know she's your girl and all, but if word got out that what I told you went straight to the police…" Jaxon shook his head. "I shouldn't even be telling you… My father isn't a forgiving sort of man and I'm already his least favorite."

Clark raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"If you agree not to tell Mayson Drake, I'll tell you who shot Lucy."

Clark closed his notebook. "I'm listening." His glasses still dangled from his fingertips.

***

On his way back to Clinton Street, Clark stopped by the Daily Planet to type up his story and turn it in to Ralph.

It was a bare-bones story. Just the facts. What, where, and to whom it happened, even a little of how it happened. But the why — the why would have to wait. And the who — that, too, would have to wait. He ended the story with the usual 'police are still actively searching for suspects.' No 'Superman flies off with the victim' or 'Saves the detective from the bomb.' Those colorful stories were for another reporter, not Clark Kent.

Clark called his home phone to check for messages. Mayson had called twenty minutes before. She said she was leaving the station in a half-hour with or without him. He called the station and told her he was on his way. Then he called Lois's apartment. Dr. … Sam answered.

"How is she, Sam?" Dr. Lane's first name still felt uncomfortable on his lips.

"Better. She's resting."

"Still?" Clark asked, worried.

"No, again. We had a difficult afternoon. She disappeared on me and, well, I'm sure you know what that's like. My heart was in my throat."

"I'm sorry, Sam." Clark winced. "I was hoping to save you from that experience."

"I wish you could save her from that experience," Dr. Lane replied.

"Unfortunately, it's beyond my control."

"Lucy said it has something to do with what's happening in her dimension."

"O-kay." Clark tried to wrap his mind around that information. "We'll talk more about that later. How do you know she's better?"

Sam chuckled. "She asked for a roast beef sandwich with Swiss cheese and a chocolate milkshake."

Clark smiled. Lois was back. "I'll pick one up on my way over. I've promised Detective Drake that I'd bring her to see Lucy tonight. Do you think she's up for visitors?"

"I think so, but she said she wants to spend tomorrow in bed. No interruptions."

Clark sighed. Sounds like Lois and Kal finally got their wedding. He hoped H.G. Wells was able to find a cure in time, or this might be the last time he ever saw her. And then he realized that if Wells did find a cure, it might be the last time as well. He still hadn't had the courage to ask her how she was going to convince her younger self to return to the worst day of her life.

"Sam, I hate to ask this, but do you think you could make yourself scarce for the interview?" Clark inquired hesitantly. "Your presence might raise some extra questions."

"Sure. I've got a date tonight anyway. Well, I'm thinking of it as a date. I'm sure Lucy meant it as a chaperone after the day I've had today. I think she's afraid I might want to take a drink."

That was the last thing they needed at this juncture. "Do you?"

"Tempting though that sounds, Lois needs me. I'll resist for

her."

Clark smiled. Good for him. "I have one more request. It's a strange one. Everyone thinks that Lucy was shot in the shoulder today, so could you tape up her shoulder?"

"Already done," Dr. Lane told him. "Lucy said how you used your heat vision to cauterize her wounds. Smart thinking. They look like old scars already."

"I…" Clark realized that this was neither the time nor place to discuss Lois's new abilities. "Yeah. Great. I'll talk to you later, Sam. I've got to go." He hung up the phone. Probably best if Lois didn't know about her ability to heal quickly; she was a bit of a daredevil already.

***

Superman landed in front of the police station, carrying a paper bag. He was running late. He hoped Mayson had waited for him. Scanning the building, he saw her sitting at her desk, impatiently tapping a pen. When he walked in, she glanced up at him and scowled.

Oh, now what? he thought. He crossed to her desk.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he murmured.

"You're not late, Superman," she retorted. "Clark is."

He fought the urge to cringe. That was what pressed her buttons; he forgot to change.

"And I'm not walking out of here wearing a bulletproof vest with Superman as my bodyguard. I'll be the laughingstock of the whole station."

"I'll go change," he suggested.

"You do that."

Superman found the men's room in the hall and was back to her desk as Clark Kent in under a minute. "I picked up some sandwiches. I also told Lucy we'd stop by so you could get her statement."

"Thanks, Clark." Mayson grabbed her purse. "Let's go. I hope you don't mind if I drive."

"That would be great." He lowered his voice. "I don't like to fly as Clark."

"I'm okay if I never fly again. I like having both feet on the ground," she said, stopping in front of the desk sergeant. "I'll be at Lucy El's apartment getting her statement and then I'm going home." She turned to Clark. "She is at home, right, not tucked away in some secret lair?"

"She's at home," Clark confirmed. He gave the desk sergeant Lois's phone number. As they stepped away from the desk, he whispered, "I don't have a lair, Mayson."

They walked in silence to her car. As she looked for her car key, Clark remembered Lois telling him about Mayson dying in a car explosion. He set a hand on her shoulder to stop her from unlocking the door. "Mayson, wait."

"What's up?"

He lowered his glasses and scanned her car. No bomb. "Nothing. Let's go."

Mayson opened the driver's side door and got inside. "You seem jumpy. Do you really think this psycho is going to come after me just because we ate a few meals together?" She watched with a raised brow as he buckled himself in.

"What? It's the law."

A little satisfied smile crept onto her lips.

"Is that all I am? A dining companion?" Clark inquired.

Mayson reached over and patted his hand. "No, Clark. You're more."

He took her hand in his and kissed it. "Good."

She smiled and removed her hand from his to start the car.

Clark leaned back and put his hands behind his head as she pulled the car out from the parking space. "A lair might be nice. A little home away from home. What do you think? A cave? No, too clammy and bat-like." He shivered. "A tropical island, perhaps? Oh, how about a castle of ice up at the North Pole?"

Mayson laughed.

"Nah. I guess I'll just stick to my apartment for now."

Soon, they pulled up to the row of brownstone apartments on Lois's quiet street.

"This is nice," Mayson said in the elevator.

"Yes," Clark agreed, wondering what she was thinking.

He knocked on the door.

"Very nice."

"*Can you get it, James?"* he heard Lois ask.

"Great," Clark groaned under his breath.

"What?" Mayson asked as Mr. Olsen opened the door. "Oh. Hello, Mr. Olsen."

"Is that you, Clark?" Lois called from the other room.

"Yes," Clark replied.

"Have you seen my glasses? I seem to have misplaced them." Lois's voice seemed panicked.

Clark patted his pockets. He pulled her glasses from his inside pocket quickly, pretending to find them on a side table. "Here they are," he said, going down the hallway to her bedroom.

"What's *he* doing here?" Clark asked under his breath, holding out the glasses.

Her arm reached into the hall and took them. "I don't know," she hissed. "He just showed up. He said he called you."

Clark winced. "I didn't have a chance to call him back."

"I need to talk to you," she whispered, coming into the hall. She had put on her glasses and changed into a different shirt. "Privately."

"Later." He motioned toward the living room. "Mayson's here."

"I know. My father warned me. Later is no good; I plan to be enjoying my honeymoon." She glanced over at him with a smile.

Clark sighed, the light dimming in his eyes. "Congratulations."

Lois took hold of his arm. "You'll have your day. I have it on great authority that happiness is in your future."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow at that remark, but said nothing.

They walked slowly out to the other room. "Hi, Mayson." She held out the shirt she had been wearing when she had been shot. Then her eyes lit up. "Do I smell sandwiches? I'm starved."

Mayson took the shirt and glanced at her hand on to Clark's arm with pursed lips. He helped Lois to her seat.

"Do you have a clean paper bag?" Mayson asked her.

"Ah…" Lois thought a moment. "Clark, could you?"

Clark took the shirt and the sandwiches into the kitchen. Mr. Olsen tagged along behind him. Clark returned with the shirt in a paper bag, which he handed to Mayson.

His boss followed with a plate of sandwiches. "These are all roast beef. Where is Lucy's vegetarian sandwich?"

Lois blanched, gazing at the plateful of sandwiches with longing and a sigh.

"What? Oh, don't tell me that they forgot her Portobello and Swiss sandwich." Clark covered this error with aplomb.

"Well, at least, you didn't forget my chocolate shake. Right?" she asked, with a hopeful glance at Clark. "Right?"

"Ooops." He smiled weakly.

She pointed at him with a fierce look. "Clark Kent…."

Mr. Olsen grabbed her finger. "Lucy, honey, I will order you whatever you want."

She glanced up at her boss and jerked her finger out of his hands. "Don't call me 'honey,' Jimmy."

"Sorry." He blushed. "So, a chocolate shake and a Portobello and Swiss sandwich. Anything else?"

Mayson took Clark aside. "I was wondering how she could afford this place on her salary." She looked over at Mr. Olsen. "Now I know."

"What?! No! Mayson, she's subletting this place," he

whispered to her. “While the owner’s away.”

Lois glanced over to them and glared.

“I don’t think she likes me much,” Mayson whispered back.

Clark sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Mayson stepped toward Lois and pulled out her notebook. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, thanks to Clark.” She gave him a smile. “If he hadn’t zap-zapped my shoulder right away, I’d be a whole lot worse off.”

“Zap-zapped?” Mayson wondered with a glance at Clark.

“Heat vision,” he murmured.

“Oh.” Mayson took another step closer to Lois and away from Clark. “Can you tell me what happened this afternoon, Lucy?”

“Not really. It was kind of a blur,” Lois replied.

“Clark said you overheard something. Tell me about it.”

Lois gazed wide-eyed at Clark. Obviously that information was supposed to be kept between them. Ooops.

“At the desk next to mine, Jaxon was on his mobile phone,” Lois finally admitted.

Mr. Olsen set down Lois’s red telephone receiver. “Jaxon? Jaxon was involved with this? I knew I should have fired him when you first told me about him.”

Mayson turned to Mr. Olsen with interest. “Told you what, exactly?”

Mr. Olsen gulped and looked at Clark.

The detective then turned to him as well. “Have you been holding out on me, Clark?”

He swallowed. “One thing at a time, Mayson. Why don’t you finish with Lucy first?”

Mayson thought about that. “Okay. I’ll come back to you two in a minute.”

After she turned her attention back to Lois, Mr. Olsen mouthed an apology to Clark.

“You were saying, Lucy?”

The telephone rang and Lois looked like she wanted to answer it, but didn’t want to move at the same time. “Clark, could you?”

“Of course.” He walked over and picked up the receiver, despite Mr. Olsen being closer. “Hello?”

“Oh, good. There you are, Clark. How is Lucy?” Mayor White inquired.

“She’s fine, Chief,” Clark replied. “Resting.”

“Trying to,” Lois mumbled, rubbing her temples.

“Glad to hear it. I need to talk to you, Clark. I’ll be right up.”

“No, Perry. This is not a good time. Perry? *Perry?*” Clark hung up the receiver. “Mayor White’s on his way.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Great. The whole gang.” She grabbed a blanket off the back of her chair and draped it over herself.

“Mayor White?” Mayson’s gaze slid over each of them curiously. “Okay. Go on, Lucy.”

“I couldn’t hear exactly what Jaxon was saying, but he did say something about a test. It sounded like he wanted whomever he was talking to — Junior, I think he called him — to cancel the test. And he mentioned you, Mayson, and Clark and me and Superman and…” Lois thought for a moment as if trying to remember another name, but then shook her head. “I don’t know, but it really frightened me.” She pulled her knees up to her chest.

Was Lois acting? Or had she really been frightened? Clark wondered.

“I wanted to get away, but I didn’t know where to go, where I’d be safe,” Lois went on. “I wanted Clark… to warn Clark, but I didn’t know how to contact him. I knew he was off with you.” She swallowed.

“Jaxon said you fixed your makeup and asked him out to lunch. That true?”

An awkward chuckle escaped Lois’s lips as she rolled her eyes. “I don’t wear makeup, Mayson. I moved closer to him to see if I could hear his conversation better, but it didn’t work. That’s when I got lightheaded and dizzy. I don’t remember much after that. I think I called out for Superman, but I don’t know.” She gazed up at Clark. “Did you hear me?”

Clark nodded, kneeling down beside her. “Did your blood sugar get low again, Lucy?” He wanted to make sure they used the same cover story.

“Blood sugar?” Mayson asked.

“Sometimes I forget to eat and I get dizzy.”

Mr. Olsen jumped out of his chair. “I’ll get you a banana.” He went into the kitchen.

“You’ve got quite an admirer there,” Mayson commented dryly.

“Tell me about it,” Lois said with a shake of her head. “Any advice on how to repel men?”

“No.” Mayson squeezed her lips together, before taking Clark’s hand with a smile. “I do all right.”

“Oh, no! Mayson, I didn’t mean…” Lois looked at Clark with a ‘forgive me’ glance.

Clark rubbed his free hand down his face. “Can this day get any worse?” he mumbled to himself as someone knocked on the door. He scanned it and saw Perry. He let go of Mayson’s hand and went to answer the door.

“Hi, Chief, what’s…”

“What in the King’s name do you think you’re doing?” Perry pushed a newspaper into Clark’s face. “How could you do this to…?” At that moment, the Mayor realized they were not alone. A big embarrassed grin spread across his mouth. “Hello, everybody.” He lowered his voice and murmured through unmoving lips, “Clark, I thought you said Lucy was resting.”

Clark glanced down at the newspaper. Well, technically, it was a tabloid, the *Daily Whisper*. His heart sank; this couldn’t be good, Perry never read the tabloids. The headline, *Superman’s Main Squeeze*, was accompanied by a photo of his rooftop kiss with Mayson. Only the tabloid had edited the photo, so it wasn’t Clark kissing Mayson, but Superman. He couldn’t hold in a growl. Mayson was going to hate this. “Ask and ye shall be answered,” Clark grumbled. He glanced over at her.

“What is it?” Mayson asked, stepping closer.

He hugged the paper to his chest. “Mayor White, have you met my friend, Mayson…”

“Mayson Drake, nice to meet you,” Perry said, holding out his hand.

“Likewise, Mayor White,” she replied, shaking his hand. “Clark can only say nice things about you. I didn’t know you knew who I was, though.”

“Sweetheart, everyone now knows who you are,” Perry said cryptically.

“Clark?” Mayson couldn’t be put off any longer.

He pulled the paper away from his chest and held it out to her. “I’m so sorry, Mayson.”

She turned white and stumbled backwards to the sofa. “What? I didn’t. Wouldn’t… *Clark!*”

Mr. Olsen rushed to her side to look at the paper. “White, you cannot believe these lies this rag… We’ll sue them for slander.”

“Libel,” Mayor White corrected.

“What’s going on?” Lois asked.

Perry stood between her and Mayson. “How is everybody doing, darling?”

Lois looked up at him. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you’re all right, honey?”

“Oooh. Don’t call her that, White,” Mr. Olsen warned.

“Stop patronizing me, Perry. What’s going on?”

He looked at her as if speaking in code. “Is *everybody* doing all right?”

“Clark, what in the world is he talking about?” Lois snarled.

Her glare would have burned holes in his jacket if she had had heat vision.

Oh, God! Please don't let her develop heat vision, too, Clark silently begged. He put his arm around Perry and moved him away from Lois. "Everybody's fine, Chief," he whispered. "Just fine."

"Good. Good to hear."

"Is anybody going to tell me what's going on?" Lois said, pushing herself to her feet.

Mayson held out the tabloid. "Take it."

Lois scanned the front page. "Oh, this isn't good. Not good at all." Then she opened to the story. "Clark, you've got to stop kissing Mayson in public, especially as Superman."

"I didn't!" he sputtered.

"Lucy, honey, are you okay?" Perry asked again.

"Stop asking me that. Why wouldn't I be fine, Perry?"

Mr. Olsen pulled Perry aside. "Apparently, she doesn't date."

"Appearances can be deceiving," murmured Perry.

"This photo is a fake?" she asked Clark.

"Doctored. I wasn't dressed as Superman when I kissed Mayson."

"Well, there's that. But the world couldn't have expected Superman to remain celibate, could they? For heaven's sake, you were engaged when you came on the scene," she said, sitting back down.

"Lucy!" Clark coughed as he flushed.

"The wrong word?" She winced. "Sorry."

Clark rushed to redirect the conversation. "But this makes Mayson a target. Anybody who wants to have power over Superman will try to do so through her," he explained.

"Can we get her Secret Service protection, White?" Mr. Olsen asked.

Lois shook her head as if she'd heard this argument before. "You Kent boys," she muttered under her breath, before raising her voice. "Mayson is a big girl who carries a gun for a living. I bet she can take care of herself. At the end of the day, it's up to her."

Mayson looked at Lois in surprise. "Thank you, Lucy. But I think Clark's right. I wouldn't want to become a bargaining chip against him."

Clark took her arm and practically flew her into the kitchen. "What are you saying, Mayson?"

"We're going to have to categorically deny this story. Claim the cover photo is a fake and put the other photos in doubt."

"Oh," he whispered, looking down.

"And," she wrapped her arms around his neck, "We're going to have to be a lot more careful." Then she placed a kiss upon his lips. Happier, he pulled her close.

"Thank you, Mayson," Clark told her. "For not giving up on me."

"Let's hope you're worth it." She smiled tenderly, before suggesting with a wink, "Let's get out of here."

"Okay," he agreed. "There's something I have to do first." He lowered his lips to hers once more.

A knock on the front door interrupted them. Lois's sandwich and chocolate shake had finally arrived. Clark grabbed a large bottle of water from the fridge and five glasses. They walked back into the living room.

Mr. Olsen shut the door and handed the bag of Lois's food to her. Clark grabbed the platter with the sandwiches and passed it around as Mayson filled the glasses.

"I should have ordered some beer. Do you have any?" Mr. Olsen asked Lois.

"I'm not allowed to drink," she announced and then gulped.

"But you could keep it on hand for guests," her boss put forward.

"I am a recovering alcoholic, James." She exhaled with a glance at Clark.

"Really?" Perry seemed surprised. "How long?"

"A couple of years," she said with another sigh.

"Good for you."

Lois smiled weakly at Clark and he recognized it as fake. No meat, no alcohol. Not that she would be drinking, anyway. She would kill him if she had to continue this persona after the baby was born. If Lucy El became diabetic and had to give up sweets, Lois might end up doing something drastic. Clark decided to bring her some more roast beef and Swiss sandwiches for the weekend.

"Lucy had an idea," Mr. Olsen said. "If it works, you won't have to deal with lawyers. You'd be defeating those tabloids at their own game."

Perry grinned mischievously and took a bite of a sandwich.

Mr. Olsen continued, "But there is a drawback to this plan."

"What's that?" Clark asked.

"You both are going to absolutely hate it," Lois answered. "James was telling me that Clark saved you from a bomb this afternoon, Mayson. Is that right?"

"Well, Super… yes," Mayson replied. "What about it?"

"If anyone asks, tell them that the photo was taken after he saved you and that you were just thanking him." Lois pointed at the photos. "You can't see any weapons in the photo."

Clark's heart lightened. "That works under your idea of categorically deny. Sounds good. Women kiss Superman all the time after I save them. It could work. Why would we hate this idea?"

Perry patted his shoulder. "Because, son, that's only phase one."

"Do we need a phase two?" Mayson asked.

"If you want to keep seeing each other," Perry told them.

"Superman gets invited to lots of events, doesn't he?" Lois asked.

"You know I do." He didn't like the direction she was headed.

"Well, we're going to overload the tabloids and the public with Superman by having you bring a different date to every one of those events."

Clark groaned, "Lucy, no!"

"Well, not Superman, but Clark Kent. Superman is a symbol and should not date. We're all in agreement on this?"

"I, for one, won't kiss him," Mayson stated, crossing her arms.

Clark looked at Mayson for a moment, before glancing at Lois.

Lois was shaking her head. "The one woman in Metropolis. I'll never understand it."

"*What?*" Mayson asked her.

"Nothing."

Perry grinned like a cat at a saucer of milk. "I knew it."

"What?" Lois asked him, her voice low and menacing.

"Nothing."

Clark knew darn well Lois had heard the Chief. Or, at least, he would have known if it hadn't felt like his world was caving in on him. "This would be torture, pure unadulterated torture. I don't want to do it," he said as his entire body and attitude slumped.

"I know a few lawyers I could recommend, Clark." Mr. Olsen took another bite of his sandwich. "And you could fight *The Whisper* in open court."

"Do you know how hard it is to find an honest lawyer in this town?" Clark shivered. "Okay, explain your theory, Lucy."

Lois took a long sip from her shake. "If Clark Kent is seen with every woman in Metropolis on his arm, no one is going to think twice if he has lunch or even dinner with Mayson every once in a while. Everyone will think they are just friends, because

no sane woman could handle their man out on the town with a plethora of other women."

"Don't you think that Superman's image would take a hit from being seen with all those women?" Clark inquired, hopeful this remark would discourage the idea.

"But Superman won't be seen dating any women. Clark Kent will be. You go to a bunch of events at first and then slowly dwindle them down until you are only attending the ones you want to attend. Hopefully by that time, the tabloids will be sick of photographing staid Clark Kent and have moved on to greener pastures. Then you can go back to your life. As long as you never kiss another woman in public again."

Clark sighed. "It feels like I'm still bending the truth, but it could work. And if it removes the target from Mayson, I'm willing to give it a try." He looked at her. "Would you still want to — go out seems like the wrong phrase in this situation — date me under these circumstances?"

Mayson took his hand. "If Clark agrees not to kiss any those women…"

"Trust me, Mayson, there isn't another single woman in Metropolis I would even consider kissing." Clark brought her hand up to his lips, but his eyes glanced at Lois.

She took a long sip from her shake and looked away.

"I'm beat. Can you escort me home now, Clark?"

"Did you finish getting your statement from Lucy?" he asked.

Mayson put a hand to her forehead. "I forgot. Let me check my notes." She found her notepad on the coffee table and reread her notes. "No. I'm not finished. Why were you thinking about firing Jaxon, Mr. Olsen?"

"Great Caesar's ghost, Jimmy! Did you let that slip?"

Mayson turned to Perry White. "You too, Mr. White? What are all of you hiding?"

"We'll get to that in a minute, Mayson. But first I need to tell Lucy about my interview with Jaxon."

"Why would you interview Jaxon?" Lois leaned forward. "And more importantly, is he still in one piece?"

"Of course, Lucy," Clark informed her with mock hurt at her implication. "I'm against killing people, you know that."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "Against killing, yes. But if they threaten your friends…."

"Clark?" Mayson turned to him, aghast. "Is this true?"

"She's exaggerating. I *don't* torture people," Clark stated firmly. "I just talked to Jaxon, that's all. He wasn't any more damaged than before I spoke with him."

"He's hurt?" Lois asked, surprised.

"He was standing right behind you when you were shot. The bullet passed through you and into him," Mayson told her.

"Oh." Lois swallowed, touching her shoulder. "Is he all right?"

"The bullet shattered some bone in his left shoulder, but he'll heal," Clark said.

"Why do you need to tell Lucy about your interview with Jaxon tonight?" Mayson asked with a yawn. "Can't she just read about it in tomorrow's paper?"

"No. He said some things off the record that I need to tell Lucy." Clark turned to Perry. "In order to get the information I wanted, I promised him I would not tell Mayson or the police."

"Oh." Perry nodded.

Mayson placed her hands on her hips as her eyes narrowed into slits. "Should I wait in the hall?" she inquired, despite everything in her body language to the contrary.

Perry grinned. "You want to do a Jericho Firestorm, don't you, Clark?"

Clark nodded with a slight tilt of his head.

"What's a Jericho Firestorm?" Mr. Olsen asked.

Perry took Mayson's arm and moved her into the dining room. "Shall we move Lucy to the sofa by the door?"

"Jericho Firestorm isn't a *what*, it's a *who*." Lois stood up and moved to the other sofa. "He was a sadistic arsonist who plagued the coast just north of the docks with fires for months. What was that, Perry, five years ago?"

The Chief's jaw dropped. "How in Memphis did you know about Jericho Firestorm, Lucy?"

Clark looked at Lois with wide eyes. *Come on, Lois, lie on your toes,* he urged with his mind.

"From Clark, of course," she replied with an innocent smile. "He's always telling me Lois Lane stories."

"Oh." Perry laughed. "For a moment there…" He shook his head. "Lois is quite a character."

Mayson asked, "Who is Lois Lane?"

"Only the best investigative reporter this city has ever seen," smirked Lois.

Everyone turned to her in shock.

"Until Clark Kent," she amended.

Mr. Olsen came and stood next to Mayson. "She disappeared while on assignment in the Congo three years ago. Gun running?"

"That's right. And yes to your guess too, Lucy. Jericho Firestorm was roughly five years ago." Perry leaned against Lois's dining room table. "You see, Lois hunted down and cornered the son of a bitch for an interview, but the sneaky devil would only talk to her off the record. In exchange for information about the location of his next fire, he made her promise she would not tell the police. It was too big of a scoop, so Lois took the deal. Then we invited Detective Henderson to my office and Lois Lane told me everything he said in the interview."

"So, she broke her promise to Jericho?" Mayson asked, surprised.

"Of course not," Lois snapped. "Lois Lane does not reveal sources."

"She's channeling her again, Clark." Perry chortled. "Let me explain Jericho Firestorm again, Mayson. We brought Detective Henderson in to listen, while Lois told *me* what Jericho told her. She didn't break her word. She did not speak directly to Henderson the entire time. He was not allowed to question her about what she told me. It was as if he overheard it at a restaurant. Henderson then caught Jericho as he was setting his final fire. And because everything Lois learned was off the record, it was not admissible in court. Eventually, Jericho was released on a technicality. Henderson caught him a week later trying to set fire to a tied-up Lois in her old apartment. She moved here after that."

He watched as Mayson digested the information. "This is crazy, but I'm game." The detective shook her head and then sat down at the dining table, her notebook ready.

Clark sat down opposite Lois, his back to the others. "Jaxon told me that Junior is his older brother."

Lois's eyes went wide. "Oh, wow. This is news. Lex had another son? I knew his first wife died in a car accident. I always assumed that the child didn't survive either, but if he did…" Her lips tilted downwards. "Lex can't be *that* old, can he?"

"Who knows how old he is? He's a master of deception and lies," Clark replied. Lex hadn't looked old enough to have a son their age when he had seen him get shot by the clone in the alley.

"What else did he say?" Lois asked, getting back to Jaxon.

"He said that his father frightens him more than I do."

"I can believe that." Lois smiled sweetly at him. "Lex doesn't have a decent bone in his body, while you're not frightening in the least."

"Thanks, Lucy. Damage my ego why don't you?" Clark removed his glasses and stared at her. "I've been told that Superman can be quite intimidating, though."

"You're a cruel man, Clark Kent," she whispered, a slight quaver to her voice.

Lois wasn't teasing him as she was a moment ago. Something had changed in her expression. She no longer saw him, he realized. She saw Kal — the man she had just married back in her home dimension — sitting right in front of her, close enough to touch. He slipped on his glasses and leaned back. She blinked the tears from her eyes and looked away.

"Lex Junior hates Superman," he continued as if nothing had happened. "But killing Superman is too difficult a task. It's not like they can buy Kryptonite at the corner store. So he thought he could get at me through my friends."

"Why does Junior hate you? I mean, did Jaxon give you a reason besides the obvious?" she asked. Her voice was a little deeper, rougher, but she was back.

"Junior developed a device called a Neuroscanner, which latches onto an individual's genetic fingerprint and allows a person to watch and listen to what another person says and hears. He can also control that person with migraines, if they don't do as he says."

"Ouch. What a horrible invention. But what does that have to do with you?"

"Apparently, Lex Junior is obsessed with their stepmother and used the device on her. For some reason, when Superman showed up, the whole thing went haywire and stopped working properly," Clark explained. "Jaxon said that the last image Junior saw on the monitors before the circuits were overloaded was Superman's face."

Lois's jaw dropped and her hand covered her mouth.

"You're not going to be sick, are you?" Clark whispered, leaning closer.

She swallowed, reaching out for him. "I'm fine. Clark, did he say anything else about his stepmother?" She took his hand and squeezed it.

He furrowed his brow and let go of her hand. "That was about it. Anyway, the failure of Lex Junior's device angered Lex Senior so much that Junior is no longer allowed contact with the stepmother."

"Sounds like he used it without Daddy's permission."

"Could be." Clark nodded. "So, he decided to take his revenge out on me — or, more accurately, my friends."

"So, Lex Luthor had nothing to do with the shooting this afternoon?" Lois repeated with a breath of relief. "That makes sense, it's not his usual M.O."

"Apparently it was all Junior's idea. Jaxon wants his brother locked up in an insane asylum. He's worried he might come after you again. I think our web designer has a little crush on you."

Lois rolled her eyes. "What does a woman have to do to be left alone in this town? Did he give you anything on how to capture Junior?"

"Jaxon said he hasn't seen him since he was a little boy. Doesn't even know what he looks like now," Clark said, his skepticism evident. "Junior had some kind of birth defect on his face — a skull malformation — so he likes to stay hidden away from people."

"That would explain why Lex told everyone he was dead. Lex likes to be surrounded by perfect and pretty things. A son with a birth defect would embarrass him and he wouldn't want to be reminded of him."

"Jaxon said his brother likes to call and keep tabs on him. He's been taunting Jaxon, which is how he knew that Junior was trying to shoot you this afternoon."

"So, did he tell us anything about Junior that would be helpful, besides being insane? We deal with psychos on a weekly basis. That's nothing new."

"Jaxon said his brother was raised in Australia and might have moved to Hong Kong or Singapore recently. He doesn't think Lex Junior is local to Metropolis."

"Great. Long distance rifles have just gotten a new meaning." Lois shook her head, paused for a moment, and then shook her head again. "We should talk to Dr. Klein and see whether we have a sample of the genetic fingerprint for the stepmother, if it can be backtracked to the Neuroscanner and thus to Junior."

"That's a pretty big 'if,' Lucy." He looked at her doubtfully. "Anyway, the Neuroscanner is broken."

"Just ask." Lois took a deep breath. "He might be trying to fix it." She took another deep breath. "Clark," she whispered, reaching out to him. "Take me back to my room, please. I'm not feeling well."

She closed her eyes and by the time she had reopened them, Clark had already whisked her away to her bedroom. He sat down next to her on the bed.

"Did I disappear again?" Lois asked.

Her hand felt lighter in weight and density than it had earlier. "Not yet. But you're looking a tad pale."

"Can you get everyone out of here?" she asked. "And ask my father to come home."

"He said he had a date," Clark told her.

Lois smiled indulgently at him. "Moonbeam's a little young for him. Apartment three, ground floor."

"I want to stay with you," he told her. What if Lois faded away and never came back? He needed to be here if that scenario occurred.

"You should take Mayson home. She needs you."

He felt torn. Clark liked Mayson, he really did. But Mayson was no Lois Lane. There was only — okay, technically, there was more than one Lois Lane — but only one soul mate for him. He groaned. And neither of these women were her. No matter how much he loved *this* Lois, she was now and would always be Kal's wife.

"Clark, take your girlfriend home." Lois murmured. "To those people I am nothing but an old college friend to you."

Clark took off her glasses and set them on the side table. "Lois, you know you are more than that." He brushed a lock of her hair off her face.

She reached up to his face, to his glasses.

He placed his hand over hers, stopping her from removing them. "You'll see him tonight in your dreams."

She dropped her hand and turned away.

"Clark?" Mayson inquired from the doorway.

He turned towards the detective, still torn. Whether she admitted it or not, Mayson needed his protection, but it was Lois that he wanted to protect. Unfortunately, he knew staying with Lois wouldn't help her, and there was someone else she wanted. "Coming."

"Is she all right?" Mayson asked as he left the room, shutting the door.

"She suddenly felt tired," he murmured. "She's had quite a day."

"We all have." Mayson took hold of his hand. "Maybe she shouldn't be left alone. Do you want to stay?"

He had already made that decision. Knowing what she and her husband would be doing in Lois's dreams made Clark want to be by himself even less. He cupped Mayson's jaw in the palm of his hand and kissed her tenderly. "I want to be with you. I'll check on her in the morning."

Mayson smiled and leaned against his chest. Right answer.

Clark wrapped his arms around her. It felt good to be able to hold someone like this and he felt guilty for wishing it were Kal's wife.

"I can stay with Lucy," Mr. Olsen volunteered.

"It's okay. I've got a doctor friend who has already agreed to stay with her."

"That's probably for the best," agreed Perry.

"Excuse me," said Clark with a kiss to Mayson's cheek. "I'll just check to see if he has a key." He went out the front door.

***

"Were Clark and Lois close?" Mayson asked Perry, her eyes following Clark out the door.

"Heavens, no, Mayson," he answered. "He's never met her. Clark joined the paper a couple of weeks after she went to the Congo. One of the first assignments I gave him was to go and find her."

James chuckled. "Actually, Lucy is a dead ringer for Lois. Even fooled Perry."

Perry shook his head at James.

Mayson looked at the sofa where Lucy and Clark had just been sitting and then over her shoulder towards Lucy's bedroom. She sat back down with a deep breath. "Could you explain that? Why would she…?"

"Clark and Lucy had this plan, where she impersonated Lois to see if it would bring out her killers or captors or whatever. It was a shot in the dark, really," clarified Perry. "Anyway, it all came to a head during the mayoral debate, when Superman emerged and was revealed by Tempus to be Clark Kent."

"Oh, yes, I remember," Mayson said, covering her mouth with her hand. "That's right, Lois Lane flew into the debate in Superman's arms. MNN showed the footage for weeks afterwards. That was *her*? Lucy, I mean."

The mayor nodded. "Then Lois Lane disappeared again after the election. Nobody knew where or why," Perry said. "Back to the Congo!" He threw up his arms in disbelief. "Like she would go back there. Well, we know why now. Those of us in this room do, anyways."

"And what does this have to do with Jaxon and Lex Luthor?"

"Lucy and Clark knew this Lex guy before Clark came to work at the *Daily Planet*. Some rich SOB exposed by their articles, who then escaped. Apparently Jaxon's his son. They think he's spying on Superman, trying to find his weaknesses. Plus, he might know where Lois is."

Lois Lane, the missing reporter, and Lex Luthor? That's a stretch, Mayson thought.

"She even told us Lex Luthor ruined her wedding," James explained. "As payback."

"Lucy's married?" Mayson's face was a maze of confusion.

The men looked at one another as if they hadn't added that possibility into their model. One shrugged and the other shook his head.

"Well, you should know I met Lex Luthor, three or four years ago, back when I worked for Bill Church of Cost Mart," Mayson informed them.

"What?" Clark had returned. "You know Lex Luthor?"

"I met him. Once. A very charismatic man. Well-dressed, well-schooled, well-financed," Mayson told him. "He owned some property in Atlanta that Bill was interested in developing. He wasn't married back then."

Clark seemed very interested. "Was he based in Atlanta?"

She shook her head. "He had some holdings there, but we met him in…" She thought for a moment. "I want to say Berkistan, but I can't be sure. This would have been before the war, of course."

"Bill Church met Lex Luthor in Berkistan to discuss property for a Cost Mart store in Atlanta?" Clark asked skeptically.

"Bill traveled around the world, because there are Cost Marts around the world. It wasn't strange to meet business associates in faraway places."

"Okay." Clark looked at Perry, who raised his eyebrows. Clearly, neither of them believed her. Terrific.

"That's good to know, Mayson. A lead. Thank you." Clark smiled at her in a way that made her knees weak. "The doctor has a key and will be here in a few minutes. Why don't we go? Let Lucy rest."

James and Perry nodded. Clark picked up the dishes and leftover food and put them in the kitchen. As James grabbed his jacket, Perry picked up the tabloid and handed it to Clark. Mayson hoped Clark would toss it into the trash, but he tucked it under his arm before shutting the door behind them. James took the elevator up to his penthouse apartment, while Perry accompanied them down the stairs to the main door where a town car was waiting for him.

"Keep in touch, Clark," the mayor said, shaking his hand. "My door is always open, if you need to talk."

"Thanks, Chief. I appreciate that," Clark grinned. Mayson could tell he was about to tell another one of his jokes. "Does that include exclusive interviews with the mayor?" And there it was. Really, Clark needed a better sense of humor.

Mayor White laughed. Maybe it was a newspaper joke. "Set those up with my secretary," the mayor called to him.

Clark waved as the town car drove off.

Mayson placed a hand on Clark's arm as he went to open the car door. "Tell me again how you know Lucy."

"Lucy and I worked together on the newspaper at Kansas State." Clark didn't look her in the eye when he said this. He tilted down his glasses and stared at her car for some odd reason. Then he opened the door and got in.

"Not an old girlfriend, then?" Mayson asked, getting behind the wheel.

"No." He laughed softly, as if amused by a private joke to which she wasn't privy. "I was dating Lana at the time. *She* kept a pretty close eye on me."

Oh, right. *Her.* The ex-fiancée. "So, Lucy isn't the girl who got away?"

"No." Clark took hold of Mayson's hand. "She's just an old friend. That's all."

Mayson wanted to be crystal clear about this, before getting more involved with this tabloid darling. "The way she looked at you…"

"Lucy has never been interested in *me*, Mayson," Clark unequivocally stated, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "There has always been someone else."

Mayson stared at him for a minute and then started the car.

***

My dearest Clark, my love, my husband. I know today was a long day for you, what with the Wedding Destroyer and our wedding on the hill and time travel and all. I did a little traveling myself today. Apparently, if anything happens to the younger me, it erases me from existence. I disappeared for awhile. Actually, I disappeared at least three times today. Once with the electrocution, once before Mr. Wells arrived, and once when Lady Loisette married Baron Tempos. It certainly gave my father a fright.

Well, he discovered my secret. He knows I'm not his daughter Lucy. Somehow, Kal convinced him that we needed him and trusted him with our secret. I'm exhausted from all this disappearing and reappearing. Once when I disappeared, I didn't just fade into nothingness. I believe I traveled back in time, back further than the Fox and Lady Loisette, into a time of fairy tales. I have written down the fairy tale to share it with you. I wonder if it was the first time our souls met and were pledged together forever.

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there lived a king and a queen who wanted a child more than anything in the world. Finally, after many years, they were blessed with a daughter. To celebrate this event, they invited everyone in the kingdom to rejoice in the newest member of their family. They also invited the eight good fairies. Each of the good fairies was allowed to give the young princess one gift.

The first fairy granted the princess beauty. The second, the gift of song. The third, intelligence. The fourth, independence. The fifth, the gift of storytelling. The sixth, loyalty. The seventh

fairy gave her the gift of adoration.

Before the eighth fairy could give her gift, the party was interrupted by a ninth fairy, whose invitation had been forgotten. She placed a curse on the young princess. Upon reaching her sixteenth birthday, the young princess would fall into a deep sleep from which she could never awaken. Then the ninth fairy disappeared, never to be seen in the kingdom again.

The eighth fairy stepped forward. She could not undo the horrible curse which had been placed on the child. Instead, with all of her wisdom, she changed the curse. Instead of sleeping forever, she granted the gift to love so deeply and so passionately that just one kiss from her true love would awaken the princess from her endless slumber.

True to the fairies' words, this princess did indeed grow up with intelligence, beauty, song and story, and a fierce independent streak. She was the best friend anyone could wish for, and was loved by every man who met her. But unfortunately for the young princess, she never found that one true love the eighth fairy had promised. Upon reaching her sixteenth birthday, the young princess was bitten by a strange bug and passed into her endless sleep. All of her admirers came to kiss her, but none of the suitors were deemed worthy, for the princess still slept.

Years passed and the princess continued to sleep. Every morning, the queen had her daughter carried into the garden and laid on a bed in the hope that someone would kiss her and wake her from this spell. Soon, the princess's presence in the garden was taken for granted, like a fine statue.

After nine years, a knight returning from battle caught sight of the beautiful princess asleep in the garden and he sat down next to her. Every afternoon from that day onward, the knight ate his lunch with the sleeping princess and told her a story from his travels or an amusing anecdote from town.

The queen kept watch over the garden and saw how the knight thought of her daughter, where others had not. When a sudden sprinkling of rain arrived, he removed his cloak to keep her dry. When the winds blew dry and harsh, he carried the sleeping princess to a sheltered corner where she would not be disturbed. When another man tried to take liberties with her, the knight drew his sword and protected her honor. He was a noble knight, deserving of her daughter's love, and the queen hoped in vain that his kiss would wake her daughter from the horrible curse.

One day, war broke out with a faraway kingdom. The whole castle was in such disarray that the sleeping princess lay forgotten in the garden. In the darkness of the evening, the knight stole through the garden on his way to his quarters. He was deeply saddened that he had not been able to visit the fair princess earlier that day due to his preparations for battle the next morning.

When he found her abandoned in the garden, he knelt beside her and declared his love to her. No longer able to resist the beautiful princess, the knight granted himself one gentle farewell kiss. Her arms encircled his neck and deepened the kiss. Overjoyed that she was awake, the knight carried her directly to the chapel, so that they could be married before he had to leave the next morning. Unfortunately, the chapel was deserted and no cleric could be found to officiate their wedding. Kneeling at the altar, the knight and the princess pledged their love to one another.

The next morning the knight left his bride for battle. No one but the princess knew whose kiss had awoken her. The kingdom was overjoyed at the princess's awakening and once again suitors returned to claim her hand. She refused all offers, hoping without hope as the days passed that her knight would return to her.

As her belly grew swollen with child, the offers faded away and the princess was hidden away from the eyes of the kingdom. The king and queen begged and pleaded with their daughter to reveal the name of the man who had awoken their daughter's heart. All she would say on the matter was that they would recognize him when he returned to officially claim her hand as his face would be the face of their child. The princess gave birth to a daughter as beautiful and gifted as herself. This time neither a grand banquet nor the good fairies of the kingdom were called.

A year after the birth of the young princess, the knight returned battle-weary and broken, unrecognizable to anyone but the woman who had known him for just one night. She saw in his eyes the eyes of her daughter. In his voice, she heard the voice from a dream which had spoken to her every day for a year. The caress of his hand on her face felt like that of only one man, her true love. On his lips, she could taste love's first kiss. She knew her true love, her husband, even though no one else did.

The king, the queen, the other knights, the nobility, the squires, and ladies-in-waiting all begged her to reconsider. This dirty, scarred man with a limp, a wrecked back, and a defeated spirit could not possibly be the man who had broken the curse with his kiss. They flung doubt and shame in her face, but nothing changed her mind. She knew her love and she would not consider any other. Slowly, she nursed the knight back to health.

One day as he played in the garden with his two-year-old daughter, he laughed, and the queen recognized the knight who had told stories to the sleeping princess all those years ago. The princess had found a love so strong and passionate it broke any barrier to impede it. The queen, overcome with joy and love, knelt in front of the knight and begged his forgiveness. She thanked him for returning to them her beautiful, intelligent, headstrong, willful, loyal to a fault, songstress storyteller of a daughter, who was beloved by all who knew her. For when one finds true love, one can never be lost again.

Good night, my true love. I go to dance with you in my dreams. LL

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Lois walked into the Daily Planet sucking on her morning smoothie, oblivious to the stares she received. She hummed in the elevator as she rode up to the newsroom. Floating past Ralph, she beamed him a "Good morning, boss."

Ralph dropped his coffee cup as she passed by.

She went to her desk and stopped. It was empty. Cleared of everything, including her computer. That was strange. James was sitting at Jaxon's desk, so she sat down and rolled her chair over to him. "Good morning, James."

"Lucy! What are you doing here?"

She swiveled her chair around, so she could look at his computer screen. "I had the peculiar feeling that I worked here." She took a long look at her empty desk. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I shouldn't have taken Monday off."

"No. Of course you still work here, Lucy. Just not *here* here. There." James pointed across the bullpen to Lois Lane's desk. "Clark wanted you farther away from the windows."

Lois sighed. "What a sweetie. Always thinking of me." She lowered her voice. "I thought I was supposed to be where I could keep an eye on Jaxon."

He lowered his voice to match hers. "Jaxon is out on sick leave. Fractured shoulder."

"Oh, right." She took a long sip from her straw. "Watcha doing?"

"Looking at you, Lucy. You just amaze me."

"Huh? Why?"

"Lucy, you were shot on Friday — four days ago — and you came in to work this morning floating on air."

She smiled a smile so large it couldn't get any larger. "I had a good weekend."

"Clark said you wouldn't talk to him… to anyone. That you spent the whole weekend in bed."

Her huge smile got larger as she sipped her drink. “And?”

James cupped his chin looking at her. “I’ve never seen anyone so happy. You’re glowing.”

“Thanks. What does Clark think about me taking Lois Lane’s desk? It couldn’t have been his idea.”

“How did you… Yes, Ralph said if Clark wanted you to move desks, that was the only one he’d give you.”

“Poor Clark.” She shook her head. “Ralph gives him such a hard time. It’s because he’s jealous. Clark is much better-looking, a much better person, and a much, much, much better reporter.”

“Lucy, are you all right?”

“I’m super.” She smiled mischievously.

“‘Cause you’re acting like you’re drunk,” James said with raised brows.

“I am drunk.” She lowered her voice and leaned closer to him. “On love.”

“Really?” James asked, surprised and — perhaps — a little disappointed. “I thought you didn’t date.”

“I don’t.” Lois sighed and then pulled her chair closer to James. She held a finger to her lips. “Our little secret. You and me. Don’t tell Clark I told you; he thinks it’s best if we keep it quiet.”

“Uh-huh.” Her boss’s boss nodded conspiratorially.

“I’m married.”

James had been leaning so far over to hear her that he toppled right out of his chair.

“Jimmy!”

He jumped up and dusted off his suit. “I thought we agreed on James.”

“Sorry.” She wet her lips. “James.”

“You’re married?” he whispered, swallowing. “Really?”

Lois raised her brows and nodded, taking another sip of her drink.

“I just can’t wrap my head around that, Lucy.” He rubbed his forehead. “To whom?”

“A really super man.” Lois sighed.

“SUPERMAN!” James gasped. Then lowered his voice when Clark looked up and glanced around. They ducked. “You mean Clark?”

Lois giggled. “Ah, no. I said ***a*** super man. I didn’t mean that Superman.”

“Oh.” James chuckled. “After last Friday night, I guess that’s a crazy assumption.”

“If I were married to that Superman, I’d…” She thought about how to finish that sentence for a moment. “How about we just don’t go there?”

“Agreed.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s acting like he’s lost his girlfriend, his best friend, and his freedom in one fell swoop.”

Lois grimaced. “Poor Clark. Friday was a pretty bad day for him.”

“If it hadn’t been for the hurricane that hit Haiti, I doubt anyone would have even seen Superman this weekend.”

“Well, it’s good that he got out of his apartment. If he hadn’t been seen all weekend, it would have added fuel to the tabloid fire.”

James nodded in agreement.

“So, you didn’t tell me what you’re doing on Jaxon’s computer.”

He turned back to the monitor. “I’m still trying to piece together what he was up to.”

“I’m yours, if you want me.” She smiled and then realized how that sounded as his jaw dropped. “To help. Sift through the data.”

“Right. Of course. I knew that.” He swallowed. “Maybe you should check in with Clark first.”

Lois was staring at Clark. He was talking to a tall auburn-haired woman, whom she could have sworn was Cat Grant if not for the way she was dressed. More stylish than trashy, but not conservative either. “Planning on it,” Lois said, standing up. “Before he does something he’ll regret.”

She focused her hearing on their conversation.

“*So, then, it’s a date,*” Clark was saying to Cat.

“Oh, Clark. What have I done?” Lois groaned.

Cat beamed at him with a seductive tease. “Now I know what it takes to have Clark Kent agree to go out with me.” She laughed. “I’ll be back later to iron out the details.”

Lois slid into the chair next to Clark’s desk moments after Cat left. “Are you out of your mind? We’re trying to polish your image. Not tarnish it.”

“‘Good morning, Clark,’” he said, ignoring her question. “Good morning, Lucy. ‘I had a great weekend.’ I can see that. ‘What did you do?’ I spent the whole weekend waiting for my best friend to return my calls. ‘I’m sorry, Clark.’ “ He looked her straight in the eyes. “You look like you enjoyed your weekend, Lucy. You’re glowing.”

“I—”

He held up his hand. “Spare me the details. I really don’t want to hear them.”

“Okay.” She bit her bottom lip, then lowered her voice. “If it’s any consolation, we’re great together.”

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “That’s a detail.”

“I’m sorry, Clark.” She placed a hand on his arm. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know.” He placed a hand over hers. “Try harder.”

“Yes, sir.” Her laugh trailed off at his serious expression. “So, what’s this about you asking Cat Grant out?”

“Oh, that’s right. You missed yesterday. Mr. Olsen and Ralph decided to help me on my quest to date as many of Metropolis’s finest single ladies as possible by holding a charity raffle.”

“They’re auctioning you off?”

“Oh, it’s worse than that. The twenty-five largest donations automatically earn a date with Clark Kent and the other twenty-five slots will be drawn at random.”

Lois winced. “I’m sorry. What’s the charity?”

“The Orphans of Metropolis.”

“I thought it might be.” She nodded.

“Fifty dates to fifty events I probably wouldn’t have wanted to go to anyway.” He lowered his voice. “I don’t mind doing events as Superman. Accepting a ribbon here, throwing out a first pitch there, giving a speech, hammering in the first peg. I fly in, I do my thing, then I fly out. No one expects Superman to hang out. I still get to have a life. But these things are social parties, society balls, charity events — I’m going to these gatherings as Clark Kent, so I’ve got to go for several hours. Shake hands. Schmooze. Small talk. Listen to all the speeches. Shake more hands. And all with a complete stranger as my date.” He heaved a dejected sigh. “At least it’s for a worthy cause.”

“Two great causes, if it means the tabloids will leave you alone… eventually. Won’t it be worth it?”

He lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. “That better be the outcome or I’m coming to your dimension and outing Kal.”

Lois scowled. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He shot her an evil grin. “Try me.”

“I knew you would hate this idea. I just didn’t know it was the only solution that would come up during our brainstorming meeting. How’s Mayson taking it all?”

“She was stuck at home for the whole weekend, because the tabloid scum parked on her block.”

“What? Frightened of some little reporters?” Lois could help but laugh.

He grimaced. “No. I asked her stay out of sight in case Junior

planned another attempt."

"Oh. Sorry." She really was. She wanted Clark to be happy. Everyone should be as happy as her. "Is Mayson okay?"

"Well, after the ribbing she's probably getting at work this morning…"

Lois waved off this concern. "She can handle those boys."

"I had to leap from rooftop to rooftop Saturday morning just to get home."

Lois raised a brow. "You spent the night? And you gave me a hard time about my weekend."

"She went to get some wine and find some papers she had on Lex Luthor, but by the time she got back I had fallen asleep on her couch."

"Whoa, back up there, papers she had on Lex Luthor?"

"She's met him. She used to work for Bill Church and—"

"Intergang," Lois interjected.

"What?!" Clark's jaw dropped.

"Bill Church is the head of Intergang. But Mayson's clean. We vetted her in my dimension."

"Lex Luthor met Bill Church just over three years ago in Berkistan to discuss selling property in Atlanta for a Cost Mart store," he explained.

"You're kidding, right? And this didn't raise any flags for Mayson?"

"She trusts him." Clark shrugged.

"Amazing. I'd say she was a bad judge of character, but she likes you."

"Thank you."

"She doesn't like Superman, though. And she doesn't like me, either, so I guess maybe she is a bad judge of character." Lois reveled in her words.

"Ha-ha, Lucy. For a second there I thought you'd actually paid me a compliment."

"Back up a minute. Berkistan in '93 was peaceful; then they got a whole slew of illegal weapons and civil war broke out."

"Yeah, so?"

"Right around that time, the UN was in the Congo trading food for weapons. The guns were supposed to be destroyed," Lois told him, "But most disappeared. I… Lois Lane almost climbed into a crate of illegal guns being shipped out of the Congo."

"What stopped y… her?" Clark asked.

"Security. They caught her and deported her back to Metropolis. I doubt they'd let me back into the country. I… she never found out where the guns ended up."

"So, you think the guns that disappeared from the Congo are the ones that fueled the civil war in Berkistan?"

She nodded.

"Wait a minute? What year was Lois lost in the Congo?" His eyes had grown huge.

Lois knew he knew the answer to that question, but she rubbed it in just the same. "The same year that Lois Lane went to the Congo. 1993. Right before you, Clark Kent, started here." *Duh.*

"Berkistan!" Clark smacked himself in the forehead. "Why in the world would I look in Berkistan, when she got lost in the Congo? This is it. This is the missing link."

"And what were Lex Luthor and Bill Church really doing in Berkistan in '93?" Lois inquired.

"You don't think that…"

"Think what?" She looked at him curiously.

"That Lex really had anything to do with Lois's disappearance?"

Lois frowned. "I hope not."

Hope flared in Clark's eyes. "Maybe she's still alive."

"It could also have been Bill Church."

"Has he ever shown any interest in you-know-who?"

"Me? No. Church did try to have one of his flunkies extort Sup… Kal. Threaten to kill me or Jimmy or Perry, should he interfere with Intergang's expansion plans." She smiled. "It's a funny story, really. Since Superman couldn't show his colors in the Westside, he went undercover as a policeman." She released a deep breath, thinking about how her husband must have looked in MPD blue. "I do love a man in uniform." She looked him up and down.

"What?" he asked hesitantly.

"Maybe you should try it, see if it helps with Mayson's Superman problem."

"She doesn't have a problem. She just prefers me," he retorted.

Lois leaned closer, lowering her voice. "What you're forgetting here is that he's a part of you. You are…"

WIN A DATE WITH SUPERMAN'S CLARK KENT! Ralph walked up with the blazing headline. "What do you think, Clark?"

"That sounds awful," he groaned.

"Great! We'll run with it." Ralph actually turned and acknowledged Lois. "Good work ethic. Don't let them get you down, researcher." He walked off.

"Can I throw my smoothie at him?" She snarled, holding up her cup. "Researcher, ha!"

"Lucy, your cup is empty. And no. What does my friend Lucy say when life hits me over the head with bad news? Oh yeah — life lesson on the house."

"I do not. I say, suck it up. I told Kal that life lesson thing." She pouted.

"Really? That's horrible. What did you do?"

"Me?" Lois batted her eyelashes innocently. "Who says *I* did anything?"

He raised a brow.

"Okay. I stole a Superman story from him. In my defense, Clark Kent is Superman. I just didn't know it at the time. So, it really was a life lesson for him."

"You keep telling yourself that," he said, turning back to his monitor.

"You still haven't told me why you asked Cat Grant out."

"You're jealous!" He chuckled softly as if he enjoyed that idea.

"Am not. I just don't trust her." She lowered her voice. "His whole first year at the paper, she tried and tried and *tried* to get Kal to date her and he said he never did. It made him more attractive that she wasn't the kind of girl he liked."

"I didn't date her my first year here, either, in case you're wondering." Clark pursed his lips. "Of course, it helped that I had a steady, and extremely jealous, girlfriend to fall back on. But that didn't stop Cat from trying. I'm not her type any more though."

"Type? She doesn't have a type, besides male."

"She's changed," he told her.

"Yeah, I noticed the tastefulness. I almost didn't recognize her."

Someone walked by with a box of donuts. Lucy jumped up and grabbed a couple. She sat down and Clark looked at her. She sighed and handed one to him.

"Thank you. And I didn't mean her style. After that asteroid almost hit Earth, she gave up on men, sex, and the whole dating scene for about a year."

"What?" Lois choked.

He took a bite of his donut. She impatiently waited for him to finish chewing.

"She was celibate for about a year, then decided to give up on men altogether."

"What?" Lois was confused. *Cat Grant? Celibate?*

Clark held up the invitation. "This is the event we're going to

together."

"GLAAD's Annual Ball. What does this… Oh. Altogether, altogether."

He nodded.

"Wow! I didn't see that one coming."

"It's nice to see you speechless every once in a while." He leaned back in his chair and actually beamed at her.

She dismissed his comment with a wave of her hand. "Back to that asteroid thing." She leaned in. "I know I'm supposed to be doing my homework on the history of this dimension and everything, but it's too recent for the history books. How did you get rid of the asteroid without Superman?"

"You didn't read my article for the *Daily Planet*?" Clark asked, taking another bite of his donut.

"You just wrote that it shattered on its own, spreading its debris outward, not towards Earth." She kept her voice low. "Is that true?"

"Man, you just have to know everything, don't you?" He gazed at her with admiration.

She waited patiently.

"Off the record, Ms. Lane? No." He grinned.

A smile spread across her face. "Put that on our to-do list. I want to hear the whole story. Off the record, of course."

"Of course." He picked up another card off his desk. "I'll tell you the whole story, if you agree to be one of the 1001 dates of Clark Kent. Perry sent over a list of events at City Hall this fall. I've got the perfect one, it's on Halloween."

"Halloween?" She lowered her gaze, the smile gone from her face. "That's more than three months away, Clark."

Clark took her elbow and led her into the conference room. After the door was shut, he turned to her. "What are you telling me, Lois?"

"The curse is broken. I'm free to go. H.G. Wells could be here any day now to take me home. I appreciate all that you've done for me, but I don't have a reason to stay away any longer," Lois said, looking him in the eyes.

"Oh." The hope that she had seen in his eyes earlier flickered, dimmed, and then went out completely. "I understand. You want to go home to Kal. If you were my Lois, I'd want you back, too."

She winced. "Please, Clark, don't. I still want to help you find Lois, I do. But Kal needs me."

"He has the younger… Lois, have you any idea how you are going to convince the younger you to give up being married to Kal and go back to the worst day of her life?"

Lois's jaw dropped. "That's *my* life, *my* time, *my* husband. We can just take her and drop her back in her old timeslot. No harm, no foul."

Clark frowned, crossing his arms. "No, you can't. Because you're going to need *my* help to get her back there at that precise moment and I refuse to take her back to that horrific situation unless you can convince her to go willingly. I refuse to do that to you; I'm surprised you would do that to yourself."

"I don't need you." Lois looked directly into his eyes as she stood up straighter and crossed her arms. "I'll just have my husband take her back."

But as soon as she said it, she knew her Clark was just as unlikely to send her double back into the past without her consent, either. Did Lois really want her Clark involved in this whole dimensional switch thing, anyway? It was bad enough that they were going to have to explain about making the switch to him, about lying to him. If she could convince this Clark to make the switch, then she could just slip into her dimension like nothing had happened. It was still early in her pregnancy. Her Clark would never need to know everything that had happened when she made her alternate dimension detour. Never need to know how she had kissed this Clark when she thought the New Kryptonians had disintegrated him, how she had begged him to make love to her. She needed this Clark to make the switch.

"You don't need me? Fine." He turned to leave, but then stopped and his shoulders drooped along with his voice. "Go back to your perfect life with your perfect man and his perfect family. Go ahead, leave me with yet another Lois Lane mess to clean up."

"Clark." She reached for him, but he pulled away. "I don't belong here. Your Lois is out there, somewhere, waiting for you to rescue her."

He shook his head in defeat. "It doesn't really matter, anyway. Mayson likes me."

"But she hates Superman. *Lois* is your soul mate."

"And you're not?" He turned his gaze on her, filled with yearning.

"I'm Kal's soul mate," she whispered, her voice catching in her throat. "*His*."

"Really? Just his?" Clark raised a brow. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't feel this thing between us." He gazed at her with a hint of a smile and her heart went flip-flop. Damn his Clark Kent charm.

She was just going to deny it. Lois's mouth opened and then closed. *Come on, Lane, you can lie to this man*, she told herself. Her mouth opened again as she pointed to him, but then closed again as she withdrew her finger. *Lie to him? Why would it be a lie?* she asked herself. *Oooh, that man!* She glared at him with a mixture of fire and ice in her eyes. She stepped forward and slapped him across the face.

Clark nodded. "Just as I thought." He turned and left the room.

Lois watched him leave, feeling as if all the joy from her weekend had just been leached from her bones. She wrapped her arms around her tummy and dropped into one of the conference room chairs. She stared into space as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

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Chapter 3 — One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Author's Note: I have altered the timeline of the show in this chapter by moving Tempus's John Doe presidential bid to its correct spot after *Ghosts* (October/Halloween 1996), and around the time of *Stop the Presses* (i.e. November 1996).

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Two months later…

Dr. Klein took the bent piece of metal from Superman. "Okay, that was the strongest metal found on Earth and you crushed it like a tin can. Impressive. We'll have to find something harder."

Superman nodded.

"Have you tried to see how far your x-ray and heat vision work?"

"I have a decent range. But I have never measured it."

"Okay. We'll try that next week." Dr. Klein pressed his lips together for a moment. "As your doctor, there was something else I wanted to discuss with you."

Superman looked at him curiously and waited. And waited. And waited.

"We've been working regularly together for two months now, so I feel we can talk openly about this, right?"

Tilting his head, Superman tried to fathom where Dr. Klein's mind was headed.

Dr. Klein took another glance around the lab and, despite it being just the two of them left in the room, lowered his voice. "One of the lab assistants noticed that you come here on a fairly regular basis, and advised me that you've been dating lots of different women. Is this true?"

Superman nodded.

"You are taking precautions. Using protection?"

Superman's eyes widened. "Against these women? Do I need

to?"

Dr. Klein winced. "We've established that you are similar to a regular human male. Women are different from men, physically. You understand that, right?"

"I was engaged to be married, Dr. Klein. I do understand the difference between men and women."

Dr. Klein released a breath of gratitude. "So, you are taking precautions then?"

"Precaution from what? The only thing we've discovered that can hurt me is Kryptonite." Superman was confused.

Dr. Klein wrapped an arm around Superman's shoulder. "Then you aren't really dating a lot of women, if you don't understand how a woman can crush a man like a tin can."

"No," Superman said. "I'm attending social events with a lot of different women for charity."

"Phew." Dr. Klein chuckled softly to himself. "If I had to go into the dangers of …." He shook his head.

Superman joined in Dr. Klein's awkward laughter. "You'd think we were discussing the birds and bees."

The scientist cringed. He took a deep breath. "I'm not a medical doctor, Superman. Understand that this is a difficult subject for me to discuss specifically with any other man."

"What subject are we discussing?" Superman asked, intrigued.

"Sex."

"Oh." Superman nodded. "Oh." Definitely the birds and the bees. His eyes went wide. Oh, *those* kinds of precautions. "Sorry."

"You understand my discomfort, then. Just tell me your experience in that department and we can move on, okay?"

This time it was Superman who checked for wayward ears. "I don't have any experience in that department."

"You don't?" Dr. Klein seemed a little surprised.

"Not a fact I want spread around, Dr. Klein," Superman said in his intimidating voice.

"Of course. Doctor-patient confidentiality. One hundred percent," Dr. Klein reassured him. "You were engaged without experimenting with the test subject first?"

Superman paused, uncomfortable. Sometimes the way Dr. Klein expressed everyday things in scientific terms unnerved him. "My situation is different because I'm different. I've waited, so that my first time would be with someone I trust completely."

"I'm not a therapist, but you were engaged to someone you didn't trust completely?"

Superman shrugged. "I thought if we actually got married, despite everything different about me, I could trust her. We never made it that far, so I'm glad I waited. Now that I'm Superman, I must be completely one hundred percent sure of someone before I could allow such intimacy."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Dr. Klein replied with a nod.

"Is there enough compatibility between my biology and human women for me to father a child, Dr. Klein?"

The researcher thought about this for a minute. "That's a good question, Superman. Let's run some tests next week, when you come in for your appointment. But in the meantime, if you decide to take the plunge with a woman, best cover up." Then Dr. Klein continued, clearly not wanting him to misunderstand, "Should you decide to become intimate, use protection."

"Of course." Superman nodded.

***

Dearest Clark —

I cannot believe it is the first day of autumn already. I am four months pregnant now and beginning to show. Although you'd have to see me naked to tell. No one who does not already know will find out. Lucy El's style of extremely baggy pants and flouncy shirts should keep my secret safe. Coat and sweater season will be upon us before we know it and the extra layers will make it easier to hide my growing belly. I miss you, terribly, and wish I could be sharing all this with you.

The nausea has finally subsided and I can eat again. Yea! When Dad weighed me yesterday, I had lost thirteen pounds since the first time he weighed me. Who knew that having a baby would be the best diet I'd ever be on?

My father and I snuck into the University Hospital last night and did an ultrasound on their big fancy machine. I felt almost like my old self again… or since my old self is in jail… like I was on the lam. My dad wanted a better look at the baby than he could get with his old sports ultrasound machine. He was worried because the baby's heart rate was double a normal baby's at this stage. I reassured him that so is yours. I even made him check Kal's heart rate for comparison. But Kal agreed with Dad. So, we broke into the ultrasound room at 1:45a.m. Dad was reassured. He could see the heart, arms, legs, and even the baby's bottom. I only saw a grey blob. He even took a photo. It still looks like a grey blob.

It was extra scary to break into the hospital without Kal's help. I was afraid that if we got caught in person or on a surveillance camera, it would cause him more problems with the tabloids. So, we will tell him about our trip this afternoon.

Kal and Mayson are still dating, if you can call it that. They meet for lunch at the D.P. or he zips over to her place for dinner. He's trying to keep a positive attitude, but this week alone she was called away during dinner and he away from lunch. He's still working his way through the fifty 'Win a Date with Superman's Clark Kent' winners (Ralph chose the title). With at least three events a week, he's only made it through roughly half of the winners in the past two months. He'll finish sometime during the holidays. I wish we had more news on Lex Luthor; the more we learn about him, the more I'm convinced that he has Kal's Lois Lane.

Now, I know I didn't tell you the detail I'm about to reveal. I didn't want to worry you. Before you groan "Lo-is" the way you do when you know I'm about to do something you don't want me to do, please hear me out. I'm telling you now because if I don't share this with someone I'll burst.

Kal said that Jaxon told him that the Neuroscanner allowed a person to watch through the eyes of whoever's genetic fingerprint it was linked to. Jaxon told him that the device went haywire when Superman arrived on the scene. And the last image Junior saw on the monitors was Superman's. That means whoever was looking at Superman has an identical genetic fingerprint to Lex Luthor's wife! Right? Who was the person who taught Kal how to be Superman? Who wasn't in this dimension before and might have caused the circuits to overload due to two people with the same genetic fingerprint causing conflicting visual images and auditory sounds?

Do you see where I am going with this? Of course you do, which is why I love you. Kal is oblivious. He isn't as tuned in to me as you are. And sometimes, I'm quite thankful for that. But sometimes, it's so frustrating and infuriating — having to wait for him to catch up to my hopscotch logic — that it makes me miss you even more.

The night he told me about his interview with Jaxon, we were doing a Jericho Firestorm… did I ever tell you that story? Well, if I haven't, ask Perry; he really tells it best. Anyway, this dimension's Perry, Jimmy, and Mayson were listening. I couldn't very well share my hypothesis then, without a lot of explaining and revealing of facts Kal and I want kept secret. Then that weekend, you and I started our honeymoon and I was distracted enough to forget about everything else. Just thinking about it distracts me.

The memories of our honeymoon were almost like actually being there. I mean, I was actually there. You did make love to me. She is me — just a younger me. I simply didn't remember it

until it happened to her. Crazy as I sound, I have a good excuse. I am living in both the present and the past at the same time. She is my past, but she's living in the present same as me. I could taste your kisses. And feel your caresses. And the floating was very nice, too. Of course, it wasn't our first time. Actually, it's kind of funny — you got to make love to me for the first time, twice. Once with me and once with the younger me. Hold on, the baby's kicking up a storm.

I'm back. Had to use the bathroom. Baby kicks me in the bladder. Maybe Baby's saying, Mama, the Kryptonian in me doesn't want to see those pictures in your head of Daddy and you on your honeymoon. I'm just joking. I'm sure our child cannot read minds. I hope!

Anyway, back to telling you about trying to tell Kal about my lightbulb moment. We went on our honeymoon…. And Kal has been trying so hard to be the best boyfriend to Mayson. Then I realized that I couldn't reveal to him that his Lois is married to Lex. How am I ever going to tell him? It would a) break his heart (bet you would agree with me there) and b) ruin his new relationship with Mayson. I would like to say I have high hopes for Mayson and Kal, but truth be told, I cannot.

Firstly, Kal is destined to love his Lois — and if she returns, which I have on great authority she will, it won't matter — well, actually, it will *matter to him that she's married to Lex. It'll crush him. So when Lois returns, Mayson won't like it one bit; she's just like Lana in that regard. Secondly, even though she knows that Kal is SM, there's still something about SM that Mayson doesn't like. Personally, I don't understand her aversion. I love the blue suit and being flown around by you. (Kal rarely is SM around me, so I haven't seen 'him' much.)*

Oh, Clark. I just thought about flying around with you and the baby started kicking again. She likes it when I think about you. No, I don't know for sure the baby is a girl. It's just a feeling.

Now, what was I writing about before I got distracted? Right, Jaxon. It's been two months since we were shot by Junior. I mean, Jaxon was shot; the bullet kind of passed right through my shoulder — I was phasing out of existence at that moment (thank you, Wedding Destroyer). I wanted to visit him in the hospital, but Kal was against the idea — said you would be, too — and by the time I was able to sneak away undetected, Jaxon had checked out. He wasn't staying at his apartment either; his landlady said he went out of town to recover. I got so desperate that I even asked Mayson where he was. She wouldn't tell me — I don't think she knew he had left, but she would never tell me that — then the little tattletale told Kal I was looking for Jaxon. And I got a stern talking-to.

I don't know what it is with men like Kal — as soon as a woman gets pregnant he thinks he can treat her like a child and say he's doing it to protect her. Today — no, wait, today's Sunday, it must have been Friday — I heard through the rumor mill that Jaxon returned to Metropolis, mostly recovered, and will be coming back to work tomorrow! I can finally talk to him about his stepmother. And see how accurate my hypothesis is. Then I just have to figure out how to tell Kal and Sam that Lois is married to Lex. Ugh. Just the thought of that gives me the willies. Poor Lois.

I miss you so much. I wish there were a way I could come home. Even when you are able to get the murder charges against me dropped, Kal still won't return the younger me to the past until I can think of a way to convince her to go willingly. He's too noble (read: stubborn) in that regard. Reminds me a bit of you. How can I convince the younger me to leave you and go back to Amnesiaville? How can I convince her that the past really is her true place in the timeline? That this blissful future we have together can only happen if she returns? Will she believe that I'm her… only a pregnant her? I remember how I was before I got pregnant: not ready for the responsibility, not ready for motherhood. How will I convince myself that this is really what she/I want?

Take care, Husband. I love how you decorated our new apartment, and cannot wait to share it with you. If only there was a way for me to come home. I miss you so much and my fantasy dreams from our honeymoon are fading and turning into nightmares of me pacing in an eight by eight cell. Keep the younger me safe, Clark. If anything were to happen to her… we'd disappear forever.

Okay, enough talking about the bad stuff in my lives. I'm going to sign off now and think more about you; see if I can get our baby to kick some more. Oh, how I wish I could share this with you. Have you place your hand on my belly and wait for the bump, bump of her kick. She's quite a strong kicker. Now, if only she'd stop using my bladder as a soccer ball.

Love you always and forever, LL

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Clark flew over the trees and fields. He hadn't been to Smallville in over a year. Lana had dragged him down to celebrate Christmas with her family two years earlier. She always said Christmas was for families and she wanted to have him spend it with hers. He couldn't stand being around her family, and had wanted it to be just the two of them in Metropolis. All that love and joy and happiness, when he had none, hurt too much. He felt like an outsider, never truly welcome.

But it wasn't Christmas now. It was September. Why was his mind dreaming of Smallville? Of the Kent farm? Of the farmhouse where he had shared love and happiness with his parents? He landed outside the farmhouse and stared at its dusty and neglected shell. He hadn't been to the house in years and it certainly looked it. Was it still there? Did it still look like this? Was that tree he used to climb and dream of faraway places still just outside his bedroom window? He wanted to go home. He looked in through the window and heard the phone ring. How did this abandoned house still have phone service?

Clark's eyes flew open. He sat up in bed and picked up the phone.

"Clark?" It was Sam.

He looked at the clock. It was 4 a.m. on a Sunday morning. "What's wrong?"

"Can you come over?"

Clark was gone before the receiver fell onto the base. Superman blew open Lois's living room windows. "What's the matter?"

Sam was still standing at the phone. He looked tired, exhausted really. The man blinked his eyes at Clark and then hung up the phone.

"I got up in the middle of the night. Old men have to do that, you know. On my way back to bed, I thought I'd check on Lucy. I've gotten into the habit of doing that since she disappeared two months ago. I just have to check."

Clark blanched. "Is she gone?" *Oh, please, God! Please have him say no.*

"No. No, not exactly. Maybe I should just show you."

They walked down the hall in silence. Sam pushed open the door. Lois's bed was empty, even her comforter was missing.

"Where—?" Clark sputtered. Sam had said….

Sam pointed up. Lois was sleeping on the ceiling. Blanket draped over her, just like she was asleep in bed.

"It almost gave me a heart attack. I didn't know what to do," Sam whispered. "If she woke up there…" He shivered.

Clark smiled. "I'll get her down."

"Thanks."

Superman floated up to the ceiling, scooped Lois into his arms and drifted down to the bed with her. He laid her on her bed, properly on her left side, and tucked the blankets around her. Stepping back, he bumped a paper off her side table. Picking it

up, he saw it was an ultrasound photo of the baby.

"Is this…?" He held it up to Sam, who nodded. "Wow. Wait. Where did you get an ultrasound photo?"

Sam held a finger up to his lips and they stepped out of Lois's room. "She didn't want to tell you. But we broke into the ultrasound room at the University Hospital this morning."

"Without me?" Clark was shocked and a bit angered. What if they had been caught?

"She didn't want to bring you. You've sacrificed so much for her already. She thought if something went wrong, she didn't want you to be implicated."

Lois was protecting him. Clark exhaled and stared at the photo to distract himself from thinking about what that might mean.

"That's her head, arms, and bottom. Her legs are tucked up on the other side," Sam explained.

"It's a girl?" Clark asked, glancing at the man.

"I have no idea. I'm not that good at identifying body parts on an ultrasound machine. Lucy calls the baby a her."

Clark's heart was beating so loud, he wondered if Sam could hear it. It felt like he was looking at his future. Maybe someday, he'd be sharing a moment like this with someone. A child of his own. And this, this was his little… "Niece or nephew," Clark said the words aloud. "Wow. Family." That one word tugged at his heart more than it usually did. He handed the photo back to Sam.

"Lucy is very excited. She insisted that we print a photo, so she could show you. So act surprised," Sam suggested with a wink. He stared at the picture for a moment and then added, "Should I be worried?"

"About what?" Clark asked. Sam had lost him.

"The flying?"

"Oh. That." Clark had meant to talk to Sam about this for over a month, but he kept getting distracted. He sat down on the sofa. "This isn't a normal pregnancy."

Sam followed to the couch opposite. "I'm not an idiot, Clark."

Clark lowered his voice; he didn't want to wake Lois. "She has taken on some of my… technically, Kal's abilities."

"Such as?"

"Super hearing."

"Uh-huh," Sam whispered. "She'd love that. Lois always loved to eavesdrop on other people's conversations."

"She also has increased healing powers," Clark explained.

"What do you mean?" This interested Sam.

"I didn't cauterize her gunshot wound with my heat vision. It had already healed when I first noticed she'd been shot."

"My Lois has always been one to step towards danger, when others would step away." Sam shook his head.

"That's Lucy in a nutshell, which is why I never told her about the super healing."

"And now, flying."

"Floating, really. If we don't tell her that she's flying in her dreams, she might not try to access that ability." It was more a hope than a reality, but at least they would be able to delay that knowledge for a while.

Sam nodded. "She takes enough risks already. Do you think she'll get more of these abilities? Like heat vision? A girl with her anger…" He shivered at the thought.

"I don't know, Sam. This is all new territory for me too."

Sam thought for a minute. "Is it possible to get a blood sample?"

"You've taken blood from her before, I don't see why it should be different now."

"I mean from you. For comparison."

This surprised Clark. "I've never bled. When Dr. Klein tried to draw blood, I busted three needles before he gave up." He patted his arm. "Impervious is impervious."

They sat in silence. Clark stared at the photo that Sam had dropped on the coffee table. This little miracle child. Even though it wasn't his, it easily could have been. Just seeing the proof — even if it was a grainy photo — changed him, pulled him towards Lois again, if not physically, then emotionally. He knew he would protect her and the child as if they were his own. He would die to save them, if necessary. "Do you think she has changed physically?" he asked Sam.

"Obviously. She didn't used to heal herself from bullets or float, I'm betting."

"No, I meant permanently."

"Ah. That's the big question. Will she retain these new abilities after the baby's born?" Sam shrugged, shaking his head. "Who knows? She's the first of her kind. Although, I wouldn't mind if she became permanently impervious."

They both grinned.

"Neither would Kal."

"Could you stay?" Sam inquired. "Sit in her room and make sure it doesn't happen again?"

"Of course," Clark answered, amazed at the trust that this man now put in him. A few months ago, Lois's father was ready to throw him out the window for being in her room. Of course, Clark had been *in bed* with her at the time. Things had changed; Sam was still scared for her safety, but now in a completely different way. "I can't stand guard every night or she might try to kill us both."

"She does like things her way. For tonight, at least. So I can get some sleep."

Clark nodded and they walked back to the bedrooms. Sam went into the guest room and Clark peered in at Lois, still sleeping soundly in her bed. He set the ultrasound photo back on her bedside table. Sitting down in the chair by her window, he wrapped his cape around himself. He didn't think he would be able to get back asleep.

So, Lois could float. He wondered how different life would be for Lois and Kal if her new abilities remained. He remembered her telling him about Ultra Woman. How the emotional burden was too much for her, but that was when Kal had lost his powers. She had been alone as a superhero. It was definitely more difficult to be alone. How nice it would be to have someone to fly with; they could do anything, go anywhere. It would be wonderful to have someone with whom to share it all. Someone invulnerable, like him, so he wasn't always needing to worry. Kal was always the lucky one.

If Lois had acquired his abilities would that mean she would also be susceptible to Kryptonite? She wasn't from Krypton, so would that glowing green rock have the same effect on her? Not that he would ever test that theory. He remembered the bone-chilling pain he felt at the debate when Tempus produced the Kryptonite. Oh, that hurt the way he imagined a thousand knives stabbing a human would feel. No, he could never do that to her. He could not risk her health or that of the baby's to test such a theory. She might not have a reaction to Kryptonite, but the baby might. It was part of him… Kal.

Clark's eyes focused on Lois again. She slept so peacefully. He wondered what she was dreaming about. Was her younger self still on trial for murder?

He had come so close to losing her. Lois had her bag packed — not that there was much she was going to take back with her — her photographs and few personal belongings. Lois claimed to have thought of something to convince her younger self to go back, but Clark didn't believe her. He figured she was going to wing it, think of something on the spot; that was more her style. Then she waited day after day after day, but H.G. Wells never came for her.

One morning, Lois awoke in tears, saying that her younger self had been jailed for murder. Lois didn't want to do the switch

only to end up in jail; she would wait until Kal cleared her name. She wasn't sure how he would do that, though, since she had been holding the gun when it went off.

It wasn't like Lois could return without H.G. Wells and his time machine anyway. Clark had been kind enough to refrain from mentioning that part to her.

Six weeks passed and Lois's trial began this week. But she was still worried. Kal was worried. Someone had made a hologram of her walking down the street aiming a gun at a witness. Obviously, someone wanted her in jail badly. If she didn't get out soon, this Lois would be too far along in her pregnancy to return without a ton of questions.

Lois told Clark that she wasn't going to hide the truth from Kal — she would tell him everything. And her husband would have no qualms taking her back four months pregnant. But explaining it to their parents (although technically Martha already knew) and Perry was a completely different story. The two of them hadn't even been married four months ago. Although, that was not as important in this day and age.

The longer the younger Lois was in jail, the more likely it was that this Lois would stay here for her entire pregnancy. Clark smiled. Selfishly, he was happy that she was still there. Since getting shot, she had helped him capture three more bad guys from her past. She also worked long hours with Mr. Olsen sifting through the data about local Metropolis utilities, media outlets, scientific laboratories, and real estate collected by Jaxon.

Clark didn't like how close she had become with his boss. It was causing talk in the office. But a part of her didn't care; this wasn't her 'real' life. And a part of him was thrilled that the office scuttlebutt no longer linked Superman's name with hers.

Mayson didn't like Lois in the least and hated that Clark trusted her implicitly. She despised that he spent his whole day working with Lucy, when she had to sneak around just to have lunch with him. He could no longer mention Lucy's name without Mayson rolling her eyes. He didn't know what it was about her that Mayson didn't like, but he knew the fact that he refused to give up his friendship with Lucy was driving a wedge into his relationship with Mayson. Clark would have to tell Mayson the truth — or some reasonable facsimile of the truth — soon, or risk losing her.

He had offered to take Mayson away for the weekend. But she only agreed to go if they drove. She treated Superman with only common courtesy, like an annoying Siamese twin she had to deal with, and never failed to mention his mistakes. He hadn't Mirandized that bank robber. He had damaged property when removing hostages from a bank vault. He had dangled a gangster off a building for information.

They were even running out of topics of conversation. As a rule, Mayson didn't speak of active investigations, so they could not discuss her work. She refused to speak about Bill Church anymore when Clark said that he and Lucy had found links tying him to Intergang. Mayson was sick to death of Lex Luthor and thought he and Lucy were trying to build a case against a perfectly innocent man.

He liked that Mayson liked Clark for Clark. He was tired of seeing the disappointed expressions on his contest winners' faces when he showed up instead of Superman. Lois had been right, the tabloids were getting bored with him. '*Clark Kent went out with another nobody. They danced. They ate. They talked.'* Boring. Boring. Boring.

The tabloids had gone back to printing obvious lies. He grinned. Strangely, they all had to do with intimate relations he had never had. *'I Gave Birth to Superman's Twins.' 'Superman Used Mind Control to Ravish My Body.' 'My Weekend at Superman's Love Cave.'* Like he would have a cave — love or otherwise.

He had ended a few dates early to answer a call for help. The women were thrilled to see Superman, even for a moment, but all the tabloids could write was that '*Superman Ditches Date to Save Family of Four.'* Not exactly bad press. He even offered to reschedule the dates. They couldn't even fault him that.

Thanks to Cat Grant, each woman was informed in advance that if he were needed he would leave. None of the women seemed to mind. They had their personal time with their hero, and got their fix. They were also warned that there would be no physical contact (i.e. no kissing). Cat had been a great liaison between him and the dates. She always made sure that if the woman chose a formal event, she had appropriate attire. She wouldn't let Clark arrive at a classy event with an inappropriately dressed date. She also made sure that each date got a nice photo with Clark.

Lois still regarded Cat suspiciously, as though it was an act and the woman might jump his bones at any moment. But Lois was getting better. He was beginning to wonder if the Cat in Lois's dimension was way worse than this Cat had ever been.

His eyes started to droop. He tried to stay awake, but it was still early in the morning and he was tired. He had had to ditch a date to help after a natural gas explosion in Baltimore earlier.

Soon, he was flying over Smallville once again.

"Clark!" Lois's voice pulled him from his dream. Why did he keep thinking of the old Kent house? He blinked his eyes and tried to focus on her.

Lois was glowing again. Her hair was shiny and bright, even if it was getting a tad bit shaggy. She was so happy that, if she knew she could float, she would be hitting the ceiling.

He had meant to sneak out to the couch before she woke, but instead of being angry with him, she actually looked glad… no, excited to see him. She jumped off the bed and ran to him. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her tummy. Bump. Bump. The baby was kicking. The hairs on his arms actually stood up. Wow! He smiled.

"Did you see the photo? Where did I put it?" She ran to her bedside table and brought it to him. "She's normal. Normal! Legs, arms, head, heart. Everything is where it's supposed to be. And she's healthy. Okay, her heart rate is faster than a hummingbird's, but nobody's perfect." She hugged her tummy. "Except mommy's little one."

"Do you think it's right to keep calling the baby a 'she'? What if you're wrong? Wouldn't it give the baby a complex or something?" he teased her.

Lois gasped, clapping her hand over her mouth. "I'm sure I'm right, but only 97% sure. You're right. What if we have a son? Oh, thank you, Clark. You think of everything." She ran up and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She gasped again. "Clark, you're in the blue suit."

He closed his eyes. Okay, here comes the explosion. What was he doing in her bedroom? Had he been watching her? Spying on her?

"Take me flying."

"What?" His jaw fell.

"I want to see what the baby thinks of flying. I dreamed I was flying last night. I actually had a dream, a normal everyday dream for once. I'm so sick of pacing inside a jail cell. Anyway, she… Baby kicks more when I'm close to you. I think Baby thinks you're her daddy." Her eyes widened. "Is that a bad thing? Am I a bad mom?" She plopped down on the bed, head in her hands, crying.

"Lois?" he asked, sitting down next to her. "You're the best mother I know. Who else would ask Superman to take her baby flying before it was born?"

Lois looked up through her fingertips. "Really?"

He nodded.

She wiped the tears off her face. "So, you'll do it? I haven't gone flying since I've gotten here. If you don't count being

saved."

"You're right. This is the baby's heritage and it needs to fly more." Clark smiled, reassuring her.

Lois grinned, tears completely gone. "Exactly. Where should we go?" She bit her lip as she thought about this.

Clark almost suggested Smallville, but it didn't feel right to take this Lois to Smallville. She had been to Smallville in her dimension. This Smallville didn't have the Kents and wasn't quite as nice of a place, he imagined, without them. "Someplace far."

"Right, the tabloids. Paris? Oooh. I would love some croissants. Pain au chocolat. Yum."

He smiled. "Paris it is. It's kind of chilly out today, so bundle up." Standing up, he started toward the door. "I'll let you change."

"Clark."

He turned around.

"Thank you." She beamed at him and his heart did that flip-flop thing it only did for her. "You're the best uncle ever!"

Clark grinned. Uncle. He liked the sound of that.

***

As they returned to Lois's building, a couple of bags of croissants in hand, Clark saw something that sent a chill down his spine. He landed on the roof and groaned. They had decided they could land faster on the roof with less chance of being photographed than if they entered through her window.

"Clark, what's wrong?"

"Mayson's car is outside." Did he have a date with Mayson that he had blanked on? It was possible, his schedule was crazy. But if he did, what was she doing here?

"That's strange. She never comes here. Wait." She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her belly. "Baby was lulled to sleep over the Atlantic, but now that we're no longer flying, Baby's kicking again."

"Lois, you can't do that in front of Mayson," he reminded her. "She'll get the wrong impression."

"I know." She gave him an encouraging smile, dropping his hand. "I just wanted you to know the baby liked flying with you."

"Bring her over when she's a teenager and I'll give her flying lessons," Clark suggested, opening the roof door for her.

Lois elbowed him. "I thought we weren't assuming Baby's gender."

"Ninety-seven is pretty close to a hundred. And anyway, I trust your judgment."

"Thank you, Clark. That was fun. We never get to hang out anymore, just as Lois and Clark."

"Whose idea was it for me to date half of Metropolis?"

"Guilty." She laughed and then blanched, stumbling against him. "That's why I had a dream about flying last night, wasn't it? My brain was shielding me from the truth."

"What truth?"

"About the trial."

"I thought the trial hadn't started yet?" He opened the stairwell door to the fifth floor.

"Her present is my past. I was able to foretell the New Kryptonians, wasn't I?" Lois reminded him.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "You're panicking. Nothing's decided yet."

"You're right. There's still time for Kal to save me." She patted her pockets, finally finding her keys. Before opening the door, she turned to Clark and lowered her voice. "If Mayson's here, maybe you should go back to the stairwell and change."

Clark glanced down at his blue suit. "I always forget. Thanks, Lois."

"Lucy."

"I knew that." He grinned sheepishly. Oops.

She opened the door and held up the bags. "Daddy, I have croissants." She stopped two steps into her apartment, probably at the realization that she called Lois's father 'Daddy' in front of his girlfriend. "Mayson, what a surprise. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

A second later, Clark was standing behind her. "Subtle," he whispered too low for the others to hear. "Lucy, you're blocking the door. Mayson! Good morning. We didn't have a date, did we?"

Mayson looked between the two of them with a raised brow. "That's a good question."

"Us?" Lucy scoffed. "We just went out for croissants. There's this great boulangerie in Paris—"

"Paris, France?" Mayson's lips pressed into a snarl.

"Shut up," Clark hissed at Lois.

"You should really try one. Better yet, let Clark take you to Paris. A mini-holiday." Lois smiled, holding out the bag. She really was trying, but with every word she was digging him a deeper hole with his glowering girlfriend.

"Did either of you think to take your passports with you?"

The smile vanished from Lois's face. She turned to Clark. "Why did I encourage you to date her, again?" She didn't even try to whisper.

Clark rubbed his face. Having spent half the night here, he needed to shave. "Mayson—"

She stood up. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Jones, or whatever your name is. Enjoy your breakfast." She walked towards the door, pushing past Lois. "Clark. Hall. Now."

Lois grimaced at him. "Sorry."

"Clark, I'd like to bend your ear about something when you're done," Sam called from the living room as Clark went into the hall.

Mayson closed the door and held up her hand, indicating that she didn't want him to speak. "Enough, Clark. I've had enough. Meet me at Clinton Street in half an hour. And bring the truth with you." She walked down the hall with a flip of her hand.

Why? Why? Why? Clark rested his head against the door. He had been having such a good morning, too.

He opened the door and Lois was standing in the living room, her shirt raised, having Sam Lane feel the baby kick.

"Have you felt this?" Sam asked, excitement in his eyes. "Oh, sweetie." He seemed as thrilled as Clark had felt when he first placed his hand on Lois's tummy that morning.

"She loves to fly, Daddy. So I made Clark take me out. Please, don't be angry at him. It's all my fault."

"Why would he be angry with me?" Clark asked.

"Oh, he asked that I not go flying. He's worried I might fall and hurt the baby." Lois shoved a pain au chocolat into her mouth. "You've got to try one of these, Clark."

"I'll have a plain one, thanks," he said as she went into the kitchen.

"You have a girlfriend?" Sam asked with a raised brow.

Clark glanced over his shoulder at the door. "Apparently, that is up for debate."

"Sorry, I forgot. When the phone rang this morning, I just answered it. It was Mayson wondering if you were here."

"Great, she's hunting me down now." Clark wiped a hand down his weary face.

"When I told her that you weren't here, she asked to speak with Lucy. She introduced herself as Detective Drake. I didn't know that she was your girlfriend." Sam actually sounded apologetic. "I told her that Lucy left me a note saying that you had taken her out to get breakfast. 'Be back soon.' She took that to mean that she was welcome to wait here for you."

Clark sat down at the dining room table and buried his face in his hands. "I can't do this any longer, Lois. I can't keep lying to her. How can we have a relationship if it's built on lies?"

Lois set down plates, then brought over the pot of coffee.

"*Your* relationship isn't built on lies, Clark. *Our* relationship is built on lies. And because you are trying to protect me, every person we care about in this dimension only knows one clue to our relationship. If they ever got together to compare notes…"

"How does Kal do it? Lying to everyone," Clark clarified, raising his gaze to her. "I thought Superman was supposed to stand for Truth?"

Lois put her hand over Clark's. "Before I figured out that Kal was Superman, he would dash away, apparently for no reason, and I didn't know what to think. I knew that he loved me, but I also knew that was keeping something from me. I couldn't understand how he could do both those things at the same time. So, I know how Mayson feels. It hurts when the man you love lies to you. She's a smart woman, an investigator herself, so when she says that you aren't telling her the truth, understand she might have proof."

"She said as much just now."

"It's still hard for Kal. He hates to lie as much as you do. But he doesn't want the people he cares about in his life to be targets if the truth came out," Lois said. It sounded like Kal did everyday what Clark had started doing since Lois became a part of his life. "He ends up using a lot of subterfuge, half-truths, and answering questions with questions. When he can tell the truth, he does. As it is now, my parents don't even know he's Superman."

"Really?" Sam asked, sitting down. "You told me first?"

She shot him a wicked grin. "You're my test pilot."

"How am I doing?"

"Well, on the positive side, you're still sober. On the negative side, you answer the telephone," she teased. "*Dr. Jones*."

"I thought it might be you, Lucy. When she pounded on the door, demanding that I let her in, I knew I had to tell her something. I remembered that I wasn't supposed to tell anyone that I'm Lois's father. So, I told her that I'm Dr. Jones, the doctor friend of Superman's who looked after you when you had been shot. You invited me to breakfast." He shrugged.

"Clark, I trust your decision. If you believe that your relationship with Mayson won't survive this, if it's important enough to you to risk everything, and if she is trustworthy enough to keep our secret, then tell her the truth. Should you have any doubts, though…" Lois didn't finish the sentence.

Clark took a deep breath and sighed. "That's a lot of ifs."

"As well it should be," Lois replied, touching her belly. "We're pretty important."

He polished off his croissant and downed his coffee. "I'd better be off." He stood up.

"Clark," Sam said. "Let's keep the flying to a minimum, shall we? I don't know what the atmospheric pressure could do to the fetus."

"Daddy, the books say I can fly in an airplane through the second trimester. What's the difference?"

"Wind speed. Weather. Temperature control. But if that's what the books say, Lucy… Clark, no flying after mid-October. Until then, keep it to a minimum." Sam turned back to his patient. "How's that for a compromise?"

Clark nodded, stepping into the front hall closet and emerging as Superman. "Wish me luck." He blew out her living room windows like a gale force wind.

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Superman slowed as he approached toward his apartment building, scanning all the nooks and crannies on Clinton Street for photographers. When he considered everything safe and clear, he landed on the secret patio behind his apartment.

Then he scanned his apartment for bugs and cameras. Everyone knew Clark Kent was Superman, so it was possible that someone could find his place and try to listen to his private conversations. He hated to be so paranoid, but anything was possible. Every time Mayson came over, he checked. Journalists, he well knew, were terrible sneaks. Tabloid reporters were even worse, because they had no morals whatsoever. This would be an important conversation and he wanted to make sure it was private.

Clark went into his bedroom and changed out of his blue suit. He threw on some jeans and grabbed a t-shirt; the less Superman —like, the better. He sighed.

Should he tell her? He liked her. He cared about her. Did he love her? They had only been dating a few months. And it had been a rough few months. Clark didn't feel like she trusted him. Of course, that might be because he had been lying to her about Lucy. From what Lois told him, women didn't like it when you lied to them, especially about the other women in your life.

He liked that Mayson liked Clark Kent better than Superman. But she didn't like Superman at all, which was a problem. Lana hadn't liked the idea of Superman either. Was Mayson just another strong, bossy female who told him what to do? Was he still mourning his relationship with Lana through Mayson? What about Lois… *his* Lois? What if they found her while he was dating Mayson? How would he feel about that?

Shaking his head, Clark went into the kitchen and took the orange juice out of the fridge. His Lois was a dream, a pipe dream really. Mayson was real and she liked him. Or, at least, she used to like him. She was giving him one last shot. What about Kal's Lois? He smiled. That was fun this morning, flying with her. If only… a knock on the door distracted him enough to spill his orange juice down his shirt. Great.

"Just a minute." He cleaned up the mess and ran into the bedroom to grab another shirt. He opened the door, shirtless. "Hi, Mayson. I just spilled some juice on my shirt."

Mayson stared at his bare chest and swallowed. "You spilled?"

"It happens." Clark pulled on his shirt and she seemed to catch her breath. "Rarely, but it happens." He stepped aside to let her in, then shut the door.

Mayson placed her hand on his chest and kissed him. Good sign. She still liked him. "I've wondered if it…" She shook her head.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked, walking down the steps into living room. "I might still have some orange juice left or I could make some coffee."

"I'll take some juice without shirt in it," she said, then her eyes widened in embarrassment. "Thank you."

"Okay." He smiled at her faux pas. So she liked what she saw, huh? "One glass of juice, hold the shirt."

He returned to the living room and set two glasses of juice on the coffee table. "Mayson, I've gotten this feeling that you don't trust me and—"

Mayson held up her hand and started speaking before he had a chance to sit down. "Clark, I'm a detective. It's my job to know when someone is lying to me. Is Lucy really Lois Lane, the missing reporter?"

He hadn't expected that. "No! She only impersonated her back in February, during the election."

She stared at him. "Are you sure?"

Clark nodded, sitting down next to her. "Positive."

"I ask because Lucy El does not exist and she seems to know a lot about Lois."

"She's a good researcher." He picked up his juice and took a sip.

"Uh-huh." Mayson obviously did not accept this answer. She picked up her juice. "As I said, Lucy El does not exist. She did not attend Kansas State during the years that you were there, nor the five years afterwards. She has a funky accent that fluctuates between Texan to Southern to sometimes even Memphis to Metropolis."

His smile stiffened. Lois had warned him that Mayson was a

good investigator.

"I checked your résumé," she continued. "You never worked on an exposé of Lex Luthor, nor have you ever shared a byline with a Lucy El. Before starting at the *Daily Planet* you did mostly freelance work for various different newspapers around the world. Nothing really investigatory in nature, either. None of the previous editors you worked for had ever heard the name Lucy El. I even contacted your former fiancée…"

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"… Lana Lang and she does not remember ever meeting anyone by the name of Lucy El or hearing you speak about such a person. She did share an interesting tidbit about Lois Lane though. It seems that the vixen reporter — her words, not mine — showed up at the Planet one afternoon, walked straight up to you and kissed you, as if you were more than old friends. You told her at the time you had no idea who she was." Mayson paused and took a sip of her juice. "So, Clark, are you still going to continue with this charade? Who is that woman?"

"Lucy El," he replied. In this dimension, at least, that was the truth.

"That man she called 'Daddy' is Dr. Sam Lane, Lois Lane's father, isn't that correct?"

"You are," Clark admitted the truth of that statement.

"But you are trying to tell me that the woman posing as your college buddy is not his daughter."

"She is not." Again, technically true.

"She lives in Lois Lane's old apartment," Mayson said.

"Yes."

"Clark! Give me something, here. Why is that man staying at her apartment? Clearly, he lives there."

Clark thought about how to answer that statement truthfully. "Lucy posed as Lois when she visited earlier this year. That is Lois Lane's apartment and it's just a coincidence that she is subletting it. Perry suggested that Mr. Olsen rent it to her when he hired her on, as a favor to me. She feels a connection to Lois because of those reasons. So, when she heard that Dr. Lane had run into hard times, she felt like she owed it to Lois to help him out."

"Really?" Skepticism dripped from that one word. "She doesn't seem that selfless."

These women clearly would never be friends. Nothing he could say would change that fact. But Clark refused to be the wall between which they butted heads. "Lucy also suggested to me that I should ask you out."

"That was a joke," Mayson retorted.

He shook his head.

"Why?"

"She thought we might hit it off." He smiled.

Mayson stared at him, waiting for him to say more.

Unfortunately, he couldn't explain the circumstances in which Lucy *knew* he and Mayson would get along. "She vouched for you. That you weren't another Superman groupie," he finally said.

"That's true." The detective laughed with derision. "How did she know?"

Clark raised a shoulder. "She just reads people well." Especially people she knew from her dimension. "It's what makes her a good research assistant."

Mayson shook her head. "She isn't from the future, is she?"

For a split second, Clark thought she was serious. "Nope." He smiled at being able to once again speak the truth. "Not from the future."

Mayson wasn't smiling. "Until she arrived here three months ago, Lucy El did not exist. There are no records of a Lucy El having been born anywhere. Gone to school anywhere. Lived anywhere. *Ever.* She's never had a bank account or a credit card. It's like she appeared out of thin air. Yet, you vouch for her like she is exactly who she says she is."

"I do. I know exactly who she is. I know her past and why she is in Metropolis and roughly when she'll return home."

"She's leaving?" Mayson looked excited at this prospect.

"Someday, sooner than…" He stopped himself. "Later," he added. "That is her private business. She felt bad, weighing down our relationship with her baggage, so she has agreed to let me share this information with you. Understand that you cannot reveal this to anyone without placing her life and mine — *Clark Kent's* life as Superman — in grave danger."

He watched as Mayson thought about this. "So, her story, her background has to do with Superman? And if I agree never to tell anyone, it would be to protect him?"

"Yes." He knew this would be a difficult decision for her as she always had treated his Superman persona with thinly veiled contempt. It was crucial for her to understand that he was Superman and Superman was Clark Kent. That they were indeed the same man.

"And by agreeing to protect Superman and Lucy, I am also protecting you, Clark Kent?"

"Exactly," he told her.

Mayson smiled and set her hand on his knee. "I kind of like the prospect of protecting you for a change. I agree to keep private whatever you tell me."

"Off the record?"

"Off the record," she agreed.

Clark exhaled. They had made it past the first hurdle. "What do you want to know?"

"Who is she?"

"Lucy El," he repeated.

This infuriated Mayson as he knew it would. "*Clark!* Okay, if she's Lucy El, where are Mama and Papa El?"

He took a deep breath, amazed that she had unconsciously given him another way to answer truthfully. "Dead."

"Dead? How convenient. And how exactly did they die?" she asked incredulously.

"Lara and Jor-El died when the planet Krypton exploded roughly thirty years ago." He had never told anyone from his dimension about his birth parents, not even Lana. Actually, it had been Lois who had told him their names on back in the Daily Planet conference room with Mr. Wells all those months ago.

Mayson looked at him in disbelief. "Are you trying to tell me that Lucy El is Superman's sister?" She stood up. "No. Not for one minute am I buying that story, Clark."

"Sister-in-law," Clark corrected her calmly. It was as close to the truth as he could get.

Mayson froze. "What?"

"Lucy is married to my twin brother, Kal-El."

"You have a *twin* brother?"

Clark nodded.

"Identical twin?"

He nodded again.

"Wow." She sat back down.

Clark gave her a moment to process that information. He returned their empty glasses to the kitchen.

"There are two of him," he heard her mumble to herself and he smiled. She had sounded more in awe than frightened.

Clark returned to the living room with a couple of bottles of water; he handed one to her. She opened it and took a large gulp.

"Well, that certainly explains a lot," Mayson said.

He nodded.

"The Kents only had one son though."

"Kal grew up on New Krypton," he explained. He didn't want to continue lying to her, but he really couldn't tell anyone else about alternate dimensions or explain to his girlfriend how Lois and Clark were married there.

"New Krypton? I thought everyone died when Superman's

home planet was destroyed," Mayson said.

He had told her a bit of his private history: the spaceship crashing into Shuster's field, his folks finding him and raising him as their own, losing them just as he started developing his abilities and how difficult that had been for him, and bouncing from foster family to foster family. "New Krypton is a colony of Krypton."

She blanched. "So there are more of him." She took another gulp of water.

"Yes, there are more people like *me*."

"Lucy isn't…"

He smiled. He still couldn't imagine Lois with all of his powers, as Ultra Woman. "No, she's human."

Mayson relaxed. "How did she meet Kal if he grew up on New Krypton?"

Unfortunately, Lucy and Kal-El's backstory would have to be a lie. Kal-El wasn't from New Krypton and, according to Lois, never even made it to the colony when he left last spring to help Lady Zara. Clark hoped he could fabricate a story on the fly as well as Lois. "He found out about me… about how our parents sent me to Earth as a baby and he came looking for me a couple of years ago. He met Lucy and they fell in love."

"Are you two similar, personality-wise?" Mayson asked. As a detective she was worried about a rogue Kryptonian loose on her planet. After what Lois told him about how brutal Lord Nor and his men had been in her dimension, it was a fairly justified concern.

"Lucy says we are, except that he has a fondness for junk food," Clark answered with slight chuckle, taking a sip of his water. That factoid always made him smile.

Mayson laughed. "That must have been strange, meeting your double."

Clark sighed. "Actually, I haven't met him yet."

Her face fell. "But you said…"

"He was looking for me. Then he met Lucy and… well, love is a good distraction." He smiled fondly at her. "She's the one who found me, last February. She posed as Lois to get close to me and earn my trust."

"So, you've never met this twin brother?" She asked him slowly. "You believe this whole crazy story on the word of Lucy El?" Mayson was looking at him with pity. Not a good sign. "I'm so glad you told me this. Lucy is obviously some kind of con artist."

Laughter bubbled out of Clark's mouth. He had not expected this rationale. "Ah. No, Mayson. She's the real deal. I trust her completely."

Mayson sighed. "Oh, Clark, you are so good and so trusting, you believe everyone else is, too. You lost your parents at an early age and just broke up with your fiancée. You were alone and this beautiful woman shows up and dazzles you with a story about a long-lost brother. Of course you wanted to believe her. You were an easy mark."

Great, Kent, fly yourself out of this mess. "Mayson, she knew things about me that only Lana knew and some things that I never told anyone. She knew about Krypton and how I got here as a baby."

"As I recall, Tempus knew these things too."

"She has photos of her and Kal," Clark told her.

"Photos can be faked, Clark. You and I both know that," Mayson replied rationally.

"Fifty of them? They weren't fakes." He pointed at his eyes.

"So, she hired a lookalike. I saw a Superman double at a birthday party recently and even I couldn't tell the difference until he opened his mouth."

Clark's jaw dropped. She actually didn't believe him. He hadn't expected that. "You really don't like Lucy, do you?"

"Never have. There are times when she looks at you…" Mayson shook her head.

"And sees Kal," he explained.

Mayson leaned back and crossed her arms. "Okay. Where is this husband of hers, anyway?"

"New Krypton. Civil war was breaking out and he went back to see if he could stop it." Well, Kal had gone there originally when Lois came over to his dimension.

"How noble of him. Convenient too that he isn't around for you to meet in person." Mayson shook her head. "You *still* can't suppose that she would lie to you."

"And you can't believe that she's telling the truth."

"Have you given her any money?" Mayson asked.

"Just five hundred, when she first got here, to buy necessities."

"What? Did someone steal her wallet, too?" His girlfriend sounded angry as her voice rose. "And you got her a job — because you vouched for her — and an apartment, also because you vouched for her. Everyone trusts a person that Superman trusts."

It was the first time Mayson had ever referred to him as Superman and she did it as she tried not to call him an idiot. Clark took off his glasses and ran a hand over his eyes. "Mayson, have some confidence in me. She asked for nothing but my protection," he said softly, juxtaposing her anger

Mayson took his hand. "From Lex Luthor?"

"She had some dealings with him in the past that went badly, true. But no, not him in particular, just protection in general. And I am happy to oblige — she's family."

"No, Clark. She's a *con artist*." She pulled out her cell phone. "Let me call someone I know in Fraud."

Clark took the phone out of her hand. "No."

"Excuse me?"

"You promised not to tell another person about this."

"Yes, but that was before I knew Lucy's a swindler," she replied.

"Mayson," he said, standing up and walking over to his wine rack. He floated up and set her cell phone in the uppermost slot. He floated back down and stood in front of her with his arms crossed. "You would rather believe that I was duped than accept that Lucy's identity is who I *know* her to be."

"Give me back my phone, Clark."

"No. I will give you back your phone when I know you believe me."

Mayson pressed her lips together. "Okay. I accept as true that you would believe anything she told you because she looks like Lois Lane, the woman you've spent three years searching for."

"What?" Was there a billboard on his forehead that he couldn't see?

"You said yourself that she's not Lois. Yet there's a part of you that thinks of her as that proverbial damsel in distress. You're always rushing off to help her."

"Because she is my sister-in-law," he ground out. He was running out of ideas.

Mayson stood up and patted him on the arm. "You keep telling yourself that, Clark."

"Mayson, I'm dating you. I care for you," he said, pulling her into his arms for a hug. "I'm torturing myself in a social hell to keep us out of the tabloids."

"And yet you are in love with the ghost of Lois Lane."

He froze for a moment and then stepped back. "Is that what you think of me?"

"I'm not blind, Clark. I see how you look at Lucy."

"And how is that, Mayson?" he inquired wryly.

"Like you are distracted by love."

Clark hated it when people threw his words back in his face.

"There could only be two explanations," Mayson continued. "Lucy is the Lois Lane you fell in love with after years of

searching for her — even Lana verified this much — but she doesn't know you love her, which means you have been lying to me all morning. Or she's someone who looks like Lois and you're looking through her at something or someone else. You readily admit that she is not your missing Lois, so you must not be able to accept that Lois is dead and that you couldn't save her."

Clark sat down on the sofa and removed his glasses again. He threw them against the wall, shattering them. "No, I couldn't save her. Just as I couldn't save my parents from that car accident. Or my birth parents from their early death. This beautiful, talented woman with wits and guts and boldness and the determination to get the story, any story she set her heart on. No, I couldn't save her. How can I have these abilities and still be unable to save someone as wonderful as her?" He buried his face in his hands.

Mayson sat down next to him and hugged him. "Oh, Clark. I'm so sorry." She kissed his cheek. He didn't react. She held him tighter, yet he could hardly feel her. He felt numb. She kissed his cheek, again and again.

Clark turned and pressed a kiss against her lips. This time the kiss was more than pleasant. It was hot and passionate and fiery. Mayson felt it too. She pulled back for a moment and looked him directly in the eyes. He didn't know what she saw there, but she climbed into his lap and kissed him as he had kissed her. He pulled the hair clip holding her hair away from her face and tossed it to the ground. She tugged his t-shirt up and pulled it over his head. They were floating in mid-air, tangled in an embrace.

"Clark," she moaned and then slipped down his chest. He caught her and set her down on the floor.

"Were we—" she asked, glancing up.

"Sorry," he whispered, kissing the top of her head. He floated over to the wine rack, retrieved her phone and returned it to her. "I shouldn't have lost control. I almost dropped you."

Mayson tossed the phone onto the coffee table and wrapped her arms around him again. She kissed him, but he didn't respond. "Clark, I liked that you lost a little control. It's human." She took his hand and tugged it toward his bedroom.

"No, Mayson." He glanced away. "I can't."

She kissed his cheek. "Why not? Live a little," she whispered, kissing over to his ear.

He stumbled backwards to the couch and Mayson landed on top of him. "Tempting though it might be, Mayson. I can't…" He shut his eyes as she continued to nibble on his earlobe. "Lose control."

Mayson smiled as she kissed down his neck. His resolve was weakening.

"I know that you like me, Clark Kent," she whispered. "I'm your here and now. Flesh and blood." She trailed his fingers down her chest. Her skin was soft and slightly damp from perspiration.

"Feel my hot breath." She blew into his ear. Nice and warm. Tingling.

"Hear my heartbeat." She pulled his head against her chest. Her heart was certainly racing.

"Taste my…" She pressed another passionate kiss to his lips. "Let yourself go."

They were floating upwards again. He wanted her more than he had wanted anyone since… since the night that Kal had been disintegrated and Lois had kissed him. Oh, Lois! What was he doing? *Letting himself live*, a voice inside his head told him. But an icy chill had already started dripping down his spine. He pulled Mayson closer. "Live."

Her phone rang at that moment and they plopped back down on the sofa.

"If that's Henderson, I'm going to kill him," Mayson announced, rolling off Clark and reaching for her phone. "This better be good," she growled to Henderson. "Yes, you are interrupting something, so be fast about it."

Clark ran to his bathroom and took a thirty-second ice-cold shower. He took another fifteen seconds to dry off, dress, and was back on the couch just as she had left him another twenty seconds later.

"Sean McCarthy, really." Mayson glanced over her shoulder at Clark. He waved. She waved back. "I thought he went underground after killing that DEA agent."

When she turned her back away from him again, he released his breath. He had never lost control like that before. Not even with Lana. Lois had tempted him physically on several occasions and he wondered if she had awakened something carnal inside him. He rubbed his face and realized his glasses were missing. Then, he remembered what he had done to them. He saw the debris on the wall behind his TV. What was wrong with him?

"Okay. I'll be right there," Mayson said, closing her phone. "Clark?"

"Right here," he said, standing up.

"I was afraid you left."

He smiled, moving closer to kiss her. "I couldn't leave."

"I've got to meet Henderson. My uncle has a cabin in the woods. Do you think you might want to go next weekend? Just the two of us. No interruptions. No cell phone coverage." Mayson smiled, resting her hand on his bare chest. She looked him straight in the eyes and exhaled. "I'd even let you fly us there."

That kiss had done something to her as well. For the first time, Clark could see Mayson looking at all of him and liking what she saw. That realization made him feel good. "Deal." He grinned. "So, we're good?"

"I'm good. You, we need to work on a little." She reached up to his bare face. "You look different without your glasses."

"I'm sorry about losing my temper." He kissed her. "I don't know what's gotten into me today."

"Truth. It's a drug. It can cause anger and joy but it's also a powerful aphrodisiac." Mayson embraced him again with a passion their previous two months of kisses had lacked. "Feel free to use it on me anytime." One more slow, lingering kiss, then she pulled herself away and up the steps. "I've got to go."

He jogged up to the door. "I'll walk you to your car."

"No, Clark. We've had enough trouble with tabloids. I wouldn't want them to catch you with your shirt off." She ran her fingers down his chest. "But feel free to forget all your shirts at home next weekend."

Clark kissed her goodbye and shut the door after her. He jogged back down the steps into his living room. Something skittered across the floor. It was her hair clip. He picked it up and ran out to the street. Mayson was just getting into her car.

"Mayson!" he called, waving her hair clip. She didn't hear him.

Tick! Tick! Tick!

"No!" Clark was at her car door in half a second. "Mayson!"

She stared at him with concern as he ripped off the door to her car. He was pulling her out when the bomb blasted them into the building across the street.

***

Lois set down her pen. *What was that?* Unknowingly, she mimicked the way Clark looked up and to the right as she listened.

"*No! Mayson!"* That was Clark's voice. Something was wrong.

"Oh, no," she gasped, running out to the living room. Then she heard the explosion. Her knees gave out and she grabbed the wall. *Not again. Poor Clark.*

"What's the matter, sweetie?" Lois's father asked. He was reading the newspaper on the sofa.

"Something's happened to Mayson," she said, grabbing her purse. "I've got to go."

"I didn't hear the phone ring."

Lois pulled on her ugly loafers. "I'll explain later."

"I thought Mayson didn't like you. Maybe you shouldn't interfere."

"No, Daddy, I heard an explosion. I've got to go to Clark. He'll need me."

"I'll come with you," he said, getting up.

"No, you wait, in case he comes here. Don't let him leave." She swallowed. "Clar… Kal disappeared into himself when Mayson died. And this Clark, he isn't as strong, emotionally, and…" She exhaled, hating to admit this next thought aloud as if that made it more true. "Mayson means more to him."

"Mayson died?" Sam hugged her.

"In my dimension. Hopefully, Clark wasn't too late this time," she said, stepping out of the hug and opening the door.

"Lois, take a cab."

She snorted. "No, I thought I'd fly."

He looked stunned as if he believed her. "Cab!" he called.

Lois waved her hand as she jogged down the hall. In the elevator, she ran into James Olsen. She pressed the first floor button three times.

"In a rush somewhere?" he inquired.

"Can you drive me to Clinton Street, James?"

"Sure. Running late for lunch with Clark?"

Lois placed a fake smile on her lips. "Something like that."

When they arrived at the parking structure, he turned to her with a grin. "Which car should we take?"

"The fastest one."

"All right, then." James pushed a security alarm button on his keychain and she heard a cherry-red Ferrari beep in the corner of the garage.

She glanced at him surprised. "I always pictured you as a Mustang kind of guy."

"I was." He grinned with a shrug. "Before the millions."

"Can I borrow your phone?" she asked, buckling herself in.

"Sure." He passed it to her.

Lois dialed Clark's number. She hoped that she was wrong about the bomb, but the machine picked up. "I'm on my way, Clark. Don't do anything rash. If you get this message, please, wait for me."

"Something wrong?" James asked.

"I hope not." She dialed another number. "Come on, Mayson, pick up… great, voicemail." She hung up and dialed a third number. "Detective Henderson? Hi, this is Lucy El, Clark Kent's assistant at the *Daily Planet*. Have you heard from Detective Drake? I was trying to reach Clark and I know he was with Mayson this morning… yes, I'll hold." She took a deep breath, automatically placing a hand on her rounded stomach as she did so. "Please. Please, be there. I want to be wrong."

James stepped on the gas and sped down the street.

"What do you mean, she hasn't shown up yet? Was she on the way there? I see. Well, I was on the phone with Clark five minutes ago when I heard an explosion. Now I can't reach him. Can you meet me at his apartment? Oh. It's 344 Clinton Street. Thanks."

"Lucy, where are your glasses?" James asked out of the blue as she handed back his phone.

Lois patted her face. Crap. She dug through her purse and pulled out her emergency pair. "Thanks. I was wondering why the world was so blurry."

James turned onto Clinton Street and saw smoke. "What the…."

"Oh, no," Lois gasped. "It did happen." The police had just arrived. "Hurry, James, before they cordon off the street."

James pulled the Ferrari off to the side of the road and she jumped out. He followed her as she ran down the street.

"Clark? Clark?" Lois stopped next to Mayson's still burning car. That wasn't like Superman to leave a car on fire. The driver-side door had been pulled off and tossed in the road. She looked around and saw a dent in the brick entry in the apartment building across the street. "Clark?" she called again. James caught up with her as she turned and ran towards his apartment.

He surveyed the damage with a shake of his head. "I wish I had a camera."

Clark's front door was ajar. Not good. Clark never left his apartment unlocked. She went inside. "Clark? Mayson?" she called but heard no response. Even worse. She found Clark's t-shirt on the floor next to the sofa. Strange. As she walked to his bedroom, she stepped on a piece of glass. It had come from his glasses. She glanced around and found his broken frames near the TV. She picked them up. In his bedroom, she found his blue suit and red cape lying on the bed and his boots next to the bed. That wasn't like Clark, at all. He was always so careful with his suit.

Lois returned to the living room, wondering how his confession to Mayson had gone over. Had she left on good terms? Had they broken up? It didn't matter, her brain told her. He would still blame himself, either way.

"There you are," James said, entering the apartment. "One of the neighbors witnessed the entire thing. She was watering the plants on her balcony at the time. A blonde lady walked to her car. A minute later a — and I'm quoting here — 'shirtless David in jeans' ran after her, calling her name. Then he ripped off her car door like a strongman and pulled her out of the car when it exploded; they were knocked into the building across the street. She didn't see what happened after that because the smoke was too thick. When it cleared, they were gone."

Lois fell onto the sofa and took a couple of deep breaths. "He got her out before the car exploded. That's good." She looked down at his broken glasses in her hand.

"Are those Clark's?"

Lois nodded.

James looked around. "What happened here?"

Before she could answer, there was a knock on the door and Detective Henderson walked in. Lois slipped Clark's glasses into her purse. "I'd like to know the same thing. Mr. Olsen." He nodded at James. "Lucy El, I presume?"

Lois wiped her eyes and held out her hand. "Detective Henderson."

He pulled out his notebook. "Tell me what you know."

"Clark brought croissants to my place this morning for breakfast. Mayson showed up, looking for him. They agreed to meet at his apartment. She wanted to talk to him about something, I don't know what." She glanced at James and he looked away. They both knew what. "It was about nine-thirty when he left my place."

"You were on the phone with him when you heard the explosion?" Henderson asked. "What time was that?"

"I don't know." Lois shook her head. "We were talking, when suddenly he dropped the phone. I guess he didn't hang up properly, because I heard the explosion. I tried calling back, but the line was busy." She walked to Clark's cordless phone, which was clearly hung up and pressed the off button for good measure.

"Why are you touching evidence?" snapped Detective Henderson.

"I'm not," Lois countered, setting down the receiver. "This isn't the crime scene."

"Well, don't touch anything else."

James and Lois exchanged another glance. He had seen her pocket Clark's glasses. He had also heard her leaving a message for Clark.

"You said that you spoke to Mayson," she asked casually. "When was that?"

Henderson smiled at some inside joke. “About eleven. She wasn’t at all happy about it, either.”

“You called her into the office on a Sunday, why?”

“Sean McCar… Never you mind, Ms. El.”

Sean McCarthy. Of course! “I was just curious to know what could tempt her away from her meeting with Clark.”

Henderson chuckled, picking up Clark’s shirt from the floor. “Meeting? So, her and Kent, huh? And she said that was just tabloid fodder.”

Lois walked up to Henderson, lowered her glasses, and stared him directly in the eyes. “Let’s not go spreading rumors that might get someone killed, shall we, Detective Henderson? We might already be too late.”

He swallowed, nodded, and dropped the shirt. “Has anyone ever told you that your eyes are exactly like Lois Lane’s?”

She rolled her eyes. “All the time.” Pushing her glasses up on her nose, she turned to James. “They must be at the University Hospital. Let’s go.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Detective Henderson said.

Lois stumbled on the stairs outside Clark’s apartment. James grabbed her arm to steady her. “Are you okay, Lucy?”

She nodded and lowered her voice. “He left his Superman suit at home. That isn’t like him.”

“Oh, right, the shirtless David.”

“Michelangelo’s David isn’t wearing a shirt either, James. He’s nude.”

They snuck past the police who were cordoning off the street. Barry Balson, the *Daily Planet*’s Superman reporter, grabbed her arm as they reached James’s car. “Lucy! What happened? I heard about it on my police scanner.”

Lois turned to James and then back to Barry. “Mr. Olsen has this one, Barry.”

Barry looked at Mr. Olsen and stepped away from Lucy. “Sorry, Mr. Olsen, I didn’t see you there. I didn’t know you wanted to be a reporter.” He smiled politely at his boss.

James looked at Lucy with shock. She nodded her head towards Barry.

“Stay here,” James added to Barry. “See if you can find out anything about the bomb in Mayson’s car.”

“On it, sir.”

They got into the car and drove away before Barry could ask any more questions.

“I’m not a reporter, Lucy,” he said over the roar of the wind.

“You’d make a good one, James, if you gave it a shot.” She smiled encouragingly at him. “Look how you got that neighbor to tell you what happened. Plus, you found out Detective Henderson’s side of the story as well. Not bad for a beginner. Anyway, you couldn’t be worse than Ralph.”

“I’m more of a behind the scenes guy,” he replied.

She vaguely remembered something he said when they arrived at the scene. “Then we should get you a camera.”

At the hospital, James dropped Lois off at the emergency entrance as he went to park the car. She went directly to the desk, “Is Mayson Drake here?”

“We cannot give out information on patients, Miss. Are you family?” the woman behind the desk droned.

“She was the woman in the explosion?” Lois tried again.

The woman shook her head.

“She would have been carried in by a tall, handsome, brown-haired man without a shirt. I’m actually looking for him. Is he still here?”

The woman brightened to almost-human. “Oh, the GQ model.” She glanced around with a hopeful grin. “I don’t know. I don’t see him.”

Lois stepped away from the counter. Poor Clark. Shirtless for one day and that day lives in infamy. It was a busy day at the hospital. Screaming babies with drippy noses. Fathers with the last of the season’s BBQ burns. A couple of possible gang members standing guard in the corner. She wished she had x-ray vision.

Maybe if she concentrated enough she could hear him. She closed her eyes. Suddenly, all the voices were amplified. Slowly, she listened to each one, tuning out the rejects.

“Did you see that new Paulie Shore movie?” Rejected.

“Mommy, is Daddy going to be okay?” Rejected.

“Clamp, we’ve got bleeding here.” Hold to reevaluate.

“Donde esta el baño?” Rejected.

“And then I said to him. If you think you’re Superman why don’t you take a flying leap…” Rejected.

“Who let Tarzan in?” Hold.

Tarzan?

“He brought in the victim. He snarled when I asked him to wait outside. He won’t leave her. You want to get him to move, be my guest. He’s made of cement.”

Bingo!

Lois opened her eyes. Where did that voice come from? Surgery? She lowered her glasses like she had seen Clark do a thousand times and concentrated on the double doors leading out the emergency waiting room. Suddenly, she could see past the doors, but only because someone pushed a gurney though them. There he was, standing at an operating room door, down the hall. She stepped back and bumped into James.

“I found Clark.” She nodded toward the double doors. “Mayson is being prepped for surgery.”

“How bad is it?”

Lois shook her head. “I’m going in to get Clark. Cover me.”

“What?” he sputtered.

Lois pushed through the double doors. When a nurse called out to her, James stepped between them.

“Excuse me, miss. My name is James Olsen and I own the *Daily Planet.* I was wondering who would I speak with about donating money to the University Hospital?”

This made the nurse pause. “You want to give us money?”

“Yes, you see I have a friend inside…” he continued as he watched Lois give him the thumbs up sign.

Lois shut the double doors and walked over to Clark. She put a hand on his arm. “Clark?”

He growled at her and then noticed who was speaking to him. “Lois! Mayson…” His eyes closed as his head dropped; he could not finish his sentence.

“I know, Clark.” She hugged him and took hold of his hand.

“They’re prepping her for surgery,” he murmured.

“How bad is it?”

Clark swallowed. “She got the brunt of the explosion. I got her out of the car, but she was still between me and the bomb when it went off. If I had just a fraction of a second more—” He buried his face in his hands. “If I had just walked her to her car. Or told her not to leave. Or just smashed her phone when it rang. Anything…”

“It’s not your fault, Clark. She’s alive — that’s more of a chance than the other Mayson got.”

“Alive? She has a collapsed lung, a fractured femur, three broken ribs, glass and brick fragments embedded in her face and chest. Plus countless burns.” His voice started to shake. “And there was blood, so much blood.”

Lois looked at him. His chiseled chest was red from blood. It had dripped down and turned the top of his jeans fuchsia pink. He had streaks of blood across his face and into his hair. She tugged on his arm, trying to move him to a row of seats opposite the operating room. At first, he held his ground, but then relented.

“Clark, we need to get you home and washed up and into clean clothes. Then you can come back and wait for Mayson to come out of surgery. If Henderson finds you like this, he’s going to bag and tag you as evidence.”

He looked at Lois, but his eyes didn't see her. He looked down at his chest and jeans and then back at her. "I can't leave her. They wouldn't even let me into the operating room. What if I need to—"

"I'll stay, Clark," Lois soothed. "She'll be in surgery for a while. Go home, clean up, and then come back."

Clark looked at Lois and this time he saw her. "Thank you, Lois. If you get a chance, not that she would speak to you, tell her that I'm sorry."

Lois held on to his hand. "Clark, you didn't do anything wrong. This is the bomber's fault, not yours. You aren't to blame."

"It doesn't feel that way. It feels like I failed again. Like everyone I care about is taken from me. I am the angel of death. First my parents, then Lois, and now sweet, sweet Mayson."

"Really? Sweet?" Lois questioned his choice of words. "I would have gone with pigheaded."

Clark raised a brow.

"Okay. You're right, it isn't important."

"I was thinking more of the pot calling the kettle black," he responded.

"I deserved that." Lois smiled. She hoped for a smile in return, but his eyes and face looked dead. Defeated.

Clark stared at the door of the operating room for a while. Lois could not tell if he was watching the doctors at work or if he was just thinking. Suddenly, his eyes hardened and she saw anger and determination, where before she had only seen worry and guilt.

He stood up. "I'm going to clean up and change. There's something I need to do."

Lois held on to his hand. "No, Clark. Get washed up and come back here. Come. Back. Here."

"There's someone I need to talk to," he said as he started walking towards the doors. "Someone needs to answer for what has been done."

"No, Clark. I won't let you go. Don't!" She held on to his hand. He was dragging her with him. "This isn't justice. This is vengeance. Mayson wouldn't like this."

James passed through the double doors and saw them, Clark covered in blood and marching toward him like a bull and Lois holding tightly to his arm, trying to pull him back.

"Stop him!" she yelled.

"Are you nuts?" James answered, throwing a hand up at him. "He's Superman!"

Clark picked Lois up with one hand and set her down in front of James. "Keep an eye on her for me, Mr. Olsen. She promised to stay here. There's a worm I need to squish." He scowled, his eyes focused and hard.

"A worm?" James gulped.

"Clark, no!" Lois called to him. "He doesn't have anything to do with this. This doesn't have to do with Junior!" But he was gone like the wind, not having heard a word. She collapsed on the floor, in tears. "No, Clark. Don't go after Jaxon."

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An hour passed. The nurses came by and took Lois and James to the official OR waiting room. The chairs were slightly more comfortable and there were a couple of coffee tables with magazines. There were also pay telephones and vending machines.

Lois called Sam and told him what was happening. He hadn't heard from Clark either. Henderson and several other detectives arrived and stood in the other corner of the waiting room. They kept looking at Lois and James with suspicion.

She could hear them whispering to each other, wondering at their presence in the waiting room. Were they personal friends of Mayson's or were they there because of another patient? She was impressed that Henderson held his tongue, but he did glance at her from time to time. He came up to her after the second hour.

"Lucy, where's Clark?" he whispered.

"I sent him home to get cleaned up." She was wondering where Clark had gone off to as well. She hoped it was just a run-of-the-mill emergency. But she doubted it.

"He was covered in Mayson's blood," James added.

Lucy elbowed him to shut up.

Henderson winced as that image passed through his mind. "That was evidence."

"I made a judgment call. Nobody, especially them…" She nodded to the other detectives in the room and lowered her voice. "…wanted to see Superman covered in Mayson's blood."

The detective's jaw dropped as she linked Superman's name to Clark's. Then he nodded. "Okay."

"Plus, Superman would never have let you touch him, let alone swab him," she murmured. "Especially today."

Henderson sat down next to her. "How long have they been dating?"

"What in blue blazes does that information have to do with this investigation?"

"Perry!" Lucy jumped up and hugged him. He reacted awkwardly to this outpouring of emotion until he realized she did it to whisper in his ear. "He's gone after Jaxon."

The mayor pulled back to look her in the eye. "What in the King's name would he do that for?"

She hugged him again. "He wouldn't listen to reason. He thinks that the bomb had to do with Junior going after his friends."

"Does it?" Perry asked.

"No." She pulled out of the hug and sat down. "Sean McCarthy planted the bomb under Mayson's car."

"How do you know that?" Henderson demanded. Lucy had forgotten he was still there.

She pointed at herself. "World's best investigative…" She paused. *Ooops*. "… Researcher. Why do you think Clark Kent wanted me to work for him?"

Perry chuckled. "I miss the newsroom. Too many stuffed shirts at City Hall. Too PC." He turned to James, who was staring at a blank notepad. "Don't quote me on that."

"Lucy wants me to write the article about the explosion."

Lois pointed at the pad. "Just write what you know, what you saw. We'll clean it up later."

Perry looked at her with curiosity.

She shrugged. "He needs a hobby besides spending money. Anyway, he can't be worse than Ralph."

Perry threw up his hands. "I'm not commenting on *that*." But he flashed her a smile.

By the third hour, Mayson was finally out of surgery and in recovery. Her vital signs looked good and it was likely that she would survive.

Lois pulled Perry over to the coffee vending machine. "I'm getting worried about Clark. He should be back by now."

"Do you think you could find him?" he asked.

"I don't know. I think he went to Jaxon's, but if he went somewhere after there…" She shrugged. "I'm worried what he might do. He wasn't in his right state of mind."

"What do you mean, honey?" Perry asked, linking arms with her and handing her a bottle of water. "You need to keep hydrated."

Lois smiled. "Thank you." She thought about how she should answer his question as she took a sip of water. "His apartment wasn't clean. He left clothing flung about, and this." She opened her purse and showed him Clark's glasses.

He raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think you might be jumping to conclusions, Lucy? You don't have any proof."

"Good thing that this is completely off the record then," she reminded him.

"Oh, right. Force of habit. Perhaps I should go to Jaxon's and —"

"Mayor White, that is an impossible solution and you know it," Lois told him.

"But you're… and I'm…" he stumbled badly over his excuse.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You never saw *Jurassic Park*, did you?"

"What's that?" he looked at her curiously.

"A movie. About dinosaurs that came to life. Blockbuster film," Lois tried to explain and he just kept shaking his head. And then she remembered she was in another dimension where Arnold Schwarzenegger sang. "Wow! It doesn't exist. Good to know. My mistake."

Perry glanced at her with a raised brow.

Luckily, at that moment James brought over his notepad of scribbles. "We can't publish this in the *Daily Planet*. This is horrible."

Perry took it out of his hand and looked it over. He glanced at Lois and nodded. She smiled weakly. "We'll clean it up. Between you, me, and Perry, we can make it work. It's just a rough draft."

"One of us should go to Clark's apartment and see if he's there," Perry suggested. "I just can't imagine where that boy could be."

"He was pretty messed up," Lois whispered. "He wouldn't be there, if he could be here. I'm worried about him. I know everyone likes to think he's this super human man, but to me…" She sighed. "… he's a fragile boy whose girl just got hurt."

"You love him, don't you?" Perry asked out of the blue.

"Of course. Clark is like family to me."

"Then why, honey, did you—" he started.

James coughed and shook his head. "Not now, White."

"Oh, right. Another time then."

Lois glanced at the mayor in confusion, but then shook it off. "Perry, what condition would you be in if you got covered in your wife's blood?"

Perry blanched and swallowed uncomfortably. Then he raised an eyebrow at this comparison. "*Mayson* is his Alice? I don't think so, honey."

"Maybe not, but for now she's the closest he's got."

"But—" Perry started, but then stopped when he saw James shake his head. "Well, I'd be in shock, mostly."

"Okay, you're in shock and you can fly anywhere super fast and have super strength and you feel guilty for not being one fraction of a second faster. Would you be sitting and waiting at the hospital, twiddling your thumbs?"

Perry's eyes grew wider. "Hell, no! I'd be out looking for the devil that did this. You don't think that Kent would…" He shook his head. "Oh God, no, Lucy."

Lois nodded. "He might and that's what worries me." She took another sip of water. "I need to go find him. See if I can stop him."

"Sweetheart, do you think you can?"

Lois closed her eyes and pictured flying above Metropolis on the day Superman had rescued her from Lex Luthor. And then the look in Clark's eyes, the night her Clark had been disintegrated. She felt the baby kick for the first time in hours. She placed a gentle hand on her tummy and smiled. "There might be a way."

As she went to pick up her things, a nurse came into the waiting room. "Clark? Clark? Mayson is asking to speak with Clark."

Lois grimaced. She had hoped Clark would be back before this point. She didn't want to give Mayson his message. And she knew that Mayson did not want to see her. She stepped forward anyway. "Clark asked me to give Mayson a message from him, if he did not return in time."

"I'll come with you," Henderson said.

"No, Detective. I'm sorry, this is a private message for Mayson."

James squeezed her hand and she took a deep breath. Nodding, Lois followed the nurse to the mostly dark recovery room. She noticed that they were alone. No other patients shared this space, only a nurse at a desk across the room.

Lois took a deep breath and walked up to Mayson's bed. She was precisely how Clark described her. She had a cast on her left leg. Her hands were bandaged, probably from burns. She had a tube coming out of her chest from the punctured lung. She also had numerous smaller bandages from the glass and brick debris. She was still hooked up to machines that beeped and told everyone she was still alive. Medicines and fluids were dripping into her arms via an IV. She looked horrible, even for Mayson, but at least she was alive. Her eyes were shut, resting. Lois took a seat in the chair next to the bed.

Mayson's eyes opened. Her face fell when she saw Lois instead of Clark. "Why you here?" Her voice was hoarse from the air tube.

"I'm sorry, Mayson. I know I'm the last person you want to see right now—"

"True. Clark? He okay?"

Lois had heard of denial, but Mayson took the cake.

"Here?" Mayson added, moving her hand slightly toward her chest.

All right. Maybe Mayson was all there.

"Not really," Lois told her. "He left as they were prepping you for surgery. I tried to stop him, but he kind of plowed right through me. He said that he had to find a worm that needed squishing. I told him that you wouldn't like that, but he didn't seem to care."

Mayson closed her eyes for a moment. "He blames himself."

"Yes." Lois was surprised at the depth of Mayson's knowledge about Clark's history. "He called himself the angel of death."

A tear wound its way down Mayson's face. "He's in pain. He's lost so much."

Lois nodded. "Don't be surprised if he tries to break up with you for your own good. To protect you. Don't let him, of course." She didn't know how much Clark had told Mayson about herself; but when he had said he was going to tell Mayson the truth Lois had assumed it was the cover story they had concocted for themselves about Kal and Clark being twins. "Kal tried to do this to me, several times. He called himself a jinx. But I fought for him and he couldn't keep away. That's what you need to do. He needs you."

"You like him," Mayson said more than asked.

"Of course. Clark's a good man; just like his brother, only more fragile."

"He told you about telling me?"

Lois shook her head. "He was planning on it, when he left this morning to meet you."

"Liar."

"Excuse me?" Lois didn't understand.

"Leave Clark alone," Mayson groaned.

"I can't do that, Mayson. I need him."

"Not your daddy?"

Lois had no idea to what Mayson was referring. And they she remembered she had called Sam 'Daddy' in front of Mayson. "Oh, that man from this morning." Lois chuckled. "He's not really my dad. He's an old friend of Clark's. He likes it when I call him Daddy, it reminds him of his two lost girls."

"Lost girls?"

"Lois, of course. The most famous lost person in Metropolis. And Lucy, his other daughter, who ran away from home ten years ago."

"You Lucy?" Mayson asked her.

"His Lucy? No." She shook her head. "Just the same name. That's all."

"Why? Me and Clark?"

Lois thought about this question. "Why did I set up you and Clark? I was being selfish, I guess. I could see that it was hurting Clark, me talking about Kal all the time. I thought it might do him some good, to see that someone liked him for himself without the suit. And, lo and behold, you walked through the door. Oh, and he likes you; more than I ever imagined. He talks about you all the time. '*Today's the day I'm meeting Mayson for lunch. Have an excuse ready to tell Ralph, so he doesn't interrupt.*'" Lois laughed. "You give him hope. Someone with whom he can share his troubles. A Superman without hope could be a very dangerous person, indeed. He needs to care for someone and have someone care for him."

"You set me up for Superman?" Mayson asked, dismayed.

"Did I set you up with Superman? No, Mayson. I thought you understood, Clark Kent *is* the man, Superman is just the job description." She thought about how she phrased that. "Or something like that." Her Clark had explained it better.

"Ah. I see." Mayson closed her eyes.

Lois thought that Mayson had fallen back asleep and she moved to get up.

"Where's Clark?" Mayson whispered, opening her eyes.

"I don't know, and that frightens me. I'm going to go look for him. He needs to see that you're okay. That you survived." Lois tried to smile reassuringly. "He'll be so happy. I know he cares for you a great deal."

"Did Clark give message?" Mayson whispered.

"Oh, right. The message he gave me to give to you. He's sorry."

"Sorry?" Mayson mumbled, closing her eyes and turning her head away. "Ow."

"Oh, right, the whiplash. I'll let you rest. Henderson wanted to come in and say hi, too." Lois waved and walked out of the room.

Lois thought that the conversation went pretty well, especially since Mayson still hated her. *Oh, Clark.* She shook her head. Mayson was disappointed that she hadn't gotten a more romantic message? Maybe Lois should have fudged more on his behalf, but she wasn't sure what sentiment to give. How much *did* Clark really care for that woman? Clark would simply have to convince Mayson that she'd messed up the message instead. It wouldn't matter much in the big picture as Lucy was already in Mayson's doghouse. Oh, wait, convince Clark to lie to his girlfriend? She rolled her eyes at herself. Like *that* would ever happen.

She went back into the waiting room to tell Henderson that Mayson was ready to see him. Although, technically, Lois wasn't sure this was true.

Perry and James were conferring over his notepad. The Chief was back. "You can't include the reference to David, Olsen."

"But it's great imagery, White."

"Hi, boys," Lois said. "I'm off to find Clark."

James stood up. "I'll drive you."

"Can you stay here in case Clark shows up?"

He looked disappointed with this task, but nodded. She'd have more freedom to get the job done alone. Lois set her hand on his shoulder. "Thanks."

Lois took a cab to the Clinton Street apartment first. She still had her key. The street was cordoned off but she was able to sneak around the main crime scene. Henderson had officially taped off Clark's apartment.

That man better not try to implicate Clark in the bombing of Mayson's car, Lois thought. She pulled out her key, which she had never returned to Clark when she had moved out. Nudging aside the tape, she easily entered. She tried not to touch anything. Clark had obviously been there. She saw a bloody footprint leading from the patio into the bedroom. She hoped Henderson didn't notice it as well. The blue suit was missing from the bed. She sighed. Would he ever take it off again, after this?

Next she checked the bathroom. She was sure he took a shower; how could he not? Lois wasn't sure exactly what she was seeking, but she found it in the shower: a fist-sized hole in the shower wall. She rubbed her face with her hands. How could she have let him come home alone? She should have stayed with him.

Lois locked his apartment door and returned to the main street a block away. If Jaxon got hurt, she would blame herself. Not that Jaxon was an innocent bystander, but he didn't deserve Superman's wrath. She felt a chill down her spine. She had known since her first visit that this Clark wasn't as grounded and secure as her Clark. He didn't have the self-confidence, the coolness of head, and the optimism that her Clark had learned from his parents. He had learned that life was uncertain, that loved ones leave you quickly and that he needed to take care of himself. He was more of a loner than her Clark. He couldn't control his anger or his emotions as well as her Clark either.

Lois flagged down a cab and gave Jaxon's address to the driver. As the cab pulled up down the street from his brownstone, she saw Jaxon jog out the front door and jump into a waiting car. She wondered how he could look so happy. If Superman hadn't pummeled him, there had to be a good reason. She told the cabbie to follow the convertible. She had a feeling he wasn't heading out to lunch or a movie.

Jaxon's car pulled up outside a warehouse.

Lois stopped her cab two warehouses away and hid behind the dumpster on the other side of his car. Jaxon was talking on his cell phone. He seemed annoyed by something and hung up on whomever he had been talking to. She watched him get out of his car and type in the security password and enter the building.

Usually she wouldn't be able to see someone type in their password, but his was so obvious. Lois almost couldn't believe it was so easy. Six, two, four, eight, five. She wondered if it was a date — June 24, 1985 — or if he just made a cross pattern. He didn't even cover up the keypad as any normal, security-conscious person would. Jaxon's overconfidence in himself was setting off alarm bells in her head.

Lois waited a minute and then listened at the door. She heard nothing except the hum of computers, so she typed in the code. The door unlocked and she went inside.

Lois entered a semi-dark room filled with large mainframe computers. Clearly, this was the back room to Jaxon's VR — Virtual Reality — computer. She had a bad feeling that Clark had agreed to something unwise. She had warned him not to underestimate Jaxon. That on the outside he was your everyday super nerd, but inside his VR, he'd have the advantage, be the superhero (or super villain in this case) and Clark would just be average Clark.

She followed the ramped concrete floor upwards into a well-lit video arcade. It was empty of customers at the moment. Every whir and beep and computer-generated sound effect made her flinch and duck. Glancing around the room, she searched for another exit or another room. There were a couple of doors at the back near the unmanned Arcade Manager's booth marked "Employees Only" and "Security."

The "Security" room had a password-protected keypad; the "Employees Only" room did not. As Lois knelt down next to that door, she heard Jaxon on the telephone again. She recognized his voice, but could not hear him clearly.

Why couldn't she hear him? She had super hearing. Was the room lead-lined? No wait, that was only for Superman's vision gizmo thingy, wasn't it? Would she be able to hear if Jaxon had soundproofed the room? Strange. Unless someone had planned ahead and knew that Superman would come seeking the VR

machine or its creator at some time. Okay, now she was sounding paranoid in her own head. Not good.

As Lois straightened up, her lower back began to hurt. *Terrific.* She rubbed her back. All the sitting in uncomfortable chairs was finally catching up to her. Then the baby kindly kicked her. She had missed lunch and Baby was not happy. She would need to eat something soon or the baby…

Kick!

Oh, Baby had read her mind. One swift kick to the bladder, too. So much for stealthy undercover work.

"Not now, little one," Lois whispered with a pat to her tummy. She wished she had remembered to go while at Clark's apartment. She noticed another room in the corner of the arcade room. Perhaps it was a restroom. Quietly, she pushed the door open and found not a restroom, but the hub of the VR machine. And there, strapped into Jaxon's contraption, was Superman.

Other than being plugged into the machine, he seemed fine. Not tense. Not fighting. Just walking.

Lois's heart ached seeing him there. She rubbed her face. How in the world was she going to get him unplugged from that machine, especially without James's help?

Okay. First things first. Mommy needed a potty break.

After Lois returned from the unisex restroom located in the back of the room, she checked out the rest of the VR room. It was fairly similar to the room she and her Clark had visited back in her own world. Two console rings for visitors and, behind a glass panel, Jaxon's main control console.

Her stomach growled and the baby kicked again. How was she ever going to concentrate with these distractions? Lois looked in her purse. Maybe she had a hidden Double Fudge Crunch Bar. No such luck. But someone had added a package of peanut butter crackers. She could almost kiss Clark for remembering her blood sugar.

Swinging her purse onto her back, Lois sat on the ring surrounding Clark as she nibbled on her cracker and thought about how she was going to get him out of this mess.

***

Clark felt like a fool. He had been walking around inside Jaxon's VR contraption for what felt like the better part of three hours. At least it had given him time to cool off.

Superman had arrived at Jaxon's apartment within five minutes of stepping out of his shower. He hadn't knocked on the door; he had come in through Jaxon's open window. He picked the worm up by the scruff of his neck and demanded that he tell him where he could get hold of Junior.

Understandably, Jaxon had been terrified. "I didn't do anything," he whined.

"Someone told his big nasty brother that Mayson Drake was a friend of mine. Today, her car blew up."

Jaxon turned white as a sheet. "It wasn't me. I swear. Father had Junior locked up for his clumsiness — for shooting me by mistake and wasting… his time."

"Maybe you should give me your father's address and I'll just double-check that you aren't lying to me."

Jaxon swallowed. "You know, Clark, you might as well kill me, because that's what my father will do if he discovers I gave out his private address."

Clark drew back his fist to punch him when Jason gasped, "You're really going to kill me, Superman?"

The Man of Steel dropped him on the ground and Jaxon scrambled away like the cockroach that he was.

"You know, you're just a big bully. Just like all those jocks I had to deal with at school. If you had just asked, maybe I would have told you what you wanted to know." Jaxon held up his hand. "Don't try asking now. I won't tell you anything; how do I know you won't come back and pound me later?"

"I give you my word," Superman told him. Even to him it seemed like a weak deal.

"What if I say something you don't like? No, I won't tell you a thing, unless…" He looked up at Superman hopefully.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you agree to even the playing field."

Superman had raised an eyebrow. "How?"

And that's how he got stuck in Jaxon's VR machine.

Superman had agreed to talk to Jaxon in the VR; what he forgot to do was secure a promise to let him out after their discussion. As if *that* — Clark scoffed at himself — would guarantee that Jaxon still let him go.

The worm told Clark that they could speak as equals in the VR, but he had lied. Clark was a regular human in the VR, wearing not his blue suit, but a regular business suit. Jaxon, on the other hand, had made himself into a big burly blond dude with an "X" tattooed on his chest. A man who had been programmed — surprise, surprise — to have Superman's powers.

Jaxon had even placed a scantily-clad woman, representing Lucy, to watch their "discussion" from a Daily Planet window. The blond "X-Man" first picked him up by the scruff of the neck as he had done to Jaxon, and then thrown — not dropped — Clark to the ground. He laughed at Clark and informed him that he could never again leave the VR world.

Then Jaxon's character said the one thing that crushed Clark. They really had nothing to do with Mayson's car bomb — she must have ticked off somebody on her own. He'd laughed and laughed as he flew up to Lucy's window, where that big Neanderthal Jaxon kissed her. Then he pulled out a pen to sign an autograph for her and disappeared. Not just into the room, but literally. He had left Clark in the machine alone and unable to leave.

Clark had gone into the Daily Planet where the virtual Ralph fired him, while a virtual Perry and Mr. Olsen looked on and laughed maniacally. No matter where Clark went in this virtual Metropolis, he could never go home. He kept walking in circles, seeing the same twenty people, including four sets of twins.

He even tried to stop somewhere for lunch, just to break up the monotony, but found that virtual Clark had lost his wallet.

So, this was to be his fate, walking in circles around Metropolis with no money, home, or friends. And no ability to fly away from it all.

Clark dropped onto a bench to ponder how he had gotten himself into this predicament. Lois would be wondering where he was. Had Mayson survived surgery? He would never know.

He had failed to be a hero that morning and had only made a bigger botch of things that afternoon. If Jaxon was telling the truth, Junior had nothing to do with the bomb in Mayson's car. Clark arrogantly thought she had been targeted because of him, but that was closed-minded of him. Of course she would be a target because of him, but she also held a job which came with its own set of dangers. He wondered who was really behind the bomb.

It was at that point that a group of elderly people showed up and started giving him nasty looks. Guess he wasn't allowed to sit too long in Jaxon's world. Wonderful. Back to wandering in circles.

After about his twenty-seventh circle, something changed. He could smell something. Peanut butter. He didn't think much about it at first, but wherever he went, the smell was still there. He realized it might not be coming from inside the virtual world at all. In the real world, he had super senses; was he picking up something outside this virtual hell?

Clark stopped walking, closed his eyes and tried to listen. He could hear a heartbeat. He was not alone. Probably it was Jaxon back to gloat on his new prize possession. He took a deep breath and released it. Okay, definitely peanut butter; it was overpowering all other scents. Maybe it was really close by. He

held out his hands as far as he could reach.

"*Whoa there, Clark!"*

Clark froze as he gasped, "Lois!" Of course, the peanut butter crackers he had put in her purse before their jaunt to Paris that morning.

The big question was whether, when he spoke, she could hear him. "Lois, can you hear me?" he asked.

A VR passerby looked at him talking to himself as if he were nuts; Clark ignored him.

He waited what seemed like forever, but probably closer to a minute. No answer. He could not control his speech. Great. How was he going to let her know that he knew she was there. Clark held out his hands again.

"*Clark? I don't know if you can hear me. Hopefully, your super hearing can penetrate those headphones. I am going to touch you. Gently, now."* She paused. "*No, wait!"*

Clark froze, again.

"*If I touch you and you can't hear me or know that I'm coming you could swing your arm and bye-bye Lois. So, if you can hear me make your right hand into a fist."*

Good thinking, Lois. He made a fist.

"*Oh, Clark!"* Lois hugged him. He had never felt anything so wonderful. He closed his eyes and pictured her hugging him, otherwise his vision was telling him he was hugging thin air.

"*Not so tight, Clark!"*

He opened his arms, but she continued to hold him.

"*I was so worried. More on that later. Right fist will mean 'yes.' Left fist ' no.' Do you understand?"*

Clark made a right fist 'yes.'

"*Great! Try speaking out loud to me."*

He tried speaking again, slowly. "Lois, can you hear me?"

Another VR passerby looked at him as if he were nuts. Actually, it was the same man as before.

"*I didn't hear anything. Did you speak?"*

'Yes,' replied Clark's right fist.

"*Darn. Okay, I'll do the majority of the talking. Gee, I hope that doesn't put a crimp in our relationship, changing it so drastically like that."*

Clark laughed. Oh, how he had missed her.

"*First of all, where are you in the game? On the street?"*

Right fist 'yes.'

"*Get off the street! If you're hit by a car in VR world, VR Clark could die, which would kill a normal human. I don't know what it would do to you and I don't want to find out. Are you on the sidewalk now?"*

Right fist 'yes.' He had been standing on the sidewalk the entire time, but he couldn't explain that to her.

Lois embraced him again. He breathed in and out. The peanut butter scent was almost gone now, so he could smell her. He closed his eyes. She stepped out of the hug, but kept one hand resting on his chest, so he'd know she was still there.

"*Ground rules. I don't know if Jaxon explained them to you when he tricked you in there, so I'm going to go over them again."*

Right fist 'yes.'

"*I can't take off your helmet to get you out of the game. It could kill you. If you die in VR land, it could kill your real body, so don't do that. To get out of the game, you need an exit pass. When Kal and I were stuck in the VR world, Jaxon's 'LL' watch was his exit pass out of the game. Did you notice him wearing a watch?"*

Left fist 'no.'

"*Okay. Don't worry. It could still be the exit pass. Maybe you didn't notice it."*

Clark raised both hands with a shrug.

"*Okay. You don't know. Some real world facts you should know. I followed Jaxon into the building, but he's talking on the phone in another room; it was lead-lined or soundproofed or something, so I couldn't hear anything. So, if I disappear suddenly or go quiet, take that as a clue that we are no longer alone. Plus, if you talk to me in the VR world, better call me Lucy."*

Good to know. Right fist 'yes.'

"*I know you're feeling helpless in there and that's not a feeling you're used to. Just know that I've been there before. Both trapped in the VR and dealing with a blind Superman. Did I ever tell you that story?"*

Left fist 'no.' He wished that she would just stop yammering and try to get him out of this contraption.

"*It's a doozy, especially since it resulted in Kal standing Mayson up… Oh, Mayson! Clark, you're probably worried sick."*

Right fist 'yes.' Yes, Lois, how was Mayson?

"*She's out of surgery. She survived, thanks to you. But she's angry as hell you weren't there and left me as your messenger."*

Clark winced. He really screwed up big time. He took Lois's hand off his chest and kissed it.

"*You're welcome,"* she replied. "*She does love you, Clark. Let me give you a free piece of advice about women."*

Left fist 'no.' If only he could speak to her with more words than in 'yes' and 'no,' he could remind her that Jaxon was around somewhere. They needed to hurry.

Lois ignored him. "*Sometimes the best way to say 'I love you' is just to be there for her, especially if you have to wait a long time to see her… and she knows you had to wait. Especially if you would rather be out stepping on worms."*

Clark sighed. Now she tells him. He shook his head. She had been trying to tell him that earlier, only he hadn't been in the mood to listen. He kissed her hand again.

"*You're welcome,"* Lois replied. "*Oh, by the way, the real bomber is Sean McCarthy, the same guy as before, which you would have known if you had taken the time to listen to me.*

Clark closed his eyes and remembered Mayson on the phone with Henderson that morning.

"*Sean McCarthy, really." Mayson glanced over her shoulder at Clark. He waved. She waved back. "I thought he went underground after killing that DEA agent."*

He hadn't been listening, because he had lost control with her and that scared him.

"*Also, remember the date 6-24-85,"* Lois continued. "*It's Jaxon's security keypad code to the building."*

Good to know.

Lois froze. "*What was that?"*

Clark listened, but could not hear anything.

"*Someone is coming,"* she whispered, pressing her body flat against his. "*If you get a chance, ask him about his stepmother. A name would be good."*

Clark wrinkled his brow. Why did she want to know that? Oh, yeah, the trace back to Junior. Was that why she wanted to talk to Jaxon since the shooting? He had a chance to kiss her cheek before she was gone.

He continued walking down the street, but he wasn't paying attention to the VR game. He could hear a door opening somewhere.

"*Well, hello there Clark. How are you enjoying your walk?"* Jaxon chuckled.

Clark stopped and growled.

"*I was just talking to dear old Dad. Oh, what's the fun of this? I'm talking to an empty shell, you can't hear me or respond."* Jaxon tapped on his helmet. "*Maybe I should tell you face to face. Father said not to underestimate you, but what can you do to me in my world? Nothing."* He laughed again.

Clark realized that, in the VR world, he was standing in the middle of an intersection and a semi-truck was heading straight for him. He jumped to the curb, barely making it. Ow, his

shoulder hurt. He didn't like that feeling. He would have to be more careful. If he killed himself in the game, Lois would be denied the chance to tell him she told him so. Smiling, he picked himself up and dusted himself off. He would hate to disappoint her.

He started walking again and then, suddenly, he was standing in an office. Jaxon was playing with his world. Clark took a deep breath. Okay, a watch with the letters LL on it. He would have to either be quick or sneaky. He didn't have super speed in this world, so he would have to trick Jaxon.

The VR door opened and Jaxon walked in, wearing a stylish business suit. "Hello, there, Mr. Kent. I understand you are looking for a new job. Have a seat. What makes you think you are qualified to work for Jaxon, Inc.?" Jaxon sat down on the other side of his desk and chuckled. "Just having some fun with you, Clark. How are you liking your new world? Enjoying yourself?"

"Immensely," Clark responded with sarcasm. "It's almost like a vacation. No work to do. No one to save. How relaxing."

"You forgot no one to talk to. No food to eat. No bed to sleep in." Jaxon grinned.

Clark scowled.

"Glad you are having a good time." Jaxon leaned back in his chair. "Let's see, where should I start? I bet you're wondering about your girlfriend, Mayson."

Clark glared at him.

"I know you must be worried. I thought I'd check out the news after your little confession earlier about the car bomb. It seems that Superman was too late. Mayson died on the operating table."

Clark blanched and stumbled back into a chair. Had Lois lied to him? No. She wouldn't lie to him about that. She had to be telling the truth, especially the part about Mayson being mad at him. He would believe Lois over Jaxon any day.

"I'm sorry you didn't get a chance to say goodbye. The whole world is going to miss you, Superman. After Mayson's death, Superman's disappearance will seem natural for a man in mourning, don't you think? I mean, you couldn't even save your own girlfriend, how will anyone be able to trust you again?"

Clark put his head in his hands. He had to get control of himself. This might be the only chance he had to escape. But Jaxon was playing on his every fear.

"So, had you done the big bouncy, bouncy with Mayson?"

Clark looked up with a glare. He wished he had his heat vision.

"What? None of my business? Later, then." Jaxon kicked his feet up on the desk. "You see, I'm the only person you have to talk to. So, maybe someday, we'll be the best of buddies and you will tell me all the juicy details about you and Mayson."

Clark growled.

"And Lucy."

"Lucy?" That startled him.

"There has to be a history there, Clark. I mean, I've looked for hers." Jaxon shook his head. "Yeah, she's in your protective custody, isn't she? Because outside of three months ago, she didn't exist."

They really should have done a better job on her back story.

"She's none of your business."

"Of course, she is, Clark. You see, you're missing and Lucy will need someone to comfort her." He smirked. "Who better than the man who tried to save her from the shooter?"

"Save her? You were behind her."

"Mrs. Pollcheck, my landlady, said she's been looking for me," Jaxon gloated. "Guess she wanted to thank me."

Clark shook his head. Jaxon would think that, wouldn't he?

"That's two strikes against you, Superman. You couldn't save Lucy from being shot, and now, you couldn't save Mayson. Even Lana dumped you. You really are a bad boyfriend."

Clark's hand was forming a fist. He truly wanted to punch him.

Suddenly, a voice whispered in his ear, it was Lois. He could feel her, pressed against his back. "*Remember, Clark. He has all the power in there. I know he must be taunting you. I can see the two of you on the monitor. It doesn't matter what he says, what matters is the exit pass."*

As usual, Lois was right. He took a deep breath and relaxed his hand. Find the exit pass and keep him talking.

"So, are you going to tell me about your father?"

"My father? Did you hear that?"

Ooops. "Hear what?" Clark glanced around as if Jaxon was referring to a sound in the VR.

"Why do you want to know about my father?" Jaxon was suspicious.

"Just curious about the kind of man who scares you more than Superman."

"My father doesn't scare me," Jaxon stammered. "He's an important man. Powerful. Rich. Super smart. Bet you're wishing about now *that* was one of your super powers."

Sounded like Lex Luthor. "What a great dad, Jaxon," Clark added with sarcasm. "I bet he's really proud of you."

"He sure is," Jaxon said with a little more enthusiasm than necessary. He was lying. Lex wasn't happy. Wonder why?

"Then how did Junior become his favorite son?" Clark asked.

"Junior's not his favorite," Jaxon snapped.

"You said, when I interviewed you back in the hospital, that Junior was Dad's favorite."

"Well, not anymore." Jaxon leaned back.

"My mistake. This…" Clark spread out his hands. "…is quite an accomplishment. I'm sure he is proud."

"I caught Superman where all others have failed."

"Ah." Clark nodded. "Other people have been trying to capture me? I never realized that. They must not have been doing a good job. Or maybe no one else was trying. Perhaps I really am easy to catch. I should work on that," he mocked Jaxon.

Jaxon started fiddling with his sleeve, his lips pressed tightly together. Was Clark hitting a nerve? He should move the topic back somewhere safe, so Jaxon wouldn't leave before he found the exit pass.

Clark leaned back in his chair. "Dad must have been really upset with Junior, hitting on your mom like that?"

"Lola's not my mom," Jaxon said, jumping to his feet. Ooops. Found another nerve. "She's just some lounge singer he found in a Berkistan hotel. Junior likes her because she's hot. She's not smart like Lucy."

Bingo. "Strange that someone as smart as your father would be tricked into marrying a dumb lounge singer?" That didn't sound like Lex Luthor.

"She's really hot. Legs that never end. Big brown eyes. Some men are fools for that sort of thing. Not like you and me, Clark. We like women who challenge us intellectually." Jaxon thought he was smarter than his father when it came to women. Interesting.

Clark grinned. "I don't know. I'm a sucker for a nice pair of legs, myself."

"Riiiight," Jaxon drawled.

"I've got to have more self-control than most men. It wouldn't be good for the image."

Jaxon laughed. Clark actually got him to laugh. Maybe he had made a connection.

"See, Jaxon. I'm not that bad of a guy. Just trying to make my way in the world, just like everyone else. How about you let me out?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd have me locked up in ten seconds flat."

"For what, showing me your VR game? I don't have any evidence that you kidnapped me, just my word," Clark said, knowing that his word actually meant something. "But the longer you keep me here, the more evidence builds up."

Jaxon beamed, patting his jacket pocket. "That is, if anyone finds you before you get killed or die of boredom."

Clark leaned forward. "I could put a good word in with Lucy for you."

"You could. But you won't. She's a porcelain doll that you have placed high on a shelf so no one else can play with her. There's something there between you two; I don't know what. But you wouldn't chance her liking me."

"True. If she didn't fall for Superman's strength or Mr. Olsen's wealth, what makes you think she'd have anything to do with you?"

"Olsen's been trying to tap that?" This seemed to annoy Jaxon.

Clark was happy that Lois couldn't hear this conversation or she'd be tempted to put on the VR headset and punch Jaxon's lights out. "Lucy turned him down flat. But they've become quite close over the last couple of months." Sorry, Mr. Olsen.

"What?!" Jaxon put his elbows on the desk and started to wring his hands. Clark could not see a watch. If it wasn't the watch, what else would be the exit pass?

"He's been helping her do computer research." Clark smiled. "We've been short a researcher and he's jumped in to help."

"Do you mean, if I hadn't been shot, I could be her best buddy now?" Jealousy and doubt entered Jaxon's expression.

Lois breathed down his neck and made him shiver. "*Where's the watch?"*

Clark shrugged. Luckily, it answered both of their questions.

"*Maybe I should go into the VR and talk to him?"* Lois whispered. "*He'd tell me."*

Clark closed his left fist.

"*Do you want to be stuck in there forever?"*

He opened his left fist and closed it again.

"Well, I can't let Olsen to take Lucy away from me," Jaxon mumbled.

"He can't take away something that doesn't want to go with him. She told him 'no'."

"Yeah, Olsen's a decent guy. He wouldn't do that." Jaxon smirked. "Me, not so much."

Clark leaned forward, his fist clenching again.

"*What is he saying to you, Clark? You look furious."*

"I wonder if she likes computer games?" Jaxon continued.

"Oh, you'd bring me a friend. How nice of you." Clark leaned back, again in control. "Unfortunately, Lucy prefers the real world."

"*Okay. If it isn't the watch, what other item would he use as his exit pass? It would have to be something he had on him the last time you met with him."*

"I bet you do too, Clark, but here you are."

"*Did he pretend to be some big blond gorilla? For some reason, he thought I'd prefer him that way. Yuck."*

Clark closed his right hand. "But if you brought her here, I'd learn to adapt." He smiled as if in anticipation. "I've learned she doesn't like the brute force type. Maybe she'd prefer me as Clark Kent, average guy."

"Your girlfriend has been dead an hour, Clark. An hour! Forgive me if I don't take dating advice from you." Jaxon chuckled with a shake of his head. "And to think you almost killed me because of her. Puts things in perspective, doesn't it?"

Clark looked down, honestly chagrined. He had forgotten about Mayson. He was a lousy boyfriend. One discussion about Lois and poof, there went Mayson from his brain. "You're right," Clark admitted. "She deserves better. What made me think I could have a normal life?"

"*Clark! You're going to pieces again. I can see it in your eyes. He's trying to drive the will to survive out of you. Don't let him get to you. I know you're vulnerable right now, but don't give up. I need you. Mayson needs you. Please, Clark, hold on."*

"Wow, Clark. That's quite a confession." Jaxon gloated, patting his jacket breast pocket. "Well, I'd better be going now."

"*It's the pen, Clark!"*

Clark looked up and saw Jaxon standing at the desk with a pen in his hand.

"Can I write her a note goodbye?" The reporter held out his hand for the pen.

"Well, why not?" Jaxon almost handed Clark the pen from his pocket, but then put it back. "That one's special. Dad gave it to me when I graduated from MIT."

He pulled out a yellow legal pad and an ordinary ball point pen.

"*You've got to get that pen, Clark. It's either you or him."*

Clark pretended to scribble for a moment and tossed the pen into the trash. "It didn't work." He leaned over and tried to grab the pen from Jaxon's hand. "It's not every day that a man writes the woman he loves a note goodbye."

Jaxon seized Clark's wrist and twisted it.

"Ow. Ow. Ow."

"How does it feel to have a broken wrist, Clark? Ever have one of those before? I doubt it."

Clark reached over with his left hand and clicked the pen. As both of them were holding on to it, they both came out of the VR game at the same time.

***

Lois pushed the helmet off Superman's head and helped him with his gloves.

"My wrist," he mumbled.

"Let's get you into the sunlight," she suggested.

Jaxon walked into the VR room from his office. "Lucy! How did you…"

"I'm good, huh?" She grinned, pulling off Superman's other glove and unhooked his VR belt.

"You lied to me?" Jaxon's face fell, staring at Superman. "You weren't really going to tell her goodbye."

Superman gave one last glance at Jaxon and scooped Lois into his arms and went out the door.

"You're just going to leave him there?" she asked, once they were airborne. "Aren't you going to take him to the police?"

"There's only my word against his that I was ever held against my will. Not really a story I want out in the press anyway."

"What am I, chopped liver?"

"I don't want you involved in this, Lois. We've worked too hard to keep you out of the spotlight. I just want to forget this ever happened."

Lois hugged him. "Are you okay?"

"My wrist feels better. It feels good to breathe fresh air again. Thank you, Lois."

"It looked like he was messing with your mind."

He swallowed. "I'll survive."

"Clark, do you need some time before you go to see Mayson?" Lois asked quietly. "Once you tell her what happened, she'll understand."

"No. Best if I do it now," he said.

"I ask, because you're heading away from the hospital."

"You and the baby need more than peanut butter crackers. I'm taking you home," he told her.

"I can eat at the hospital, Clark. If you want… company."

"No, thank you, Lois. I'll go alone."

"Clark, I don't think you should be alone right now," she whispered.

He pushed open the doors of her large living room window

and set her down inside. “I’ll always be alone, Lois.” She hoped never to see the expression on his face on her Clark’s face. He was drawn and exhausted, like he didn’t have a friend in the world and didn’t deserve one.

Sam came rushing into the room and Superman turned to him. “Don’t let her leave before she’s eaten.” Then he turned and took off through the window again.

She ran to the window. “Clark, no!” But he was gone.

Lois embraced Sam. “Clark’s broken, Daddy. His spirit has been crushed. And I can’t help him.”

Sam led her to the sofa, where she burst into tears. She tried to speak, but could not form the words.

“Give yourself a minute, sweetie.”

Lois took a couple of deep breaths. “I’ve got to go after him.”

“What have you eaten recently?” Sam asked.

“Don’t listen to him, Daddy. He’s trying to stop me from helping him. He’s going to break Mayson’s heart. I can’t let him do that.”

“Isn’t that his decision?” Sam asked. “Isn’t it his life?”

“But he’s doing it for all the wrong reasons. He blames himself for not being one second faster.” She wiped her nose with her knuckles. “He blames himself for her accident.”

“It’s *his* life, Lucy. He doesn’t need you to live it for him.”

“But he’s making the wrong choice,” Lois tried to explain. “It’s going to make him miserable. It’s already making him miserable.”

“That it might. But only he has the right to make those decisions, not you,” Sam reminded her.

“But I’m his… his…” she sobbed. She wasn’t anything to him, technically. That realization made her cry harder.

“Lois. You’re *Kal’s* wife. You get to make life’s choices with him,” Sam said, heading into the kitchen and returning with a box of tissues. “Clark alone gets to make his own mistakes. It’s how he will learn to make better decisions, the next time around.”

“But he thinks there’s never going to be a next time, Daddy.” Lois blew her nose.

“We both know he’ll get another chance.”

“When I see Clark in pain, it’s as if my Clark is in pain. When he’s in pain, I need to do everything I can to stop it.”

Sam hugged her. “You will be such a good mother, sweetie. You have such a capacity to love. One of the hardest lessons to learn as a parent is when you can help and when you need to stand back and let them fight their own battles.”

Lois looked at him for a minute before answering. “Daddy, Clark isn’t a child. He’s a grown man.”

“Then how about you start treating him like one?” Sam patted her knee and went into the kitchen. A minute later he returned with half a roast beef with Swiss sandwich and a glass of juice. “I went out and bought it for you after you called. I knew today would be a hard one for you.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” She took a sip of juice. “I wish there was something I could do to stop the train wreck from happening before me.”

“We can’t all be superheroes, sweetie.”

“If anyone needed a superhero right about now it would be Clark,” she said, adding, “To save him from himself.”

***

Sam insisted on accompanying Lois to the hospital and would not be persuaded otherwise. She found the waiting room to be deserted of most of its earlier inhabitants. Strangely, James and Perry were still there, discussing James’s notepad.

“Is Clark still in with Mayson?” Lois asked, walking up to them.

“Lucy!” James jumped to his feet and then noticed Sam standing behind her. He glanced between them. Perry just stood there with his jaw hanging open.

“Sorry, James. This is my doctor, Dr. Sam Lane. Sam, this is the owner of the *Daily Planet* and our apartment building, Mr. James Olsen.”

The men nodded at one another and shook hands.

“And this is…”

“Perry, or I guess I should call you Mayor White now. Congratulations,” Sam said with his hand extended.

“Thanks, Sam,” Perry said, shaking his hand. “It’s been a long time. What in the King’s name are you doing here?”

“We were worried about Clark,” Lois explained. “He seemed a bit down, when he dropped me off at home to get something to eat.”

Perry and James exchanged a full conversation in a glance. Perry finally broke the silence. “Clark’s already left, honey. James and I were just about to leave.”

“What? Already?” Lois fell into a chair and then turned to Sam. “We couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes behind him.”

“More like a half-hour, Lucy,” Sam corrected.

“I guess Mayson didn’t want him around,” said James.

“Mayson kicked him out? But she loves him.” She glanced between the men for a better explanation. “He needs her.”

“Apparently, he needed her more than she needed him.”

“No!” Lois shook her head. “That can’t be right. I expected him to break up with her for her own good. I warned her that it might—” Her eyes went wide with horror. “Oh, my God, what did I do?” Her head dropped into her hands. “I did this. I came down here to stop him from making a tragic error of judgment and it was already too late. She countered with a preemptive break-up. Oh, Clark, forgive me. Forgive me.”

Perry leaned over to James and Sam and asked out of the corner of his mouth, “Any idea what she just said?”

They shook their heads.

“Did he say where he was going? I’ve got to apologize.” Lois stood up.

“Away,” replied Perry.

“What do you mean ‘away’?” Lois stammered, tears filling her eye lashes. “Don’t be nice to me, Perry. Tell me the truth, even if it hurts.”

The mayor wrapped his arm about her shoulders. “Honey, Clark needs some time alone right now. That old hound dog is checking in down at Heartbreak Hotel.”

“It’s all my fault.”

“Don’t you be a-worrying. Clark will come back to you.” Perry walked them out of earshot of the others. “Lucy, honey. Did you know he confuses you with Lois?”

“Who, Clark? Yeah.” She rolled her eyes. “I noticed that, too. I keep having to correct him.”

“That doesn’t worry you?” he asked.

Lois sighed. “Not really. He’s in love with her. I remind him of her. I’m used to it now. It’s one of two major reasons we never would have made it as a couple.”

“Wait a gosh darn minute here, Lucy,” Perry said, stopping. “You knew he was in love with Lois, yet you didn’t want him to break up with Mayson?”

“Right.”

“Want to explain that one to this old-timer?”

Lois linked her arm with his. “Mayson was his right now hope. Lois is his future hope. How can Superman be a symbol of hope if he doesn’t have any himself? Plus, you don’t break up with a woman on the same day she barely survives a bomb blast. Even if it is for her own good.”

“I’ll have to agree with you there, Lucy. But how did you know he was going to break up with her?”

“I wish I could call it psychic intuition.” Lois shook her head. “Because that is what superheroes do. They try to distance themselves from those they love if danger comes knocking at their door. Clark didn’t want Mayson getting hurt because he’s

Superman. So, he was going to break up with her."

"Sounds like you have some experience in that department, honey," said Perry with a slight nudge of his elbow. "He ever try that on you?"

"Of course—" Lois had forgotten where she was and to whom she was speaking. "Not. Of course not, Perry! Clark and I never dated. How could you ever think that?" She gave him a glare. "We're *just* friends. Always have been. Nothing more."

"O-kay." Perry nodded. "So, what was that other major reason you two never would have made it as a couple?"

"Why don't you ask Clark that question the next time you see him?" Lois answered. She had stuck her foot in her mouth enough for one day.

"Did you say that Lois's dad was your doctor? Is that wise?"

Lois looked at him with confusion. "Dr. Sam Lane is the best doctor I know; how would it be unwise?"

"Okay." Perry decided to switch gears. "What does Clark think about that?"

"Obviously, we're not privy to each other's private decisions anymore," Lois snapped.

"Okay. Okay." Perry held up his hands. They had circled back to James and Sam by this point.

James asked in a soft voice, "Where did he go after he left to take his shower this morning?"

Lucy looked down at her clunky, ugly clogs. "I'm sorry. He asked that I not tell anyone."

"How did you find him?"

Lois made a pattern on the carpet with the point of her shoe. "No one knows Clark Kent better than me," she answered. "Better than he knows himself."

"Lucy, Clark said that he'd call you when he can," James told her.

"What is that supposed to mean? 'When he can'?" She threw up her hands and shook her head.

"He's taking a week of vacation."

"What?" She dropped back into a chair. She reached out and took Sam's hand. The warmth helped, but it wasn't the comfort she sought. "But he's my best friend. He can't just leave without word." She turned to Sam. "Can he?"

"Looks like he finally cut those apron strings."

"But he needs me." She looked at the three men for confirmation. "And I need him. What am I supposed to do for a whole week without Clark?"

"You'll survive," Lois's father said with a hint of a smile.

"I'd better survive or I will kill him when he gets back." She stood up and stomped out of the waiting room.

Perry turned to Sam Lane. "Are you sure that isn't your daughter?"

Sam cracked a smile. "She does have Lois's fire, doesn't she?"

***

Clark sat at the edge of the tallest building in Metropolis. The sun was beginning to set — pink, orange, and blue danced across the sky — but he could not enjoy it. He felt empty inside. Wrapping his cape around himself, he wondered where he should go. He didn't want to go back to his apartment. There were too many fresh memories of Mayson there. He knew that Lucy would hold him and comfort him, after she berated him for not listening to her.

But he deserved to feel rotten. It was because he hadn't been fast enough that Mayson ended up in the hospital. Because he was blinded by remorse and self-centeredness, he had gone after the wrong man. Because he lost control of his temper, Jaxon had been able to guilt-trip him into his virtual reality game. And because he had been in the VR game, he hadn't been there when Mayson got out of surgery, making her feel that he cared less for her than he did for vengeance. It was his fault that Mayson no longer wanted him around. Personally, Clark didn't blame her.

Mayson said that she loved him and that she knew he cared for her, but that she needed someone who would put her first, before everything else in his life — including Superman — and she didn't think that he could ever do that. She had thought for a few minutes that morning that maybe she could teach him to do that, but he had proved to her without a shadow of a doubt that he could not. So, it was for the best if they did not continue their relationship, or deepen it, as they had discussed that morning, because then someone was truly going to get hurt and she was afraid it might be her.

Clark hadn't tried to persuade her that he could change or to give him another chance. Jaxon had been right about one thing: he was a horrible boyfriend. He simply kissed her and told her again that he was sorry and that he wished things could be different. Then he left.

He had wanted to fly, fly, fly far away. His chest ached in a way it hadn't ever ached before. And he wanted to catch Sean McCarthy and present him to Mayson with a giant red bow. The corner of his mouth hinted upwards. He still wanted to do that.

Perry and Mr. Olsen were witness to his heartache. He tried to act like nothing was wrong, but he could never pull a fast one on the Chief. He thought back over their conversation.

"You look like someone just punched you in the gut, Clark. Mayson not forgive you for disappearing on her?

Clark nodded. "She told me that she needed some space from me for a while."

"How long are you in the doghouse?"

He blew out a breath. "I believe her exact words were 'as long as Superman still flies'."

"Ouch," Mr. Olsen said with a sympathetic wince. "Harsh."

"What a day," Clark said, wiping the hair off his brow. "What I need is a vacation, a one week vacation to recover from this one day."

"Take it. You deserve it," Mr. Olsen told him. "Go and lie on the beach somewhere. Let the police earn their paychecks this week."

Perry double finger pointed at Mr. Olsen and warned, "Don't you knock my boys in blue, Jimmy. They work plenty hard."

Clark smacked himself in the head. "I can't go. I can't leave Lois—" He stopped short upon realizing his blunder. "I mean, Lucy. She'd kill me and I don't mean figuratively."

"I was going to propose that you take her with you—" Perry began.

"That's a bad idea," Mr. Olsen cut in.

Perry glared at him. "But then I thought some time alone might do our boy some good. Clear his head. Set his priorities in order."

"We can keep an eye on her for you," Mr. Olsen grinned.

"Of course we will. She'll be fine. Make her miss you for a while."

"She misses Clark Kent enough as it is," Clark replied, thinking of Kal. She always called him her Kal patch. As long as he was around, she felt that her husband wasn't so far away.

"Well, absence makes the heart grow fonder."

He shook his head. "Don't I know it."

Mr. Olsen patted him on the back as if he understood that Clark had been speaking of her fondness of someone else. Had Lois told him about Kal? That seemed unlikely.

"I'd better bolt. If I'm still here when Lucy shows up, she'll start to fuss over me again and I'll never escape. Thank you, Perry. Mr. Olsen." He shook their hands and then left.

Superman had flown around the city for a while, stopped a mugging, rescued a kitten from a tree, and helped someone with car trouble, before he ended up sitting on top of the Daily Planet building, wondering where his life had gone so wrong and where he could go to forget about Metropolis for awhile.

Clark knew where he wanted to go — he'd been dreaming about it for weeks — but it was still Sunday. Tomorrow. He would go tomorrow. Anyway, he wanted to have another discussion with Dr. Klein. He had figured out a solution to the blood sample problem. All that walking around in the VR world had given him plenty of time to think. He knew that Lois wouldn't like it, so best not to tell her about it until afterwards. And there was still the problem of Sean McCarthy. He couldn't let him walk around free while Mayson was in the hospital. Bobby Bigmouth was the perfect place to start.

***

Later, after following the good lead that Bobby had given him, Superman caught Dr. Klein just before nine the next morning in the parking lot of S.T.A.R. Labs. Dr. Klein loved his idea on a scientific level and hated it on a personal level.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Dr. Klein asked.

"No, I don't want to do this," Superman replied. "But I want to get the answer to the question we discussed last week."

"Oh, really? Have there been developments on that front?" Dr. Klein was interested.

Superman thought back to what he had lost with Mayson. "Let's just say I was tempted to lose control in a way I've never done before. I'd like some answers, should it ever…" He paused, knowing full well temptation was no longer an option for him. "… come up again."

"Oh. Answers. Do you expect anything will… *come up* in the near future?"

Superman shook his head. "But I understand your tin can reference better this week than I did last week."

"Tin cans? Oh." Dr. Klein patted him on the back. "Women have all the super powers when it comes to crushing a man's heart. I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"Well, let's run some tests then. So you have an answer, should it… *arise* another time."

After they ran a battery of tests, Dr. Klein asked, "Are you sure, Superman? We could figure out the answer without blood."

"I want it to be a thorough exam. How much blood will you need to run tests?"

"If we get a couple of syringes full then we never have to do this again. I could keep the extra blood in the vault with the Kryptonite. Personally, I feel quite uncomfortable about your proposed method."

"Line up the syringes in front of me and I'll draw the blood myself," Superman suggested.

"I saw the news reports, Superman. Will you be able to?"

Superman hesitated. "Will you assist me if I can't?"

Dr. Klein nodded.

Clark changed out of his blue suit and into his workout clothes. He pulled off his tank top so that Dr. Klein could hook up the heart rate, respiratory, and blood pressure monitors. Then Dr. Klein attached sensors to his temples and four areas of his chest and back. Dr. Klein set a medium-sized metal box on the lab table and lined up five syringes in front of it.

"Again, Clark. We do not have to do this. If something were to happen…"

Clark shook his head. "No. This is important." He stared for a moment at the closed box. "If something unexpected were to happen…" He cleared his throat. "Tell Lucy that I'm sorry."

"Lucy?"

"My research assistant," Clark explained.

"Oh."

'Sorry' hadn't been enough of a message for Mayson. If he died, Lois would need more of a message. "And that I love her."

"Oh!" Dr. Klein raised a brow. "Was she the one—"

"No!" Clark shook his head. "Our relationship is complicated. I love Lucy… like a sister." A sister-in-law. A sister-in-law he wished was *his* wife.

"I see." Dr. Klein nodded.

"If something were to happen to me—" He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. "Help her, if she comes to you." He looked him directly in the eye. "Please."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Dr. Klein asked again.

Clark stared at the box. Kal had apparently been exposed to Kryptonite on more than a couple of occasions, including once last Christmas when Lois's father had used it to cure him of a raging virus. He had been shot with a Kryptonite bullet, kissed with lipstick infused with Kryptonite, sprayed with a Kryptonite gas, jumped through a Kryptonite force field and — thanks to Tempus — surrounded by Kryptonite as a baby. Clark had gotten the inspiration for drawing blood from Lois's story about a man attempting to graft his head onto Kal's body. That crazy doctor had used Kryptonite to weaken Kal enough for surgery. If Kryptonite could weaken Kal enough for surgery, it should easily weaken Clark enough to draw blood. He took a deep breath.

"I'm ready, Dr. Klein. Open the box."

The brightness of the green rock hurt Clark's eyes. He looked away and felt the tightness in his chest and the weakness in his knees. He gripped the edge of the lab table. "How long, doctor?"

"Only fifteen seconds."

Clark grimaced. Not enough time. The knives had started to pierce his body, he was sweating in a way he had only ever done with Kryptonite before. He tried to keep himself upright. He tried deep, calming breaths, but his throat was so sore. It hurt to breath. "Time."

"Thirty seconds."

Not enough time. One of the knives stabbed him through the gut, making him double over. He pulled himself upright again. He focused on Dr. Klein. He couldn't wait any longer. "Try the first needle." Clark lay out his arm and Dr. Klein tried to draw blood. The needle pricked his skin and felt like sword stabbing him in the gut, but then the needle broke.

"We need more time, Clark. I'm sorry." Dr. Klein set the broken needle next to the others. He then grabbed a stool for Clark to sit on. "I really think you should lie down."

"Thank you," he said, trying to control the shaking. "I'll be fine." He felt better sitting down. Well, not better, but less likely to pass out.

Finally, after two minutes they were able to get a needle into Clark's arm and keep it there long enough to draw blood. Two vials of rich maroon good stuff. Clark had never felt so weak, had never felt such dizziness. Dr. Klein put a cotton ball over the needle and pulled it out. He then taped down the cotton ball with a band-aid.

Clark reached over with his free arm and closed the box. He felt better instantly. The ringing in his ears stopped and his eyes no longer hurt. But he felt weak and exhausted like never before. Then again, he hadn't slept. Dr. Klein unhooked the sensors from his body and then Clark fell to the floor. He pulled himself back up to the stool and sat down. The room seemed quieter than usual and he realized it was because he couldn't hear the scientists in the other labs.

Then he heard something strange. It sounded like the soft cracking of glass. He looked over at the two vials of blood that had been drawn and he realized that the first vial was cracking. "Dr. Klein, do you have any metal vials?" he asked.

"Sure. Why?" asked the scientist.

At that moment the first vial popped, as if it had been holding pressurized gas that had been overfilled. It was enough of a pop to spray blood and glass fragments all over the table. Dr. Klein grabbed the second vial and quickly poured the contents into a larger metal vial, then capped it. Meanwhile, Clark blew his freezing breath over the spilled blood. He then was able to pick up the entirety of the blood at once.

"Do you have a micro strainer?" Clark asked.

Dr. Klein found one, handing it to him.

Clark reached for his glasses only to remember that he no longer had glasses. That was a problem — he couldn't be Clark Kent without his glasses. What happened to his spare pair? Oh, yeah, Lana sat on them back in January. He'd been too busy to replace them.

He focused on the blood-icicle. Nothing happened. Not good. Clark took a deep breath and tried again. Nothing. *Come on, body, you can do this*, he told himself. He closed his eyes and thought of the hottest substance he could think of: lava. Opening his eyes, he focused again on the blood. A spark. A drip. Yes! It was working. Slowly, Clark melted the blood again and strained out the glass.

The second metal vial was capped. Clark found a heat-proof plate and poured onto it the glass fragments from the broken first vial, the second glass vial and the broken needles, and the needle that had worked. Using his heat vision to melt the metal and glass, he burned up whatever remnants of blood had been there.

"Did I get it all?" Clark asked, looking around the lab table.

"I believe so," said Dr. Klein, picking up the two metal vials of blood and the box of Kryptonite. "I'll just return these to the vault."

"And I'll see you next week," said Clark, picking up his shirt. "I'm heading out on vacation."

"Sounds nice." The scientist smiled.

Clark stumbled after him. "Maybe I should take a few minutes to rest."

"Lie down in my office, Clark. I wouldn't want you flying in that condition. Plus, there is one more test we need to conduct."

"Test? What kind of test?" Clark asked.

Dr. Klein raised his full arms. "Go lie down, Clark. We'll discuss this when I return."

When Clark opened his eyes, two hours had passed. He stretched and the band-aid with cotton ball burst off his arm. Catching it in mid-air, Clark smiled and pocketed it. Just enough blood for Lois's dad to make a comparison. He quickly changed back into the blue suit and entered Dr. Klein's lab.

"Superman! You're finally awake. Sorry, I didn't want to disturb you."

"That's all right, Dr. Klein. I had a long night and didn't get any sleep. Thank you for the loan of your couch."

"Anytime," the researcher said.

"You mentioned something about one last test for me, before I left?" Superman asked.

"Yes. Yes." Klein put an arm around Superman and walked him back into the hall. "I have it set up for you at that room down at the end of the hall."

"Okay." Superman waited for further instructions.

"It's pretty self-explanatory." Dr. Klein nodded, clapping him on the back.

"What is?" Superman asked. "What will I find in that room?"

"Magazines. And a cup."

"And what kind of test is that, exactly?" Superman was confused again.

Dr. Klein pressed his lips together. "We're miscommunicating again, aren't we?"

Superman just looked blankly at him.

Dr. Klein lowered his voice. "I need to test your swimmers."

"My… oh. *Those* swimmers." He nodded, glancing between the room and Dr. Klein.

"Are you up for this?"

No, not really. Superman swallowed uncomfortably. "Of course." And he walked down the hall. What *wouldn't* he do for Lois Lane?

***

It was early afternoon by the time Clark finished at S.T.A.R. Labs. So much for an early start on his vacation. He only had one more stop before heading on his way. He flew past the Daily Planet and saw Lois working at her desk. Good girl. He thought she might have glanced up when he flew past, but he was just a blur outside. He blew open the windows of her apartment, scaring Sam, who was cutting carrot sticks in the kitchen.

"Clark Kent! You're going to be the death of me one of these days," Sam yelled, carrying the knife with him as he entered the living room. "I could have cut my thumb off. Next time, call first before you decide to blow in. Most civilized people knock."

Superman stood there with his arms crossed. "I apologize. You are completely correct. I didn't see you in the kitchen window when I flew past; I'll remember my manners next time."

"Thank you." Sam stood there for half a minute staring at him. "What do you want? Lucy's at work."

"I know. I came to see you."

"Me?" Sam's expression softened, then became excited. "Do you have news on Lois?"

Superman shook his head. "But I do have something else you requested." He held out the cotton ball.

Sam dropped the knife on the coffee table, took the cotton ball and examined it. "What the…? Clark, this has blood on it."

"Yes."

"Do I want to know whose blood it is?" Sam inquired warily.

"Mine."

Sam's eyes widened. "But you are… how? Are you okay? Should I call Lucy?"

"I'm okay. Please, don't tell Lucy. It would only make her more anxious."

"More? The woman is on pregnancy hormones overdrive. It took the three of us to calm her after you ditched her at the hospital yesterday." Sam retrieved a plastic sandwich bag to hold the cotton ball.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I care about Lucy a great deal, which is why I told her to stay home. I couldn't be around her after Mayson…" He took a deep breath. "I take it that you've heard."

Sam nodded, sitting down on the sofa. "You left word with the head gossips of the *Daily Planet*."

Clark huffed in annoyance, lifting up his cape and sitting down on the couch opposite Sam.

"Lucy thought you were going to break up with Mayson. That's why she insisted on us going over there. She wanted to stop you."

"I was going to break up with her, which is why it hurts so much that she rejected me first."

"Run that by me again?" Sam asked.

"I can't handle the responsibility of loving someone as fragile as a human woman. Mayson drove me crazy in ways I had never felt before; I almost lost total control with her.

"Clark," Sam said, leaning forward. "That's how women are supposed to make men feel; why do you think we keep chasing after them? That feeling, that adrenaline rush, it's like a drug. We keep wanting more and more."

"I am not most men. I am not someone who should ever lose control."

Sam shook his head with a sad smile. "You're missing out on some of life's most wonderful feelings."

"Sam, when Mayson got hurt, I could no longer control my anger. My rage took over and I almost hurt an innocent man. And the guilt I feel over not being able to keep her from harm… I never want to feel this way again, it's like someone stabbed my heart. It hurts — physically hurts — right here." He tapped the center of his chest. "These are not wonderful emotions. I can't allow myself to ever get close to another woman again; I'm not strong enough to handle the consequences. I care too much for her to continue to date her, because if she or any other woman I cared about ever got hurt, really hurt, because of me…" He took

a deep breath, unable to finish that thought.

"Clark, when Ellen — Lois's mom — and I were first dating, our car got rear-ended, just bumped really, but Ellen hit her head against her door. When I saw the blood, my vision went red. I got out of the car and punched the fellow in the nose for hurting the woman I loved. Physiologically, our bodies are made to protect the women we love and any possible offspring that they might be carrying. Some say that's why our blood is red: like a bullfighter's cape, it attracts our attention to what's important."

Superman thought about this for a moment. "So, you're saying that what I felt with Mayson was normal?"

"Perfectly normal," Sam told him.

"But I'm not normal. I'm not most men. I am someone who should never lose control in any way, shape, or fashion." Superman looked down, then over at Sam. "If I punched a man in the nose for hurting Lois, I could quite easily kill him."

"You meant Mayson?" Sam asked.

"Right. Of course. *Mayson*." Superman stood up and moved closer to the window. "I've never even met my Lois."

"*Your* Lois? Your *Lois*?" Sam stood up, picked up the knife, and charged him. Superman easily stepped out of his way.

"Anyway, there is the blood sample to compare to Lucy's. I'll be on my way now, Sam. See you in a week." Superman shot him an embarrassed grin, dived out the living room window, and flew out of sight.

"Stay away from my daughter!" Sam yelled, shaking his fist. "You tights-wearing freak!"

***

Superman, a small valise in hand, landed in a group of trees just outside of Smallville. Clark emerged from the woods and started to hike into town. People were already bundled up for the fall. The corn had been picked and the autumn winds had started to blow. He took a deep breath. Nothing like fresh county air. It was nice to be home.

He walked into the Smallville County Bank. His parents, the Kents, had paid the mortgage on the farm every month like clockwork. Ownership must have returned to the bank after they died. The bank manager would know who bought it after the inevitable foreclosure, and who the current owners were. He stopped at the first desk.

A chunky, curly-haired woman glanced up, then jumped to her feet. "Clark? Clark Kent?" She held out her hand. "I don't know if you remember me. Mitzi Gannor. Well, Mitzi Cummings then. I was a sophomore when you were a senior. Probably not. Wow! What are you doing in town?"

So much for subtle. The bank had gone quiet and everyone was staring at him. He shook her hand. "Just visiting. Is Mr. Robertson still manager of the bank?"

"Oh, gosh, no, Clark. He retired some years back and took Mrs. Robertson to Florida."

"Oh." So much for easy.

"Mr. Wilkenson is bank manager, now."

As Mitzi spoke these words, a plump, balding, grey-haired man walked out of the glass-enclosed office. He held out his hand. "Clark Kent! What an honor it is to have you back in Smallville. Josh Wilkenson. I knew your parents well."

Clark shook his hand. "You did?"

"Sure did. I'm the one who helped Martha and Jonathan refinance their last loan. Would you like to come into my office?"

"That would be great." He turned to Mitzi. "Thank you."

"Oh, no. Thank you. Scott, my son, is going to be thrilled that you're back in town." She held up a photo of her son dressed as Superman.

Clark laughed. "Tell him I'm just visiting. And not to fly off any roofs."

"Oh, no. He won't do that again." She nodded seriously.

He stared at her for a moment and then followed Mr. Wilkenson into his office.

Clark left the office a few minutes later. Mr. Wilkenson referred him to the Kent's family attorney. Clark hadn't known that his parents had a lawyer or had even drawn up wills. But then again, they were very meticulous people; it only made sense that they had wills. He waved at Mitzi and headed back to Main Street.

Word had spread that Clark Kent was back in town. People were coming to gawk at him from store windows. He guessed that the old saying was true: one really couldn't go home again. He glanced down at the address in his hand and turned into a nondescript entrance that led to the upstairs office of Richard Colborgh, Esquire. He knocked on the glass door and heard a bit of shuffling inside.

A lanky, casually dressed man came to the door. "Clark Kent, at last," he said, ushering him into the room. The office itself was also nondescript, a stereotypical lawyer's office with a wood desk and bookshelves of law books. "I was wondering if I would need to have some young whippersnapper from the city hunt you down before I retired. But now you're here." He smiled.

"Mr. Colborgh, I presume," Clark asked, shaking his hand.

"Sorry, yes. Everyone knows who you are. People must forget to introduce themselves all the time."

Clark nodded. "Mr. Wilkenson from the bank said that you might know who the current owner is of my parents' farm."

"Of course. Of course. The lands were sold off after your folks passed. Sad. Sad day." Mr. Colborgh shook his head as he sat down at his desk. "The Irigs bought everything with the exception of the house and the five acres surrounding it."

Clark leaned forward. "Excuse me?"

"The house and the surrounding acres were put into trust with the money from the life insurance policies the Kents purchased nine years earlier." Mr. Colborgh reached into a cabinet behind him and removed a file.

"My parents had life insurance policies?" This surprised Clark. They had never told him. Nobody had told him.

"Small ones. With the money earned from the sale of the lands and those policies, the trustee was able to pay off the bank and purchase the house and the surrounding acres free and clear. The remaining funds were used to pay the taxes on the land these past twenty years." He opened the file.

"Wow." His parents were more forward-thinking than he had ever known. "Who was the beneficiary of the trust?"

Mr. Colborgh looked at him with shock. "Why, you are, of course." He placed his finger on a paper in the file and adjusted his reading glasses. "'*All proceeds of the estate will be held in the Kent Family Trust until Clark Kent reaches the age of eighteen, at which time, the property and funds in said Trust will pass to him.*' Been waiting quite a long time for you to come and sign all the necessary paperwork, my boy."

"Me? My parents left me the house?" Clark fell against the back of his seat. "I never knew. No one ever told me. I thought they left me with nothing." He looked up at the lawyer, who seemed to be getting a nasty look on his face.

"Those foster care social workers! I told them about the trust. They were supposed to tell you." The man came slowly around the desk and patted him on the arm. "I'm sorry, Clark. I thought you were informed about your parents' will. But when you left town after graduation, I figured you weren't interested in settling down in Smallville. I continued to oversee the trust in case you ever changed your mind." He smiled. "And here you are. Glad you came now, Clark. Don't know if I could have held off retirement any longer. The wife, you know."

"The house is mine? I have a home?" He was still in shock. His parents had thought about him, provided for his future. He had thought that they couldn't afford to make such plans, poor farmers that they were. And the life insurance policies had been

purchased nine years before their deaths, right after they found him. His heart swelled with love. So deep was he in his thoughts, he almost forgot to listen to the lawyer.

"I go out and check on the place from time to time. Abandoned houses are popular with the teenage rock-throwing crowd. I've had to replace a few windows over the years. But other than that, the house is pretty much the same as when you moved out. The furniture is still there, although it could use some cleaning."

Clark smiled. "I can handle that. Any chance I can get the phone and power turned on this week?"

"Already on, my boy," Mr. Colborgh said, returning to his side of the desk. "Had to turn it on back in the spring, when you came out of the closet, so to speak. Needed to add an alarm system. Hope you don't mind." He looked in the file and flipped a few pages. He took a piece of note paper and jotted down some information. "We've had a few more gawkers in town since your big news hit the papers. Even some idiot who wanted to buy the old house and turn it into a museum. Your folks wouldn't have liked that." He passed the note paper to Clark. "Here's the phone number — unlisted, of course. Oh, wait." He pulled the paper back and wrote another number on it. "And the pass code for the alarm. I used your mother's birth date; feel free to change it to something a little more private. The alarm password, should the alarm company call, is Lana Lang. Figured nobody would think you'd use that name after you two broke up in the spring."

Clark looked at the paper in his hand and reached over to shake Mr. Colborgh's hand again. "Thank you, Mr. Colborgh. You don't know how much this means to me, to have a place of my own."

"Technically, it's still owned by the trust, but I'll start filing the proper paperwork and if you come back—" He thought for a moment. "— Wednesday, I'll have it ready for you to sign."

"I'll be here." Clark pressed his lips together with satisfaction. "You have gone above and beyond the call of duty, Mr. Colborgh. Thank you. If I can ever assist you with anything, anything at all, please, feel free to contact me."

Mr. Colborgh seemed a little taken aback by this offer. "It's nothing, Clark. Just doing my job. Your parents deserved no less."

Clark picked up his bag and headed for the door.

"Clark?"

He turned back to see the old man holding up a set of keys. "You might need these."

"Thank you, Mr. Colborgh. See you Wednesday." Clark grinned and pocketed the keys. He wanted nothing more than to jump into the air and fly straight to his home. Home — he liked the sound of that. But first he needed to stop by the store and pick up some groceries and cleaning supplies. Plus, it was probably best if he wasn't seen flying around town.

As he stepped back onto Main Street, he happened to glance across the street at Smallville Optical. Another smile came to his lips. Things were definitely starting to look up. He jogged across the street and was easily able to procure a same-day appointment with the optometrist. As he waited for the doctor, he wandered around the store looking at the different frames. Maybe it was time for a change. He wondered what Lois would think when he returned home with a new look. He grinned. She would hate it.

***

"Where is he?"

Lois looked up from her computer screen as Jaxon barreled down on her. "Where's who?"

Jaxon glared at her. "You know who. Your big bully of a boyfriend, that's whom!"

The bullpen quieted down as all eyes focused on them.

"If you had done your job as researcher, you'd know I don't have a boyfriend, Jaxon. And if I did, I certainly wouldn't be talking to you about him." She turned back to her computer screen.

"Where is he, Lucy?" he growled.

"I don't know, Jaxon. Have you checked Virtual World? He seemed to have enjoyed visiting there so very much." Her sarcasm was not lost on him.

"He ruined my computer."

"Serves you right for kidnapping him," she said, not glancing away from her screen.

"He heat-blasted my sprinkler system."

Her eyes moved up from her screen to meet his as her voice lowered to a snarl. "Do you have any proof of that accusation?"

"I know it was him."

"Ah." She focused back on her screen. "I didn't realize were psychic, Jaxon." Then she looked directly at him. "Do you know what I'm thinking?"

He took a step back. "I don't have to be psychic to know what you're thinking."

"Good."

"Have you seen this?" he said, tossing a photo of Sean McCarthy tied up with red computer cord.

A smile slipped onto her mouth. *Good going, Clark.* "So." She tossed the photo back across her desk.

"That's the exact same type of cord that was stolen from my computer lab last night."

"Shall I contact Detective Henderson for you? I bet he'd love to know a connection that ties you to Sean McCarthy and Mayson Drake's car bombing." She picked up her phone. "Or should I just buzz Barry with your hypothesis?"

"I had nothing to do with Mayson's car bombing."

Lucy glanced at the photo. "Now you do."

Jaxon leaned over at her. "He ruined millions of dollars worth of computer equipment."

She set down the telephone receiver. "I'm sure you were insured, Jaxon. And, again, do you have any proof that anyone in particular was involved? Was anyone caught breaking in on your security tape?"

"You know there wasn't."

She looked up at him. "So, I guess it's just your word against his."

"Who else could it have been?" he accused.

James walked by her desk at that moment and gave Jaxon a nasty look. "Is he bothering you, Lucy?"

She smiled at her boss. "Actually, he is, Mr. Olsen. I'm finding it hard to concentrate."

"Jaxon."

Jaxon held up his hands. "I'm going. I'm going." He stomped back to his desk.

Lucy's smile grew larger. "Thank you."

"What was that all about?" James asked.

She handed him the photo Jaxon had left on her desk.

"Who's that?"

"Sean McCarthy."

"I'm sorry?"

"The man who planted the bomb under Mayson's car." She lowered her voice. "Barry heard that he was found tied up with a big red bow in Henderson's office this morning. Attached was a card reading *To: Metro PD, From: A Friend*. Obviously, someone on the police force took a picture."

"Do we have a vigilante in our midst?" James asked, taking a closer look at the photo.

"Apparently. Good thing Clark's away on vacation."

"Good thing." He grinned. "What was Jaxon so sour about?"

"Oh, it seems that someone broke into his computer lab and stole some red computer cord."

James looked at her. "Like this cord?"

"Uh-huh."

"And he thought it might have had something to do with you?"

Lois smiled demurely. "He thought I might know something about it."

"And do you?" James raised a brow. "Does this have something to do with what you couldn't tell me yesterday?"

"I know as much as he does, James. Just speculation and guesswork. No cold hard facts." She winked.

James stared at her for a moment, trying to read between the lines. "Have you heard from Clark?"

"Not yet." She turned back to her computer screen. "Have you ever heard of a company called L.I., Ltd.?"

"No." He pulled up a chair and sat down next to her. "Should I have?"

"Well, I keep coming across it. It was where Dr. Carlton, the Johnson brothers, and a couple of others we've come across recently got their funding. It seems to be based out of Singapore."

"A shell corporation?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "It's got fingers in a lot of pies. Oil, gas, military contracts, computer software, drug companies, media outlets — including MNN — the space program, and even scientific laboratories. It has lots of money and it's throwing it around." She leaned closer to James. "This is a guess — a big guess — but it feels a lot like Lex Luthor. These are the types of companies he'd be interested in."

"Really?"

"If I gave you a list of companies from my L.I., Ltd. list, could you cross-reference them with the data you collected?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

Olsen grinned. "You don't have to look at me like that to get my help."

"Thank you." She pulled a folder out of her pile and tossed it to him.

"All these?" he gasped. "Okay. Now I understand the eyelash-batting."

Lois was already concentrating on her screen once more. "I have no idea what you're referring to."

James stood up and she stopped him with a slight touch to his arm.

"That was a good story about Mayson's bombing you wrote for the evening edition."

"Now you're just being nice," he said, but his eyes lit up at her praise.

"I still think you need to get a hobby. Have you thought any more about photography?"

"Only if you promise to model for me sometime," James said, giving her that same puppy dog look Jimmy always gave her whenever he wanted something. How could she resist?

"I see no problem with you taking pictures of your friends." She smiled, turning away. "As long as you don't run them in your paper."

"That's a promise." He laughed, then held up the folder. "I'll let you know what I find out."

***

Clark walked up to the front porch with the last bag of groceries and waved goodbye to Mitzi and Scott. He had bumped into them at the grocery store and she not only offered him a lift home, but dinner later in the week. Maybe it was possible to come home again after all.

He unlocked the door and typed his mother's birth date in the security pad. He was glad he had not broken in the night before, as he had been tempted to. That would have been a rude awakening. He carried the bags into the kitchen and put the perishables into the fridge. Although it hadn't been used in twenty years, the fridge was clean and still worked — for now. He'd have to replace it soon. There was a lot of dust in the house, although he wasn't sure it was twenty years worth. He suspected that Mr. Colborgh had hired someone to clean the house several times since Clark had moved out.

Clark moved from room to room, picking up photos and other odds and ends that reminded him of his parents. There was a basket next to his mom's chair in the living room, with her knitting still in it. He picked up the yarn and gently blew off the dust. It was a small pair of blue, yellow, and red mittens. He swallowed. She must have been working on them for him. She had always made him a new set of mittens for Christmas every year.

He went into his father's office/shop. His father had kept a photo of Clark and himself on the desk. Clark sat down in the chair. That had been from their flyfishing trip that last summer. That had been a great trip — he couldn't help the smile that appeared as he thought of him and his dad on the river. His dad had been so proud of the fish Clark had caught. He still missed his parents every day.

This trip down memory lane was going to be harder on him than he thought.

Clark got up from the desk and went up to the bedrooms. He had been forced to leave everything but a suitcase of clothes and a photo behind when he went into foster care. His room looked almost the same as when he had left it. His baseball mitt still sat on his bookshelf with his old battered copy of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. He smiled. Maybe he should ask to have it autographed next time Wells was in town. Should the man ever come back.

The idea of Lois leaving and going back to Kal with the baby made Clark's chest tighten. He wondered how Lois was holding up, but he didn't really feel like talking with her on the phone. He had an attraction to Lois which he could fight a lot easier if he didn't talk to her or see her. When he heard her voice, he was drawn to her like a magnet. He sat down on his old bed and sent up a cloud of dust.

Clark had been wondering earlier, while speaking to Sam, if it was possible for a man to have hormonal changes when someone close to him was pregnant. Not with just any baby, but his baby. Not that Lois was pregnant with *his* baby, technically, but genetically he and Kal were a match. It was a crazy theory, he knew, but he'd love to have a scientific explanation for his odd behavior. If his hormones had changed, it could explain why it was difficult for him to stay away.

He had spent the night with Lois — well, in her room — and then she had shared the baby's kick with him. He smiled; that was truly amazing. He had carried her in his arms to Paris and back. They had spent close personal time together and it had been wonderful. Friends wonderful, not romantic wonderful. He considered if that was why he had been so emotional, later, when he spoke to Mayson. Of course, it might have something to do with that whole Man - Woman biological conundrum that Sam suggested. But it felt as if Lois were becoming his own version of Red Kryptonite.

From what Lois had told him, Red Kryptonite affected Superman's emotions, intensified them. That was one of the reasons he had agreed so readily to Mr. Olsen's suggestion of the vacation. He wanted to know if space and time away from Lois would clear his head, lessen the draw. What he didn't know was whether or not he'd be able to stay away for an entire week. By the time he returned to Metropolis, it would almost be October.

Clark jumped off his old bed and ran downstairs so fast that he left a cloud of dust in his wake. In his father's office he found a calendar. Drat. The dates were all from 1976.

"Let's see," he murmured, picking up a pencil. "If I adjusted the calendar to show that Saturday was the autumn equinox—" He finished filling in the dates. Yep. Lois's birthday was on Wednesday. And he'd miss it if he stayed in Smallville.

He had to stay in Smallville to meet with Mr. Colborgh on

Wednesday. This was one of those times when his super abilities would allow him to do everything he wanted to do. He smiled, truly happy for the first time all day.

Leaning back in his father's chair, he laced his fingers behind his head. Now, what would be the perfect gift for the woman who had everything — in another dimension?

***

The next morning at breakfast, Sam was still in a grouchy mood. He banged around pots and pans in an attempt to make scrambled eggs.

Lois sat down at the breakfast bar. "Something on your mind, Daddy?"

"Have you ever heard something that confirmed what you already knew was true — inevitable really — but to hear the words spoken…" He slammed a drawer and caught his finger. He stuck it in his mouth.

Lois remembered the day that her Clark had admitted he was Superman and the day she found out she was pregnant. "Yes."

"Really? I thought that it was only me." Sam pulled the eggs out of the fridge.

"What did you hear?" Lois's interest was piqued.

Sam shook his head as if it was inconsequential. "Something that Clark said."

Lois jumped up. "You've spoken with Clark?"

He winced. "He stopped by, yesterday afternoon, while you were at work."

"And you didn't tell me, Daddy?" She reached over and slugged him in the arm, before sitting back down. "How is he?"

"Confused. And extremely naïve about love." He rubbed his arm.

This stunned her. "He talked to you about *Mayson*?"

"What? This surprises you?" Sam said sourly. "Clark and I have become close over the past few months. I'm like a mentor with life experience."

"You?"

He shrugged off her skepticism. "I have some experience with women."

"Lois's mom left you when she was — what, nine? — and you have yet to remarry." Lois then thought about her father and his multitudes of sins and raised her hands. "Actually, strike that. You are a good man and a great dad. I'm sure you will find love again."

"Thank you, sweetie. I appreciate a load of horse dung like that at any time," Sam replied. "I'm an okay man and a horrible father, the damage for which I am trying to restore with you. I'm too old for love."

Lois decided to let that information hang. "So, what did Clark say to set your teeth on edge?"

"He called my daughter '*his* Lois.' Like she belonged to him."

"Ah." Lois nodded.

"What's this understanding 'ah' sound? You've heard him say this before?" he demanded.

"It's a good sign." Maybe Clark hadn't given up on the concept of love. She smiled with some hope. "And yes, once in a blue moon, it slips out when he least expects it." She reached out to comfort Sam. "It's nothing personal… or even actually possessive. It's his way to differentiate between us in his mind. Between me and her."

Sam sat down next to Lois. "I haven't gotten her back yet and already I'm afraid that I'm losing her to a man who walks around in tights."

Lois laughed. Sam's distaste for Clark's choice in clothing and ties had always been contentious. "That's just the father in you worried about his little girl. Think about this logically."

"Logically?"

"What is Lois like? Anything like me?" Lois inquired.

He nodded his head while rolling his eyes. "Headstrong. Determined. Independent. Stubborn. Pushy."

Lois pinched her lips together. "Let's not go overboard with the love, here."

"Sorry." He smiled, eyes twinkling. "Oh! I forgot arrogant."

"Does that sound like someone who will fall in love at first sight with a good, kind-hearted man, like Clark Kent?"

"Are you saying that you didn't fall in love at first sight with Kal?" Sam asked hopefully.

"God, no! I fought it tooth and nail. I didn't realize how I felt about him until I was walking down the aisle to marry someone else. Then I was bound and determined to force Kal into making the first move."

"Did he?"

"Eventually. An inch a month. I didn't know about his secret identity, so there was the whole confusion about him lying to me all the time. What I'm trying to say is that Lois is a fighter, like me. She won't fall for Clark overnight, if for no other reason than everyone will be rooting for him." She patted Sam on the back. "You've got plenty of time."

He took a deep breath and released it. "Thanks, sweetie. That's a load off my mind."

Lois took a sip of her orange juice. "Did Clark mention when he would call?" She was starting to go through withdrawal. Her trial back home wasn't going well. That slimy District Attorney actually called Superman to the stand and then treated him as a hostile witness. She bet that Clark forgot she was on trial for murder back in her dimension and she needed her Kal-patch.

Sam shook his head.

Lois sighed. She'd just have to wait and see.

***

About mid-morning, long after the morning meeting, Lois sat at her desk, staring off into space. Actually, she was staring at Clark's desk, wondering where he was and if he was okay. Jaxon was still giving her surly looks from across the bullpen. So much for his crush, but at least she knew that Clark wasn't stuck in the virtual world again.

Her eyelids began to droop and suddenly she was flying through the air with Clark. Her Clark. He took her above the clouds, as he had done on the first day he admitted who he was and he kissed her with his cape wrapped around her to keep her warm.

Wake up, Lois! You're beginning to drool.

Lois jumped awake and glanced around, wiping her mouth. Had anyone noticed her dozing? Anyone other than Clark? She smiled. She'd know his voice anywhere. There sitting on her desk was a pain au chocolat that hadn't been there before. And a bouquet of flowers. Taking a bite of the pastry, she then looked at the card. The note was written in his handwriting.

Sorry. Needed some air to clear my head.

How about dinner tomorrow night? Your choice.

C.K.

Lois lifted up the flowers and took a whiff. He hadn't forgotten.

***

"All right," said Mr. Colborgh, handing Clark another set of papers. "These are the last ones, then the assets in the trust will be yours."

Had he been human, Clark would have been reading these legal papers and signing his name for two hours. Speed reading cut that down to a fraction, and if he hadn't been impervious, he'd surely have a hand cramp from the repeated signing of his name.

Mr. Colborgh opened his bottom desk drawer and removed a small box. "One last thing."

Clark signed his name one last time and handed the papers back to him, curious.

"Sherriff Fenster gave these to me to hold for you." Mr. Colborgh hesitated and then pushed the box across the table to Clark.

Clark opened the box. Inside were his mom's engagement ring and parents' wedding rings. He closed the box. "They should have been buried with these."

"I'm sorry, Clark, but your parents were cremated per the instructions in their wills."

"Oh? But I went to their funeral."

Mr. Colborgh swallowed. "They were too badly burned Clark. The coffins were just for show at the funeral. We buried them in urns. I'm sorry."

Clark nodded and pocketed the box. "Thank you for letting me know."

"How's the house coming along?" Mr. Colborgh asked, purposely changing the subject.

"Slowly. I got all the dust out yesterday." Clark chuckled. "For a second, I thought I caused a tornado. Every time I think I'm used to being back at the old house, I come across something of my mom's or dad's and it's like I'm ten again, waiting for them to return from the market." He stood up and held out his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Colborgh. I appreciate all your help and discretion."

"My pleasure, son. It's a great pleasure to have you back in Smallville. I know your parents would be proud of you."

Clark smiled and for a split second he pictured his parents standing next to Mr. Colborgh, gazing at him with pride. He nodded and left the office. He was glad he'd made that date with Lois. He could use some laughter.

***

At Clark's knock, Sam opened the door to apartment 501. Clark smiled, hoping that he had forgiven him for the other day when the man had come after him with a knife.

"Finally," groaned Sam in relief.

Uh-oh. Clark came inside. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. She won't talk to me. She was fine last night, talking about the flowers you sent. Then this morning, she wouldn't get out of bed. Said there wasn't a point, that her life was over. And you didn't let us know how to contact you."

Clark was at her bedroom door an instant later. He knocked, but there was no answer. Lois was sitting in bed, her head lying against bent knees, and tissues covering the comforter. She glanced up when he entered, her eyes red and puffy. "Clark! I'm guilty."

"Guilty? Of what?" he asked, sitting down on the bed next to her.

She wrapped her arms around him. "Of murder, you idiot."

"Oh. The trial."

"Yes, the trial. I can never go home, Clark. They want to execute me." She started to cry again.

"Kal will never let that happen and you know it."

She gasped between sobs. "Oh, I know it all right." She sniffled. "He broke me out of jail. 'Mad Dog Lane' is on the lam. He risked everything he believes in for me. The D.A. suspects that Superman helped me escape. Everything is all wrong."

"Mad Dog?" Clark pressed his lips together so that he wouldn't laugh. "*You?*" He couldn't hold the laughter in any longer.

"Yes, me!" She threw a pillow at him.

He threw it back. "Out of bed, sourpuss."

She buried herself under the covers. "What's the point?"

"We are going out to dinner. To celebrate your freedom, Mad Dog," Clark said, throwing off the covers. "Anything you want."

She crawled over the bed away from him. "No!"

"Go take a shower. No more moping and self-pity for you."

"No!" Lois hid herself on the other side of the bed. "My life's over."

"What do you want to eat? Anywhere in the world."

"Anywhere?" Her eyes peered over the edge of the bed. "Anything I want?"

"Yep." Clark leaned across the bed towards her. "Do you feel like dressing up?" he coaxed.

"No!" She ducked back down on the other side of the bed.

He crossed his arms and waited.

"I want a cheeseburger with the works. And a chocolate milkshake made with real ice cream," she finally admitted.

"Sounds like you'll get indigestion, but if that's what you want, so be it. Any diner in particular?"

Lois's eyes peered over the edge of the bed again. "There's a great little hamburger joint I know in Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia?" He thought for a minute. "I think it's raining in Philly right now. Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"You go and shower, while I go change into something less formal."

Lois seemed to notice his suit for the first time. "You look nice, Clark. Any special occasion?"

He aimed a pillow at her. "I always dress up when Mad Dog breaks out of prison," he laughed and stepped out of the room.

A pillow followed him out into the hall.

"How did you do that?" Sam asked bewildered. "In two minutes, she went from night to day."

Clark pointed at Sam. "I blame you."

"What did I do?"

Clark went to the desk and lifted up Lois's page-a-day calendar.

Sam blanched as his eyes went wide. "I forgot."

Clark set down the calendar. "She wants to go out for hamburgers. I have to go change."

"She doesn't want to go someplace nice?" Sam was surprised.

"When you've been stuck playing a vegetarian for months…" Clark shrugged. Well, a public vegetarian. He and Sam ensured that she got plenty of protein at home.

"Right." Sam nodded. "Thanks, Clark. You always know what to say to her. Sorry about the other day. I overreacted."

Clark laughed. "Good thing I have super speed. Just one thing, though."

"What's that?"

"Please, don't call me 'tights-wearing-freak' anymore." Clark grimaced.

"I probably shouldn't." Sam grinned. "It might catch on."

Clark groaned. "I hope not." He stepped over to the windows and popped them open. A minute later, he was back in jeans and a t-shirt.

***

Clark shook his head as he watched Lois polish off her hamburger. They were at a hamburger stand on the beach in Key West, watching the sun set.

"I *am* eating for two," she mumbled between bites.

"It looks like you're eating for four. I'm sorry about Philadelphia."

"You were right. I didn't feel up to a lightning strike tonight. My life sucks enough as it is." She wiped her mouth with a napkin. "And this is a much nicer view." She looked out over the ocean and exhaled. Turning back to Clark, she noticed his eyes on her.

"You have a pretty good life, Lois."

She held up her hand. "No. Tonight, I'm just plain Lucy. No history. No future. Just me."

"All right." He smiled, taking a sip of his iced tea.

Lois liked this smile. It was one that was distinctly *this* Clark. It didn't remind her of her husband. She spooned a chunk of ice cream from her shake into her mouth. The more time she spent in

this dimension, the less the two Clarks seemed like the same man. “So, where did you go on your vacation?”

He held up his hand and smiled. “Tonight, I’m just plain Clark. No history. No future. Just me.”

“Ha-ha. Seriously, where did you go?” She took another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth. She wasn’t going to let him go without telling her.

His smile turned mysterious. “I had some things to work out for myself.”

“I know,” she whispered, guilt tugging at her heart. “I’m sorry about Mayson, Clark.” She truly was. It seemed like this breakup hurt him more than the one with Lana. Of course, at *that* time Clark had become infatuated with her, cushioning the blow somewhat.

“Me, too,” he admitted.

“No. I mean, I’m sorry I stuck my big fat nose into your relationship. It’s my fault she broke up with you.” She took another sip of her shake. “Well, she’s an idiot, but it’s still my fault.”

He raised a brow. “She’s *not* an idiot, Lucy. And it’s not your fault, it’s mine. Jaxon’s right. I’m a horrible boyfriend.”

A growl emerged from deep within her. “Is that what that slug was up to in the VR?” She took hold of Clark’s hand. “Don’t listen to him, Clark. If you are anything like Kal — and I know that you are — you’ll be the best boyfriend in the world. You are romantic, kind, generous, patient…” She shot him a silly grin. “And you don’t mind a little insanity in your friends.”

“Speaking of Kal,” Clark said, setting down his drink and reaching into his pocket. “I know he’d want you to have this.” He set down a little box on the table and slid it over to her.

Lois gasped. It was a little black ring box. Her heart was racing. What did Clark think he was doing?

“I don’t want you to think of it as a gift from me,” he said. “Just think of me as Kal’s messenger.”

Hesitantly, she opened the box. Inside was a simple gold band. A wedding ring. The heaviness in her chest that began when she gave up her wedding ring suddenly felt twice as burdensome.

“I figured if you are going to be Lucy El, wife of Kal,” Clark continued. “— at least you should have a ring to wear on your finger.”

Lois picked it up and saw that something was written inside. She shifted it in her fingers in the dim light until she could read it. *My Love Encircles You.* She took a deep breath as a chill went down her spine and looked him in the eye. “Whose ring is this, Clark?”

He looked away. “My mother’s.”

Holy crap! She put it back in the box. “I can’t wear this, Clark. This belongs to your future wife.” She slid the box back across the table to him.

Clark picked up the box and set it down in front of her. “Lois, you are as close as I will get to a wife.” He stood up and started toward the beach.

Lois grabbed his hand to stop him. “No, I’m not.”

Clark continued toward the beach and she followed, still holding his hand. It felt good to hold his hand. It reminded her of when she and her husband had been best friends, before their relationship had blossomed into more.

“This wasn’t an easy decision for me, Lois.” He sighed. “I’m not strong like Kal. Mayson getting hurt made me go crazy in a way I could not handle. Insane, really. If I felt this way when someone I just liked… just cared about was injured, imagine if it had been someone I actually loved? My Lois?” His eyes betrayed his unspoken ‘you.’ “Innocent people could die.” He pulled her hand up to his chest as he looked out to the ocean, but her eyes didn’t leave his face. “Even if I found my Lois, and she turned out to be better than you, we still will never be together. I couldn’t do that to her. I couldn’t chance someone going after her to get at me.”

This speech sounds familiar, thought Lois. *He’s breaking up with his Lois for her own good before he even knows she’s still out there, still alive. A part of him doesn’t believe he’ll ever find her. That he deserves to be loved.*

Clark took the ring box out of her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. “This ring is from Kal. Not from me, Lucy. Please, think of it that way.”

“Clark, don’t give up on finding Lois,” she pleaded. “I know we’re getting closer.”

“Stop. Just stop. My Lois is gone. Perry, Sam, and I have been spinning our wheels here for years. We’ll never escape.” He flung his hand out to the ocean. “She is lost to the universe. She and I weren’t meant to be. Just accept it. It’s better this way.”

Lois grabbed his shoulders and made him face her. “Tell you what. If it makes you feel better, I’ll wear your ring.” She held her hand up for him to see. “But I’m only holding onto it for you. I’m your safe deposit box. I will give it back to you when I return home or when we find her, whichever comes first. Deal?”

Clark wrapped his arms around her. “Thank you, Lucy. You give me hope.”

Lois hooked her arms around him. *Hope.* She would be there for Clark, believe in him, be his rock, hold him when Mother Nature spit at him, be *his* Lois until they found his soul mate to replace her. “There’s no way she could be better than me, you know that, right?” she teased. “Perfect for you maybe but not better than me.”

He laughed, letting her go so he could look her in the eyes. “How could anyone improve on perfection?”

“Exactly.” She grinned, taking hold of his hand once more. They took a few steps in silence, before Lois continued, “Hey, did you ever get that slug to tell you more about his stepmother?”

“Oh, right. She’s some lounge singer Luthor met at the Berkistan Hotel.” Clark shook his head. “Lulu, Lorna, Luna, something like that?”

Lois stumbled, but he caught her. “Lola?”

“Yes, that was it. Lola, the lounge singer. Doesn’t really sound like Lex Luthor’s type, does it?” He laughed. “I guess they all can’t be as wonderful as you.”

It was time. That was the confirmation she had needed to tell him what she knew. She had to tell Clark that *his* Lois was married to Lex Luthor. Her gut churned at the thought of being the bearer of bad news. It would kill the little bit of hope he was building inside of her. No! Despite all that, she needed to tell him the truth. He deserved to know what he was up against.

Lois took a deep breath and opened her mouth to say something, but Clark continued, “So, where do you want to go for cake?”

“Cake?” That was a detour in the conversation that knocked all other thoughts out of her head.

“What’s a birthday without cake?” he asked.

She groaned. “It’s a day I don’t get another year older.” Then she laughed. “Or another pound heavier.”

“You’re skin and bones as it is.” He grinned. “I’ll sing.”

Lois pointed a finger at him. “Don’t. You. Dare!”

“Happy, Happy Birthday…” Clark started, but she let go of his hand and ran down the beach, covering her ears and screaming.

***

Cat Grant sat down on the edge of Clark’s desk. “How was your vacation, Clark? We missed you around here.”

Clark leaned back. “Relaxing. What’s up?”

“New invitations for the man in blue.”

His shoulders sagged. *Oh, yeah. Mayson was gone, but the ritual remained.* “How many dates do I have left?”

“A few,” Cat said kindly. “You’ll be done in early

December."

"Ah, a Christmas miracle." Clark hoped more than believed in the validity of that statement. "What have you got?"

Cat flipped through the pile of invitations. Clark pulled one out of the crowd.

"I didn't know if you would want to go to that one. Personally, I thought it might freak you out. You want me to call one of your winners?"

"No," he said, a smile slipping onto his lips. "I'll handle this one. I already have someone in mind."

"Really?" Cat raised a brow with curiosity. "Anyone I know?"

"They can take the girl out of gossip…"

She shrugged. "Once a reporter, always a reporter."

"Off the record?"

Cat nodded with anticipation, leaning forward.

"She's out of this world." He slipped the invitation into his pocket and smiled secretively.

"And?"

"That's all I'm saying to any reporter about a woman *I* invite on a date. Maybe we won't even show up." He returned his focus to the pile of invitations. He sorted them quickly into two piles. "These I'll attend; these politely reject. Thank you, Cat."

She continued to stand next to his desk. "If I find out who she is, will you give me the scoop?"

"You'll always be my first 'no comment'," he told her politely. *There's no way in hell he'd tell her.*

Cat groaned. "What's the point of having a celebrity working at the paper if he treats me like all the other celebrities out there?" She grabbed the invites and stomped off. "Thanks again, Clark."

"If I'm ever in the mood for an exclusive, you know you've got it," he called after her. *Never gonna happen.*

"I'm going to hold you to that," she replied with a wave of her hand.

Clark rolled his chair over to Lois's desk. "I'm heading out to S.T.A.R. Labs for my weekly meeting, if you need me."

Lois glanced up and smiled. "Can I come?"

No! "You don't have security clearance." Clark lowered his voice. "And since you don't exist, you're not likely to earn it either." *Thank God!*

"I just wanted to meet your Dr. Klein to see how different he is from the man I know." She tapped her computer screen. "James said he'd drop by with the information he'd compiled on L.I., Ltd."

"Do you really think it might have something to do with…" Clark glanced across the room at Jaxon plugging away at his computer. "… you-know-who?"

Lois followed his glance and lowered her voice to a hush. "It's very possible. Everything Lex ever touched had Lex or Luthor in the name. Lex Tower, LexCorp, LNN, LexComm, Luthor Technologies, and, of course, Lex Labs. L.I. sounds like an easy abbreviation of Lex or Luthor, something. It's that something that I'm stuck on. Industries, International, Income, we've tried every possible word starting with 'I' that I can come up with, and nada. I think we're down to Intergang." Their gazes locked. "It couldn't be that, could it?"

"Luthor didn't have a connection to Intergang that you know of?" Clark whispered, moving closer.

"No, Kal and I didn't trip over Intergang until months after Lex died — the first time — and LexCorp had been dissolved. But if he were the original leader of Intergang before Bill Church took over…" Lois leaned back in her chair and mouthed the word, 'Wow.' Suddenly, she closed her eyes and set her hand on her tummy.

Clark touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

She smiled with a nod, standing up. "Too much soccer. Excuse me."

"Is it getting worse?" he asked, concerned.

"It's normal, Clark. Perfectly normal." She winked. "Probably just a UTI. Bring me some cranberry juice when you come back, will you?" she asked, heading toward the restroom.

Did Lois just say what he thought she said? What was he supposed to do with that information? He chose to ignore it. "My pleasure, Mrs. El," Clark nonetheless replied, as he rolled back to his desk and took his jacket from the back of his chair.

Less than five minutes later, he was dressed in the blue suit and walking into S.T.A.R. Labs.

***

Lois switched off the light on her desk and stood up with a stretch. Clark had left for S.T.A.R. Labs that morning and never returned. She was worried. She had a sixth sense when it came to Clark (either of them) and his safety, and something was definitely wrong.

She had tried Dr. Klein's office at one o'clock and again at three, but there was no answer. The main security desk didn't have Superman signing out. Not that that meant anything; her Superman often didn't sign in and out of S.T.A.R. Labs either. She had tried Clark's home number and got his machine as well. She had scanned the wire service, MNN, and even the radio, but no major disasters had occurred. Clark had simply disappeared. She turned on her light again and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Klein?" Lois inquired.

"Yes?"

"Hello, Dr. Klein, this is Lucy El over at the Daily Planet," she told him.

"Lucy! Hi. Wow! Is everything all right?" Dr. Klein seemed to know who she was. Lois decided to pocket that information for now, although she wondered at the enthusiasm of the scientist's greeting.

"Is Superman still there? He never returned from his appointment with you and that was…" Her voice trailed away. *Of course, Clark wasn't still there.*

"No. I'm sorry, Lucy. Clark left some hours ago."

"Was he okay? I mean, I understand if you can't tell me that because of doctor-patient confidentiality." Oh, God, why had she reminded him of that?

"You know about that?" Dr. Klein seemed surprised.

"Well, yes," Lois admitted. Maybe if she told Dr. Klein about how close a friendship she and Clark had, she'd be able to get more information out of him. "I'm the one who suggested he needed someone whom he could contact in that capacity. Naturally Clark thought of you. I was just worried when he didn't return, like he usually does. He's been unhappy lately, since his breakup with his girlfriend."

"Has he? Oh right, he mentioned that. Tin cans," Dr. Klein replied, making about as much sense as her Dr. Klein did at times.

Tin cans? Lois shook her head, trying to concentrate on their conversation.

The scientist went on, "Well, yes, he did seem a little down, more disappointed, when he left today. Physically he was fine, though."

"Dr. Klein, physically Superman is always fine. What would he be disappointed about? Did a test not go well?" Lois's heart ached. Poor Clark. He still wasn't over Mayson.

"No. All our tests today went well, exceeded expectations, actually. It was a private matter, I can't really speak about it, even with you, Lucy," Dr. Klein said.

Lois's mind jumped all over the place. What sort of private matter would Dr. Klein not feel comfortable discussing with her that would make Clark disappointed? Lois gasped. That couldn't be it. Dr. Klein hadn't run the fertility tests on Clark, had he? Clark hadn't said word one about that to her. That wouldn't have

made him depressed though; he already knew he could father children. Hello, she was the living proof. “Dr. Klein, did you give Clark test results today?”

“I really cannot discuss this with you, Lucy. I’m sorry. I wish you luck in finding him.”

“I understand, Dr. Klein. I wouldn’t want you to breach doctor-patient confidentiality either. I’ll try Clark at home again. Goodbye.” She hung up the line, then dialed Clark at home, reaching his machine again.

Lois pulled on her coat, then sat back down. She opened her purse and pulled out her wallet. Inside, behind her press pass, which sadly was starting to gather dust in this dimension, she had tucked a little orange square of paper. Clark’s emergency number. The number of his hideout, where he said he might be contacted if he couldn’t be reached elsewhere. Where he had gone during vacation. He said that it was a private number, where he would only be able to be reached sometimes. She looked at the number and recognized the area code. Kansas.

Lois picked up the phone and dialed. So, that’s where he had gone on vacation: Smallville. Clark Kent, it didn’t matter which one, always went to the same place when he was torn up about something. Home. But the phone rang off the hook; there wasn’t even a machine. He wasn’t there. She hung up and turned off her light. What could be bothering him? Why hadn’t he contacted her? That wasn’t like him.

It was raining on the walk back to her apartment and Lois wished there was a cab to hail, but they were all taken. She was drenched by the time she got home. She unlocked the door and called out, but no one answered. That was strange; where was everyone? She shut the door and her father padded out of his room, rubbing his eyes. He looked like he was just waking up from a nap.

“Hi, Princess.”

“Hi, Daddy. Have you seen, Clark?” She peeled off her wet coat and shook it, before hanging it up in the closet. “He went to an appointment this morning and never returned.”

Sam glanced at her and looked away. All right, he was definitely hiding something. “He stopped by this afternoon. We talked for a while and then he mentioned wanting to see Perry.”

“Perry?” She hadn’t tried Mayor White, mainly because he was the mayor. And secondly, she hadn’t wanted to worry him. She realized that Perry was as close to a buddy as this Clark Kent had. She picked up her address book next to her telephone and searched for Perry’s new private number. She dialed and Alice picked up.

“Alice. Hi, this is Lucy El, Clark Kent’s… oh, he’s mentioned me. Yes, I’m fine, thank you. I hate to worry Perry, but… I seem to have misplaced Clark. Is he there? Thank you. Tell Perry hello from me. Thanks.” She hung up.

“They sent him home in the town car?” Why couldn’t he go home on his own? She shook her head. It wasn’t like Clark could get drunk. “I’m going to change into some dry clothes and dry my hair, Daddy. We have any frozen dinners left?”

“One or two. Although you should really be eating fresh food,” he reminded her.

“I agree. Shall we order takeout instead?”

He shook his head. “I miss Lois’s home-cooked meals.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I grew up with my mom…”

“No explanation necessary.” He held up a hand. “I’ve tasted Ellen’s cooking.”

When Lois had finished changing her clothes, there was a knock on the door. Sam let Clark inside.

“She here?” she heard him ask.

“Hi, Clark,” she said, rushing out to the living room. He looked haggard — like he had been drinking — only alcohol didn’t affect Superman. Had he been exposed to Kryptonite? “I was getting worried. You never came back—”

He held up a bottle of cranberry juice and set it on the coffee table. “I just realized I forgot. Good night.”

Lois caught him at the door. “Clark, wait.”

He turned and looked at her with such sadness in his eyes, her heart ached. This was depression, not Kryptonite.

Lois opened her arms and Clark stepped into them. He wrapped his arms around her and for the first time in her life, she heard him softly cry. “Clark?” Damn that Dr. Klein; this was more than disappointment — this was bereavement.

Clark sniffed. “I’m okay. Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” Lois took him by the hand and led him to the sofa. She glanced over at Sam, but saw that he had already left the room. She knelt down next to her friend. “What’s wrong?”

“No, Lois. You take the sofa. You should sit down.” He started to stand, but she held him down.

“Stop it, Clark. I’m fine,” Lois said, moving next to him on the sofa anyway.

He touched her hair. “You’re wet.”

She smiled. Even when his life was in shambles, she came first with Clark. “So are you. It’s raining.”

“Hold still.” Clark looked at her and she realized he was about to use heat vision on her.

“Not below the neck, Clark,” she warned him.

“Trust me.”

Lois closed her eyes and soon was very warm. Her hair was no longer dripping. She opened her eyes and saw a tear making its way down his cheek. She wiped it away. “Clark, what’s wrong?”

He reached out and touched her tummy. The baby gave a little kick for the first time in hours and a hint of a smile appeared on his lips for just a moment. “Can I make a strange request?”

“Sure, Clark, anything.” He was really starting to worry her.

“May I listen to your tummy?”

That was a strange request. “O-kay,” Lois replied with a raised brow. “You mean physically?” She pointed to the hem of her shirt.

Clark hesitated. “Never mind,” he murmured, trying to stand again.

Lois grabbed his hand and reassured him, “Of course, Clark. You’re family.” She folded up her shirt and he laid his ear gently upon the bare skin of her tummy.

Clark closed his eyes and soon was breathing deeply in sleep. Whatever had been bothering him had weighed him down so much he was exhausted. She scooted his head off her lap and set it on a pillow, then went to find him a blanket. She couldn’t believe he was asleep. It was hardly six o’clock in the evening.

She leaned against Sam’s bedroom door frame. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Dr. Klein gave him the test results today. You know the fertility tests that you asked him to get taken.”

“Obviously, he’s fertile.” She pointed at her stomach.

“That only proves that Kal can have children. Clark is another person entirely.”

Lois’s jaw dropped. “No!”

Sam nodded.

Lois closed her eyes as the tears leaked out, her heart aching for him. “Poor Clark. That’s so unfair. There has to be a mistake.”

Sam shook his head. “He brought me a copy of the data to double-check, sweetie. His swimmers were not moving.”

An instant later, Lois was back at the sofa, her arms surrounding Clark. “I’m so sorry, Clark. You would have made the best father anyone could ever want.”

***

After dinner, Lois came out of the bathroom to find the sofa empty, the blanket folded on it, and Clark gone.

“He went home,” Sam explained at her puzzled expression.

"He'll be all right. It was just a bit of a shock."

"He didn't want to talk about it?" *With me?* She sat down on the sofa where Clark had been sleeping; it was still slightly warm. It hurt that Clark kept this information from her. She hated that he felt the need to shield her from his own heartache. That idiot had to know he wore his heart on his sleeve. She knew when he was happy and when he was sad. *She* knew what to say to make the pain… well, maybe in this case she didn't. How would her husband feel if he had been told he couldn't father children? Lois pressed her palms into her eyes with anguish. Like he had been exposed to Kryptonite.

"Some things can't be cured with talk, only time," Sam told her. "You can give him that."

"I wish I could give him more. Don't take this personally, but I hate this dimension. The Kents are dead; Perry isn't running the *Planet,* Ralph is; Charlton Heston is president — trust me, that's just weird; Jimmy is Clark's boss instead of his buddy; Lex Luthor is alive and well and married to—" She swallowed the rest of what she was going to say. She couldn't tell Sam, not like this. "Lois is missing. And now, this. It's not fair."

Sam sat down next to her. "Life isn't always fair, sweetie." He was quiet a minute. "You know Lex Luthor?"

"Do you remember I told you that I was walking down the aisle to marry someone else when I realized that I was in love with… with Kal?" Even after all these months, it was still hard to think of her Clark as "Kal".

Lois's father nodded, his face growing pale.

"Lex Luthor."

He clutched her arm. "Didn't you know he's a monster?"

Sam was acting strangely, blanching at Lex's name. "I realized it later," Lois answered guardedly.

He swallowed. "What did he do when you rejected him so publicly?"

Lois felt like she was having this conversation in a fogbank. Her brain couldn't concentrate on it clearly. She paused before replying, "Well, he really didn't get that opportunity, because our wedding was interrupted by the police. Lex jumped off his penthouse balcony minutes later."

"He died?" Sam was surprised. "He committed suicide? That doesn't sound like him."

"Yeah, well… he was brought back to life by one of his Frankenstein doctors."

Sam gulped and grew more pale. He was almost white. "Please, tell me it wasn't…"

Lois stood up and backed away from him. The fog in her mind was starting to lift. "Sam, how do you know about Lex? I've never mentioned him." Her mind flashed on a memory from her own life. The boxers with super strength. It was one of the first stories she and Clark had worked together. "The cyborgs. Lex was funding your research."

"They weren't cyborgs, sweetie."

Lois held up her hand. "Don't try to justify it." She took a couple more steps back.

"It started out as prosthetics for amputees. Honorable work, but then he wanted more and more. He wanted me to create some super solider. When I rejected him, he told me what a beautiful daughter I had… not 'have.' *Had*. He used the past tense."

"The crazy experiments Perry mentioned you doing in your garage…"

He nodded.

"They started before Lois went to the Congo?"

Sam nodded again. "Then she disappeared. I know it was because of me, because I had turned him down. I put everything I had into trying to give him what he wanted, so he'd give me back my girl." He buried his face in his hands. "But it wasn't enough. I was too late… I knew she'd never come back to me."

"Sam, you mentioned once that you knew she was still alive. I thought at the time it was just wishful thinking. Do you have hard proof?"

"A couple of months after she disappeared Lois sent me a postcard from some South Pacific island, saying she had met someone. A whirlwind romance. They were eloping and she'd contact me as soon as they were settled." He gulped. "She joked that she wouldn't even have to change her initials."

"You never heard from her again?"

He shook his head.

"And you never showed that postcard to anyone? To Clark?" Lois's words were harsh, but the man didn't deserve to be treated nicely.

"Are you kidding? Clark was the only one still looking for her."

"Sam, with his abilities, he could have found her two years ago." Lois threw up her hands in disgust. "He's been looking for her in the wrong place for over two years."

"I didn't know he was Superman two years ago! Nobody did." He buried his face in his hands once more. "You think I haven't kicked myself a thousand times? It's my fault that she's gone."

"That's why you started drinking again. The postcard." She nodded, the fog completely clear. Everything made sense. "She's married to him, you know."

Sam looked up, his face now almost green. "You escaped your monster; my girl did not. Who knows what he's done to her in the last three years? I just want my baby back safe and sound." He started to cry.

She was appalled at his actions, but a part of her couldn't stand to see her father cry, even if he wasn't actually her father. She resisted her urge to comfort him; he deserved to feel the way he did. "We have to tell Clark."

"No!" He jumped up and started pacing. "We can never tell Clark — he would kill me. Especially after the way I treated him when he got engaged to that blonde woman. I blamed him for giving up. You didn't hear him the other day, telling me that if someone hurt his Lois and he punched them, he could kill them." He tapped the side of his head. "You think I didn't see him killing me, if I told him? No! Absolutely not."

"He won't kill you, Sam. Not as long as he loves Lois." She hated to, but she reassured him.

"You think he won't stop loving her as soon as he finds out that she's married to that monster?" He was still pacing.

"Love doesn't work that way, Sam. You can't turn it on and off. If it's there, it's there."

"Trust me, Lucy, he would no longer believe anything I say or do and he would kill me for keeping this secret from him. He would no longer allow me to be your doctor and he'd dump me back on the streets where I belong. Without him, we will never be able to rescue her. And without me, what would happen to you when you reach nine months? You can't go to a regular doctor. Not now."

"Can we trust you?" she asked, her hands on her hips. "How do we know you won't violate that trust, turn me over to Lex, just to get Lois back?"

"I swear to you on my life, I would never give that man anything, even to get Lois back," Sam pleaded with her. "I love you like my own child."

"I wish I could believe you, Sam. But you lied to us." She took a step closer to him and looked directly into his eyes. "You're right, though, to swear on your life. Clark and I have formed a bond. He will protect me and this baby as if we were his own, with all of his abilities if need be."

Sam swallowed and nodded. "I know."

"I just want you to know exactly who you're dealing with and what you can expect if you lie to us again."

"I won't. I swear."

Lois placed a hand over her growing stomach and looked out the window. “But you’re right. We can’t tell Clark about Lois yet. It would crush him. He’s had enough disappointment recently. We’ll have to concentrate our efforts on finding Lex. Once we find Lex, then we’ll tell Clark.”

***

The next several weeks were hard on Lois. She watched Clark going through the motions of his life: coming to work, saving people when necessary, and going on lots of unnecessary dates. But when Clark smiled, the light never reached his eyes. Her heart ached for him, but she also knew there was nothing she could say or do to ease that pain. She had been afraid that he would start avoiding her, the personification of his pain, but the opposite happened. He wanted to spend more and more time with her and for that she was grateful. That she could be there for him, as he was there for her.

Lois watched him working at his desk. He glanced up and caught her gaze. He pressed his lips together as if debating something and then rolled his chair over to her desk.

“Have lunch with me today. There’s this new sandwich shop that I hear has great pastrami sandwiches.” He was spoiling her rotten. Her radar went up. What did he want?

“I’m a vegetarian, Clark. Just the smell of pastrami… ugh.” She fake-shivered.

Clark looked concerned. “Really? Still?”

Lois laughed with a shake of her head. “No seafood, though, please.”

He glanced across the room at their friendly neighborhood hacker/kidnapper extraordinaire and lowered his voice. “Any news about Lex Luthor?”

She touched his arm. “I’m sorry, Clark, he’s disappeared. He won’t be found until he wants to be found.” Lois reached up and cradled his face. Clark was such a good man, she wished she could find him his true love, he deserved some happiness. Then she remembered he wasn’t Kal and dropped her hand.

Clark’s brow furrowed as he gazed at her and she hoped he hadn’t read too much into that gesture.

“Are you getting enough sleep, Lucy? The circles under your eyes are getting darker. Anything wrong with Kal and you?”

Lois shook her head. “Someone let a ghost loose in our apartment. She’s been taking over my body and trying to steal Kal.” She yawned with a shrug. “It’s not exactly sleep-inducing. What is it with Charlton Heston running basically unopposed for re-election? Even in my dreams, President Garner’s toughest opponent is some unknown character who calls himself John Doe.” She shuddered. “What I could really use is a night off from reality.”

Clark grinned; this time the light did reach his eyes. Something was definitely up with him. “That’s what I wanted to speak to you about.”

***

Lois took another look at herself in the mirror. She felt ridiculous. She had hated the costume back when it was necessary to be Metropolis’s superhero, but to wear it to a party? A deep lavender body suit with a pink belt and yellow stripes up the thigh. Lavender boots, mask, cuffs, and a turquoise cape. One could not be modest in this outfit. The belt hit her belly in just the right spot, hiding her burgeoning baby bulge.

Clark had promised no one would know it was her. And that there would be dancing. She could be herself, not Lucy El, for one evening. No glasses, no pretense, no vegetarianism, just Superman and Ultra Woman out for a night on the town. Fun. What she did to put a smile on that man’s face. She walked into the living room, where Superman waited.

“Wow!”

Lois blushed. His compliment felt pretty good, especially when she felt more like an evolutionary cousin to a hippo. “It’s too tight, Clark. People are going to notice my belly.”

“Nonsense. I had the tailor make the top a couple inches longer than in the original suit, so you can raise your arms without your stomach showing. Plus, it isn’t so fitted around the waist and the belt hides anything you don’t want anyone to know about. They’d have to look at you under a microscope to notice your extra passenger.” Clark’s smile melted any of her lingering doubts. “No one will know it’s you,” he repeated. “I promise.”

Hadn’t she made the same promise to him once? “What is the theme of this party again?”

“Come as your favorite superhero.”

“So, where’s your costume, Clark?” She walked up to him and tried to peek under the neckline of the blue suit. “Are you wearing your Wonder Woman costume under there somewhere?”

Superman swatted her hand away and gasped. “Did Kal tell you about us, Ultra Woman? That was supposed to be a secret.”

“What?” She glared at him with such intensity he could almost feel heat vision coming out of her eyes.

“Just a joke. Just a joke.” He laughed, holding up his hands. “Never even met her, I promise!”

“Ha-ha.” Lois was not amused. “So, where is it? You aren’t going like *that*, are you?”

Clark smiled and pulled out a full, fake mustache that matched his hair color perfectly.

Lois laughed. “That’s some costume, Superman.”

He stepped up to the mirror by the front door and pressed it to his face. He looked like a completely different person. “What do you think?”

“Subtle, but effective.”

Clark took her arm and walked up to the window. “Shall we fly?”

“Won’t that be a little bit of a dead giveaway?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. She wondered how much of her facial expressions the mask covered up.

“I can land us a block away or we can take a cab if you prefer.” He grimaced. “I promised Sam, no flying after mid-October and it’s Halloween. We’ll take a cab.”

“I prefer flying,” Lois pouted. “Sam’s not the boss of me and he’s not here to stop us.”

“He’s your doctor,” Clark reminded her. “We’ll take a cab.”

She winced. She still hadn’t completely forgiven Sam Lane for getting his daughter kidnapped and seduced by Lex Luthor. One day maybe, but not today.

“Do you have space in the suit for cab fare?” she asked, running her fingers down his chest.

“Cab drivers usually let me ride for free,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Not tonight, they won’t. There will be hundreds, if not thousands of Supermans roaming around Metropolis tonight, especially at this party.” She turned back to her room. “I’ll grab my purse.”

“No, don’t, Lois. How are you going to wear a purse and a cape? It doesn’t work.” He stepped into the closet and came back out, looking exactly the same.

“Just had to get money out of my wallet.” He tucked a twenty into his belt and another into his boot. He slipped a third into her boot. “Just in case I have to duck out early.”

She’d have to ask her Clark someday where he kept his wallet in that tight blue suit. Maybe they could just play a game of hide-and-seek. “Where will you keep the coins?”

“I’ll just round up.” He took hold of her elbow as they went out her front door. “Let’s go, Ultra Woman.”

They arrived to a sea of blue and red with hints of yellow at the hotel ballroom. Almost every man had come as Superman. There were also quite a few female equivalents, Superwoman, who had a red mini-skirt instead of shorts. There was also a sea of Wonder Women, more than a couple of Spidermans, Green

Lanterns, several Flashes, even a Catwoman or two, but only one Ultra Woman. Lois was surprised she didn't see any Batman impersonators.

"Who are you supposed to be?" inquired the doorman who took their invitation.

"I am Ultra Woman," replied Lois with hands on her hips.

"Ultra hot," the man replied with a head bob.

"That's my date you're talking about," Clark growled.

"Superman," Lois said, setting a hand on his shoulder. "He's just paying me a compliment. Right?"

The man nodded. "Just nice to see something other than Superman. That's all I meant. No offense."

"None taken," Lois replied for Clark and dragged him inside. "Calm yourself, Superman."

He pulled her close to make sure she could hear him, unnecessary with her super hearing. "Just make sure you leave with the correct Superman."

She whispered back, "I'm only interested in men who can fly."

He laughed.

They saw Mayor White out on the dance floor with a Catwoman, whom Lois could have sworn was Cat Grant. Perry, of course, was dressed as Elvis. She nodded in his direction and Clark laughed again. She was glad they came. It was a silly theme. Everyone was in costume and with so many Superman wannabes, Clark actually didn't stand out for once. He could just have fun and dance. Be himself in a crowd. As the party was hosted by the Mayor, the music included a lot of swing, big band, and Elvis.

Clark dragged her on to the dance floor for Elvis's "Hard Headed Woman". He pulled her close and whispered in her ear, "There are a lot of Elvis songs that describe you perfectly."

"Who, me or Ultra Woman?" She grinned.

Unlike her Clark who ballroom-danced like a prince, this Clark could swing and jitterbug with the best of them. After a few songs, Lois was thrilled when the slow song "The Wonder of You" came up on rotation.

As they danced cheek to cheek, Lois closed her eyes and thought of her Superman and dancing with him after the Cost Mart charity ball. He always said that dancing wasn't really dancing if you had your feet on the ground.

"Shall we get a drink?" Clark asked and it felt like her feet slammed to the ground. Had they been floating? Or had she just been imagining it?

Lois nodded and they walked to the bar. Clark ordered her a cranberry juice and tasted it to make sure it hadn't been spiked.

"My hero," she whispered. She knew he heard her, because a smile appeared on his face. "This is fun. I'm glad we came."

"Me too," he answered, sipping his soda.

"Is it odd, being surrounded by so many impersonators?"

"It's nice to be me and still blend in with the crowd for a change." He led her over to the buffet tables. "Plus, it's highly complimentary. Food?"

She shook her head. She wasn't hungry, for once. "Let's just finish these drinks and head back to the dance floor. This will probably be my last dance for a while."

He led her back to the floor for "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby". When he pulled her close, during one of the spins, she could hear him singing along with the words.

And when it came to winning blue ribbons
I bet you taught the other kids how
I can see the judges' eyes when they handed you the prize
You had the cutest bow
You must've been a beautiful baby
'*Cause baby, look at you now!*

Clark sure knew how to charm the socks off her.

An hour later, they were sitting at a table finishing their dinner, when Baby reminded her that she hadn't been to the restroom in a while. She leaned close to Clark. "I've got to go use the facilities. Can you clean this up and I'll meet you back at the dance floor?" He nodded.

The Ultra Woman costume was not one for getting into and out of quickly when one was in a hurry. As she stepped out of the stall, finally zipped up and ready to wash up, she found Cat Grant standing in front of her.

"Excuse me," Lois stepped to the side to get around her. Cat followed her to the sinks.

"You're Clark Kent's date, are you not?" Cat asked.

"I'm here with Superman," Lois corrected, hoping that the woman didn't recognize her.

"The real one?"

Lois shook her hands, spraying water all over her interrogator. "Are you trying to interview me in the ladies room, Miss?" She stepped around Cat to get over to the paper towels. Even she had only stooped that low on a rare occasion. Another woman was spritzing herself with perfume; no wonder it stank in the bathroom. Her pregnancy nose was so sensitive to smells, she was tempted to tell the Superwoman to just throw the bottle in the trash. It wasn't worth the price she paid.

"What's your costume supposed to be?" Cat asked, stepping between them and still trying to pry information out of her.

"Ultra Woman."

"Never heard of her."

Lois smiled. "I'm new." She easily stepped around her. "Excuse me, my date is waiting."

When Lois finally got back to the dance floor, it was a sea of red and blue. Everywhere she turned, she saw Supermen and not once was it the correct one. It was fairly dark on the dance floor, despite the strobe light, and several Supermen had mustaches, but Lois couldn't find the real one.

She turned and bumped into the feather on the headdress of some Indian Princess — was that supposed to be Tiger Lily from Peter Pan or Sacajawea? — and she sneezed. Pushing through the throng of dancers, she got turned around and around, and she started to feel dizzy. Just as Lois was thinking about returning to the table where she had left Clark, the crowd of dancers suddenly parted, enabling her to breathe again. Thank God! One more minute and she'd clear the floor herself. That's when she saw her Superman across the dance floor. She smiled and sashayed over to him.

"Hi," Lois said to him. "You want to dance?"

Superman nodded and they started dancing to Elvis's "Suspicious Minds". Lois realized about halfway through the song that she was dancing with the wrong Superman. This Superman didn't dance with any style or grace or at all. She looked around for Clark, but still couldn't find him. If she could only rise above this crowd and look around. The song finally ended and Lois waved goodbye to this imposter and went to find her date. As she turned away, the man grabbed her arm and pulled her close.

"No. Thank you. I'm here with someone." She gently tried to pull free, but the man would not let go.

"Yeah, lady. Me," the man answered gruffly. She could look clearly into his face now and although he was the correct height and had similar hair color, this man did not look anything like Clark Kent. He held tightly onto her waist.

She felt ridiculous calling for help from Superman, when surrounded by a roomful of superheroes. Who knew who might answer her call? Sometimes, a woman had to be her own superhero.

"I said 'no!'" Lois slammed the heel of her boot into his foot, balled her fist, and punched him in the jaw. The man stumbled across the dance floor and landed at the feet of Elvis… Mayor White. *That was a nice punch*, she thought. *That felt good*. It had

been a while since she'd had a chance to stretch those muscles. A round of applause followed her as she walked off the dance floor.

Perry looked down at the man and then over at her. He signaled a few security guards to remove the man from the floor and then he headed her way. Oh, drat. He must have recognized her.

"Excuse me, Miss," Elvis Perry said. "Was that man bothering you?"

Lois nodded. "I'm sorry about disrupting your party, but some men just don't take 'no' for an answer." Actually, punching that man's lights out felt good. She actually felt like herself instead of some bland replica of herself. She laughed from the giddiness of this feeling.

"That's some right hook you have."

Lois shrugged a shoulder dismissively. "Have you seen Superman?"

Elvis Perry chuckled and gestured toward the crowd.

"They all look alike. Will the real Superman please come forward?" she called out to the crowd and then waited, but he still didn't appear.

Elvis Perry laughed. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm Ultra Woman," Lois answered with a slight nod. It felt strange introducing herself to Perry, just as it had when she was Ultra Woman the first time. "What's your name? Elvis?"

He bowed. "Would you like to dance? I must warn you I tend to dip low and often."

Lois laughed and nodded her acceptance. He led her back to the dance floor for "The Way You Look Tonight". It was nice not to feel lost anymore. As he spun her around the floor for a second dance to "I Don't Get Around Much Anymore" a rush of wind blew through the room. Perry dipped low and, suddenly, Lois was looking up into the face of Superman, the real one.

"My I cut in?" Clark asked and Lois's heart lurched. There just wasn't anyone in the world quite as handsome as Clark Kent.

"Ultra Woman?" Perry inquired, tilting her upright. "Is this the man who brought you or another imposter?"

"I don't know," she replied as Perry spun her around. "Does he fly? I only date men who fly."

Elvis Perry chuckled. Clark looked askance at her, arms crossed. Oops, she had blown his cover. Perry bowed with a kiss to her hand. "Enchanted to meet you."

"What a charmer." She smiled at the mayor with a wink. "Better not let Priscilla see you; I hear she gets nasty jealous."

Elvis Perry laughed and then glanced around the room to see if Alice had indeed seen him dancing with Ultra Woman. He spotted her and waved. A moment later Superman was holding Lois in his arms.

"You disappeared on me," she said, teasingly.

"Sorry. There was a mugging a couple blocks away and then a hold-up at a diner. I thought I'd be back sooner. Everything all right?"

"Now that you're here." She rested her cheek against his with a sigh. "Elvis had to rescue me from a drunk." No need to supply details.

Clark stepped out of the dance and scanned the room, instantly on alert. "Where is he?"

She pulled him back in. "I told you. Elvis made him leave the building. I'm fine."

The song switched to "Don't Be Cruel" and Lois smiled as he spun her around. Nothing compared to dancing with Clark.

"Cat's on the prowl," she warned him.

"Huh?" Clark murmured, distracted.

"She cornered me in the restroom. She figured out that I was with the *real* Superman. What did you say to her?" Lois asked when the music brought them back together.

Superman shrugged innocently and didn't answer. The music slowed and "She's Not You" started. Clark looked her in the eye for a moment and held her close. They were both slow dancing with people who weren't there.

Lois closed her eyes. In her arms, this Clark felt just like her Clark. He smelled just like him. He held her just like her Clark. She didn't want to let him go. When they danced like this, her Clark felt so near. It was so easy to pretend she was with the man of her dreams.

The music changed to a faster tune, Clark tried to step out of their embrace, but she held him close, not wanting to break this feeling. He went with it, but spun her around in time with the music. She was thankful he didn't question her actions.

The music switched again to "Don't", the song in which Elvis sang that he didn't want her to tell him 'Don't.' Clark pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "Drink?"

She nodded, unable to speak. They left the dance floor.

They sat down at a table in silence, sipping their drinks. Clark finally broke the peace, "Who knew Elvis was such a romantic?"

Lois couldn't answer. She still felt under the spell of the night. She knew she should say something. She should leave, go home, get away from Clark. But instead, she looked at him with all the emotions pulsing through her veins.

He swallowed. "How about some air?"

Standing up, she took his hand. He led her out of the ballroom to a small terrace. As she stepped closer to him Lois closed her eyes and Clark wrapped an arm around her waist. A moment later they were on the roof.

The cooler air felt good against her hot skin, but it didn't clear this feeling from her mind.

"Lois," he whispered, his lips next to her ear.

She shook her head. "Lois isn't here tonight," she murmured, feeling naughty. "Just Superman and Ultra Woman."

"I don't think—" he started to say, before she placed her fingers over his lips.

"Don't think." She began to sway to the music they could both still hear. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He closed his eyes. Slowly, he started dancing with her, his resistance melting.

"I'm not him," he said, trying one last time to fight destiny.

"Yes, you are."

As they swayed to the music, she whispered, "Surrender." She placed her lips to his, but he turned away. Tears blinded her as she pushed him aside. The pain of his rejection swallowed her. These feelings for him were overpowering her; she could no longer control them or deny them. Opening the door to the stairwell, she disappeared.

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Clark stood on the roof, the air around him suddenly cold. He had done the right thing, but it felt so wrong. He could hear her sobs as she ran down the stairs. He couldn't leave things like this. Flying down, he intercepted her at the bottom of the stairwell. She was breathing hard from running and crying. She beat her fists against his chest as he embraced her. She set her head against his shoulder and cried.

The music changed again and Clark looked at Lois. "It's now or never," Elvis sang, and Clark had to agree with him. He tilted her chin up and closed his eyes, kissing her like everything inside him told him he should. Fireworks exploded in his nerve endings.

This is what a kiss should feel like, he thought. *Two people becoming one.* She pulled him towards her, closer, deeper. She wanted this as much as he did, he realized. His heart began to sing a tune he had never heard before. The tune of desire, of passion, of love. He wanted more of her, all of her. There was no going back. For this one moment, she was his. Forever, he would be hers.

She pulled away after a minute and grinned. Happy, with no regrets. Never in his life had anyone looked at him with such affection, such longing. She wanted him. *Him!* Grabbing his

hand, she took him back to the dance floor. He followed her lead. There was no Lois or Clark, no Lucy or Kal, just Ultra Woman and Superman. Woman and man. Her and him. Here and now. Wherever she went, he'd follow willingly.

They started swaying to the music again. He could live with that one last kiss, he thought, until Elvis starting singing "Burning Love". He forgot they were surrounded by people and that she was another man's wife. All the unpleasant stuff just faded away. One glance from her, the yearning in her eyes finally matching his, and their lips were locked together again.

He thought that the first kiss had been a fluke. No kiss could be as wonderful or tantalizing as that kiss. That was until the second kiss and the third and the fourth. There would be no end. All her kisses drove him to distraction, wild with desire. He felt like he had the first time he discovered he could fly. Free. Like a rocket headed for the moon. This woman was his rocket fuel.

Clark had no idea how long they had been kissing when he realized they were no longer standing on the ground, but floating in the air above the heads of the other dancers. He looked at her and she at him, then she laughed. A full throated laugh. It perplexed him, until he heard the lyrics *Come fly with me, let's fly, let's fly away*.

She took hold of his hands and floated in the air, spinning them around, dancing on air. It was only at that moment that he realized he wasn't controlling them, she was. Her pleasure was making them float. *Her!* Sam was going to kill him. Death would be worth it after this. He pulled her into his arms and lowered them towards the floor, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Superman!" she gasped. "It's Miranda! We've got to stop her."

Superman had no idea who or what Ultra Woman was talking about, he could only stare at her. He didn't want to stop anyone else tonight. He didn't want to break this spell. He just wanted to kiss her again and again.

Looking at his face, Lois gave a decisive nod. "Got it. It's already too late for you. I'll stop her!" Ultra Woman stepped away from him, only to realize they were still in mid-air and starting to gather attention from the other people on the dance floor. She let go of Superman's hand and flew past one of Perry's undercover police officers and stole his handcuffs. Then she landed in front of Miranda, who was dressed as Superwoman.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ultra Woman asked her.

"Just giving out free samples of my new perfume." Miranda held up her perfume bottle, but Ultra Woman snatched it away from her before she could be spritzed.

"*Revenge*? I've already tried it, thanks. It's not for me." Ultra Woman tossed the bottle to Superman who was hovering behind her, wondering what she was doing. He sniffed the perfume and made a face. Ugh, it smelled like cat urine.

"Actually, I call it *Animal Magnetism*, but I like *Revenge* better. Mind if I steal the name?" Miranda asked as Ultra Woman handcuffed her.

Without responding Ultra Woman flew the woman back to Perry's security team, who stood there with their jaws agape.

"I'd like to make a citizen's arrest. This is Miranda. No last name. She sprayed her love potion made with pheromones around the ballroom tonight. Thankfully, Superman and I were immune."

"Thankfully," the undercover policeman said with a sarcastic grin.

Superman handed them the bottle without speaking. Love potion? Pheromones? It explained the cat urine smell. He himself was doubtful about their immunity though.

Ultra Woman turned back to him with a smile and murmured, "Let's split."

Superman nodded, still unable to speak. Were these emotions he felt real, or just a result of being drugged? Lois took off into the air and hovered above the police officers until he joined her. She held out her hand, which he willingly took and they zipped out of the ballroom to whoops and cheers. He was never going to hear the end of this; so much for the months of dates he had endured. At least she was in disguise. She stopped in mid-air above the city and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Lois, if we're under the influence of a love potion…"

"Not Lois, Ultra Woman," she whispered into his ear.

"Ultra Woman, please, if we are under a spell…"

"Who cares?" she whispered, kissing him once more. "Anyway, small doses of *Revenge* didn't seem to affect Kal, but maybe *Animal Magnetism* does."

He'd have to agree with her there. But if pheromones weren't interfering with his judgment, what was? "I'm taking you home."

"Stay with me tonight," she murmured, kissing down his neck. She definitely wasn't immune to the pheromones, and he was beginning to doubt his own willpower as her nibbling on his neck brought out feelings he had never dreamed existed inside him.

Tentatively, Superman pried her arms from around his neck and took her hand. "Come on."

Less than a minute later they were standing in her living room. Sam was waiting for them, his arms crossed. *Just what I need*, Clark thought. Sam raised an eyebrow at them both flying into the room.

"Go to bed, Ultra Woman," Superman said, turning her towards her bedroom and patting her on the bottom. She turned around and leaned her entire body onto him, kissing him so thoroughly that he felt it down to his toes.

She giggled and then, out of the sight of Sam, crooked her finger for him to follow her. He waved with a smile.

Sighing, Clark turned to Sam. "We got dosed with a pheromone perfume at the party. I needed to get her out of there."

Sam just shook his head. "That's actually not why I'm waiting for you. Although I distinctly warned you about no flying after mid-October."

Clark groaned. He felt like he was about to get the wrath of bringing a teenage daughter home two hours late.

"I wanted to return this to you," Sam continued, holding up the plastic bag with the cotton ball in it.

Clark wasn't expecting that. "Did you get the information you needed?" he asked, taking the bag.

"No." Sam shook his head. "Lucy no longer bleeds. I pricked her finger the other day for a sample and it healed before any blood escaped. We'll have to wait and see if her powers remain, diminish, or grow stronger after the baby's born."

Clark exhaled and leaned against the sofa. "Thanks."

"I wanted you to know that the sample was somewhere safe," Sam said with a nod, turning towards his bedroom. "Good night."

"What? No riot act?" Clark was surprised.

Sam paused. "You are both adults. You'll regret your actions tomorrow and that will be punishment enough. And, as she reminds me daily, I'm not her father."

"Is everything all right, Sam?" Clark asked. Sam seemed more terse, but strangely not because of him for a change.

"Lucy's mad at me. I told her about something that happened before Lois disappeared and, of course, she sided with my daughter. She'll forgive me eventually, I'm sure." Sam waved good night and went down the hall.

Clark went into the kitchen and set the bag in the sink. He used his heat vision to melt both the plastic bag and cotton ball, blowing out the leftover flame.

He should go home, Clark told himself. He sighed, leaning against the counter. He didn't know if it was the effects of the pheromone perfume or something else, but his apartment was the last place he wanted to be at this moment. Especially if he knew Lois was waiting for him, wanting him, in the next room. He

buried his face in his hands. 'Go home,' his inner voice warned. 'She's someone else's wife.' He closed his eyes and relived that kiss on the dance floor. When he opened his eyes, he was standing at her bedroom door. He opened it and went inside.

***

Lois rubbed her temples again. Her head was throbbing and it had nothing to do with the pheromone perfume she had been dosed with the night before. Everyone in the newsroom wanted to know about Ultra Woman, *everything* about Ultra Woman. It was like the day had Superman arrived, all over again.

She and Clark had come so far in their friendship over the past four months, only to end up right where they had started. The sexual tension had returned. Terrific. Lois closed her eyes, trying to block out the noise in the conference room and beyond. Memories of dancing with Clark the previous night slipped back into the forefront of her mind.

Her body moving with his.

His body moving with hers.

The deep breathing.

The sweat.

The moaning.

The pleasure.

Skin against skin.

Again and again and again.

The kisses that had started at her mouth and… she released a slow, steady breath.

Lois knew she would never be able to listen to Elvis again without thinking of Clark, without craving *this* Clark's touch. Ever.

Cat had slid into the seat next to her as she sat down for the morning meeting. "Did Clark say anything to you about Ultra Woman?"

"No," Lois repeated for the hundredth time. "If you want to know about her, ask him."

"Wonder where he is this morning?" Cat purred, looking around for him.

"India. Train derailment," Lois replied shortly.

"Yeah, right."

Lois rolled her eyes, picked up the TV remote in the center of the table and turned on MNN.

Superman arrived on the scene about six a.m. EST, shortly after the derailment and has been working nonstop to help save as many of the passengers, many of whom were buried in mud, as can be saved.

She clicked off the TV.

Ralph finally arrived at the meeting. "Okay. People. This Ultra Woman person is our only story. Is she from Krypton? If not, where did she come from? Is she here to stay? What is her relationship with Superman? Details, people. I want the details. Where did they go after the mayor's party? What is her secret identity? He had one, so we can assume she does too. Who's talking to Clark?"

"Clark told me when I gave him the invitation that were he ever to talk about his date, I would get the exclusive," Cat announced.

"Good, Cat, you tackle Clark when he gets back from India."

"Gladly," she purred.

Lois rolled her eyes. Lucky Clark.

"Lucy, what are you working on?"

"Clark called me at the crack of dawn this morning, before he left for India, told me about Miranda and asked me to follow the money. Find out who was financing her," she replied. That seemed like as good a place to work as any.

"Obviously, he has all the answers we need for our top story on Ultra Woman. Let's hope someone else doesn't beat us to the scoop because our ace reporter doesn't want to talk about his private life."

Lois bit her tongue so the words she wanted to scream at him didn't emerge. Slime.

"Photos! People, did any of you actually remember to bring a camera with you to the mayor's party?"

Silence.

"Great! Biggest news since Superman and we don't even have a photo. Mr. Olsen!" Ralph gasped, taking a couple of steps back. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Lois glanced up and saw James enter the room. He threw five photographs on the table. "I took some pictures, Ralph. Hope they help."

She grabbed the closest one to her and examined it. Ultra Woman was flying Miranda to the security team. Ultra Woman didn't look half bad in the photo. She passed it to Cat. Someone passed her another photo. Ultra Woman and Superman were holding hands and hovering in mid-air above the police and Miranda. She glanced over at James. "Great shot." She smiled as her stomach fell. He returned her smile.

Another photo eventually got passed her way. In this one, Ultra Woman was dancing with Elvis Perry. She laughed and shook her head. Another photo showed her and Superman — the right one — dancing. Ultra Woman and Superman were looking at one another with intense expressions, but luckily no lip action. When the last photo circled around to her, she wanted to tear it to pieces. It showed her slugging the jerk who wouldn't let her leave the dance floor. Her punch wasn't that hard… not Super Strength hard, but this photo showed definite air beneath his heels. Super. She pressed her lips together and raised an eyebrow at James with a shake of her head.

"What! Not one photo of Superman kissing Ultra Woman! That's the story, people."

"This isn't the *Daily Whisper*, Ralph. Superman's love life is a sidebar at best," corrected Mr. Olsen. "Celebrity gossip is not front page news at the *Daily Planet*." Yea, Jimmy!

After the meeting, James stopped by her desk. "You didn't like the photos, did you?" he asked.

"James, they were amazing! What I didn't like was you going back on your promise of not publishing photos that you took of your friends, like Clark, in your paper."

He dropped an envelope on her desk. "I hope this eases your anger at me. These were the ones I didn't give to Ralph." It was a thick envelope. He had written: *For Clark, Private* across the front.

"James? You in the habit of following Clark about on his dates?" she asked quietly. "That could be hazardous to your health."

"Oh, I wasn't photographing him, per se. Actually, I didn't even recognize Clark until they started flying about the dance floor. He was wearing this full mustache. I was photographing her." James slid into the seat next to Lois with a sigh. "Ultra Woman is amazing, Lucy. You should have seen her. Beautiful, full of joy, laughter, and spunk. From the moment I first saw her until she left, I couldn't stop taking photos of her."

"May I?" she asked, indicating the envelope of photos. James nodded.

"I know she won't have anything to do with me, because she's obviously head over heels in love with Superman. But I'll be happy to admire her from afar." He sighed dreamily.

"Sounds like you got a good dose of *Revenge*… er… *Animal Magnetism*, yourself."

"Excuse me?" James was confused.

Lois looked quickly through the photos and pulled out one from near the bottom with Ultra Woman confronting Miranda. "From what Clark told me on the phone this morning, this blonde Superwoman, Miranda, sprayed the party guests with a pheromone perfume called *Animal Magnetism* that made people lose their inhibitions and fall in love."

James looked excited. “So Ultra Woman might not be in love with Superman after all, but just under *Animal Magnetism*’s spell. I might have a chance?”

Lois patted him on the arm. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up, James. It doesn’t create feelings that weren’t there to begin with, it just loosens people’s natural mental barriers to those feelings, according to Ultra Woman. Evidently she’s met up with this Miranda person before.” She stopped at a photo of Ultra Woman and Superman in a tight passionate embrace. She covered her face. Had they really made out like that in public? She gulped. “It looks like she and Superman have some pretty powerful feelings there,” she said, more to herself than James.

“Yeah. I was surprised Clark would act like that in public,” he replied. “He’s going to have tabloid reporters hounding him around again.”

“Maybe he thought no one would recognize him because of the mustache,” she surmised. “You, Clark, Cat, Perry, everyone got to go to the party of the year and I stayed home handing out candy to the three kids from our building.” She lowered her voice. “I guess that’s what us old married folks do.”

James laughed. “Maybe you and your husband can go together next year.”

Lois looked down at the ring Clark had given her, twisting it around on her finger. *Her husband.* “I doubt it.” She was going to keep Clark and Kal far apart. If her Clark ever saw these photos, *Revenge* or no, she’d be dead meat and so would this Clark.

“I’m sure Perry will make it an annual party after the success of this year.”

“Kal’s not much of a dancer.”

“Oh.” James seemed curious. “His name is Cal? Is that short for Calvin?”

Lois smiled. “No, K-A-L.”

“Kal-El? He’s not from around here, is he?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Far, far away.” She glanced at James; he was staring at her hands, her ring and the way she was twisting it around her finger. She stilled her hands. “So, James, you never told me, how you dressed for the party. What superhero did you go as?”

“I was Clark Kent,” he murmured, glancing away.

“Oh. You went as Superman, too.” She nodded.

“No. Clark Kent. I wore a suit and glasses, wore my hair pulled forward over my forehead like him. Any reporter as good as he is counts as a hero in my book.”

Lois’s jaw dropped. “Do you mind if I tell him about your costume?” she whispered, leaning forward. “Because that’s quite a compliment. He’d be honored that you think that way. Between you and me, James, I think you intimidate him a little bit.”

“*I* intimidate *him*?” James scoffed.

“Well, you do own the *Daily Planet;* you’re so young and have accomplished so much. Plus, what you say here goes. You’re his boss’s boss. Good job, knocking Ralph down a peg this morning by the way.”

“You should really treat him with more respect, Lucy. He is your boss, too.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Yes, he’s my boss, I’ll grant you that. But I only respect people who’ve earned it. Ralph hasn’t earned it.”

“Do you think you could do a better job?” he asked, out of the blue.

Lois thought about her dream from the other night. It had been her second day as editor of her *Daily Planet*. “Yes. Yes, in fact, I do.”

She nodded with certainty, then she remembered how annoyed her Clark had been with her for dismissing his story. He had stopped talking to her. She missed him so much, and then last night at the party… the baby kicked her and she set her hand on her stomach.

“But I don’t want it,” Lois told James. “All that stress, long hours. Ugh. I don’t sleep enough as it is.” She smiled wearily at him. “It’s hard on any marriage. Plus, I’d miss my friends. My friends who go to super parties and don’t invite me. I really should get new friends.”

James laughed. “I’ll invite you to the next shindig I go to. I promise.”

“No, please, don’t. I was only joking. I’m really not shindig material.” She really couldn’t wear an evening gown and be unstylish, baggy Lucy at the same time. “And if that’s what happens at just your run-of-the-mill costume party, I think I’m safer at home.” She shivered for added effect. “Who knows what I would have done if I had been exposed to that perfume?” She thought of that kiss on the stairwell; that wasn’t because of any pheromone perfume. That had been her, Lois, with all her wits intact. “I get lonely sometimes and miss him so much… Kal’s a jealous man, James. Very jealous.” She glanced down at the pile of photographic proof of her cheating. “Best if I stay home.”

James nodded and wandered off.

Alone for the first time since she arrived at work, Lois’s mind returned to the night before. To Clark kissing her. To her kissing him. What had gotten into her? She knew it was wrong. Everything inside her told her it was wrong, but then why had it felt so right? Like they were two souls joining into one? As if they were made to fit together. And they had fit together so well.

No! She fit with her Clark… Not *this* Clark. It was wrong. Very wrong. Yet, she was drawn to him. Craved him. Longed to be with him again. To kiss him again. To have him touch her again. She hadn’t had that in so long. Memories of her dimension were wonderful, but they were just that: memories.

She’d felt the powerful pull this Clark had on her, back when she had met him that first time and kissed him that first time. He wasn’t hers then either. Only this time, she was the one who wasn’t available. No, she hadn’t been available then either. Neither of them had been. Neither of them were available now. His Lois was still out there, waiting for him to rescue her. What had she done? Her head began to throb again.

Where in the hell was H.G. Wells and why hadn’t he come to take her home after the murder trial? This was all his fault.

***

Clark didn’t arrive at the Planet until mid-afternoon. He snuck in and slipped into the chair next to Lois’s desk, wearing the mustache from the night before. She glanced up and suddenly he was there, and she gasped.

Lois reached out and touched his fake mustache with a smile, remembering how kissing him with it felt so different — ticklish at first, but not bad. But then her hand fell as she gazed into his eyes, the pain she saw there stabbing at her. Clark must know, as she did, that it never should have happened and it never could happen again, no matter how much they wanted it to.

“So, how bad is it?” he whispered, after clearing his throat.

“Very. Cat’s going to pounce on you as soon as she sees that you’re back.”

“Great.” Sarcasm dripped from that one word.

“Ultra Woman is the top story. No one was able to find out anything, so far as I can tell. They’re banking on the exclusive you promised Cat,” she said, pulling open her purse and passing him the package of photos. “James took some pictures last night. These are your personal set. We should burn them as soon as possible.”

Clark opened the envelope, glanced at a photo and then closed it again. “Whoa!” He blanched.

“Bad, huh?”

“I’ll look at these later,” he said, tucking them into his pocket.

“Recommended.”

“I can come over about eight and we can look at them

together," he suggested with the hint of a teasing smile.

"Ha-ha. Very funny. Not without a chaperone, big boy." She looked at him over the top of her glasses. "Not alone, anyway."

"I can't stop thinking about… her… Ultra Woman." He sighed. "She took my breath away."

She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. "Stop. Stop it, now. I am *married* to Kal. I always will be." She looked into his eyes with the yearning she still felt from the night before. "Ultra Woman will never return."

"I'll miss her," he whispered, looking deep into her eyes. "I already do."

Lois melted under his gaze. "She misses you, too, Clark." Then she pressed her lips together and turned away. "Which is why she can never return."

***

Just to get everyone off his back, Clark gave Cat an exclusive interview about Ultra Woman an hour later. Cat had started off with the basics: Ultra Woman's secret identity, where she had grown up. He smiled and jokingly said that if he told her, it wouldn't be a secret any more. She asked if he had x-rayed under her mask and recognized her. He told her the truth, that he had never even thought about doing that.

He had to come up with a backstory for her of some kind. Apparently, she was also from Krypton. Her parents had also sent her to Earth as a baby, same as his.

He didn't want his dimension to learn about New Krypton; if it ever got out that he was keeping its existence a secret, it would validate all of Tempus's claims about him. He didn't need that.

Cat then moved on to some personal questions regarding their relationship. He said Miranda's perfume had obviously affected them and made them lose control like the others at the party. Ultra Woman had decided that they needed to take a break from each other for a while and see how they felt without the influence of the love potion.

At her prodding, he began with the cover story — that he agreed it was a smart move to take a break from their relationship. All new relationships need time at the beginning. Blah. Blah. Blah.

From across the room, he heard Lois's laugh ring out and it caused a stabbing pain in his heart to know that she would never be his. The pain on his face caused Cat to reach out for his arm.

"She's my destiny," he whispered. "I had her for one brief moment and now she's gone." Then he blinked his eyes, realized to whom he was speaking and begged her not to quote him. Pleaded with her.

Cat just smiled like the Cheshire cat who had gotten a bowl of cream. He told her that he was still suffering under the effects of the perfume and wasn't in total control of his feelings for Ultra Woman, but that he would be better tomorrow.

"Of course," she told him, not believing a word of it.

He worried for about thirty seconds about what Lois would think when she read whatever Cat decided to write, if she hadn't been listening to the interview already. Then Clark remembered that she already knew everything he had told Cat. She knew that he loved her and would do anything for her. She knew that he was suffering because he couldn't have her. But they both knew it wasn't meant it to be. And once again, he had to deal with that reality, alone. Kal had the perfect life and his own life sucked.

After Cat left to type up her story, his mind drifted to a conversation he and Lois had had while walking to work the other morning.

"Clark." She paused to take a sip of her smoothie.

"Hmmm." He hadn't really been paying attention. This was when she liked to tell him about what was happening in the other dimension. He usually only listened with half an ear to her incessant ramblings about Kal, just happy to hear her voice.

"Which is real? This life here with you or that life in my dreams with the other you? You know, the man you call Kal?" She looked at him with wide eyes over her straw.

He shook his head. "Excuse me?" Had she just referred to Kal as the 'other' him? Had Lois been teasing him?

"That dream life, I know in my mind it is supposed to be my real life, but…" She hesitated, not wanting to voice what she was feeling.

"But what?"

"But this life, here with you. *This* life *feels* real."

"They are both real, Lois. Are you feeling all right?" He placed a hand to her forehead.

"I'm feeling fine, Clark. It's just sometimes, I get a little confused. It's as if I have amnesia and you are just treating me as a friend until I get my memory straight. But every night in my dreams, I remember a little more about what our life was like before the accident."

"What accident?" he asked, trying to understand.

"Exactly! Was there an accident that wiped away my memories?" She looked at him expectantly, like her life depended on his answer.

He thought about what she was saying. She did sound a little spacey that morning. "You say that I'm 'just treating you as a friend' as opposed to what? Are we not friends?"

"Yes, of course we're friends. Best friends." She smiled. "You are the only person I can trust in this wacky world." She took hold of his arm.

"Then?" Where was she going with this?

"Oh. It's nothing. I'm probably being crazy."

"That, I'll agree with." He grinned.

She socked him in the arm, but then was quiet for a full block. Lois was never quiet. "Well, as opposed to more than friends."

He smiled at her. "We *are* more than just friends, Lois, if that's what you're wondering. You're the only person in Metropolis I would lie for."

"Would you lie to me, Clark?"

"I hope not, Lois." Had he lied to her? Not that he could recall.

"Are you the man of my dreams?" she asked, looking at him expectantly. His heart skipped a beat, doing that flip-flop that only she could make it do. She was certainly muddled. She must not have gotten enough sleep.

"I would like nothing more than to be the man of your dreams, Lois, but—" That's when he heard the alarm bells — an apartment building was on fire. They needed his help. He hadn't even needed to explain.

"Go! Go!" She urged him.

"We'll talk more about this later," he told her, leaving a kiss on her cheek.

But with their crazy lives, they hadn't gotten back to her strange confusion of that morning.

Was that why she had wanted to kiss him up on the roof? Because, for some reason, she was confusing him and Kal? She wasn't bewildered anymore, it seemed. She had told him straight out that they could no longer be alone together. He had gone from the only man she could trust in Metropolis to persona non grata. Or… Clark swiveled around in his chair to look at her and swallowed. Was it that she could no longer trust herself with him?

Clark pondered this for a minute. Or two. Or five. Then he tried to shake the thought from his head. She was married to Kal, not him. His life as Superman would be over if it ever got out that he was even fantasizing about another man's wife. With a sigh, he turned back to his computer to type up his story on the Indian train derailment.

***

Clark sat up in bed. He had been tossing and turning all night, thinking about Ultra Woman. A week had passed since the party

and he still could not get her out of his mind. She coursed through his veins like superheated blood. He clicked on the light next to his bed and buried his face in his hands. He glanced up at his loft and then forced himself to lie back in bed.

"Go to sleep," he told himself. "She will never be yours." He repeated this mantra every night, but for some reason, this night it didn't work. When he closed his eyes, he could feel her lips brushing against his. An instant later, he was up in his loft.

He shifted a few boxes out of the way. One of these days, he was going to have to put his Lois's belongings in storage. Clark liked having them close. He flipped open one of the boxes, pulled out a sweater, and held it up to his nose. He could still smell a hint of her perfume. Perfume.

He set the sweater back in the box and opened the middle drawer of his extra dresser. He pulled out the envelope of photos that he had put away a week ago, knowing that if he looked at them, he wouldn't be able to stay away from her. It was too soon and they were both still too vulnerable. He didn't want to think about Ultra Woman. At work, it was near impossible to avoid the topic. Everyone still wanted to know about her… about them.

Ralph asked him daily if he had heard from Ultra Woman. When was she going to return? Clark could only shrug. His public heartache had been tabloid fodder since Cat's exclusive had hit the papers after Halloween. The headline read "*Metropolis Falls in Love with Ultra Woman"* — a play on Miranda's love-potion story. Cat's sidebar headline had been"*Ultra Woman Breaks Clark Kent's Heart."* The word 'destiny' had indeed come up in the article; she also mentioned the possibility of him still being affected by the potion, but blew it off as speculation. Perry would have edited it out. But Ralph was no Perry.

He could no longer spend any time with Lois, alone or otherwise, as all women in his life were under public scrutiny. When he tried to walk with her to work one morning, the slimy tabloid reporter, Leo Nunk, had followed them. Apparently, Lois knew Nunk from the other dimension, so it took some convincing and super speed not to let Nunk provoke her into punching him. Lois was becoming more wild with this forced separation. She was having as hard a time battling her private feelings for him as he was. He had always been her "Kal patch," and for a week they could have only a few guarded conversations at work. She wouldn't speak to him on the telephone for more than a couple of minutes. She said it felt more illicit — even if they were talking about mundane things — to speak to him that way. He could tell that she was going through Clark withdrawal.

Clark flew with the pictures to his dining room table and pulled them out of the envelope. Mr. Olsen obviously had it bad, poor fellow. Clark shook his head. He didn't know what it was about Lois, but she collected suitors like some men collected baseball hats.

In a photo of them eating, she was laughing. He couldn't remember what he had said. Clark closed his eyes. He could see Ultra Woman laughing, then she picked up a napkin and wiped his mouth. Oh, right. He had gotten mustard on his fake mustache. That was endearing. He opened his eyes.

Wait a second. When had they gotten sprayed with the perfume? He didn't remember seeing Miranda during the first half of the evening. He picked up the photos and quickly scanned them. There! While they had been dancing, after he returned from the diner, there was a blonde Superwoman that could have been Miranda. But that would mean… he swallowed.

That would mean that Lois had tried to kiss him, up on the roof, before she had been spritzed by Miranda. He set down the photos; that couldn't be right. Perhaps she had gotten an earlier dose as well. Yes. He couldn't believe she would want to kiss him without help. No, it was the perfume that drove her to accept his advances. And since then, she was having difficulties rebuilding that wall between them. If he believed otherwise, he would go crazy.

What was he thinking? He was already going crazy. Up at three a.m., looking at photos of a woman he could not have. He picked up the pile of photos. He should have moved them to Smallville at his first opportunity, so temptation wouldn't be so close. As he shoved the photographs back into the envelope, a couple fell to the floor.

There was one — not of Ultra Woman, but of Lucy. She was sitting at her desk, staring off into space. He wondered who she was thinking about? Kal, of course; who else? He took all the photos and looked at each one to see if there were any other Lucy photos. There were a total of three. Mr. Olsen must have added them by mistake. The other two photos of Lucy were taken when she was out of the office. She was at a restaurant. Mr. Olsen must have taken her to dinner. A part of Clark didn't like the idea that there were aspects of Lois's life he didn't know about. She was smiling in one and in the other she was looking off, over James's shoulder.

Clark went back to the photograph of her at work. He pulled that one out of the pack. He would keep that one here.

Flying back to the loft, he returned the photos to the middle drawer. When he dropped in the envelope, he pulled out the Ultra Woman mask. He closed his eyes and held it up to his face. It smelled like she had spent all night dancing, yet the material was cool and soft, just like Lois's skin. His eyes flashed open and he dropped the mask back in the drawer. Yep, the Ultra Woman suit would be going to Smallville, too.

Clark dove off the loft and stopped just before hitting his bed. He fluffed his pillow, turned off the light, and lay down on his belly to sleep. He tossed and turned and tossed some more. There was no way he could sleep with Lois pulsing through his veins. He hadn't been to Smallville in a few weeks and he should get that stuff out of his apartment. The sooner, the better.

Three minutes later he was showered, dressed in the blue suit, and lifting off with the first set of boxes from his loft. Maybe he'd even set up a Lois Lane Memorial room for his Lois with all of her stuff. He would have to get a second security system, because if anyone broke into his Smallville house and saw that room… Clark shook his head. He didn't know what would happen, but he imagined it would be something similar to Lana Lang's worst nightmares for him.

He was long gone when his home phone rang and rang. His machine picked up.

"*Clark! Clark? Where are you? I had another nightmare. John Doe is Tempus!"*

Shortly before five o'clock, Superman returned from delivering and unpacking the last set of boxes. The alarm was set and the Ultra Woman photographs and suit were locked away in a safe his parents had installed when he was young. They had never used it, but they had wanted it just in case.

It felt good to have all that stuff out of his apartment, out of his easy reach. He went to the kitchen for some orange juice and found that photograph of Lucy staring off into space, her glasses hanging from her fingertips, and a hint of a smile on her lips, still sitting on his table. Mr. Olsen was much too good of a photographer, catching her unaware like that. In this photo, she looked more like Lois than she did like Lucy. Clark really should remind her about not taking off her glasses at work.

A blinking red light caught his attention. Someone called while he was out? He could think of only one person, but he pressed the play button anyway. Her anxious tone made the hairs on his arms stand on end.

Clark stumbled backwards and sat down on his couch. Tempus! A man he hadn't even known had tried to ruin Clark's life and kill him for his own fame and glory. Clark hated him down to a cellular level.

John Doe? John Doe? John Doe! The third party candidate in the presidential elections in her dimension. It might as well have been a bad dream with all the help he could offer from this dimension. If Clark went to her, all he could do was comfort her, listen to her fears. But there was not a single thing either of them could actually do about it. They were here and Tempus was in her dimension. That was a matter for Kal to take care of.

A large part of him struggled with the need to fly to Lois's apartment, but Clark held it at bay. He could not trust himself alone with her; she was too much of a temptation, especially vulnerable as she was… as he was. If they kissed again, Clark doubted either of them could stop. Once was a mistake, twice… twice was a decision. He swallowed, but he could not just ignore her message. It made him feel like a cad, but he would call.

"Hello?" Lois sounded groggy with sleep.

"Hi, Lois."

"Clark! Oh, Clark. Why didn't you—"

"You know why, Lois," he interrupted. "Are you feeling any better?"

"No. Clark! Tempus has brainwashed everyone in my dimension into thinking that he's a darn nice guy," she said, panic in her voice.

"In twenty-four hours? How?"

"Less than that. I know two things: Tempus is evil and John Doe is 'a darn nice guy'," Lois told him.

"Wow. Even you? What are you and Kal doing to stop him?" He sighed to himself, knowing this was another fruitless conversation which helped her vent.

"We're still trying to work out how he's doing it. But he's gone from nothing in the polls to beating Garner in less than six hours. I don't know how we'll figure this out in time. Election day is tomorrow."

"Today, actually," he corrected. "Ralph wants me covering the Madsen defeat. His words, not mine." He glanced at the clock. "I'd better be going."

"What about Tempus?"

"What about him, Lois? We're here. He's there. If you have any ideas on how we can help Kal without letting Tempus know you're here and pregnant with Superman's child, I'm willing to listen." He paused, and sensed her growing anger as she ground her teeth and her pulse quickened. "I'll check in with you later, Lois."

"Okay. I'm sorry I bothered you," she whispered.

Clark inwardly groaned. "Lois. Don't think that way. You know you're not a bother. I'll always listen to your worries. I'm just trying to set realistic, achievable goals here."

"What am I to you then?" Lois snapped.

"My sister-in-law." He hated to put it so bluntly, but it was true.

She didn't say anything for a moment. "I know. It's just that it doesn't feel that way."

"We shouldn't talk about this," he murmured, his heart breaking with every word.

"The more we don't talk about it, the larger it becomes."

"I love you. I want you. I would be there, right now, holding you, kissing you, making love to you *if* you weren't married to Kal. *In love* with Kal," he retorted. "There, did that make things better?"

"No," she whispered. Great, he had made her cry.

"I'm sorry, Lois. Please forgive me. This is hard on me too. We'll get through this. Something will snap you back to reality, return you to your old self," Clark said with optimism he neither felt nor believed. "We just have to find out what it is."

"What about you?"

He sighed. "I know my fate. I've always known it."

"Oh, Clark…" Sympathy infused her tone. He couldn't listen any more.

"Goodbye, Lois."

***

Clark was glad for one thing: it was a busy news week. Charlton Heston won the reelection in a landslide. An earthquake in California and a Midwest snowstorm kept Superman out of Metropolis for three days. Life was easier for him if he kept busy; being Superman kept his mind off Lois. And it kept him physically away from her as well.

He spent his nights in Smallville, enjoying the silence the old farmhouse afforded him, yet surrounded by his Lois's things. Clark had cleared out his old bedroom, donating anything he could to charity, but keeping a few old mementoes. He hung up her clothes in the closet and placed her photos around the room. It almost felt like she was alive… like she could walk into the room at any moment.

Clark lingered over each item, thinking about how Lois would have looked in each piece of clothing. He knew it wasn't the healthy thing to do, but it was better to be in love with a dead woman than tempt the living into infidelity again, right?

He sent his stories to Ralph over the wire service. Every time he checked in with his editor, Ralph was only interested in one story: Ultra Woman. And Clark was forced to admit once more that he hadn't heard from her.

While he was away, Clark called Lois every morning and evening. She accused him of avoiding her and he couldn't deny it. She missed him. It didn't help that her dreams were filled with Tempus taking over her dimension. But at least the stress of Tempus distracted her from thinking about him. When he returned from California, Lois was almost back to her regular self, except for the dark circles growing under her eyes. She no longer looked at him with yearning from across the newsroom, for which he was eternally grateful.

It had been two weeks since the costume party, and Clark was finally able to get a full night's sleep in his own apartment. He still longed for Lois with his entire body and soul, but he knew how to live with unrequited love. It was quiet in Metropolis and Clark happily went to bed early. He still had plenty of sleep to catch up on.

***

Clark flew through the air. Someone was calling his name. Clearing the clouds, he could finally see her. Chained to a rock in the middle of the sea like Andromeda, a blindfold around her eyes, stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her long, deep brown hair blew in the wind. He could see her, but he could not reach her. The winds kept pushing him back.

Her voice called out to him. "Clark Kent. Please, save me. Hear me, Clark. Find me. Help me, Clark. Without you, I am dead."

The closer he came to the rock, the farther away it got, the softer her voice.

Suddenly, a bright light flashed from the heavens, striking her with a bolt of lightning.

"No!" Clark yelled, sitting up in bed. It was just a dream, a nightmare. Yet he was breathless and his hands shook. He covered his face with his hands.

He had had this dream before, but never had the woman been so near that he could see her face. It was Lois. Only it wasn't Lois. Lois didn't talk to him like that. It felt wrong. It was her, but not her all at once. She was in danger and he couldn't save her — that part of the dream was always the same. This time she had been hit by a lightning strike. That was new, different, more horrifying. Each time he had this dream, she called out to him to save her and he never could reach her in time.

Clark climbed out of bed and walked into his kitchen for a glass of water. He was leaning against his kitchen counter when he saw an angel descend from the heavens onto his patio. An angel dressed only in the top half of pajamas.

"Lois!" he gasped, rushing to her. "What are you doing here?"

"Clark," she could hardly speak his name as she entered his apartment. Her face was damp with tears and she collapsed against him. "He's gone. He's gone."

Clark picked her up and carried her back to his bed. Covering up her shivering body with extra blankets, he held her. Knowing she could only be speaking of Kal, but also knowing that she was too distraught to be questioned further. When she finally stopped sobbing, he asked, "Where has he gone, Lois?"

"He's lost in time," she murmured, turning around and resting her head against his bare chest. "Tempus tricked him into a time window and then it exploded." She started to cry again.

Clark felt her pain, but he could not sit there any longer with her so close, her hands holding him and her tears dripping down his bare chest. He felt naked in just his pajama shorts. "Excuse me, Lois." He slipped out from under her.

"Clark!" She reached out to him.

He swallowed and stepped into his closet. He returned a moment later, dressed in sweatpants and t-shirt. Then he sat down next to her. She grabbed hold of him again and pulled her towards her, burying her head in his chest once more. He resisted one more minute and then wrapped his arms around her once again.

When she was able, the whole story poured out. Lois explained about all the new reforms Tempus was enacting while turning himself into America's first dictator. She told him about how Andrus, the peacekeeper from the future, had asked Superman for his help in returning Tempus to the future for trial. How Tempus had tricked Superman and sent the time window spinning out of control. "I reached out for him, but Tempus held me back. I couldn't reach Clark and the window just sped away from me into oblivion. Then Andrus disintegrated and disappeared, like he no longer existed. Superman is gone and now our future is gone, too. I don't see how I'm ever going to get him back."

Lois looked up at him, her expression stormy. "How dare you sit there and look like him and not do anything to help. This is all your fault. If only you had helped earlier." She balled up her fist and punched him in the jaw. Then she collapsed against his chest, crying once more.

Clark sighed and rubbed his jaw. He looked down at her fist and x-rayed it, finding nothing broken. She was lucky. That was some punch. Not that it hurt, but he had certainly felt it, straight down to his heart. At least, she wasn't trying to kiss him, like she had the last time Kal died. He swallowed, trying to block those thoughts from his mind. He had no more resistance left. One kiss and he would be gone forever.

Eventually Lois fell asleep, nestled in his arms. Clark held her, his heart suddenly empty, feeling like a hollow shell of the man he had been before she had come to him that night. He knew she was distraught and did not mean any of the things she had accused him of. He needed to prove to her that he was a man she could believe in, who wouldn't let her down, ever again. Clark had no idea how he could ever prove that he was worthy of her.

She was still asleep when Clark left for work that morning. He called Sam and let him know where she was, having come to him in the middle of the night with another nightmare about Kal. He left out a pair of sweatpants for her to wear home, if she so desired.

Clark sat at work, going through the motions, not really feeling up to writing about anything that day. It was hard to work when he had left his heart at home. He kept looking at her desk, hoping beyond hope that she had pulled herself together enough to come in to work, but he knew he was just setting himself up for disappointment. He'd be lucky if Lucy ever showed up again. Without Kal, Lois would lose hope. Without hope, what reason would Lois find to care about what happened to her or what anyone thought about her?

He had to find a way to give Lois hope, if only for the sake of the baby, and in doing so he would prove that he was worthy of her. Worthy of being Superman. For that's what he was: *her* Superman. She may have created him in Kal's image, but it took Lois to make him Super. Compared to Kal's Superman, Clark was just a pale reflection. Especially since he knew he would someday be on his own again.

As he sat as his desk, enduring yet another lecture from Ralph, he saw a strange little man in a bowler hat come out of the elevator. His spirits lifted. H.G. Wells. Clark stood up from his desk, walked away from Ralph and up to Wells.

"Clark," H.G. Wells said. "Lois needs you."

Clark nodded. She sure did. "I just need to stop by my apartment and then we can go." The two men entered the elevator together.

***

Superman landed on the patio to his apartment. He zipped inside. Lois was sitting at his dining room table. It looked like she had just gotten out of bed.

"Clark!" She jumped up and ran into his arms. "Kal's still alive. H.G. Wells is looking for him, right now. He may still be alive."

"I know," he said, setting her down and stepping away from her. She was still only wearing a pajama top. "H.G. Wells is here."

"Here?"

"For me. He asked me to go to your dimension and help stop Tempus, while he is searching for… your Clark. Excuse me." He went into the bedroom, took a valise from the closet and started filling it with clothing.

Lois stood in the doorway, watching him. "Thank you, Clark."

Clark nodded as he went into the bathroom and returned moments later, brushing past her as he tried to go through the doorway. She smelled so nice and was wearing so little. "Please, Lois. Don't do this to me. Not now."

She took two steps back, enabling him to pass.

He went to his desk drawer and removed two photos he kept there. One was the photo of Lois that Mr. Olsen had taken and the other was the ultrasound photo — to remind him for whom he was fighting. He slipped these into the valise as well. Then he turned back to her. "Do you need a lift home?"

"Home?" she asked. He could see the hope filling her eyes.

"Lois Lane's apartment, here, in this dimension. That home," he corrected himself.

"Oh." She looked down at her pajamas and bare feet. "Yes, I guess I do." She walked up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He stood there for a moment and just stared at her, before wrapping his arms around her. "I'm doing this for you, you know."

"I know, Clark."

"I would do anything for you, Lois," he whispered, closing his eyes and placing his cheek next to hers. "Anything."

Her voice quivered as she spoke. "Clark, I may be better at faking it than you are, but—"

Clark cut her off with a kiss, lifting her into his arms. They were high above the city, before he came up for air.

"You shouldn't do that, Clark," Lois whispered, resting her head on his shoulder. "I'm a sucker for men who fly."

Clark smiled weakly.

A moment later, they landed in the living room of her apartment. He set her down and Lois leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Take care. I can't afford to lose another Clark."

"I know," he whispered, kissing her forehead at the hairline.

"I'll come back to you, Lois." A moment later he was gone.

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Chapter 4 — The Rescue of Mrs. Luthor

Author's Note: I have altered the timeline of the show in this chapter by moving Tempus's John Doe presidential bid to its correct spot between the *Ghosts* (October/Halloween 1996) and around the time of *Stop the Presses* (November 1996).

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Sam was sitting at the breakfast bar, drinking coffee, when Lucy walked in dressed for work.

"Good morning, Daddy," she hummed, kissing his cheek.

He stared at her as she grabbed a muffin off his plate and took a bite. Lucy hadn't called him Daddy since she learned of his involvement with Lex Luthor, and she certainly would never have kissed his cheek. She didn't look right. Too chipper.

"I'm starving this morning. The baby must be growing like a weed. Did Clark call? Do you know if he's picking me up today?" she asked him.

"Lucy, Clark's not here. He went to rescue your dimension from Tempus. Remember?" Sam tried to explain. But her eyes looked more drugged than puffy from crying. "Lucy, did you take any medicine? That wouldn't be good for the baby."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Daddy. Of course I haven't taken any medication." She took another bite of the muffin. "That's right. Clark is looking for Kal. Kal's my husband." Then she put her finger up to her lips. "Secret." This announcement did not seem to bother her in the slightest. Something was definitely wrong.

"Why don't you stay home today, sweetie? You look like you could use the rest," he encouraged.

"My, you are talking in riddles today, Daddy. I missed work yesterday and the day before and Ralph is a yeller. I don't want to be yelled at, so I'd better be on time today. With Clark out of town, someone has to go to work to cover for him." She lowered her voice. "Do you think anyone else has figured out he's really Superman?"

Sam took her arm and sat her down. "Sweetie, everyone knows he's Superman."

"Oh, I wonder why I thought it was such a big secret? Huh." She shrugged and took another bite of muffin. "Gosh, this is dry. Do we have any juice?"

Sam pointed at the fridge.

She jumped off her stool and went to get herself juice. "Maybe that's not the secret. That feels like the secret. Hmmm. Juice!" She poured them each a glass.

"Thank you, sweetie."

"I know what the secret is!" she squealed, causing him to spill his juice. "No one is supposed to know Clark is Kal, the father of my baby!" She threw up her hands in disbelief. "I cannot believe I forgot that was the secret."

"Clark is the father of your baby?" Sam gasped. He had told Sam that Kal was the father.

"Told you. Secret." She put her finger to her lips again.

Sam shook his head. She was obviously in shock. "Kal is Clark's brother, Lucy. His twin brother. They are not the same person."

"They aren't the same person?" She looked at him like he had grown an extra arm out his head. "No? Get out of here. I mean, I knew he had a split personality going on with Clark Kent and Superman and everything, but he's actually two people pretending to be one person with multiple personalities? This is front page material, Daddy. Thanks for the scoop."

"No, sweetie. Clark is Superman. But so is Kal. No, that did not come out right. How am I going to explain this to you?" Sam put his head in his hands. *Why* did he have to explain this to her? His head was beginning to throb.

"There are two Supermans?…. Supermannequins? Supermen? Supermen! Wow! Daddy, this is a bigger scoop than I thought possible. I better get to the Daily Planet right away and type this up or Lois Lane isn't the best investigative reporter this dimension has ever seen." She stopped and grinned. "And of course I am." She went to flip up her hair with her hand, but she only flipped air. "Daddy, when I did I cut my hair? I used to have such beautiful hair. Where did it go?"

"You got a haircut. You thought you were looking a little shaggy." Sam's mind raced. He was going to need backup. The only backup he had was in another dimension. "Crap."

Lucy gasped. "Daddy. Your language! Baby on board." She pointed to her belly.

"Sorry, sweetie." He took hold of her arms and sat her down at the couch. "I need your help. Can you tell Daddy who else knows about Kal? Wait, Moonbeam!" He ran to the red telephone and dialed. It rang off the hook, no answer. *Some psychic.* He returned to where Lucy was sitting on the couch. "Does anyone else in this dimension know about Kal?" He nodded encouragingly.

Lucy thought for a minute. "Mayson. Clark told Mayson. Of course, she didn't believe him. I mean, who would believe such a story. Hell, I don't. Oh! Maybe I should. I mean, Mayson blew up right after he told her. Is it possible that you can blow up if you don't believe everything Clark tells you?" She put her hand to her lips. "Wow! Superman is all powerful."

Mayson was not a viable option. They hated each other. "Anyone else, sweetie. Did you tell anyone else about Kal? Perry, perhaps? I know what good friends you are with the mayor." He nodded encouragingly at her.

"Did you know that before he became the mayor, he was my boss. True story," she said, pointing at him. "He's also half Elvis. Another true story. But no, I didn't tell Perry about Kal. I should. Kal is such a great guy. I should tell everyone." Tears started streaming down her face. "Why didn't I tell Perry? He's like my best friend, next to Clark, Kal, and Jimmy and you. I shouldn't forget about you. I really need some women friends."

"Jimmy? Jimmy who, sweetie? Did you tell Jimmy about Kal?"

Lucy smiled a giant smile. "Yeah, I did. Kal is so great I had to tell someone. Did I tell you that on the honeymoon, he—" She giggled, covering her mouth.

"I don't need to hear about your honeymoon, sweetie. Tell me more about Jimmy."

"You know Jimmy, Daddy." She pushed him on the arm and he stumbled across the room. "My boss James Olsen, publisher of the *Daily Planet*." She pointed up to the ceiling. "He has the penthouse apartment here. That Jimmy. Only he likes to be called James for some reason. He knows all about Kal. Well, he knows that Kal exists. Does that count?"

Sam stood up, rubbing his arm. Was she starting to develop super strength, too? That would be a bad combination if she were suffering from delusions and able to fly, as well.

"Lucy." He snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. "Lois." That seemed to get her attention. "Lois, sweetie."

"Sam. What's going on? Any news from Clark? And don't call me 'sweetie.' You haven't earned it."

Okay, Sam thought, calling her Lois was the key to her sanity. "Lois, I'm going upstairs to talk to James Olsen, publisher of the *Daily Planet*. Do you think you could wait here for me? I'll be right back." He used big hand gestures.

Lois looked him up and down. "Why are you treating me like a child, Sam?"

"Because you are delusional, Lois," he said bluntly. "Sorry, that came out rather harsh." But he could already see her anger growing.

"Delusional? *I'm* delusional?"

"Lois, think about Clark."

Lois shrugged. “What about him?”

“What do you think about him?” Sam asked.

“I think he’s a great guy, but he’s no Superman.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “Oh, that man. Those blue tights. Yummy!”

Oh, great. Delusional was back. “Lois, stay here. Wait for me, right here. Okay?” Sam ran out the door to the elevator and pushed the call button repeatedly until it arrived. “Penthouse.” He pushed the top floor button. When the doors opened he ran to the one door on this floor and started banging. “James Olsen? Mr. James Olsen?”

“Who’s asking?” A voice from an intercom asked.

“It’s Sam Lane, Lucy’s doctor. I need help and Clark is out of town. She’s gone into shock and I can’t control her.”

James Olsen opened his door. “What’s wrong with Lucy?”

“Kal, her husband, disappeared the day before yesterday. Clark went to find him, but the shock of losing Kal has sent Lucy over the edge. Yesterday, she was comatose; today, she’s delusional. Help me, please,” Sam begged.

“You’re a doctor, can’t you give her a sedative?” James suggested, grabbing his coat.

“No, I can’t.” Sam could think of two reasons a sedative would be a bad idea. One, the baby. Two, he didn’t think it would work with her current metabolism. “Please, hurry. I’ve left her alone in the apartment.” Then he fully realized that he had left her alone in the apartment. “Oh, crap! Meet me there!” Sam ran back to the elevator; luckily it was still there.

James was right behind him. “How did Kal disappear, again?”

Sam could never think on his feet like Lois could, but he certainly couldn’t tell this man the truth. “He has a top-secret job, hush hush. They informed her the day before yesterday about his disappearance.”

“Ralph went ballistic. He was talking to Clark and Clark just stood up and walked out of the newsroom. And then he didn’t come back. No word or anything. I’m glad to hear there was a good reason behind it. I’ve been trying to reach him since yesterday morning.”

The elevator arrived on the fifth floor and Sam and James rushed to 501, but the door was ajar. They walked inside but didn’t see her. Sam ran to her bedroom, then the bathroom; both rooms were empty.

“I left her on the sofa. If she gets out like that, all could be lost. Clark is going to kill me. Tear me limb from limb if anything happens to her.” Sam fell onto the sofa. “She’s got top-secret information up there.” He tapped his head. Not to mention the top-secret baby growing inside her belly.

“You know, I believe you, Dr. Lane. Where do you think she might have gone?” James asked.

Sam remembered her flying into the apartment on Halloween. “Anywhere. Clark is going to kill me. Wait! She was dressed for work. Maybe the Daily Planet. She said that since Clark was out of town, she had to cover for him at the paper.”

James shook his head. “She *is* delusional, if she thinks she could cover for Clark.” He fished into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. “I’ll drive down to the Planet and see if I can find her.”

***

Lois walked into the bullpen just in time for the morning meeting. She slipped into the conference room as the next to last person was closing the door.

“Okay, people. Has anyone found out where Clark disappeared to? He walked off the job the day before yesterday, and no one has seen him or Superman since. Anyone? Anyone?”

Everyone just shook their head.

“Lucy!” Ralph yelled, noticing her as she sat down. “Thanks for joining us. You know Clark better than anyone. Where is he?”

Lois started to cry. “He’s gone. Clark is gone. He went out the window and it just got smaller and smaller and smaller until it disappeared. I’ll never see him again!” The tears were streaming down her face.

“Something happened to Superman? This is front page stuff!” Ralph squealed with delight.

“What happened again, Lucy?” Cat asked, putting her arm around her. “You aren’t making sense.”

“I love him so much and I never got to tell him… he’s gone.” Her eyes focused and became cold. “Tempus did this! It’s all his fault,” she growled. “Oh, Clark!” She buried her head in her arms on the table.

“What? Tempus is back? This is huge! Oh, I can see the headlines now: *Superman Defeated By Tempus!*” Ralph spread his hands wide as if picturing the headline.

Lois’s head snapped up. “*What?!*” She glowered at Ralph. “What did you say? Kal is gone and all you can think about is your lousy headline?” Surprising everyone in the room, she dove across the table without touching it and tackled Ralph.

James Olsen opened the conference room door. “Lucy, *NO!”* He ran over to her and pulled her off her boss.

“You are so fired, Lucy! Get your stuff and leave this instant,” Ralph screeched with a cough. “Good riddance.”

Lois tried to pull herself out of James’s grasp, but the baby chose that moment to kick her. She grabbed her stomach and stumbled backward, knocking them both over.

“Give her a break, Ralph! Her husband disappeared and Clark went to find him,” James scolded, pulling himself and then Lucy off the floor. “She’s in shock from the grief. She wasn’t even supposed to be at work today.”

Ralph coughed. “You mean Superman’s not really gone? Tempus wasn’t involved?” He seemed disappointed.

James rolled his eyes, murmuring, “Lucy’s right. You really are an idiot.”

“Lucy’s married?” Jaxon gasped from the back of the room.

“Someone actually married her?” Cat scoffed, shaking her head in disbelief.

James put one of her arms around his neck and Barry Balson took her other arm and helped drag Lois out of the conference room. James sat her down in Clark’s chair.

“Barry, can you get her some water?”

“Right on it, boss.” Barry ran off.

“Lucy? Lucy, are you all right?” James asked, kneeling down in front of her so he could look her in the eye.

Lois glanced up, noticing him for the first time. “Has anyone heard from Clark? Is he back? Is there any news?”

James shook his head. “Lucy, if anyone can find Kal, Clark will.”

She nodded. “He promised me he would. And Superman doesn’t make promises he can’t keep.” She leaned her head upon his shoulder and wept.

***

Meanwhile in Lois’s home dimension…

Clark sat on Lois and Kal’s… Clark’s sofa. He had done it. He had captured Tempus, stopped him from blowing this dimension to smithereens, yet he still felt empty. Lois and Kal were typing up their story at the Daily Planet at that very moment. H.G. Wells was returning Tempus to the future.

Clark felt horrible. He had no willpower against Lois at all, even this stand-in Lois. He had almost kissed her and she had almost kissed him back. She looked and acted a bit different than the Lois hiding out in his dimension. He guessed he had just gotten used to her ‘Lucy’ look. Seeing her stylish and — well, he hadn’t noticed the little bit of weight she gained until seeing her compared to *this* unpregnant Lois — anyway, she reminded him again of the woman who had made him into Superman. Not the woman who made a super man. He buried his face in his hands.

He had lost any resistance he ever mustered against her that one night in October.

It was obvious, looking at the photos in this room and hearing how this Lois talked about her husband, how happy they were and how much they loved each other. And here he was, trying to steal this man's true wife and child for himself.

Clark knew the Lois he left back in his dimension would have to go home one day, so that this stand-in Lois could be returned to the correct spot in this dimension's timeline. He didn't need H.G. Wells to remind him that if the stand-in didn't return, the Lois in his dimension would cease to exist. It had been pure folly on his part to allow himself to fall for her — all over again — in the first place.

Martha Kent came downstairs and waved him into the kitchen. "Jonathan is lying down. He didn't get much sleep last night."

"I haven't slept in weeks," Clark sympathized.

She reached over and hugged him. "How is Lois?"

"Ecstatic now that she found Clark—"

"Not *that* Lois, Clark," she said, going to the fridge and pulling out a bottle of juice. "The Lois I sent to you this summer."

Clark had completely forgotten that Kal's mother knew about Lois's trip.

"A mess." He smiled weakly at his vague description.

"I bet."

"She talks about Kal… her Clark all the time. She really misses him. Oh, wait!" He zipped out to his overnight bag and returned with the photographs. He took one last look at them and then handed them to Martha. "Here. She'd want you to have them."

Martha gasped with delight. "Is this the baby?"

He nodded and pointed out the head, arms, and bottom. "This was at four months. The legs are tucked in on the other side. She's quite a little soccer player."

"Kicking already?" Martha was glowing. "Do you know for sure that it's a girl?"

"Just a feeling on Lois's part." He shrugged. "She won't let me…" He touched his glasses.

"No, probably not in the baby's best interest. We can wait."

"And, yes, it kicks Lois all the time." He nodded with a smile as he thought of the baby he considered his own. "And healthy. Lois tracked down Sam Lane and he's been her doctor. He's been keeping a good eye on her. Making sure she eats, sleeps, and behaves."

Martha laughed. "I can't believe she'd tolerate a leash."

"She's getting used to it now. Keeping the morning sickness under wraps was no fun." He explained about Lois's secret identity as Lucy El, wife of Kal-El, and flipped to the other photo.

"I've never seen her look so…" Martha searched for the right word. "Frumpy."

Clark laughed. "Well, she chose Lucy's baggy style to cover up the pregnancy and for comfort. We'll see how well it worked; she only just started to show in the last few weeks. I… we didn't need extra questions buzzing around the newsroom."

"Of course." Martha nodded. "I wish I could share these with Clark."

"No!" Clark said a tad too forcefully. "It's too late."

She looked at him with a raised brow and sat down at the table.

"She's six months pregnant," he tried to explain. "The baby's getting bigger by the day. I know Clark would take her back in any condition, but how would she explain that to everyone else? With everything the Lois stand-in has been through in the last five months, no one's going to believe that she's been hiding a baby too. Plus, this Lois obviously isn't pregnant, not six months pregnant." Clark stopped himself from rambling any more. He sat down next to Martha and tried not to drop his head into his hands in exasperation.

She took his hand in hers and patted it. "What makes you think you can try to pull a fast one on me, Clark Kent?"

His jaw hung open. His mom used to say that to him. His chin started to quiver, "Mom… Martha…" He swallowed. "I'm not holding Lois hostage."

"I'm glad to hear it. But…" She looked at him expectantly.

"But I need her," he whispered, lowering his head. "My life is empty without her."

"Oh, Clark, I'm sorry to hear that," Martha said and she truly did look sorry. "But she's not your wife."

"I know. I tell myself that every day."

"Oh, dear." Martha shook her head. "You've fallen in love with Lois."

Clark looked at her. How had she known? He really must check his forehead for that tattoo.

"Sweetie, it's written all over your face. I knew from the first moment that Clark — our Clark — started talking about her that he was in love with her. I see it with you, too. She has had quite an effect on you two."

Clark smiled sheepishly. "She calls us her Kent boys."

Martha laughed. "Oh, I would have loved for Clark to have had a sibling. But Jonathan and I were just happy when one baby fell out of the sky." She sighed. "Clark, can I trust you to do the right thing?"

He nodded. "She wanted to come home after the honeymoon, but then the stand-in Lois got arrested."

Her brow furrowed. "How did you know about that?"

"Lois knows everything that happens in this dimension, because she has all of the stand-in's memories."

Martha's jaw dropped.

"Well, not *all* of her memories, just the ones the stand-in has experienced so far," Clark clarified. "Every night when she sleeps she relives this Lois's day — her memories — in her dreams. The stand-in is her, only a couple of months younger. As long as we plan on putting this Lois back in her correct spot in the timeline of this dimension, the true Lois will continue to have these memories and…" He hesitated. "She'll continue to exist."

"So, you do know she has to come back?"

He nodded. "We also are going to need this Lois's consent to get her to go back to the worst day of her life. I refuse to do it by force."

She patted his hand. "You're a good man, Clark. You'll find someone of your own."

"Lois is determined to find my missing Lois." Clark looked down, not hopeful.

"Who better to find Lois than herself?" Martha said with a hint of laughter. "She's a stubborn woman, Clark. When she gets it stuck in her head that she'll do something…"

"It usually gets done," he agreed.

"I have something for her," Martha told him. She went out to the other room and returned with a plastic bag.

Clark glanced inside. It was a framed copy of Lois and Clark's wedding photo. "She will love this." The fragments of his broken heart floated around in his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Lois was married. He had slept with a married woman. He was the lowest form of scum in the universe. "Thank you," he ground out. He heard someone at the front door and stood up, pushing the photographs across the table. "Please, don't say anything to Clark about this, Mom… Martha."

"They're back?" She put the pictures in her pocket.

Clark nodded.

Martha jumped to her feet and rushed into the living room. "Jonathan, they're back!" she called upstairs to her husband.

Clark followed her and put the bag that Martha had given him

into his valise.

"You can call me Mom if you want to, Clark," Martha told him with a wink. "I wouldn't mind having you for a second son."

Clark hugged her. "Thanks, Mom." He let go as Jonathan jogged down the stairs.

Jonathan stood next to his wife, murmuring, "What was that all about?"

The door opened and in walked Lois and Kal. It was a strange feeling for Clark to see someone else who was also obviously himself. Kal ran inside and hugged his parents. Clark stood off to the side, not wanting to intrude on this family moment.

Kal then turned to him and stretched out his hand. "You must be Clark."

"As must you." Clark nodded and shook his brother's hand.

"Thank you for being here to protect my family while I was gone," Kal said, each word twisting in Clark's chest.

Unable to stop himself, Clark glanced over at Lois and smiled. "My pleasure. You have a wonderful family."

"Well, my boy," H.G. Wells said, coming inside. "I think it's time to get you back where you belong."

***

Clark turned to Wells as they sat down in the time machine. "Mr. Wells, I'm having some difficulty with Lois and I could use your advice."

Wells glanced at him with confusion. "You said that you still hadn't found your Lois."

Clark sighed. "Not *my* Lois. That Clark's wife, Lois."

Wells flipped a few switches and turned a knob and seemed to be listening with only half an ear. "What kind of difficulty?"

"She's keeps confusing me with Kal… that Clark. There has always been the attraction between us, but lately it's gotten out of control. My willpower is at nil. I know she has to come back here after the baby is born—"

Wells gasped and turned his full attention to him. "What are you talking about, Clark? What baby?"

Clark looked at him for a moment. "Didn't you come and see me this summer? Or was it another you… an older you?"

The time machine wavered and then they popped back out in Clark's dimension behind the *Daily Planet*.

Wells stared at him. "I came to visit you this past summer?"

"You brought Lois to me, to watch over. His Lois," Clark explained.

"That Lois?" asked Wells, still confused.

"No. That Lois is one we borrowed from the past to stand-in for his true Lois, who had to leave that dimension, because of the curse."

Wells gulped. "They activated the curse early?"

Clark nodded. "Before he left for New Krypton."

"Let's go somewhere more private, where you can tell me everything," Wells said, starting to flip switches and levers.

A half-hour later they were sitting at Clark's kitchen table in Smallville and drinking tea.

"Let me get this straight. That Clark's Lois Lane is starting to forget that her dimension is real, where she truly belongs?" Wells inquired. "Even though she still has the stand-in Lois's memories as dreams."

Clark nodded. "It was just that one time. She said it feels like she's remembering something that happened to her… to us in the past."

"She has been in this dimension for five months? When did you start noticing these lapses in her memory? Perhaps her judgment as well?"

Clark swallowed, glancing away. "Around Halloween."

"Halloween!" Wells gasped. "Clark, that was weeks ago. When were you planning on returning her home?"

"We were going to return her as soon as you had broken the curse, but then the stand-in Lois got arrested and we decided to wait until she got cleared. That took longer than we expected," he explained, taking a sip of his tea.

"Clark, we need to return her to her dimension as soon as possible."

Clark thought for a moment. "Well, the baby's due sometime in February…"

"No, Clark. I mean, today," Wells interrupted.

"No! Absolutely not." Clark stood up, looking thunderous. "She's six months pregnant, Mr. Wells. Is travel between dimensions even safe for the baby?"

"She is suffering from a version of time-travel sickness, I believe. I can't understand why the other me did not warn you about it. I've had it once or twice. You become delusional; your real life and memories blend into one big jumble in here." He tapped his head. "You forget about when you belong and believe you are when you are supposed to be. It's time's way of making things right. We need to take her back to *her* dimension, *her* timeline, to reset her mind before she loses it completely."

Clark, feeling crushed, dropped back into his chair. She was going away. Today. No, he wouldn't let her go. "Mr. Wells, how can she return to her dimension six months pregnant? I know Lois's and Kal's… Clark's life isn't normal, but no one is going to accept that she's been pregnant all these months or that the child is Clark's if she suddenly becomes pregnant overnight."

Wells thought about that for a minute. "Perhaps a short visit will be enough. But I recommend she sees Clark… *her* Clark, to refresh her memory completely. To remind her to whom she is really married."

"To forget about me, you mean," Clark mumbled, staring into his mug.

"She's not your wife, my boy," Wells reminded him.

"I know she's not my wife!" Clark growled. "Why does everybody think I don't know this? That this one fact doesn't torture me on a daily basis?"

Wells raised a brow. "Everyone?"

"Martha. She knows everything. Well… enough. Sam, my Lois's father, knows as well. Well, some of it. I'm not as good at keeping secrets as her Clark." Clark rubbed his forehead with the palms of his hands, a pained expression wrecking the contours of his face. "I guess we'd better get this over with. I'll take you to her."

"We need to find your Lois, Clark. It will help you let this Lois go."

"She's gone, Mr. Wells." He shook his head. "My life didn't seem empty until I met Lois, then I realized just how full it could be."

Clark called Sam to warn him that they were going to fly a time machine into the living room. Sam informed him that Lucy had gone out and hadn't returned. Clark glanced at his watch; it was after six. Where would she go? Work? Something was wrong. Clark walked Wells to his time machine, out in the old barn.

"Something's wrong back in Metropolis. Lois went out and she's not back yet. You wait at her apartment with Sam. I'll go look for her and then meet you back there."

Wells nodded his agreement as Superman disappeared into the grey November sky. They arrived at Lois Lane's apartment at about the same time. Sam was sitting on the sofa. He appeared dazed and exhausted. He looked up as Clark entered through the living room window.

"Clark! Thank God, you returned," Sam said, rising to his feet. "Lucy is delusional. She doesn't know the sun from the moon. She escaped me yesterday and went to work and ended up attacking Ralph because he said something about Superman she didn't like. Luckily, James pulled her off and brought her back home. I went to the bathroom after lunch today and when I returned, she was gone. I don't know where she went. James has

been looking for her. I even called Perry. I'm at my wit's end."

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear," exclaimed Mr. Wells. "It looks like she has a serious case of Time-Sickness. Or, more correctly, Interdimensional Time Sickness."

Sam noticed the huge machine in the middle of his living room and the small man behind its controls. "You know, Clark, when you told me about the two dimensions and everything, I didn't expect this."

"I know it's a lot to take in, Sam. I'll find Lois, don't worry." In a blink of an eye, Superman was gone.

Sam looked at Mr. Wells. "Tell me more about this Interdimensional Time Sickness."

***

Earlier that day…

Lois flew to S.T.A.R. Labs, landing just down the street. She straightened her dress and walked into the reception area. "I'd like to speak with Dr. Bernard Klein, please."

The receptionist looked her over. "Do you have an appointment?"

An appointment? No, that would have been the thing to do, wouldn't it? It wasn't like her to make a blunder like that. "No. Could you tell him that Lucy El would like to see him, if it's possible?"

The receptionist took a few calls and then waved Lois back from the waiting area. "Ms. El. Dr. Klein will be out in a moment to see you."

Lois sat down and straightened out her dress, more of a shirt and skirt actually. It wasn't the most becoming thing. Actually, it looked more like a clown costume than a dress, but Lucy El was not known for style. She couldn't wait to shed this persona forever and get back to her nice, conservative suits.

Dr. Klein walked out to the waiting room and saw her sitting there, eyes closed and a hint of a smile on her face. "Ms. El?"

"Dr. Klein!" Lois jumped to her feet. She needed to talk to him about… her mind suddenly went blank. Why had she come here? A nervous grin appeared on her face. Kal? No, Kal was still lost. Clark was looking for him. The baby kicked and she gently caressed her tummy. The baby? No, that's a secret. Lois! Yes, she had come about Lois. She needed to talk to Dr. Klein about Lois before Clark returned. "Wow! You look exactly the same."

"The same as what, Ms. El?" Dr. Klein gave her a curious look.

"The same as the other you." She gave him a friendly smile and then frowned. Why had she just said that? He would have no idea what she was talking about. This was a bad idea. She shouldn't have come. "Can I discuss something with you in private?"

"I'm sorry, you need a security clearance to get past reception," he explained.

"I do have one! Just not here. I've never been here to this S.T.A.R. Labs." Lois glanced around the lobby and returned to staring at him in awe. "I can't believe how much you look just like the Dr. Klein back home at my S.T.A.R. Labs." She shook her head. Stop rambling. "Here, I don't exist, so I can't get clearance. I shouldn't have said that." She covered her mouth. This was not going to work. "I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry, I should go. Clark is going to flip when he finds out."

"Are you all right, Ms. El?" Dr. Klein asked, lowering his voice. He looked concerned; he took her arm, moving her to the farthest corner of the waiting room. He had always been so nice.

"You can call me Lois… No! That's not right. Lucy! Yes! Yes, call me Lucy. That's my name." She nodded.

"You don't seem all right, Lucy. Maybe I should call Clark and tell him you're here."

She blanched, reaching out for the wall. "You can't call Clark. He isn't home. He's looking for Kal. My husband is lost in time. Clark's brother, his twin." She continued nodding and then her eyes went wide as she slid down the wall. "Ooops. That was the secret, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone." She looked at him with panic in her eyes as she watched his jaw drop. "Don't tell Clark I told you. Please. I should go home. He'll want me to be at home."

The scientist knelt down beside her, whispering, "He said that if anything were to happen to him, you might come to see me. Is that why you're here, Lucy? Did something happen to Clark?"

"No." Lois shook her head, wrapping her arm around her stomach. "I am only to contact you about the baby in an emergency. This isn't an emergency. I'm fine." She shook her head and then corrected herself, "We're fine."

Dr. Klein's eyes went wider. Then he swallowed and held out his hand to help her up. "Maybe you should come with me to my office, Lucy."

"We're fine." Lois was adamant, but took his hand anyway. "Healthy. It's not due for three months. I'm here so you can help me find…" Her mind went blank again. "Me."

"You're lost?" He gazed at her with a confused expression. He really did think she was lost.

"Yes, but not *me*, me. Lois, me. Clark's true love." She nodded. Yes, that sounded right. "He's lost her. Well, not *lost,* lost because he hasn't found her yet. She disappeared before he could find her. And we need your help to locate her. I'm not crazy, Dr. Klein. My mind just isn't working today. Or yesterday. Please help me."

"Okay." Dr. Klein continued to walk with her past the reception area. They stopped outside of security. "We're going to go through security now, Lucy. Can you hand them your purse?"

Lois tilted her head and looked at the guards. She wasn't bulletproof like Clark. "Where are we going, Dr. Klein?"

"To my office, so we can talk privately," he explained, nodding to security. "And call Clark."

"They can have my purse. There isn't anything in it, except a couple of dollars and my press pass." She lowered her voice and held out her purse. "I don't have identification, because I don't exist here." And Clark's private emergency number. She grabbed the purse back, clutching it to her chest. "No, they can't have that. They can look, but they must give it right back to me."

"They'll give it right back," Dr. Klein assured her.

They walked through security to the elevators.

In the elevator, Lois turned to Dr. Klein in earnest. "Did Clark tell you about the neurotransmitter? No. That's not right. The Neuroscanner? Yes, that's it. Did Clark tell you about that? I told him to tell you, so we could find her."

Dr. Klein shook his head. "He never mentioned this Lois person or the Neuroscanner, Lucy."

Lois felt hopeless, her brain a mishmash of information. She took a deep breath and started explaining slowly. "Clark doesn't know that the Neuroscanner will find her; he thinks it will find someone else. That's why I came when he's not in town. If he finds out she's his wife, his heart will break. Clark is so fragile."

"What is a Neuroscanner, Lucy?" One part of her rambling caught the scientist's attention.

Lois closed her eyes to concentrate. "The bad man who shot me invented something that would allow him to see and hear what a specific person hears and sees." She took a deep breath. So far, so good.

"You were shot?" he gasped.

Lois waved off his question. "I'm a fast healer. Sssshhh." *Neuroscanner. Come on, Lois, concentrate.* "He used the Neuroscanner to capture her genetic fingerprint. If you had her genetic fingerprint too, would you be able to trace it back to his Neuroscanner?" She opened her eyes and grinned. She could do this, she just had to really concentrate. She looked at Dr. Klein hopefully. "So, Superman can find the bad man."

"He took her genetic fingerprint. Hmmm."

She could see his creative juices working. *Yes!*

"Do you have a sample of her genetic fingerprint?" he asked.

Lois held out her finger in answer.

Dr. Klein looked at her with pity as the elevator doors opened.

Standing on the other side of the doors was Professor Jefferson Cole, the man who framed her for murder back in her home dimension. She turned her finger over and pointed to Jefferson Cole, backing away. "Bad. Bad. Man." She looked at Dr. Klein, whose sympathy intensified. "Help!" She grabbed her head. "Help, Superman, help," she whispered. Her voice stopped working. "He's going to kill me. Help! Superman, help." She curled up into a ball in the corner of the elevator and started to cry.

***

Superman landed on his patio. He took a quick scan of the apartment. No Lois. He was about to take off, when he noticed the light flashing on the answering machine. He zipped inside and pressed the button.

"*Hi Clark, it's Mr.*—" Skip.

"*Clark. It's Mr. Olsen again*—" Skip.

"*Clark, Ralph's furious. Please contact*—" Skip.

He would worry about his professional life later.

"*Lucy, it's Sam. If you are there, please*—" Skip.

"*Clark, it's Dr. Klein."* Clark was about to press skip, but then paused. Why would Dr. Klein be calling him? "*Lucy's here. She said that you were out of town, but she's delusiona; so I'm hoping she's wrong about that. Professor Cole has restrained her; he thinks that she's a risk. When you get back, please contact me immediately."*

Superman had left at the mention of Lucy's name. Before the message finished playing, he had already reached S.T.A.R. Labs.

The doors to reception were locked. He flew above the building and scanned it. He could faintly hear Lois; she sounded scared. "No. No. No. Superman, help!"

Superman crashed through an office window on the floor above Dr. Klein's office. He sped down the hall and found Lucy tied up in a padded room. She was cowering in the corner in a straitjacket as Professor Jefferson Cole approached her with a hypodermic needle. Two security guards stood behind Cole with their guns drawn. Dr. Klein was standing between them, trying to stop Cole.

"That lady is crazy, Klein. She thinks I'm a killer. Move! She needs a sedative."

"I'm warning you, Cole, don't touch her! Don't try to sedate her. She's not who you… Superman! Thank goodness!"

Superman knocked the guards' heads together. As he picked up Cole by his neck, he growled. "What are you doing to her?"

Professor Cole squeaked and dropped the needle.

"I warned you not to touch her, Cole," Dr. Klein said as he rushed to Lucy's side.

Superman threw Jefferson Cole against the padded wall, where he slid down unconscious.

"Are you all right?" Dr. Klein asked, untying the straitjacket.

"Help. Superman. Help. Superman." Lois rocked back and forth, repeating herself softly.

Superman knelt down next to her and gently caressed her face. "Lucy, are you all right?"

She blinked her eyes and then focused them on him. "Clark? If you're back, I haven't lost you. You aren't gone forever." She looked up at him with a heart full of love.

Dr. Klein took the straitjacket off Lois and threw it across the room.

When her hands were free, she reached up to Clark's face. "I knew if I called for you, you'd hear me from the other dimension. You're my—"

He silenced her with a soft kiss. He knew it was wrong, but she was a rambling fool. He didn't need Klein knowing she was Ultra Woman or about the other dimension. Who knew what else she had already told him? Superman picked her up and cradled her in his arms. She pulled him closer.

"Ah, not now, Lucy," he murmured with a glance at Dr. Klein, who was trying to look anywhere else but at them.

"He knows about us, Kal. I told him everything. He's so nice." Lois glanced over Superman's shoulder at Dr. Klein and smiled. "I just wanted to talk to Dr. Klein. But then Professor Cole was there. He tied me up and tried to kill me. I knew he would. He's the one who framed me for murder."

Superman kissed her forehead. "Mr. Wells is waiting for you, Lucy. He's going to take you home to Kal," he murmured, resting his head against hers. "He knows how to cure you."

"Home? To Clark? What about you?" Lois looked at him, tears welling up in her eyes. "I can't leave you alone. What about the baby? Clark doesn't know."

"Kal loves you, Lucy. He'd take you blind and broken. You will make him so happy." He kissed her cheek. "Don't worry about me, I'll be okay. I'll survive."

"Clark loves me." She sighed, resting her head against his shoulder.

Superman turned to his doctor. "I'm sorry, Dr. Klein. I didn't know how sick she was or I never would have left her alone. Thank you." He cleared his throat. "Don't read too much into this. She's mistaking me for someone else."

Dr. Klein shrugged. "Every family has skeletons."

Jefferson Cole twitched and Superman glared at him. "If that man gets hold of Kryptonite, he will try to kill us all. Lucy isn't crazy; she can see into a man's soul. If she says a man is bad, believe her."

"Then I'm glad she thinks I'm nice," Dr. Klein exhaled with relief.

"Me, too." Superman nodded and then took off, Lucy still cradled in his arms.

***

H.G. Wells switched off the time machine and turned to Lois. "All right, Lois. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know what you and Clark were so worried about. I'm fine." She turned her head and gasped. "We're in Smallville. What are we doing here?"

"We came to see Martha Kent," he told her.

"But Mr. Wells, Martha Kent is dead," she whispered, leaning towards him.

"Not Clark's mother, Lois. Your Clark's… Kal's mom. You remember Martha Kent, don't you?"

Lois closed her eyes as images flashed through her mind. "Right." She nodded. "Clark's mom. I like her."

"Good. Good."

They stepped out of the time machine and walked to the front door. She stopped his hand before he could knock. "Am I really home?"

He nodded and knocked on the door.

***

Martha heard a knock on her front door. Her brow furrowed. She set down her knitting and opened the door. On the other side of the door she found H.G. Wells, just as she had seen him the previous day, and Lois, wearing sweatpants and one of Clark's old t-shirts, looking spacey and slightly mental.

"Mr. Wells? Lois!" Martha grabbed her in a huge hug. "Come in, come in. Jonathan's not back from town. What are you doing here?" She showed them into the living room, then glanced outside to make sure they hadn't been seen.

Lois looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time.

Martha watched her carefully, before leaning towards Mr. Wells. "Is she all right?"

"A bit of Interdimensional Time Sickness, I'm afraid. I

needed to get her back to her dimension for a while. She's been forgetting Lois Lane's life and how to be her."

Martha's eyes widened. "Clark didn't say anything…"

"He knew something was wrong, but he didn't realize how far gone she was until he got back. Luckily, I was still there to catch it. Easily fixed." He smiled comfortingly.

Martha smiled at Mr. Wells. "Easily fixed?"

"Oh, yes. I would love a cup of tea, Mrs. Kent."

Martha led him into the kitchen, leaving Lois alone in the living room.

"Will Lois be all right? She looks a bit lost."

"She just needs a little time to remember who she really is. Refresh her memory of the people and places in her life," Mr. Wells informed her.

Martha put the kettle on the stove. "Mr. Wells, she's only been here once, no twice. We usually come to Metropolis. The places that Lois is familiar with — her apartment, Clark's apartment, the Daily Planet — are no longer available to her; those are the people who can't see her like this."

"I'm hoping that a few minutes with you will set her right again," Wells said. "It's scarier to witness than to cure."

"Hoping?"

"I've never dealt with someone who has Interdimensional Time Sickness before. Actually, this is the first recorded case," he explained.

"Ah."

Lois came into the kitchen holding a framed picture. Martha swallowed. *Which one was it?*

"Martha. This is your son, Clark. I like him," she said, holding up the picture. "Mr. Wells. Can I see this Clark?"

Martha released her breath.

Mr. Wells patted her hand. "We'll see, Lois."

Lois looked around the kitchen, setting down the photo on the counter. "I like it here. It feels like home. Like Clark." She burped. "Sorry, I have a little heartburn from the baby." She placed her hand on her tummy. "Do you have any chicken? I'd like some roast chicken."

"Ah, sure, Lois. I believe we have some leftover roast chicken in the fridge." Martha retrieved the chicken and set it on the counter.

Lois immediately reached over and grabbed a drumstick.

"Lois!" Martha gasped, then tried to cover her shock. "Would you like a plate?"

Lois stepped back. "That was wrong, wasn't it?"

"No. Of course not, dear. I just thought you might want to wash up first."

"Oh," Lois replied. "Right." She went to the kitchen sink.

Martha watched her and shook her head at Mr. Wells. "Spacey," she whispered under her breath.

Lois sniffled. "I'm trying the best I can, Martha. I've got all this information in my head that has blended together, so it doesn't make any sense. I can't remember who belongs to which dimension, much less where I belong."

Martha handed her a towel and led her to the kitchen table. "Would you like me to heat it up?" she asked, putting some chicken on a plate.

"Cold is fine. Thank you, Martha."

The tea kettle whistled and Martha poured a cup of tea for Mr. Wells. "Would you like some tea, Lois?"

"No. Do you have any juice? I usually drink juice now, or smoothies. I love smoothies." She sighed. "They remind me of Clark. I'm off coffee and alcohol, of course. And Lucy is a vegetarian. Ugh." She took a bite of chicken. "You don't know how much you crave meat until you can't have it any more. Oh, applesauce. Do you have applesauce? Oooh, and some corn chips. That sounds good."

Martha laughed, setting Mr. Wells' tea on the table. "I know that I have corn chips, somewhere."

Lois leaned over to Mr. Wells to explain. "Clark loves his junk food, but not Clark; he prefers carrot sticks and fruit."

Martha put some cranberry juice on the table for Lois. "I can see why you're so confused, dear. It must be confounding living with two different Clarks."

"I'm not living with Clark. I'm living in Lois Lane's old apartment with Sam Lane, my doctor."

"Oh." Martha found the corn chips and set them on the table.

Lois took a handful and put it on her plate. "Clark is too much like my Clark. The baby loves junk food, too. I've gained five pounds in the last two weeks alone." She munched on some chips, then took a sip of juice. "I'm eating as fast as I can. No need to kick me," she said to her belly. "Want to feel? She's quite a kicker."

"Excuse me," Mr. Wells said, taking his tea into the living room.

Martha cautiously stepped forward to Lois, who lifted up her shirt. She had a nice tummy starting to develop. Martha saw a quiver on her stomach as the baby kicked. "Did you see that?"

Lois nodded.

Martha held out her hand and then snapped it away fast. "Ow. Does the baby have a hammer in there?"

"That's your Grandma, Baby, play nice." Lois laughed and dropped her shirt with a shake of her head.

"That didn't hurt? That kick?" Martha inquired.

Lois shook her head, taking a bite of chicken. "Tickled a little."

Martha sat down next to her and gazed at her.

"So, Martha. What's new with you? Taking any new classes?"

Martha smiled. "I've taken up knitting again. I've got a good set of booties almost finished. And I am taking a course in infant first aid. Although, adult first aid should be next," she said, rubbing her still aching hand.

"Somebody is going to think you're going to be a grandmother soon," Lois replied with a knowing expression.

"Well…" Martha laughed. "I can get away with it now that you and Clark are married."

Lois sighed. "It was such a beautiful wedding. Clark looked so handsome in his tux."

Martha's jaw dropped for a moment. "Oh, that's right, you have the other Lois's memories. I'm not surprised you're all confused. Two Clarks, a secret identity, a hidden pregnancy, two dimensions, and the memories of two lives."

"Don't forget the three Loises."

"Three?"

"Me, younger Lois, and Clark's Lois."

"Which Clark would that be?" Martha asked, not knowing how mixed up Lois still was. Perhaps Mr. Wells was right. She simply needed some time in her own world. Amazing.

"It is kind of confusing, isn't it?" Lois thought for a minute. "There's me, the stand-in Lois and the missing Lois. Although, between you and me, I've found her."

"I knew if anyone could, it would be you." Martha chuckled in admiration. "Clark must be thrilled. Where was she? Siberia?"

Lois took a sip of her juice. "Well, I know what happened to her, sort of, but not where she is exactly."

"So, what happened to her?" Martha was interested. Lois and Clark's lives were more fascinating than a soap opera. "Lois — the other Lois — said she disappeared in the Congo, during a gunrunning story."

Lois nodded. "Clark isn't going to like it."

Martha waited.

"I'm a little fuzzy on the details, but I think she ended up climbing into a crate of illegal guns that was then shipped to Berkistan. Somehow she ended up as a lounge singer at the

Berkistan Hotel there, where she met Lex Luthor."

"No! Not him."

Lois nodded. "According to her father, they eloped about two-and-a-half, three years ago."

"Poor Clark. No wonder no one could find her."

"That Clark is fated to be unlucky in love. We have to still find out where the unhappy couple is living. When we do, I'll tell Superman so he can go rescue her."

"Are you sure she'll want to be rescued?" Martha asked warily.

"Of course. She's married to Lex Luthor, so I'm sure she's being mistreated. As soon as she learned the truth about him, I bet she started trying to escape. At least, I hope so. I know that Lois Lane is destined to be blind when it comes to love, but hopefully not galactically stupid as well."

"You were not stupid, Lois. Naïve, perhaps, until you found Clark."

Lois sighed with longing. "Clark. I miss him so much."

"It doesn't sound like you are confused any more, Lois. You know who are."

"Well, it's certainly not Ultra Woman anymore. Never again!" She groaned, covering her eyes with her hand.

"Okay." Martha was confused by this statement. Obviously, there was more to that story she wasn't going to hear.

"It's hard to be around Clark, when I miss my Clark so much. That's why I need to see my Clark before I go back." She nodded.

Martha grabbed her hand. "Don't go back, Lois. Stay here with Jonathan and me. We'll hide you until the baby is born."

Lois looked at her skeptically. "Like that wouldn't go badly when Clark finds out. And he would find out. It's bad enough that I'm lying to him, hiding in another dimension. I can't involve you more than I already have, Martha. I have no doctor here. No emergency medical care if I need it. Plus, *that* Clark needs me."

"Lois, *your* Clark needs you," Martha reminded her.

"And as long as my stand-in is here, he'll have me. Clark needs me. Without me, he'll have no one, because he won't have me to help him find his Lois. I need to do that for him before I come back. He's not as strong — emotionally — as your son and he doesn't have Clark's confidence. His personal life is in a complete shambles… Okay, half of that is because I become a rambling blabbermouth when I become delusional. But that's beside the point." She waved that issue out of the air. "It's because he lost his parents at such a young age; he never learned to be a whole person, parts of him are missing."

"You will come back, won't you, Lois? If Clark lost you and the baby—" Martha bit her lip.

"Martha, barring any unforeseen complications, we'll come back as soon as I'm able. We'll figure out a way to convince the other Lois to go back to her timeline and I'll take her place. Clark and Lois will adopt a nice little foundling child, or something. I don't know, really, how it will work out. But it will. Somehow." She leaned forward towards Martha. "There are a few quirks I might need to work through after the baby is born."

"Quirks?"

Lois glanced over her shoulder to see if Mr. Wells could see her. He could not. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

"Jonathan has just said goodbye to Joe at Smallville Feed and Seed and is now on his way back. We'll have to leave soon."

"How did…?" Martha sputtered.

Lois pointed to her ear.

Martha's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

Lois nodded. The she picked up Martha's carving knife and poked her finger. Nothing happened. She set down the knife.

"You're…"

Lois lowered her voice. "No, not indestructible like Clark, just super fast healing." She held her finger up to Martha. There was a small, but healed, cut on her finger where she had stabbed herself. "Sam thinks it's to help against broken ribs from the super kicker here." She caressed her belly. "And then there's this." She stood up, took a deep breath, and levitated a foot off the floor, then set herself down.

"Quirks indeed, Lois. Anything else?"

"I don't think so. The flying and super hearing are defensive traits to help protect the baby. I cannot imagine they will remain after the baby's born; Sam's not so sure. Once a person's genetic makeup has been altered…" She raised her hands and shrugged. "Personally, I'll miss them when they're gone. Oh, to be a reporter with these skills." She sighed with envy. "Lucky Clark. Sam said that Clark thinks that my Clark would want me only to keep the super healing. Do those Kent boys think I'm danger-prone or something?" She winked at Clark's mom.

Martha laughed. Her Kent boys. She liked the sound of that. "Surely not you, Lois?"

Lois suddenly stood up. "We've got to go. Jonathan's almost home. Mr. Wells," she called to him.

"Stay and have dinner, Lois," Martha insisted. "Jonathan would love to see you."

Lois shook her head. "No. Clark would kill me if I gave his father a heart attack. Besides I'm dressed for an insane asylum." She kissed Martha on the cheek. "Thanks for lunch and my sanity break. I love you."

"I love you, too." Martha hugged her.

Mr. Wells peeked his head into the kitchen.

"Jonathan is almost home, we had better go. Thanks again, Martha."

"Anytime, Lois." She hugged her daughter-in-law again. "Take care of my grandchild."

"I will." Lois smiled.

Mr. Wells passed Martha his teacup. "Thank you for the tea, Mrs. Kent."

"Don't be a stranger," she said, walking them out to the front door. "Bring her by any time, Mr. Wells. Weekly would be fine with me." She waved as they walked down the steps to that crazy invention sitting in her yard. A minute and one more wave later, they were gone.

Martha shut the door and exhaled. She went to the bookcase and picked up a photo of her boys. Clark would have been angry if Lois had noticed this photo. Luckily, Lois had been sufficiently out of it not to. Then again, it was Clark's fault he hadn't come clean with her.

She set down the photo and returned to the kitchen, moving Lois's plate and glass to the sink, as well as Mr. Wells's teacup. Pulling a bottle of red wine out of the pantry, Martha poured herself a glass to steady her shaking nerves. Five minutes later, she was still sitting at the table with a half-drunk glass of wine when Jonathan walked in through the kitchen door.

"Martha?"

"Jonathan, how about a chicken sandwich?" She picked up her carving knife to slice off some chicken, stopped before touching the chicken and took the knife to the full sink.

He pulled out a couple of plates and the bread. "Was Clark here?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Corn chips. Neither of us eat them. Or did—" He pointed over his shoulder out the kitchen door.

"Oh, no! He wasn't here either." She seized the bag and clipped it shut. "Jack said something about stopping by for dinner."

"Is everything all right, Martha?" Jonathan asked, picking up the photo of their son Lois had left on the counter.

"Just fine, Jonathan. It's been a long couple of days," she confessed.

He wrapped his arm around her and kissed her cheek. "We

got our boy back. It's a good day." They both looked at the framed photo in his hand.

She nodded with a smile. "A good day," she agreed.

***

Later in Metropolis…

Superman flew through his townhouse window and landed in his living room. He spun out of his blue suit and into a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Lois skipped down the stairs and kissed him on the cheek. "Hard day?" she asked as he plopped down on the sofa.

"Tiring. Dropped Mom off at the farmhouse and Dad at the Topeka airport to pick up his truck. There were wild fires in Australia all along the west coast. I was there all day." He inhaled and winced. "I smell like I've been smoked."

"Go take yourself a long, hot shower," Lois said from over his shoulder as she ran her fingers down her husband's chest.

"Yeah?" He smiled mischievously and pulled her over the back of the couch and into his lap with a kiss. "And then?"

"Down, big boy," she replied, extricating herself off his lap and straightening her suit. "I have my monthly Women in Journalism dinner tonight."

"Awww." Clark pouted, then smiled at her reassuringly. "It's okay, Lois. I'll have some leftovers and pass out early."

"Are you sure?" she asked, grabbing her briefcase. "I can skip it."

"I'm beat. Go have fun."

Lois placed a long kiss on his lips. "Throw your towels in the hamper; I'm going to do a load when I return. I love you."

"I love you." He watched her leave with a wave.

Clark's eyes blinked a few times and then shut. A minute later, he rubbed them open. Pulling himself off the couch, he bounded up the stairs to the shower. The hot shower felt good. His eyes blinked a few more times as he dried himself off. He threw the towels into the hamper and spun himself into his pajama shorts and a fresh t-shirt. Five minutes after Lois left, Clark dropped himself into bed and was fast asleep.

He awoke awhile later to find Lois lying next to him in one of his old t-shirts, kissing his neck.

"Oh," Clark said, a large smile spread across his face. "Decided to come back, did you?"

"Always," his wife whispered, covering his mouth with hers. "I love you."

He licked his lips. "Mmmm. You taste good."

"Strawberries." She bit into one.

"Who has strawberries this time of year?"

"I picked these up in Florida." Lois took another strawberry and nibbled it. "Want one?"

"Fly down there often, do you?" He grinned, sitting up. There was something different about his wife tonight. He didn't know if it had to do with him being lost in time. She seemed extra beautiful. She placed a strawberry in his mouth.

"When I can," she whispered, lifting herself up and resting on his lap. She fed him another strawberry.

"You look different," Clark said, brushing a lock of hair away from her cheek. "Glowing, yet sad."

"I miss you." Lois set down the bowl of strawberries and kissed him deeply. It was a passionate kiss, full of longing and unfulfilled promises. Her breathing got faster as did her heartbeat. Much faster. It was almost…

"Lois?" He took hold of her shoulders. "Someone else is here. I hear another heart beat." He concentrated on the heart beat, it was super fast.

A smile graced her mouth, red from strawberry juice. "That's because we aren't alone, anymore, Daddy." She lifted up her shirt and showed him her stomach. There was a noticeable little pregnancy bump.

His eyes widened and he placed his hand on her tummy. A little kick responded to his touch, sending shockwaves through his nervous system and causing the hairs on his arms to stick up.

"Lois! When? How?"

She grinned at his surprised expression. "You know *how*," his wife whispered, kissing him again. She tasted like strawberries. "As for when… you remember our first time together?"

"Of course I remember our honeymoon." He kissed her.

Lois shook her head, but intensified the kiss. "*Before* our honeymoon," she whispered. "I know I told you to forget, but I didn't think you actually would."

"Oh, you mean our *first*, first time." Clark's smile deepened to a grin. "I thought *you* had forgotten."

She shifted her position and kissed him again. He cleared his throat. She felt too good.

"I can never forget, Clark. I have this little reminder with me all the time." Lois slid down his body until she was lying on top of him, her mouth on his.

"All this time? And you never said a word?" he murmured, getting distracted by her kisses.

"I couldn't say a word, Clark," she whispered, still kissing him. "Because I'm only a dream."

Clark wrapped his arms around her. "If you're only a dream, don't wake me up."

A while later, his naked wife lay resting in his arms. Clark was almost back asleep. He was happier than he could ever remember. "Have you thought of any names?" he asked his dream bride.

"I thought we could name her Lara after your birth mom."

He smiled his approval. "I'd like that. What if it's a boy?"

"I've got a feeling it's a girl."

"You want me to do a little buzz-buzz to find out?"

Lois slapped him on the chest. "Clark Kent, you are not going to x-ray our unborn child."

"Simmer down, Mama, it was only a suggestion." He chuckled. "What about Jordan?"

"Nah. Samuel. Jonathan. Perry or James. As long as we don't name it Junior."

Clark turned to face her and noticed a slight circular scar on her right shoulder. As he touched it, she wrapped her arms about his neck and kissed him intensely, distracting him from that thought.

"I've got to go, Clark," she said softly between kisses. "You need your sleep."

"No, don't go, Lois. I don't want this dream to end."

"Neither do I," she whispered, giving him another kiss. "Hand me a shirt, will you?"

Clark reached over the side of the bed and picked up a t-shirt from the floor. It was the blue one he'd been wearing when he came to bed. Lois smiled and slipped it over her head. She crawled over him to the floor, pausing for one more kiss.

He clung to her arm as her feet hit the floor. "I don't want you to go."

"That's good to hear," she said, looking pleased at his words.

"Either of you," he whispered as his hand snuck under her shirt to her belly. The baby kicked again. It sent shockwaves through his nervous system. He leaned over and kissed her tummy. "I love you, little baby. Treat Mama well."

"We'll miss you too, Clark," Lois said, starting to levitate. She floated over him with one last kiss. "Now get some sleep, my love. *Sleep*."

His eyes drifted shut. Was she just flying? Clark's eyes flashed open, but she was gone. "Lois?" he called out to her. "Lois?" He flew through the house using super speed. He was alone. Maybe she had been a dream, after all.

He could still taste the strawberries on his lips, but the bowl was gone from the bedside table. Sitting back down on the bed, he sighed, both disappointed and content. What a perfect dream.

Clark hadn't thought about that *first*, first night together since Zara and the other New Kryptonians had left. When he had suggested to Lois that he wanted to stay the night, she told him that they would be married soon enough and they had waited that long. He had agreed. What were a few more days after waiting so long? He closed his eyes and lay down, remembering again their first hello and last goodbye before he left for New Krypton.

***

Lois flew down and landed in the co-pilot seat of the time machine.

"How was your walk around Metropolis?" H.G. Wells asked, starting to flip switches and turn knobs. "You didn't run into anyone who recognized you, did you?"

She took the last strawberry from her bowl and shook her head with a smile. "I'm ready to return, Mr. Wells. I won't forget who I am anymore." She bit into the strawberry.

"I've been thinking about that. I had better leave a time—" He paused and stared at her for a moment. "Lois, weren't you wearing a green shirt earlier?"

Glancing down at Clark's dusty blue shirt, Lois smiled at him innocently. "Was I?"

"Lois?"

She batted her eyelashes, but didn't answer.

"He didn't see you, did he? We can't have him believing that the stand-in might be a clone. If anything were to happen to her…"

"My younger self was out and Clark was asleep. He *is* my husband. You really didn't expect me to stay away, did you?" she retorted. "Shall we go?"

He pressed his lips together as if he couldn't believe her gumption and pulled the lever, causing the time machine to disappear. They reappeared in Lois Lane's living room in the other dimension.

Sam ran out of his bedroom. "Lucy! You're back." He pulled her from the time machine with a hug.

"Sam." She hugged him back.

The doctor turned to H.G. Wells. "She is back, right?"

Wells nodded. "Easy to cure, if you have the right equipment, and patience." He patted his time machine. "Now, there were some things in the past I wanted to check out. See if I can find where your daughter disappeared off to."

Sam glanced at Lois, then away.

"It's okay, Mr. Wells. We know how she disappeared or, shall I say, with whom." Lois patted Sam on the arm. "*We'll* find Clark's missing Lois. I've been working on it."

"You found her? I knew it wasn't impossible," Mr. Wells said with enthusiasm and then his brow furrowed. "With whom?"

"Lois Lane is now Lola Luthor."

"Oh, no. That's not good."

"Clark will manage. If he won her too easily, the prize would not be as valuable."

"Ah… well." Wells nodded. "I do need to speak with Clark about—" He glanced at Lois. "Never mind, I'll find him."

Sam looked at Lois and announced, "He was pretty broken up when you left."

"Poor Clark." Her heart ached. She truly was fond of Clark. She knew how much her mental breakdown had affected him. Both of them. "When you find him, tell him I'd like to see him. I need to apologize. I've really ruined his life this time."

Superman flew in through the window. "You didn't ruin my life, Lois."

"Clark!" She ran to him and gave him a sisterly hug. "I'm so sorry."

Superman swallowed and stepped away from her, looking at her carefully. "Lois?"

"I owe you something," Lois said, then slapped him across the face. She had told him not to try to kiss her stand-in again when she first arrived in this dimension. He had broken that pledge. "Don't let it happen again. This is your last warning."

Sam's and H.G. Wells's mouths dropped open.

"I deserved that one," Superman chuckled, rubbing his cheek. "You need to be careful, Lois. You're really developing some strength in that right arm of yours." He turned to the others. "She's back."

Lois dropped onto the sofa. "Oh, Clark. Your job. Dr. Klein. I really made a mess of things, didn't I?"

"You do know how to keep life interesting."

Mr. Wells stepped forward. "Clark, if I may have a moment of your time. There is something I do wish to speak to you about…" He glanced over at Lois. "… privately."

Clark gazed at Lois — not exactly with longing, yet not quite without it either — and then nodded, stepping onto the time machine. "Let's get out of here. She needs her rest. Good night, Lois. I'm glad you're okay."

"Me, too." She stared at him. "Good night, Clark." She turned to H.G. Wells. "Thank you."

"You're … um… welcome, Lois." He nodded and stepped onto the time machine. With a nod to Sam, Mr. Wells turned some knobs and pulled the lever, making them disappear.

Sam came over and sat next to her. "*Are* you all right, Lucy?"

"Yeah," Lois said, staring at the spot where the time machine had just been and taking a deep breath. "The attraction is still there. He's still just like my Clark." She turned to Sam. "I just have my self-control back in check. Keep an eye on me though, will you, Sam? Don't let me fall off the wagon."

He nodded.

She glanced around. "What time is it?"

"Ten-ish."

"It's a little late to call James." She stood up and stretched with a yawn. "I really should get some sleep. I've got some apologies to issue tomorrow. Ugh."

"Lois never liked apologizing either." Sam chuckled. "Somehow it was like admitting defeat."

Lois pressed her lips together. "I'm learning." She walked down the hall to her bedroom.

***

Meanwhile, back in Lois's home dimension…

Clark could feel Lois kissing him; it felt good. *Oh, so nice.*

"Come on. Wake up, sleepyhead."

Clark pried his eyes open; the morning sun was way too bright. Lois kissed him again. He wrapped his arms around her and rolled over, pinning her down. "I don't want to wake up," he murmured. "Let's stay in bed."

She laughed. "You really must have been tired."

"I had the best dream." He grinned, lying down next to her. "It was about you."

"About me, huh?" She smiled, kissing him. "I can see why you wouldn't want to get up, then. But some of us have to work." She tried to slide over him to get off the bed. He grabbed her thigh as she sat on top of him. "Clark!"

He ignored her quizzical look and lifted up her pajama top, examining her flat tummy with his fingers.

"If you tell me you can see those four Double Fudge Crunch bars I had over the weekend…"

Clark dropped her shirt and looked her directly in the eyes. "You're so beautiful, Lois." He pulled her down for another kiss.

"Wow. That must have been some dream, Clark. You're usually such a morning person."

"I dreamed about our first time together," he murmured as she slid to the floor.

"Mmmm. Our honeymoon." Lois leaned over to kiss him again. "I can see why you want to stay in bed." She tried to stand up when he took her hand.

"You remember that last night before I left for New Krypton,

don't you, Wife?"

"Of course, I do, Husband. I remember us promising to save ourselves for each other on our wedding day. And I'm glad we waited." She kissed him and stood up.

"What?! Waited? Why?" He sat up, stunned, as he watched her walk away.

"Because otherwise, one of us would have died from the curse." She blew him a kiss and entered the bathroom.

The curse! He gulped, falling back against his pillow. He had forgotten all about the curse.

But they hadn't waited. They had made love that night. Hadn't they? That couldn't have all been some wild, wonderful dream, like the passionate dream he had with the pregnant Lois last night. *Had* she been real? Some kind of angel? She did fly, after all. But the woman who just entered the bathroom was definitely his Lois. Definitely his Lois. No frogs this time. And if she was Lois, then who was the woman he made love with the night before? The pregnant woman who knew about their *first*, first time?

***

Dearest Clark —

I know I should start out this letter with an apology for seducing you. But strangely enough, I'm not sorry. Not sorry in the least. (Picture me with a huge grin here). It was so nice to have a little Clark break. I've missed you so much. I thought having the stand-in Lois's memories would be enough, but it isn't. Even though she is me… I'm still not in control and you know how much I like to be in control.

I'm sorry I haven't written in my Clark book in a while. I had a little breakdown here, which is why I was allowed to visit my dimension. H.G. Wells called it 'Interdimensional Time Sickness.' It's where I confused both my dimensions, not knowing what was real. It was pretty scary having no control like that and having people look at me like I was delusional, because I ***was*** *delusional. Anyway, I had a nice chat with your mom and it set my mind straight. She's such a trouper. Her heart is breaking by what I'm doing to you. I'm sorry about that.*

Please, don't be angry with me for not returning to you just yet. That is something I want to do more than ever, especially after tonight. But I can't return for good yet. I've already screwed up my secret identity's life here, I don't need to do the same there by showing up six months pregnant. What would people think if your perfectly slim and beautiful wife suddenly started showing up in maternity clothes? I'm afraid they might think the baby grew so fast due to super help. We don't need people to think I cheated on you with Superman. Is that even possible to cheat on my husband with my husband? Our lives will be complicated soon enough without all that drama. So I'm waiting until the baby is born. We can raise a foundling child, can't we?

Besides, there's something I need to do here first, other than have our baby. I owe Kal that much. He has put his whole life on the line for me… us. If I don't help him find his Lois, I'll always feel like I ruined his life completely and then abandoned him. I can't do that to him again. Now that I've got my brains back in order I'll start working full time on that. Especially since I'll have a lot of spare time on my hands. I kind of flew into a rage at work and attacked Ralph, our resident idiot-in-chief, and got fired. Well, he shouldn't have said what he said about Superman. You know me, Superman's staunchest supporter. Still am.

Well, the yawns are taking over. Time to hit the sheets. I love you more than ever. You don't know how happy I was to see the joy on your face when you felt our baby kick. I don't know what I have been so worried about. You'll be the best daddy ever.

Stay safe, dearest Clark, and I'll do the same. LL

***

Lois took a deep breath and then knocked.

The intercom buzzed. "*Lucy?"*

"James?" She looked around, not knowing where to speak. "I'm sorry."

The door opened. He was standing there, garment bag slung over his arm. "Lucy, you're back. How is Kal? Clark said you were able to visit him for twelve hours."

"I wish it had been twelve hours." Lois couldn't stop herself from smiling at the mention of her husband. "He's wonderful. Thank you."

"More than super?" He laughed.

"He'll always be super. In a different way than Clark though. I came to apologize and to say thanks for your help in my hours of need, but it looks like I caught you at a bad time." She stepped back as he came out of his apartment.

"Walk with me." He shut his door and locked it. "Software developers' conference in Tokyo."

"Oh. I didn't know you still had a finger in that pie."

"I have fingers in many pies." He thought about that statement and shook his head. "That didn't sound quite right."

She laughed.

"You feeling better?" James asked, pushing the elevator button.

"Yes, much. Thank you. Now you can see why Clark's my babysitter." She bubbled with laughter, still a little high from her hour of passion with her husband. "Something happens to Kal and I turn into an H-Bomb."

"We were all worried about you," James said, stepping into the elevator.

Lois followed. "We?"

"All your friends at the *Daily Planet*."

"Oh. I don't think I have many of those. Not after what happened with Ralph."

"You'd be surprised. I agree that could have been handled better." James threw her a disappointed expression. "As it is, I've had to give Ralph a plum job at our Gotham City bureau, so he wouldn't sue. City desk. He said he could use a break from superheroes for a while."

Lois guffawed. "So you sent him to *Gotham City*?" She patted his arm. "James, you are a riot. Superman will seem like a kitten compared—" She stopped laughing at his bewildered expression. "Perhaps I'm mistaken. Never mind." Another chuckle escaped.

"Is there something I should know about Gotham City, oh wise sage?"

"Let's just say, I'm glad you chose to live in Metropolis, James. Gotham City is a dark and dangerous town."

"You're not going to tell me?" He looked hurt.

"Nope." She laughed again. She had to clutch her side, it was beginning to ache from all this laughter. She took several deep breaths to calm herself, as they left the elevator and walked out to the street. "Let's just wait and see. Something may happen there. Or maybe not. This world is funny that way."

"Want to ride with me to the airport?" James held open the door to the hired car.

She shrugged. Why not? It wasn't like she had much else to do anymore.

He sat down next to her and closed the door. "You know too much, Lucy. Are you psychic? Or did you work for the NIA?"

"I wouldn't be able to tell you if I had, now would I?" Lois raised a brow.

James shook his head. "You are so mysterious. But I like you. You don't kowtow to my money and you're not afraid of my power as your boss."

"My *former* boss, you mean. I was fired, remember?" she said with a nudge.

He nodded. "I'm having a hard time filling Ralph's shoes. Clark said his plate is already overflowing."

"He'd make a great editor."

"But he already has two jobs."

She had to agree.

"And you said no. But after last week, probably not a good idea."

"Probably not." She smiled. Had his offer been a genuine one?

"Barry Balson wants to stay on the Superman beat. I can't blame him with Clark supplying him half his notes. It's a sweet deal."

"Clark never misses the little details that turn a nothing story into a great story. I'll miss working with him." She already missed their morning walks.

"You don't have to." He interrupted her thoughts.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm rehiring you. I'm hoping it won't be the worst decision I make as a newspaper man."

"No. I mean. Yes, thank you. I'll take it. Don't worry, I'll be out of your hair in about three months, tops."

The smile fell off his face as he looked at her. "You're leaving?" This prospect seemed to sadden him. "Clark will miss you." He paused in thought. "Forget Clark. *I'll* miss you. Don't even think of leaving us."

"You are sweet, James. But my husband will be back from his assignment then. And it will be time for me to go back to him," she explained. "I need him."

"Of course. Right. I understand completely."

Lois looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Now, if we could just find Lex Luthor. I still think he's the key to finding out where Lois is. And if we were to find Lois… Whoa! You won't even notice I'm gone because the Daily Planet will seem like a different planet."

James smiled. "I heard she's quite a force of nature, but I'd still notice."

"Thank you, James. You've always been more than kind to me."

He cleared his throat. "Kal's a lucky man."

"Don't make me find you someone too, James. My plate is full with Clark."

He laughed. "I'm sure he appreciates all your hard work."

Lois raised a brow. For some reason, she thought he was being sarcastic. "So, who did you find to be editor? It's not a position to leave vacant."

"Cat will be acting editor."

"Cat?" Lois gasped. *Now, there's a worse decision than rehiring me*, she thought. "Cat Grant? Have you lost your mind?"

"You'd be the first to know." James chuckled. "Cat's a good reporter. And it's only until the end of the year. Back when Perry won the election, I hired the Associate Editor from our London bureau to take over for him. It's taking this guy months to organize his life to relocate here. Apparently, he just became a father again last month and his wife finally gave her permission to move them."

Lois's jaw dropped. "You mean Ralph was just acting editor this whole time?"

"Of course! It was only supposed to be for a month, which led to six months. Ugh. Good riddance."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "You just moved up five IQ points in my book."

"Thanks, I think. Shall I have my driver drop you off at the Planet?"

Lois looked down at her clothes. "How about he drops me off back at my apartment? The *Daily Planet* can live without me for a few more hours. And I have one more apology I have to make." She laughed. "I am never going to go crazy again. It's too much work."

"Okay." He chuckled in agreement. "Off the record, are those rumors true that S.T.A.R. Labs held you against your will and Superman barged in breaking heads to rescue you?"

"We'll make you a news reporter yet, James," Lois told him, wondering where he had gotten his information. "On the record, no one's head was broken except mine."

James opened the car door and stepped out. Leaning back in, he said, "Be forewarned, you might be questioned by Balson, officially, when you get in the office."

"I don't envy him trying that in front of Clark."

"Me either." James laughed. "See you in a week."

Lois waved goodbye to him and shut the door. She sat back in the town car and contemplated her next dilemma. Where would she get a blood sample for Dr. Klein to develop a Neuroscanner tracking device when she was no longer able to bleed?

***

Clark sat at his desk, typing up the details to a string of robberies on the Westside. Superman had been too distracted this month to deal with it. Cat Grant, now the acting editor, suggested that if he wrote the story about the robberies it would clue in the robbers that Superman was on the case. He thought it an interesting tactic for deterring crime.

The newsroom staff had been quite chipper with the news that Ralph was moving to the Gotham City bureau; Clark wasn't the only reporter happy with Cat's fresh approach. He sent the article to the printer and glanced at Lucy's desk. It made his heart ache to see it so empty.

His phone rang. "Clark Kent speaking."

"Finally, I reached you. Clark Kent, please help me. I'm alive. You don't—" a woman's voice said before the phone disconnected.

A chill shivered down his spine.

"Hello? Hello?" But the caller was gone. She had sounded just like Lois, only not. He had gotten a couple of calls like it over the years, but this voice always gave him shivers. It reminded him of his nightmare about the woman chained to the rock.

Clark called down to the switchboard and then to the telephone company. There were too many calls placed to the *Daily Planet* to know which call it was or where it had originated. He told the phone company to send him a list of all phone calls that the *Daily Planet* had received in the past two hours. Such a list was not possible. They could give him a list of outgoing calls with a court order. *Never mind. Useless.* He slammed down the phone, hard enough to break it. Great. With a sigh, he unplugged the phone and threw it away. He walked into the supply closet and got himself a new phone.

That voice. "*I'm alive."* Why would a caller say that?

He plugged in his new phone and was about to call Lois when she walked out of the elevator.

Cat stepped out of the editor's office at that moment and started clapping. Suddenly, the whole bullpen staff exploded in applause. Lois paused at the top of the ramp and looked at Clark with a perplexed expression. Then he saw the light bulb come on in her eyes. She curtsied and blew kisses to the crowd, which made them disperse.

"What was that all about?" Clark asked as she approached his desk. "I thought you got fired."

"Ralph. Obviously, I wasn't alone in thinking he was a cretin. James rehired me on the condition that I don't make it his worst decision ever." She pushed her glasses up her nose.

Clark smiled. "It's good to see you back here. I never worked with a partner before, but as soon as you were gone, I—" His face fell. "I'm glad you're back."

"I missed you too," she whispered, taking off her jacket and sitting down at her desk.

"Don't. Please," he murmured under his breath, not looking at her.

"That's not what I meant."

He looked over at her and she smiled a smile of friendship. He returned the smile. With a sigh, he refocused on his computer. Right, he had already completed his article. What was he working on? He could not concentrate. He still wanted her. How was he going to survive the next three months, let alone the rest of his life?

Clark's phone rang again. Hesitating a moment, he picked it up. "Clark Kent."

"Hi, Clark. It's Dr. Klein."

Clark swallowed, glancing over at Lois. She was watching him. Listening.

"Clark?" the scientist prompted.

"I'm here, Dr. Klein," Clark replied.

"I just wanted to apologize again on behalf of S.T.A.R. Labs for that incident the other day."

Clark cleared his throat and turned his back on Lois. "You aren't the one who should be apologizing, Dr. Klein."

"Well, I received Lucy's kind note of apology a few minutes ago. I wanted you to know that S.T.A.R. Labs and I are still interested in working with you if you are still interested in working with us… with me." He paused, but Clark didn't say anything, only turned back around to look at Lois. She was avoiding his gaze, but he could tell she was still listening.

"Eavesdropper," Clark hissed.

"Excuse me?" asked Dr. Klein with hope.

"Yes, I am still interested in working with you, Dr. Klein," he finally said.

He heard the scientist exhale with relief.

"I would like to discuss this further with you, in private," Clark continued.

"Of course. Of course, Clark. If you and Lucy would like—"

"NO!" Clark thundered. "*She's* not a part of this agreement." He turned and stared at her. He spoke slowly and deliberately. "If she even sets one foot in S.T.A.R. Labs again, heads will roll."

Lois smiled sweetly at him as if she hadn't heard a word he said.

He heard Dr. Klein gulp. "Whatever you say, Clark. I just thought in light of her circumstances…"

Clark growled.

"Okay. We'll discuss it later. Are you interested in meeting here or elsewhere?"

Clark made arrangements with Dr. Klein and then hung up. He stood up and walked to her desk. "Are we perfectly clear?" he said to her.

"Crystal." She looked up at him. "Can we talk privately?"

"We have nothing to say to each other," he said, taking his coat. "Alone."

"No. You have nothing to say to me. I have plenty I wish to discuss with you."

"Tough." He started to leave.

"Clark." She said his name with such pain, it made him pause his step. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"So am I." He continued walking.

Lois did not even know why he was so angry.

It did not bother him that Perry knew about the baby and thought it was his. Perry was a hopeless romantic and only wished happiness for Clark. He knew that Sam would not hurt Lois, because she was essentially his daughter. But S.T.A.R. Labs knowing about her condition was unacceptable.

When he had broken into S.T.A.R. Labs and seen her tied up, with Jefferson Cole trying to give her a shot, it brought to light all the fears that Lana had had for him…. And reminded him of that article in Mr. Well's future newspaper, the one announcing Lois Lane's funeral and what had happened to her.

If they wanted to test Superman's abilities, see how he differed from humans, so be it. But Lois was different. She wasn't just some alien raised on Earth, who could defend herself. She had been impregnated by him — basically him — and that was far more interesting to scientists. How was her body changing, adapting? What would the baby be like? She was the lab rat they were really interested in. They wouldn't really care about her or the baby. And for that reason, seeing her at S.T.A.R. Labs had terrified him far more than anything in his entire life.

***

Superman landed at Riverside Park. The waters were choppy and grey on that cold November day. He paced back and forth along the path next to the river trying to regain control over his emotions. Another reason he would never let himself get close to another woman again. Once was enough.

Dr. Klein, bundled up against the cold, arrived along the path. "Superman, I—"

Superman held up a finger and then scanned the doctor's body for microphones or bugs. He was clean. Then he turned to the river and blew. Soon, there was a thick crust of ice covering a section of the river.

Dr. Klein paused, looking at the ice with dread.

"We'll talk out there," said Superman, lifting Dr. Klein up and setting him down in the middle of the frozen section of the river.

"Superman, I can see that your trust in me has been shattered. What can I do to rectify that?" Dr. Klein said, his gaze darting between Superman and the waves lapping at the edges of the ice.

"Tell me everything you know."

"But I don't know anything…" Dr. Klein stammered.

Superman glared at him.

Dr. Klein amended his statement. "You want me to tell you everything that Lucy told me?"

He nodded, his arms crossed.

"All right. She was a little incoherent. She made several conflicting statements. What I was able to discern was that she is married to your twin brother, Kal, and is roughly six months pregnant with his child."

Superman grimaced. Lois had told Klein everything.

"She then said that *you* were Kal and the baby was yours," Dr. Klein went on. "But that Kal was lost in time."

He looked at the scientist but said nothing, just waited.

"Lucy said something about dimensions, about the other me at the other S.T.A.R. Labs, and how she didn't really exist." Dr. Klein raised an eyebrow at that. "Oh, and that there was a woman named Lois who was your true love and that some 'bad man' — her words — had shot her. Lucy her, not Lois. And she kept confusing herself with this Lois woman."

Superman nodded his understanding of the distinction. "Did she mention why she came to see you?" This was the question that had been gnawing at him since he found her at S.T.A.R. Labs.

Dr. Klein swallowed. "Something about a Neuroscanner."

He chuckled quietly to himself with a shake of his head. He hadn't expected that, but it was typical of Lois and her one-track mind. She would — and did — risk everything to follow one minor lead.

Dr. Klein eyed him nervously. "I haven't told anyone about the baby or about your brother. I figured that fell under the auspices of doctor-patient confidentiality."

Superman looked at his doctor and believed he was telling the truth. "Thank you, Dr. Klein. It is the kind of information that would endanger her life if it ever fell into the wrong hands. And there are those, even at S.T.A.R. Labs, who would look at her as a guinea pig instead of a human being."

Dr. Klein pursed his lips, but then said what was on his mind. "I figured she might be human after she did nothing to defend herself against Cole."

"She was having a bad day. Usually she's a fighter; but, yes, she's from Earth." Superman sighed, shaking his head in

amusement. “Once you get to know her, you can’t help but love her.”

“So, the baby is yours?” Dr. Klein inquired, his curiosity piqued.

“I’ve been told it to be impossible.”

Dr. Klein blanched, bringing his finger to his mouth in thought. Suddenly he started to pace. “I’ve been thinking about that, Superman, now that I know that your genetics are compatible to humans. I may have made a mistake on your last sample that you gave me. If you were to donate another fluid sample…”

Superman stared at him with his arms crossed. “It’s my brother’s child. There’s no point in retesting me, Dr. Klein, as I plan on never becoming intimate with anyone again.”

Dr. Klein stopped pacing, glancing nervously at the water’s edge. “Oh.”

Superman turned and looked at the Metropolis skyline at the shore. “When I told you about the smashed tin can of my last relationship, it turns out I was mistaken. That pain was a mere indentation, compared with how I feel now.”

“Perhaps if you were to speak to a licensed therapist—”

Superman growled.

“Perhaps not.” Dr. Klein watched as a chunk of ice broke off and floated down the river. He swallowed, moving closer to the man in blue. “Clark, do you think we might move back to the shore now?”

“Professor Cole wasn’t too badly injured, was he?” Superman asked quietly. “Is he planning on pressing charges against me?”

Dr. Klein looked at him in shock. “Of course not. He did take the matter up with the board of directors at S.T.A.R. Labs, but they voted against him.”

Superman turned and stared at him. “What matter would that be?”

Dr. Klein cleared his throat, looking again at the choppy water. “Do you think we could move to the shore first, Clark?”

“That bad?”

The doctor did not look him in the eye.

“I do not kill, Dr. Klein. When I discovered my abilities, I believed that I must be here for a reason and that reason was to help people, not to hurt them. I made a promise to myself that I would never take a human life. And I don’t break my promises.”

“That’s good to know, Superman,” Dr. Klein said, his voice wavering, as he watched another chunk of ice break off and float away.

“The matter that Jefferson Cole brought before the S.T.A.R. Labs board of directors, Dr. Klein?”

The ice creaked and the doctor moved even closer to Superman. “Oh. Oh. He wanted the Kryptonite sample to be available to all S.T.A.R. Labs scientists to be tested for other scientific uses… Oh, that’s a big piece of ice, Clark.”

Superman looked up at the sky, his red cape blowing in the breeze. “Warmer day than I expected, Dr. Klein. You were saying?”

“Or a weapon to be used against you, just in case… for Earth’s protection.”

“Ah. To protect Earth. How noble. And the board of directors voted against him by what margin?”

The ice groaned and Dr. Klein grabbed Superman’s elbow. “They agreed that Tempus’s sample belonged to you and you alone. Eight to three. Please, don’t ask me for their names, Superman. If something were to happen to those three, it might change the votes of the other eight members.”

“I completely agree with you, Dr. Klein. I am merely curious why those three fear me.” Superman lifted the doctor off the ice and swiftly carried him back to the path at Riverfront Park.

“Oh, thank you, Superman.” Dr. Klein sighed in relief, before his knees wobbled and sat down on a nearby bench. He took several deep breaths and then looked up at Superman. “After your warning about Cole, I moved the Kryptonite and your blood work to my personal vault at the lab, fearing he might take such action.”

“I’m glad that you take our partnership so seriously.”

“I do. This partnership is an opportunity of a lifetime. I do worry about Lucy’s health. Has she sought medical attention?”

“She is under the care of a trusted physician,” Superman replied cautiously.

“I’m glad to hear it. Should any complications arise, I would be more than willing to lend my expertise to the problem. Not that there should be any problems.” He gulped and placed a smile on his face.

“God forbid,” Superman murmured, gazing out over the river. A large chunk of ice broke off from the ice bridge and bobbed up and down in the water for a moment before floating away.

***

Clark returned to the bullpen feeling much better about Lois’s safety. Dr. Klein had been the good man that she said he was, someone they could trust. He smiled. He still didn’t want Lois to go anywhere near S.T.A.R. Labs and told Dr. Klein as much. Dr. Klein was but one of the scientists working there. He didn’t need her running into any other people from her past.

He sat down at his desk and glanced around. Where was she? Her coat was gone. He looked over at his desk. No note. He went to her desk and shifted the papers to see if he could find a clue of her whereabouts.

Barry came by. “I think Cat sent her home,” he answered Clark’s unasked question.

Clark barged into his acting editor’s office. Cat glanced up from her desk.

“Yes, Clark?”

“You sent Lucy home?” he growled.

She raised a brow. “Down, boy.”

“How could you send her home? She said that Mr. Olsen rehired her.”

“He did. She looked a little pale and was practically falling asleep at her desk. I figured she wasn’t fully recovered from her illness, so I sent—”

A gust of wind blew through her office, sending all the loose papers into the air.

“— her home,” Cat finished to herself. She shook her head and returned to the copy in front of her.

***

Clark knocked on Lois’s door. Sam opened it and let him in without a word.

“Where is she?” he asked.

“In bed.”

Clark headed down the hall. “Is she okay?” He tried to relax his hands out of fists. “She’s not disappearing again, is she?”

Sam shook his head. “She was having some belly pains. I recommended a couple of days of bed rest.”

Clark raised his hand to knock on her door.

“Come in, Clark,” she called.

He was at her side in an instant. “Lois?” She did look a little drawn, pale.

“What are you doing here, silly?” Her smile was an attempt at reassuring him, he was sure. “I’m okay, just a little tired. I just overdid it a bit these last few days.”

“I was worried,” he whispered, leaning his head against her arm. She caressed his jaw with her hand. “What’s this about pains?”

“Perfectly normal,” Sam answered from the doorway. “She just did too much lately, as she said.”

“Do you want me to scan your belly to see if everything’s all right with the baby?” He gazed at her with concern, taking her hand.

"What is it with you Kent boys and x-raying unborn children?" She tsk-tsked.

Clark sat up and stared at her.

Lois continued, "I hear her heartbeat, Clark. She sounds fine."

He glanced over his shoulder at Sam, who nodded and removed himself.

"Don't upset her," he called to Clark. "Doctor's orders."

Clark swallowed. How could he talk to her about Kal, accuse her of visiting him without upsetting her?

"How did your meeting with Dr. Klein go?" she asked, filling the silence.

"We worked through some of my anger about the other day."

"Why were you angry with Dr. Klein?" Lois questioned, looking up at him with worry in her eyes.

Clark took a deep breath. *Don't get upset*, he told himself. *Don't blame her.* "Do you know how I felt seeing you tied up, guns pointed at you, with them trying to inject you with who knows what?"

"Clark," she murmured, pulling his head to rest on her chest as she held him.

He could hear the baby's heartbeat more clearly. It relaxed him. "I feel like a fool for abandoning you for selfish reasons last week. I feel like the worst protector in the whole entire world. I feel like a heel for not listening to you about the Neuroscanner. I should have known you wouldn't let it lie."

"I'm sorry, Clark."

"Stop apologizing, Lois. Please. If I had told you about my worries in the first place, this might never have happened. Let's lay blame where it belongs: it's my fault."

"I am pretty stubborn," she admitted. "I need to work on that."

He could hear a slight chuckle vibrate through her chest. It felt so nice to be this close to her again. Right. Natural. Calming. "Sam says it's biological, this need to protect you."

"What do you think?" Lois asked, running her fingers through his hair.

A quiet laugh escaped his lips. "It would be nice to have these uncontrollable desires explained away by science, instead of blaming fate all the time. Although I don't know if I appreciate being lumped in with lions and wolves and other wild animals." He hesitated before softly speaking the next words to her. "One squeeze and I could have easily killed Cole. I know this because I was tempted. I've never been tempted to kill anyone before."

"But you didn't. That's what makes you different from the wild animals, Clark. You can stop yourself before something bad happens."

"If he had hurt one hair on your head—" His fist clenched.

"Thank God he didn't. My hair is sacred. One broken hair and it throws off the whole style."

Clark laughed. Lois always knew just what to say.

"Alrighty then. Visiting time is over, you two. Lucy needs her rest." Sam was back. Clark wondered how long he had been standing in the doorway watching them.

He sat up and placed a hand on her belly. "Take care, you two."

Lois covered his hand with hers for a brief moment, then moved it away.

Clark wondered if she felt the electricity of that touch as he had. He kissed her forehead, wanting to kiss her lips but stopping himself, and then he dragged himself from her room. As he walked back down the hall, he could have sworn he heard her quietly singing "Love Me Tender". Cringing at her choice of songs, he wondered if she knew she was torturing him. He spun into the blue suit and was gone.

***

Sam shut the window after him and walked back to Lois's room. He could still hear her singing. Glancing through the open doorway, he saw her gently stroking her belly.

Lucy looked up at him. "The books say that they can hear your voice at this stage. So, I've decided to start singing to her."

"May I recommend you wait until Clark leaves next time? He thought you were singing to him. He may be resigned to you returning to Kal; it doesn't mean he's happy about it."

She winced. "Oops. That probably wasn't the best choice in songs. Next time he's here, I'll start with *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*."

Sam nodded. "Good idea."

"Sam, you know that Thanksgiving is next week."

He smiled. "I noticed it on the calendar, thanks."

"Well, I'm no gourmet chef and you're no gourmet chef, and Clark will probably be flying around putting out deep-fried turkey fires. He doesn't have any family, your family is who knows where and, well, my family is in another dimension. So, I thought we could do something non-traditional for Thanksgiving."

"Pizza and beer and a football game or three?" Sam looked hopeful.

"No beer."

"Right." Sam leaned against the doorframe with a sigh.

"I was thinking about all of us volunteering at the Fifth Street Shelter, if that's all right with you."

His smile spread wider. "I'd like that. Very much. That's just what Lois would want to do."

"Really?" Somehow, this surprised her.

"Yeah. Right after her mother and sister left, we weren't really in the mood to be thankful, so she suggested we go somewhere to reeducate ourselves. That was the first year we volunteered at a homeless shelter for Thanksgiving. It kind of became our tradition. It's where she learned to make pumpkin pies."

"That's a skill I don't have and could use."

"I'll give them a call and see about volunteering." He took a step into the room and kissed her forehead. "Go back to singing. He's gone and I like hearing your voice. It's almost like Lois is back again."

He left the room. A few minutes later he heard her start humming.

***

Superman sat on the edge of Lois's roof, listening to her conversation with Sam below. She wasn't trying to step on his heart; she was singing to the baby. That was good. He could sit there all afternoon and listen to her beautiful voice. He shook his head; he never knew Lois could sing so well. He wondered whether his Lois did, too.

He looked up at the sky. It looked like it was going to start raining at any moment and he had to get back to work. As he stood up, she started singing "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head". He smiled. Her singing was something he could easily get used to.

***

Meanwhile, back in Lois's home dimension…

Jonathan and Clark sat in the living room at the Kent house in Smallville, having gorged themselves on turkey, stuffing, and pie. Lois was on the telephone in the hall and Martha had fallen asleep in her chair, knitting needles in her hands. Jonathan stared at his son, who was staring at his mom.

"Half-time," Jonathan announced, standing up with a stretch. "How about you help me out in the barn, Clark?"

"Sure, Dad." Clark pulled his gaze away from his mom and put on his coat. "When did Mom start knitting again?"

"This fall, no, it was in August. Don't be surprised if you get a new scarf for Christmas. You might warn Lois."

Clark smiled fondly. "I remember all those mittens she used

to make me. It didn't feel like Christmas until I found the mittens from Mom."

They walked into the barn and Clark looked around. "What did you need help with, Dad?"

"You. What do you have on your mind, son?" Jonathan asked.

Clark looked away. "Nothing."

"Oh, it's definitely something. You didn't notice any of Mid-West's touchdowns. That isn't like you. You and Lois seem good. Is something wrong in Metropolis?"

"No. Everything's fine." He picked up a rock and started tossing it in the air. "I had a strange dream recently and I just can't stop thinking about it."

"Dream, huh? That seems more like your mother's field of expertise."

"No, Dad. I'd rather I talk to you. It's not the kind of dream I want to discuss with Mom."

The light bulb came on in Jonathan's eyes. "Oh. I thought we covered those in middle school." He winked at Clark.

"It wasn't really that kind of dream, Dad." Then he smiled. "Much."

Jonathan held up his hand. "Skip the details. What bothers you about it?"

Clark was quiet for a minute as he thought. "Have you ever had a dream that felt so real that you start looking for answers in real life?"

"I had a dream once, where I thought I hadn't plowed the west field and forgot to buy seed, and I got up the next morning and was halfway dressed when your mother woke up and reminded me that it was only February and the ground was rock solid. That what you mean?"

"Kind of." Clark caught the rock and looked down at it. "I dreamed that Lois was six months pregnant. I could hear the baby's heartbeat. I felt the baby kick. Lois even fed me strawberries. She knew things that…" He shook his head. "Then she said she had to go."

Jonathan sat down on a hay bale. "I didn't know you and Lois were trying, Clark."

"We aren't. We're still newlyweds. We haven't even walked down that road. But this dream…" He sighed, starting to toss the rock once more. "It was perfect. It felt so real. I even searched for her, when I awoke, but it was like she was never there."

"It was a dream, Clark," Jonathan reminded him.

"Everything points to it being a dream. She even told me in the dream that it was a dream."

"Unusual."

"Exactly. And when I woke up the next morning my blue shirt was missing."

Jonathan laughed. "What does that have to do with the price of corn?"

"It's the shirt I was wearing when I went to bed. It's the shirt I gave to the dream Lois to wear before she left and…" He swallowed. "And I found the green shirt she had been wearing folded up in my laundry basket a few days later."

Jonathan's jaw dropped. "She left her shirt?"

Clark looked away. "Technically, it was *my* shirt. One I hadn't seen since before I left for New Krypton."

"Oh." Jonathan chuckled. "It's definitely real then." He laid the sarcasm on thick.

Clark pursed his lips. "Lois and I made love the night before I left with the Kryptonians. The dream Lois said that was when she got pregnant."

"Oh."

"I figured it out in the morning. If it were real, the baby would be due mid-February. Lois would be about six months pregnant now." He caught the rock in his hand and crushed it into gravel.

"Ah." Jonathan nodded. "You want the dream to be real."

"You don't understand, Dad," Clark said as he started pacing. "When I felt the baby kick, I could feel it in all of my nerve endings. I haven't felt anything like that except when Lois and I first kissed. We made a connection. A bond. I'm missing out on seeing the baby develop and grow. And that Lois…" He sighed. "She was so beautiful, glowing. Sexy." He grinned. "And she could fly."

"That's some dream, Clark. I can see why you don't want to let it go. Have you discussed it with your wife?"

Clark's eyes grew wide as he shook his head.

"Lois doesn't fly, does she?"

"Not since her Ultra Woman days." He paused in thought. "She doesn't remember our first time."

He must have heard Clark correctly. "Excuse me?"

"I would swear on my future children that Lois and I made love before I left for New Krypton, but my wife says our first time was on our honeymoon."

"I wouldn't swear on that, Clark," Jonathan suggested. Not with their luck, at least.

"You're right. I meant it as a figure of speech."

Jonathan rubbed his hands together, wishing that he hadn't forgotten his gloves. "Could that have also been a dream, Clark?"

His son shook his head. "A man doesn't forget his first time, Dad."

Jonathan stopped rubbing his hands and looked at his son. He couldn't have heard that right and asked him to clarify. "You mean your first time with Lois?"

Clark shook his head.

"That was your *first*, first time?" Jonathan swallowed. He had been sure that Clark and Lana… or in college or while traveling… but then again, Clark *was* special.

His son nodded.

"Oh." Jonathan thought for a moment, then blanched. "Lois *is* Lois, right?"

"I'm positive that it's her. She has the scar on her ankle bone that she broke from before we met."

"You checked?"

"With our history?" Clark shrugged.

"Of course."

"I had to make sure, but I knew it was her before I checked. You can see why this is driving me nuts. I love my wife, but I feel like I have another wife floating around in the ether somewhere with our unborn child." He slammed one fist into the palm of his other hand. It clapped like thunder. "Oh, sorry." He grabbed his head. "I'm so afraid it was only a dream. That I'll never see them again."

Jonathan walked up to his son and put an arm around his shoulder. "This dream really affected you."

Clark nodded, unable to speak.

"Your mother would probably say that the dream Lois was your unconscious desires to have children reaching out and punching you in the nose."

Clark couldn't help but smile.

"Perhaps it's time to have that talk with Lois, son."

He sighed. "I don't think she's ready for that, Dad. We're still getting used to each other as a married couple."

"All right. But then you need to keep telling yourself that it was just a dream."

"I know." Clark nodded. "Thanks, Dad. It's great to finally get that off my chest." He hugged him.

"Anytime, son." Jonathan paused, trying to figure out exactly how to word what he wanted to say.

"Was there something else, Dad?" Clark asked, concerned.

"It's time to tell Lois, Clark. She's known that you're Superman for eighteen months now. And it's been almost three years since you brought him here."

Clark winced. “Yeah. I know, Dad. It’s complicated.”

“How is it complicated? Just tell her. The longer you wait…”

“The timing has to be right. Trust me, I know Lois and she’s going to flip if she finds out that Jack knew first, especially after it took me so long before I told her. If I reveal I’ve been hiding him from her, what with the trial and Tempus and everything, our life is just settling down again. I want to have some peace for a while.”

Jonathan raised a brow at his son and pressed his lips together. “The time will never be right, son. Just do it. This is the last time we’re removing photos before she visits, Clark. You’re lucky he went out of town this weekend or he would have been here for Thanksgiving. He’s family now. We’re proud of him, like we’re proud of you. No more hiding him from her.”

“Okay.” Clark nodded and then asked sheepishly, “Is Jack angry at me?”

“No.” Jonathan chortled as he nudged his son’s shoulder. “You know the kid thinks the world of you. But your mother and I have had enough. You know what she thinks of secrets within the family.”

“Yes, Dad.” Clark rolled his eyes with a wobble of his head.

“I caught her drinking wine by herself in the afternoon, Clark. That isn’t like her.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “Mom?”

“It surprised me, too. So, this is it.” Jonathan crossed his hands and then separated them. “No more, Clark.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll tell Lois.”

“Thank you. We’d better head back before the womenfolk start to wonder about us.”

Clark laughed. “And the half-time show should be about over by now. Go Mid-West U!”

Lois stood at the front door of the house when they returned from the barn. “I was wondering what happened to you two.”

Clark waved and jogged up the stairs to her. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “I love you, Wife.”

“That’s good to hear.” She smiled. “I love you, too, Husband.”

Jonathan passed them in the doorway with a grin.

Clark pulled her outside and shut the door, kissing her again. “Want to go somewhere?”

“Clark! Your parents.”

He kissed her again, so passionately and deeply that they started to float.

“I mean,” she coughed to clear her throat. “Yes, of course, I do.”

Clark started kissing her again and a moment later, they were gone.

Jonathan lowered the curtains on his living room window and smiled. He’d done good.

***

Back in the other dimension…

Clark held his hands together and gave Kal’s wife puppy dog eyes.

“A sucker is born every moment,” Lois sighed with a shake of her head.

“Perry had to stay in town last minute to thwart a union strike at the utility department. Alice has already left to visit the boys. He was practically begging and Perry doesn’t beg. We have to go, Lois. He doesn’t want to spend Thanksgiving alone.”

“I’ve been on my feet all day, Clark, at the shelter. I’m tired.”

“I’ll carry you everywhere.” He picked her up and grinned. “He promised me the exclusive.”

Lois laughed. “Okay. Fine. But Lucy doesn’t have anything nice to wear to dinner at the Mayor’s house.” She looked at him and swallowed. He was too close. She looked across the room at Sam, who was watching them closely and mouthed the word, ‘help.’

“I’ll help you find something, sweetie.” Sam stepped forward. “I’m looking forward to having a nice hot meal that wasn’t heated up in a microwave.” Clark still hadn’t set her down. “I’ll take her, Clark.”

“Oh, sorry.” Clark cleared his throat and set her down.

“Thanks, Clark.” She and Sam walked down the hall to her room.

“I’ll just swing home and change,” Clark called from the living room and then with a swoosh, he was gone.

“Thank you, Sam.” Lois put a hand to her chest and took a deep breath. “It’s hard when he holds me that close. I miss Kal so much and Clark…” She took another deep breath.

“I know, sweetie. Are you all right? Can you handle tonight?” He suddenly looked concerned.

“I’m fine, Sam. Just tired. Don’t be surprised if I fall asleep on a couch somewhere.” She yawned.

“Do you really need my help finding something to wear?” he asked, fear in his eyes.

Lois smiled. “A woman always says that about her closet.” She went into her room and shut the door.

After getting undressed, she hopped into the shower. A comforting, yet steamy, shower would wash away the weariness from her bones. She looked down at her stomach; it was really getting big. She leaned a hand against the wall. She hoped it wasn’t twins. She took a deep breath.

“Relax, Lois. If you were having twins, you would hear the second heartbeat. Sam only saw one baby on the ultrasound. Don’t stress yourself out. Just two and a half months to go,” Lois told herself. How exactly had she been able to wear that Ultra Woman suit at the end of last month?

She gasped. Had that only been a month ago? It felt like eternity. She closed her eyes and Elvis started to sing in her head.

Lord almighty,
I feel my temperature rising,
mmm, it’s burning straight into my soul…
Your kisses lift me higher,
Like the sweet song of a choir,
You light my morning sky,
With burning love…
It’s a hunk, a hunk of burning love…

Hearing a sound in her room, Lois turned off the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. “Hello?”

On her bed was a beautiful dress, not at all in Lucy’s style: maroon, empire waist, sleeveless. She pressed her lips together. This was Lois’s style. Maroon was the color her Clark had wanted her to wear on their first date. *Oh, this wasn’t good.* Where in the world would he find such a dress on Thanksgiving Day of all days?

“Clark,” she muttered and went to dry off.

“*Lois,”* she heard him respond. He must be nearby. Out in the living room, probably.

“If you come into my bedroom while I’m in the shower again, I will literally punch you to the moon. Are we clear?”

“*Crystal.”* He chuckled.

“Good.”

“*I liked your singing.”*

He heard that? Perfect, just what she needed. “Stop whispering in my ear, Clark.”

“*Yes, ma’am.”*

She didn’t hear anything for a few minutes and continued to dry off.

“*That was our song, wasn’t it? ‘Burning Love’?”*

Lois swallowed and sat down on her bed, a tear dripping down her cheek. “Clark, don’t. I love my husband.”

“*I know. Sorry.”*

“You need to move on. We’re going back to him, Clark. So stop. Just stop. You’re only torturing yourself.” And me, she

added silently.

"*And you?"*

He knew her too well.

Sometimes, like tonight, Lois was happy that telepathic communication never worked between them. Listening to him whisper to her was bad enough, she didn't need him inside her head as well. She went into the bathroom to blow dry her hair, cutting off any further murmurings from his voice.

Lois came out to the living room a few minutes later, wearing the maroon dress. It was a little tight over her bust. She hadn't noticed them growing larger, but they must have. Luckily, the cut of this dress hung loosely around her waist, hiding most of the rest of her curves.

"Can you zip me up?" she asked.

Clark just stood there, staring at her. This wasn't a good idea. Finally, he blinked and stepped forward. He ran his finger up her back as he zipped. She could feel his warm breath on her neck.

She turned around, stepping away from him. What was wrong with him?

"Shall I carry you?" he volunteered, holding out his hands.

"You lay one finger on me and I'll slap you to kingdom come."

Clark stepped back. "I deserve that."

"Actually, you deserve the slap." Lois glared at him.

"Did I miss something?" Sam asked, stepping between them.

"You're starting to act like a stalker. A creepy ex-boyfriend. Just stop it."

"A creepy stalker? Lois, that's a little strong, don't you think?" Clark asked, his eyes full of pain. "And who was just singing our song?"

"In the privacy of my own room. It's none of your business."

"Then don't call me creepy."

"Did you fly up to Canada and just happen to buy me a dress that fits perfectly? Or did you coincidentally happen to have this one hanging in your closet?" Her gaze turned fierce.

"What is she talking about?" Sam looked at him.

"It's just a dress," Clark murmured.

"Whose dress is this, Clark?"

He looked away.

"It's *her* dress, isn't it?"

Clark still wouldn't look at her.

"I'm not her. I'm Kal's wife."

"It's a dress, Lois. And I knew it would fit you. That's all," he murmured.

"Is it? I need to know if you ever liked me for me or if I'm just some sick substitute for your fantasy, Clark."

Clark glowered at her. "That's rich coming from you, Lois."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've changed my whole life for you and then you go risk everything by going to Kal, telling him about the baby."

"He's my husband. I miss him. He was asleep and thought I was just a dream."

"A nightmare is more like it," he snapped.

Lois slapped him across the face. "Don't, Clark. I love him. I needed to know he was real, not just a dream. I needed to know if he even remembered me."

"He lives with you. He's married to you. Of course he remembers you. He has the perfect life."

"You mean instead of having a dress-up facsimile of his love," she retorted.

Clark stared her directly in the eyes. "You don't think that this kills me? Listening to you talk about him, hearing the love in your voice when you speak of him." He swallowed. "Knowing I'll never have what he has, because she's dead," he murmured, looking away.

"And I'm alive, so you think you can… Clark?"

He had blanched and grabbed her shoulders. "Say that, again."

"What?"

"Say 'Finally, I reached you. Clark Kent, please, help me. I'm alive.'"

He had gone crazy. "What are you—"

"Say it," he urged. "In your normal voice."

Sam came closer. Clark closed his eyes.

"Finally, I reached you. Clark Kent, please, help me. I'm alive."

His eyes flashed open and he turned to Sam. "Lois is alive."

These men. Lois threw up her hands. "Standing right here."

"Our Lois," Clark corrected. "She called me the other day. That was all she was able to say before we got disconnected."

"She called you? Why would she call you?" Sam asked.

"Well, you don't have a phone. Perry no longer works at the *Daily Planet*, so that leaves…" Clark thought for a moment. "I have no idea why she would call me."

"Maybe she knows you're Superman," Lois suggested.

Clark looked crestfallen. "Yes, that's probably it."

Oh, why had she said that? "This is good news, Clark. She's alive."

"Let's go! Let's tell Perry. He'll be thrilled," Sam said, shuffling them to the door.

"I need to cover up," Lois said, running to her room. She grabbed her tummy and took a deep breath. No running. She opened her drawers and pulled out her large black cardigan sweater. Then she grabbed her John Lennon glasses off the dresser. And her coat.

"Why did you cover up?" Clark asked in the cab. "You looked so—"

"Big as a house," she finished for him. "It's cold out, you know."

"Striking." He took her hand and squeezed it. "Some women look better with child. I didn't think you could look any better, but you proved me wrong, once again."

"That's my job, you know. Proving Clark Kent wrong."

"Yes. I figured that out on my own. Thanks."

She laughed.

"I'm still in shock. I can't believe she called me. I had no idea it was her until I heard you say, 'I'm alive'."

"I'm happy for you," Lois whispered. She was. This was why she had come back, but somehow knowing that his Lois was alive and well and trying to reach him, cut her like a knife.

"We can't tell Perry," Sam announced.

"Why not?" asked Lois.

"How did Clark recognize her voice?"

"Because I said… oh." She looked at Clark.

Clark pressed his lips together. "It's still good news, except that we have no idea where she is."

Sam's grin threatened to split his face. "Exceptional news. My girl is still alive!"

***

Perry raised his glass of wine. "I'm thankful I have friends who would come over at a moment's notice on Thanksgiving Day to keep an old man company."

"You're not old," Lucy corrected.

"Hear! Hear!" Sam agreed.

They all laughed.

Perry turned to her. "Lucy?"

She looked across the table at Clark. "I'm thankful for small miracles. And for friends who would change their entire lives to help me out." She smiled and raised her glass of sparkling apple juice.

Clark gazed back at her. "You're welcome," he whispered.

"No matter how crazy I drive them."

They laughed again.

"Clark?"

He sighed. “I’m thankful to have a family once more.”

Perry raised an eyebrow at him.

“No matter how crazy they drive me.”

They all laughed.

“Sam?”

“I’m thankful that my daughter’s alive!” Sam cheered, raising his glass of sparkling apple juice.

“Sam,” Lois and Clark groaned in dismay.

“Great Caesar’s ghost! You found her?” Perry leaned forward.

“No,” Clark answered with a glare at Sam. “I received a phone call from someone who sounded like her, but it got disconnected.”

“What did she say?”

“‘Finally, I reached you. Clark Kent, please help me. I’m alive’,” replied Clark.

“Not that I want to rain on your parade, Sam. But that could have been anyone, Clark.”

“It sounded like Lois,” Clark clarified with a shrug.

“How in the King’s name do you know what Lois Lane sounds like? You’ve never even met the woman.”

Clark looked at Lois and smiled. “I’ve got all her old interview tapes. I’ve listened to her voice for hours… when I was researching what might have happened to her.”

Perry nodded, accepting that explanation. “Good job, son. But without concrete proof, we still don’t have a story.”

Lois smiled. You could take Perry White out of the newsroom, but you couldn’t take the newsroom out of Perry White.

“Well, this is definitely something to celebrate,” Perry said, standing up. “I’m stuffed. Let’s move out to the living room. We’ll have pie later. I’ve got a new Elvis CD I’ve been wanting to play.”

“No!” gasped Lois and Clark in unison.

She looked at Clark and turned back to the dining room. “My sweater.”

***

Perry put an arm around Clark’s shoulders and walked him into the living room.

“Are you saying you don’t like Elvis, Clark?” Perry asked with a glance back at Lois. “You haven’t had a problem with his music before.”

Clark cleared his throat. “I haven’t been able to listen to it since…” he started saying, then looked away.

“Oh. Since my little Halloween bash?” Perry nodded. “I understand completely. Don’t need to remind you of your ‘destiny’.” He grinned.

Clark rubbed his hand down his face.

“What’s her problem with Elvis?” Perry asked with an inquisitive glance at Lois.

“Nothing. She loves Elvis’s music. Was singing him earlier tonight in fact. She just knows my situation.”

“Oh.”

Lucy entered the room and stood at one of the bookcases examining Perry’s books. Sam sat down on the couch, leaned back, and unbuttoned his top button.

“I’ve got another CD you might like, honey,” Perry said, calling to Lois and taking a CD from his rack. “Ella Fitzgerald.”

Lucy smiled at him. As soon as the music started, she started to sway.

“She certainly is a beautiful woman, Clark,” Perry said in a low voice.

Clark nodded.

“I’ve seen plenty of women who go to seed in this condition, but not Lucy. She just keeps getting more lovely,” Perry gushed.

“Maybe you need to switch to coffee, Perry,” Clark said.

“I’m not drunk, my boy. I know what I’m saying.”

“Yes, sir. I agree,” Clark replied. “I told her so earlier.”

Lucy was still swaying to the music. Unexpectedly, they could hear her singing along.

The way you sing off key
The way you haunt my dreams
No, no, they can’t take that away from me…

Clark’s turned around and stared at her. He couldn’t look away. It didn’t feel like she was singing to Kal or the baby, the music was just flowing through her. That voice, the sway of her hips, the hint of rose petal scent. He was tempted to fly over there and take her in his arms, sway with her to the music. Kiss those lips. He closed his eyes in pain. She was Kal’s. She could never be his. The fates would not allow it.

“It’s obvious you’re smitten with the girl, Clark. Why don’t you do the right thing by her?”

“No. I can’t,” Clark said, turning to face Perry.

“You love her, Clark. She might not be able to fly, my boy, but she’d make you happy.”

“Oh, I know she would.” A hint of a pained smile graced his lips. Love wouldn’t be love without the misery. “It’s not in the cards for us, sir.”

“Why’s that, Clark? She loves you.”

“Yes, I’m sure she does in a way.”

“And there’s your baby…”

Clark grimaced. “Ah… there’s the rub, Chief.”

“What do you mean?” Perry asked, his expression a bit more intense.

Clark poured a drink off Perry’s bar and swallowed it in one gulp. “I can’t have children.”

“Oh.” Perry looked over Clark’s shoulder at Lucy. “Oh! Surely that doesn’t matter, son. You were adopted yourself, if I recall correctly.”

“I don’t think she knows it, but she’s singing to me right now. You’re a smart man, Mayor White, what do you think that means?”

We may never, never meet again
on the bumpy road to love
Still I will always, always keep the memory of
The way you hold your knife
The way we danced ‘til three
The way you changed my life
No. No, they can’t take that away from me…

Lois’s soft lilting voice carried over to the gentlemen in their silence.

Perry listened to her sing and thought for moment. “Because she’s already married to someone else.”

“Bingo, Chief.”

“Oh, Clark, I’m sorry. She sure has a beautiful voice, though. It’s like Lola Dane lives again,” Perry told him fondly.

“What?” Clark sputtered. “What did you say?”

“Lola Dane. Didn’t I tell you about Lola? Lois went undercover once as a lounge singer by the name of Lola Dane at the West End Club.” Perry whistled. “She brought the house down. I almost lost my star reporter to show business.”

But Clark wasn’t listening. His brain had come to a full stop at the name ‘Lola Dane.’ He turned completely away from Lois. He could no longer look at her. He had thought Lois’s hopscotch logic of tying his Lois to Lex Luthor was just a decoy; a means to an end for her secret identity.

“Clark, stop.” Perry had put his hand on Clark’s arm.

“Huh?” Clark refocused his attention on his former boss.

“That’s expensive Scotch there, son, and you just downed four glasses in a span of two minutes.”

“What?” He looked down at his hands. Sure enough, he had been pouring drinks from the decanter. “Sorry. Alcohol doesn’t affect me.”

“Then stop drinking my good stuff like it was sugar water,”

Perry snapped and then winced. “That’s not what—”

Clark stepped away from Perry’s bar and rubbed his hand down his face.

“Something’s bothering you, son. What is it?”

Clark watched Lois sit down on the sofa next to Sam. She had stopped singing. “Jaxon told me that his stepmother was a lounge singer his father met at the Berkistan Hotel, by the name of Lola.”

“That’s only a coincidence, Clark. Lois disappeared in the Congo.”

“We think she might have followed the illegal gun story from the Congo to Berkistan by hiding inside one of the crates of guns.”

“That sounds like Lois. The bigger the risk, the bigger the payoff, the bigger the story. But that doesn’t mean that—”

“Jaxon said his brother was bowled over by this sexy stepmother because she had legs that never ended and the biggest set of brown eyes he’d ever seen.”

“Well, Clark, that does sound like Lois, but—”

“I wondered why Luthor would marry some lounge singer. It didn’t make sense,” Clark said, still staring at Lois. “He might play with a woman like that, but not marry her. He likes women who are forthright and can stand on their own, ones that stimulate him intellectually as well as physically.

“Now, Clark, don’t go tying all these coincidences together or you’re going to end up thinking—”

“That another woman I love is married.” He glanced at Perry and then back over at Lois. She looked up at his gaze.

“Yeah, son, that.” Perry gave him a condolence pat on the back. They were quiet a couple of minutes before he continued. “You ever hear back from that Ultra Woman babe?”

Lucy rolled her eyes and set her head on Sam’s shoulder.

Clark turned his back to her. “No. I don’t think I’ll ever see her again.”

“That’s too bad, Clark. There was definite fire there.”

He sighed. “Explosives is more like it, Perry. Probably for the best, anyway. Those that first burn brightest, fade fastest.”

Perry laughed. “Nonsense. Alice and I are just as strong as the day we married. Stronger.”

“I’m happy for you, Perry. Ultra Woman and I were destined for one another, just not in this dimension.”

Perry shook his head at that statement. “You just need to focus your attentions on the right lady. You’ve got too many women on your mind.”

“I’m cursed when it comes to women, Perry. Maybe it’s best if I stop trying altogether.”

“Yeah. Maybe a break is just what you need,” Perry agreed. “You ready for some pie?”

Clark shook his head. “I’ve got to go, Perry. I hear a siren.”

“Okay, Clark. Go, get your mind off things.” Perry shook his hand.

***

Lois’s head popped up as Clark left the room and she walked over to Perry. “Where’s Clark off to?”

“He heard an alarm.”

Lois listened for a moment. “No, he didn’t.”

Perry raised a brow at this pronouncement. “Do you have Ultra Woman’s hearing, Lucy?”

She gestured to herself. “Do you think this body would look that good in a pair of tights?”

“Well, uh…”

“Rhetorical, Perry. Clark gets a certain look on his face when he’s super hearing and he didn’t get that look. What were you two talking about? He seemed to be downing your liquor pretty quickly.”

“Lois Lane.”

“Ah.” She nodded. “We’ve got to find her, Perry. He needs someone like her in his life.”

“I agree with you completely,” Perry replied. “But I don’t know if that’s in the cards anymore, honey.”

“Of course it is.” She smiled. “Since he can’t have me, he should at least have the next best thing.”

Perry raised an eyebrow at her. “Next best thing?” He shook his head. “He thinks he can’t have Lois, Lucy, because—”

The doors opened and James walked in. “You’re going to love me!”

Sam, Lucy, and Perry gathered around to see what he meant.

“Maybe I should wait until Kent is here. Yes, definitely, Clark should hear this.” He looked around. “Where is he anyway?”

“Emergency,” Perry explained. “And you better not make us wait after an announcement like that.”

“Okay. So there I was, sitting in the lounge of my hotel in Tokyo, and I strike up a conversation with this older gent. Turns out he was interested in media companies and software, same as me. He says that he’s interested in taking my newspaper off my hands whenever I feel like selling.”

“Et tu, Brute?” muttered Perry.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Lois said.

“I told him that with Clark Kent on my staff, I’d own the *Daily Planet* until I was old and grey.”

“Good for you, Jimmy,” Perry said, patting him on the back.

“Don’t call me Jimmy, White.”

“Well, it was at that point the woman in the next chair leaned forward. She said, and I quote, ‘You own the *Daily Planet*? Do you know Perry? Do you know Clark Kent?’ I realized that was the first time I had mentioned which newspaper I owned and I wondered how this man knew me from Jack the Ripper.”

“This woman knew me?” Perry asked, curious.

“It gets better. He turns to her and says, ‘Don’t worry your pretty head about such things, dear.’”

“Ugh,” Lois grimaced.

“She looked like she was going to argue when she suddenly grabbed her head and leaned back, like someone had pinched her spine. And he said, quietly, ‘If you want to stay out of the suite, dear, you need to learn to mind your tongue.’”

“What did this woman look like?” Lois inquired with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“I’ll get to that.” James waved off her question. “I told them that of course I knew Perry and Clark; I count them among my best friends. Hope you don’t mind, White?”

“Thanks, Jim… Olsen.”

“Clark would be honored that you consider him your friend,” Lois replied for him. “Go on.”

“She was still grabbing her head as if she had a massive headache, but she tells me, ‘I find Clark Kent’s writing some of the best journalism I’ve read since Lois Lane disappeared.’” He nodded.

“She didn’t!” Sam exclaimed.

“That’s when she fell to her knees from the pain in her head and this man snapped his fingers. His associate came up and he told him, ‘Lola is feeling under the weather, Asabi, take her back to our suite.’ “

“No!” Perry and Lois gasped. Even though Lois could feel this confirmation coming.

“What?” Sam asked, looking between them.

“This Asabi guy takes her away, and I thought she was screaming in pain, but then I realized she’s saying to him, ‘No. No. No. I was so close. I can stand the pain, let me go back.’ Or something to that effect.”

“Tell me you got photos,” Lois said, grabbing his wrist.

“I’ll get to that.” James shook off her hand.

“James!” Perry exclaimed.

“Of course, it struck me as curious that such a beautiful woman would want to speak with me about the inner workings of

the *Daily Planet*."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Because, of course, beautiful women have no head for news."

"I walked into that one, didn't I?" James gazed at her apologetically. "Then I told this man that I would never consider talking such serious business with a man whose name I didn't know. He stood up and handed me his business card and told me that he hoped I would put it to good use." James reached into his breast pocket and then checked his pants pockets before finding the card in the inside pocket of his jacket and flung it on the coffee table.

Perry picked it up. "Lex Luthor, owner and CEO, L.I., Ltd., Singapore."

"Lex Luthor?" Sam gulped.

"Singapore?" Lois asked.

"I couldn't leave it like that. But I wasn't sure what to do. Then I thought, 'What would CK do?' "

"Probably find their suite and scan it with his x-ray vision, break down the door, and fly off with the woman in his arms," mumbled Lois. She raised her voice and said, "You should have called him, James."

"Oh, yeah. I didn't think of that. Anyway, I did find out what suite they were staying in and engaged in a little round-the-clock surveillance, but nothing came of it. Luckily, I was in Tokyo, so I found this great little miniature camera store… White, you should have seen the kind of surveillance—"

"Olsen!" shouted Perry. "On with it."

"Right. Right. Then at one of the cocktail parties towards the end of the conference, this…" James pulled out the photos and set them on the coffee table.

Lois grabbed the top photo. It was Lex Luthor all right. "He's bald!"

They all turned toward her.

"He had hair when I knew him," Lois explained weakly.

"And the woman who wanted to speak with me, Jaxon's stepmother? Her pain had Neuroscanner all over it. The migraines when she spoke out of turn. It looks like Junior got it working again." He grabbed a photo from near the bottom of the pile. She stood alone near a pillar wearing a sleeveless pale pink gown. Her hair, straight and long, just reached the curve of her back. She seemed to be staring off in space. "That's her." He whistled. "She's a beaut, just like Jaxon said."

Sam grabbed the photo out of his hand. "Lois! That's my daughter."

James's jaw dropped. "Oh, sorry, Dr. Lane."

"Great Caesar's ghost!" Perry crowed. "She is alive! She's alive!"

"The Neuroscanner works?" Lois asked quietly with a glance at Sam, but he was too busy staring at the photo of his Lois. She looked at her hands and then rubbed her arms in a hug. Her genetic makeup had changed enough that she was no longer affecting Junior's signal.

James coughed. "Uh, Dr. Lane… Sam." He swallowed and handed him another photo of Lois and Lex. In this one they were walking, her hand in the crook of his arm, but she looked odd, off.

"Why does she look funny?" Sam asked, studying the photo.

"Because she's blind," said James, dropping that bombshell as carefully as possible.

Sam's head dropped into his hands.

"What?" demanded Perry. "That can't be right. My star reporter? Blind?" He leaned back in his seat on the couch.

"I don't think anyone else noticed, but I have a blind cousin and recognized the signs. Just as you said, Lucy, he checked out above board on everything. If I hadn't known what a sadist he was or hadn't known about the Neuroscanner or hadn't witnessed for myself what he did to her that day at the hotel, I wouldn't have believed it."

"Sometimes, I just hate to be right. I can't believe he blinded her." She looked away, a tear trailing down her cheek. "I didn't expect that kind of brutality." She reached over and hugged Sam.

"Now, now. Lucy, we don't have any proof that he blinded her. It could have been an accident. Something in the water…" Perry searched for another excuse. "Damn. I can't be unbiased in this case. This is Lois we're talking about here. I'm so sorry, Sam, but I want Superman to go after him with a submachine gun."

A hint of a smile appeared on Lois's lips. "Superman doesn't hurt people, Perry. You know that. And he certainly wouldn't use a gun," she whispered and then she cleared her throat. "I want us all to be perfectly clear on one thing. No one is to tell Clark about Lois. Not. One. Word." She turned to James. "About Lex Luthor go ahead, crow to your heart's content. I'm beginning to think our best investigative journalist is being wasted in the boardroom."

James blushed. "Thanks, Lucy."

"Good work, son." Perry patted James on the shoulder once more. "I'm going to have to agree with Lucy here. Let's just keep this news about Lois amongst us."

Sam stood up. "Not tell Clark? That's crazy! How is he going to rescue her if he doesn't know she's there?"

Perry paused. "Trust me, Sam. He already knows." He glanced at Lois and shook his head.

Sam sat back down, but he didn't look happy about it. "And he didn't tell me?" he grumbled.

"If Clark finds out that Lex blinded Lois… or hurt her in any way…" Lois shook her head. "Who knows what he would do, Sam? It wouldn't be in her best interest if Clark flew off half-cocked to Singapore without planning first and without a way to disable the Neuroscanner. Those are details we need to work out before we can tell Clark."

"So," James said, clapping and rubbing his hands together. "What's our next step?"

Everyone was quiet for a minute, thinking.

"Well, the first step would be to get Clark to Singapore," Sam stated the obvious.

"I'll set up an interview with Lex Luthor," Lois murmured. She wasn't looking forward to being that close to the Luthor camp, even via telephone.

"Lex Luthor doesn't do interviews, Lucy. I asked," James informed them. "Apparently, he's a very private man."

"He'll grant this interview." Lois nodded, certain in her assessment of her ex-fiancé.

"How in the Sam Hill are you going to do accomplish that? I thought he hated you," Perry asked.

"Lex Luthor thinks he's the smartest man in the universe. Superman is goodness personified. Lex Luthor is the opposite. He has a huge ego; the challenge of pulling a fast one on Superman will be too big a temptation for him to resist."

"Let's hope that Clark is up for the challenge," Perry murmured.

"He'll be up to it. I guarantee it," said Sam, burying his face in his hands once more. "Oh, my girl. My poor little girl."

***

Once again, Clark sat on the top of the Daily Planet building wondering where and how everything in his life had gone wrong. He didn't want to be here moping. He hated mopers. But this year, he felt he had become one. First, meeting Kal's Lois and realizing the wonder that was true love… knowing he wasn't completely crazy to have fallen in love with a woman he had never met before. Because being with Kal's Lois told him he had been right, not crazy, about how he felt for his Lois.

Then he had moped over his break-up with Lana. *Okay*, he thought, a hint of a smile brushing his lips, he hadn't really

moped about that. Still it had hurt when she dumped him.

Then there was his coming out of the closet as Superman. Mope, mope and more mope. Ugh!

Then Lois had returned to him and he once again realized that his love for Lois wasn't a fluke. He truly and honestly loved her. But Kal's Lois had been even less available to him. Pregnant. Mope. Mope. And double mope.

But she needed him. Needed *him*. Not like everyone else in this world who would take any old superhero they could lay their hands on. (Again he admitted, yes, he was the only one who could rescue them). Lois Lane had specifically needed him: Clark Kent. Her protector. Her friend. But Clark still wasn't allowed to have her, to love her in the way he wanted. She belonged to Kal. He was just her Kal-Patch. Mope.

Mayson. Clark sighed. He hadn't been in love with her, but he had certainly cared for her. Maybe that could have grown into love. He hadn't been able to protect her and she had rejected him. The pain of that rejection had sent him into a tailspin. Mope.

Learning that Kal had bested him again. Kal could father a child. But not Clark, of course. Kal could have a family, surround himself with love. Not him. Triple mope.

Then there was the night of the Halloween party. Clark closed his eyes and a smile slipped onto his face. Lois. His. For one night. *Remember the way she looked at you?* Not Kal; him. The way her lips pressed against his lips. Her hands exploring his body, pulling him to her. Her breath had tickled his ears. Her tongue had tasted — *Fine*, he admitted, expelling a breath. *It wasn't real*. They both had been under the influence of that pheromone perfume, in addition to the beginnings of Interdimensional Time Sickness for her…

Shut up! his mind shouted. *A part of her loves you. You! Not Kal. It was your name she moaned, not Kal's. Yours!* Clark shook his head. Only his name was also Kal's name. He buried his face in his hands. Mope. Mope. Mopity. Mope. Mope. Kal's Lois would never ever truly be his.

And now this. *His* soul mate, his one real chance at happiness, was married to another man. And not just any other man. His Lois was married to Lex Luthor. He thought back to that snake of a man, who had stolen Kal's Lois away from her wedding to Kal, who had silenced her screams for help with a needle to the throat, who had chased her down the streets of Metropolis, who had created a murderous psycho clone, and who had lied to her when she was confused about who she was. *That* was the man who had legal rights with the woman Clark loved. *That man* could kiss her, touch her, wipe away her tears. He could hold her, comfort her, and sleep with her and…

Clark blasted off the building into the sky, over the clouds. *No!* His mind shouted. *No!* He wasn't going to go there with his thoughts. He wasn't going to imagine her loving that monster. Only it was too late. As soon as the words formed, so did the pictures in his mind. He raced around and around and around the world, trying to distance himself from these thoughts.

When he finally stopped, Clark wasn't quite sure where he was. China? No, too dark. It was daytime in Asia. Ethiopia? No, too cold. Utah? Perhaps. He sat down on the edge of what could have been an old abandoned quarry. It reminded him of his life. Bleak. Devoid of color. Empty of life. He wrapped his red cape around himself. No more moping.

Okay. So, *his* Lois wasn't technically his to have. It wasn't like Clark really thought they would have had a chance anyway, did he? He had already decided that he couldn't afford any more smashed tin cans in his life. He sighed. Tin cans, humph. Melted pools of tin was more like it. Being with Superman endangered women. What if he lost control? If someone hurt the woman he loved again…

"*Finally, I reached you. Clark Kent, please help me. I'm alive."*

Someone had already hurt the woman he loved. His Lois had called him and asked him to *help her*. Was it some elaborate trap set up by Luthor? Clark shook his head. No, he couldn't think that. He wouldn't believe that Lois willingly set him up. Not after being tortured by Junior's Neuroscanner. How long had they used that infernal device on her? What had they forced her to do? Clark winced, not wanting to dwell on the possibilities rushing around in his mind. Thank God it was broken and could no longer hurt her.

Lex Luthor had hurt his own wife. Clark growled. Lex Luthor allowed his son to spy on and torture his own wife. Clark's eyes focused on a lone tree across the rocky yard of the quarry. Suddenly, it burst into flames. Clark jumped off his perch on the edge of the quarry and as he floated down the rock wall, he punched it and punched it and punched it, until a mountain of rubble piled up to almost the top of the cliff and dust clouded the air.

Kal's Lois had known about Lola — about his Lois being married to Luthor. She had known and kept it from him. His one glance at her before leaving Perry's house told him that. Why hadn't she told him? Had she ever planned on telling him? His mouth thinned in anger.

Lois knew it would hurt him — she knew the information would torture him. He hung his head. Lois knew him better than he knew himself. She was protecting him. She was waiting to tell him until they had found his Lois.

Clark stood on top of his pile of gravel, the crisp November wind lapping at his cape. Lex Luthor needed to pay for what he had done to Lois. But his Lois didn't need vengeance, she needed help, to be rescued. She needed a hero, not a zero. Not a moper, but a man of action. He stood up taller, shoulders back, head held high. Superman could be that man for Lois.

***

Lois sat at her desk, staring at her telephone. The sun had set outside hours earlier in Metropolis; most of the newsroom staff, including Clark, had posted their stories and gone home for the night. Yet, Lois sat here still. This was the third night this week she had tried to get hold of Lex Luthor and she was hoping that the third time was a charm. Singapore, being literally on the other side of the world, was just getting to work as they were heading home.

She stood up and started to walk around the newsroom. Spending all this time sitting down was giving her the worst backaches. It felt like this baby was getting bigger by the minute and no amount of heavy clothing was doing the job of covering her ever-burgeoning tummy. Plus, all these extra layers were hot — it felt like a sauna in the newsroom. She pulled off one of the bulky sweaters and took a deep breath. She put her hands against her back and arched, hoping to stretch that kink down her spine.

FLASH! Lois turned to find James standing by her desk with a camera. Great. Just when she looked her most pregnant. She waved at him and tried not to waddle as she returned to her desk.

"I brought you some dinner," James said, holding up a bag. "When I called your apartment, Sam said you were staying late to try again. Hope you're in the mood for Italian."

"Love it. I'm starving," she replied with a smile. They went into the conference room and spread out their take-out containers.

"Cranberry juice for the lady," he said, handing her a bottle. "Have you told Clark yet?"

"What can I say to him? 'We found Lex Luthor, hiding in plain sight in Singapore, but the jerk won't come to the phone'?" She swirled her pasta around her fork and took a ravenous bite. "You are a godsend, James. Thank you."

He beamed under her praise and passed her a pile of napkins.

"I couldn't possibly look any worse." She chuckled, tucking a napkin into her top-most sweater.

"Well, you could remove about half those layers. Don't tell

me that you're cold in the newsroom or you'll make me feel like Ebenezer Scrooge," he said.

"Personal body image issues," she clarified. "Oh, what the hell, since it's just the two of us." She glanced out to the newsroom to make sure they were alone and then removed layer upon layer until it was just her maternity pants and a thin turtleneck. She stretched up to the ceiling and sat back down. "Much better." Digging into her pasta, she gazed over at James. His jaw had dropped to the floor.

He pointed at her. "Lucy. You're… you're…"

Oh, crap. He wasn't in on the whole baby secret. "Not one word to anyone," she told him and threw another sweater back on.

He stood up and started pacing. "It all makes sense. That's why White wanted Clark to… and you don't drink… and sent back that salad with the blue cheese… why Clark is so overprotective of you… why you said Sam's your doctor… and you're leaving us in about two months… and I'm the biggest idiot in the entire world."

She smiled, swallowing the temptation to mention a few lunkheads she knew personally. "I didn't mean to make you feel like an idiot. I just didn't want a lot of questions. Reporters are the world's biggest gossips."

"It's Kal's, right?"

Lois raised a brow at him and continued eating, refusing to dignify his remark.

"Sorry, stupid question. When are you due?"

"Mid-February."

"Boy or a girl?"

"Hope so." She grinned. "Sit down. Eat your dinner. All this pacing is making me dizzy."

James dropped into his seat and wiped his face with his hand. "Wow, this is big."

"And only getting bigger."

"That's not what I meant." He chuckled at her joke anyway. "Here I thought you were cold and kept cranking up the thermostat."

"Oh, please, turn it down. I'm drinking a gallon of water a day as it is." Lois fanned herself with a pile of napkins.

James jumped back up and ran out of the conference room. Lois watched him go. He was back two minutes later.

"There, I lowered it back to seventy. Sorry."

"Thank you. That was sweet."

He stood back up and started pacing again.

"Is something wrong, James?" she asked.

"I feel like I should be doing something productive. Here you are…" He indicated her with his hand again. "Creating life. Wow!"

"Calm down." She was amused at how in shock he really was. "I've been doing it for a while now."

"What can I do to help?"

"Sit down. Eat your dinner. Treat me normally." She spun around another forkful of pasta.

"Right." He sat down. She could still hear his feet tapping under the table. "Do you have a nursery yet?"

Lois shook her head. "I'll be heading back home soon after the baby's born. We'll get that stuff then."

He just stared at her. "Straight from the hospital?"

She swallowed. "We're going to try for a home birth." No super complications needed for the hospital workers to witness. No publicity. No one to know. No chance of unwanted visitors.

"Really?" He looked uncomfortable with that idea.

"Women have been doing this for thousands of years, James. How hard can it be?" She shrugged. "A little pain, lots of heavy breathing and discomfort, and boom, a baby."

He shook his head. "Wow! You're in total denial."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You've been so busy finding Lois, fixing Clark's love life, and capturing Lex Luthor, you're totally ignored the fact that you'll have someone to take care of soon. Like two months."

"There's plenty of time to get that stuff later." Lois waved off his concerns. "Eat!"

"Lucy." He looked her straight in the eye. "It *is* later now."

Her fork stopped halfway to her mouth. "What do you mean, James?"

"What are you going to do if the baby comes early? Preemies happen all the time, nowadays. I was a preemie. Six weeks early is not unheard of. N*ow* is the time to prepare."

Lois dropped her fork and started hyperventilating. "Early? But it can't come early. Nine months. I know the exact date. That's when it has to happen. Not early."

"Head between your knees, Lucy. Head between your knees."

"Are you nuts? I don't even know what my knees look like anymore," she exclaimed.

They looked at one another and burst into laughter.

"Oh, Lucy. I'm going to miss you," James said, brushing away a tear of laughter. "You know how to keep life real. You always surprise me."

Lois wiped her mouth and glanced at the clock. "Finally. Today is the day. Keep your fingers crossed for me." She stood up and walked out to her desk.

James pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a number. "White. Olsen here. I just found out about Lucy… *yes*, just now… it's due in February and she is completely unprepared. We seriously need to throw this woman a shower… yes, *us*. Who else is there? Exactly. Superman…. Clark and Lucy have been pretty tight lipped about the whole thing. Lois? She's trying again right now. I'll keep you posted." He hung up his phone and exited the conference room. He walked up to her and rubbed her shoulders. "Any luck?"

"I'm on hold." She yawned. "Again."

James sat down in the seat next to her. "Let me take some photos of you like this for Kal."

Lois smiled at him and pointed to the phone, then covered up the mouthpiece and murmured, "Sounds good. We'll discuss it later."

James grinned and leaned back.

"Hello? Nigel? Nigel St. John?" She glanced at James, only to be blinded by a flash. She blinked her eyes, trying to clear the stars from her vision. She grabbed his camera and moved it to the corner of her desk. "You don't know me, but I'm sure my name is familiar. My name is Lucy, Lucy El. I'm Clark Kent's personal research assistant. I would like to speak with…" She took a deep breath and reached over for James's hand. "Lex Luthor about his son Junior shooting me in the shoulder this past summer."

James squeezed her hand. "Are you crazy?" he whispered. "You're supposed to be making an interview appointment for Clark, not adding your name to an assignation list. He is going to kill you."

"Yes, I'll hold." She shook her head. "Luthor isn't going to kill me. I'm just trying to get his attention."

"Who cares about Luthor? Clark's going to kill you," he retorted.

"Who am I going to kill, Mr. Olsen?" Clark's voice floated down as he descended into the newsroom from the upper windows.

Lois held up a finger to James and grabbed Superman's blue suit, pulling him closer.

James indicated Lucy with a jerk of his head.

"Mrs. El. I'm sorry that you are under the misguided notion that my son, Lex, Jr., had anything to do with your unfortunate accident this past summer," a male voice said into her ear.

It was Lex Luthor all right. Suddenly, the image of him calling to her from his town car appeared in her head, '*It's Kent.*

The man you love and thought you couldn't have.'

Lois started to shiver uncontrollably. "Good morning, Lex."

Superman held out his hand for the phone. She switched the phone to her other ear and took his outstretched hand in hers.

"I didn't know we were on a first name basis, Lucy," Lex teased.

She was so cold, her teeth began to chatter. She stood up and leaned her head against Superman's chest. "I know you so well, it's like we're meeting again after a long hiatus."

"You have me at a complete disadvantage."

Superman wrapped his cape around her. He was so warm, Lois finally started to melt.

"That would be a first, Lex, I am sure. My boss, Clark Kent, would like to meet with you in Singapore."

"Clark Kent?" She could actually hear Lex smiling. "The star reporter at the *Daily Planet*? My wife is quite a fan of his work."

"Well, then, Lex, we should really make it a dinner meeting, so he can meet her. He does adore his fans. And Jaxon says Lola has such a beautiful singing voice."

Superman covered up the mouthpiece on the phone. "What are you doing?"

Lois pulled the receiver away from him.

"It sounds like quite an evening. Will you be joining us?" Lex inquired.

Superman pressed his lips together and shook his head.

"Alas, no. I have a terrible fear of flying. I think it might stem from my vertigo."

James gave her a thumbs up.

"That's too bad. Jaxon has told me all about you, too," Lex informed her. "Horrible about that civil war in Berkistan, good people disappear there all the time. It seems to bother you quite a bit."

"Yes, they do, and it does," she agreed with a smile. Her husband was safe and sound in another dimension. "But let's not talk about that. We should make this meeting before Christmas, don't you think? So we can all have a fresh start for the New Year."

"Shall I pass you to my executive assistant, Mrs. Cox, to firm up the details?"

Lois scowled. "I'm afraid I might get lost in the transfer. Why don't you just have her hand you the appointment book. I know she's standing right there."

Superman and James exchanged a glance.

"Stop taunting him," Superman whispered. James nodded in agreement.

"Okay. How about the evening of December 19th?" Lex suggested.

She glanced at Superman and he nodded.

"Oooh, sorry. He has an engagement that night. Can we make it the 20th? Clark loves to explore every country he visits."

"Stop," Superman mouthed.

"Lola and I have a Christmas party we're throwing that night; Mr. Kent is more than welcome to join us," Lex told her. "I'm sure I could make time for him during the weekend for that interview."

"Sounds great," she replied. "Shall I have him contact the L.I., Ltd. headquarters that afternoon for the details?"

"No. I'll have the details messengered over to the *Daily Planet* today… or in your case, tomorrow."

"I look forward to receiving them. Thank you for your time, Mr. Luthor."

"It's been informative, Ms. El," responded Lex before disconnecting.

As Lois hung up the phone Superman pulled her into a hug. "You are amazing, Lucy. How in the world did you ever find him?"

Lois took a deep breath, breathing in his aura. "I didn't. James here did."

Superman turned to him. "Mr. Olsen?" He held out his hand. "Thank you."

James glanced at Lois, who nodded her head. "No, Clark, thank you." He shook his hand. "You are a good example to look up to."

"James here is being modest. He copied your investigative skills while in Japan last week. He has been telling everyone what a great reporter you are for months now, Clark, including Lex Luthor himself."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that kind of support," replied Clark. He almost seemed uncomfortable under this praise.

Lois glared at James, who looked a bit uncomfortable as well.

Her boss's boss cleared his throat. "Why don't you call me, James, Clark?"

Superman grin split his face in two. "Thank you, sir… eh, James. I will." He picked Lois up and cradled her in his arms. "You are the craziest woman in the world. I'm going to have to hire a bodyguard for you. Goading criminal masterminds like that. You should have told me you were calling him."

"Merry Christmas, Clark," she said with a smile. He really shouldn't hold her like this. "Now, set me down."

He set her down and took a step away. She was suddenly cold again, but it was easier to breathe.

"I'm sending you to Martha's that weekend," he announced.

"No! Clark, you need me," Lois retorted, stomping her foot. "If you send me to Martha's, you'll be on your own. Anyway, how will you get me there?"

"I have my secrets, too, Lucy," Superman said with a raised brow.

"Who's Martha?" James piped in. They had forgotten about him.

"Lucy's mother-in-law," Superman explained. "She'll be safe there."

"But what if you need me? You won't be able to contact me there," Lois said.

"Superman works alone, Lucy. You know that."

"No, he doesn't. Without James's help we wouldn't know where Lex was." Lois grabbed James's elbow. "And you can't say that my help has been insignificant, can you?"

"Of course I'd still be in limbo if you — both of you — hadn't helped. But Lucy, surely you understand that I need to have a clear head, no distractions." Superman cleared his throat. "This is Lex Luthor we're talking about here."

"I'm a distraction?" she inquired innocently.

Superman glanced at her with a look that she instantly recognized as '*you're kidding me, right?*' "When I'm worried about your safety, that's a distraction," he said. "And with you throwing it in Luthor's face that you know more about him than he does about you, you practically invited him to come after you."

Lois glanced at James and he nodded in agreement. "I can take care of myself."

"It's not just about you anymore, Lucy," James reminded her.

Superman looked at him and then back at Lois. "You *told* him?" At her nod, he shook his head. "Have you completely forgotten how to keep a secret?"

"He's trustworthy, Clark." Lois set a reassuring hand on Superman's arm.

"That may be, but I'm beginning to wonder if you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She glared at him. "It's my life we're talking about here."

"I'm trying to protect Kal's child as well as you. And if any of his enemies were to find out, you both would be in grave danger. Why do you think I offered my protection in the first place?" he scolded.

"I won't tell anyone, Clark. I promise," James said, defending

Lois's decision to tell him. "You can trust me. I can even look after her while you're gone."

"I appreciate the offer, Mr. Olsen… James, really I do. But Lucy here has a habit of getting into *super* big trouble that she needs *super* protection to get out of. At least if she's at Martha's I'll know she won't get into trouble."

"Sam isn't going to want me flying," she reminded him.

"Sam might make an exception in this case." He beamed at her. Damn, they both knew Sam would. "James, can you drive Lucy home? I should go back on patrol."

James nodded.

"We're going to talk about this again before you leave, Superman," she said as he floated into the air. "This isn't my last word on the subject."

Superman grinned. "I never expected it to be." And he flew off.

"Wow. He's got you pegged," James said, heading back into the conference room.

"Hardy har har," Lois replied, unamused.

James put on his coat and cleared away their dinner as Lois put on her many layers again. She still felt chilled from her conversation with Lex. She ought to feel hot, talking to someone in hell. *Oh right, this Lex wasn't* in *hell. He's in Singapore.*

"Can I ask you a personal question?" James inquired quietly in the elevator down to the lobby.

Lois looked at him curiously.

"Is there some reason Clark thinks an old woman would be better protection for you than me?"

She laughed. "Martha may be a tough woman, James, but I don't think that's what he meant. Her place is remote, hidden, nearly impossible to find. It's me out and about in Metropolis that scares him."

James breathed a sigh of relief with a slight chuckle. He took another glance at her and said, "I thought you told me and Perry that Lex Luthor knew who you were. Didn't you tell us that he ruined your wedding with Kal?"

Lois didn't say anything as she ruminated over this question. She didn't open her mouth again until they were in his car. "James, I know you have gone out on a limb for me, more than a couple of times. Can you just trust me when I tell you that he might not know Lucy El, but he knows me like the back of his hand?"

"Is he one of Kal's enemies that Clark was talking about?"

She nodded and then looked away.

"I can see why Clark was so angry at you for taunting Lex."

"Lex wouldn't have come to the phone, unless I had something on him personally. That's how he works, so that's how he expects others to treat him. If I hadn't stood up to him, acted like he didn't scare me, he wouldn't have taken me seriously." She rubbed her arms with her hands. "I can't say it didn't terrify me to hear his voice, especially when I never thought I'd hear it again."

"You have nerves of steel," he said, starting the car.

"Really, it felt more like Jello." She pointed in front of them. "Home, James."

He laughed and drove her home.

***

Lois called Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs the next afternoon while Clark was attending a press conference at the Science Museum. She was surprised to find him at his desk.

"Lucy?" He swallowed nervously. "Everything all right with —" He coughed. "Clark?"

"Clark's fine, Dr. Klein."

"And you?" the scientist asked hesitantly.

"I'm well, too. I'm calling in regards to the information I gave you when we met that one time."

Lois heard the phone drop out of his hand. "Information?" His voice cracked. "What information would that be?"

"About the Neuroscanner."

"Oh, that information." Dr. Klein sighed in relief.

"I was wondering if you've made any progress with the hair sample I gave you in tracking the genetic fingerprint back to the Neuroscanner." Lois had finally remembered that when her Clark gave a DNA sample to match it against that boy with super powers, they hadn't used blood, but a sample of hair.

"Well, no. I haven't made much progress with that," answered Dr. Klein. "Is there some urgency that I don't know about?"

"If possible, we need a working prototype by the morning of the eighteenth at the latest."

He gulped. "That soon?"

"Without it, Superman won't be able to go through with his rescue mission."

With the Neuroscanner still operational, this dimension's Lois would end up being an unwitting mole in Superman's camp and anyone else with whom she came in contact. Junior and Lex would still be able to see and hear through her senses. This dimension's Lois would also be at Lex's and Junior's mercy as they would be able to subject her to migraine pain whenever they pleased. Neither condition would be desirable to Clark or Lois… either of them.

"Do you have proof that it is operational?" Dr. Klein inquired.

"Eyewitness account."

"Wow! Okay, I'll see what I can do, Ms. El. But I make no guarantees."

"Do your best, Dr. Klein. Her life is in your hands," Lois told him.

He lowered his voice. "Do you still believe that she's his true love?"

"There's always that possibility, Dr. Klein."

He gulped. "I'll get right on it, Lucy."

"Thank you, Dr. Klein," Lois said, hanging up. She looked down at her to-do list and checked off *N.S.* Next on her list: cross-reference L.I., Ltd. and Lex Luthor with Singapore, and see if she could find an address.

Someone walked up behind her. Lois could hear him breathing down her neck. Glancing up, she saw it was Jaxon and she scooted her chair away. He was definitely too close for comfort.

"Thanks. Thanks a lot, Lucy. Because of you my father has revoked funding for my Virtual Reality computer."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Jaxon," she said. "Now you won't be able to kidnap any more people. Are they going to revoke your license to be a bad guy as well?" Sarcasm dripped off her words.

Jaxon glared at her and stomped off.

Lois glanced down at her list and checked off Jaxon's name. She knew after mentioning his name to Lex the day before, it would only a matter of time before he heard from his dear old dad. She looked at him pouting at his desk and added a question mark next to her check mark. Clark wasn't going to appreciate her rebuff to Jaxon, but the little twerp seemed harmless without his super computer.

***

The weeks passed and Lois made no progress convincing Clark to let her stay in this dimension while he was in Singapore. Sam compromised only so far as insisting that the time machine (who knew that H.G. Wells had left one with Clark?) would be brought to her as opposed to her being to flown to it.

Lois sat at her dining room table eating breakfast when the phone rang. Sam answered it.

"We'll see you soon," he said and hung up. Sitting next to Lois, he relayed the message. "Clark's on his way."

"Really, Sam. I'll be just fine here in Metropolis. I won't

leave the apartment, I promise. Who knows what all this interdimensional travel is doing to the baby?"

Sam looked at her over his coffee mug. "Are you actually worried about the baby's safety or do you hate being sent away like some poor defenseless woman?"

He knew her too well. "Both," she grumbled.

Her substitute father put his hand over hers. "Know that this isn't about you."

"I know." She pouted. "It's about your Lois."

Sam nodded. "That's why we need to tell Clark she's blind as well."

"We can't, Sam." Lois had debated this point in her mind long and hard. "You didn't see him at the hospital when Mayson got hurt, Sam. He was out of control. He rushed off to attack Jaxon and ended up making stupid mistakes, like getting himself trapped in the Virtual Reality computer. If Clark finds out that Lex blinded your daughter… who knows what mistakes he might make in anger. It's better, better for Lois, if he doesn't know upfront."

"I'm going to have to disagree with you about this one point." Sam shook his head. "But I don't want him to make mistakes either, Lucy, which is why you need to go to the other dimension."

"But I have put so much work into this story, I want to be here for the outcome. I want to be here in case he needs me."

Sam sighed. "It's so hard to let our children grow up, Lucy. Let them stand on their own two feet, take those first few steps on their own."

She pressed her lips together. "You think I'm mothering Clark again."

"By giving Clark the crutch of you being here, you're telling him you don't believe he can do this without you. He needs to be one hundred percent confident. This is my daughter we're talking about here."

Lois's heart ached. She didn't want to undermine Clark's fragile confidence — he needed to know that she was safe, that he had protected her — but Sam was right. If Clark was worried about her safety, and the baby's, he would be distracted. She sighed. "Fine. I'll go. No complaints."

A moment later the time machine appeared in her living room. Superman stepped off the machine and then spun into his Clark clothes. Lois put a hand to her mouth. That was her Clark's move.

Clark caught her expression and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, but it really is more convenient."

Lois let herself breathe. "It's okay. I just didn't know —" She swallowed. "I'll go get my things."

Clark watched her leave the room and then sidled up to Sam. "She's not going to fight me?" he asked, surprised.

"She saw that you were right. If you were worried about their safety, it would be a distraction."

Clark glanced at him skeptically. "She's never admitted that I'm right before. You must have misheard her."

"No. He heard me correctly," Lois said, reentering the room with snow boots on her feet, her heavy coat on and a small suitcase in hand. "It might never happen again, so savor the moment."

He grinned. "Believe me, I am."

She put her stuff down on the passenger seat and touched the edge of the sled. As she did so, several lights came on and she snatched her hand to her chest.

A male voice spoke from the machine. "Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved."

"What the—" she gasped.

"Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized."

"It's been programmed only to work with you, me, and Mr. Wells. Safety precaution, in case someone else stumbled across it," Clark explained. Then he showed her how to reprogram the machine to return to his dimension.

"So, I turn this knob here. Set the date and time here?" she repeated.

"No! Don't touch the date and time knob or you'll travel through time. This knob controls interdimensional travel. If you don't touch the time/date knob, it will remain in sync," he explained.

Lois nodded. She hoped she would remember that two days hence.

"I wrote down the instructions on this piece of paper," he said with a reassuring smile, handing her the paper. "I don't want you to get lost."

She took a deep breath and smiled at him. "Neither do I. It was so nice of Mr. Wells to leave his spare machine with us."

"He was worried that you might come down with time sickness again before the baby is born and he might not be around to catch it."

"I could live without that," Lois murmured, staring at him.

"We all could," Sam agreed.

"Ready?" Clark asked.

"No, not quite." Lois stood up and hugged Clark. He smelled so good when he was this close. How easy it would be to fall under his spell again. She shook her head. That spinning costume change had really messed with her head. She kissed his cheek. "I'll miss you, Clark. You can do this." Stepping back, she took a deep breath while still staring into his eyes. Maybe it was best that she was spending a couple of days back in her dimension.

Clark moved a fraction of an inch closer to her, when Sam cleared his throat. Lois blinked and climbed back onto the time machine.

"Under your seat is an invisibility tarp. Use it to hide the machine while you're not using it." Clark's voice seemed a bit rougher than normal.

Lois nodded.

"Let's go over the ground rules one last time."

She sighed. "No visiting Kal. No contacting Kal. No leaving the Kent farm for any reason whatsoever."

"No coming back early," he reminded her.

She saluted him. "Yes, sir. Martha knows I'm coming, right?"

Clark's eyes went wide as saucers.

"Clark." She groaned with a shake of her head. "We've got to stop dropping by unannounced. One of these days, she won't be at home."

"You're her grandbaby's mama," said Sam. "You'll be welcome."

Lois smiled at Sam. "Oh, wait," she said, digging through her pockets. "I almost forgot." She pulled out a small envelope and handed it to Clark. "An early Christmas present."

Clark glanced at the envelope and started to open it, when she put her hand over his. "Wait until I'm gone."

He raised an eyebrow and pressed his lips together in distrust. "Am I going like it?"

"Oh, yes. You'll love it." She grinned mischievously, putting her hand on the lever. "You just might not be happy about it."

Lois waved to Sam, who waved back. Then with one last long glance at Clark, she pulled the lever and faded from view.

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Clark rubbed his hand down his face. "How could she ever think she wouldn't be a distraction?"

"Maybe a few days in the other dimension will clear her mind," said Sam.

"Right," Clark reluctantly agreed. He looked down at the note in his hand and decided to look at it later. He slipped it into his pocket. "But will a few days without her around clear mine?"

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Sam asked, heading into the kitchen.

Clark looked out the window. He really should be heading to work, morning meeting and all, although he and James had already informed Cat of his weekend assignment. “Sure.”

He wasn’t in a hurry to meet Lex Luthor face to face. Luthor had kidnapped the woman of his dreams. He glanced back to where the time machine had disappeared. Both of them. He wondered if he would be able to hold his anger in check. It was just one aspect of his personality where he failed to meet the original Superman’s standards.

Clark followed Sam into the kitchen and took a mug of steaming coffee from him.

“I really appreciate you looking for my daughter, Clark. Don’t be surprised, though—” Sam was interrupted by the telephone ringing. He set down his coffee and answered it. “Hello?”

“Is Lucy there?” Clark recognized Dr. Klein’s voice straight away.

“No. Can I take a message?” answered Sam.

Clark held out his hand for the receiver.

“Or would you like to speak with Clark Kent?”

“Oh, yes. I should speak directly to him,” replied Dr. Klein.

Sam passed Clark the phone.

“Could you please tell me why you are contacting Lucy, at home, when I specifically told you not to contact her?” Clark said acidly.

Sam looked at him with a raised brow.

Dr. Klein cleared his throat. “Lucy gave me this number and asked me to contact her here at this time as she would be unavailable for a few days.”

Grimacing, Clark closed his eyes. “May I ask what this is regarding?”

“I have the prototype she asked for. She said that you would need it for your trip.”

He had no idea what Dr. Klein was speaking about. Then he remembered the envelope she handed him. “Hold on, Dr. Klein.” Clark put the phone on his shoulder and took the note out of his pocket.

Clark:

I had Dr. Klein work up something to help you track Lex Jr.’s Neuroscanner. Hope it helps on your mission. Don’t be angry with him. I didn’t go to S.T.A.R. Labs. Everything was handled via messenger.

Love, Lucy

Clark ran his fingers over that last line of the note and then passed it to Sam. He put the phone back to his ear. “Is it operational, Dr. Klein?”

“It only has a range of a couple of miles. I can guarantee you that the Neuroscanner is not operational in Metropolis,” the scientist informed him.

“I didn’t think it would be, Dr. Klein.”

“Unfortunately, since I haven’t been able to pick up any readings, I cannot guarantee that the tracker works one hundred percent. Or it could be that the Neuroscanner is turned off or broken, again. I’ll explain exactly how the tracker works when you come pick it up,” said Dr. Klein.

“Thank you, Dr. Klein. I’ll be there straight away to pick it up.” Clark hung up the phone and glanced at Sam.

Sam handed the note back to Clark, fear in his eyes. “The Neuroscanner? Is it what caused the pain in her head?”

Clark looked at him, confused. *How did Sam known about the Neuroscanner?* Sam had not been privy to that initial conversation where Clark described what Jaxon had told him about Junior’s device.

“James said that Luthor’s wife grabbed her head and fell to her knees in pain, after she spoke out of turn during their conversation,” Sam clarified.

Ah, Lois knew that the Neuroscanner was working again. The little minx realized that it would have to be destroyed before he could rescue Lex Luthor’s wife.

Clark nodded to Sam. “Sam, could please you stay the weekend at my apartment? I didn’t like the way Luthor spoke to Lucy and I don’t want you in danger if he decides to try anything.” He tossed him his keys and then spun into his blue suit. He stepped towards the window.

“Thank you, Clark,” Sam said falteringly. He pressed his lips together as if he were trying hard not to say something.

“Was there something else?” Clark asked.

“Could you tell my girl that her daddy says ‘rainbows after thunderstorms’? She’ll know what it means.” Sam’s chin trembled as he spoke. “And, Clark, don’t let love blind you as her love once blinded her.”

“I won’t,” he said, wondering at Sam’s strange advice. He nodded once more and blew through the windows to S.T.A.R. Labs.

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Meanwhile, over in Lois’s home dimension…

Lois was in the Kents’ barn. How in the world was she going to hide the time machine from Jonathan all weekend? Had Clark actually said ‘an invisibility tarp’? Lois shook her head in disbelief. Even with one of those, couldn’t Jonathan still bump into it? This was why she liked being in charge of the planning. He hadn’t even contacted Martha. Oh, Clark. She hated to be an unannounced visitor, let alone one that had to stay hidden all weekend long.

Lois took a good long listen to see if Jonathan was nearby, but only heard the animals and the blowing of wind. *Oh joy, Kansas in December.* She missed Metropolis already.

She put her suitcase down on the ground. Bending down was already becoming a problem with her ever-expanding tummy. How was she going to reach that tarp? She squatted down and reached out her hand, holding on to the edge of the sleigh.

“Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved,” that same male voice announced, causing her to stumble backwards and land on her bottom. So much for stealth mode. She wondered if there was a volume button. Taking her gloves from her pockets, she put them on and then proceeded to pull herself to her feet, grabbing the tarp from under the driver’s seat in the process.

Luckily, the tarp was lightweight and easily covered the time machine with one good flick of her wrists. Wow, it completely disappeared. Thank you, future inventor. She wondered if Alan Morris had played a hand or if someone worked off his ideas.

Lois picked up her suitcase and went to the barn door. She knew the general direction from the barn to the house and concentrated in that direction. Martha, she could hear, was in the kitchen. Putting something together on the stove for lunch it sounded like. She concentrated harder, hoping to hear Jonathan. There, he was listening to the radio and what was that other sound? It almost sounded like spooling of thread. Was he sewing?

“*Ow.”* She heard Jonathan yelp, then the sucking of his finger.

“*Are you all right?”* Martha called to him.

“*Huh?”* he called back, lowering the volume of the radio.

“*I said, are you all right?”* Martha repeated.

“*I’m fine, honey. Just cut my finger on this darn fly.”* Ah, he was tying flyfishing flies in his office. Then he turned the volume back up on his radio. That radio would be great cover.

Lois opened the barn door and pushed herself through the several inches of snow to the kitchen door. She tapped softly on the window. She must have tapped too quietly, because Martha didn’t even glance her way. She tapped again. This time, Martha tilted her head and looked at the door as if she was hearing things. Lois waved at her and Martha dropped her spoon on the floor.

Clark’s mother let her in and just stared at her. “Lois?” she

whispered, looking carefully at her. “What are you doing here?”

Lois set down her suitcase and shook off the snow that had accumulated on her in the two minutes it took to walk from the barn. Then she took off her heavy coat, hanging it on a hook by the door. “Can I stay for the weekend? Clark’s worried about our safety,” she said, setting her hand on her tummy.

“Of course. Stay forever, if you like,” Martha answered, looking out the door for someone else. “Where’s Mr. Wells?”

Lois shrugged. “He left his spare time machine with us, just in case I went delusional again.” She grinned. “I haven’t.”

“Glad to hear it,” Martha said, wrapping her arms as well as she could around her. “My, how you’ve grown in less than a month.”

“Tell me about it.” Lois pulled out a seat and sat down. “Just two more months.” She sighed.

Martha sat down next to her. “What’s this about Clark being worried about your safety? Is there something wrong in his dimension? Did some crazy psycho figure out who you are?”

Lois shook her head. “We found Lois. She’s married to Lex Luthor, like I suspected, and living in Singapore of all places. I mouthed off to Lex Luthor on the phone, when I was setting up an interview for Clark, and so now Clark is worried that Lex will send some goons after me while he’s off rescuing her.”

“You spoke to that dimension’s Lex Luthor. Are you nuts?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Lois shook her head. “I did it as my secret identity,” she said in her Southern Lucy voice.

Martha looked at her like she was still crazy. “So Clark sent you to us? I’m going to have to tell Jonathan, Lois. I cannot keep you for the weekend and sneak around my husband’s back. It’s too much; I just can’t.”

Lois put her hand on her mother-in-law’s. “I know, Martha. But maybe we could break it to him later. Maybe not mention the baby and see if he notices I’m a different Lois than the one Clark has back in Metropolis.”

Martha looked at her head to toe. “He’ll notice.”

“I’ve got a bulky sweater in my suitcase.”

Martha raised an eyebrow. “Sweetie, did you ever own a bulky sweater before moving to the other dimension?”

Lois thought for a minute. “Yes! I may not have worn it often… or at all. But the snow is falling by the shovelfuls out there. It wouldn’t be unthinkable for me to wear a sweater here.”

Martha shrugged. “You can try it, but we’re telling him the truth, if he notices. And we’ll have to tell him anyway. He’s sure to mention your visit when we head out to Metropolis next week for Christmas.”

Lois tapped her fingers on the table. “The less people here who know the better. We’ll think of something. If you think he can keep it from Clark, because if he gets suspicious of the stand-in—” She shivered. “The stand-in is my past. If something happens to her, I’m history.”

“I know the drill, honey. I still wish we didn’t have to lie to Clark.”

“Me too, Martha. You don’t know how much I miss sharing this pregnancy with Clark, knowing he won’t be there for her birth.”

“Still convinced it’s a girl?” Martha asked with a smile.

“I hope I’m right or I’ll have given our first son a total complex.”

Martha laughed. “I’m sure he or she will be fine. Heaven knows that before the sexual revolution, people of both genders were all referred to by the pronoun ‘he’ and all us women turned out all right.”

“Yes, but women have always been more adaptable to gender roles.” Lois winked.

“That’s true,” Martha agreed, taking a sip of her tea. “Oh, how rude of me. Would you like something hot to drink?”

“Cocoa would be great. Or maybe some herbal tea.”

Martha got up and took the box of cocoa out of the cupboard. It only had one packet left. “Oh, dear. We’re almost out.” She glanced out the window. “That snow is really coming down. We’re going to have to make a run to the market before we get snowed in.”

“Snowed in? Does that happen often?”

“Several times every winter. Luckily, we’re farmers so we have lots of cold storage,” Martha said, pulling out a pot and filling it with a mug full of milk.

“At least if we’re snowed in this weekend, I’ll be guaranteed no other unexpected visitors will show up.” Lois exhaled in relief.

“Except Clark.”

“What?” Lois gasped.

“Oh, that’s not what I meant,” Martha explained. “I meant he’d be able to get through the storm. We’re not expecting him though.” She smiled with reassurance.

Lois released the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Good. I really don’t need the extra stress. I’ll be so worried about Clark enough this weekend… other Clark. I don’t trust Lex Luthor.”

“I don’t imagine you would.” Martha stirred the cocoa. “While this is heating, why don’t I take you up to Clark’s old room? You can stay in there.”

Lois hadn’t had a chance to snoop through his room the last time she and Clark were in town. She had been so worried about Bad Brain Johnson. “I’d like that.”

As they were going up the stairs, Lois intentionally masked her footsteps by making herself extra light as she stepped at the same time as Martha. If she could go the whole weekend without telling Jonathan that she was there, it would be easier on her. Maybe not easier on Martha though.

She set her suitcase down on Clark’s old footlocker at the end of his bed. The whole room was filled with his essence — childhood photos, old football flags, books. She sat down on the bed and just breathed it all in. Lois looked at Martha. “When I get back for good, I have this strange feeling I’m going to stick to him like a leech.”

Martha laughed. “Good luck with that, Mrs. Superman.”

“Oh, right.” Lois rolled her eyes at that. “Maybe we’ll just need a second honeymoon.”

Martha didn’t say anything, but glanced at Lois’s tummy with a skeptical expression. “We’d better get back to that cocoa before it bubbles over.”

“Can I have a minute, Martha?” Lois asked, running her fingers over the bedspread.

“Of course, honey. Take as much time as you like.” Martha nodded, leaving the room. Lois shut the door and then hugged his pillow. Clean. She set it down and looked around the room. She opened the dresser drawers, but all those clothes were clean and didn’t smell like him either. She opened the closet and found hanging from a hook an old red and blue scarf that Martha had obviously knitted for him. She held it up to her nose and breathed in. Clark. She wrapped it around her neck and opened the door.

“Martha!” Jonathan called, coming out of the office.

Lois closed the bedroom door all but a crack and listened.

“Martha! The weather service said we’re likely to get over a foot of snow with this storm. We’d better head to the market and pick up supplies while we still can.”

“I was thinking the same thing, Jonathan. I’m making up a list now.”

“I’m going to go out to the barn and check on the animals and feed.” He was quiet for a minute. “Martha, did you get a new coat and snow boots?”

Lois gasped. Jonathan was more observant than she had given him credit for.

"They're Lois's," said Martha and left it that. Lois could hear her pouring the cocoa into a mug.

"Okay," he replied hesitantly, and then she heard the door open and shut.

Lois wanted to skip down the stairs and hug Martha, but the extra weight had been throwing her off balance recently. She went into the kitchen. "You are marvelous."

"Thank you." Martha smiled and handed her the mug of cocoa. "What did I do?"

"Jonathan and the boots," Lois said.

Martha shrugged. "He'll ask about them again eventually. Anything in particular you are craving at the moment? I'm making a list."

Lois took a sip of the cocoa. "Clark." She sighed with a weak smile. "He's the only thing I crave."

Martha nodded. "I noticed the scarf."

"Do you think he'd mind if I borrowed it?" Lois rubbed the soft wool against her cheek.

"He hasn't worn it in years. I doubt he'd notice it missing."

Lois grinned. "Mine!"

"Do you want to come into town with us?" Martha offered.

Lois shook her head. "I'm not here, remember. Too many questions. Also, I told Clark I wouldn't leave the farm." She rolled her eyes.

"He worries about you."

Lois nodded. "He's gone into this super protective mode. I'm not allowed to fly. I can't go anywhere in Metropolis unless someone from his approved list goes with me. I'm not allowed to taunt super villains anymore." She laughed. "All right. That last one I made up. He and Sam are debating if it's biological, you know like wild animals protecting the pregnant members of the herd."

Martha raised a brow. "He cares about you, too."

"There's that, as well. He is a Clark. And Clark and Lois are destined to be together, we can't help it." She took a sip of her cocoa.

Martha was staring intently at her as if expecting her to say something else.

Lois continued quickly, "But we do. He's not my Clark. He knows that and I know that. It's one of the reasons I've been trying so hard to find his Lois. Maybe with her around, he'll stop looking so moony-eyed at me." She sighed, because it was really hard for her to resist him when he looked at her like that.

"So, what's he going to do with two of you around?"

Lois chuckled. "I hadn't thought about that." Her chuckle turned into a hearty laugh. "We're going to drive him batty."

"I have no doubt in my mind about that. Tell him he's welcome to come and talk to us, should he need to."

"I'll do that." Lois turned her head off to the right. "Jonathan's on his way back to the house. I'm going back upstairs. We'll wait for my big revelation after you get back from town, if you don't mind."

"Did you think of anything in particular you wanted me to pick up?" Martha asked.

Lois pushed herself to her feet. "I don't know. More cocoa?"

"I'll call you from the store. Maybe you'll have thought of something by then. Perhaps something that's not available in the other dimension," Martha suggested.

Lois shook her head and shrugged as she left the kitchen. She floated herself up the stairs, so as not to make any noise. Much easier on her back than climbing them. Jonathan came in to the kitchen just as Lois reached the base of the stairs.

"Ready?" he asked Martha.

"Let me just throw on my coat and snow boots."

"What about the ones that Lois gave you?" he asked. Ah, so he thought they were hand-me-downs.

"Wrong size," Martha replied.

"Oh."

Lois knew where Clark got his ability to tell people the truth without them realizing he was speaking in half-truths. She shut Clark's bedroom door and lay down on the bed.

Sleep had been avoiding her lately. She was worried about Clark and his trip to Singapore. And watching her Clark get all rosy-eyed about Christmas again in her dreams just made her ache for him more. The other Clark was more like her; Christmas was more of a holiday to avoid than to participate in. They had bonded recently over *not* putting up a tree, *not* stringing lights, *not* drinking eggnog, and *not* buying Christmas gifts. She turned onto her left side and closed her eyes.

Lois had no idea how long she had been asleep when the phone rang. It hadn't felt long, just a moment really, but long enough to leave her feeling groggy. She opened the door to Clark's room and wandered down the hall to his folks' room. She could hear the telephone ringing louder there.

With a yawn and a stretch, Lois picked up the telephone and murmured, "Martha, check and see if you can get me a box of Double Fudge Crunch Bars, could you?"

"Lois?" her husband's voice gasped.

Gulp! Why was Clark calling? Right, he was always calling his parents.

"Lois?" He sounded desperate.

She hung up the phone and flew down the stairs, literally. Holding her stomach, she ran into the kitchen, jumped into her boots and pulled on her coat and gloves. How much time did she have? Two minutes from the instant she had hung up the phone, tops; realistically, probably seconds.

Lois opened the kitchen door and the wind and snow blew straight into her face. She pushed against it to get outside and then pulled the door shut behind her. She tried to fly to the barn, but the wind kept blowing her back to the house. She would just have to struggle through the snow. Bending her head down and wrapping Clark's scarf over the bottom half of her face, she trudged on. Just as she arrived at the barn, she saw Clark's familiar blue and red blur zip through the wall of white snow to his parents' front door. She sighed in relief and entered the barn.

The barn looked the same as it always had. Where had she left the time machine? She felt around with her hands. How she wished she had x-ray vision. Uh oh. Clark had x-ray vision and if he scanned the barn… she wondered if x-ray vision could penetrate the invisibility tarp. She guessed it would. She was going to have to fly off. Should she go back to the other dimension? Or should she travel through time? Where were those instructions that Clark had given her?

Lois dug through her pockets, eventually finding the paper. She took another step forward and bumped into the time machine. Yea! She reached down and pulled up the edge of the tarp, sneaking underneath. She wondered if the time machine would work with the tarp still on top. She turned a knob. Nothing. Great, she leaned her head against the console. Why wasn't it working?

A male voice spoke from the machine. "Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved."

"Crap."

"Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized."

She swallowed and moved her butt into the driver's seat and unzipped her coat. At least the machine was turned on and warming up. She looked down at Clark's instructions, but she could hardly read them under the tarp. She adjusted the time/date knob, hoping that if she moved just a couple of hours into the future, he would be gone. She would be able to return in relative safety to the Kents, without incurring the other Clark's wrath for returning early.

"Lois?"

Clark was outside the barn now.

"Lois!"

She sighed, wishing she could run out to him. "Please, Clark," she murmured. "Know that I love you, but I can't see you right now." Lois pulled the lever as the barn door opened. The time machine dropped her through time Jello again and she was gone.

***

Five minutes earlier, Clark had been leaning back in his chair at the Planet. His story was filed and he had a couple of hours to Christmas shop. He still needed to find just the right thing for Lois. He glanced over, and smiled at the sight of her, nose pressed to her computer screen. That other Clark was right: he was the luckiest man alive.

Lois turned to him and smiled. "Clark, what time are your folks getting in next Tuesday?"

He searched his mind, but it was a blank. All he could think of was her smile. He shrugged. "I can't remember."

"Could you give them a call and find out? I'm trying to schedule an interview with the mayor."

"Okay." Maybe he could get her to take off early this evening as well. He could make dinner reservations at his favorite restaurant, Chez Kent. Clark dialed the phone, but didn't take his eyes off his wife. It was ringing off the hook. Where were his parents? He glanced at the television to see if that storm hit earlier than they were expecting.

"Martha, check and see if you can get me a box of Double Fudge Crunch Bars, could you?" a familiar voice said into his ear.

"Lois?" he asked. It couldn't be Lois. He was looking at Lois. She was still at her desk. But he would recognize his wife's voice anywhere. And who else would want a box of Double Fudge Crunch Bars, Lois's favorite chocolate vice? Whoever it was was still on the line. He heard her swallow.

"Lois?" he asked again. He was getting déjà vu. Why was there a Lois Lane at his folk's house? She hung up. Someone was definitely there. He stood up and loosened his tie.

"What's up?" Lois asked, stopping him.

"I'm worried about my folks. They didn't answer their phone, so I'm going to check it out, what with the storm and all." He kissed her cheek. He hated to lie to her, although it technically wasn't a lie. But he couldn't tell her that she was also in Kansas.

Lois glanced up at him. "I hope they're all right."

Clark nodded and rushed straight into the storeroom. He threw open the window and jumped through it even as he spun into his blue suit.

It took him longer than usual to get to his folks' house. The headwind was really strong. He didn't see his dad's truck as he slowed himself down to land on their front porch. He opened the front door. It wasn't locked; that wasn't like them. "Hello?" he called.

Silence. He scanned the house with his x-ray vision. No one was there. Had he been hearing things? No, he'd recognize Lois's voice anywhere; plus she said 'Martha' and the chocolate bars. He closed his eyes and smelled. Cocoa.

Clark wandered into the kitchen. Sure enough, there was a half-drunk cup of cocoa still sitting on the kitchen table. He picked it up and examined it. No lipstick. Hmmm. The Lois he knew wore lipstick and so did his mom. He lifted the lid of the pot on the stove. Chicken noodle soup from scratch. Yum. He looked around for the spoon to stir it, when he kicked something with his red boot. His mom's big wooden spoon. He picked it up and dropped it in the sink, wondering why she had left it on the floor.

Examining the kitchen more carefully, he found a little unmelted snow by the kitchen door.

Suddenly he heard a male voice speaking from the direction of the barn. "*Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved."*

What was that?

"*Crap,"* Lois grumbled. Yep, he grinned, she was definitely there.

The male voice, which he recognized as a mechanical recording, spoke again. "*Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized."*

Clark opened the door and pushed his way outside. Raising himself into the air, he saw the footprints from the house to the barn clearly. Deeper than he would expect for someone his wife's size, unless… he flew over to the barn. "Lois?" he called again.

Why was this Lois hiding from him? He x-rayed the barn and saw her sitting on the driver's seat of a time machine. But she looked strange, distorted, like he was looking at her through an old pane of glass.

"Lois!" He didn't want her to disappear on him again. Glancing up at his voice, her coat shifted and he saw her rounded belly. A cold shiver passed down his spine. The heavier footprints. She was real. The pregnant Lois. She hadn't been a dream. He wasn't crazy. She was real. He opened the barn door, but she wasn't there. The time machine wasn't there either. Had it disappeared already?

Out of the blue, he heard her sigh. Then she whispered, "Please, Clark, know that I love you, but I can't see you right now." He turned on his x-ray vision just in time to see her and the time machine disappear.

"No!" he shouted, reaching for her, but knowing he was already too late. He dropped to his knees. "No, Lois, don't go." His chest constricted. It reminded him of the time Tempus had kidnapped her and taken her to that other dimension. She was pregnant with his child, she loved him, but she ran away just the same. She was gone. And there was no way for him to find her.

Why did this pregnant Lois keep doing this to him? Why couldn't she see him? Was she a Lois from the future? If so, why did she keep visiting him in the past? Had something happened to him in the future, making it necessary for her to come to the past to visit him? But if she was pregnant in the future, why had she told him that the child had been conceived the night before he left for New Krypton? Had he spent that night with a Lois from the future, not his current Lois? He shook his head. That was the craziest of ideas. And what in the world was she doing visiting his folks? Where *were* his folks?

The phone started ringing in the house. With a sigh, he returned to the house and picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said, feeling like all the joy had been drained out of him.

"Clark?" It was his mom.

"Mom?"

"What are you doing there?" she asked.

"Why are you calling your own house? Isn't Dad with you?" He scanned the house again as he spoke. "Who did you expect to pick up? My wife, perchance?"

She gasped. "Clark, your father dropped me off at the market before heading to Joe's Feed. We're in town getting supplies before the big storm. I'm calling home because—" She took a deep breath, lowering her voice. "I just called you and Lois said you headed out to the farm. I was worried. What's up?"

That story made sense. He shook his head. Why would he think that she was going behind his back? Because the pregnant Lois said, 'Martha' when he called.

"Clark?"

His head was spinning from it all. It couldn't be real. His mom wouldn't lie to him, would she? "I called the farm to double-check your flight reservations for next week and Lois answered the phone saying she wanted a box of Double Fudge Crunch Bars. I thought that was a little odd since my wife was sitting next to me at the time. I thought I'd fly here and check it out."

Martha laughed. "That sounds just like Lois. A box of Double

Fudge Crunch Bars. I should have known."

"So, it was real? Somewhere out there in the ether is a pregnant Lois Lane?" He couldn't believe it. His mom knew about his mystery Lois.

"This really isn't a telephone conversation, is it, Clark?" she reminded him.

"No. It isn't," he agreed.

"Can we talk about this face to face, next week, when we're in Metropolis?" she asked hopefully.

"Why? Are you expecting company?" he growled.

She sighed. "No, Clark, I wasn't expecting company. I just thought your wife would want you back before dark. If you want to wait at the house, that is fine by me."

"Can I help you in town?" He didn't really want to hang around the house at this moment. It felt too empty with Lois gone.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Clark." She was right, of course. Everyone would want to know what he was doing in town with his parents heading out to Metropolis the next week.

"You're probably right, Mom."

"Your father and I will be home in about an hour, if the roads aren't too bad."

"Okay," he said, sitting down at the table, his head in his hands.

"Oh, Clark, are you sure you're okay? You sound like you're in pain."

"I am, Mom. I feel like someone just yanked out my heart and stomped on it," he murmured.

"Clark, I'm so sorry. I love you," she told him.

"I know, Mom. I love you too. See you soon." He hung up the phone.

***

Martha hung up the phone and dug through her purse. She pulled out her emergency phone card, dialing the *Daily Planet*. "Hi, Lois, it's Martha. I tried Clark's line, but it went straight to voicemail. Is he there?"

"Isn't he there with you?" asked Lois, concerned. "He just left for the farm."

"Oh, I'm in town at the market. The snow is really coming down, I thought I'd call and let him know where we were in case he gets worried and tries to call. I know how he can get when we get bad weather."

"The big worry wart." Lois laughed.

"I'll just call the house and tell him where we are. Let him know, if he heads back to Metropolis before I can reach him, will you?"

"Will do, Martha. Oh, while I still have you on the phone, when is your flight next Tuesday?"

Martha relayed the details of their Christmas Eve flight and hung up. She sighed. She should never have told Lois to answer the phone; that was very short-sighted of both of them. She went back inside and pulled a box of Double Fudge Crunch Bars off the shelf, adding them to her basket.

What in the world was she going to say to Clark? And where in the world did Lois disappear to? Or more precisely, *when* in *which* world?

***

Lois looked around the barn. It seemed the same, only no Clark standing at the doorway. She climbed out of the sleigh and looked around. Where was the invisibility tarp? It seemed to remain when the time machine moved. She walked around the sleigh and kicked the floor of the barn, but she didn't catch her foot on anything. She hoped it hadn't gotten lost in time. Clark would just kill her if she lost it. H.G. Wells too, probably.

Her heart ached at seeing her husband so close; she hated running away like that. Lois hoped that he hadn't seen her, but she feared that he had. Anyway, she knew he had heard her. She zipped up her coat and was amazed that she no longer heard the roar of the wind. She had set the time machine two hours forward, and it seemed like the storm was already over.

She opened the door to the barn and noticed that it was dark, yet not. The sky was dark like night dark, but the moonlight off the snow made it seem bright as day. It was so clear she could see the stars. Where had all the clouds gone? *Oh, no.* She had set the time for more than two hours. The snow had fallen in large drifts — was it possible that more than two feet of snow had fallen in just one afternoon? She sighed. She hoped that Martha wasn't too worried about her.

Lois stepped back inside the barn and looked around. Yes, she was still in the Kent barn, in her dimension, not the alternate dimension. There was the hay and she could still hear the animals. That was weird. She went to open the barn door again, when she heard voices. She hoped they weren't heading to the barn, because without the invisibility tarp she was sunk.

"Lois! Lois! Don't run away from me." It was Clark.

She gasped. He knew she was in the barn. Had he heard the time machine return?

"Tell me what that letter means," he urged.

Letter? What letter?

"Clark, please. You were never supposed to see that. I wish you had let me burn it."

What was Lois doing there? Had he brought her stand-in to the Kents in the middle of a snowstorm? That didn't sound like Clark.

"Then why did you write it?"

"If Lara and I had died in the other dimension because of the curse, I wanted you to know the truth. I owed you that much."

Oh, no! Her jaw dropped. That wasn't the stand-in Lois, that was her. How far into the future had she set that infernal machine?

Lois moved back to the barn door and pushed it open a bit to look out. The couple had gone not towards the barn, but out toward the trees. The moonlight on the snow made it almost as bright as daylight outside and she could see them perfectly. Lois and Clark, back together again. It gave her hope.

"Don't you owe me the truth now?" he asked. "You didn't tell me what would have happened, Lois. Tell me now."

That future Lois fell to her knees in the snow, crying. "I can't, Clark. I can't tell you."

A tear streamed down her cheek. That she could never do. She could never tell Clark about that horrible photo in the *Daily Planet*. The photo of him at the grave of his wife. Of what happened to them.

Future Clark knelt in the snow next to future her, and wrapped his arms around her. "If it's that bad, you shouldn't keep it to yourself. It's a future that did not happen. You are safe now. The curse did not kill you and it did not kill me. It was like a bad dream, Lois. Tell me and the pain will go away."

Lois leaned out of the barn to get a better look at the couple and future Lois gasped. She had been spotted. Crap.

Future Lois pointed at her over Clark's shoulder. "Go away! You can't hear this. You can't know what will happen to you. If you know your future, you may try to change something and then not survive. You need to go away now and stay the course."

Lois felt a chill down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold and snow. Future Lois had been talking to her, not to Clark. She nodded at future Lois and stepped back into the barn.

"Lois, I am not going anywhere," Clark was saying to future her. "The world could open up at our feet and I would not leave you."

A hint of a smile graced her lips as Lois walked back to the sleigh. That was what he had said when he had proposed. She took other Clark's instructions out of her pocket and looked them over. She looked at the date on the console. Christmas Eve 1997.

She had propelled herself over a year into the future. Oops. It had been dark under that invisibility tarp. She took her hand out of her glove and set her bare skin on the console.

The male voice spoke aloud. "Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved."

"*What was that?"* She heard future Clark gasp. Damn his super hearing. Damn that super loud time machine.

"*It was nothing, Clark. Stay with me or the world will open itself up and swallow us whole."*

"*I definitely heard something, Lois. Someone is there."*

"*It's just me, Clark. When I am gone, I'll tell you the truth about the curse."*

Lois gulped. What truth about the curse? What was she talking about? They must have broken the curse or she wouldn't be with Clark in this future. Was she saying that she, present Lois, was still cursed?

"*Go. Or the Earth will swallow you whole,"* future her continued. She was still speaking to her.

"*Lois, you aren't making any sense. I'm not going to leave you and the Earth is not swallowing you."*

"Please, Clark, listen to her. I know that you love me, but you can't see me right now. She needs you to stay with her," she whispered, correcting the date and time on the machine.

"Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized" the male voice announced.

"*Oh my God. That's you and the time machine. This is where you disappeared off to that day in the barn last year, when you ran away from me."*

"*Yes, Clark, but remember, I always come back to you."*

Lois smiled, pulling the lever, glad that in the future she and Clark were together. She loved Clark and she always would. She wasn't sure she could tell him the truth, even if he deserved the truth.

***

Lois returned to the barn. The wind was once again howling outside the barn. She double-checked the time and date on the time machine before disembarking. Hopefully, Clark had returned to Metropolis, none the…. Oh, crap. What had future Clark said? *This is where you disappeared off to that day in the barn, when you ran away from me.* He knew. He had heard her, seen her, and knew. So much for stealth mode.

Walking around the time machine, Lois again looked for the missing tarp. She pulled her glove out of her pocket and put it on. She didn't want to take any chances of setting off that infernal time machine voice again. She would ask Clark to turn down the volume, when she returned to the other dimension. It was way too loud for sneaky getaways.

She kicked something with her foot. The tarp. *Thank God.* She picked it up, but it got snagged on something and then she realized it was trapped under the time machine itself. Lovely. She would have to bring Martha out later to move the time machine and pick up the tarp.

Lois flipped the loose section of the tarp over the time machine as best she could and then headed for the barn door. She fixed the scarf around her nose and mouth again and pushed open the barn door. It almost blew out of her hand, the wind pushing it open. The snow was starting to pile up, but at least it wasn't in drifts like it had been in the future. She pushed the barn door closed and plodded her way back to the house. She was tired, hungry, and still cursed.

How had that happened? Hadn't traveling into their past lives changed the future so she wouldn't be cursed? How had she made love to her Clark a month ago if she was still cursed? She would survive, Lois told herself. And so would her daughter. Lois smiled. She and Clark were having a daughter. Lara. Her future self told her that if she stayed the course — returned to other dimension, she surmised — she would survive. There would be no coming back early. No hiding out in Smallville until the baby was born. She had to return to the other Clark in the other dimension or die. How does one survive a curse? Was there a way to research that?

Lois stamped her feet on the back door stoop and opened the kitchen door. The warmth on her face from the kitchen was definitely welcome. She could smell soup and her stomach growled in anticipation. It had been a long morning since breakfast. She unfurled the scarf from her face and saw that she wasn't alone in the kitchen.

Martha, Jonathan, and Clark sat at the kitchen table, all of them staring at her.

Lois swallowed. Her husband was so near, so dear and loving to her in the future, tears started streaming from her eyes. Clark stood up, his mouth hanging open.

She went straight to him, wrapping her arms around him. "I'm so sorry, Clark. I shouldn't have run away from you like that. I was scared, so scared." She pressed her lips to his. "I love you so much." She kissed him again, but he was not kissing her back. He was just standing there, ramrod straight. "Please forgive me. I couldn't live if you didn't forgive me."

"Lois?" Martha said and then raised her voice. "Lois Lane Luthor!"

Lois turned and glared at Martha. "That is not my name," she groused.

"I know, sweetie, but I was trying to tell you. That's not *your* Clark from *your* dimension. This is *our* son, Clark; he's married to *our* Lois."

Lois looked at Martha like she was crazy. "What? No, that's my Clark. He's come to take me home." She knew the other Clark like the back of her hand and this was not the other Clark. Wait… Martha said that he was her *son* Clark. Martha was pretending that she was other Clark's Lois.

"No. I'm sorry, Lois, but my mom's right. My Lois is waiting for me in Metropolis," said her husband.

Lois looked directly at him as the tears continued to fall down her cheeks. *Recognize me,* she willed him. *Recognize in my eyes that I am your true love. Know me. Please, break me out of this hell.*

Clark blinked and turned to his mom. "Are you sure, Mom? Are you sure this is the other Clark's future wife? She looks just like Lois… my Lois."

"I know, son," Jonathan answered. "But remember that Clark looked just like you, too."

Lois stepped away from Clark and released a deep breath. Clark had recognized her. She smiled. He didn't trust his own judgment because his mother was misleading him. But he had recognized her. And that restored her confidence again.

"Well, there are some differences," Martha said, standing up and helping Lois off with her coat.

Lois's protruding tummy was more obvious without her heavy coat.

Jonathan's spoon hit the table as he turned to Clark.

Clark nodded back to him. "I know, Dad."

"How far along are you?" Jonathan asked softly.

Lois smiled proudly. "I'm due in roughly two months. Want to feel, Clark? I bet she'll kick if you talk to her. She loves to hear your voice… well, Clark's voice, anyway."

Clark's eyes went wide as he swallowed.

"I don't think that's such a great idea, Lois. He's already quite confused," Martha said, sitting Lois down next to her chair. "Let me get you some soup."

Clark sat back down but continued to stare at her. "Have we met before?" he asked. "Did you come and visit me a month ago?"

Lois looking away. He remembered the 'dream'. But she couldn't let him think he'd made love to the other Lois, when he

hadn't. She couldn't do that to him. "This is my first time into the past. I tried to do just plain interdimensional travel, but I messed it up. That machine is so confusing. Clark gave me instructions; maybe you could make sense of them for me. As for meeting you before…" Lois licked her lips with a grin. "You'd have to let me have a real kiss to refresh my memory."

Clark's jaw fell open.

"Lois!" Martha scolded her.

Lois sighed with a shrug. "It was worth a try. Believe me, handsome. You'd know if you'd met me before. Nobody ever forgets Lois Lane. Maybe we'll meet again in your future and in my past." She smiled a knowing smile. But if she was going to play someone from the future, she might as well play it to fullest. "Maybe not. It's not good to know too much about one's future, I've been told. It might force you to make different choices, cause different outcomes to your future."

"Good advice. And on that note, I shall leave," Clark said, standing up and wiping his mouth. He kissed his mother's cheek. "Thanks for the soup, Mom."

Lois still wanted to kiss her husband. She craved him more, having him this close. She didn't want him to leave. "Clark. Don't go. I'll be good."

"My wife is waiting for me at home."

Right*, his wife*. As opposed to the woman sitting beside him. It felt like someone had taken hold of her throat and squeezed — she couldn't speak, she couldn't breathe. Lois wanted to tell Clark the truth about her and their daughter, but it was too late now. She had to go back, back to the other dimension, back to the other Clark, back where the curse would not kill them. If she told Clark the truth now, he would have difficulty letting her return. Somehow she found her voice and said, "Could you help me with the time machine before you go? I'd really appreciate it." She smiled at him, a friendly smile.

Clark nodded and headed for the kitchen door. Lois stood up and Martha grabbed her arm and whispered, "Be good. Don't make me regret this any more than I already do." Lois nodded. Martha had indeed put everything on the line for her. She turned to the kitchen door and saw Clark staring curiously at the two of them. She pulled on her coat. Back into the storm. *Ugh.*

Her husband made a solid wall between her and wind. The whistling wind made it difficult for them to speak until they were inside the barn. He turned to her and, without another word, pressed his lips to hers.

Lois melted. How she had missed him! She wrapped her arms around him as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

He rested his forehead against hers. "I know you are my wife, not his. I know that you are mine, deep down to my core. Don't deny it. Don't tell me any more lies. I never thought my mom would lie to me even if my life was at stake, so I know you must have your reasons if you got her to lie to me. Someday you will tell them to me. I don't agree with your decision, but I will trust your judgment on this." He kissed her again.

"Thank you, Clark," she whispered.

He unzipped her coat and stuck his hand under her shirt and rubbed his hand over her tummy. "Hi there, baby of mine." The baby kicked back her greeting. His eyes flashed back to Lois's and pulled her in for another kiss. "I've missed you."

"No, Clark," she said, her chin quivering. "You have me, back home waiting for you in Metropolis."

"I know. She's you and you're her. I don't know how that's possible."

"The wonders of time travel," Lois explained. "You are my past, my present, and my future, Clark. But she is my past. Without her, I do not exist. We do not exist. Remember that."

"So, you and little one are my future. I can live with that." He smiled, his hand caressing her cheek. "We'll be together again someday, my love?"

She smiled, remembering the couple embracing in the snow bank, and nodded. "If we don't screw it up, knowing too much of our future."

"Okay. No more questions." He lifted her up and cradled her in his arms. "I love you, Wife."

"And I love you, Husband." She still had her arms around his neck and she pulled him in for another kiss. Her legs slid down his and she leaned into him, knocking him backward and against the sleigh. "I miss you so much."

"Why? Where am I? Have I died? Why are we not together?" he asked as she silenced his questions with another kiss.

"I can't tell you, Clark. Please know that," she murmured.

"Right. Sorry. I don't want to let you go." He lifted her up and took her onto the sleigh. "Let's run away. Spend a few days, hiding somewhere in time, getting to know each other again." He stuck his hand under the hem of her shirt again and kissed her.

"Don't tempt me, Clark. We can't." She stepped off his lap, straightening her shirt and zipping up her coat. She took a deep breath, trying to control her emotions. "I can't."

Clark stepped up behind her, unwound the scarf as he started to kiss down her neck. "Why not? We've got a time machine at our disposal, we can come back to this exact moment and no one will be the wiser, except us."

Lois closed her eyes. "Because we'll never come back."

"What do you mean? I trust us."

She pushed away from him and rewound the scarf. "I don't. The more you touch me, the more you kiss me, the more I want you."

Instantly, her husband was kissing her again. "I want you, too, Lois."

Lois turned away from him. "You are cheating on your current wife, Clark."

"You are my wife, Lois."

"I am your future," she reminded him, though it tore her up inside. "She is your present. You'll make her suspicious, Clark. And I'll know, because I have all her memories. Please, don't do that to me…. Us."

"Do you want me to make love with her when I get home? Would that make you happy?" he snapped.

Lois closed her eyes and smiled. "Oh, yes, that would be nice. Those are my favorite dreams."

Clearly that was not the reaction he expected. "You're weird, Lois." He smiled with a shake of his head, wrapping his arms around her again. "It's this you that I want to make love with, right now," he whispered. "That would feel better than any dream." He began kissing her again.

"Oh, yes," she moaned. He lifted her into his arms and carried her back to the time machine. "Oh, no, Clark." She pulled away from him once more. "Stop. Stop, please. I want you too much."

"Just a couple of hours. We'll come here on Christmas Day. My parents will be in Metropolis."

"You are changing our future, Clark. Please, stop."

He wrapped his arms around her. "How am I changing our future?"

Lois sniffled. "You are making it impossible for me to say goodbye to you."

"Ah." Clark smiled, snuggling against her cheek. "And you have to say goodbye?"

"Yes," Lois whispered, closing her eyes. What did future her say about the curse? "We are only on a visit. If we don't return, then we might not survive. And then it all will have been for naught."

He turned her around and stared into her eyes. "All of what would have been for naught?"

Lois looked away, tear tracks glistening on her cheeks . "I can't tell you. Someday, but not now. Please accept this, Clark."

Clark pulled her close, hugging her. “I’m sorry, Lois. Whatever you’ve gone through, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” Lois whispered. “If it means the three of us can be together someday, it will be worth it. All of it.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye either,” her husband whispered, kissing her forehead. “But I don’t want to change our future, if we get to be together then. I’ll wait.” Clark sighed. “I’ll take a swim in the frozen river first.”

She whispered in his ear, “You have me waiting for you at home.”

“I’d be lucky if you’re waiting for me at home. As you know, our schedules don’t always mesh up these days.”

“We’ll manage.” Lois smiled encouragingly at him.

Clark stared at her for a moment then turned to the time machine. “So, what kind of trouble are you having with this thing? Are you going to make it back to whenever you came from?”

She pulled out other Clark’s instructions. “I think I understand.”

He snagged the instructions from her hands.

“No, Clark!” she gasped.

Her husband looked at the instructions. “Boy, my handwriting is a mess in the future. I must have been in a hurry. What do you want me to explain?”

Lois grabbed the instructions back from him and returned them to her pocket. “Actually, it’s my invisibility tarp. It stayed behind when I flew off earlier and is stuck underneath. I was thinking we could set the machine for one minute in the future and…”

Clark looked at her with a raised brow. He lifted up the machine with one hand and tugged the tarp out from underneath with the other, handing it to her.

“Or you could just do that.” She laughed. “Show off.”

Clark set down the time machine. “What’s the point of super strength if I don’t get to use it around the house?”

Lois stood in front of the machine and with a good flick of her wrist, covered it again.

“That explains the distortion when I x-rayed you earlier. So, now I believe you are from the future.” He shook his head. “An invisibility tarp.” He gazed at her. “I’m not going to say goodbye, Lois.”

“Thank you, Clark.” She smiled weakly at him, teardrops dotting her eyelashes.

Clark pulled her to him and pressed a long, passionate kiss on her lips. “I love you. Come back to me, pretty lady.”

“Always,” Lois whispered, savoring one last snuggle. “Always, Clark.”

“I’ll walk you back to the house.” He cleared his throat, opening the barn door. The wind smacked them in the face. “Let me see you again, before you leave. Let me have some more time alone with you.” He caressed her belly. “The two of you.”

“No. Clark. No. You’re being crazy.”

“I’m crazy?” Clark laughed. “Who’s the one traveling through time to visit her in-laws?”

Lois laughed. “Ding. You caught me.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Sunday morning.”

“I’ll see you then.” Her husband grinned.

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No!” she yelled, opening the kitchen door.

“Yes!” he countered.

“No! And that’s my final answer, Clark.” She turned and saw the Kents eyeing them suspiciously, especially Martha who just shook her head. “I’m not telling you about your future, Clark, so stop asking.”

Her husband stopped dead in his tracks for five seconds and then retorted. “I just want to know if my Lois and I can have children. Do you know anything about that? My parents would be thrilled to know they’ll be grandparents someday. Just a simple yes or no, Lois. Please?”

“No, Clark.” Lois unzipped her coat and he helped her take it off.

Clark gulped. “What are you saying, Lois?”

“No, I’m not going to tell you about your future, Clark. If you want to know whether or not you can have children, go and ask Dr. Klein. That’s who my Clark talked to.” She smiled at him and patted his face. “Anyway, it’s obvious your folks are going to be grandparents someday. Hello?” She pointed at her big belly.

Jonathan chuckled. “You want us to be grandparents to the baby, Lois?”

Martha ran up to her and hugged her. “Oh, Lois. We’d be honored. I told Clark, he could be my other adopted son.”

“Mom!” Clark groaned.

“Oh, Martha. Clark will be so thrilled. His parents are dead and my mother ran off with some plastic surgeon when I was nine. My dad’s a homeless recovering alcoholic.” Her chin started to wobble as she got into the role. “Thank you. Thank you, Martha.”

“Lois?”

“This is why Clark didn’t want me to come. He was so afraid you’d say no. He’s been alone so long. But I told him, of course Martha will say yes. She just has to. I knew you would.” Lois pulled her into another hug and whispered, “Thank you.” She turned and gazed at Clark over his mother’s shoulder and gave him a wink.

Clark just stared at her as if he had no idea who she was after all.

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Author’s Note: In these next few parts, canon Lois will be addressed as and referred to as ‘Lucy’ until otherwise noted (except in canon dimension, of course.)

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Meanwhile, back in the other dimension…

Superman landed in the botanical gardens in Singapore City. It could have seemed hot and humid compared to Metropolis but actually it was comfortable. Singapore reminded him of Borneo: tropical, lush, and beautiful, although definitely still a city. Lucy (he needed to think of Kal’s Lois as her secret identity from this moment on or become completely confused between the two Loises) Lucy would love it here.

Stop thinking about her, he told himself. He was here to interview Lex Luthor and to lay the groundwork for rescuing his Lois. Kal’s Lois, *Lucy,* should be safe in Kansas, eating good home-cooked food and cursing him for her utter boredom. Clark smiled. She loved him. But she was Kal’s wife and would never, could never be his. He needed to forget about her and think about the mission at hand.

Superman slung his garment bag over a tree branch and spun into a business suit. Clark picked up his bag and walked out to the path, continuing until he came into the city proper and was able to flag down a taxi. Lucy had procured some Singaporean dollars for him and made a hotel reservation near the venue of the Luthor party.

Clark was worried that his mission might be postponed or interrupted by Mother Nature. He had been forced to fly high over a weather system in the eastern Pacific Ocean to avoid the heavy winds and rains. He hoped that the atmospheric pressure hadn’t burst any of his toiletries.

There was lots of activity in the streets. It looked hectic, more hectic than an average day in a city. People were boarding up their store windows and bringing down the loose items — flags, banners, flower pots — hanging outside . The closer he got to downtown Singapore, the less panic he witnessed. Either the

financial powers that be had evacuated the city or were not worried in the least. Obviously, the locals were the only ones taking the warning seriously. He shook his head in frustration.

Clark entered an ornately decorated lobby. The front desk clerk informed him that they were moving all guests to the lower ten floors, but there were a fair amount of cancellations due to the approaching storm.

"Category Three, Mr. Kent. And we've never had even a typhoon." Then the man did a double take. "Clark Kent? *The* Clark Kent?" A grin spread over his face. "Praise be to Allah. We are saved."

Clark lowered his voice, keeping eye contact with the man. "Even Superman cannot always change Mother Nature's plans."

"I know that, sir. Let me upgrade your room to the presidential suite. Complimentary upgrade. I take it that a little wind would not bother you."

Clark smiled humbly. "Usually not. But please, I do not require preferential treatment."

"I am happy to do it, sir. The governor's suite, perhaps? It is on a lower floor and does not come with a personal butler, but it is still nice.

Clark gave up arguing with the man. "That would be fine." He handed over his credit card.

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Kent. To know that you have come in advance of the storm will give everyone hope, sir," the front desk clerk told him.

"I will not have it be said that I do not pay my own way, Jamil," Clark replied, reading the man's nametag, his credit card still extended. "Or that I took payment for any services rendered."

Jamil beamed, taking Clark's card. "You are as good as they say, sir. May Allah be with you." He bowed his head.

Clark repeated the gesture to him. "And also with you."

Jamil handed him back his credit card and his key card. "Oh, and Mr. Kent. This package was left for you." The man frowned, holding out a manila envelope. "It was Asabi, Mr. Luthor's man, who brought it." He looked like he wanted to spit, but then thought better of it.

"Do you know Mr. Luthor?" Clark asked, interested.

"Everyone in Singapore knows of Mr. Luthor. He has helped develop Singapore into the beautiful jewel that she is today." The man's words did not match the tone of his voice. He swallowed and lowered his voice. "I cannot speak more of him. He has the evil eye." Jamil then raised his voice. "Enjoy your stay, Mr. Kent."

Okay, thought Clark. If Jamil won't speak of Lex Luthor, maybe he could find someone else who would. A bellhop appeared at his side and took his bag. The service was not needed, but Clark wasn't one to deny an eager worker his tip.

The governor's suite was more luxurious than any other place he had ever stayed. It had more space than his and Lois's apartments combined. He tipped the bellhop and threw the package from Luthor on the coffee table, unwilling to let the man dictate his itinerary. He walked to the sliding glass door off the balcony. The room overlooked the large pool, which was surrounded by rows of topiary. Lucy had outdone herself in choosing this hotel.

Clark already missed Lucy. He wanted to hear her voice, know everything was all right. Have her yell at him for not checking the weather before flying out. She had wanted to kiss him that morning before she left. If Sam hadn't stopped him… why did he keep torturing himself thinking of Lucy? They knew she had to return to her dimension for good, someday soon, or go permanently insane. *Forget about Lucy,* he told himself. It was his Lois he needed to concentrate on. *His Lois*.

Reaching into his pocket, Clark removed the tracker that Dr. Klein had made. He wished he could flick the switch on this device and just block the Neuroscanner, stop her pain, if indeed Junior had gotten it working again. Would Luthor even let Clark see her? Lucy thought so. It wouldn't be much of a test if the carrot wasn't one worth attaining. And since it was apparently tattooed on his forehead how much he was obsessed with the missing *Daily Planet* reporter, Jaxon must know of it. And if Jaxon knew, it was probably a good bet that Luthor did as well. Clark hated that what should be his deepest secrets were anything but secret.

He wondered how Lois compared to Lucy? In essentials they would be the same, as Lucy kept telling him whenever she spoke of Kal. Despite their different upbringings, he and Kal had turned out fundamentally the same. Lois's upbringing differed from Lucy's as well. Plus, she had married and lived with… was still living with Lex Luthor. That traumatic event in itself may have changed her essentials. Clark hadn't discovered any other event that would have changed her personality much from Lucy's, and he had searched her entire life story after developing his schoolboy-like crush on her. Would he still fall for her if she was very different from Lucy? Would Lois still be his destiny, his soul mate, as Lucy was for Kal? Would he still feel the same way towards her, having already fallen for Lucy? Would he feel anything at all?

Clark held up the tracking device. Time to find out. He flipped it on. The only thing that changed was that the power light lit up. He flipped it off again, and put it back in his pocket. He didn't think it was going to be that easy, did he?

Returning to the living room, Clark sat down on the sofa and stared at Luthor's package. With a sigh, he picked it up and opened it. He wasn't sure what he would find, but certainly not this. He laughed. It was a standard P.R. package. Brochures on a local art museum to which the Luthors had donated art pieces. Hospitals he had funded. Public works projects. Charitable organizations that Mrs. Luthor… *Mrs.* Luthor? He turned the pamphlet over. There on the back of the brochure was a picture of Lois — his Lois — holding a child orphaned by monsoon flooding in Malaysia a couple of years earlier. Her hair was longer, but it was certainly her. Her eyes were closed and she was hugging the child like a teddy bear. The pain on her face was mirrored by the child. They both looked like they had something dear stolen from them. It was a haunting photo that tore at his heart. He needed to get out of there. Get some fresh air. He still had roughly twenty-four hours before the party the next evening, and he needed to do some local research to find out more about Luthor.

As Clark reached the door, the suite's phone rang. He picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Kent? This is Jamil at the front desk," the man on the other end of the phone told him.

"Yes, Jamil?"

The man paused, before saying, "I spoke to my cousin who works at the Singapore Weather Service and told him that you checked into the hotel. I know that is against hotel policy, and I do apologize, sir, but Singapore doesn't get cyclones. Mr. Kent, I am worried about my family. My cousin, Azim, would like to speak with you."

Clark sighed. "I don't think that there is anything I can do, Jamil. Sometimes a natural disaster cannot be stopped by super strength."

"I know that, sir, but Azim does not think this is a natural disaster."

"I'm sorry, I don't follow," Clark said, opening the desk drawers until he found a notepad and pen.

"Azim thinks the Cyclone Rafflesia is man-made."

There could be a real story here after all. "How is that possible?" Clark asked.

"Let me give you the address for the SWS, so Azim can explain it to you."

Five minutes later, Clark was taking a taxi to the Singapore Weather Service. As he arrived, he saw a small group of men and women milling about. He recognized reporters, by their notepads, tape recorders, and television cameras. He pulled his press pass out of his wallet and hoped it would be acceptable, despite being from another country. Behind his U.S. press pass, he found another press pass, this one for Singapore, with a note attached: *Just in case, L.*

How did she do that? Clark shook his head. That was why she was constantly saying that she was the world's greatest investigative reporter; she was always two steps ahead of him. He held up his pass as the doors opened for the press conference and walked right inside.

At the press conference, Clark learned that Cyclone Rafflesia was named after the world's largest and smelliest flower. Unfortunate, because the flower smelled like a decaying corpse. The cyclone had grown from a thunderstorm north of Ho Chi Minh City a week earlier, and had slowly inched its way southward toward Malaysia and Singapore, growing in intensity. The first winds were expected to reach Singapore around nine o'clock the next evening as a Category Two, or possibly a weak Category Three cyclone.

Great. Right in the middle of Lex Luthor's holiday party. His date with Lois Lane might be postponed after all.

After the press conference, Azim flagged down Clark and took the reporter into his office, where he showed Clark all his data. Clark took copious notes and asked all the right questions, plus a few stupid ones.

Azim started out by explaining his first clue that this storm was anything but natural. "Singapore is graced by being located less than five hundred miles from the equator. Within this range, it's rare for a cyclone to develop — so rare, in fact, that there is none on record here in Singapore."

"What else makes this storm different from other cyclones?" Clark asked him.

Azim showed him videos of five other named cyclones over the last few years. "Do you notice something similar with all them? They spin clockwise. This storm, Cyclone Rafflesia, is spinning counter-clockwise. That only happens south of the equator." Azim clicked a few buttons on his computer. "This, Mr. Kent, is why I asked Jamil to send you to me. I think you will want to check something out. Something only you can do. See this satellite photo here? This was from ten days ago. Nothing. Nine days ago. Nothing. And then, just over a week ago…"

Clark leaned forward. A speck that looked almost the size of a small island had appeared. Even looking at the speck with his microscopic vision he could not discern what is was, but that was more due to the computer satellite image. "What is that?"

"Exactly, Mr. Kent. But look at the sea surface temperature at the same time. The water temperature in that section of the South China Sea dropped ten degrees that day. Here's a week ago." A cloud was developing over that dot. "Six days ago." The clouds increased in size and started moving in the wrong direction. "Five days ago." The monsoon thunderstorm from Vietnam mentioned in the SWS bulletin had moved in, joined the man-made clouds, and became a mass of swirling clouds with an eye at its center.

Clark would have to see a better picture to know what that speck was or just go in person as Superman.

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Walking into the ballroom on the fifth floor, Clark couldn't believe how many people had turned out for this shindig with a cyclone headed for Singapore. Either these people didn't believe the weather reports, hadn't heard them, or didn't understand the implications. Possibly they didn't care, but in his heart he couldn't believe that. The winds had already started to pick up. The businesses along the Singapore River were boarded up and deserted as the waves grew larger. With Singapore only roughly thirty feet above sea level it wouldn't take much of a storm surge to flood the city-state. It wouldn't take much flying debris to damage the windows in all those glass buildings surrounding them either.

Clark tugged at his black bowtie. He felt ridiculous continuing on his rescue mission with so many lives at risk. But he had done all he could do, prevention-wise. His Lois still needed him. If he delayed his rescue mission until after the storm, Luthor might have changed his mind about allowing Clark access to his wife or moved her to another location entirely.

Superman had checked out the windmill farms on the coasts of Malaysia that had been drawing power from the grid instead of generating it. He found what remained of an iceberg that someone had dropped in the middle of the South China Sea. Between the cooled waters, the extra vapor caused by the ice, the extra winds, and who knew what else, it was clear someone had created this weather system. Mother Nature had taken the seeds and run with it, creating a cyclone where one had never been before. Why anyone would want to go through all this trouble to create a natural disaster was beyond Clark's comprehension.

People would die because someone wanted to tamper with the laws of nature. Superman might be able to calm earthquakes to minimize the damage, but winds — especially cyclone winds — would only grow stronger if he used his super breath on them. Cool winds mixed with hot winds were not what these people needed. It frustrated him to no end that the only help he would be able to supply was search-and-rescue after the fact.

It didn't help that he was distracted by thoughts of his Lois. She was supposed to be here. He took a drink off a passing tray. Clark suddenly heard her laughter and turned around. Like the Red Sea, the guests parted and he saw her. Her long brown hair hung straight down her back, only pulled away around her face. Her skin-tight, cherry-red, strapless evening gown flared out at her knees and matched the red of her lips. God, she was the most beautiful woman Clark had ever seen. She was even more beautiful than Kal's Lois.

"Lola certainly is the handsomest woman of my acquaintance," said a voice from beside him.

He pulled his gaze from Lois to see a bald, yet distinguished man next to him. The man held out his hand. "Clark Kent, I presume. Lex Luthor."

Clark shook his hand warily, too polite to refuse. "Thank you for inviting me to your party. You must forgive the bluntness of my assistant. She has a tendency to speak without thinking."

Lex laughed. "Sounds like my wife."

Clark stilled his expression, so as not to react to that remark.

"Actually, Kent, I liked your assistant. She has a kind of spunk I find attractive in a woman. Perhaps I'll fly to Metropolis someday and you can introduce me."

Clark glanced over at Lola again; he was finding it hard to keep his eyes off her.

"How rude of me. Shall I introduce you?" Lex suggested, reading Clark's mind. "She's dying to meet you."

What an odd word choice, Clark thought. As they started crossing the room towards her, Lola glanced away from the man with whom she was conversing, noticing them. Her eyes lit up with the joy of a child.

"Lexy!" she cried in excitement, her voice almost baby-dollish, trying to run towards him but unable to, due to her gown. She gave up and held out her arms to him.

Lexy? Clark glanced between Lola and Luthor. He was looking at her like a disappointed schoolmaster and she like a schoolgirl. They met up in the middle of the floor, where she grabbed Lex's arm and gazed at him with a look of utter devotion. Clark's stomach turned.

"Darling, this is the man I was telling you about," Lex informed her. "Clark Kent."

Lola gave him eye contact for exactly five seconds before she looked him over top to bottom to top again, like a child eyeing her first hot fudge sundae.

Clark smiled at her uncomfortably. "Mrs. Luthor," he said, shaking her hand. She gave his hand an extra squeeze, then she winked at him. Whatever he expected when he met his Lois Lane, this wasn't it. She was certainly more beautiful than he had predicted. More beautiful than Kal's Lois, but he felt nothing when he looked at her. Nothing like what he had felt when he first laid eyes on Lucy. No electricity like their first touch. He pasted a smile on his face.

Lola took Clark's arm and grinned at her husband, waving him off. "Go entertain our guests, darling. I've got this one."

Clark looked at Luthor for his reaction to this announcement. Luthor smiled patronizingly at her. "Enjoy yourself, darling. Remember to behave yourself. Mr. Kent is a reporter and anything you say to him is fair game." His words were more of a tease than a real warning.

Lola's relationship with Lex wasn't exactly what he had expected based on what he knew of Lois Lane. Nor did she appear to be someone tortured by the Neuroscanner. As he and Lola took a turn around the room, he heard Lex Luthor snap his fingers. The man Lola had been speaking with as they approached her reappeared.

"Keep an eye on them," Luthor ordered.

Aha. That was more what Clark expected. He turned to look at Lola and patted her hand. "Your husband said you were a big fan of my work," he said. "Thank you."

Lola grinned at him. "You're welcome," she said, but added nothing else.

Clark lowered his voice. "I got your message. How can I help?"

She looked at him with a panicked expression. "I have no idea what you're talking about." Then she stopped to greet a couple and introduced Clark.

Mentally, he kicked himself. He wondered if it was the Neuroscanner that was stopping her from being herself. If Junior was monitoring her, he heard him ask the question, which could explain her panicked expression.

Between introductions, Lola spoke of shopping in Singapore and of getting a great deal on some piece of art she had found on the Riverwalk recently. He smiled politely as he wondered when or if the real Lois Lane was ever going to appear. "What do you think of Singapore's first ever cyclone warning?" he asked, trying to change the topic of conversation away from shopping.

Lola's eyes went wide with genuine fear. "Cyclone? Here in Singapore?" She gripped his arm tightly, then she swallowed. "When?"

"It's supposed to make landfall in the next couple of hours," he replied, surprised that she had no prior knowledge of it. "Didn't your husband tell you?"

She shook her head violently, let go of his arm, and made a beeline to the man following them. "Asabi! Asabi! What is this about a cyclone? Cyclones aren't supposed to strike here. That was in the data you gave me. Do you know what high winds will do to the frog population around here?"

Asabi pried her hand off his arm and patted it like she was some scared child. "It is nothing for you to worry about, ma'am. Let's go get you a treat, shall we? Would you like a treat?"

Her eyes lit up as she nodded. "Yes, a treat! I need a treat. That will calm me down." As they passed back by Clark, Lola paused and put a hand on his arm. "Mr. Kent, if you could please excuse me. Asabi has informed me of something that requires my attention. I'll be back in a few minutes."

A live band started warming up in the corner of the room. "Mrs. Luthor, I hope you'll honor us with a song when you return. I've been told that your voice is most delightful." He smiled at her.

But instead of being pleased by his request, her face fell. After a quick glance at Asabi, she replied, "I'm sorry, Mr. Kent, I was recently ill and wouldn't want to strain my vocal cords. Excuse me."

"Of course." He nodded and watched which door they disappeared through. She seemed strange, this Lola Luthor, not at all like Lois. She looked like Lois, sounded similar to Lois, laughed like Lois… he couldn't put his finger on it, but something was missing.

Clark x-rayed the wall to see where Lola and Asabi had gone. Three rooms over was a small bedroom with a guard and a keypad entry. They were standing at a large tabletop aquarium filled with frogs.

Suddenly, Luthor put his arm around Clark's shoulders turning him away from where he had been looking. "Kent, my boy, enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Luthor. Your wife is a delight," Clark answered, waiting to return his focus to Lola.

"Please, call me Lex."

"Tell me, Lex, why did you continue with your holiday party despite the cyclone warning?" Clark asked.

"Always the reporter, eh, Kent? It was Lola's idea, she really wanted to meet you. And I'd do anything to make her happy."

Clark didn't believe him. Not one word of it. "Actually, Lola seemed quite terrified when I mentioned the cyclone warning. She seemed worried about the local frog population." He looked at Luthor with a raised brow.

Lex pulled out a cigar and lit it with a sneer towards the door Lola and Asabi had gone through. "She's quite the environmentalist."

"It's too bad about her cold; I was looking forward to hearing her sing." Clark waved a hand in front of his face to move Lex's cigar smoke away. "Perry says that Lola's singing career almost stole his best reporter away from him."

"How is Metropolis's new mayor?" Lex asked, changing the subject. "Liking his new job? It's not the same working within the system as commenting on it, is it?" He grinned, chewing on his cigar. "The quality of the *Daily Planet* has really declined since he left. I'm even considering canceling my subscription."

"Every paper has an adjustment period between editors," Clark murmured, not wishing to discuss office politics with this man.

"It must be grating on your nerves knowing that your own paper would stoop to printing details of your…" He paused as if considering his word choice carefully. "Personal life. Makes you consider changing papers, doesn't it?"

"No. Not at all, Lex. I'm happy at the *Daily Planet*." He looked over his shoulder, looking to see if Lola had returned.

"Have you found her?" Lex asked.

Clark snapped his gaze back to Luthor. "Who?"

"Your mystery woman. Your destiny. Ultra Woman."

Would he never escape that one word? "Women," he said, shrugging dismissively.

"I agree with you there, Kent." Lex laughed. "No matter what you do, what you give them, they always want more. It's never enough." The billionaire exhaled a mouthful of smoke. "But the heart wants what the heart wants. You can't deny it, no matter the cost."

"Your heart or hers?" Clark asked. "I've found that if you can't give a woman what she wants most, then it probably wasn't meant to be."

"Interesting theory, Kent. I've found that every woman has a price, you just have to be willing to pay it."

Clark raised a brow to that statement; it was the kind of

declaration that would have started Lucy's teeth to grinding. "A friend of mine would say that love isn't a commodity to be bought or sold, but given freely or not at all."

"Your friend sounds like a wise woman," Lex stated. "What's her name? Lucy El, perhaps?" He grinned.

"Lois Lane," Clark replied.

"Excuse me?" Luthor stared at him. Clark had succeeded in wiping that gloating expression off his face momentarily. "You know Lois Lane?"

"Do *you*? She wrote that in an article six years ago on prostitution and the sex slave trade."

Lola returned at that moment and gave Lex a large sloppy kiss. He smiled at Clark and then wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. "And I've learned, Kent, that women have a tendency to change their minds."

"Oh, what are you boys talking about?" Lola asked, hanging off Lex's arm.

"Hors d'oeuvres," said a waiter, passing by. Clark shook his head.

"No, thanks, I just ate," Lola replied, licking her lips.

Lex turned slightly green and wiped his mouth again, waving the waiter away.

"Love," Clark told her.

She looked perplexed.

"And you," Clark continued.

"Me?" She squeaked. "Really, Lexy? Do you really love me?" She looked at him with adoration. It made Clark's stomach crawl.

"Of course, my love," Lex replied uncomfortably. "A word." He took her elbow and led her away.

Clark tried to listen, but Lex swirled his finger in the air and the band started to play at that moment, deafening him. Instead, he watched Lex and Lola have their discussion. Something about it seemed off, yet familiar. Then it clicked. She reminded him of the clone who argued with Kal that day he had rescued the younger Lois from her dimension's Lex Luthor.

Taking a few steps back, Clark leaned against a pillar as the room started spinning. The clone. It all made sense. She looked like Lois, but was superficial, materialistic, child-like. That would explain why he felt nothing, felt empty around her. She wasn't *his Lois*. If this was a clone, where was the real Lois Lane?

Clark pulled the device that Dr. Klein had given him out of his pocket and flipped it on. This time a second light blinked, slowly and steadily. He was here; Junior was in this building, controlling her, spying on her at this very moment. He swallowed. His Lois was nearby.

Lola stomped away from Lex and headed for Clark. Right up to him. She pressed her body against his. "Clark," she whispered in his ear. "Dance with me."

Swallowing, Clark slipped the device back into his pocket. The clone, Lola, took his hand and led him out to the dance floor as the band began to play something slow. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his again. He knew she wasn't Lois, but she still smelled like Lois, sounded like Lois, and felt like Lois.

"Mrs. Luthor—"

She leaned her cheek against his. "Call me Lola, Clark. We both know I'm not the real Mrs. Luthor and I never will be."

He pulled back to look at her face, but she tugged him close again.

Lola continued, "I'll never be able to seduce you, will I?"

Clark wasn't expecting this turn of events. That must have been some argument with Lex. "No matter how tempted I might be, Lola, I'm sorry — no."

"Now you're just being kind." She chuckled. "I overheard Lex say that you never lie or break a promise, is that true?"

"Yes." Clark had always tried his best to be truthful, before Lucy had come into his life.

"Lex lies to me all the time and is always breaking his promises to me. Will you save me?" Lola looked up at him, her eyes big and full of hope.

"Save you from what, Lola?"

"The storm, silly." Lola ran her fingers down his chest. "Can't you hear it roaring outside? Lex says you have really good hearing."

Clark closed his eyes, taking hold of her hand so the clone would stop touching him so intimately, and listened. The cyclone was indeed starting to blow. He had forgotten all about the storm in this windowless room.

"Lex says he's not going to save me; that only you can save me from the storm. So, if I tell you what you want to know, will you promise to save me? Save both of us from the storm and from him?" She scowled at the mention of her husband.

Clark stepped back so that he could look her in the eye. "Both of you?"

The music stopped and they looked up to the stage.

"My wife has agreed to sing us a song or two," Lex announced. He held his hand out to her. "Darling?"

Lola looked at Clark. "Promise?" she whispered.

Clark nodded.

She flashed him a quick grin, before walking reluctantly over to the microphone. With a glare at Lex, Lola coughed. "Please, pardon my voice. I'm just recovering from an illness."

Clark realized that she didn't want to sing. Lex forcing her to perform for him had been the last straw, causing the clone to rebel.

"This first song is Lex's favorite. I sang it to him when we first met and he always requests it," she said as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. Then she started singing "I've Got A Crush On You". Lola, it turned out, only had a decent voice, definitely nowhere near Lucy's natural talent. That was why she did not want to sing. She knew it would give her away as the fraud that she was. Anyone who had heard the real Lois Lane sing would know she wasn't her.

It was sad the way Lex forced her to perform even when she could not perform to Lois's standards. Lex must know he had an imperfect copy. Had he made her for him, Clark Kent? Had he made her to seduce him, so he would think he was getting the real deal? But there was more to Lois than a beautiful body; her soul couldn't be cloned. Lex wouldn't know that Clark could recognize that Lola wasn't his Lois. Lex didn't know Clark's ace-in-the-hole: Lucy.

Clark pulled the device out of his pocket and inched away from the band. Lex really did love this song. The billionaire stared at Lola, watching her perform. In the blink of an eye, Clark was out the door and in an elevator riding up.

After five floors, Clark realized that the blinking light was slowing, not getting faster. He was moving away from Junior's Neuroscanner, not towards it. What had Jaxon said about his step-brother? "*Junior had some kind of birth defect on his face — a skull malformation — so he likes to stay hidden away from people."* He must be downstairs in the basement, out of sight.

Getting out on the next floor, Clark took another elevator heading down. The light started to blink faster. He was getting closer. He stopped and listened. Lola was still singing to Lex. He should be back in the ballroom before the end of her song… before Luthor noticed he was no longer there. He was down as low as he could go and although the light was blinking extremely fast, he knew he wasn't there yet. Clark wandered through the maintenance room, past water heaters and electrical pipes and industrial-sized washing machines, until he found a freight elevator. He stepped inside the open doors and noticed it went down another two levels.

Clark tried the sub-sub-basement first. It wasn't like the other basement he had just come from. The walls, though cement, were painted and had sconces in the shape of torches. He passed a hydroponic rose garden and he heard music. Lola was still singing to Lex; she was near the end of her song. He wasn't going to make it back to the party in time. Either Lex Jr. had the sounds of the party piped down there or they were being played for Lois and he was listening to her, listening to Lola.

"Can you believe Father actually thinks that Clark Kent will fall for her?" Lex, Jr. chuckled into his microphone — his direct connection to Lois. "Listen to her. Talent must be attached to the soul, not the body. Your hero is a fool, thinking my clone is you. But then again, he has never met you and she does have your exquisite body. Pressing that nice body of yours against him when they dance. Whispering 'rescue me' in his ear as they dance. He'll take her away and here you will stay with us. By the time he realizes he has the wrong woman, you, Father, and I will no longer be in Singapore." He laughed.

Clark's skin crawled as Junior's slimy voice taunted her.

"Shut up, you sick snake. I can't hear Lola." That was Lois. Alive and well, and giving it back as much as she was getting it. Her voice emerged out of the console speakers. Luthor must have her elsewhere in the building. "Come on, Lola. Come on. You can do it," she encouraged the clone.

The song had ended and they could hear the polite applause. "This next song was taught to me by the only person who was ever nice to me," Lola was saying. "She believes that I can do anything I set my heart on. So, I sing this song for the real Lola, up on the 105th floor, and I dedicate it to her husband, Lex Luthor." There were gasps from the party guests. "Oh, by the way, darling, we want a divorce." Then Lola started to sing, "You Don't Own Me".

Clark smiled. *Thank you, Lola.*

Junior hissed. "Oh, no, no, no. She went off script!"

He could hear Lois singing along with Lola, her voice melodic and seductive as she rejected Lex through her clone.

"You shouldn't have done that!" Lex, Jr. roared into the microphone and Lois screamed out in pain. "Your little stunt worth it, step-Mummy?"

Clark came around the corner and knocked Junior out of his chair and across the room. He turned down the pain amplifiers and Lois stopped screaming, but he could still hear her panting for breath. The console indicated her heart rate was still elevated. He stared at the console until it melted and smoked in front of him, the components fried under his heat vision.

As Lex, Jr. tried to crawl away, Clark picked him up by his smoking jacket lapels. The left side of Junior's head seemed larger than the right; perhaps it was, or maybe it just seemed so because the hair on that side of his head only grew in patches. His face wasn't symmetrical like most people, either. The skull around the left ocular cavity almost covered his eye, giving him the appearance of having recently lost a boxing match. He wasn't ugly per se, but he certainly didn't fit in Luthor's 'perfect' world.

Clark pulled the little black control box out of his hand, crushing the Neuroscanner into dust, as he said, "No more, Junior."

"Just tell me one thing," Junior begged, staring at Clark as he dangled from his hand. "Who is she? Who's the woman with Lola's genetic fingerprint? The one who made you Superman?"

Clark smiled at him. "Lois Lane, of course."

"No, I mean, did I shoot the right—" but Junior said no more, because Clark threw him against the concrete wall, where he whimpered then blacked out.

Clark looked down at his crumpled, yet still living, body. "No, you toad. You shot the wrong person entirely."

He kicked over the console and made sure there wasn't a part of it still intact before leaving the basement. On the ride back to the main floor of the building, he changed into his blue suit.

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The wind gusts from the cyclone had become very strong. He couldn't imagine why Luthor had left Lois up on the hundred and fifth floor during such a storm. The other buildings did block some of the wind, but this building was taller than the surrounding ones, leaving the upper floors exposed to the high winds. Superman tried to fly straight up, but even he was getting blown around by the blasts of air. There was one floor with a light still on and he aimed for it. He misjudged the gusts this high up and was blown straight through the window.

Luckily, the occupant of this apartment had already evacuated, but forgot to turn off a light. He shook the glass from his suit and hair. After a quick survey of the room, Superman realized he was only on the hundred and fourth floor. With a slight jump he was able to climb up to the next balcony without flying through another window. The balcony door was unlocked. He slid it open and walked into the room, then closed the door behind him, cutting off the wind and noise.

Superman could still hear Lola's voice and music being piped in through the speakers. He was surprised Lex hadn't pulled her from the stage. The lights were off, but he was sure this was Lois's room. He could see her silhouette pacing, illuminated from the light under the door that must connect her room to the rest of the suite. She sang softly along with Lola. "*I'm free and I long to be free…*" His heart swelled at the sound of her voice; this was definitely his Lois.

As he closed the door to the balcony, she spoke. "Hello?" She adopted a karate stance, facing him. "Who's there?"

"A friend," he replied, a smile emerging on his lips. Stunning and feisty, yep, definitely Lois.

"How did you get in here?"

"Through the window," he replied calmly.

"Are you nuts? We are on the 105th floor. Didn't you notice the wind?" She was still bouncing around in her karate stance. "What do you want?"

The room was dark so perhaps she couldn't see him. He clicked on the lamp next to the bed, but she didn't react to the changing of light.

"I'm here to help you," Superman said, moving slowly closer towards her.

"Stop! I can hear you moving about. Just stop. I know karate, you know."

He smiled, standing still with his arms crossed. "So I see."

"Lucky you. Who are you?"

Superman stared at her. Something was wrong. Why didn't she recognize him? Why wasn't she looking at him?

"Who sent you?" she demanded when he hadn't spoken.

"Clark Kent," he replied at the same time.

Lois lowered her hands for a moment. Then she raised them up again. "Really? You know Clark Kent?" Her voice seemed rougher. "Prove it."

Lois knew his name, his heart sang. She trusted Clark Kent. He racked his brain. How could he prove who he was to someone who had never met him? "Rainbows follow thunderstorms," he finally said. Her father had said she would know what that meant.

Lois dropped her hands and fell to her knees. "You know my father?" she murmured with relief.

"Yes, very well," he answered, kneeling down next to her. "Shall we go?" His hand shook slightly with anticipation as he placed it on her shoulder. The electricity that flowed between them was strong, sharper than what he felt with Lucy. It was all he could do not to pull her into his arms.

She jumped away from him. "Don't touch me!"

Clark's hands rose into the air as his heart erupted in shock. She couldn't see. "I'm sorry, Lois. I didn't realize you were blind." He shook his head and then growled, "That monster

blinded you." Rage for Lex rose like bile into his throat but he pushed it down. His anger would only frighten her.

The lights flickered and went out. He heard the hum of electricity disappear. They were in the dark once again. He heard a softer, low hum and knew the emergency generator must have kicked on because he could now see a faint glow from the emergency lighting in the hall outside her door.

"Yeah." She gulped, crawling towards him. "Say it again."

"What?"

"My name." She was right next to him. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his cheeks. "I haven't heard it in over three years."

"Lois? Are you ready to go? I'm going to lift you up into my arms."

"I'm blind, but I can still walk," she stated emphatically.

"Out the window?" he teased.

She scooted away from him. "You are nuts. We're on the 105th floor!"

Superman smiled. She really had no idea who he was. When she called him, she hadn't been calling for Superman to help her, but the investigative reporter, Clark Kent. "I can fly," he explained.

"No, really. Let's just take the elevator."

"The power just got knocked out from the storm."

Something banged against her door. "Lola, darling. I'll get you out of there in a minute," Lex called.

Now Superman knew why he hadn't pulled Lola from the stage. After Lola's announcement, Lex must have headed straight to Lois's room. Lois moved away from the door and closer to Superman.

"Trust me," Superman said.

Lois jumped as another loud bang struck the door. She was practically in his arms. "Wait a minute," she said, lying down on the floor and pulling herself under her bed.

"Hiding from him won't do any good."

"I know that. Grab me a bag," she called to him. Superman looked around.

Another smash against the door. He could hear the wood splintering. "He's almost through, Lois. We need to go."

She pulled herself out from under the bed with an armful of notebooks. "The bag?" she asked, holding out her hand. When he didn't hand her one, she continued. "In the closet."

He was back a second later, handing it to her. "Oh, you found one. Good." She dropped the notebooks into the bag and slung it over her shoulder.

With the next crash, the door was splintered through and through. A beam of light pierced the room from Luthor's flashlight. "Lola! Don't go with him. He's insane. He thinks he can fly!" Lex called to her.

Superman scooped her into his arms. After a moment of hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Don't kill me," she whispered.

"Not planning on it. Hold on tight, Lois. There's a cyclone out there, so it might be a little bumpy." He opened the sliding glass door as the first bullets buzzed past them. Superman held up his cape and the bullets bounced right off it.

"Don't take my wife!" Lex screamed.

Lois held on tighter to him. "Let's go."

A second later, they were in the air, wet and spinning. They went up and up and up. Finally, they breached the storm and were over the clouds. He heard her release her breath.

"Am I dead?"

Superman smiled. "No. A few more minutes and you'll be somewhere safe." As he flew east, the night became darker, then lighter until the sun rose before them. She missed it all — she was blind.

It was mid-morning in Smallville when Superman set them down on his front porch.

"Where are we?" Lois shivered in her thin t-shirt and slacks. "It's freezing."

"Smallville, Kansas. We'll be inside in a moment." He unlocked the house and punched his mom's birth date into the security pad.

"You're kidding me, right? Kansas? We were in Singapore not ten minutes ago."

"More or less. I'm not as fast with a passenger," Superman said, ushering her inside. "You'll be safe here for the time being. There's some food in the fridge. Let me take you to your room." He took her hand and led her to the stairs. "Here is the staircase," he warned her.

"What is this place?" she asked as they slowly made their way up.

"Clark Kent's family home. It's where he lived before his folks died."

"Oh. That explains why his pet cause is Metropolis's orphans. I knew he was a good man when he was still looking for me in January. Either that or crazy."

Superman chuckled. "You saw that one-inch story?"

"Hey, it was about me. Of course I saw it."

As he opened the door to the Lois Lane room, Clark wondered how long Lois had been blind. "Welcome home," he said, turning on the light. "Your clothes are in the closet and drawers."

Lois stiffened. "Please tell me I haven't gone from one prison to another."

"No, you are not my prisoner, Lois. I thought you would want to unwind for a few days before the media storm that will be your return to Metropolis."

"Just you and me?" she asked skeptically, brow raised.

"Actually, just you, if you can manage. I've got to get back to Singapore. I promised the clone, Lola, that I'd rescue her too. And then I need to help as much as I can."

"Help with what?" she asked, feeling along the wall until she bumped her leg into the bed and sat down. She drew the quilt from the bed around her shoulders.

"Search-and-rescue, mostly. There are going to be a lot of people needing assistance after Cyclone Rafflesia blows out of there."

"Cyclone? Cyclones don't form that close to the equator."

"You can read about it tomorrow." Superman winced. Of course, she couldn't read about it. "Lola can read it to you. Clark's already wired in his story. Apparently, the cyclone was man-made." He looked at her shivering on the bed. He wanted to zap her with his heat vision or just hold her and tell her everything would be okay, but she didn't know him from Adam. "I'll turn up the thermostat and make a fire in the fireplace downstairs before I go. It will warm up soon enough," he said, hesitating in the doorway. He hated to leave her so soon.

"Wait!" she called, reaching out her hand.

"I'm still here." He took her hand in his and drew in a breath at the electricity between them.

"Thank you. Anyone ever tell you that you are amazing?"

He laughed. "No. I can honestly say I haven't heard that one in awhile." He stood there for a moment holding her hand. "I've got to go. I promised Lola."

"Right," she said, letting go of his hand. He felt empty without it.

"We'll be back soon. She can help you while I'm working in Singapore. In the meantime, get some rest," he said, pausing for one last look at her. "You're free, Lois." She felt a breeze and he was gone.

***

Singapore was already a mess when Superman returned. It was disturbing how much damage could be caused in a half-hour.

The holiday party must have fizzled out after Lola's last showstopper. Clark couldn't believe the clone had it in her. The power was out all over town, so most of the party guests remained in the ballroom, now only lit with emergency lights and candles.

"Where's Lola?" Clark asked one of the party guests she had introduced him to earlier. He had changed back into his tux.

Clark had to ask five people before someone would answer him. "Luthor and his manservant took her that way." The man pointed through the door Lola and Asabi had gone through earlier.

Clark found her room and knocked on the door, but no one answered. "Lola?" he called before x-raying the room. The frog aquarium had been dumped on the floor. Broken glass and dead frogs. This couldn't be good.

He spun into his blue suit and returned to Lois's room. It was empty, despite the door being left fully open. Glass littered the floor. He hadn't broken this window, so it must have been Luthor, or the bullets, or even the storm. Superman x-rayed the neighboring rooms in the suite and the next two floors up as well. All deserted.

Clark was getting a bad feeling. He hadn't meant to take so long with Lois. He should have just taken her back to his hotel suite, but he feared it was too close, too easily breached. Searching the entire building took a while, and with each room his unease grew. He had promised Lola that he would rescue her. Perhaps he should have taken her first, but as it was, he barely beat Luthor back to Lois's room.

His last stop was Lex Jr.'s basement lair. The room looked basically the same as he had left it, only Junior was gone. He must have gone up the secret staircase that Superman had found to come down. Where had Luthor taken her?

Clark went back to Lola's room and broke down her door. The balcony door had been left open. Why would Luthor open the balcony door during a cyclone? Unless… He walked through the wind to the balcony and looked down. That was when he heard a moan. There, lying on the ground in a pool of blood, was Lola. With a swift jump, Superman landed beside her. He took her hand in his. "Lola, I'm so sorry."

"Clark?" she whispered, her eyes opening through their slits. "Clark, you came back…"

"Of course, Lola. I promised. I'm so sorry, I'm too late." He bent his head to hers.

"Did I do good?"

"You did wonderfully." He forced a smile.

"You came back for me," she whispered and her lips cracked upwards into a smile, before she stopped breathing altogether, her frozen eyes staring into his.

Superman bent his head and the tears rolled down his cheeks. She didn't deserve this sort of end. He put his hand over her eyes and closed her lids. He should tell the police, but the cyclone made that basically impracticable. They would be busy dealing with the aftermath of the storm. One clone life would get lost in the mess.

Superman scooped her into his arms and jumped back to her balcony with her. He passed building residents, party guests, and workers, but did not see them. They all stopped and stared as Superman, with tears running down his face, walked by carrying a once-beautiful but now bloody body. A few people gasped and turned away, but they all knew who had hurt the woman who had humiliated Lex Luthor at his own Christmas party. Superman walked through an already broken window in the building's lobby and took off into the air.

***

You're free, Lois. His words echoed in her heard. Was she? After all this time? This man — this flying man — damn, she forgot to ask him his name, said she was. As things were, his name really didn't matter. It would when she finally got back to Metropolis, back to Perry and the *Daily Planet* and started writing her story. She didn't need eyesight to write. She just needed a notebook and a pen. Or a keyboard attached to a computer. Just put her hands on the right keys and give her a good editor — or maybe just a copywriter — to clean up her typos and to read back what she had written. She sighed. The *Daily Planet*. Was she finally going to be able to go home?

Lois. She never thought hearing someone speak her name would make her feel so good. It was like someone letting light into her darkness. She sighed. Figurative light, metaphorical even. But real darkness. God, she hated Lex. She wished she had never met him. Never set foot inside that gun crate. That had been stupid. Extremely stupid, even if it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Lois scoffed at herself as she shook her head. *Idea?* She hadn't thought about it. She hadn't planned. She had just climbed into the crate, living up to her "Leap First Lois" nickname she had earned at the *Planet*.

No. If she was going to be truthful with herself, "Hurricane Lane" had been what people whispered behind her back and sometimes even said to her face. And it would be an even more popular nickname now that she had survived a cyclone as well.

But she hadn't earned the nickname just for riding through that hurricane on that National Guard Search-and-Rescue boat. No, she had earned that hideous nickname for the way she 'blew' through men like a hurricane. Was it Cat who had given it to her? Wouldn't that be a bit of the pot calling the kettle black? Wouldn't they all laugh to hear (not that *she* would tell them, but being the biggest gossips in the world, her fellow reporters would somehow find out) that she had had sex — Lois shivered at the thought of sex with Lex — with only one man in the past three (or was it four?) years?

Okay. Yes. Technically, she and Lex were husband and wife. Ugh. She *had* said, "I do."

Lois shivered again. Which had been more stupid, climbing into the gun crate or marrying Lex? Six of one, half-dozen of the other.

If she hadn't climbed into the gun crate, she wouldn't have been knocked around during the flight to Berkistan. Those guns wouldn't have knocked into her head and made her lose her memories. She wouldn't have been so dehydrated and hungry, delusional enough to think that Lex was some sort of "philanthropist missionary" who had saved her from the gun runners — instead of being their boss. She had believed all of his lies.

Lois put a hand on her face as she pulled the blanket tighter around herself, ashamed and embarrassed that she had been so gullible. He had told her that she was a lounge singer by the name of Lola Dane. That name *had* sounded familiar. Of course it did; it was one of her aliases. And she *could* sing, she discovered, so of course she thought Lex was telling her the truth.

Lex had wined and dined her, flown her to exotic locales. Put her up in the nicest of hotels. When he asked her to marry him, she said "yes." Why not? It seemed like a good life. He *seemed* like a good man. Lies. All lies. She should have been suspicious when the marriage license listed the name Lois Lane instead of Lola Dane.

"Typo," Lex told her. "We'll fix it later."

And that postcard to her father… oooh. Her father! Lois couldn't wait to give him her two cents about *his* involvement with Lex. She knew her father loved her. He hadn't given up on her. But like Lois, her father sometimes jumped into things without proper planning. She had forgiven her father — mostly — a couple of years back, when Lex told her about her funeral.

This was after she had regained her memories, long after she had kicked Lex out of her bed. She shivered again. She hated how amnesia had left her out of control, open to suggestion. Lex

told her what to do and she had done it.

Never, never again! She was Hurricane Lane! Men were to be used and discarded! Lois groaned. She didn't really feel that way. True, she used to treat men that way sometimes, but only because she hadn't wanted them to do that to her first. She hadn't wanted to give them the power to control which direction their "relationship" would go. *Used to?* She scoffed at herself again. Before she had gotten married.

Lois was a born-again virgin. *Ew.* Even to her that sounded bad. Over the past few years, she had embraced her celibate side. She wouldn't let Lex get anywhere near her sexually.

The one time Lex threatened to force himself on her, Lois told him in no uncertain terms that she would kill herself before she would let any man do that to her again. And Lex believed her — probably because she meant it and because she had held a steak knife from dinner to her wrist. Lex was a skilled fighter. She had seen his ability at fencing and she had seen him kill a man with his bare hands when one of his servants had messed up, so she knew better than to turn the blade on her husband.

But Lois saw fear in Lex's eyes the day she held that knife to her wrist. The sick, perverted evil man actually thought he loved her, in his own vulgar, demented way. Lex didn't want her to die. He might bend over backwards with crazy gadgets, gizmos, tonics and perfumes to try to brainwash her into liking him again. He might hold her prisoner, deny her access to her friends and family and the *Daily Planet*, structure her life, deny her freedom, even blind her, but he didn't want her to die… he just wanted her to love him again. And with that one weakness — his one flaw — Lex had given her back the power and control over *their* relationship.

Lex knew he couldn't force himself on her without her killing herself, and she would have found a way to do it if he tried. Since he didn't want her dead, he never tried… never called her bluff. Thank goodness. Lex wanted Lois to love him, desire him — and she shuddered whenever she thought this — *again*. She had never loved Lex, not even when she thought she was Lola Dane… at least, not with her heart. She wished that someone would invent a device to wipe the bad memories of sex with Lex from her mind. Those thoughts always left her with a bitter, vomity taste in her mouth.

After Lois realized that *she* now held the power to allow Lex — fat chance — or deny him access to her body, she decided that she was perfectly safe as his prisoner. He had lost the edge in their relationship. He could and had done things to try to change her desire (or in this case, lack of desire) for him, but those ended up being more temporary annoyances. And because she held all the power, she was able to keep her wits about her, despite the numerous tests and the lack of freedom. She kept trying to escape, to contact the *Daily Planet*, knowing full well that Lex wouldn't harm her or let others harm her.

The first man Lex had killed in front of her was a waiter who had tripped and accidently spilled hot soup on her. She escaped with very minor burns, but the waiter had been strangled within seconds of the incident. That was the only edge Lex had still held over her: what he would do, could do, and had done to others in her name or under the guise of 'protecting her.' It hadn't happened often, especially after she told Lex that she would never sleep with him again because he was a murderer, but Lex still loved demonstrating this little bit of power over her from time to time.

Lois shivered and it wasn't just from thinking about Lex. *I'm officially cold.* Kansas, huh? Well, at least she was back in the States. She wondered why her flying man had brought her here instead of back to Metropolis. Was it because she was blind and couldn't fend for herself? Was it because his plans had gone out the window — no pun intended — when he learned he would have to rescue Lola, too? Or was it because it was a house where she would be safe from Lex and his thugs?

Clark Kent's childhood home… she had endlessly fantasized about the man and here she was in his family's home. Lois stood up and walked gradually forward, not knowing what she would find. *Damn!* She should have just stuck to hugging the walls like she usually did in new places. After about five steps, she bumped into a piece of furniture, a dresser. She opened the top drawer. Underwear, socks and bras. What had he said?

"*Your clothes are in the closet and drawers."*

My clothes? He couldn't have really meant *her* clothes. He must have meant clothes *for* her. How long was he planning for her to stay here? And why would Clark Kent have women's clothes at his family home? A sharp pang gripped her chest. He must have married that blonde bitch from the engagement announcement she had seen last year.

Okay. That wasn't fair. Lois didn't know that the blonde was a bitch, per se. Maybe she was very nice. Lois's stomach turned. But the woman had looked so smug, her hand on Clark's chest like she owned him. Oh, right. If Clark had married the blonde, he then — officially — *would* be hers.

Lois took a deep breath. She didn't know the guy. He was free to have a life of his own. That announcement had ruined last year's New Year… well, the bits of it that hadn't already been ruined by Lex and Lex Jr. Had Clark proposed to his girlfriend on Christmas? Had it been a large or small wedding? Had he taken her to Paris on their honeymoon? Lois had always wanted to go to Paris, the City of Love. Were they happy? And if they were, why would Lex and Lex Jr. think he would have fallen for Lola's charms? And why hadn't Lex told her about the wedding? He knew about her silly crush on the reporter. Damn Lex Jr. and that mind control device he had used on her. Spying on her using her own eyesight, that was pretty darn low. Luckily, she was blind before he got it working again. Lois sighed. Yeah, lucky her.

A tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it away. Clark Kent. Married.

Stop torturing yourself, Lois. Clark Kent was just a fantasy anyway. You knew that. No man would ever be so sweet and loving and caring and heroic and brave as the man you pictured Clark to be, she told herself. He wouldn't ever sweep her off her feet and carry her off into the sunset. *He* hadn't rescued her from Lex, anyway. The flying man had. *But Clark had sent him.*

Lois shook her head. She really needed to ask the flying man his name. She couldn't keep calling him 'the flying man.' That would be her first order of business when he returned with Lola.

She opened another drawer. Shirts. Another drawer. Pants and jeans. Did she and the new Mrs. Kent even wear the same size? Men never thought ahead about details like that. She sighed. *Mrs. Kent.* She opened the bottom drawer and felt inside. Sweaters. Thank goodness. Finally something she could wear. She pulled on a sweater and shut the drawer.

Time to do some exploring and find out if she was as free as the flying man said she was. She hadn't heard anyone else in the house since they had arrived. So no guards. She could always hear the guards outside her doors of her suite in the tower. Talking. Eating. Snoring. There had always been someone there guarding her door.

Was there surveillance? Secret camera? Or was it just as the flying man said: she was safe, in Clark Kent's home? But why wasn't anyone here?

Right. Clark and Bitch Kent probably lived in Metropolis since he worked at the *Daily Planet.* Why did thinking of Clark Kent as married create an ache in her chest so? She had never met the man. She probably wouldn't recognize those dark eyes, broad shoulders and charming smile if she saw him walking down the street. If she could see, that was. She could hardly remember what he looked like now. Was her memory of that photo even accurate? Or had her imagination embellished it?

Clark Kent had never given up on her. She was amazed at how this stranger had kept looking for her even after they had put up that ridiculous and completely unwarranted tombstone in the cemetery. But she must have been just another story to him. He surely wasn't harboring a secret fantasy life about her, not while married and living with blondie.

Slowly, Lois explored the entire top floor of the house. None of the rooms had locked doors. She hadn't come across any guards or workers or servants. True to her flying man's word, Lois was free. Carefully, she made her way downstairs. There was a fire in the living room and it was much warmer down there. After a few more minutes of wall hugging and bumping into furniture, Lois found the front door.

It really was cold outside. It felt good to have fresh, sharp air touch her cheeks. How long had she lived in the humidity of Singapore? The coldness in her lungs tasted like independence, like freedom. She wondered what month it was. She had lost count a while back. December? They hadn't celebrated Christmas yet. Was it even after Thanksgiving?

After a while, she couldn't bear the coldness any longer and shut the door, returning to the warmth of the living room. She didn't stay there long, since she figured an open flame and blindness were a bad combo for her. More wall hugging and eventually she found the kitchen. She would have Lola make her something after she arrived with the flying man. Although, truth be told, the thought of Lola loose in a kitchen seemed more dangerous than that open fireplace in the living room.

Lois wasn't really hungry. Not for food anyway, but she was hungry for information. What had everyone thought of her disappearance and 'death'? Did Perry really think she was gone? Who was this flying man? How had he known her? Right, Clark Kent had sent him to find her. And he knew her father. Daddy never would have given up on her. What had happened in the world since Lex had her blinded and refused to read the news to her? He hadn't even allowed her television, the monster. News to Lois was like food for a normal person. She was starving.

Lois returned to the living room and found her way to the stairs. Maybe the flying man would give her some information, tell her more about Clark Kent. Her fantasy hero. The pipe dream she had clung to in the darkness of her lonely nights. She knew he couldn't possibly be as wonderful as she had imagined, no man was. They all just wanted a woman for sex. Wham! Bam! Thank you, ma'am.

She made it back upstairs to 'her' room. Sitting down on the bed, Lois covered herself with the quilt again. Then she double-checked that her bag of notebooks was still where she had left them. She really should hide them, so no one else would steal them. She had been guarding them so long, they felt like her babies. She bent over and slid the bag under the bed and put down the bedskirt again. That would do for now.

Lois wanted to be held, comforted, caressed, and loved intimately. She desperately wanted to get rid of this numbness that had come over her since she realized that she would never get her chance with Clark Kent — her personal hero — because he was married.

You're married too, numbskull, she reminded herself. Then she laughed. She hadn't really been 'married' to Lex since she read Clark Kent's first article in the *Daily Planet*. There was something about him, about his name even, that was familiar. She didn't know what it was or how or why, but she knew him. And that was when she started to realize she might not actually *be* Lola Dane.

Lois heard a door open and shut downstairs. He had been gone for what felt like hours. She was getting worried. Hadn't he said that he would be right back with Lola? Since he could travel around the world in minutes, she thought a few minutes would be a few minutes.

She walked downstairs touching both the wall and the handrail. Months of blindness had taught her to walk slowly in unfamiliar places. Still, Lois hated maneuvering down staircases, not knowing how many steps before she hit bottom, so she counted as she descended them. Seven down, turn on the landing, eight more until the ground level. She wished she had counted them when she came down earlier, so she would already know. Fifteen. She heard someone in the living room, crying.

As she approached, he simply said, "She's dead," and started crying again.

Lois ran her fingers along the back of the couch until she found the end. Then she sat down next to him. Feeling along the cushions until she found him, Lois wrapped her arms around him, trying her best to comfort this man who had rescued her. "It's not your fault," she murmured.

"Yes, it is. I promised her I would rescue her from him and I didn't. It's my fault that she died," he told her.

Lois could feel he was dirty and muddy and wondered what else he had been doing. "How did she die?" she asked, not really wanting to know the answer. Lex could be a cruel, cruel man.

The man gulped. "He threw her off a fifth-floor balcony."

Lois winced at this news, but was not surprised.

He drew in a gasp of air. "She died about a minute after I found her." His head slid from her shoulder to her chest as he wept, and she wondered if this was the first time he had ever cried.

"Lex did this, not you. You went back for her. You fulfilled your promise. He killed her, not you," she reassured him.

"It could have been you," he replied.

"No. Lex loves me. He's a sick bastard, but he has never hurt me physically."

"You are blind."

"Right." She chuckled. "You've got me there. But Lex always told me it was temporary, reversible. He's a psychopath, but everything he did to me was to try to brainwash me into loving him again. He hated that when I regained my memory, I no longer wanted anything to do with him."

"Don't excuse his behavior," her hero growled.

"Believe me, I'm not. I'm thankful you rescued me first. Otherwise, I'd still be his prisoner." She ran her fingers through his hair. It was dirty, covered in mud. "Still being tortured by Lex, Jr."

"I should have brought her with me when I came to get you. That's what I should have done."

"Stop it! It's not your fault that she died. Don't keep going back over everything you could have or should have done. The past is the past. You did what you did and I, for one, am thankful. Hate me, if you wish, for living when she died. But I'm happy that I'm free and nothing you say will ever change that."

"I could never hate you, Lois," he murmured.

"Of course you could." She smiled. "I'm easy to hate. I'm stubborn as all get out. I never admit I'm wrong, even when I am. I always have to be right. I ramble incessantly. I eat way too much chocolate — although, technically, you'd have to be pretty shallow to hate me for that."

He tilted his face towards her; she sensed he was looking at her.

"You know, this isn't fair. You know what I look like, but I have no idea what you look like."

"Does it really matter?" the man said, tensing.

He was nervous. Interesting. This made her more curious. Why did he not want her to know what he looked like? He had felt like a man when he carried her from Singapore. Was there something about him physically that he didn't want her to know about?

"Oh great, now you're going to add superficial and shallow to that list. I'm a reporter. I need to know everything before I form

an opinion. Hold still. I'm going to look at you."

Lois could feel him smile as she ran her fingers around his face. It seemed like a decent face, no blemishes at least. "Hmmm. I found a problem with you."

She could feel concern form across his face. It mattered what she thought of him. She continued, "Actually, two problems, but they are easily fixable. First, you're upside down." He smiled again and she could almost swear she heard a slight chuckle. She could feel his smile because her hands were still on his cheeks.

He sat up and without him against her, Lois felt cold once more. She took hold of his shoulders and slid onto his lap.

Her hero was no longer wearing that skintight outfit with the cape he had been wearing earlier. He had changed into jeans and a flannel shirt. He stiffened uncomfortably as she settled in his lap.

"Ah. Lois, I don't think—"

"Shhh. I'm looking at you," she whispered, starting to feel his face once more.

Lois started with his eyebrows. She felt his bone structure, his jaw, his cheekbones, his ears, his nose, his lips.

The man swallowed.

Lois had no idea what he looked like, but he felt divine.

He cleared his throat. "What's the other thing wrong with me?"

Lois could feel him looking up at her, curious. She loved talking with him like this; it was almost as if she could see his reaction with her fingers. "You're filthy. What have you been up to, besides saving the world?"

He looked away, but he couldn't get away from her because she still held his face. The tears started again. Damn. She knew what he was going to say.

"I buried her. I couldn't leave her there to be added to a list of cyclone victims, gone and forgotten, without friends or loved ones. I couldn't do that, not after I failed…" He couldn't say anymore because Lois covered his mouth with hers.

The electricity from that one kiss set her on fire. After three years of self-imposed celibacy, fighting off the advances of a lovesick psychopath, the first man she met was a genuine superhero, who cried at the death of her clone. How could she resist him?

This man made her whole body tingle in a way she had never felt before. Never had a man made her feel like this. Never. Blondie could keep Clark Kent. Lois would take this flying man instead.

"Oh, my." Lois moaned, kissing him deeper, pulling him closer. He was so hot, he melted that cold chill, the numbness she had felt since arriving in Kansas. "Amazing." She slid her fingers under his shirt and he jumped.

"Lois," he murmured between kisses. "This isn't a good idea."

She didn't listen to him, because he didn't believe his own chivalrous words. He was returning her kisses, so she continued to unbutton his shirt. Suddenly, Lois stopped. "You're right. This isn't a good idea."

Grabbing his hand, she slid off his lap.

His whole body was hard. Not cold hard like metal, but a firm, solid, muscular hard. She found it difficult to separate herself from him.

Lois wondered what it would feel like to touch that body. Skin to skin. *If you sleep with him, you control the relationship*, her mind told her. *He can't break your heart.*

"Be my eyes and make sure I don't hit anything." Lois led him to the stairs, but he navigated them there safely. She smiled, touching the handrail. "We make a good team."

Lois ran up the stairs, pulling him along behind her. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Landing, turn right. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.* At the top of the stairs she stopped. She pointed at the room he had given to her. "My bedroom, right?"

"Lois, this isn't…"

She ignored him and continued down the hall to the left. She stopped at the first door. "What's this?"

"Another bedroom," he replied, before being pulled farther down the hall.

"Here?"

"The bathroom."

Lois had discovered it earlier, but he didn't need to know that. She opened the door and flipped on the light switch. "For the darkness-challenged." She pushed him inside. "Got towels?"

"Yes."

"Good. Hit the showers. You're gritty and muddy."

The man laughed. It wasn't what he was expecting. She liked the sound of his laughter.

Lois grabbed him and pressed another kiss on his lips. "Go. Clean up." She spanked his butt and shut the door.

A minute after the water turned on — she counted to sixty — Lois opened the door and went inside.

***

Clark chuckled as Lois shut the bathroom door. He didn't think he had the willpower to resist her after those kisses. If he had been wearing his glasses, they would have been steamed up. He quickly stripped out of his muddy clothes and turned on the coldest shower in Kansas.

Wow! She was hot. The cold water on his hot skin steamed up the bathroom. He was so busy washing his hair that he did not notice her until her head appeared in his shower.

"Lois!" he gasped, trying to cover himself.

"Don't worry," she told him with a smile. "I won't peek."

"Lois, what are you doing in here?"

"I got a little dirty myself," she replied, holding out her hands towards the water. "Now, turn up the hot water because some of us are liable to succumb to hypothermia."

"Lois, you are not coming into… okay, you are." He couldn't finish that thought.

"The hot water please, or you'll have to think of another way to warm me up."

Clark hadn't noticed the temperature of the water until she said that, because he felt like he had melted and gone down the drain. He rotated around and turned up the hot water. He knew he shouldn't face her, but he was afraid of what she might do if he couldn't see her coming. Shyly, he turned back around. She was twisting her long brown tresses into a knot. Clark swallowed when Lois held out her hand.

"Soap, please? You wouldn't want me to feel around for it, would you?"

He didn't, so he handed her the bar of soap, which, in hindsight, had been an equally bad idea.

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Chapter 5 — Earth Angel

Author's Note: The "Lois" in Chapter 5 and 6 refers to alt-Lois. Canon Lois will be called "Lucy" to help lessen the confusion between the two characters.

***

Two hours later…

Clark lay in bed with a sleeping Lois's head lying on his naked shoulder, wondering how he was ever going to survive this woman.

He needed to head back to Singapore and start helping with rescue and recovery. It would be dawn there soon. But for some reason, he couldn't move. Maybe because they had made love more times in a row than he thought was physically possible. Since that first kiss downstairs on the couch, she could not take her hands off him. He already knew she was irresistible to him, especially in his emotionally weakened state. He hadn't slept in

what felt like twenty-four hours and he had another long day of search and rescue ahead of him. He sighed.

Being with Lois was better than he expected, better than… everything. She called him her amazing man, which he didn't mind. That was how he felt about her, simply amazed. And it was nice not to be super for once. To be liked without being seen. For himself and himself alone. No names, no backstory, just him.

Clark was going to have to tell her who he was, eventually. He wanted her more than ever and he had no idea how he was going to put an end to it. That's what the next sigh was for. Superman could not be seen cavorting with another man's wife. Especially the wife of an evil psychopath like Lex Luthor. He may have rescued her from hell, but other people would only see that he used his superpowers to take another man's wife — another man's wife with whom he had been obsessed with for years. He could picture the headlines in his mind and he cringed.

Clark would have to speak with Lois before he left, because he a) didn't want to just disappear on her, and b) needed to let her know that she could not under any situation ever tell another living soul about what happened between them.

He kissed her cheek and Lois snuggled against him like she was having a good dream. Maybe he should go make her breakfast; although, technically, in Kansas it was closer to suppertime. Quickly and quietly, Clark slid out of bed without disturbing her and went to take a two-minute shower.

The bathroom was a mess, towels all over the floor. He swallowed. Showering would never be the same. Perhaps he should take a swim in the creek instead. True, there were a few more icicles, but he was running so hot, he doubted he would notice them. He cleaned up the bathroom and took his shower. No point in adding his part to help global warming.

Clark returned to his bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. Lois was still asleep. He sat down on the edge of the bed and ran his fingers down her cheek. She was so beautiful, so loving. He wanted to drop his towel and crawl back into bed with her. He wanted nothing more than to spend the day in her arms, making love with her. He swallowed. That swim in the creek was beginning to sound like a good idea.

As his fingers ran down her face again, Clark realized he was in love with her. Not just a schoolboy's crush, but full-on, forever-and-ever love. *Oh, no. That's not good.* He shouldn't be in love with her. It would be bad for him and equally bad for her, because she was technically still married to Lex Luthor. But the heart wanted what the heart wanted.

His hand froze. That was what Luthor had told him. *This is bad. Really bad.*

Lois had just gotten out of a relationship with a love-crazy, obsessive guy. The last thing she would want was another one. He spun into his clothes, then went into her room and brought her an outfit to put on when she woke up. He couldn't have her wandering around the house — he took a deep breath — without clothes.

Clark zipped downstairs to make some breakfast. He didn't know Lois's skill level with her blindness and didn't want to chance her burning down the house trying to cook without her vision. He gulped down his food and placed hers on a tray to take up to the room. He turned around to find her standing in the doorway.

"Lois!" he gasped. She was making it a habit to sneak up on him. *Super hearing, what was wrong with you?* Thankfully, she had found the clothes he had left for her. "I made you breakfast." He set the tray on the table and walked over to her.

"Breakfast? You truly are amazing." Lois beamed in his general direction and placed her hands on his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. "And in more than one room."

Clark kissed her; he couldn't stop himself after a compliment like that. She jumped into his arms and started tugging off his shirt. He swallowed, trying to back away, but she was attached. Oh man, she wanted more of him. *This is bad. Really bad. But in a really good way.*

He cleared his throat. "Lois, I have to get back to Singapore and Malaysia. I have to go help."

"Oh, right." She slid down his body, but continued to lean her full body against his. "I forgot, you're not just my hero. I guess you help other people as well."

"I go where I'm needed, Lois, but I'll always be your hero. Always."

"I'm going to hold you to that, you know," Lois said, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"I know," Clark murmured, kissing the top of her head. He swallowed, not wanting to leave, not wanting to say what he had to say. "Lois, you can't tell anyone about us, about last night. That needs to stay between us."

"Are you crazy? Nobody would believe me." She reached her hand under his shirt and ran her fingers over the material of his blue suit. "Were we floating part of the time?"

He blushed with a chuckle. "Perhaps. I was a little distracted."

"Amazing," Lois murmured, tilting her head up and kissing him. "That's what I've decided I'm going to call you, my Mr. Amazing."

Clark laughed. Oh, was he in big trouble. "I've got to go."

"When will I see you again?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"As soon as I can get away. I've got to get you back to Metropolis at some point," he told her. Not that he really wanted to take her to Metropolis. He wanted to stay here for the rest of his life. But when did he ever get what he wanted?

"Right." She bit her lip, running her finger down his chest. "I mean when will we float together again?"

Was Lois asking what he thought she was asking? She wanted more of him? He grinned like a Cheshire cat before the sharp pain of reality struck his heart. He couldn't have more of her; she was married to someone else. He was Superman. "We'll talk when I get back."

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she pressed another kiss to his lips that he felt down to his toenails. "How about a quickie then?"

"Lois." Clark groaned, not wanting to leave, yet knowing he had to. "I really need to go."

"Okay," Lois said, stepping fully away from him. It was like she was tearing him in half.

"Are you going to be okay? Alone in the house?" Clark asked hesitantly.

"I'll manage, Mr. Amazing. I am Ms. Amazing, you know." She laughed. It was a happy laugh. He had made her happy. He liked that feeling.

Clark grabbed her and pressed a fierce kiss on her lips. "That you are, Lois," he mumbled, not wanting to take his lips from hers, and then with a gust of wind, he was gone.

***

Lois felt around the table until she found the tray of food he left for her. Sitting down, she sighed with contentment. Making love to him was like nothing she had ever felt before. And she should know, the amount of men she had gone through.

Amazing. Truly, amazing. She grinned as the previous night passed again through her mind. And the floating… wow! That was a new experience. Freeing. It was like sex on a roller coaster. Up and down and around and around. And she was the queen of adrenaline junkies. Lois felt her face. She was flushed and if she grinned any more, her cheeks would surely crack.

Breakfast. Right. Food. Eat. *Distract yourself, girl,* she told herself. *He'll be gone for hours.* Lois took a sip of her coffee. Black with a dab of low-fat milk, no sugar. How had he known?

She smiled. That man was hers and she was never ever going to let him go. He was her reward for dealing with Lex for the last three years, because if anyone needed a reward, it surely was her. At least she had stopped sleeping with Lex when she got her memories back. She shivered. The thought of sleeping with her husband upset her stomach.

As she took another sip of her coffee, Lois realized she knew absolutely nothing about Mr. Amazing, not even his real name. It just hadn't seemed important at the time. She meant to ask him when he returned with Lola, but…. She smiled. She got distracted. First by his tears, then by his charm, and then by his kisses. Lois ran her fingers over her mouth.

True, Mr. Amazing was a good man. A very good man. In every meaning of the word. She fanned her face again. *Down, girl.* She released a breath, trying to concentrate on what she knew about her Mr. Amazing. He was *flying* off to help victims of a cyclone. He had cried when he hadn't been able to save Lola. She sighed. Poor Lola. She didn't deserve that fate.

So, Mr. Amazing was a good man who was sensitive and could fly. Okay, the flying part was a little out of the ordinary, but after last night, perfectly acceptable. More than perfectly acceptable, she smiled dreamily. She took a bite of her eggs. And he was thoughtful. Kind. And, yum, he could cook eggs. That was it, that was all she knew. Not good.

Lois could hear Perry's voice inside her head: '*You've got to know a man before jumping into bed with him, honey.*'

"Yes, Perry. I know. I did it again." Wham, whir, thank you, sir! She really shouldn't have anything more to do with Mr. Amazing… except that she was completely addicted to him. Her body was still tingling. From that first kiss on the couch, her body craved him. If Mr. Amazing didn't come back, she was sure she would go through withdrawal. She took a bite of toast. And to think she had been crushing on Clark Kent with a man like Mr. Amazing in the world. He was like her daydreams of Clark, only on steroids. Her toast stopped halfway to her mouth. Nah, steroids wouldn't make a man fly.

Modest. Lois had almost forgotten modest. Or was it secretive? Private? He hadn't wanted her to talk about *them*. What exactly had Mr. Amazing meant by that? 'Them,' he had said. That they had had sex? That they were a couple? Were they? Hmmm. She would have to think about that. She would take being friends with benefits for now, but Mr. Amazing was so sweet, so kind, so gentle, so understanding, so patient with her, and so… she couldn't think of another word besides amazing. *Super* came in a close second. This definitely was a man she wanted to get to know better, if he stuck around after this first night. Most men she had sex with never did. She hoped Mr. Amazing would be different.

Anyway, who would she talk to about him? Hello, left alone in a house in the middle of nowhere in Kansas. Smallville? It had to be true, no one could make up a name like that. She took another bite of eggs.

She wondered if there was a telephone in the house. Lois Lane always found a way to file her story. She grinned in anticipation. It had been so long since she had called the office and filed a story. Would they even remember her? Perry would, of course. But the others? Screw the others. She had a story which would have them on their knees in supplication.

Was that what he meant — don't mention *them* when she called in her story? Her story about *him*? He never said not to tell anyone about 'him,' just 'them.' Sex like that was front-page news, but Lois wouldn't tell anyone. She didn't work for the *Daily Whisper.* No, she wouldn't talk about that, despite wanting to yell it from the rooftops. She wanted Mr. Amazing all to herself. Again and again and again. He was lucky she wasn't one to kiss and tell. She patted around the tray to see if there was any more food. A glass of orange juice. She downed it in one gulp.

"*We'll talk when I get back."* Her brow furrowed. What in the world had he meant by that? How was that an answer to her question? What had she asked him? When could they float together again? She smiled contentedly with a sigh. Floating with Mr. Amazing. Her mind drifted off.

"*We'll talk when I get back."* Talking wasn't floating. Talking was the opposite of floating. Her heart sank. He'd better not try to break up with her. He'd better not try to dump her after last night. He couldn't be one of those men. Not Mr. Amazing. Her sunny day just clouded over. No! She wasn't going to let him dump her. He was *hers*! Her reward for having been married to Lex Luthor, for having given up sex for three years, for being blinded.

All right. She stretched her arms over her head. Where were telephones usually kept? Bedroom, kitchen, and living rooms. She didn't really feel like sitting here in the kitchen. The fire was still warm in the living room; she would see if she could find the phone in there. Slowly, she walked away from the table holding out her hands, so not to run into any obstructions. She held one hand up at face height and one at her waist. She found the wall and followed it to the swinging kitchen door, which lead her to the living room.

Lois bumped her knee on a small table located next to a lounge chair. After searching for what felt like quite a while (but was probably closer to ten minutes), she found the telephone on a row of bookshelves behind the kitchen door. She had knocked over several photographs. Hopefully, she hadn't damaged any of Clark Kent's stuff.

She carried the telephone over to the long table behind the couch that she had bumped into a few minutes earlier. She took a deep breath. Here went everything. She picked up the receiver, heard a dial tone, and smiled. It was her lucky day. Placing her fingers over the buttons, she dialed the number she repeated in her sleep.

"Hello, *Daily Planet*."

"Put me through to Perry White," Lois said. "I've got the story of a lifetime for him."

"Sorry, ma'am, Mayor White no longer works here," she was told.

"Ma'am?" hissed Lois at the flunky who answered the phone. When had she become a ma'am? She wasn't even thirty. Mayor White? Oh, that's right, according to the last newspaper she had read, he was battling for the mayor's office against some man… Tempus. Guess he won. "What about Clark Kent?" He had been writing articles about her; he would want to know she had been rescued.

"Sorry, Kent's in Singapore on assignment." *Oh, right. Singapore. Duh, Lois! He had been dancing cheek-to-cheek with Lola.* Or had Junior just been teasing her about that? Was Clark Kent in the middle of that cyclone? Poor Clark. Wait… what had Mr. Amazing said? Clark Kent had sent him. And here she was at Clark's house in Smallville. So, Clark Kent must already know she had been rescued. *Mr. Amazing must also be a good friend of Clark's. Maybe that's how Clark's such a good investigative reporter. Well, Clark Kent, hope you don't mind, but Lois Lane is going to reveal your hidden source. Can we say 'scoop'? This is just too big.*

"Well, who do you have who covers superheroes?" she said snidely, fully expecting to be hung up on. Mr. Amazing never said she couldn't talk about him. Just not about them. She smiled wickedly.

"Transferring," the junior peon said.

Oh, so they were going to take her seriously.

"Barry Balson. City beat."

"Barry? Lois Lane here. Have I got a story for you—" she began.

"*Hurricane Lane?*" Barry said with some surprise. "Wow! You *are* the story. We thought you were dead. What cat dug you

up? Where have you been for the last few years?"

"Can it, Balson. You want my story or not?" she snapped.

"Yeah, it's definitely you. Shoot."

"So, there I was, locked in my room as usual, listening to the winds blow. I could tell these were cyclone-force gusts—" Lois started in on her story.

"Wait a minute," Barry interrupted. "You were in Cyclone Rafflesia? You're in Singapore? Clark found you?"

"Clark Kent was looking for me in Singapore?" He'd still been searching for her? The part of her heart that stopped beating when Kent and Barbie had gotten married started beating again. He hadn't forgotten about her?

"Well, I don't know about that, per se," Barry said timidly. "He's been looking for you for over three years. You're kind of a pet hobby of his."

Hobby? She was Clark Kent's hobby? Her heart felt like it stopped again.

"He went over there to interview some guy," Barry was still saying. "Fifth richest man in the world. Rex Rueford, I think."

Lois shook her head. "Clark Kent was looking for me?" she repeated. She just couldn't believe he hadn't given up on her. Maybe it wasn't just a coincidence that Amazing had found her when and where he had found her. "And, Barry, you better get your facts straight. Lex Luthor is the *third* richest man in the world. He doesn't sue over much, but he might sue the *Planet* if you got *that* wrong."

"You know that guy?" Barry asked.

"Yeah. I know him," she said flatly, though she didn't feel like revealing more. "So, how Clark figured out where I was — that's his story. How I was rescued — that's my story."

"Okay. I won't interrupt," he promised.

"I heard a crash on the floor below me," Lois said, back into story mode. "I thought the storm was a nasty one and my guards would be moving me soon to a more secure location, so I moved closer to the door. Suddenly, I realized that there's a man in my room."

"He burst through the door?" Barry asked.

"No." She thought for a moment. "He said he came from the window, my balcony. I asked who he was and he said he was a friend. I asked him who he was again, whose friend, and he said 'Clark Kent.' So Clark must have told him where Lex was holding me."

"Uh-huh," said Barry, slowly. "O-*kay*… uh, Lois, don't you know that Clark is… wait. *Lex*? As in Lex Luthor — that billionaire guy? *He* was the one holding you captive?"

Crap. She hadn't meant to let that slip. "Yeah. Long story. I'll tell it later. So, this man asked me if I was Lois Lane. No, I said, Marlene Dietrich — you've found me."

Barry chuckled.

"So, he says he'd carry me," Lois continued. "He was going to pick me up. I told him I was fine enough to walk and, get this, he says, 'out the window?' Mind you, I was on the 105th floor. That's a long drop, so I suggested we use the elevator. That's when he tells me that the power had been knocked out in the storm."

"You didn't notice that the power was out, Lois?"

"No, nimrod, I'm blind as a bat," Lois exclaimed, annoyed at yet another interruption. "One of those crazy scientists Lex hired to brainwash me shone some light in my eyes and now I'm blind. I haven't been able to see since February."

"Oh, my God! Lois!" He sounded genuinely dismayed.

"Barry, are you getting this?" she questioned.

"Yes. Yes. Sorry, I'm listening."

"So, this man tells me, 'Don't worry, Lois, I can fly.' I'm thinking, here I am in my room with a crazy man who's going to kill us by jumping out a window, during a cyclone no less, when Lex starts banging on my door with an ax or something trying to break in. This man says, 'trust me,' so I do. And he scoops me up and jumps out into the cyclone and, guess what, he *actually could fly!* I expected we would be plunging to our deaths when I realized we're not going down… we were going up and less than a minute later we were out of the winds, out of the rain, over the storm without an airplane. Oh, Barry, it was amazing… he was simply…" She sighed. "Super."

"So, Lois, you met Superman." Barry laughed quietly.

"Yes. Superman! Let's call him that!" Mr. Amazing was her pet name for him, but Superman sounded even better… for everyone else.

"Of course, we'll call him that, Lois, that's his name."

"*What?*" She couldn't have heard him right. "Repeat that?"

"Well, it's not his real name, but his moniker," Barry said.

"*What?"* She was stunned. This was her scoop and it wasn't even news. How was that possible?

"Lois, Superman has been around since the mayoral election back at the beginning of the year… February, I guess," Barry said and she could hear the pity in his voice. Pity aimed at her. "He's old hat… well, not exactly old hat, because then I'd be out of a job. I cover the Superman beat."

Lois heard 'February' and a light bulb went off in her brain. Lex Luthor had heard about this superhero fellow and then blinded her and ordered a total media blackout so she wouldn't find out about him. That was why he was so paranoid about this Clark Kent reporter who was still looking for her after three years. Lex knew Clark was friends with this hero.

"Lois?"

She decided to change gears. "Tell me about this Superman fellow. I know he can fly and he's super fast. I mean, he flew me from Singapore to who knows where I am in a matter of minutes. I could be at the North Pole for all I know. He said I'd be safe and I'm freezing cold. I think there's snow outside."

"Lois, it's a week before Christmas. There's snow everywhere," Barry said sadly. He still had that pity tone.

"Oh. It's almost Christmas?" Had it almost been a whole year since Lex blinded her? She had lost count. Lois felt around her for a chair and sat down on the couch.

"Where have you been, Lois, living in a cave?"

"I may as well have, Barry," Lois said as she thought about how to spin her own story. *A psychopath kidnaps me and does everything in his power to brainwash me and bend me to his will, ends up blinding me and instituting a total media blackout so I can't call on this new superhero to rescue me.* Would anyone believe that true story? It sounded more like *Dirt Digger* than *Daily Planet.*

"Sorry, Lois." Barry did actually sound sorry. She'd always liked Barry.

Back to her story. "Tell me about this Superman guy. What do you know? Where's he from? Does he have any other powers? Is he the only superhero out there? Come on, Barry, give me the 411."

"Didn't Clark tell you?" Barry inquired hesitantly.

Lois felt like rolling her eyes. *What was it going to take to get a straight answer from this man?* "I told you, this Superman fellow took me to a secure location. I'm guessing Clark Kent is still back in Singapore covering the cyclone."

Barry didn't speak for a minute. Then he began guardedly, "Lois, where is Superman now, at this moment?"

"He dropped me off, then he went back to Singapore to rescue my clone… then he…"

"I'm sorry. Did you say *clone*?"

Oh, why did she have to mention Lola? "Yeah, right. Lex Luthor had me cloned. I guess, he was trying to fool Superman in rescuing her instead of me. Ha-ha," she said without mirth.

"Man, he's obsessed with you."

"Tell me about it." She shook her head. Barry didn't know

the half of it.

"So, Superman rescued this clone… then what?"

"Lola — the clone — didn't make it." Lois bit her bottom lip. Then what? The most wonderful, amazing experience of her life. She cleared her throat. Barry didn't need to know about that. Nobody needed to know about that. "He went back to help with the cleanup and search-and-rescue. He said he'd take me back to Metropolis later tonight, I think."

"Lois, it is tonight."

Lois pressed her lips together. She was really getting annoyed with Barry's attitude. "After dark I'm guessing, Singapore time."

"Oh." He paused for a moment. "So, you haven't officially met Clark Kent?"

"Not officially or unofficially. I'm sure we'll get acquainted when we're both back at the *Planet*. Are you going to tell me about this Superman guy or not?"

Lois heard some chuckles on the other end of the line. It sounded like more than one person.

"Barry Bartholomew Balson, what in the hell is going on over there? Do you have me on speakerphone?" she roared into the phone.

"Bartholomew?" That was Cat's voice. She would recognize the gossip diva's voice anywhere. "How did you know Barry's middle name, Lois? Oh, wait, don't tell me. Let me guess. You and—"

"Metropolis's greatest investigative reporter!" Lois interrupted. She hadn't slept with half as many men as Cat. Lois had some morals and a screening process, thank you very much. Unlike *other* reporters. "You should try it sometime, Cat."

The chuckles turned to outright laughter.

"Do you think this is a joke?" Lois demanded. It hurt that her whole conversation with Barry had been eavesdropped on by who knew how many people via speakerphone

"Frankly, Lois, some of us have always thought of you as a joke. So, you're not dead. Figures. I knew we couldn't get rid of you that easily," Cat tittered. "How about you use all of your investigative skills…" Here Cat's titters skipped the giggle stage and went straight to a belly laugh. "— and find out all you can about the man from the planet Krypton or, better yet, his girlfriend, Ultra Woman."

Lois gulped. Girlfriend? "Krypton?" she repeated as a soft echo. She'd had sex with an alien. She had been so sure he was a man. Mr. Amazing felt like a man, had all the parts of a man. And *that* wasn't the worst of it. He had a girlfriend! No wonder he didn't want her talking about them. Scum. Lois felt like she had been slugged in the gut.

"That's right, Lois. Your Superman is from outer space." Cat continued to laugh and her next words dripped more with skepticism than anything else. "So, use all of those formidable investigative skills you're always bragging about and when you know as much as the rest of us already do, then and only then, we'll discuss giving you your job back."

"Yeah?" Lois retorted. "Well, who gave you that kind of power, queen of sheen?"

"Mr. Olsen, our publisher," Cat gloated. "You see, Lois, I'm acting editor for the next two weeks until our new editor shows up."

Lois gasped. "No!"

"That's right, dearie. I'm in charge of *your* fate. So, you better get us some new info on our good friend Superman or no investigative job for you," Cat's teasing had more than a hint of malice mixed with her laughter. "Like, did you make a move on him? *Did* he accept?"

Lois's jaw dropped. Cat would assume that about her. In this case, she would have been correct. Wait a minute. What did Cat mean, 'did he accept?' Had this Superman guy cheated on his girlfriend — this Ultra Woman — before? Some Superman. He was just like all the other guys out there.

Barry grabbed the phone off speaker. "Don't listen to her."

Lois sniffled. "Barry, you could have warned me I was on speakerphone."

"I'm sorry, Lois."

"I've known you since I was a junior peon on the Metro High Bulletin." Lois felt betrayed. Cat, she expected this from, but Barry? "How could you do this to me?"

"I'm sorry, Lois. And you were never a junior peon, even in high school."

"Thanks," she murmured. "Is it true?"

"Yes, she's acting editor."

Lois sniffled again. "Barry, you know she hates me."

"I warned you not to steal Claude away from her."

Lois scoffed. "I didn't steal him, he came willingly. Anyway, she should be thanking her lucky stars. He could have stolen that mayoral call girl story from her like he stole the cyborg boxer story from me," she grumbled. At least Perry had believed her and shipped Claude back to the French bureau. "So, is this Mr. Olsen guy trying to run the paper into the ground or what?"

"Lo-is," Barry spoke her name slowly, just like Perry did when he was warning her to watch her tongue. She missed her silver fox of an editor. "I'm sorry," Barry apologized again.

There wasn't anything more to say. Lois felt completely humiliated. Back in the States for a few hours and Cat Grant had already punched the wind out of her sails.

"Was there anything else you wanted to tell me about your rescue, Lois, or should I just get the rest from Clark?"

Lois blinked and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I don't have anything more to add, Barry. I just have one last question."

"Shoot."

"Is City Hall's number the same as it was three years ago?"

"Sure is, Lois. See you soon, then."

"I wish I could say the same, Barry," she replied and hung up.

Lois let herself have a good forty-five second cry and then with a deep breath, picked up the receiver. Placing her fingers on the buttons, she slowly dialed again.

"Mayor's office."

"This is Lois Lane. I need to speak to Perry White immediately," she told the man who answered the phone.

"I'm sorry, the mayor has left for the evening. Would you care to leave a callback number?"

Lois had no idea what Clark's Smallville number was. "I'll hold, while you track him down."

"But he might not be available until morning," she was warned.

"You have five minutes. If you don't connect this call in that time, I'll hang up and you will be looking for a job in the morning," Lois snarled. She was no longer feeling charitable.

The man cleared his throat. "Did you say 'Lois Lane,' as in the dead *Daily Planet* reporter?"

"Either I'm not dead or you're talking to a zombie."

"I'll connect you."

"Good idea." Lois took a couple of deep breaths. She had to be in control when Perry answered or she would simply lose it.

"Lois, is that really you, honey?" Perry's voice almost whispered into the phone in disbelief.

"It's really me, Perry."

He cheered. "Woo-woo! He did it! Saints alive, he did it. Where are you, honey?"

"I don't know for certain, Perry. Someplace safe, apparently, and cold." She shivered, taking a deep breath. The fire in the fireplace must be dying down.

"I take it you're not back in Metropolis yet, then?" He sounded concerned.

"No. He…" She couldn't say his real name. Hell, she still didn't know his real name. Only his title. "He had to fly back to

Singapore… the cyclone and all."

"Lois, honey, is everything alright? You sound funny."

She never could disguise her feelings from her editor and friend. "Oh, Perry. Please, tell me he isn't green."

"In the King's name, Lois, please tell me you didn't."

Lois was crying in earnest now. "Oh, he *is* green! I knew he was too perfect to be perfect."

"For heaven's sake, Lois," her former boss grumbled. "He's not green. He looks as human as you or me. Who has been telling you stories?"

She sucked in her sobs and started hiccupping. "He's not green? He's human? Krypton? I knew I should have never believed Cat." She took a deep breath.

"Cat Grant. I should have known. Why you two never could get along I'll never know. Why didn't you call me first?" he wanted to know.

"I did call you first, Perry! I just didn't know you weren't at the paper anymore. I told Barry about my rescue by Superman, but then I found out they had me on speakerphone and were all laughing at me." She started crying again.

"Why were they laughing at you, honey?"

"They said I couldn't be the Metropolis's best investigative reporter if I had never heard of Superman. That I couldn't have my job back until I could tell them everything there was to know about him." She took another deep breath and sobbed, "And his girlfriend, Ultra Woman."

Perry gave her a minute to compose herself. "Lois, honey. They were just teasing you. They don't know anything about Ultra Woman either. She's the best-kept secret in Metropolis. Those gossips were just goading you. Anyway, he only had one date with her and that was months ago. He hasn't seen her since."

"Really?" she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "He's really not seeing anyone?" Yippee! Maybe Superman liked her after all.

"Lois, please, honey, tell me nothing happened between you two."

She squeaked.

"Lo-is!"

"He started to cry, Perry. You know how I can't handle that," she whined. God, even to her that sounded like an excuse.

"Hold on, Lois. Are you sure it was Superman? He doesn't cry."

"Is there another guy in the world that flies?" She gave him five seconds to answer and then continued, "He blamed himself when he couldn't save my clone."

Perry cleared his throat. "*Clone?*"

Lois sighed. "Lex Luthor cloned me. His son said it was to have Clark Kent rescue her instead of me, throw him off our scent. Well, when Superman rescued me, he left her behind with Clark Kent, because he didn't want to chance carrying both of us through cyclone-force winds. He left me at the safe house and returned to Singapore to rescue her. Only… only, I don't know, Lex got to her first, I guess. Superman said that she had been thrown off a balcony. Oh, gosh. I hope that Lex didn't get to Clark, as well." Her heart started pounding. *Clark!*

Silence. "Lois, we'll talk about your marriage to that monster another time. And I'm sure Clark's fine. He can take care of himself. I want to explain to you something about Superman. Honey, he's a bit naïve. He believes in truth and justice. I mean, he *really* believes in it. He's not jaded like you and me. He doesn't believe in killing anyone, for any reason. He believes he was sent to us to help. It's what makes him such a good man."

"Okay. So he has a strong belief system," she said, drying her cheeks with her sleeve. "I don't understand what you're trying to say, Perry."

"Lois, I know you. You didn't earn the nickname 'Hurricane Lane' by tussling the hair on a few men's heads."

She smiled. "That was a long time ago, Chief. I'm reformed, now."

Perry guffawed. "Right, an old married lady? That's a load of bull hockey and you know it."

Lois moaned. "But, Perry, he's so amazing—"

"Stop! Stop right there, Lois. Tell me nothing happened."

"Nothing happened," she lied.

"You only kissed him."

Lois rolled her eyes even though she was blind. "I only kissed him."

"That's what I want to hear. Now, we've talked about this, Lois. You can't jump into bed with every Mark, Dick, and Clark."

"I don't!" she snapped, knowing his words held too much truth. "Anyway, you know that I always have to be in control with men. Always. You know why I do this, Perry, better than anyone."

"Lo-is," he warned.

"Perry, why do I have this strange feeling you care more about this superhero's emotional well-being than mine?" she asked, barely holding her anger in check.

"Because you are my tough-as-nails reporter, Lois. You've been held prisoner for over three years, subjected to who-knows-what horrors and listen to you, worried about being thrown off the cheerleading squad, moaning about Cat teasing you, and whining about whether the quarterback will be taking you to the dance."

Lois smiled, relaxing. Perry had her pegged. "So, Mayor White, tell me about this hero. He can fly and he's fast. What else?"

"Why don't you go straight to the source?" he inquired.

"A good reporter knows the answers before she asks the questions. Who taught me that? Anyway, he's in Singapore with Clark Kent. Helping out after the cyclone."

Silence. "O-kay. Since you've been out of the loop and you're blind…"

"How did you know that?"

"James Olsen met you in Tokyo, remember?"

"I'd say he's pretty smart for a kid," she replied, hazarding a guess on Olsen's age from how his voice had sounded to her. "But then again, he put Cat in charge as editor."

"That kid owns the *Daily Planet* now, Lois. Don't forget that."

"Yes, Chief. Just the facts." She was sitting on the edge of her seat.

"Are you sure you don't want to just ask him yourself?"

"I will. I will." She waved off his question. "Tell me already! I've got to know."

"Super strength, x-ray vision, heat vision, super cooling breath, super hearing, flying, and speed," Perry rambled them off like he was ticking them off his fingers.

Lois's jaw hung open. "Get out of here! All that?"

"Plus he's invulnerable. When I first met him, he stuck a C6 bomb in his mouth. It made him burp."

Wow! Lois mouthed. "I'm glad he's on our side." She paused before asking, "He's from another planet, isn't he? Cat wasn't lying to me about that."

"Yes, ma'am."

She cringed at the ma'am. "And you're sure he isn't green or blue?"

Perry guffawed. "What does it matter? You're blind."

Lois shrugged. "Good point." She thought for a moment, her foot making circles on the floor. "He must be a decent guy or you wouldn't be trying to protect him from the likes of me."

"The best, Lois. I count him as one of my best friends. Same as you."

"High accolades." She bit her lip and then asked him the question at the tip of her tongue. "Perry, would I really be that

bad for him?"

"He's a hero to people all over the world," Perry told her.

"Oh, that whole truth and justice thing."

"If he were seen dating a married woman, it would damage his image. Ruin his reputation," the mayor warned her. "People would no longer trust him. It would crush him."

It felt like Perry had dumped a bucket of icy water over her. Lois couldn't cause Mr. Amazing pain. Her bottom lip began to quiver. "Even if she weren't really married? Even if she had amnesia when she married the jerk and when she got her memory back, refused to have anything else to do with him? Even if that madman held her prisoner for the next three years, making her friends and family think she was dead, all the while trying to brainwash her, bend her to his will, and force her to love him again? Even then?"

"Afraid so. Married is married in his book, Lois. And off-limits." Perry cleared his throat again. "You've been in the business long enough to see why. One scandal can ruin a good man, can't it, honey?"

"Uh-huh." Lois gulped. She had found the most amazing man. Or, he had found her. A man like that might break his rules in a moment of weakness, but he would never let it happen again. '*We'll talk when I get back,'* he had told her. Mr. Amazing wasn't planning on continuing their relationship while she was still married to Lex Luthor. And there was no way Luthor would ever grant her a divorce. "It isn't fair," she grumbled.

"Why don't you go relax, honey? Life is going to be Vegas crazy when you come back here tomorrow. Enjoy the silence while you can. Have Clark give me a call before you come home and I'll be there to meet you."

"He's still in Singapore," she reminded him tersely. "Why does everyone assume I know Clark? I haven't met him yet. Yes, it was his great reporting skills that found me, but then he stayed behind on the front lines and sent in the special forces."

"Um… I'm sorry, Lois. You're right. You're right. I'm sure Superman will… or if he doesn't… why don't you have the Man in Blue call me before he brings you back, okay, honey?"

"His uniform is blue?" Lois asked wistfully.

"Primary blue with a big yellow 'S' on the chest. His cape is red. So are his shorts and boots."

Lois started fanning herself. She no longer felt cold. "Wow."

"Lois?"

"Yeah, Chief?"

"Go take a cold shower."

Lois coughed. "Noted. And thanks, Perry, for never giving up on me."

"Hey, until they produce a body, I'll always believe you're alive."

"Thanks, Chief."

"Welcome back, kid."

Lois hung up the phone. So, Mr. Amazing's name was Superman or at least his title was. He still sounded amazing to her. Super strength. Heat vision. *Was that how he started the fire in the fireplace?* she wondered. X-ray vision. Well, he had already seen her naked, nothing to fear there. Super cooling breath. That must help with putting out fires. Super hearing. God, she would love that skill. And he was invulnerable. Plus the flying and super speed. *Wow!* Could she pick them or could she pick them?

The girlfriend — Ultra Woman — she could be a problem. Competition wasn't fun. Especially competition with superpowers. Yet nobody knew anything about her. And she disappeared after that first date. *Wonder why?* Lois's curiosity was piqued. She would definitely be doing some investigating about her. But one date wouldn't make that woman his girlfriend. She would have to ask Mr. Amazing about Ultra Woman. No, she would wait until he told her he was Superman. Why hadn't he told her he was a household name? Or even what his name was? That would have been good information to have before calling in her "I've been rescued by a flying man" story. Hummph.

Lois sighed. It seemed like Lex Luthor was winning once again. He always found a way to come between her and happiness. She knew that Mr. Amazing liked her; there was no doubt in her mind about that. But if she was the cause of his downfall, she would never forgive herself and she doubted he would either. So, she would be good and back off. She would keep her hands off of him… as soon as they left Smallville. Lois smiled wickedly, biting her thumb.

She had no idea how she was going to accomplish this feat, but as soon as she could, she would dive back into her work. Then her smile faded. Damn Lex for blinding her.

***

Superman landed in Smallville some eighteen hours after he had left. He was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open. He hoped Lois was okay. He could have crashed at his hotel suite in Singapore, but he wanted to check on her. The sun was high in the sky, as it was around noon, Kansas time. He landed on the front porch with a heavier than usual thud.

Lois immediately opened the front door as if she had been waiting for him. "You're home."

"I could have been one of Luthor's thugs to nab you, Lois," he said, coming inside and moving her away from the doorway. "You shouldn't have opened the door for me without checking who it was first, especially since you're blind."

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking," she said, shutting the door behind him. "What have I done today? I looked at all your books, but couldn't read any of them. I found a radio and learned all about corn and hog futures and country music. I made toast. I slept for twelve hours, or at least I think it was twelve hours, which is what I imagine you're ready to do."

"A nap does sound nice." He sat down on the couch and rubbed his face.

Lois came up behind him and started to massage his shoulders. "Wow. You're solid. It's like your muscles have hardened up like steel."

He stiffened. Had she somehow discovered who he was?

"I'm obviously doing no good here at all," she said, patting his arms. "Why don't you run upstairs and take a nice hot shower? Get cleaned up."

Superman turned and looked at her. She had an innocent expression on her face, but this was Lois Lane. If she was anything like Lucy, mischievous innocence was her specialty. Did she plan on joining his shower again?

"My cooking skills aren't what they used to be, but I think I could rustle you up a mean PB&J." Lois smiled in his direction. "And a glass of milk."

As she started toward the kitchen, he grabbed her hand and pulled her back to him. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?" She seemed genuinely confused.

"That was a rude greeting and I'm sorry." He stood up and leaned in to kiss her, when she placed her hand on his face.

"I don't think that's a good idea right now. You're exhausted. And you smell like you've been in the tropics all day, digging through rubble and swimming through the river. You need a shower, some food, and a bed." She kissed his cheek and continued on towards the kitchen. At the kitchen door, she murmured under her breath, "There'll be plenty of time for that later, Mr. Amazing."

Superman smiled, loving her more than before. How in the world had he lived his life without her? Then his smile faded. How in the world was he going to live his life without her? He sighed and went upstairs to take his shower.

As he shut the bathroom door, Clark contemplated locking it. Instead, he spent two minutes debating whether or not he should.

He didn't want to lock it, he wanted her to join his shower again. But he really should lock it and discourage that kind of behavior, if she was planning on doing it again.

Finally, he ended up laughing. She wasn't going to join his shower. Clark could hear her humming down in the kitchen. He scanned through the floor; she was making his sandwich, just like she said. He jumped into the shower without locking the door, listening to her singing to herself down in the kitchen. It was difficult to relax, focusing all his attention on her voice a floor below him.

After the shower, he again walked to his bedroom with his towel wrapped around his waist. He wondered if she would be waiting for him in his bed. He wondered if he would be able to resist her if she was. She wasn't. Listening, he could hear her still singing in the kitchen. She was still doing a jazzy version of "Tea for Two". He laughed. She was singing to him. He spun into clothes and rushed down to her, unable to be apart from her any longer.

Upon entering the kitchen, he swooped her into his arms and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist and pulled him closer. He sat her down on the kitchen table and ran his fingers under her shirt to the soft skin at her waist. "Oh, Lois," he murmured. He had missed her.

"Stop. We shouldn't do this," she said, releasing him from her hold. She was completely right, but it killed Clark to hear her say it. "What would Clark Kent think?" She shivered. "*Us* on his kitchen table. Better not." She pushed him away and jumped to the floor. "What bad houseguests we are."

Clark laughed wholeheartedly. Did she still not know? His heart sang at this thought. She just accepted him for who he was, no questions asked? He could live with that. Or was she just teasing him?

She sat down across from where she had his sandwich and milk waiting for him. "Is something funny?"

"I wasn't planning on telling him," Clark replied, still chuckling, as he sat down.

"What kind of guy is Clark Kent? I've created this image of him in my head and I'm curious to know how close it is to the truth," she said. "I bet it's nowhere close."

He grinned sneakily. "You'll meet him soon enough." Then Clark felt a stab of guilt. He really should tell Lois the truth. But something was holding him back. He liked being her Mr. Amazing. Clark Kent wasn't Mr. Amazing material.

"Is he coming here?" Lois asked hopefully.

"No." Clark didn't want to introduce her to his true self just yet. "In Metropolis."

"Oh." She nodded. "I'm guessing the Singapore airport is still closed then?"

Clark nodded and then realized she couldn't see him. "Yes."

"Are you two close?" she quizzed.

"Very." He took a bite of his sandwich and tried to keep the smile from his face. It didn't work. Being with Lois just made him happy.

"How did you meet? If you don't mind me asking?"

Clark froze. How in the world could he explain what happened with Lucy and Lana and the Lois connection and the kiss, without telling her everything? "Another time, perhaps. It's a long story."

Lois sighed. "I've nothing better to do." They were quiet for a minute. "Do you want to talk about Singapore?"

Clark didn't want to think about Singapore. He took her hand in his. "No. This is better."

"How are we going to do this?" she asked him, her thumb rubbing against his.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm crazy about you, in case you hadn't noticed. And I know you're crazy about me," she informed him.

Clark was thrilled to hear that Lois liked him. How bright must that tattoo on his forehead be, if even a blind woman could read it? At this moment, he didn't care if it was in neon. He loved her and she was holding his hand.

"But, legally, I'm married to Lex Luthor," Lois went on. "Clearly, you're some big shot superhero. Flying around the world helping people. I bet people look up to you. They're not going to look up to you anymore if you're shacked up with Lex Luthor's wife, are they? Especially if you're the one who took me away from him in the first place. They won't care what a horrible man he is or that you rescued me, will they?"

Wow! He wasn't expecting this. Had Lois figured this all out on her own? "No, they won't," Clark admitted, his mouth having gone dry. It killed him to have to do this, to give Lois up. Later, he would go off someplace private and use every curse word he had ever learned at Tempus for revealing his secret identity to everyone… well, almost everyone.

"What are we going to do about this?" A tear was trickling down her cheek.

He reached across the table and wiped it away. It sizzled against his skin like acid to know he had caused her to cry. "We'll figure something out," he said with an optimism he didn't really feel.

Lois shook her head. "No, we won't. To me, you will always be my Mr. Amazing. But if even one person stopped looking up to you, because of me… us… I don't think I could live with that guilt. Lex will never give me a divorce. Our marriage was never about my happiness, only about his."

Clark's face became thunderous as he growled, "What are you saying, Lois? Did he…" he sputtered, trying to get the words to emerge. "Did he… force you?" He couldn't continue speaking as his blood began to boil.

Lois gasped. "No! No, nothing like that."

He relaxed. "Good."

She squeezed his hand. "I meant it didn't matter to him whether or not I was happy, or he would have let me go years ago. He wanted me to want him; it was all about control. Forcing me…" She swallowed. "It was never an option."

Clark sensed that there was more she wasn't saying, but he didn't want to linger on the topic either. "Lex isn't going to let you go easily — is that what you're saying?"

"He's never going to let me be free. This house, these few days, will be the closest to freedom I'll ever get. He always wins." She sounded so dismal it was like her best friend had died.

"I'm sure the courts will grant you a divorce without his consent," he said with certainty. He had to have some hope.

"He'll fight it," she replied. "He's rich and he doesn't care how much money he has to spend to get his way. Wait until you learn about how much he spent just to brainwash me. And a clone? Not cheap. It will get really ugly. Nothing any superhero should be tangled up in."

"I'll protect you," he whispered.

"You're sweet." She smiled indulgently. "What I'm saying is that you cannot protect me. I won't let you take a bullet for me."

"I'm bulletproof, Lois. They just bounce right off me. No problem," he told her proudly. He usually wasn't the bragging type, but it was worth it to see her shocked expression.

Her mouth hung open. "Wow!" Lois shook her head. "But that's not the kind of bullet I was talking about. The kind of bullet to which I'm referring, you aren't immune. The negative publicity. The smear campaigns. We would have to be squeaky clean to come out of those unscathed."

"Oh." He swallowed, feeling like she had just popped his balloon.

"Yeah. And nights like last night won't give us a squeaky clean image. And believe you me, I'm betting you draw attention like a pretty girl in a bikini at a comic book convention."

"A bit." He laughed softly to himself at the image she put in his head.

"So, after we return to Metropolis, after tonight, we're going to have to go our separate ways. Forever." He could see the tears building up in those unseeing eyes again.

"Not forever," Clark corrected, his voice breaking. "Just until you can get your divorce."

"Right. Until *then*." Lois bowed her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Whenever that will be."

"We can still be friends though, right?" He had just found her. He couldn't give her up completely. He didn't know how.

"Fake it? We can try, but I don't know how believable I'll be, Mr. Amazing," she admitted. "You don't know how incredibly sexy you are."

Him? Sexy? Clark laughed in disbelief. "Wow. I must be hot. Even blind ladies think I'm attractive."

"Mock me, if you wish, but we only have…"

He picked her up and carried her upstairs into his bedroom.

"Tonight," she finished.

Clark set her down, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her as if there was no tomorrow. Because for them, there was no tomorrow.

***

Superman hovered outside of Lois's apartment windows, doing a quick scan to make sure it was safe. After his discussion with Lex Luthor the other night, he doubted that Lex would send someone to harm Lucy, but all bets were off after he had saved the real Lois. He saw movement and burst inside.

"Clark!" Lucy gasped, falling off the time machine. He caught her.

"Lucy!" he exclaimed, setting her down. "What are you doing here?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "I live here, you dolt. What are you doing here?"

"You weren't supposed to return until tomorrow," he reminded her.

"I know, but then I figured it would be best if I returned before she did. Ready the apartment. I mean, where else is your Lois going to live? With you?" She chuckled. "Plus, I thought it best if you hid away the time machine before she got here."

Superman looked at her and then at the time machine. "You're right. I'll take it back with me."

Lucy's chuckle turned into bubbly laughter. "You don't trust me. Think I'm going to sneak over to the other dimension and visit my husband?" Then she stopped laughing, staring at him. "Is that why you didn't tell me about it before? You really thought I'd run off on you?" Then she smiled again, like it didn't matter.

Superman looked at her, really focused on her. "You look relaxed. Happy even." He raised a brow. "What *did* you do?"

"Me? I didn't do anything. Anything at all."

"Methinks she doth protest too much," he replied. "You saw him, didn't you?" He sighed, understanding all too well why she was drawn to Kal. Why she couldn't keep away.

"No," Lucy said, taking her suitcase down off the time machine.

Superman spun into his Clark clothes, retrieved the suitcase from her, and took it the rest of the way to her bedroom.

"He saw *me*," she corrected.

"Oh, Lucy." He groaned with a shake of his head. "Lucy. Lucy. Lucy."

"He made an unexpected visit to the farm. I ran, but that infernal machine's security alarm voice is so loud, he heard me. You've got to turn it down. It's hard to make a quiet getaway."

Clark put her suitcase down next to the dresser and then sat down on the bed, his head in his hands.

Lucy sat down next to him. "Really, Clark, it wasn't *that* bad. I just told him I'm from the future and… Clark?" She wrapped her arms around him. "What's wrong, Clark? Oh, God. I never asked about your trip. And here I am rambling on about nothing. I'm so sorry."

Clark rested his head on her shoulder. "I never understood until now, Lucy, how much a part of you he is. How much you mean to Kal. I thought I knew. Oh, Lucy, what am I going to do?"

Lucy studied him for a minute. "Clark! You naughty boy. You kissed her!" She beamed, nudging his shoulder. "I warned you not to."

"Actually, *she* kissed me." Clark swallowed. "You didn't even ask if I found her, you just knew. How do you do that?"

She patted him on the knee. "I know you. Nothing was going to keep Clark Kent away from his Lois Lane once he found her. Not even Lex Luthor."

Nothing. Yeah, right. "Not even a cyclone."

"Really, Clark? You have the best luck with stories. Here you have Lois Lane, an interview with Lex Luthor, and you get a cyclone as well." She shook her head. "I wish I could have been there."

He looked her in the eye. "I'm glad you weren't." He cleared his throat. "That man made a clone of her and after I rescued Lois, he killed the clone. Threw her off the balcony into the cyclone and left her for dead."

Lucy hugged him. "Oh, Clark. I'm so sorry."

Clark was surprised that he felt hardly any pull towards her at all anymore. He didn't want to still feel desire for Lucy, but he always had before. It felt strange, almost a kind of freedom, not to want her in that way. For the first time since she had arrived that past summer, Kal's Lois actually felt like his sister-in-law.

"So, what's my new roomie like?" Lucy asked with a nudge.

"She's exquisite, of course." He smiled at her and she nodded. "Her hair comes down to about here." He pressed a spot on her back. "And she's blind," he growled, thinking of Lex. "That man blinded her." He took a deep breath, calming himself.

Strange that Lucy didn't remark about Lois being blind. He took another deep breath as he realized that she already knew. He pushed that realization to the back of his mind. "She's funny. And gutsy." He smiled to himself as he thought of Lois. "And smart. Levelheaded. Brave. Sneaky, and I think a little bit of an exhibitionist."

Lucy raised a brow at that revelation, but didn't say anything.

"Caring. Sweet. Loving. Energetic. Insatiable, really." Clark coughed, looking away. When he turned back, Lucy had her lips pursed and her eyebrows were still raised. "And I think a bit of a neat freak." His smile grew into a naughty grin as he remembered how Lois kept sending him to the shower. He released a breath, then recalled that he was giving her up and his eyes turned sad. "I should really be heading back. I just wanted to check and make sure the apartment was safe for her return."

"All right," Lucy said, standing up. "Can you give me an hour? To clean up, change the sheets. Move my stuff into the guest room. Call the welcoming committee."

"What about Sam?" he asked. "Where's he going to live?"

"Well, I thought about that. How do you feel about giving him your spare bed? You can live in the loft for a few months, can't you?"

Clark didn't know if he really wanted Lois's father as a roommate. "I don't know, Lucy. Our relationship may change, now that Lois is back."

Lucy looked at him inquisitively. "Really? Fine. I guess I could move back in with you." She crossed her arms and waited.

He thought about the ramifications of that idea. When Lois found out that he was Clark Kent, as she was bound to eventually, and if Clark was living with his female assistant… Lois would never think it was platonic, even if he and Lucy found a way to make it so. Therefore, Lois would kill him. Maybe not right away, but she would research how to do it and then she would kill

him. Clark cleared his throat nervously. “Yeah, Sam would make a great roommate. It’s only for a few months, right? You think he’d be okay with it?”

“Do you think he’ll be more okay with the other options?”

Clark laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. He doesn’t trust me as far as he could throw me.”

Lucy looked at him and shook her head. “You don’t think he trusts you now, wait until he finds out you slept with his daughter.” She picked up a pillow, pulled off the case, and threw it at him.

His jaw hung open. “Lucy!”

“Greatest investigative reporter of all time,” she said with a shrug.

“What gave me away?”

She giggled. “Well, you just admitted it, for one.”

Clark winced. He really needed to watch himself.

“And two, you haven’t called me Lois, not once, since we arrived here tonight. You don’t think of me as Lois Lane, the love of your life anymore. I’m Lucy, your research assistant, best friend, and Kal’s wife.” She pulled another pillow off the bed. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m fine with that. But I don’t think that you could have changed *that* drastically in two days with just one kiss or even two; it had to have been more — much more.” She held up her hand. “Please, spare me the details.”

“You were right.” He grinned. “We’re great together.”

“Clark!” Lucy threw another pillow at him. “That’s a detail!”

He dodged it. “Turnabout is no fun, huh, Lucy?” He bubbled with laughter.

“Get out of here.” She threw a third pillow at him. “Go back to your girlfriend. I’ve got an apartment to clean.”

Clark caught this one and then took the case off, adding to the pile. “Want some help?”

She stood there and put her hands on her hips. “That insatiable, huh?”

“You have no idea.” He yawned with a stretch. “I haven’t slept in two days.”

Lucy put her hands over her ears. “Oh, Clark! Details. Details.”

He laughed.

“You want to help, fine by me. Finish stripping the beds and remake them. Then empty Sam’s stuff out of the drawers of the guest dresser and take them your place. I’ll move my stuff from here to the guest room while you do that. We should tell everyone that she’ll be here in an hour for the homecoming party. How does that sound?”

Clark kissed her cheek. “You’re the best, Lucy.”

“You’d better not let your new girlfriend hear you saying that. She might get the wrong idea,” she teased. “I hear that Lois Lane has a mean temper.”

His Lois wasn’t his girlfriend. She was simply the woman he loved. But there was no way she could be his girlfriend anytime in the foreseeable future. Not after she returned to Metropolis. She couldn’t be. “Lucy, don’t tell anyone about this, please.”

She held up her hands. “Whatever you say. No more girlfriend jokes.”

“I’m serious. We can’t let anyone know. Ever.” Clark looked down and whispered, “Don’t forget, she’s married to someone else.”

“Well, not really…. Oh! Oh, *Superman*.” Lucy hugged him. “Clark, I’m so sorry.”

“Me, too.” He took a deep breath, trying to control his emotions. He patted her on the back and stepped out of the hug. “I’m going to go clean the other room.”

Clark walked out of the bedroom that soon would be occupied by his Lois. He couldn’t be in there any longer.

***

Lucy watched as Superman arrived at their apartment with Lois in his arms, blowing through the living room windows. Everyone — Perry, Sam, and James — applauded. Lucy thought it best to have just the gang present for Lois’s return to Metropolis.

“This is nice.” Lois smiled as Superman set her down. She was as exquisite as he said. Lucy vaguely remembered being that thin. This pregnancy was beginning to make her feel like a fat cow.

Superman stood more rigid as Lois felt for his face. When she found it, she placed a light kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Superman,” she said, then turned away from him.

Lucy wasn’t sure of Clark’s expression. He acted as if Lois had slapped him across the face unexpectedly instead of kissed him. It was almost as if he had never heard her call him Superman before. She got a slight chill of déjà vu. *Oh, crap, is that what had happened?* Opening that evening’s copy of the *Daily Planet*, Lucy glanced down at the headline and sighed. *Those Kent boys — they never learned.*

She moved closer to Clark as Lois moved farther away. Lois took Perry’s hands in hers, then embraced her former editor.

Everyone’s attention was on Lois, not Clark. Lucy saw him edging closer to the window, ready to make his escape.

“Lois,” Sam spoke up for the first time, touching her arm.

“Daddy!” Lois squealed, hugging him.

Sam melted under this enthusiastic greeting.

“Clark,” Lucy murmured, not loud enough for anyone else to hear.

“Not now,” he muttered, staring at Lois. His expression hard.

“Yes, now,” Lucy replied. “There’s something you should see.”

Smack! Lucy glanced over her shoulder.

Lois had just slapped her father across the face.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” Sam apologized with a cringe. “I didn’t know what kind of man he was.”

“I warned you about taking money from eccentric billionaires,” Lois scolded him. “You should always know where your research funds are coming from and what they’re going to expect in return.”

Lucy turned back to Clark. He looked like he had been punched in the gut. Oh, that was right, she had never told Clark that Sam knew about Lex Luthor or how Lex had funded Sam’s work or how this work — his medical experiments — may have contributed to Lex kidnapping Lois. And if Clark had known about the Lex Luthor link three years earlier, perhaps… Lucy shook her head. Betrayals all around.

Clark caught her glance and frowned. “I’m still needed in Singapore,” he announced and dove out the window.

“Wait!” Lucy called, standing at the windowsill, but he was gone. She was still holding the paper.

His Lois must have felt his departing breeze or heard his words, because her haunted expression mirrored his. Pain all around.

Lucy shook her head. This was supposed to be a joyful homecoming.

Superman would be back. Lucy recognized that look he gave Lois. He would want to confront Lois about lying to him, about pretending to have no knowledge of Superman, but he would wait until everyone was gone. Lucy couldn’t believe him. *That was rich, Clark. Who exactly lied first, Superman?*

And speaking of Clark… Lucy pressed her lips together. *If he hadn’t told Lois about Superman, had Clark Kent been left out of the equation as well?* She rolled her eyes. *Had Clark left Lois completely in the dark about who he is? Had he told her nothing? What was wrong with that man?*

“Is Clark Kent back from Singapore?” Lois said. “I’d really like to thank him for not giving up on me.”

The men looked at each other and then over to Lucy. She just

shook her head in disbelief. Clark needed a good throttling.

"He was just here, princess. I'm not sure where he went," answered Sam. Well, that was vague. But then again, Lucy didn't want to be the one who spilled the beans on Clark either. Clark should have told her.

"Oh. He didn't even wait to meet me?" Lois looked like this news saddened her. Then she nodded. "Right. His wife. He probably wanted to get home to see her."

The men looked at each other again and then turned to Lucy as if she knew what in the world Lois was talking about.

"Wife? Honey, Clark Kent isn't married." This time it was Perry who spoke.

"No. Of course he's married. Perry, I saw his engagement announcement almost a year ago," Lois said, her expression more lost than anything. "Are they still just engaged? Have they even set a date yet? What's Blondie's name again?"

Sam shrugged. Perry shook his head. And James just looked dazed.

Lucy decided to field this one. "Lana. Lana Lang was her name. And they broke up earlier this year. Clark isn't getting married, Lois."

"Who the hell are you?" Lois demanded, turning her head towards Lucy's voice.

"I'm Clark Kent's research assistant, Lucy El. I'm your roommate," Lucy announced. *Great, Clark. Did you tell the woman anything other than you liked her?*

"Oh, yeah. Superman mentioned you," said Lois, quickly dismissing her. "So Clark just left. Without even saying 'hello'?" Her voice was soft and low, hurt.

"He probably went to file his story," Perry guessed, but it sounded weak to everyone present, even Lois, whose face fell at the suggestion.

***

Superman returned to Lois's apartment sometime after midnight. As he shut the window, Lucy turned on the light.

"I knew you'd be back."

"I need to speak with her, Lucy." He walked towards the bedrooms and she stepped in front of him. "This is between Lois and me."

"Did you see this?" she asked, slamming the *Daily Planet* against his chest.

Superman glanced down at that evening's headlines. *Lois Lane Alive: Rescued from Penthouse Prison by Flying Man. "Let's call him Superman!" she told the Daily Planet.*

He scanned the rest of the story and dropped the paper on the floor.

"You didn't tell her who you are? What's wrong with you? You are worse than Kal!" Lucy accused.

"I need to speak with her, Lucy. Please." His voice was softer.

"Are you going to tell her the truth or yell at her for not telling you what she found out from Cat?"

He seemed shocked that she knew him so well. "How did….?"

"World's —"

Superman cringed. "Don't say it, Lucy."

"— only expert on Superman," Lucy finished. "I saw the expression on your face. She didn't tell you she knew on purpose. I bet she was waiting for you to tell her and you never did. You humiliated her and she was going to give you a taste of your own medicine. That's what I would have done."

He hung his head. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I didn't know she'd check in with the paper."

Lucy raised a brow. "I would think you'd know better by now. What would I have done if it had been me who had been kidnapped?"

He didn't even have to think about his answer. "You would have called Kal."

"And then?"

"Perry," Superman answered reluctantly.

"Exactly. Did you think she wouldn't realize that there was a phone in the house?"

"Truthfully, it never occurred to me." He gave her his best sheepish smile. It didn't work.

Lucy rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"I need to talk to her, Lucy. Please, let me by," Clark insisted.

"Are you going to tell her about Clark Kent?" She looked at him expectantly.

"*You* didn't tell her?" He seemed surprised.

Men! "I can't believe you! No one should tell her *except* you. You made this…" Lucy forced her anger down before she started on a rampage. "Do you really want her to find out from someone else?"

"No. I know," he said, leaning against the sofa. "But it's nice that she likes me — accepts me — without knowing anything about me. It makes me feel good. I haven't had that in a long time."

Lucy refused to accept excuses. "Then I'm going to crush that ego of yours, bub. She cried herself to sleep tonight."

Superman winced. "Let me go talk to her."

Lucy stood her ground, crossing her arms. "No. This is for your own good. I know what's going to happen in that bedroom if I let you back."

A hint of a smile appeared on his lips. "I'll be good."

"Ha!" she scoffed. "I know you. And when it comes to Lois Lane you have as much willpower as me in a chocolate factory. She's married. *MARRIED*. You agreed to keep your distance, so you need to stick to that. For your own good. And for hers. You visit her tonight and she'll expect it every night."

"Oh, come on…"

"I would if I were her," Lucy whispered, glancing at him.

A tiny part of her regretted that Clark had never come back, never tried to come back, after they retired the Ultra Woman suit. Lucy wouldn't have cheated on her husband a second time; still, it hurt that he hadn't tried. Bruised her ego. Lucy knew he hadn't because he was a Boy Scout and good guys like that didn't sleep with married women. Twice. She knew they never would have crossed that line if either of them had been able to resist the pheromone drug. She didn't know if it was because of "Revenge" or the Interdimensional Time Sickness or what, but a small part of her still loved *this* Clark, and this Clark alone, for himself and not because he reminded her of her Clark. That small part had grown even smaller, especially after seeing her husband this weekend, but that love still remained and was likely to remain for a while. Lucy would never let Clark know that. Either of them. But these feelings weren't why she stood up for his Lois, literally standing between them.

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

Lucy nodded. "Why do you think I came back early? Kal threatened to come see me again. I love him so much, I knew if I saw him again, I would never make it back here." Tears dripped down her cheeks. "And I knew I had to come back or the curse would kill us both."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, his brow furrowed. "You guys got rid of the curse."

"When I was trying to hide from him, I made a mistake and ended up when I shouldn't have and heard something I shouldn't have," Lucy confessed.

Superman wrapped his arms around her, holding her against his chest. "What did you learn?"

Lucy shook her head and murmured against his chest. "Nothing specific, only that the curse is real and if I know too much I might do something different. I need to 'stay the course'." She gave him a quick hug and then moved away. "I can't. You remind me too much of him. Nothing personal, but I really didn't

want to come back. I miss him so much."

"Understood." He didn't say anything for a minute. "So, you don't think I should see Lois?"

"Not tonight. Go home. Cool off. Get some sleep," she recommended. "Talk to her in the light of day. Tell her the truth. She's gone through enough tonight."

Superman stared at her. "I *really*, really want to see her, Lucy."

"You don't think I know that? You've broken up for the good of Superman. She deserves a clean break. You both do. Each time you see each other in the middle of the night you are drawing out the torment. You need some time apart to clear your heads."

Superman scoffed, "Because that has done wonders for you and Kal?"

Lucy pointed out the window. "*Go!* And I don't want to catch you in this apartment again after midnight unless there's an emergency."

"I love her, Lucy, body and soul. She's my life, now. Let me speak to her just this once. Please. Let me apologize to her for not telling her about me. For embarrassing her with her co-workers. Please," he said as she continued to point out the window.

"Out!"

"Okay. Okay. I'm going." He unlocked the windows and floated out.

"I'm locking them, so don't even try to come back, Superman!" Lucy yelled, shutting the windows in his face. He growled and flew off.

Lucy turned around to find Lois standing behind her. How long had she been there? Had Clark seen her? "It's okay. He won't bother you. I sent him away. You can go back to bed."

Lois was furious. "You did *what*?"

"I sent him away. I figured you wouldn't want to see him."

"Well, you figured wrong, Missy," Lois hissed, her hands on her hips.

"But you cried yourself to sleep. I heard you," Lucy stammered.

"How I go to sleep and with whom is none of your concern. I'm a big girl and I don't need you to protect me."

Lucy's jaw dropped. "You wanted him to come back and argue with you. You wanted him to come back, because you knew if he came back tonight he'd find a way to keep coming back…" The light bulb popped above her head. Lois had planned this. That was why she hadn't told him she knew. She was never planning on letting him go. Even for his own good.

"Obviously, he told you. I'm not supposed to say anything to anyone, but he told you. Typical."

"I'm his best friend," Lucy tried to explain. Why did she keep sticking her nose into Clark's love life? It kept blowing up in her face. She was just going to have to let him ruin his own life. She just didn't want to, especially if it was in her power to keep him safe.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Lucy sighed, rubbing her temples. "It means he didn't have to tell me. I just knew by looking at him."

"Oh." Lois thought about that for a minute. "I want you to know something. I'm not keen on this roommate arrangement, but I'm willing to be flexible because I'm still getting used to being blind on my own and you'll be out of my hair in a few months. But get one thing straight right now, Missy: you will not now, nor ever again, come between me and him. This is your one and only warning."

"Understood," Lucy replied. She would have to find another way to protect Clark from himself and his Superman-hungry Lois.

"Good."

"I was only trying to help."

"I don't need your help," said Lois, stomping back to her room and slamming the door.

Lucy shook her head. "He's delusional, completely delusional to like that woman."

***

Meanwhile, back in Lucy's home dimension…

Superman landed by the kitchen door and shook the snow off his hair and cape. Then he spun into his Clark clothes before entering his parents' house.

Martha was at the sink washing dishes and jumped at his entrance. "Clark, you scared me."

"Sorry, Mom," he said, kissing her cheek. "Lois still asleep?"

She turned off the water and faced him, while drying off her hands. "I don't know, Clark. Why don't you fly back to Metropolis and see?"

"Not that Lois, Mom. Your Lois." He looked up, tempted to scan for her.

"She's gone, Clark. Best forget about her."

Clark's eyes bulged. "What? She said that she wasn't leaving until today?" He flew quickly around the house and out to the barn, but sure enough the time machine was gone.

He sat down on a bale of hay and put his head in his hands. He had had her in his grasp, but let her slide through his fingers. He should have known she was lying to him. His mom entered the barn and sat down next to him.

"She left last night."

"I told her I'd be stopping by this morning."

"Ah." His mother nodded. "That explains her early departure."

Clark glanced up at her. "She was avoiding me again? Why would she do that?"

Martha wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Because she's the other Clark's Lois, not yours."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow at her. "Mom, please. I know my wife. And that Lois was my Lois."

"Clark, who is more likely to lie to you, me or Lois Lane?" Martha asked.

His heart sank. "Why would she lie to me, Mom? Why raise my hopes like that?"

She was silent a moment. "Because she misses her Clark. She was pretending you were him."

"Did something happen to the other Clark?" Clark hardly knew the man, but he couldn't deny the connection.

His mother sighed. "She's legally still married to Lex Luthor."

Clark's jaw dropped. "But, Mom, she's really—"

"I know. Lex is fighting their divorce tooth and nail. He won't let her go. Does that surprise you?"

"Mom." He swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. "Is that Lex's child?" He hated to ask the question; just the thought of Lois and Lex… he shivered in disgust.

"No. It's Clark's baby. Maybe that's why you felt such a pull towards her."

"Oh, my God. Poor Clark." And with Lois still married to Lex. He shook his head.

"It's been especially hard on them since Tempus outed him, everyone in his dimension knows he's Superman. He and Lois have had to cut off almost all contact since they found out about the baby. And when she started to show, she had to go into hiding completely for fear that Lex would try to claim the child as his own if he found out about it."

His past problems with this dimension's Lex paled in comparison, he thought, still shaking his head. "Forgive me, Mom, but his dimension really sucks."

She smiled. "And your life has been a bed of roses?"

"At least I have my Lois to come home to every night. It truly makes me appreciate what I've got."

Martha patted his knee. "And yet here you are looking for

your future wife in the present." She shook her head, standing up. "I don't know how I'm ever going to get a grandchild with you spending so much time over here."

Clark laughed. "Got it, Mom. Message received, loud and clear." He kissed her cheek. "I love you." He spun into his blue suit. "You're the best."

She smiled at him weakly, waving goodbye, as he took off into the air. He wondered, as he entered the clouds, why she had looked so sad.

***

Back in the other dimension…

Early Monday morning, there was a knock on Lucy's apartment door. She left the kitchen fully expecting to find Clark as she usually did at that hour. Instead Sam walked in.

"Oh, Sam. I'm sorry about the other night," she said, hugging him.

"I appreciate that, Lucy. Clark refuses to even look at me. I couldn't take the brooding any longer and had to get out of there. How did you two fare yesterday? Best of buds?" he asked hopefully.

Lucy rolled her eyes and avoided the question completely. "So, Clark's back from Singapore, huh?" She figured that had been an excuse.

"He slept the entire day, yesterday. That cyclone really wore him out."

More like Lois Lane wore him out, thought Lucy. "Mr. Sourpuss Chicken not coming by to walk me to work, then?"

Sam shook his head. "I doubt it. He grumbled something about being mad at you."

She nodded. Great. Clark and Lois could team up against her. At least Sam still liked her.

He held up a note. "He wanted me to give this to Lois."

Love notes? Cute, Clark. "She's not up yet. Did you read it?"

Sam shook his head. "It's personal."

"How is she going to read it, then?" Lucy asked, putting on her coat and John Lennon glasses.

"I thought you could…" He looked at her expectantly.

Lucy chuckled. "Doubtful. She's ticked off at me."

"What happened?"

"Apparently, I crossed some line. She doesn't want my help." She glanced over her shoulder towards the bedrooms. "You might want to check her wrist though. I think she burned it trying to make coffee yesterday morning."

"Ah. That's why you called." Sam nodded with understanding. "She's never been one for asking for help."

"That will make her relationship with Superman interesting." Lucy smiled with a shake of her head. "'Help, Superman!' is my catch phrase."

Sam wasn't smiling. "What relationship?"

Oops, she had forgotten Sam's parental nerve. "I meant friendship, Sam. Just friendship." She kissed him on the cheek. Clark had been outed once because of her. She wouldn't do that to him … or Sam… again. "If Clark's not coming, I'm taking a cab. I don't feel up to the exercise."

He looked concerned. "How are you feeling? We should do another exam. It's been a few weeks."

"I'll come to you. Too many questions here," she said, gesturing with her head towards to the bedrooms. "My back hurts a little. Nothing a bit of time won't cure."

"All this sitting around isn't helping. I'll tell Clark to make sure he takes you for a walk every day."

Lucy grimaced. "Woof. Woof."

Lois appeared out of nowhere, stealthy thing. "Did we get a dog?" she teased.

"Good morning, Princess," Sam said, crossing to her and kissing her cheek.

"Oh, goody. My morning babysitter has arrived," Lois groaned.

Lucy shook her head. "Well, I'm off. Sam, we'll meet up later. And Lois, do you think you could find your sunny disposition for when Clark stops by? He said he wanted to talk with you."

"Clark's really back?" she asked, feeling her way towards the kitchen. "And I finally get to meet him this time? If he sticks around, that is."

Sam and Lucy exchanged a look, before Lucy answered. "He was exhausted. I bet he slept the day away. I'm sure he'll explain everything when he stops by." She pointed to Superman's note and Sam nodded. "Bye."

***

Sam shut the door behind Lucy.

"I don't like her," Lois started in. "Does she always stick her nose where it doesn't belong?"

Sam grinned, shaking his head. Not like anyone else he knew. "All the time, but she means well."

"I can take care of myself, Daddy. I don't need a babysitter," she pointed out.

He joined her in the kitchen. "How about a personal chef?"

Lois scoffed, "You? Please."

"I'm getting better. I can scramble an egg without burning it now." He chuckled. He really had improved. "Because of me Lucy hasn't starved."

"Daddy." Lois pulled out a barstool and sat down. "What's up with you and her, anyway? Is she your girlfriend?"

Sam blanched. "Absolutely not! I would never… Lois, how could you suggest such a thing? She's your age."

"Whoa!" Lois held up her hands. "Just asking." She was quiet a minute, thinking. "She's my age?"

Sam swallowed, pulling out the frying pan. "Exactly," he murmured. He raised his voice. "And married."

"Married?" His daughter gasped in surprise. "Where is her husband? And what are you doing making her breakfast?"

"Kal-El is on some hush-hush secret job, negotiating peace treaties or something."

Lois raised her brows. "Daddy, when someone has a hush-hush secret job like that, they don't tell people they have a hush-hush secret job. They usually tell people they've got some boring accounting job or something."

"Really?" He pulled the bread out of the fridge and dropped a couple of pieces into the toaster. "Clark asked if I could help her with her nutrition, because she has low blood sugar and forgets to eat."

"Wow. He sure takes a lot of interest in his co-workers' lives," Lois said suspiciously.

"Well, she's also his best friend from college or something," he explained, wishing she would stop asking him so many loaded questions. He wasn't as good at this lying game as Lucy or his daughter.

"Hmmm. That's strange," she replied. "She said that she was Superman's best friend."

Sam closed his eyes and shook his head. They really needed to coordinate their stories if they were going to keep up this charade with Lois. He would bring the topic up the next time he saw Clark or Lucy. Actually, if Clark let Sam get a word in edgewise he'd tell the man exactly what he thought about Mr. Truth and Justice *lying* to his daughter, when everyone else knew the truth. But he agreed with Lucy. Clark made this mess, he needed to clean it up. "They're sort of a team. Her, Clark, and Superman."

Her lips pressed together. "I thought as much."

Sam put a plate of eggs and toast in front of her.

"Thanks for breakfast, Daddy. I need some practice with food preparation before I can live on my own." She held out her wrist for him to examine.

It was just a minor burn. He kissed it and handed her some silverware. Then he got her a glass of juice and sat down next to her.

"Tell me about Superman, Daddy. What's he like?"

Sam's eyes bugged. He didn't want to talk to his daughter about him. "Oh, I have a note for you." He searched his pockets.

"From Superman?" She beamed, positively glowing.

Oh, that wasn't good, Sam thought. "Ah, Clark gave it to me," he replied, finding it.

"Oh." She seemed crestfallen.

Sam opened the note and quickly scanned it. It seemed innocent enough. He cleared his throat. "Lois, I should have told you about who I am sooner. I'm sorry if I caused you any pain. Love, Superman."

Lois held out her hand and he gave her the note. "Did he really write 'Love, Superman?'"

Oh, this definitely isn't good. She had a silly grin on her face and slipped the note into her pocket. *Isn't Lois supposed to be fighting her attraction to that man? Isn't that what Lucy said she'd do?*

"Lois, did something happen between you and Superman?" Sam really didn't want to hear her answer.

"Of course not, Daddy," she said, hopping down from her chair. "Technically, I'm married to that creep Lex. And Superman is… well, Superman. He would never do anything with a married woman, would he?" Her expression was far too innocent. "But a girl can dream, can't she?"

Yeah, right. Never do anything with a married woman. Right. Sam pressed his lips together as he watched Lois run her fingers along the wall until she reached the hall and turned. She was humming. *Happy. Too happy from that note. This is not good, not good at all.*

***

Clark sent his follow-up cyclone article to the printer. Lucy walked in and waved; he turned his back on her. He hated to admit she was right, because she was always right, especially about this. When it came to Lois Lane, he had no willpower. And whose fault was that? Who had been by his side since the summer, lowering said willpower? Then she had the audacity to remind him he had no self-control to stay away from the real… his real Lois Lane when he needed it the most.

The phone rang and he picked it up. "Clark Kent."

"Where's my wife?" Lex thundered into his ear.

He turned around and faced Lucy, and mouthed 'Lex Luthor'. Her eyes went wide. "In a safe location," Clark finally replied.

"She's my wife and I want her back."

Clark ground his teeth. Lois wasn't a belonging or tool he had borrowed; she was a person with her own wants and desires. "Well, she doesn't want you back."

Lucy scooted her chair closer.

"You kidnapped her and you can quote me on that, Kent," Lex told him.

"Why don't you give me your contact information, Lex, and I'll pass it on to Lois. If she wants to contact you, she will." Clark smiled, knowing full well Lois wouldn't want anything more to do with her psychopathic husband.

"What? So you can kill me and marry my widow? I don't think so, Kent," the billionaire retorted.

Lucy gasped.

Lex succeeded in wiping the smile off Clark's face. "Unlike you, Lex, I don't kill people," Clark replied through gritted teeth.

"Neither do I, Kent. Frogs on the other hand…" Lois's husband said flippantly.

Clark growled. "Can I quote you on that as well, Lex? You admit to killing Lois Lane's clone, Lola?"

"You can put words in my mouth all you want, Kent. When I am through with you, no one is going to believe a word you say or write," Lex said.

Clark glanced at Lucy. "Do what you like to me, Lex. But Lois will never return to you willingly."

"I *will* find her, Kent, and she *will* come home to me. Willing or unwilling, it doesn't matter. She's my wife and always will be. And if I hear one word against me in your paper, you can tell little Jimmy Olsen he'll have a slander suit on his hands faster… faster than a speeding bullet." Lex hung up.

Clark returned his receiver to its base and glanced over to Lucy. "I've got to go tell her," he said, standing up and loosening his collar.

"Morning meeting, Clark," Cat called, passing by him. "Come or you'll be writing classifieds by lunch."

He sighed and grabbed his notebook. Lois could wait until after the meeting.

"He's just trying to rattle you, Clark," Lucy reassured him.

"It worked."

As soon as the conference room doors were closed, Cat dropped her notebook on the table, instantly quieting the murmuring voices. "I think we should begin this meeting with a round of applause for Clark Kent, who not only found Lois Lane despite everyone else giving her up for dead, but also found time to file a separate story on the man-made cyclone."

Everyone clapped. Clark smiled sheepishly.

"I'd also like to thank you for not telling Lois that you're Superman. I haven't had such a good laugh since before she disappeared three and a half years ago."

Clark glared at her as she once again laughed; others joined in, but he remained silent. He wouldn't have anyone making fun of Lois by using him.

"Actually, in case Lois hasn't informed you, Clark… or should I say, Superman? Has she even met Clark yet?" she questioned, her eyes full of delight.

He continued to glower and fewer people laughed with her this time.

"No? Wonderful. I hereby forbid you to tell her that you, Clark Kent, are Superman."

Clark's eyes widened in surprise. "What?! You can't do that!"

"Any of you, in fact. As I told Lois the other evening on the phone, she needs to bring me all the information she can dig up on Superman before I'll let her back here as a full-time reporter," Cat continued.

"Cat, that is unfair to Lois," Lucy said the words that Clark could not speak. His tongue was still tied in shock.

"*Unfair?* Lois had the gall to throw in my face her tagline of 'Metropolis's Best Investigative Reporter' within breaths of admitting she had no idea who Superman is. I'm just giving her the chance to prove that she still has what it takes."

"She has notebooks full of information on Lex Luthor and his dirty dealings," Clark said finally finding his voice.

"Kudos!" Cat replied. "I'll be interested in reading those stories once they can pass Legal. But my order still stands. Clark can only be referred to as Superman by anyone from the *Daily Planet*, while in his blue suit. Otherwise, only refer to him — in and out of print — as Clark Kent. Anyone, and I mean *anyone*," she looked pointedly at Clark, "informing Lois of any details about Clark's double life will be writing obits for six months and if they're lower on the totem pole," she gazed at Lucy, "they'll be outright fired."

"Cat, you can't do this to her. She's blind and on total media blackout for the last ten months," Clark argued.

She threw him her Cheshire cat grin. "Which makes Lois investigating you a tad more difficult, but not impossible."

"Plus I just got off the phone with Lex Luthor." Clark glanced around the room for Jaxon, but the computer nerd wasn't there. "He plans on kidnapping her the first chance he gets. Her life is in danger."

"Then I'm guessing it's an even more difficult assignment. Don't worry, Clark, she's a big girl. She can handle this. She'll be angry, but that will only make her work harder. Now, what are you and Lucy working on? Cyclone damage and recovery?"

Clark pushed that story across the table to her. "Lois mentioned that Lex told her that her blindness was reversible. We're going to look into that angle."

Cat seemed to chew over that topic idea. "Fine for now. But if something more interesting pops up, I'm putting you on that instead."

Clark nodded and glanced at Lucy. She gazed back with heartfelt sympathy. He didn't hear much of the rest of the meeting. His mind was stuck on the snow job he had helped create for Lois. He dragged his feet back to his desk and buried his head in his hands.

Lucy tapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, Clark. It's about time Lois met you." She smiled, feebly. "Officially."

"What's the point?" he grumbled.

"We need to inform her of Luthor's threat and to research our story."

Clark groaned.

Lucy crossed her arms and stared at him. "Self pity is not a good look on you."

He didn't say anything, just glared back at her.

"Got it." She sat down at her desk. "If you really don't want to see her, I understand completely. She's a bit headstrong. And pushy." Lucy shook her head and started typing.

"You forgot stubborn," Clark said, putting on his coat.

"Ugh. Don't remind me." Lucy rolled her eyes.

Clark took down her coat and helped her put it on. "And exquisite."

Lucy just shook her head. "To each his own."

He grinned. "Precisely."

"Huh? What?" she asked, confused.

"Shall we?" he said, ignoring her questions as he held his hand out toward the elevators. "And sneaky and underhanded."

"Really? We'll have to keep an eye on her, then," she suggested.

"My sentiments exactly."

Lucy looked at him out of the corner of her eye as they rode down in the elevator. "You owe me a smoothie."

"You can't admit that you might have been wrong," he teased. If Lucy had let him speak to Lois the other night, then they might not be in their current mess. Of course, he hadn't been planning on telling Lois about Clark the other night.

"And you can't admit I was right," she replied. Of course, she was right. He had no self-control around Lois Lane. So, he would spend as much time as he could with her… as Clark Kent. As long as Lois didn't know about his 'secret' identity, he could be close to her without breaking their deal of Superman and Lois staying apart. Of course, as soon as she found out, he would be a dead man.

They were greeted by a cold breeze outside the building. "I don't care if Sam thinks I need exercise, we're taking a cab."

As they sat in the back of the cab, Lucy turned to him. "What did you say in your note?"

"I just apologized for not telling her about Superman," he whispered his reply.

"I'm glad you didn't write anything intimate. You don't want a paper trail that Lex could use against you."

"Of course not. I knew Sam or you would have to read her the note. I'm not a fool," Clark said. Sure, he didn't need to use the word 'love' in salutation and normally wouldn't in correspondence of any kind, especially as Superman. He would be more careful next time.

Clark took a deep breath and released it slowly as they stood on the front stoop of her apartment building.

"Nervous?" Lucy asked.

He shrugged.

"Are you more afraid that she'll recognize you or that she won't?"

Lucy had hit the nail on the head. He was torn between wanting her to recognize his voice, knowing it was her Mr. Amazing, and knowing it would be better if she didn't know at all. Better for him because it would be easier for Clark to resist Lois if she wasn't flirting with Clark all the time, or, worst case scenario — no longer interested in him because he was just your average guy. There was a large (and selfish) part of him that wanted this daydream of love with Lois to last as long as possible.

"It took me two years to figure it out, Clark. Two years of being in love with two different sides of the same man," Lucy said, reassuring him. "Maybe she won't be as blind as I was." She pulled out her keys. "No pun intended."

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Lois felt around her bedroom once more. At least when she was in here, she could practice how many steps it was between furniture pieces without anyone watching. Four steps from the door to reach her bed. There was a night table on each side of the bed. Her dresser was three steps from the middle of the foot of her bed. It was five steps to the chair by the window. And then six steps from the chair back to the door. She practiced again and again until she could move about the bedroom without counting. This was the part about blindness that bothered her the most — that she had to practice moving around unfamiliar places.

Luckily, her apartment was almost exactly as she had left it… with the exception of her new live-in roommate, Lucy. She pressed her lips together in disgust. Why did everyone think she needed someone with her? Plenty of blind people lived and survived just fine on their own. After the other night, she wondered if Lucy was more of a guard and less of a helper. But it wasn't as if she was keeping Lois in, more like keeping Superman out.

If Lucy, Clark, and Superman were a team, why appoint herself Lois's protector and why would Lois need protection from Mr. Amazing? He was so gentle, kind, and loving. She sighed. Amazing. Would there be any other reason for Lucy to keep him away from her? Could she just be trying to protect his reputation? From what Lois heard of their conversation the other night, it sounded like Lucy was telling him what to do. He was almost begging to see her and Lucy kept saying, "No." How did Lucy wield such power over Superman?

Lois remembered Superman saying, "*I love her, Lucy. Please, let me speak to her this once."*

How her heart had pounded in her chest when she had heard that. He loved her? How could he love her? He didn't even know her… well, except for… she smiled. She had heard of men saying they loved her to get into her bed, but never afterward. Perry had said he was naïve. Could he be *that* naïve? Could he be so inexperienced with women that he believed himself in love with her after one weekend?

True, being with him was the best experience of her life. Being with him was certainly addicting. Being with him made her feel complete. She didn't feel nervous or scared or even blind around him. It was like she was home. She smiled. Yes, that was it. Mr. Amazing was her home. Without him, she *felt* blind. Had he also felt that connection between them? Was that what he was confusing for love? Was it love? How could it be love when she knew nothing about him? She was going to see what else she could learn from Lucy.

Lois shook her head. *And Clark Kent wasn't married.* Imagine that. Here she had slept with Mr. Amazing to get over her depression over Clark Kent being married, and the man was still single. Crazy world. Turns out, Clark wasn't the man she had

thought he was after all, and Mr. Amazing was. Lois couldn't believe Clark, coming to her 'Welcome Back' party only to leave before they could meet. What was up with that?

She heard voices out in the living room. Her father was talking to someone. Lois opened the door to her bedroom and stuck her head out. Carefully, so not to make a sound, she walked toward the living room. Living with Lex for three years had given her plenty of practice sneaking about.

"Cat is so determined for Lois to prove her investigative skills that she has forbidden anyone at the *Daily Planet*, especially Lucy and I, to tell her anything about Superman, or she'll demote us for six months."

Who was that? His voice sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it.

"Oh, she's not going to be happy to hear that." Her father sighed. "Lois and Cat have butted heads over everything since she started at the *Planet*. It isn't fair to you or to her. She needs to know the truth."

Truth? What truth? Was there something else they weren't telling her?

Her father continued, "If you are unable or unwilling to do so, I will. In the meantime, can you tell me why my daughter is so obsessed with Superman?"

Lois gasped. How could he? To total strangers, too?

"We're not alone." That was Lucy. Damn. She had been seen.

Lois took a deep breath. Five steps, then stop. Be sure to remind them who was in charge. She entered the living room, bumping into the end table. Darn. Four steps. "What makes you think I can't find out the truth on my own? I'm still a damn good reporter and if I have to prove myself to Cat or anyone else, I will. I don't want anyone to shield me because I'm a little rusty or disabled. And my relationship with Superman is nobody's business but our own."

"Hi, Lois," said Lucy. "I've brought by someone who wanted to meet you. Lois Lane, Clark Kent."

Clark Kent? Lois's knees wanted to buckle, her heart started to race, and it felt like a cool breeze tickled her spine. This was the man who pulled her out of her Lola Dane haze. That was where she recognized his voice from — that telephone call she had made to him. She held out her slightly shaking hand. "Nice to finally meet my hero." She smiled politely, despite still being slightly miffed at him for leaving her party before they were introduced.

It took a moment, but Clark finally took her hand and shook it. Suddenly, Lois *felt* like she had come home at last. "Amazing," she whispered.

This connection she felt with Clark Kent was because of her old crush, Lois told herself. That was all. It didn't mean anything. It couldn't; Lois liked Mr. Amazing.

"Excuse me?" Clark asked, letting go of her hand. And as quickly as it had come, the feeling disappeared.

"Your hands. They are so warm."

"Oh." Did he sound disappointed? "How am I your hero, Lois?"

Lois couldn't stop herself from grinning. "You sent me Superman." *You saved me from Lex*, would have been a more accurate answer. But she still didn't understand how reading his articles and seeing his name had helped her get her memories back. She had never met him before. One of them surely would have remembered.

"Ah." She heard Clark swallow, before he said, "Perry has told me so much about you, I feel like I already know you."

Lois took a step away from the end table and Clark automatically took her arm. "May I be your guide?"

"Just this once," she replied, wondering why he had this effect on her. He guided her to the sofa. "When I have my bearings back I'll expect you to treat me like everyone else."

"I don't think I can," he murmured.

"Why not?" she snapped.

"You're Lois Lane, the best investigative reporter in Metropolis," Clark answered. "You're better than everyone else."

Lois hadn't expected him to say that and laughed. "Oh, Clark. Flattery used to get you everywhere." She grinned in Clark's general direction. "But I might make an exception for you."

"*Lois!*" That was her father. She'd forgotten he was there.

"Daddy, please. I'm sure he knew I was only kidding." She felt Clark start to move away. "Sit here, next to me, Clark. I'd love a chance to see what you look like." She held up her hands and heard him take in a sharp breath. Was that surprise?

"No. Thank you, Lois. I'm not much to look at," he said, continuing to move away.

Not much to look at? That didn't jibe with her memory from that engagement photo. Maybe her memory was wrong. Why did she still feel that pull towards him? What was it about this man that she couldn't shake?

"Lois, Lex called this morning looking for you," Lucy disclosed softly.

"What? Where? When?" Lois said, her heart starting to race. She held out her hand to where Clark had just been, but instead grabbed air.

"Lex called me at the paper this morning, Lois. He wanted me to know that he intended to get you back," Clark said. He was right next to her again. She felt along his arm until she located his hand and held it tight.

"He's found me already? I was at least hoping to make it through Christmas," Lois said, half-joking. She was glad she was already sitting down and felt calmer with Clark holding her hand.

"No. He hasn't found you. It was just a fishing expedition," he reassured her. "And he's not going to find you. I will make sure of that."

"That is very kind of you, Clark," Lois responded. "Although I don't know how you'll accomplish that. Anyway, Lex doesn't scare me. I know that he should, but he doesn't." She squeezed Clark's hand. "I just don't want anyone else to get hurt because of me."

"If necessary, Superman can take you back to the Smallville house," he suggested.

"No." About this point she was adamant. "I'm not going to hide away. I've just been a prisoner for three years, I need my freedom."

"What Smallville house? Lois, did you spend time alone with Superman at this house?" her father asked gruffly.

Clark brought her hand to his chest for a moment and then let go.

"No, not really, Daddy. He just dropped me off at Clark's childhood home and then went back to help with the cyclone victims. I spent the weekend by myself, mostly." She hoped he bought this story. She swallowed, realizing her father seemed overly concerned. "Do you not trust him, Daddy?" She still couldn't speak the word Superman. He was her Mr. Amazing and always would be.

"No. No, I don't, not when it comes to you. Truthfully, Lois, I don't trust *any* man around you." Her father's voice seemed harsh and she didn't think he was speaking to her, because at this statement Clark moved completely away and she felt desolate again.

Lois turned in the direction of her father's voice. "I'm a big girl, Daddy. This is about my reaction to that note he sent this morning, isn't it?" She would have to be more careful with her emotions around her father. She sniffed, her eyes getting damp. "You want to know the truth about me and Superman?" she said, standing up and hopefully facing him. "The truth is I tried to kiss him. The operative word being *tried*. He thanked me… *thanked* me… but said his heart belonged elsewhere. There, now everyone

knows how I made a fool of myself with the superhero. *Happy?*" She sat back down and put her head in her hands.

"Wow," she heard Lucy murmur. "She's good."

"Elsewhere, huh?" her father replied dryly. Well, so much for her father buying her story.

"As I told you earlier, Daddy. I'm a married woman. He would never get involved with a married woman. I can't help it if I want him." She sighed. She didn't mean to, but thinking about being with Mr. Amazing, she couldn't help it. "Every girl dreams of catching the eye of a real live superhero. Isn't that true, Lucy? I just got captured by the moment. I'll get over him, eventually, I'm sure."

"Yep, us girls all dream of superheroes," Lucy agreed with a chuckle.

"Never get involved with a married woman, huh?" That was her father again. He didn't believe her. Why was that?

Someone cleared his throat. She thought it might be Clark, because he spoke up a moment later. "Let's get back to the subject of your safety, Lois."

Lois wiped the fake tears from her eyes. "Agreed. As long as you don't lock me up."

"I worry about you. Lex might not scare you, but he scares me," Clark revealed, making her heart race. "I don't want you anywhere near him ever again."

She smiled. Clark was so sweet. "Neither do I."

"So, when you talk to others about where you live, could you refer to it as the safe house?" he asked. "Don't tell anyone that you're living with Lucy."

"I could do that." Lois nodded.

"And don't tell anyone else about my house in Smallville, in case we have to take you back there sometime."

Lois nodded. "Agreed."

"I don't want you out and about by yourself. Take me or Sam or… no, not Lucy."

"Thanks a lot," Lucy replied sarcastically.

So, Lois was only to go outside with a male bodyguard? How 1790s. She knew karate. It wasn't like Lois was defenseless because she was blind.

"Anyone else?" He thought for a moment. "No, I can't think of anyone off the top of my head that I trust."

"Superman?" Lois suggested optimistically.

"Yeah. That's not going to happen," said Lucy. "Superman doesn't take walks or run errands."

"Why not? What if he gets hungry?" Lois asked curiously.

Silence. Lois wondered how much non-verbal communication was going on beyond her eyelids.

"Oh, yeah. You aren't supposed to talk to me about Superman." Lois groaned. "This really sucks."

Clark sat back down next to her and took her hands into his. "I'm sorry, Lois. I didn't mean for this to happen. Superman should have been honest with you from the very beginning."

"Yeah, isn't truth part of his motto?"

Silence. God! Were they not even going to tell her the basics? Please!

"Clark," said Lucy. Just his name. Nothing else.

"I know," Clark said reluctantly. "I've got to go, Lois. I just wanted to stop by and meet you at last. We'll talk more later."

"What? Already? You just got here." She liked Clark, really liked him. More than she should. She didn't want him to go. She held out her hand to shake his again. He touched it for a moment, and then she heard what sounded like a breeze behind her.

"He has an appointment, Lois," Lucy informed her.

"Oh." She turned to the sound. "Daddy, did you open a window? It's freezing outside."

"Sorry, Princess. I'll go shut it," replied her father.

She heard the window click, then she felt the breeze blow by her face with a gentle kiss on her cheek and the soft voice of Mr. Amazing, who murmured, "Thank you, Lois." She gasped. Then the breeze disappeared and the window shut again.

Lois stood up, placing a hand to her cheek, moving toward where she heard the window shut. "Superman," she whispered. Then she turned away from the window. "Did Superman just stop by and pick up Clark?"

"Yes," Lucy answered softly. "Superman was here."

A chill went down her spine. Why had he thanked her? Had he heard her lie for him to her father? How long had he been eavesdropping on their conversation? "Well, why didn't you tell me? I would have liked to say 'hello'." She returned to the sofa and sat down.

"There was an emergency. He was in a hurry."

"Oh, right. Everyone's hero." She pressed her lips together, but then remembered he took a moment to kiss her and smiled.

"What did you think of Clark, Princess?" her father asked, sitting down next to her. He sounded almost sardonic.

"Does he always disappear like that?"

Lucy chuckled. "You have no idea."

"Clark seems nice enough, I guess. It's hard to know anyone in a couple of minutes." She shrugged. She liked Clark more than she cared to admit to anyone. Especially to an eavesdropping superhero lover. Lois wouldn't want Superman to get jealous of Clark. Would he? Hmmm. That might be a way to get him to pay more attention to her. A smile crept to Lois's lips. "So, Lucy, aren't you supposed to be at the newsroom?"

"Actually, Clark wanted me to research your blindness. Lex told you it was reversible?"

"How… oh, Superman must have told him. Yeah, well, not really. It's complicated." Lois bit her lip. She really didn't like the idea of Clark and Superman discussing her behind her back.

"Start at the beginning, Princess," coaxed her father.

Lois thought about that day, ten months ago, when Clark Kent had truly become her hero… when she knew in her heart that he would someday save her. It had started out just like every other day. Breakfast. Reading the *Daily Planet* that the maid had snuck in to her. She always read Clark Kent's articles, not only because it was his first article on the missing reporter Lois Lane that had brought her fledgling memories back to light, but because he sucked his readers into a story, made them care about the underdog in a way she had always dreamed of doing. She even remembered the last story of his that she read. Something about how Tempus was turning Metropolis into the Wild West with his gun sales. No, wait, that was Perry's editorial. Clark had written about a drive-by shooting where a little six-year-old, playing in her yard, had gotten shot.

Lex had come in and seen her with the paper, eyes damp from Clark's story, and that had been the last straw. He had taken away the paper and gone to make a few phone calls. A couple of hours later, two men in white doctor coats came in, and she knew he was going to try to brainwash her again. She sighed.

"Lex didn't like it when I got my memories back. He hired scientists, inventors, magicians, and even doctors to try to brainwash me into thinking he was a decent guy, instead of the evil louse I knew him to be. Did you know he and Intergang were behind the illegal guns being shipped out of the Congo? I did. But that's another story. First, he hired the Johnson brothers, a couple of crazy inventors."

"Bad Brain Johnson?" Lucy asked.

"You've heard of him? Well, his little brother actually did all the inventing. He invented this thing, I think they called it the Whammy, which was supposed to make everyone highly susceptible to suggestion. Except me. It helped me remember things." She snickered. "They even made Lex wear this silly helmet to protect him from the Whammy. A couple of doses of that thing and I was me again. Oh, that ticked Lex off. Then he tried hypnosis, which worked pretty well on my memories, but

every time he went to kiss me, I'd snap out of it and slap him. He even tried some wacky perfume one of his chemists cooked up, but that backfired too. I just wasn't interested in him."

"*Animal Magnetism*?" her father asked.

"Yeah. You've heard of it?"

Lucy cleared her throat. "Go on, Lois."

"Even his sons were in on it. Jaxon tried to get me into his Virtual Reality game, but Lex wanted to control me in the real world, so he sent Jaxon back to the drawing board. Lex, Jr. came up with this contraption that allowed him into my brain; it gave me migraines every time I didn't do what he wanted me to do. Lex, Jr.'s creepy voice as my own personal DJ for three months. Then suddenly, just as it had started, it stopped. No more voice narration, no pain-jarring headaches. I was myself again. I had hoped it was because something had happened to Lex, Jr., but no such luck. Lex, Jr. came into the suite one day, and Lex, Jr. never leaves the basement except when Lex wanted to do something as a family." She shivered. "Like Christmas."

"You've always loved Christmas, Princess." Her father seemed sad.

"I do. I love Christmas. The tree, and the lights, and baking. The carols and bells. *Lane* Family Christmases, Daddy. Luthor Christmases were creepy: structured, planned, orchestrated. Eww. It wasn't Christmas."

"Christmas is days away, Lois. Today is the 23rd."

"Wow! That soon?" She thought about that. "Lucy, where will Superman spend his Christmas? Do you know?"

"I'm not sure. I think he will spend it at the orphanage. He likes to give them extra attention this time of year, because they don't have anyone," Lucy told her. "He has always felt close to orphans himself because his parents died after they sent him here as a baby."

"Poor Superman. How did they die?" Lois asked. Maybe Lucy could be convinced to be her Superman source.

"His home planet of Krypton exploded."

"Oh, my God!" Lois gasped. "And he's been alone ever since? Did he grow up in an orphanage, too?"

"No. He was found and adopted by a couple here on Earth who couldn't have children of their own."

"Lucy." Her father sounded concerned.

"Yes, I know. My job is at stake. I'm sorry, Lois. I shouldn't have told you even that much. But it's one of my favorite stories. It's what made him who is today."

"Daddy, we should definitely invite him for Christmas. We can get a big tree. I'm sure I have a box of Christmas decorations down in the basement storage. Are you going to spend Christmas with your husband, Lucy?"

"No," Lucy answered with regret. "This will be our first Christmas apart in three years." Her voice quivered. "Oh, how Kal loves Christmas. Everything about Christmas. Even though Christmas for my family was always about the fighting and bickering and my dad kissing the neighbor lady — no offense, Sam — Clar… I mean, Kal always made sure my Christmas was happy, even before I knew he was the one. Clark and I were just not going to celebrate it this year."

"Clark doesn't like Christmas, either?" This wrenched at Lois's heart. Clark seemed really sweet. How could he not like Christmas?

"Clark's parents died when he was ten," Lucy explained.

"Yes, Superman mentioned that. What happened to him?"

"He was bounced around to different foster parents mostly. I don't think it was a very happy time for him. He says it was a long time ago, but I think it still bothers him."

"Daddy, we are going to have to invite these Scrooges to our Christmas," Lois insisted. "Because what's our motto?"

"There's always room at the Lane house at Christmas." Her father sniffled. "But, Princess, I lost the house. I'm sleeping on Clark's guest bed at the moment."

Her father lost the house? She shook her head. She would talk about that with him later. "Clark took you in? I knew I liked him. So we'll do Christmas here. Clark and Superman can come. And Lucy, you already live here."

Lucy sighed. "Lois, you were telling us about how you became blind."

"Oh, yeah. Where did I leave off?" She thought for a moment. "Oh, Lex, Jr. rushed into the suite and took his father off to the side, probably to tell him that his contraption broke. Lex never swore, but he certainly did that day. I'll never forget what he said, '*Goddamn it! Not Clark Kent!*' I don't know what Clark did, but it sure set Lex off. He called in some more of his brainwashing gurus. These guys had created a way for information to beam directly into the brain using light. One of them even called himself Dr. Light."

"No!" Lucy gasped. "It can't be that easy."

Lois thought her outburst strange. "I haven't even told you what he did yet," she sputtered.

"You know this, Lucy?" her father asked.

"Maybe," Lucy replied. "Go on, Lois."

Lois was flabbergasted. How could Lucy know about Dr. Light? Her confusion threw off her storytelling skills for a minute. "So, anyway, they beamed a light into my eyes, freezing me like a statue for five to ten minutes. When I came out of it, Lex was arguing with Dr. Light. There was something wrong with his brainwashing light; it wasn't perfected yet, so it leaked or something. Anyway, he was trying to come up with another way to subdue me, because Lex, Jr.'s machine failed and he didn't like that I kept trying to escape. He kept repeating to them, 'It's temporary, right? I want it to be reversible. I don't want her like this forever, just until I find a permanent solution.' They promised him it was only temporary. Then they beamed a different light into my eyes and presto chango, I'm blind. So, Lex technically didn't tell me that it was reversible. I don't know for sure that it is."

"Lois, think carefully. Was the light they beamed into your eyes a certain color?"

That was an odd question. "Yeah, it was purple, like a lavender shade," she replied.

Lucy jumped to her feet and started pacing. "Ultraviolet light."

"But ultraviolet light doesn't have color to it, Lucy. It's clear," her father corrected.

"He added color to it to help direct the beam of light." Lucy paced slower than most people, but she was definitely pacing. "I don't know if it will be reversible on her. She's been blind a lot longer than a weekend."

"Who was blinded for just a weekend?" Lois demanded. No wonder she gasped at Dr. Light's name. She knew him.

Lucy didn't answer right away. "Kal."

"Cal?" Who was Cal?

"Oh." Her father seemed dismayed by this information. "Lucy's husband."

"If you can cure my blindness by Christmas, Lucy, I'll throw you the best Christmas you've ever had. It will even make you forget about your husband."

"I doubt that, Lois." Then Lucy chuckled. "If I can — actually, it would be better if Sam does it, he's the doctor — if we can cure you by Christmas, Lois, I'll see if I can get Superman to stop by. That'll be all the gift you'll need."

"Lucy! Lois! What aren't you girls telling me? I was right, something did happen," her father said, hitting a fist into the palm of his hand.

Before Lois could deny it again, Lucy said, "Don't be ridiculous, Sam. I just meant that seeing what her hero looks like would be a nice gift." She sighed. "Because a girl never forgets

the first time she lays eyes on Superman."

"Uh-huh." Her father wasn't buying it; he really didn't trust Superman. Lois again wondered why.

Either Lucy was telling the truth and Superman was a sight to behold (and Lois was sure he was, because he couldn't be Mr. Amazing and an ugly Joe at the same time) or if she took her father's meaning, he was anything *but*.

"Just tell me he's not green."

Lucy roared with laughter. "Green? Oh, that's a good one, Lois!"

Perry had told her he wasn't green. Lois knew she should have kept her mouth shut.

"Superman is not green, Princess," her father reassured her. "But if he touched one hair on your head, he's a dead man."

Oh, dear, thought Lois. Another reason to keep her relationship with Mr. Amazing a secret. She would be more careful in the future.

The phone rang and Sam picked it up. "Hello? Oh, hi, Perry… yes, she's right here… Lois?"

Lois jumped up and bumped into the coffee table, knocking herself back to the sofa. She heaved a sigh and moved more slowly on her second attempt. "Hello?"

"Hi, honey. How are you doing? Settling in all right?" he asked.

"Fine, Perry. Lucy thinks she might know how to cure my blindness," Lois announced.

"Wow! Already? She's a remarkable researcher. Clark's lucky to have her."

Lois didn't like the sound of that. Lucy was a married woman and Clark was… not Mr. Amazing. Why was she getting jealous? Perry must have meant it in professional sense. "Uh-huh."

"I was wondering if you were up for breakfast and a photo-op on Christmas Eve? That would be tomorrow."

She grinned. Lois knew there was a reason she loved her former editor. "I'd love it."

"Pastrami?"

"For breakfast?" She laughed. "My mouth is already watering, Perry."

"I'll send a car over at seven-thirty. Does that work for you?" Mayor White asked.

Photo-op? As in press photographers? "What would I have to do to prepare? It's not like I can fix my hair or makeup for the occasion."

"Right. Do you want me to hire someone for you?"

"You're kidding, right?" Skepticism flooded her words.

"I know how you like to look nice, Lois," Perry said.

"Aw, thanks, Perry. But the correct answer would have been, you think I'd look beautiful no matter what."

"Of course. That's what I meant."

"There we go. See you soon," she said, hanging up. "I've got breakfast with the mayor tomorrow. He's sending a car."

"Do you think that's wise?" Lucy asked. "Especially with Lex after you?"

"I'm not going to hide away," Lois replied, heading for her bedroom. "Which one of you wants to help me coordinate my outfit?"

"Clark's not going to be happy about this," she heard Lucy murmur to her father.

"You help her with her clothes and I'll accompany her to Perry's," Lois heard her father suggest to Lucy.

Her roommate sighed. "Lois, can't we do this tonight, when I get home from work?"

Lois ignored her. She was sitting on her bed when Lucy entered. "I don't know what clothing Superman brought back with us."

"Let's see," Lucy said, looking through the closet. "Looks mostly like slacks and a couple of blouses. No suits."

"Do you have anything I could borrow?"

"I don't think we share the same style or size," Lucy replied with a soft laugh.

"Oh." Lois thought for a moment. "I wonder what happened to all my clothes? Did someone donate them to charity, perhaps? When they thought I died…"

"Clark cleared out all of your personal stuff from the apartment before I moved in. He's got it stored away somewhere."

Lois wasn't quite sure to make of that statement. Either it was stalker creepy or extremely thoughtful. She would go with thoughtful. Lex was stalker creepy. "Well, see what you can find. Or maybe we can go out shopping this afternoon."

"Shopping is not a high priority right now, Lois. Don't forget Lex is still after you."

"How can I forget it? Nobody will let me," Lois grumbled. "That man has ruined my life."

Lois could have sworn Lucy said "Join the club" as she shifted through her closet. But Lois had no idea how Lucy and Lex could ever have met. She must have heard incorrectly.

Eventually, Lucy pulled out a pair of slacks and a blouse and handed them to Lois. "I've got to go back to work. See if I can find the solution to your blindness."

"How did Kal get cured?" Lois asked.

"Infrared light."

"That's it?" That seemed too easy.

"Yep. I'll see if I can get you an appointment with Clark's optometrist."

"Clark wears glasses?" Lois hadn't expected that. Oh, that was right. She vaguely remembered that he was wearing glasses in that photo with the bitch. Actually, Lois was curious what the man looked like. Was he not much to look at, like he said? Or was he just being modest? Strange, that he wouldn't let her touch his face.

"You'd be surprised what a pair of glasses can hide," Lucy replied, pushing her own glasses up her nose.

***

Clark stared at his computer screen. The words he had typed there just didn't make any sense to him. All he could think about was Lois. How was he going to keep away from her? She was in his blood; she was all he could think about. He sighed. This morning's meeting with her had confused him. Had she felt something when they touched, as he had? It was as if she knew it was him, but couldn't believe her own feelings.

Lois had flirted with Clark Kent, big time. She couldn't keep her hands off him. Was that because she was blind? Or was it something else? A part of Clark — the Superman part of him — felt jealous that Lois would flirt with the Clark part of him. It made no sense. How could he be jealous of himself? He should be thrilled that his Lois Lane was attracted to every aspect of him, instead of feeling like she was cheating on him by flirting with Clark. Of course, officially, Superman and Lois didn't exist as a couple. They weren't an item. They hadn't spent an intense and highly intimate weekend together in the country. She was free to flirt with other men. But he didn't have to like it.

Clark glanced over at Lucy. She had this secretive smile on her face all afternoon and he worried that she was up to something. Why did everyone always keep secrets from him? He shook his head and tried once again to focus on his article.

His phone rang. "Clark Kent."

"Mr. Kent, it's Security downstairs. A gorgeous woman is on her way up to see you. We couldn't stop her. She just stormed her way past us."

Clark chuckled. *Great. Another fan. This time gorgeous. Sometimes, I hate my alter ego.*, This should be an interesting distraction from thinking about Lois. "It's fine. Thanks for the warning."

Lucy stood up and took some papers over to Cat for review. He couldn't take his eyes off her. *What is that sneaky wench up to?*

"Clark Kent! Where the hell are you?" A voice screamed over the newsroom. Maybe it wasn't a fan after all. The newsroom fell quiet as the woman stormed across the bullpen.

"Lois," Clark gasped, focusing his attention on the woman bearing down on a scrawny copyboy with glasses. Only this Lois had her sight back. That was what Lucy had been grinning about.

"Oh crap," he heard Lucy whisper. "She got loose."

Now that she could see, would Lois start to notice all the things that he and Superman had in common? Or would these frames actually fool her like they had Kal's Lois? Once she realized that Clark Kent and Superman were the same person, would he be able to keep himself away from her without this disguise to hide behind? Would he be able to resist her as he knew Superman should? Would she still want him?

"You. Are you Clark Kent?" Then Lois looked at the copyboy, up and down. "There's no way you're Clark Kent. Where is he?"

The copy boy shook as he pointed in Clark's general direction.

"Oh, this is going to be good," he heard Cat purr. He saw out of the corner of his eye that she was holding onto Lucy's arm, not allowing her to run interference. "No, let's see what happens."

Swallowing, Clark stood up and looked at Lois. His heart started to beat faster as he realized this new aspect of their relationship was spinning him like a tornado. She stopped five feet away from him. "Clark? Clark Kent?" She seemed as stunned as he felt. She stared at him, the anger knocked out of her.

"Hi, Lois." He smiled casually, trying not to show everyone how thrilled he was that she could now see. "I see you got your sight back. What are you doing here?"

"I work here," Lois stated. Then all of a sudden the anger was back. "You lied to me, Clark Kent," she said, pointing at him.

"Did I?" He swallowed again, wondering if she had figured out he was Superman already. There was a smattering of guffaws and titters around the office as his co-workers watched his uneasiness grow at being accused of lying.

"You said you were nothing much to look at," she replied, her lips pressed together in anger. The chuckles grew into outright laughter.

Clark looked away, his discomfort consuming him whole. "Thanks, Lois." He cleared his throat. "What can I do for you?"

"Where's my stuff?" she snarled.

Oh, that's why she's here. He glanced over at Lucy, who was still being held back by Cat. His editor was enjoying this more than a saucer of cream. 'Sorry,' Lucy mouthed.

"In storage. I'll get it—" he started saying before he noticed that Jaxon had walked up to them. *Great. Just what we need.*

"Lola?" Jaxon said, shock in his voice.

Lois glanced over her shoulder at him. "Not now, Jaxon, I'm talking with—" Then she stopped, her back going ramrod straight, her eyes growing wide. She turned around and kept both eyes on her step-son as she backed towards Clark. "What are you doing here, Jaxon?"

"I work here, Lola. I do the website and help out in research. Father is going to be so glad to know I found you. He's been worried sick."

"I'm sure he has." Lois grabbed hold of Clark's hands behind her back. "Jaxon, you know that your father kidnapped me and held me against my will for over three years, right?" She spoke to him as if he were a little slow.

"Lola, I know that Father said you banged your head and started to believe you were this missing reporter from the *Daily Planet*. Everything will be okay. I'll call Father and he can come pick you up and take you home." He pulled out his mobile phone.

Lois placed her hand on his phone. "Jaxon Xavier, listen to me. I *am* Lois Lane, not Lola Luthor. Okay? Don't call your father; I don't want to go back to him. He has been trying to brainwash me for years into believing I'm someone I'm not," she said seriously, but still as if he were a child and not a man. "I've always liked you. Don't do this."

"No, Lola, he's been trying to get your memories back. He loves you so much. He'll be so happy that I found you." Jaxon flipped open his phone and started dialing.

Clark glanced at Lucy and saw her eyes were as wide and anxious as he felt. The laughter in the bullpen was now eerily gone.

"Clark." Lois's voice shook as she backed into him, not taking her gaze off Jaxon. "Call Superman and tell him I need him to take me back to the safe house. Right now."

He could hear her heartbeat accelerating. She had said earlier that Lex didn't scare her, but her heart was calling her a liar. She was terrified of going back to her husband. "I'll take you, Lois," Clark said, taking her arm and grabbing his coat off the hook next to his desk. "Let's go."

As they passed Cat, Lois said, "Fire him, Cat. He's a spy for Lex Luthor."

"Whatever you say, Lois." Their temporary editor laughed. "Any luck finding Superman?"

Clark glared at her.

"And, Clark, don't forget you have a date tonight. Last one. Better show up this time."

Lois slowed down at her old desk. "Clark, who's been using my desk?"

"Excuse me," Lucy said, sitting down at her desk which had formerly belonged to Lois.

"You!" Lois pointed at Lucy. "First my apartment, now my desk? Clark, she's trying to steal my life."

"Let's go, Lois," Clark reminded her, nudging her towards the exit.

Lois pointed to her eyes and then back at Lucy. "I don't trust you, Lucy El!" she screamed as Clark almost dragged her from the newsroom. "And you dress like a bag lady, too!"

He could hear Cat's continued laughter as the elevator went down. "Lois, that was uncalled for."

Lois crossed her arms, mumbling, "Now I know why she was keeping Superman away from me the other night. She wasn't trying to protect his image, she wants him for herself. Well, she can't have him. He's mine."

Clark couldn't say anything to that. He put on his coat and exhaled a deep breath. Lois still wanted him as much as he wanted her. He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and show her how much he missed her. But Clark Kent couldn't do that any more than Superman could.

Lois winced, turning to him. "Oh, my God! Clark. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. Nothing happened, I promise. I just have this huge crush on him and I can't keep my mouth shut. He's just so gorgeous in that blue suit of his and—"

"You've seen him?" Clark asked, surprised. "*When?*" She had been blind when he saw her that morning.

They went out into the cold and Clark waved down a cab. He made sure he stood between her and the wind, protecting her even from Mother Nature.

"He flew by the apartment after lunch. And, my God! I know Lucy warned me he was a sight to behold, but I swear my knees went weak. I didn't realize how gorgeous he is." She stepped into the cab. "I'm doing it again. I'm just in shock from seeing Jaxon, so my mouth is running a mile a minute. Sorry." She covered her mouth.

"Lois, where is Sam?" Clark asked, curious where her so-called daytime bodyguard had gone.

"He went to the grocery store. And really, I wasn't planning on leaving the apartment, but then I looked through my closet for something better to wear to breakfast with Perry tomorrow and realized that all the clothes that Superman gave me were actually *my* clothes. He must have gotten them from you. Lucy said you took my stuff out of the apartment before she moved in. Thank you for that, by the way, because I don't trust her as far as I can spit. Although I can spit pretty far. Scratch that. Anyway, I figured you must have my stuff somewhere close enough for you to give them to Superman for me and I thought more and more about you having my stuff and wondering why you never gave them to my dad and—"

"Take a breath, Lois. I've got your stuff in storage. I'll get to it when I get the chance."

She took a breath. "Right."

"And for the record, I think you look nice just the way you are."

Lois smiled and took hold of his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Thank you for rescuing me again, Clark. You really are *my* hero."

"I'm sorry, Lois. I should have warned you about Jaxon. That's why we didn't want you to come into the office."

"Cat's not going to fire him, is she?" Lois asked.

"No grounds for termination. Mr. Olsen — James has been trying to find a way to get rid of him since the summer, when we realized who he was."

"You knew about him since the summer?" Lois inquired, looking at him from the corner of her eye. Then she looked straight at him, studying him. She was really close, almost too close. What fascinated her about boring Clark Kent?

Clark nodded, unable to speak with her so near. He turned away and cleared his throat. "Lucy thought there might be a connection between Jaxon coming to the *Daily Planet* and the appearance of Superman. She thought that Luthor might be spying on me." *Oh, dear. He hadn't meant to let that slip.*

"Because you are so close to Superman." She nodded in sudden comprehension. "No wonder he was always swearing at you. Lex hates you."

"Really? He seemed so friendly at the Christmas Party."

"I'm sure you were polite too, Clark. And you just love him, right?" she goaded.

Clark couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, Lois. You got me." He glanced down at her head on his shoulder. She glanced up at him; it felt good to see her focusing on him with her eyes. She was close enough to kiss. He wanted to do nothing more than press his lips to hers. But Clark Kent wasn't allowed to kiss married women, either, because everyone knew who he was. *Almost everyone.* "Stop!" Clark called out to the cab driver. "We'll walk from here," he said, handing a pile of bills to the driver. "Let's go, Lois."

They walked in silence for a block. He really needed to drop her off at the apartment and get back to work. He needed to confront Lucy about her keeping him out of the loop. The more he was around Lois, the more he wanted her. They needed to stay away from one another or Lex would have legitimate grounds to smear his name in the mud. Well, more legitimate grounds… more well-known grounds…

"Lucy knew about Jaxon and Lex?" Lois questioned him, stirring him from his thoughts.

"Yes. Sometimes, it seems like she knows about everyone," Clark admitted truthfully.

"Tell me about her husband. What does he *really* do?"

Clark glanced over at her. She had figured out that the hush-hush secret job was just a sham. "I can't say," he replied.

"Oh. So, it really is a secret?" She sounded almost disappointed.

"Afraid so."

"Have you met him? Does he really exist?" *Funny, Mayson asked you the same thing.*

He nodded. "Afraid so."

"Is she really going home in a few months?"

"If we're lucky," he replied, meaning that if she survived the pregnancy and the curse.

She raised a brow. "I thought she was your best friend."

"But she's also a danger magnet," he confessed. He hoped Lois wasn't one as well, or between the two of them he'd never get any sleep.

"Oh." Lois was quiet a moment then nudged him with her elbow. "Exactly why are you having me live with a danger magnet, Clark?"

"Because *I* certainly can't live with her." He laughed. "My girlfriend would not approve."

Lois stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Clark Kent, you have a girlfriend? Did you get back together with the blonde you were engaged to? What's her name?" She snapped her fingers as she struggled for the name. "Lana?"

Clark stared at her. Had he admitted that out loud? How did she know about Lana? "No," he replied. "We broke up."

"So you've got a new girlfriend. Why is this the first I'm hearing about her?" There was an edge to her voice. Was she jealous? Of Clark Kent's girlfriend? No, that couldn't be it.

"Sorry, Lois." He really was sorry. He shouldn't have said anything. And officially, Lois wasn't his girlfriend. Unofficially? Only in a perfect world. And his dimension was far from perfect. He pretended to cough before speaking, his soft voice slightly hoarse. "She's kind of a secret girlfriend. Can you keep it to yourself?"

Lois raised a brow towards him. "A *secret* girlfriend?" She grinned, nudging him in the arm again. "So why all the secrecy?"

He stepped away from her in time. She really touched him way too often for his sanity. "Reporters are notorious gossips, and I have bad luck with women."

"Really?" Lois seemed curious. Too curious. "What was that about a date tonight?"

Clark cleared his throat. "I auctioned myself off for charity a while back."

"I would have liked to see that bidding war," Lois teased him. She had no idea how close to the mark she was. "So, how much did you go for, handsome?" *A lot. Fifty thousand had been the highest bid.*

"Enough about me. Here we are. Back at the safe house," he said brusquely, as he skipped up the stairs to open the door for her.

She walked up the stairs, keeping an eye on him the entire time.

***

Lucy looked up and down the street for a cab. She couldn't believe that Clark had ditched her again. That was two mornings in a row now. This time she was sure it was an emergency, but she still missed him — her best friend in this dimension.

A dark town car pulled up and two men jumped out and dragged her into it. "You're coming with us, Mrs. Luthor," one of the men grumbled.

"Oh, no, not that," Lucy moaned. She elbowed one of the men and smacked the other. As she turned to get out of the car, she realized the door was already shut and they were off. The men pulled her down into the seat and held her arms.

"She's a fighter, Mr. Luthor."

Lucy glanced up. Lex Luthor sat across from her.

"Well, Lex, I see you aren't up to your usual standards," she admonished. "Has Superman put away all the good bad guys out there? That you had to settle for these two dimwits?"

"Hi, darling," he said, lifting up a glass of champagne.

She made a buzzer sound. "Wrong."

"Lola."

"Strike two."

Lex raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm not going to call you Lois Lane."

Okay, that one he got right, but she'd die before ever telling him that. "Strike three."

Lex studied her a minute and then handed his drink to Mrs. Cox, seated next to him. He leaned forward and took the hat from her head, staring at her short hair. He lifted her chin with his index finger and turned her jaw back and forth. Then he pulled open her coat. Lucy jerked her hands free from the two thugs and pulled her coat closed.

"Do you mind?" She couldn't let him know that she was pregnant or she would be a dead woman for sure.

"That is not my wife," Lex informed his thugs.

"But, Mr. Luthor, we followed her and Clark Kent from the Daily Planet to this apartment building last night. She lives in your wife's old apartment."

"That may be so, boys. But this woman, striking though she may be, is not my wife." He took his drink back from Mrs. Cox. "Lola isn't chunky and she wouldn't be caught dead in an outfit like that."

"You can drop me off at the Daily Planet, Lex. I'll tell Clark you send your regards," Lucy suggested, trying hard not to be hurt by Lex's harsh description. Another part of her was thrilled that this awful secret identity disguise had actually worked.

"Now, why would I want to do that? Lucy, isn't it? You are much more valuable to me as a hostage. Clark's assistant and best friend. A valuable commodity, don't you think?"

Lucy closed her eyes and concentrated. She knew that Kryptonians could read minds, but she had never perfected it. Time to try again. *Help, Clark. Lex has me. Please, Clark, help me*, she screamed at him in her thoughts, hoping she had finally gotten through. But all she heard in response was silence.

"Champagne, Mrs. El?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink; neither should you at seven o'clock in the morning."

He raised a brow. "No?" Lex shrugged. "I do have other ways to make you talk."

"May I recommend that you drop me off at the Daily Planet building, and get yourself out of town before Superman finds out that you tried to kidnap Lois again and were stupid enough to nab me instead?"

"Stupid? I am anything but stupid, Mrs. El." Lex glared at her.

"If you think he will negotiate with you, you are an idiot," she told him. She knew she shouldn't be taunting him, but he started it by kidnapping her and then insulting her. "Clark will never give her back to you. And if you harm even one hair on my head, let's hope the cave you decide to live in is at the Earth's core, because he *will* find you. You really don't want to see him when he's mad." She stared directly into Lex's eyes. There was something cold in his eyes she had never seen in her Lex's eyes… she blinked. No, not *her* Lex. Her *dimension's* Lex. Her stomach acid seemed twice as sharp today, but with the henchmen holding her arms, she couldn't rub the pain away.

"You think he likes you?" Lex chuckled. "Darling, you're yesterday's news. You should have seen how he was ogling my wife in Singapore. Now, you will tell me where my wife is, or we'll dump your body in some lead-lined tank somewhere where he'll never find you."

Lois swallowed. *He's just provoking you, Lois. Clark still cares for you. You're still here under his protection. And if this moron hurts you he'd have two Supermen to contend with.* "First of all, Clark Kent does not ogle. Second, I'm his friend. Superman doesn't like it when his friends get hurt. And third, your wife is *dead*. You threw her off a balcony into a cyclone. Remember?" So much for telepathy. Time to use some old-fashioned lung power. "And fourth, *SUPERMAN HELP*!" Lucy yelled, before the thugs grabbed her and covered her mouth with tape.

"Tsk. Tsk. And we were having such a nice, pleasant conversation, too." Lex shook his head, sipping again from his champagne flute.

***

Superman flew away from Mazik's jewelry store and handed the masked men to the police waiting outside. He was on his way to the office when he heard Lucy scream for help. He was at the apartment in two seconds. Sam and Lois stood in the living room as he came in the window.

"Superman!" Lois gasped in delight.

"Where's Lucy?" he demanded.

"She left for the office not ten minutes ago," Sam told him.

"Stay here until I bring her back," he said, diving out the window again.

Superman flew over the city, knowing she was in enough danger to call to him only once, meaning that someone was stopping her from calling out to him a second time. The only credible threat was Lex Luthor, so he reviewed what he knew of him. If he had grabbed her from outside the apartment building, then he would probably still be in a limousine or town car heading away from her apartment as well as away from the Daily Planet.

He found a car matching that description, stopped at a red light. Superman flew down and stood before it, holding up his hand. He did a quick x-ray of the car. He saw Lucy grab the shirts of the two men on either side of her, bang their heads together in front of her, then push them at Lex before opening the car door. Guess she had developed a little super strength after all. He was at the door in time to help her out. He ripped the tape from her mouth.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded, then proceeded to pass out. He scooped her up into his arms flying her directly to the apartment as the car drove off.

"Oh, my God, Lucy!" Sam said, following Superman to Lucy's bedroom. "Is she all right?"

Superman laid her on the bed. "She passed out, Sam. Could you?" He couldn't say more. His heart was choking his vocal cords. He sat down on the bed next to her and removed her heavy coat.

Sam took hold of her wrist and placed a hand on her forehead.

Lois was at the door. "What happened?"

"Lex Luthor nabbed her," Superman replied. "Is she all right, Sam? If he did anything to her…"

"Her heart rate is a bit up. But I don't have my doctor's kit with me; I can't check all of her vitals."

Superman was gone and back in less than three seconds with Sam's doctor bag.

"Clark," Lucy said, coming out of the faint as Sam placed a blood pressure monitor on her arm.

"Right here," he said, holding her hand and caressing her face.

"Superman." She smiled, gazing up at him. "You heard me. You saved me."

"Always, Lucy. Always."

"I warned him not to mess with me. Did you get him?"

He shook his head. "He drove off. But you clobbered those thugs pretty well."

"Lucy clobbered some thugs?" Lois asked incredulously.

"She knows karate, too," he explained. Although Lucy hadn't used it to subdue the men who had taken her.

"Oh." Lois accepted this answer.

"Can you check her heart rate?" Sam asked, nodding toward Lucy's tummy.

Clark's brow furrowed. Sam sounded worried. He glanced at Lois, who was staring at him, and then over at Sam.

"Lois, Princess, can you wait for us in the living room? Please."

She rolled her eyes at them and stepped away from the door.

Clark placed his hand under Lucy's shirts and sweaters, directly on her belly and counted. "Same as always."

"That's good." Sam exhaled a breath of relief. Sam indicated the windows with his head.

"Sam, I can see you just fine and hear you wherever you are, so you might as well tell him right here," Lucy informed him softly. Nothing got past her.

"Lucy, your blood pressure is up more than I like. I'm recommending bed rest to see if we can get it to go down."

Clark looked at Sam with fear. "What does that mean?"

"Too much excitement in my ho-hum life," Lucy told him.

"That's right, sweetie," Sam agreed, patting her hand.

"Did he do anything to you?" Superman asked. He felt like he had when Jefferson Cole had taken her at S.T.A.R. Labs. "Inject you with anything?"

"As if he could." Lucy smiled at him reassuringly. "He threatened to use me as a hostage for Lois. But I told him you don't negotiate with terrorists and you'd never give her back to him."

Superman accepted her reassurance and returned her smile.

"That's good to hear," piped in Lois from the doorway. She was back. "Since Lucy's okay, I'm going to my breakfast with Perry. The town car should be waiting downstairs."

"You're not going anywhere," Superman told her.

"Yes, I am," she retorted. "I have breakfast plans with Perry. I'm not going to break them because of my crazy ex-husband. I'm not going to let him continue to ruin my life."

"You aren't leaving the apartment without an escort from now on," Superman told Lois, then he turned to Lucy. "Either of you."

"I was going to go with Lois to her breakfast with Perry, but I think I should stay and keep an eye on Lucy," said Sam.

"Great!" Lois threw up her hands. "Because she got a little faint, I've got to miss out on my breakfast with Perry? That hardly seems fair. You promised me I wasn't your prisoner."

"I'll come with you," Superman told her.

Lois raised an eyebrow and placed her hands on her hips. "I thought you didn't run errands."

"She's right," murmured Lucy. "You can't be our personal bodyguard twenty-four/seven, Superman."

"Speak for yourself," Lois retorted. "He can be my personal twenty-four/seven bodyguard, any time he likes."

"Lo-is." Superman sighed. She really had to stop saying such things in front of other people, especially her father. "I'll get Clark Kent."

"I'm sure he's busy," snapped Lois. She really wanted him — Superman him.

"I'm sure he is, too," replied Superman, a hint of a smile coming to his eyes as he gazed at Lois. He missed her too. "But he needs to eat breakfast, just like everyone else. He'll want to help."

She had caught his look, because he saw her return it. It was so nice having the subtleties of non-verbal communication with her. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Superman?" Lois asked him.

He glanced down at Lucy. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I've got Sam. I'll be fine." Lucy smiled encouragingly at him, then lowered her voice to less than a whisper. "Enjoy your date with Lois."

Superman kissed her forehead, then went to the living room where Lois was waiting. He took both her hands into his and she sighed, staring at him. He realized it was the first time she had ever really had the chance to look at him — Superman him — up close.

Lois reached up and touched his cheek. "I was right that first night. You do look divine," she breathed.

Superman lowered his head slightly, trying not to blush.

"I just wanted to make sure that you were still *my* Mr. Amazing," she whispered, resting her head on his chest.

"Always," he replied softly. "But we can't really talk now. You've got your breakfast with Mayor White and your father is probably listening as best he can from the other room. He doesn't trust me around you."

"I've noticed that, too." Lois giggled and then gave him an exaggerated wink. "Do you have a reputation I should be worried about?" It was obvious that she didn't believe he had.

With a shake of his head, Superman whispered, "Can you leave the window unlatched for me tonight?" He placed his cheek against hers. "I need to see you. Alone."

"Every night," she replied and wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him closer.

Lucy had warned him that Lois would say that. He hated that Lucy was always right. "No, just tonight."

Lois bit her bottom lip. "On the condition that you bring me a Christmas tree in a stand."

Superman chuckled with a slight groan. "So, now I must come bearing gifts?"

"If you want…" She shrugged. "We're doing Christmas here, despite the Scrooges, Lucy and Clark, if you want to come."

"We'll see, Lois. Don't be so hard on Lucy. She has a lot on her plate right now."

"Fine." Lois rolled her eyes with a pout. "I'll be nice."

"Thank you," Superman murmured, kissing that pout off her lips. "Now, I'll go find Clark so you can thumb your nose at your ex-husband by having breakfast with the mayor. Try to be careful, please. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

He placed another gentle kiss on her lips and then flew out the window and down to the street. He spun into his business suit and returned upstairs via the elevator. *Clark, you lead a crazy life*, he thought to himself.

***

When Clark and Lois walked into the mayor's private conference room at City Hall, Perry gave Clark a look that he easily recognized, but his former boss said it aloud anyway. "Clark Kent, what in the King's name do you think you're doing?"

Before he could speak, Lois dove in with the explanation of Lucy's abduction by Lex. "And according to Lucy, those bonehead thugs thought she was *me*! Can you believe it?"

Perry looked over at Clark and then shook his head. "Looks like I'm going to have to assign some officers to guard your place, Lois. Clark here is too valuable a commodity to babysit a couple of beauties to keep them from a madman."

Clark cleared his throat. "I don't mind, Chief."

"I bet you don't, Clark. But there are better uses for your time. I'll make sure Lois gets home safe. Why don't you skedaddle on to work? We wouldn't want Cat to start gossiping about the two of you."

"No, sir," Clark agreed. He turned to Lois. "I'll see you later, Lois."

"You will?" she asked, surprised.

Ooops. This secret identity stuff was harder than he thought. "When I come back to check on Lucy," he explained. "This afternoon."

"Lucy!" Perry gasped. "You didn't tell me that she was hurt. Is she all right?" He looked anxiously between them.

"Oh, she's fine," Lois told him. "Just a little elevated blood pressure from all the stress." She crossed to the platters of food.

"Mmmm. This looks good."

Perry looked Clark in the eye. "Clark?"

"Sam's watching over her. She's resting at home," he assured his friend.

"Oh, that's good. High blood pressure is nothing to take lightly."

"If she dropped a few pounds, she wouldn't be plagued with high blood pressure," Lois said, filling up her plate with fruit. "And she might be a tad prettier. Not so round in the face. I don't know why everybody has their knickers in a twist. You've had high blood pressure for years, Perry, and you're just fine."

"Lo-is!" Perry scolded.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll be nice. Why everyone wants me to be so kind to little Miss Know-It-All…" Lois grumbled.

Perry grabbed Clark's arm and led him to the far side of the room. "Is Lucy okay?"

Clark lowered his voice. "The baby's heart rate is normal." Well, normal for this baby.

Perry released a breath. "You're going to have to tell Lois one of these days about her roommate's condition."

"It's on my list of things to tell her," Clark admitted.

"Yeah, that list is getting pretty long, isn't it, Clark?" Perry glowered at him. The Chief wasn't happy about him keeping his identity a secret from Lois either. *Join the club.*

"Not you too, Perry. Cat's threatened me with demotion if I tell her." Clark sighed, then changed the subject back to Lucy. "We're just lucky Lex didn't realize—" He shook his head, cutting off the end of his sentence before he could say too much.

"That he didn't recognize Lucy?" Perry finished.

Clark nodded, keeping his eyes on Lois, sitting at the table on the other side of the room. He had forgotten that Lucy had told Perry about having known Lex personally.

"Have you had *your* blood pressure checked recently, Clark? I can't believe you put those two together as roommates." Perry shook his head and chuckled. "You're a braver man than I am. That's all I can say."

Clark glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "What do you mean?"

"What if Lois finds out about you and Lucy?"

Clark's eyes flashed to Perry's. "I have no idea what you are referring to."

Perry chuckled. "Sure you do."

Clark cleared his throat and gave his ex-boss an intense look. "Really, sir, you have no idea what you're talking about."

"I don't? Hmmm. So, that wasn't you who drank all my good Scotch on Thanksgiving and poured his heart out to me?"

Clark grinned with embarrassment. *Guilty.* "Nope. Must have been that superhero guy. He likes to dress up like me and play practical jokes on my friends."

Perry got a serious expression on his face. "You're playing with fire, Clark."

He didn't catch Perry's meaning.

"You shouldn't be within fifty feet of that girl and we both know it."

Oh, *that.* Clark sighed. "She told you."

"Who do you think gave her the nickname Hurricane Lane?"

Clark raised a brow. He hadn't heard that one.

"She blows into town and the men folk never walk the same again."

"Yeah. That sounds like her." Clark laughed softly with a shake of his head. "You could have warned me." They both knew it would have been a fruitless endeavor.

Perry told him again what they both knew to be true. "You need to stay away from her, Kent."

"I can't," the reporter stated simply, gazing in Lois's direction. "I don't know how."

"Cold turkey, my boy," Perry suggested with a slap to his back. "Cold turkey."

"Are you boys going to sit in the corner all morning and talk shop, ignoring me?" Lois asked from the other end of the table.

"Terribly sorry, Lois. Here I invited you to dine and I bend Clark's ear off about Singapore," Perry lied to Lois as they moved back across the room. "Have a Merry Christmas, Clark. You doing anything special?"

"I'm going to show Clark how Christmas is supposed to be celebrated," Lois answered for him.

Perry turned to Clark with raised brows. "Is that so?"

"I wouldn't take no for an answer." Lois grinned. "Christmas shouldn't be spent alone."

"Yep. You're a dead man." Perry nodded.

"Oh, my God. Clark! Did you have plans with your girlfriend?" Lois's eyes went wide as she realized she had spilled the beans.

Clark covered his face with his hand. So much for his *secret* girlfriend. Him and his big mouth. Thank goodness it was only Perry.

"Girlfriend?" Perry asked, turning to him.

"Yeah. She wants me to put in an appearance," Clark murmured, glancing away.

Perry grinned his evil, yet innocent grin.

Oh, no. What is his old editor going to do? Clark winced in anticipation.

"So, Clark, whatcha you get her?"

Clark's eyes went wide as his heart hit his stomach. He gulped as Lois glanced up at him with curiosity. A boatload of disappointment. Yep. He still held the title of worst boyfriend in the world.

"Ooooh." Perry shook his head with a frown. "That's not good, Clark. And this your first Christmas together, too."

"Do you need some help? I love to buy presents," Lois said, taking a bite of melon. "I'm still waiting on the backpay that Mr. Olsen promised me, so I'm going small this year. But Dad and I have this big Christmas meal planned. What's she like?"

"Yeah, Clark. What's she like?" Perry grinned, taking a sip of his coffee. If his old boss smiled any bigger, his face would break.

Clark swallowed and closed his eyes. *Please, let there be someone out in the world calling for help.* Silence. He sighed and opened his eyes, gazing directly at Lois. "Perfection."

Lois shook her head. "Oh, then Perry's right. You're screwed. Perfect people are impossible to buy for."

Perry laughed. "Well, there you have it, Clark. You need to dump her and move to the North Pole."

Lois pounded Perry on the bicep. "He'd better not! He'll ruin her Christmases for years to come. A girl can recover from a bad gift, but not always from a broken heart. Trust me, I know."

"Oh?" Clark knew her history like the back of his hand, yet the only broken heart he recalled was because her best friend stole her story and her editor/boyfriend in college. Was that what she was referring to?

Lois sighed. "There are plenty of men… what am I talking about?" She rolled her eyes. "Most of the men I've met in my life I could easily live without, but only one…" She glanced up directly into Clark's eyes, her voice soft as she continued, "…or possibly two … I don't think I could survive without."

Clark swallowed, unable to look away. He could hear her heart beating faster than it normally did. Was that because of him? Clark Kent, him?

"It sure has been windy lately. I heard something about the hurricane season lasting through the New Year, this year," Perry changed the subject with a cough. "Did you hear anything about that, Lois?"

She broke the stare first and turned her eyes to her former editor. "Ha-ha. Very funny, Perry."

Clark cleared his throat. “Well, I’d better be heading to work.”

Lois was on her feet. “Are you sure you aren’t going to eat anything? Superman assured me that you need to eat too.”

“Thank you. But I’ve already eaten breakfast, Lois. Bring her back home safe, Perry.” Clark looked at his former boss, who nodded. “Merry Christmas to you, Alice, and the boys, then.” At the door, he glanced back over his shoulder at Lois laughing with Perry and whispered, “Perfection.”

***

Sam was asleep when Clark snuck out of the Clinton Street apartment. It was late, very late — Santa late. He flew to Lois’s apartment and checked the window; she had indeed left it unlocked. *Here goes nothing. Grand gesture time.*

Superman had already flown a Christmas tree to the orphans earlier that day, so what was one more tree, right? Luckily, Lois wanted to decorate it herself. Or had she? He picked up the tree from where he had left it on her roof earlier that evening and gently brought it in through the window, being careful not to damage any of the branches.

He placed the tree between the two windows in the dark living room, wondering if he was too late. Had she already gone to bed? Was she expecting him to join her there? He closed the window behind him, and then noticed Lois asleep on her couch, a box of Christmas decorations next to her on the floor. He opened the box and quickly decorated the tree, lights and all. He found some extra lights and strung them up around the room. Voila, Christmas.

And like Santa, Superman placed the simple gifts he had picked up that afternoon under the tree, just in case Clark couldn’t make it for Christmas morning. It was probably best if Superman didn’t make an appearance anyway. And because he was playing the part of two men, he had to pick up two sets of gifts for Lois. Lucy and Sam would understand if he didn’t get them two gifts. Perry was right, he was a dead man. Lois’s gift from Superman was silly, really. He shook his head. *She’ll probably hate it.* It would have better to have not gotten her a gift at all.

Superman knelt down beside her and lifted her into his arms. She was so light and fragile. “Perfection,” he whispered.

Lois’s eyes opened and she smiled. “Hi there, handsome. Are you taking me someplace?”

“I was going to set you down on your bed,” Superman replied. “You would have woken up with a stiff neck from sleeping on the couch.”

She grinned naughtily. “Bed sounds nice.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, really kissed him. “Mmmm, amazing.”

He sat back down on the couch with her. “No, Lois. We can’t. Remember?”

“Right. My psycho ex-husband.” She kissed him again with a sigh. “You are just so addicting.”

Superman smiled. “I was thinking the same thing about you.”

“Oh, I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“There is only you, Lois,” he replied, kissing her again.

“Speaking of which…” She cleared her throat. “I heard what you said to Lucy the other night about loving me.”

“I know. I saw you standing behind her before I said it. I wanted you to know how I feel about you, that I was sorry for not telling you that I’m a household name.”

Lois gestured dismissively, like that argument was old news. “Superman…” She shook her head. “That just sounds wrong… Mr. Amazing, I need to know something… how many women have you been with?”

This was a shock. He hadn’t been expecting this question. Not tonight. He cleared his throat. “Is that important?”

“You don’t know me. I mean, you *know* me… but you don’t really *know* know me, you know?”

He shook his head. What in the world was she talking about?

“I just need to know that you aren’t confusing this chemistry thing that we have — that we definitely have — with love. I want to know that you know the difference before I figure out what I’m feeling.” Lois looked at Superman, and although he could see the confusion and sadness in her eyes, it was nice to see emotion there.

“Before I answer any of your questions, Lois, I need to know that what I say stays between us. That you want to know about my past for you, and not for any article or to score points at work.” On this point, he would not waver.

He could see the anger building up behind her eyes. Maybe seeing emotion there wasn’t such a great thing. But she took a deep breath and let it go. “That’s a valid point. I have been known in the past to do almost anything for a story. Please, believe me when I say that I will not write an article about you from what you say to me. That is a line I will not cross.”

“And you won’t share what I tell you with Cat Grant?”

“Especially not with Cat Grant. There will be a new editor starting soon anyway.”

“I know you’re confused right now, Lois. There is much about me you don’t know and I wish I could tell you, but I can’t.” Actually, he could. He should. But it would ruin her Christmas, so he wouldn’t. “It’s complicated.” Superman held her. “You scare me, sometimes.”

“I scare you?” Lois giggled as if that thought was preposterous.

“How I feel about you scares me. How fragile you are scares me. If anything were to happen to you… I don’t know if I could survive in a world without you… I don’t know how I have survived this long. And because of all that, you’re probably better off without me,” he acknowledged.

“You’d better not be breaking up with me, Amazing,” she snarled.

“I can’t break up with someone who already broke up with me,” he retorted.

Lois held up a finger. “Technically, I was only telling you what you were going to tell me.”

“So, you don’t want us to be over?” he whispered with hope.

Lois looked at him like he was crazy. “I think about you all day and dream about you all night. My body craves your touch, because I feel whole with you around… and empty when you’re not there. We’ll never be over.”

“Even if you found someone else, someone you fall in love with and want to have children with?” Superman whispered, looking away. “Someone without such a need for secrecy or who’s worried about a PR nightmare because of your marriage to Lex?”

“Amazing, there is no comparison.” She took his chin and tilted it so he was looking at her once more. “I can’t go back after you. It would be like having vanilla ice cream my entire life, except for one weekend when I was able to eat Double Fudge Ripple with Chocolate Chunks, then have to go back to eating vanilla from then on. It won’t taste the same.”

“So, *I’m* chocolate?” Superman grinned with merriment.

“Most definitely chocolate.” Lois kissed him.

“And you, Lois Lane, are my Red Kryptonite.”

Her brow furrowed. “What’s that?”

“I’ve been told that it’s like Green Kryptonite, except that it wreaks havoc with my emotions instead of my cells,” he explained.

“What’s Kryptonite?” Lois asked, staring at him, all expression gone from her face.

“A meteorite from my home planet of Krypton. The one thing that can kill me.”

She pulled him tighter. “I don’t like the idea that there’s

something out there that can hurt you."

"Well, it's just the one thing so far that we've found." He smiled, happy that she worried about him. "And yet everything out there can hurt you," he murmured, his cheek touching her cheek; he was glad he remembered to shave before coming over.

"Hey, I'm a tough broad," Lois said, pulling back with a wink. "It would take a whole heck of a lot to kill me."

Superman ran his fingers over her hair. "Can we talk about something else?"

"So, are you going to tell me or not?" she asked, sitting back and touching his 'S' lightly.

"Tell you what?"

Lois gazed directly into his eyes. "How many women you've been with?"

He sighed. "I haven't dated much."

"Why? You're a hunk. I'm sure you meet plenty of women."

"Thanks, Lois." Superman chuckled at her description of him. "But that's not what I meant. I *save* plenty of women, yes. There are women who jump off bridges just to meet me. But I don't usually stick around to talk to people much. I rescue them, put them someplace safe, get the bad guys to the authorities, and then I'm on my way. Not much time for chit-chat. That's what Clark Kent does. He interacts with the public for me."

"I was wondering how your team works." Lois thought about that information for a moment. "So, I was just a fluke."

"In what way?" Superman asked, baffled by her logic.

"You couldn't just rescue me and set me on the sidewalk and go. You had to take me somewhere safe; only your public relations guy was stuck in Singapore because of the cyclone, and you were forced to interact with me yourself."

"Oh, that kind of fluke. Yeah." Superman smiled at the title she gave Clark Kent. "You could put it that way. But I wasn't *forced* to interact with you, Lois. That was my choice. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

She raised an eyebrow. "But you weren't expecting Hurricane Lane to invade your shower."

Superman cleared his throat. "Ahh, no." He pulled her in for a kiss. "Showering hasn't been the same since."

Lois pulled back. "I need to know, Amazing. If I hadn't come into your shower, would you have made a move on me?"

"I had just rescued you from an emotionally abusive husband, so no."

"Other than that. If I had been kidnapped by some random psycho, would you have made a move on me?" She looked him directly in the eyes. "The truth."

Superman sighed. "No. I need to be one hundred percent positive about someone before I make that big step."

"And, of course, you weren't one hundred percent positive about me when I climbed into your shower." Her voice shook. "Then why didn't you just leave? I'm sure you could have zipped out of there, untouched by the crazy blind lady. I mean, you're you — you can do anything."

He caressed her cheek with his hand. "I can't do everything." He pressed his lips to hers. "I can't resist you."

A hint of a smile brushed her lips, before she responded, "But I was a *naked* woman in your shower. How many men could resist *that*?"

"It wasn't just some random naked woman in my shower, Lois. It was you."

She punched his shoulder with a smile. "So, if it had been some buxom blonde starlet who climbed into your shower…"

"I would have flown for the hills." He laughed. "Faster than a speeding bullet."

Lois pulled him into a kiss, too deep to break away from without getting dizzy. When she did finally let him come up for air, she snuggled up against his shoulder. "Why?"

Superman rolled his eyes. Sometimes Lois Lane talked too much. Couldn't she just enjoy their one night together without asking so many darn questions? No, he guessed not. A Lois Lane without questions, without curiosity, wouldn't be Lois Lane. He sighed and asked the inevitable, "Why, what?"

"Why didn't you run to the hills when I stepped into your shower? What makes me different from that random buxom blonde? Besides the obvious, of course."

He kissed her cheek. "I'm not in love with the buxom blonde," he whispered.

"But you were in love with me? A complete stranger you had met only several hours before?"

Superman's jaw dropped. Oops. How had she just wormed that out of him? She was quite the interviewer. He would have to be more careful. He cleared his throat and replied, "But you weren't a complete stranger to me, Lois. Remember, Clark Kent has been looking for you for years."

"Uh-huh." She chewed on that for a moment. "Why? Why didn't he give up, like everyone else?"

"Not everyone else. Perry and your father never gave up."

"You're changing the subject. And don't tell me that you convinced Clark to keep looking for me because you had fallen in love with me. You didn't show up until February and he was still looking for me in January. Are you telling me that Superman and Clark Kent have known each other for years?"

He sighed. "Truthfully, no."

"So?"

"You'll have to ask Clark yourself." Superman winced. He really didn't want to have that conversation. How could he stop her from asking Clark that question? "But I think it's because he became obsessed with the mystery of your disappearance."

"The mystery or me?" Lois sat up straight. "Did Clark Kent become obsessed with me? And then he told you all about me and you developed a crush on me, too?" She shook her head with that chain of thoughts. "You stole me away from him!" she accused him as she poked his chest with her index finger.

He chuckled at her leap of conclusions. "Hardly."

"What's that supposed to mean? That Clark Kent doesn't have any qualities a woman like me could fall for? He's sweet and kind and cute and… and courteous… and funny… and…"

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" he asked wryly.

"Maybe," she said with a pout. "You aren't much of a friend, Superman. What chance did Clark Kent have after I met you, made love to you? None." He had been demoted from Amazing to Superman. "Is that why you brought me out to Smallville, leaving him back in Singapore? So you could get in good with me before I even met him?"

"If it's any consolation, he wouldn't have made a move either because you're married."

"That hasn't stopped you," she grumbled.

Superman had to nip this conversation thread in the bud. "Lois, you're making a mountain out of a molehill. Firstly, you made the move, not me. And secondly, publicly, there can be no 'us.' Lex Luthor has made it perfectly clear that he plans on dragging me and Clark Kent down into the mud, if there is even a suggestion of impropriety on our parts."

Lois sniffed. "Like staying up all night making love to his wife on Christmas Eve?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "Or any other night for that matter."

"So what you're saying is that I'm still screwed?" She harrumphed.

Superman took her gently by the shoulders and looked deep in her eyes. "What I am saying is that I love you so much that I will wait for you, no matter how long it takes for you to rid yourself of that horrible man. You are worth it."

"Really?" Lois asked, a hint of a smile appearing on her lips.

"Definitely."

"I can't screw this up?"

He laughed. "Well, if you went running through the streets of Metropolis yelling at the top of your lungs that you had had an affair with Superman…"

"Or wrote up an article entitled *Details of Superman's Super Love Making*?" Lois giggled.

"Cat would just love that." Superman laughed.

"Wouldn't she, though?" She grinned. "Of course, I'd have to sell it to the *Daily Whisper*. It's too racy for the *Daily Planet*."

"Definitely."

Lois shifted herself onto his lap, straddling him. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Yet it was Superman who pulled her to him with another mind-blowing kiss.

"So only the ultimate betrayal would make you stop loving me?" she whispered.

"Uh-huh."

"Then I'd better be good."

"Uh-huh," he murmured, still kissing her. Not really paying attention to her barrage of questions.

"Where do you live?"

Superman pulled away from her, the cold water of her inquiry dripping down his face. "What?"

"Do you live at the Smallville house?"

He shook his head. "Lois."

"I can't help it. I don't know anything about you. I need to know more."

"How much more?" he inquired hesitantly.

She threw her hands into the air. "Everything."

"I thought you wanted to figure it out on your own. Prove to yourself that you still have the right stuff."

Lois put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "I have the right stuff!"

He raised an eyebrow.

"I know that there's another side to you that you haven't let me see since I got my sight back."

"What do you mean?"

"I know that you don't always wear the blue suit," she said, pointing at his chest.

"I know you know that. You know that side of me better than anyone." Superman kissed her nose.

"Well, yes." She smiled naughtily. "But, sometimes, you wear regular clothes."

"Do I?" His jaw dropped. She had noticed that, had she? Her curiosity was insatiable.

"Who are you when you aren't in the blue suit?"

He picked her up and spun her around. "That's for me to know and you to figure out, Ms. Metropolis's Best Investigative Reporter."

"Whoa! Look at all the pretty lights. Amazing, you decorated my apartment," she said, noticing his handiwork for the first time.

He set her down by the Christmas tree. "Merry Christmas, Lois."

"I think I might be falling for you, Mr. Amazing," she whispered, gazing at the tree. Then she turned to him with a mischievous expression. "Let me have another peek under that blue suit, this time without being blind." She batted her eyelashes. "Please."

Superman picked her up and set her on his hips. "I don't know, Lois. Making love to me might be different without the touch-and-feel method."

Lois breathed into his ear. "It could be better." She sent a shiver down his spine as he tried to think how it could possibly be better.

"I'm trying to be good, Lois. You're making it hard."

She grinned, then breathed into his ear again. "Hard or difficult or both?"

"Lois Lane!" Superman gasped with a chuckle that got muffled by her kiss, which melted him to the floor. He was finally able to pull himself away a minute later. He sat back and wrapped his arms around his knees. "You've got to stop tempting me."

Lois crawled towards him on all fours, her long hair partially covering her face. "Why?"

Superman zipped to the other side of the couch. "Because if I make love to you again, I won't be able to stop." He shrugged. "Remember, no resistance."

She kept crawling towards him. "Who wants you to stop?"

"Lois." He zipped to the other side of the room. "I should go."

"No!" Lois stopped and sat down on the floor next to the Christmas tree. "Oooh, presents."

Superman picked her up and moved her away from the tree. "Wait until I'm gone."

Lois pressed a kiss to his lips. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"No, I don't think so, Lois," he murmured. "I'll be too busy doing the breast stroke in the Arctic."

She smiled and ran a finger down his chest. "You are hot."

"It's probably best if we don't see each other alone like this for a while," Superman told her.

Lois frowned. "I know." She leaned her head against his chest. "Can I add one condition to that?"

"Hmmm."

"Can I get your first New Year's kiss?"

"Who else would I kiss?" Superman murmured, running his fingers through her hair. He held her in silence for the longest time, not wanting to let go, not wanting to say another word. Then he kissed the top of her head, before he floated towards the window.

Lois watched him go, her eyes brimming with tears.

He stopped at the window and blew her a kiss. "I've only ever been with Lois Lane," he whispered and disappeared out the window.

***

Lois ran to the window, but he was already gone. A blur in the night to be confused with Santa Claus. She shut and locked the window. She turned off the Christmas lights and stumbled to her bedroom for a good cry.

When Lois opened her bedroom door, she saw boxes of gifts scattered here and there around her room. Instantly her tears disappeared. With childish glee, she ran inside to start opening them. Inside each one was a box of chocolates from a different country. Switzerland. Belgium. France. Germany. Norway. Brazil. Austria. England. Venezuela. Canada. Spain. Portugal. Japan. And, of course, America. Dark chocolate. Milk chocolate. Mexican Hot Chocolate. Liqueur filled chocolates. Maple filled chocolates. Cream filled. Caramel Chocolates. Coconut Chocolates. Boxes of chocolates. Handmade chocolates from specialty shops. Bars of chocolates. Even a bag of chocolate kisses. More chocolates than it would take her a year to eat. Okay, maybe not a year. She laughed and laughed until the tears ran down her face. Mr. Amazing certainly was her chocolate in a world of vanilla.

***

Lucy pulled herself out of bed, yawning. What a nightmare. She felt like she had lived through sixteen Christmas Eves, each worse than the previous, but her Clark once again had saved the day. She smiled, wishing she had taken him up on that little time travel excursion to his parents' house he had offered. She could be there right now, making love to her husband. She closed her eyes and thought about that with a sigh.

She dragged herself out to the living room, then rubbed her eyes. Where in the world was she? Disneyland? Weren't they just going to skip Christmas this year? Oh crap, that's right. Her

roommate was a jolly Christmas elf. God, Lucy wished she could drink coffee. Dimensional humor sucked. At least one member of each Lois and Clark couple just had to be obsessed with the holidays, didn't they? She sighed.

Lucy poured herself a glass of orange juice and tried to pull her robe tighter. How did she get so big? Her belly was bigger than her boobs and she still had what, six or seven weeks to go? How was she going to hide this baby from anyone for much longer? Especially her roommate? She finished her orange juice and returned to her bedroom. That robe was definitely making her look pregnant, not fat. She shook her head. She missed being able to be herself at home. Grabbing a big bulky sweater from the laundry pile, she put it on over her pajama top. There. Now she just looked fat, not pregnant. She wanted to lie down on the bed and cry.

There was a knock at the door and Lucy stumbled down the hall to answer it. "Who is it?" she asked. She really hoped it wasn't Lex Luthor. She didn't want to deal with him again. Ever. Been there, done that. Scratched him off her list with both permanent marker and White-Out.

"Clark and Sam, sweetie," Sam answered. "We've brought breakfast."

Lucy opened the door and let them in. "Can I please have caffeine? Just today," she begged Sam.

"No, Lucy. Not with your high blood pressure." He kissed her cheek. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Sam." Lucy turned to Clark. He looked like she felt. "Up late, Clark?"

He took a quick glance around. "Couldn't sleep." Then he kissed her cheek and caressed her belly. "Merry Christmas, Lucy. How are you two feeling this morning?"

"Fat." She waddled away from the front door and plopped herself down on the sofa. "Wasn't there a point recently when I lost weight instead of gaining it?"

"There will be again, soon." Clark reminded her. "I brought croissants and pain au chocolat from Paris. Your favorite boulangerie."

Lucy blew him a kiss. "They were open? Oh, Clark, you're the best." She watched him look around again.

"She's not up yet. Mrs. Claus was up late last night decorating the apartment."

Sam nodded, looking around. "It looks nice. She does love the holidays."

Clark slyly grinned and Lucy raised a brow at him. He ducked quickly into the kitchen with the pastries. Guess Lois had some Super help with the decorating. Lucy wasn't going to get involved. If they screwed up Superman's life, that was their business. She was done playing chaperone. At least they hadn't woken her up. But then again, she had been sleeping like a hibernating bear recently. "I wonder if the speed healing will mean no stretch marks. That would be a bonus."

Sam brought her a blanket and sat down next to her. "How are you feeling?"

Hadn't they covered that? "Fine, Sam. No pain, no dizziness. Just exhaustion. Hey, Clark, ever hear of an elf from the fifth dimension who calls himself Mister—"

Clark came out of the kitchen, bringing a steaming mug of hot cocoa with whipped cream for her.

Lucy sighed appreciatively. "How do you do that?" He always knew what she needed. No matter what the dimension, Clark Kent was simply the best.

Sam clapped. "Oh, that looks good." He went into the kitchen for one of his own.

Clark handed a mug to her with a slight bow. "For you, milady."

"I love you, you know," she said. "You give me hope that I'll survive this dimension and make it home again."

Clark knelt down beside her with a grin. "Who knew the power chocolate had over you, Lois?" he murmured, gazing up at her. He glanced over his shoulder down the hall, then back at her, lowering his voice even more. "I love you, too."

Lucy took a sip of her cocoa. "You going to tell her today?"

Fear showed in his eyes. "God, no."

She placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "She'll still love you, you big chicken."

Clark gulped and she could see that he didn't believe her.

"How could she not?" She smiled at him.

"Merry Christmas!" Lois came in full of energy and bounce, fully showered and dressed. "I've got the new Elvis Christmas CD. Gift from Perry."

Clark smiled at Lucy's groan. "We'll survive," he told her. Then he stood up to greet Lois.

Lucy murmured with a sigh, "You might, but I won't." She watched him glow just at the sight of Lois.

Sam sat down beside her again. "Missing Kal?"

Lucy pulled her gaze away from Clark and turned to Sam. "More every day."

"Does he look at you the way Clark looks at her?" Sam asked, staring at Lois and Clark talking about Superman's croissants.

"Uh-huh." She nodded, taking another sip of cocoa. This Clark used to look at her that way, too. It was hard to let go. "Facing the inevitable, instead of fighting it?"

Sam nodded. "You too?"

"That obvious, huh?" Lucy asked with a nervous chuckle.

"It's hard when someone you love stops looking at you like that. It must be especially hard when he also looks exactly like someone else you love."

Lucy swallowed. "Yeah."

"I've got gifts!" Lois chimed in, sliding a pile out from under the tree.

"I thought we weren't exchanging gifts this year," said Lucy.

"That was before Lois returned," Sam murmured.

"Great." Lucy pressed her lips together. Couldn't she just wallow in misery over missing her husband?

"Lucy." Lois handed her a box.

"Uh, thank you, Lois," Lucy said, sitting up. She hadn't expected anything from the queen of sour grapes.

"Clark." Lois handed him a similar box.

"Thank you, Lois."

"Just a little something I had made up for team Superman." Lois grinned.

Clark and Lucy exchanged a worried glance and started to open their gifts.

Lucy opened her box and a peal of laughter escaped. "Thank you, Lois. I love it."

Clark glanced over at her. It was a t-shirt, XL, which read on the front *Not Lois Lane* and on the back *Not Lola Luthor.* He chuckled and then glanced down at his gift with even more dread.

Slowly, he opened his box and then glanced at Lois. "Ah, thanks, Lois. You know I'll never wear this, right?"

Lois laughed. "You can around your apartment."

Clark pulled out a blue Superman t-shirt with a red and yellow Superman emblem on the front, then he turned it around for Lucy and Sam to read the back. *Lois Lane's Personal Superhero.*

Lucy laughed at how accurate it was. "Aww. Isn't she sweet?" She looked over to Lois. "Are you sure that box was meant for Clark?"

Lois glared at her. "Of course."

Okay, Lucy had to fix this. She couldn't have Lois hating her. "I've got a gift for you, too, Lois." Lucy put her hand in Sam's and he gave her an extra pull to get to her feet. She went into her room and returned a few minutes later. "I'm sorry, I didn't wrap

it." She handed a business card to Lois. "Merry Christmas, Lois."

Lois looked down at the card. "Moonbeam Mayhem, Attorney at Law, Divorce." She looked at Lucy with tears glistening in her eyes.

"She's the best — psychic, really. She's waiting for your call," Lucy told her.

"Thank you, Lucy." Lois actually hugged her. It must be the holiday spirit.

Sam smiled. "She's good, Lois. Trustworthy, too. She's right on the first floor, so you don't even have to leave the building."

Lois didn't look thrilled about staying within the building, but she smiled politely anyway. "I'll just put this in my room."

Clark's brow furrowed. "Wait a minute, Sam. This is your friend on the first floor?" He looked at Lucy. She nodded.

"An old friend, actually," Lucy replied, sitting back down on the sofa.

"How can you have an old friend, here, Lucy?" Clark asked, apprehensive. "I thought I knew everyone you knew here."

"I do have my own life, Clark. Besides, she remembers me from back home."

His eyes widened and he knelt down next to her, lowering his voice. "So, when you say psychic, you mean *psychic*?"

"Wouldn't it be nice to see Lex's next step before he makes it?" Lucy asked innocently.

"I could kiss you," he whispered, staring up at her.

Lucy swallowed, patting his hand and placing a smile on her face. "That's just the Elvis music. Here she comes. Merry Christmas, Clark."

Clark continued to stare at her for a moment, and she wondered if he was thinking of Perry's Halloween party as she was. "You do too much for me," he whispered. He kissed her cheek before he stood up.

Lois squinted as she looked between the two of them. Lucy tried to put an innocent expression on her face, but feared that just made her appear more suspicious.

Clark reached under the tree and pulled out a rectangular gift, handing it to Lucy. "From Kal."

"No!" she gasped, glancing at the card. He had written on the note, *Open when alone.* She looked at Clark with love and a heartfelt smile. "Excuse me." She placed her hand in Sam's again and got another pull off the couch.

As she tottered down the hall to her room, she heard Lois say to her father, "Wow, I didn't realize how weak the high blood pressure made her. Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine. Now, where's that gift I made for you?"

Lucy closed her bedroom door and sat on her bed. She took a deep breath, then tore the paper. It was a framed photo from her wedding. There were her mom and dad, Perry and Jimmy, Martha and Jonathan, Mike — her guardian angel — and, of course, the most handsome man she knew. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Oh, Clark, I love it," she murmured.

"*I knew you would,"* she heard him reply.

She sat on her bed, staring at the photo as his conversation with Lois drifted in and out.

"*How did you get her a gift from her husband? Daddy said he's off on assignment somewhere,"* Lois asked Clark.

"*Superman brought it back with him,"* he replied. "*He knows how much she misses him."*

Lucy smiled. Good ol' Superman.

"*How romantic."* Lois sighed. "*What did she get you?"*

Nothing, thought Lucy. She really was a heel.

"*She did me some favors this week without telling me."*

"Clark," Lucy spoke aloud to him. "It's bad when I can hear you smiling at her from the other room. She's bound to notice how much Clark Kent is in love with her if you don't tone it down a little."

She heard him chuckle in response.

"*Is something funny?"* Lois asked.

"*That's some t-shirt you got her,"* Clark told her. "*That should stop Lex."*

"Nice save," Lucy murmured.

"*Let's go grind some coffee, Lois,"* he told her.

Lucy giggled softly. Guess he didn't like her eavesdropping.

Sam knocked on her door. "Everything okay?"

She held up the photo to him.

"Wow! Your mother looks great," he said, sitting next to her on the bed. Then he coughed at an attempt to cover his faux pas. "I mean you make a beautiful bride, sweetie."

Lucy set down the photo and hugged him. "Thanks, Daddy. I love you, too."

"I thought I could give Clark a moment alone to give Lois her gift."

"That's trusting of you," Lucy said, with a raised brow. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Sam held up a note card, which he handed to her. "Clark's gift to me."

Lucy opened the card. *I promise to be a proper gentleman to Lois Lane at all times.* There was no signature, but the card was in Clark's handwriting.

"Really?" She laughed.

Sam nodded.

"Wow, Sam. You know what a promise from him is?"

"An ironclad contract." He beamed. "He'd kill himself before breaking it."

Lucy laughed. "Better not show that to Lois."

"I know." Sam tucked it into his pocket with a smile. He gazed at her, taking her hand. "I wish he had given me a similar card when I moved in here with you."

"Oh crap, that promise applies to me too," she gasped in sarcastic shock. "At least my virtue is safe now." She laughed, rubbing her huge tummy.

"Ha-ha."

"Come on, help this beached whale return to the party." Lucy slid the photo under her pillow before Sam pulled her off the bed. "I'm sorry I don't have anything for you, Sam," she said, holding on to his arm.

"You gave my daughter back her sight. I'm good."

"I don't know, Sam. That was a double-edged sword." Lucy shook her head.

"I know she's a wild card sometimes. But she doesn't want Lex to get her either. She'll be good."

Lucy patted him on the chest. "You keep believing that, Sam." *And I'll keep an eye on her,* she thought. She didn't trust Lois an inch. She knew herself and she knew that this Lois was sneakier than she was.

***

Lois straightened the waist of her new dress from Clark, the sweetie, and checked her hair in the mirror. She was going to have to get it cut one of these days. She hated that it took forever to dry, and the weather in Metropolis was too cold to just let it air dry. If they would just let her out of the apartment…

It seemed almost ridiculous to dress up to see a lawyer, but she wanted to make a good first impression. Her back pay from Mr. Olsen had finally arrived, and after taxes and deductions for her rent for the past three years, she wouldn't have much to live on if they didn't hire her back full-time at the paper. Sure, she could survive a little while longer. But food in Metropolis was expensive and her wardrobe dismal. Plus, she would have to replace her laptop. Mr. Olsen said he would rehire her in a minute, just on the recommendation of Perry, but he had promised his new editor sole hiring and firing rights for the news staff as part of his deal.

She had met with Gareth McTinney on Monday afternoon, and he seemed like an upright sort of guy. He knew what he was

doing. Firstly, he arrived a week early to start as editor, because he was so appalled at Cat Grant's handling of the whole Lois Lane rescue story. According to Lucy, their new boss had left London this weekend, after Christmas, and walked into the bullpen first thing Monday morning, fuming mad. He didn't want anyone from the *Daily Planet* to be portrayed as a fool, especially by his own paper. He told Lois that he was sure there were "halfwits" on the news staff, but he certainly wasn't going to advertise it on the front page. Cat had been demoted back to gossip — even worse, Hollywood celebrity gossip — and shipped off to California for three months to cover the award circuit. Lois smiled wickedly. Good riddance.

Gareth called Lois in to apologize for Cat's imprudent headlines about her rescue, but he hadn't hired Lois back full-time though. He agreed with Cat on one thing: the Superman story. She could do freelance for the *Daily Planet* until she turned in all she could find out about the Man of Steel. *Cool nickname for Mr. Amazing*, she thought. If she was indeed the best investigative reporter the paper had ever seen or even in the top two (hello, Clark Kent), she had to prove it by bringing in something new about Superman. Something that nobody knew about him. Since she was still working on figuring out what everyone else did know, it was an uphill battle. And as she also didn't want to alienate Mr. Amazing himself by revealing what she *did* know, she felt stuck in a ravine without a rope.

Lois was still trying to get access to the *Daily Planet*'s archives to read the old articles about him. She was sure that would be her goldmine. But she was still under what felt like house arrest. Clark said Superman was too worried about her safety to let her walk around without an escort. So her father, or one of the police cadets that Perry had assigned as bodyguards, or — if she was lucky — Clark accompanied her whenever she left the apartment. In the past week, she had gone to the grocery store once. The Daily Planet building once. And just out for a stroll to get some fresh air once. She was going stir crazy.

Lex Luthor was still out and about in Metropolis. Apparently he was shopping for a new home. *Lovely*. Jaxon kept bothering Lucy and Clark trying to find her whereabouts, but he was lucky to get the time of day from them. She hadn't even met Gareth at his office, but at Mr. Olsen's, so that Jaxon wouldn't be apprised of her location. Mr. Olsen had his legal team working on a way to fire Jaxon Xavier, but technically he hadn't done anything illegal. The website he designed was outstanding, and his research was second-to-none apparently. Lex Jr. was also still out and about somewhere in the world, doing who knew what. Her safety was still at risk. So home she stayed. Bored stiff.

Lois wished she hadn't left her laptop in the Congo all those years ago, when she had climbed into the shipping crate full of illegal guns. Then, at least she would be able to surf the web for information about Superman and also feel some connection to the world at large.

Lucy and Clark were tight-lipped about Superman as well. And Mr. Amazing could have been just a blur in the sky, as far as she was concerned. Lois hadn't seen him at all for three days. Oh sure, she heard this and that from Lucy, Clark, and even Barry — who was feeling bad about the whole rescue interview fiasco too — as well as the radio and the TV, about the whereabouts of the Man In Blue, but she saw nothing of him personally. On the fourth and fifth day, she had seen him, but he was flying off to some emergency somewhere. She didn't think he had even seen her. And here it was seven days since their intense Christmas Eve date and she still had no idea when or where they would next meet up. She wouldn't be surprised if it would be days still. No notes. No contact whatsoever. If it weren't for the boxes of chocolate in her bedroom to keep her company, she would have almost begun to wonder if she had dreamed up the whole thing. This was New Year's Eve and she was trying to keep her hopes up for at least one appearance and a kiss.

Mr. Amazing loves me, she kept telling herself. He told her that she was the only woman with whom he had ever been intimate. A Cheshire cat-sized grin slid onto her lips. So he hadn't been intimate with Ultra Woman. Good to know. Lois Lane — one, Ultra Woman — zero.

Lois reckoned the best way to see her man was ridding herself of her husband. So, here she was standing at the mirror by her front door, checking herself before walking into the elevator and going down a whole four stories to the ground floor to meet with Moonbeam Mayhem, Divorce Attorney at law. At least she didn't need an escort to visit people within her own building. She sighed. Her father was going to escort her to Moonbeam's anyway and then head out to Uncle Mike's for lunch. She wanted to go to Uncle Mike's for lunch. He made the best chocolate raspberry torte. She shook her head. If she kept eating chocolate like she was, she would soon look like Lucy. As it was, she was exercising three hours every morning just to work off all the calories of the chocolates she had eaten the night before. A vicious cycle. But it kept her occupied.

"Ready, Princess?" her father asked.

"Clark did say he'd be dropping by for dinner, right?" She grimaced. That sounded a little too anxious. Seeing Clark was the only thing keeping her withdrawal symptoms for Mr. Amazing at bay. He distracted her from missing Mr. Amazing; sometimes, she worried, too much. He was kind and funny and friendly — and present. Somehow, he was like her Amazing patch. Whenever he was around, she didn't miss Amazing so much. Not a good sign.

Lois hadn't thought much about the crush that Clark Kent might have on her. Clark liked her, as far as she could tell, just as a friend. Anyway, he had that secret girlfriend. She wondered how close of a girlfriend she was. He had spent most of Christmas with them, saying — when she pushed him on the subject — that he had been able to spend Christmas Eve with his girlfriend instead. She was spending Christmas with family. And here he was spending New Year's Eve with Lucy and her. Where was this so-called girlfriend? Stuck at home, he had told her. Must be some snowstorm.

"Yes, Lucy's been teaching him how to play cards." Her father's words brought Lois out of her reverie and back into the present. "Maybe you two could help Clark with his poker. Apparently, he loses whenever he plays Perry."

"Well, Perry cheats. Plus, Clark lacks a poker face," Lois said. "With Clark, what you see is what you get. He doesn't know how to hide anything; it's right there plastered on his forehead."

Her father looked at her as if he didn't believe a word she said. "Shall we go?"

They rode down the elevator in silence while she contemplated the expression she had seen on her father's face. As they stepped out, she turned to him. "Daddy, is there something I don't know about Clark?"

Her father shook his head. She didn't know if he meant "no", or if he just couldn't believe she was asking such a stupid question.

"If there is anything you want to know, I'm sure Clark would tell you, Princess. He's a fairly honest guy," he responded.

She shrugged. "See, lack of a poker face."

Her father shook his head again and knocked on the door.

"Coming, coming!" Moonbeam called from inside. Didn't sound too professional to Lois.

The door opened and Lois's jaw dropped. "Star!?"

"Lois!"

The women embraced.

"You've met?" her father stammered.

"Daddy, this isn't Moonbeam. This is my friend, Star. She used to do my psychic readings before I left for the Congo," Lois

explained.

"I told you not to go on that trip, if I recall properly."

Her father's jaw dropped this time.

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty." Lois rolled her eyes.

Moonbeam moved away from the door and they walked inside. "Really? Who told you that you'd miss out on true love if you went on that trip? Me. As it happened, you disappeared and I realized you would end up married to the worst man imaginable. And someday, you were going to need a divorce lawyer when you finally did make your way back to Metropolis. So, I went to law school and changed my name to Moonbeam. More professional, don't you think? I practically had to beg Lucy to give you my card. Of course, that was before they found you; before they even realized you had married that jerk. How's Lucy doing anyway? I haven't seen her in forever. She's as big as a house, I bet."

Lois's mouth opened and then closed. And then opened and closed, again. She looked at her father, who smiled and shrugged.

"Have fun, Princess," he told her with a kiss to her cheek. "Bye, Moonbeam. We still on for tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it, Sam." She beamed with a wave, shutting the door behind him.

"You're dating my father? Isn't that a breach of legal etiquette or something?" Lois finally gasped.

"Sit down, Lois. Perry invited him to City Hall's soiree and he couldn't invite you because your psycho husband is still after you, and well, Lucy, she just wouldn't go, not after… and so he invited me. We're going to have fun. That's all I see."

"Sorry." Lois shook her head, sitting down on the sofa. "That just came out left field."

"That's okay, I'm used to it." Moonbeam waved it off. "So, I've filed a petition for a restraining order against Lex Luthor on your behalf, being that he's followed you back to Metropolis and tried to kidnap you. Failed, but still tried."

Lois smiled. Lucy hadn't been kidding. Moonbeam was exactly the type of divorce lawyer she needed. "Great!"

"I've also drafted up a new will I want you to look over. I'm guessing you don't want him having access to anything of yours, including your body after you die… in case you die before this whole divorce is finalized."

Lois leaned forward. "Will it ever be finalized?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure. We're going to do a sneak attack on him. He won't know what hit him."

Lois felt an overwhelming surge of emotions. "Star, can I just say I love you?"

Her lawyer held up her hands. "Whoa there, girl, my name is Moonbeam, now. I can see…." She stopped and tilted her head to the side and then smiled brightly. "You've met him. Oh, Lois, I'm so happy for you. It took you three, no, almost four years, to finally connect up with your true love. Oh. Oh. Oh." She hugged her and Lois melted.

Mr. Amazing was her true love; she knew it and her heart swelled. He was the one she was supposed to have met if she hadn't gone to the Congo? She couldn't believe her rotten luck. Why hadn't she listened to Star in the first place? Lois knew now that she did love him.

"You must be ecstatic. Tell me, how long did it take you to realize that Clark was the one? Five minutes? Ten? An hour?" Moonbeam snapped her fingers. "Lois?"

There were birds chirping and twinkling lights shining around her head. *Clark?* Clark Kent was her true love? No, that couldn't be right. "But he's not Mr. Amazing," she finally stammered.

"He's not?" Moonbeam studied her for a minute. All sixty seconds of a minute. "Oh. I see what happened. You're confused. My mistake. I should have seen that. Never mind."

"*Never mind?!*" Lois's face fell as her heart sank. "Are you saying I lost out on true love with Clark, again, this time because of Mr. Amazing?" She knew there was a connection between her and Clark. She had sensed it the first time she read his first story in the *Daily Planet*. She had felt it that first time they touched. Oh, what had she done? How was she ever going give up Mr. Amazing's wonderful chocolate sensation for Clark's ho-hum vanilla?

"No, I'm saying that your Mr. Amazing is your true love. I got my lines crossed."

What? Mr. Amazing was indeed her true love? How could he be her true love when she had just convinced herself, not two seconds before, that Clark was her true love? That wasn't true love. That was cheating on true love. She felt like she had just been clobbered by a baseball bat. The stars and chirping birds were back. She felt lightheaded, almost faint.

"Lois, are you okay?" Moonbeam waved a hand in front of her face, but she couldn't focus. "You look like you have low blood sugar. Let me get you a cookie and some water."

Lois lay down on the sofa. How could she do that to Mr. Amazing? Give him up so easily? For plain old Clark Kent of all people. Why, if Mr. Amazing was her true love, was she so drawn to Clark? Nothing made sense anymore.

"Here you go, Lois. Nibble on this and see if it makes you feel better." Moonbeam handed her a shortbread cookie and set the glass of water on the coffee table.

"Did you say I was confused?" Lois asked, taking a bite of the cookie.

"Yes. But don't worry, not for very much longer. When you finally see the light…" Moonbeam's eyes opened wide. She stood up and started pacing.

Lois felt better and sat up. She had never seen her friend so agitated. "Star… Moonbeam, are you all right?"

Moonbeam stopped pacing and turned to Lois. "We've got to get started on this divorce. Today. No time to lose. You've got a busy month ahead of you."

"I do?"

"Yes, now, what do you want from Lex Luthor for all of your pain and suffering? Fifty million? Five billion? What?"

Lois sighed. "My freedom and my name."

"That's it?" Moonbeam sat down beside her, picking up her legal pad.

Lois nodded. "That's it. I don't want his money. I never did."

"I can get you your freedom, but it will take some sacrifices on your end, and a bit of time."

"I can wait."

Moonbeam raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Lois Lane, you are the most impatient woman I have ever met."

Lois chuckled. "For Mr. Amazing, I can wait."

Moonbeam shook her head like she didn't believe her. "Even if it means you can't make love with him again for over a year?"

Lois gasped, choking on her cookie. "Another year?" She had been going crazy just because she hadn't made love to him during these last ten days.

Moonbeam slapped her on the back. "Don't worry, it's not going to be that long before you've got him where you want him again."

Lois sighed with relief. *Thank God.*

"Now, I cannot guarantee your name. Actually, I'm pretty much not going to be able to get that for you."

Lois raised an eyebrow. She figured it would be easier to get her name than her freedom. Star always did speak to her on another level, seeing things Lois could never understand until it slapped her in the face. Like that trip to the Congo. She should have listened to Star on that one.

"Lois, I've got to tell you that to get what you want, you're going to have to give up some things you aren't going to want to

lose. Something you thought you always desired. Something you never knew you wanted." Moonbeam gasped and she placed her hand on Lois's arm, her eyes sad. "I'm so sorry, Lois." She hugged her. "So sorry."

Lois had no idea what Moonbeam was talking about, but it didn't seem good.

Moonbeam caught her breath and then continued, "It's not going to be easy. And, frankly, it's going to be painful. But if you can withstand all that, you will end up with what you want and more. Your life will finally be happy, so happy I'd even call it super." Her eyes opened wide. "No! Really? Wow! I didn't see that coming."

"What?" Lois was dying of curiosity now.

Moonbeam smiled. "Lois Lane, be glad you've got me under attorney-client privilege, 'cause, honey, you're going to need it."

"Oh." Lois smiled, understanding finally dawning. Moonbeam must have realized who Mr. Amazing was. She did say her life would be Super. And happy. Happy would be nice for a change.

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Lois tried to look in the windows, but the curtains were drawn. She pulled out her lock pick and was about to use it, but then noticed the wires. Sensors. Dang. Sensors meant an alarm system. An alarm system meant she had to know the code. Birthdays, anniversaries, the date his parents died. Too many options and she didn't know how many tries she had.

Why would Clark have an alarm system on his childhood home? What was he hiding? Her curiosity was piqued. She wanted her old laptop and Clark said that he had rescued it from her hotel in the Congo. She couldn't believe her good fortune, but then he hadn't given it to her. She had already checked his apartment the other day. It wasn't there. She started wandering around the perimeter of the house. She hoped she hadn't made this trip to Smallville for nothing.

Behind the house was an old barn. Might as well check it out — maybe he used it for storage. It was dark and dusty in the old barn; she bet it hadn't been used since his parents died, since there was no security system. The wind was blowing and it was nice to get out of the chill. The forecast on the radio said snow. Snow in Kansas meant feet, not inches.

Perhaps she should have just asked Clark for her laptop instead of coming out here herself. Maybe this time, he would've given it to her. Right. Then she'd still be stuck in her apartment in Metropolis. No thanks!

Lois had stolen Lucy El's I.D. and had gotten her hair cut short like Clark's assistant. What had they called it — a pixie cut? She wouldn't miss the long tresses. Lex had liked that style, not her. He hadn't let her cut her hair the entire time they were together. Control freak, anyone? Then she had borrowed some of Lucy's extra big, baggy clothes. Neither Clark nor Superman had brought her any more clothing from Clark's house. Mr. Amazing had brought her here — she was sure this was the same place. It was just as cold and smelled like hay. Of course, she was on a farm… in a barn. Mr. Amazing knew Clark Kent's passwords, knew that Clark had stored her stuff here when he cleaned out her apartment before Lucy El moved in.

Lois didn't like Lucy. There was something off about her, but she couldn't put a finger on what. And who chose to dress like this on purpose? Ugh. And who wore glasses without any correction? After cutting her hair and stealing Lucy's clothing, she had taken the first flight to Topeka, rented a car (with a credit card she stole from Clark's wallet) and bam, straight into an alarm system. Damn!

As she walked around the barn, Lois noticed something peculiar. It was warmer on the right hand side of the barn, as if something was blocking the wind. She reached out her hand until she felt something in the nothingness. She pulled her hand back, surprised. She felt almost blind again, because she could feel something but not see it. It felt like material, possibly a tarp. She reached out once more, grabbed it with her fingers and gave a hard tug. Suddenly, a huge golden platform with two chairs and a console with knobs and switches appeared in front of her.

An invisibility tarp? That seemed too advanced for a farm boy from Kansas. This machine must belong to Mr. Amazing. Clark must be holding on to it for him. Amazing must really trust Clark. That's why Clark had a security system on the house — because of Superman.

The chairs looked to be almost a hundred years old. What was this thing? She sat down in one chair and ran her fingers over the console. As she did so, several lights came on and she snatched her hand to her chest.

A male voice spoke, "Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved."

"What the—" she gasped.

"Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized."

This machine knew who she was? How was that possible? And she had authorization to use it, whatever it was? Well, only one way to find out. Lois pulled the lever in front of her and suddenly felt and sounded like she had been dropped into a vat of Jell-o, then pulled out again, clean.

Lois took a deep breath and then another as she realized she had gone to Oz, yet she was still in Kansas. Still in Clark's barn, only now she was surrounded by noise. Cows? Chickens? Was that a tractor? The barn was no longer empty. She stepped off the crazy contraption and ran out of the barn, hoping to jump into her car and drive back to Topeka.

Only there was a good foot of snow on the ground now, and as she lumbered around the side of the house, no car! She glanced over her shoulder and noticed lights on in the house. She ran up the front steps, opened the front door and shut it behind her, leaning against it.

It was warm and homey and smelled like home cooked food. There was a fire in the fireplace and knitting in a basket by one of the easy chairs. Books and photos on the bookshelves told her that this was not a vacation home. Someone lived here year around. Lois walked closer to the photos. That was a graduation photo of Clark with two people who looked similar to the photo Clark had on his dresser at his apartment. How could that be? Clark's parents died when he was ten. There was another photo of the same couple in a gondola in Venice. And another of Clark by himself. A photo with Clark and a younger man.

Did Clark have a brother? She raised a brow. He had never mentioned a brother. But how well did she really know him? Since he had been orphaned at a young age, what had happened to this brother? Of course, he didn't look much like Clark. Maybe she was mistaken. Lois moved on to the next photo. Here was one… she stepped back. How could that be?

It was a wedding photo. Her parents — *both* of her parents — and Clark and this couple and someone who looked like Lucy in a wedding dress. Well, a thin Lucy. She took a couple more steps back and caught sight of movement off to her left. She turned and jumped into her karate stance, only to find herself looking into a mirror. She looked at her reflection and then at the wedding photo. The bride could have been her! How come she never noticed the similarities between them before? She gasped and felt a strong desire to flee. She stumbled backwards, tripping over a footstool and landing with a crash.

"Jonathan?" called a woman's voice from upstairs. "Is that you?"

Lois looked around for a place to hide. She ran one way, then back until she just lay flat on the couch and hoped whoever that was wouldn't notice her.

"Jonathan?" The voice called again. "Clark?"

Lois pulled a blanket over herself and buried her head under a

throw pillow.

"Who's there?" The older woman from the photo — the one who looked like Clark's mom — came into the room. She wore a bandana over her hair, and old jeans and a castaway flannel shirt with streaks of yellow paint on it. She rubbed her hands on an old rag. "Hello?" she called out again. Then she noticed the overturned footstool.

Amateur mistake. Lois wanted to kick herself. She should have righted the stool.

The woman took another glance around the room, sliding carefully with her back against the wall. She pulled a baseball bat out of a niche next to the bookcase. "Jonathan? Clark? Jack?" she called again. After a pause, she said, "Lois?"

Lois's head popped up with an 'eeep'. This woman knew who she was. She covered her mouth and buried her head again.

"Lois? Is that you? Lois?"

Suddenly a hand tapped Lois's shoulder. "Lois, what in the world are you doing? You scared me to death."

She glanced up, watching the woman set down the bat and plop into the easy chair with the knitting. Lois didn't know this woman, but this woman certainly knew her.

"Did something happen in Metropolis? Did Clark fly you out? Is he still here?"

Lois pulled the pillow off her head and slowly sat up. She stared at the woman for a moment before answering, "No, Clark's at the office."

Martha looked at her. "Lois, how did you get here? The Topeka airport is closed from the storm."

Lois just stared at her. She didn't know what to say. She really didn't want to say anything about the contraption in the barn.

"Lois?" This woman looked her up and down and then asked, hesitantly, "Lucy?"

Lois gasped. She knew Lucy? "Who are you?" the reporter finally sputtered.

The woman smiled, patting Lois's leg. "Martha Kent. Clark's mother. You remember me, don't you, honey?"

Lois shook her head. "Am I dead?"

"Dead?" The woman laughed. "Why would you think that?"

"Because Clark's parents are dead. Superman told me, and I read about it in a short bio I found on him. They died when Clark was a boy." She gulped.

The woman's jaw dropped and she took a closer look at her. "Lois Lane?"

Lois nodded.

"Lois Lane… Luthor?" Martha guessed again.

"I am dead." Lois dropped her face into her hands.

"No, honey. Did you get here in the time machine?"

Time machine? What was this woman talking about?

"The big sled like thing with two chairs and a bunch of knobs?" Martha continued.

Lois nodded.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?" The woman smiled encouragingly.

"How do you know me?" Lois asked warily, not sure she liked answering questions when she didn't have any answers herself.

Martha scratched her head. "Let's just say I've heard a great deal about you from Clark and Lucy. Do you know Lucy?"

Lois nodded. "She's Clark's research assistant and she's commandeered my apartment."

Martha nodded. "That's right. She's a good friend of mine. How's she doing?"

Lois shrugged. "Fine, I guess. So, I'm not dead?"

"No." Martha laughed. "Would you like to go home?"

"Do I have to click my heels together?"

Martha continued to laugh, standing up. "Not unless you want to. Where did you park the time machine?"

"It's in the barn. Are you going to explain to me how you are suddenly alive?" Lois asked.

"I've always been alive, sweetie, nothing sudden about it."

Lois liked this batty old lady and followed her back out to the barn. "Do you know how to operate this thing?"

Martha shook her head. "I thought you did."

"No, I just touched it and it lit up. Then I pulled the lever and poof."

Martha squinted at the controls. "You know, if we messed with this thing, you could end up who knows where and when." She patted Lois's arm.

Lois gurgled. "I just want to leave Oz and go home."

"Come back to the house. I'll call Clark. He'll know what to do."

***

Clark leaned back in his chair. Life was finally getting back to normal after that crazy Red Kryptonite scare. He didn't want to go through that again. Losing control of his powers scared him. He had been so afraid he was going to hurt Lois. He looked over at her and smiled. His phone rang, jarring him out of these thoughts.

"Clark Kent."

"Clark?"

He sat up. "Mom? What's up?"

"Clark, I was wondering if you could contact Superman for me. I have a little problem I need his help with on the farm."

It wasn't like his mom to refer to Superman as separate from himself. Something was up. "Mom? Is everything all right? You do know what you're asking, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone, Mom?" he thought he heard a voice in the background.

"A friend stopped by with a minor difficulty. Best if we explain it directly to Superman when he gets here." Then he heard his mom cover the phone and add to someone with her, "Yes, sweetie, Superman is a close family friend."

"Got it, Mom," he replied. "I'll see if I can find him."

"Oh, Clark. Do me a favor," she said, lowering her voice. "Leave your wife in Metropolis."

"O-kay, Mom. I'll see you soon." Clark hung up and leaned back in his chair. "Huh?"

Lois looked up from her desk. "Who was that?"

"My mom. She needs some…" He lowered his voice as he approached her desk. "… Super help on the farm."

"Is everything alright?"

"I don't know. She sounded odd. She asked if I could contact you-know-who for her." He shook his head as she grabbed her coat. "No, Lois. Why don't you stay here? It's probably just some help in advance of the storm."

Lois sat back down. "Ugh. Stormy winter weather. I'll stay here. Thanks."

He kissed her cheek. "I'm sure I'll be home for supper."

She grabbed him and pulled him back for a real kiss. "Better be, Husband."

Clark grinned as he darted away, loosening his tie. With kisses like that, he'd be sure he was.

Less than two minutes later he was hovering above his parents' house. A quick scan showed his mom in the kitchen alone. He entered through the kitchen door.

"Hi…" he almost said 'Mom,' but a slight shake of her head stopped him.

Martha lowered her voice to less than a whisper. "I don't think she knows Superman's secret identity."

"Who?" Superman whispered back.

The kitchen door opened and Lois Lane stepped inside.

"Lois?" Hadn't he just left her in Metropolis?

"Amazing, am I ever glad to see you!" Lois ran up to him and jumped into his arms, kissing him profusely.

As much as he liked the attention, his mother said this woman didn't know Superman and Clark were the same person. He gently extricated himself from her. "Aren't you married to Clark Kent?" he asked with a glance to his mom, who winced.

"Married to Clark Kent? No! I'm married to Lex Luthor."

"*What?!*" he gasped in horror, looking again to his mom for explanation.

"Maybe some introductions are in order. Lois, this isn't your Superman," said Martha.

"What?" Lois took a step back, glaring at him. "Then *whose* Superman is he?"

"And this isn't… *our* Lois."

"Excuse me?" Superman was confused. Not *his* Lois?

"It looks like the other Clark finally found his missing *Daily Planet* colleague," Martha explained.

"Oh." Superman nodded. "But… she isn't… she isn't… Is she?" He took a couple of steps backwards and scanned Lois as she looked at him like he was nuts. There in the middle of her stomach was a small circle of cells that didn't look like anything surrounding it. Very small, young, but definitely a baby. He shook his head. "That was *his* Lois after all." He took a few more steps back, stunned. He had been so sure the pregnant woman who had visited before Christmas had been his wife. Doubt filled him. "She's pregnant," he announced.

"What?" both women stammered.

"Three, maybe four weeks," he clarified.

Lois blanched and sat down, her hands covering her stomach.

"Does Clark know?" Superman asked.

"Do you think I slept with Clark Kent?" She fumed. "Is that what this is all about?"

Martha leaned forward. "Then whose child is it, dear?"

Lois shook her head. "I've only been with one man in the past three years." She looked Superman straight in the eyes. "You."

Superman gulped. "*Me?*"

Lois stood up and crossed to him, running her fingers down his cheek. "Don't you remember, Mr. Amazing? You rescued me in Singapore. Took me away from Lex and back to Clark's old house in Smallville. I came into your shower and…" She leaned over and pressed her lips to his. "I know I was blind at the time, but I'd recognize you anywhere."

"Poor Clark," murmured Martha. "He never stood a chance."

Superman stepped away from her, again, hitting the counter behind him. "Mr. *Amazing*?" He swallowed.

Lois stepped up to him again, pinning him to the counter, pressing her body against his and whispering in his ear, "Because you are so very, very amazing in every way possible." She bit his ear and then licked down his neck. "I especially liked the floating."

Clark gulped again, glancing nervously over at his mom. He picked her up and physically moved her away from him. "Lo-is! Clark's Mom."

Martha smiled widely. "Don't mind me, Mr. Amazing. I'm learning a lot."

He shot his mom a glare. "Really, Lois, I'm not *your*… Superman."

"Then whose Superman are you? I know we promised to keep everything a secret because I'm married, but you said you loved me. Now everything's different." She looked up at him with tears dotting her eyelashes. "If we're…we're…"

"I meant, Lois, that you are friends with the *other* Superman," he tried to explain.

"Other Superman?" She looked between him and Martha, completely baffled. "There's more than one?"

Martha took Lois's hand and sat her down at the kitchen table. "The Clark you know isn't my son. Your friend Clark and the Superman you know are from another dimension."

"Another what?" Lois stared at Martha, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Superman piped in. "An alternate parallel universe where we all exist except in an altered form."

"Great. I am in Oz." Lois grabbed her head. "May I have a drink now?"

"I'll get you some water." Martha stood up and went to the cabinet.

"How about something stronger?"

"Sorry, no more alcohol for you," replied Martha.

"Crap. That's right." She shook her head. Then she focused on Superman. "You look just like him."

"In your dimension you married Lex Luthor," Superman shook his head. It was too much. His mom hadn't been making up that story.

"Who did… oh, right, Clark Kent. He's a sweet guy, and there's a definite connection there, but once a girl goes Amazing… there's no going back," she sighed with a grin at him.

Superman stepped away. "Déjà vu," he mumbled to his mom as she smiled.

"So, are you ready to tell me how you stumbled onto the time machine belonging to your dimension's Superman?" his mom asked.

Lois took a gulp from the glass of water. "I… the other me… really chose Clark Kent?" She scratched her head. "What does he have that you don't have?"

"She was engaged to Lex Luthor, but left him at the altar," Martha informed her, deftly changing the subject.

"No, Mo… Mrs. Kent. The cops busted in on the wedding before she could say 'I do' and then Lex jumped to his death," Clark corrected his mother.

"Ask our Lois. I think I'm right." She beamed at her son.

His eyes lit up. "Really? She never told me that."

"She couldn't go through with it on account that she was in love with…" Martha glanced at Los for a second and then back at him. "Clark."

His entire face brightened. "I always knew Lois Lane was one smart woman."

"*Hello?* Sitting right here. And before you two start thinking I'm some idiot for marrying the world's cruelest man, I'd like to state in my defense that I had amnesia at the time and thought I was a lounge singer by the name of —"

"Wanda Detroit?" Superman shook his head. "That seems familiar, too."

"No, Lola Dane. Wanda Detroit is the name of a character — a P.I. — in a mystery novel I had been writing when Lex kidnapped me. And one of the reasons I was trying to break into Clark's Smallville home. I think he might have my laptop stored away somewhere in there."

Superman shook his head. "Tsk. Tsk."

"Well, I *didn't* break in, Superman." Lois pressed her lips together. "As you know, Clark's got a security alarm system."

"You could have just asked him for it. I'm sure he would have given it to you," he stated the obvious.

"Really? Gee, I wish *I* had thought of that." Lois rolled her eyes. "Too late for that now. Anyway, I was getting cold, so I went into the old abandoned barn behind the house. That's when I bumped into that contraption thing. It was under an invisibility tarp."

"And you had to give it a test drive? You are as bad as my… our Lois."

Lois smiled at him as if she caught him in a trap. "You can call me your Lois anytime you want, sexy." She placed her hand on his arm.

"Thank you, Lois. But I don't date," Superman said,

removing her hand. “Let’s see about getting you back where you belong.”

Lois took his arm again, as they all walked to the barn.

“I don’t know what I did. I just sat down.” She demonstrated. “Then I touched the console.”

“Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved,” spoke the same male voice as before. Clark recognized the machine as the one the very pregnant Lois used. He gulped at the invisibility tarp as well. He had made out with the other Clark’s Lois. He would never forgive himself. That was why she didn’t want to run off with him. She knew she wouldn’t hold up under closer scrutiny. He felt like a louse for not believing his mom. He should’ve known she never would lie to him.

Lois shrugged her shoulders. “See what I mean?”

“Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized.”

“It sounds like Wells added a security device so it could only be used by select people in case a random person came across it,” Superman surmised.

“Superman: Voice Fingerprint authorized.”

“I wonder why he included Lois?” He glanced questioningly at his mom.

“Maybe it was for our Lois to use during that whole Tempus fiasco,” Martha suggested.

“Tempus… that guy who ran for mayor? He was in your dimension, too?” Lois asked, stunned.

Superman nodded. That made sense. But why would Wells leave a time machine with that other Clark at all? He turned a couple of knobs and sat down in the passenger seat.

“Are you coming with me?” Lois asked, gazing at him hopefully.

Martha stepped forward. “Do you think that’s such a good idea?” she said to her son.

“I just want to make sure Lois gets back safe. And I’d like a word with Clark.”

Lois waved. “Bye, Martha.” She pulled the lever and POP, they were back in the cold, drafty barn. “I’m glad you came back with me, Amazing. This place is kind of lonely after the Kents’ farm.”

Superman looked around the barn. “That it is.” None of his parents’ warmth and love was here. He felt a cold shiver that didn’t come from the wind. “Here I’d be but for the grace of God.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s see about getting into Clark’s house,” he said, leaving the barn.

The sky was dark grey and cast a forbidding shadow over the house. He pulled out his keys for his folks’ house and hoped they would work for Clark’s. The key fit.

“Of course, you know the password,” Lois reminded him.

He shook his head. “Luckily, I’m fast learner.” As they stepped inside the house, Superman found the security panel. He tried his mom’s birth date and it shut off.

“See, Amazing, you knew the code,” Lois announced proudly.

“I do have an inside edge.”

She looked at him curiously.

Oh, right. This Lois doesn’t know about the secret identity. He shook his head. Lois had told him that Tempus had outed this Clark and he thought everyone here knew. “I know Clark Kent very well.”

Comprehension dawned and Lois nodded.

“I’m going to search for my…” she said, rushing to the stairs.

“You aren’t going to search for anything just yet,” Superman replied, flying up and blocking her path. “First, we’re going to call Clark.”

Lois grumbled and returned to the living room. She looked Superman up and down and smiled. “Or we could visit your bedroom and I could refresh your memory. Remind you what it’s like for us to…” She licked her lips as she moved closer to him. “Float.”

“Lois. *I* don’t… float with *you*,” Superman said, picking up the phone, happy that there was a dial tone. He dialed the phone number for the *Daily Planet* in his dimension and hoped it would be the same.

A man answered the phone. “*Daily Planet*, research.”

“I’d like to speak to Clark Kent please,” he said, keeping an eye on Lois.

She was wandering around looking at the living room. “It’s strange to see everything I couldn’t before.”

“He’s out. Can I take a message?” the man replied.

Message? How could he phrase…? “Please tell him that Kal-El called.”

Lois glanced over at him, listening.

“Kal-El? *The* Kal-El? I was beginning to think you were a figment of her imagination,” said the man on the other end of the phone.

“Whose imagination?” Superman inquired, suddenly more interested.

“Your wife’s.”

“Pardon?” That threw him. “To whom am I speaking?”

“Jaxon Xavier, Research.”

Superman’s head exploded. That little computer nerd who had kidnapped Lois? “You stay away from my wife,” he growled and then shook his head. No one in this dimension knew *him* or his wife. What was he thinking?

“Transferring,” the man responded.

“Jaxon Xavier is working at the *Daily Planet*. What is the world coming to?” he murmured to himself.

“Tell me about it,” Lois piped up. “I can’t go to the newsroom because of that pinhead.”

“Hello. Clark Kent’s desk, Lucy speaking,” a woman answered with a lilting Southern type accent.

“Lucy, hello. I need to reach Clark Kent on an urgent matter. What would be the best way to contact him?” Superman asked her.

“You tell me and I’ll hunt him down. He’ll be mostly out this afternoon, but he does check in with me,” she answered. She had a nice voice, despite her strange accent.

“This is a private matter of some delicacy,” Superman informed her.

“Clark does not have any secrets from me. I’m his personal research assistant,” Lucy explained. “Anything you tell him, he’ll probably share with me anyway, so you might as well tell me what the problem is. It will save time.”

“Clark Kent has his own personal research assistant?” Superman was surprised. He glanced at Lois and she nodded with a roll of her eyes.

“Clark Kent is the best reporter this city has ever seen since Lois Lane. So yes, he has his own research assistant.” Her response seemed a bit defensive. “Do you want to leave the message or not?”

“You know all his secrets, do you?” he asked, curious. How much *had* the other Clark shared with his assistant. “Do you know Kal-El, too?”

“Very well. Probably better than you do.” Lucy was still being defensive.

Did this woman have to deal with Superman groupies constantly calling for her boss? Superman wondered. He agreed that would be a pain and thanked God again that his personal life was still secret.

“What about him?” she asked.

Superman decided to drop a bomb and see how much this woman really knew. “*I’m* Kal-El.”

“Very funny, Clark, very funny.” She wasn’t laughing. “So, I

take it you found—"

She wasn't buying it. "No. This really is Kal-El."

Lucy dropped the phone. He heard her pick it up and her breath and heart rate seemed more rapid, but she didn't say anything.

"Lucy, are you still there?" Superman asked.

"Uh-huh," she murmured. He heard her swallow.

"Could you tell him that I have what he seeks and to meet me at…" Superman wracked his brain for a way to keep their location private. He smiled as an idea hit him. "… the Fortress of Solitude?"

Silence.

"Lucy?"

He heard a soft sob. Lucy was crying. "Clark, this isn't funny, anymore. Just tell me it's you playing a joke on me. Please, 'cause you sound just like him. And you know how much I miss him."

Clark looked at the phone. *What's wrong with this woman?* "This is really Kal-El. Can you give him the message for me or not?"

Lucy sniffled, trying to get control of herself again, before responding, "Yes, Kal. I can give him the message."

Her crying was really tugging at his heartstrings. *What had Clark told this woman about Kal-El?* Superman wondered. "Are you sure you're okay, miss?"

"I'm fine. You just sound like my husband, whom I miss very much. Clark will be happy to hear that you found her, instead of her husband."

She floored him. Superman had no idea how she knew. "How did you—?"

Lucy sighed with sympathy. "No one knows Clark Kent better than I do. Not even you, Kal-El."

"I beg to differ," he retorted. Superman couldn't believe the nerve of this woman.

Lucy chuckled with a slight scoff, "I thought you might. You'd better keep an eye on her. She's not like your wife; she's slippery." And she hung up.

Superman looked at the receiver for a moment, perplexed that Lucy knew Kal-El was married; but then again, so had Jaxon. Superman turned around as he hung up. Sure enough, Lois was gone. Two seconds later, he was leading her back down the stairs. "I didn't break in here so you could sneak around, Lois. Clark will want to talk with you."

Lois plopped on the couch. "Look, technically, I'm not sneaking around. I've already spent an entire weekend here. True, I was blind at the time, but that's beside the point. I like Clark Kent, but I don't need another lecture. He's a nice guy, but for some strange reason he thinks that I need protecting. I've just been locked up for more than three years. I need my freedom, so if you don't want to have anything more to do with me, why don't you just let me go and I'll take myself back to Topeka?"

"Lex Luthor held you prisoner for over three years?" His heart ached for her.

"Yes." Lois looked down. She seemed saddened that he didn't have the other Clark's memories. "Well, as I reminded you earlier, *you* rescued me, but Clark told you… *him* where to find me."

"And you're not afraid of Lex?" he asked in surprise. "He abducted our Lois on her wedding day, leaving a clone in her place. It nearly destroyed Clark."

Lois looked at him with confusion. "Which wedding day? Lex and Lois's? Or Clark and Lois's? Do you mean that Lex kidnapped her… your Lois and forced her to marry him, but that she refused, because she was in love with Clark?"

Superman hated talking about his wedding that never was. Or technically, his marriage to the clone. "Clark's first wedding to Lois," he replied softly.

"Oh. I think Lex was planning to do something similar to Clark, only without all the wedding rigamarole. Lex figured out that Clark was still looking for me. He set a trap and was going to let him rescue the frog-eater… sorry, the clone, instead. But then I convinced Lola — the clone — to rebel against Lex and she told Clark where he could find me. Clark sent you… *my* Superman to free me from my chains."

"He had you in chains?" asked Superman with horror.

"They weren't physical chains. I can't describe it; he got inside my head somehow." Lois shivered. "He used my senses against me. Anyway, we escaped out the window just as Lex broke into my room." She sighed and gazed at him tenderly. "Who knew a man like you could exist in the world? I thought I must have been dreaming. You took me in your arms and just leapt off the 105th floor into a cyclone. I thought we were goners — I never thought you could actually fly? It was the most amazing feeling, the wind in my face and hair. I knew at that moment that you were the man I had been looking for my whole life. You were just …" She regarded him with longing. "Super."

"This was what, a month ago? And you hadn't heard of Superman before he showed up to rescue you?" Superman asked incredulously. "He's been around for almost a year here, hasn't he?"

"So I've been told." Lois nodded. "Superman rescued me a week before Christmas. I can hear the skepticism in your voice, in everybody's voices. You don't think I haven't been hearing everybody laugh at me for weeks now? But *no*, I didn't know. I think you're the reason Lex blinded me. Blinded and sequestered for ten months, I had no idea what was going on in the world, that there was even a man like you… or him. All I knew was that Lex was constantly swearing at Clark Kent. I built up this huge demi-god fantasy in my head about Clark." Lois laughed softly to herself as she thought back. "I imagined Clark Kent had all these super powers. The super power to annoy Lex. The super power to thwart his every plan. The super power to interrupt vital evil machinery. The power to find me where ever I might be. Clark was my knight in shining armor, until I met Superman… my Mr. Amazing… you." She sighed forlornly and then looked over at Superman. "You're not going to tell Clark that, are you?"

Superman just stood across the room, staring at her and shaking his head. "I can't believe how much you're like Lois." He was in awe of her.

"I am Lois." She stood up and walked over to him. "There's something about you I can't resist. I know you *are* mine. Why do you make me feel that way?"

Superman moved away from her. "You're a married woman, Lois. And I'm…"

"A married man. I heard you tell that little cockroach to stay away from 'your wife'. And you told me that you don't date. Cute." She chuckled. "But there's something between us. You can feel it, too. I'm beginning to think that you're half in love with Clark Kent's wife."

He swallowed and zipped across the room. "Clark Kent is in love with Lois Lane. I would never come between them. Their love means that much to me."

"So…" Lois slowly narrowed the gap between them. "Who is Kal-El, Superman?"

Superman cleared his throat. "I am. It's my Kryptonian name."

Lois paused. "Where have I heard that name before?" He could see the gears cranking in her mind.

"Obviously this dimension's Superman has mentioned the name before; everyone at the *Daily Planet* has heard of me. Jaxon." He grimaced. "That Lucy woman."

Lois's eyes flashed to his. "Lucy." She grinned a Cat Grant-sized smile and Superman instantly felt wary. "Yes, she's an odd sort of woman. I mean, look how she dresses." Lois fingered the

edge of her baggy shirt for some reason. He had wondered why she was dressed the way she was.

"She seems a little high strung and emotional," Superman agreed. "I'm surprised Clark would trust someone like that with all his secrets."

He didn't know how, but Lois's grin grew larger. "There must be a reason. A good reason. She misses her husband, you know, Kal-El." She walked closer to him.

"I gathered as much," Superman responded.

"Her husband is some bigwig with a secret hush-hush job, so I'm told, where he negotiates peace between warring factions and other things of the sort." Lois eyed him, looking him over from top to bottom as she circled him like a predator hunting its prey. "He's been off on assignment since the summer, so she's been here working with Clark. They work very closely, I've noticed. *Very* closely. She knows all about him and Superman, too. She knows about everything in fact. Sometimes, it's like she can read people and know whether they're good or bad. He trusts her completely. More than me, of course." She continued to move closer to him. "Pudgy thing of a woman, who dresses in these horribly baggy clothes and clogs and wears these John Lennon glasses with no corrective lenses. Sound familiar?" Lois took off the glasses and set them on the shelf.

Superman shook his head. He didn't know of anyone like that in his dimension.

"How about you, Superman? Do you miss your wife?" Lois was very near him now. "Does she perhaps look something like me?"

This Lois did look a lot like his Lois; he swallowed, stepping back. No wonder he had thought she was his wife a month ago. It wasn't like this was some ditzy clone. This *was* Lois, just not his Lois. "Lois, you're making me uncomfortable."

"Am I?" She licked her lips. "I just have one last question, Superman," she murmured, as she was close enough to kiss him. "What's your relationship to Ultra Woman?"

That was a splash of cold water in his face. "How do you know about her?"

Lois shrugged. "I hear things." Had his Lois mentioned Ultra Woman to Clark when she was here earlier this year? Why would the other Clark mention her to this Lois? It didn't make sense.

"Did you two date? An old girlfriend, perhaps?" Lois guessed.

He grinned. "You could say that. But I don't talk about her, especially with investigative reporters such as yourself."

Lois stepped close to him again. "How about *your* wife? Would you speak to *your* wife about her?"

Superman swallowed. This Lois was really too close and looked too much like his Lois, since she took off those glasses. His thoughts flashed again to the very pregnant Lois he kissed back in December. He had already kissed this Lois. This Lois from the future. Had it really been this Lois and not his wife from the future?

"She knows all about her," he murmured, trying to move to the side, but Lois had a hand on either side of him. "We don't have any secrets from one another."

"Really?" Lois chuckled mischievously as she pushed her body against his. "Is that because she *is* Ultra Woman?" she asked, pressing her lips to his.

Oh, my goodness. She even kissed like his Lois.

***

Meanwhile back in Metropolis…

Clark stood in his apartment talking to Sam again about his last conversation with Lois, trying to get an inkling to where she would have disappeared off.

"As I told you, Clark, Lois didn't confide in me. She's a master at disguises. She could be anywhere," Sam repeated.

"When did you last see her? This morning?" Clark was trying to figure out just when she had left. She had been at the apartment when he picked Lucy up for work. Lois seemed fine. Asked him again about bringing her stuff back. He apologized again. He had meant to bring it the day before, but a plane slid off the runway at Newark Airport. He said he would talk to Superman about bringing it by that night.

"No. Yesterday," Sam was saying. "She stopped by here to talk."

"She came here?" Clark asked as a bad feeling set in. A sinking feeling. She hadn't much expressed interest in Clark's life or Clark's apartment before. Actually, she flirted less with his Clark side now after discovering he had a girlfriend — or had it been after their Christmas Eve date? Clark just didn't appeal to her. His Superman side was thrilled. His Clark side, not so much. "What did she want to talk about?"

"She wanted to know what I was up to. What happened to me while she was gone? Why I was relying on the kindness of strangers?"

That did not seem like Lois, not his Lois who was totally self-absorbed. He didn't know if she had always been that way, but three years surrounded by Lex Luthor certainly had rubbed off on her. Well, he didn't know if he could call it total self-absorption. She was obsessed with Superman. She was asking everyone and anyone about him. Clark didn't know how many times he wanted to jump in front of her and yell, "Me! Lois, I'm Superman! Don't you recognize me?" He had never thought the glasses and uniform thing worked, but he was amazed… he winced. He missed being her Mr. Amazing.

Clark started looking around his apartment for clues as to what Lois really had been doing there. The only things he found missing in the apartment were the two *Daily Whisper* tabloids he had kept in his top dresser drawer. So, she had gone into the loft and rifled through his drawers. *Great*. He really shouldn't be so surprised; she *was* Lois Lane after all. One tabloid was about Superman and Mayson and the other one about Ultra Woman. He had meant to take them to Smallville, but now the Superman-crazed investigator Lois Lane had them.

Perhaps she had gone to do more research on Superman. Where? The library? How had she gotten out and about without her police protection? It wouldn't take her long to discover that everyone knew Clark Kent was really the Man in Blue. That he had kept the truth from her. Lucy had told him not to do this to her, but then Cat and Gareth had forbidden anyone on the *Planet* staff to reveal anything to Lois about him, especially Clark Kent. It was just cruel, this test they put Lois through to get her job back.

The photos on his dresser had been moved as well. The one of his parents and the one of him and Lois (Lucy) at the mayoral debate. He didn't know how long he would be able to keep away from Lois in the guise of Superman. He was actually quite surprised at how easy it had been; just about as easy as it had been to keep Superman away from Lucy when she had first arrived.

He was able to spend time with her as Clark, which eased his pain somewhat, but he missed her. Touching her. Holding her. Showering with her. He sighed. He could no longer count the number of times Lucy had kicked him under the table to get him to stop gaping at Lois like some moonstruck teenager. It wasn't fair, he loved her. He wanted to put his arms around her and comfort her when everyone at the paper was being mean to her. But she had no interest in Clark Kent at all, not since she learned he was off the market. She was forced to spend time with him, because he was her roommate Lucy's best friend. Lois tolerated Clark and that hurt almost as much as her obsession with Superman.

Oh, great, he was moping again. He needed to go, continue searching for her, and find her before Lex Luthor's goons did. If

they hadn't found her already.

As he went to bid Sam goodbye, the phone rang.

"Clark." It was Lucy. "It was Kal." She sniffled. "Really him."

Oh, great, not another Kal moment. "This isn't the best time to tell me about your life back home, Lucy—"

"No, Clark," she interrupted. "He called on the telephone."

"He what?" That stunned him. He could only call if…

"He's here."

What in the hell? What — not to mention how — was Lucy's husband doing in his dimension? "Did he recognize you?"

"No. I don't think so, but he did have a message for you. 'Tell Clark I have what he seeks and to meet him at the Fortress of Solitude.' Where is that? He stumped me there," Lucy admitted.

Clark laughed. He hadn't thought of his old treehouse for years. The one place that even Kal's wife wouldn't know about.

"What's so funny?" Lucy snapped.

"I can't believe there is actually something in my life you don't know about," he said with another chuckle. "What would they be doing there?"

"Get him out of here as fast as you can. Who knows what she's already told him about me?"

"Hanging up," he said, which was the only thing he could say to that comment. He was about to hang up the phone, when she called out to him.

"Clark, wait." Lucy lowered her voice. "Will you please get that you-know-who crazed investigative reporter away from my husband?"

He gulped. Lucy was worried. And if she was worried about something that usually meant there was something to worry about. "You don't think—" he sputtered.

"Right, because it was so easy for us."

He hung up the phone and turned to Sam. "Kal has Lois in Smallville. She's safe."

"I thought he was on New Krypton stopping a civil war?" Sam asked, incredulous.

"He's back. I'll explain later."

Two seconds later, Clark was taking off from his patio.

A heavy snowstorm was starting to blow through the Plains States — another reason he hadn't come to Smallville to get Lois's stuff. He landed on the front porch of his house and saw that the lights were on inside. Kal and Lois had broken into his house? *Is nothing sacred anymore?* If she had seen his Lois Lane room… His anger was already starting to boil when he opened the door and saw his Lois and the other Superman pushed up against his wall next to a roaring fire, kissing… kissing… Clark saw red.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Clark yelled, shaking the house to its foundation. "That's not your wife, Kal-El."

Lois jumped away from Superman and saw her Superman standing in the doorway, anger shimmering around him like an aura. She looked between the two of them and then started to back away.

Superman stood still, his eyes opened wide, staring at Clark.

"You!" Clark roared, pointing out the front door. "Outside."

Superman flew outside. In a split second, Clark joined him leaving Lois alone in the house.

"She kissed me!" Superman said, moving out into the snow-covered yard.

Clark sped up and bolted onto Superman's chest, knocking him across the field with a crack like thunder.

Superman was back next to the house in a moment. "I'm not going to fight you," he said, holding up his hands.

"You've known my Lois for a couple of hours before you couldn't resist each other. I spent two nights under your roof, two nights with your wife. Bet you're wondering how long we were able to resist each other," Clark taunted him.

"My wife would never—" Superman's eyes burned red.

"You were missing, presumably lost for eternity in time. Maybe she came to me for comfort," Clark said as Superman's heat vision blasted him on his 'S' knocking him back into the trees.

Superman raced to the edge of the forest to wait for him. "Take back what you said about her."

Clark came blasting through the woods to hit him the chest again. "Maybe you should just ask her."

Superman stood his ground. "I'll do that," he lifted himself into the air and flew towards the old barn.

Clark followed. He stood in the doorway of the barn and watched Kal sit down in his time machine — his emergency transport for Lucy. "Where do you think you're going in *my* time machine?"

"Superman: Voice Fingerprint authorized."

"Home." Kal pushed a few buttons and then pulled the lever. Then the time machine disappeared.

***

Martha was about halfway through her glass of red wine when she heard what sounded like thunder and then a crash. She grabbed her coat and ran out the kitchen door. In her yard, rolling around in the snow like two wild animals were her two Supermen.

She put her fingers to her lips and blew an extremely loud whistle. Both men froze and turned to her. "Time out!" she hollered. "Both of you in the kitchen. And if either of you track snow into my clean house with your boots…"

Her son came quietly with hunched shoulders, while the other Clark who still had anger in his eyes, kindly kissed her cheek and whispered, "Hi, Mom."

Her son turned to him. "She's not your Mom," he growled.

"Clark!" Martha scolded him then she turned to the other dimension's Clark. "Hi, Clark. Nice to see you."

She followed the men inside and threw her coat on a hook just inside, after shutting the door.

"Mom, Clark—"

"Uh-uh." She waved a finger at both men. Her son stood, arms crossed, at one side of the kitchen while the other Clark sat at the table. "I don't know what set you boys off. But you are too old to be fighting like a couple of seven-year-olds. Here are the ground rules. There will be no using super powers in my house. Do you boys understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," they answered in unison, shoulders slumped.

"Now, I want you to apologize. Clark." She turned to her son. "Starting with you."

"Mom," he started to whine.

"Clark Kent!"

He growled, then stated, "I'm sorry I didn't stop his Lois from kissing me."

"Clark!" Martha gasped at her son.

"*And* for breaking into my house *and* for trying to steal my time machine," the other Clark added acidly.

"Clark Jerome Kent, what has gotten into you? None of that sounds like the boy I raised," Martha reprimanded.

Clark bent his head, ashamed.

The other Clark grinned at her scolding.

Martha turned to him. "Wipe that smirk off your face, young man. Your turn."

"I didn't—" the other Clark started as her son took a few steps toward him with fire in his eyes.

"You didn't?" Martha demanded. "My son doesn't lose his temper at the drop of a hat, so spill it."

The other Clark lowered his head. "I'm sorry I insinuated that I slept with your wife while you were lost in time."

"Clark! That's awful." She took a closer look at him.

Something about that apology seemed off. It was too specific. He glanced up at her and then looked away. Her heart sank. *Oh, that couldn't be good.* She picked up her glass of wine and took another drink.

"Mom, what are you doing drinking wine at three o'clock in the afternoon?" her son asked.

"It's been a stressful day," she muttered.

He took the glass away from her and poured it down the sink, then knelt down beside her. "Mom, have you been stressed out a lot lately?"

Martha glanced at other Clark, catching his eye, then turned back to her son.

"Dad's been worried," continued her son. "He said something about catching you drinking alone before Thanksgiving as well."

Martha hugged her son and then stole a glance at the other Clark. "I've been worried about you, sweetie. And Lois. It's been a crazy year."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I promise to be in touch better in this year."

"Thank you, Clark." She pulled out of his embrace. "Now, I only have one question for you boys: where's Lois?"

The other Clark gasped as her son said, "Ah, we left her back at Clark's house." He smiled sheepishly.

"I can't believe that you left a woman alone who took *your* time machine…" Martha turned to the other dimension's Clark. "… without permission, because she got distracted from snooping around your house."

The other Clark swallowed. "She came here? Great." Sarcasm dripped from his final word.

"How about we do a better job of hiding the time machine this time, Clark," she suggested to him. "We don't need any more unexpected visitors."

He nodded and then stood up, holding out his hand to Martha's son, "Thanks for bringing her back safely."

Clark smiled, shaking his hand. "Good luck with her, Clark. She's a loose cannon."

The other Clark grinned. "That's what makes her so exciting."

Martha turned and gave her son a pointed look and then moved her eyes to the other Clark.

Her son sighed. "So, Clark, Lois was telling me that you're quite the Lothario."

Martha rolled her eyes. *Wrong topic, son.*

"Who, *me*?" The other Clark laughed. "Hardly."

"She says that you seem close to your assistant, Lucy. Very close."

The other Clark swallowed. "We're just good friends. That's all." He glanced self-consciously at Martha.

"How come this Lucy woman thinks she knows more about me than I do?" Clark asked, arms crossed.

"Huh?"

"Kal-El? Why have you been throwing around my name—"

"*Our* name," the other Clark corrected. "And I haven't been 'throwing it around'. I let Lucy borrow it."

Clark raised an eyebrow at that. Martha covered her face with her hands. She could see everything about to explode.

"Want to explain that one to me?" her son asked.

The other Clark looked at him as if he really didn't want to explain, but Clark wasn't one to lose a staring contest.

"My friend Lucy came to me last summer needing a safe place to hide for a while. We created this secret identity for her as my old college friend, Lucy El, wife of Kal-El. I got her a job as my research assistant at the paper and put her up in Lois's old apartment, which the paper was still paying for. It was only supposed to be temporary, while her fiancé was out on assignment, a couple of months tops."

"Why did she need a safe place to hide? Why come to you?" Clark inquired, his arms still crossed.

The other Clark cleared his throat with a pleading glance at Martha. She threw up her hands and shook her head, so he continued, "She's pregnant and needs protection."

Martha cringed in anticipation to her son's reaction.

"Super protection?"

"Super enemies." The other Clark smiled weakly and shrugged. "Her fiancé is the type of guy criminals love to hate. He's a close friend of mine and I would do anything to protect his wife."

"Fiancée, you mean," Clark corrected

"They've gotten married since. It's complicated." The other Clark clenched his teeth. Martha could see that he didn't want to give an inch.

"I see." Clark pressed his lips together. "So, you're not cheating on Lois? Lucy's baby isn't yours?"

The other dimension's Clark didn't say anything for a moment as he glowered at Clark. Then his attitude changed and he laughed softly to himself. "No, it's yours, *Kal-El*."

Martha's eyes went large and then she buried her head in her hands again.

"What do you mean 'cheating on Lois'?" continued the other Clark. "We can't even date; she's married to Lex Luthor."

A slight smiled brushed Clark's lips as he answered casually, "So, when you hit me across Kansas, you were telling me that she means nothing to you?"

"I hit you across a field," the other Clark amended.

"Don't deny you're in love with your Lois, *Mr. Amazing*."

Martha was surprised that her only child had the taunting tone of an older brother down pat.

The other dimension's Clark flinched, lowering his head. "She told you about that?"

"Of course. Why do you think she was kissing me? A part of her didn't buy the whole two dimensions explanation. She thought I was you, until she saw the two of us with her own eyes."

"Really?" Then his eyes darkened. "That still doesn't explain why you didn't stop her. Stop yourself."

Martha's son swallowed, before replying, "You know why, Clark. You must have felt it, too."

The other Clark shut his eyes. "You have no idea."

Clark nudged him in the shoulder like a big brother. "You need to man up, Clark. Lois needs you."

"And I need her," the other Clark replied, glancing up at them, his despair evident. "But as you know, Superman can't be seen with another man's wife. And I don't have a secret identity to hide behind. Everyone in my dimension knows that Clark Kent is Superman."

"Not everyone." Martha leaned forward and took the other Clark's hand. "Sweetie, it's time you were honest with her. No more hiding behind Clark Kent."

"It was so nice at first, not having her know." Martha's new son smiled fondly. "To know that Lois liked me without her actually knowing everything about me, like everyone else in the world. Only now, it's gone on too long. Her job at the *Planet* depends on her finding out all she can about me…. *Superman* me. Gareth, our new editor, has forbidden anyone at the paper from helping her discover Superman's true identity, especially me — Clark Kent… Superman. Argh!" He threw up his hands. "It's just a horrible mess. How do you do this every day?" He looked at Martha's son, who just shrugged in return. "Lois is obsessed with everything associated with Superman. Trying to dig up something new that nobody knows."

"Like Ultra Woman?" Clark asked with a raised brow. "Why in the world would you tell her about Ultra Woman?"

Martha turned to the other Clark and glared at him. He smiled sheepishly again and cleared his throat. "Funny story, actually. But for another time. Yes, *definitely* another time. I really should

be heading back to my dimension to talk to Lois."

Clark didn't look like he wanted to end their conversation there, but the other Clark stood up.

"Don't be a stranger, Clark," Martha told him. "But let's leave that Lois back in your dimension until she understands the consequences of her actions." She took his hand and squeezed it. "Have you learned your lesson?" She wasn't talking about his Lois any longer.

He pressed his lips together and nodded, appearing quite penitent. Martha didn't know what happened between this Clark and her daughter-in-law and, frankly, she didn't *want* to know. Their lives were confusing enough without adding anything else into the mix.

"Good. If ever things get too complicated at home, remember that Jonathan and I are here for you," she told him. She knew things in the other Metropolis were going to get worse before they were better, especially when Lois gave birth sometime in the next six weeks.

"Thanks, Mom." He kissed Martha on the cheek. "I might just take you up on that."

"Take care. And say hi to Lu—" She shook her head. Now he had her doing it. "*Lois* for me."

"Will do." The other Clark glanced with remorse at Clark one last time and then left through the kitchen door in a flash.

"Mom." Her son looked at her with curiosity. "Do you know his assistant Lucy?"

"I meant Lois, Clark. How about some Ding Dongs before you leave?"

"I've got to get home and talk to Lois," Clark said, kissing his mom's cheek. Then he paused. "Well, maybe a couple for the flight home."

"Remember, sweetie, he who lives in a straw hut, should not build his fire too close to home."

Clark shook his head. "What?"

"Lois loves you. And you love her. Mistakes happen," she said, translating.

"I've got to tell her the truth, Mom."

Martha held up her hand. "I'm not going to judge you, Clark. It's your decision."

"Lois and I promised never to keep secrets from one another," he explained, as if she needed an explanation.

Martha stared at him for a long moment. How she wanted to tell her son the truth about his wife. She sighed, stunned that the other Clark had told her son so much and he still did not see the answer dangling directly in front of him.

Her son withered under her gaze. "Okay. Fine. I know. I haven't told her about Jack being in Kansas yet. But other than that I've been completely honest, so stop giving me the 'look.' Really, Mom, I'm planning on telling her. But not today. Today, I have to tell her about kissing the other Lois." He groaned, sitting down at the kitchen table. "How am I ever going to explain that?"

Martha pressed her lips together and raised a brow. "Yes, how are you?"

Clark shook his head. "Do you want to know why I didn't zip off when she kissed me? I was trying to figure out if her kisses were like the kisses I shared with the pregnant Lois back in the barn last month."

"Clark Jerome Kent! You kissed a pregnant Lois!?" Martha gasped. Although as she thought about it, she wasn't too surprised. "So?"

Clark laughed. "I couldn't tell. Maybe. Maybe not." He stopped laughing as reality set in. "Lois is going to kill me."

She patted him on the shoulder. "You might be surprised at how forgiving she'll be." Especially if Martha understood the other Clark's expression of regret. Of course, that was the Lois in the other dimension. The one back in Metropolis hadn't cheated on him. She sighed, wishing she could just erase all the knowledge conveyed in that one glance her new son had given her. She could really use a drink.

Her son glanced up at her with a perplexed expression.

"The cupcakes!" Martha slapped her head. "I think I'll join you." She smiled; nobody would do an intervention on cupcakes.

***

An hour earlier, back in the other dimension…

Lois looked between the two Superman. *Oh, my God. There really are two of them. And Mr. Amazing looks furious as all get out.* She backed away from them. If truth be told, it was actually her fault. She was the one who started kissing that other Superman, Kal-El, and once she started… she released a breath…. But that other Superman hadn't stopped her either.

The Supermen went outside and Lois ran to the window to watch. They were moving so fast she couldn't tell which was which. She grabbed her coat and went out onto the front porch.

"…. I spent two nights under your roof, two nights with your wife. Bet you're wondering how long…"

That must be her Superman as he wasn't married. But he told the other Superman he slept with his wife? Was he insane? Did he want to die? Had he actually slept with the other Superman's wife? She swallowed. Had her Superman lied to her? Superman didn't lie. Did he even love her, after all? Had she just been a substitute for the other woman?

That other Superman heat blasted her Superman into the woods and then followed him to the tree line.

Lois wasn't going to wait here for her Mr. Amazing to return and unleash his jealousy on her. She ran down the steps of the house and into her rental car. Luckily, the keys were still in her coat pocket. She was down the driveway before either of the Supermen had returned.

The snow was starting to fall in drifts. The roaring of the wind didn't help. Every time it rumbled, she hit the accelerator thinking it was her Superman coming to get her. When that other Superman told him about her breaking into Clark's house and stealing his time machine, his jealousy over her kissing the…

Superman was jealous. She grinned with excitement. He thought she belonged to him. Her grin disappeared as she pressed her lips together. *That's rich*. She had hardly spoken two words to him since Christmas Eve, over two weeks ago. Sure, she had seen him fly past a time or two. When he said that he wouldn't spend any personal time with her, she hadn't thought it was going to be the last time she saw him altogether. And this whole thing at the *Daily Planet* refusing to let her rejoin at full level until she proved herself with a Superman story… it really would have been nice to have some help, or if Superman could have been there to tell her something, anything about what everyone else already knew. *Thanks a lot, oh love of my life, father of my child.*

Oh, crap. She didn't even want to think about that. How was she ever going to tell him? Would he fight the media to be with her? Would he abandon her for himself, his image? Would he try to hide her away, so no one else would know? Make her disappear? Would he even care?

Tears dotted her eyelashes. Of course he would care. He cried at the death of the clone. He did love her. He was just really angry at that other Superman for kissing her. She needed to turn around the car and talk to him. Once he cooled down, she would talk to him. *Oh, my God!* Was kissing that other Superman the kind of betrayal Mr. Amazing said would cause him to stop loving her? If she could no longer have the hope of a future with him…

The road curved, but her tires didn't turn. Black ice? She heard the crack of thunder. Her whole body shivered. At least, she hoped it was thunder. Then she saw a streak of lightning. Lightning? In a blizzard? What kind of crazy weather did they have out here?

Lois gently pressed on the brakes. She wanted to get out of

there fast, but not so fast that she crashed. But putting her foot on the brakes caused the car to swerve one way then the other, slipping on the ice. She tried to turn into the spin, was that correct? Oh, it had been so long since she had driven, especially in snow. Nothing she did seemed to help. In slow motion, she watched as her car spun one hundred eighty degrees and off the road into a ditch.

Lois took a couple of deep breaths. Everything was fine. She wasn't hurt and her rental car was still half way on the road. She pressed down on the gas, but with at least one tire hanging over the ditch, her efforts did more to slide the car towards the ditch than away from it.

Mr. Amazing told the other Superman that he had slept with his wife? That just didn't make sense. He told her that he had only slept with her. Suddenly she was cold, icy cold, and she didn't think it was from the weather. Mr. Amazing hadn't said that he had only slept with her. He had said he had only been with *Lois Lane*. And there was concrete proof that she wasn't the only Lois Lane out there. But the other Lois Lane wasn't Superman's wife, she was Clark Kent's wife. So, unless the other Superman was also Clark Kent…

Lois's eyes went wide. Oh, God! *Clark Kent!* How come she had never seen it before? Because Clark Kent wore glasses. Same dark hair and eyes. Same electric feeling when they touched. Clark was so sweet, kind, loving, and present… just never at the same time as Superman. Ooooh. Her eyes formed slits. She could just clobber him. No wonder everyone at the *Planet* was laughing at her. Clark Kent was Superman. He wasn't left behind in Singapore when Superman rescued her. He was Superman!

What about Clark's secret girlfriend? She laughed. *Her!* She was Clark Kent's secret girlfriend. *Oh, that's rich. Very funny, Clark*. No wonder his girlfriend would be ticked off if Lucy moved in with him. Yeah, she sure would be. And he saw her on Christmas Eve and she was stuck home on New Year's Eve. *Oooh, Mr. Amazing is in big trouble. Big, big trouble!*

The snow was falling so fast and so heavy, she couldn't see out the front window any more. She needed to get out to flag down a passing motorist. Who knew how long the Supermen would be fighting or where they would end up when they finished? She couldn't count on a rescue from either of them anytime soon. She jumped as she heard another crack of thunder. She unbuckled her seatbelt and was about to open her door when she heard a deep, low, roaring sound.

Suddenly, something struck the front corner of her car, pushing it completely into the ditch. Her head was thrown first against her door and then, as the car tipped, against the passenger side door. She could hear some muffled voices before the cold, darkness, and pain took her with them.

***

Superman parked the time machine in the barn and quickly threw the invisibility tarp back over it. He would move it later. He felt like a fool. He knew Kal wasn't going to steal Lois, but when he had seen them kissing, something primal had exploded within him. He wondered if part of it was that he already knew how lax his willpower had been against Lucy. Guilt washed over him like a bucket of mud. He had done far worse to Kal than Kal had done to him. If Kal actually knew how Lucy and he…

Clark entered the house through the kitchen door. The house was quiet. Too quiet.

"Lois?" Superman called. Where was she? He sped through the house. She wasn't there and the front door was open. Her purse was still sitting on the table behind the couch. "Lois?" He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He went outside and saw that her rental car was gone, the tire tracks disappearing quickly in the heavy snow.

No point in chasing her down. If he had learned one thing about Lois Lane — any of them — when they were mad, it was good to give her space. He trudged up the steps to his house. It looked like his luck with women was right on course. It proved him right, falling (again) for a woman who wasn't available to him. Probably for the best anyway. He shut his front door and sat down. Best if she stopped liking Superman, anyway, before she really got hurt. He buried his head in his hands.

Unexpectedly, his ears picked up a CB radio call. "*Emergency vehicles needed on Silas Springs Road. I shoved a compact off the road with my snowplow. You'd better send an EMT as well. I can't pull the driver out, she looks bad."*

Superman felt a chill. Silas Springs Road wasn't far from the Kent farm. "Lois?" He flew out his front door and was at the scene of the accident a moment later.

"Superman! Am I ever glad to see you," the snowplow driver said. "I didn't see her car. It was facing the wrong direction and it's whiteout conditions out here."

Clark lifted up the small, white car and set it down on the road. He tore off the door of the car and saw Lois crumpled up at a strange angle in the passenger seat.

"I don't know, Superman. She looks bad. Maybe we should wait for a stretcher."

Clark ignored him. Her heartbeat was weak and growing fainter. He scooped her up into his arms and took off. It was hard flying in this wind with the snow blinding him. He turned on his x-ray vision to figure out where he was. He was closing in on his house. He could take her to Lawrence County Hospital, which would be the closest hospital, but he thought he should push on through to Topeka or Wichita or even down to Houston, where they had a major trauma center. He heard a clap of thunder. Thunder? In a snow storm? He'd better push on, because there was bound to be…

All of a sudden, a bolt from the blue struck him, spinning him out of control. He crashed down on the ground, Lois on top of him. She twitched. The lightning had passed through him and into her.

Her eyes fluttered open a moment and she looked at him, "Clark?" Her eyes closed again, and she became limp against his chest.

"Lois? *Lois*?" Clark spoke to her but she did not respond. Oh God, he had killed her. First the car accident, then the lightning, there was no way she could survive all that. Her poor body wasn't built like his. She wasn't invulnerable. She had been a perfect human being and now, because of him, she was gone.

Superman picked up her lifeless body and carried her into his house. It was a bit of a walk through the woods to the house, but he couldn't fly. He doubted he would ever be able to fly again. The blowing wind and snow didn't detract him. Step after step he trudged to his house. He felt numb. How could he live without his soul? Function, probably yes. Live, no. He laid her down on the bed in his Lois Lane Memorial room. Now it really was her memorial room.

What had he done? Because of him, because he hadn't been able to control his temper, she was dead. He had been avoiding her, lying to her, hiding his true self from her, treating her as if she were the enemy instead of the love of his life. *This* was his punishment for what he had done to her. She deserved better than him. Mr. Amazing had just died along with Lois Lane. How could he ever be anyone's hero again if he couldn't even save the life of the woman he loved?

Superman knelt down beside her and rested his head on her chest. He heard a faint heartbeat. She wasn't dead yet. He didn't want to leave her side, but he would never forgive himself if he didn't bring Sam out to say goodbye. He owed the man that much.

Kissing her cheek, he murmured, "I'm so sorry, Lois. You deserved some happiness. You deserved to be loved by someone better than me. I'm a jinx."

A minute later, he landed at his apartment on Clinton Street. Sam was reading the newspaper. He glanced up at Superman's entrance.

"Hi, Clark. Where's Lois?"

Clark sniffled, took Sam's coat out of the closet, and handed it to him. Sam threw down his newspaper and put on his coat. Clark brought him his medical bag from the bedroom.

"Clark, where's my daughter?" Sam repeated more forcefully.

Superman looked at him, tears in his eyes. Sam had never seen the Man of Steel cry before.

"Take me there, now."

Clark nodded, still unable to speak. A few minutes later, they landed softly on Clark's front porch. Sam shook off the snow he had collected on him, while Clark opened the door.

"Lois?" Sam called. Clark pointed up the stairs. "Lois?"

Clark sat down on the couch and buried his head in his hands. The tears started to flow down his cheeks. If only he had gone after her. It was his fault she was dying. His fault. He had killed Lois. His Lois. He should have been the one to die. Not her. Not after all she had been through with Lex. She deserved to live. To love. To find happiness. He was the bad egg. He should have been the one to die. But, no, *he* was always the one who survived.

He didn't know how long he had sat there, before he felt Sam's hand on his shoulder. Clark glanced up. It had become dark outside.

"Clark," Sam said, his voice hoarse.

"I'm so sorry, Sam. It's all my fault. If I had just followed her, when she drove off—"

"Clark," Sam repeated and then coughed. "She's fine."

The younger man looked up at the doctor through his tears. He listened and heard Sam's heartbeat and a second strong heartbeat. He could hear her breathing in and out. "She's alive?"

"She's unconscious," Lois's father clarified.

"How long?" Clark stammered, looking up at Sam. "How long does she have?"

"I couldn't find anything wrong with her, Clark."

Clark looked at him with confusion. "But her neck? Her head? The blood?"

"I can't explain it either. Why don't you tell me what happened?" Sam sat down.

"Her car got hit by a snowplow and ended up in a ditch. She had a gash in her head and her neck, her spine looked crooked. She hadn't fastened her seatbelt." He swallowed. Images followed these words in his head. He would never be able to erase them from him mind.

"That doesn't sound like Lois." Sam shook his head.

"Her heartbeat was faint, so I was flying her to the hospital." Clark sniffed. "On the way there, we were struck by lightning."

"Lightning?" Sam gasped, a hand covering his mouth.

"Then we crashed down in the woods over there." Clark flung his hand out in the general direction. "She opened her eyes and said my name and then passed out. I brought her back here and came to get you straight away. I knew you'd want to say goodbye." He buried his face in his hands again.

"Thank you, Clark. I appreciate that." Sam was silent for a minute as he waited for Clark to compose himself. "Did you x-ray her?"

Clark raised his head, looked at Sam for a moment, then disappeared up the stairs. When Sam caught up to him, Clark was standing next to the bed, staring at Lois.

"Well?"

"She doesn't have a single broken bone. How is that possible?"

Sam shrugged. "A miracle?"

"A miracle?" Clark shook his head. "Miracles don't happen to me. Remember, I'm cursed when it comes to love."

"The miracle happened to *her*, not you." Sam pressed his lips together. "And you haven't won her heart yet, Clark."

A flash of a smile came to his lips, then vanished. "But she has mine." He covered her with a blanket. "Would you mind if I sit with her?"

Sam patted him on the back. "Why don't we let her rest? You come with me and tell me what happened."

Clark stared at Lois. He didn't want to leave her. He wanted to be the first thing she saw when she woke up. He never wanted to leave her side again.

"She's not going anywhere." Sam took his elbow and led him from the room.

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They sat down at the kitchen table, each with a cup of tea. Sam shook his head with a chuckle. "She stole the time machine and went to Lucy's dimension. Lois sure does know how to get herself in trouble."

"She was lucky the time machine was preprogrammed to go to Martha's. It was set for Lucy, in case she got confused again." Clark swallowed, hoping never to live through that again either. "Kal brought her back and called me."

"Did she tell you why she came out here in the first place?" Sam asked, intrigued.

Clark shrugged. "She wanted to know more about me as Superman ?" He shook his head. "Or Clark, maybe? I… Superman brought her here on the way back from Singapore. She stayed here a couple of days by herself, while I helped with the cleanup from the cyclone. We brought back some of her clothes from here."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Her clothes are here?"

Clark kept his focus on his tea. "When Lucy moved into Lois's apartment, I cleared her stuff out and stored it here."

"Oh." Sam didn't look like he quite bought that reasoning.

Clark took a sip of his tea and waited him out.

"So." Sam moved on. "Kal's back from New Krypton. Yet, Lucy hasn't gone back to him."

Clark glanced over his shoulder and x-rayed the bedroom upstairs, quickly ascertaining that Lois hadn't moved. "Nobody knows that Kal is Superman in his dimension, so if Lucy — his Lois — showed up out of the blue, seven or eight months pregnant, it would cause too many questions."

Sam sighed with a shake of his head. "So she'll be returning after the baby's born?"

Clark nodded. "She has to return."

"Right. Time Sickness." Sam stared at Clark. "Any idea why Lois drove off in the middle of snowstorm?"

Clark's shoulders slouched even more. "No idea." That wasn't quite true. Actually, he knew it to be a bald-faced lie.

"Why don't you hazard a guess?"

Clark glanced up at him. Clearly, Sam didn't believe him. "Kal and I went outside…" He cleared his throat. "…to have some words and return him to his dimension. When I got back to the house, she was gone."

"Oh? Words, huh?" Sam took a sip of his tea. "Did he find out about you and Lucy?"

Clark shook his head. "I wouldn't still be alive if he had." Clark knew how angry he had felt just seeing Kal and Lois kissing. He could only imagine the extent of Kal's anger once he found out about him having slept with Lucy. Just the suggestion of impropriety on their part and Kal had heat blasted him into the forest. No, Kal would have killed Clark and he would have been justified. Maybe Clark should have just confessed and let Kal kill him. It was what Clark deserved after what he allowed to happen to Lois.

"You don't think you could beat him in a fight?" Sam said with curiosity.

"No." A hint of a smile appeared on Clark's lips. "For two

reasons. Firstly, he's been Superman for three years longer than me. And secondly, I was in the wrong. I don't deserve to win."

"So, I wonder what set him off?" Sam took another sip of tea.

Clark sighed, smiling weakly. "Who says that he was the one who was set off?"

"Ah." Sam shook his head. "Lois kissed him."

"How…?" Clark stammered.

"I know my daughter. When she sees something she wants, she takes it. And I've seen how she looks at you, Clark. And how you look at her."

He smiled sardonically. "She doesn't look at *me* like that. It's the suit; it drives ladies wild."

Sam patted him on the shoulder. "Well, something happened to make her run. She's not a runner normally, unless you count jumping into the fray. Why don't you shower and change? Give her a chance to get to know Clark without the blue suit. He's a decent guy, so I've been told."

For some reason, neither of them seemed to believe the rumors.

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Lois blinked her eyes. It was bright outside. She took a deep breath. She could smell coffee. Was that bacon? Eggs? Toast? A ray of sunshine shone through the window, blanketing her in sunlight. She felt good. Better than good.

She sat up in bed and noticed Clark. He was sitting in a chair with a blanket covering him. Had he slept there all night? When she threw off her quilt, she noticed she was still wearing Lucy's clothes. They were a little stiff like they had gotten wet and then air-dried naturally. Looking around the room, she saw her photos. *Her* photos. The ones that had been on her bookshelves and walls of her apartment.

Sitting on an old wooden desk against one wall was her laptop; it was sitting there as if it belonged there. Like she had plugged it into recharge before heading to bed.

Her stomach twinged, cramped. Lois rolled her head around, stretching her neck and shoulders. She yawned. Just what she needed, cramping. She gasped, her hand covering her belly. No. Not that. Anything, but that. She took a deep breath. She was being paranoid.

Lois heard a noise downstairs — a cough — and it made her jump. It sounded like it was right next to her. Had Clark woken up? But when she looked over at him, he was exactly the same. Someone was cooking breakfast. She grinned. *Mr. Amazing!*

No. Clark was Mr. Amazing, wasn't he? She was so confused. She walked out of the bedroom and skipped down the stairs. She felt so good. Not a part of her hurt, except that pesky twinge in her stomach. And she felt so light, like she could just float.

Lois pushed open the door to the kitchen. Sam was setting a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon on a tray. She had never felt so disappointed in her life. So, no Mr. Amazing. Maybe he was Clark Kent, after all. Well, she wouldn't let him know that she knew. He deserved a little punishment.

"Hi, Daddy," Lois said, making him jump. "Is that for Clark or me?"

Her father grabbed his chest and then rushed up to her and hugged her. "Lois, Princess, you're all right."

She stole a piece of bacon off the plate. "Why wouldn't I be all right?"

He took the plate off the tray and set it on the table. He poured her a glass of juice and then sat down in a neighboring chair with his coffee.

Lois looked at him. "What? No coffee?" she asked, heading over to the cabinets.

"Oh, sorry. I'm used to making breakfast for Lucy."

"I'm starved. Do we have any cream?" She found a coffee mug; filling it only half way with coffee, she poured the remainder of the half and half carton into the mug. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I already ate, sweetie." He shook his head. "Princess, you look just like Lucy with your hair and that get up."

Lois scooped four sugars into her almost overflowing mug.

"Whoa, honey! That's a lot of calories," her father warned.

"Huh?" She looked down at her mug. Then she shrugged and took a sip. Sweet. "Live in the moment, I say."

"You've never said that," he corrected. "I believe your motto is 'once on the lips, straight to the hips.'"

"Well, that was the old me. The new me says, 'eat what I want and die happy'."

Sam slightly choked on his coffee and started coughing.

Lois looked at him, but he waved away her concern, so she continued, "Plus, if I was fifty pounds heavier, maybe all these men chasing after me would leave me alone." She plopped down into her seat, breaking it. She shook off her surprise and sat down more carefully in the next chair. Sam glanced between her and the chair, but didn't say anything. "You don't see whackos chasing…" She paused, taking a bite of toast. "Daddy, how did Lucy ever catch a man like Kal-El?"

He smiled, taking a sip of his coffee. "Figured that out, did you?"

"She's wicked smart and attractive in a way, since she looks like me, but look how she dresses." Lois flipped up her shirt and then noticed the blood stain. "What's this?"

"You were in a car accident, remember, Princess?"

Lois swallowed as her stomach cramped again. She ran to the downstairs powder room to look at herself in the mirror. Her face had been cleaned, but blood had obviously covered her face at some point. She found traces around her hairline and under her ear but couldn't find the wound from where the blood had come. She pulled off Lucy's flouncy shirt and noticed the stiffness of the material came from dried blood, not dried snow.

Her tummy cramped again and she could no longer ignore the signs of her forthcoming period. She sat down on the toilet and peeked at her underwear. Tears dripped down her cheeks. She wiped her nose. Why was she so upset? She hadn't wanted to have a baby. Not now, when her life was already so complicated. But it had been *theirs*, something that belonged just to them. Proof that her Mr. Amazing existed. Proof that she wasn't crazy when she dreamed of him touching her, floating with her. Proof of his love. Proof that they belonged together. She took a deep breath. This was her punishment for kissing Kal-El, she told herself. Karma. She let a few more tears fall down her cheeks and then wiped them off with a sniffle.

Lois splashed some water on her face. She didn't want to return to the kitchen in a bloody shirt. She threw it in the trashcan and ran upstairs to her room. Clark was still asleep in the chair. She shrugged; he had seen her more naked than this. She grabbed a t-shirt out of the dresser and returned to the kitchen.

"Daddy, what happened to me?" She sat down carefully in a chair.

"Superman said that your car got hit by a snowplow and that you hadn't been wearing your seatbelt."

Lois closed her eyes for a moment, remembering. "So that's what hit me. My car spun around on the ice and had gone partly into the ditch. Superman found me? Was I unconscious? Did you heal me? Or did he? Why don't I have a scratch on me? How long was I asleep? You didn't turn me into one of your cyborgs, did you?" She stared at her father, willing the answers out of him with her barrage of questions.

"No, of course not, Princess. He said he was flying you to the hospital when the two of you were struck by lightning. You crashed into the woods. He thought you were dead and came to get me, so I could say goodbye."

Lois stared at him. "But… but…"

"I know." He smiled. "It's a miracle."

"How is this possible? I feel better than I have ever felt in my life. No aches, no pain, with the exception of some PMS cramping." She took a deep breath. *Don't think about that.* "There has to be a reason, Daddy. You know, I don't believe in miracles any more than I believe in magic."

"In this past year, I've seen so much that I'm a believer," her father told her.

"Please, don't tell me you're born again?" Lois looked at him skeptically. "You're the doctor. Well, examine me."

"I already have. You're perfectly healthy. And Superman x-rayed you, no broken bones."

Lois looked around. "Where is Superman, anyway?" Her father had lied to her as well. He could swim in limbo with Clark.

"He thought, after yesterday, you might not want to see him for awhile," answered her father.

"Right. I would not want to see him for awhile, since I see him all the time now." She bit her lip. '*Don't call me, Lois, I'll call you.'* She was going to torture Clark Kent for this. "He did go psycho on Kal-El, all because I gave him a little kiss. Do you think Superman might like me? Did he develop a crush on me after we spent that one weekend here? I guess he doesn't spend much time one-on-one with women and thought we had some connection over PB&Js. Did you see that room upstairs?" She rolled her eyes. "A bit stalkerish, don't you think?"

Her father nodded. "I noticed. He can be a little intense, Lois, but his heart is in the right place."

"Intense? That's stating it a little mildly, don't you think, Daddy?" Her bottom lip began to quiver. So Mr. Amazing didn't think she would want to see him. He didn't think she would want to talk to him about what happened. To tell him about the baby. She sucked in another deep breath. He didn't know about the baby. *The baby that was no more.* She needed to cry and she would give anything to have him hold her while she cried. But not now, she would wait until she was alone; she couldn't tell her father. She sniffled, wiping her nose with her arm. "If he thinks I'm going to stay cooped up here…"

"You're free to go at any time, Lois," a sad voice from behind her said. "We just wanted you safe from Luthor."

Lois spun around. "Clark! What are you doing here?"

"I was worried about you," he replied. "Good morning, Sam. How's our little patient?"

"Perfect." Her father beamed. "She even has your appetite."

Clark stared at her. "How is that possible? I've seen super healing powers before, Lois, but you take the cake."

Lois laughed. "I don't have any super powers, Clark."

Clark noticed the broken chair. "What happened here?" he said, picking up the pieces.

"I sat down. It must have been on its last leg."

Clark nodded in understanding. "I hate it when that happens."

"Happens to you often?" she asked skeptically. *Yeah, I bet it does, Superman.*

"More often than you'd think." He smiled mysteriously, taking the pieces out the kitchen door.

"He's an odd duck." Lois shook her head, taking a bite of her bacon.

The phone rang. Her father went to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Sam? Where is he? I'm going to tear him in two!" Lucy screamed.

"Whoa! She's mad," said Lois. Lucy was screaming so loud she could hear her across the kitchen. Wonder what she was so pissy about?

"Was that Lois?" Lucy continued. "What are you all doing out there? I'm sitting here wondering what's going on. She doesn't come home last night and nobody thought to call me!"

Clark returned from outside.

"Sorry, Lucy," Sam apologized, turning to Clark.

The younger man held up his hands and shook his head forcefully.

Yeah, I bet he doesn't want to talk to Lucy after telling her husband that they slept together. Only, how would Lucy have found out about that? Lois thought.

Lucy went on yelling, "Tell him to come to the phone or I'll fly out there and—"

"Hello, Lucy," Clark murmured, taking the phone.

"I'm going to kill you. Kill you dead. How could you tell Kal…"

So, Lois thought, *Lucy knows he said something to Kal-El. Interesting. How did she do that? Must be some Ultra Woman ability. Some connection between her and her Superman.*

"This is Clark, Lucy. Superman's not here," he said with a smile to Lois, who was visibly listening.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"I'm going to fly out there…" Lucy threatened.

"Don't do anything rash, Lucy. I'm sure we'll be back in the city by nightfall," Clark reassured her.

"*Me*, rash? That's bold, Clark. Are you going to tell me what you're still doing there or you going to let me just come to my own ugly conclusions?"

"Lois was in a car accident."

"I'm sorry, Clark." Lucy was suddenly calm. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Clark told her. "Not a scratch, actually."

Lucy didn't say anything for a moment. "Then why is Sam there? A chaperone?"

"She's funny." Lois laughed and Clark turned to her with mild curiosity. Her father shook his head. Had he not heard Lucy?

"Maybe I should have Sam explain." Clark passed the phone back to her father.

They could all hear Lucy yelling, "Clark, don't you dare… hello, Sam. He's being a big chicken again, isn't he?"

Her father turned his back on Clark and then smiled. "No comment."

Lois turned to Clark as he sat down next to her. "Big chicken?" She took a sip of coffee.

He grinned far too innocently and shrugged.

"So, are you going to tell me what happened?" Lucy asked Sam.

"It's an actual miracle, Lucy. Lois got banged up when her car got hit by a snowplow and… Superman was flying her to the hospital, when they got struck by lightning."

"Lightning?" Lucy gasped. "Oh, my God. And Superman was holding her?"

"Of course. He said the blast knocked them into the woods. He thought she died."

Mr. Amazing thought she had died? Lois glanced at Clark. He did indeed look like he had been shot through the heart. She just wanted to hug him and tell him everything was okay; she was fine. But he didn't know she knew about Clark Kent. And Mr. Amazing wasn't here. So, Mr. Amazing thought she was dead and just left. He buried the clone, but abandoned her? *Thanks, Clark. Thanks a lot. Feeling the love.*

What would she think about that, if she didn't know the truth? She would think that she had committed the ultimate betrayal and Mr. Amazing didn't love her anymore. She could play that. Lois sniffled, her bottom lip quivering. Clark glanced over at her. She closed her eyes and willed a tear out of her eye. He placed an arm over her shoulder and squeezed. It took every ounce of her self-control not to lean into him. *He lied to you,* she reminded herself. *He's still lying to you.*

"And she's perfectly fine, now? Not a scratch on her?" Lucy asked.

"Yeah, just like Clark said," Sam repeated.

"Sam, listen to me," Lucy said forcefully, yet eerily calm.

"Not a *single* scratch on her?"

"Yes," Sam answered. "How did you know? Have you seen this before?"

Lucy sighed. "Yeah, Sam. I have. Just not to this extreme."

He turned to the others. "She knows what happened."

Clark shook his head in disbelief. "How does she do that?"

"See, I told you. A rational explanation, not a miracle." Lois nodded, shrugging off Clark's arm. *Enough closeness.* She needed to breathe.

"Well?" inquired Sam.

Clark grabbed the phone out of his hand. "Well?"

"Can I speak with Lois?" Lucy requested.

Clark held out the phone to Lois. "She wants to speak with you."

Lois took the phone. "You're not going to kill me too, are you?" She laughed.

Lucy didn't laugh. "You heard me say that, didn't you? Of course, you did. We'll discuss that later. How do you feel?"

"Great! Except for some PMS cramping…" She bit her lip to hold back the tears, her laughter sucked down a deep dark hole in her heart. "I wish people would stop asking me that."

"Oh, they will, soon enough," Lucy reassured her.

"So, what happened to me?"

Lucy paused. "It would be best if I explained it to you in person. Can you have Superman fly you home?"

"Like that's going to happen." Lois shook her head. She wasn't going to give Mr. Amazing the satisfaction. "He's psycho, Lucy. He sucker-punched Kal-El across the field."

Clark winced and turned away from Lois, covering his ears.

Lois glared at the back of his head. *That's right, big boy. I saw and heard the whole thing.*

Lucy snarled, "Kal-El can take care of himself. And he probably deserved it. But if your Superman is anything like mine, pigheaded jealousy is his only vice. You might want to keep that in mind the next time you decide to run off and kiss—"

"He's not *my* Superman, Lucy," Lois interrupted. "Haven't you heard? I'm a married woman. Superman doesn't want to have anything to do with me." Lois bit her lip again. Those words hit too close to home. "Maybe I'll just stay away from controlling men for awhile." *How is that for a New Year's Resolution? Perfect! And about as easy to keep to as one too.*

"Good idea. But I need to talk to you as soon as possible. Tell Clark I'll fly out there."

"She wants to fly out…" Lois covered the receiver.

Her father grabbed the phone away. "No flying, Lucy! Please, I'm begging you."

Lucy harrumphed. "Got the message, spoil sport, but if she won't fly with Superman, you'd better be hoping Topeka airport has reopened. Give the phone back to Lois."

He held out the phone. Lois rolled her eyes. "Demanding thing, isn't she?"

Sam and Clark exchanged a glance. They had better not be comparing her to Lucy.

"What do you want now?" Lois groaned.

"To give you some advice," Lucy told her, sounding a lot like a mother hen. "Be careful. Keep your temper in check."

"*My* temper?" Lois laughed.

"If you're anything like me, you have a short fuse. I've been working on mine."

"Really? Couldn't tell," retorted Lois. *Anything like Lucy.* Obviously, they all knew Lucy was the other dimension's Lois Lane.

"Lois, listen to me. Slow, methodical. Think carefully about everything and everyone you touch. Do you understand?"

"Why?" Lois asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Just in case what I think happened actually happened," Lucy said vaguely.

"Why don't you just tell me?"

"Because it would be better if I were there in person to help."

"With what?" Lois wanted to know.

"You must be horrible at surprise parties. Patience. Pass the phone to Clark."

Clark took the phone with a chuckle. "You're not going to tell me either, are you, Lucy?"

"I would love to tell you, Clark. Really, I would," Lois informed him. "But you've been a bad boy. A very bad boy. So, no, I'm not going to tell you. You'll find out soon enough. Ask Sam if he'd be willing to fly back with Superman."

He covered up the mouthpiece, but before he could speak, Lois said, "How have you been bad, Clark?" She took a bite of toast and gazed at him naively.

Clark shrugged. "She doesn't like to be out of the loop." He winced and then turned to Sam.

Yeah, Clark, Lois Lane doesn't like to be kept out of the loop. Men! Lois rolled her eyes.

"Lucy wants to know if you're willing to fly Superman Express," Clark asked Sam.

Her father nodded.

"Yes. He'll come back early."

"Great. I'll need his help. Clark, stick to Lois like glue," Lucy insisted. "We can't have any more disappearing tricks. Not now."

Oh, boy. Bodyguard, Lois thought with another groan.

"Yes, ma'am," Clark teased.

"Clark, none of your lip. I'm trying to help, but if you want to battle this monster on your own, Frankenstein…"

"Okay. I'm sorry, Lois," he quickly apologized.

"Lucy."

He grimaced. "Right, sorry."

"Keep an eye on her. You need to be willing to step in if need be," Lucy warned cryptically.

"What do you mean by that?" Clark's brow furrowed.

Lucy sighed. "You'll understand if the occasion arises. This would be a lot simpler if you guys would just let me fly out there."

Clark shook his head. "And you call me pigheaded? See you later, Lucy." He hung up.

So, Clark heard the pigheaded jealousy remark. Of course he heard. He's got super hearing. "Lois?" Lois inquired, eyebrow raised, carrying her breakfast dishes to the sink.

He blushed, obviously hating that she caught his faux pas. "You should see her impersonation of you."

Liar! "How is Daddy going to fly back to Metropolis Superman Express? How are you going to contact Superman? He thinks I'm dead; who knows where he disappeared off to? He's going to blame himself, like he did when Lola died. He was really broken up about that." She studied Clark's reaction. *Go ahead. Fly yourself out of that one, Mr. Amazing.*

Clark looked away from her with a pained expression, before whispering, "He knows you didn't die, Lois. He knows that you're alive. I know how to contact him."

Wow. Her heart took a nosedive. Had Clark really just slapped her across the face with that news? She placed a hand to her mouth and turned her back towards him. *That's really cruel.*

"I'll go find you a suitcase," he said, standing up. She could sense him behind her, yet not touching her.

"A suitcase?" Lois mumbled, her mind still reeling from Clark's words about Superman.

"For your stuff," he reminded her. "The stuff you've been begging me for days to get for you. I can't have you keep breaking into my house every time you need to change your shirt."

"It must be hard being best friends with Superman," she said sharply, turning to face him again. "Having to share everything with him or else."

"You have no idea." Clark shook his head, taking a step back, away from her.

"How did you meet him?" Lois asked, leaning against the counter.

Clark thought about this for a moment. She had posed the same question to Superman, but he had refused to tell her. "Lucy introduced us. She's kind of my Superman expert."

I bet! "Oh, so that's why you tolerate her."

Her father coughed, pushing her away from the sink. "Why don't you go take a shower, Princess?"

"Good idea, Daddy. " Lois kissed her father on the cheek and faced Clark again, looking him up and down admiringly. A man who sat by her bedside all night after she was in a car accident still loved her. *Hmmm. Not bad looking in his everyday clothes either. Not bad looking at all.* How come she had never noticed how incredibly sexy Clark Kent was before?

If Clark was going to torture her, Lois could lay it on him twice as thick. "I feel dirty anyway. I could use a hot shower. A long, hot shower." Lois sighed and stretched her arms up over her head, her t-shirt riding up her waist as she did so. So, Mr. Amazing was going to try to break up with her. Not as long as she still had breath in her body. She glanced over her shoulder at Clark and licked her lips.

As soon as she left the room, her father spoke to Clark, "*You'd better get me to Lucy and pick up a car while she's getting ready. Clark? Clark?"* Lois heard her father snap his fingers.

"*Right,"* Clark replied, his voice hoarse.

Lois paused on the stairs and grinned. Step one of her torture of Clark Kent was working. She was amazed by the acoustics in this old house; they were incredible. She could hear everything.

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Chapter 6 — The Return of Ultra Woman

Author's Note: The "Lois" in Chapter 5 and 6 refers to alt-Lois. Canon Lois will be called "Lucy" to help lessen the confusion between the two characters.

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Clark had dropped Sam off at Lois's apartment. Lucy greeted him with her usual slap in the face. Then she asked him to leave. No, told him to leave. He sighed. It had been wrong of him to taunt Kal with his wife's possible infidelity, but he hadn't been thinking straight. Clark knew it was his own Lois that Kal was watching at his house, but when he had opened the door and seen them kissing…

At first glance, seeing Lois in Lucy's clothes, with her hair cut like Lucy's… maybe part of him had thought that Kal was kissing Lucy, not his Lois. But when Lois jumped away from Kal and he saw that it definitely was his Lois, Clark had completely lost it. Lois had been driving him crazy with these smoldering looks every time he — well, Mr. Amazing — saw her.

Clark knew if he kissed Lois again, he would not have the ability to stop. So, from now on, no more visits from Mr. Amazing. He was too dangerous for her to be around. Lois was too fragile a person for a man like him. Too breakable. Too addicting.

Though she had been pleasant and admiring of Clark and his writing talents, she showed no interest in that side of him whatsoever — well, not since he invented his "secret girlfriend" — until this morning on the way to the shower, when Lois had looked at Clark as a piece of meat. A piece of juicy, tasty, freshly barbequed meat. A part of him thought Lois had figured it all out and was tormenting him on purpose, because it sure felt like torture having her look at him like that as she talked about showering. A shiver danced down his spine. *Whoa*. Lois was one hot woman, but she was married and he had already been burnt once by a married woman.

Clark winced. Not only had he unintentionally been burned by Lucy, but his guilt over his part in the affair had doubled… tripled… exponentially increased since he saw Kal kissing Lois. Lois and Kal had only kissed. He knew that Lois had kissed Kal partly because of dimension confusion and partly because she thought that Kal was her Mr. Amazing. Nor had she known to be watchful of the soul mate pull. Because of all that and because his own anger, Lois had rushed into a snowstorm and almost died. Clark had forgiven her, more quickly and easily than he might otherwise would have. His own guilt in the whole matter seemed far worse.

Yet, it was difficult for Clark to get the image of the two of them out of his mind and he knew it would haunt him for a long time to come. The image had left a bad taste in his mouth. Lois, while guilty of kissing Kal, was forgiven. He still had difficulty forgiving Kal for *his* actions, even though Clark knew he and Kal's wife had not only kissed but done a whole lot more. Guilt stabbed through Clark, knowing full well the pain he himself had inflicted, and would in the future inflict, upon the unknowing and innocent Kal.

Clark had not tried to stop himself from falling in love with Lucy at the beginning; he couldn't help himself. It just… happened. He was already half in love with her after she had walked into the newsroom and kissed him in front of Lana that day last February. None of Lana's kisses had ever seared through him like that one kiss had. Even after Kal's Lois told him that she was not the Lois from his dimension, and that she was in love with and about to marry Kal, Clark had still not been able to stop himself.

With every fiber of Clark's being he knew what he had done was wrong. He remembered learning in church and from his parents that it was wrong to covet another man's wife. And even though Lucy hadn't been Kal's wife — technically — until weeks after she had arrived pregnant on his doorstep this past summer, Clark knew Lucy was not his to love. But that still had not stopped him from looking at her whenever he got the chance, from wanting to spend as much time with her as he could, or from desiring her in a way he knew he should not. If he had tried harder in the beginning not to fall in love Lucy as a substitute for his missing Lois, and to fight against the soul mate pull, perhaps the affects of that pheromone perfume would have been easier to fight.

Though he and Lucy might tease each other about their one night together from time to time, Clark knew neither of them truly found the anguish they had caused funny. Neither would Kal, should he learn of the affair. Clark had not spoken lightly when he had told Sam that Kal would be justified in killing him after learning what Clark and Lucy had done to her husband. Clark felt, now that he had tasted a fraction of the pain Kal would suffer upon learning of their deceit, that he deserved any punishment meted out to him by Kal. Clark would take the punishment without complaint, hoping to ease the burden on his heart.

Clark had already decided that he would be — should be — alone for the rest of his life; he did not deserve happiness after his actions caused so much grief in others. It was for the best. Lois and he could be friends. She had been miraculously healed after the car accident. But he couldn't expect miracles every time she got hurt and, with his luck, there was bound to be another time.

He took a deep breath and slowly flew down to the Topeka airport. Clark never wanted to live through Lois dying ever again. It was his fault for scaring her with his temper and for her getting struck by lightning.

Clark spun into his business suit and walked into the car rental agency. After he had signed the papers and gotten the keys, he went outside to the pay phone to call Lois at his house. The phone rang repeatedly, and Clark was about to fly over to see what was up when she finally answered.

"Clark, you never said you'd be calling from the airport,"

Lois said. “I didn’t know if I should answer it.”

“Just wanted to let you know that I’ll be there in an hour, if the roads aren’t too bad,” he told her, wishing he were brave enough to fly out there and tell her the truth. He doubted he would ever allow himself to fly with Lois again. Another self-imposed punishment for his mountains of crimes.

“I’ll be here, packing my suitcases.” Her words were light, but he could tell by her tone she’d rather not have to deal with her stuff. Another wave of guilt passed over him as he remembered putting off returning her things to her.

“I’ll see you soon,” Clark said about to hang up.

“Clark!”

He paused. “Yes?”

“Thanks for helping me out. I don’t deserve your kindness after the mess I made. I know I’ve been nothing but a thorn in your side since coming back to Metropolis,” Lois apologized. “I promise to be better.”

“No problem, Lois. I’m always glad to help. See you soon,” he said, hanging up. He was thankful that she wasn’t taking Clark for granted. He smiled in relief. In fact, that was the nicest she had been to him since Superman flew her back to Metropolis.

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When Clark arrived at the house an hour later, it was quiet except for the sound of her sobbing. He was upstairs in an instant. She wasn’t in her room. He walked slowly down the hall and found her curled up into a tight ball on the bed they had shared. He swallowed, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Lois? Are you all right?” he whispered.

She nodded, which seemed contradictory to her body language. Rolling over, she set her head in his lap and continued to cry, her whole body wracked with sobs. Clark’s heart cracked a little with each sob. He had done this. He had hurt her this badly. It was his fault. He should have never let them become close, but they had. He wrapped his arms around her, wishing he had the courage to tell her the truth, to apologize.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois cried, wiping her nose on her arm. “I just came in here and I realized that this was… and I was reminded of him and how… and now it’s over… it’s gone… how something so precious, that was never meant to be… that was never really there, is now gone… gone forever…” Anguish overcame her and the sobs took her over again.

Clark could do nothing more than hold her and rock her. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, allowing a tear to escape.

He felt the loss and pain at the ending of their relationship as well.

He missed her, too.

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Clark woke up on the bed a while later. Lois was gone. He must have fallen asleep at some point. She had cried and cried and cried, until she had cried herself to sleep. He didn’t think anyone could have so much love inside of them to release in the form of tears. He had curled up next to her, continuing to hold her, not wanting to let her go.

Sitting up, Clark stretched and glanced at his watch. Ten twelve. He walked down the hall, following the sounds of typing that had drawn his attention. He found her sitting quietly at the desk in her room, typing away on her laptop. She closed it as soon as he entered.

“Ready to go?” he asked. He realized belatedly that his question sounded a bit gruff after what had just happened between them. He hadn’t meant it to. But he doubted, knowing what he knew about Lois, that she wanted to discuss her emotional outpouring from earlier. Especially with Clark Kent. They didn’t have that kind of friendship. If she did, he would be more than willing to listen. More than willing to hold her again. More than willing to do anything she asked.

“Do you mind if I leave some stuff here? I don’t really feel like lugging home all my shorts and tank tops, right now.” She sat back in her chair. “It’s actually a very pleasant room.”

“I’ve always liked it.”

“This used to be your room?”

Clark nodded. “You’re welcome to come and use it whenever you like.” What made him say that? She wasn’t going to want to ever return here again.

“The quiet is peaceful. After having someone watching me nonstop for almost four years, it’s good to be alone.”

“Sometimes, it’s nice to get away from the noise of the city.”

“It’s a good place to write, too,” Lois said, unplugging her laptop and returning it to its case. “Thanks for putting up with me, Clark.” She smiled weakly at him.

His heart bent. “My pleasure,” he replied. Why was she being so nice to him? Clark went to pick up her suitcases.

“I’ve got it,” Lois said, jerking it out of his hand. It flew out of her hand and across the room.

“I thought you packed.”

“I did, too.” Picking up the suitcase again, she set it on the bed and opened it. It was stuffed full of clothes and a few framed photographs. “That’s odd. It felt empty.” Lois closed it again and stared at it for a minute. “You carry it.”

Clark picked it up. It felt like a full suitcase to him. Not a heavy suitcase; he had never come across one of those. He picked up the other suitcase as well. “I’ll just load the car. You see if you’ve forgotten anything.”

When he returned, he found her wandering around his parents’ old bedroom. “Looking for something?” he asked.

“Your room. There isn’t any personal stuff. Photos, notes, anything except in my room. I thought this was your home away from home.”

Clark looked away, uncomfortable.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” Lois said, coming to him and setting her hand on his chest.

He took a deep breath and set his hand over hers for a moment, before removing it from his chest. Then Clark smiled. “Of course you wanted to pry. You’re Lois Lane.”

“Ouch! Is that what you think of me?”

“It’s what makes you such a good reporter. It’s what makes you who you are.”

“So, Mr. Kent,” she said, skipping down the stairs. “Why aren’t you at home at home?”

“Because I only just moved in this fall. I haven’t had time to make it my own,” he explained.

“Oh,” Lois replied. “That makes sense. So, the next time I come here, you’ll have put in some personal touches for me to snoop through?”

Clark laughed. “If you insist, we can do that when you come back for your spring clothes.” She wanted to come back. His heart soared, before reality shot it out of the air again.

“Oh, I definitely insist,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at him and winking. “Otherwise, it’s like you don’t live here.”

“I don’t live here,” he said, setting the alarm code and shutting the front door.

“Oh, right. This is your Fortress of Solitude.”

He chuckled. “You heard that, did you?”

Lois nodded.

“Well…” Clark made a buzzer sound. “This isn’t the Fortress of Solitude.” He stepped off the front porch and trudged through the snow around the corner of the house. She followed. He pointed to an old tree house in one of the trees. “That’s my Fortress of Solitude.”

Lois laughed and started to climb up the trunk of the tree, swinging easily up to the fort.

“Lois, don’t climb up there. It’s old.” Clark climbed up after her. He found her looking through his old collection of marbles, wooden swords and guns, and arrowheads.

"Here's stuff to snoop through." She grinned wickedly. "Now I feel like I'm getting to know the real Clark Kent."

He squatted down next to her. "You know, you're the first girl to enter the Fortress with the exception of my mom."

"I like your mom. She's cool."

Clark looked at her for a moment as if she was crazy, before the light bulb went on. "Oh, Martha Kent, Clark's Mom. I like her, too. She reminds me of my mom, only different."

Lois stared at him like she was going to ask something, but then changed her mind. "Different, how?"

"More outgoing. More worldly. Maybe my mom was those things too, but I never had a chance to really get to know her. She died when I was ten. And when you're ten, your mom is still just your mom."

"Yeah," Lois agreed. "I lost my mom when I was about ten, too. She ran off with my little sister and a plastic surgeon. She and I never did see eye to eye. I never saw them again."

"I know. Sam told me," Clark said, sitting down and dangling his feet over the edge of the tree house. "Your sister, Lucy, is an actress in Hollywood."

She gawked at him. "*What?*"

"Lucy Lane is an actress in Hollywood. Nothing major, but a couple of speaking parts."

Lois climbed down out of the tree house. Clark jumped down, landing with a solid thud next to her.

"Shall we go? I don't want to miss the one o'clock to Metropolis." He started walking toward the four-wheel drive rental until he noticed she was still standing under the tree house.

"How do you know that? About Lucy?" Lois asked, when he walked back to her.

Clark held out his hand with a slight smile. "Clark Kent, Investigative Reporter." He dropped his hand after she just stared at it. "I've been looking for you for over three years, Lois. There isn't much I don't know about you. Shall we go?"

Lois slowly followed him. "Is that all I am to you? A story?"

Clark wanted to take her into his arms and show her otherwise, but sighed instead. "I'm hoping I am a friend and a colleague, once we make sure Luthor isn't coming after you anymore."

Lois didn't respond and he had a strange feeling that wasn't the answer she was looking for. She sat quietly in the car as they drove through town.

Clark decided to fill the silence with a guided tour.

"There's the city hall. The bank. Maisie's Diner — I took Lana there for ice cream on our first date."

"Stop."

He slowed the car to a stop and looked at her.

"I need to get some things at the market. Do you mind?" she asked.

Clark pulled the SUV up to the curb and turned off the car, looking at her curiously. *What couldn't wait until they got back to Metropolis?*

"I'll be right back. You can wait." Lois smiled weakly, grabbing her purse and getting out of the car. A few minutes later, she returned with a bag, bulging with a big item.

He x-rayed the bag and then turned away, embarrassed. Feminine items. *Oh.*

She pulled a Double Fudge Crunch Bar out of the bag. "You want a bite?" she offered.

Clark shook his head and pulled back out onto Main Street. He was quiet a minute as she munched on her chocolate bar. "Joe's Feed. Smallville High," he continued with his guided tour.

Lois turned and looked at him. "Do you really think he's going to keep coming after me?"

Clark didn't need her to tell him who the 'he' was in her question. "Luthor seemed to go through a lot of trouble to hold on to you. Do you really think he won't?"

"No. You're right. Lex will keep coming until one of us is dead. He doesn't like to lose."

"From what I've heard, neither do you," Clark teased gently.

"Oh, think you're so smart, Smallville. Think you know everything about me, do you?" Lois glowered at him.

"Pretty much," he answered smugly.

She glared at him. "What's my favorite ice cream?"

He shook his head with a grin. "Low ball question? Double Fudge Ripple with Chocolate Chunks."

"Okay. That was an easy one." She thought for a moment, taking another bite of her candy bar. "The first boy I ever kissed?"

"Stan Dunkel, in kindergarten. Stan's now married and has three kids, lives outside of New York and has a pet grooming business he runs with his wife, Darlene. He says, 'Hi, Spunky'."

"Ha-ha." Lois gulped. "I bet you just made that up."

"I don't lie, Lois." For the most part. To everyone else, he was honest. To Lois….

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh, now I know you're lying, big boy. Everybody lies. You've lied to everyone about Lucy and who she is."

"Lucy isn't above lying; actually, she's one of the best liars I've ever met." He glanced at Lois, wondering which Lois would win in a lying contest. "Technically, she did most of the lying. I couldn't let it out that she was Superman's sister-in-law, now could I?"

"That's not exactly who she is, is she?" Lois countered. She was too good at asking questions.

"Lucy finds it easier if she thinks of the two Supermen as twin brothers," he explained. "It's easier if she knows where the line is." That line had become his friend these many months. He had bumped against it until his head hurt. And a couple of times it had twisted around his neck like a noose. But there it would remain as he knew it should. Since his Lois arrived, he had encircled himself with the line. He needed to protect his Lois from what was on the other side.

"Wait a minute! Lucy needs to draw a line between herself and our Superman? Is she drawn to him like I was to Kal-El?"

Clark glanced at her and then refocused his attention on the road, while he mentally kicked himself. Him and his big mouth.

"I wonder if she's ever crossed that line? Clark? Has she? You're Superman's best friend, *well*?"

Clark took a deep breath and exhaled, refusing to answer, staring straight ahead. Ignoring her.

"Was he able to resist her, I wonder? Knowing she was destined to love Superman. Love Superman." Lois sighed. "They've been hanging out together much longer than the hour Kal and I spent together. Oh, my God! They did fall in love. That's why he got so mad yesterday. With my hair cut like hers and wearing her clothes, he thought for a second I was her."

Lucy was going to kill him. He wished that Lois would just shut up.

"But our Superman can't have her. She belongs to Kal. He knows that. She's going to have to return to her dimension one of these days. That's why the time machine is out at your Smallville place, isn't it? To take her home. I wonder why she came here in the first place." She thought for a moment, but then shook her head. "How romantic. How sad." She sniffed, a pout forming. "Oh, now I feel sorry for him. I shouldn't have… oh!" She swallowed, a tear running down her cheek. "That means he never really…" She covered her mouth. "I should never have run away." She slouched down in her seat, pulling out another chocolate bar — from her purse this time — and biting into it. It was one of the chocolate bars he had given her at Christmas. She sniffed again, bringing her knees up to her chest.

Clark glanced over at her and felt like someone punched him in the stomach. "Lois?"

"He never really loved me, did he?" she murmured, her wet eyes focused forward. "You can tell me the truth. I can take it."

No, Lois, don't think that, Clark winced. He really was the world's worst boyfriend. "Of course, he does."

Lois glanced at him, tears running down her cheeks. "Stick with the truth, Smallville. It looks better on you. Why would he love me?"

Clark pulled the car over to the side of the road. This wasn't a conversation to have while driving. He turned and faced her. "Why wouldn't he love you? You are so beautiful, the sun rises in your eyes. You're so intelligent, everyone at the *Planet* is giving you such a hard time because it's the only way for them to even the playing field. You're so witty, you make me laugh when I feel like crying. You are so brave and gutsy that you'd thumb your nose at a crazy crime boss, daring him to come after you. You're so tough that you wouldn't let Lex Luthor steal your hope and sanity while locked up as his prisoner for over three years." He sighed. "You're so wonderful."

She smiled at him through her tears, reaching out and cupping his face in her hand. "You're sweet, Smallville."

He turned the car to the road, pulling back out. "And no, you shouldn't have run off," Clark mumbled. "But don't pity him. He doesn't deserve it."

Lois looked at him with a raised brow. He concentrated on the road. His knuckles were almost white from gripping the steering wheel.

"You're angry at him, Clark. Little goody two shoes from Smallville is angry at his hero for crossing that line. Did your image of him get a little tarnished because he showed himself to have a heart, to be human, to be frail, and have desires just like the rest of us? To make mistakes?"

"No!" he snapped. "I'm angry at Superman for scaring you. For making you run off in the middle of a wild electrical snow storm, for almost getting you killed. When I thought you died…" Clark stopped speaking, his voice choked with emotion. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. Lois Lane — not just a pregnant Lois — was his red Kryptonite. *Think of the line*, he told himself.

Lois did not speak for a minute. "Clark," she whispered. "Is that why you sat by my bedside all night?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"And I'm sorry too. I like you. Really, I do. Sometimes, I wish I had met you first. But I think the Fates have me linked with Superman."

Clark scoffed and shook his head. "There is no destiny, Lois. You make your own decisions."

"I think you're a little jealous of Superman," she said.

He sighed. "At times, I wonder what my life would be like if Lucy had never introduced us."

"That bad, huh? Always having to live in a hero's shadow."

"It isn't all that bad," Clark said, allowing a smile to emerge as he thought of Lois crawling toward him on her hands and knees on Christmas Eve. "Without him I would never have met you."

"Aren't you sweet?" Lois hooked her arm with his and leaned against his shoulder. "Screw destiny. I'm going to fall for you."

He laughed with a shake of his head. "Lois, I'm not asking you to fall for me. Actually, it would be better for you if you didn't. I'm a jinx. Cursed when it comes to love."

"Oh?" Lois mused. "You don't believe in destiny, but you believe in jinxes and curses? You are one big enigma, Clark Kent, and I'm going to figure you out." She poked him in the chest.

"Lois, I'm not worth figuring out. Why don't you work on you for a while?" he suggested. "See who you are and what you want without a man in your life."

"Hmmm. You really don't want that spotlight pointed in your direction. Wonder what it is you don't want me to find out?"

Clark rolled his eyes. There was no middle ground with this woman.

"So, what went wrong between you and Lana? Actually, I was kind of surprised not to find you two married. I read about your engagement in the paper, before Lex blinded me."

"You saw that?" He was surprised that she still remembered seeing that.

"So, tell me. What happened?"

He wondered what she would think of the truth.

"Oh, is it still too painful?" she asked, taking another bite of her chocolate bar.

"It's been almost a year now, Lois," Clark reminded her. "And I don't know what's sadder, that it didn't hurt when she dumped me or that I almost married someone whom I didn't miss when she was gone."

"Ouch! You're a cold fish. You didn't miss her at all?"

Clark shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I guess I did a little. But more the companionship, having someone to talk with, than her in particular."

"You don't have any friends? You're such a nice guy, I can't believe that."

"Close friends, no. Lucy's my closest friend at the moment and she's heading back to Kal soon. I won't even have her for long." Clark sighed. Friendship with Lucy had always been a road fraught with potholes.

"Tell you what. I'll be your bosom buddy. You can talk to me about your problems," Lois volunteered. "But on the flip side, you'll have to be mine. And I tend to ramble on and on and on. But strictly off the record there, Mr. Investigative Reporter. I don't want to be your source for all things Lex Luthor."

"You don't want to tell the world about hubby's dirty dealings?" he queried, glancing at her.

"Of course. But *I'm* going to write those stories, not you. Or, if Gareth won't let me touch the story with a ten-foot pole, being too close, I'll be your source as long as I get to do the work with you. Partners. But not on the personal stuff."

"Same goes with me. Off the record on the stuff I tell you. Because this Superman stuff is above top security clearance," he replied, stating the obvious.

"The tabloids do seem obsessed with the Man in Blue. I almost don't know what to believe."

"With the tabloids, it's best not to believe any of it," Clark recommended.

"I hate the tabloids as much as any other self-respecting journalist, Clark, but you've got to admit they do have a grain of truth to some of their stories," she reminded him. *Not* that he needed reminding.

"You going to sell me out to Leo Nunk or Randy Goode's *Dirt Digger*?" he asked.

"Goode? Ugh. No, he's already approached me twice to do a tell-all spread about life with the reclusive billionaire. He even volunteered to get me in touch with Spencer Spencer from *Love Fortress International* if I wanted to do a 'real spread' — his words." Lois shivered. "I want what I say to mean something, not be someone's gossip."

"Then I guess you're a trustworthy friend." Friend. That wouldn't be crossing the line. Blurring it, maybe, but not crossing it.

"So. Tell, tell. Why'd Lana dump you?"

He groaned. Lois was persistent. "You really want to know? Fine!" he snapped and then he glanced at her. "You."

"*Me?* You didn't even know me a year ago."

Clark grinned, the temptation to tell her the truth now that she knew about the two dimensions too strong. "But I did. You walked into the newsroom and kissed me right in front of my fiancée."

Lois leaned away from him, letting go of his arm, as her brow

furrowed. “I’ve never kissed you, Clark.”

“I know. It was Lucy, impersonating you.” He chuckled.

“What was she doing in our dimension? Why would she impersonate me? Why would she kiss you? She’s married to Superman, isn’t she? Not Clark Kent.”

“Oh, right. Almost forgot about his role. Yep. Lois Lane and Superman. That’s why Lana dumped me.” Clark smiled mischievously.

“Hardy har-har. You got me. If you didn’t want to tell me you could have just said so,” Lois grumbled.

He doubted that very much.

Lois crossed her arms, stuck her bottom lip out in a pout and stared out the front window.

Clark continued to drive, letting Lois wallow in curiosity while he organized his thoughts. He knew she wouldn’t stay silent for long. It wasn’t in her genes. She actually made it four minutes, a new record.

“Not much out there, is there?” she said wistfully.

“It’s actually quite beautiful in the spring. So green and lush.”

Lois sighed. “It’s so grey. Cold.”

“Well, it’s definitely no tropical island. Missing home?”

“Singapore wasn’t home, Clark. It was my prison,” she murmured. “Not that I was ever let out of the 105th floor to enjoy it.”

Clark felt bad. He had been unkind with his teasing. “An evil time-traveling man by the name of Tempus kidnapped Lucy and stranded her here.”

Lois glanced at him, listening.

“Back in her dimension, she could always contact Superman through Clark Kent, so she tracked me down at the *Daily Planet*. She needed our Superman to get her back home,” he told her, tiptoeing the truth line.

“But why impersonate me?”

“Lois Lane and Clark Kent are partners in her dimension, so when she walked into the bullpen and Perry saw her, he naturally assumed she was you. She used his mistake to get partnered up with me.”

“But why *kiss* you? That doesn’t make sense.”

Clark cleared his throat and looked back to the road. Oh, hell, why had he given in to temptation?

“All those photos at Martha’s house. What had Kal-El said? That’s right, we’re married!” Lois beamed at him.

“No.” He smiled at her, indulgently, wishing it were true, but knowing it would never come true. “That dimension’s Clark Kent and Lois Lane are married. As I said before, their destiny doesn’t have to be our destiny. For example, that Lois Lane never married Lex Luthor.”

“Lucky her,” Lois mumbled.

“Oh, she was engaged to him. There was even a wedding, but she couldn’t go through with it.”

“Guess she didn’t have amnesia, either.”

“Actually, she did.”

“Really?” Lois was staring at him.

“Lex Luthor kidnapped her from the church before her wedding to her Clark, and replaced her with a clone. Just like your clone. Then when she escaped from Lex, she hit her head, and thought she was—”

“Wanda Detroit. Yeah, right. I guess Kal did mention that story, too.”

“Oh.” What else had Kal told her?

“So, she kissed you. I can imagine Lana couldn’t have liked that much. How does Superman figure into this tale?”

Lois sure had a one-track mind.

“When Perry partnered us up, she told me all about her other dimension. Her Clark and her Superman. So we went looking for our Superman. He was just trying to be an average guy, not some superhero, just trying to blend in. She made him into the Superman he is today. She gave him the confidence to be the man he was born to be.”

“No wonder he fell for her.”

Clark rolled his eyes. Let’s see if he could repair some of this damage. “I never said he fell for her. Or that the line was ever crossed between them.”

“Of course you did. With your silence, Smallville. Your honesty gene wouldn’t let you deny it.” She grinned, knowing she had him cornered. “Lana didn’t like you hanging out with this woman who kissed you, I get that. But Superman?”

“She thought it weird that he went around in tights, I guess.” He shrugged. “She told me that I could either be… friends with him or marry her. Not both.”

Lois laughed and laughed and laughed.

Clark wasn’t amused. “What’s so funny?”

“She didn’t dump you. You dumped her.” She grabbed her belly as if it hurt from her laughter. “Oh, that felt good, Smallville. I haven’t laughed like that in years.” Lois looked at him with a new sparkle in her eyes.

Clark was still confused. “But I didn’t want to break up with her.”

“Sure you did. You see, by giving you the ultimatum she was also empowering you to say ‘no’ to her, which I’m presuming she didn’t do often.”

“She only had my best interest at heart,” he said, instinctively still defending Lana despite her having done nothing to deserve it.

“By telling you who you could be friends with?” She looked at him skeptically.

“Lana was worried I was associating with the wrong sort of people.”

“There’s a right sort and a wrong sort of people?”

Even to Clark that sounded bad. “Of course not.”

“Lana was worried about what people would say about her, wasn’t she?” Lois asked.

“I guess so.”

“Essentially, she was saying that she didn’t want to be associated with a tights-wearing vigilante — no matter how hot and sexy he is — so you couldn’t be either. You didn’t like that, so you told her sayonara.”

It was like Lois took a box off his head, letting in the light. “Wow! You’re right, Lois. I did break up with her.” Clark leaned back in his seat and a smile grew on his face. Maybe he wasn’t cursed after all.

“You’re welcome.” She smiled.

“How did you get so smart?”

“Lots of experience.” Lois winced. “That came out wrong. What I mean is, I’ve issued an ultimatum or two in my life and they’ve always come back around to hit me in the face. I’ve learned that if there is something I want, to just take it, then and there, and never give it the chance to say no or I won’t get it at all. And if I can’t have what I want…” The smile on her face turned to a grin as she put her fingertips together. “Be patient.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

Clark looked at her with a sinking feeling. “I’m glad you never turned to evil, Lois. Superman would have his hands full with you.” *Unlike now.*

***

They pulled up to the Topeka airport and Lois stretched. She was having a divine time teasing Clark. She had learned a lot more about him in these past twenty-four hours than she had during the whole last month. So, Superman was going to take an airplane trip to Metropolis with her. That should be interesting. She wondered if he had ever flown on an airplane before. He dropped off the rental car and they took the shuttle to the airport.

Lois could hear the other passengers whispering and pointing in their direction as they stood in line to get their tickets. They

clearly recognized him as Superman. Why hadn't she noticed anyone doing that in Metropolis? Then again, she had never really been out and about with Clark Kent.

"Two tickets to Metropolis, please," Clark told the counter agent. "One-way."

Lois placed her ticket and Lucy's ID on the counter. "Actually, I have my return ticket here, Clark. We just need a ticket for you." Then she stood back to watch the fun.

"Clark? Clark Kent?" The ticket counter agent's face went white. "You want to fly Topeka Air to Metropolis?"

"Yes. On the one o'clock flight. Is there room?"

The ticket counter person looked to her co-worker and then back at him. "Have you ever flown with us before, Mr. Kent?" she asked nervously, typing on her computer.

"No. This is my first time."

The woman cleared her throat and then lowered her voice. "Is there any specific reason that you are flying with us today? Any reason we should be apprised of, sir?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Clark replied. *Oh, he really couldn't be this oblivious.* Lois wondered if they would even let him fly.

A manager approached the desk. "What seems to be the problem?"

Clark looked at the ticket agent and then at the manager. "Is there something wrong?"

The manager looked at him and then at the screen and then back at him. "Mr. Kent? Mr. Clark Kent? *The* Clark Kent?" The manager gaped at him.

"The only one that I know of."

Lois leaned over to him and whispered into his ear. "Liar."

Clark gave her a sharp look and then turned back to the Topeka Air agents, pulling out his wallet. "I forgot to show you my driver's license."

"Yes. Thank you," the manager said, his voice hoarse, typing into the computer. "Are you and Ms. El traveling together then, Mr. Kent?" All the women behind the counter were giving her nasty looks. She wondered how much more nasty they would be if they knew how intimate she and Superman had been.

"Yes. She's my assistant."

Lois smiled at the group of employees that was starting to gather behind the counter.

"First class, sir?"

"Coach is fine."

The manager's eyes went wide. "We'd be willing to give you a free upgrade to first class, sir."

"Coach is fine." Clark shook his head.

Aw, shucks. A free upgrade would have been nice, frowned Lois. That man of hers was just too honest.

"I'm sorry, sir. Unfortunately we don't have two coach seats together. If you want to sit with Ms. El, I'll have to put you both in first class," the manager said, continuing to type into his computer. Lois couldn't believe it. The man was lying and giving them the free upgrade, anyway.

Clark looked at Lois and she put on her innocent face, which she knew he didn't believe by his expression. He handed the man his credit card. "That's fine. I'll pay the difference."

Wow. He really didn't take advantage of his celebrity status. She was more and more impressed by him. Clark was so completely and utterly different from Lex. Lex always expected to be treated as if he should be dipped in gold. Clark only wished to be treated like everyone else. Lois wanted to wrap her arms around him and give him a hug. But that would have been a big no-no. She could just imagine what the ladies behind the counter or the other people in line would do if she did.

The manager smiled and rang up the sale. "Here you go, sir. If you could just sign here? Two first-class boarding passes from Topeka to Metropolis on our one o'clock flight. Do you have any luggage to check?"

"Oh, yes. Lucy?"

Lois looked down at those pesky suitcases and took a step back. Remembering what happened at the house, she didn't want to touch them. "Could you, Clark?"

He nodded and set them on the scale. Together they weighed forty-three pounds.

Yet they had felt as light as feathers. How was that possible? Lois thought.

"What about your laptop?" Clark asked her.

"That's coming with me, buster," Lois said, patting her laptop case. "I'm not letting this sucker out of my sight again."

Clark's brow furrowed as he glanced between her and the ticket agent. "Is that okay?"

"Yes, sir," answered the ticket agent. "It's small enough to count as a carry-on item."

"Oh. Right." Clark nodded, recognizing the term. "Carry-on."

Lois smiled. Nope, he'd never flown on a plane before. This is going to be interesting.

"Here are your baggage claim stubs. Let me staple those to your ticket folder." The manager did just that and then handed all the items to Clark, including their IDs. "Thank you for choosing to fly with us today."

"You're welcome," Clark answered, taking the paperwork and Lois's elbow before moving away from the counter.

"That was weird, Clark. I wonder why they gave us such a hard time?" Lois said naively.

He glanced at her and released a breath, thinking she still hadn't figured it out. Could Clark really believe she was that blind? *Had* she been that blind?

"They seemed to know who you were, though. I never knew you were such a big name reporter, Clark. Good for you."

Clark smiled falteringly at her praise; it was obvious he wished that was why he had gotten the attention they had at the counter, instead of the truth. It must be an ego bust to know he would no longer earn kudos from his writing as long as everyone knew he was also Superman. *Poor Clark.*

They sailed through security. No big surprise there.

They walked through the terminal and found their gate. Lois saw a magazine stand and entered to buy a book for the flight; Clark followed her, almost hovering. Was he afraid of what she might learn there? She took a quick glance at the magazines and saw a few covers featuring Superman, but nary a reference to Clark Kent. He must have noticed the same, because he relaxed and pretended to browse.

Lois went to the novels and found herself a bodice ripper that might hold her attention. Although after Mr. Amazing, even romance novels paled in comparison. She smiled. He could be so romantic; why had he shunned her at the house? Was it because of her father? Or was it because she had kissed Kal-El? She drew in a quick breath and hoped beyond hope that Mr. Amazing hadn't considered that the kind of betrayal that would make him fall out of love with her. Her heart crumbled. Maybe he had.

She quickly flipped through the book and then set it down, stepping away, her brain suddenly full of images from the story. *What just happened?* Hesitantly, Lois picked up the book again and chose a random page. She read the page and realized she knew what it said. She flipped the book over and reread the back cover. Had she read it before? Although Lex had allowed her to read romance novels, he had only given her access to the classics. She went to the publisher's page and saw it was brand new, only just released. *Why did it seem so familiar?* She returned it to the shelf and walked back into the concourse, sitting down on a bench, her brain aching with confusion. *That was just too weird.*

"We still have an hour before our flight. Are you hungry? I saw a snack bar back there."

As Lois looked up at him to answer, a little boy bolted around the corner and almost barreled into Clark. Clark caught him with

ease and set him back down on the ground.

"Whoa there, champ. What's the rush?"

The boy, probably close to six years of age, looked almost the mirror image of what she imagined Clark must have looked like at that age. Dark hair, big brown eyes, and a pair of glasses sliding down his nose. He looked up and up to Clark's face and gasped, his eyes wide. "Is it true? Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Clark asked him warily.

"Do you really know Superman?"

"Ah, yes, I do," Clark answered cautiously, then glanced around nervously. "Why don't we find your folks? I'll be right back," Clark told Lois. She quickly scanned the concourse and saw the boy's parents two gates down. The mother waved her son back and the father had a red face at his son's boldness.

Lois watched as the boy took hold of Clark's hand, with no fear whatsoever, and dragged him back to his parents. "Mom! Dad! Did you see him catch me? Did you?"

"I'm so sorry," the father apologized. "He's usually so shy."

The acoustics in this place were remarkable. Even with all these people, Lois could hear them clearly.

"It's okay." Clark smiled at the parents and then down at the little boy, who still hadn't let him go.

"Timothy, why don't you let go of the nice man's hand?" the mother coaxed her son.

Clark knelt down to Timothy's eye level. "Everything all right here?"

"He says he knows Superman," the boy said. "Just as my dad said."

The father's pink face turned beet red in mortification. "I'm so sorry," he stammered.

Lois raised a brow. Okay, now they were on to something.

Clark glanced over his shoulder at her, and even though she was two gates away, he lowered his voice. "Actually, Timothy, I am Superman."

Thank you, Timothy. Lois grinned. *Confirmation complete.* Despite Clark lowering his voice, she could hear him just fine.

"Wow, cool! Why aren't you dressed like Superman, then?"

"I only dress like Superman when someone is in trouble and needs my help. If I came into the airport in my blue suit, then it might make people nervous or scared that something was wrong, and it could cause a panic. We wouldn't want that to happen, would we?"

Little Timothy shook his head.

"So, when I'm not off saving people, I dress like this. Just like your dad. This way, people don't get frightened, because they know everything's okay," Clark explained.

"Oh. And you wear glasses, just like me."

"That I do. Not only do glasses make you see better, they make people think you are smart and listen to what you say." He winked at Timothy.

"Wow!" Timothy pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Why are you at the airport, Superman?"

"Timothy, you've asked the nice man enough questions for one day," the father said.

"I'm here because of that woman right there." Clark pointed to Lois. "Everyone turn and wave." The entire family and Clark waved at her. Tentatively, Lois lifted her hand and waved back, confounded. What was he going to say? "She's a friend of mine, but she did a couple of bad things and I have to take her back to Metropolis."

"What did she do?" Timothy asked, really interested.

"She borrowed some of my things without asking and she ran away."

Lois pressed her lips together. Thanks, Clark. Thanks a lot. Brand me a common criminal with the kid.

"Oooh." The boy knew that those were bad things, indeed. The whole family was still staring at her. "Why didn't you just fly her back?"

Clark smiled. "Well, Timothy, that doesn't seem like much of a punishment, now does it? She takes my stuff, then runs away with it, and she gets a free ride with Superman? No sirree, Bob. She has to take an airplane back."

"Yeah!" Timothy was down with punishing Lois by not giving her a free Superman flight. "Is she going to jail?"

The parents started looking at her with nervous expression.

"Oh, no. She didn't actually steal anything and she returned the stuff she borrowed. She's a very important lady, that one. So, I've got to travel with her and make sure she stays safe."

The parents still looked at her like she was a common criminal. *Great, Clark.* Good thing they weren't on their flight.

"How is she important?" Timothy was filled with questions.

"You know how everyone needs someone to tell all their important secrets to?"

Timothy looked at him like he was crazy. "If you tell someone your secrets, they won't be secret anymore."

"There shouldn't be any secrets out there that you couldn't tell to your secret keeper. Your secret keeper might be your mom or your dad or grandpa or grandma or someone like that. If you have someone you can trust with your secrets, then they don't weigh heavily on your shoulders. It makes you feel better. And that woman there, well, she's the secret keeper of someone very important."

"Who?" Timothy asked eagerly.

Clark put a finger to his mouth. "Sssh. It's a secret." He smiled.

"Awww, shoot."

But at least Clark got the parents to smile. They weren't looking daggers at her any more.

"I've got to go back over there and keep an eye on her. Okay, Timothy?"

"Why don't you let go of the nice man's hand now, Timothy?" suggested his mother.

"Can you show me the Superman suit?" That kid had a one-track mind. Lois liked him.

"Tell you what, if you let go of my hand, I'll be able to show you just a little bit here in my sleeve. I wouldn't want to show you the entire suit and cause a panic now, would I?"

Timothy shook his head, but he let go of Clark's hand. Clark turned his back on Lois, but it looked like he was reaching into his sleeve.

Lois couldn't see any blue from where she sat, but Timothy's eyes and the eyes of his parents sure got big. An announcement came over the loudspeaker and the pain was deafening. *Holy cow, that's loud!* She stuck a finger in her ear and shook her head to stop the ringing. When she was able to glance back at Clark, he was shaking hands with the parents and waving goodbye to Timothy.

Clark walked back to her with a satisfied grin on his face. He sat down next to her.

"He sure glommed onto you," she teased. "I saw he wouldn't let go."

"He's a good kid. It happens." Clark shrugged nonchalantly.

"You tell him all about Superman?" Lois batted her eyes innocently.

"Enough." He smiled.

She could see that he liked kids; they were his biggest fans. The ones he didn't want to disappoint by being involved in a scandal with a married woman. Perry said that he would be crushed if people saw him as an adulterer. She realized the children were the main ones he would want to protect from that information. She watched as he turned and waved at Timothy, again.

Clark would make a good dad. Lois pictured him playing ball with a little boy like Timothy, out in the fields around the

Smallville house. Or taking a walk with a little girl on his shoulder, floating her up to the top of a tree to get the biggest leaf to make into a fan. His birth parents had died when Krypton exploded and then his adoptive parents died in a car accident. He had been alone for so long. She bet he couldn't wait to start a family of his own.

Her bottom lip began to quiver and her eyes felt damp again. She placed a hand on her stomach. She would never tell him that she had been pregnant. He would be devastated. It would be better if he never knew how close they had been to starting a family of their own.

"Do you want to get a snack, Lois? I feel like some ice cream," Clark announced.

It was hours since breakfast, but she wasn't hungry. She must have downed three chocolate bars on the ride to the airport. Truthfully, all Lois wanted to do was sit at the gate, hold Clark's hand and rest her head on his shoulder. Be close to him. Share her pain.

Lois knew she couldn't even do that if he was aware that she knew Clark Kent was Superman. She was married. Lucy El, whom she was impersonating, was also married. It seemed that everywhere they went, Clark Kent would be recognized as Superman. They'd never be able to go anywhere and just be themselves. Never be able to do anything romantic out in public. Never just sit and be a couple of sweethearts waiting for a plane. "Sure."

Clark looked at her. "Is everything all right?"

Had he noticed the catch in her voice? Lois took a deep breath. "I was just thinking about how lonely Superman must be sometimes. It must be hard, being recognized everywhere he goes."

"You're pitying him again," he grumbled, walking off to the snack counter.

Lois followed him, just fast enough to pass him. As she went by, she whispered, "I don't pity him, Clark. I love him." She looked at the snack bar menu. As she turned to speak to him, she realized Clark wasn't there. She glanced around and found him stopped in the middle of the concourse, staring at her. Perplexed, she walked back over to him. "Something wrong?"

Clark looked like he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her. As she drew in a breath at the intensity of his gaze, he blinked his eyes and shook his head. "No."

Then Lois gasped, realizing that had been the first time she had ever told him that she loved him. "Oh, I'm sorry, Clark. That was really insensitive of me. I will never say another word about him ever again. Please, forgive me." *Serves you right, flyboy!*

He sighed. "It's okay, Lois. I get to hear all about Kal from Lucy, might as well hear all about *him* from you."

"No, you're right. I'll never speak another word about him again." She held up her hand. "He doesn't deserve my love after the way he treated me yesterday. I'm going to move on with my life."

"What?" Clark stammered.

"You are always there for me when I need you. I'm going to fall in love with you instead." Lois winked, sauntering back to the snack bar.

He stomped after her. "Lois," he growled. "That's not funny."

"Yes, it is." She stared up at the menu board. She leaned close to him and whispered, "Do you think that they have Double Fudge Ripple with Chocolate Chunks?"

Clark laughed quietly. "I doubt it. Isn't that a very rare flavor?"

"Oh, right." She sighed dramatically. "I could have vanilla instead. It just won't taste the same, but I suppose I could get used to it," she said with regret, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye.

Clark was trying hard to keep the smile from his lips. "You could always have the twist cone. Half chocolate, half vanilla."

"Oooh, twist. Yum." Lois smiled at him with glee. "That would be better than just plain vanilla. See, you're always there for me. Even for the little things in life." She sighed, again. "I just cannot believe that he…." The line moved and she walked up the counter. "Two twist cones, please." She paid for their ice cream and walked away from the counter.

His ice cream melted as he stared at her. "It's melting, Clark," Lois told him, but he still stared. She shrugged, leaning over and licking the drip running down his ice cream cone and fingers. Clark jerked so suddenly as she 'accidentally' licked his fingers, the cone went flying into the air. She reached out and gracefully caught it, handing it back to him. "Sorry about that, Clark. But I warned you it was melting."

"You can't believe that he *what*, Lois?" he said, finally releasing himself from his stare.

Her eyes misted up. "It's not important, Clark. I told you I wouldn't speak of him anymore. It really isn't fair to you." Lois licked her cone.

Clark brought the cone to his lips. "That's okay, Lois. Remember, friends tell friends their problems."

"That's true. But you're his friend, too. I don't want to put you in the middle, even more than you already are." Lois licked her cone again. "Actually, you're a better friend to him than he is to you."

He raised a brow. "Why do you say that?"

Lois didn't say anything as they walked back to their gate. She continued eating her ice cream. "Mmm. This is really good, Clark. It's no Double Fudge Ripple with Chocolate Chunks, but I guess I could eat this for the rest of my life." She looked at her cone without much enthusiasm. "Or just go without." She sat down in an empty row of seats by the window. He sat down next to her, obviously waiting to hear the answer to his question. She made him wait, trying to figure out a good way to word what she wanted to say. "He lied to me."

"He doesn't lie, Lois," Clark told her.

"Stop defending him, Clark. Please. He's lied to me from the start." Lois looked down. "I should have known he didn't really love me, when he never told me who he was. At first, it didn't matter. Just being with him was enough. I should have known — it was just too good to be true. But he didn't have to tell me he loved me, not when he really loved her. That's the kicker. Why make me fall in love him, make me think he was this really romantic guy, tell me he would wait for me no matter what, and then…" She sniffed and took a lick of her cone.

"Then?" Clark whispered.

"Not."

Clark flinched. "In his defense, he's not good with women. He means well, but it always blows up in his face."

"See what a good friend you are? You're still defending him. I knew I shouldn't have put you in the middle." She tossed the rest of her cone in a nearby garbage can, making it easily. "I can't eat that. Maybe I should just give up on ice cream all together." She hugged her laptop case. "What other women? I thought it was just me and you-know-who?" She lowered her voice, leaning towards him. "Ultra Woman."

Clark coughed. "You know about that?"

Lois shrugged. "Did he date someone called Mayson Drake?"

He shook his head. "No, that was me."

She tilted her head. "But why would the tabloids make it look like he did by putting that photo on the front page? You know, the one I stole from your apartment."

"I know the one. Mayson wasn't very happy about that photo, I can tell you that much." Clark smiled forlornly. "She's not a big Superman fan. She thinks he breaks too many laws while catching bad guys and saving people."

Lois's jaw dropped. *Clark dated a woman who didn't like*

Superman? He does have issues. "That must have been difficult for you, dating someone who obviously disliked your best friend."

"Yeah, a bit." He swallowed. "I kept them apart as best I could. If you don't mind, Lois, I don't really want to talk about her."

"Wow, she did a real number on you. I understand."

"Well, since you convinced me that Lana didn't really dump me, it means that it was just Mayson."

She set her hand on his. "I'm sorry, Clark."

He jerked his hand away and glanced around, making sure nobody saw her. "Please, don't do that, Lois."

"Wow, Clark, jumpy much?"

Clark lowered his voice, hissing, "Don't forget you're a married woman."

Lois rolled her eyes. "I forgot who I was talking to. It won't happen again, Smallville." She held up her hands, then hugged her laptop case to her chest again, dropping all expression from her face. "I've filed for divorce, Clark. Don't treat me like I have the black plague."

"I'm sorry. I overreacted. You just surprised me, that's all."

If he really wanted to be surprised, she should tell him about her being pregnant with Mr. Amazing's child. Clark was lucky. Lois would never tell him.

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They were quiet for a few minutes. Clark finished his ice cream cone and threw his napkin in the trash. As he returned, he saw a couple of tears rolling down her cheeks. "Lois, I'm sorry."

"I've had a really bad day, Clark. Could you just forget about apologizing for a while, please?"

He sat down next to her and twiddled his thumbs. After a few minutes, he murmured, "When are they going to call our flight? I'm tired of waiting."

"Welcome to flying commercial," Lois replied.

"I'm not good at sitting around and doing nothing."

"Me neither." She wiped the tears from her face. "If you want to call him and fly home, go right ahead. I can make this trip by myself."

"Lucy said I should stay with you," he reminded her.

"*Lucy!*" Lois growled, turning away from him. "Don't mention her to me, please."

"I'm…" He swallowed the rest of what he was going to say.

"I'm fine, really. Things just feel weird. Sounds are really loud, reading gives me a headache, those suitcases…" She shivered.

Clark looked at her. "I'll stay."

"I wish you could just hold me and tell me everything's going to be fine," she murmured.

"Me, too." He wanted nothing more than to hold her.

"Like you did this morning." Lois looked at him. "Thank you. You don't know how much that meant to me, not being alone at that moment."

"I hate that he causes you so much anguish," he murmured, his heart constricting at the memory.

She smirked. "Me too. But that wasn't his fault."

Clark appeared skeptical. "Not his fault?"

"Never mind, Clark. It's complicated. Something private, between him and me." She sniffled again.

Did Lois really think he — Clark Kent — didn't know that she and Superman had been intimate? He nodded. "I think I know already, Lois. It's all right."

Lois looked at him in shock and then shook her head. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, Clark, believe me. Don't even try, please."

"I hate that you feel like you have to hoard your pain, Lois." He wished she'd throw some of it his way. After all, he was the one who deserved it.

"Forget it, Clark. I shouldn't have said anything."

"I'm here; let me help."

She glared at him. "Trust me, Clark. You *can't* handle it." Lois stood up and wandered around the waiting area.

Clark watched her, wishing she would let him in, knowing she wouldn't. No matter what she said, he knew deep in his heart that he was at fault. Only Mr. Amazing caused her that pain. He didn't like that reading was giving her headaches. He didn't like that everything was too loud for her. He didn't like that because of his temper, he could never be Mr. Amazing again.

They called boarding for first-class passengers and he followed Lois to the line. He pulled the boarding passes out of his pocket and handed one to her. She didn't say anything as she took it. She almost looked distraught. He hoped flying in an airplane wouldn't aggravate the problem, whatever it was.

Clark wondered how long it would take Lucy before she would forgive him and tell him what had happened to Lois. He knew she would forgive him eventually, but it had been a big digression on his part. Even bigger, now that Lois knew about Lucy. Lucy would forgive him; she always did. Weeks and weeks from that point probably, if he was lucky. He sighed and handed his boarding pass to the flight attendant.

The seats in first class were huge and soft and wonderful with real blankets and pillows. He had the flight attendant bring both for Lois. He was really worried. Maybe this healing thing that happened to her was only temporary and her body would just collapse at any minute. He released a breath. No, Lucy would have told him if it was that serious. The healing thing must be permanent. What else could it be?

Lois covered herself with the blanket and propped the pillow between them. He didn't know if that was to block her view of him or to turn her back to him. He didn't know what Clark Kent had done to piss her off. A few minutes later, he felt her hand brush against his leg. It was at that moment, he realized that she had placed the blanket over the hand rest, so they could hold hands without anyone knowing. He smiled as a chill went down his spine. It felt so good to hold her hand again. He took a deep breath and released it. At least, she would spend the flight sleeping.

"I love you, Mr. Amazing, wherever you are," Clark heard her murmur under her breath. Stroking her thumb with his, he wished he could tell her he loved her too. Never again.

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Clark apparently couldn't sit still. After the plane took off and the flight attendants started serving refreshments, he got up to walk the aisles. If Lois hadn't had the morning she did, she would probably have teased him about joining the mile high club. She smiled as she thought about joining the club without a plane someday. She shook her head. Not anymore. What was scaring him off? She hadn't seen him up close and personal in weeks (as Mr. Amazing at any rate) and suddenly that persona was angry because she made out a little with his twin? *Men.*

The flight attendant brought her coffee. Black this time, with two sugars. She had had enough heavy stuff for one day. It was so hot it was actually steaming. *First class ruled.* With Lex, she had traveled on a private jet — recommended, if your wife was a kidnap victim. The *Daily Planet* was so broke before Mr. Olsen bought it, she had previously always traveled coach. She wondered, when she got her job back, if she would still travel coach. She didn't really have much experience with first class; so far, she loved it.

Lois stirred her coffee with the little red stir stick they gave her. Then she blew on it to cool it off as she leaned across Clark's seat and looked down the aisle to see where he had disappeared to. Must be in coach. The first-class cabin's privacy curtain was closed. She lifted her cup to her lips to sip, but nothing came out. Glancing down, she saw that her coffee had turned into a

popsicle.

Her eyes opened wide. *What in the…? It was steaming not a minute ago.* She pulled up the stir stick but the whole cup went with it. She glanced around to see if anyone was watching her. She was going to have to melt it and fast, before the flight attendant or Clark returned. She glanced up at the little air conditioning fan above her. *That's ridiculous, Lois,* she told herself. *Those little vents are cool, but not that cool.*

She went over in her mind what happened since she got the cup of coffee. Lois had put in the sugar, stirred, blew on it to cool it down and poof — coffee-icicle. Her mouth hung open.

No way! Super cooling breath was one of Superman's abilities. How in the world did she now possess it? Lois glanced around again. If she had stolen that, maybe she had acquired some of his other skills as well. She closed her eyes a moment and recalled that first conversation with Perry. Strength, speed, flying, cooling breath, heat vision, x-ray vision, invulnerability and hearing. Super cooling breath, got it. Hearing? Check. Strength? Check. Invulnerability? Her brow furrowed, would that include super healing? If it did, big check.

She decided to see if she could use a little heat vision on the coffee-icicle without bringing the plane down. She wrapped her hands around the little china coffee cup and then glanced around at the first-class passengers. *Nobody's looking.* She tilted down her Lucy glasses, focused on the frozen coffee and thought 'heat.' Soon her mug of coffee was boiling hot again. Of course, she had melted her stir stick, so she set the cup off to the side. She didn't really need to ingest melted plastic.

Lois leaned back in her comfy seat with a smile. Heat vision, check. Her day was suddenly ticking upwards. There was no possible way Superman could run — or in his case, fly — away from her now.

She grinned. No wonder Lucy had told her to be very careful whenever she touched anyone or anything. The chair she broke at breakfast! She had just plopped herself into it. She couldn't do that anymore. *Good to know.* What else weird had happened that day? *The book!* Oh my gosh, she had speed-read it. That was how she knew what it was about. She would have to be careful about that as well. But super great research tool. She wanted to get up and dance around the plane. She was going to be the best reporter ever! Clark Kent wouldn't be able to catch her in a million…

"Hi!" said Clark, sitting back down. "You're awake."

"Hi." Lois smiled wickedly at him. *I have a secret.*

"You look like you're feeling better."

"Tremendous! Never felt better." Her smile grew into an effervescent grin. "So, tell me about some of these abilities of Superman's."

He raised a brow. "Lo-is."

"Lucy," she said, batting her eyelashes. "Lucy El." She held out her hand. "Your assistant who knows everything that you do about Superman, remember? So, spill it. No breaking any rules here." She smiled. "Just a nice conversation between colleagues."

Clark swallowed, lowering his voice. "You don't know everything she knows. She knows more than I do; she's been around him for almost four years now. I've been… with Superman for less than a year."

"Then we will certainly have to pick Lucy's brain for every little detail she knows before she heads back to her husband." Lois licked her teeth, thinking a moment. "You ever going to tell me why she's here in the first place?"

He glanced around. "That's not a conversation for a crowded plane."

She conceded that point. "Later then." She leaned closer to him and dropped her voice even more. "I feel so good right now, I could fly."

"Good thing we're in an airplane." Clark chuckled.

Lois radiated happiness. Oh, she definitely wanted to try flying…. Without a plane.

***

The cab stopped outside of Lois Lane's apartment building and Lois jumped out. Clark paid the driver and then went to retrieve the suitcases from the trunk. He didn't know what had happened on the plane, but something had. Lois was happy to be alive. More than happy. Practically glowing. She swung her laptop case over her shoulder and grabbed one of the suitcases from the sidewalk, then practically flew up the front steps to her building.

Lois swung open the door and sailed inside. Clark shook his head. She wasn't scared of the luggage anymore. She wasn't scared of anything anymore. She almost seemed excited to be going back to her apartment where Lucy surely was there to kill her for kissing her husband. He released a breath. Clark followed her into the elevator that was standing open and waiting for them on the ground floor. He set the second suitcase down on the floor of the elevator next to the one that Lois had put there. He pressed the button for the fifth floor and the doors slid shut.

"Wait!" she gasped. He turned around. She was reading a note taped on the back of the elevator.

'Ride elevator at your own risk. Building has been having sporadic power outages and the elevator has stopped five plus times already.' The note was signed by Maintenance.

"Great. You'd think the note would have been on the outside of the elevator." Clark rolled his eyes and hoped that they could finally arrive at the apartment. This day had gone on long enough. He was ready for Lucy to tell them the big news why Lois wasn't dead and…

The elevator stopped. It wasn't on the fifth floor yet. The lights dimmed and went out and they were standing in the dark. Lois giggled.

"Did someone slip you some drugs on the plane, Lois?" *What's up with her?*

"No, I was just wondering if this was a job for Superman?" She laughed again.

Clark resisted the urge to groan. "It'll turn back on again soon, I'm sure," he reassured her. "We'll have to talk to James about adding some emergency lighting to this box."

"Sit down, Clark. Take a load off. You're way too tense." Lois was already sitting on the floor. "I don't mind the dark. Remember, I was blind for ten months."

Clark slid down to the floor and rested his head on his knees. Looking over at her, he watched as she crawled across the elevator towards him. "What are you doing, Lois?"

She grinned naughtily. "I'm finally going to look at you, Clark," she whispered, pushing down his knees and sitting in his lap.

He cleared his throat. "Lois? What are you talking about?"

"Didn't Superman tell you about this game?" She licked her lips. He would have considered it seductive if he didn't already think everything she did was seductive. "The first time I kissed him was right after we played."

"Lois," Clark warned her.

She took off his glasses and set them in his shirt pocket. Then she started tracing his face with her fingertips.

He wondered whether she had any idea how erotic that was.

"What's the matter, Clark? Don't you trust me?"

Absolutely not. "Lois, I don't think this is a good idea," Clark murmured.

"You need to relax more, Clark. You're always so tense. Maybe I'll give you a massage one of these days. Not this week, though. This week's bad. Perhaps, in a week or two, when I've adjusted." Her breath sounded rough and sexy and was making his heart race and his body react.

He cleared his throat. "Adjusted to what?"

"Being alive. I almost died, you know." This she whispered

in his ear.

Clark coughed. "Lois, I really think you should get off my lap, now."

She was still at his ear. "Make me, big boy."

What he really wanted to do was pull her into his arms and kiss her until the cows came home and then went back out in the field again. She was making it incredibly difficult to think. Her chest was pushed up against his and her hips rocked back and forth as she moved her hands softly around his face. No wonder he was so turned on by her at the Smallville house that night. This felt divine. He took a deep breath and set his hands on her hips. Part of him wanted to pull her closer. A large part of him.

But she was a married woman. Married to an evil madman, but still married. It was bad enough that he had slept with her once… twice. He felt guilty as hell for breaking the sacred marriage vows, with two different women. He really should have told Kal the truth and let him kill him. "You're married," he said finally finding his voice. It sounded higher and squeakier than normal.

Her hands stopped moving. Her voice turned colder. "What Lex and I had wasn't a marriage, Clark."

"Legally, you belong to him," he muttered, instantly regretting the words as soon as they left his mouth.

Lois let go of his face entirely and he felt like she had slapped him. "If that's really how you feel, why do you and Superman keep protecting me from him? When we get to the apartment do you want to call Jaxon and let him know where to find me? So Lex can come and pick up his belongings?"

Clark swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. "No."

"Well, then…" Her forearm pressed against his throat and shoved him against the elevator wall.

Clark felt no desire to resist. He deserved her condemnation.

"Let's get one thing straight right now. I *belong* only to one person: m*yself.* No number of marriage certificates will ever change that. It would be in your best interest to remember that as well." She let go of his throat.

Clark coughed. He couldn't believe how weak he felt under her grip. It was probably because he was so turned on he couldn't think straight. Or because just Lois's scent was overpowering him like a strong narcotic. She squeezed her thighs, causing new and perilous sensations to fill his body. He was right. She would make a dangerous super-villain.

"Now, let's see about turning on the lights," Lois murmured, resting her hands on his cheeks and staring at his face. She took a deep breath. Strange she hadn't noticed the similarities between him and Mr. Amazing yet. As he lifted up her hips so he could breathe, she gasped and flew across the elevator, hitting the wall opposite him.

"What happened?" Clark asked, crawling over to her.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "I thought I saw something."

"Are you all right? I think you dented the elevator."

"I'll survive." Lois waved off his complaints. "Clark," she whispered. "Do you think that Mr…" She cleared her throat. "… that Superman knows I only kissed Kal-El because I thought it was him? Do you think he knows that?"

"Who knows what Superman thinks about that, Lois?" Clark murmured. He didn't want to talk about Superman. He wanted to kiss her and his resistance was fading fast. She smelled so good. And that face massage she had given him…

"Do you think you could tell him that?" Lois closed her eyes. "No. Don't tell him. Let's see if he comes to talk to me first. It's not your job to mediate between me and him." She grabbed Clark's face in her hands. "Please, tell me it's not your job to mediate between him and his girlfriends."

"I don't think so. You're the only woman he's been with since I've met him," he whispered.

"With the exception of Ultra Woman," Lois reminded him with a glare.

"I never met her," he replied. Well, at least his Clark Kent persona had never met Ultra Woman. "She was gone before morning."

Lois raised an eyebrow to that remark. She didn't believe him. Maybe that was because she knew Lucy was Ultra Woman.

"Clark," she whispered, setting her cheek against his. She sighed. "You have a nice face. I like it."

"Thanks." He could feel her hot breath against his ear.

"Clark," she murmured.

"Uh-huh." He was getting to the point where he was unable to enunciate.

"I can feel destiny pulling me towards you."

"Me too, Lois." Clark swallowed. *Lex Luthor's wife,* he reminded himself like a splash of cold water. It ineffectually rose from his body like steam, he was so hot. "We need to resist it, though. Make our own decisions."

"Are you afraid?"

"A little bit," he told her honestly. All he wanted to do was turn his head. Touch his lips to hers. *Come on, Clark! You can do it. Resist her.*

"I don't think he'd hurt you, Clark," her voice wavered. Nervous on his behalf? "You are his best friend, aren't you?"

"I'm not afraid of Superman, Lois," he reassured her. "Are you?"

Lois hesitated a moment before answering. "I'm afraid that if I kiss you, like I want to — really, *really* want to," her voice went lower, deeper, "he'll know it wasn't an accident and I'd lose him forever, if I haven't already."

"He'd have to be pretty stupid to give you up over one kiss," Clark murmured. *Resistance fading.*

"Two kisses, actually. The one with Kal-El and the one I want you to give me right now." The lights flickered and came back on and Clark was already standing up again, in front of the door, glasses on. Lois sighed. "Time's up." She pulled herself to her feet as the elevator doors opened. Clark stepped out onto the fifth floor with the suitcases and Lois followed him.

She reached into her purse to pull out her keys. Clark lightly touched her arm, before she put them into the lock. She stopped, glancing at him.

"I just wanted one last look at you." He sighed dramatically. "Before she kills you."

Lois laughed. "As if."

The door swung open and Lucy stood on the other side, daggers in her eyes. "Took you two long enough."

"Hi, Lucy." Clark smiled at her, still trying to get back in her good graces.

"Kansas is pretty far away," Lois replied, nudging past Lucy with both of her suitcases.

Clark followed her inside and shut the door behind him. They both turned and looked at him, then at each other.

Lucy's eyes closed into slits. "You kissed my husband!" She growled.

"You slept with my boyfriend!" Lois retorted.

Lucy turned to him, shocked. "Clark! How could you?"

Clark's jaw fell open. He hadn't expected this turn.

"He didn't." Lois saved him. "Superman told Kal." Or not.

Lucy glared at him. "I know. He should have known Kal would discuss it with me."

"How could you have cheated on him?" Lois asked in disbelief.

"Funny coming from you, little miss hot stuff. What, one Superman not enough for you?"

"Or you?"

"Ladies, please," Clark said, stepping between them. "There's no need to fight."

"Clark," Lois said, keeping her eyes on Lucy. "Stay out of

this."

Lucy raised a brow at him. "Yeah, Clark. This doesn't concern *you*." Her sarcasm bit him.

He swallowed. "I want to know what happened to Lois. How she survived the accident, the lightning strike."

"I think I figured it out," Lois said. There was that self-confident smile again.

"You do?" They both turned to her. That's what it was. That's why her mood changed. She knows something.

"Have you heard anything about what Superman's been up to today, Lucy?" Lois asked casually. Too casually. "Busy saving people or something? Some huge natural disaster require his attention perhaps?"

"Nothing. Not a peep," said Lucy with a glance at Clark.

"Hmmm." Lois thought for a minute before making up her mind. "I can't tell you, Clark."

"Why not?" he gasped.

"What do you think, Lucy? If I told Clark, he'd tell Superman, wouldn't he?"

"Oh, most definitely," Lucy agreed.

"I believe I deserve an apology from Superman for his behavior yesterday. Or at least an opportunity for me to speak with him, clear the air, and tell him thank you for rescuing me… yet again."

"That sounds reasonable, Lois," Lucy said with a raised eyebrow, turning towards him. "Don't you think, Clark?"

"I haven't heard you apologize for stealing my credit card or the time machine or breaking into my house," he sputtered.

"My, you've been busy," Lucy stated, looking at Lois.

"Oh, that was Kal who broke into your house, Clark. Not me. I wasn't going to attempt it with that security system."

Lucy's jaw dropped open. "Kal broke into Clark's house?"

Lois nodded with a shrug.

"Or apologized to Lucy for kissing Kal and stealing her ID," added Clark,

"I'm sorry, Lucy. I thought he was my man," Lois said.

"Perfectly understandable. Kal's extremely handsome. Don't let it happen again."

"Not planning on it. You keep your hands off my man."

Lucy gave Clark a quick glance. "I'll do my best."

Lois held out her hand. "Truce."

Lucy nodded, shaking it. "Truce."

They both turned to Clark, who stood there in astonishment. What happened? They were about to claw each other a moment ago.

"I'm sorry for stealing your credit card, Clark; I'll reimburse you all the charges," Lois said. "And for attempting to break into your house. Don't even try to convince me that time machine is yours."

"Thank you, Lois. I appreciate that, I think."

They stood there a minute in silence, staring at each other, before Lois piped up. "Oh, and thank you for bringing me home and for sitting by my side all night." She took hold of his hand and gave it a light squeeze. "You don't know how much it meant for me to see you there, when I woke up this morning… to know that you cared."

Clark swallowed and placed a smile on his lips. "Anytime."

"But you can go now," Lois informed him.

The smile fell off his face. "What?"

"We're not going to tell you, Clark. I know if we do, you'll tell Superman and I don't see why he should know, if I don't get to know his secret identity." Lois batted her eyelashes innocently as an evil grin slipped onto her lips.

"Lois!" He begged her with his eyes. "Please."

Lois nodded. "Not going to tell me, huh? I didn't think so. Tell him if he cares enough to ask about what happened to me directly, then I'll be happy to tell him, so long as he's willing to give something back. Tit for tat."

"Lois, please. I'd tell you if I could, but my job—"

She shook her head. "That's a BS excuse, Clark, and you know it."

He winced. She was right. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"I understand, Clark. You've chosen your side. If he doesn't want me to know who he is, that's his decision. I'm sorry you're caught in the middle, but it doesn't mean I have to play by his rules." She stepped right up to him and then gave him a hug, pressing her full body against his, whispering in his ear, "See, I told you you're a better friend than he is. He stole me away from you; he didn't give you a chance to win me on your own. Any time you want to switch sides, let me know. And I'll let you in on my little secret." She ran her hands over his butt, pushing him closer to her. "Anytime, Clark. Day or night."

Clark swallowed, a hot shiver dancing down his spine. Lois let go and stepped back. Suddenly, he felt like he had double vision. Both Loises were standing in front of him in identical positions, with identical self-satisfied expressions on their faces. And they were both grinning in amusement. Perry was right, if they ever ganged up on him, he would be a dead man. *Prophecy fulfilled.*

"Goodbye, Clark," said Lucy… no, that one was Lois. His head was spinning. The other Lois opened the door and he stepped out into the hall. They waved in unison and shut the door. He had never felt so alone. He turned around and x-rayed into the room.

"Clark hasn't left yet," Lucy informed Lois.

"I can wait."

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, stomping down the hall.

***

Lois waited and listened. She couldn't hear anything but a strange fluttering sound.

"I think…" Lucy started, but Lois held up a finger.

They couldn't talk out loud or Clark would hear them with those super ears of his. Lois could wait. After two minutes and still not hearing the telltale sound of Superman departing, Lois walked to her desk. She removed a couple of notepads and pens and tossed one of each to Lucy.

I KNOW she wrote, holding it up to Lucy, but away from both the window and the front door.

Lucy stared at her for a minute, then looked down at the notepad and pen on the floor in front of her as if she didn't want to pick it up. She went over to Lois and grabbed her notepad and pen out of her hand. *Know?*

I KNOW! Lois underlined her previous words. Then she looked around, even peering out the windows. *Did you hear him leave? I didn't,* wrote Lois.

Lucy raised an eyebrow. Does Clark make a sound when he leaves?

Lois rolled her eyes. *SM.* She shook her head. What was that strange fluttering sound?

"Oh," replied Lucy. "Was he here?"

Lois tapped her notepad and flipped back to her first note *I KNOW!*

Lucy's eyes opened wide and wrote, *Know, Know?*

Lois nodded.

How? wrote Lucy, sitting down on the couch.

Christmas Eve he told me he had only been intimate with Lois Lane… not with me, but with "Lois Lane." Then I found out about the other dimension, where there was another Clark Kent and he was married to another Lois Lane. SM was so angry when he saw me kissing Kal… Lois glanced over at Lois. "I'm really sorry about that, you know. I can just imagine—"

Lucy held up her hand for her to stop.

Lois nodded, understanding. She wouldn't want to hear the details of Mr. Amazing and Ultra Woman either. *He told Kal that*

he had been with his wife. You and I know he doesn't lie, I put two and two together.

"Ah." Lucy nodded. "I'm sorry." She took the pen. *He should have told you.*

"Duh!"

Lucy winced. "Don't say that, please. Not about this."

Lois wondered what nerve she had hit. "Sure."

"So, you know what happened after the accident, huh?" Lucy asked.

Do I have his powers?

Lucy nodded.

How?

The lightning. Lucy wrote on the pad.

"That's what I thought." *Temporary or permanent?* Lois wrote.

Lucy shrugged. *Don't know. A little boy had SM's powers for some months, but they faded. But the boy didn't touch SM directly when the lightning struck; SM rescued the plane the boy was in. Another man also got his powers, that time through direct contact, but he gave them back when Lex's doctor tried to steal the power from them.*

Lois shook her head. "Lex? I thought your Lex died?"

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Long story. I'll tell you about it another time."

Can I fly? Lois looked at her expectantly. There was that fluttering noise again. What *was* that?

Lucy took a deep breath and floated herself off the couch and onto her feet.

Lois's eyes bulged. "Wow, you really are Ultra Woman." She laughed. "And you were sitting under Cat's nose the whole time." She laughed and laughed, finally wiping a tear from her eye. "I wish I could rub her face in it."

"Don't, Lois, because I'm not Ultra Woman. Come, I'll introduce you." She waved for Lois to follow her.

Lois sat frozen in her seat. "You're *not* Ultra Woman?" Who else had Mr. Amazing lied about?

"Look at me. Do I look like Ultra Woman to you?" Lucy laughed, rubbing her huge tummy. "I don't even have the suit." She waved for Lois to follow her.

Lois was at her side in a moment. "If you're not Ultra Woman, who is?"

Lucy smiled and turned her toward the wall. Lois stared at herself in the mirror. "Lois Lane, meet Ultra Woman."

Lois looked at her, eyes wide. "No." It couldn't be true. That would be so… She grinned at herself in the mirror. *Amazing*. She could do anything and go anywhere. Lex would never be able to lay a finger on her again. Freedom! And nobody would know who she was… her eyes grew wide. She would have a secret identity. A secret identity that already existed before she had been rescued, so nobody could possibly know it was her. A secret identity known for making out with Superman! In public! She rushed back to the couch and picked up the pad and pen. *Where's the suit?*

Lucy slowly returned to the couch and took the pen. *Clark took it back. Afraid I'd go off on some wild adventures, rescuing people or something.* She shook her head. "No, thanks."

"Wait a minute. No offense, but how in the world did you fit in that suit? And what in the hell is that fluttering noise? Is there a butterfly or moth loose in here or something?" She pressed her hands to her ears and she glanced around the room. She felt like she was going batty. Oh, God! Not a bat!

Lucy pulled down her hands. "My daughter's heartbeat."

"What?" Lois stammered, staring at Lucy. Her eyes blinked and she took in the whole picture. "Oh, my God! Lucy, you're not fat, you're pregnant!" She stumbled back, knocking over a table and breaking it. She sat in the debris and stared at her roommate. Lucy had stolen her life. She had taken her apartment, her job, her man, she had even been Ultra Woman first, and now she had a baby, when… when… Lois was on her feet in a second and she pointed out the door. "Get out! Right now. Leave my life alone."

"Lois?"

Tears started streaming down her cheeks. "I told you to get out."

"Lois, are you all right?" Lucy asked, hesitantly stepping closer.

"Go on! Go back to your own dimension and leave mine alone." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Go home."

"I can't, Lois. I've been cursed. That's why I'm here. If I go home, we'll die."

Lois wiped her nose on her sleeve again. "What?"

"Lois's and Clark's love is so pure and so strong, we're soul mates. We are drawn together in every lifetime. Centuries ago a jealous man had a wizard curse our love, so that one of us always dies after the first time we make love together."

"I died," Lois whispered. "Daddy said that Superman thought I had died, that's why he went to get him."

Lucy took her hands and led her back to the couch. "He told me that, too. Lois, Superman saved you with that lightning strike. You beat the odds and survived the curse."

"I survived?" Lois said, rocking back and forth. "Then why does it feel like someone killed me?"

Lucy wrapped her arms around her, while Lois sobbed.

"I… I…" Lois tried to speak, but the words wouldn't form. "Kal said I was expecting…" She cried out in anguish. "Before the accident." She buried her head onto Lucy's shoulder.

"Oh, Lois, no." She held Lois tightly as she cried. "I'm so sorry."

Lois pulled away, wiping her eyes and nose. "Don't tell him, he doesn't know. It would destroy him."

Lucy shook her head. "Are we cursed with communication problems, too? You've got to tell him."

"No! Everyone he loves dies. His birth parents, the Kents, me, and now…." Her bottom lip began to shake again. "No, I'll never tell him. Maybe Kal was wrong. Maybe I wasn't." She sniffed. "We don't *need* to tell him."

Lucy wasn't listening to her. She was staring over her shoulder. Then she sighed and looked Lois in the eye. "Dr. Klein told him that he can't conceive children. You have to tell him the truth."

Lois turned around and peered behind her wondering what Lucy had been looking at. There was nothing there, but the grey January sky of Metropolis. "Maybe this Dr. Klein was right and Kal was wrong."

Had he just been there? Had he heard what she was crying about? Did he know and just fly off? It felt like her heart stopped beating. *No*, *Clark wouldn't do that.*

"Lois."

Lois wiped her nose on her sleeve again. "So, I can fly, huh? Is it hard?

"Not once you get used to it. You're changing the subject."

Lois flashed her a weak smile. "Darn tooting I am. Where's Daddy?"

"Your father has gone to get your car. Uncle Mike's been holding on to it for you. I've told him everything about your condition, including how to give your power back to Superman, if you ever change your mind."

"Change my mind? Are you nuts? This is my ticket to freedom," Lois told her. "Lex can't catch me and Clark can't run away from me now."

Lucy sighed. "Lois, someone once said that with great power comes great responsibility." She shook her head. "But for some reason, I don't think it was Superman. If you decide to take on the cloak of Ultra Woman, you have to know it requires great sacrifice. You won't be able to save everyone. You won't be able

to stop all the evil in the world. People will expect more from you than you might be able to give. I couldn't handle it — the disappointment, the grief — and I gave Clark back his powers."

Lois looked at her, perplexed. "But you can still fly?"

Lucy smiled indulgently. "Oh, that's one of the side effects of carrying Superman's child."

"Well, I'm not you."

"Agreed. Want to take a drive into the country? Practice some skills?"

Lois nodded, wiping the last of the tears from her eyes.

***

Clark walked home. He didn't feel much like flying. He needed to stretch his legs. The Loises had ganged up on him, bonded over their mutual anger about him not telling Lois about his secret identity.

Lois kept pulling him this way and that. First, she said that she was in love with Mr. Amazing. Then she told him that she was attracted to Clark Kent. Next, she pushed him away. Then she told him to visit her night or day. Was she so willing to give up Mr. Amazing for Clark? Was she willing to cheat on Superman, did she just do it to make him jealous, or did she really like Clark Kent? His head was spinning from the possibilities. Or had she figured out that Mr. Amazing was Clark Kent and she was driving him crazy on purpose? Clark chuckled at that possibility. *Yeah, right.* Lois would be so angry when she found out she wouldn't be able to play a game like that on him.

There was no way he was going to survive living like this. No way would he be able to stay away from Lois for as long as it took to get her divorced from that mad man Luthor. They were going to have to find a way to make it work or he would have to break her heart for good. No more promises of waiting forever. Let her get on with her life. Let her find another man, who could love her without hurting her, whose life and morals wouldn't be ruined by the fact that she was still officially married.

Gareth had said something about making him a foreign correspondent, a "whole world correspondent", he had called the job. With Clark's skills, it would be a win-win for the paper, their new editor had told him. Clark did not want to leave Metropolis, but perhaps it was for the best. He would give up the Clinton Street apartment and use the Smallville house as his permanent residence. Then Lois wouldn't have to see him at all. And he could keep her safe by staying away from her.

His heart ached at this possibility. It would be for the best. The best for her and the best for Superman. After he got Lucy's baby delivered safely and then back to their own dimension, he would leave Metropolis.

Why did Clark feel like he had just been shot with a Kryptonite bullet into his heart? The pain was unbearable. He leapt into the air, spinning into his Superman suit as he did so, not caring who saw him. He couldn't live without Lois. It was wrong to be in love with a married woman, but he just couldn't live without her. He would rather have her kill him by knowing the truth than ever contemplate living without her.

As he reached the windows, Clark heard her sobbing. *Oh, God! Lois is crying again.*

"Before the accident," she was saying, burying her head in Lucy's shoulder.

"Oh, Lois, no." Lucy held her tight as she cried. "I'm so sorry."

Something happened before the accident? What was she talking about? Even Lucy appeared distraught by what she heard.

Lois pulled away, wiping her eyes and nose. "Don't tell him, he doesn't know. It would destroy him." It felt like someone ripped off his skin, leaving him exposed. Something so horrible happened that Lois felt like she had to keep it from *him*? What would destroy *him*? Something worse than her dying?

Lucy shook her head. "Are we cursed with communication problems, too? You've got to tell him." She glanced over Lois's shoulder and saw him hovering outside the windows, listening to their conversation and waved for him to come in. Whatever it was, Lucy thought he should know.

Help! A scream broke his concentration. *Help!*

Lois continued to cry. "No, I'll never tell him. Maybe Kal was wrong. Maybe I wasn't." She sniffed. "We don't need to tell him."

KAL? What in the world had that no-good, rotten man told his girlfriend to make her so hysterical?

"Help! Get away from me, you big…"

Clark sighed. Lois was going to have to wait. He zipped away and was gone.

By the time he got back after the mugging, then a robbery and a car fire, the living room was empty. He flew into the apartment, but they weren't there. He saw a notepad and pen on the coffee table, but when he flipped through it, he saw that it had never been used. One of Lois's side tables, the one with the vase of yellow flowers on it, was missing. But other than that, everything looked normal. Where could they have gone? Lois's day had been crazy with traveling already, why would she want to go out again? Had they gone out willingly? Or had someone taken them? His heart began to race. He took a deep breath to calm it.

Clark knew he was driving himself crazy. Jumping to conclusions. There was no proof, other than a missing table, that something was wrong. He hated that both Loises were out and about somewhere in Metropolis without his protection. Up to who knew what. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself.

Go home, he told himself. *Relax. Watch a game. Do something that has nothing to do with Lois.* He grabbed the notepad off the coffee table. He wrote a quick note and left it on Lucy's bed. Then he flew out the window.

***

Lois pulled the vacuum into her bedroom. Her father had said Lucy wasn't getting enough exercise with all that sitting around at the office, so they had gone out for a walk. Lois figured it was a perfect time to clean her bedroom, *really* clean it. With all this extra super power, she could easily pick up furniture and vacuum underneath.

First, she lifted up the chair. Then the bed and the end tables, and finally the dresser. See, she knew Lucy hadn't cleaned this place thoroughly; there was a piece of wadded paper under the dresser. She set the dresser off to the side and turned off the vacuum. She picked up the paper and was about to toss it into the trashcan when she saw the words *Lois Lane anecdotes*. She flattened out the paper. It was a part of a note in her handwriting, but she certainly hadn't written it. It must have been something of Lucy's.

Oh, I didn't tell you. Kal is totally in love with Lois Lane. HIS Lois — not me. Even though he's never met her. It seems that Perry assigned Kal to the initial team he sent to the Congo to look for Lois after she disappeared. He searched everywhere for three weeks and found nada. Not that the locals with whom Lois had been speaking to about the gun running story would talk. I had a horrible time getting them to speak with me at first, too. Did I ever tell you that after I found a shipment of guns (supposed to be destroyed by the UN) actually being shipped elsewhere, I tried to smuggle myself into a crate along with the guns, and only ended up getting caught and deported back to Metropolis? But that's another story.

Anyway, when Kal got back home, he kept up with the story. He read and reread all of her old articles. He interviewed her family, friends, colleagues, and even a few of her old sources. (How he discovered who they were, who knows? I guess he's quite the investigative reporter. I mean, of course Clark Kent is a terrific investigative reporter — even without Lois Lane. Love

you. Think you're wonderful.)

Perry used to tell him Lois Lane anecdotes like our Perry tells Elvis stories (did I tell you that Elvis used to be president here and is still alive and well?). When the story seemed dead, the previous owner of the paper used Lois Lane's "death" as extra publicity. Perry, Sam, and Kal were the only holdouts against placing the tombstone in the graveyard. Kal promised Sam at that point that he would never give up looking for Lois. He had fallen in love with me… I mean, with THIS dimension's Lois. And you know what a promise from a Clark Kent means. It means forever.

Lois turned the paper over.

Then another year passed and still no new leads. Kal continued to work on the story on his own, but then — and I'm guessing here, because I wouldn't dare presume to ask Kal — Lana gave him the old relationship ultimatum, so he caved and proposed. In a way, by agreeing to marry Lana, he was giving up on HIS Lois and it shattered him, his hope. Not to mention, it ticked off Sam, who thought that Kal had given his daughter up for dead. Then I showed up, when Tempus kidnapped me, and all those old Lois Lane feelings started blowing around again. Lana gave him the 'it's me or Superman' ultimatum. She really likes things her way, doesn't she? I don't think she liked me much or how much Kal listened to me, either.

You know, Clark, it is really hard to write to you about this, because I don't want you to be jealous of Kal. I want you to know what I know. I don't want you to think I have any secrets from you. Kal is a sweet man, but when I look at him, I don't see you anymore; I see your twin brother. You know that, don't you? I bet I could tell you two apart even if you were standing side-by-side. There's a slight difference around the eyes and I don't mean that he wears completely different glasses… well, he does, but that's beside the point.

So, to make a long story even longer. After I got here, this time, things were awkward at first. I love and miss you and he looks like you. He loves HIS Lois and I'm as close as he's ever gotten to his Lois. I told you before, he's become quite the

Quite the what? Lois looked around the room, but found no more pieces of paper. This was the rejected part of a letter she was writing to Kal. But she doesn't call him Kal, of course, because to Lucy "Kal" was "Clark". She could see why Lucy rejected this version of the note. It was horrible. If Lucy wanted to share what was going on with this dimension's Clark without making her husband jealous, this wasn't the note to write. Even Lois didn't believe everything between her Clark and Lucy was innocent from this note. She wondered when her roommate had written this. How long had it been sitting under the dresser? She obviously wasn't the cleaner that Lois was.

Lois sat down on her bed and reread the note. So Lucy thought that Clark was in love with Lois, way back before they knew where to find her. She even thought that Clark saw her when he looked at Lucy. Was it possible that Clark loved her first and was just using Lucy? It was clear to Lois that even then Lucy was having feelings for Clark that were separate from the feelings she had for her husband. Lois wanted to feel bad for Lucy that Clark had used her, but she just felt sick. Lois didn't want to know about their feelings for each other. Lois wanted Clark just to love her, not a stand-in of her. But as Lois had already read this little bit, she needed to know more.

What else had Lucy written to her husband about her? About Clark? Lois went into Lucy's room and dug through the dresser until she found a pile of photos. She quickly scanned through them. *Look, there's Clark and James Olsen, out of a suit for once.* She raised her eyebrow, studying the photo. That wasn't Mr. Olsen… that was the James Olsen from Lucy's dimension. He was friends with Kal.

These were photos of Lucy and Kal. Lois stopped at a photo of Superman and a woman in lavender, pink, and teal: Ultra Woman. So, she had been Ultra Woman at one time with Kal. Ultra Woman and Superman were holding hands over the *Daily Planet* globe. Everything Lois had learned about the Ultra Woman who showed up here, had Ultra Lucy out and about only that one night, Halloween.

Lois put the photos back into the drawer and pulled out a framed photo, Clark Kent and Lois Lane at the Kerth Awards. Clark was holding an award. They looked so happy. She sighed and put the photo back. She didn't see any Kerth Awards in either her future or Clark's. She went over to the bed and slid her fingers under the pillows. She pulled out another framed photo, this one of Lucy's and Kal's wedding. She gasped. Her mother and father together, smiling. She had seen this photo at Martha's, but she hadn't *really* looked at it. Clark and Lois married, happy — together. She sighed, envious.

How was Lois ever going to convince her Clark that they were supposed to be together as well? No matter what she did, he pulled back, pulled away from her. He was scared of something, something more than his reputation. But what? She slid her fingers under Lucy's pillow and returned the wedding photo. Her fingers hit a notebook and she smiled. *Gold mine!*

Lois read through the pages of the book quickly. Loads of it was sentimental *I love you* and *I miss you*, but every once in awhile Lucy wrote in detail about their search for Lois or about her Clark. Lucy and Clark borrowed an earlier version of herself from time to substitute for Lucy over in her dimension, so nobody — including Kal — would know she was missing. That was why he didn't say he was missing her when she had asked him if he missed his wife; he didn't know she was gone. And the inventor of the Time Machine was the real H.G. Wells! *Wow!*

Poor Lucy. Her husband didn't know she was missing and she could only live her dimension's life in her dreams. She remembered everything that her other self experienced, that was how she had known Clark told Kal that he slept with her. He must have brought it up with the substitute wife when he had gotten home that night. No wonder Lucy was attracted to her Clark. Memories and dreams were one thing; a living, breathing man was quite another.

Lucy wouldn't give these letters to Kal. Of that, Lois was one hundred percent sure. As Lucy wrote more and more about Clark, the more admiring she was of him, and the less lovey-dovey she was to Kal, until Halloween. After that, Lucy only mentioned Clark in passing, like she hardly saw him, and she went berserko with the lovey-dovey talk. That was the guilt talking. Lucy was definitely not going to give these letters to her husband; Kal would easily read between the lines, just as Lois had.

Even Lois wanted to burn them, so her Clark would never read them. Lois didn't want her Clark to know how strong Lucy's feelings for him had actually been. Lucy loved her husband, but a part of her was also still in love with Lois's Clark. Lois didn't think Lucy would do anything with her Clark, being nine months pregnant and all. The baby was due the day after Valentine's Day. After that, all bets were off.

Jaxon told Clark about the Neuroscanner, huh? And it broke down last February because the other Lois Lane had shown up, overloading its circuits. Interesting. *Thank you, Lucy.*

But eventually something happened and Lex, Jr. had been able to fix it, because he started using it again, right before their trip to Tokyo. Lucy wrote of this to Clark; she was worried that the baby had changed her genetic makeup. This freaked Lucy out, but she had no one to turn to, because everyone was thrilled about finding her, the missing Lois Lane, at last. Lucy was afraid to mention it to Clark, to let him know that his one true love was married to a monster. Lucy had been forced to handle loads on her own without her husband.

Lois flipped through the letters again, trying to find some

clue as to why Clark kept pushing her away. In September, Lucy wrote of Mayson breaking up with Clark. Lucy had been shocked, because she was so sure that Clark was going to break up with Mayson. Hmmm. Lois flipped back a few pages. Here Lucy had written how Clark wanted to tell Mayson everything about Lucy, because Lucy was becoming a wedge between him and Mayson. So, Clark had told Mayson about Lucy and Kal, but Mayson still broke up with him? No, there had to be more to it than that. Wait. Right before Lucy wrote about Mayson breaking up with Clark, she mentioned being at the hospital. Lois reread those pages more carefully.

Sean McCarthy finally made his move on Mayson Drake. I had been lulled into a false sense of security, having almost forgotten that our Mayson had died.

They had a Mayson? And she had died?

Kal was able to save her, barely. I've never seen someone look so broken.

Broken? Clark or Mayson? Clark had almost not been able to save his girlfriend. Superman had almost not been able to save her, either.

Déjà vu.

'Tell me about it, Lucy,' Lois thought. Wait, something broke in Kal, too, when Mayson died in her dimension. Kal must have been close to his Mayson as well. Was that the déjà vu? Strange, that Lucy would be fine with this Clark dating Mayson.

Kal thought that Jaxon or Junior was involved because they were behind the shooting.

Shooting? What shooting?

Kal went on a rampage.

Rampage? Mr. Amazing?

And ended up getting caught in Jaxon's VR machine.

Poor Clark. One couldn't just leave Jaxon's machine. Lois knew. Lois set down the notebook. When was that? September. Four months ago. She closed her eyes. Yes, Lex had come into her suite several months back and was practically dancing off the walls with happiness, praising Jaxon, which he never did. Lex normally thought that his son was an idiot. Lex had even taken her out to a restaurant to celebrate. But the next day, Jaxon was back on Lex's hit list. He even canceled Jaxon's funding. She reopened the notebook.

When he didn't show at the hospital, I was able to find where Jaxon had him squirreled away and helped him escape. I feel bad for Kal, he had sacrificed so much for his relationship with Mayson, to have it end so badly. I wish I had had the guts to go back and confront her about it.

All right, something definitely happened with Mayson. Whatever happened to or with Mayson broke Clark. He had said that she had dumped him and he didn't want to talk about it.

Lois was going to need to fix Clark, before he was going to accept a future with her. After her accident in Smallville, it was obvious to her that Clark was still broken or rebroken, because Mr. Amazing had disappeared. Something happened to kill off that side of Clark and if Clark wasn't going to tell her, she would have to find someone who could. And she couldn't do that trapped in the apartment.

Lois slid the notebook back under Lucy's pillow. She went to the trashcan to see if there were any new pages she hadn't wanted to share with her husband. There was only one thing in the trash, a note from her Clark. Her hands began to shake as she read it:

Came back to talk to Lois, but you all disappeared, clearly not ready to talk with me. Call me, so I know you made it home safe. CK

Clark had wanted to talk to her. Had Lucy called him? Well, another twenty-four hours had passed and she hadn't heard word one from him. He better not have lost his nerve. She needed him to make the first move this time; she was getting tired of chasing him all the time. If he wanted another kiss from her, he would have to come and get it.

***

Lucy pulled herself out of bed, reluctantly. She was completely exhausted. Drained. The whole weekend was crazy: teaching Lois how to control her heat vision (goodbye notebook with their Saturday afternoon conversation in it) and how to put out fires with her cooling breath. How to fly, how to land, how to speed run without hitting anything like a tree, how to stop on a dime. How to control her super strength without hurting anyone. How to use her x-ray vision.

She moaned and tried to pull her feet to the edge of the bed. She didn't want to get up and she certainly didn't want to go to work.

Lois rushed in. "I heard a moan. Are you all right?"

Lucy looked at her. "I got up three times during the night to pee. I'm tired and as big as a house. So no, I'm not all right," she snapped.

"Whoa!" Lois took a step back. "Why don't you just go back to bed? Clark can surely survive the day without you. He's a big boy."

Lucy looked at her, but did not have the energy to fight. "Agreed. Let me just use the bathroom and call Clark."

When she came out of the bathroom, Lois ushered her straight back to bed. "I called Clark for you. Don't you worry. You need your rest. Sleep the day away. You won't be getting any after the baby's born."

Lucy looked at Lois again, knowing she was completely correct, and happily crawled back into bed to dream again of her man. She and Kal had been playing strip poker during her last dream and he was down to his shirt and shorts. She grinned, wondering where the dream might end. Minutes later, he was beating the pants off her, literally.

***

Lucy beat Clark into work on Tuesday morning. Mudslides in Bolivia. She would probably beat him home, too. *Poor Clark.* Natural disasters were always especially hard on him. The amount of death. The lack of control.

Lois had walked her down to the waiting cab. Who needed police protection when she lived with a superhero? Lois didn't want her to come into work this day either. But Lucy knew, with Clark out of the office, someone from Team Superman needed to show up to the morning meeting.

Her back was killing her and all that extra sleep hadn't helped. She sure had enjoyed all the extra dreaming. *Mmmm, Kal*. She stretched, still working out some kinks in her neck. What was she going to do when she returned to her dimension and her stand-in returned to her timeslot and dreams were just dreams again? What was she going to do when she had to start calling her husband by Clark and not Kal? She checked her desk for a note from Clark; some heads-up on what he was working on.

Continue to do research on Intergang.

Her brow furrowed. *What research on Intergang?* The last work they had done on Intergang was before Lois's rescue when they had been able to decode Lex's L.I., Ltd. as Luthor Intergang, Ltd. Had he found a new lead? She looked around her desk. Someone had moved stuff.

Lucy opened her top right-hand drawer and found a photo of her and Clark — true, it was of Kal, not this dimension's Clark — resting where it had not been when she had left on Friday. She and Clark had decided that of all the photos in her Lucy and Kal collection, this one was the least romantic looking, and showed them least like a couple. He okayed it for her to bring to the office, so she could have a little reminder of home there. They had even come up with matching stories of when the photo was taken. During the previous summer, a baseball game they had attended together. They were laughing. Jimmy had taken the photo and it made her think of him, too. She missed her friends,

Jimmy and Perry, and her dad and even her Mom. She sighed. Who would put this photo in the desk, she wondered.

Gareth called the morning meeting and Lucy grabbed a notebook. Slowly, as she no longer ran anywhere, she tried not to waddle to the conference room. Gareth pulled her aside before the meeting started.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked.

Lucy wondered about the concern, as he hadn't acknowledged her previously. "Sure, fine. Sorry about yesterday, I was exhausted. Long weekend. But I'm here today, one hundred percent, Mr. McTinney." She nodded.

"Your head better?"

Her head? Was that what Clark told him? "Yes, much, thanks."

"Do you need extra cushions or pillows for your chair?"

That sounded great, but she wondered why he asked. "No, I'm fine," she stated, staring at him.

"If you need anyone to take anything down from the high shelves or carry up a box from archives, you let me know and I'll find you some muscle, understood?"

His concern was bordering on suspicious. "I can do my job, Mr. McTinney. You don't need to worry about that."

"I understand, Lucy. My wife just gave birth to our third child a month ago. I know that the last months of pregnancy can be the worst."

Oh, crap! How in the hell had he known about the baby? She looked down at the clothes she was wearing. Long and baggy enough to hide the bulge, she thought. But not to an expert new father as her new boss. James better not have had anything to do with this breach in knowledge.

"Excuse me?" she sputtered.

"When will you be leaving on maternity leave? Have you let HR know how long you'll be gone?"

These were all professional, sincere questions which, had this been a normal pregnancy (with a normal woman and a normal husband), probably would have been thought of as nice even. But not her secret pregnancy with Superman's baby in this alternate universe where her alternate Clark was slogging through mudslides… *Deny. Deny. Deny.*

The room had gone silent and she feared that everyone in the room had overheard his last questions. She knew she was acting like a fish with her mouth opening and closing with nothing coming out. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jaxon looking at her, his eyes opening wider, realization hitting home. *Double crap!*

"You think I'm *pregnant*?" she growled as she wrapped her arms about herself.

Gareth's face went white and then red. "But… but… my wife just gave birth. I know what a pregnant woman looks like, Lucy. I'm not an idiot."

"Well, you do a damn good impression of one, Mr. McTinney." Lucy glared at him, grabbed her notebook, and stormed out of the room. She went to her desk, took her coat off her hook and was about to stomp out of the bullpen, when she thought better of it. She picked up the phone and first placed an urgent call to Lois. As the phone rang, she could hear Barry speaking in the conference room.

"Gareth, you're lucky that Clark wasn't here to hear you say that to her."

"What did I say that was wrong?" responded her boss. "She's obviously pregnant and those are things a pregnant employee should clear with the boss before heading out on maternity leave."

"She was also the first and only person on a first-name basis with Mr. Olsen, with the exception of Clark Kent," said Barry.

"And even before Clark Kent," clarified Jaxon.

Everyone nodded in agreement with Jaxon.

"Bollocks!" said Gareth, before wiping his brow. "Okay, back to the meeting. I'll deal with her later."

Finally, Lois answered the phone.

"Lois!" Lucy hissed into the phone. "I need your help. You've got to cover for me. Get your butt to the *Daily Planet*, immediately, and meet me in the ladies room in five minutes."

"What happened? Your water burst?" Lois probed.

"No, worse! Gareth McTinney thinks I'm pregnant. I need you to cover for me," she whispered, hardly loud enough for her to hear.

"But you are pregnant."

"Lois, this is not the time for semantics. Will you cover for me or not?"

"Five minutes. Ladies room. Be there." Lois hung up.

Lucy hung up with her finger, glanced back over her shoulder at the conference room full of the biggest gossips in Metropolis — all watching her — and dialed again.

"James? Thank God. Could you please tell me why Gareth McTinney would pull me aside at the morning meeting and ask me, in front of the entire news staff, when I'm heading on maternity leave?"

"He did what?" James was obviously as stunned as she was.

"So, you didn't say anything to him?" she asked.

"Absolutely not, Lucy! I promised Clark complete discretion. The only person I've talked to about it is Perry, who already knew."

"Good. That's what I thought. Thought you'd like to know. I'm going to go have a good cry in the ladies room. Could you please inform our new editor that he has been misinformed, please? Especially before Clark gets wind of it."

"Clark doesn't know?" He released a breath of relief.

"Mudslides in Bolivia," she explained. "But he's going to blow a fuse when he finds out."

"It would be my personal pleasure, Lucy, to defuse this bomb. I'll be right down."

"Thank you, James. You're a good friend."

Lucy put the photo of her and Kal back up on her top shelf where it was previously, and then grabbed her purse and a box tissues, heading for the ladies' room.

It took two more minutes before Lois showed up. Lucy was already halfway out of her clothes, when she heard the knock on the door.

"Lois?" she whispered.

"Here."

Lucy unlocked the door and let her in, locking it behind her again. Lois kindly had dressed in some of her Lucy El clothes and wore the new long brunette wig her father had gotten her for when she needed to be seen as Lois Lane in public.

"I need for you to put on my clothes and pretend to be me from now on. It will get you out of the apartment and back at the *Planet* with a cover story."

Lois was undressed in two seconds. "Well, hurry up."

"My God!" Lucy gasped. "Did you look that good, before the super metabolism kicked in?"

Lois glanced down at her flat six-pack tummy. "I've been stuck in that apartment for a month with nothing to do but exercise, plus three years locked in my room before that. What super metabolism?"

"Oh, Kryptonians have super metabolism, so you can eat as much high-calorie, high-fat food as you want without gaining an ounce," Lucy explained, taking off the last layers of her clothing.

"Get out of here. Are there any drawbacks to my new life at all?" Lois was already dressed again.

Lucy sighed, slowly starting to get redressed. "Well, Lucy El's life sucks. She's a vegetarian recovering alcoholic, who dresses like a bag lady and is married to a workaholic husband she never sees."

"She's a vegetarian?" Lois scowled with a raised brow.

"Morning sickness did not agree with the scent of pastrami."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Me, too. You don't know how much I loathe Portobello sandwiches now."

Lois laughed. "I can well imagine."

"All right. Clark's out in Bolivia dealing with mudslides. I'll explain everything to him later. If he shows up today at all, just fake it and see if he notices."

"He won't," Lois reassured her.

"He might, but I doubt he'll even be in today."

"Clark didn't notice yesterday."

Lucy stopped pulling on a turtleneck, the neck part around her nose. "You were the one who moved my photo."

"I told you that you didn't have to come into work today. I had it covered." Lois grinned.

Lucy laughed. "And Clark didn't notice?"

"Oblivious. Of course, I was down in archives, finally catching up on my Superman research. I told McTinney that I had bumped my head yesterday as my excuse for being fuzzy on people's names."

"I find that hilarious that the one person who wants to see you more than anyone else couldn't see you right in front—" Then again, she had worked two years with Clark without realizing he was Superman. Lucy shook her head and handed Lois her glasses. "You forgot yours. Maybe they really do hide the truth."

"Clark never noticed the trees in the forest," Lois said with delight, placing the John Lennon glasses on her nose.

"By the way, that photo is of me and Kal, not me and Clark, so don't take it down, it will make Clark suspicious. James Olsen is coming down to yell at McTinney for telling me I look pregnant. I called him after I spoke with you. He knows I'm pregnant, but also that we don't want anyone to know, so he's covering it up for us. He and I are good friends, so he might stop by to see how Lucy is doing after he yells at McTinney. I call him James, not Mr. Olsen." Lucy took the ugly barrettes out of her hair and handed them to Lois. "If at some point today, you can bump into Jaxon so he can feel that Lucy El is definitely not pregnant, that would be a bonus, but I'll understand if you don't want to. He looked overly excited when our new editor brought it to everyone's attention during the meeting that I should be leaving on maternity leave. We don't want Lex to know about the baby."

"Understandable. Lucy, I have it covered. Promise."

Lucy nodded. "I've been Lucy for so long now, I sometimes forget that she's just an act and not really me."

"Do you want me to walk you downstairs?"

"No, we probably shouldn't be seen together," Lucy reminded her as she pulled on the waist long wig. She quickly braided it as so not to look like Lois Luthor, who always left it straight down her back. "I'll leave first and take the stairs. You can stay in here and cry or something for another ten minutes or so." She opened her purse and applied a light bit of makeup.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Lois said, coming to the mirror and wiping off the makeup on her face.

Lucy handed her the compact. "Just a little to make her seem monochrome."

Lois nodded.

She handed Lois a stick of gum. "Lucy chews it incessantly."

Lois looked down at the gum. "Did you know that gum chewing is illegal in Singapore? Part of their clean city program." She shrugged and plopped the gum in her mouth. "Mmmm. This is my first piece of gum in over four years." She laughed. "It makes me feel naughty."

Lucy pulled on the coat that Lois had been wearing, an ankle-length white coat and a matching white hat. She pulled twenty dollars out of the purse and then handed the purse over to Lois. "Good luck."

"Thanks, you too. See you after work. I'll teach you how to make meatloaf."

"You're the best." Lucy kissed her cheek and then had to wipe the lipstick off. "Thanks."

"Go enjoy your maternity leave. It's the last real vacation you'll get for the next twenty years."

"Ha-ha," Lucy grimaced at her. More because she was probably right. She unlocked the restroom door, stuck her head out to listen. "James is chewing out McTinney right now. He's sending someone to come find me, so get cracking with the waterworks. Bye."

Five steps later, Lucy was out the door to the stairwell and felt free at last. She floated carefully down the stairs, hoping not to twist her ankle with these crazy one-inch heels that Lois had been wearing. She just did not have the weight distribution for heels of any height at this point and time. Soon, she was at the last flight of stairs and she walked slowly down them holding tightly to the handrail. She made it to the lobby and quickly walked out and into the street. She flagged down a cab and rode it home, happy to have left Lucy El behind at work. She hoped that Lois could handle it.

***

Clark looked over at Lucy, sitting at her desk. She looked especially nice today. A motherhood glow? He shrugged. Actually, she had been looking beautiful all week such that he could hardly stop looking at her. Of course, on Monday, she had spent all morning down in the archives, researching Intergang's bigwigs. It had been her idea, okayed by Lois, to use some of Lois's covert spying notes from her time with Lex to write up several articles on Intergang's illegal pursuits. Then he had spent all of Tuesday in Bolivia.

This morning's meeting had gone strangely; nobody spoke, no chitchat, just eerie silence, like everyone was waiting for a bomb to drop. It was weird. Gareth reviewed assignments and the meeting ended, no bomb. When he had asked Lucy about it, she simply shrugged. Maybe he was imagining things.

Lois called to cancel any activities with him and said that she would be staying home all week, typing up her adventures on her laptop. He was happy to talk to her on the phone, because she had refused to see him in person since being dropped off Saturday afternoon. He wondered if she was feeling a little guilty about her escapade in the broken elevator. Despite the guilt he felt for being in love with a married woman, he himself couldn't stop thinking about it and what could have happened if he hadn't resisted her temptation. Each time he thought about it, the part of him that wished he had kissed her grew. It was making it difficult to concentrate on work. He released a breath, shooting papers off his desk and into the air. He chuckled and quickly gathered them back up.

Lucy glanced up from her desk with a sly smile. He had caught her looking at him with longing a couple of times over the last few days, and hoped she wasn't starting to confuse him with Kal again. He pressed his lips together. Kal. Lucy would tell him nothing about what he had overheard Lois say to her the other day. *Ask Lois*, was all she would say on the matter. *It's not for me to say*. He shook his head. She was no longer his mole at the apartment.

Clark was resigned to not knowing what had happened in Smallville. Lois was healthy, according to Sam, and that was the important part. Yes, Lucy told Sam what had happened to his daughter, but Lois also told him not to say word one about it to anyone else, especially to him. He sighed. Sam was happy to oblige. Actually, what Sam had said that he was fine with what happened in Smallville, preferring this to the alternative. He wondered what Sam meant by that. Probably that he liked his

daughter alive as opposed to…

"Hi, Clark," said a familiar voice.

Clark glanced up and did a double take. Mayson Drake stood not five feet from his desk, her coat draped over her arm. "Mayson! Wow, you look great." He gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. She still had a few battle scars on her face from the flying bits of the bomb, but other than that appeared completely healed. Still beautiful.

"Thanks for the flowers. I meant to call you every week when I got them, but I didn't know what to say." She looked down and away, lowering her voice. "I feel awful for how I treated you, Clark."

"Nothing worse than I deserved, Mayson."

"You're a man of action, Clark. I should have realized that sitting by someone's hospital bedside for hours on end wasn't in your playbook."

He smiled weakly. "I'm working on my bedside manner." He stared at her, wondering where their relationship would have gone if that trip to her uncle's cabin hadn't been canceled. "Are you back to work?"

She nodded. "Just got off desk duty and approved for field work again. I see you found Lois, just where you thought you would. I read that she married that man. How are you managing?" She raised a brow and he didn't think she meant him alone.

He swallowed. "Life's complicated."

"I heard about Lucy's abduction by Lois's ex-husband, Lois's restraining order against him, and the police escorts that Perry assigned. Are you getting any sleep? Or are you forcing yourself to do twenty-four hour guard duty?" She smiled. Mayson had always understood that one of his biggest problems was that he cared too much.

Clark cleared his throat. "Not twenty-four hours, as you can see."

"So, are you still dating Ultra Woman?" she asked, her voice low. "I know how good you are at keeping things from the press."

"No," he stammered. He could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. "She just disappeared after that fiasco at Perry's bash. I haven't seen her since. It's probably for the best. I'm not really boyfriend material, as you plainly know."

Mayson shifted her weight onto the other foot. "I don't know, Clark. I always thought with the right woman, you'd be amazing." She smiled weakly. "Unfortunately, I wasn't the right woman."

Clark wanted to tell her how he wished she could have been the right woman, but he didn't. There had always only been one right woman for him and they both knew it. "So, are you seeing anyone?" he asked, thinking it was a polite question to ask in this situation.

"Actually, I am. His name is Dan. He's FBI and overprotective, like you. But I'm getting used to it." She laughed. "He's constantly buying me gifts." She shrugged.

"Happiness certainly agrees with you, Mayson. I've never seen you look more beautiful."

He heard a growl from Lucy's desk and he craned around Mayson to look at Lucy, but she turned away. Strange.

"Thank you, Clark," said Mayson, giving him another hug. "That is kind of you to say. I thought you were supposed to always tell the truth?"

Clark shook his head. "I *am* telling the truth, Mayson. Why does everyone think I'm lying all the time now?"

Mayson reassured him with a smile. "I was only teasing, Clark."

"Oh." He felt embarrassed by his outburst. "So, what brings you to the Daily Planet?"

"Lucy invited me to lunch."

"I can't believe it." His jaw dropped as he lowered his voice. "You hate Lucy. Plus, you think she's a con artist after my vast fortune."

Mayson laughed. "Well, at least you've proved to me that she's not Lois Lane."

"You know who she is, Mayson," he told her in all seriousness. He leaned forward. "Really."

"I don't believe you, Clark," Mayson said, pointing at him with a grin.

He lowered his voice. "That's a photo of her and Kal on her desk."

She glanced over at the photo and then back at him, whispering, "That's you, Clark."

He sighed, exasperated. "Trust me, Mayson, when I tell you it isn't."

"Believe what you want to believe, Clark. You don't have to convince me anymore."

Lucy joined them at that moment. "Ready?"

"Tell her that's Kal," he said to Lucy.

Her eyes opened wide with fear for a split second, then she turned to Mayson. "It is. Shall we go?"

Mayson went to put on her coat with a shake of her head.

Clark jumped to help her, leaning close enough to whisper, "I've met him."

Mayson froze, then shook her head. "Whatever you say, Clark. I believe you." Clearly, she didn't, but she was right — he didn't need to convince her any more. He just hated to have her think he lied to her.

"Bye, Mayson. See you later, Lucy."

Lucy waved at him with a noncommittal flick of her wrist. She seemed annoyed at him. What did he do? He shook his head and tried once more to make sense of the research Lucy had done for him.

A few minutes after Lucy and Mayson left, Clark's phone rang. "Clark Kent."

"Have you lost your flipping mind, Kent?" the mayor of Metropolis screamed in his ear.

"Perry, what's up?" Did Lois say something about this past weekend to him?

"Why did you cancel the girls' police protection escort?"

"What?" Clark gasped. "I didn't."

There was silence as Perry considered this. "If it wasn't you…"

"When did the order get issued, Perry?"

"Monday morning."

"Lois called me Monday morning and said she was planning on locking herself in her room with her laptop all week and not to disturb her," Clark explained. "But Lucy hasn't said word one to me about missing her guards."

"You need to get to the bottom of this, pronto, Clark. If one of those girls… women…" His old boss's voice broke.

"You don't need to tell me, Chief. Look, Lucy's at lunch with Mayson Drake right now, so she's perfectly safe."

"With Mayson Drake?" Skepticism dripped from Perry's tone. "Those women hate each other, Kent."

"Lucy arranged it. Maybe Mayson has some information on Intergang. She used to work for Bill Church, don't forget."

Silence once again hung between them. "Bill Church is one of my oldest friends, Clark. If you've got hard proof…"

"Clark. Line two. Lois Lane," Barry called from across the bullpen.

"Got to go, Chief. Lois is on the other line," said Clark. "I'll check with her about the guards, all right."

"Clark, just make sure those ladies are safe."

"You know I will, Chief." He hung up and picked up the other line. "Lois?"

"Clark?"

Hearing her voice was like a balm to the stress of his

conversation with Perry. “Getting much work done?”

“I’ve been trying to reach you since last night. Where have you been?” Lois asked him.

He swallowed. *Bolivia*? “I had to run some errands.”

“Can you come over, now?” she inquired in her demanding way. “I need to talk with you.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“Give me fifteen minutes, Lois.”

She laughed. “How about two?”

Did she know he was Superman? “Sure,” he said, slowly. “I can be there in two.” He grinned. *She knows.* What a weight off his shoulders.

Less than a minute later, Superman came in through the living room window. Lois was in the kitchen, making lunch and he came up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. “I’ve missed you,” he whispered.

“I’ve missed you, too, Clark,” she replied with a sigh. “But I’m afraid you’ve missed your Lois more.”

A thunderbolt hit his brain. This was Lucy. He turned her around. Big round tummy, certainly not his Lois.

“She said you didn’t recognize her, but I didn’t believe her until this moment. Guess I owe her five bucks,” Lucy smiled weakly.

His jaw dropped. That had been Lois at the office. Lois, whom he had been working with all day. Lois Lane, who just went to lunch with Mayson Drake, his ex-girlfriend. He stumbled backwards. “When did you make the switch?”

“As I told you, I’ve been trying to reach you since last night.” Lucy nudged him aside and sat down at the dining table. “There’s a sandwich in there for you, if you’re hungry.”

He couldn’t sit and eat; he started pacing.

“Clark, you’re giving me neck strain. Sit down.”

Superman stopped across from her, holding on to the back of the chair. “Does she know?”

“I’m sure she’ll let you know as soon as she does,” Lucy informed him with a smile.

“Did you know that she’s at lunch with Mayson Drake as we speak?” he told her.

Lucy’s sandwich stopped halfway to her mouth, before she set it back down. “Mayson? Mayson doesn’t trust me. Why would they eat lunch together?”

“What, my ex-girlfriend and the love of my life? Gee, I have no idea what they might talk about.” Superman shook his head.

“Why do you think Lois wants to know about Clark’s relationship with his ex-girlfriend?” Lucy asked, picking up her sandwich again.

That stumped him for a moment. “I wouldn’t tell her about Mayson.”

“Ah, so she went to the source.” Lucy nodded, her eyes twinkling. “Hope she didn’t speak with Lana, too.”

Superman didn’t want to think about that possibility. “Why aren’t you at work, Lucy El?”

She swallowed. “Nobody said anything to you?”

Superman shook his head, a sinking feeling developing in the pit of his stomach. This didn’t sound good.

“Gareth McTinney asked me during the morning meeting yesterday when I’m going on maternity leave.” She watched him carefully.

“He *what*?!” The Man in Blue was so angry, he was starting to hover.

“Basically, he announced I was pregnant to the newsroom.”

“I told you not to trust Mr. Olsen,” he snarled.

Lucy set down her sandwich. “He didn’t tell him, Clark. McTinney figured it out all on his own. James defended me! Read him the riot act about assuming that pudgy female employees are pregnant without proof.”

“He did?” Superman set himself back down. “Good.”

“Unofficially, I’m on maternity leave and the role of Lucy El will now be portrayed by Lois Lane. *Your* Lois Lane. Who was going crazy not being able to leave the apartment.”

“I take it you told her about the baby.”

Lucy’s expression told him that she wouldn’t dignify that statement with an answer.

“Guess so. How could you let her into the newsroom? She’s supposed to be researching Superman to get back on the paper.”

Lucy took a sip of her milk with a smile. “Sounds like she’s more interested in Clark Kent at the moment.”

He sat down next to her, grabbing an apple slice from her plate. “Has she mentioned me? Asked you anything about me?”

“Superman? Nope. Hasn’t brought him up since Saturday, although she did mention Clark Kent once or twice.” She smiled.

He sighed. “She’s really angry at Superman, isn’t she?”

“A bit. She enjoys working with you on Intergang, though.”

Superman glanced over at her, stealing another apple slice. “She likes working with me?”

“She likes *you*, Clark.” She glanced at him.

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Liking me has never been the problem. Whether I’m Superman or Clark Kent, it doesn’t matter. We can’t be together. She’s still married to Lex Luthor. And an affair is an affair, no matter what.”

Lois stared at him and then exhaled a deep breath. “A couple of years ago we met this man, Eugene Laderman, who was convicted of murdering the abusive husband of his lover. Eugene was innocent, of course, and we proved it — the husband wasn’t actually dead, it turned out. And, technically, Eugene wasn’t her lover either. Anyway, I’m going to tell you what I told Kal: It’s okay to have an affair when your husband is a brutal sociopath.”

“No, it’s not, Lucy. It’s not okay.” Clark groaned.

“That’s what Kal said,” she murmured, a slight sad smile coming to her lips.

Clark looked her in the eye. “*Your* husband isn’t a brutal sociopath, Lucy.”

She took his hand and squeezed it. “I never said what happened between us was okay, Clark, and I never will.”

He nodded in agreement. It should never have happened, and it would never happen again.

“But Lex *is* a murdering sociopath, Clark,” Lucy continued. “He murdered Lola, among others. He kidnapped Lois and made her believe she was someone she wasn’t. And when she got her memories back, he tortured her, tried to brainwash her, and held her prisoner for over three years. That isn’t a marriage, no matter what the courts or any legal document states. What happened between you and her *wasn’t* an affair. It was the meeting of souls. The joining of souls.” She squeezed his hand again, reassuring him. “You’ve got to be honest with Lois and maybe together you can come up with a plan. Love will find a way, Clark.”

“Lois Lane doesn’t plan, Lucy, she acts,” he muttered, his lips pressed together. He wanted to believe Lucy, but deep in his heart he knew what he and Lois had done to Lex was wrong. No matter how horrible Lex Luthor was.

Lucy scowled at him, letting go of his hand. “Is that so? Fine. You just sit around and mope, Man of Steel. That will accomplish everything for you.”

“What is there to plan, Lucy? She’s married; I’m Superman. Never the two should mix.” Superman sighed. “I’m thinking of taking a world correspondent job that Gareth offered me.”

Lucy took hold of his hand again. “Running away is never the answer, Clark.”

“I wouldn’t be running away; I’d just be giving her space to live her life without me. I’ll still love her. I’ll always love her, just from a distance.”

Lucy took a bite of apple. “How is that not running away again?”

"It's better for her anyway."

"If you do that, you'd essentially be dumping her," she told him. "Don't you think it would be better to make that decision together?"

"We've already broken up, since we aren't allowed to be together. She's free to see other men." Superman swallowed. He hated the idea.

"And you're free to wallow in despair." Lucy shook her head. "She doesn't *want* anyone else. She just wants you. And she wants you to want her." She sipped her milk. "Actually, I take that back. She has expressed interest in another man."

Superman didn't say anything, just grumbled.

"Should I tell you?" She smiled. "You know him. Actually, he's one of your best friends."

"If you say James Olsen, I'll head to the Arctic and scream my lungs out," he threatened.

"Okay," Lucy shrugged. "If you don't want to know…" She glanced over at him.

He was surprised. Olsen was essentially a kid — a rich kid, but still a kid. "It is him? Really?"

She leaned closer to him. "His name is Clark Kent."

"Ha-ha," he scoffed, but her words had lessened the tension strangling his heart.

Lucy picked up her dishes and carried them back to the sink. "You're right. After her lunch with Mayson, she probably won't be interested in dating him anymore either."

Superman buried his head in his hands again. He was sure that between the two of them, the Loises would discover another way to kill him besides Kryptonite.

"Oooh, Clark. She's kicking. You want to feel?" Lucy sat back down next to him and raised her shirt, exposing a huge round tummy.

Clark set his hand on top and felt the baby kick him. He sighed. He loved that baby.

"She's missed you," she whispered.

"And I've missed her." He glanced into Lucy's eyes. "Both of you." For the first time since rescuing Lois, he was drawn towards Lucy, tempted to kiss her as his hand rested on her belly. A realization hit him. It was the baby; she was trying to bring them together. She didn't like that they were arguing. He could sense the baby calling out to him telepathically. "Daddy."

Lucy started. "*What?*"

Clark shook his head and removed his hand. He cleared his throat. "She thinks I'm Kal."

"Excuse me?" she sputtered.

"She thinks I'm her father. She wants us to kiss and make up. Stop arguing," he tried to explain.

Lucy grabbed his hand and placed it on her tummy again. "She's speaking to you?"

Clark shook his head. "Emotions. Feelings. It's not exactly words, per se."

A tear dripped down Lucy's cheek. "It's not fair," she mumbled.

"She loves you, Lois. She wants you to be happy. She senses that you are happier when I'm around. She wants me to stay with you. Be with you and make you happy." Hearing the baby's sentiments sent a fresh wave of guilt through him.

Lucy placed her hand over his, another tear dripping down her cheek. "No. It's not fair that Clark is missing his daughter speak to him like this." She set her head on his shoulder. "Can you tell her that her daddy loves her? And misses her, too?"

"I don't know." He closed his eyes and was quiet a minute. "I love you, Lois."

"I love you too, Clark." She kissed his lips gently, then pulled away. "Thank you. You're the best uncle ever."

Clark opened his eyes and looked into hers. "I'm the worst uncle ever," he grumbled. "Because I don't want to be just her uncle. I want to be Daddy."

Lucy closed her eyes, wincing at his words. She wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled him close, holding him. "I know. And I'm so sorry, so very sorry, Clark. I wish you were somebody's daddy, too."

"The baby wants to know why you're so sad again, Mommy."

Lucy swallowed. "I'll tell her when she's older."

He chuckled. "And so it begins."

"You better get back to work, Clark," she said, placing her hand on his again. Then she looked up at him. "You'll be a daddy someday, Clark, with Lois. I know you will."

"No, I won't." He sighed, standing up. "I want Kal's life. I want a wife who accepts him for who he is, a daughter who speaks to him before being born. I want parents who still love him enough to tell him he's wrong. And friends. And a home. I want to be able to kiss the woman I love whenever I want, without feeling like everyone is watching. I want to walk down the street without everyone knowing my biggest secret. His life is perfect. I envy him."

"Perfect? Ha! Kal's life isn't perfect. You know what Kal is dealing with right now? Last week someone kept exposing him to Red Kryptonite and his powers went haywire. He couldn't stop when he landed and he damaged so many buildings around Metropolis, the mayor told him to leave. He destroyed our kitchen with his heat vision trying to cook a frozen roast, because he couldn't turn it off. His powers were at seven hundred percent and he was afraid to touch me, because he hugged me one afternoon and bruised my arm." Lucy held out her arm. "See the bruise? No, because this didn't happen to me recently. It happened somewhere around ten to twelve months ago. But I know it happened, it's happening as we speak. His wife has gone crazy and has fallen in love with his brother, but she can't talk to anyone about it because it is wrong, so very wrong, and because he's in love with someone else. Kal's daughter doesn't know who he is. And he doesn't even know we're missing. So don't tell me that Kal's life is perfect, Clark. His life is far from perfect." Lucy grabbed his hand and squeezed it, staring at him. "And yes, you will be a daddy someday, Clark. Love will give you a way, if you believe hard enough. Stop being afraid. Give Lois a chance. You might be surprised by what she can take."

Clark stared at her. "Kal hurt you? Bruised you with a hug?"

"It was an accident, Clark. Together we found out who was responsible. Kal has learned to ask for help when he needs it; so should you."

Clark cupped her chin in his palm. "You are so precious. How can he allow himself to be around you?"

"He didn't." Lucy swallowed, looking away. "He's avoided me."

Clark nodded. "As he should."

Lucy winced. "Avoiding a problem doesn't make it go away. It just angers it and makes it want to slug you."

He chuckled. "So *you're* the problem?"

"Clark, you will never be able to leave Lois, so you might as well tell her everything and work with her," Lucy insisted.

"No, it's better if she doesn't know, Lucy. Together I will only hurt her more, like Kal hurt you. I don't know how Kal can do it; love you without fearing he will break you."

"Lois is stronger than you know, Clark. She won't break easily."

"Every time she cries, I feel like I shattered her."

Lucy socked him in the arm. "Then stop making her cry. Tell her you still love her and give her the chance to solve your problems together."

"I can't."

She hit him again. "Clark. You rushed right over here this afternoon, no qualms about telling her how much you love her."

"You don't understand, Lucy. If she ever were to get hurt again, because of me…" Clark stammered. "Red Kryptonite or not."

"Isn't that *her* decision, not yours?"

"You said the same thing about Mayson and look what happened to her," he reminded her.

"She survived because of you." Lucy grabbed his hands. "As did Lois."

He kissed her knuckles. "I know you're trying to make me feel better, Lucy, but the truth is both of them were hurt because I wasn't fast enough."

Lucy shook her head in disbelief. "You? *You* weren't fast enough? Who do you want to be? The Flash?"

Clark chuckled softly. "Nah. I prefer the blue suit."

"Don't take the job, Clark. You'll be miserable as a world correspondent. You need a base. Friends. A home."

"Kal needs those things." Clark let go of her hands. "And I'll never be *him*, Lucy. I don't have his strength." He set a hand on her stomach. "Bye, beautiful."

Lucy reached for his wrist, but he was faster. With a wave, he was gone out the window.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Clark." He heard her speaking to him. "But without me, he'd be you. Do you know how many times Kal has given up? Tried to hang up the cape? Pushed me away for my own safety? More times than I care to recall. I am what makes him strong. Remember how it was before I came this summer? Is that who you want to be? Do you want to go back to that lonely existence? Lois will make you stronger if you let her. So, let her."

Clark flew to the top of the tallest building in town and sat down, put his knees to his chest and wrapped his cape around himself. Lucy and Lois kept telling him to trust in love. Love would find a way, but he was a realist. Lucy had made him Superman and then she left him. Lois had made him Mr. Amazing, and she would leave him someday, too. When the novelty and reality and the danger of being with a superhero finally sank in, she would be out the door. Because once you took off the cape and tights, he was really only Clark Kent, a reporter with a heart of gold, an idealist, and champion of the underdog — a nobody. Not the kind of man a strong woman like Lois would want to come home to.

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Lois and Mayson sat across the table from each other, contemplating one another. Lois took a sip of her drink and handed her menu to the waitress. She wasn't quite sure where to begin. Or how well Lucy and Mayson knew each other.

"Clark took me here once for lunch," Mayson told her.

"Really?" There was the opening for which she was looking.

"The day you got shot by Junior." Mayson took a sip of her ice tea.

The shooting from the letters. Junior had come after Lucy? *Had he figured out how his circuits got overloaded*, she wondered. "Oh." She should have looked that up in the archives.

"How's the shoulder?"

"Better. It twinges sometimes." Lois had no idea which shoulder it was. "And you?" She had researched Mayson's bombing. She knew she couldn't go into this lunch completely blind.

"Running still winds me, so I avoid it." Mayson fake smiled. "Henderson's been great and so has Dan." She gave a real smile this time. Clark was right, she was happy.

"Glad to hear it."

Mayson pressed her lips together and looked her up and down. Oh, not a good sign. "So, what do you want, Lucy? I know you wouldn't invite me to lunch to catch up on old times."

Wow, straight to the punch. Lois liked this woman. "I'm worried about Clark. It's like a piece of him is missing and I'm hoping you know what or where it is. He won't talk to me."

Mayson raised a curious eyebrow at this pronouncement and folded her hands together. "He seemed fine to me."

"He's changed since your car bombing, like he's empty, hollow. I don't know how else to describe it." Lois shook her head, hoping Mayson bought whatever it was she was saying.

Mayson sighed. "Watching your girlfriend get blown up changes a man, especially a man who thinks he ought to be able to control his own world."

"What do you mean?" Lois thought she knew what Mayson meant, but she wanted to be sure.

Mayson raised a skeptical brow. "You know exactly what I mean, Lucy."

The waitress came and brought their food.

Lois looked at Mayson innocently and dug into her salad. *Ugh. The only vegetarian item on the menu.* What was the point of being able to eat whatever she wanted without gaining a gram, only to have a secret identity who wouldn't consume anything worth eating?

"Are you saying you haven't noticed that Clark's a bit of a control freak?" Mayson chuckled. She was having a salad as well, but a Cobb salad with diced roasted chicken and bacon.

"We all like things our way, Mayson," Lois reminded her.

She was quiet a couple of minutes while she ate. Lois waited, hoping it was because Mayson was organizing her thoughts. "I don't know how much of our conversation he's told you, Lucy."

"He doesn't like to talk about you, Mayson. That's why I've come."

"Even now?" This surprised the detective. "I was sure he was over me when I read about Ultra Woman…" Mayson shook her head. "I thought at the time that's what Clark needed. Someone he can be himself with. Someone he can lose control with, without worrying about her safety. He's scared of hurting us human women." She laughed softly to herself, then stared Lois in the eye with a raised brow. "It must be the same with Kal."

That was right, Mayson knew about Kal. Really knew. How much information had Clark shared with her? Lois still didn't have that speed reading down to a science and wished she had looked at Lucy's letters to Kal more closely. Lois felt like a deer crossing the road at night and Mayson was the semi-trailer heading right for her. "He used to worry about hurting me by accident, but we worked through it. He's very gentle." She sighed, thinking of Mr. Amazing.

Mayson glanced around and then leaned forward, lowering her voice. "Just between you and me, I've got to know: how wonderful is it to float with him?"

Lois's jaw dropped. *Exactly how intimate had Clark been with Mayson?* "Excuse me?" she practically snarled.

"You know exactly what I'm asking you, Lucy? If you truly are his sister-in-law, you'd know too." She took a bite of her salad and waited for Lois to answer.

Great, a test. "I do know what you're talking about. What I'm wondering is how you know about it?"

Mayson shrugged. "You're the researcher, how do you think?"

Lois closed her eyes. She had to. Her jealousy was taking over and she was worried she might send a heat missile Mayson's way. She took a deep breath and counted to ten. Mayson said she wanted to know, so she hadn't actually been there… but had Clark floated with her at some point, when they made out? She took another deep breath and counted to ten again. No wonder he hadn't wanted to speak about her. She swallowed and finally opened her eyes.

"Jealous much?" Mayson laughed with a bit of sparkle. "Lois."

Lois's jaw dropped. Mayson knew she wasn't Lucy. "Excuse me?" she gasped.

"I'm not an idiot, Lois. Lucy would never have asked me any of these questions, because she'd know what Clark was thinking before he did." Mayson chuckled. "Anyway, she would never have growled when Clark complimented me. She set the two of us up. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone — including him — that you're impersonating her. I guess turnabout is fair play, since she impersonated you once."

Lois shrugged, taking another bite of her salad. It had been worth a shot. "So, you think he's just freaking out because he's afraid to lose control? Afraid he might hurt me?"

This time Mayson's mouth formed an O. "You mean I was right?" She laughed. "I was totally bluffing, Lois."

Lois chuckled. "Ooops." She took a sip of her drink.

"He made a move? I'm surprised. He seemed a bit shy of intimacy. Actually, I shouldn't be surprised. You're you!"

Lois's brow came together. "What's that supposed to mean, I'm me?"

Mayson shook her head. "Come on. He has a huge crush on you."

Lois smiled. "Nice to know." She liked Mayson. She knew she shouldn't trust her as far as she used to be able to toss her because she was Clark's ex-girlfriend, but she liked her just the same. "So, how come you broke up with him?"

"Lucy didn't tell you?" Mayson asked, surprised. "You've got to watch out for her. She'll sabotage your relationship just trying to be helpful."

"Been there." Lois rolled her eyes and Mayson laughed. "We've got an understanding now."

Mayson laughed harder with a shake of her head. "When I was in the hospital, Lucy came to me and told me that Clark was about to break up with me, because of the bombing, because he felt guilty that he couldn't keep me safe. She told me not to accept it. Not allow him to break up with me. He needed me to be his hope."

"Ah. And you did the opposite. If he was going to dump you, you'd get there first to shock him into not wanting to break up with you." Lois sighed. "Been there, too. Doesn't work with Clark, does it?"

Mayson shook her head. "And then he never came back. He sent flowers every week for weeks, until the end of October. I figured once he fell for Ultra Woman, there wasn't any chance for me, because the flowers stopped coming. He'd moved on. By that point I had met Dan, so I was ready to move on too." She sighed with contentment. "Now, there's a man who knows how to be there when you need him." She waved to someone across the room. Lois turned around and saw Dan waving back.

Mayson's Dan was Daniel Scardino, FBI. *Crap*. Lois scrunched down in her chair. "He's not listening to this conversation, is he, Mayson? You promised that this would stay between us."

"No." Mayson studied her. "He's just my backup. I don't trust Lucy."

"Good. Do me a favor and don't tell him that I'm Lois Lane posing as Lucy El. Don't tell anyone. Just trust me on this, agreed?" Lois nodded.

"Why?" Mayson raised a brow; then a light bulb went off. "You and Dan?"

"A long time ago, Mayson. He was fresh out of the academy at the time. I was just getting a foothold at the paper. It meant nothing. Nothing."

Mayson got a sour expression on her face. "I can't get away from you, can I? Is there a man in this town you haven't touched first?" When Lois smiled weakly, Mayson raised a hand. "I don't want to know." So much for friendship with Mayson Drake.

"I'm sorry," Lois murmured.

"You want my advice about Clark?" she snapped. "If you truly want to make him happy, find Ultra Woman and convince her to come back to him. He's never going to be able to be content with you, Lois. He won't be able to resist you, he's so in love with you he'd probably even chance public scrutiny and censure to be with you." Mayson's annoyance softened with her voice. "But he's had so much pain in his life, he won't want to chance physically hurting the one woman he loves more than any other. Because if you two dated and anything ever happened to you that he didn't have in his power to stop, it would shatter his soul." She closed her eyes as if seeing Clark in such pain hurt her as well. "He'd never recover from it. He'd blame himself forever."

Her mouth suddenly dry, Lois took a sip of water, then whispered, "You mean if I died?"

"Died? You'd better not even go there, Lois. If you died, Superman would die with you." Mayson raised her brow and took a sip of her iced tea. It was the first time Mayson had mentioned the Man of Steel since Lois had met her. Clark wasn't kidding about Mayson not liking the Superman persona.

Lois took a deep breath. "Why did you keep dating him, then? If he was so obsessed with me?"

"Well, you were essentially dead and…" A hint of a smile brushed Mayson's lips. "Because Clark Kent is sexy as hell."

Lois nodded. "That he is." She sighed. "You think that giving him up, telling him I don't want to date him, is the only way to make him happy?" That couldn't possibly be the key to Clark's happiness. "Is that the only way to stop him from acting so standoffish?"

"Of course not. It will crush him, but he'll understand. He doesn't want to hurt you any more than you want to be hurt. Eventually, he'll understand and he'll survive. Find Ultra Woman for him, someone with whom he can be himself and learn to lose control and not hold it tight within his fists, and he'll be your friend for life. To love somebody you must set them free."

Lois looked down and whispered, "My heart beats to the rhythm of his heart. The blood in my veins came from him. I can't live without him, Mayson."

"And yet, you know you must. Your marriage to Lex is crushing him. You need to set him free, Lois."

Lois bowed her head. Mayson spoke the truth. Everyone kept telling her this, it must be true. "Doing the right thing sucks."

"It sure does," Mayson agreed.

The waitress came by and Lois ordered the biggest, most fat-drenched chocolate desert on the menu.

"Whoa!" Mayson gasped.

Lois winked at her. "Might as well gain fifty pounds and chase off all those other men that will surely come to call when I'm single again."

Mayson shook her head. "Where's Lucy anyway? Did she give up trying to con Clark?"

"Con Clark?" Lois had no idea what Mayson was talking about and decided to shrug off the thought. "No, someone at the office guessed she was pregnant, so she's gone into hiding back at the apartment. She and Clark don't want everyone to know she's carrying a super baby. Which is half the reason why I'm now Lucy El. My ex-husband is looking for Lois Lane, so I needed to be someone else who is able to leave the apartment. Personally, I hate this persona. She dresses ugly and doesn't drink coffee or alcohol or eat meat." She scowled.

Mayson's jaw dropped and she set both hands on the table to steady herself. "Lucy's going to have a baby? Oh, my God! She really is his sister-in-law."

Lois's eyes bugged. "You didn't know? I was sure that if Clark told you about the real Kal, he told you about why she needed protection, too."

Mayson swallowed. "No, he left that part out."

Lois grabbed her hand. "You can't tell anyone. If someone like Lex finds out, Clark will kill me."

"Trust me, I won't." Mayson took her drink and downed it. "Oh, my God. This explains so much. Thank you, Lois… eh, Lucy. I won't tell another soul. This gives me closure. Now I finally understand why he lied to me for all those months. If I had…" She put a hand to mouth and stared off into space. "This changes things, doesn't it?"

"Why?" Lois asked hesitantly.

"If Clark ever became a father…" Mayson's eyes bugged out. "Oh, my gosh. Watch out, world."

Lois swallowed, not wishing to go down this road. "Mayson, are you fine knowing this? Or do you need me to hit you over the head?"

Mayson blinked a couple of times and focused on Lois, seeing she was completely serious, her hand in a fist. "I'm fine."

"Good." Lois took a sip of her drink. "Hey, do you know anything about Intergang you want to share with me? Clark and I are working on a connection between Lex Luthor and Intergang."

"Lex Luthor and Intergang? Please." Mayson rolled her eyes. "I know, Lucy and Clark think Bill Church is… oh, my God!" Her hand went to her mouth. "Lex Luthor and Bill Church! Now it all makes sense. Who goes to Berkistan for a business meeting about CostMart? I'm such an idiot." She waved her finger in the air and Dan was at their table a moment later. "Dan, Lucy. Lucy, Dan. Dan, Lucy El is a genius! If you ever need to know anything about Lex Luthor or Intergang, go to her."

"I'm not sharing my sources, Mayson," Lois said with a glare at Mayson.

"Lex Luthor?" Dan said warily, glancing at Lucy. "Are you sure, Mayson?" He lowered his voice. "She's a reporter."

"Researcher." Mayson waved off his concerns. "It explains everything! Why he's relocating to Metropolis. Why Jaxon's at the *Planet*. He's been doing research on Metropolis because they're hitting here next."

"Who's Jaxon?" Dan looked between them, flummoxed.

"Lex Luthor's son," Lois explained.

"Oh." Dan nodded. "Oh!" He knelt down between them, looking at Lois. "You've got to share your source."

She cleared her throat. "I can't."

He looked at Mayson, who lowered her voice, "Her source is Lex Luthor's wife, Lois Lane."

"Mayson!"

Dan blanched. "Oh. Mayson, um, there's something I need to tell you about Lois Lane."

Lois smiled. He hadn't recognized her. She stood up. "Well, Clark needs me at the office. You want me to share my intel, you've got to share yours as well." She opened her purse and tossed some cash on the table. "Thanks for the information, Mayson, and enjoy my dessert."

"Do you want an escort back to the paper?" Mayson asked. "I hear that you're supposed to be under police protection at all times."

Lois waved her hand at her. "I'll be fine." Then she beat it out of there like only Ultra Woman could.

***

When Lois arrived back at the office, she found Clark sitting at his desk with a grimace on his face. She smiled at him. "Hi, Clark."

"Lucy, how was lunch with Mayson? Still the best of friends?"

Crap. He knows. That little tattletale. "It was very informative, Clark." She had asked Lucy not to say anything to him about their little switcheroo, but Lucy insisted that they were keeping enough from him already.

"May I speak with you in the conference room?" he asked sternly.

"Of course, Clark." She set her belongings down at her desk and followed him into the conference room.

As soon as he shut the door, he turned on her. "Why did you want to talk with Mayson? Was it about Intergang?"

Maybe Lucy hadn't told him. "She's excited about our Lex Luthor and Intergang angle; she and Dan think we might be on to something there."

"Dan? Her boyfriend, Dan? You had lunch with him, too?" He relaxed, obviously thinking they wouldn't have talked about him with Mayson's current boyfriend at the table.

"Yeah, Dan Scardino." She crossed her arms and watched him. Let's see how much the know-it-all really did know about her.

"Hold on, Mayson's new boyfriend is your ex-boyfriend Dan Scardino?"

Damn. Maybe Lucy told him. "He wasn't my boyfriend. We went on three dates, seven years ago. He bought me weird gifts and was overprotective, so I dumped him. And he joined us during dessert and didn't recognize me."

Clark looked at her with slight panic in his eyes. "Dessert?"

Lois looked down at her fingernails. "Actually, Mayson did ask me a curious question. She asked me about sex with Kal, whether or not we floated."

"What?" he gasped, leaning against the table.

She looked up from her fingernails. "I told her that I've never had sex with Kal."

"Lois, Kal is Lucy's husband. Of course, they—"

She looked deep into his eyes. "We make love."

Clark gulped.

"And it's…" Lois sighed, a big smile spreading across her face, and a tingling sensation dancing around her body, causing her to shiver. "None of her business."

Clark laughed, taking hold of her hands and gazing at her with such intensity. "Oh, Lois, I love you." He blushed as he realized what he had said.

"I know." Lois swallowed, her voice husky. "She told me that too."

"Mayson told you that I love you?" he sputtered.

Lois loved knocking him off kilter. "She told me that you have a huge crush on me, but then she said something interesting. She said that if I ever died, Superman would too." She tilted her head to the side. "I wonder what she meant by that."

He looked away.

"Did Superman die, Clark?" she whispered.

"No," Clark replied, looking into her eyes. "But Mr. Amazing did."

Lois felt a cold chill drip over her body, her eyes filling with tears. She let go of his hands and walked away from him. "He told you about that?" she spat at him.

"I'm sorry, Lois, I shouldn't have said anything."

"*Lucy*, Clark. I'm Lucy El, remember? I'm fat and married to Kal-El. I wear these stupid glasses with no corrective lenses. I dress in these shabby clothes and clunky shoes and wear these ugly barrettes in my hair. I don't drink coffee or alcohol or eat meat." She sat down at the far side of the table. "And I'm best friends with Clark Kent and Superman, although I'm beginning to wonder why."

Clark sat down next to her. "Why did you cancel your police guard?"

Lois looked him in the eye. "Does it really matter, Clark?"

"I worry about you," he whispered.

"I'm not nine months pregnant, Clark. I can take care of myself. I guarantee you, Lex Luthor isn't going to capture me again. I'm tired of being someone's prisoner. First I was his and now I'm yours." She stood up and took a deep breath. "If you see Superman, tell him I'm sorry Mr. Amazing died. I'll miss him. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a story to research." Lois walked out of the conference room, slamming the door, causing all the glass to shatter and fall to the ground. She stopped, listening to

the glass breaking. Then she went to her desk, picked up her coat and purse and walked out of the newsroom.

***

Lois and Lucy sat in the living room of their apartment, nibbling on Superman's Christmas chocolate. The coffee table was covered with boxes.

"That was just cruel, Lois," Lucy said again.

"I know."

"He told me that Lois Lane doesn't plan, she just acts."

"We do, don't we?" Lois shook her head, taking a bite of chocolate.

"According to Mr. Wells, Tempus said that bad guys plan, think three steps ahead, while all superheroes do is react."

Lois laughed. "So true. What we need to do is act a little more like a bad guy and do some planning. No more running off half-cocked, interviewing ex-girlfriends without the proper research. I should have talked to you first."

"And I'm so sorry that I told him about Kal's powers going haywire. I should have known that he'd react that way. He's already so scared that he'll hurt you, now I've just made him paranoid," Lucy said with a shake of her head. "I hate that these Kent boys think that because they have all the super powers, they get to have complete control over the decisions in our relationships. Argh." She growled and took a bite of a chocolate caramel. "Oh, Lois. This is so good."

"I know." Lois smiled. "He really outdid himself, didn't he?" She sighed. "Clark isn't the only one with super powers in our relationship, but he isn't man enough to be honest and find out the truth about me."

Lucy sighed. "He's just scared. He really does love you."

"I know he does. The lunkhead even told me so before he told me that my Superman was dead. If we hadn't been at the office, he might have even kissed me."

"He went too far," Lucy agreed.

"It's like he pulls me toward him so he can push me away. He doesn't know what to do with these intense feelings he has for me. He wants me, but knows he shouldn't act on those feelings. I am going to have to take the decision-making process away from him. He doesn't know how to handle it." Lois shook her head.

Lucy laughed. "We definitely need a plan."

Someone knocked on the door. Lois looked over at it and lowered her glasses. "It's Moonbeam." She disappeared for a split second and returned wearing the wig and a Lois Lane pantsuit. Lucy pointed to her face and Lois took off the glasses. "I don't know why we're going through the trouble. Moonbeam is psychic." She opened the door.

"We've got trouble," Moonbeam said, entering the apartment. "Lex Luthor is avoiding the divorce subpoena. We're technically not filed for divorce until he accepts it."

Lois tossed her a chocolate bar. "Come, join our pity party."

Moonbeam sat down next to her. "What's with all the chocolate?"

"Mr. Amazing's Christmas gift to me." Lois smiled.

"Wow!" Moonbeam gushed, opening her chocolate bar. "He loves you."

"Good thing I can't gain weight anymore." Lois laughed.

Lucy set down her box of chocolate. "Speaking of which, I better stop. Wouldn't want to go into early labor."

Moonbeam looked at her, concerned. "How are you doing?"

Lucy sighed. "Fat and missing Kal."

"Kal? Oh, right, that's what you call your Clark here. So confusing, all these secret identities." Moonbeam shook her head, taking another bite of chocolate bar.

"So we need someone to deliver the subpoena to Lex Luthor whom he won't refuse to see," said Lois, a grin growing on her face. "I know just the person."

"Who?" Moonbeam asked.

"The person in that mirror," Lois replied.

Moonbeam appeared lost.

"But Lois, you don't have the costume," Lucy reminded her.

Lois grinned wickedly. "I know how to get it. We just need to do some planning. Do you think you can get Clark to come over? We need to borrow his keys."

"Maybe we can get Sam to borrow them for you?" Lucy suggested.

Lois thought about this. "I hate to get Daddy involved. Maybe I can just borrow them the next time Clark's in the shower." She practically danced with amusement.

"What?" Lucy asked.

Lois shook her head. "Sorry, mental picture."

"Oh." Lucy looked away, flushing.

"If you are thinking about committing a crime, I probably shouldn't hear about it," Moonbeam said, standing up. "Let me know if you find your friend who can help us out."

Lois pointed at her lawyer. "I'll have her stop by as soon as I find her."

Moonbeam nodded and left, taking her candy bar with her.

"Lucy, you know Clark best. I need a list of all the important dates in his life. Birthdays, death of his parents, anniversaries, etc. One of them has to match the alarm code at the Smallville house."

"Are you sure it's there?" Lucy asked.

"Where else would it be? I didn't see it when I was there last weekend. He must have a safe it's locked in." Lois sighed. "I hope this works or Ultra Woman will have to get a new costume."

***

Lois stood at the mirror in Clark's Smallville bedroom and adjusted her mask. Planning worked wonders. The security code was his mother's birthday. No wonder Kal got it on the first try. Clark had used a different code for the safe. It wasn't any of the codes on Lucy's list. Lois had tried one last date, Halloween, and the safe opened. That wasn't a good omen.

Inside, Lois not only found Ultra Woman's suit, but also an envelope of photos. She glanced at only one or two of them before putting them back. It hurt too much to see Lucy and Clark together. She didn't want to think that Lucy had worn this outfit first. It didn't matter, she told herself. That was before, this was now. Lucy was rooting for them almost as much as she was. Lucy had her own Clark. She would be going home to him soon after the baby was born. Each day that passed was a day closer to Lucy leaving. Then Lois won't have to worry about her anymore.

Stealing the key to the Smallville house turned out to be easier than Lois expected. Clark was vulnerable in that he thought he was the only person around with enhanced abilities.

Lois had her father call her as soon as Clark stepped into the shower with the phrase, "I'm on my way."

Then Sam left the apartment (no point in involving him) and she flew in through the patio. She had practiced the day before, while Clark was in Europe helping with a massive pile-up on the autobahn. Thank you, winter weather. She wore a skintight black leotard and tights, with a hood to hide her hair. She took his keys, made copies of the ones she thought went to the Smallville house and then flew back to his apartment. He had been still in the shower. She exhaled, thinking about Clark in the shower.

The one mistake Lois had made was in stopping to take a peek at him with her x-ray vision. His naked body was as exquisite as she imagined it would be; she sighed, gazing at him. It was the sigh that had almost done her in. Clark heard her. But the one advantage she had on her side was she was already dressed. During the extra split second he took to turn off the water and grab a towel, she had been already entering the window of her apartment, dangling the keys for Lucy to see. Then the phone rang.

"Lucy, the strangest thing just happened. I think someone

broke into my apartment," Clark told her.

Lucy turned to Lois and glared. "What gives you that idea?" she asked.

"I heard someone."

"What did you hear?"

He hemmed and hawed, obviously not wanting to admit hearing her sigh. "Is Lois there?"

"He wants to talk to you, Lois."

"I don't want to talk to him," Lois responded with a flip of her hand.

Lois could hear Clark swallow over the phone line. "Never mind. I was mistaken. I must have been hearing things."

"Is anything missing?" Lucy wanted to know.

"No. Never mind. My mind must be playing tricks on me," he said, hanging up.

Lucy turned on her. "What did you do? Whistle?"

"I just sighed. He's quite the sight in the shower." She sighed again, biting her bottom lip. To think she had already showered with that man. If she had known what he had looked like that first night in Smallville, she wouldn't have had the nerve to climb into his shower. A hint of a smile played on her lips. Who was she kidding? Of course she would have.

Lucy glowered at her. "We're planners now, Lois. No mistakes, remember? No stopping to admire the scenery while out on a mission."

Lois nodded in agreement. But it had been worth it. At least, she hadn't done what she really had been tempted to do — enter his shower. Instead, Lois got dressed and headed to work.

At lunch, she zipped off to Smallville with the list of dates Lucy had given her. The second key she tried fit in the lock and the first code turned off the security alarm. Easy as pie. Finding the hidden safe, not so easy. Using her x-ray vision, she scanned the entire house and finally found the safe in the basement by the washing machine. Not the place a robber would think to find Superman's most valuable treasures.

Lois took one last look at herself in the mirror. Mask on straight. Cape draping nicely. Suit snug, although not as snug as it could be over her tummy. She would have to alter it. She zipped down to the front door, typed in the security code, locked the front door and was off. She landed in the alley behind the Planet and spun into her Lucy El clothes. She left the Ultra suit underneath as Lucy suggested. How did Clark dress like this every day? It was kind of bulky. What was one more layer? She couldn't wait until spring, when she planned on revealing Lucy's new slimmer self.

Lois shook her head. *Spring?* What was she thinking? Come spring, Lucy would be gone and hopefully, Lois Lane would be back sitting at this desk.

***

That evening, Lois showed Lucy how to make stir-fry chicken with vegetables. My, that woman was a mess in the kitchen. Of course, not being able to reach over one's tummy to get to the counter was a drawback. Lois helped her out by doing all the chopping in seconds.

After dinner, she spun out of her Lucy El clothes — thankful to be rid of those extra layers — and after a good-luck hug from Lucy, took off for Jaxon Xavier's. She landed on his balcony and easily entered his apartment through his unlocked balcony doors. Jaxon was sitting at his breakfast bar, munching on a microwave dinner, chatting on his cell phone.

"If that's your father, tell him I would like a word," she spoke to him.

Jaxon turned towards the voice and dropped his phone on the ground in surprise. He bent down, picked up the phone and said, "I'll call you back, Junior."

Lois glared. "I have a bone to pick with him, too. But alas, one creepy Luthor at a time. Your father. Call him."

Jaxon swallowed and dialed the phone.

"What is it, Jaxon?" his father said in that annoyed tone he saved for pestering employees and unwanted children.

"Ultra Woman is here, Father, and wants to talk to you," he said delicately, as if that would help the poor boy.

"Is that another one of your geeky friends pulling a prank on you?" roared Lex. "You know, nobody's seen Ultra Woman since Halloween. Why would the first place she reappears be at your apartment? It's probably someone in a costume."

"No, Father. It's her." He cleared his throat. "She came through my balcony."

"Fine. Put her on."

"I don't wish to speak on the phone, Jaxon." She crossed her arms. "Tell your father I want to meet with him. I have a message to deliver from a mutual acquaintance."

"She wants to meet with you, Father. She says she has a message from a mutual acquaintance," Jaxon repeated.

"Oh. Clark sending his girlfriend to deliver messages for him now?" Lex scoffed. "I'm not staying away from my wife, if that's the message."

"I need the address, Jaxon," Ultra Woman stated, not waiting for Jaxon to repeat Lex's words.

"She really wants to see you, Father," Jaxon pleaded.

"Agreed. I'd like to see this super woman for myself."

Lois resisted rolling her eyes. "Ultra Woman," she corrected loud enough for her husband to hear.

"Give her the address, but tell her to come through the window to prove she's the real deal." Lex hung up, chuckling.

Ultra Woman flew onto his balcony a minute later. Lex opened the balcony doors.

"My, my. Ultra Woman, pictures do not do you justice," he said with his derisive smile. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

Lois pulled out the divorce papers and handed them to him. "Lex Luthor, you have been served. Have a happy divorce." She turned on her heel and flew out the balcony window. She could still hear him yelling threats and insults a block later.

Instead of heading back to her apartment, Ultra Woman decided to fly around for a bit. Feel the wind in her face, enjoy the view of her city from above.

"*No! No! Get off of me,"* she heard a woman yelling.

Ultra Woman followed the voice as it got louder until she found from where it was coming. She landed beside a car and knocked on the window.

"Get lost!" a male voice told her from inside the car.

The superheroine opened the door and pulled the man out of the car by the scruff of his collar. "I believe that the lady said 'No'." Ultra Woman held him above her head as she glanced back at the woman inside. "Are you all right?"

The woman nodded.

"Do you want to press charges?"

The woman shook her head.

"I understand. Is this your car or his?"

"His." The woman finally murmured.

"Let me take out this trash and then I'll assist you home. Excuse me." She tossed the man into a dumpster half a block down. She wiped her hands off on her pants and, returning to the car, opened the door on the passenger side. "May I give you a lift anywhere?"

The woman slid out of the car and hugged her. "Thank you. Thank you. He seemed so nice online," the woman said, starting to cry. "I thought I was a goner."

"You'll survive," Lois murmured, lifting her into her arms. "Where's home?"

"Garfield Street."

Ultra Woman nodded and took off into the air. It was more difficult flying with a passenger, especially a crying, sobbing one.

They landed on Garfield Street a few minutes later. “May I recommend a more public meeting spot the next time you wish to meet someone you don’t know for the first time?”

“Thank you… uh… uh…”

“Ultra Woman.” She nodded and took off again. She could see why Clark didn’t like to stand around and chitchat with the awestruck victims.

On her way back to the apartment, Ultra Woman stopped a purse snatcher and a mugging within a block of one another. She shook her head. What was this city coming to? At the mugging, she took the gun away from the culprit and bent it in half.

“Hey, that’s personal property!” exclaimed the thief.

“You’re kidding me, right?” She rolled her eyes, picked up the thief and dropped him off in front of the precinct house three blocks away. She tied him up next to the purse snatcher she had set down minutes earlier. Then she took off into the air and headed straight home.

Lois ripped off her mask as she landed. “Oh, this thing is uncomfortable. We’ve got to come up with something better.” She zipped into her bedroom and changed into her robe.

“How did it go?” Lucy asked glancing up from her book, *Parenting: How to Survive the First Year.*

“Lex has now been served. I also saved a date rape victim, captured a mugger and a purse snatcher, all on my way home. Poor Clark. Now I see why his work is never done.”

Lucy shook her head. “I thought we were going to stick to the plan, Lois. Deliver the divorce papers, not be seen by the general public.”

“Right. The plan. Do you think Clark is going to believe that Ultra Woman is really back? Five bucks says he stays in denial.”

“Money from a baby.” Lucy shook her head.

“How can he not deny it? You’re as big as a house and I’m just plain human Lois. Who else could it be? But to be on the safe side, I’d better return the suit to the safe tomorrow in case he gets suspicious and decides to check.”

“Good idea. That’s thinking ahead.” Lucy nodded.

“You still owe me five bucks from when Clark didn’t recognize me at work.” Lois held out her hand. “Although, I wish I had lost that one. I cannot believe he confused me with a nine month pregnant woman.”

Lucy flicked her hand over her shoulder to the sideboard. “It’s in my purse. It’s the glasses, you know. They fool anyone.”

Lois walked over to the sideboard where the purse sat, then paused. “Hey, this is my purse.”

Lucy shrugged. “It belongs to both of us now.”

“Ha-ha. I want my five bucks.”

“What are you arguing about? When I leave, you get to keep everything in Lucy El’s bank account. That should cover it. It’s not like I can take that money back to my dimension, anyhow.” Lucy returned to reading her book. “How is your memoir, *Life with a Mad Man,* coming along?”

Lois shrugged. “I’ve got the first three chapters finished, but I’m not really motivated. I don’t want to think about my life with Lex Luthor. I want to think about my life with Clark Kent.” She sighed, zipping into her room and returning with another box of chocolate. “I miss him.”

“So call him.” Lucy still wasn’t looking up from her book. “Better yet, stop by and join his shower.” She glanced up and raised her eyebrows. “You need to start thinking about your long-term goals with Clark. What’s your plan? Where do you want to be a year from now?”

“Hell, I don’t know where I’ll be at the end of the month.”

“Here, I hope.” Lucy smiled weakly. “I’ll need you when I give birth.”

That thought made Lois uncomfortable. “I don’t know, Lucy.” She shot her a squeamish expression.

“Come here. I want to test something. Put your hand on my tummy.”

Lois sat down next to her and reluctantly rested her hand on Lucy’s belly, then she jerked her hand away. “What was that?” She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry.

Lucy looked at her. “What did she say?”

How had…? “Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!”

“She recognized you as me… us.” Lucy sighed. “I’m not Kryptonian, so I can’t hear her.”

Lois knew the answer to this question before she asked it. “Clark?”

Lucy nodded. “She thinks he’s Kal.”

Lois set her hand back down on Lucy’s belly and closed her eyes. “She misses him.”

“We all do,” Lucy murmured, setting down her book. “If you think about him what does she do?”

Lois tried to think of a happy moment with Clark. Christmas Eve, sitting on the couch. All of sudden she was filled with more longing for Clark than usual. “She tells me to go to him. Bring Daddy to her. Wow. You’re going to have your hands full with this one.” Lois smiled tenderly.

“Okay. Now, picture flying.”

Lois closed her eyes again. “Oh! She’s kicking. Lucy, she loves to fly.”

“I know. How can she not?”

“How is this possible?” Lois’s brow furrowed.

“Kryptonians are telepathic. When the New Kryptonians were here, when they took Kal-El back with them, we discovered this new ability. This is how they communicate when they are far apart. No cell phones on Krypton,” Lucy joked, but it fell flat. “But it seems to only work between Kryptonians. I’ve tried to contact Clark several times when I’m in danger, but nothing.” She shrugged.

“My Clark?” Lois asked suspiciously.

“Yes, *your* Clark. My Clark is in another dimension. I doubt telepathic powers work trans-dimensionally.”

“Good point.” Lois thought about the multitude of possibilities this new ability could bring. “So, hypothetically, I could contact Clark telepathically?”

“In theory.” Lucy raised a brow. “I recommend the telephone until all this secret identity stuff gets resolved.”

“Yeah. Probably for the best.” She set her hand on Lucy’s tummy again. “She wants you to sing about rainbows again.”

Lucy smiled. “She liked that song? Do you know ‘Over the Rainbow’?”

“Of course.” And Lois began to sing, “Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there’s a land that I heard of…”

***

As he flew over Metropolis, Clark heard Lois singing and smiled. He flew over to the windows of their apartment and saw the two Loises sitting on the sofa, singing to the baby. He knew they were singing to the baby, because Lois had her head resting on Lucy’s belly. He stood at the window, watching and listening to them sing. He wanted to be inside, next to them, part of the family. He flew away, knowing that it might be a little weird. The three of them, huddled around Lucy’s belly talking, laughing, sharing thoughts. When he touched Lucy’s belly he was drawn to her, even though he knew she was Kal’s and that he loved Lois.

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Don’t go!”

He gasped, stopping mid-air. He could hear the baby calling to him. She had known he was nearby, thinking of her. The singing stopped suddenly too. He could no longer hear it. He sighed and continued to fly home.

***

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Don’t go!”

Lois’s head popped off of Lucy’s belly, and she was at the window a moment later.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy asked, sitting up.

"Superman was here. The baby felt his presence. She called out to him to stay." Lois put her hand up to the window. "Amazing."

Lucy covered up her tummy. "I'm going to bed. Why don't you call your father and say good night? Maybe someone else will answer the phone."

Lois stood at the window gazing out for a few more minutes, wondering what Clark must have been thinking seeing the two of them singing to the baby. She pictured herself round with child singing to the baby, hearing its thoughts, leaning against Clark's chest as he held them. A big happy family.

With regret she pulled herself away from this daydream and headed for the bathroom. She took a long shower, trying not to think of the one she had shared with Mr. Amazing, and failing. Afterwards, she sat down on her bed and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" Clark's voice in her ear made her longing increase.

"Clark?" she said, knowing it was him, but not wanting to sound too anxious or excited to hear his voice.

"Lois? Is everything okay?" He sounded worried.

"Yes. I just missed you," Lois murmured.

"You missed *me*?" He sounded stunned.

"I feel bad. I shouldn't have snapped at you earlier," she said without apology. She didn't regret it *that* much.

"I deserved it," Clark admitted softly.

"True. But I still shouldn't blame you for his mistakes."

"We all make mistakes, Lois."

"Some more than others." She wet her lips. "I didn't call to argue with you."

"Glad to hear it," Clark sounded happier at that thought that he actually chuckled.

"Thank you for telling me you loved me the other day. I needed to hear it," she confessed.

Lois could hear his already fast heart rate increase. "Lois, that was—"

"You'd better not say it was a mistake, Clark," she snapped.

He cleared his throat. "Unintentional. It kind of slipped out."

"It was still nice to hear. Especially after Mayson told me I should stay far away from you because I'll only bring you misery."

"Too late," he chuckled again.

"No truer words, Clark." Lois snuggled under her blankets. "Hey, we make each other miserable; it must be true love."

"Must be." This time he sounded sad, melancholy, like he thought she was teasing him.

"I just wanted to hear your voice before I went to sleep. I feel safer knowing you're around."

He coughed. "Me?" Again with the disbelief. *Did Clark think he isn't loveable?*

"You."

"You'd feel safer if you hadn't dismissed the guards," he rebuked gently.

"I'd feel safer if you were here with me," she whispered naughtily.

"That's not a good idea, Lois."

"You're probably right." She grinned, biting her bottom lip. "It's a terrific idea."

He laughed softly in agreement. "Fantastic idea."

"Tremendous idea."

"But not a good idea."

"Oh, no, not good. Not good at all. Sometimes, don't you want to be something other than good?" she teased him.

"Such as?"

Amazing, she almost said. Instead she said, "You know. The opposite of good."

"Bad?" he asked skeptically.

"No, naughty."

Clark cleared his throat again. "Lois, I can't have this conversation with you."

"You are, though, Clark."

"I mean, your father is listening to every word I say."

"Ooops." Lois laughed. "Good night, Clark. If you change your mind…"

"You'll be the first person I call. Good night, Lois."

Lois hung up the phone and giggled with a sigh. "Clark, I love you." She shut off the light, closed her eyes and whispered it again, "I love you, Clark Kent." He had better be listening, because she was planning on whispering it until he heard her.

***

Clark stopped by Lois's apartment the next morning to walk her to work as he used to do with Lucy. Old habits die hard. Mostly it was because he couldn't get Lois off his mind. He dreamt of her all night. Every time dream Lois opened her mouth she said, "I love you, Clark Kent," even when saying it had nothing to do with what was going on in the dream. It was odd, weird, and not at all relaxing… in a very good way.

Lucy opened the door. "Good morning, Clark. We weren't expecting you this morning."

"I thought I might walk with Lois to work," he said, coming inside.

"She already left."

He stopped. "She did?"

"Yeah, she had an errand to run." Lucy glanced at him from over her shoulder. "Did you stop by last night?"

He froze. How did she know about that? "Who, me?"

"No. Superman."

"Oh. Him. Yeah, he might have flown by." Clark feigned a cough. "He… I heard you singing."

"I got Lois to help me sing to the baby." She smiled sweetly.

"Lucky kid." Clark couldn't resist anymore, the draw was too strong. He walked over to Lucy. "Can I say hi?"

She rolled her eyes and lifted her arms. He slipped his hand under her shirt and once again felt the pull towards Lucy. He swallowed and stepped away. "She's a powerful force, that one."

Lucy nodded. "So, what made you stop by? Lois or the little one?"

"She called me last night."

"Lois?"

Clark nodded.

Lucy continued, "I told her if she missed you so much, she should just call you."

"I can't stop thinking about her. Lucy, what am I going to do? I couldn't sleep last night."

"Go to work, Clark. I'm out of the advice business. Neither of you listen to me and I'm tired of sounding like a broken record. Talk. Talk. Talk. You say there's nothing left to say. She says she won't talk unless you go first." Lucy rolled her eyes. "Then you both come to me and whine about how much you miss each other. Personally, I'm tired. You keep this up, I'm going to lock the two of you in a lead-lined room for a week to work it out."

Clark took a deep breath, thinking about being locked in a room alone with Lois for a week. Slowly, he released his breath. Lucy was right. They were driving each other, and her, crazy. "How is Kal doing with the Red Kryptonite? Has he hurt you anymore?" He looked at her concerned.

"No." She sighed. "The worst was when he damaged our house when he got the hiccups." She shook her head. "Perry's son, Jerry, was behind it. Poor Perry. He's heartbroken."

Clark nodded. "At least when you don't have a secret identity, your friends don't go after you without knowing they're going after you."

"But that was last week. This week, my substitute Lois refused to go to Sweden with him when he won the 'International Peace Prize', because she was so mad after he told her that he

kissed your Lois. But now she feels bad and got them a room at Chateau Roberge for the weekend to mend fences."

He patted her arm. "I'm sorry, Lucy."

"Me too. I miss him. At least I have a valid excuse."

Clark placed his hand on her tummy again and then kissed his sister-in-law goodbye.

"You better stop doing that. Lois won't like it," Lucy said as he reached the door.

He stopped and looked at her. "What can she complain about? I'm her boyfriend's best friend, unofficially."

Lucy shook her head. "That's right. You killed her boyfriend."

Clark winced. "She told you about that?"

"I'm a great sounding board." Lucy poked him in the chest. "What were you thinking? Telling her you love her one moment and that her Superman is dead in the next? She hasn't seen him since her accident; she's liable to believe you next time."

"I have no idea why I said that. Sometimes things come out of my mouth that sound good until they touch the air, then they explode." He laughed softly to himself. "She's like my own version of Red Kryptonite." He opened the door.

Lucy waved. "Apt. Don't be a stranger, Clark."

Clark sighed, closing the door. He wanted to go back in and take Lucy in his arms and kiss her. It was wrong. It was the baby pulling him towards her, thinking he was Kal. He missed Lois. He would see her at work.

Lois beat him to the office despite her errand. He slipped into the chair next to her desk. "I couldn't stop thinking about you last night. You invaded my dreams," he whispered.

She smiled. "I try my best. Mayson's been calling every ten minutes."

Clark frowned. What did she want? He went to his desk and called Mayson. "What's up? Lucy said you've been trying to reach me?"

"Did you tie up two low-level thugs outside a precinct house last night?"

"No." He lowered his voice and turned his back on Lois. "Superman doesn't do that. He always hands them over to authorities. You know that."

Mayson chuckled. "Always talk about yourself in the third person?"

"Sorry. It wasn't me." He glanced over at Lois. She was pretending she wasn't listening, but she was pretending too hard.

"Got it, just checking. If you hear anything, let me know."

"Will do, Mayson," he replied.

"Hey. I enjoyed having lunch with Lucy the other day," Mayson told him.

He dropped into his chair. "*Really?*" Was Lois getting thick with all his ex-girlfriends? First Lucy and now Mayson. This couldn't be good. Something inside his head reminded him that Lucy wasn't an ex-girlfriend, but a mistake. A big ol' life-ending mistake.

"Yes. Lucy's really mellowed out," Mayson told him. "And Clark, just so you know, I believe you."

Clark felt like a ton of bricks fell on him. "What did she say to convince you?"

Mayson laughed. "Oh, I don't know. Something about floating."

He flinched with a glance at Lois. She had her back to him, but he could have sworn he heard laughter.

"Oh." He cleared his throat. "Just need Ultra Woman and your little club is complete," he murmured, more to himself than to Mayson.

"Oh, did she mention what I said about Ultra Woman?"

Clark was sitting up at full attention. "What did *you* say, Mayson?"

"That I think Ultra Woman would be the perfect woman for you."

Great, just what Lois needed to hear. "Me? Or Superman?" *Oh God*. Had Mayson, of all people, told Lois that he was Superman? He glanced over at Lois, but she was on the phone. She hadn't heard.

"Suddenly there's a difference?" Mayson teased.

"Ultra Woman isn't coming back, Mayson. She made that perfectly clear. So you and everyone else out there looking for her can just stop. That boat has sailed." He exhaled. "I'm just not boyfriend material."

Mayson sighed. "That's too bad, Clark. I think it would be good for you to lose control every once in awhile."

Shivering, Clark knew exactly what Mayson meant when she said he needed to lose control. "Mayson, I don't want to have this conversation with you."

She laughed. "Agreed. Bye, Clark."

He hung up and turned to look at Lois again. If there was a woman who could make him lose control, she was it.

Lois waved at him. "Leo Nunk, line three."

Leo Nunk? From the *Daily Whisper*? What did that tabloid fiend want? He lifted up the receiver. "Clark Kent."

"Hi, Clark. Just wanted your response to the news that Ultra Woman was back."

Clark laughed, shaking his head. What was with people today? "She's not back, Leo. She said she's not coming back and I believe her."

"So, you didn't hear?"

Clark groaned. "Didn't hear what?" He shrugged out of his coat.

"That she rescued a woman from a bad date last night."

"Ultra Woman? Sorry to rain on your exclusive, Leo, but I don't think it was her. Probably some vigilante in a costume. I see they're selling them all over town now."

"Thanks for the quote, Kent. See you in the funny papers." Leo hung up.

Clark shook his head. Why was everyone obsessed with Ultra Woman again all of a sudden? Slow news cycle?

"Morning meeting!" Gareth called, walking out of his office. Clark grabbed his notebook.

This just in, a runaway subway train has passengers terrified in New York City… Clark glanced up at the TV screen. He then looked at Lois, who was staring at him curiously. He looked over at Barry. "Tell Gareth I've gone to cover the subway in New York."

Barry laughed and waved. "I'll cover for you, partner."

Clark took one last look at Lois and then darted toward the supply closet.

"Good luck," he heard her whisper. He sighed. It would be great if Lois just knew. If he just stopped hiding the fact from her, she would learn about it easily on her own without him telling her. Then she would know. Of course, then he couldn't flirt with her anymore. He wouldn't be able to be around her, because he knew the instant she knew — after her anger died down — she would be all over him. There would be no way he would be able to avoid Hurricane Lane when she made landfall. And Superman's image of a clean-cut, all-Kryptonian-American boy would be right out the window in a heartbeat.

***

Lois watched as Clark darted out of the newsroom. She grabbed her notebook and followed the crowd to the conference room. Another day, another story. What kind of spin could she put on it?

Gareth bounced from reporter to reporter getting the latest story updates. Finally, he called on her.

"Well, it looks like Clark's working on the runaway subway train in New York story. I'm still doing research on Intergang for that piece we're working on." Lois paused, waited for the room

to quiet. “Want to hear something funny? Leo Nunk called Clark this morning.”

“Who’s that?” Gareth asked. He was allowed a faux pas like that. He was still new to Metropolis.

“Head sleazeball for the *Daily Whisper*,” someone informed him.

“What did he want?”

“He wanted Clark to comment on reports that Ultra Woman was back.” Lois laughed, like it was the funniest thing ever.

Dead silence filled the conference room, except Lois’s laughter. Then an explosion of chatter as the bomb went off. *How fun!* Lois grinned.

“Quiet!” Gareth yelled. “There were rumors last Halloween about Clark and this Ultra Woman character, right? What did Clark say to Nunk?”

“Clark thought it must have been a vigilante in an Ultra Woman suit,” Lois said. “He said he didn’t think she’d ever come back.”

“Spoken like a man spurned,” another reporter added.

“Any truth to these rumors? Is it a vigilante?” Gareth inquired.

“No.” This was Jaxon, right on cue.

Lois smiled and placed her hand to her face to cover up her expression.

“It’s not a rumor. She’s back. She stopped by my apartment last night,” Jaxon continued.

“In your dreams, Jaxon,” someone retorted.

“No, I wasn’t dreaming, Carlos. She wanted to get in touch with my father.”

“Wait. Isn’t your father Lex Luthor?” their editor asked.

Jaxon nodded. “She said that she had a message for him from a mutual acquaintance. When she got his address, she flew out the window. This wasn’t just someone in a suit. It really was Ultra Woman.” He whistled. “And boy, was she hot.”

Lois felt like ice-cold jelly dripped down her back. *Creepy, Jaxon*.

“Thanks for the heads-up, Jaxon. So who was the message from?” Gareth drilled, staring at Jaxon with eyebrows raised. “Obviously not Superman. He doesn’t know she’s back.”

“I don’t know.” Lex’s son swallowed nervously. “They didn’t tell me.”

“Find out! What is she doing back in town? Why is she contacting Lex Luthor? Who is their mutual acquaintance? Is she on the side of good or has she gone bad? Check on the vigilante angle.”

“Don’t call my dad bad,” Lois heard Jaxon mumble under his breath.

“I can check shops for Ultra Woman suits,” Lois volunteered. *Ultra Woman gone bad?* She would have to stop that rumor right away.

“Great! You work with Barry on this,” ordered Gareth.

Lois nodded toward Barry. He saluted her back.

“See what sightings, if any, anyone has had. Get on this, people!” Gareth clapped his hands and the meeting disbursed.

Lois ran to her desk and called Lucy. “Hey, babe,” she said as soon as Lucy answered. “You owe me ten now.” Then she explained what had happened that morning.

“Moonbeam called. It seems like Luthor’s lawyer is ready for a meeting.”

“Already? That’s quick.” Lois frowned. “I’m not going to be optimistic.”

“With Luthor it’s not recommended,” Lucy told her, as if Lois needed to be reminded.

“Thanks for the message. I’ll call her.”

“Did you return the suit?”

“Yeah, but I think I’m going to need it again before long.” She hung up and called Moonbeam.

***

Lois spent all weekend traveling around the country as Ultra Woman. She went out to L.A. to check on her sister Lucy. While there, she saved a small passenger plane when the engine started smoking, and picked up a couple of drug dealers, whom she delivered to the police tied with a bow. She wasn’t ready for direct contact yet. While in L.A., she found some good quality knockoff Ultra Woman costumes. They could come in handy, not always having to wear the same one.

In Mexico, she stopped a drug cartel hit, returned a wallet from a pickpocket, and saved a family from a burning home. But she didn’t want to go anywhere she might run into Superman.

Ultra Woman wasn’t following the news and chasing the big stories. She wanted little news items, something with plausible deniability so she wouldn’t stand out.

She saved a cat in a tree in Brooklyn, stopped someone from jumping off the bridge, and bought a hot dog. Stopped a carjacking and a home invasion in Gotham City. Lucy had told her of a so-called hero in her dimension that covered Gotham City; no such luck here. Rescued an ice skater who had ventured too far on the lake in Chicago and bumped a stalled car off the railroad tracks outside of Seattle.

***

Clark arrived late at the office on Monday morning. There was a train derailment outside of Boston during the morning commute and he had rushed to help. Maybe he should have Lucy… Lois check on the possibility that the Boston commuter train and the New York subway incidents were related.

He felt bad, once again, at not being able to walk Lois to work. He didn’t like her going about without protection, either from him or the police. He understood her position of not wanting to constantly be under guard, but he didn’t want her anywhere her ex-husband could get to her. It put his mind at ease that Lucy was resting at home and avoiding the public. Clark hadn’t been able to visit them all weekend due to mudslides in India and an earthquake in Turkey. It had been a very busy weekend. At least he hadn’t been plagued with dreams of Lois; he had slept like the dead.

Jogging into the bullpen, he found a small crowd of people standing outside the conference room. He slid up to Lucy and asked what was going on, but before she could answer, he heard Lex Luthor’s voice.

Clark turned, then focused on the occupants of the conference room. Lois and Moonbeam sat on one side of the conference table, while Lex and presumably his lawyer sat on the other. Lois was sitting quietly, ramrod straight, her long dark wig on and slightly covering her face, her head tilted down as Lex yelled at her. Clark cringed, wishing he could go in and rescue her.

“What’s going on?” Clark repeated his question to Lucy, the real Lucy. Lois knew about the meeting in advance, obviously. Moonbeam *and* Lucy were here. Lois was dressed in a business suit. This public meeting spot was apparently of her choosing.

“Luthor’s counter demands for the divorce,” Lucy murmured under her breath.

“What were her initial demands?” Clark asked, guessing the answer.

“Her freedom.”

“*And?*”

“That’s all,” Lucy replied.

Clark grinned for a split second and then looked at Lex ranting, as he clearly was demanding something in return. Not that he deserved to get it. “What does he want?”

Lucy shook her head. Either she couldn’t tell him or she wouldn’t tell him there. Clark turned his attention back on Luthor, concentrating on what he was saying. Lex noticed him at that moment as well, and the hatred in the evil man’s eyes — which honed in on Clark — could be felt by all.

"Him! He's the reason you don't love me anymore. He's the reason you left me. Him! I'll make it known to the entire world that he stole you from me." Lex punctuated every indication of Clark by pointing at him. Without ever hearing a word said — as only those with super hearing could hear him — they all knew he was talking about Clark.

Clark turned away. He didn't need to be the subject of more office gossip.

"He really hates you."

Clark turned to the speaker. Jaxon. "What did *I* do?"

Jaxon looked at him in disbelief.

"Besides rescue Lois from him? Lex held her hostage for three years."

"She married him of her own free will," Jaxon reminded him.

"She had amnesia. When Lois got her memories back, your father wouldn't let her go. He tried to brainwash her and ended up blinding her, so she couldn't escape."

Jaxon stared at his father in the conference room. "Did Lois ever tell you when she started to remember?"

So Jaxon thinks of her as Lois Lane now. He no longer believes the lies his father told him about her being Lola.

"We haven't talked much about her captivity." They hadn't conversed much. Actually, Clark was looking forward to a day when they were on the same page, when they could stop arguing and finally talk again about something other than themselves. Like they had when they left Smallville. He had really enjoyed talking with her that day; it almost felt like they were a normal couple. They had also talked when she was in her Lucy persona. But they only really talked about work, so it wasn't the same.

"She'd been reading the *Daily Planet* at breakfast. I was there, trying to convince my father to give me more money for my VR computer, which he always makes me beg for in person. And she turned to us — interrupted us in fact, which she had never done before — and said, 'Hey, I know this man, this reporter, Clark Kent.'"

Jaxon had his full attention and the attention of everyone else standing there.

"Excuse me?" Clark was stunned. He had never met Lois before Singapore.

"That was Father's reaction as well. How could she know you? She didn't know anyone, except him and the people he had introduced her to. He even pointed out to her that it was your first story in the paper, because it said something like 'introducing Clark Kent, newest member to the *Daily Planet* staff' in the byline."

Clark remembered that story. "The closing of the old theater?"

Jaxon shrugged; either he hadn't read it or didn't remember. But Clark did. He remembered that byline very well. No reporter forgets his first story published in the *Daily Planet*.

"She said something like, 'But I know him. I knew he would write well.'"

Clark felt a chill. Lois knew him, knew he was a writer, but not his writing? Suddenly, his whole universe felt like it tipped. Had he met her before Singapore? If so, where? Why did he not remember her? *How* could he not remember her? Or was it just the ranting of a woman who had lived through a traumatic event? Had she just confused him with someone else? He glanced at Lucy, but she shrugged. She had no idea what Lois had been referring to either.

"Lois couldn't remember how she knew you, but she wouldn't give up the notion that she did. She got into her head that there were things she should know, but didn't. When she gets something into her head, you can't drive it out with a nine-iron."

Clark nodded. That certainly was true.

"She read everything you wrote with such an appetite, it was like it was chocolate."

Clark smiled. Lois certainly did love her chocolate.

"And when she read that you were looking for the missing reporter Lois Lane, she knew, just knew, that was her. She got it into her mind that you would find her and rescue her. Until that point, she didn't think she needed rescuing. Father stopped letting her read the *Daily Planet* after that. Then I heard that she started bribing the maid staff to bring her a copy. I personally thought she had lost her mind. I still thought she was mental even after she came back here, until Father said he wanted to own the *Daily Planet*. Then I knew; she must really be Lois Lane."

Jaxon had everyone's rapt attention before that faux pas, now he had their anger as well. First started the glowers, then a few grumblings, and it finally came to a head when someone threw a stapler at him.

"What?!" Then Luthor's son realized what he had let slip and gulped. He took a few steps back and then started to run, several of the reporters following him.

Lucy leaned over to Clark, "James now has his grounds for termination."

All Clark could do was nod. He was staring at Lois. Had he rescued her at some point before Singapore? He shook his head. Lana had never wanted him to interfere. He had wanted to help people, before he became Superman, but Lana thought it would draw unwanted attention to him and his abilities. Lois was staring at him, too. That was when he heard her voice.

"*Oh, Clark. What are we going to do?*" He heard her voice, inside his head. How was that possible? He glanced at Lucy.

"Did you say something?" he asked her.

Lucy shook her head.

Maybe Clark only thought he'd heard her. He looked back at Lois, but she was no longer gazing at him; instead she was conferring with Moonbeam.

Lex left the conference room with a smug expression on his face, and as he walked past Clark he said, "Stay away from my wife, Kent."

Clark threw up his hands as if to say he hadn't touched Lex's wife. Only he had. He had touched every inch of her body and wanted to do so again. He glanced over at her. Her eyes seemed dead. Lex had really done a number on her. The more he got to know Lex Luthor, the more he hated him. And he usually didn't hate people. Disliked, yes; hate, no.

He stepped into the conference room. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Lois didn't even look up. "This isn't a good time, Clark," she murmured under her breath.

Clark nodded and left the room. After what Jaxon had told him, and everyone around them, it was probably wise to give her a wide berth. But her eyes looked so empty. He hated seeing her like that. He just wanted to hold her and tell her that everything would be fine, but he didn't know that; he had no idea when everything would be okay again.

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Lois nodded to Lucy as she and Moonbeam left the conference room. "I've just got to use the facilities. Why don't you hail us a cab? I'll be right down."

Moonbeam nodded and headed toward the elevator as Lois went down the hall to the ladies room. Lucy followed her. Two minutes later, Lois emerged as Lucy El and returned to Lucy's desk.

Clark rolled his chair over to her. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

"No. But I will be," she said.

"I'm going to make sure she gets home safe."

Lois nodded. Probably for the best if Clark wasn't right in front of her, because all she wanted to do was hold him and cry. She watched him disappear down the hall towards both the restrooms and the supply closet, wondering if he was also

following Lucy to get another chance at the baby. Lucy had said the baby thought he was Kal. Did the baby call him Daddy, like she called her Mommy? Lois remembered it had the other night. A part of her screamed out in pain at that thought and she closed her eyes.

Lois picked up her phone and dialed.

"City Hall."

Glancing around, she lowered her voice. "Is Perry White available? Tell him Lois Lane is calling, please."

There was a pause, then Perry picked up the line.

"Hi, darling. I was just thinking about you. What's up?"

"I hate it that you're always right," she grumbled.

Perry chuckled. "What am I right about this time?"

"That I'm bad for him."

"What happened?" Perry wanted to know.

"Lex won't grant me a divorce," she whispered. "If I proceed with the divorce decree, he's going to add Clark as a co-plaintiff and publicly accuse us both of infidelity."

"But you haven't slept with Clark," Perry scoffed.

Lois rolled her eyes. "I *know*, Perry. I've known that Clark is Superman since the weekend before last. But it doesn't matter if I have or haven't — Lex would still ruin him. He promises if I drop the divorce and agree never to see Clark again, or any other man for that matter, he'll allow me my freedom to live and work wherever I want. Lex'll even stop trying to kidnap me and won't smear Clark's good name. I just have to stay married to Lex."

"Does Clark know that you know?"

"Really, Perry? That was the important fact gleaned from what I just said?"

"I'm sorry. You're right. What does Clark think?" Perry inquired.

"I haven't told him yet, Perry. But I'm going to have to leave Metropolis. That's the only way. Maybe the *Daily Whisper* will hire me, since I won't be able to get my job back at your old paper without leaking secrets I'm not willing to share."

"You're still the best reporter I know," he told her. "You'll figure something out. Hey, what about giving Gareth McTinney that first story you sent me? At least you'd get your old job back."

"What are you talking about, Perry? How would offering him that story get me my job back?" Lois shook her head. *The Chief must have a screw loose.*

Perry was silent for a moment. "Never mind. It was a crazy idea anyway. So, you're going to dump Clark?"

Lois glanced around and lowered her voice. "I don't see how I can dump someone I'm not even allowed to date, but yeah. I wish there was another way, but there isn't. It just wasn't meant to be for us."

Perry coughed. "I hate to disagree with you on this, but you're more wrong than Elvis marrying Ann-Margaret."

"Perry."

"But it's your life and you get to screw it up."

"Thanks. Even if I could get my job back, I'd still have to leave town. I'm bad news." She sighed. "Maybe Lucy would hire me on as her nanny."

Perry laughed so hard, she could hear him slapping his knee. "You, with kids? I don't think so."

She felt like he had slapped her across the face instead. She wanted to argue with him, but this wasn't the venue for such an argument. "Bye, Perry."

Lois was just hanging up, when Gareth set his hand on her shoulder. "Lucy, do you think I could speak with you in my office for a minute?"

"Sure, Mr. McTinney." She swallowed nervously; had he heard any of her conversation with Perry? *Great going, Lois.*

Gareth left the door of the office opened a crack, which she found interesting, and offered her a seat. He sat down on the edge of his desk. "I'd like to apologize for what happened the other day at the meeting, Lucy."

Oh, that's what he wanted to talk about and why he left the door open. Paying homage to the antiquated notion that a man and a woman couldn't be alone in a room with a door closed without hanky-panky being assumed, even an office of windows. Since her boss knew that she was close personal friends with not only Clark Kent, but also the owner of the paper, he was planning on treading lightly with her.

Let's see, she was a pudgy woman accused of being fat enough to go on maternity leave. Cue body slouch, embarrassment, and humiliation. Lois looked down and away from Gareth.

"I was wrong to assume that you were…" He coughed. "I mean, I should have handled my inquiries differently, more quietly, not in such a public forum."

"Uh-huh," she mumbled, still not looking him in the eye. She started shaking her foot as a nervous twitch.

"You're good friends with Clark Kent, right?" Gareth asked.

Lois glanced up, curious about his line of questioning, but then immediately looked away.

"I mean, of course, you are work colleagues, but the talk around the newsroom is that you've known each other a long time," her boss clarified.

"Yes," she responded. "We met back in college." That was the history that Lucy told her. Vague, non-specific, perfect answer for someone in conversation with a boss who made her feel uncomfortable.

"Did you go to Kansas State as well?"

O-kay, this was a little more specific. Was he just making polite conversation or had he checked on her background and found that it didn't exist? What kind of details did he want? She shifted in her seat.

"No." That was the easiest answer. Lucy had informed her that Mayson had done a quick background check on Lucy El months earlier and found no one of her description had attended Kansas State while Clark was enrolled.

"How did you meet?"

Oh, crap. She hadn't any idea what to answer. Neither Clark nor Lucy had told her a cover story to use. When in doubt, the best lie was thinly veiled truth. "We met at Mid West U. Kansas State was playing Mid West and I'd taken a five hour bus ride there from the city with a friend of mine, Molly, who wanted to visit her boyfriend."

"Uh-huh." Gareth leaned forward, wanting more.

Why did she pick this story? Perry. It was his fault for putting it on her mind. Lois looked away, honestly mortified and embarrassed. She glanced over her shoulder and out the door to her desk, where she wished she could be sitting at that very moment.

"Go on," Gareth coaxed her.

Damn. Wrong answer.

She forgot everyone was obsessed with Clark Kent, aka Superman, and wanted to know everything about him. Lois glanced back at the opened door and lightly blew, closing it. She didn't need the bullpen hearing this tale.

"Molly ran off with Ryan, her boyfriend, and I was stuck on a strange campus alone, knowing no one. I went to the game — I was a sophomore, new to journalism. I thought maybe I'd try to write a sports story for Met U's student paper, that's where Molly and I went. Clark was quarterback for Kansas State. He played a good game; they won, I remember." She released her breath, not really wanting to go on with the story. She went quiet, not wanting to remember what happened that night at Mid West. The loud screams, the drunk fans, the chaos, the crowds, the jostling, the music pumping out of the frat houses, the bright lights against the dark sky, the cold wind that made her shiver through her light

jacket.

"What? You went to the locker room and got an interview with him? Struck up a conversation with him, something like that?" Gareth asked, going completely in the wrong direction.

"No." The images of that night were just as vivid as if it happened the previous day. It had been late, she had missed the bus back to Metropolis and didn't know if Molly had caught it or not. She didn't have a place to stay. It was cold and getting colder, bitter cold for mid-October. She shivered. She had wandered around the campus, hoping to find some academic building she could crash in when that group of drunk Mid West fans had stumbled across her. Stumbled indeed, they were plastered. Some of them had faces painted in Mid West colors and they were angry as hell that their team had not only lost to Kansas State, but also to Met U the previous week. And she had been wearing her Met U sweatshirt. She ran, but was not fast enough. They caught her and held her down in the bushes. She screamed.

"Lucy?"

Lois glanced up at Gareth McTinney with tears in her eyes. "He saved me from being raped by a group of drunk frat guys," she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself.

Whatever story he had expected, this wasn't it. He swallowed, not knowing what to say.

Lois's eyes glazed over as she remembered what happened next. "He appeared out of nowhere, my hero. They tried to fight him, but he was too strong, eventually they ran off and it was just the two of us." She pointed to a slight mark on her head by her hairline. "That's from that night. He must have heard me scream, been nearby, I don't know. I never asked him. He asked me if I was okay, I don't know what I said. Gibberish, probably. I told him my name was Lucy when he asked." That part was also true. She hadn't wanted to tell him her real name, so she had given her sister's.

"He wanted to take me to Mid West University Hospital or contact security, but I couldn't… couldn't…" She placed her hands over her face, removing her glasses to wipe away her tears, then replaced them. "He carried me to a late night pizza parlor, where we ate pizza and drank hot tea. He said he was afraid I was going to go into shock from the cold and everything; he even gave me his letterman jacket to wear, Kansas State." She smiled. "I thought he must be pre-med, but he said that he was a junior in journalism, like me, on a football scholarship, full ride. Kansas wanted him to go pro, but he wanted to write and travel the world, help people. I told him I liked the puzzle, finding the answer, the whodunit, searching for clues. We closed the pizza place down. I didn't have anywhere to go and he didn't want me wandering the campus alone in my sorry state. It was really cold by that time, but he stayed with me. Walked around campus until I couldn't stay on my feet any longer. We sat down on a bench and he held me, keeping me warm, despite me having his jacket. I guess I fell asleep. When I awoke an hour later, I was at University Hospital, here in Metropolis, with no idea how I got there, with someone paging my father. My hero was gone."

Lois swallowed, glancing up at Gareth, whose jaw was scraping his chest. *Oh, double crap!* Had she just told him that whole story? She had never told anyone that story before, except Perry. She had written it out for him and tried to sell it to him freelance as her first story. He had rejected it, but encouraged her to keep writing. That had been her toehold into the *Daily Planet*. She needed to fix this. This was supposed to be how Lucy El met Clark Kent.

Clark Kent! Oh, it was him. She *had* met him before. He really was her hero as she kept calling him. She placed a hand to her head to try to stop it from spinning. That was how she had gotten back to Metropolis so quickly, he had flown her. Lois wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Anyway, I tracked him down and thanked him. We started corresponding back and forth. We became great pen pals. He even introduced me to Kal. Kal-El, my husband." She placed what she hoped looked like a real smile on her face. "Clark's the best friend I'll ever have."

"That's some story." Gareth was finally able to find his voice. "You should write it up and we could publish it under a history of Superman bit."

"No." Lois dried her cheeks. "No. I've never shared that story with anyone before, except Perry White and…" She shook her head. "I can't believe I just told you. Please, no. I can't. Please understand. No."

He patted her shoulder. "I understand."

Lois stood up, nodded to Gareth and walked out of his office. She had to get out of there. Her brain was spinning. She *had* met Clark years before; it must have been almost nine years earlier. Her hands began to shake. She still had his letterman jacket. She had tracked him down, found his name. It had been pretty easy, he was quarterback for the Kansas State football team. She had wanted to thank him, return his jacket. But it was too much, she couldn't speak about that night. The horror, the pain, the fear. She had taken up karate after that to battle her fear. She wrote it down, figured she could thank Clark through her words, but it never got published and she just pushed it back in her mind, like she pushed his jacket into the back of her closet.

That night at Mid West was why she always had to be in control. Why she dictated when and where and how she had sex with a man. It always had to be her decision. It was why she told Lex she would die before letting him take her by force. She had promised herself never to let a man have power over her again. And from the day that Clark first rescued her onwards, she hadn't. Not sexually, at least. Until Lex. But it had always been an illusion, this sense of control. She'd never really had it at all. And now as Ultra Woman, a man could never take that power away from her again. It was time to take action and make her life her own again. She only had to figure out what it was she really wanted and how to get it.

Lois stumbled to her desk and picked up the phone and dialed Clark's home number. Her father picked up. "Daddy."

"Yes, Princess? Is everything all right?"

Lois took a deep breath. "Yes. Do you still have my stuff from college or did you donate it somewhere?" She held her breath in anticipation.

"All the stuff from the house ended up at Uncle Mike's. Your college stuff might be there, it might not."

"Can you call Uncle Mike and tell him I'm coming by at lunch?" she asked.

"He'll be thrilled. He's been dying to see you."

"Me, too." She pasted a smile on her lips, hoping it translated through the phone lines. "Thanks, Daddy. Bye."

Lois hung up and went to get a drink of water. It was all too much. Why had she told that story to Gareth, of all people? Why had Perry dredged up that tale? She hadn't thought about that night in years. Clark Kent was her hero all along. No wonder his name pulled her out of her amnesia — part of her subconscious remembered the man who had saved her that night at Mid West. How in the world could she leave him now, when she had been searching for him all of her life?

***

Clark returned to the office a couple of hours later. One of the scientific labs had been robbed for its computer chips. Whoever the thief was, he was fast. All the video camera caught was a blur; even slowed down to a split second frame, he saw nothing but a shimmer of gold.

Something was wrong. Gareth was standing next to Lois, talking to her, and waving a hand in front of her face. She looked catatonic.

Gareth looked up at his approach and appeared relieved. He

grabbed Clark's arm and took him into his office. "Thank God, Clark. Maybe you can do something. I think I broke her. Sorry."

"What happened?" Clark asked. He doubted it was Gareth; it probably had something to do with her meeting with Luthor.

"I apologized for the other day." His editor blanched. He still hadn't told Clark about the other day when he had told the newsroom about Lucy's pregnancy.

Clark raised a brow.

"I misspoke, so I wanted to apologize again," Gareth stammered, brushing over the incident. "She seemed uncomfortable, so I asked about when the two of you met. Usually, there's a funny story when best friends meet. It becomes an anecdote and everyone laughs. I didn't realize your story wasn't one of those." He swallowed uncomfortably.

"What did she tell you?" Clark asked, glancing over at Lois, who still hadn't moved since he entered the newsroom. Was that what Gareth meant when he said he had broke her?

"The truth, I'm afraid," his boss admitted.

Clark's attention was riveted back to him. What had she told him? Had they met before Singapore? Did she remember and told Gareth? "Go on."

"I can't repeat it, Clark. You were there, you know."

No, he didn't know. He had not the foggiest idea what Gareth was talking about. But he had to fake knowledge of this story that Lois told their boss.

"I knew she must have a reason for covering herself up like that," Gareth continued. "I thought she was pregnant, but it stems back to that night, doesn't it? That kind of terror scars a woman for life. I saw it countless times back in London."

What had Lois told him? Had she made up a story or had she told him something true from her past? He knew her life like the back of his hand. Had he missed something? All Clark could do was nod. He patted his boss on the shoulder. "It's probably just low blood sugar, she'll be fine," he reassured him.

"Clark, she hasn't moved in over an hour."

"I've seen this before. She'll be okay." Clark went out to Lois's desk and sat down next to her. "Lois?" he whispered, so only she could hear. She still didn't react. He took hold of her hand. "Honey?"

She blinked, once and then once again. Clark turned to Gareth and smiled. His boss looked relieved.

"Lois, are you all right?"

"It's just a job, right? It doesn't mean anything, really? A person is more than what they do," she said in reply.

What was she talking about? Had Lois figured out about him and Superman? Was that the job she was talking about? "Of course."

"A person can start over, become someone else, if the motivation is strong enough. It's that or death, because that other life would be worse than death." He saw an epiphany light up her eyes. "I could die."

Clark squeezed her hand. "Lois, you're scaring me."

She glanced over at him, noticing him for the first time and smiled. "Hi, Clark."

He exhaled. "Are you okay? You freaked out Gareth."

"Oh?" Lois turned and waved at her boss who was still staring at them from his office. Guardedly, he waved back. She looked at Clark once more.

"What did you tell him?" he wanted to know, he needed to know.

"I told him about that night we met," she replied.

"So he said."

"I hadn't thought about that night in years. Pushed it to the back of my mind. How come I never saw it before?" Lois cupped his jaw with her hand. "Here you were, right in front of me the whole time and I never saw you. Of course it's you. Same jaw, same caring eyes. That's why I felt what I did, why I recognized your touch. It's you. Perry knew; that's what he was trying to tell me."

Clark swallowed. Did Perry tell her about Superman? "How mad are you?"

Her brow furrowed. "Mad? Why would I be mad, Clark?"

All right, Lois didn't know about Superman; that would certainly make her mad. She was talking about something else. He shook his head. What was she talking about, then?

"This changes everything, Clark. I know what I have to do now." Lois kissed his cheek. "Thank you. That's long overdue, I know." She picked up her purse. "I've got to go. I'm having lunch with my uncle."

"You… you can't go," Clark protested. She couldn't leave him without telling him.

Lois smiled at him. "Of course I can. I can do anything. Oh, and tell Barry I'll have that data for him when I return."

What was going on? "What data? You're working with Barry on something?" Lucy was supposed to be *his* personal assistant and researcher. What was Lois up to?

Lois grinned. "Just tell him." She waved and was gone.

Clark stared after her. Why did he feel like he had just experienced his first hit-and-run? They had met, years before? When? Something that terrified her? His mind was blank. He went back to his desk and picked up his phone and dialed.

"Lucy?" he murmured when she had picked up the phone.

"Hi, Clark. What's up?"

"How did you meet Kal?"

She laughed. "Perry was interviewing him for a job and I barged in, like I always do, and he introduced us."

"You didn't meet him before? Years before?" he probed hopeful.

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. Nobody will tell me. Did something terrifying happen to you?"

"Clark, terrifying things happen to me all the time," she stated, all too truthfully. "What's going on?"

"You remember how Jaxon was saying that Lois remembered me when she had her amnesia."

"Yeah," she coaxed.

"She told Gareth some story about how we met — Lucy and Clark, that is — which he would only describe as terrifying," Clark explained. *Terrifying?* His mind still couldn't wrap around that word. "Thinking about that story did something to her, Lucy, she was lost in her mind — out of it completely — Gareth said for more than an hour."

"It was probably that meeting with Luthor," Lucy reassured him.

"That's what I thought, too, but it wasn't. When Lois snapped out of it, she looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time. I thought she had figured it out, about Superman, but it was something else. I believe she remembers meeting me sometime in her past, only I don't remember her." Clark ran his fingers through his hair. "*How* could I forget her?"

Lucy thought about this. "Maybe you haven't forgotten about her, Clark. Maybe she's still there in your mind, you just don't know that it's her."

What? "That makes no sense."

"Sorry, that's the best I've got," Lucy said.

He decided to let it rest and tried another angle. "Do you know what research she's doing for Barry?"

Lucy chuckled. "Gareth put them on the Ultra Woman story."

Clark's head was starting to spin. "What Ultra Woman story?"

"Sorry, that's all I have."

He growled. "You're a fountain of information."

"You're the investigative reporter, Clark. You figure it out," Lucy told him, hanging up.

"Lois Lane," he growled. Every one of them.

***

Lois walked into the apartment after lunch, wearing a Kansas State letterman jacket. Lucy watched as she went over to her room and returned with a box of chocolates.

"You still have some left? I thought we polished them off the other day."

Lois smiled. "Not yet. He really outdid himself."

"Nice jacket. Is that Clark's?"

Lois nodded, cuddling inside of it. "I made a decision. I've come up with a plan."

Lucy sat up and set down her newest parenting book. "Great! Let's hear it."

"Not yet. I've got some kinks to work out. Let's just say it's a contingency plan, if Clark continues to be stubborn."

"Oh." Lucy picked up her book again with another glance at Lois. "Where did you get his jacket?"

"He gave it to me."

Lucy raised a brow at this information and then asked slowly, "When?"

"The night he rescued me," Lois replied.

Lucy nodded. *Oh, it must have been at the Smallville house when he brought her back from Singapore.* "And you didn't figure out the connection between him and Superman?"

Lois shrugged. "Sometime you just can't see what's right in front of you."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Tell me about it. It took me two years to figure out that Kal was Superman."

"Two years?" Lois bubbled with laughter.

Lucy pressed her lips together sourly. "In our dimension, nobody knows his secret identity."

"Two years, though, Lucy? Come on. Didn't the wow factor give him away?"

"Wow factor?" Lucy shook her head, confused.

Lois mouthed the word 'Wow.'

"Oh." Lucy chuckled. "That wow." She cleared her throat and pretended to read her book. "Kal and I didn't until after I knew."

Lois's jaw dropped. "Two years?" She patted Lucy's arm in sympathy. "I'm so sorry."

Lucy shrugged. "You can't miss what you don't know. And it was more like three years before we… I do miss him now, all the time." She sighed. "Thank God for my dreams."

"Three years!"

Lucy raised a brow. "I'm not you, and Kal's not Clark. We wanted to wait until our honeymoon." She looked back down at her book.

Lois grabbed it away. "Oh, no you don't. This conversation isn't over. You waited? You were a—"

"No, I wasn't," Lucy said, trying to grab her book back. "But I'd been burned before, so I wanted to wait. And he…"

"And Kal what?" Lois hovered just beyond her reach.

"Give me back my book, Lois."

"Oh, my God!" Lois giggled. "You mean, *he* was."

"Lois! You want to know the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

Lois dropped the book on the coffee table, sat down on the sofa, and put her chin in her hands, all attention.

"This was our first time," Lucy told her, pointing at her stomach. "The night before he took off for New Krypton to help with their civil war."

Lois handed her a chocolate. "You had only one night together before you came here?"

Lucy nodded. "The curse. If I hadn't come here, he'd still be gone and I'd die in childbirth." She bit into the chocolate. "He was supposed to return on the day of our funeral."

"Oh. I thought my life with Clark sucked, but you win." Lois handed her another chocolate. "At least I got two nights. And I see him every day."

"But you really did die," Lucy told her. "I'm hoping to avoid that part."

"And sometimes it feels like he's punishing me for dying… or perhaps it's because I lived." Lois sighed. "That's why I'm angry. Do you know, I haven't seen Superman, not even as a blur in the sky, since the accident? It's almost as if he never existed." She rubbed her arms and smelled the collar of the jacket. "If I still didn't know that they were one and same, I wouldn't be making excuses for Superman any more, would I? I'd have moved on." A hint of a smile graced her lips. "Moved on to Clark Kent."

"He's been resisting you as well," Lucy reminded her.

"But him I can locate."

"The outcome is the same, though."

"I think my plan should include a little bit of pain for our Mr. Kent." Lois rubbed her hands together. "I was going to tell him, but I think it would be little more believable if he didn't know the truth. Just let the reality of his feelings hit him square in the face."

"Lois!" Lucy gasped, shocked. "We aren't trying to become evil, remember."

Lois waved off her worries. "Not physical pain. Emotional pain. Just a little payback for all the pain and suffering he's caused me."

"He's in pain, too. He misses you. He's already suffering," Lucy reminded her with a shake of her head.

"And yet he still stays away."

"You both are being pigheaded and stubborn." Lucy picked up her book. "You are making him chose between you and Superman. With Lana, the choice was easy. But you keep making him feel that he's made the wrong decision. You want him to tell you the truth, you need to let him know he can have both his cake and eat it, too. The cake right now, although sweet and delicious, is full of poison — or Kryptonite, in this case." She flipped open her book. "Aren't you supposed to be at work researching Intergang or something?"

"Intergang!" Lois said, hitting herself on her forehead and then jumping to her feet. "That's what I was missing. I need to get them involved. Clark's right. You are a genius." She zipped into her room and left the jacket behind, then she took off through the living room window.

Lucy shook her head, waddling over to shut the window and take another chocolate from the box Lois left on the coffee table. "Won't Clark be surprised to learn he's married to an evil genius?"

***

Lois opened the door to Bobby Bigmouth.

"Lucy El?" he inquired.

She nodded. "Bobby Bigmouth?"

He looked at her outstretched hand and ignored it, stepping into the apartment. "I've heard rumors about you. That you don't even know how to boil water. I expect to be treated better than… what's that smell?"

"Beef bourguignon. Lois has been giving me a few cooking lessons," Lois told him. Well, she had been *trying* to teach Lucy to cook. It was like teaching a lunkhead to understand women. Slow going.

Bobby started to drool. "Lois? Lois Lane? Do you know when she left town, I lost thirty five pounds in the first month alone?"

"You are looking a little undernourished, Bobby," Lois said, pulling out a chair at the dining table. "And if you have some good information, her uncle gave me a chocolate raspberry torte for desert. But, if not…"

"A chocolate raspberry torte from Mike Lane? I'll give you

my mother's social security number for a slice."

Lois laughed. "I don't want your mother's social security number, Bobby. I want Intergang on a silver platter."

He rubbed his hands together. "For beef bourguignon and chocolate raspberry torte, I could give you a few details."

A ding went off in the kitchen and Lois ran to pull something out of the oven.

He sniffed. "Is that a fresh baked baguette?"

Lois smiled, holding it up. Bought from Lucy's favorite boulangerie in Paris.

"If you have anything else, I'll give you their social security —" Bobby stopped speaking as she set a steaming bowl of potato bacon soup down in front of him.

"I'm just putting the asparagus on now," she called, returning to the kitchen. She turned around to the sound of him weeping.

"Marry me, Lucy El," he said on his knees.

She patted his face. "I'm already married, Bobby. Go and eat. And don't burn your tongue."

"What do you want to know? Birthdays? Anniversaries? Kid's names?" He took a sip of soup. "Bank account numbers?"

She set the baguette and some brie on a wooden cutting board down next to him. "Businesses they own? Businesses they want to own?"

She popped open a new bottle of wine and poured him a glass. His eyes filled with tears. "I thought you were a recovering alcoholic?"

"I'm not having any, Bobby. So make sure you drink it all or take it with you when you go." She set the bottle on the table.

He looked at her suspiciously. "Do you want to know who Ultra Woman is?"

Lois raised a curious eyebrow at him.

"Fine. I don't know that one, but I could find out for you."

"Intergang, Bobby."

"Which politicians are in their back pocket? Which are under negotiation? What are they planning to do next? Hired assassins?"

Lois sat down next to him with a glass of milk and her notepad. "All of it."

"You feed me like this, every week, and I just might start to feel full again." He sighed, taking another sip of soup. "Speaking of assassins, they've put a hit out on you."

A smile flashed across her face. It was just what she wanted to hear. Then she frowned. "What? What have I done?"

"Besides feed me the best homemade dinner I've eaten in four years? They don't like how close you are to Clark Kent. They want to put a tear in his cape."

She pouted. "And here I was hoping it had to do with my research methods."

He tore off a piece of baguette. "Those, too. They don't like some of the questions you ask." He sipped his wine. "Lex Luthor's been asking questions about you, too. About your husband and rumored baby."

She poured him more wine. "Tell him nothing about Kal-El and you can take the entire torte home with you." She stood up and removed her heavy sweater and put on an apron, tying it tightly around her.

"You have a waist!" he gasped, coughing on his soup. "A thin waist!"

She looked down. "So I do. And here I thought I'd been born without one." She winked at him. "Just wanted to put those darn pregnancy rumors to rest. But you can leave out the thin part. I don't mind being known to have a little chunk; otherwise, all sorts of rumors might develop and that would upset Kal. He and Clark being so close and all."

Bobby waved his hand dismissively. "Nah. Nobody's thought that about you and Clark Kent for months now, since that whole mental breakdown at the Planet and at S.T.A.R. Labs. Although there are still rumors that you didn't exist before last summer."

Lois put the asparagus on to cook and sat back down next to him. "Clearly I exist, Bobby." She chewed on that information about Lucy having a nervous breakdown. She would have to ask Lucy about that. Maybe her father knew something about it. "So, what do you have for me on Intergang? I hear that they're joined at the hip with Lex Luthor."

Bobby smiled. "More than just at the hip, Lucy." Bobby's big mouth didn't stop talking throughout the hour it took him to eat all the food that Lucy kept putting in front of him.

***

Monday, January 27, 1997

Dear Martha,

I'm so sorry about wreaking havoc between your Supermen. I hope they didn't cause you too much trouble when they returned there, and I'm sorry if it seemed like I dumped that in your lap.

My life has completely changed since we met. My divorce attorney has finally heard back from Lex's lawyer. If I continue with my divorce petition, Lex plans on announcing to the world that we were a perfectly happy couple until Superman kidnapped his wife, and that our marriage dissolved due to marriage infidelity on my part (with Superman as the co-defendant). If I drop the divorce, Lex will let me have my freedom and won't say anything against Superman, so long as I never see my hero again. So, it looks like I'm going to be married to Lex until one of us dies.

I have been spending a lot more time with Clark Kent, ever since the accident when he sat at my bedside all night. And he held me when I broke down, realizing that I was all alone. He tells me funny stories. Whenever he's around, I find I can have such a good time, hours pass without me even thinking of Superman.

We've also been spending lots of time at work together. Lucy has gotten so huge, I've had to take over her job at the Daily Planet*. Clark said that she didn't really show until after her sixth month, then boom! Clark loves that baby so much, it breaks my heart when he looks at her. Does he wish Lucy and Kal's child was his own or is he just paranoid that something will happen, complications that we can't handle? Only Lucy shows no fear. She said that if I could beat the curse, so can she.*

Nobody but Mr. Olsen has noticed the switch at work and he did only because Lucy and he are such good friends. Even Clark didn't notice it was me instead of her working by his side the first few days. Boy, was he mad when he found out I interviewed his ex-girlfriend, Mayson Drake.

The more time I spend with Clark, the more I realize why your Lois married her Clark. If only I had met him before Superman… but my life wouldn't be any different, would it? I'd still be married to Lex and unable to be with the man I love.

Tell my Clark that I love him. I love him so much, it hurts not to be near him. He doesn't listen when I try to tell him. If you are reading this letter, it means he has once again rejected me. I can take it no longer. Someone other than him needs to take control of our relationship, and I'm afraid it falls on me to make the hard decision, alone, because he will not admit to me how I know he feels. Life would be simpler for everybody if I were dead. Then I could finally be free of Lex Luthor, able to love the man I want. This will make things better for everyone. Superman will finally be able to throw away that line he's been hiding behind for so long. He'll be free, same as me.

Thank you. And I'm sorry to put you in this position.

Sincerely, LL

p.s. Tell Kal-El to keep his x-ray vision away from a woman's body. He's not a doctor. He was wrong to tell me what he did. I wonder each day, if he had been right instead of wrong, would it have made a difference? Would it have made him fight for me instead of abandon me? Would he have had the courage to tell

the world that he loved me or would he have hidden me away in shame? Daddy says I'm lucky Superman can't have children. Strange, I don't feel lucky.

Martha set down the letter, reached over and hugged him. "Oh, Clark. I'm sorry. So very sorry."

Clark looked down at the folded letter and then back at Martha, confused. "Why? What did Lois say?"

Martha's mouth hung open a moment in surprise. Lois had never told him about the baby. She swallowed. "Tell me about the accident."

"She told you about that?" He seemed dismayed.

"No. She told me about Clark being there for her, when Superman wasn't. You still haven't told her?" she scolded.

Clark looked down in shame. "No, I haven't. Lois and I — Clark, that is — have been getting along so well as friends…"

"No, you haven't. Tell me what happened, Clark."

"What did she write?" he asked, but Martha pulled the letter away. She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Clark sat down in the chair next to her and buried his face in his hands. "She drove off into a snowstorm while Kal — your Clark — and I were fighting. Her car slid off the road and was knocked into a ditch by a snowplow."

"Oh, Clark." Martha took hold of his hand.

"Her head was bleeding and her neck and spine seemed wrong," he whispered, a tear running down his cheek. "Her heartbeat was weak when I pulled her out. I was flying her to the hospital when we got struck out of the sky by lightning. We landed in the woods, there, by the house. She looked at me, said my name, and passed out." His voice shook. "I was sure she was dead."

Martha said nothing, just stared at him, her jaw hanging open. "Lightning?"

"Yeah. It was one of those freak electrical snowstorms."

Martha nodded. "Go on."

"I took her to the house and then flew to Metropolis to get her father. Sam's a doctor," Clark explained.

"I know."

"Oh. Right." Clark cleared his throat. "I owe him so much, agreeing to be Lucy's doctor and all, that I couldn't let her die without allowing him to say goodbye."

Martha smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

"But it turns out I was wrong. Lois didn't die. She was perfectly fine. Not a scratch or broken bone." He smiled through his tears. "I thought I had killed her, Mar… Mom. No, not me. Superman."

"You are Superman, Clark," she reminded him.

"No, I'm not. I can't be her Superman anymore. All he does is hurt her," he confessed softly. "And I can't be someone who causes her pain."

Martha stared at him in shock. "You've given up being Superman, Clark?"

"No. Just around her."

"Oh." Martha released her breath. She thought about that for a moment. "So, Superman has abandoned only her."

"What? No!" Clark gasped. "I haven't abandoned her, Mom. I'm with her all the time. Well, Clark is. She and Lucy have switched places at work, so Lois and I work together most days and we hang out together after work and…"

"Clark has taken Superman's place then?"

"As friends, Mom. Just friends. I can't be responsible for her getting hurt again."

"Nor were you responsible for her getting hurt the last time. Car accidents happen all the time."

"I know," he whispered, bowing his head.

Martha winced, realizing her mistake a moment too late. "Your parents died in a car accident, didn't they?" She wrapped her arms around him as he nodded. "That wasn't your fault either, I bet."

"No." He swallowed. "But Lois wouldn't have driven off into the storm if I hadn't lost my temper."

Just like her Clark, this man carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. "Maybe she was going to get ice cream. The Lois I know does love her ice cream."

Clark looked at her incredulously. "Mom. She wasn't going out for ice cream."

"How do you know? Did you talk to her about it? No. So, all she knows is that Superman saw her kissing Clark…" Martha shook her head. "The other Superman. She runs off. Crashes her car. You… Superman rescues her. You both get struck by lightning and then she never sees him again."

Clark opened and closed his mouth a few times. "Superman makes her miserable, Mom. Do you know she cried for an hour, uncontrollably, the morning after the accident? It was as if a part of her had died. Superman did that."

Martha looked down at the letter in her hand. She took a deep breath and released it. That's when she must have realized she lost the baby. And she couldn't tell Clark, because he wasn't the father, Superman was. She flipped through the pages of the letter once again. "Did you tell her about the curse?"

"What curse?"

Martha's eyes opened wide as she stared at him in disbelief. "'*What curse?*'"

"Oh, that curse." He chuckled. "No, that curse deals with Lucy and Kal — your Clark and Lois — it doesn't have anything to do with me and my—" Clark covered his mouth, turning pale.

"How soon after the accident was Lois better? You said she had that breakdown the next morning."

"The next morning. She was up and about, climbing up to my old Fortress of Solitude. Perfectly fine. Well, she…" He shook his head. "Nothing."

"She was almost killed in a car accident and struck by lightning and then was climbing trees the next day? Don't you find that odd, Clark?"

"Lucy's seen this before," he explained with a shrug.

Martha couldn't believe that not knowing wasn't eating him alive. The reason behind Lois's super quick recovery would drive her Clark nuts, not knowing. If Lucy told him that his Lois was in good health, he would just believe her, no questions asked? This Clark must have a lot of faith in Lucy — why did he trust her so implicitly? Or was he just used to her keeping things from him? "Really? When?" Was Lucy thinking about the same incident as she was?

"I don't know. She and Lois won't tell me until Superman reveals his secret identity to Lois," he confessed dejectedly.

Martha laughed. "Blackmail. Oh, Lois. She always hated that Clark left her in the dark for so long. But I think I know the incident she's referring to. Hold on, let me double-check."

Clark grinned and released a breath. He seemed almost relieved that someone was going to finally tell him the truth. Martha nodded. It was eating him up inside, just as she thought.

Martha patted his shoulder and then went to the phone and dialed. "Hi, sweetie, it's Mom. A quick question." She looked over at the Clark sitting in her kitchen. "A couple of years ago… Waldecker, Wallace, what's his name? Was that lightning?"

"Mom," her son asked. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, your brother's here and he had a similar situation happen with him," Martha explained.

"Who? Oh. *Him*," Clark didn't sound thrilled that the other Clark was visiting her. Or was it that she referred to him as Clark's brother? "Yes, Mom, that was lightning."

"Thanks, Clark. That's what I thought." She turned her back on the Clark in her kitchen and lowered her voice. "Oh, by the way, I got a note from the other Lois, his Lois, and she asked me to tell you that you were wrong."

Clark's brow furrowed.

"Wrong? About what, Mom?" Her son seemed confused.

Martha lowered her voice to less than a whisper, hating to do this to her new Clark, but knowing it was what he needed to hear. "About her being pregnant."

"What? *No!*" Clark gasped, falling off his chair and onto the kitchen floor. "I can't have children," he stammered. "Dr. Klein said I can't."

"Oh, sorry, Clark. I didn't mean for you to hear that," she said apologetically to the Clark in her kitchen. Back into the phone, she said, "See, straight out of the horse's mouth. You must have been wrong."

Clark picked up the letter from the table and read it quickly through. "Oh, my God! Lois, no!" He threw down the pages and flew out of the house.

Martha smiled in triumph. "Thanks, Clark. Clark? *Clark?*" She shrugged and hung up the phone. As she turned around, she saw her son, still in the blue suit, walking in the kitchen door.

"Where is Clark?" he demanded.

"He went back to his dimension." Martha picked up the letter from Lois to place it back into the envelope. But there was something else in there.

She set down the letter and pulled out a child's Superman Valentine. It read, *Don't tell Clark, but I know.* It was signed, *The all new and improved Ultra Woman*.

Martha laughed. "I like her, his Lois. She has spunk. Just what he needs. And you think you have your hands full with your Lois." She shook her head.

Superman spun into his Clark clothes. "Mom, did you just tell the other Clark that I told his Lois that she was pregnant by telling me that she's not? How could you do that to him?"

Martha opened the letter and read the final paragraph of Lois's letter to him:

Tell Kal-El to keep his x-ray vision away from a woman's body. He's not a doctor. He was wrong to tell me what he did. I wonder each day, if he had been right instead of wrong, would it have made a difference? Would it have made him fight for me instead of abandon me? Would he have had the courage to tell the world that he loved me or would he have hidden me away in shame? Daddy says I'm lucky Superman can't have children. Strange, I don't feel lucky.

Then Martha crossed her arms and looked at him. "Sometimes a mother tells her son what he needs to hear, whether or not he wants to hear it."

Her son sat down in the chair that the other Clark had just vacated. "I can't have children."

Martha hugged him. "I'm sure you and Lois can. Just because he can't have children, doesn't mean you can't either, Clark."

He went to pick up the letter, but Martha grabbed it first. "It's private," she said. She couldn't let him read what Lois wrote about Lucy's baby.

Clark raised a brow at this.

"Who was Clark touching when he was struck by lightning, Mom?"

She smiled mysteriously but didn't respond.

"Mom?"

Martha stood up and, putting her letter back into its envelope, hastened to the door to the living room. Clark was faster. He grabbed the letter out of her hand.

Quickly, he scanned it and gasped, "It doesn't say."

"No, it doesn't." She scowled.

"Mom, this isn't a letter. This is a suicide note," Clark stated the obvious.

Martha nodded.

"That's why you told him, isn't it?"

She nodded again holding out her hand.

As he handed the note back, the Superman valentine floated down from the envelope.

Clark grabbed it out of the midair. "What the…?" His eyes flashed to hers. "Lois?"

Martha grabbed it out of his hand. "Clark, I told you. Private."

Clark shook his head. "Poor Clark."

"*Poor Clark?*" Martha put her hand on her son's arm. "Your brother isn't as strong as you are emotionally, Clark. This will be good for him. He needs her in a different way than you need your Lois."

"Will you stop calling him that! He's not my brother, Mom."

"You've always wanted a brother, Clark. Lois thinks—" She stopped herself, pressing her lips together, holding tighter onto the letter. "For a long time, that Clark had no one. No folks, no Lois, and no Superman. He looked to you as his role model as the original Superman. He tried to be you and he realized he couldn't. He's still learning to be himself and the best Superman he can be. So if he needs me to smack his head and point him in the right direction from time to time, just like you do, I'll be there for him. Someday, you might realize just how helpful he has been to you and your family."

Her son sat still for a moment. "I'm sorry, Mom. You're right. I'm being petty and slightly jealous. He was a lot of help during the whole Tempus episode."

Martha smiled at him and put Lois's letter on a high shelf between big jars of ornamental pasta. "So, do you and Lois have anything planned for Valentine's Day?"

He sighed. "After our romantic weekend at Chateau Roberge a couple of weeks ago blew up in our faces, we've decided to stay at home for the time being." He leaned against the counter. Then a huge grin spread across his face. "I'm flying her out to a deserted island I know of with a sandy white beach where we can have a romantic picnic, just the two of us. No press. No photographers. Just us, a couple of palm trees, and turquoise-blue waters."

Martha sighed. A couple more weeks. Lois was due to give birth on the fifteenth. She was ready for her real daughter-in-law and her grandchild to come home. "That sounds nice, Clark. Just in case, you might want to fly her out in a blonde wig."

Clark chuckled. "I'll make the suggestion."

Martha glanced up at Lois's letter, released her breath and patted her son on his arm. Sometimes you need a pair of glasses to hide the truth; sometimes, people are naturally blind.

***

Earlier that morning in the other dimension…

Lois rubbed her wet hair with a towel. She stopped at the edge of the bathroom. Something was wrong. Different. She dropped the towel on the floor, wrapped her robe tighter around herself and floated into the air. Someone had been in her room. Something was out of a place. As she scanned the room, she noticed a large grey mat just inside her bedroom from the bathroom that hadn't been there before. And a few feet away sat a new black box.

"Lucy?" she called to her roommate. No answer.

Lois set herself down in the bedroom and ran down the hall to Lucy's room. The bed was empty. She sighed and floated up to where her friend dozed on the ceiling, pulling her back down to the bed.

"Lucy, wake up!" Lois shook her.

Lucy rolled over, ignoring her.

"Earth to Mrs. Kent! Wake up."

Lucy stretched and sat up. "I had the best dream. Kal and I finally had an evening together at home." She smiled. "And we celebrated."

"Snap out of it, Lucy. We've got an emergency situation here," Lois informed her.

"Okay. Got it. Just let me use the facilities first." Lucy swung

her legs over the side of her bed and wiggled her toes.

"You might want to use Mr. Olsen's. Our bathroom is a bit out of order. Forever."

Lucy looked at her, concerned, "Show me."

They walked back into the master bedroom.

"This looks familiar." Lucy thought a moment. "Joe the Blow. Pressure-sensitive mat. If you step on the mat, it activates the bomb. Then you have to keep to the rhythm, or boom."

Lucy looked at the bomb, rubbing her belly. "Should we call Superman, the bomb squad, or do you want to take care of it?" She took a deep breath.

"Oh, go use the other door, already." Lois rolled her eyes.

Lucy darted out into the hall.

"Lucy, it's time," Lois called to her.

"Time for what?" Lucy answered from the bathroom.

"Time to implement the Ultra Woman plan," Lois said, starting to pace.

Silence, then a flush. Lucy washed her hands and walked towards Lois.

"Stop!" Lois reminded her.

Lucy stopped one step away from the mat. "Thanks. I didn't need to go through that again. Especially as a beluga whale."

Lois picked her up and moved her back to the bedroom.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Lucy asked.

"Will written. Letter to Martha written. Ultra Woman exclusive article almost finished. I've even got the purple suit, clean and ready to wear."

"That's not what I meant. Are you ready? Are you sure you want to do this? Once you make this leap, it's hard to come back. This is a big step. You're giving up everything. Well, not everything. I mean, Clark is head over heels for you, completely and totally."

"He'd better be, or I'm going through a whole hell of a lot for nothing," Lois snapped.

"If you're not sure, we can wait until after the baby's born. Make sure you're sure." Lucy reassured her. "I'm bigger than a house. I don't know if anyone's going to be fooled into thinking we're the same person anymore."

"No. We won't get another opportunity like this. And we can't just hold onto this one or Joe the Blow will come back to fix the problem. And I really don't like that they came in here, while you were asleep and I was in the shower. Please. Are there no boundaries anymore?"

"Lo-is," Lucy groaned.

"Got it. Not important. Right. Go get dressed as Lucy El," Lois said, going over the plan. "You're going to work. Do you think you can get Mr. Olsen to take you?"

"I've been postponing breakfast with him all week. I'll go call him and unpostpone it."

"I'll catch Clark and get him to take the note to Martha."

"Are you sure the note will work, Lois? Will it delay him long enough? Will he read between the lines?"

"From what you've told me about Martha, she will understand the note. It's vague enough to get her to ask Clark the right questions. She'll make him understand its meaning and get Clark to regret how Superman has treated me. And yes, I know I have to be faster than I've ever been before."

"Lois, this could backfire in your face," Lucy warned her. "Clark isn't going to like being played."

Lois scowled. "He played me first, Lucy."

"He doesn't deserve this, Lois. How can you justify putting him through that kind of pain again?"

"It has to be believable. If he's seen to be broken up, stressed out, then Lex and Jaxon will believe it. They need to believe that he's in pain."

"I know. I just hate hurting him." Lucy swallowed.

Lois looked at her. "He's mine," she growled. "You have Kal."

Lucy put up her hands. "Lois, he's still my friend, but that's all."

"Better be all. Let's go over the plan. If I'm going to die, it's got to be believable or Lex isn't going to buy it and I'll have died for nothing. There is no do-over here."

Lucy sat down on Lois's bed.

"First, you get dressed as Lucy El and have Mr. Olsen take —"

"James. Lucy El calls him James. You need to remember that."

"Right. Get James to take you to work. I'll have Clark take the letter to Martha. Then I'll call my dad and tell him the plan is go for today. Then I'll call work and tell Cat about Ultra Woman."

"What about the body?" Lucy asked. "Lex is going to want a body to bury."

"Crap. Okay." Lois thought for a moment. "Don't worry, there will be a body."

"Clark's not going to like this, Lois. He's going to feel like it's a huge lie… a huge series of lies. And you know how Clark feels about lying."

Lois rolled her eyes. "So, it's all right to lie to me and make me look like a fool, but not vice-versa? Luckily, Clark does not feel as strongly about lying as Kal. Did he really snipe at you for making reservations at Chateau Roberge?" She shook her head. "It's the only way Clark and I can be together, Lucy."

"I know." Lucy sighed. "I'll go get dressed."

As soon as Lucy left the room, Lois spun into her Ultra Woman suit. She had borrowed the old sewing machine belonging to Clark's mother and made her suit more streamlined and form-fitting. Skintight. No pregnant babe here. She winced at that thought and pushed it to the back of her mind again. No distractions. After another glance in the mirror, she spun into her Lucy El costume. She sat down on her bed, took a deep breath, and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Clark?" Lois sounded breathless. *Stay calm. Stay cool,* she reminded herself.

"Lois? Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Can you come over early? I have a favor to ask you."

"Tell him I want a smoothie," Lucy called from the other room.

"And can you bring Lucy a smoothie?"

He laughed. "Got it. A favor and a smoothie. Anything else?"

Lois grinned and then replied with a little sass, "We'll see when you get here, Clark."

She heard him gulp and then hang up. Good, he understood her hint. She waited five minutes and then called her father at the same number.

"Dad, today's the day."

"Already? Lois, I'm not sure about this. It's like testing if you're bulletproof with real bullets," her father said.

"I know, it's exciting," she enthused. "Everything else we tested has rung true. I can do this, Dad."

"Are you sure that this is what you want? All the work you put into becoming the best reporter in the world, you'll be throwing that away."

"I know, Daddy. But think what I'll be able to accomplish instead. All the people I can help. And I'll still be working at the paper. I won't be giving that up."

"I love you, Princess. I don't want you to die," he said, his voice rough.

"I love you too, Daddy. Just be ready when they call you to identify me. It has to be you, not Clark."

Her father sniffed. "No parent is ever ready for that phone call, honey."

"Oh, I have to go, Daddy. Clark'll be here any minute."

"I'm proud of you, Lois. Take care."

"Thanks, Daddy. I will." She hung up the phone and walked out to the living room.

Lucy came out two minutes later carrying a suitcase. "My valuables," she explained. "Stuff we don't want the police finding in the debris. Can you leave this in Smallville for me?"

"Oh my God! I almost forgot about that. That would have caused too many questions." Lois stuck a finger in her mouth and started to nibble. "What else have we let fall through the cracks?"

The women were silent for a minute, thinking, before a knock interrupted them.

"Ready?" Lucy asked almost silently.

Lois took a deep breath and then nodded. Lucy grabbed her suitcase and stuck it into the hall closet.

Lois opened the door and Clark stood on the other side, an innocent smile on his face. She wanted to smile at him. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and give him the kiss of a lifetime. She wanted…

"Is everything all right, Lois?" he asked.

She realized she was staring at him. "Oh, sorry." She stepped aside so he could enter.

Lucy passed by, grabbing the smoothie. "Thanks, Clark."

"How are you feeling today, Lucy?" he asked, but his eyes stayed on Lois as if he noticed something amiss.

"Like a beached killer whale in a parka."

"Huh?" He blinked, pulling his eyes away from Lois, turning to Lucy.

Lucy smiled at him. "Very happy that I know my exact due date. And counting down the minutes. Less than three weeks to go."

Clark pressed his lips together. "Just because you were due on the fifteenth before doesn't mean you still will be. We've changed history, hopefully."

"Changed history?" Lois asked innocently.

"We have," Lucy reassured him, ignoring Lois.

"Then anything is possible, Lucy, even an earlier delivery date, so I don't want you doing anything that might cause Baby Kent to arrive early." He blanched at his mistake and shot a glance at Lois. She pretended she hadn't noticed his gaffe. He sighed and gently stroked Lucy's tummy over her clothes.

Lois's eyes narrowed to slits and Lucy quickly took a step away. Clark seemed confused at this movement and turned to Lois. She raised an eyebrow and gave him a pointed look.

"Thanks for the smoothie, Clark," Lucy said again, heading out the door. "James promised to take me to breakfast."

"I hope you two ladies are being careful — we can't have anyone seeing you together if you are both portraying Lucy El. You shouldn't both be out and about in Metropolis at the same time."

Lucy smiled at him. "I'll be careful." She threw a parting look at Lois and shut the door.

Clark turned to Lois and she took a breath.

"We're alone now," she whispered, causing a pained expression to flash across his face. Was he scared about being alone with her?

"You wanted something?" he asked.

Lois stepped up to him. "Why haven't you tried to kiss me, Clark?"

Clark took a step backwards, caught off guard by her question. "Are you feeling all right, Lois?"

"Is it because of him?" she asked, staring at Clark. "Did he say something about me? Did he tell you to stay away from me?"

"We don't talk about you, Lois," he stated truthfully.

"Oh." She looked down and away. "He wouldn't do that, would he?" She turned away from him. "I sometimes feel as if I have lost or given away everything precious in my life. Yet what do I have to show for it? How has my life changed since he rescued me? I still live under someone else's name. I am not free to go where I want, be who I want, or love who I want. My life is no longer my own. I still can't be me. Who *am* I anymore?" Tears rolled down her cheek as she sat down on the sofa.

Clark knelt down beside her. "You are still Lois Lane."

"And who is Lois Lane? Wife and prisoner to a madman. Ridiculed reporter. I want to be more. I want to help people. Be free to love the man that I choose, whomever that might be." She looked into his eyes. "Whether that be him or someone else."

Clark seemed uncomfortable. "Have hope, Lois."

"In what?" Lois whispered. "Hope that Lex will die of food poisoning and that my hero will have waited for me? Are you telling me I might have to wait years to get my life back? You say you know me better than anyone else, Clark. Am I someone who can just stand on the sidelines and wait?"

He smiled feebly. "No."

"Yet, that is what you are asking me to do. What if, after all this waiting and hoping, he's not there? What about Ultra Woman? What if she came back? He himself described her as his destiny. How can I compete with destiny?"

Clark glanced away, almost embarrassed. "I told you before, Lois, you are in charge of your own destiny. Don't let it rule you. Take charge."

"Agreed. After today, I, Lois Lane, will never ask you for anything in my life again," she announced.

He eyed her suspiciously. "You won't?"

"Clark, I haven't asked you yet." She chuckled nervously. She crossed over to her desk and picked up a letter, handing it to him. "Can you take this letter to Martha for me? It's a note of apology for my actions in regards to Kal-El and…" She swallowed, still not able to speak his title. "Him."

"You don't have anything to apologize for, Lois," said Clark. He touched her hand for a moment, but then let go.

"I shouldn't have kissed Kal, Clark. I shouldn't have done that. I just couldn't resist him, like something stronger than me was pulling me towards him. Do you know what that's like?"

Clark glanced away with a nod.

"Then they started fighting and I just know they took the time machine back to Martha's farm. I have no idea what sort of damage they did there."

"All right. I'll take it as soon as I can—"

Lois shook her head, placing her hands in his. "No. Can you ask him to give you a lift to Smallville? I need you to take it now or I might change my mind."

"Change your mind about what?" he asked, raising a brow and squeezing her hands.

"Taking charge of my destiny."

"Lois." He looked warily at her. "What are you planning on doing?"

"This," she whispered, leaning forward to kiss him. At the last second, he turned away.

"I can't, Lois," he murmured. "You're married."

Lois sniffled, leaning back and nodding with closed eyes. "I understand, Clark. I didn't really think you would. I was just hopeful." She blinked back her tears and whispered, "This is your last chance, Clark. I won't offer again."

He stared at her, but didn't say anything. Then he turned away, wincing. "It's better this way."

"You don't have the courage to love me, fight against the odds and be mine, I understand. Can you leave now? I have to get ready." She pointed at the door.

Clark stood and stared at her. And she continued to point at the door without looking at him. He stepped into the hall and said, "Look, Lois… I'm sorry."

She crossed the room in an instant to shut the door. "Me too," she murmured, leaning up against it. Then she heard him

speaking to her under his breath and she smiled.

"I love you so much it hurts, Lois. There is you and only you and if it takes one hundred years, I'd wait for you, because there is no one else in the world for me."

Lois grinned with success. Was that so hard? To tell her just what she wanted to hear? *Right. Time to take charge.*

She stood in the window and waited. A minute later she heard Superman take off. She walked around the apartment. What else did they not want the police or Luthor to find? She searched through Lucy's drawers again to see if she had missed a photo or note or anything. She went through her room. She checked under all the furniture, including the mattresses. She didn't need to leave another partial letter to Kal like the one she found a couple of weeks ago. She went through the bathroom and the kitchen last. Nothing. She was amazed that two women so intimately involved with the Man of Steel left no evidence behind.

Wait! The note he wrote to her when she was blind, apologizing for not telling her who he really was. He had signed it, *Love Superman*. What had she done with that? She ran to her room and found it still tucked into the pocket of her robe. She would put this with the rest of the chocolate that she had already relocated to Smallville.

Lois gave Clark a two minute head start. She spun into her Ultra Woman suit, grabbed Lucy's suitcase from the front hall closet, and blew quickly through the living room window. It had taken her lots of practice to fly off, stealthily, so she wouldn't be seen.

Flying. It was her favorite part of being Ultra Woman. She slowed down over Clark's Smallville house and scanned the premises for Clark or the time machine. She found neither. She breathed a sigh of relief. Quickly, she entered the house with her stolen set of keys. When he discovered all the transgressions she had committed for this scheme of hers, he would be furious. She punched in Clark's mother's birthdate. Zipping upstairs to the Lois Lane room, she left Lucy's suitcase in the closet and the note on the desk. Lois stood at the window and gazed out over the fields, wondering just how much time she would have before Clark returned from the other dimension.

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Clark hastily parked the time machine in the barn and covered it with the invisibility tarp. Did Lois really have so little hope left? She wrote to Martha to tell Clark that she loved him. Him — Clark Kent. That was why she wanted him to kiss her that morning. Why would she think she would be better off dead? Had he really left her believing that neither Superman nor Clark cared for her at all?

Clark flew past the newsroom and saw her sitting at her desk and released a breath. She was okay. She hadn't wanted him out of the dimension to do something rash. He wanted nothing more than to land by her desk as Superman and take her in his arms, but he knew he could not. That would ruin everything.

Superman Has Affair with Assistant! Clark could see the headline already. Lois would be revealed. Lucy would be exposed. He took a deep breath. He needed to get Lois alone and tell her the truth, at last.

As he went to land in the alley behind the Daily Planet, he heard a screech of tires and took off again. A bus sliding down the street sideways, out of control. He dealt with it quickly. Finally, he could go talk to Lois. He sped into the alley again when he heard an explosion. He wasn't getting a break. Flying up above the city, he looked around for the fire. Down at the wharf, a cargo ship was on fire. He sighed. This looked like another job for Superman.

Another hour had passed before he finally was able to spin into his Clark Kent clothes and go to work. He hoped he wasn't too late to tell her not to give up on Superman. He would take her into the conference room, shut the blinds, and tell her he was Superman and that he still loved her. That he would always love her. Ask her not to give up on him. To give him one last chance. They would figure out a solution, something, together.

Clark jogged up the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator. As he arrived to the newsroom, he could tell something was up by the buzzing in the air. He tiptoed behind Lois and covered her eyes. "Guess who?"

"Clark," she said, her voice rough and wrong. Lois's Lucy didn't sound quite so Texan. That sounded like… he spun her around and looked into the damp eyes of Lucy, not Lois. Damp. Why were her eyes damp? Where was Lois?

"Lucy?" he asked and she glanced away.

"Clark!" Cat Grant called to him. "I want you to add a quote to this story," she insisted, waving a mini-tape cassette.

"Aren't you supposed to be covering the awards circuit in Hollywood?" Clark asked, perplexed that she would try to order him around after her demotion from acting editor. He still hadn't forgiven her. Cat was one of the main reasons Lois blamed him for her humiliation by her own newspaper.

"Forget Hollywood, Gareth brought me back for this. This is bigger than all that."

"You're no better than a piranha, Cat," Lucy said. "No, worse — a shark."

"Why, Lucy, thank you for the compliment." Cat nodded at her.

"What are you talking about? What story?"

Cat grinned. "Oh, even better! You haven't heard." She picked up Lucy's mini-tape recorder off her desk, dumped out the tape and put in hers, pressing play.

"*Cat! I found her. I found her!*" It was Lois's voice. "*You are going to rue the day you ever tried to knock me down a peg.*"

Cat looked at the machine. "Let's just fast forward over…"

Clark grabbed the machine away from her.

"*Tried to, Lois? Succeeded is more like it*," Cat had retaliated. "*Found who?*"

"*Ultra Woman, of course*."

Clark's jaw hung open and he stumbled back to Lucy's desk. He glanced at her and she nodded at him with wide eyes. Of all the things he thought Lois Lane capable of, this was not one of them. He was sure Lucy and Lois were the tightest of friends. Bonded over their mutual dislike of him keeping secrets from her. He could not picture Lois stepping on Lucy and him to get a story. Guess she had lied about how far she would go to get a story.

"*Yeah, right, Lois,"* Cat had scoffed.

"*I not only found her, Cat. I released her from her prison. I rescued her from extinction.*"

Clark's brow furrowed. What in the world was Lois talking about? Ultra Woman hadn't been locked away.

"*You rescued her? Yeah, right,*" Cat had retorted in disbelief.

"*You can read all about it in my exclusive article. I'm just working on the finishing touches*."

"*No!"* Cat had gasped.

"*Yes. By the way, I think you misunderstood that whole destiny reference of Clark's*."

Clark's? She had read that interview he had given to Cat about Ultra Woman? She knew the truth about him? The newsroom started to spin around in circles, making him dizzy. How long had Lois known the truth about him? Why hadn't she said anything?

"*Oh, come on. How can anyone misunderstand destiny, Lois?*" Cat had inquired.

"*It seems on Krypton infants are married off to one another, so Ultra Woman and Superman were married as infants*…"

Clark's jaw dropped as he turned to Lucy and she nodded.

"*Are you saying that Ultra Woman and Superman are married?*"

"*I explain it much better in my article. And wait till you hear about her secret identity, you will not believe it in a thousand years!*" Lois laughed. "*I know I was shocked*."

"*Who?"*

Clark got a chill down his spine.

"*It's—*"

Lois's voice was interrupted by a series of clicks and beeps and replaced by a man's voice. "*Hello, there, Lucy El. Here's a gift from your local bombmaker's union. I hear that you need to lose a few pounds… You like to dance, don't you? Now, stay with the beat*…"

Clark heard something make a tic-tic sound in a slow and easy rhythm.

"*We'll start off nice and slow for you*," continued the man's voice.

"*Cat*," Lois said as her voice shook a bit. "*Tell Lucy I think I accidentally took her shower this morning*."

"*Stick to the beat. If your footsteps don't match the beat… Well, I'd hate to see what happens*."

"*Oh and Cat,"* Lois continued.

"*Uh-huh,"* Cat had replied.

"*Could you tell Clark I need his help, please?*"

Clark stood up and handed the recorder back to Cat, but Lucy grabbed his arm and shook her head. His eyes went wide, not wanting to understand what Lucy was saying.

"*Oh, you want him to get Superman for you?*" Cat had guessed.

"*No, Cat, that would be redundant,"* Lois had replied. He could hear her jumping to the beat. "*Because he is Superman."*

Clark swallowed. She definitely knew.

"*You know?"* Cat had also been surprised.

Lois had still been jumping to the beat. "*Cat, everybody knows. I figured it out weeks ago*."

Weeks? He glanced down at Lucy, who handed him an envelope.

"This came for you while you were out, Clark." She sniffed and wiped her nose.

"*Once I figured out that he was Superman,"* Lois continued. "*I realized he wasn't the real story, she was. That's why I went looking for Ultra Woman. Thanks for giving me a reason to stay out of the office*."

"*Stay with the beat, Lucy,"* the male recorded voice had reminded her, upping the tempo.

"*But I could really use his help soon. So, if you could give him my message, please.*"

"*Tell me who Ultra Woman is!"* Cat had demanded on the tape.

Clark looked over at Cat with a glare. She returned an apologetic smile.

"*I die and her secret dies with me, Cat. Get Clark, please*," Lois had begged and then had hung up.

Cat stopped the tape.

Clark opened the envelope Lucy had handed to him. The message inside read, *Boom! Best of luck replacing your assistant. Intergang*

"Your reaction?" Cat asked, holding up the tape recorder.

Clark took the mini-recorder and squeezed it, turning it to dust.

"Clark, that was… never mind." Lucy sighed with a shake of her head.

"Where is she?" he asked Lucy, turning away from Cat.

Lucy closed her eyes and looked away.

"No!" Clark roared and blew out of the newsroom through the windows above the bullpen.

Moments later he was hovering outside the blackened hole that used to be the wall to Lois Lane's apartment. The shattered wall mirrored how his chest felt. *Lois. Gone. His fault. Again.* He had to see her… Superman took a breath of air into his lungs. One last time. As he tried to fly inside, Mayson Drake came to the hole and held up her hand.

"No, Clark. No." It was the first time she had ever addressed Superman as Clark.

"Tell me it's not true," he told her. "Please, Mayson."

"I'm sorry, Clark," Mayson replied with tears in her eyes. "I can't."

He floated next to the hole. "I need to see her," he whispered to Mayson. "Please. I need to say goodbye."

She reached out to him. "I know, Clark. But her body has just been moved to the morgue."

Clark took her hand in his for a moment and let out a gasp of pain. He went to fly off but Mayson held his hand a second longer and spoke to him in a soft whisper. "I know what Lois means to you, Clark, but remember she's a married woman. Watch yourself, please?"

"Thank you, Mayson," he replied with a nod.

"Clark, wait! The body—" she called out to him, but he was gone.

Sam. Clark needed to tell Sam. He flew home, but the apartment was empty. He would wait there for Sam. He didn't want to go back to the office. He didn't want to go anywhere. He no longer wanted to exist. Lois was dead. He had known it would be some mistake of his that killed her, and it was. He had assumed the woman he saw through the window was Lois and it turned out to be Lucy. If he hadn't… no, if he hadn't saved the bus, then all those people and pedestrians would have died, too.

Lois had made up some crazy story about Ultra Woman being back and married to Superman and then she died. Blown up by an Intergang bomb. He would deal with them later. He was too numb. He couldn't act. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't even fly.

Sitting there on his bed was his old letterman jacket from Kansas State. He picked it up and a note fluttered into the air.

Clark,

Thank you for always being my hero. Now it's my turn to rescue you.

LL

Clark held the jacket to his chest. *Oh, God*. She was Lucy, the girl he saved at Mid West. He had looked for her. Flown to Metropolis U. every day for a week, two weeks. He'd checked at the campus paper, the journalism classes, at the cafeterias, and finally at the hospital where she was treated. But the campus was too large and there were too many people. No Lucy. No one knew of the girl he had rescued.

He even broke up with Lana Lang to search for her. Clark told Lana that he had met someone else. When he returned to Kansas State, downtrodden and disillusioned, Lana had been there with arms open wide to take him back. Lucy was the reason he had come to Metropolis and the *Daily Planet*, because she said it was her dream to work there. He thought Lucy was lost to him forever. He hugged the jacket tighter. Now, she really was.

He jumped off the loft and returned to the living room.

There were three messages on the phone.

The first was Cat Grant's. "*Clark? Where are you ? Lois needs your help, right now! At her apartment.*"

Beep.

"*Clark."* It was Lois. "*I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it… I wasn't really going to…"* He could hear the beat box tapping out quite a fast rhythm. Much faster than when she had been talking with Cat. She sounded almost out of breath. *"It's my fault. I shouldn't have sent you to Martha's. I know, Clark. I've known since the accident. Please forgive me. I just wanted you to tell me."* She was quiet a couple of seconds as the beat grew faster. "*I can't do this anymore, Clark. I… love…"* Then a series of beeps and a loud explosion ended the message.

Clark fell to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No."

Beep.

"*Clark!*" This was James's voice. "*Lucy is safe at the office. I'm so sorry about your friend Lois.*"

Clark reached up to turn off the machine, but couldn't quite touch the controls from the floor.

"*We're lucky more people weren't hurt. If it weren't for her, Lois's neighbors could have been hurt in the blast. She said that Lois insisted on waiting for you. I know she means the world to you, Clark, but don't blame her. Lois demanded that she save the neighbors first. I've told Lucy she's welcome to stay with me at the penthouse until she leaves. I'm sorry again, Clark.*"

Beep.

He shook his head. She, who? What was James talking about?

Clark heard keys jingling in the lock of the front door of his apartment. Sam entered holding a bag of donuts. Clark doubted the man would ever eat them again.

"Hi, Clark. What are you doing home?" Sam asked. "Is that Lois's jacket?"

"No, it's mine." Clark closed his eyes and covered his face.

"Clark?" Sam dropped the donut bag on the table.

"Lois. Bomb." It was all he could say.

"What?!" Sam gasped. "A bomb? She blew herself up with a bomb?" He stumbled over to the couch.

Clark studied him. He had known. "Sam. What are you saying? You knew?"

Sam looked at him with both horror and genuine grief. "Knew? Of course, I didn't know. She said she was going to do something big and asked me to cover for her with you. I didn't think she'd really die."

"You thought she was putting herself in jeopardy so I'd have to rescue her, and thus reveal that Superman is Clark Kent."

Sam looked at him and then nodded.

That plan made sense. But why send him away then? "It was Intergang. They were targeting Lucy El and Lois got caught in the middle."

Sam frowned. "But…" He shook his head. "I thought Lois was Lucy El now?"

That's right, she was. Had been. Intergang had not targeted the wrong person after all. He and Lois had been working on the Luthor and Intergang connection. She must have gotten too close, stepped on the wrong toes.

She was still dead.

The phone rang. Neither of them wanted to answer it, so they let the machine catch it.

"Hey, Clark, it's Detective Henderson. We need to reach Sam Lane. Mayson said you'd know where to reach him."

Sam stood up and lifted up the receiver. "This is Sam Lane."

"Oh! Dr. Lane… um… uh."

"Clark told me about Lois," Sam informed him.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Lane. But I need you to come down to the morgue and identify her body."

Clark stood up and spun into a business suit. "I'll go."

"Do you need me to send a car?"

"No, Detective. Clark will bring me."

Clark stopped at the front door and turned back to Sam as the man hung up. "You want to go?"

Sam scowled at him. "No, Clark. I don't want to do this. But as her next of kin… let's get this over with."

Clark agreed. "Cab okay?"

Sam nodded.

***

Clark and Sam stood on one side of the viewing window. Clark felt like his heart would collapse from beating so hard and fast. *Don't be her. Don't be her*, he begged, ashamed he was hoping for someone else's death.

The curtain opened. The coroner's assistant stood next to the sheet-covered gurney. Henderson nodded to the man and the man pulled back the sheet.

Clark's heart exploded with relief. *It's not her! It's not her! That's Lola, the clone.* Relief was then followed by confusion. How did Lola end up at Lois's apartment? He had buried her at the farm. Only Lois knew that. What in the world was going on?

"Yes," Sam was saying. "That's my daughter."

Clark turned to Sam in shock. "Are you sure, Sam?" he asked. Lola still had long hair and Lois cut hers to match Lucy's before the accident. Clark was positive that that body was not Lois Lane's. Lola seemed really well preserved. No decay noticeable at all, despite the bomb blast. That was probably due to the freezing temperatures in Kansas since he'd buried her.

Sam looked at him with gritted teeth. "Do you think I wouldn't know my own daughter?"

"No, Sam, that's not what I…"

"Do you have doubts on her identity, Clark?" Detective Henderson asked.

Clark knew he had to speak the truth. But he was still confused as to what Lola was doing there. Someone thawed her out and stuck her in Lois's apartment before detonating the bomb? It didn't make sense. Who would replace Lois with a clone? Other than Luthor? *Luthor!*

"Clark." Sam looked at him with panic. Panic? Why would Sam be afraid he would tell Henderson that this wasn't his daughter? Unless he knew that Lola wasn't Lois and he, too, was in on the deception? That would mean Luthor didn't do this. Where was Lois?

"Clark?" Henderson asked, again.

Clark didn't know what to say or think.

Sam had warned him that it was big, this plan of Lois's.

Finally, he gulped. "That body looks like Lois Lane." Which was the truth. "Only without her soul," he added, also the truth.

Sam still glowered at him, willing him to shut up.

"She wanted me to rescue her and I couldn't do it. I was too late," Clark mumbled, a tear dripping down his face. "Too late. I'll never forgive myself."

Henderson spun his finger in the air and the coroner's assistant covered her up and closed the curtain.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Henderson said, leaving them alone in the viewing room.

Clark stared at the curtain. What had he just done? What was going on? He looked at Sam who also seemed in shock, staring at the curtain.

"I'm going to have nightmares about this," Sam murmured.

Clark had forgotten that Sam had never seen Lola. Never knew how identical her clone really was.

"Let's get you home," Clark said as a lab technician burst in.

"Clark Kent?" she asked and with one glance at him, continued, "There's a leak at the nuclear power plant in Philadelphia."

Clark turned to Sam, torn.

"Go!" Sam told him. "I'll be fine."

Clark nodded and disappeared in a rush of wind, leaving the lab tech in awe. "That was really him!"

***

Clark arrived at the Philadelphia nuclear power plant a minute later. There was work to be done, people to save. Things to distract him from thinking about Lois and whatever it was she had or had not done. He flew inside looking for workers in the steam. He found a large man coughing and sitting on the ground.

"I've got you," Superman told him. "Are you injured?"

The man shook his head. "I'll wait."

"For what?" he asked. "You need to get out of here."

"For her," the man said pointing over Superman's shoulder.

Superman turned around and stared as Ultra Woman landed next to him. “I’ve got him, Superman. You go fix the leak.”

He stared at her for a moment as she picked up the worker with ease and disappeared out the way she came. Superman shook himself out of his thoughts. The leak. He found it and sealed it with his heat vision, then he flew back out to where the injured workers were sitting. They were all staring up at the beautiful heroine in purple and teal floating above them.

Superman flew up to join her, but she rose even higher, so high above Philadelphia that the people looked like dots. He stopped next to her, staring at her in dumbfounded wonder.

“Lois?” he finally stammered.

“Clark.”

“You’re alive!”

She scowled. “Damn. I owe Lucy five bucks.”

He looked at her like she was bonkers.

“I was sure the first thing you would notice was the flying.” She grinned, zipping around him.

Superman’s brain was still absorbing it all. “You can fly?”

Ultra Woman moved closer to him. “You noticed.”

“How? Why?” He couldn’t think straight.

“The lightning strike. It copied your powers to me,” she explained.

Superman stared at Ultra Woman, his mind reeling. “You have my powers?”

Ultra Woman smiled.

“Flying. Super strength. Hearing?”

Ultra Woman nodded.

“Heat vision and x-ray vision?”

Ultra Woman nodded, looking at him up and down as her naughty grin increased.

“Speed?”

Ultra Woman winked and disappeared. He followed her. She stopped at the Smallville house. She was sitting on the front steps when he arrived. He sat down next to her.

“You’re still married,” Superman mumbled.

“Lois Lane was married,” she corrected him. “I’m not her anymore. She died.”

Clark raised a brow. “Lo-is.”

“Lucy,” she corrected him again, holding out her hand. “Lucy El.”

Superman still looked at her skeptically. “Lucy is married, too,” he reminded her.

“Oh, no!” she gasped, smacking herself in her forehead. “I completely forgot. She’s married to Kal-El.” Ultra Woman leaned over and whispered in his ear, “The last son of Krypton.”

He coughed. “Well, yes. He is that, but no one knows that’s who he is.”

“Finally! You get a *secret*, secret identity,” Lois teased him.

“But it also means that we still can’t be together. Superman can’t be seen with a married woman.”

Ultra Woman sighed. “You forget that there is another person in this relationship, Clark, one that he can be seen with: *me!* Superman’s destiny.” She held up her arms in a ta-da manner, floating into the air.

Superman chuckled, floating after her. “That’s why you said that Superman and Ultra Woman were married. You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you? Lois, what am I going to do with you?” He shook his head.

“Anything you like, Mr. Amazing.” She ran a finger down his jaw. “I’m quite unbreakable, now. You don’t have to hold back.”

He caught her hand and pulled her to him. “You promise, no more dying?”

“You promise never to break my heart again?” Ultra Woman wrapped her legs around him, squeezing him tight. He couldn’t respond as she pulled him closer. “No more excuses.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. She placed her lips next to his ear. “No more delays.”

Superman pressed his lips to hers and they spun into the sky. Soon, they were up amongst the stars.

“Wow!” he murmured. “We should change your name to Wow Woman.”

“Mr. Amazing and Wow Woman back together, again.” Ultra Woman kissed down his neck. “Catch me if you can.” She dove back down to Earth.

Clark grinned with delight. *Challenge accepted*.

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Chapter 7 — And Baby Makes Four

Clark lay next to Lois, breathing heavily and, for the first time that he could recall, sweating. Making love to this Lois, his soul mate, was easily the most incredible experience of his life. She made his nerve endings sing. Each time was like his first time. No, not his first time. His first time had been with Kal’s wife. Each time he made love to Lois was like making love to her — this woman in his arms — again for the first time. New, exciting, breathtaking… amazing.

He could easily close the blinds and never leave this room again. He loved gliding his fingers over her skin — every inch of it. And he had, Clark smiled, touched every inch of her skin — time and time again. First with his kisses, then with his hands, and then… then with his bare skin. For the rest of his life, he would kick himself for being so stubborn and pigheaded. How had his body survived the last six weeks without making love to this woman? His girlfriend scooted closer to him and rested her head on his chest.

“Oh, my God, Lois. ‘Wow’ doesn’t even come close to this feeling,” he told her, kissing the top of her head.

“Now you know why I call you Mr. Amazing.” She smiled, running a finger down his bare chest.

“So, am I still amazing as your equal?” he asked quietly.

Lois rolled on top of him. “Who says you’re my equal?”

Clark lifted her off him. “Time out! Quarterback needs a break.”

She leaned up against him and breathed into his ear, causing a whole new series of nerve endings to shout with joy. “Quarterback needs to go out for more protection.”

He turned towards her. “Already?”

Lois nodded. “I doubled up, unsure what our friction might do.”

Clark kissed her. “Mmmm, friction. We could always go without. Dr. Klein says—”

“Do you mind if I don’t risk my figure to Dr. Klein?” Lois interrupted. “I just got this body and I’d like to keep it looking like this at least until we can get married. And since I’m married to two other men right now, that could be awhile.”

Clark was silent for a minute as he ran his fingers through her hair. “Lois. What did Kal-El tell you?”

Lois froze. “I don’t want to talk about that, Clark. I shouldn’t have said anything to Martha. I was just angry at him for raising my hopes.”

“About what?” Clark knew what, but he needed to hear her say it.

A tear crept down her cheek. “About us. About our possible future.” She gazed at him and saw her pain reflected in his eyes. “Martha told you?”

Clark nodded. Yes, that Lois had been pregnant with his child before the car accident. It couldn’t possibly be true, he knew, because Dr. Klein told him he couldn’t father children. But his love shouldn’t have had to shoulder that burden herself.

Lois closed her eyes and leaned her head again his chest. “Martha shouldn’t have said anything. I was trying to save you that pain.”

“I am Superman, you know. I don’t know why my so-called friends keep hiding the truth from me. I can handle it,” Clark

grumbled. He was hurt. It upset him that none of his friends thought he could handle bad news or disappointments. He lived bad news daily, both as Clark Kent — investigative reporter — and as Superman.

"No. You can't, Clark. That's why you need me."

"I need you," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "Because I can no longer breathe without you."

"Good thing I can't die."

"Yeah." Clark went quiet. He wished she wouldn't joke about that. Lois had had too many close calls recently; the most recent occasion still smarted. "Stay away from Kryptonite. I don't know what it will or will not do to you, you freak of nature. I don't want to take any chances."

"I'll do my best."

"Why would Kal-El scan your body in the first place?" he wondered.

"Who knows? It was like he couldn't believe I was your Lois until he saw that I was pregnant."

What did Kal know that he hadn't told Clark? Did his Lois become pregnant in the future? "Were you?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? My period started the next morning after the accident."

Right. He remembered now. Yet, those words stabbed him like a Kryptonite knife. "Or *because* of the accident. It was my fault. I killed our miracle baby." He turned away.

Lois turned his face back towards her. "This is why we keep things from you, Clark. It wasn't your fault any more than it was mine or the snow plow driver's or Mother Nature's. And it's possible that I could have lost it anyway. It was still early. And it's also possible that Dr. Klein was right and Kal was wrong. Maybe you can't have children."

Clark knew Lois was trying to reassure him, to make him feel better, but this ache inside of him remained. "No. Kal's never wrong."

Lois smiled. "Everyone makes mistakes. Even the great Kal-El."

"Why would he automatically check if you were…" He swallowed. He couldn't speak the word. "That doesn't make sense."

"Lucy." They both said at the same time. And then they laughed. *Lucy!* Clark shook his head. She invaded every part of his life.

"Lucy said something about running into Kal, but that was the weekend I rescued you from Singapore." Clark distinctly remembered Lois joining him in the shower. She had been just what he needed while dealing with the grief of failing Lola — her clone. Lois's long brown hair caressing her backside. Her lips smiling at him, despite her eyes not being able to see him. Her hands taking hold of his hands, pulling him closer as the water cascaded over her flawless skin. He cleared his throat. "I was a little distracted."

Lois smiled lovingly at him. "Were you?"

He moved her up against him, kissing her. "Still am."

"Down boy," she said, pulling away from him. "We're out of protection, remember?"

"Argh. Maybe Dr. Klein can develop something that can withstand our friction."

Lois grinned with amusement. "I'd like to be there when you bring up that topic."

"Ha-ha. I don't want you anywhere near him." He was completely serious.

"What if Lucy El has a technical question that comes up in research for a story?"

"Then you tell me and I'll ask him. Don't go near him, especially as Lucy El."

Lois put her elbow on the pillow and propped up her head with her hand as she asked him slowly, curiously, "Why?"

Clark sighed. "Because Lucy went crazy. Delusional crazy, really, before Thanksgiving. And she went to see Dr. Klein about…" He stopped himself, not really wanting to talk about what Junior had done to the woman he loved. "Something. And because she had no self-control, Lucy ended up telling him all about Kal-El — her husband, my twin brother — and her baby."

"So, me visiting without a basketball tummy would bring up too many issues." She nodded, understanding.

"Also Dr. Klein is liable to go running to the hills." Clark chuckled softly, a little embarrassed. He hadn't meant to frighten the man. Or maybe he had. Finding Lucy at S.T.A.R. Labs was one of the most terrifying moments in his life. "We have an understanding. Dr. Klein stays away from Lucy. I don't kill him."

"Wow!" Lois said. He could see her mind trying to wrap around his anger. "I thought you don't kill people, Clark."

"I don't, as a rule. And neither should you now."

She rolled her eyes.

Clark continued. "But when it comes to Lucy and the baby's safety, all rules go out the window." He would protect them to the death. His or anyone else's.

"You still love her," Lois whispered. He could see that the realization of this fact caused her pain as she closed her eyes tightly.

"Lois, look at me."

She turned away.

Clark wrapped his arms around her. How could he make her understand the difference between how he felt for Kal's Lois and how he felt for her? "Lois, I will always love her and protect her. Lucy is you. Your twin. But I'm in love with you. I always have been, and I always will be."

Lois glanced at him over her shoulder, studying his face. She wanted to believe him, he thought, but he didn't have her one hundred percent convinced. Was that because she knew? Could she possibly know that a part of him still loved Kal's Lois, was still attracted to Lucy, and always would be? But this Lois, here in his arms, was the one woman with whom he wanted to spend eternity. She must have found the answer she was looking for, because a moment later she faced him again and started kissing down from his ear to his shoulder. "You'd better love me, Clark, because I'm going to be around a long, long time."

Clark groaned. "You are driving me crazy, Wow Woman!"

"That's my job, Mr. Amazing," she whispered and then jumped out of bed. "I'm going to shower. We should really be heading back to Metropolis. Two days is long enough for Clark to mourn Lois, don't you think?"

He sat up. "We've been here for two days straight?"

She grinned and sashayed out the door, naked.

Five minutes later, he joined her in the shower.

"Clark, I thought we were out of protection?" Lois said not able to resist as he kissed her and pulled her close.

"We *were*. But I couldn't let you take a shower alone, now could I?"

The phone was ringing when they got out of the shower. Clark quickly dried off and zoomed downstairs.

"Tell Ultra Woman enough already. The seismic activity in Kansas is rising."

"Hi, Lucy." Clark smiled. Yep, invaded every part of his life.

"I need you guys to come back. I'm bigger than a blue whale here," Lucy reminded him. "Whatshername needs to take over or my water is going to break on the newsroom floor."

"Oh, right. Sorry. We got distracted." A feeling of pleasure came over him as he grinned. He would be distracted for the rest of his life.

"James convinced Gareth that I've been out of work due to the Intergang threat. And let her know that Perry's a mess."

"I forgot about Perry," Lois whispered, suddenly by his side.

"And unless you want the baby to live at James's penthouse

after it's born, I need some super contractors to fix our apartment," Lucy went on.

Just like Lucy to keep them focused on what was important. She had known he needed these couple of days, but now it was time to get back to work. "We'll be home soon, Lucy," Clark told her, pulling Lois to his chest.

Lucy took a deep breath, before saying, "And Lex Luthor called."

Clark grimaced. "And?"

"He wants Lois's body."

Lois grabbed the phone. "Call Moonbeam. She should be all over that. I have it in my will that my father gets control of my body."

"Just keeping you informed," Lucy said. "Your funeral is on Saturday. The mayor will be speaking and wants to know if Superman can say a few words."

"We'll talk about this later, Lucy," Clark told her. He didn't want to think about Lois's funeral. The raw pain, the anguish he had felt when they faked her death, was still too close to the surface. "She'll be at work tomorrow."

"No more tremors, please." Lucy laughed.

"No guarantees," Lois said, hanging up the phone and tugging at Clark's towel. "Now, where were we?"

"How are you going to keep your hands off me at work?" he teased, racing up the stairs.

Lois shrugged. "Think you're so irresistible, do you? I was able to stop myself from jumping your bones for a couple of weeks now. Shall we see how good your willpower is?" she inquired, floating above him.

He floated up to her. "When it comes to you, I have none whatsoever." And he pulled her in for another kiss.

***

"I'd like to thank you all for coming out to pay respects to the best investigative reporter I've ever had the privilege of knowing," Perry said from the podium placed near the open grave at the cemetery where Lois Lane's old headstone was located.

Lucy, Clark, James, Sam, and Moonbeam sat together in the front row. Cat Grant, crying her eyes out, Ralph, Gareth, Barry, and even Jaxon sat in the rows behind them. Most other people whom Lois had worked with at the *Daily Planet*, top citizens, and politicians she had interviewed over the years, and other acquaintances, gawkers, and Superman groupies filled the rest of the rows.

Clark leaned his head on Lucy's shoulder and held her hand. He looked genuinely broken up about Lois's death. But in truth, he knew this funeral was finally to be a proper burial for Lola, the clone who helped him find the love of his life. His crazy love, who gave up her old life to spend the rest of her eternity fighting crime with him.

Ultra Woman was hovering nearby, keeping an eye out for Lex Luthor's entourage. They guessed he would try to disrupt the funeral. He had already screamed bloody murder and tried to get an injunction against Moonbeam and Sam for taking possession of the body. His lawyers had gone wild in court trying to get access to the body for their own autopsy, also denied.

Lois had hoped her body would be ruled a suicide so Lex wouldn't receive the millions in life insurance he had out on her, but no such luck. Homicide by bomb — a signature Joe the Blow contract killing for Intergang — was considered murder. Lose some, win others. Then again, if Lucy El and Clark Kent could prove a tie between Lex's company, L.I., Ltd, and Intergang, that might be enough to stop the insurance companies from paying a dime to her ex.

When Lex learned the hit was made by Intergang, he launched an all-out civil war against them. Clark didn't like wars of any kind, but a war between evil factions — as long as no innocents were killed in the process — was far more acceptable than a normal war. Unfortunately, since neither Lex Luthor's henchmen nor Intergang's thugs had any predilection to keep civilians safe, more often than not the general public was caught in the crossfire of this war.

So, while Clark sat mourning a woman he had known just a couple of hours — Lois Lane's clone Lola — Ultra Woman made sure no one tried to disturb her funeral.

Perry wiped a tear from his cheek. He had gone on with Lois Lane anecdotes for fifteen minutes already. "Lois was like a daughter to me, or since she has a father who doted on her, a niece. She was a gifted storyteller and a fabulous singer, who made me cry or laugh with both her words and her voice. She was a virtuoso at the card table, quick for a ruse, and a true friend. I had just gotten her back and I'll miss her forever. Her light went out far too soon, extinguished by the very people she fought against her entire career, organized crime. If ever I knew anyone who would go out fighting, it was her. It's the way she would want to be remembered. So, in her honor, I would like to announce the Lois Lane Task Force, which will fight against organized crime and corruption in Metropolis." Perry looked down at an envelope in his hand. "As an extra tribute, I was thinking of giving Gareth McTinney — editor-in-chief at the *Daily Planet* — a copy of the very first article Lois ever sent to me to be printed in tomorrow's paper."

Clark heard a gasp and then a blasting off sound, which could only have come from Ultra Woman. He looked around, but she was high up in the air.

Even Perry looked up, surprised. He stared at the envelope in his hand and shook his head. Setting it down on the podium, he continued, "But after taking another look at the story, I've reconsidered. Though it is an extraordinary bit of investigative writing, Lois needs to be remembered, not for who she was at twenty, but for her current brilliant work. I've petitioned the Attorney General for access to her computer files on behalf of my friend James Olsen at the *Daily Planet* for her rumored last exclusive article on Ultra Woman. I understand that she left her friends, Clark Kent and Lucy El, sole access to her notes, papers, and writings in her will, and I hope someday to be able to read that last article. Unfortunately, according to the Justice Department, her laptop was badly damaged in the explosion and I fear that last article will be lost to us forever."

"Subtle," whispered Lucy to Clark. He smiled at her, wondering about his girlfriend's first article and why it caused such an explosive reaction from Lois when Perry mentioned it.

"I should go talk with her," he murmured.

"Aren't you supposed to speak after Perry?" Lucy reminded him.

Clark swallowed. Torn between eulogizing the woman who saved his love or consoling his true love.

"My friend, Clark Kent, has a few words he wanted to say about Lois," said the mayor in closing.

Clark stood up, his option chosen for him. He was uncomfortable speaking about Lois in the past tense when he knew she was very much alive, so he worded his eulogy accordingly.

As he shook Perry's hand, his friend pulled him close. "I want a word with the two of you when you have a minute." Then the mayor looked up into the sky, shading his eyes.

Clark nodded at this request and cleared his throat. He wasn't a big fan of public speaking, as Kal-El was, preferring to let his articles to do his talking for him.

"I did not know the woman here before me very well. We had only just met — just started to get to know each other as friends, when she was killed. Murdered. Taken from this world much too soon. I promised her I would protect her, rescue her, and I wasn't able to fulfill that promise. And for that, I will be eternally sorry."

A tear dripped down his cheek. “I admired her bravery, selflessness, and her loyalty to her friends. I wish I’d had the opportunity to get to know her better.” Clark stepped away from the podium and picked up a handful of dirt to toss on the coffin. “Goodbye, Lola,” he whispered, letting the dirt run from his fingers. “Thank you for rescuing her again. You are a true friend.” He set his hand on the casket and sighed. The coffin slowly started descending into the grave.

“Stop! Stop, right now!” Lex shouted, storming through the crowd.

Ultra Woman swooped down and physically stood between him and the grave. Clark came and stood next to her. Out of the crowd Mayson appeared.

“That’s not my wife!” Lex screamed, pointing to the descending coffin. “Until I see the body with my own eyes, I will not believe my wife is dead. Legally, I’m still her next of kin.”

“Mr. Luthor,” Mayson said, stepping forward. “Lois Lane’s body was identified by both her father, Sam Lane, and Clark Kent here.”

“It’s a cover-up. They are hiding her from me, so I can’t get her back.”

Clark spoke up. “I am not hiding Lois Lane anywhere, Lex. You did that. Lois is right here.” One of his open hands aimed at the coffin, the other indicating Ultra Woman and Lex.

“Isn’t Mr. Luthor in violation of his restraining order, Detective Drake?” Ultra Woman asked.

“Legally, restraining orders cannot be enforced after death,” Mayson said, glancing around. “But on this occasion, I’m willing make an exception. Mr. Luthor, I am asking you to put fifty feet between you and Ms. Lane’s body.”

“You can’t do that! This is her funeral. I’m her husband. I have every right to be here.”

“To disrupt it?” Clark asked, brow raised.

“All right, then. I’m also enforcing the restraining order against you in the kidnapping of Lucy El. You are in violation of that one as well,” Mayson reminded him. “Or perhaps I should just arrest you for that crime right now.”

“You should arrest her for the murder of my wife. She was there and she didn’t do anything to stop it,” Lex said, pointing at Ultra Woman. “Some superhero.”

“Excuse me?” Ultra Woman raised a skeptical brow at Lex. It barely cleared the top of her mask.

“I read the articles in the paper. You were quoted as saying that you found my wife on that bomb mat and instead of rescuing her, you left to help other people.”

Clark ground his teeth. If Lois unleashed her fury at him, all could be lost. He closed his eyes. *He’s baiting you. Don’t let him get under your skin.*

Lois looked at him with such intensity, he felt kissed without ever feeling her lips. “Mr. Luthor, I am not going to argue with you at Lois Lane’s funeral. I saved people that day and I’m sorry one of them wasn’t her.”

“You let her die, so you could steal Superman from her,” Lex accused. “Everyone knows he was in love with her.”

Ultra Woman gave Clark a long glance; he smiled at her with a slight shrug. She turned back to Lex. “Goodbye, Mr. Luthor.” Then she moved away from him.

“Fifty feet, Mr. Luthor,” Mayson repeated, pointing away from the gravesite.

“There used to be a time you could buy yourself a judge in this town,” Lex grumbled under his breath.

As Ultra Woman passed Clark, her hand lightly caressed his, and she whispered, “Someone must be doing something right around here.” Lois always knew just what to say to make him love her even more.

“This isn’t over,” Lex yelled as uniformed police officers dragged him away.

Clark turned to Mayson. “Thank you.”

She smiled at him. “You know how I hate law breakers, Clark.” She glanced over at Ultra Woman and then covered her face so her words wouldn’t be caught on camera. “Speaking of which, when you have a minute, I need to speak with you privately.”

Clark groaned. “What did I do now, Mayson?”

Mayson glanced again at Ultra Woman and repeated softly, “Privately, Clark.”

“Fine, I’ll call on you later.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Ultra Woman and held out her hand. “I’m Mayson Drake.”

“I know who you are, Detective Drake,” Ultra Woman said, shaking her hand. “Lois told me that you’re quite a fan.”

Mayson glanced uncomfortably at Clark and blushed.

Clark shot a terse look at Ultra Woman. She nodded and took off into the air.

“Anyway, call me, Clark,” said Mayson, moving into the crowd.

Clark watched her go, wondering what she wanted. He saw her meeting up with a man with shaggy hair and a silly tie, instantly not liking him.

“Daniel Scardino,” he heard Lois whisper from the sky. Ah, that was why he didn’t like the guy. One of Lois’s ex-boyfriends.

The funeral was breaking up after Lex’s disturbance. Clark turned back to Lola’s grave and watched as the grave diggers started filling in the hole. Suddenly, he felt a hand slipping into his.

“Take me home,” Lucy said. “My back is killing me. I hate folding chairs.”

Clark looked at her, concerned. “We’re getting close now.”

She nodded. “I’m ready to go home now.” Lucy didn’t mean her apartment, which he and Lois had fixed over the last two days. She meant her dimension.

“I know. Soon.”

Sam joined them. “What do we have to do to be rid of that man for good?”

“Time and patience, Sam,” Clark told him.

Lucy looped her free hand around Sam’s elbow. “Every day we get closer, Sam. Clark’s right.”

“Speaking of which, we have a visitor whose arrival we need to plan for in earnest now.” Sam lowered his voice. “The four of us need to sit down and discuss this in detail. A discussion that is long overdue.”

“You’re right, Sam. I apologize. All these delays were my fault,” Clark admitted.

Sam nodded. Clark wasn’t going to get any disagreement from this crowd. He felt horrible about his behavior over the past few weeks. He needed to replace the card he had given Sam at Christmas. He had not lived up to that promise very well. He doubted a promise to marry Sam’s daughter as soon as her divorce from Lex was finalized would give the man peace of mind either. Perhaps a promise to love her forever and to try his best never to cause her pain again would do.

Lois told him that she was having Moonbeam continue with the divorce proceedings. She had put it in her will, because even in death she didn’t want to be married to Luthor. Lois also had set in motion to have her name legally changed, the paperwork filed the day before the bombing. She knew the checks and balances usually meant a lack of communication between branches of government. Her death would not stop either her divorce proceedings or her name change from going forward through the courts unless someone compared social security numbers, dates and names, which was why she had logged her name change out of state. She had thought out all these minute details in advance and planned them well. All because he had told Lucy that Lois Lane never planned, she just acted. Open mouth, insert foot.

Soon, Lois Lane would no longer legally exist; Sally Jo Lannet would. Then after the divorce was finalized, Sally Jo would change her name again to Louisa Lucia Lannet, aka Lucy Lannet. Then she could finally marry Clark Kal-El Kent. Thereby, making Lucy El legally her name. No more fake papers and IDs.

Clark stopped and looked into the air, hoping to see her. He just realized that his girlfriend had proposed marriage when she told Cat that Superman and Ultra Woman were married as infants. Some crazy, yet real Kryptonian custom that Lucy had failed to mention to him, but not to his Lois. Ultra Woman had asked Superman to marry her. How could he say no to a woman willing to die to have him in her life?

***

Meanwhile back at the Daily Planet in Lucy's home dimension…

"Jimmy," Clark said, waving to his friend standing by the coffee machine. "How much do we owe you for our share of Chinese food the other night? Sorry about ditching you like that."

"It's okay, CK," Jimmy told him with a reassuring smile. "I knew you'd get me back. You're always good about that."

"Thanks. How much?"

Jimmy pulled the receipt out of his wallet. "Did you hear about the new sextuplets just delivered at Met U. Hospital?"

"Sextuplets?" Lois whistled, adding sugar to her coffee. "Ouch. Wouldn't want to be that mother."

"Wouldn't want to write the article," murmured Ralph, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "And we sure don't want you to write it, Lois."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lois asked. Clark glanced up from the receipt Jimmy handed him, curious.

"After you went bonkers last summer, I ended up with that teen pregnancy article Perry had assigned you. Never again." Ralph raised his hands and laughed.

"Bonkers?" Clark inquired, brow raised.

"I didn't go crazy," Lois blew off Ralph's statement with a wave of her hand and returned to her desk. "Just a little exhaustion."

Clark looked at Jimmy. "Bonkers?"

Jimmy pressed his lips together and glanced away. So there was truth to Ralph's statement.

"When was this?" Clark asked his friend.

"Late June, early July. It was nothing, Clark. Don't worry about it." Jimmy tried to wave it off as well, but his reassuring smile was strained. It was definitely something.

"What happened?" Clark coaxed him.

"It was while you were on that Intergang assignment." Jimmy shook his head and glanced over at Lois, making sure she couldn't hear what he was saying, but he lowered his voice anyway. "She was on this strange diet, bananas and yogurt. Perry thought the lack of protein and lack of Clark made her mind go a little out of whack."

So, this meltdown happened while he was away with Zara and the New Kryptonians. "Bananas and yogurt? Even for Lois that's a funky diet. She hates bananas."

"She said it was a pre-wedding diet. I don't understand women, CK. Why would a woman as beautiful as Lois think she needed to lose weight? She even stopped drinking coffee, so she was extra crabby. Perry told her you loved her just the way she was, but she didn't listen."

"A strange diet doesn't sound too bonkers," Clark told him.

"Oh, that wasn't the bonkers part, that was the cause," replied Jimmy, checking off the reasons on his fingers. "Bonkers was her falling asleep at the morning meeting, almost passing out at her desk before turning green, and then sitting in the conference room repeating your name for three minutes straight. Clark. Clark. Clark. Clark." Jimmy shook his head. "Perry thought she might throw up, so he sent her home."

"What?" Clark stammered. "How come nobody told me about this?"

"It was nothing. I drove her home. She got some sleep, your mom came to visit her for a girls' weekend, and she was right as rain when she returned on Monday. Fine, she couldn't remember my girlfriend's name, but same old Lois otherwise."

"My mom?" Clark raised an eyebrow. This was more than exhaustion if Lois called on his mom. "When was this again?"

"I don't know. You'd been gone something like thirty-five days and three hours, according to Lois." Jimmy laughed with a shake of his head.

"That's quite a specific number, Jimmy." Clark crossed his arms and waited.

"We'd been talking about the reason for the rise in teen pregnancies or something. Ralph made his usual crude comment tying Superman to the teen pregnancy rate, literally. Lois jumped in to defend Superman as she always does."

Clark glanced over at his wife, his staunchest supporter, and smiled tenderly.

"She said that Superman had been 'gone for months'," Jimmy continued. "I told her I didn't think that was right, and asked her how long you had been gone, because you went undercover around the same time. She checked her agenda and told me something like 'thirty-five days, three hours,' and that's when she turned green and started repeating your name." He smiled, patting Clark on the shoulder. "She was worried about you, that's all. You hadn't checked in for a week or something. But you're here now and she's fine. It was a long time ago. Eight months back, thereabouts. Don't read too much into it — it didn't mean anything." Jimmy walked back to his desk.

Clark felt like he had been hit in the head with a shovel and it actually hurt. He saw stars. *Eight months?* He swallowed. Eight months ago, Lois freaked out because he had been gone for what, five weeks, when they had been talking about pregnancy. And then she called his mom to visit her. Five weeks after their *first*, first time? Had she missed her period?

Only… Clark stared at his wife… only she didn't remember their *first*, first time. Said it couldn't have happened or the curse would have kicked in. Only it had happened. They had definitely made love. And five weeks later she had a public freak-out, got sent home from work, spent the weekend with his mom and then returned to work, just fine. Clark sat down at his desk.

"Are you all right, Clark? You look like you saw a ghost," Lois said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

"Lois, you didn't miss anything early last summer, did you?" he murmured, taking hold of her hand and kissing it.

Her eyes went wide as her body froze. "Like what, Clark?"

Clark stood up and wrapped his arms around her; she was shaking. He lowered his voice, "Like your period?"

Lois hit him in the arm and accused him with a laugh, "Clark!"

He raised a brow. "Well?"

She grabbed his tie, then whispered, "Of course not. How could I? You know we didn't… until our honeymoon." She pulled him in for a kiss. There it was, that denial again.

"Lois, did my mom come visit you last summer?"

Lois froze again. "Uh-huh."

"Why?" He raised a brow, studying her closely.

She swallowed as her eyes darted everywhere but his face, her heart rate increasing. "Exhaustion. Over work. It was nothing, Clark." She kissed him and then again, deeper. "I was fine. Just missed you, that's all. I needed someone I could talk to… really talk to about you."

He took her hand in his. "Okay. It doesn't matter. Just curious."

Lois released the breath she had been holding and returned to

her desk. Okay. That was weird. His wife's explanation made perfect sense, but she was lying. There was something she didn't want him to know. He wondered what it was. Did his mom know? He couldn't go around his wife and ask his mom. No, that would surely get him into trouble.

Why had Lois had a meltdown? Why had his mother come to visit? What was Lois lying about? And why was he almost certain it had to do with the dream Lois who came to visit him before Thanksgiving?

***

Back in the other dimension…

Mayson Drake walked into the newsroom and straight up to Clark's desk. He glanced up.

"Mayson!"

"You didn't call. Can we talk?" Mayson asked, nodding toward the conference room. "Now."

Mayson's question was more of a demand. Clark stood up. "Sure."

With a raised brow, Mayson glanced at Lucy typing away at her computer and then walked into the conference room.

Clark shut the door behind him. "What's going on, Mayson?"

"I'm removing myself from Lois Lane's murder investigation."

"What?" Clark was startled. He hadn't expected this. "Why?"

"I know."

"Know what, Mayson?" he asked.

"I know that it wasn't Lois we buried the other day," she said, pinching her lips together. "I can't, in good conscience, continue working on her murder investigation when I know she isn't dead."

"What?" Clark gasped. Oh God, they didn't need this. No one was supposed to know. How did Mayson figure it out?

"The body we buried had long hair. Lois cut her hair when she started impersonating Lucy," Mayson explained.

His jaw dropped. Clark turned and looked at Lucy — his Lois — at her desk. Mayson knew. She knew that it was Lois she had lunch with a couple weeks past. Lois glanced at him, alarm in her eyes.

"I won't say anything, Clark," Mayson continued. "I just don't want to be in a position to be put on the stand someday and asked questions about this case. I asked to be removed, because of you. Because we dated and because of your relationship with Ultra Woman. I thought you should know."

Clark had no idea whether to admit the whole thing or deny it, although denying it would be tantamount to lying. He couldn't deny it if she asked him directly, which strangely she hadn't. She just stated the facts.

Mayson sighed, touching his arm. "I still love you, Clark. I know this wouldn't look good for you if it came out. I know Lois did it to get away from Luthor. Having met the guy, I can't say I blame her. I won't say anything because I don't think you had anything to do with this, even though I know you would do anything for her, even now. You were crushed the other day at her apartment. You really thought she was dead. I don't envy Ultra Woman; she must really trust the two of you." Mayson shook her head.

"Thank you, Mayson," he murmured. "You're a good friend."

"I just have one question, Clark." Mayson closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes and stared at him. "Who did we bury in Lois's grave?"

Clark coughed. The direct question of all direct questions. "Lola Luthor; the clone that Lex killed the night I rescued Lois in Singapore."

"Poetic. I guess Lex was right after all." Mayson chuckled. "Well, he won't learn the truth from me."

"Thank you." It was all he could say.

Mayson thought about that information some more. "Clark, didn't she die back in December? How come she didn't look decayed?"

He nodded. "I buried her near my parents' graves in Smallville." Near his farmhouse would describe the location better, but that detail wasn't important. "Her body must have become frozen in the cold winter temperatures."

"Let's hope that Lex isn't able to exhume Lola's body. Frog DNA and the fracturing of the red blood cells due to being frozen might be noticed by a thorough autopsy and give Lois away."

Clark swallowed. "Then let's hope every judge in town continues to deny Lex that opportunity."

"Oh, by the way," Mayson said, opening the door of the conference room. "Henderson wanted you to know, Lex Luthor is insisting we add Ultra Woman to our list of suspects in Lois's bombing. Same garbage he was spouting at the funeral." She shook her head. "It won't stick."

Clark watched as his ex-girlfriend left. She was still quite a woman.

***

Lois, dressed in her Lucy costume, joined Clark at the conference room door.

"Ultra Woman is a suspect in Lois Lane's death, huh? I just can't win, can I?"

Clark smiled reassuringly at her. "Mayson's right. It won't stick."

"Should we write it up?" she asked him.

"Go ahead and tell Barry. He's covering the Lois investigation. I told Gareth I wouldn't write anything on Ultra Woman or Lois Lane because I was too biased."

"I could write it," Lois suggested.

"Ha-ha."

She shook her head. "Lex Luthor thinks Ultra Woman didn't rescue Lois so that she could have Superman free and clear." Lois chuckled wickedly at him with a bouncing eyebrow. "There is a little truth in that."

Clark shrugged. "Who knew I had such an effect on women?"

Clark's secret girlfriend slugged him on the arm, hard. "Not me, buster. I'm a married woman."

He rubbed his arm. "Ow. I'm lucky to have you, Lucy." His sarcasm wasn't lost on her.

"Perry called," she told him. "He said he had the scoop of a lifetime and he wanted us both there. Mayor's house, drinks, six p.m."

"It's a wonder we get anything accomplished. Wait a minute. Lucy doesn't drink."

Lois rolled her eyes. Just another facet of her wonderful new persona. Not that alcohol would have an effect on her anymore. "I have that next Intergang article finished. Let them try to come after me again." She grinned at him, gleefully. Let them try and catch her this time.

"Please, no." Was that panic in Clark's voice?

She put her hand on his arm, reassuring him she would be fine. "Okay." When would he get used to how unbreakable she now was? Perhaps they had killed her off once too many times.

Clark released his breath. "Thank you."

"We'll wait until whatshername goes home. Then we'll have some fun with Intergang."

"Lu-cy."

Lois's gleeful grin reappeared.

"Do I have to tell you the code again?"

Heaven forbid! Not again! "No." Thou shall not kill, thou shall not break the law, thou shall work within the guidelines of the justice system. Blah. Blah. Blah.

"Good."

Lois sat back down at her desk. What was it going to take? She was invulnerable and she could tell he still worried about her.

She heard someone calling for help and looked to him.

"I'll go," he said, disappearing toward the supply room.

Lois nodded with a sigh. Of course, *he* would.

The phone rang. "Research. Lucy El speaking."

The man on the other end swallowed nervously. "Hello, Lucy."

Lois raised a brow. Who was this? She didn't recognize his voice. "Hello," she said cautiously.

"It's Dr. Klein. Is Clark in?"

A-ha. Just the man she needed to speak to. "No, just went on a call, Dr. Klein. How are you?" She hoped she didn't sound too enthusiastic.

"Fine," he responded guardedly, and then couldn't resist. "The big question is, how are you?"

Clark wasn't joking when he said Dr. Klein knew everything. Let's see, how had Lucy been answering that question recently? "Fat."

Dr. Klein chuckled. "That's to be expected."

"Will you be there for me should I need you?" This was what Lucy wanted her to ask him.

The scientist cleared his throat. "I don't think that's the best idea."

Clark had definitely put the fear of Superman into him about Lucy, but they needed him. "It isn't the best time to discuss this. Shall I come to you?"

"NO!" He gasped.

Ooops. That's right. No going to S.T.A.R. Labs. "It's okay. Clark read me the riot act, too. I'll send a friend instead."

The scientist gulped. "Just tell Clark I called. We need to schedule our next appointment."

"Will do," Lois answered, hanging up. She wrote the message up for Clark. She wondered exactly how Clark had threatened the man.

Despite what she wrote to Martha, Lois knew that Lucy was worried and she wanted the whole team assembled. Lois thought a part of Lucy wanted to have the birth in a hospital with a flock of medical staff available, just in case. But for some crazy reason Lucy kept saying "no hospitals, no medical staff." Lois knew it would cause too many questions if something went wrong, but there was something else worrying Lucy, making her extra paranoid. Lucy hadn't liked Sam's suggestion that they have the birth elsewhere, more secluded and soundproof than at the apartment.

Actually, the apartment had been soundproofed and reinforced structurally when she and Clark repaired it. They had wanted to take some extra precautions, should they ever spend the night there in the future.

Lucy hadn't liked any of the alternative locations that Sam and Clark had come up with. Lois wanted more medical personnel, but there weren't any more in their small circle and Lucy refused to add anyone else to their circle. Lucy said she would feel better with just Dr. Klein's advice. Clark refused. He didn't want Dr. Klein to be present at the birth, but Lucy and Lois both knew that should there be super complications, Clark would want him there. Lucy had asked Lois to convince Dr. Klein to be on standby. Lois smiled. This looked like a job for Ultra Woman.

***

Ultra Woman saw Dr. Klein walk out of S.T.A.R. Labs and over to his motorcycle. She landed next to him. "Hello."

He stumbled backwards almost knocking over his bike. She grabbed it and put it back upright.

"*You!*"

Ultra Woman smiled, loving that she still elicited this response in people. It reminded her of how people used to react back in her old Lois Lane days. "Lucy mentioned she was sending a liaison… a friend."

Dr. Klein cleared his throat. "You're a *friend*?" He seemed astonished. Exactly how much did the man know?

Ultra Woman frowned. "Is there a reason I shouldn't be her friend, Dr. Klein?"

The scientist shook his head adamantly. So, he did know. Wow! Clark wasn't kidding when he said that Lucy had gone over the edge.

"Needless to say, she's my friend and she asked that you be available for her should she need you. Clark's being stubborn."

He gulped and nodded. "Superman doesn't want me anywhere near Lucy and…" Dr. Klein lowered his voice. "… the baby."

"It's not his. You know that, right?" She wanted to make that crystal clear.

Dr. Klein nodded. "Do you know…" He swallowed; the word getting stuck in his throat. "… her husband?"

Ultra Woman smiled with a slight nod. "We've met."

"Wow! It's so hard to fathom. Well, not since you showed up. Obviously, there are more of you… Oh, God! There are more of you!" His eyes popped from their sockets and he gripped his bike.

Ultra Woman chuckled. "We did grow up here." She wasn't quite sure how Clark had described Kal's background to Dr. Klein, if he had.

"Right."

"I am curious about one thing: what would cause Lucy to come and visit you when she was so… ill?" She raised a brow.

Dr. Klein looked away. "She was searching for someone," he murmured.

"At S.T.A.R. Labs?"

"No." The scientist didn't want to elaborate. He glanced around and up to the sky, shading his eyes.

Ultra Woman waited with her hands on her hips. Superman crossed his arms, Ultra Woman put her hands on her hips. Lucy had explained the difference.

"Lois Lane," Clark's doctor finally admitted.

"Pardon me?"

"She wanted help finding Lois Lane."

Lois hadn't expected that. "How could you help find Lois Lane?"

Dr. Klein looked extremely uncomfortable.

"I owe Lois my life. She rescued me from a trap."

This piqued his interest. "How could you have been trapped? You have the same powers as Superman, right?"

"Not all traps can be broken with strength," she replied cryptically.

"Ah. Like the Neuroscanner." He nodded.

"The Neuroscanner?" What did this man know about that?

"The device that was holding Lois Lane captive. The one that allowed the 'bad man', as Lucy called him, to see through her eyes and hear through her ears. And talk directly to her mind. Give her migraines."

Ultra Woman remembered all too well. "And you developed a device that neutralized this Neuroscanner?" she asked him in awe, gaining more respect for the scientist every moment.

"I wish. No, Lucy wanted me to find a way to track the Neuroscanner back to its source. So she gave me a sample of Lois's hair and asked me to find the man controlling it."

Ultra Woman took a deep breath and slowly released it. Lucy had risked everything to talk to Dr. Klein about a way to trace the Neuroscanner signal back to Lex, Jr. so Superman could make sure that she would no longer be tortured by him. "Did you do it? Did you find a way to trace the source?" He must have. She hadn't had any more headaches since leaving Singapore. Actually, Lex, Jr. had been right in the middle of giving her a migraine when the pain and his voice had disappeared. That was right before Mr. Amazing appeared.

"As far as I know. Superman did rescue her originally, I

understand." Dr. Klein sighed. "Poor Clark."

My God! Did Clark tell everyone he was in love with her? She shook her head. And he told *her* to be discreet.

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant…" Dr. Klein stumbled over his words before clamping his mouth shut.

"It's hard when you lose a friend," Ultra Woman said and the doctor nodded. "I don't think Clark would be able to handle it if we were to lose Lucy as well."

Dr. Klein blanched.

"He would want everything possible to be done for her. And besides a medical doctor, a super power expert might be exactly what she needs on the big day. Who knows what kind of complications we might run across?"

Dr. Klein looked her in the eye. "*I'm* his expert?"

Clark's girlfriend nodded. "You're the best we've got. The baby's due on the fifteenth, so be sure to keep your schedule open."

The scientist cleared his throat. "Ultra Woman, you do know that it could be anytime in the two weeks surrounding the fifteen, if not sooner, right?"

Panic filled her eyes before she reined it back in. "Let's hope not. But just in case, don't leave town."

Dr. Klein nodded. There was still something obviously on his mind, but for a minute he didn't say anything. He glanced back up into the sky. What… ah, Superman. Why had Clark scared this man? Finally the scientist leaned forward, lowering his voice, "What will he do to me if I can't do anything for her?"

Ultra Woman set a reassuring hand on his arm. "If you try your best, nothing. That's what he gives every day and he expects no less from everyone else. I fear more of what he would do to himself, if something were to happen to her."

"You love him." Dr. Klein sighed in relief. "Clark has learned some hard lessons this year. In some ways, he's quite naïve, especially about women."

Ultra Woman couldn't help but grin mischievously. "Not anymore."

She flew off and could hear him laughing to himself. "Good for you, Clark. Good for you."

***

Clark turned to Lois as they arrived at the Mayor's house that evening. "I should have brought Lucy. He's expecting her."

Lois raised a brow. "I am Lucy now, Clark."

"Yes, but he'll know that you're not her."

"I know I failed miserably with Mayson, but I've learned tons about this persona since then. I can do this."

Clark shrugged. "Oh well. Maybe it's best he knows that you're alive, as he's one of your best friends."

"Ye of little faith." Lois shook her head.

"Ye forgetful of Perry's powers of perception," Clark reminded her as the door opened. One of Perry's assistants led them to his office.

They sat in his home office for roughly two minutes before Perry arrived. He dismissed his assistant and shut the door firmly behind him. Then the mayor turned to them with a big smile. "Clark! Lucy!" He greeted them each with a hug and then he went to the stereo in the corner and turned on Elvis.

Perry didn't hug people and he despised people who hugged as a greeting. Clark shifted uncomfortably in his chair. *Great. Elvis, too*. What was the Mayor up to?

"Rough week. Rough week." Perry sighed, heading over to his rollaway bar and pouring three Scotches. He handed one to Clark, offered one to Lois, but when she turned him down, he took the other two to his desk.

"Clark, did I ever tell you why I hired you at the *Daily Planet*?"

"For my writing skills, I hope," Clark replied, wondering at this segue.

"Yes, of course." Perry wiped his words from the air. "I worded that poorly. Do you know why I gave you a chance to prove your reporting skills?"

"My writing samples?"

"The Borneo tree frog? Ah. No, Clark. Because someone gave you a reference."

Clark's brow furrowed. "Who?" He glanced at Lois, but she was looking down at her hands in her lap.

"When you walked in that day, Lois Lane had been missing, I don't know, one… two months. I missed her so much and I had been going through all her old stories, hoping to find something, some hint of what had happened to her. I rediscovered this one the night before you walked into my office." Perry slid the story across his desk. It was a single-page typewritten story; the paper was faded and it had been well read. "It was about an attempted gang rape she witnessed on Mid West U's campus by some drunken frat boys who hadn't liked the girl's Met U sweatshirt."

Clark glanced at Lois, who winced as if she was hurt. He looked down at the paper in his hand and murmured, "Lois." They had never gotten around to discussing what had happened all those years ago.

"A young man from Kansas State fought the odds, five against one, to rescue her and he didn't even break a sweat. She even called him her hero, her Super-man. Quite the story, don't you think, Clark?" Perry took a sip of his drink.

"When did she write this? 1989?" Clark swallowed.

Perry nodded.

"You know, Perry, I searched for her for two weeks. I even told Lana I had met someone else and I couldn't see her anymore. Every day, I flew out to Metropolis U. and wandered the campus. I asked everyone, professors, the editor of the university paper, cafeteria workers, nurses at the hospital where I dropped her off… nobody knew Lucy." Clark sighed. "That's what she told me her name was. It never occurred to me that she hadn't told me the truth. Of course she lied. I was just some guy — worse, a jock; maybe I'd end up hurting her, too. I was a broken man when I went back to Kansas State without finding her." He took a sip of his Scotch. "What did she say that night we met? 'This would make the front page at the *Daily Planet*, if they'd ever believe me, which they won't. Who would ever believe I was rescued by someone as amazing as you?' I came to the *Daily Planet* because of that girl. She made me the man I am today." He set his glass on Perry's desk. "Thank you, Perry. I always wondered what happened to her."

"So, here I am, sitting in my office at the Daily Planet," continued Perry, "…and who should waltz in my door, but good old Clark Kent from Kansas State, Lois Lane's 'Super-man'. I had to give you a chance, I owed her that much. And then you just blew me away with that theater piece. I thought, hey, if he rescued her once, maybe he'd find my Lois and rescue her again."

Clark sighed. "And I did. Took me a while. My self-confidence wasn't the same as it had been back in my college days. The funny thing is, I didn't even recognize her. I stared at her face and listened to her interview tapes for three years, yet never once did it occur to me that Lois Lane was my missing co-ed."

Perry handed him the glass of Scotch Lois had rejected.

"Thanks, Perry." Clark took a sip of the drink.

"I was thinking about sending that story to Gareth McTinney, see if he was interested in publishing it as part of a retrospective on Lois or maybe a 'history of Superman' feature, but I can't do that, now can I, Lucy?" It was the first time Perry had acknowledged her since he had greeted them.

Lois shook her head. "No."

Clark gazed at her as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

"And why can't I do that, Lucy?"

Lois hesitated. “Because I told Gareth that was the story of how Lucy El met Clark Kent.”

The terrible story that Gareth could not repeat? Clark’s jaw dropped. “You’re the Lucy from Mid West? Not Lois? She really was named Lucy?”

Lois wiped her cheeks again and took the Scotch glass out of his hand. “Game’s up, Clark.” She took a sip. “Perry knows I’m not Lucy El. I should have known better than try to fake my own death.” She finished off the drink and set it on the desk.

“No, Lois!” Perry slammed his hand on the desk. “You should have known better than to try to fool your old Memphis editor into thinking you were dead.” Moving around the desk, he lifted her up and spun her around. “Oh God, girl! You are a sight for sore eyes. This is my fault for telling you I wouldn’t believe you were dead without a body.” He set her down and she sat in her chair once more, a smile brushing her lips. Perry sat on the corner of his desk. “So, you’re dead. Now what?”

“What gave me away?” Lois asked him.

“What, other than the fact that my arms go around you when we hug? Or that you aren’t in labor on my carpet? Nothing. You had me fooled, until Gareth refreshed my memory before the funeral about the story of how Lucy and Clark met, and I had this very same story in my hand to give to him to publish in the next day’s paper. Lois, you could have warned me that you told him. When I told you to give him that story, I didn’t mean as a cover story.”

“Sorry,” Lois mumbled.

“You told her to turn in that Mid West U. story to Gareth?” Clark asked. “Why?”

“So she could get her job back. The Superman story that no one else had.”

Lois walked over to the bar and was about to pour another Scotch when Perry took the decanter out of her hands. “I put some champagne on ice,” he said. “Just in case.”

“I could have given him ‘*Superman Flies In Plane For First Time’* too.” She winked at Clark with a sly grin. “That would have been a funny story.”

Clark scowled at her, slipping Lois’s first story into his pocket. “You knew, even then?”

“I figured it out minutes before the accident, Clark.” She tapped her head. “Payback.”

“What accident?” Perry asked, bringing out a bottle of champagne from his mini-fridge.

Lois and Clark’s eyes both went wide. Ooops.

“I was in a little fender bender in Kansas when I went out to Smallville to do some research on Clark Kent,” Lois said dismissively.

“Oh,” Perry said. “Darn, this isn’t even cold. Clark, could you?” He handed the bottle to him.

Clark blew his cooling breath over the bottle, hiding his sigh of relief. Perry bought the fender bender story. When the bottle had frosted up, he handed it back to their former boss, who opened it and poured it into three glasses.

“Why would you do research on Clark Kent if you didn’t know he was Superman?” Perry asked.

Lois smiled at Clark. “He’s a perplexing fellow. I was intrigued.”

Perry laughed, holding up his glass. “To Lois and Clark, the best investigative team in the world.” They clanged their glasses together. “Intrigued by Clark Kent? Enough to go to Smallville to do research? Lois, please. I know destiny when I see it. You two were meant for each other more than Elvis and Priscilla.”

Lois and Clark turned to each other. Not good.

“Um. Chief, didn’t you tell me I shouldn’t be within fifty feet of her?” Clark asked.

“And didn’t you tell me that I’m bad for him? That if the general public were to see him dating a married woman like myself, it would crush him?”

“Didn’t you tell me to dump her?”

“You told him to dump me? Thanks. Thanks a lot, Perry.” Lois downed her champagne and shook her head.

“And? What did you do instead? You got rid of your husband,” Perry said, pointing between the two of them. “And you two are working closer together than you were before.”

“I didn’t get rid of my husband, Perry, I’m still married. Actually, now I’m married to two men — one real jerk and one fictitious hero. I did this to get my life back and to work on my career, not for some man. And Clark’s as good as married to Ultra Woman. I realized she’s what he needs in his life, not me. We’re just friends now, Perry.”

“Bull hockey!” Perry laughed. “You two will be just friends when our sun turns red like Krypton’s. I’ve never seen two people more in love with each other.”

“Lucy El and Clark Kent just work together,” Clark told him. It was the closest way he could say it without lying.

“Yeah. But Lois and Clark are in love.”

“Lois Lane is dead, Perry,” Lois reminded him.

“Come on. You fell in love during college, but forces dragged you apart. Then you spend the rest of your lives searching for one another, dreaming of one another, despite being out of step in time. And when you do finally meet again….” He clapped his hands together. “Instant chemistry, love at first… well, it wasn’t love at first sight, exactly… love at first kiss for both of you. It’s fate.”

Clark cleared his throat. “I don’t really believe in fate, Chief.” He stood up and handed his glass back to the mayor. “Thank you for the information on Lois’s first story. Time for me to be heading on, though. Good night, Lucy. Good night, Chief.” Clark nodded.

“Tell me one thing, Clark, and I’ll believe you, because you always tell me the truth. Who do you love more, Clark? Ultra Woman or Lois Lane?”

Clark winced.

“Oh, Perry, don’t ask him that,” moaned Lois. “That’s just cruel.”

“Chief, I used to love Lois Lane, but the woman she used to be is gone. Now, I’m head-over-heels in love with Ultra Woman. If ever there was a destiny for me, she’s it. Does that clear things up for you?”

Perry’s jaw dropped. “Ultra Woman? After everything you learned tonight, you still choose Ultra Woman?”

Clark nodded as he opened the door.

“Aren’t you going to take Lois home?”

“Why?” Clark shrugged again with another smile at Lois. “She hates to be under guard. See you in the morning, Lucy. Hate to dash on you, Chief, but I’ve got a date with destiny.”

“Good night, Clark,” Lois waved. “Meeting her at the usual spot?”

“Uh-huh.” He shot them a grin as he headed out the door. “Bye, Chief.”

***

Perry turned to Lois. “You’re kidding me, right? You can’t be all right about this? You two could hardly keep your eyes, let alone your hands, off each other just a couple of weeks ago. What happened? You can’t turn off passion like that.”

Lois sat down. “I died.” She sighed. “Your life gets reprioritized when something like that happens to you. Anyway, Clark’s happier like this.”

“He does seem happier,” Perry said suspiciously. “What about you? Are you happier?”

“It’s still an adjustment,” she stated truthfully. “But I can honestly say, I’m not unhappy.”

“I don’t understand that boy. What does she have that you don’t?”

'*Clark',* Lois thought to herself with a sneaky smile. She loved that she was still number one in Perry's book — that not even a hot superhero babe could move her out of that spot. "Ultra Woman is freedom personified, Perry. She's an unknown factor, unencumbered, so their relationship can't cause a scandal. Plus, and it's a biggie, she's invincible. With her, he can be himself and he doesn't have to worry about her getting hurt." She poured herself another glass of champagne.

"She's not invincible, Lois. She's invulnerable," her old boss corrected. "So, you still have a shot."

Lois chose to ignore him. "Anyway, I like Ultra Woman. She helped me deliver my divorce papers to Lex when he was avoiding me. Then when Lex threatened to hurt Clark's reputation if I continued with the divorce, she helped me kill myself. She's a good friend."

"But if Clark's with Ultra Woman now, why get rid of Lois Lane? Who would believe he and you were an item with her around? Wouldn't his reputation have been intact without you having to die?"

Just like Perry to poke through her reasoning with a sword. "I was tired of constantly being on guard, worrying about my own safety and Lucy's, having Clark worrying about us. I was ready to sever all ties with Lex, move on with my life. I was tired of dealing with him, fighting him. If Lois were still alive, that's all my life would be for who knows how long. I hadn't been Lois Lane for three years and my reputation was already in the dumps. I was ready to move forward. Start over."

"But, Lois, you had the exclusive interview with Ultra Woman. You know her secret identity. That would have saved your career." Perry grabbed her arms. "Who is she, honey?"

Lois smiled mysteriously. "I'm not telling."

"What?" Perry gasped, letting go. He hadn't expected this answer.

"I'm not telling."

The mayor's eyes widened as the truth hit him. "You were never planning on telling anyone, were you?"

Lois smiled with a shake of her head and took another sip of champagne. "I wanted to go out back on top; with a bang, so to speak. Secret identities are meant to stay secret, Perry, that *is* why they're secret. If everyone knew who Ultra Woman was, they couldn't be together."

"They couldn't be together?" Perry repeated, staring at her. "You know, Lois, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were Ultra Woman."

"I'd hate for a rumor like that to get out." Lois chuckled, picking up the Scotch glass that she used. She notched down her glasses, held up the glass in front of her and with her heat vision cleaned the outside of the glass of her fingerprints and lip prints. "Good thing you know better. You know that I was in Singapore on the evening of your costume party. No way I could have been here and there at the same time, is there?" She set the Scotch glass down on the corner of the bar, where it dropped on the floor, breaking into pieces. "Ooops."

"I thought it might be you. I didn't know how logistically it could be, but I thought it might be." Perry gazed down at her broken glass, yet not moving to clean it up. "It would explain Clark's unwavering passion for her and her sudden reappearance. But you didn't react the way Clark did when I turned on the Elvis music just now."

"Excuse me?" Her brows came together.

"Superman and Ultra Woman made out for the first time to Elvis at my party, so when he hears it, it makes him think of her… romantically. He mentioned that back at Thanksgiving."

Lois ran her tongue over her teeth with a scowl. "Is that so?"

Perry sat down on the edge of his desk with a raised brow. "None of those old feelings left, I see."

"Fine. So I still love him. I'll always love him. If Tempus hadn't outed Clark, maybe he and the old me — the Lois Lane me — could have had a chance." She shook her head. "He's the love of my life and after being with him, I could never even look at another man. And knowing that she was there first burns me up inside. Infuriates me to no end. There, does that answer your question? Does that make you feel better, knowing Lois Lane will never be with Clark Kent again? Well, good thing Lois Lane is dead. I can move on with my life as Kal-El's wife, Lucy." She took her champagne glass and threw it into the fireplace, shattering it.

Perry stared at the second broken glass. "Oh my God. Ultra Woman's reaction when I mentioned the Mid West article at your funeral." Perry turned to retrieve the story off his desk, but it wasn't there. He looked on the floor and in the envelope, but it was gone. "Where's the story?"

"What story?" she asked too innocently.

"The Mid West story you wrote and sent me." He continued to look around his desk. "The story where you and Clark met for the first time."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Perry. I never wrote such a story. I told you the story, just like I told Gareth McTinney."

His head snapped up and brows came together. "Lois," he growled.

"Are you all right, Perry? Lois is dead. I know we look a lot alike, but I'm Lucy. Lucy El." She set her hand on his shoulder. "You should rest. I'm going to go now, Perry."

"Lo-is."

"Lucy," she corrected, moving to the door and giving him an intense look. "Don't make that mistake again. We can't have Lex thinking she's still alive. And I'm an alcoholic, remember, so probably best if you don't serve me champagne again. Who knows what I might do or say, if I were to fall off the wagon?"

"Please." Perry took hold of her hand to stop her. "Wait, honey. I'm sorry. Don't leave like this. Just one more question. If you're Lucy El now, then who was she?"

Lois smiled and patted his face. "A mirage."

His brows came together in confusion.

Lois took a deep breath and looked him square in the eye. "It must really be annoying for you, Perry."

"What?" he stammered.

"Always being right." Lois grinned at him and then winked.

Perry's jaw dropped but she was already gone.

***

Ultra Woman knocked on the door of the Smallville house.

"It's open," Clark called.

"Are you decent?" she called back.

He opened the door, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. "Does that make a difference, my destiny?"

"Hi, I was wondering if Superman could come out and play," Ultra Woman said with a grin.

Grabbing her wrist, Clark pulled her inside, pressing a kiss to her lips. "I missed you."

Lois shut the door with her foot. "Missed you more."

"Where did you want to go with Superman?"

She ran her finger down his chest. "I thought we might try the mile high club?"

Clark laughed. "Too many spying eyes, Lois. How about we just stay inside?"

"Heart of the Amazon jungle?" she suggested.

"Getting tired of Kansas already?" Clark started kissing down her neck.

"No," Lois murmured.

"Trying to spice things up?" Clark removed her mask and continued kissing her.

"No."

"Then?"

"Concerned that your old family home might collapse around us one night has come to mind."

Clark laughed. "Good point. I guess if this is going to be our home, we need to reinforce the beams and foundation and add some more security systems."

"Our home?" Lois smiled. "I like the sound of that. Speaking of security systems, where did you put the story you stole from Perry?"

"In the safe," he said as he unhooked her cape.

"We should probably change all the passwords on the safe and front door. They're too obvious," she said as he kissed down her neck.

"Whatever you say."

"You could have warned me that he knew about Lucy."

Clark's face split in half with mirth. "Where's the fun in that?"

Lois leapt into his arms, wrapping her legs around him. "You're lucky I love you, Clark Kent."

"I love you, Lois Lane." He pressed a kiss to her lips.

"You've got to stop calling me that," she said. "Otherwise, you're going to slip up one of these days and say it in public."

"Right. Sally Jo?"

Ultra Woman laughed, kissing him. "How about you call me Wow and I call you Amazing?"

"You already call me Amazing."

"You always have been," Lois whispered, kissing him again. "Did you really break up with Lana and look for me?"

"Uh-huh," Clark murmured, unbuckling her belt.

"Loving you even more." She grinned.

Clark cleared his throat and placed a smile on his face. "Just one little question."

"Uh-huh?" Lois murmured, unbuttoning his shirt.

"If you knew who I was, why didn't you contact me?"

Lois pulled away from him and raised a brow. "Little question?"

"Sorry. You're right. That's—"

"I did contact you," Ultra interrupted. "Well… I *tried* to. I picked up the phone a hundred times to call you. I drafted I don't know how many letters, but how do you thank someone for saving you from a nightmare?" She rested her head against his. "Every time I tried to, I kept thinking of those men, dragging me into the bushes. My hands would shake, my heart would start to race, my throat would close up. I couldn't. I just couldn't."

Clark lifted her into his arms. "It still bothers you?"

"I've always had the nightmares and they are always the same. You're never there." Ultra ran her hand over the blue of his suit under his shirt.

"They are just nightmares, Lois. I saved you then and I'll save you every time." Clark kissed her.

"You don't need to save me anymore, Clark. I can save myself." An amused smile slipped onto her face. "I know karate, now."

"I know, Mr. Amazing told me. I'm telling you, Lois, that man just wouldn't shut up about you." He rolled his eyes. "Lois this. And Lois that. I had to check out what all the fuss was about."

"And?" She raised her brows.

"He didn't do you justice. Did I mention that 'Wow' doesn't even come close to how you make me feel?"

"Once or twice. But I can hear it again." Lois lovingly nudged him. "I'm so glad the rumors of his demise were greatly exaggerated."

Clark winced. "Sorry about that."

"Oh, you'll make it up to me."

"I will?"

She nodded.

"How?" Clark gulped.

His girlfriend whispered into his ear.

"Really?" He smiled nervously. "Now?"

Lois bit her lip as she nodded. Clark zoomed them up the stairs, clothes flying off behind them as they went.

***

Back in the Kent townhouse in Lucy's home dimension…

Clark tossed and turned unable to sleep. He and Lois had finally found a moment to be together without the audience of a surprise party. He pulled his sleeping wife into his arms and smelled her sweet scent. Kissing her cheek, he wondered what was keeping him awake.

Was it that a computer program had said that Jimmy was a ninety-seven percent chance match to him? Did it bother him that someone had just been three percent off from finding his secret identity? He sighed, thinking it must be more than that.

Clark's brain buzzed a mile a minute, still in disbelief at what his mom had done to the other Clark. Even though the man needed a wake-up call, that seemed excessively cruel. All this talk about babies and precautions, or the lack there of, had started that day at the farm. His mother had been very secretive all year. Since he came back with the New Kryptonians. Lying. Keeping secrets. Drinking. It wasn't like her.

He thought about the pregnant Lois dream he had had before Thanksgiving. Was his dad right? Was it just his unconscious desire to start a family materializing in his dreams? He sighed. She had tasted of strawberries. Mmmmm. His mind drifted away as he relaxed into sleep.

***

Dream Lois floated above him, feeding him strawberries, "Our *first*, first time," she murmured, kissing him. Suddenly, she morphed into the really pregnant Lois kissing him at the time machine.

"I miss you so much, Clark," she said as he kissed her. He unwound his old scarf from around her neck. He kissed from her ear to her shoulder. She was his wife, not the other Clark's Lois.

"Run away with me," he begged.

"I can't," she said. "We can't change the future. I have to go back."

Clark continued to kiss her, pulling aside her shirt. She stepped away rewrapping the scarf, but not before he noticed the same circular scar on her shoulder that he had seen on his dream Lois.

She faded into the other Clark's Lois, thin and looking so much like his Lois. "Lucy misses her husband, you know, Kal-El… How about you, Superman? Do you miss *your* wife? Does she perhaps look something like me?… Her husband has been off on assignment since the summer, so she's been here working with Clark. She knows all about him and Superman, too, all about everything in fact. He trusts her more than he does me." She kissed him.

As she kissed him another voice, with a slightly Texas twang spoke, "Clark, stop this. You know how much I miss him and you sound just like him… She's not like your wife…"

The other Clark's Lois murmured, "She misses her husband so much…"

Then she was pregnant Lois again and he was kissing her in his folk's barn. "I miss you so much."

He could hear the other Clark speaking, "My friend Lucy came to me last summer needing a safe place to hide for a while… Her fiancé is the type of guy who criminals love to hate. Super enemies. He's a close friend of mine and I would have done anything to protect his wife… They've gotten married since then. It's complicated."

Then he heard the other Clark's Lois, "Her husband is some bigwig with a secret hush-hush job, where he negotiates peace between warring factions and other things of the sort."

He heard Zara's voice, "If you don't come with us to New

Krypton, we will break into civil war."

Then he was at the office talking to his Lois, before they snuck off to Chateau Roberge. "Superman will get those two old war horses to talk peace."

Clark was kissing Lois by the window in her apartment the night of their *first*, first time. He flew her to bed and made love to her. The next morning Superman flew out the Daily Planet windows with one last look back at his fiancée's tear-stained face. Suddenly, they were standing on that hill, the sunset behind them, saying their vows.

Then he was in the other dimension at other Clark's Smallville house and Clark's Lois was chasing him around the living room. "Lucy misses her husband, you know, *Kal-El*."

"We created this secret identity for her as Lucy El, *wife* of Kal-El. It was only supposed to be temporary, while her fiancé was out on assignment, a couple of months tops."

Clark placed his hand on his Lois's flat tummy. "If you tell me you can see those four Double Fudge Crunch Bars I ate…"

The tummy grew to a small baby bump. "I always have a reminder of our *first*, first time, Clark." He could feel a slight kick from the baby.

Her tummy grew even bigger as did the kick. "She misses her daddy."

Voices and faces swirled around him as he spun around and around and around.

"I have a feeling it's a girl." Pregnant Lois.

"Lucy and Clark work very closely together, I've noticed. Very closely." The other dimension's Lois.

"We're just good friends… I spent two nights under your roof; two nights with your wife. Bet you're wondering how long we were able to resist each other… I'm sorry I insinuated that I had slept with your wife while you were lost in time." The other Clark.

"Lucy misses her husband, you know, *Kal-El*." The other Clark's Lois.

"You know, you're the luckiest man alive." The other Clark.

"If you knew how much he has helped you and your family…" His mom.

"No, the baby is yours, *Kal-El*." The other Clark.

"Almost passing out at her desk before turning green and then sitting in the conference room repeating your name for three minutes straight. Clark. Clark. Clark. Clark. Clark…. That was eight months ago." Jimmy.

"The baby's due mid-February." The very pregnant Lois.

The other Lois's voice spoke clearly as he suddenly was standing still, alone. "Clark loves Lucy's and Kal's baby, wishing it was his own… She said that if I could beat the curse, so can she."

Clark sat up in bed, his heart racing from his crazy dream. The room felt like it was tilted on its side. The baby was due in mid-February; today was the tenth. His hands began to shake. In the summer, his fiancée went to the other Clark's dimension to escape the curse. Lucy El was his wife. His missing Lois. And she was pregnant with his child. A chill went down his spine.

He climbed out of bed and was in his blue suit and headed for Smallville ten seconds later. Before the minute was up, he was unlocking his parents' front door and taking the other Lois's suicide note down from where his mom had placed it between the jars of pasta. He needed to read it again.

We've also been spending lots of time at work together. Lucy has gotten so huge, I've had to take over her job at the Daily Planet. *Clark said that she didn't really show until after her sixth month, then boom! Clark loves that baby so much, it breaks my heart when he looks at her. Does he wish the baby was his own or is he just paranoid that something will happen, complications that we can't handle? Only Lucy shows no fear. She said that if I could beat the curse, so can she.*

Clark sat down at the kitchen table and set his head in his hands. Lucy El was the woman he made love to before he left for New Krypton — *his* Lois. Oh my God! He had spoken with Lucy El on the phone. And she knew all about Superman and Kal-El's wife. Why hadn't he seen it before? Why hadn't he recognized Lois's voice? Could it really be true? Was there a Lois out there somewhere, pregnant with his child? Was he about to become a father? Or was he just fantasizing again about that pregnant dream Lois?

Clark didn't know how long he sat there before his folks walked in.

"Clark?! What are you doing here, son?" his father asked.

"Mom, is Lois living in the other dimension with the other Clark? Is she Lucy?"

His mom hugged him. "Oh, Clark."

"That's ridiculous!" His folks spoke at the same time. "You figured it out."

His dad turned to his mom. "What?"

His mom sat down next to Clark and took hold of his hand.

"I had this weird dream where Lois kept morphing into all these different versions of herself." Clark shook his head. "Tell me everything from the beginning."

"Martha, have you been keeping something from us?" his father asked, appearing as if she had struck him across the face.

"I did whatever I did because Lois asked me to, and to save you both heartache. The less people who knew the easier and the more seamless a transition could be made," his mom explained to his father.

"Who is that woman asleep in my bed right now?" Clark asked, gazing over at her.

"Lois."

Both men looked skeptically at her.

"Lois from the past. Mr. Wells and the other Clark borrowed her from some point right before she got amnesia."

"So, she's still Lois?" Clark released a breath. He knew his instincts weren't off.

"Yes. She's the Lois kidnapped by Luthor and chased by the clone. According to Mr. Wells, as long as we plan on returning her to that point within a certain amount of time, time allows us to borrow her. And Lois knew she couldn't just disappear into the other dimension. She needed to leave a place holder in the present."

"I don't understand, Martha. Why did she move to the other dimension with the other Clark?" his father asked, dumbfounded.

His mom bit her bottom lip and stared at Clark. Her son looked at her and then looked back down to his hands. "Because when she and Clark made love before he left for New Krypton, she became pregnant."

Clark winced. It was true. Everything that dream Lois had said to him.

"So, Clark. That Lois that you dreamed of before Thanksgiving — that you thought felt so real — was indeed real?"

"What? She came and visited you?" his mom asked, dismayed. "She said she wanted to see you and what Lois wants…" She shook her head.

Clark nodded. He couldn't speak. Somewhere out in the universe were Lois and his child. It was true. He was going to be a father and soon, if he wasn't already.

"I still don't understand. Why did she run away?" his dad asked. "We would have taken care of her."

Clark continued to stare at his hands. He knew the reason: the curse.

His mom looked at Clark and then at her husband. "Clark?"

"The curse," he whispered.

"Curse?" his dad asked unbelievingly, looking at his wife.

"Well, I don't know the whole of it, just the little bit that Mr.

Wells told me. Apparently, Lois and Clark are destined to fall in love, but also to die a horrible death after the first time they make love."

"Oh, my God!" His dad gasped.

Clark thought back on that crazy day… night… nights… days… Lois spent chasing down past-life Tempus, so that they — the newly married Mr. and Mrs. Kent — could finally make love. "Lois and I are soul mates, so in every lifetime we seek each other out. About a thousand years ago, Tempus fell in love with her, but she chose me instead. So, he had his wizard curse our love for all time. I found out about it on… well, right before our honeymoon. Only Lois and I had already made love back in May, before I left for New Krypton." He looked up at his mom. "Tell me everything."

"I can't. Lois didn't tell me everything. Or anything about the curse. I found the—" She pressed her lips together. "Mr. Wells told me a bit. Lois only told me she had to go because the New Kryptonians would kill you if they found out she was expecting your child, when you were supposed to be married to Zara."

Clark sighed. "Yeah. They wouldn't have liked that."

"Lois said she'd come back as soon as it was safe… only, Lois — the substitute Lois — got arrested. The pregnant Lois waited and waited, and by the time you cleared her name she was six months pregnant and too far along to return."

"And how do you know all this?" his father asked.

"Because Lois told me she was pregnant when I came to visit her last summer. Lois needed someone to help her — the substitute Lois — with the transition, the jump in time."

Clark brow furrowed. "What did you tell her, this substitute Lois from the past?"

"Lois wrote out a diary, explaining everything that had happened in the months between Lex kidnapping her and her leaving for the other dimension. We told the substitute Lois that her therapist told her that sometimes amnesia has a way of recurring."

"She must have been terrified," his father said, shaking his head. "Thinking her memories could disappear again at any moment."

"I bet she battled through it like a drill sergeant." Clark chuckled softly, knowing his wife.

His mom nodded.

"That's why she has no memory of our *first*, first time, because Lois didn't tell her about it."

His mother nodded again.

That was why she freaked out when he asked her if she "missed anything" during the previous summer. She still didn't have those memories, because she never experienced those events.

"That's why the other Clark has the time machine. So, he can return Lois to me once the baby is born?" he asked his mom.

She swallowed. "Clark has refused to let her come home… refused to kidnap your current wife and dump her back in the past until Lois can think of a way to convince her other self to go back willingly."

"Oh."

"And Lois has no idea how to convince herself to return to the worst time of her life."

Clark dragged his hands through his hair. "God, I don't want Lois to go back there, either." That was a horrible time for them. It had been one of the worst times of his life.

"But she has to go; it's her past. If she doesn't go back and hit her head and become Wanda Detroit, she won't be there for you to make love to before you leave for New Krypton and the baby will no longer exist."

His father blinked his eyes. "Does anyone else have a headache just trying to understand it all?"

"But Lois and the baby will be coming back to me after the birth?" Clark inquired. "Right?"

His mom squeezed his hands. "I hope so, sweetie. If she doesn't have any complications."

"Complications?" His jaw fell open. "What kind of complications?"

"Nothing, Clark. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Mom." He stared at her. What wasn't she telling him? The other Lois had mentioned complications as well in her letter.

His mom closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "*If* she survives the birth. Don't forget, this is the first Kryptonian-human child. We don't know what might happen."

Clark buried his head. *Oh, my God. Lois might not survive?* That was why she didn't want him to know. Why Lois told his mother to lie… Lois knew there was a chance she might not return and she did not want him to worry. And that was why pregnant Lois told him to protect the substitute her — his current wife, asleep in his bed. Lois wasn't lying when she said that the Lois back home in his bed was her past. That she couldn't exist without her.

"Will Clark come and tell you when she's had the baby? That she survived?" his dad asked his mom.

His mother shrugged. "I don't know. I hope so, but my guess is the next time they come, it will be for good. So, let us hope that no news is good news." She smiled weakly.

"I just can't stand around and do nothing, Mom. Somewhere out there is my wife and child." He stood up and started to pace.

"What can you do, son?" his dad asked. "You can't get to the other dimension without a time machine, can you?"

"No. I don't think so." Clark continued to pace. He hit his fist into the palm of his other hand causing a loud thunder-like crack. "God! I feel so powerless. I hate this feeling. There has to be *something* I can do. Argh!" He roared in frustration. Taking a deep breath and slowly releasing it, he tried to combat the helplessness overtaking over him. "I wish I could be there for her," he mumbled. "I guess I can do what I do best…" He scoffed at himself. "…investigate. Talk to Dr. Klein, find out what kind of complications might arise. Try to ease my mind that way." Pathetic. That was how investigating this problem would make him feel. He didn't want to investigate, he wanted to act! By the time he had investigated, his baby would already have been born. If it hadn't already.

"So, Superman is going to tell Dr. Klein that he got a girl pregnant?" his father asked doubtfully.

"Oh. Right. I'm going to have to ask him hypothetically."

"Hypothetically?"

"If Superman were to get a girl pregnant… No." Clark shook his head. "Become intimate with a woman, would she… could she become pregnant?"

His father raised a brow. "Obviously, yes."

"But Clark can't tell Dr. Klein that he's already become intimate with someone and gotten her pregnant, Jonathan," explained his mom. "Because that's not what Superman would do. It would sound like Superman had a one-night stand."

Clark flinched. "I don't need that kind of publicity again."

"What are you going to tell Lois?"

"Lois?" Clark was confused; Lois already knew.

"Your wife. The one asleep in your bed."

"Oh!" Clark gasped. Right. *Her.* She wasn't any less his wife, because she was plucked out of time. She was still Lois. She was almost more his wife than the woman in the other dimension, because he had loved her and married her and lived with her since returning from New Krypton. That was what the very pregnant Lois had meant when she said he would be cheating on her with her. She would know. This Lois was his present wife and the pregnant Lois was his future. He sighed. "I'll tell her I want to have kids and we should check with Dr. Klein about seeing if it's possible." He shook his head. "It feels like a lie."

"It's not a lie, Clark," his mom reassured him. "You do want children."

Clark raised a brow at her. "That's not the part that would feel like a lie, Mom."

"It's not a lie, it's a misdirection. She thinks you're looking at point 'A' when you are already at point 'X'."

Clark gazed at her uncertainly.

"Or you could just be patient and wait for Lois to return."

Clark chewed his options for roughly twenty seconds. "Misdirection, huh?"

His mom glanced at his dad and smiled.

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Author's Note: Canon Lois will once again be addressed as 'Lois' or 'Kal's Lois' or 'Kal's Lucy.' She will still be called 'Lucy' when others who know her as that speak with or about her. Alt-Lois will now be called 'Ultra Woman', 'Ultra Lois', 'the other Lois' or just plain "Ultra" or sometimes a rare 'Ultra Lucy.' I'm trying to keep it clear who is who. I apologize in advance for any confusion between the Loises.

***

A few nights later in the other dimension…

Lucy sat down on her bed, lifted up her feet, and wiggled her toes. "Good night, toes. Nice to see you again."

Lois and Clark had given her a box of dark chocolates for Valentine's Day. They told her the gift was from Kal, but she knew the truth. She sighed. It was kind of them to think of her. Since Clark's girlfriend had gone public as Ultra Woman, Lucy spent more and more nights alone in the apartment. Her days were already lonely.

She rubbed her bulging tummy. Well, not completely alone. A foot pressed against the side of her belly. Her mouth fell open in surprise. A full foot, five little toes and everything, was pressed distinctly against the inside of her tummy. Wow.

"Good night, little one. I love you," she said, placing her hand on the foot. "I can't wait to meet you."

The foot disappeared and a hand replaced it on the other side of her belly. Lucy caressed it with her hand. She wished she had someone with whom to share this moment. Clark and Lois were battling an oil fire in Oklahoma. Sam spent less time with them since his daughter and the "tights-wearing-freak" had officially become a couple. Lucy understood how Sam must feel. She felt like a third wheel as well. There was a spot in her chest that ached every time she saw Clark with another woman, even if the other woman was essentially herself. And her Clark… Lucy sighed. Her Clark thought she was a figment of his imagination. He didn't know the baby even existed.

"Soon, sweetie. Soon." Lucy continued to rub her belly; it had been aching all evening. She knew she shouldn't eat the whole box of chocolates — so she had only eaten half a box. She hadn't meant to, but self-control was difficult when she thought of her Clark. She missed him so much. Her dreams, the few she had these days with her sleeping so poorly, seemed wrong. There was tension back in her dimension. They had finally made love again. It had been over a week.

This dimension's Lois and Clark had this romantic day planned out for Valentine's Day. Or should she say Superman and Ultra Woman? They were flying to Paris. Lucy shook her head. Paris was the other Lois's Hawaii. Lucy stretched up and over her head. Hawaii. She and her Clark still had never made it there. As she stretched, Lucy felt a sharp pain by her belly. Oh, she shouldn't have done that.

Lucy took another deep breath and slowly released it. There, that felt better. She pulled her feet into bed. Ow! Her stomach twinged again. What had she done today to make her ache all over? Oh, right, she had walked down the stairs to the first floor and back to the fifth. Sam said it was good for her to get exercise.

She had read through all the baby and parenting books that everyone brought her. She would be an expert. Not that there was much else to do stuck in the apartment. She would hate to get herself addicted to another soap opera. Exhaling, Lucy rubbed her tummy. Yes, a half box of dark chocolates in one sitting was probably not the best idea she had ever had.

Lucy wanted to sleep. Sleeping meant dreaming and dreaming meant seeing her Clark, kissing her Clark, talking and laughing with her Clark, and if she was lucky, making love with her Clark. But sleep had eluded her the last few nights. She had caught up during the day with catnaps, but she was still exhausted and missed Clark. Both of them.

This Clark ate dinner with them, whenever he could, but his girlfriend kept a close eye on him. Lois didn't like him touching Lucy's tummy and communicating with the baby. Lois said it made Clark sad; Lucy thought it made Lois sadder. Lois hated that there was a connection that Lucy had with Clark that he didn't have with his girlfriend. "Someday" wasn't good enough for Lois.

Also, Lois was still jealous of her. Lucy tried to explain it had only been the one night; that they had been under the influence of '*Revenge,'* topped off with a little Interdimensional Time Sickness. That it hadn't meant anything. But Lois knew differently. She knew Lucy lied.

It *had* meant something. It meant that Lucy had been intimate with this Clark first, and that was something Lucy could never give back; something Clark would always remember. Something that Lois couldn't stop him from thinking about, if he wanted to. And it annoyed Lois to no end that there might be moments in the future when he would think fondly about that night. Lois didn't like it that Clark got uncomfortable when Elvis music played. Or how Lucy and Clark had glanced at one another that time it had played. So Lois made sure it never happened after that one time.

Lucy took another deep breath. There was that twitch again. If she didn't know that the baby was due on the fifteenth, she… oh, God! *Due* the fifteenth, but labor could start earlier than that and last for hours, maybe days. *Idiot!*

Lucy swung her feet back over the edge of her bed. She checked Lois's room. Nope, not back from the oil refinery fire. She plodded out to the living room. She took a deep breath and rubbed her tummy. Picking up the phone, she dialed Clark's number.

"Hello?" a drowsy voice answered.

"Sam! Is Clark back?"

"Nope. Haven't seen him. Is something up?"

"I think I'm in labor," Lucy told him.

He yawned. "All right, sweetie. Why don't you go back to bed and call me in the morning or when contractions are three minutes apart."

"Sam!" she yelled.

"Huh? What? Labor? Okay. Sorry, I'm awake now. I'll be right over."

"Thank you," Lucy said hanging up.

Turning on the TV, Lucy checked to see if MNN was still covering the oil refinery fire, but it wasn't. Lucy drummed her fingers on the TV remote and then returned to the telephone and dialed the Smallville house number. Lucy knew the super duo spent some nights there, because she knew they wouldn't dare spend any here, not with her super hearing. The phone rang off the hook. She sighed, hanging up the phone. They were still probably battling the fire.

Suddenly, Lucy felt completely unprepared for this event in her life and wished she could have Clark there to comfort her. Either of them. Why hadn't she just returned to her dimension for the birth? Her Clark would have understood. Oh, right, the stand-in. She wasn't a hundred percent sure at which point in her history this Clark had plucked her out and she still hadn't come up with a reasonable argument to convince her other self to return

to the past.

Who would want to leave Clark and have amnesia? Lucy shivered. And be with Lex. And kiss Dr. Deter. Ugh. Now her tummy not only hurt, she felt like she was going to throw up. At least she knew she wouldn't be stuck in this dimension forever. Ultra Woman wouldn't allow it. Ultra Woman would kidnap Clark's current wife and dump her in the past for Lucy if she asked, just to get Lucy out of the picture, out of her dimension. Of course, that would tick off this Clark… Lucy shrugged. It was definitely there as a backup plan.

And of course, there was the curse; that would not go away. No. Lucy wouldn't let herself dwell on that.

She hadn't taken a Lamaze class, being in hiding and all. But Lucy had read all about it and studied all those women on TV shows who were pregnant. She started breathing fast and regular and soon felt lightheaded. Oh, this wasn't going to work at all. What she needed was a Clark Kent to hold her hand and tell her everything would be all right.

She tried to levitate herself out of the chair, but she couldn't. She didn't know if it were the pain in her belly or if her super abilities were coming to an end because she was going to give birth. No! Not her superpowers. Couldn't she just keep a few, like hearing? She bit her bottom lip. She didn't need to fly. She liked it, but she could live without it. But super healing? Oh, she definitely wanted to keep that one. She put her hands on either side of her and pushed herself up to her feet.

Lucy opened the living room window and felt the cold breeze slap her in the face. "Clark!" Oh, right. "Superman! Ultra Woman! Help!" She tried this off and on for approximately five minutes to no avail before Sam arrived.

"Anything from Lois and Clark?" he asked.

"No, I've just tried calling them, but they must still be battling the oil refinery fire in Oklahoma and out of range," she said. "They'll show up eventually, I'm sure."

A sharp pain doubled her over.

"Breathe!" Sam told her.

Lucy growled at him. "No, I thought I'd just hold my breath and see if I could get this balloon any bigger."

"I see you haven't lost your sense of humor, at least."

"Ha ha," she scowled at him. Lucy grabbed Sam by the shoulders. "If Clark Kent doesn't show up for the birth of this child and I die, promise me you will go to Smallville and take the time machine to Kal and bring him back here to kill Clark! *Promise me*."

"Calm down, Lucy. He'll be here," Sam tried to reassure her, but his voice was shaking. She could tell he didn't want to do this without him either. "Breathe."

She growled at him.

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Clark and Lois arrived at the newsroom together. They hadn't left each other's side all night. First they'd had dinner at the apartment with Lucy. Lois had shown her how to make lasagna. He loved it when his girlfriend made pasta. Then the oil refinery fire, which took them several hours to put out and clean up. He grinned. Then they cleaned up in Smallville. He floated over to his desk.

"Down, boy," he heard his Lucy murmur.

Ooops. He really had floated to his desk. Turning to smile at her, Clark said, "Just thinking about Ultra Woman."

"I figured," Lois replied, sitting down at Lucy's desk. "I saw on the news that you two were in New York for breakfast."

He nodded. "She wanted to see the view at the top of the Empire State Building."

"How King Kong of you."

"Ha-ha."

"And how was it? The view?" Lois asked, a twinkle in her eye.

It had been raining and foggy and he couldn't see anything but her. "The view was exquisite. I'm taking her to the Eiffel Tower tomorrow."

She smiled with a sigh. "I've always wanted to go there. Kal's promised me we'd go, but we haven't been there yet."

"Maybe he'll take you there for a honeymoon."

His girlfriend winked. "A second honeymoon?"

"A real honeymoon. I thought the first one got interrupted by business."

Lois sighed. "Oh, yes. There was an emergency at work and he had to zip off. Like you, Kal takes his job seriously."

If they kept this up for much longer, someone was going to notice they weren't talking about other people. Clark cleared his throat and returned to his desk. "I was just thinking I should have picked up—"

"*Clark Jerome Kent, if you don't show up for the birth of this baby after everything we've been through…"*

Clark gulped and was gone.

***

Lois glanced up from her desk. "Should have picked up what, Clark?"

But he wasn't there. She got hit in the face with a strong wind. Her brows came together. Strange, she hadn't heard anything. Picking up the papers that had blown off her desk with his departure, she listened for the cry for help, but heard nothing, not even a siren. She shrugged. It must have been important. He would explain his rudeness later, she was sure.

Gareth came over to her desk. "Where was Clark off to like a bolt of lightning? Hot story?"

She shrugged. "He didn't say."

"Perhaps Ultra Woman was calling him for a date or something?" he said in good humor.

"Perhaps." Lois smiled. "But I doubt it. They had breakfast in New York this morning."

Gareth handed her a message. "I believe this is yours, Lucy. It blew over to me when he left."

"Thank you." Lois glanced down at the message, her brow furrowing.

"Ultra Woman has him wrapped around her little finger." Gareth shook his head.

She smiled politely. "He doesn't seem to mind."

Gareth laughed, walking away.

The message was a reminder notice from her OB/GYN office about her doctor's appointment for that morning. What doctor's appointment? She hadn't made a doctor's appointment, and certainly not after becoming Ultra Woman. Picking up the phone, she dialed the number on the message.

"S.T.A.R. Labs. Please hold."

The phone slipped out of her hand. *Oh, crap*. The message was from Lucy. That was why Clark left so quickly; he heard her calling to him. She swallowed. Strange that he had when she hadn't. Quickly, she hung up the phone and then picked it up again, dialing her apartment.

"Hello?" her father answered.

"How is she?"

"Lois, thank God! When Clark arrived without you…"

"He forgot to relay the message," Lois stated, trying to keep emotion out of her tone.

Her father sighed. "Princess. Don't read too much into it, please. When women go into labor, men have a tendency to forget how to think. It has something to do with the woman in pain and the man having no control over the situation whatsoever."

"I know. Do you need anything?"

"A nurse. A doctor who has practiced medicine regularly in the last five years. A drink," her father started to ramble.

"Take a deep breath. You can do this. You're the best doctor I

know. It will be a piece of cake."

He lowered his voice, as if that would stop Clark from hearing him. "Lois, my hands are shaking."

"Good thing you aren't performing surgery then." She wanted to call him Daddy out of habit, but bit her tongue. "I'll bring your back-up to the rendezvous. Okay?"

Her father took a deep breath. "Not yet. Stay at work for now. She's nowhere near dilated enough. She still needs to do a lot more laboring before we move to the rendezvous. I'm hoping for time to take a nap. We've been up all night and we'll probably still be here at lunch." She heard Lucy cry out in pain and then her father hung up.

Her father had suggested that the birth not be a 'home' birth, because of the blood and the noise and for the unknown factor. They didn't know if this birth was going to be like a human birth or something else entirely. Clark had found an abandoned hospital, set for demolition in a couple of months time, on the other side of Metropolis.

Lucy got Lois to swear to bring Dr. Klein. She got Clark to swear to be by her side the entire time and her father to swear that, if push came to shove (no pun intended) Dr. Sam Lane was not to take Lucy to a real doctor or a real hospital. There was something that frightened Lucy more than death, but Lois didn't know what. It was something other than Superman's reputation.

Her father had given the pregnant Lucy a check-up just a few days before. Her blood pressure was better, although not quite to the level that her father had hoped. But when giving birth under this type of situation, a little stress was understandable.

The past weekend, Ultra Woman and Superman had cleaned the surgery room, disinfecting it. She would sterilize it with her heat vision before Clark brought the patient over. They had found an old operating table in the hospital and cleaned it up as well. A portable generator would supply them with energy. An oxygen tank, just in case. Sheets, towels, blankets, and medical supplies. A bassinette and baby blankets.

Clark wanted to bring his bassinette from Smallville, but it was a little too big even for Superman to be flying around with it unnoticed. James had shipped in a small bassinette and changing table. Perry filled in the rest with a stroller, bathtub, and clothing. As a grandfather, such purchases were easily overlooked by the public.

Perry hadn't mentioned their last meeting when Lois saw him for the impromptu baby shower. Probably best if they never mentioned it again. He did a great job of calling her Lucy, but after a while it just got confusing. By the end of the evening there was Lucy, herself, and Kal's Lucy. After James and Perry had left, Clark suggested that Lucy be called Lois after the birth, since she would definitely not be Lucy anymore… And that Lois be called Lucy, since his Lois was technically dead. Her father wasn't the only one confused with the name change switch. She had suggested Kal's Lucy and Clark's Lucy. KL and Lucy, for short. The name Lois would then be gone from this dimension, so Lex would never find out. But with all good intentions… the name Lois still remained.

Lois took a deep breath. All right, time to stop putting off the inevitable. She picked up the phone and called Dr. Klein to warn him that Ultra Woman was putting him on standby. She would pick him up when they finally headed to the rendezvous spot.

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Lucy held on to Clark's hand. "I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm okay," she repeated, squeezing his hand tighter and tighter and tighter. She released a breath, relaxing against his shoulder. They sat next to each other in her bed.

"How's the baby's heart rate?" Sam asked from the doorway.

Clark lifted his hand from her exposed belly. "Sorry, I forgot to count. I was trying to calm her." He wasn't talking about the mother.

"Is she scared?" Lucy asked, worried.

"Birth is life's first adventure, sweetie," Sam replied. "We all live through it and never remember it. Thank God."

"She's happy I'm here with you. She doesn't want you to be alone."

Sam threw up his hands at the slight. "Next contraction, time it and count heart beats, please." He tossed Clark the stopwatch. "I'm going to go lie down. Call me with any major changes."

They were alone for the first time in weeks, since Lois had revealed she was Ultra Woman. "I'm sorry I'm late." Clark kissed her cheek. "When did the contractions start?"

"Last night sometime. I haven't gotten any sleep really."

"Oh, Lois, I'm sorry." He snuggled up against her. "Try to get some now, before the contractions get too close together. Sam said you still have a while to go," Clark informed her.

Lucy scowled. "James was right. I am dreadfully unprepared. This isn't something you can learn in a book. The pain has gone from discomfort to cramping to shooting agony, and I still have the worst of it to go."

Clark kissed her head again. "I won't leave you. Promise."

"Even for nuclear war?" she asked hopefully.

"Why? Have you heard something?" He grinned, knowing she was only joking. "Ultra Woman can handle anything that comes up," he told her, hoping nothing came up. "This was why you came here, so you wouldn't have to go through this alone."

"Thanks for putting your life on hold for me… us… we appreciate it, Clark."

"No problem. With Ultra Woman around, I can get a day off every once in a while… only…" He paused, unsure if he should voice his concerns to Lucy.

"Only what?"

"She hasn't come face to face with any super bad guys. She's mostly worked with me on rescues and natural disasters. I don't know what she would do if she came up against someone like Lex Luthor, especially with their history. Would she be able to control herself, her anger, without me there?"

Lucy raised a brow. "What would you do if Lex came after me or your girlfriend or…"

He swallowed. "The baby?"

"Lara." She smiled, taking hold of his hand. "I'm naming her after your birth mother."

"Kal will like that." Clark set his hand on her belly. "Lara." His heart swelled. She was too easy to love. "I don't know what I'd do if Lex or someone else came after her. You know I already love her like a daughter, I'd probably protect her as a daughter, too." He looked away. "I hope never to be put in a situation where I have to choose between the welfare of my child and killing someone." But he knew what he would do; he would protect his child no matter what, no matter the consequences.

"If something happens to me, Clark, promise me that you'll take Lara to her father. He'll need her. You've got to set time right and return my stand-in to the past."

"I know," Clark whispered. "But nothing is going to happen to you, Lois. You can survive this. It's just giving birth. Thousands of women do this every day."

She elbowed him. "Don't go there, Clark, please. Ow!" She rubbed her elbow. "When did you regrow your armored plating?"

Clark gulped. Not a good sign.

The phone rang. It was Lois checking in. *Ooops*. His girlfriend was going to give him hell for leaving like that. He glanced down at Lucy and sighed. When he had heard her in pain, his instincts took over. He had to come. Actually, Clark couldn't even remember changing into his Superman suit and then realized he hadn't. He had broken one of his cardinal rules: only fly as Superman. But Lucy hadn't been calling for Superman, she had called for Clark Kent.

"Ow. Ow. Ow!" Lucy screamed, jerking his hand.

"That was Lois," Sam said back in the doorway a minute later. "My daughter Lois, I mean." Yes, this name thing was confusing everyone.

"Oh?" Lucy said, glancing up and breathing through her mouth. "Is she on her way?" Clark couldn't tell if she was hopeful or wary. He wished there was some way to get his girlfriend to move past his one indiscretion with Lucy. Not that he had moved past it either. Betraying Kal would haunt him 'til the end of his days.

"No. I told her to hold tight. We'll call her before we move to the hospital."

"Oh." Lucy seemed disappointed.

"You didn't hear the conversation?" Sam asked.

"No. I think I fell asleep."

"Sounds like a plan." Sam nodded, but his glance to Clark said he was worried. He left again.

Lucy was quiet for a few minutes and Clark thought she had fallen back asleep.

"She's never going to forgive me, is she?" Lucy murmured.

"It's me she'll never forgive. You're only human."

"Ha-ha, Clark." She reached up and caressed his cheek.

"It was before I met her. It only happened the one time." Clark closed his eyes. It felt good when she touched him like that. Gentle. Sweet. Right.

"Making love to you she can forgive. After all, who could resist sleeping with Superman?"

He chuckled. "You'd be surprised."

"It was the falling in love with you that Lois will never forgive me for."

Clark gulped. What was she talking about? Why did she keep saying that? He hoped she wasn't getting Interdimensional Time Sickness again. "You didn't fall in love with me, Lois. You thought I was your Clark, not me."

Lucy turned her head so she could place a tender kiss on his lips. "Don't sell yourself short, Clark. I didn't set you up with Mayson only to keep your mind off me. It helped me stay away from you, too. You're a pretty irresistible fellow."

"You're just saying that because you miss your Clark and I remind you of him."

"A bit," she confessed. "But you two really are very different. Just like your Lois and I are very different."

He rubbed his thumb over her hand. The two Loises were very different, but also very similar.

"Don't worry. I know we weren't meant to be. And I do love my Clark more." Lucy snuggled up against his shoulder. "I just wanted you to know that when *we* made love," she sighed, taking hold of his hand in both of hers. "I was making love to you, not him."

Clark didn't know what to do with that information. He didn't think it was a good sign that his heart went flip-flop at the news. He didn't know what he should say as he ran his fingers through her hair. He did love her, he always had and he always would. Like her, he did love his Lois more, but that didn't stop his feelings for this Lois. Feelings he had since the first moment she kissed him a year ago. He felt he might be opening a Pandora's box if he admitted out loud that his feelings matched hers.

Her breathing was steady and deep. Lucy had fallen back asleep. Clark had always loved cuddling with her. Their relationship was more intimate in a completely different way than his relationship with Lois. Lucy was slow, gentle, and thoughtful, whereas Lois was indeed a hurricane, powerful, strong, yet unpredictable in a playful way.

Clark really did love his Lois. He beamed. If he had to tie it to one thing, it was that she had never been in awe of his powers and abilities… with one notable exception. She made him feel normal… no, not normal. Human. Just like Lucy had always treated James Olsen as an equal — no wonder the man was half in love with her —Lois had always treated him as an equal, even when he knew she was far superior to him in every way.

Lucy shifted in her sleep, moaned. Was she dreaming? Or was she reliving her stand-in's day? *What's going on in Kal's life?* he wondered. Since Lois took over as Lucy El, Clark didn't get to spend time alone with Lucy anymore. Didn't get to hear about what was going on in her real life. He kind of missed Lucy's soap opera life tales. Sharing her life with him had always brought them a closeness he enjoyed. Not that he would ever admit it to her, because she could ramble on so.

Lucy moaned again. "Clark." She pulled his hand to her chest.

He moved his hand to her stomach to feel the baby's heart rate and started the stopwatch with the hand clutched at her chest.

A few minutes later Lucy relaxed again, leaning against his shoulder. "Clark, do me a favor," she whispered.

"Anything, Lois."

"Don't let this baby be born today."

"What?" he stammered. What was she talking about?

"I don't want her born on the thirteenth."

Clark chuckled. "I don't think that's really up to you. It's up to her."

"Well, tell her then."

His chuckles turned to laughter. "She's not going to understand, Lois. Time is a complex concept for someone who hasn't even been born yet."

She grimaced. "Go ahead. Make fun of the non-Kryptonian, then." She pouted.

Clark placed his hand back on her belly. "She's growing fainter, harder to read."

Lucy gasped. "Her heart rate?"

"No. Her mind. Her emotions."

She moved his hand down to the bottom of her belly.

"Oh!" He jumped in surprise. "She's changed position."

Laughing, Lucy grabbed her belly with another gasp. "You've got to stop making me laugh, Clark."

Clark smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. Are you okay?"

Lucy nodded. "Help me up. Time to walk and visit the ladies' room."

After the bathroom, they took a walk around the apartment three times before Lucy made them sit back down. "I'm tired," she murmured, battling to keep her eyes open.

Clark picked her up and carried her back to bed. She was asleep longer this time, almost an hour. So tired, she even slept through contractions. Lois stopped by to check on everyone during this time. Correction, Ultra Woman stopped by. She set a cup of ice chips on the side table.

"How's she doing?" Ultra Woman asked, sitting down on the bed.

"Fine. Nothing strange or alarming so far. Just normal labor, I think," he answered.

His girlfriend set her hand on Lucy's belly, next to and touching his hand. He had forgotten he still had it there. The connection was instantaneous. They both gasped in delight as Lara filled them with happiness, love. Lara, Lois, and he were a family. Lois placed her other hand over her mouth, her eyes filling with tears.

"Oh, Clark," she whispered, her lips shaking. "She loves us. She loves us."

Clark took Lois's hand off the tummy and held it in his hand, pulling her to him. "She loves them."

Lois closed her eyes and nodded. "Right."

He placed a kiss upon her lips. "I love you."

"You wouldn't leave me for them, would you?" she asked. "If you could?"

"Never been an option, Wow Woman," Clark murmured,

kissing her again. “I love you too much.”

Ultra Woman smiled. “Just checking.” She took off her mask and wiped around her eyes. “We’ve got to find a more comfortable mask. This one is horrible to cry in.”

Clark snickered and she pushed him for laughing at her.

“I’ll be back later. Call me if you need me sooner.” She slipped her mask back on.

“Always.”

She blew him a kiss and disappeared.

His girlfriend still took his breath away. How could he be so lucky that she loved him? It just didn’t seem fathomable.

“‘Wow Woman’?” Lucy murmured, next to him.

“You weren’t supposed to hear that,” Clark scolded gently. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Do I even want to know what she calls you?”

“Nope.” Merriment danced across his face. “But if you are dying of curiosity, I’ll let you ask Kal. He knows.” Clark mentally kicked himself, hoping she didn’t ask *how* Kal knew. Time to change the subject. “So, what’s going on with Kal? Anything exciting in the other dimension?”

“Did I tell you that some woman thought that Jimmy was Superman?”

“Jimmy?”

“Our James Olsen,” she clarified.

“You mean that researcher? That kid? Some woman thought *he* was Kal?” He laughed.

“Ninety-seven percent computer match.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “A computer said he was a ninety-seven percent match to us? Should I be insulted?”

Lois laughed softly with a smile. “Don’t worry. Kal thought it a high percentage as well. Her employer kidnapped her and me to extort Superman after he overheard her talking to Jimmy. He tried to get Superman to do something illegal, but Clark saved the day.”

“I always do,” he teased.

“The other Clark… my Clark,” Lucy said, cuddling against his shoulder. “Penny, the girl, discovered Jimmy was just an ordinary guy, but liked him enough to continue dating him nonetheless.”

“Lucky Jimmy. Most women are disappointed when I don’t show up in the blue suit.”

“Those of us lucky enough to know Clark Kent aren’t.”

Clark kissed the top of her head. He didn’t need her talking about being in love with him again. “So, what stories is Lois Lane working on this week?”

“Politics. Corporate corruption. The usual.” She pulled herself up to a sitting position. Taking a deep breath, she slowly released it. “There, that’s better.” She smiled at him, but he didn’t think it was a real smile. There was too much fear in her eyes.

“It will be okay, Lois. You can do this.”

“Thanks for being here, Clark.” Lucy swallowed, looking away. “It makes me feel like he’s here, too.”

“He’d want to be here, if he knew. I know he would. He loves you so much,” Clark reminded her.

She started to cry. “Why didn’t we tell him, Clark? How could we keep this from him?” Lucy leaned onto his chest and grabbed his shirt. “I’m the worst wife ever.”

“Lois.”

“How am I ever going to go home? There is no way I will ever be able to convince myself to go back to that day? I hurt him so much. It was Luthor! All Luthor’s fault. He kidnapped me from my wedding. He made the clone who tried to kill me. Then he convinced me that Clark was a bad man when I lost my memory. Lex tried to make me kill him. I could just tear him in two.”

At the sound of fabric tearing, Clark glanced down at what was left of his shirt. “Lois, are you all right?”

“Huh?” Lucy looked up at him, fabric in her hands. “How did I do that?”

“I don’t know. I thought you lost your super strength with the labor.”

“Me, too. I couldn’t even levitate myself out of a chair last night.” She doubled over. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” She screamed so loud, it caused his ears to ring.

“What’s going on in here?” Sam asked, running in.

“I don’t know. She was fine just a minute ago,” Clark said as Kal’s Lois started to float into the air. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down.

“Oh, my back. Rub my back, Clark. All this sitting in bed is hurting my back.”

Clark looked at Sam for approval. Sam shrugged. “Allowed. Gentle.”

“My stomach.” She placed a hand over her mouth. “I think I’m going to be sick.” Clark let go of her wrist and she floated into the air again.

“I’ll bring you a bowl,” Sam suggested, leaving the room.

Clark nodded. Her normal labor just started going haywire. When Sam returned, Lucy threw up into the bowl.

“You need to stay hydrated, Lucy. Have you had anything to drink today?”

Lucy stared at Sam with blank eyes.

“No, I don’t think she has. The ice chips! Lois brought ice, Lois. Do you want some?” Clark lifted the cup off the side table and handed it to her.

Lucy plucked a couple of ice chips off the top and set them in her mouth. “They’re gone.”

Clark set his hand on her forehead. “Sam.”

Sam set his hand on her forehead. “This isn’t good, Lucy. Let’s take your temperature.” He stuck a thermometer into her mouth.

“I run hot,” Clark reminded him.

“She’s not you. Her body is trying to figure out what do to with all this stuff running through it. Hormones. Estrogen. And Kryptonian genetic material. What to keep, what to discard, what she’ll need as a new mother, what she won’t.” He pulled the thermometer out of her mouth. “One hundred five degrees. Lucy, sweetie, you’re too hot.”

“I feel fine, except my tummy hurts.” She started rubbing her stomach again.

“Cool bath?” Clark suggested.

Sam nodded, leaving the room.

Clark brought her the ice chips. “Eat.”

Lucy nodded and munched on ice chips. They could hear Sam running the bath. She looked at Clark. “I’m scared, Clark.” Her bottom lip started to shake.

“You’ll be okay, honey.”

“Maybe we should call Lois,” she suggested. “I don’t think you should bathe with me.”

Clark’s mouth twist upwards as he chuckled. “Probably for the best.” He went into the other room to call his girlfriend, when he felt a swift breeze fly past. He turned and saw the windows fly open and Lucy take a flying leap, but Ultra Woman suddenly blocked the exit, keeping Lucy inside.

“Going somewhere, Lucy?” Ultra Woman asked her. Clark set down the phone.

“I’m going to kill him! Lex Luthor is the worst man in the world and he’s going to pay for all the torment he made me and Clark go through,” Lucy shouted.

“I’ll agree with you there, Lucy, but this is neither the time nor the place.” Ultra Woman took Lucy’s wrist and brought her back inside. “I thought that was you I heard screaming a minute ago.” She looked around her to Clark. “Need some help?”

He nodded, sticking his finger in his ear. It was still ringing.

“Got you good, did she?” Ultra Woman smiled.

"Think she was loud wherever you were? Try sitting next to her when she screams like that."

"Good thing we soundproofed the apartment."

"We were just about to put her into a bath to cool her down. Her temperature is at 105. She suggested I call you for backup and then this." Clark was dumbfounded. "She was fine five minutes ago."

Lucy tugged on Ultra Woman, trying to return to the window, then she doubled over screaming. Clark was instantly at her side. She strained against both of them, her feet not touching the ground.

"Lois," Clark said calmly. "Lois, honey, you need to think about the baby. Think about Lara and Clark. You don't want to do anything that might upset them or hurt them, do you?"

Lucy strained against them a moment longer and then collapsed into a pile of tears. "No."

He picked her up. "Let's go sit in the bath, shall we? Nice and cool."

At the bathroom door, Sam asked, "What's going on out there?"

"Lucy's just acting out her favorite scene from…"

Clark glared at Ultra Woman and she didn't finish her sentence. He set Lucy down, but she refused to let go of his hand.

"You promised," she reminded him, staring into his eyes. "I need you, Clark. I cannot do this alone."

"You won't be alone, honey," Ultra Woman told her. "You've got me. He doesn't need to see you naked."

Clark's eyes went wide at the thought and he rapidly shook his head. He really didn't need to be in the bathroom with a naked pregnant Lucy and his girlfriend. No way.

"See? You know how turned on he gets by pregnant women." Ultra Woman pulled Clark's hand out of Lucy's and shut the bathroom door.

He turned to Sam, whose brow was raised by Ultra Woman's statement, and Clark cleared his throat. "I have no idea what she meant by that." He really didn't.

"What's going on with her?" Sam asked.

"She wants to kill Lex Luthor."

"No — Lucy," Sam clarified.

"Yup, that one." Clark nodded. "One Lex Luthor will do in a pinch. Interchangeable, I guess."

"I'm ready for that drink, now," Sam said, leaning against the wall and sliding to the floor. "Maybe we should let both of them have a freebie. Set them loose, see what they do." He shrugged. "The world would be a better place."

Clark shook his head. "I know you hate Lex Luthor as much as the rest of us, but that is no justification for killing the man. Now, if he had physically and irreparably harmed either one of them, I'd say all bets were off."

"Clark, I know you feel a bond between you and Lucy's baby. Imagine she's all grown up. You've raised her yourself with blood, sweat, and tears. And some psychopath that you introduced her to, takes her and hides her away for almost four years and you haven't known whether or not she was alive or dead, or what else he might be doing to her. Now tell me again, how I hate him as much as the rest of you?"

Clark buried his head in his hands. "I would have ripped the man in two," he whispered.

"It's not too late," Sam told him with a nudge, but Clark shook his head. "My daughter has more self-control than I ever have. If I had been locked up by a mad man for three years and then suddenly had super powers, he'd be a goner."

Clark sighed. "Yep. She's pretty special, that one."

"Clark. Still my daughter." Sam raised his brow at him. "I'm keeping an eye on the two of you."

"Yes, sir."

"And I'm telling you right now. I'm never going to go through this again. I know as the day progresses, it's only going to get worse. I repeat, I am not going to do it again." He stared right into Clark's eyes.

Clark swallowed. "Message received, Dr. Lane, loud and clear."

"Good."

He looked down. As if it were likely, anyway. Clark sighed again, thinking of that moment when Lara had bonded with him and Lois. The joy in Lois's eyes, she was so happy, the feeling of them as a family. It would be worth it to go through it all again, to see that light in her eyes once more. Too bad it wasn't in the cards for them. It would have been nice to have a family of his own someday.

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It was after ten o'clock that night when Sam announced that Lucy was finally dilated enough to move to their makeshift hospital. The mother had calmed down again. That flare-up of super abilities had reverted to a normal labor an hour later, then reared its ugly head again about four-fifteen and then again a couple hours later when her water finally broke. Her temperature had fluctuated between a normal 98.6 to 105.3 degrees. They were all tired and exhausted, especially Lucy, by the time Sam made the announcement. He had taken another nap that afternoon and Ultra Woman had returned to the office after lunch, only to be called home again just after four. Clark had been on duty all day, refusing to leave, refusing to take a break, except when Lucy was in the bathroom.

Lucy knew that in some ways, Clark felt as close to this baby as if it were his own. He was holding on to Lois's hand while rubbing her back when Sam told them the news.

"Oh, yea! It's almost over." She smiled at Clark.

Sam shook his head. "No, sweetie. The hard part is just beginning."

"What?!" Lucy stammered.

"This has only been labor. You still have to do birth."

Lucy's eyes actually rolled back in her head with exhaustion and only Clark's calm voice revived her. "Think of Lara."

She blinked. Right. Her daughter. "I'm so tired. Can't I sleep for a while?"

Sam shrugged. "Go ahead and try. Don't think it's going to happen, do you?"

The contractions had come so closely together they felt like they were on top of each other at times. She had gone through sixteen cups of ice chips in the last three hours alone. She looked up at Clark. He looked so much like her Clark that she almost felt him present. "Don't leave me."

Clark smiled down at her. "Wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

"I love you so much," Lucy said, pulling him in for a kiss on her lips.

"I'll relay the message to Clark," he murmured. "Or better yet, you do it."

This Clark would never let her daydream, not even once, that he was her Clark. He always reminded her that he was the other Clark. He didn't want her to fall into the trap of believing he was her Clark, of pushing herself over the edge towards delusion again. Although he never stopped her from kissing him from time to time either, Lucy noticed.

Ultra Woman had been generous and not done more than growl the first few times Lucy had kissed Clark. His girlfriend had seen that Lucy needed Clark, really needed him as her friend, as her rock to anchor her to reality. Ultra Woman had even told Lucy, when they were alone in the bathroom, that it was okay. Ultra Woman wouldn't punish either of them for what happened that day. But then she informed Lucy in no uncertain terms, that if Lucy tried to kiss Clark again after the baby's birthday, Lucy would meet with all fury of Ultra Woman's powers.

When neither Sam nor Ultra Woman could control her in her manic phase, Clark just had to take her hand and speak to her as if he were Kal — call her "honey," remind her she was doing it for Lara — and she would calm right down. Clark had called her Lois from the moment he arrived that morning and hadn't stopped. This wasn't a day for secret identities or for hiding. This day was about Lara and Clark never let her or anyone else forget it.

Ultra Woman flew Dr. Lane to the hospital and then went to retrieve Dr. Klein from S.T.A.R. Labs, where the poor man had probably nibbled his fingernails down to the nubs, wondering when the call would come. Lois surmised that Clark was going to be outraged when he found out that they had contacted the scientist without obtaining his permission.

"Clark," Lucy whispered as he picked her up for the journey. Ultra Woman had already put Lucy into the nighty they had bought specially for the occasion. Clark had bundled her up in blankets as well; the cold February air hinted at snow.

"Yes, Lois."

"Don't be angry."

"That's not a good start to a conversation, Lois. What did you do?" Clark stopped at the windows and looked at her.

"I'm scared, Clark, and it's not a feeling I like."

"I know, honey. You'll be okay. You can do this."

"I'm scared of the curse, Clark. I'm scared that something is going to happen that we can't control or can't anticipate. So I…" Lucy bit her lip, glancing down. "I asked Lois… well, Ultra Woman, really, to bring Dr. Klein to our hospital. Just in case something happens and we need someone else to bounce ideas off of."

Clark took a deep breath and released it. "Lois, did you know that Mr. Wells showed me the paper with your funeral announcement in it?"

She blinked through her tears and focused her eyes on him. "You saw that? You read what it said happened? What they did to us?"

Clark nodded. "Why do you think I got so mad when you went to S.T.A.R. Labs when you were delusional? I knew what horrible things people could do, would do to someone in your condition. I couldn't let that happen to you or to Lara or to Clark. It's why I agreed to let you come and disrupt my life for a year. Why I felt, and still feel, you need protection. But if you trust that Dr. Klein as a scientist will not take advantage of you as a human being, I will trust your judgment."

"The Dr. Klein in my dimension warned me, after being told not to, that the mayor ordered Green Kryptonite bullets to be readied in case Superman couldn't control his powers when he was affected by the Red Kryptonite."

"What?!" Clark roared. "That would kill us."

Lois nodded. "Luckily, the bullet only grazed him. That little bit of Green Kryptonite counteracted all the Red."

"They beg for Superman's help, but the moment his powers go a little out of control, they try to kill him?" Clark shook his head, trying to understand that concept. "Kal didn't hurt anyone, did he?"

Lois shook her head. "I trust Dr. Klein, Clark. And I want him there. Please trust him again, too. For me."

Clark nodded, but did not speak.

"Clark. One last thing," she whispered as he lifted her out the window and then shut it behind them.

He held her closer.

"If something happens to me. If I don't survive…"

"Stop saying that, Lois. Please," he begged.

"If I don't survive, could you take my body back to Clark so he can bury me?"

Clark nodded, tears dusting his eyelashes. "You aren't allowed to die, Lois. I'm telling you that now. So, promise me you won't give up. Clark will never forgive you if you give up? Agreed?"

Lucy nodded against his chest. "Agreed."

Superman flew in a window at their makeshift hospital that Ultra Woman had left open for them. It was bitterly cold in the building. The February temperatures hinted at snowfall in Metropolis by Valentine's Day. Superman walked slowly down the deserted corridor to the operating room that he and Ultra Woman had prepared for the birth. Lucy shivered, hoping someone remembered to bring space heaters. They passed by Dr. Klein sitting in a chair outside the door. He was all bundled up and rubbing his hands together for warmth. He stood up as they approached.

"Hi," murmured the scientist.

Clark stopped. "Good evening, Dr. Klein. I believe you remember my friend, Lucy." He turned her towards the man.

"Hello, Dr. Klein. Thank you so much for coming." Lucy smiled gratefully at him.

Dr. Klein returned her smile. "Thank you for entrusting me with this honor."

Lucy reached out and took his hand. "You are a good and trustworthy man." She winced, a sharp pain in her tummy reminding her why they were there. "Nothing personal, but I hope we don't need you."

"No offense taken. I hope you don't need me, either."

"Clark." The pain was becoming unbearable.

"Dr. Klein." Clark nodded his head and took her inside.

Superman and Ultra Woman had done a good job sterilizing the room. Unfortunately, it looked more like a stainless steel kitchen than a happy birthing room. At least Ultra Woman had found some cushions for the operating table. Clark set Lucy down on top of them.

"You could have gotten me a bed," Lucy told them. "Babies have been born on beds for thousands of years." She grimaced and pulled her knees to her chest. "Ow!"

"Breathe," Sam reminded her.

Lucy shivered. It was so cold in the room. "Can't we have some heat? I'm going to be half naked for most of this."

"Our generators are only powerful enough to run the lights and machines. No extra juice for heat. Sorry," Clark apologized. He handed her a hot blanket, warmed up by heat vision.

"I don't recommend starting a fire," Sam reminded them proactively. "Indoor fires make great death traps."

Ultra Woman rolled her eyes and Lucy smiled. They both had heard their fathers spout the obvious before.

"Blankets it is," Lucy said, covering herself up well. She held out her hand. "Clark."

He took her hand.

"You lost the coin toss. You get to stay up with me, while Lo… Ultra Woman will be helping Dr. Lane with the birth." Lucy pulled Clark tight up against her side. "Don't leave me."

"Not planning on it."

Ultra Woman smiled at her. There had been no coin toss. There was no way any of them were going to let Clark stand at that end of her body during the birth. It had been a unanimous vote, three to zero; Clark had been absent for the vote.

"That means she's cutting Lara's cord," Lucy informed him.

"But… but…" he stammered.

"You aren't the father, Clark," Lucy reminded him quietly. "Let her do it. I need you here with me."

"Okay," he replied, but she could see that he was hurt by this decision.

Lucy pulled him close to her as another painful contraction started. "Clark!"

Clark wrapped his arms and his warmth around her.

She turned and whispered in his ear. "Lois asked that the first cord you cut be for your own child. Give her that."

Clark gazed down at the other end of the table and into his girlfriend's eyes that glanced up at Lucy's words. "I love you," he whispered and Ultra Woman smiled, knowing that those words were for her. He kissed Lucy's cheek. "You're a good friend."

But she couldn't hear him over her own screams.

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"All right now, one more time, Lucy. Push," Sam instructed.

"I can't, I'm tired. Let Lois push for a while." She lay back against Clark's shoulder.

Ultra Woman laughed. "Sorry, honey. No can do."

"Come on, Lois. You can do this," Clark coaxed her. "Almost there. Do you have one more push for Lara?"

Lucy took a deep breath, held tightly onto Clark's arm, and pushed with what was left of her screaming ability. She collapsed against Clark once more.

Dr. Lane smiled ecstatically. "We did it. Here she is," he said, holding up a bloody infant into the air for a moment for Lucy and Clark to see. "Lois, suction."

Ultra Woman took a nose aspirator and sucked the mucus from the baby's nose and mouth. Then she wiped down Lara as best she could, while her father clamped her umbilical cord. She smiled and picked up the shears to cut the cord at the moment her father told her to.

There was a clatter of metal onto the floor as the shears broke. "Clark!" Ultra Woman glanced up frantically at him. "Her cord is invulnerable."

"We've got to cut her free. What else can we use?" Dr. Lane asked, glancing uncertainly at his tools.

"Ultra Woman," Clark said calmly, unable to move from Lucy's side. "Use your heat vision."

Ultra Woman nodded and then focused on the cord. "It worked!" She grinned proudly as she swaddled Lara loosely in the baby blankets they had brought. First, Ultra Woman heated up the blanket with her heat vision. She didn't want her niece to get cold. She carried Lara to the new mother. "Lois Lane Kent, meet your daughter, Lara."

Lucy eagerly took Lara into her arms as the baby began to cry. "Hello, beautiful. I'm your mommy." She set her daughter onto her chest, bare skin to bare skin. The warmth must have been what Lara wanted because she instantly calmed down.

"We're not done yet, Lucy. I still need you to push out the afterbirth," Sam reminded them.

"Give her a few minutes to bond, Daddy," Ultra Woman told him, standing next to Clark. Clark warmed up another blanket with his heat vision and draped it over the patients.

"Oh, Uncle Clark, she has your eyes." Lucy smiled at him. "I don't know whose hair that is though. How can two brunettes have a blonde child?" She glanced down at Dr. Lane, but he was busy.

"She certainly has her mother's smile," said Clark. "She'll be a looker. I pity her daddy." He chuckled.

"Do you think she'll want to nurse?" Ultra Woman asked. "She seems quite tired."

"Aren't we all." Clark yawned. "What time is it?"

They looked at one another. None of them wore a watch. Clark had taken his off while massaging Lucy's back at the apartment. Ultra Woman straightened her mask and ran out to where Dr. Klein was sleeping in a chair outside the door, shaking him awake. "Dr. Klein?"

"Huh?" He blinked his eyes open. "Ultra Woman? Is something wrong?"

"Do you have the time?" she asked.

Dr. Klein rubbed his eyes and glanced down at his watch. "Let's see, it's five minutes after midnight."

"Five minutes after midnight!" she announced, returning to the room.

Dr. Klein followed her inside. "It looks like you've got yourself a Valentine's Day baby." He saw the baby on her mother's chest and turned away.

Lucy kissed her daughter's head. "You did listen to your mommy. See, not born on the thirteenth." She gazed up at Clark, who laughed.

"I brought a Polaroid camera," Dr. Klein said, holding up the camera. "I figured you would want photos that didn't need to go through a photo lab."

Clark grinned with joy as Dr. Klein took a photo of him, Lucy, and Lara. Then one of Ultra Woman, Clark, Lara, and her mommy. One of just mother and daughter. One of just Clark and Lara. And one of Clark, Ultra Woman, and Lara. Clark kissed his girlfriend's cheek. As Ultra Woman went to return Lara to her mother, Sam stopped her.

"Can you hold her for a few minutes, so Lucy and I can finish up here?" her father asked her.

"Absolutely," Ultra Woman replied. She could have had a daughter like this. She sighed. Her Lara wasn't meant to be, if Kal had been correct and she had indeed been pregnant at the time of the accident. Of course, Kal's assessment of her 'condition' did not equal cold hard facts in Ultra Woman's mind. It sure felt like she had been pregnant when she discovered she wasn't. Thinking about what might have been still hurt deep inside her. Ultra Woman gazed at Clark, her eyelashes dotted with tears.

Clark came and put an arm around Lois and the baby. He leaned over and kissed the top of Lara's head. "No, sweetie," Clark murmured to his niece. "Uncle Clark. Not Daddy. Uncle Clark." Then he looked at his girlfriend and she knew what he wanted to do. She nodded, gently lifting the baby up to her shoulder. Both she and Clark leaned a cheek against Lara's head and closed their eyes, feeling the warmth and happiness of unconditional parental love that Lara had with Kal and Lucy, that she shared with her Uncle Clark and Aunt Lois.

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Lucy held out her hand to him. "Clark."

He kissed Lara's head, then Ultra Woman's lips and went to his sister-in-law, taking her hand in his. Lucy felt cold. He forgot how cold it was at the hospital. "Sam, are we almost done? Can we take these ladies home?"

Sam glanced at him momentarily with a slight shake of his head. Something was wrong. Clark turned his attention to Lucy. Her color was off. The rosy glow had left her cheeks.

"Lois," he murmured, concerned.

Lucy caressed his cheek with her hand. "Tell Clark that I love him," she said. Her hand fell from his cheek, her eyes closed, and her head tilted away.

"Lois!" He gasped. "Sam!"

Ultra Woman was by his side a moment later.

"She's hemorrhaging, Clark. I can't get the bleeding to stop," Sam told them.

"Lucy. Hold on, honey. Clark needs you. Lara needs you." He leaned his head down to hers. "Please, Lois, please don't leave me. I need you."

"Can you x-ray her? Find out where she's bleeding?" Sam asked.

Ultra Woman looked down at Lucy's body. "Clark, can you hold Lara?"

"Here. I'll hold her," volunteered Dr. Klein.

Clark gave him a sharp look when Ultra Woman handed over the baby. Lucy had told him to trust Dr. Klein. He tried to remember her confidence in him. Either way, unless Dr. Klein had horrible hearing, he now knew that Lucy's name was really Lois and she had her own Clark. Clark hoped Lucy's trust in the scientist was well founded.

Ultra scanned Lucy's body. "I don't know. I can't tell." She looked at Clark, helpless.

He scanned her body as well. “I’m sorry, Sam.” Clark shook his head.

“Princess, come here and do what I’m doing while I set up the oxygen tank.”

Ultra Woman glanced at Clark with fear, but did as she was told.

Sam pulled off his gloves and tossed them into the trash. He grabbed a fresh pair and set up the oxygen tank, putting a mask over Lucy’s nose and mouth. “I’m not a surgeon, Clark. This is out of my level of expertise. I know she said no hospitals, ever, but I don’t know what else to do.”

They were all looking at Clark. He alone knew why Lois didn’t want to go to the hospital.

Lara started to cry.

Clark thought desperately. He couldn’t let Lucy die. There must be something they could do. An idea came to him. “Dr. Klein, give Lara to me. Ultra Woman, take Dr. Klein back to S.T.A.R. Labs. He has some of my blood in his vault. Maybe a shot of that will be the lightning she needs.”

Ultra Woman nodded at him with understanding. Dr. Klein passed Lara to him and Clark held her gently in the crook of one arm as he still held her mother’s hand with the other. Lara whimpered as if she sensed something was wrong.

“Sam?” Clark glanced at the doctor.

“I don’t know. It might work,” Dr. Lane said, taking over from Ultra Woman’s attempts to stop the bleeding.

Ultra Woman dropped her gloves in the trash and took Dr. Klein’s arm. “Let’s go!” She ran out the door with the scientist before he could answer.

Clark wished someone else was there to hold Lara. He felt like he was pulled in two directions at once. He kissed Lara’s head and rocked back and forth. She calmed down and fell asleep. He sucked in the air around him, pulling the bassinette from across the room. He let go of Lucy’s hand for a moment while he quickly swaddled Lara and set her in the bassinette he had just warmed with his heat vision. Then he picked up Lucy’s hand again.

“Lois,” Clark said. “You promised me you would hold on. That you would survive. Concentrate on my voice, honey. Come back to me. Lara and I need you.” He was talking to her as if he was Kal, pretending she was his. He forgot himself for a moment. “Come on, honey. Your life together with Clark is just beginning. Don’t leave him. Clark needs you. Superman can’t be Superman without his Lois Lane. You told me that once, remember? He can’t do this without you. Hold on, Lois. Please, for Clark.” He closed his eyes and kissed her cheek.

Suddenly, he could hear Lois, screaming out in pain. “Lois?” What in the hell was going on? They were just supposed to pick up the blood at S.T.A.R. Labs and come back.

Clark closed his eyes. *Lois, what are you doing,* he thought. He heard her scream again, only this time inside his head. *Lois?*

I can do this, Clark. It is the only way to save her. I can’t let her die after she risked her life for me. Lara needs her mother.

“Clark?” Sam asked, glancing up.

Clark could feel in his mind Ultra Woman’s pain. Feel and hear her scream again. There was only one thing in the world that caused him pain like that and he hoped never to feel it again. He remembered specifically telling his Lois to stay away from it.

“Something’s wrong with Lois,” Clark finally said aloud, torn between staying with Lucy and rescuing his girlfriend. “What in the hell is she doing with the Kryptonite?”

“What?!” Sam growled. “That stuff will kill her.”

“I know.” Clark swallowed. Then he nodded to Sam. “Concentrate, Sam. If we lose Lucy before your daughter can return, it all will have been for naught.”

Sam nodded with a grimace.

“Hold on, Lois. Come back to me,” Clark whispered, speaking to both Loises at once. “Don’t give up.”

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A few minutes earlier, Ultra Woman and Dr. Klein had landed at S.T.A.R. Labs and quickly made their way to his office and vault.

“How do you have his blood? How is that even possible?” Ultra asked.

“Kryptonite. It weakened his immunity enough for us to draw blood. Left him kind of woozy though. He insisted that we take a sample when we were testing if it was possible for him to have children. That was before I knew about Lucy.” Dr. Klein punched in the electronic code for his vault.

“Clark said that your results were negative. Impossible,” she said, hoping he had made an error.

“His swimmers were all dead in the first sample. But after I found out about Lucy — that a Kryptonian-human child was possible — I remembered that we had gathered his seminal fluid sample the same day we drew his blood.” Dr. Klein pulled out one of the metal vials with Clark’s blood inside. “It is possible that the exposure to the Kryptonite killed off that sample. I kept asking him to re-test.” He put that vial back and retrieved the other one. “But he said that he’d never let himself become intimate with a woman again. Maybe he’ll let me re-test it, now.” He smiled at her, then stood there staring at the two vials.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“One of these blood samples may have microscopic glass fragments in it as the test tube it was originally in shattered. I’m just trying to remember which one.”

“We can’t use either sample, Dr. Klein.” Ultra Woman shook her head. “We’re injecting it into someone who clearly no longer has super healing powers. This might not work to begin with, but if we add the possibility that glass shards are introduced into her bloodstream as well, we might as well shoot her with a gun.”

Dr. Klein’s shoulders slumped and he returned the vials to the vault. He was about to shut the door, when she caught his arm.

“Is that the Kryptonite?” Ultra asked, pointing at the lead-lined box.

He nodded warily.

“Get it out. You’ll draw my blood and we’ll give that to her instead. It’s a better match and fresher anyway.”

“Are you nuts?” Dr. Klein demanded. “Clark will kill me. He isn’t going to want you anywhere near that stuff.”

“Lucy’s life is on the line. If she dies because I wasn’t willing to endure a little trauma on her behalf, I will never forgive myself.” Ultra Woman raised a brow as he just stood there staring at her. “Pull it out. If Superman can survive a little blood donation, so can I.”

Dr. Klein hesitantly pulled the box from the vault. “It really weakened him, Ultra Woman. And it took over two minutes before his immunity was weakened enough for me to draw the blood.”

“How bad can it be? It’s just a rock, right?” She shrugged.

The scientist gaped at her in disbelief. “Ultra Woman, you saw how it affected him at the mayoral debate. He couldn’t stand up, he had no strength, no energy, no powers. It’s bad.”

“No. I never saw the mayoral debate tapes. What else do we need? Syringes? An IV bag?”

Dr. Klein stared at her. “You never saw Superman at the mayoral debates?” He shook his head. “He said that it felt like he was a human being stabbed by a thousand swords at once.”

Ultra Woman swallowed. “Oh.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll need a stool.”

“Let it be on record that I discouraged you in this,” Dr. Klein stated.

She nodded. “On record. Check.”

“They did a blood drive this afternoon in the break room, let me see if any of the supplies are still there.” Dr. Klein ran out of

his office and she followed him, carrying the Kryptonite box and shutting his safe as she passed by. “It looks like they will be continuing the drive on Monday. Lie down, Ultra Woman.”

Lois nodded and lay down on the supplied cot. He opened the box before he readied the blood drawing supplies.

Ultra Woman’s first reaction was relief. It didn’t work. The Kryptonite had no effect on her. Nothing could kill her. Then the swords pricked her in every one of her nerve endings and Ultra Woman screamed, having felt no pain worse than this in her entire life. Dying had been less painful. She tried to take a deep breath, but even breathing was difficult.

“Do you want to continue?” Dr. Klein asked.

She nodded. *I can do this. If Clark can do this, I can do this.* Ultra Woman screamed again.

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Ultra Woman ran into the operating room. “Am I too late?” she asked urgently, carefully tossing the bag of blood to Clark. He hung it on the IV pole that Sam had hooked up in her absence. She stumbled and fell to the ground.

“Lois!” both men gasped.

“I’m fine. Just tired. Exhausted.” Ultra Woman swallowed, taking a breath. “I left Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs. I couldn’t carry him back.” She leaned up against the wall of the room. “It took me twice as long to fly here as it did with me carrying him.” She closed her eyes.

“Just rest, honey. You’ll feel better soon,” Clark reassured her. He pulled a blanket from the pile next to him and tossed it to her.

“Okay,” Sam said, releasing a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.” He plugged Ultra Woman’s new crimson donation into Lucy’s IV. He returned to the end of the table to continue sponging up her hemorrhaging blood that would not stop.

Clark still held on to Lucy’s hand. “You can do this, Lois. Live. Live for Clark. Live for Lara. The world needs you. Superman needs you. Survive, honey. Survive.” Nothing happened. He looked down the table to Sam, who shook his head. Clark leaned against her head. “I will never give up on you, Lois. You can do this. You can beat the curse. Don’t let Tempus win!”

Lucy’s chest arched upward as the blood finally reached her heart. Then she started to twitch slowly at first, then more and more violently from head to foot. Ultra Woman stood up and walked to Clark. They just stood there and watched. The twitching slowed as Lucy started to float.

“Clark, hold her down!” Sam ordered.

Clark smiled at Ultra Woman as he held Lucy to the table. “Powerful juice you’ve got there, honey.”

Ultra Woman kissed his cheek and picked up Lara, cooing softly to the baby. “Who loves little Lara? Mama loves little Lara.”

Sam glanced up and watched his daughter for a moment, then shook his head like he was seeing a completely different person. He glanced at Clark who couldn’t help but smile at him. *Never go through this again, huh?* Wait ‘til he got a taste of being a grandpa.

Clark looked at Lucy and sighed. Had it worked? He closed his eyes and listened to her heart. “Her heart has stopped racing,” he said to Sam. “And her pulse feels stronger.”

“That’s something. Let’s hope that super blood will stop the bleeding. I wish we had some morphine.”

“It isn’t good for the baby,” Ultra Woman said from the other side of the room where she was floating lightly with Lara.

“She’s not pregnant anymore,” Clark reminded her.

Ultra Woman rolled her eyes. “Mother’s milk.” Why did Clark feel like she just called him an idiot? “We need to feed Lara soon if Lucy doesn’t perk up enough to breastfeed. Anyone think to bring any formula?” At their silence, she shook her head. “We need to give her a bath. Get her vital stats. Weight, height. Is Lucy stable enough to move?”

Sam shook his head.

Clark’s girlfriend cooed to the baby. “We’ll give mommy a few more minutes, won’t we, little Lara?”

“It took you all night to come out of your coma, Lois,” her father reminded her.

“She was in a coma?” Clark looked at Lois again with intense love. He couldn’t believe how close he had been at losing her. Twice. No. Three times. Kryptonite. Clark shook his head. That woman was his world. She beamed at him with all her radiant sunshine, but he wouldn’t feel whole again until he knew this other Lois would survive. “Is Lucy in a coma? Or just unconscious?” he asked the doctor.

Sam shrugged. “She’s had quite a day. Exhausted. Gave birth. Little to no sleep. That Lucy’s alive is more than I could hope for after what she’s been through in the last hour. Sleep is the best thing for her right now. I don’t want to move her for at least another hour unless there is a drastic change.”

Clark nodded. Understandable.

“Lois, why don’t you bundle Lara up and take her home?” Sam suggested. “Do everything you need to do. There is formula at the apartment. If you need anything, I’m sure Mr. Olsen would make a grocery run for you.”

“At one o’clock in the morning?” Ultra Woman raised a brow at him. “We have formula, bottles, and diapers at the apartment, she should hold out until morning. And I wouldn’t mind some one-on-one time with my little darling here.”

Clark sighed, knowing that Ultra Woman couldn’t help bonding with Lara, but it would make it all that much harder when she had to go home. “*Lucy’s* little darling.”

Ultra Woman waved her hand at the distinction. “Lara can’t tell the difference, Clark. Just like she thinks you’re her daddy.” She glanced over at him and he wondered if she could sense the flip-flop of his heart when she said that.

“You all right for flying home?” he asked. “Maybe you should rest here a little while longer. Kryptonite exposure isn’t easy to recover from.”

Lois floated over to him. “Stay with Lucy, Clark. She needs you right now. I’ll be okay. I’ve got my little battery charger, right here.” She gave a silly grin to Lara.

“Someone should go back and check on Dr. Klein. The lab needs to be sterilized and the tools and residual blood samples destroyed.”

“Has she stopped hemorrhaging, Daddy?” Ultra Woman asked.

“For the most part.” Sam nodded, tossing some bloody towels into the trash.

“I’ll go,” Ultra Woman said, almost handing Lara to Clark and then changing her mind. They floated over to Sam. “Do you want to go to Grandpa?” she asked Lara.

“I could use a break.” Sam sighed, pulling off his bloody gloves. “Hi there, angel,” he said, unable to stop the smile coming to his lips as he took Lara out of his daughter’s hands. “Nice to finally meet you.”

Clark closed his eyes. *Sneaky,* he said to her telepathically. She gave him a naughty grin, rushing over to him with a kiss.

“I needed my hands free,” Ultra Lois murmured, cupping his face. “You owe me one hell of a Valentine’s Day, buster.”

“What are you talking about? What could beat the excitement of this?” Clark smiled tenderly at her.

You know. She winked. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He nodded and then kissed her. “Fly safe.”

Ultra Woman flew out the door and returned two seconds later with the chair that Dr. Klein had been using. She set it down behind Clark and then disappeared again.

“Thanks,” he called, but she was gone. Clark sat down, putting his head next to Lucy’s. He ran his fingers through her

hair. “Come back to us, Lois. Lara is beautiful and she wants to get to know you. Clark misses you.” He lowered his voice so Sam couldn’t hear him. “I miss you. You know, president of your fan club. The ‘I love Lois’ club.” She didn’t react. He had been hopeful, but not optimistic. “I know you’re tired. I know you’ve had a long day. We just need to know that you’re okay. We’re worried about you.” Her body arched again and rested on the table, no longer floating.

Clark glanced over at Sam, who was cooing at Lara. What a ray of sunshine that baby would bring to their lives. Until it was time for her to return to her dimension and her real daddy. He sighed.

The blood in the IV bag was almost empty. He hoped it would be enough, that she wouldn’t start bleeding again when the super blood thinned in her bloodstream. He wondered what residual effects might remain, if any. If it had only worked like a shot of adrenaline to stop her hemorrhaging, he would be happy. But a little super healing would be an extra bonus for Kal… and for her. He ran his fingers down her face. “Sam, can I take off the oxygen mask?”

“How’s her pulse?”

Clark placed a couple of fingers at her neck; his own heart was beating so loud he couldn’t hear hers. “Stronger.” Better.

Sam handed Lara to Clark. He put a blood pressure gauge on Lucy’s arm and pulled out his stethoscope.

“Hello there, beautiful.” Clark never in his life thought anything could be so precious. “Your daddy is the luckiest man in the whole wide universe. Not only does he have a sweet, loving mommy like yours, but he also has the most loved daughter ever imagined. You are unique, little one. The first and only of your kind. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Do you know that you have two mommies and two daddies willing to spoil you rotten? And an extra grandpa, as well. And a line of men a block long to be your uncles. If ever you don’t feel loved enough in your dimension, you are more than welcome to come and live with Uncle Super and Aunt Ultra here in our dimension.” He kissed the top of her head. Walking over to the bassinette, he found the little pink hat that he had tucked into the side. He placed it on her head to keep her warm. He turned around to see Sam, watching him. “I think Grandpa wants you back, little one.”

Sam had taken off the oxygen mask and Lucy looked more rosy-cheeked and less at death’s door without it. Clark handed Lara back to Sam’s outstretched hands and sat back down next to Lucy. He took her hand in his once more.

“She’s the most wonderful daughter, Lois. Wake up and meet her, please.” He kissed her hand. “You know, you taught me what love feels like. I never thought I’d love someone more than you. Then you helped me find my Lois. And now Lara.” His lips trembled as he whispered to her. “My heart doesn’t know what to do with all this love. My dimension is going to explode with all this happiness you brought us.” He ran his fingers down her cheek. “I love you so much.” He placed a gentle kiss upon Lucy’s lips. “Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. Wake up.”

Her eyes slowly started to blink and he felt a gentle squeeze on his hand.

Clark didn’t want to say anything, didn’t want to do anything, in case it was a figment of his imagination.

Lucy’s eyes opened and focused on him. “Clark, you’re here,” she whispered hoarsely, bringing his hand to her lips. “I missed you so.”

Ultra Woman returned and rushed to his side. “Did it work?” She looked down at Lucy.

Lucy’s damp eyes closed for a moment. “Oh, *that* Clark.” Her love for Clark had pulled her back, but it turned out he was again the wrong Clark. It was as if his flip-flop heart went silent. He would never have been enough for this woman.

“Daddy!”

Sam brought Lara back towards her mother. “Oh God, Clark!” he gasped. “She’s alive.”

“My daughter?” Lucy murmured.

Sam passed the swaddled Lara to Clark and he held her so Lucy could see her daughter again.

“Hi, precious. Sorry, about that. Mommy’s had a long day and I got tired.” She reached out and caressed her cheek. “She’s so soft.” Her lips began to quiver and she turned her gaze to Ultra Lois. “Can you take her home for me? I’m so tired and it’s so cold here.” Her eyes closed, as she blinked slowly.

“Of course. My pleasure,” Ultra Woman replied, not wanting anyone to take away that opportunity again.

“Thank you, Lois,” Lucy whispered to her twin. “Clark will bring me home when he can.” She was still holding on to his hand.

“Are you up for this, Lois?” Clark asked her.

She nodded. “I’d say I’m seventy-five, eighty percent. I would never let anything happen to her.”

Clark held out Lara to her and she set the sleeping baby into the bassinette and covered her with blankets warmed by heat vision to block the cold during the flight home.

Ultra Woman turned to Lucy. “We’ll try nursing once you’ve gotten a few hours sleep. Mother’s milk will be best for her.” She kissed Clark on the cheek and nodded toward her father. “See you at home.” Carefully, she picked up the bassinette and left the room.

“Sleep, Lois,” Clark commanded. “You’ve had a busy day.”

“She’s so beautiful, isn’t she, Clark?” Lucy whispered.

“Now, now. You don’t want to jinx her. She might turn into a stubborn, obstinate, hard-nosed reporter like her mommy,” he teased.

“Not with you as a father.” She set her head on his hand. “I’m so cold, Clark. Can you hold me?”

He glanced at Sam, who nodded. Clark pulled her into his arms and Sam covered her with some more heat vision warmed blankets.

Lucy rested her head against his chest. “I’ve always slept better with you around,” she murmured.

Clark swallowed. Soon she was back asleep. He watched as Sam cleaned up the mess they had created. All those blood-soaked towels. “Don’t worry about it, Sam. After I bring Lucy home, your daughter and I will come back and sterilize this place again. We’ll incinerate all the evidence.”

Sam leaned against the operating table. “I could use about four thousand winks.”

“You did well, Sam. Lucy was right to choose you for her doctor.”

“Thanks, Clark. But if it hadn’t been for your plan with the blood—” he started.

“Actually, it was Lois. Your daughter, that is. She realized that my blood might be the wrong blood type and insisted that Dr. Klein draw her blood instead.” He shook his head. That was not exactly what happened, but no need to explain the details. “Crazy idea, but it worked.”

“We make a good team,” Sam said with a nod. “Next time, we’ll be better prepared.”

Clark glanced up at Sam. Next time? What next time? “Right.” He only wished there could be a next time. He sighed, resting his head against Lucy’s head.

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Meanwhile, back in the other dimension…

Clark sat upon a blanket on the white sandy beach. Lois gathered the remnants of a picnic lunch scattered around them. A bottle of champagne, uncorked and sitting in a child’s beach bucket of half-frozen sea water, sat next to him. He wrapped his arms around his knees as he gazed into the turquoise waters. He really was trying to enjoy himself, but all he could think of was

her. His missing Lois. Was she okay? Was she in labor at that very moment? Had their child been born? Was he a father already? Had they survived? When would they return to him?

Lois crawled across the blanket and covered his eyes. "Penny for your thoughts? You seem so far away."

He smiled weakly. "Sorry, honey." Sighing, he took her hands from his eyes and pulled her into his lap. "It's nice to get away from it all, isn't it?"

"This was a nice surprise, Clark. Although, the wig…"

He shrugged sheepishly. "Can't have Superman and Lois be seen going off on a romantic weekend again, can we?"

"Oh please, no." She laughed. "Let's hope there are no satellites pointed at us as we speak."

He shaded his eyes and gazed into the sky. "Not at the moment, but if there were, all they would see would be Clark Kent and his wife enjoying a picnic."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "So true." She kissed him, pushing him back onto the blanket. "I love you, Husband."

"And I love you, Wife." He really did.

Lois tugged at his shirt, pulling it out of his pants. Then she slowly, deliberately started to unbutton it.

"Lois, whatcha doing?"

She grinned as his chest was finally exposed. No blue suit. She ran her fingers down his bare chest to his bellybutton. "If you have to ask, I must be doing it wrong," she whispered, kissing his neck.

"No, you're doing it right," he murmured, wrapping his arms around her and pulling them back to a sitting position. "But I didn't bring any precautions."

"Oh." She bit her lip as she considered that statement. "Living a bit on the wild side there, Clark?"

He smiled guiltily. Honestly, Clark hadn't thought about making love to *this* wife since he discovered he had another wife somewhere in the universe ready to give birth to his child at any moment. If he and this stand-in Lois had an accident and he got her pregnant… he didn't even want to think about the ramifications of that scenario.

"Hold that thought." Lois kissed him once more, grabbed her bag and ran for the small clump of coconut trees.

Clark pulled his knees to his chest again and returned his gaze to the waters. Their lives would change completely with the addition of a child. No more dinners on the other side of the world. More nights at home. No more nights out with friends or parties. Would they ever be able to trust a babysitter alone with their child? Would they both be able to continue working at the *Daily Planet* and put their very special child in daycare? Perhaps a nanny? How could they hire a nanny without revealing Superman's secret identity? Would they want to chance it? How would they ever be able to go out again? Would the child be more human or Kryptonian? When would they know? Would their child start out normally and develop powers over time, as he had?

Suddenly, a woman in a maroon bikini ran past, clearing all those thoughts from his head. She was so beautiful.

"Last one in is a superhero," she called, giggling.

He beamed at her and spun into his suit, his swimming suit. He dropped his glasses on the blanket and chased after her into the water. She had gone out deep enough that she was treading water.

As he reached her, Lois wrapped her arms around him. "Ha-ha, you're the superhero."

Clark moved them closer to shore, so that his feet touched the sand beneath them. "Yes, but not Aquaman."

Lois laughed and kissed him, really kissed him.

"You're driving me crazy, Lois," he murmured, returning her kisses.

"It's okay, Clark. I didn't forget." She raised her brows up and down with a grin.

Didn't forget what? *Oh*. He smiled. "I'm married to the smartest woman in the world." Clark kissed her again. Well, at least she was using precautions.

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Back in the alternate dimension…

Superman flew into the apartment carrying a woman with long grey hair tied up in a bun, who held on to him for dear life. As soon as he set her down, she bent down and kissed the carpet. He smiled. She had never flown before, even in an airplane. He put a bag of fruit down on the dining room table.

Ultra Woman came out to the living room. "Where on Earth have you been?" she demanded, then stopped in her tracks as she noticed the woman. "Clark?"

"Ultra Woman, meet Manni. Manni, Ultra Woman."

The old woman stood up and looked Ultra Woman over with suspicion and uncertainty. Ultra Woman waved.

"Manni is the midwife from a small village in the heart of the Amazon. I met her earlier this year, when I stopped some strip miners from destroying her section of the rain forest," he explained.

Ultra Woman's eyes filled with love as she gazed at him. "I love you," she said, though her eyes had already told him. She took the woman's arm and led her back to the bedroom.

Lucy still lay in bed. Her eyes, although red and puffy from crying, had an emptiness in them that scared Clark. Lara lay next to her, crying. Clark knelt down next to the bed and took Lucy's hand in his.

"Lois. I've brought someone to help you."

Her finger caressed Lara's cheek, but otherwise she didn't move.

"Manni, Lucy." Clark picked up Lara and rocked her for a moment, before handing her to Manni. "Lara."

Manni tsk-tsked him, taking Lara. She handed the baby to Ultra Woman and grabbed a baby blanket from the pile next to the changing table. She spread it out on the bed, and taking Lara back, swaddled her so fast and tight he wondered if she had super powers. The swaddling stunned Lara into silence.

Manni handed the baby back to Ultra Woman, then shooed Clark from the room. He sighed. Rejected again. He leaned against the wall in the hall, watching with his x-ray vision. Manni studied Lucy lying in the bed and Lucy studied her just as closely. The midwife clapped her hands together and pulled Lucy to a sitting position. She felt her forehead, nodded. She pulled a pillow from next to her and set it on Lucy's lap. Placing Lara on the pillow in the crook of Lucy's arm, she flung open Lucy's robe and in two seconds had Lara nursing. He nodded and switched off his x-ray vision with a smile.

Ultra Woman came out of the bedroom a few minutes later. "From what I understood, Lucy needs something to drink to stay hydrated," she called as she stepped into the kitchen. In a second, he was at the blender making a mango-papaya smoothie.

"Coming right up," Superman called. He poured the smoothie into a large plastic cup with a straw. "Here you go." He pulled her into his arms with a kiss. "Hello, beautiful."

"I'll be right back," Ultra Woman whispered, taking the drink back to the bedroom. She flew back into his arms moments later, kissing him. "You are the best man in the whole world."

"Well, thank you, ma'am." He grinned, tipping an imaginary hat.

"What made you think of bringing us a midwife?"

"It looked like you two needed some professional help this morning. Yelling and tears weren't doing any good and just frustrated everyone. I was tired of feeling useless."

"Totally redeemed." Ultra Woman kissed him again. "I thought nursing would be easy for her. Natural. Innate. But I guess this is also another skill that cannot be learned from reading a book." She shook her head. "I'm worried about her.

This morning, while you were changing Lara, I…" She swallowed. "I found her curled up in a ball in the shower, repeating Clark's name. She hasn't spoken since."

"Nothing?" He frowned.

"She glared at me while I was trying to get Lara latched on. Other than that, she hasn't looked at me." His girlfriend leaned her head against his. "A 'thank you' would have been nice."

"She doesn't know what you did, Lois. What you sacrificed," he said softly. "How incredibly stupid you were."

Ultra Woman raised a brow. "We couldn't use your blood. The glass, remember? Plus, I knew my blood would match hers."

"Or how incredibly smart. You saved her. Kal will forgive you for kissing him now."

She smiled, tracing his 'S' shield with her finger. He could feel the touch down to his toes. "Oh, he's forgiven me already."

"Lois." Clark growled.

"For some reason men forgive beautiful women for kissing them quite easily." Ultra Woman pulled his lips to hers. He picked her up and brought her closer. She giggled. "See?"

He held her tighter. "I don't want you kissing anyone else but me."

"Ditto, big boy." Ultra Woman pointed at her eyes and then at his. "I'm watching you. She's off limits now. Or I will tell Kal and the two of us will beat the crap out of you. Comprende?"

Clark swallowed with a nod. "He won't need your help, Lois."

"He'll still have it." She raised her eyebrows at him. "I gave up my life for you, don't you forget it. I can ruin you just as easily and I know where Dr. Klein keeps his Kryptonite, now. Don't mess with me."

He nodded. "I'm sorry, Lois. I know yesterday was—"

Ultra Woman held up her hand, silencing him. "Everything from before this minute is the past. Forgiven. I don't want it mentioned again. I don't want to think about it again. We begin now."

"Got it." Clark kissed her again.

"Where is my father? I want to start my romantic Valentine's Day. And you need to wash up." She grimaced. "What *is* that smell?"

Clark smiled sheepishly. "I rescued a sinking fishing boat off the coast of Peru on my way to pick up Manni. That's why it took so long for me to come back."

Ultra Woman shook her head, taking a step back and poking him in the chest. "You, my dear, need a shower."

Naughtily, he brought her towards him for another kiss. "My thoughts exactly."

"I'm exhausted. All I want to do is go to bed."

He kissed her again, whispering, "My thoughts exactly."

Ultra Woman wrapped her arms around his neck. "How about this? We go to Smallville, pick up the time machine and go get Kal, bring him back to deal with her and any emergencies in our dimension and we go on one long vacation in his. Secret identities. Man and wife. Paris is calling us." She kissed him.

"Sounds great. What about his temporary wife?" Clark reminded her.

"Oh, crap. Her." She sighed. "You know, this plan you and Mr. Wells hatched was way too complicated."

Superman shrugged. "We achieved our goal. Everyone lived."

"You never told me why Lucy didn't want to go to the hospital. It couldn't be just to keep your precious reputation intact."

Superman pulled her tighter against him, resting his head against her. He didn't want to think about Wells's newspaper from that alternate future. "Trust me, Lois. You don't want to know."

Manni came out and handed Lara to Ultra Woman, then took Superman's arm and brought him back into the bedroom. She pointed at Lucy, sitting alone in the bed, staring off into space. The midwife patted him on the back and left the room, shutting the door.

"Lucy." Superman sat down on the bed next to her. "Lucy?"

Without looking at him, Lucy scooted herself down and under the covers. He flew around to the other side of the bed. "Lois."

She closed her eyes, pretending she wanted to sleep.

"I know you can hear me, Lois." He knelt down beside her. "You almost died last night. You started hemorrhaging and Sam couldn't stop it. I know you didn't want to go to the hospital because of what happened in your dimension. So, we took a chance. Ultra Woman donated a pint of her blood."

Lucy slowly opened her eyes, focusing on him.

"She exposed herself to Kryptonite at S.T.A.R. Labs and had Dr. Klein draw her blood."

A tear rolled down her cheek. "Why?" Lucy whispered. "She hates me."

"She doesn't hate you, Lois. She fluctuates between liking you and tolerating you," he half-joked. The truth was more painful. "But she loves Lara like she was her own child. And she loves me and she didn't want me to have to live through your…" Superman looked down, swallowing, unable to say the word. "She didn't want to fail me."

"Lara hates me," Lucy whispered.

Clark's heart cracked. "No, she doesn't. Lara loves you."

Lucy's bottom lip started to shake. "She loves *you* and she loves *your* Lois, because you can communicate with her. With me she just cries and cries."

"All babies cry, Lois," he reassured her.

"Clark, she cries every time Lois hands her to me." The tears fell in earnest.

"No, she doesn't."

Lucy turned her back to him. "Yes, she does, Clark. Leave me alone. I'm going to sleep."

He ran his hand over her head. "You'll feel better after you get some sleep."

As he reached the door, her voice stopped him. "I miss him with every cell in my body."

Clark closed his eyes in a wince. "I know."

"Even without his extra abilities, he was going to be the better parent." She paused. "You should have just let me die."

Clark flew to her side, sitting next to her on the bed. "Don't say that, Lois. Never say that. Clark loves you so much."

"Maybe… until he finds out about us." She reached out and touched his 'S' and then pulled her hand away. "He won't ever forgive me for that."

"It's my fault. Blame me, if you tell him. You were drugged and suffering from Interdimensional Time… I'm the villain here."

"Stop making excuses, Clark. I wanted you and I would have…" She sniffled. "Without excuses. I don't deserve him. He's always loved me. Always. This will crush him. Without his love and Lara's love, what's the point in living?"

"Hush, Lois. Stop thinking like this, you're making yourself sick. Kal loves you and he will always love you. If you choose to tell him and he doesn't forgive you right away, send him to me. After he pummels me half to death, it will make him feel better." He smiled weakly at his bad joke. Kal wouldn't stop at Clark's half-death; he wouldn't stop until he had completed the job. "And he'll realize he won't want to live without you."

Lucy placed her hand on his 'S' again. He covered her hand with his and ran his other hand down her cheek, cupping her jaw. She looked up into his eyes, then pulled her hand away. "Don't dress as Superman around me, Clark. I can't see him anymore. Be reminded of…" She turned away from him. "Leave now."

"Lois."

"Leave me alone, Clark," she snapped. "Just leave me alone."

Clark got off the bed and took a deep breath as he stared at her. He couldn't believe he had done that to her. To himself. To his Lois. "I'm sorry," he whispered, leaving the room. He went out to Lois and Lara. Lois burped Lara on her shoulder, humming softly. He came up behind them and kissed the top of Lara's head and his girlfriend's cheek. "I love you."

"You're lucky I still love you," Ultra said, turning to face him.

Clark grimaced, knowing full well he didn't deserve her love. He hoped his girlfriend hadn't been watching as well as listening.

***

Clark lay in bed, staring at the ceiling of his loft. Lara was a week old and her mother's depression had sunk to an all-time low. Lucy refused to see Perry or James. Lois had invited them to dinner to introduce them to Lara. It felt weird to be around the two of them, the two Loises. Lois showed off the baby like she was Lara's mom, while Lucy stayed in bed.

Lucy slept a lot. She didn't read. She didn't watch TV. She just slept and thought, staring off into space. Clark guessed she got out of bed to change Lara's diapers and walk around the apartment during the day, but that was about it. He should really ask Sam when was the last time he knew that Lucy had showered. They had given him the night off.

On Valentine's Day, the two of them and Manni stayed to take care of Lara, while Lucy and Sam caught up with their sleep. The next day, Sam took over and the superheroes got to spend the day in bed… mostly sleeping.

Lois kept trying to convince Clark to ask her father if he would switch places with her at least twice a week, so she could get more sleep. Lara was keeping her awake at night with the crying. Clark refused to go there. He was not going to have a conversation with his girlfriend's father about her staying over at the Clinton Street apartment, while Sam babysat. No way.

Lucy was still angry at him and he didn't blame her. Clark had no idea what had come over him; why he had touched her face like that. No matter how much he tried not to think of her, tried not to think of that one night they had spent together, he did. He was still drawn to her, especially when he knew she was hurting inside. He wanted to help her, comfort her, but he knew just being there pushed her deeper into her black hole. It didn't make things easier with Lois, either. In the last few days, Clark realized the more time he spent with Ultra Woman, the less drawn he was to Lucy, so he spent as much time with Lois as possible. He hoped he wasn't smothering her with his attention. She didn't seem to mind, though.

The dinner party had been awkward to say the least. Lucy El and Clark Kent weren't a couple. Superman and Ultra Woman were a couple. But no one knew that Lois Lane was also Ultra Woman. Their dinner guests knew their Lois Lane was technically Lucy El now, so dinner was dinner without kisses, hugs, touching, the gazes between Clark and "Lucy". Just a bunch of colleagues and old friends.

His girlfriend had carried Lara around, whenever she wasn't in the kitchen, like a prize Pekingese. When she was in the kitchen, she passed Lara to Clark, who thrilled at having her. But he didn't want to act too much like a father or uncle to her, especially in front of Perry and James. Also, Lucy refusing to leave her bed made their dinner guests uncomfortable, made them feel unwelcome. It was just weird. Clark spent the whole night trying to act like someone other than himself, while still trying to be honest and truthful.

Clark would have to tell Lois that dinner parties were out. He just couldn't do that again. He took a deep breath and tried to sleep. It wasn't coming. He closed his eyes and a soft Elvis tune floated into his mind. Slow dancing with Lucy in her Ultra Woman suit.

He forced his eyes open. No! He would not allow himself to think about the night of the costume party. No. He fluffed his pillow and turned over.

This time he was standing in an ice-cold shower and the most beautiful, exquisite naked woman with long hair to her navel stepped in. He smiled and sighed.

Clark was on the verge of sleep, when he heard a voice calling to him.

"*Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"*

He jumped out of bed and was in the air, in his pajama shorts; two seconds later, he landed at the Loises' apartment. He ran into Lucy's room and picked Lara up, holding her to his bare chest.

"What is it, sweetie? I'm here, I'm right here." He rocked her back and forth, back and forth. She was too young for nightmares. One had to have experienced life before one could be scared of it. Clark turned to see where her mother was; why she hadn't responded to her daughter's cries.

Lucy sat in bed, rocking herself back and forth.

"Lucy?"

"I changed her. I fed her. I rocked her. I sang to her. I changed her again. Nothing. Nothing calmed her. She hates me."

Clark grabbed a cloth diaper from the changing table and set it on his shoulder. Gently, holding her fragile head and neck, he set Lara on his shoulder and rubbed her back. She burped. He held her there and continued to rub her back. "I've got her, Lucy. Go back to sleep. Go and be with Kal."

"Something's wrong. He's treating me differently. Distancing himself from me, but not. He still loves me, but he's troubled by it." Lois glanced over at him. "He's treating me a little like you treated me before we found your Lois."

"Honeymoon's over?" The words just slipped out. Clark didn't know why he said them. It probably had something to do with her reference to him. He felt her words and winced, before the sound hit him.

"Out! Just get out!"

Clark left. Once again he was going to have to treat his tongue for athlete's foot. He shook his head. He wondered why Lois didn't come to comfort Lara, as she usually did when Lucy had failed. He softly knocked on her door and when there was no answer, he entered. Her bed was empty, unslept in. He sat down on her bed, closed his eyes and listened.

Ultra Woman, thank you!

Ah, out and about helping humanity. He smiled. *His* girlfriend. Clark lay Lara on the bed next to him and surrounded her on three sides, at a fair distance, with pillows. He lay down on the fourth side, resting a hand next to her cheek, so that they were touching. He watched Lara, who had finally fallen asleep, and waited for Lois to show.

A little while later, Ultra Woman came in, removed some of Lara's protective pillows and lay down on the other side of her. Clark opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Good morning, handsome. Wait for me all night?"

Clark blinked his eyes and realized the light was brighter in the bedroom than when he had come in. "Morning already?" He rubbed his eyes. "I didn't mean to fall asleep." He glanced down at Lara. She still slept, peacefully, happily.

"Whatcha doing here?" his girlfriend asked.

"Lara called to me telepathically."

"Really?" Ultra Woman seemed surprised. "From across town? Wow! I'm impressed."

"Lucy had a hard night. Where were you?" It wasn't an accusation, just a question. "Off saving the world?"

"A little bit here. A little bit there. I do my part." She bit her lip and looked off to the side.

"Lois?"

Ultra Woman swallowed. "Fine. I went to Smallville. I was

bushed and I needed a night off. I thought Lucy could handle it for one night. I didn't know Lara would call you. Sorry. " She looked at his topless PJ shorts and a wicked expression appeared in her eyes. "Or that you would come so attired, or I might have come home instead."

He ignored her innuendo. "Smallville? What time is it?"

"Around seven."

"Seven? Lara needs to be fed. Let me check if Lucy is awake?" He sat up and x-rayed the wall. "No, she's still asleep. Take Lara over there and wake her up, will you?"

Lois picked up Lara and carried her in to her mother. Several minutes later, she returned, spun into her nightgown and crawled under the covers with him. "Why didn't I think of this solution?" she whispered, resting her head against his chest.

Clark kissed her. "Because I shouldn't be sleeping at my married co-worker's apartment, especially on a regular basis. How I'm going to sneak away from here this morning…"

"Stay. It's Saturday. Have breakfast. Cuddle with me." She kissed him again, her chest up next to his. "Stay."

"Well, if you put it that way…" Clark kissed her again, running his fingers down her short nightgown to her thigh.

She moved closer to him, continuing to kiss him. "Clark?"

"Hmmm."

"I think the time machine is broken."

Clark broke off his kiss and pulled back so he could see her properly. "Excuse me?"

"I tried to go to the Kent farm to tell them about Lara. Show them the pictures that Dr. Klein took." Lois pinched her lips together. "I couldn't get the time machine to start. At all."

"Really?" He seemed surprised.

"Does it take gas?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Actually, I don't know what it runs on. I never thought about it. Oh God, all those little trips to the other dimension." Clark gulped. "Lois, how are we going to get her home?"

Lois shrugged. "That was one of the reasons I was trying to get over there. Last night was the last straw. Something is seriously bugging her. I cannot believe that she wouldn't come and spend time with James and Perry, her two best friends. She wouldn't even acknowledge them. I was going to go talk to Kal, try to convince him to come visit. Maybe even take her home."

"Kal? Are you nuts?" He notched back his tone from the growl that was about to escape. "He doesn't even know she's here or that she was pregnant! Anyway, he already has a Lois back at home."

"I know. But I thought maybe Lucy's developed another touch of the Interdimensional sickness."

"Time Sickness," he corrected.

"Whatever." She waved off her mistake. "She *needs* him. We can keep her alive, but her soul is dying. She needs him."

"I know." Clark knew he was not enough for Lucy anymore. She needed the real thing, not just her Kal-Patch. He was being selfish and he knew it. As soon as Lucy went home, so would Lara.

"I was going to suggest he take a vacation with her, help her get her sanity back, and we'd watch Lara. And when they were ready to be parents in… fourteen, fifteen years, they could come and take her back." She smiled guiltily.

"Lois. Lara isn't ours. She belongs to them."

"I know." His girlfriend pouted. "But I love her. I don't want them to take her back. I want her to stay here with us, be our baby." Her lips started to shake and she buried her head on his chest.

Clark closed his eyes and held her. "Me too," he whispered. He tilted her chin up and kissed her lightly on the lips. "You know what else I'd like?"

Lois shook her head.

"I'd like us to be a couple. No Lucy. No baby. No father-in-law roommate. Just us. Let us have some time to learn to be us, before we introduce other people into our relationship." He kissed her nose. "I'd like us to have some time for your divorce from Luthor to come through and a wedding of some sort for us, before we start adopting children into this relationship. I mean, technically, it's been less than a month since I found out you were Ultra Woman and hardly two months since Singapore."

Her jaw dropped. "That's all?"

Clark nodded.

"I'm moving a bit fast?"

"Super speed. Slow down. Enjoy life."

Lois kissed his chest.

He swallowed. Her kisses seemed to radiate through him more powerfully than Kryptonite. The opposite of Kryptonite, actually. Where Kryptonite caused pain, her kisses sent every nerve ending exploding with pleasure. "Spend time getting to know each other better." His voice cracked as she continued to kiss him and he shifted positions so she could wrap her legs about him.

"Slow down," she murmured.

"If you want…" Clark continued to kiss her as his hands moved up her legs.

"Practicing to be quiet?" Lois teased.

"Oh, definitely." He moaned.

Lois placed a finger to her lips. "Sshhh. Quiet." Then she moved her fingers down his chest again, outlining his muscles, around his belly button, to the edge of oblivion.

"As a church mouse," Clark whispered, his breath ragged.

They practiced being quiet all morning long.

***

A tear ran down Lucy's cheek and she caressed Lara's cheek.

The time machine was broken?

She was stuck in this dimension?

For how long?

Was Mr. Wells ever going to come get her?

"Oh, Clark. Help me, Superman. Help. I want to go home."

She closed her eyes, allowing another tear to roll down her cheek.

"Rescue me, Clark. Please, come and get us."

***

Several weeks later, at the Daily Planet in Lois's home dimension…

Clark flipped through the information that Jimmy had just handed to him about all the missing CEOs. Interesting. His wife would want to know about this. He glanced around and into his field of vision stepped Star. *Star?* He hadn't seen her since Lois moved from her old apartment.

"Clark." She steamrolled right over to him.

"Hi, Star," he replied, curious in where this might go. With Star it could go anywhere. "What's up?"

"Is Lois here? I'm worried about her."

"She stepped out." He leaned against the corner of his desk. "Why?"

"She's in a dark place like a black hole. Despondent."

Clark raised a brow at this statement. That didn't sound like the woman who had attacked him this morning before breakfast. "Are you sure, Star?"

"She's been in misery all year, but it has gotten so bad recently it's overpowering me. With this dark cloud hanging over her aura, I couldn't stay away any longer."

"Misery? Lois?" This puzzled him. "I don't think so, Star."

"Really? Hmmm? I wonder what it is, then?" Star chewed on the tip of her thumb as she thought.

Clark smiled indulgently. Star was always diverting. He glanced back down at the research Jimmy gave him.

"I know what it is!"

Curious, he returned his gaze to her.

"It has to do with the baby I see in your…" Star started to say, before Clark whisked her away into the conference room, sitting her down at the table. "… future."

"What about the baby?" Clark asked, staring straight into her eyes. Star wasn't talking about this Lois. She was talking about his missing Lois. "Start from the beginning, Star. What do you know about this?"

"Well, it started last summer, when her aura changed."

"Her aura changed?" O-kay. Half of what Star usually said to him he took with a grain of salt, aura reading being one such thing.

"One day, she passed me in the hall of our building, and I could have sworn she was pregnant. You can tell pregnancy auras because there are two of them," Star explained.

Clark dropped into the chair next to her. "But… her aura changed?"

"Totally. The next day, I went to her apartment to talk to her about what I saw. And to bring her some chocolate ice cream; she's always running out."

He nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"And pickles. But she didn't want the pickles anymore. I had sensed she wanted them the day before… anyway, I couldn't read her at all. Her aura was completely altered. It was almost fifteen months younger. And when I looked at her, it was like her future was changing so fast it was a blur. And it wasn't just her future. Everyone's future changed, too, when I looked at her. Well, I'm sure it didn't have to do with me actually looking at her, but I noticed it when I looked at her. Oh, gosh, was I getting motion sickness."

"Everyone's future changed?" he asked, clarifying. "Not just hers?"

"Of course, because I saw that Superman was coming back. You know how he's always rescuing her." Star wiped that detail out of the air as if it were unimportant. "I had to call three clients and tell them they weren't going to die after all. That's not good for business, you know what I mean?"

He nodded, not wanting to believe her words. "Superman wasn't going to return when he did, before Lois's aura changed?" What was she telling him?

"Oh, no." Star waved off his answer this time. "He was gone forever. Never coming back."

Clark gulped. "*Never?*" Lois was pregnant and Superman would never have returned. "Never coming back?" he murmured to himself.

She patted his shoulder reassuringly. "You would have come back from your undercover assignment about a year later, no less."

Clark stared at her in confusion. *He* returned, but *Superman* didn't? How could that be possible? Unless he lost his powers. Or no longer used them. Exposure to New Krypton's red sun? But he *had* returned as soon as his Lois was no longer pregnant. As soon as she made the switch to the other dimension. The curse, it had to be the curse. Lois must have been fated to die. Alone, pregnant, and dead. He felt sick to his stomach. That was why she went to the other dimension. She couldn't do this alone. That was what Lois hadn't told his mother. That was why she wouldn't tell him anything about the future in the barn. His hands began to shake. She had gone in search of another Clark, because she needed him to survive and the curse wouldn't let *them* be together.

"Are you all right, Clark?" Star asked, trying to catch his eye.

He cleared his throat and nodded. She didn't die. That didn't happen. Lois changed the future by going to the other dimension. "You said something about a baby in my future?"

"Did I?" Star looked at him, puzzled. "Oh, yes, there is definitely a baby in your future." She nodded. "Your brother's child."

Clark gaped at her. *What?* What about his child? Was Star confusing his child with the other Clark's? If she was, then the baby survived the birth and the other Clark was taking care of it. What about Lois? Where was she? "You said that Lois was in a dark place? Do you mean death?" he asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"Death? Hmmm. Possibly. Or depression. Or outer space. Or a cave. Or blind. It's not always clear-cut." Her expression was apologetic.

Patience, he reminded himself. "What did you think it was when you came here?"

"Depression. She misses you. She feels empty. Alone." Every word Star said hit home as if he was feeling those emotions along with Lois.

"Can you contact her?" he asked, grasping at straws. "Can you give her, this Lois in a dark place, can you give her a message from me?"

"Doesn't she still work with you?" Star asked, perplexed, glancing out towards Lois's desk. "Didn't you two get married?"

Clark didn't want to explain everything to Star. Either she understood what she was talking about or she didn't. "*That* Lois isn't under a dark cloud."

"Oh." Star thought about that for a moment and then shrugged. "Well, I can try. What's the message?"

Talk about on the spot. Clark gulped. "That I love her and I miss her and I want her to come home."

"But doesn't she still work with you? Don't you see her every day?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"Okay." Star shrugged. "I'll try to get a message to her — this Lois in the dark place — but I can't make any guarantees."

"I know. Just try." Clark looked down to his hands, all of Lois's despair creeping into his cells. He was starting to feel like he had when she had gotten amnesia and had rejected him for Lex. Lost. He needed his anchor. *Lois, where are you?*

Star put her hand on his. "You love her so much, I can see that. Your aura and hers, they're joined, Clark. You need to pull her out of the darkness, don't let her pull you in."

"Thank you, Star," he said, placing a smile on his face. This whole situation was surreal and throwing him off balance. And with this new vigilante Vixen making a mess of things, he needed to be one hundred percent in control. Clark took a deep breath and released it. "I'd better get back to work."

"Okay. Tell Lois I said hi." Star grinned, standing up.

"I'll do that, Star." This time his smile was genuine. He returned to his desk and stared off in space. *Fifteen months younger?* Didn't his mom say they pulled Lois from the clone incident? That was just a couple months before he left for New Krypton. His mind swirled with time-travel math.

***

Meanwhile, back in the other dimension…

Clark smiled fondly at Lois. They had had a fantastic weekend, traveling the world. Okay, maybe "fantastic" wasn't exactly the correct word for it. They had been tracking this new super vigilante, Vixen. She was fast, super fast. She had disappeared on them a number of times and they just wanted to talk to her. Vixen hadn't been thrilled with Ultra Woman and Ultra Woman was even less thrilled with her. Lois hadn't liked the way Vixen wrestled with him in China. Vixen didn't like that Ultra Woman kept asking her a bunch of questions.

His phone rang. "Clark Kent."

"Clark."

"Hi, Sam." Clark lowered his voice. "How is she? Everything…" He pursed his lips, not wanting to speak the word. Finally, he spit it out. "Normal?"

"I'm not a pediatrician, Clark, but from my research into the

norms for her age, she falls within them," Dr. Lane reassured him.

Clark exhaled. Lara was normal, so to speak, except for the telepathy of course.

"Actually, that's not why I'm calling," Sam replied.

"What's up?" he asked, although he had a strange feeling he knew what Sam wanted to talk to him about. They all had been avoiding the topic for weeks.

"I've thought long and hard over this. Debated the pros and cons and I've come to the conclusion that Lara needs to stop breastfeeding and switch to formula."

This wasn't what Clark expected him to say. He glanced at his girlfriend and he could tell she was listening to every word her father was saying. "We'll be right there."

Lois nodded, standing up.

"Maybe that's for the best. So you can see what I'm talking about in person," agreed Sam, hanging up.

As Clark stood up, he noticed Mayson walk in. He took a deep breath and shifted his gaze over to her. Lois caught his shift and glanced over her shoulder.

"Hi, Mayson," she said with a smile. He never understood how Lois and Mayson had always gotten along while she and Lucy were like vinegar and oil.

"Hi," Mayson replied. "How's everyone?"

Clark raised a brow. This wasn't her usual greeting. "Fine," he said cautiously.

She looked at Lois for confirmation and his girlfriend nodded. He glanced between the two of them, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

Mayson looked at Clark and lowered her voice, "Do you still have your visitors?" Before he could question her use of the plural, she brought a package out of her bag and handed it to him. "I saw this and thought of you. It's nothing really." She seemed almost embarrassed.

Clark raised a brow and opened the bag. He ground his teeth. A baby's rattle in the shape of a gavel. As he pulled the item out of the bag, he glared at his girlfriend.

"Aww, Clark, isn't that…" Lois started to speak until he caught his expression.

"I know. It's silly. But since you stand for truth and justice…" Mayson smiled with a shrug.

Clark did love it. And under any other circumstances, he might even think it adorable, but what he was wondering was why a baby's rattle would make his ex-girlfriend think of *him*?

Lois cleared her throat. "Gareth's son will really love it, Mayson."

"Gareth?"

"Here, let me introduce you," suggested his girlfriend to his ex-girlfriend.

Clark raised a brow at Lois and watched as she tried to maneuver her way out of this situation.

"Gareth McTinney, have you had a chance to meet our good friend, Mayson Drake?" she said, turning around. He was standing a few paces behind her.

Clearly, Gareth had been close enough to hear some of this exchange.

"A pleasure," Gareth said, holding out his hand. "A great pleasure to meet the famous Ms. Drake."

"Detective Drake," Lois corrected him.

"I wouldn't say famous, Mr. McTinney," Mayson said uncomfortably. She had always hated being known as one of Superman's girlfriends.

"As the only person to survive a Sean McCarthy bombing. He's a big name in London, having lent a hand to the IRA a time or two," Gareth clarified.

"Oh." Mayson glanced at Clark. "That was due more to Clark than me," she said softly.

Clark sighed. He didn't like to speak about that day, either.

"Well, yes, I guess so," Gareth said, creating an uncomfortable silence. He noticed the toy in Clark's hand. "What's that?" He glanced over at Lucy, curiously. "I thought you said that you weren't expecting? Or is that for someone else, Clark?" he asked with raised brows. Oh, crap, his boss meant Ultra Woman.

"Oh, this isn't for me." Lois laughed. "Mayson was in the bullpen last week and she saw that photo of your new son and, you know how us women get around babies."

Clark released his breath, thankful for not having to speak.

"I was just asking Lucy and Clark the best way to give it to you. After that editorial on our justice system in the paper a couple weeks ago, I thought you'd get a kick out of it," Mayson told Gareth. "I hope you don't mind."

Clark was amazed. Mayson had picked up on Lois's clues and rolled with it.

"Oh!" Gareth replied, taking the rattle. "Thank you. I love it." He smiled at her. "Martin will, too, I imagine."

"Martin?" Mayson asked, a brow raised. "A James Bond fan or a car fan?"

He was taken aback. "Both actually. How did…" Gareth stared at her.

Lois chuckled. "They didn't give her the bright shiny detective's badge just because of her pretty face, Gareth." His Lois really was a remarkable woman.

Mayson laughed as well. "Because Lucy mentioned you had another son, Austin, and a daughter, Penny."

"Oh!" Gareth blushed. "Ooops. When you put it that way, it does fly off the page doesn't it?"

"Clark and I were just heading out to lunch, Mayson. Would you like to join us?" asked his girlfriend to his ex. Not good, Lois.

Clark raised a brow and shook his head with a sigh. She loved showing off Lara.

"At ten o'clock in the morning?" Gareth asked.

"Low blood sugar," Lucy explained with a roll of her eyes. "I made the mistake of telling Clark that I missed breakfast and he insisted on something more nutritious than donuts." His girlfriend scowled at him as if he would dare come between her and anything sweet.

"I promised Kal to keep his wife well," Clark replied. Low blood sugar. Perfect excuse for everything. Who knew?

"Clark's a bit overprotective, isn't he?" Mayson added to his girlfriend.

Earth, swallow me up now, he begged, looking to the ceiling.

"You have no idea," Lois answered with a smile at him.

"I'll walk out with you," said Mayson. "Nice to finally meet you, Mr. McTinney. I hope you keep a favorable opinion of Metropolis's police detectives."

"Gareth, please." He held up the gavel rattle, giving it a little shake. "This surely isn't a bribe?"

Mayson laughed with a shake of her head.

"You won't find a more honest police detective, Gareth," Lois defended her friend. "Clark Kent wouldn't date anyone less than honest, now, would he?"

Clark pursed his lips at her, grabbing both women's arms. "Let's go, ladies."

In the elevator down, Clark didn't speak, trying to keep his anger in check.

"I'm sorry, Clark." Lois smirked. "I couldn't resist. You know how my mouth sometimes moves faster than my brain."

Clark glanced at his girlfriend, but only shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Mayson, for giving away your wonderful gift…" Lois started, before Clark glared at her in earnest. She swallowed, realizing what he was really angry about. "Oh."

"Don't be mad at her, Clark," Mayson murmured, setting her

arm on Clark's. "She thought I knew. I should have known better than to bring a baby gift to you at the office. I'm sorry."

Clark kissed Mayson's cheek. "It was very thoughtful of you, Mayson. Thank you. I really did love it." Lara wasn't his daughter, he wanted to add, but for some reason it felt like a lie. "I'm sorry we've got to bolt, because we have an appointment."

"You're welcome to come…"

"No, Lucy," Clark interrupted Lois with a glare. "I apologize, Mayson. But this isn't a good time."

Mayson held up a hand. "I understand. Lucy probably wouldn't want me within a mile of her anyway."

He sighed. They would be lucky if Lucy even noticed Mayson's presence. It had been a week since she had spoken to him or even allowed him in her room.

"Keep in touch, you guys. I'm sorry, again." Mayson left with a wave of her hand.

Clark waved until she turned the corner. He grabbed Lois's arm and pulled her into the alley. "Are you out of your mind? How could you tell her?" he scolded.

Lois shrugged. "You told her the truth about Kal and Lucy, I thought you had mentioned that as well."

"*I* haven't told a single person here about the baby. Not one." Spinning into his blue suit, he swooped her up into his arms and into the sky.

Lois gasped. "But Perry? And James? And my father? Dr. Klein? Moonbeam?"

"Perry figured it out on his own. Lucy had to tell Sam. She didn't mean to tell James. Or Dr. Klein. And she told you. You told Mayson. I have no idea about Moonbeam. I'm guessing she just knew. I haven't told a single person. Actually, correction: I told H.G. Wells — the younger version that came to get me to help with Tempus." He sighed. "Sometimes, I feel like I'm the only person who fears what could happen to Lara if the wrong people found out about her."

Lois was quiet for a moment. "You're right, Clark. This is about Lara's safety. I'll be more careful."

"I know." He kissed her cheek. "And here I thought Ultra Woman and I were an item."

"What?" she growled.

"Since I only date completely honest women," he teased. "I couldn't possibly be dating her. I've never seen anyone lie faster than a speeding bullet until I met you."

Lois laughed as he pulled up to blow through the living room windows. As soon as they landed, she punched him in the arm. "Very funny, Clark. Truth and justice is *your* thing. Ultra Woman never claimed they were hers. Hi, Daddy."

Clark turned to Sam. "I'm sorry we're late. Mayson walked in just as we were leaving. You said something about switching Lara to formula instead of breast milk."

Sam nodded. His face appeared paler than normal.

"I thought you said she was within normal parameters. Is she not gaining enough weight?" Clark asked.

"Oh, no. Lara is completely healthy. I know breastfeeding would be the best for her; I'm not halting it for her benefit." Sam sighed. "Come with me. I need your help with something."

Clark felt a cold chill run down his spine and he turned to Lois. Her expression told him she felt the chill as well. Lara was asleep in the bassinette.

Lucy sat in bed as usual. She hadn't wanted him anywhere near her, so he had rarely seen her over the past two weeks, not at all in the last week. He hadn't realized how sunken her eyes had become.

"Lucy?"

She didn't react.

Sam pulled off the covers on the bed and they gasped. She was as thin as a rail. Lucy tried to pull the covers back over herself. Clark turned his sharp expression on Sam. "Hasn't she been eating during the day?"

"Obviously, not enough. Pick her up, Lois," the man said to his daughter. "I want to weigh her."

Lois nodded, picking her up. Lucy turned away from her, refusing to acknowledge her. His girlfriend carried Lucy into the bathroom and returned a minute later to put her back in bed. Then she went into the bathroom alone. "She's down to 101 pounds."

"Oh, my God. Lucy." Clark sat on the bed next to her. She refused to look at him and turned her back on him. He looked to Sam. "How could she have lost all that weight so fast?"

Sam waved them out of the room. "I've been feeding her lunch. She said that you've been getting her breakfast and dinner?"

"Dinner. I thought you were making her breakfast," Lois responded. "So, she hasn't been eating even three meals a day."

Clark sat down at the sofa, burying his face in his hands. "I've failed her again. How could we have let this go on so long?"

"Normal breastfeeding can burn up to five hundred calories a day, Clark. If Lara has even a quarter of your metabolism, it might be more than that. I'm afraid Lara might be literally sucking the life out of her mother. If she had been eating properly or even a high calorie diet, she probably would have been fine. We haven't noticed — none of us — because she hasn't been leaving her room or her bed on most days and we've been focusing more on her daughter than her."

"She feels discarded. Unnecessary. She misses Kal," murmured Clark. He felt like he had been punched in the gut. He still loved Lucy. How could he have let this happen to her?

"We need to make sure Lucy's eating at least three meals a day, more if possible. And watch her eat. We cannot let her breastfeed any longer. Lara will be just fine on formula. Lucy needs to get out of bed and stay out of bed, every day. Shower every day. Get dressed every day. She needs to go outside, get sunlight, fresh air and exercise."

"She needs to go home." Lois voiced what they all knew to be true. "I know I've said it before, but she needs her Clark. I'm afraid she's given up on ever seeing him again." Sitting down next to Clark, his girlfriend took hold of his hand.

Sam shook his head. "She needs to gain weight before she can return."

"If she's supposed to merge into her life back home, seamlessly enough to pretend that Lara is an adopted child of hers and Kal's…" Clark swallowed. "Until she's healthy enough to sub for you at work, Lois, we really can't let her go home, even if H.G. Wells came to take her home himself."

"The one activity she has been doing reliably has been breastfeeding Lara," his girlfriend reminded him. "If we take that away from her, we need to give her something else to do besides pine for Kal. She's going crazy, trapped in here, not using her brain. Is there some kind of research we could let her do on Vixen?"

"Vixen?" Sam asked, sitting down. "What's Vixen?"

"A new super vigilante babe who has taken a liking to Clark."

Clark rolled his eyes. "She hasn't taken a liking to me, Lois," he said, correcting his girlfriend. "The wrestling in China was just a demonstration of her strength and power."

"Uh-huh."

"V — I — X — E — N?" Sam spelled out her name.

"Yes, Daddy. She wears this big gold V on her almost fully-exposed chest. Not that you've noticed that, either?" Lois looked at Clark without veiling her suspicion.

Clark just shook his head. Better for her to be jealous of Vixen than Lucy.

"No, Princess. Vixen stands for Virtually Indestructible Xenon Electrical Network. It's the project I refused to work on when Lex took you. He must have used my data on the cyborgs."

Clark sat up. “She’s a machine, Sam?” He turned to Lois. “That would explain her strength and her speed.”

“A cyborg, I think,” Sam corrected. “At least part of her is human. I just don’t know how much or how little.”

“Wait a minute. This is a Lex Luthor project?” Lois stood up and started pacing. “Lex is greedy. He wants to own everything, control everything and everyone. What would he want with a vigilante robot? What else is he using her for? She’s a little expensive to use just as a distraction. Besides the super speed, what’s her M.O.?”

“Gold specks.” Clark slapped his knee. “That sounds familiar. I recall something, some crime where the only evidence on the video was gold specks. I’ll have to go back over my notes.”

Lois raised a brow. “That doesn’t sound like a vigilante if it were a crime.”

“I wonder if Kal’s ever dealt with Vixen?”

He and Lois locked eyes, both jumping up at once. He reached Lucy’s bedroom door first. “Lucy!”

His sister-in-law still refused to look at him.

“Lois, we need your help.” He knew she was listening. Lucy always listened, even if she didn’t look like it. “Ultra Woman and I have been dealing with a new superhero person called Vixen. Have you met her before? Do you know anything about her?”

“Blonde. Black leather. Gold V surrounding her exposed bosom,” Ultra Woman said ungraciously. “She’s super fast and not very nice.”

Lucy did not respond.

“Lois, please focus. We need to know if you or Kal have dealt with her before. We could use your help.”

“Clark met her this morning,” Lucy whispered, her back still towards them. “Jimmy called her a chick. We’ve got a new owner of the *Daily Planet*, too. Something Luckaby… Australian. Cute.” She turned to look at Clark. “Clark and Lois made love without precautions this morning. If he gets that stand-in pregnant, it will cause a tear in the timeline that we won’t be able to fix without erasing me.”

Clark dropped onto the bed.

“How could she be erased?” Lois asked him.

Lucy looked at her twin. “By going back in time and stopping Clark from rescuing me from Lex Luthor and the clone. If that happens, I don’t come to this dimension. You don’t get rescued from Lex either. Lara doesn’t get born. We all end up dying.”

Clark took hold of her hand. “You are not going to be erased, Lois. You wouldn’t be having these memories unless we returned your stand-in to her correct spot in time. They can only be memories because they happened to you earlier in your life.”

“My memories are my hope,” Lucy whispered, pulling her hand out of his. She looked him up and down. “I told you I didn’t want to see you as Superman again.”

Superman stood up in all his glory. “Well, tough, Lois, because he’s a part of who I am and sometimes I forget to change my clothes. So *deal*.” He shook his head. “This is why I love you so much, Ultra Woman,” he said, turning to his girlfriend. “You love everything about me.”

She smiled at him. “Even when you yell at a delusional anorexic.”

“I’m not delusional and I’m not anorexic, I just haven’t felt like eating,” Lucy thundered, pointing at Clark. “And I don’t like to see him as Superman because that’s the man I cheated on my husband with: Superman, not Clark. I hate being reminded of my mistake, and the reason my husband will take our daughter and leave me.”

His girlfriend looked at him for a moment, before crossing her arms. “I’m going to have to side with her on this one, Clark. I don’t want her to be reminded of the man she slept with either. Change your clothes.”

He rolled his eyes. “What are you going to do when you return to Kal and *his* blue suit?”

“My Superman isn’t allowed to kiss me anymore, because it got caught on film and smeared across the tabloids. Clark almost revealed to the world that he was Superman just to stop the scandal of him sleeping with the married Lois Lane. It turned out the photos were doctored and we were safe.”

Lois spun her finger in the air and, with another roll of his eyes, Clark changed his clothes. “Let me get this straight. You’re not attracted to this guy…” Ultra Woman pointed to Clark in his business suit. “Even though he looks like your husband, whom you kiss and sleep with every day. You’re only attracted to his Superman, who reminds you of the Superman you’re not allowed to kiss in your dimension anymore.”

Lucy nodded.

Lois shook her head. “And you say you aren’t delusional.”

Even to Clark it sounded messed up.

“You are in serious need of therapy.”

“I don’t trust therapists except Dr. Friskin. Lex’s ex-wife had a double of me made and tried to frame me for Superman’s death when I went to see her after Lex died. Dr. Deter, my amnesia doctor, seduced and hypnotized me into quitting my job and running off to France with him.”

“Whoa, back up there. Which of Lex’s ex-wives did you go to for therapy, Sandra Xavier? No, wait, he didn’t marry her… Arianna Carlin, or Linda Luckaby? No, she died in childbirth… Helene Henries? Bonnie ‘Big-Ears’ Butte? Fine, I made that one up. Nobody called her ‘Big-Ears’, but me. Cindy Chivers, perhaps?”

Lucy’s jaw dropped. “How many times was Lex married? He told me I was his first true love.”

Ultra Woman pressed her lips together. “Yeah. I heard that line, too.”

“Lucy, didn’t you say the new owner of the *Daily Planet* was some guy named Luckaby?” Clark asked her.

Lucy covered her mouth. “Ew. Leslie Luckaby is a Luthor? And I thought he was cute.” She grimaced.

“Wait. Wait. Wait.” Lois held up her hands. “Linda Luckaby was Lex, Jr’s mother. Lex, Jr. isn’t cute; he’s disfigured.”

“Lex bought the *Daily Planet* right before he asked me to marry him. Then he blew it up, so I wouldn’t be around my friends anymore,” Lucy explained. “Why would Lex, Jr. want to own the *Planet*? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know about you ladies, but I’m getting a little worried about James Olsen’s safety. He said he would never sell the paper, but if both Lex Luthor and Junior owned the paper in the other dimension… I have this strange feeling that they would try to take it by force,” said Clark.

“Jaxon said Lex was interested in buying it, too. Remember, Clark, he said it while everyone was standing around gossiping during Lex and Lois’s divorce settlement meeting,” Lucy told him. Then a hint of a smile graced her lips. “Isn’t that how James was finally able to fire him? Corporate espionage?”

Clark nodded.

His girlfriend sat down and took Clark’s hand. “That’s what Lex meant, that my job security depended on him. I thought it had to do with the rumor he was going to start about Clark and me.”

Lara woke up and started to cry.

“Here, give her to me. She’s probably hungry,” Lucy said, stretching out her arms.

“Let me change her,” Clark volunteered, jumping up. He picked up Lara. “Hello, sweetie. Daddy’s here.” He winced as soon as he said it, anticipating Lois’s reaction.

“Clark,” he heard Lois say through gritted teeth. “You are *not* her father.”

“I know.” He swallowed. “Slip of the tongue.”

She raised a brow, not believing him. “Right.”

Lois held out a hand to Lucy. “Come on, why don’t you take a shower? I’ll feed Lara.”

“With what?” Lucy said, crossing her arms and glaring at her.

“A bottle.”

“I thought perhaps lactating was your newest super ability.” Lucy held out her arms. “Give her to me.”

“Lucy, I’m changing her diaper here,” Clark reminded her.

“Give her to me when you’re done then.”

“No can do, Lucy. You’ve lost too much weight. No more breastfeeding for you. Doctor’s orders.”

Lucy crawled across the bed to them. “Give her to me. She’s my daughter and I decide when and where and how and what she eats.”

“Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll take you out to lunch? My treat. Anything you want to eat. Anywhere in the world,” Clark recommended.

“I don’t want to go out to eat, I want to hold my daughter,” she groused.

“Lucy, you need a break. Go with Clark. Enjoy yourself,” Lois suggested. “My father and I will watch Lara. Take the afternoon off.”

“I’m not going to leave you alone with my daughter, Lois. I see how you look at her. You want her to be your daughter. Well, you can’t have her. She’s mine. Give her to me, Clark.”

“Lucy, you need a break.”

“You’re going to kidnap her, aren’t you? You think you can’t have kids, so you’re just going to take mine and raise her as your own. You’ve all been conspiring against me, using your telepathy to convince her that you two are her parents. No wonder she doesn’t like me. I’m nothing more than a wet nurse and now you’re taking that away from me too. You’ve turned her against me.” She climbed off the bed and tried to push Clark out of the way, but he didn’t move. “Give me my daughter.”

“Again with the delusional, Lucy,” stated Lois dryly.

“I’m not delusional.” She pushed harder against Clark.

“Lucy, you have no strength because you’ve lost so much weight,” Clark said, calm against her fury. “You need to eat and you need to get out of this apartment. Let me fly you someplace for lunch. I promise you that Lara will be here when we come back.”

She looked at him. “Promise? You aren’t trying to steal her?”

“I love Lara. I would like nothing more to be her father, but I know that’s not in the cards for me.” He looked at his girlfriend sadly. “For us. Anyway, Kal has enough reasons to kill me, I really wouldn’t want to add kidnapping his daughter to that list.”

Lucy pushed him on his shoulder. “He’s not going to kill you.”

“Not even for sleeping with his wife?” When would he learn to keep his mouth shut?

Lucy waved off his worries. “He’ll be ticked off about that, but he’ll forgive you, because…” She shrugged. “No man can resist Lois Lane.”

Lois laughed in agreement.

“Really?” Now, that sounded like the Lois Lane he knew.

“Proven fact. It’s me he’s not going to forgive. I’m the one who wasn’t supposed to cheat.”

“Oh, he’ll forgive you, Lucy. I’m Superman.” He shrugged. “No Lois Lane can resist me.” He grinned. Two could play this game.

“Lois,” Lucy said, as she took her daughter from Clark’s arms and walked towards the door.

“With pleasure.” Lois slapped him across the face.

“Ow. Lo-is.” Clark rubbed his cheek. “It hurts more when you do it.”

They both smirked at him.

“I was just trying to punch a hole in her logic.”

Lucy walked into the living room with Lara and handed her to Sam. “Sam.”

“Come to Grandpa!” he said, holding out his arms. Lucy raised a brow with pressed lips, but didn’t say anything.

Lucy turned to Clark. “I’m going to take a shower, get dressed, and you are going to take me to that hamburger stand in Key West. You know the one you took me to for my birthday.”

A smile slipped onto Clark’s face as he remembered her birthday on the beach, but then he winced, knowing the explosion was about it erupt.

“Sounds like fun,” Lois said too sweetly. “Can I come? I can carry Lucy.”

Clark sighed. His girlfriend didn’t want Superman carrying Lucy anywhere, especially anywhere special for them. “I’ve got a better idea, Loises,” he said. “Why don’t you two girls… *women* go somewhere and eat? Sam and I will stay here with Lara.”

“Girl’s day!” Lois grinned with a clap of her hands. “Oh, Lucy. I know where we can go. There’s a new Chippendale review in Las Vegas…”

“Hey!” Clark gasped. Him and his big mouth.

“Chippendales?” Lucy seemed to be considering it. “Hmmm.”

“Please. Please, no. Ultra Woman cannot be seen visiting a Chippendale review,” Clark reminded her.

“They do have all-you-can-eat buffets in Las Vegas,” Lois reminded him.

“No.” He growled.

Lois rolled her eyes. “He ruins all my fun.”

Lucy looked out the window as if she was searching for someone and then sighed. Quietly, she left the room. Clark watched her, knowing she was still deep in the woods.

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Lucy looked across the picnic table at Lois. She looked pretty ridiculous in that blonde wig, but Clark wouldn’t let the two of them out of the apartment together unless one of them was wearing a disguise. Lois lost the coin toss. Lucy wore it on the trip over and Ultra Woman wore it once they landed and she had changed back into her civilian clothing.

Ultra Woman had purchased a couple of pastrami sandwiches, chips, and drinks and taken them to a deserted state park in the southwest. California, Lucy thought, but she wasn’t sure.

They really hadn’t spoken much one-on-one since after she had come out as Ultra Woman. For some reason Clark’s girlfriend had gotten jealous of Lucy again after that. Clark was obviously smitten with the woman and Lucy couldn’t understand how she could ever be competition. This Lois still had the spit and fire she once had, but had lost somewhere along the way. Sitting here felt awkward, uncomfortable. Lucy wondered if it felt the same for Lois.

“So, tell me about Kal’s life. How does he differ from Clark?” Ultra Woman inquired.

“We finally get out of the apartment and all you want to talk about is Clark?” Lucy rolled her eyes. Thinking about her husband *and* Clark made her heart tug in two different directions at once. She didn’t want to compare them. She didn’t want to think about either of them. Every time she did, she ended up crying.

Ultra blonde Woman shrugged. The super duo was still in the honeymoon phase of their relationship. All they could think about was each other. Lucy knew she was just a thorn on the rose of their love.

“Tell me about Kal’s little brother, then,” Ultra Woman asked, taking a bit of her sandwich.

Lucy’s brow furrowed. “Clark doesn’t have a little brother.”

“Not Clark. Kal… oh, you meant *your* Clark. Sure, he does. There are pictures of him and Clark and the Kents at Martha’s house. I saw them.”

"Clark does not have a little brother," Lucy repeated. Her head was beginning to throb. She didn't want to be here with Ultra Woman. She missed her room, her bed, the darkness.

"Well, I know what I saw, Lucy. He's probably eight to ten years younger than Clark."

Lucy sighed, playing with the straw of her cup. Ultra Woman just wouldn't drop it. "You mean Jimmy?"

"Jimmy?"

"James Olsen's double is Clark's best friend," Lucy clarified.

"No. It wasn't James. This kid is younger than James. His face is thinner, jaw more angular. He had an earring in his left ear."

Lucy shook her head. She had no idea who that person could be. "I don't know, Lois. Clark doesn't have a brother. He…" Suddenly a face jumped into her mind. "Jack." Her eyes narrowed to slits and a growl emerged from deep inside her. "What color hair did this kid have?"

"I don't know, sandy brown, dark blond, I guess. Who's Jack?"

"A mullet?" Lucy asked through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, in a couple of photos. The older ones. In the newer ones his hair was shorter."

Lucy's eyes flashed to hers. "Newer photos? Were they in Metropolis?"

"No." Ultra Woman shook her head hesitantly and then tried to change the subject. "It's beautiful out here in the sunshine, isn't it? I can't believe how addicting sunshine has become after the accident. Don't you just love how it feels on your skin? It makes me feel like I could take on the world! How's your sandwich?"

"Could you tell where they were in the photos?" Lucy wasn't going to be distracted.

Ultra Woman coughed, looking away. "The farm. In one of the newer photos, with the shorter hair, the kid was wearing a cowboy hat."

"Jack was on the Kent farm?" Lucy groaned. A new ache started to burn inside of her. Why hadn't Clark told her that he had relocated Jack to Smallville? Why was he hiding him from her? Did he not trust her? Lucy felt as if a hole opened up in her chest. Her mouth felt like it was full of sand and she was drowning. Clark — her Clark —lied to her. He had promised never to do that again. She dropped her sandwich on the picnic table, having eaten only a few bites. "Take me back to Metropolis, Lois."

***

Meanwhile, back at the Daily Planet in Lois's home dimension…

Clark kissed Lois's cheek as she returned to her desk. Then she watched as he ran towards the supply closet, loosening his tie. Her husband had seemed strange after she returned from the bookstore. Lois hoped it had nothing to do with his wrestling match with Vixen earlier. She trusted Clark. How could she not? He was Clark, the most trustworthy man she had ever met. Well, except for the big lie, but that was over a year ago. There were no more lies. Still she hated seeing that video with him rolling around with that blonde Vixen. It had shaken her to her core, seeing him like that with another woman. Especially after their no-precautions lovefest at breakfast.

Jimmy came up to her desk and updated her on the unbelievably stubborn FBI, which still refused to give up that ATM tape on the bank CEO's disappearance, but then he just stood there shifting from foot to foot.

"Lois?"

She glanced up at him. "Huh?"

"Are you pregnant?"

Lois stared at him, holding in the urge to drop her jaw. "Want to run that one by me again, Jimmy?"

He swallowed. "Ah. Your friend Star was here earlier and I didn't hear all that she said, except something about a baby, and Clark moved her into the conference room faster than Superman. So, I was wondering…"

"Oh."

Star said something about a baby to Clark? Well, that explained her husband's odd behavior.

"Clark doesn't move faster than Superman, Jimmy," Lois corrected. "That's impossible."

"Yeah, I know. But one moment they were by his desk and the next they were in the conference room with the door closed. I know she's a friend of yours, Lois, so I thought you had said something to her."

Lois smiled indulgently at him. "Jimmy, I haven't seen Star since before Clark and I got married. I wouldn't tell her I was having a baby before I told you."

Jimmy exhaled.

"You're having a baby?" Perry gasped and Lois rolled her eyes.

"This is how rumors start, people. No! No! No! Now, shoo, all of you. I've got real work to do." She turned back to her computer as Jimmy and her boss scampered off.

Star had told Clark something about a baby? God, she hoped she wasn't pregnant from their pre-breakfast bliss. She was nowhere near ready to be a mother. Truthfully, the consequences of this morning's delight spooked her more than Superman fighting Vixen. Lois placed a hand over her stomach. What if she got pregnant? What if she was pregnant at that very moment? As Ralph would say, 'Faster than a speeding bullet.' She shivered. Why had she thought that? She loved Clark and she had always known he would be the best father, but her as a mother? The mother of super child? Being the mother of a regular child would be hard enough. Would she be up for the task? She knew she would never be Martha. She wondered if her new parenting book, *Raising Kids in a Busy Household,* would help her know if parenting was even feasible for their crazy, hectic lifestyle.

Clark returned shortly thereafter, and Lois wrapped her arms around his neck and greeted him with a kiss.

"That was enthusiastic. Thanks, honey. I missed you, too."

"We need to talk," Lois said to him under her breath.

His brow furrowed.

"Star came to the newsroom to see you?" she asked.

"No, to see you. She wanted me to tell you hi. She hadn't seen you in awhile and—"

"I see." Lois interrupted with a nod. "So, your conversation had nothing to do with a baby?"

"What? How did…?" her husband sputtered.

"Jimmy overheard her say something to you about a baby and then saw you take her into the conference room, and I'm quoting here, 'faster than Superman.'"

Clark pressed his lips together. "That's impossible. I cannot be faster than Superman."

"I told him that. Obviously, you weren't faster than the rumor mill though. Jimmy asked if I was pregnant. So, am I?"

"Wow! I dash out to stop one mugger and… I don't know, Lois, are you? You'd know before I would." Clark smiled sheepishly.

"So that's not what she told you then?"

He shook his head. "No, she just said that she saw a baby in our future." He lowered his voice even further. "After our discussion this morning before breakfast…" He raised his brows. "I figured it was best to get her out of the bullpen."

"Right." Lois placed a hand on his chest and smiled, reassured. "In the future, then?"

He nodded and she released a breath.

"The future I can handle; the present, not so much."

Clark pulled her back for another kiss, then whispered, "Do

you mind if I get a little more scientific data than Star's hunch?"

"Since it's us," Lois laughed. "Probably best to get a second opinion."

***

Several weeks later at the Loises' apartment in the other dimension…

Clark opened the door to the apartment and let Moonbeam in.

"How's she doing?" Moonbeam asked right off the bat.

Clark's life was surrounded by females so he wasn't quite sure to whom she referred. He cleared his throat as he considered his response.

Moonbeam pursed her lips. "Lucy."

Well, that narrowed it down to two.

"The one that isn't married to Lex Luthor," she clarified again.

"Ah." He wanted to say 'better', but that wasn't quite true.

Lucy got up, showered, and got dressed every day. She took care of Lara. Fed her with a bottle, changed her, and bathed her. She did everything they asked. Although she was eating, it was more because they were watching her, not because she wanted to. He didn't even know if she was sleeping. Of course, sleeping brought her closer to Kal.

Lucy still looked like a ghost of the woman she used to be. Gone was her vibrancy. Gone was her humor. Gone was her drive, her zest, her zeal. It was as if she had lost her soul, but the frame of its old house was still there.

Moonbeam sighed. "That bad, huh?" She clapped her hands together. "Where is she?"

Clark stepped aside. Lucy was sitting on the couch behind him, staring out the window. Her body was there, but her mind was still far, far away.

"Wow. When Star said she had gone off the deep end, I didn't know she meant into a black hole." Moonbeam sighed again. "I'll see what I can do."

"Who is Star?" Clark asked, confused.

Lucy turned toward Moonbeam, acknowledging her presence for the first time. "You've spoken with Star? But I haven't seen Star since I was married. Why would you talk to her? How could you?"

"Star can still sense you, since you belong in her universe," explained Moonbeam.

"Who is Star?" Clark asked again.

Sam spoke up from the kitchen. "Star was Moonbeam's name before she became a lawyer and changed it."

Why would Moonbeam talk to her old self about Lois… unless she meant…

"You can contact the other dimension?" Clark asked, surprised.

Moonbeam turned and faced him. "It's not like making a phone call, but yes. Star doesn't know about us, though. When she sensed that Lucy was depressed, she thought it was the Lois that you left behind. She went to speak with you down at the Planet, but she spoke to Clark instead."

Lucy grabbed Moonbeam by the shoulders. "Clark? Star talked to my Clark about me? *Me*, me? He's going to think Star's fallen off her rocker."

Moonbeam shrugged.

Clark suspected that Kal already felt that way about this Star person; he had felt that way about Moonbeam on the few occasions they had met. What would he have done if Moonbeam had come to him and told him that his Lucy was deeply depressed, when he knew she was just fine? He would have thought she was nuts.

"Star has been trying to contact you, but hasn't known how to get in touch."

"Why?" Clark sat down across from them. "Why would she want to contact her if she doesn't know about the other dimension or that Lucy is here?"

Moonbeam ignored his questions as she held out her hand to Lucy. "Give me your hand and close your eyes, Lucy. I want to try something."

They sat there holding hands with their eyes closed for a while, nothing happening as far as Clark could see. Lara woke up crying and he went to get her.

Lara was getting more beautiful every day, but she hadn't been thrilled with the change in diet. Every time he or Lois fed her a bottle, she would put a hand to their heads and put an image of Lucy in their minds. It was her way of calling to her mommy. He changed Lara's diaper and brought her out to the living room to see if there was a change with Lucy and Moonbeam.

They sat down across from the women, Lara on his lap and he, watching.

Eventually Moonbeam sighed and opened her eyes, shaking her head. "It was worth a shot." She noticed the two of them across from her. "Hello there, little one. I'm Moonbeam, a friend of your mommy and Auntie Lois. We were trying to contact your daddy."

Lara grabbed one of Clark's fingers resting against her tummy.

"No, sweetie, that is your Uncle Clark," Moonbeam continued. "Not Daddy."

Lois stood up and retrieved her daughter from Clark with a sour expression.

"Hey, I never told her I was Daddy. She's the one who calls me that," he once again defended himself to deaf ears.

"Clark," Moonbeam asked hesitantly. "How do you know she calls you Daddy?"

He gulped with a glance at Lois. Him and his big mouth.

"Kryptonians are telepathic. Lara can communicate with Superman and Ultra Woman that way," Lois explained, sitting down next to their friend.

"Really? Fascinating. I wonder…" Moonbeam reached out her palm, but did not touch Lara and closed her eyes.

Both Clark and Lucy looked at her. Definitely off her rocker in his book. He shook his head, standing up and heading toward the kitchen.

"I love her and I miss her and I want her to come home," spoke Moonbeam in a voice that was not her own.

Clark turned around. Lara had grabbed Moonbeam's thumb.

"*What?*" Lucy said with a shaking voice.

"Wow!" Moonbeam pulled her hand back. "She's a powerful girl, Lucy. Like an amplifier."

"What was that you just said? About the loving and missing and the back home?" Lucy's voice shook.

Moonbeam glanced over at Clark and then back at Lucy. "I didn't say anything."

"Yes, you did. I heard it, too."

Moonbeam appeared confused. "I don't remember saying anything."

Lucy gazed at Clark. "Clark?"

He went to take Lara, but the baby grabbed Lucy's shirt, not wanting to go. He stopped trying. "She wants you, Lucy."

Lucy shook her head. "She never wants me. It must be Lois she wants."

"Right," he responded sarcastically. "That's whose shirt she's holding onto."

Lucy looked down at her daughter. "Do you want Mommy?" She turned her around so that they were face to face. "Mommy loves you so much, sweet baboo." Leaning over to rest her head against Lara's, she kissed her, and closed her eyes. She gasped, her eyes flying open and she looked at her daughter. "Oh, Lara, I love you so much. You are the best daughter in the whole wide universe." She pulled her to her chest, rocking her, a tear dripping down her face.

"Lucy?" He stared at her. Something had happened.

"I… she heard Clark." She pressed her shaking lips together. "My Clark. Her daddy. He said that he loves me and he misses me and he wants me to come home." She looked up at him. "Why would he say that?"

Clark shrugged. He was as flabbergasted as she was. Did Kal know she was missing? That she was here? He glanced at Moonbeam. She stood up.

"Well, my work here is done." She smiled.

"Wait!" Lucy jumped to her feet. "Can you let Star know that we got the message?"

"I don't know, Lucy. It's not like making a telephone call."

Lucy stretched out her daughter's hand. "Here's your telephone. Contact her daddy for us, please."

Moonbeam looked at Lara's outstretched hand and stepped back. "I can't, Lucy. She fried my circuits."

"Oh." Lucy pulled her daughter close again.

"I did see her future in your dimension. You make it back." She smiled and left.

Lucy watched her leave and then turned to Clark. "We're going home?"

"Well, if Mr. Wells returns to pick you up, Lara probably could return home tomorrow," Sam said, bringing lunch out to the dining table.

"What about me?" Lucy asked, rocking her daughter in a tight embrace.

Clark looked at Sam and they both shook their heads. "Lucy, you need to gain at least twenty pounds, if you are going to go back to your old life without anyone knowing you were gone. What would Perry or James do if you walked into the newsroom looking like you do?"

She swallowed. "They'd put me in a hospital." Her hands began to shake. "I can't go to a hospital. I can't, Clark. You know what they'll do to me… to Lara."

Clark wrapped his arm around her. "That's over now, Lucy. No one is going to hurt you like that ever again."

"Come and have lunch," Sam said, pulling out a chair.

"It's the only way to see Kal," Clark reminded her.

"Fine." She stomped across the living room and sat down in her chair, the baby in her lap. She looked down at her sandwich. "Is this pastrami?"

Sam smiled loving at her. "Only the best for my girl."

"My favorite, Sam. Thanks."

***

Ultra Woman blew through the windows. "Oooh, just in time for lunch." She gave Clark a kiss. "Hi, handsome. I just dropped James off upstairs. He's getting tired of being guarded. He wants to know if you have anything more concrete than your hunch."

Clark sighed. "Four CEOs of companies that refused to sell to L.I, Ltd. got indicted for embezzlement, just like in Lucy's dimension. But Perry told me that the charges were all hooey. Yet the CEOs all disappeared, vanished before their names could be cleared. I don't want that to happen to James. And as Lois told us, Kal discovered the gold specks on the videotape, Vixen's handiwork."

"Vixen's dead," Lucy said between bites. "She tried to kill Superman with that electrical fireball weapon of hers and it bounced off him and struck her, disintegrating her."

"What electrical fireball weapon?" Clark asked.

Lucy finished chewing before speaking. "She does this volleyball bump move and generates some kind of electrical fireball that she shoots at anyone who ticks her off."

Clark turned to Ultra Woman. "I don't want you fighting her."

"I love you too, Clark," she said, patting his shoulder.

"No. I'm serious, Lois. You weren't born with these powers and I don't know how stable they are. I don't want you fighting her." He rested his head against hers. "Please."

"If anyone cares, I'm with Clark on this," Sam said from the dining room.

Ultra Woman smiled at her father and kissed Clark's cheek. "My men are too overprotective. Okay. I'll keep to catching normal bad guys and search and rescue only, but that means I'm leaving the crazies to you." She shook her head. "Where's my favorite niece? I need an energy boost." She walked over to Lucy and held out her arms. "Do you want to come to Aunt Ultra, sweetie?"

"Oh, thanks, Lois," Lucy said, handing over her daughter. Ultra Woman glanced at Clark with surprise.

"How's my little sweetie?" Ultra Woman cooed, kissing her cheek. "What have you been up to today?" Lara touched her face.

I love her and I miss her and I want her to come home. Clark's voice echoed in her head.

"Clark?" She looked at him. "What is this?"

"What's what?" His brow furrowed.

"Why are you telling Lara that you love her, miss her and want her to come home? Who her?"

"You heard my voice?" He looked at Lois, curiously.

"Kal's voice. Lara is telling you she heard her daddy's voice today," Lois told her.

"What? How?"

"Moonbeam was here and together, she and Lara were able to reach the other dimension."

Her jaw dropped. "But that's… wow." She snuggled against Lara. "He does sound like Uncle Super, doesn't he?"

Clark spun into his Superman suit. "I'm going to see if I can find Vixen. I want to find her before she decides to throw any of those fireballs." He kissed Lara's head and Ultra Woman's cheek and waved at her father and Lucy, before flying through the window.

Ultra Woman sighed. "Sometimes I feel we spend less time together now. I, for one, will be happy when we take out the Vixen threat."

Lucy swayed in her chair. "Ooh, I don't feel so well," she said, shaking her head. "Lightheaded. I think I ate too fast." She gulped, trying to stand up. "I feel weak."

"I might not have super human strength, sweetie, but I can still help you to your bed," Sam said, coming over to her.

"Thanks, Sam."

"I can take her, Daddy, if you want to hold Lara for a moment."

He nodded, reaching over for the precious tyke.

Ultra Woman picked up Lucy, who already felt like she weighed nothing. "Has she lost more weight, Daddy? She has almost no mass at all."

Lucy's head drooped as she passed out. "Daddy! What's wrong with her?" Ultra Woman called. She zipped Lucy into the bedroom.

Sam came in a few moments later, handing Lara to her. "Take her, Princess. She shouldn't see her mother like this."

Ultra Woman, nodded taking Lara back out to the living room. Lara started crying uncontrollably. "She'll be fine, sweetie. Hush, now. She'll be fine," she repeated, rocking the baby, trying to calm her down.

Lara seemed lighter, too. Ultra Woman glanced down and saw that she was not only lighter, but also transparent. Lara stopped crying and looked up at her. Then she disappeared completely. Ultra Woman screamed.

***

In Lois's home dimension…

"Breathe, Lois. Breathe. Come on, Lois!" Superman demanded, giving her mouth-to-mouth. She didn't respond. Oh, God! What had he done? He had killed her. She still wasn't breathing. "Lois!"

She couldn't die. What had he been thinking? If she died, her future self and their child over in the other dimension would die with her. Just ceased to exist. "Breathe, Lois." This was taking too long. He took too many chances with her life. *Oh, please, God!* Let her live and he would never freeze her again. He would find another way. He should never have risked her life.

Lois gasped, drawing in a breath. She lived. She lived! He hadn't killed her. "Lois!" Superman pulled her into his arms.

"Did it work?" she murmured.

"Yes," he answered. "Lex, Jr. blew himself up."

"I'm so cold." She shivered.

He kissed her, breaking their cardinal rule of Superman and Lois Lane, but he didn't care. She was alive! "I know how to warm you up. Basic survival techniques 101."

His wife smiled. "Oooh. My favorite technique."

Superman lifted her up and took off into the air.

"Clark," she whispered in his ear. "Not that I'm complaining, but let's not freeze me again."

"Don't worry, Lois. I already made myself that promise."

"Clark." She rested her head against his warm chest. "Why me? Why is it always me that the psychos want?"

He kissed the top of her head with a smile. "I don't know, Lois. You just bring out the psycho in us men."

"Great." Lois groaned. "How about you get me pregnant? Maybe the psychos wouldn't want me if I weigh 150 pounds."

Superman chuckled. "That's a bad reason to start a family, Lois. Anyway, I bet you'd be the sexiest pregnant woman in the world." He exhaled, blowing their living room windows open. He sure had found her sexy whenever she had visited him while pregnant. "Why don't we wait to start trying, at least until Dr. Klein returns from Barbados and gives me the test results?"

"All right. I'm not ready to be a mom yet."

Superman ran her upstairs and spun into his PJ shorts, climbing into bed with her. Skin-to-skin contact. Basic survival 101.

***

Back in the other dimension…

"Daddy!" Ultra Woman screamed. "Clark!"

Superman flew in the window at the same time her father arrived from Lucy's bedroom.

"What?"

"Lara disappeared. Just disappeared. One moment she was in my arms, crying. Then she got lighter and then transparent and she was gone, just gone." She was shaking uncontrollably. "Where is my girl?"

Superman wrapped his arms around her, gazing at her father. "Sam? Where's Lucy?"

"She just disappeared in the bedroom," he replied. The color had left Sam's cheeks and he looked ghastly.

"What?" Ultra Woman zipped down the hall to the bedroom. "Where did they go?" She sped back to the living room. "What happened, Clark?"

"Something must have happened to her placeholder back in her dimension. When she dies, it affects Lucy here."

"What? How could Kal let anything happen to her? Doesn't he know he's risking Lara's life?"

Superman pulled Ultra Woman into his arms. "She'll be back, Lois. She'll be back. Otherwise, time would have shifted and it would be like she was never here. While we still remember her, she'll be back."

"You've gone through this before?" his girlfriend choked out.

Superman nodded, scooping her up into his arms and carrying her over to the sofa as she sobbed. She turned to her father and he nodded as well.

"It's pretty scary the first time," her father told her. "But so far, she's come back every time."

Ultra Woman ripped off her mask and threw it onto the floor. Tears ran down her face. She held on to Clark tightly. "My God, how many times has Lucy died this year?"

Superman held her and whispered, "Too many."

Her father went back into the bedroom to watch for Lucy.

"Lois, where was Lara when she disappeared?" Clark asked.

"In my arms."

He let go of her. "Where were you standing?"

"Over there." She flung her hand over towards the dining room.

"I need you to go back where you were and pretend you are still holding her, in case she appears back into your arms."

Ultra Woman was shaking. "How? I'm not quite sure where I was. Oh, God! Clark, I don't know how to do this." She paced the area inbetween the sofa and the dining table.

"Just try," he said from the living room.

"Stand with me."

"I can't, Lois. I don't want be in the way, if she doesn't appear into your arms."

Ultra Woman started sobbing harder. "Oh, God, Clark. If I drop her…" She fell to the floor and started feeling around with her hands. Then she stopped and buried her face in her hands. "Lara! Lara, where are you? Oh, Clark, if anything happens to her… I will never be able to live with myself. I love her so much…"

Minutes passed and nothing changed.

"Clark, how long until she comes back?"

"I don't know, Lois. As long as it takes for Kal to save her other self."

Ultra Woman glared at his completely unhelpful answer.

More minutes passed.

"She's not coming back, is she?" Ultra Woman sobbed. "She has to come back. I would gladly trade my life for hers. Please, God, let Lara live."

"Don't give up hope, Lois."

"Lois! Clark! She's coming back," her father called from the bedroom.

Ultra Woman held her arms around an imaginary baby, hoping beyond hope that Lara would reappear there. Another minute passed. Nothing. "Clark?"

He floated into the air, looking around, but shrugged.

Ultra Woman floated into the air, not wanting to touch the floor, in case Lara ended up there. What was that? She thought she saw a pile of blankets reappear on the floor, next to where she had just been sitting. "Clark! Daddy!" She landed gently onto the floor and watched as the blankets became more distinct, more solid. She scooped Lara into her arms. "Oh, sweetie. Here you are. I was so worried." She rocked the baby back and forth, back and forth. "Clark?"

He was at her side. Her father arrived at that point.

"I don't hear her breathing," Ultra Woman whispered, the tears falling down her cheeks again.

"Lara," Clark whispered, caressing her head. "Sweetheart, are you all right?"

Ultra Woman handed her to Superman. "What have I done?" she gasped, burying her face in her hands, again. "What have I done?"

Clark rubbed the baby's back. "Sam?"

"Lie her on the floor, Clark," her father instructed.

He did so and they all gathered around.

"Try mouth-to-mouth."

Superman nodded, gently rubbing Lara's tummy and blowing into her mouth. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. He blew again.

Lara started squirming around and then let out a high-pitched scream.

Ultra Woman started crying harder.

Her father smiled, lifting up Lara. "Now, isn't that a pretty sound?" He rocked her back and forth and took her down the hall

to Lucy.

Ultra Woman sat on the floor, crying. She couldn't move. It was her fault. She must have dropped Lara when she disappeared. Knocked the wind out of her or something.

Superman wrapped his arms and cape around her. "She's okay now, Lois."

Ultra Woman still shook, sobbing against his chest. "We can never have children," she whispered. "I'm going to be a horrible mother, Clark."

"That's not true, Lois," he murmured, kissing her head as he rocked her. "All it shows is that you love too much. Not a bad trait in my book."

"I dropped her, Clark. I dropped her."

"Forgive yourself, Lois. She's fine. You didn't know that was going to happen." Clark kissed her cheek.

"You should have warned me!" She slugged him in the chest. "Clark, you should have told me it might be a possibility."

"Lois, the only time it happened was on their wedding day, when they were traveling through time trying to defeat the curse. She died, or almost died, three or four times that day. It never occurred again." Clark lifted up her jaw and set a kiss upon her lips. "And if you ask me, you'll make a wonderful mother someday."

Ultra Woman wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed so strong a kiss on his mouth, she knocked him over. She didn't stop kissing him until she heard a chuckle.

"I hope we're not interrupting anything," Lucy said, holding Lara to her shoulder.

Superman jumped to his feet and spun back into his jeans and t-shirt and then pulled Ultra Woman to her feet.

Ultra Woman hugged the two of them. "Lucy, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to drop her. When she disappeared, it was as if she took my heart with her. I love her so much. I would do anything for her." She started to cry again.

"Anything?" Lois asked, looking over her shoulder to Clark.

Ultra Woman took a step back, grabbing hold of Clark's hand and raising a brow at her. "What do you mean, Lucy?"

"Do you love Lara enough that you would allow yourself to get amnesia again and go back and live with Lex for a week or two? Would you be willing to push Clark away, not knowing that he is your true love, if you knew that in the end you could have both Clark and Lara? And be able to make love to him again for the first time?"

"What are you saying, Lucy? You want me to go back to Lex and if I do, you'll give me Lara and guarantee I can have my Clark, too?" She held out her hand without a moment's hesitation. "Deal!"

"Hey!" stammered Clark.

Lucy grinned with merriment, but did not shake her hand as she walked into the living room. "Clark, I now know how to get my stand-in to agree to go back to the worst day of our life."

Ultra Woman looked at Clark as a smile of understanding spread across his face. He pulled his girlfriend into his arms. "Sorry, Ultra Woman, she was just throwing you a hypothetical situation. She's not giving you her daughter, but you still get to keep me."

"What?!" Lois stammered. "I'll trade you Clark for Lara."

"Excuse me?" He gasped.

"Tempting, Lois. Tempting," Lucy said with a wink at Clark. "But I'm going to keep Lara. I already have one in that model."

Ultra Woman pulled Clark in for a kiss. "Just kidding, Mr. Amazing," she whispered. "You're not for sale or trade."

Clark smiled, releasing a breath of relief. "Good."

Lucy started laughing harder. "Mr. *Amazing*?"

Clark cringed.

Ultra Woman looked at her with a raised brow. "What? You don't think that's a good name for him?"

Her father covered his ears. "I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear this," he repeated leaving the room. "I don't want to hear this."

Ultra Woman winced and then laughed. "Ooops."

Clark rolled his eyes. "I'm never going to hear the end of this."

Lucy looked at Clark and smiled. "Yeah. I'd say he's a pretty amazing guy." She winked at him again. "But he's no Superman." She grinned.

Ultra Woman kissed Clark's cheek and whispered, "She's happy, Clark."

Clark nodded, holding her tight. "She's just figured out how to go home. Now all she needs is a lift." He kissed her cheek. "I better go back to looking for Vixen." He stepped away from Ultra Woman and spun back into his blue suit, then paused before the window. "Lucy? Why did you die? Do you know?"

Lucy exhaled and shook her head. "Lex, Jr. used the Neuroscanner on me. He made me tell Clark that I wanted a divorce. He made me perform some sick romantic play with Luckaby, the actor he hired to portray himself. He told me what to say and what to do. When Luckaby rebelled, Junior shot him. Lex's son decided he was going to keep me prisoner in his underground lair instead." She swallowed. "When he found us, Junior told Clark that he wanted Clark to do his bidding or he would kill me with the Neuroscanner. So, Clark froze me with his super breath, knowing I'd rather die than be Junior's prisoner. He had done it once before, when someone else found out his secret identity and kidnapped his parents. One of the things they wanted him to do was kill this super annoying reporter Lois Lane. Only this time, it took him longer to thaw me out." She shivered. "That's how I found out he was Superman, when he froze me the first time. They both touched me the same way, in the same manner, and suddenly everything was clear. I knew. I knew that he was the two men I loved most in the world. Both of them." She sighed.

"And he *killed* you. Kal killed you?" Ultra Woman couldn't believe her ears.

"He froze me, temporarily, to help us escape. Then he used his heat vision to thaw me out," Lucy clarified.

"Is he crazy? That could have killed you. It did kill you." Ultra Woman shook her head.

"I'm sure he wouldn't have done it if he had known it might hurt Lara." Lucy hugged her daughter tighter. "He doesn't know about her."

"Right," Ultra Woman said sarcastically. "What about their little communication with Moonbeam earlier?"

"He doesn't know about his daughter. He thinks *you're* the pregnant woman who visited his parents in Smallville in December. That's what Martha told him." Lucy closed her eyes. "Star came to speak with Clark weeks ago, when Vixen first came on the scene. That's when he must have…" She shook her head. "Why would he give Star a message for me then? Who else would he contact? I don't know. Anyway, he doesn't know about us. Period. End of story."

"Where was Lex, Jr.'s lair?" Superman asked, getting to the heart of his question.

"The same place Lex took me when I had amnesia and thought I was Wanda Detroit. The old subway station under the Daily Planet."

Superman nodded. "Now, I have a spot to start looking for Vixen." He kissed Ultra Woman one last time and took off out the living room windows.

Ultra Woman stared at Lucy holding her daughter. She really went through a lot — death and turmoil — just to get her happily ever after. She was glad she would never have to die again.

***

Back at the townhouse in Lois's dimension, several weeks

later…

Clark gazed down at his old bassinette his parents had asked Jack to send from the farm. He was so confused. His mother swore that his Lois was pregnant and went to the other dimension last summer. But Dr. Klein told him he wasn't able to have children with Earth women. Genetically, they didn't match.

If that was the case, who was that woman who visited his parents' farm last December? Was it his wife? Had they been able to conceive, despite the odds? Or was it the woman his mother originally said it was, the other Clark's… well, not wife, his girlfriend… the other Lois? The other Lois whom his mother said had been struck by lightning and was, for all intents and purposes, Kryptonian. The new and improved Ultra Woman would surely be able to conceive with the other Clark, wouldn't she?

Star said that there was definitely a baby in his future. His brother's child. She said that Lois was depressed — deeply depressed. Was she just mistaken? Or had she seen Lois weeping when he told her what Dr. Klein had told him? He took a sip of his buttermilk and gazed down at the bassinette. He had been so hopeful. He had been so sure that that woman from December at the farm was his wife. That Lucy El, wife of Kal-El, pregnant with his child, was truly his wife, Lois Lane. His mother said that scientists made mistakes all the time. So Dr. Klein didn't think they could conceive, so what? Martha knew better. Lois had been pregnant. That was what Lois had told her, but Lois could have been lying to her.

What if Lois went to the other dimension for another reason? Perhaps she had fallen in love with the other Clark. He shook his head. No. His Lois loved him, of that he was certain. Did she even survive the birth? He thought Star's depression story meant that she had, but what if the darkness was death?

What if Lois never returned and someday soon Mr. Wells would arrive to tell him that his Lois was just a stand-in and it was time for her to return to the past where she belonged? Suddenly, he would be left alone, with no Lois and no child, just alone with his memories. Would he be able to go on? Continue to be Superman?

Clark sighed as he still had no answers. He heard Lois coming down the stairs. She was probably wondering why he had never come back to bed.

***

Back at the Daily Planet in the alternative dimension…

Lucy turned around to grab a document off the printer. Standing next to her desk was a small man in a bowler hat. As she reached around him to the printer, he said in an English accent, "Excuse me, miss. I am looking for Clark Kent."

Her mind was on the sheet in her hand, checking it for mistakes. "He's not in. Can I help you with something?" She lifted her eyes to his.

The little man gazed at her with wide eyes. "Lois? Lois Lane?"

She frowned dismayed. She didn't need this. "No. Lucy El." She focused her attention on him. Who was he?

"Lois. Don't you recognize me?" The man wasn't letting it drop.

"Lucy," she corrected again. "And have we met?"

"Oh, dear God. You've lost your memory. I've left you here too long." He shook his head.

Okey-dokey. He just traveled into the strange zone. "Excuse me?"

"Lois, look at me closely. Think back. We met on a sunny afternoon several years ago. Clark, you, and I traveled—"

She couldn't believe this guy. "Look, mister, I've never met you. I certainly haven't traveled anywhere with you, and Lois Lane is dead."

The man stumbled backward. "Dead? Oh dear, no. I was sure bringing her here would save her from the curse."

The curse? "Who *are* you?" she asked slowly. Were they talking about the same curse? If so, how did he know about the curse?

"That's of little consequence. I need to talk to Clark Kent. How am I ever going to tell him his wife is dead?" The man sighed, sitting down on the steps leading to the editor's office.

"Wife?" Lucy growled. "Clark Kent *isn't* married." Who was this man?

"Tell me, miss. If I may be so bold, how and when did she expire? Lois Lane."

"In January. By a bomb blast," Lucy replied gently.

The man's pallor turned grey. "Bomb? And I brought her here to save her." He looked up at her. "And the baby, did it survive? No, wait, you said January, that was before she was born. I checked my dates and facts and everything told me that tonight was the night she returned home." The poor man looked as if he were about to cry. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have waited so long. I'll have to go back and save her. Otherwise Clark will be devastated. He loves her so much."

Lucy knelt down beside him. "How do you know about the baby?" she whispered. "Who *are* you?"

He looked at her again. "What did you say your name was?"

"Lucy El."

"L?"

"Perhaps you know my husband Kal-El?" she asked softly, beginning to realize she wasn't the person for whom he was looking.

The light returned to his eyes. "*You* are Kal-El's wife?"

Lucy nodded.

The man released his breath and held out his hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. El. I am Herbert George Wells."

"H.G. Wells? Oh, I have heard of you! I'm so sorry for the confusion. Clark will want to see you right away." As she shook his hand, she brought him to his feet.

"Oh, dear me. You are strong," he stammered.

She smiled. *Ooops*. "Thank you. Clark has me on an exercise program."

"Where is Clark?" Mr. Wells asked.

"He's at the apartment watching Lara."

"Then she's…! Oh, that's something at least." The man sighed in relief.

"Yes, Lara's mother needs an afternoon off every once in a while, and Clark is thrilled to help out."

Mr. Wells took hold of her hands. "She's alive as well?" He gasped.

"Sorry for the confusion." Lucy smiled.

"So, you are…" When she nodded, Mr. Wells chuckled. "No wonder you didn't recognize me."

"Why don't you go outside and wait under the globe and I'll see if I can find Clark's girlfriend to take you to him?"

He frowned. "*Girlfriend*? But I thought…" he stammered.

"Oh, no." She laughed. "I am Clark's assistant and Kal-El's wife."

This statement clearly stumped Mr. Wells, who must have been aware that Kal-El and Superman were the same man. "Then who is his girlfriend?"

Lucy grinned mischievously. "I'm sure you'll recognize her when you see her."

Mr. Wells seemed a bit thrown by this pronouncement. "Under the globe?"

"Under the globe." Lucy nodded. "Nice to have met you," she said, waving.

At the elevator, Mr. Wells bumped into James Olsen, who stared at him in wonder. "I know we've met before, your face is so familiar… wait, I know, you're that man that came with Lucy when she impersonated Lois Lane during the election. The

Congolese missionary…. um…" He snapped his fingers.

"Right. Mr. Olsen, wasn't it?" He held out his hand. "Mr. Wells."

James shook his hand. "What brings you back to Metropolis, Mr. Wells?"

"I'm here to take Lois and the baby back to her husband," Mr. Wells explained.

"What? No! She can't leave today. She can't leave without saying goodbye. I know things have been rough these last few months… but…" He studied the man. "Did you call her Lois?"

"Slip of the tongue, my boy." Mr. Wells smiled.

"Oh. Right. Are you an attaché to Kal-El then?" James asked. "He's back from his mission?"

"Yes, I guess in a manner of speaking, I am. And yes, he has returned from his mission. Anxious to see his wife and child, I'm sure."

James stepped back into the elevator with Mr. Wells. "Totally. Lara's the best. Never had a single complaint from the neighbors about her crying. Cute as a button. And Lucy, she's the smartest woman I've ever met since before I met the real Lois Lane."

"Right so. Right so." Mr. Wells nodded as the doors closed.

Lois laughed softly to herself and headed toward the supply closet.

A minute later, Mr. Wells was scooped up into her arms. "Mr. Wells, I am Superman's girlfriend, Ultra Woman."

"Oh, deary me. Clark has had a busy year." Mr. Wells chuckled, holding on to his bowler hat.

***

It was a beautiful May day. The sun was shining, the birds were singing — it was nice to be outside. Lucy sighed. All it lacked was her Clark walking beside her, holding her hand, pushing a stroller. She wanted to go home. It had taken almost two months but she had gained fifteen pounds. She could pass for Ultra Woman… well, the other Lucy, now.

She was tired of force-feeding herself. Of having ice cream sundaes and cakes and cookies and heavy rich food and as many Double Fudge Crunch bars as she wanted. Who knew she would get tired of pigging out? She thought part of the reason she wasn't gaining weight as fast as they had hoped was due to the pint of Ultra Woman's blood coursing through her veins, increasing her metabolism. At least Lois had taught her a few more recipes to add to her skills list. Wouldn't Clark be surprised when she made him an edible dinner for once? She sighed again. Clark.

Lucy wanted to say that she had put her blues behind her, but she knew she hadn't. She knew that as long as she was drawn to this Clark, as long as she thought of kissing him, holding him, of spending time with him alone as they used to, she still felt she was cheating on her husband — even if she wasn't actually physically doing so. She had lied when she said that she was just drawn to his Superman side and he knew it. He had called her on it. True, Superman reminded her specifically of that one night and she was glad she wasn't allowed to kiss Superman in her own dimension any longer. She would have to talk to Perry about the Elvis music he pumped through the newsroom. She still couldn't listen to it without thinking about Halloween… about making love to this dimension's Clark.

She took a deep breath and slowly released it. He had been so kind and gentle and caring and, well, *there*, but on that one night, he had been different. Passionate, wild, impetuous, out of control… amazing. Lois swallowed. It was as if they both knew if they slowed down, they would come to their senses and do the right thing. Neither of them had wanted to do the right thing that night. He was completely different from her Clark. Not to say that making love with her Clark was boring, it certainly wasn't. Making love with her Clark was making love. Kind, gentle, slow, caring, and… she closed her eyes… wonderful. This dimension's Clark and she hadn't made love. She released another breath. They'd definitely had sex.

Lucy ran her fingers through her hair, getting them tangled in the long red strands. Damn, she hated this wig. She couldn't wait to be back home in her own dimension where she could be herself again. Lois Lane. She could grow out her hair again. No more glasses. No more frumpy clothes. Actually, since she wasn't working anymore, the other Lois let her borrow some of her old Lois clothes. It was nice to feel dressed up, just to take a walk. To feel the sun on her face gave her an energy, a vivaciousness she hadn't felt since… since she had been Ultra Woman.

She could still feel that pint of Ultra Woman blood they pumped through her veins the night Lara had been born. Sam and Clark both thought it would thin out as she produced more of her human blood, but she didn't think so. She still had some super hearing. Not as good as Superman or as good as when she was pregnant, but definitely an improvement over her regular hearing. Her eyesight was sharper, too. She wasn't invulnerable, but she couldn't remember the last time she had developed a bruise either. She didn't have the telepathy that Kryptonians had, though. She couldn't communicate with anyone except Lara, and then only sometimes.

Lara. Her daughter was the one who had pulled her out of her funk. When Lara touched her that one day and let her hear Clark's voice telling Star he loved her and missed her, it made Lois want to live again. Her brow furrowed. Lois still didn't understand that message. Was he talking about the pregnant her he had made out with in his parent's barn back when this Clark was in Singapore? She was sure Martha had convinced him that woman was this Clark's Lois. She was positive that was the only reason he would have scanned the other Lois to see if she was pregnant. She shook her head. Sometimes she wished she had access to his thoughts, not only her own.

Lara loved her. She really truly loved her mommy. Lois sensed her love, felt it. They were closer than they had ever been before. Lois sighed again. Well, here she was, back in front of her apartment building. A cherry red Corvette pulled up beside her and James jumped out.

"Lucy!" he called. "Oh good, I haven't missed you."

Lois looked up and down the street, but it was deserted. "James, what are you doing without your bodyguard? Vixen is still on the loose. I wouldn't want her—"

"I couldn't let you leave without saying goodbye," he interrupted.

"Leave?" Who told him she was leaving? The night before, they had decided that Clark would go to Smallville with a bag of gold and see if he could get the time machine to work. With Vixen, her depression, Ultra Woman's other distractions, his *Daily Planet* assignments, and Lara, Clark hadn't taken the time to test Ultra's theory about the broken time machine. Lucy was beginning to wonder if there was more to Clark's reluctance than a busy schedule.

"Your husband's attaché was just at the newsroom. He said that he was coming to get you and Lara and take you to Kal."

Who was he talking about? Attaché? "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Wells. That man who came with you to the Planet during last year's election. The one you said was a missionary."

Her eyes lit up. *Mr. Wells!* They could finally go home. No ifs, ands, or buts. She grabbed James and hugged him. "Mr. Wells? He's here?" She started running up the stairs of the front stoop.

"Wait, Lucy! Can I talk you first?" James said, rushing after her. "I never get to see you anymore without Clark or the other Lucy or Sam around. I miss you."

Lucy walked back down the steps and sat down. "You're sweet, James."

He sat down next to her. “I know it was you who told Clark to guard me because you think that Luthor is after me, after the *Daily Planet*. I know you care.”

She smiled at him. “Of course I care. I’m sorry, I haven’t been much of a friend lately. I’ve been a little self-absorbed, I know.”

“You have someone else to occupy your thoughts. I know and I understand completely. I’m totally okay with you wanting to be with your daughter. I just didn’t want you to leave without telling you… telling you…” James stammered, then paused to collect his thoughts. “Thank you for being my friend.”

Lucy hugged him. “I will always be your friend, James. And the new Lucy is great, too. New and improved.” She laughed. “You’ll be the best of friends in no time.”

“She’s not you,” her former employer murmured. “There’s something about you that’s so different from any other woman I’ve ever met before.”

“James, stop it,” she teased, pushing his arm. “Or all these compliments will go to my head.”

He smiled sheepishly. “You are the greatest researcher I’ve ever seen. And the best friend I’ll ever know.”

Lucy had to put a stop to this. “James, it was Clark’s idea to put a guard on you. I haven’t thought about anyone but myself in months. I’m sorry to have to inform you of this, but you do have other friends. Other people in this world who care about you as much as I do.”

James’s smile grew larger. “I love you.” He gulped. Obviously, that was not what he meant to say. “I mean, as a friend.”

Lucy smiled. “I love you too, James. And if I weren’t madly and truly in love with my husband, you’d certainly be a worthy second choice.”

“You mean third,” he corrected.

Her brow furrowed. “No, second.” Why were they arguing over this moot point?

“Third. After Clark.”

Lucy’s jaw dropped. “Clark’s just a friend,” she whispered sternly. “And he’s in love with Ultra Woman.”

“I’m not an idiot, Lucy.” James chuckled. “You think I don’t know you were his date to Perry’s Superhero Ball?”

Lucy leaned back, scooting away from him. “What are you talking about, James? That wasn’t me; that was Ultra Woman.”

“That was you in an Ultra Woman costume. You thought I didn’t recognize you? That I wouldn’t notice the baby bump in all those hundreds of pictures I took of you that night?”

Lucy stared at him.

“I was so in love with you, and you only had eyes for Clark. I watched you for months, staring at him from across the newsroom. When the two of you were together it was electric, magnetic. He never looked at anyone the way he looked at you, even that fiancée of his, until the real Ultra Woman showed up. Why do you think I took over Jaxon’s duties when he was out on sick leave? To be closer to you. Why do you think I dressed like Clark Kent at the party? Because you loved him so much, I just wanted you to notice me. You are the most amazing woman I have ever met, Lucy. I have loved you since—”

She put up her hand. “Stop. James, please. I love my husband. I will always love my husband. There’s a woman out there in the world for you and you’ll find each other someday.” She stood up. “Now, let’s go inside before Vixen snatches you off the street.”

“It doesn’t matter if Lex kills me. I’ve named you as beneficiary to inherit the *Daily Planet*,” he said, not standing up.

“It does matter, James. Now come inside.” Lois grabbed his arm. “We’ve tempted fate enough today.” Then his words sunk in. “What? Me? James, no, absolutely not! I can’t inherit the *Daily Planet*. I don’t exist. I’m a figment of my own imagination, a mirage. If you named Lucy El to inherit the *Daily Planet*, that other Lucy will inherit, not me. Believe me, she’ll be thrilled. But in a week, I won’t be here anymore.”

“A week?” he stammered.

“I’m not leaving today.”

“You’re not?” A smile spread across his face. “Then I just said all that stuff…” He blushed.

“I hope this doesn’t mean you won’t take me out to dinner this week,” Lois said, moving up the steps.

He stood up. “Of course, I—” Then he was gone, only gold dust reflected in the air.

“No!” She screamed, running down the steps to the sidewalk. “Clark!” She had to save James herself. Lucy pulled off her wig, holding her arms wide. “Vixen! You grabbed the wrong person. It’s me Lex wants. His wife. Lois Lane!” she yelled. Then she too disappeared.

***

A few minutes earlier…

Clark stood at the window of the Loises’ apartment, holding Lara in his arms. Ultra Woman was in the kitchen making Mr. Wells tea. Where was Lucy? She should have been back from her walk by now. He concentrated, hoping to hear her.

“*I’m not an idiot, Lucy.”* Clark heard James chuckle. “*You think I don’t know you were his date to Perry’s Superhero Ball?”*

Clark gasped. Oh, dear God. No. That wasn’t information that James Olsen needed to know. That anyone needed to know. He glanced at Ultra Woman in the kitchen and swallowed. She wasn’t using her super hearing. She was talking to Mr. Wells about their future. He shook his head. No, James and Lois’s conversation was more important.

“*That was you in an Ultra Woman costume. You didn’t think I’d recognize you? Wouldn’t notice the baby bump in all those hundreds of pictures I took of you that night? I was so in love with you and you only had eyes for Clark. I watched you for months, staring at him from across the newsroom. When the two of you were together it was electric, magnetic. He never looked at anyone the way he looked at you, even that fiancé of his, until the real Ultra Woman showed up.”*

Oh, no. This was certainly not good. James was in love with Lois. He had seen the signs but ignored them, hoping it was just a crush. He knew her secret, her darkest secret. Clark’s deepest secret. A chill went down his spine. He couldn’t believe it was James, of all people, who had figured out that it was Lucy with him that night and that they not only had made out, but had also been in love.

Clark glanced at Ultra Woman in the kitchen again. She still hadn’t noticed the conversation outside. He released a breath of relief. Thank God for small miracles. She and Lucy had been getting along so well recently. His girlfriend didn’t need to know or hear what Lucy and he and, it seemed, James knew. That before his true love had come along, he had been head over heels in love with Lucy and she with him.

“*A week?”* James stammered.

“*I’m not leaving today.”*

“*You’re not? Then I just said all that stuff…”*

“*I hope this doesn’t mean you won’t take me out to dinner this week,”* Lucy told him. Yes, she would need to somehow convince him that he was wrong about her being the first Ultra Woman. Maybe, between the two of them…

“*Of course, I—*” James was saying before he was cut off.

Clark shook his head. What happened? Why couldn’t he hear James?

“*No!”* Lucy hollered. “*Clark!”*

Clark couldn’t move. He had Lara in his arms. A second later he was in the kitchen, handing Lara to Ultra Woman. She was staring at him, fear in her eyes. She had heard Lucy scream, too.

“*Vixen! You grabbed the wrong person. It’s me Lex wants.*

His wife. Lois Lane!"

"No!" Clark screamed, diving out the window, but he arrived at the front stoop too late. All that was left to see was her red wig on the sidewalk and the last of Vixen's gold sparkles dancing in the air.

***

Lucy awoke in Lex's penthouse apartment. She wanted to roll her eyes at the obviousness of it all, but her brain not only hurt, it felt fuzzy. She pushed herself up to a sitting position. That was better.

"Oh, good, you're awake." Lex was cracking nuts at a table in the corner. One of those cozy tables he liked to have around his apartments for impromptu meals or activities. He tossed an almond into the air and caught it in his mouth. "Before you say anything, in all fairness I'd like you to know that I've given you a shot of muscle relaxant into your larynx, so you cannot speak above a whisper. No shouting for Superman. Something I learned from my run-in with Lucy El."

Lucy took a look around the room. Against the walls stood bookcases with a few books, antiques, vases, and plaques. She turned toward the window looking for clear landmarks. In the distance, she could see the Metropolitan Bank and the *Daily Planet* building. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and concentrated on her daughter.

Lara, Mommy needs your help. Tell Uncle Super and Aunt Ultra that Mommy went to visit Lex. Then she pictured the buildings outside the window. *Tell Uncle Super to come and get me and Uncle James. Hurry, baboo. Mommy's counting on you.*

Lucy released her breath and concentrated on Lex. "I'm not going to tell you anything without proof that James Olsen is still alive," she said, her voice hardly above a whisper. He hadn't been lying about the muscle relaxant.

Lex started to chuckle. "I thought you might try lying your way out of this situation. You can't. I added sodium thiopental to the muscle relaxer, so when you do speak, you can only tell the truth."

That was why she felt nauseous. Lucy had thought it was the sight of Lex. She shook her head. This Lex Luthor didn't seem as smart as her Lex. How was he supposed to get information from her if she could hardly speak?

Lex wanted her to tell him the truth, huh? In her life, truth and lies were so tangled up, it was hard to tell one from the other. Lucy picked a half-truth to use and ran with it, shrugging. "If that's what you want, I can't imagine what information you'd want from me." She crossed the room to a cigarette case. It had to be Nigel's, he was the only one daring enough to smoke around Lex. She pulled out a cigarette, tapped it, and put it to her lips. "Don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

Clearly, Lucy stumped Lex, because his wife didn't smoke. He came over to light her cigarette, calling her bluff. She took a drag and exhaled into his face. "It's hell on the vocal chords, but, hey, you can't be a private eye without smoking, can you?"

He laughed. "You're a private eye?"

"What were you expecting? A confession to being your wife?" She chuckled, exhaling a line of smoke. "Sorry, Lex. Your wife no longer exists." Lucy went to stand next to the window for a better view, in case she needed to try to contact Lara again. "You killed her, remember?"

"Multiple personalities, eh, Lola?"

Lucy shrugged. That would explain a lot. Maybe she was insane. Nope, not yet, she knew exactly what she was doing and saying. Hmmm. Either the sodium thiopental didn't work on her, because of her pint of Ultra Woman blood, or he had been bluffing himself.

"You told Vixen that you were my dead wife Lois Lane," Lex reminded her.

"I did." She nodded. "I lied." She went to the table and smashed her cigarette out on what was clearly not an ashtray plate. "Where is James Olsen?"

"If you aren't my wife, who are you, then?" Lex said with condemnation. He didn't believe her.

Lucy sat back down. "Wanda Detroit, private eye, aka Lucy El, wife of Kal-El, and on occasion, Lois Lane, missing reporter from the *Daily Planet.*" She held out her hand. "Glad to meet you officially, Mr. Luthor."

Lex looked her over from head to toe. "You aren't the woman I met in my limo a couple of months ago." He seemed sure of this fact.

Time to mess with his head.

She smiled. "The very same."

That smug expression left his face. "You look different."

"I've lost some weight and borrowed some of your wife's old clothes." She coughed, trying to clear her throat. Talking in this whisper was really tiresome. "James Olsen is never going to sell the *Daily Planet* to you and even if he did, it still wouldn't bring your wife back."

His eyes popped from his head for a second. She had struck a nerve. "What is a private eye doing working at the *Daily Planet*?" he asked.

"Perry White and James Olsen hired me to find Lois Lane. I did a pretty good job, don't you think?" She walked across the room to his table. Taking the nutcracker, Lois cracked a nut and ate the meat. She dropped the shell on the floor.

Lex scowled. "What do you have that a team of *Daily Planet* investigators and Clark Kent don't have?"

Lucy chuckled, shaking of her head. "I have inside information about Lois Lane. I know her like the back of my hand." She looked at the back of her hand, bored with this conversation already. She was still wearing Clark's mother's ring. She really needed to give it back to him.

"You aren't scared of me, are you?" Lex asked, raising a brow at her. "I like that in a woman."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Should I be?" She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "Where's James Olsen? I'm not leaving here without him."

"Oh, are you going someplace, Wanda?" He chuckled.

Lucy leaned against the table and looked out the window. She closed her eyes, concentrating both on the image out the window and her daughter. *Lara, baboo. Come on. Tell Daddy I need him to come get me.*

"My husband will show up eventually to pick me up," she told him.

"And who's your husband?"

"Charlie King." Aka Clark Kent, aka Superman. "He's a little overprotective and has quite a temper. Also, I know something you don't know."

"You're the real Ultra Woman?" Lex laughed at his own joke. Wouldn't he love to know how close to the truth he was?

Lucy raised a brow at him. "Do you think you'd be able to give Ultra Woman a shot in the neck?" She placed her hands behind her back with a sigh. "You really are starting to bore me with your lack of intelligence."

"Excuse me?" he growled. Same old Lex, always had to be the smartest man in the room. "How dare you!"

Lucy pulled a gun from her back waistband, pointing it at him. "I'm surprised you didn't frisk me."

Lex did appear astonished. He stared at her, some of the color leaving his face. "You have a gun?"

"They're really easy to buy in Metropolis nowadays." This Metropolis, at least. "A girl needs to protect herself."

"You want to shoot me? Why would you want to kill me? I haven't done anything to you." He slowly started to raise his hands.

"You'd be surprised what you've done to me, Lex." She tilted

her head at him. “After all these years I finally have you in my sights. The lies, the kidnappings, the torture, the deception, the pain — I could just pull the trigger and wipe them all away. It would make everybody’s life so much easier, too. You and your boys have a way of creeping into my life and ruining it, every time I’m starting to get happy. No more.”

Lex gulped. “Are you sure you aren’t my wife?”

Lucy nodded.

“You’re insane. You know that, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes.” Cocking the gun, she smiled. “What have you done to James Olsen?”

“Vixen has him.”

“She’s the means to an end, Lex. Does Junior have him? I know he likes to play with his toys.” Lois tilted her head to the other side. “Is she one of his toys? Like Lola was? Or Lois was? Or is Vixen one of your toys? One bullet and I could put Lex, Jr. in charge of LexCorp.”

“What’s LexCorp?” he asked, backing up.

“Oh, that’s right, you call it L.I., Ltd., here, don’t you?” Lucy said, following him. “Call Junior and have James Olsen brought here. And James better be okay or Lois Lane is going to be a widow.”

“She’s alive?” Lex grinned. “I knew it.”

“I never said she was alive. Actually, I distinctly remember saying that she no longer existed. Bring James Olsen to this room. You have five minutes.” Truthful, from a certain point of view.

Lex walked to the telephone on his desk. He pressed a button.

“Speaker phone,” Lucy commanded.

He sneered, pressing a second button. “Mrs. Cox, could you tell Lex, Jr. to bring his latest visitor up to my office?”

Lucy waved the gun at him.

Lex rolled his eyes. “Preferably alive, Mrs. Cox.”

“Mr. Luthor?” Mrs. Cox inquired. “Is everything all right? You know Lex, Jr. doesn’t leave his chambers during the day.”

Lucy raised her brows. “Tell him to make an exception. I’ve been wanting to meet the man who shot me.” She pulled the neck of her shirt to the side to show him the small scar on her shoulder.

“Have him make an exception, Mrs. Cox. Right away, please.” Lex hung up.

“Move away from the desk, Lex,” she ordered, waving the gun. “Why don’t you stand by the window? Maybe we’ll be lucky and you’ll fall out.” Lucy smiled. “I don’t think I’d mind it as much this time.”

“This time?” Lex glanced out the window, slightly nervous.

“You jumped to your death in a previous life, Lex. On our wedding day, too.” She tsk-tsked at him with a shake of her head.

Lex swallowed. “How in the hell does Clark Kent trust you?”

“He doesn’t.” Lucy chuckled. “He’s a heartbreaker, that one.” She shook her head. Maybe that truth serum was working a bit.

“What? You and Kent? What about Charlie King?”

“Charlie’s a good man. Too good for the likes of me. Why do you think I’m here? Back home I’d be a dead woman by now.”

“Jaxon said that you went crazy and attacked your editor because he said something bad about Superman. Is that true?”

“Superman is a good man. Mmm-mmm, good.” She licked her smiling lips. “I’ll defend him to the death.”

There was a sound at the door behind them. Lucy quickly crossed to the other side of the room so her back wasn’t to the door. Junior came in, a fedora on his head, shading his eyes. He looked about the same as the one from her dimension. Skull malformed over his left eye. Patches of long stringy hair. Gaunt. Poor man fated to be disfigured. And poof, all her pity was used up. All two seconds of it.

“Well, if it isn’t Junior. Where’s James Olsen?” Lucy asked.

“Father?” Lex, Jr. inquired, glancing over to his father at the window.

“You remember Lucy El, don’t you, son?” Lex told his son. “She has a bone to pick with you about shooting her last fall.”

Lex, Jr. contemplated that information, staring at Lucy. “You! You’re the one who broke my Neuroscanner. My God, Father, she looks just like Lola.”

Lucy shrugged.

“How is that possible?” Lex, Jr. demanded.

“James Olsen?” she retorted, refusing to answer the question.

Lex’s son waved for James Olsen to come into the room. He was dragged into the room by two thugs, who dropped him onto the floor. One of the men looked familiar — too familiar.

“You may leave,” Lucy told the thugs, waving the gun towards the door. “You. Stay.” She pointed with her free hand at the man she now recognized. “Go stand with the Lexes, Trask.”

Lex and Lex, Jr. stared at her, surprised she knew the name of a mere henchman.

When Lex, Jr. tried to follow the other minion out the door, Lucy said, “Where do you think you’re going, Junior?” She raised a brow at him and waved him back towards his father. “Do you have that Neuroscanner handy? I wonder if you’d enjoy it as much as I did.”

Lex, Jr. shut the door and glanced over at his father. “Are you sure this is Lucy El and not Lola?”

“She’s deranged, son. I don’t think she even knows who she is anymore.”

“Perhaps I should have married into your family after all. What a good match we would have made.” She looked at Trask with a shake of her head and tsk-tsked. “What are we going to do with you? Did you tell them who you are? That you’re an undercover agent with Bureau 39?”

“Bureau 39?” asked Lex. “What’s that?”

Trask cleared his throat. “Bureau 39 doesn’t exist anymore, lady.”

“Right,” Lucy said with a hint of sarcasm. “Just like you don’t know who I am. You’re the man who pulled the trigger that shot me and Jaxon, aren’t you? Not Lex, Jr. He was never one to get his hands dirty.”

Lex’s cool exterior and focus melted away. “You shot my son?” He growled at Trask, stepping towards him with hands and arms extended.

“This is so heartwarming. Jaxon is going to be so moved that you care, Lex. He really doesn’t think you love him. Some men just shouldn’t be fathers.”

Lex stopped a foot away from Trask, his hands clenched into fists, but restraining himself.

“Go ahead, Lex.” Lucy waved him on with the gun. “I can wait. If you kill him that’s just one less bullet for me to use.”

Lex glared at Trask, but took a step away from him.

“No? Oh, well.” Lucy shook her head. “Dilemmas, dilemmas. Now, I don’t know which one of you I want to kill first.” She lifted up the gun and pointed it straight at Lex Luthor. “Say goodbye to Junior, Lex.”

“Wanda, please!” Lex begged, holding his hands in front of himself.

The glass of the window broke as Ultra Woman arrived. “Hello, Wanda.” She smiled. “Sorry it took us so long to get here. We were a little busy with Vixen.” She closed her eyes for a split second and Lois knew she was calling Superman.

“Thank God! Ultra Woman,” Lex said, relief in his voice. “She’s gone mad!”

Ultra Woman looked at him with a raised brow. She took a step closer to him, brushing some glass shards from his shoulder. “Sorry about that, Lex. I know how neat you like to be.” Turning her attention back to Lois, she said, “I see you even managed to get Lex, Jr. out of his crypt.” She glanced at Trask, but dismissed him as a nobody. Zipping over to James, she felt his neck. “He’s still alive.”

"Ultra Woman!" Lex complained. "Aren't you going to save us?"

"Should I?" Ultra Woman asked, turning towards him. "Do you deserve to be saved? After everything you did your wife?"

Superman arrived at this point and pressed his lips together. "Ultra Woman."

His girlfriend rolled her eyes. "I guess to *some* people everyone's life is worth the same. I'm not sure I agree with this logic." She picked up James and flew out the window she had come in.

Superman walked toward Lucy. "They aren't worth it. Put down the gun."

Lucy couldn't move, couldn't lower her arm, but she started trembling. "You know what they've done to me, Clark," she said, her voice still in a whisper. "Then they took James. It was the last straw. I had to stop them."

Superman continued to move towards her. "Hand me the gun."

"Life would be so much better if we didn't have to keep dealing with this family," she murmured. "With Bureau 39."

"So true. But this isn't the answer. Kal wouldn't like it. You know how he is about truth, justice, and the American way. You know how he feels about taking life." Superman was standing only a couple feet away from her now, blocking her shot of everyone else in the room. "Do you want to shoot me?" he asked with a raised brow.

Her outstretched arms were really shaking, but Lois couldn't lower them. "No."

Superman smiled, filling her with sunlight.

Lucy sighed, lowering her arm.

"Take the gun away from her, Superman!" Lex demanded. "And take her into custody."

Superman turned towards Lex. "I don't take orders."

Lex swallowed. Superman whizzed around the room, tying Lex, Trask, and Junior together with several drapery ties. "It's my understanding that you kidnapped her and Mr. Olsen, Lex. She was just defending herself, quite legal in Metropolis, if I understand the law correctly." He turned to Lex, Jr. "And you need to be arrested for the shooting of Jaxon Xavier and the attempted murder of Lucy El." Lex, Jr.'s expression was unreadable under his hat.

"Trask pulled the trigger," Lucy informed him.

Superman's gaze jerked over to the third man. "So, that's Trask. We finally meet face to face."

Trask looked at Superman with complete and utter hatred. "Tempus was right. You are the advance guard for the end of mankind."

"And yet I saved your life today. Ironic, isn't it?"

"That woman is unbalanced, Superman. You should have heard what she was saying about you," Lex told him. "About you being lovers."

Superman raised a brow, glancing at her.

"Sodium thiopental." Lucy shrugged, handing him the gun.

The superhero chuckled. "Lex, you didn't need to drug her. She rambles incessantly on her own." He picked her up. "She's quite the storyteller."

Lucy harrumphed, hitting him on the chest.

Ultra Woman returned, carrying Mrs. Cox with her hands tied behind her back. "Look who I found out on the street — the cherry to our Luthor sundae. She's agreed to testify against them."

"Traitor!" Lex yelled at his assistant.

Mrs. Cox just scowled back at him.

"I called Drake and Henderson," Ultra Woman continued, a hint of a smile on her lips. "They're on their way with the cavalry. I'll stay and babysit."

Superman raised a brow and whispered to her, "Behave."

Ultra Woman grinned mischievously. "Always."

Superman shook his head and zipped out the window with Lucy in his arms.

Lucy wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head against his cheek. "It took you long enough, honey."

"We were busy with Vixen." Superman held her tighter. "Next time, don't send a message through someone who's pre-verbal, Mommy."

She closed her eyes. *I'm coming home, Lara. Mommy's coming home.*

***

Clark watched Lucy walk along the beach. After Ultra Woman and Mr. Wells left to take Lara back to her dimension, Lucy asked him to bring her back to the beach in Key West where they had spent her birthday. He sighed. It had been a crazy day. First Mr. Wells showed up out of the blue, then James and Lois were kidnapped by Vixen, and finally, saying goodbye to Lara.

He thought his heart might be aching more than Lucy's at the moment. At least Lucy knew she would see her daughter again. It had been one of the hardest moments of his life. Clark always knew he would have to say goodbye to Lara, he'd just hoped… he shook his head. That hope had always been a pipe dream.

She turned around and waved for him to join her. It felt wrong to be out with Lucy, especially when Ultra Woman was in another dimension. It was like he was cheating on his girlfriend. Perhaps it felt so wrong because, in a way, it felt right. He jogged slowly to catch up, his shoes in his hand.

"Whenever I think of Key West, I'll think of you," Lucy whispered, her voice still slightly hoarse from Lex's muscle relaxant.

"Don't," Clark murmured, taking hold of her hand. "Please, Lucy. I can't."

Despite the darkness, he easily saw her smile at him. "Think you're all that and a glass of milk too, do you?"

Before he could think of what to say in response, Lucy continued, "I meant your kindness on my birthday. When you wouldn't let me stay in that funk I was in because I had been found guilty of murder. And that awful rendition of 'Happy Birthday' you sang to me. I'll treasure those memories."

"Oh." Clark grinned in embarrassment. *Ooops. Open mouth, insert foot.*

Lucy stepped up close to him, almost chest to chest. "There's something I need to give you."

Clark gulped. His heart was doing that flip-flop thing it did only for her. Before she could say another word, he dropped his shoes on the sand and pressed his lips to hers. "Lucy," he murmured, putting his arms around her. This felt right, kissing her again. He had missed her, body and soul.

Lucy didn't resist and even pulled him towards her. All those old feelings reared up again. How was he going to let her go? This woman who had invaded in his life and changed everything, who made everything worse. Who made everything better. Who had made him Superman. Who had made him a man. He would always want her, always desire her, always love her — she was a part of who he was. They were one. He lifted her up, pulling her hips towards his.

Then Lucy stopped, slid out of his arms, and took a step back. "No."

"You're right. We shouldn't go there again." Clark was breathing faster than he should. He wanted her. He wanted so much to go back there again. His body craved hers. Oh, dear God, why hadn't she gone home with her daughter?

Lois gently touched his face. "We'll always love each other, Clark. It's fate."

"Fatal," he amended with a chuckle.

"Precisely." Lucy turned her face away from him, leaning against his shoulder, looking out to the ocean.

Clark wrapped his arms around her. It felt so good to hold her like this again. “You scared me this afternoon.”

“Just this afternoon?” She laughed softly and then she went quiet. “I had to save James.”

Clark sighed. “What are we going to do about him? Since he figured out that you were the original Ultra Woman, he’s going to put two and two together.”

“Yeah. And he’s bequeathed the *Daily Planet* to me if something happens to him. You’re going to have to protect him night and day, so he doesn’t die and make your girlfriend your boss.” Lucy nudged him.

Clark rolled his eyes. “Great.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll convince him to change his will before I leave.”

“Thank you.”

Lucy turned around to face him again.

Please don’t kiss me, he thought. *I might not be able to stop.*

Lucy took his hand and dropped something light into it. “Thank you for allowing me to be your wife, Clark. For protecting us.”

His mother’s wedding ring. Clark had forgotten he had given it to her. She was really going home. This was it, the last time they would be alone together. Would he ever see her again? Could he let her go?

“Lois has seen me wearing it, so when you do finally get around to marrying her, you should give her something new,” she recommended. “Something for her alone.”

He nodded, closing his hand around the ring. “Lucy,” he murmured. There was so much Clark wanted to say. He knew this was their last private goodbye. “Lois.” He didn’t know how to put into words what he was feeling inside.

Lucy wrapped her arms around him. “Me, too.”

“If ever you need…” Clark held her tight against him.

“Best if you take me home now, Clark. I should be in bed alone when your girlfriend gets home and so should you.”

Clark nodded, kissing her cheek. “Step back, Lucy.” She did and he spun into his blue suit. Picking her up, they zipped into the sky.

***

Clark’s heart felt so empty; no Lara and soon, no Lucy. He had dropped her off at the apartment. They hadn’t spoken another word, knowing there was nothing more to say. They had just stared at one another and then he left.

He didn’t want to go back to Clinton Street; he headed instead to his Smallville house. The one place in his life where he had no memories of Lara or Lucy. He went down into the basement and opened the safe, placing his mother’s ring inside, next to his father’s. The photos from Perry’s Halloween party were still there. He touched the envelope, tempted to take a look, but then he let go and closed the safe. *No*, he told himself for the last time. Lucy belonged to Kal. There was someone else whom he loved and desired more.

Throwing a couple of logs into the fireplace in the living room, Clark zapped them with his heat vision and sat down on the sofa to wait.

He thought about what Wells told him before he and Ultra Woman had left. The time machine wasn’t broken like his girlfriend had thought. It wasn’t out of fuel. It was just that the security system he installed had worked too well. Ultra Woman’s genetic fingerprint didn’t match that of Lois Lane’s anymore, and she wasn’t one of the three people approved to use it. Wells asked if Clark wanted to add her to the approved list. The simple answer was ‘no’. He didn’t want Ultra Woman messing with time or dimensions. He didn’t want there to be a chance he might lose her again. But one thing he learned since becoming Superman, there weren’t any simple answers.

He hoped Ultra Woman returned from Kal’s dimension soon. He felt like holding someone. She was the one person who never made him feel alone. Being with Ultra Woman made him stronger than him alone. He watched the flames dance, bobbing to and fro, moving this way and that. A tear dripped down his cheek.

Clark loved that baby more than he thought he could ever love another person. Giving Lara up, returning her to her proper dad, tugged at his soul. He would miss hearing her call to him, call to Daddy, actually. She had never understood that he was her uncle. It hadn’t made sense to her. He had always been Daddy. She had known him since six weeks after she was conceived.

Would Lara understand that these people who looked like the people she had lived with since birth were her parents? Would she accept Kal as her father, even though his soul wasn’t quite the same as Clark’s? Kal would know who she was the instant he met her. Would Kal understand how Lara came to be? He was going to be confused, Clark was sure. If a baby arrived on his doorstep unexpectedly who could telepathically summon him, and who called him Daddy, it might freak him out. But that bond … Kal was sure to feel it. If Clark had felt it with Kal’s child, how strong must it be for Kal himself?

Someone was walking up the steps to the porch. Clark willed himself to his feet, staring at the door. Ultra Woman was probably feeling nearly the same loss as him. She had practically raised Lara since birth, while Lucy was off in her own little hell. Ultra Woman opened the door. Flickering firelight lit parts of her face and body. They gazed at each other for a brief moment, then suddenly she was next to him.

“How did it go?”

“Hold me,” Ultra Woman whispered.

Clark pulled her into his arms. Her cheeks were damp. He didn’t know if it was from the spring rains drenching the fields outside or from her tears, or both. He kissed her, his tears mingling with hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He picked her up and slowly carried her up the stairs.

“Don’t mind me,” Mr. Wells’ voice called from behind them.

Clark rolled his eyes. They still weren’t alone.

“We’ve got a houseguest,” Ultra Woman murmured, not letting go of him. “He’s going to stay here until Lucy is returned home.”

Clark kissed her again deeply, then set her down at the top of the stairs. “Why don’t you change out of your suit? Are you hungry?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll put him up in the room at the other end of the house. I don’t care what he thinks, but I am making love to you tonight and nobody is going to stop me.” Clark looked at her. “If that’s all right with you?”

Smiling sheepishly, Ultra Woman whispered, “Thanks for asking.” She grabbed his head and pulled him to her for another deep kiss. “That’s more than I would have done.”

Clark walked down the stairs. “Mr. Wells. How did it go? No mishaps, I hope.”

“Lois and Clark have their baby.” Wells smiled. “Now the real fun starts.”

Clark’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me there’s more. I don’t think I could take more from those two.”

“I meant parenthood.”

“Oh.” Clark laughed. “Well, luckily he has his folks there to help him out.”

“Lois’s parents were there, too. Quite a big night for them all.” Mr. Wells rubbed his hands together. “I rather feel like some champagne.”

Clark closed his eyes. *Champagne?*

Love some, Lois responded. *Be right down, unless you’ll be right up?*

He exhaled. *House guest.* Clark opened his eyes. “I just have

to go retrieve a bottle from the basement."

A quickie?

Lo-is!

Just a suggestion. Clark could sense her smiling. The naughty minx.

He returned a moment later, blowing on a bottle of champagne he and Lois had been saving for the big day Lucy returned to her dimension. Staring at the bottle, he said, "You know, Mr. Wells, I'm not sure I'm ready to celebrate just yet. Not until Lucy has made it home, safe and sound, and her stand-in is returned to her rightful spot in the timeline. That will be the right time for celebrating."

Did you crush Lucy's gun or did you leave it on the dining room table? Lois asked.

After speaking with your father about bringing a gun into the house of a deeply depressed woman and handing it to her for 'protection,' I crushed it.

I love you, Clark.

Wait there, I'll be up soon. Champagne can wait until we're alone, completely alone, dimensionally speaking.

Wait until you see what I picked up in Paris last week.

Clark swallowed, trying to focus on the man in front of him. He glanced up the stairs, unable to concentrate. He looked up.

No peeking!

He grinned, glancing down at the bottle of champagne in his hands. "I'm just going to put this in the fridge." Zipping to the refrigerator, Clark was back moments later. He yawned. "I'm exhausted. It's been a long day. Feel free to make yourself at home. The kitchen is that way. Let me show you to your room." He started up the stairs.

"It has been quite a day." Mr. Wells lowered his voice. "Clark, can you and Ultra Woman speak telepathically?"

"Sorry, that was rude. It's just quicker. I forget I'm doing it sometimes."

"No, no. Quite all right. Do you mind if I study your future this week? I am curious how your future will differ from that of my dimension."

Clark raised a brow. "No interfering?"

"No, just as an observer."

Clark paused on the stairs and turned back to Mr. Wells. "No hitchhikers?"

Wells raised his hands. "If I run into Tempus, I'll keep my distance."

"Good." At the top of the stairs, Clark turned right and took Mr. Wells into the bedroom at the end of the hall. "The sheets are clean." He tapped open a linen cabinet next to the bedroom door and pulled out a set of towels. "Here. The bathroom is down at the end of the hall on the other side of the stairs. We'll leave the night light on for you."

"You are quite generous, Clark. Thank you." Mr. Wells nodded and entered the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

Clark sighed and a moment later was opening the door to his and Ultra Woman's bedroom. His breath caught in his throat. "Wow! You look…" He shut and locked the door behind him, before taking her into his arms and making love, slow and gentle and silent, all night long.

***

Lois took one long last walk around her old apartment. She'd said goodbye to Perry and had accidentally cracked the Elvis CD he had given her. Accidentally, on purpose.

She had cleared the air with James. After hearing about the gun-toting mama who rescued him from the Luthors, he decided Lois might be a little too unstable to own the *Daily Planet*. She convinced him that Perry White would be a better beneficiary than her for the time being.

Lois tried to get James to understand that she was just an ordinary human woman. She could bleed and it was impossible for her to fly. But he didn't buy it. He knew what he knew about the Ultra Woman at Perry's superhero party and she couldn't change his mind. Eventually she had just given up and told him never to share his insights with anyone else. James had agreed as it was her marriage and Superman's reputation on the line. 'Gossip is not always newsworthy,' Lois told him.

Her flower print suitcase was packed. Lois was leaving with only the items she had brought — the photos, a few outfits, and the framed pictures. She left the notebooks with her letters to her husband in a bag with the photo album of pregnancy memories that James had made her. In the same bag were the crazy t-shirts that the other Lois had given them at Christmas as well as the fragments of the Elvis CD Perry had given her. She would ask Ultra Woman to get rid of them for her. Clark's girlfriend understood that Lois never wanted her husband to know what had happened during her year in this dimension, even though she'd promised Clark… with some glaring omissions. Lois just wanted to forget it and move on with her life. Perhaps, someday when all the old wounds had healed, she would tell her husband. But some wounds never heal.

Lois wanted to slip seamlessly into her old life, like she had never been gone and just move forward. Be the best adopted mother she could be to her actual daughter Lara. Be the best and most loyal wife she could be to her husband. Lois never wanted to think about what happened during the year she'd spent in this other dimension.

Turning to Sam, she held him tightly for a solid minute. "I'm going to miss you most, Scarecrow. Thank you for being my family and helping me find my brain and bringing my daughter into this world. There is no way I'll ever be able to repay the debt I owe you," she whispered, kissing his cheek. "I love you, Daddy."

Sam sniffled. "You already repaid me tenfold by helping Clark find my daughter, for giving her back her sight, and for believing in me when no one else would. I love you too, sweetie. Take care of yourself and that beautiful daughter of yours."

Lois took a deep breath and hugged her double in lavender tights. "Thank you, Ultra Woman, for saving my life on countless occasions, despite my not giving you any reason to like me. And for not killing me for creating the most annoying secret identity of all time." Lois smiled weakly and then bit her lip. "Take care of Clark. There's a frightened little boy inside that big strong man, who needs you and loves you more than anyone else in his entire life. *Anyone*." A tear dripped down her cheek. "And thank you for being a good mom to Lara when I couldn't." She swallowed and wiped the tears off her face, but they kept rolling down.

"Forgive yourself, Lois. You've had a hard year even during trying times. You have been a good friend and confidante to Clark." Ultra Woman pressed her lips together. "And to me, on occasion, even when I didn't deserve it. And no, I will never forgive you for creating such an awful secret identity." Ultra Woman rolled her eyes. "Vegetarian, alcoholic, myopic, unstylish cow in clogs. Clogs, for God's sake, Lois." Clark's girlfriend smiled, pulling off her mask and wiping her tears. "But Lucy El and Ultra Woman gave me an out from an even more horrible life, so I thank you for that. Thank you for letting me mother Lara, even when you could. We will always love her as if she were our own. Always."

"You'll be a mother again. I don't know why Clark is being so stubborn in believing Dr. Klein's first analysis of the data. You have more of a chance of conceiving than I ever did and look what happened to me."

"Part of him is scared of becoming a father; it's lots of responsibility to be in charge of a whole person. In a year or two, when he's a little more comfortable in his dual life and mine, he'll be ready to believe." Ultra Woman nodded with a wink. "We

know the truth."

Lois hugged her again. "If you ever need Kal's help, don't hesitate to call on us. I'm pretty good at twisting his arm." She swallowed and attempted to wipe her face again. "Okay. Go ahead and call Clark and tell him and Mr. Wells I'm ready to go home."

Ultra Woman closed her eyes. Half a minute later the time machine arrived with H.G. Wells and Superman into their living room. Lois picked up her suitcase and stepped onto the time machine. She waved goodbye to Sam and Ultra Woman.

"Meet me at the Fortress of Solitude when you return," Ultra Woman called to her boyfriend.

Lois sat down in Clark's lap. "Where is that, exactly? You never did tell me."

Clark chuckled and blew a kiss to his girlfriend as Mr. Wells turned a couple of knobs and pulled the lever. Lois, Clark, and Mr. Wells felt like they were dipped in Jello and then they disappeared.

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Chapter 8 — The Twilight Zone — Revisited

Disclaimer: This chapter starts out with the final scene written by Eugenie Ross-Leming and Brad Buckner from the Season Four finale episode *The Family Hour*. For a full disclaimer, please see the end of the story.

***

Clark held Lois. What a crazy day! Lois's parents wiped of every memory that he was Superman. Unfortunately his parents had been zapped too. He wondered what memories they lost.

Mommy! Daddy! Mommy! Daddy!

What was that? It sounded like… no. It couldn't be. Clark pulled the covers away and stepped out of bed.

"What is it?" Lois asked him, sitting up.

"I'm not quite sure."

They slipped on their robes and went down the stairs. The voice inside his head was gone, but he heard something else now. Was that a coo? He glanced at Lois and opened the sliding doors to the dining room. He hadn't remembered shutting them.

There, lying in his bassinette, was a little baby, covered by a navy blanket with an Superman crest, just like his. His breath caught in his throat.

"Clark!" Lois gasped.

He picked up a note: *Lois and Clark, this baby belongs to you.*

They looked at each other. "Clark." Lois positively glowed.

He smiled, wrapping his arm around her. "Ours."

She hugged him and then went to pick up the baby.

Clark heard footsteps on the stairs. Ooops. They must have woken up the folks. He walked out of the dining room and saw Ellen, Sam and his folks all coming down the stairs.

"We saw the light."

"Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad. There's someone we'd like you to meet," he said, stepping aside as Lois entered the living room with the baby in her arms.

Ellen's jaw wasn't the only one to fall.

"Where did it come from?" his mother asked.

Clark couldn't tell if she really didn't know or if she was just acting for everyone else. He handed over the note, which got passed from grandparent to grandparent. "We found it in my old bassinette."

"Someone broke in and left you a baby?" Sam asked, surprised. His parents also seemed to believe this to be unlikely.

Clark and Lois exchanged a glance. Maybe they should change the story to being found outside their front door. He shrugged.

"Are you going to keep it?" Ellen asked.

Lois and Clark looked at each other and smiled. "Clark can't have children of his own. County Adoption Services think it's too risky to allow me to adopt one of their children." She looked down at the baby in her arms. "The note said it belonged to us. How can we turn down such an offer?"

Clark wrapped his arms around his wife and child and rested his head on the baby's.

Daddy! Daddy!

He gasped, looking down at the child, his breath completely gone. This baby knew he was its father.

Clark kissed its head and then pulled it out of Lois's arms. He held the baby and it touched his face. He could feel, he was unsure how, just feel that this child loved him unconditionally. "I love you, too," he whispered. "There are some people I want you to meet." He walked over to his parents. "These are my folks. You can call them Grandma and Grandpa." His mom and dad caressed the baby's cheek. He walked the baby back to Lois.

Lois took the baby and walked to her parents. "These are my parents." She looked at her mom. "What do you want the baby to call you?"

"Do you think this is wise, Lois? You don't know where this baby comes from. What if its parents come looking for it?" Ellen asked.

Clark smiled with a glance to his mom, who didn't seem to understand his look. "I don't think we have to worry about that, Ellen."

"What makes you say that?" Lois's mother responded warily.

"Just a feeling," he responded.

Lois smiled. She had seen the blanket as well.

"Well…" Ellen didn't know what to say to that.

"For Pete's sake, Ellen, it's our first grandchild. Be a little more supportive," Sam said, stepping up to his daughter and her baby. "Hello, angel, you can call me Pops." He touched its cheek.

Ellen pressed her lips together. "I was trying to be a realist." She rolled her eyes and looked at the baby. Then she smiled, holding out her arms. "Come to Grammy, little one."

Clark chuckled and watched as Lois handed the baby to her mom.

"Oh, aren't you a cutie?" Ellen rocked her back and forth. She raised it to her shoulder and patted its back, bouncing up and down. "I'd say about ten to thirteen pounds. Probably not more than three months old."

Lois's jaw dropped. "Mom?"

"Forget your old mother was a nurse for over twenty years?" Ellen said, raising her brows.

Three months ago was February. Clark smiled. He looked at his mom, but she didn't seem to make the connection. Did that Bummer-B-Gone erase their memories of Lois in the other dimension? Of their grandchild? How could that be?

His father held out his arms. "My turn." Reluctantly Ellen passed him the baby.

"Jonathan," his mother whispered. "It's the spitting image of Clark as a baby."

Clark's heart swelled. Did it look just like him? He thought he had had dark hair.

"Don't be ridiculous, Martha. All babies look alike."

They both looked at Clark, but all he could do was shrug. He had no definite idea on who the birth parents were. It could be his missing Lois. His heart stopped beating. *His missing Lois!* She hadn't come with the baby. He swallowed, looking at Lois. She had been with him every moment of the last four hours. He hadn't flown off as Superman since Fat Head was arrested. He wrapped an arm around his wife and kissed her cheek.

"We should start thinking of names," Sam suggested. "Charles?"

"Jonathan has always been a good name," said Jonathan.

"No. No. Samuel has a much better ring to it," said Sam.

Clark walked over to his dad. He had to touch the baby again. His baby. He could hardly believe it. He glanced back at Lois,

Ellen, and Martha standing over by the doors to the dining room looking at the men and shaking their heads.

"Jordan?" Clark smiled with a wink at Lois. Dream Lois had already vetoed that one. She rolled her eyes. Still vetoed.

"Junior?" Sam suggested.

"No!" Both Lois and Clark said at the same time and then a little less vehemently. "No."

"Can you believe these guys?" murmured Ellen to his mom, not loud enough to interrupt Jonathan and Sam arguing over names. "You'd think that the baby could only possibly be a boy."

"Steven?" his dad mentioned.

"Do you think we should start suggesting some girls names?" asked his mom.

"No," said Lois with a smile. "I already know what I'd name her."

Ellen elbowed Lois. "If she turns out to be a girl, be on the lookout for Clark's 'a-ha moment'."

"David?" Sam recommended.

" 'A-ha moment'?" his mom wanted to know. So did he. What was Lois's mom talking about?

"Peter?" said his dad.

"The moment he realizes that someday, his little baby girl will grow up and be a woman and men will want to date her. Clark knows what men want from women and will want from his daughter someday. Suddenly he will look at men differently. Not as friends or colleagues or decent human beings, he will see them for the slimeballs they can be. He will become an adamant protector of all things feminine. The 'a-ha moment'. It usually happens, when the father notices his daughter no longer looks like a little girl, when she becomes a teenager, but it can happen earlier. For your father, it happened when whatshisname kissed you in kindergarten."

"Stan Dunkel." Lois recalled with a nod. "I wonder what ever happened to him? Daddy just flipped. He came to kindergarten class and had a sit down with Stan, man to man." She laughed. "I had forgotten about that. It wasn't until high school that another boy tried to kiss me. Daddy can be quite intimidating when he wants to be."

"With some men, it happens even earlier, at the birth of their daughters. As soon as they know that they are the father of a daughter, all men become the scum of the universe in their eyes. He needs to protect his little girl from every man out there."

"Ellen." Martha chuckled. "That's a ridiculous theory."

Lois's mom shrugged. "Okay. What could I know? I only have two daughters."

Martha shook her head. "Clark would never…" She stopped and looked over at her son.

Lois swallowed and turned her gaze to him as well.

Clark returned a smile. They didn't need to worry about him. He had a cool head on his shoulders. He had been forewarned. He was already the protector of all little girls.

"Lois, why don't you take your parents and the baby upstairs and do a preliminary physical? You know, weight and height," suggested Clark. "Diaper."

"Marshall?" said Sam.

"Diaper?" gasped Ellen. "We don't have any baby supplies here? Formula? Diapers? Clothing?" She turned to her daughter. "Do we?"

Lois shook her head.

"Somebody's going to have to run to the store tonight," said Clark, looking around. He didn't want to go. No one else volunteered either. He wanted to stay with his child.

"Clark's right. Let's do the preliminary height and weight first," said Ellen. "We need to know its weight to buy diapers and clothing anyway." She turned and walked into the dining room before Clark or Lois could stop her. "Did the parents leave anything besides a note?"

Lois grabbed her mom's arm, dragging her back into the living room. "Nope. Nothing. Just baby and note. That's all." Lois shot an intense look at Martha, who picked up something from her cue.

"Come on, Ellen. Why don't you…"

"What's this?" Clark winced as Ellen brought out the navy blanket in which the baby had been wrapped.

"Clark?" His mother instantly recognized it. He gave her a brief nod.

"Just leave it, Mom," said Lois, grabbing the blanket from her mom and tossing it back into the bassinette. "Let's go weigh the baby."

"Okay," said Ellen slowly with a perplexed look on her face.

Clark hoped she hadn't seen the big Superman 'S' on the blanket. Ellen then shook her head and took her ex-husband's arm.

"Blake?" Sam was saying, taking the baby from Jonathan.

"Oh, shut up, Sam. Do you have your medical bag with you?"

"No," Sam said, just realizing another topic had also been discussed.

"It's okay, Mom. We're just doing height and weight. We can do the other stuff later," said Lois, ushering them up the stairs with a long glance at Clark. She expelled a breath with a shake of her head, following behind them.

"Is this what I think it is?" his mom asked him, holding up the blanket.

Clark nodded. "Do you think…?" He hated to mention the missing Lois with his current place-holder wife having just left the room.

"Zara and Ching?" his dad suggested with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Perhaps some other Kryptonians who remained after the invasion," said his mom. "But knew they had to go back and couldn't take the baby. But how would they know you…" She shook her head.

Clark glanced between his folks. They didn't remember about his wife being pregnant and heading to the other dimension because of the curse that might kill them. The Bummer-B-Gone had definitely wiped away those memories. True, they had stressed his mom out, but he still couldn't fathom that all the memories of his pregnant Lois were bad enough to be wiped clean. The names of the New Kryptonians, strangely enough, were still there. Perhaps Clark had gotten them away from the Bummer-B-Gone before those memories had been reached. He felt more lost than ever without being able to confide in his mom and dad.

"What about the other Clark?" his mom said. "Maybe he finally found his Lois."

So she remembered the other Clark, but not that he had found his Lois or that she had met her.

Clark nodded. "He did find her, Mom."

"Oh, good." She smiled, but that smile faded. "But if you can't have children…"

"Who knows, Mom, the baby could be—" started Clark.

"It's a girl!" screamed Ellen, running down the stairs. "A girl! I knew it. I just knew it!" She ran back up.

"A daughter," said Clark, his face lighting up. His skin began to tingle. "I have a daughter."

"Congratulations, son," said his father, holding out his hand.

Clark beamed and shook his dad's hand. Then he picked them both up and turned them around with a gigantic hug. "I'm a dad. A dad."

As he set them back down, his mother said, "She could be human."

Clark closed his eyes. *It's Daddy telling you I love you.* He felt a response of giggling and joy from the baby. He didn't hear

it, he felt it, sensed it in his mind. His eyes flashed opened. “No, Mom, she can’t be. She’s telepathic.”

His mom and dad stared at him, before his dad finally spoke up, “Excuse me, son?”

“The baby called to Lois and me, telepathically. That’s how I knew she was here,” he whispered. “I just didn’t know what I was hearing until I saw her with my own eyes. I couldn’t believe it.”

“Maybe she’s from the future,” suggested his mom, hugging him. “Perhaps Dr. Klein was wrong and she really is yours.”

Clark smiled weakly, not knowing what to believe. “I hope so, Mom. I hope so.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, though. She’s mine now. I have a daughter.” He grinned.

Ellen, Sam, Lois, and the baby returned from upstairs.

“Rosanna?” suggested Sam. “Mabel? Joan? Catherine?”

“No, Pops. Not Catherine.”

Clark smiled. *No, definitely not Catherine.*

“Names that start with the letter ‘L’ are nice. I’ve always preferred those,” said Ellen.

“Lara,” said Lois, looking at Clark. “L-A-R-A, after Clark’s birth mother.” That was the same name that dream Lois had wanted, too. They had to be the same person.

“Lara Lucia,” Clark corrected. Lucy. After her possible birth mother’s secret identity.

“Lucy, like my sister,” Lois said, smiling. “A little bit of you, a little bit of me.”

“Lara Lucia Kent?” contemplated Ellen with a nod. “I like it.”

Clark took the baby from Sam. “Hello there, Lara.” The baby smiled, actually smiled at him. That was the right name. “Yes, she’s definitely a Lara.” He hugged her and felt her heartbeats. They were fast, faster than Lois, faster than a normal human infant’s, that was for sure. She could be part Kryptonian. She could be his natural daughter. Or even the other Clark’s and Ultra Woman’s, sent back from the future. He wished he knew for sure. But as he told his folks, it really didn’t matter. He didn’t care who her birth parents were, he knew she belonged to him. She was without a doubt his daughter, whether natural or adopted. He loved her and she loved him. Sighing, Clark shifted his gaze to Lois. He loved them both.

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Clark shook her shoulder. “They’re back.”

Lois blinked and then rubbed her eyes. “Finally.” There was a weight on her chest. Glancing down, she saw the baby lying cuddled asleep in the crook of her arm. “Hello, there.” A baby. Wow! She was still in shock. Things happened fast when one was married to Superman. Gazing up at Clark, she smiled.

Lois always knew Clark would be a great father, but only after she had seen him take to Lara like a fish to water did she realize how much he really wanted to have a family of his own. He loved Lara with all his heart and soul from the first instant he saw her. Bonding didn’t come so easily for her; it never had. Once they got her to sleep through the night… Lois yawned. Or maybe just a few more naps like this one and Lois was sure she would be right there with Clark.

After her folks and Jonathan had left for the store the previous night, she, Martha, and Clark had discussed the possibilities of who the child’s parents could be… well, Lois and Martha had. Clark was mainly silent on the topic, preferring to cuddle with Lara. Martha thought it might be holdovers from the visitors from New Krypton or possibly Zara and Ching, as the timing was accurate. Lois couldn’t fathom why they, as leaders of New Krypton, would want to have their child raised on Earth, unless additional problems had arisen on New Krypton. Or how they could have had a child at the *beginning* of their official relationship.

Lois hoped it might be a future version of the other Clark and his Lois — having solved the whole two-species problem. She wished him happiness, knowing he had so little in his dimension. But then why would the other Clark send said child to them? Unless some crazy thing happened like her daydream of the… what? eight children at once. Clark would only agree that both scenarios were possible.

It was obvious to Lois that Clark didn’t care who Lara’s biological parents were. They were her parents now and that was all that mattered to him. He had been given a great gift and he was going to love Lara with all of his heart. Clark was being so Clark. It made her love him even more. Lois knew the puzzle was going to keep her up at night. She yawned again… well, when she wasn’t already awake because of Lara.

When Jonathan and her parents had returned from the all-night grocery store, they had come in with a bag of formula and baby bottles, a box of diapers, a bag with onesies and baby blankets, a baby bathtub, a bag of baby toiletries, a ‘caring for a baby’ book, and a full bag of baby toys. She had shaken her head, betting there hadn’t been a single item left in that store.

No matter how much Lois loved having a new daughter, she had hated using her hand towels for diapers. Clark had scooped Lara out of Lois’s arms and rushed her upstairs to change her diaper. While he had done that — *best daddy in the world*, thought Lois, and she wondered how long volunteering to change diapers would last — she, Martha, and her mother had tried to figure out how to make formula.

“Dad, she’s three months old. Not really crawling yet.” Clark had chuckled, coming back down the stairs.

“Safety first,” his father had replied.

Lois glanced out the kitchen door at this exchange. Jonathan had been carrying a baby safety gate inside for the top of the stairs.

That was the night before. They had fed Lara and tried to get her back to sleep. Lois had walked her, Clark had even flown her a little, after Lois’s parents had gone to bed. But the little cutie did not want to sleep until after three or four in the morning.

This morning Lois’s dark circles were down to her chin. Clark could handle sleeplessness a little better than she. He had sent the grandparents out to do some shopping, even giving them use of her Cherokee. Then he fed and changed Lara again. By the time Lois woke up at ten, she had found them lying on a blanket in the middle of their living room.

“Tummy time,” he had explained, holding up the parenting book. “It strengthens her neck muscles and prepares her for crawling.”

Lois smiled, going over to her desk. “Where’s my camera?” she asked. Three drawers later, she pulled it out. No film. A quick call to her mom’s cell phone fixed that problem. She lay down on the blanket with Lara and Clark and tried to raise her head off the floor, too. Clark brought her a cup of coffee and a square of coffee cake. Thank God for Martha Kent.

All morning she and Clark had spent quality family time with Lara. They hadn’t discussed politics, the *Daily Planet*, corporate greed, or anything going on in the world. They just spent time with their daughter. It had been wonderful. Sometime after lunch, Lois fed Lara another bottle and then laid down on the sofa. She wondered who had fallen asleep first.

Lois rubbed her eyes again, turning into a sitting position as Clark helped carry stuff from the car. And stuff there was. A rocking chair, a changing table, a stroller, a crib, crib sheets, a car seat, a high chair, a baby monitor (as if they needed one of those with Clark around), a diaper pail, a snuggly, a swing, baby-proofing supplies, bags and bags of clothes, more toys, more books, more diapers and more safety gates.

“Did you leave us anything to buy?” Lois asked her parents as Clark brought in the last load.

“This will get you started, dear,” said her mother, plopping

down on the sofa next to her.

Started? Lois's eyes bugged. Who knew that babies required so much gear? She glanced at Clark, but he merely shrugged with a smile. Clark, of course, knew.

Jonathan came in last with a bag from their favorite Chinese restaurant. "I brought dinner."

Dinner? Had she slept all afternoon? She glanced over at the clock: four-thirty. Okay. Not so late. Lara was still asleep, so she walked her daughter upstairs to the bassinette, which they had put next to their bed. She kissed her daughter's forehead and set her in the bassinette.

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As Martha cleared the leftover takeout cartons, Lara woke up and Clark ran upstairs to retrieve her. They moved out to the living room, where Clark fed Lara her bottle and Lois served the fortune cookies with coffee.

"'You will go on a grand adventure.'" Lois laughed. "That's for sure. Clark?"

"I have my fortune, right here," Clark said, holding up Lara.

That man loved their daughter so much, she thought with a smile. "Okay," Lois said, cracking open his cookie. "'Happiness is your forte.' They know you well, Clark." She fed him his cookie. "But it's still not a fortune. I hate that."

"I'll take it." Her husband beamed at her. "I am happy."

Lois kissed his cheek and laid her head against his arm.

There was silence for a few minutes as the exhaustion of the day hung over them. Jonathan slapped his hands on his knee. "Come on, Sam, let's get the stroller together."

Clark passed Lara to Lois to finish feeding her.

"Is anyone going to mention the four hundred pound alien in the room?" Ellen asked out of the blue.

"What?" gasped Martha.

"Excuse me?" Clark asked from the closet, where he was retrieving his toolbox.

Jonathan's and Lois's jaws dropped. Sam just stared at Ellen.

"It's clear to me and to Sam that Lara is not human."

"What?" gasped Lois, holding her daughter closer.

Clark dropped the toolbox on the floor next to his father and instantly moved next to Lois, surrounding both her and Lara with his arms.

"What are you saying, Ellen?" Martha asked.

Her mother rolled her eyes. "The baby blanket with the big yellow 'S' on it for starters. The card which was watermarked with the 'Carter' brand logo on the back, obviously from Earth. And the fact that the baby's heart rate is twice as fast as a human baby's. Are you telling me that I'm the only one who noticed those things?"

Clark and Lois looked at one another and then over at the Kents. Lois hadn't thought about the card the note was written on. Clark must have noticed Lara's heart rate, but hadn't mentioned it. They all knew what the 'S' blanket meant.

"Ellen, this isn't the time," said Sam.

"When is the time? When Lara starts flying around the living room?"

"Mom! That's not going to happen," Lois said, looking over at Martha. *Was it?*

"Do you want my opinion?" Ellen said, and then proceeded to give it without waiting for an answer. "I think this baby belongs to Superman and Ultra Woman."

Clark covered his mouth with his hand as he chuckled, relaxing.

Lois pressed her lips together, so her smile wouldn't be so noticeable. "Really, Mom?"

"I'm not an idiot, you know. Ultra Woman showed up that one week, then disappeared. It was obvious to me Superman was smitten with her. Wasn't it obvious to you?"

"Completely smitten," whispered Clark, kissing Lois's cheek.

"Who knows how long the gestation period is for Kryptonians? Do you?"

Lois glanced at Clark and he shook his head. "Not really my area of expertise," he replied.

Jonathan cut open the stroller box with his pocket knife and started laying out the pieces.

"You two are his best friends," her mother continued.

"We don't know that for sure, Mom," said Lois. "But, yes, we're close."

"He'd do anything for you?"

"Within reason," answered Clark. "But giving us his firstborn child?" He shrugged.

"For safekeeping."

"What do you mean, Ellen?" asked Martha. "If anyone could keep a baby safe, it's Superman."

"No offense to your friend, Lois, but Superman is constantly flying off, rescuing people, night and day. If he didn't have anyone to look after that baby…"

"What are you suggesting?" asked Clark, getting more defensive than he should about this ridiculous line of questioning. "Are you suggesting that something happened to Ultra Woman? That she wouldn't… didn't survive the birth of their hypothetical child? That if she wasn't around to care for it, that he would be a bad father? He would give up his child?" He stood up.

"No, not at all, Clark," backtracked his mother-in-law. "It was just a theory."

Clark shook his head and walked out of the room.

"Clark! Clark!" Martha followed him into the kitchen.

"Great. Good going, Mom." Lois shook her head. "Clark idolizes Superman." She looked over her shoulder towards where he had disappeared. Her mother's theory had really upset him.

"I didn't mean…" Her mother sat down next to Lois. "I meant Superman trusts you. He knows you would keep his child safe. I meant we all would keep his child safe. I would never…"

Lois patted her mother's hand, but she didn't know what to say to her mother's theory. The other Clark had no family. If something happened to his Lois in childbirth, if she didn't survive… would he have to choose between being Superman versus taking care of his own child? A tear crept down her cheek. She hoped that he would never have to make that decision.

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Martha pushed open the kitchen door. Clark was staring out the window. "She was just rambling, like Lois does sometimes. It didn't mean anything." As she neared him, she realized his eyes were damp. "Clark?"

"I love Lara so much. She is a part of me. A part of Lois. I would give up almost anything to protect her. Does she think that Superman would give up his own child over his job, Mom? Is that what she thinks of me?"

Martha wrapped her arms around him. "If she knew your secret, Clark, she never would have said those things. You know that. Not after watching you with Lara. No one would ever believe that of you."

"I know that, Mom. I know I overreacted. It was more what she said about Ultra Woman. If she died in childbirth… I…" He swallowed. "Lara is my child, Mom. I know it. I feel it."

"What do you mean, Clark?" she whispered, resting her head on his arm.

"I mean she's my biological child, Mom."

"Clark. How is that possible? Lois…" She faced Clark to her. "Clark, you didn't?"

"No, Mom. I didn't." He shook his head. Staring his mom in the eyes, he said, "Mom, remember, please. Remember last summer. Please, I need someone I can talk to about this. Do you remember Lucy?"

Martha tried hard to grasp what he was talking about. "Lois's sister?" she finally said.

His face fell. That wasn't the correct answer. "Do you remember coming to Metropolis last summer?" He spoke softly. "You visited Lois, she shared some big news. Does any of this sound familiar, Mom?"

"I visited Lois last summer?" she asked, perplexed. That sounded familiar, but not at the same time. "What did I do here?"

"I don't know, Mom. I don't know." He shook his head.

"Have I lost my mind?"

"No, Mom. You and Dad and Ellen and Sam had your memories erased."

"Oh, right, I'm sorry, Clark. Did I forget something important?" she asked.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter." He hugged her. "I love you, Mom. I'm just worried about Lois, that's all."

"She'll be fine. Motherhood can be a tough adjustment for some women. She'll come around. Lois can survive anything the world throws at her, you know that."

Clark continued to hold Martha, kissing the top of her head. "Thanks, Mom. That's what I wanted to hear."

Martha patted her son's hand. She knew there was something else. Something important. It was on the tip of her tongue, but then it was gone.

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Clark wanted to march into the newsroom on Monday morning, pass out pink bubble gum cigars and announce to everyone he was a daddy! He wanted to show a photograph of Lara to Perry and Jimmy and anyone else who wanted to see it, and take six weeks of paternity leave. Did they even have that at the *Planet*? Technically, it would be adoption leave, wouldn't it?

Lois asked him to hold off. Wait. They needed to organize their lives first, organize their story, before announcing to the world that someone had left them a baby on their doorstep. She would call in sick this week from work. Clark would go in and file their stories. Do some research. See if anyone was missing a baby. See if any babies matching Lara's description had been kidnapped recently.

He and his wife knew that Lara was theirs and they weren't ever giving her back. But they were big enough names in Metropolis that if it were announced that they had found a baby (and Perry would insist on putting it in the paper) people would come out of the woodwork to claim that the child was theirs. They didn't want that to happen. They didn't want the headache of an official investigation. They didn't want Lara examined by independent doctors. They didn't want to chance that some government official would try to take their daughter away. She was theirs and they weren't going to let anyone take her away from them. Ever.

Clark's smile got bigger and bigger and bigger as Lois had continued her rant at four this morning, shaking her empty Double Fudge Crunch Bar wrapper at him. She loved Lara and she would fight to the death to protect her… even from their well-intentioned friends at work. He agreed with her and took her back to bed to get some sleep.

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Lois sighed. A moment to herself. Then the guilt set in. She almost stopped her parents and the Kents from taking Lara for a walk. Almost stopped them because she didn't want to be away from her daughter that long. She missed Lara already. When were they going to return? Rubbing her eyes, she yawned. She missed sleeping through the night, too. Who knew a baby would wake up every four hours wanting a bottle or a diaper change or a snuggle? Who knew that last night, Lois would be standing at the bassinette waiting for her daughter to wake up because *she* couldn't wait to snuggle with her?

Lara was so beautiful. She reminded her of Clark, especially around the eyes. Her husband and daughter had bonded at first touch, she thought with a smile, even before the first touch. His eyes lit up at first sight. Love at first sight with his daughter. How could she not love Clark more whenever she watched them together? It was almost as if they could read each other's thoughts.

Lois shook her head. She had to get dressed. She couldn't walk around all day in her underwear. This was the first moment all weekend that she had had to herself. The doorbell rang. She shook her head again. So much for her moment alone. Throwing on her robe, she skipped down the stairs.

"Martha," Lois called out. "Did you forget your spare—" She opened the door and stared into the eyes of H.G. Wells.

"Mr. Wells?" She closed her robe tighter. "What are you doing here?" Then reality struck her. "No! Absolutely not. You cannot take my daughter. We just got her. No!"

"Lois, I'm not here for your new daughter," Mr. Wells informed her. She released a breath and stepped aside to let him in. He paused. "I would like to introduce you to her birth mother, though."

An icy chill ran down Lois's spine. Goose bumps on top of goose bumps broke out over her arms. "Just me? You don't want to introduce her to Clark?"

Mr. Wells smiled. "They've met." He stepped away from the door and from the alcove, she watched herself walk in. Lois covered her mouth and took a couple of steps back.

"You're… you're…" She swallowed, finding her nerve, after the initial shock. "Lois." She practically spit the name out of her mouth. Two seconds later, Lois struck her double across the face. "That's for kissing my husband."

Mr. Wells seemed a little perplexed by this turn of events.

The other Lois rubbed her cheek with a nod. She glanced over her shoulder as if she heard something and pressed her lips together. "I can see how you would feel that way, but I'm not the other dimension's Lois, I'm you."

"Me?" Lois gasped. "From the future?" She nodded, looking at herself head to toe. "I age well."

The other Lois glanced over her shoulder with a glare again. Had she lost her marbles?

"Wait a minute," Lois said as the lightning bolt of realization struck. "I'm Lara's mother? *I* will give birth to her?" She stumbled backwards and sat down on the stairs.

"Yes—" Mr. Wells started to say, before she raised her hand.

"Don't tell me yet." She took a deep breath and stared at her future self. "Who is her father?"

"Clark."

Relief washed over her, but Lois wanted to make sure there was no confusion. "My Clark?"

The future Lois nodded. "She was conceived the night before he left for New Krypton."

"That's impossible."

Mr. Wells and her future self glanced at one another and then looked back at Lois. "As you know, Lois, I dislike using that word," said Mr. Wells at last.

"But that's the past!" Lois stammered.

Her future self nodded.

"I would remember if he and I…. Oh!" Lois gasped and then swallowed. "I didn't have a relapse of amnesia last summer, did I?"

They both shook their heads.

Her future self knelt down next to Lois. "Do you remember kicking Lex in the face after he gave you that shot to your throat?"

Lois nodded.

"Then you ran off and saw Superman arguing with the clone?"

Lois nodded, again.

"He flew off and you tried calling to him, but he didn't hear you?"

"No! He did hear me. He came back for me, swooped down and took me up into the clouds." That was the last memory she had before her blackout.

Her future self opened the front door and Superman walked in. "Clark! Tell them how…" She looked closer at him. He didn't stand like her Superman; he almost seemed embarrassed. "Clark?" She covered her mouth. "Oh, God! You're the *other* Clark."

He nodded.

"But he… we…" Lois's eyes went wide as he glanced away. She point at him. "You kidnapped me!"

"I rescued you," the other Superman corrected.

"Well, yes, but without my permission," she argued.

The other Superman smiled. "I need permission to rescue you, Lois?"

"No." Lois pouted rubbing her forehead. "I don't understand."

"I needed someone to be me, here, while I was pregnant in the other dimension. So we borrowed you from that moment in time."

"What? I've… you've been in the other dimension while I was here?" Lois's head was whirling.

Her future self nodded.

"Why?"

"You know why, Lois," her future self said. "It's the same reason you kept telling Clark that you never made love with him before the honeymoon."

"The curse?" Lois murmured.

"The curse."

Lois turned to Mr. Wells. "I thought the curse was instantaneous, like that newspaper article you showed me of me dying of some illness during our honeymoon."

Mr. Wells thought for a moment before speaking. "Well, yes. I have been trying to figure that one out myself. I believe since technically you already consummated your love with Clark on numerous occasions, having been married to him all this time, when he consummated with you for the first time before he left for New Krypton, it alters the curse from a quick death to something else. It draws out the torment by separating the two of you before one of you dies." Mr. Wells turned to the other Superman. "Although, that doesn't explain what happened between you and your Lois."

The other Superman shrugged with a glance at her future self, who swallowed and placed a smile on her face.

Lois's brows came together as she stared at them. They knew something; they knew why. But another detail was nagging her more. "How can Clark make love to me for the first time, but it not be the first time for me? It's the past. It's already happened."

"Just like you consummated with Clark the first time on your honeymoon, when it wasn't his first time with you," Mr. Wells explained. "Time travel."

Lois's eyes went wide as the realization of what they were telling her sunk in. "You want me to go back to my past?"

They nodded.

"No way! Absolutely not!"

Her future self sighed. "I understand how you don't want to go back to your rightful spot in history. Believe me, I do. But if you don't go back, you don't make love with Clark, Lara doesn't get conceived, and I no longer exist to give birth to her."

"How can I go back? I know what the future holds for me."

"If we return you to the exact moment that Clark here rescues you, perhaps even a few moments before, you will then strike your head and …"

"Become Wanda Detroit with no memories." Lois rubbed her head. It was already starting to throb. "And if I don't go back, I'm essentially erasing Lara from time?" She swallowed as they nodded.

Lois loved her daughter more than anything. She didn't want to become Wanda Detroit or have amnesia or crush Clark by falling for Dr. Deter over him or live through Zara and Ching taking him to New Krypton. On the plus side, though, she would get to make love to Clark for the first time all over again. And she would get to feel Lara — their love personified — growing inside her. She placed a hand over her tummy. How could she say no? She looked at her future self. She would survive to return home to Clark. If she went back in time, she would someday come back to this moment in time and have both her Clark and her Lara, who would be her natural daughter.

Lois nodded. "All right. On one condition: I want to see Lara one last time before we go." She turned to the other Superman. "Can you fly me to her? She's gone for a stroller ride in the park with her grandparents."

The biggest grin spread over his face as he seemed to light up from inside. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Oh, that's right. You've met her."

The other Clark nodded. "She's like a daughter to me. I've missed her so much these last few days."

Her future self rested a hand on his arm. "We all have, Clark." The movement was tender, close.

Lois looked suspiciously at her future self. "Are you sure you're me?"

"I have all your memories," her future self replied.

"Where did Clark and I spend Valentine's Day?"

The future her smiled. "That's Lara's birthday." She sighed. "That island in the Pacific. He made us wear that godawful blonde wig."

The other Superman glanced at her. "You didn't tell me about that."

Her future self raised a brow. "I don't tell you everything, Clark."

He looked down. "You used to. God, I couldn't get you to shut up."

Her future self laughed. It was clear to Lois that she and this other Clark had become close. Lois stared at them. How close? A little doubt tugged at her chest. She had always felt drawn towards the other Clark. Could she spend a year with him without her Clark around? Could she do this? Could she go back in time, leave her Clark, knowing… knowing what, exactly? She shook that thought out of her head. Of course she could. For Lara.

"Clark. Do you have the bag?" her future self asked.

Bag?

The other Superman produced a garment bag.

"What's this?" Lois asked, unzipping the bag. She stepped back in disgust. "I don't want to wear that! Lex made me wear that." Lois looked at her future self and she nodded. *Oh, yeah,* Lois thought with a sigh. Ugh. For Lara. Lois could do this for her daughter.

Taking a deep breath, Lois took the garment bag and went upstairs, muttering to herself. Why had she always come up with crazy schemes in the past… future… ugh! Whatever. Now she understood why Clark was always so jittery whenever she got an idea.

As Lois pulled the pink pantsuit out of the bag, her hands began to shake. She took another deep breath. Glancing at the telephone next to her on the nightstand, she picked it up and dialed.

"Clark Kent."

Her heart filled with love. She loved him so much. He positively glowed around his daughter. *His daughter.* She continually had to tug his arm to keep his feet on the ground.

"Hello?" Clark repeated.

"Hi, Clark."

"Lois! Is everything all right?" he asked quickly. She'd better get control of herself before he zipped home.

"Sorry, Clark. I just missed you."

He sighed in relief. "You missed me?"

"Always," she whispered. "I just needed to hear your voice."

"Is everything okay, Lois?" He still sounded concerned.

"Yes, of course. I'm not allowed to miss you?"

"I miss you too, honey."

She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I love you, Clark. You know that, don't you?"

"Lois?"

"Sorry, a bit of time to myself and I get a little emotional. It must be the lack of sleep."

He chuckled. "I know what you mean, but she's worth it."

"She sure is." Lois smiled. She would do anything for her child. *Her child*. "I'd better let you get back to work."

"Okay. Love you."

"I love you, too," she said, hanging up the phone. She took a deep breath, staring at the phone. Would Clark even notice a difference? Would her husband know that her future self was not the woman he had kissed goodbye that morning? Standing up and wiping the tears from her cheeks, Lois pulled the pink suit from the garment bag. Ugh. Lex Luthor. How had she ever agreed to marry that man?

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Clark released a breath. "She called Kal."

"I know," Lois replied. She was walking around her townhouse, touching everything as if she was seeing it for the first time. "This is such a strange feeling. Knowing everything, yet not."

"How did you know?" Clark asked. "About the phone call?"

She touched her ear.

"Really? Still?" He was surprised. He figured Ultra Woman's super blood would have been diluted by now.

Lois shrugged. "I can't hear the people down the block or across town like you can." She picked up a photo of her mom and her. "Be careful, Clark. My mother suspects you might be Lara's father."

"Me?" Clark gasped. "How does your mom know about me?"

Lois chuckled. "Superman. She saw the blanket that you gave Lara. She thinks Superman and Ultra Woman are Lara's parents."

He grinned. "We'd gladly take her."

Lois rested a hand on his chest with a tender smile. "I know. We would name you guardians, if we knew how." He covered her hand with his. She really had to stop touching him.

Mr. Wells cleared his throat and Clark took a step away from Lois, letting her hand fall. "Clark. Lois. I'm going to go get the time machine ready." Their comfort level with each other was making him uncomfortable.

Hopefully Mr. Wells hadn't figured out why the Lois from his own dimension hadn't died from the curse right away. Because Clark had already made love to her in the form of this Lois. Oh God! Had she almost died on the birthing table, not because of the curse with her Clark, but because of making love to him? It had never occurred to him before that maybe they had freed her from the curse with Kal only to saddle her with a separation and death because of making love to him.

"Clark?" Lois was staring at him. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, not wishing to speak. His flip-flop heart seemed to be skipping a beat.

"Five minutes, Clark. That's all we can give her with Lara. We can't chance this dimension's Superman seeing you," Mr. Wells was saying.

"He's at the office," Lois reminded him. "My stand-in just spoke with him."

"Jolly good. Perhaps you can call him when they leave here, keep him occupied for another five minutes."

A smile that lit up Lois's face. "I can do that."

Something tugged inside Clark's chest. He didn't want Lois to make love with Kal, but Kal was her husband; of course she wanted him. Clark cleared his throat. It didn't mean he had to like it.

"Ten minutes, Clark. Five more here. That will give me time to get back to the time machine. And five minutes with Lara. Then we really ought to go. We can't have two Supermen seen in Metropolis at once."

"I know, Mr. Wells." Clark swallowed. Five minutes. Then he would never see Lois again.

Lois hugged Mr. Wells. "Thank you for saving my life, Lara's life, and Superman's life. You're a true hero."

Mr. Wells seemed uncomfortable with all that praise.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Mr. Wells," Lois continued. "But I hope I never see you again."

He grinned. "I might stop by for tea sometime, if that's all right. Check and see if you're all right."

"Just for tea," she warned.

"Clark." Mr. Wells nodded, heading out the door.

Lois exhaled as soon as he was gone. "This is starting to feel real, Clark. Like I'm really home."

Clark wanted to feel happy for her and he guessed a little bit of him was happy that this danger magnet was Kal's problem again. Mostly he felt a hole in his chest that wouldn't heal soon. This Lois was still his best friend.

"I'm scared, Clark. I've never felt scared like this in my life." Lois reached out her hand and he took it, pulling her into his arms.

Clark was scared too, though he didn't know why. Kal would protect Lois with his life. "Yeah, big old scary Kal, who loves you more than anything. A daughter who adores you. Parents and in-laws to help you out. A job you love and where you're respected. Friends. Sounds like a scary life."

Lois slapped him on the chest gently. "I'm nervous about seeing Kal… Clark again. It's been a year. We weren't even married yet when I left. What if he suspects I'm not the same woman he kissed before heading off to the office this morning?"

"You promised me you would tell him everything," Clark said, holding her.

She smiled weakly. "I will. Almost everything. I won't tell him what would have happened; I can't."

Clark nodded. Kal wouldn't want to know that, didn't need to know. He wished he didn't know it himself.

"And I won't tell him about us."

Clark held her tighter. "What *us*? There's only me and you and Ultra Woman."

"And Clark Kent. You can't forget him."

"And Lucy El, Kal-El's wife."

"How many of us were there in this relationship?" Lois laughed. "It was a crazy year."

"It was." Clark loved it when Lois laughed. She hadn't done much of that lately. He kissed the top of her head. "Ultra Woman and I are going to take a vacation when I get back. Try to get used to the peace and quiet of you being gone."

"You mean Lara. I've been pretty quiet lately," she whispered, leaning her head against his 'S'.

Clark ran a hand over her hair. Lois was better, not so depressed. But the sadness was still there. He had hoped going home would cure her, but now he wasn't sure. What was eating her up inside? "I don't know if we'll ever get used to Lara being gone. She's been a part of our life for so long now. There will always be a hole where she belongs."

Lois stepped back and touched his face. "You'll be a great dad someday, Clark. I can just picture you and Ultra Woman and baby Wow Amazing flying through the air together."

Clark laughed as only she could make him laugh, taking her hand in his. "Wow Amazing, huh?"

"That's pretty awful, I admit." Lois chuckled. He loved to see her smile. He picked her up and kissed her. He hadn't meant to. He had told himself specifically not to, not with the younger Lois in the house. She resisted a moment, then kissed him back. It was a last kiss, a kiss goodbye and they both knew it. He set her down and she leaned against his shoulder. "Thank you for everything, Clark."

Clark and Lois heard the younger Lois coming and stepped apart. Neither of them wanted her to know what her future held for them. She might change her mind.

As substitute Lois came around the bend of the stairwell, she looked at them. "Can I ask another question?" Lois turned to face her stand-in. "What was it like to be pregnant with Lara?"

Clark released a breath. That wasn't the question he thought she was going to ask.

Lois glanced at him with a smile. "Amazing." *The minx.*

"Different from a normal pregnancy?"

She shrugged. "A bit, but not in a bad way."

"Would you do it again?"

"Maybe, someday, we will."

Clark swallowed. "But, Lois…" He didn't want to worry the stand-in about the complications, but how could she even consider that again? What if she died?

"Lara will need a sibling."

Clark cleared his throat. He didn't want to start thinking about that. "We should go. Wells said he would give us five minutes with Lara. He's afraid we might bump into Clark."

The stand-in turned to them. "Clark doesn't know about this?"

Lois shook her head. "How could he? He was with Zara and the New Kryptonians when I left."

"Right." The substitute Lois nodded. "Are you going to tell him?"

Lois stared at her as if she was contemplating the answer. Clark stepped forward. "Of course she's going to tell him," he said, giving Lois a sharp look. She nodded in agreement.

"I have nothing to hide," Lois murmured.

That's right, Clark nodded. If she wouldn't tell Kal, he would. He didn't know how or when, but Kal should know the truth about his daughter. He took Lois's hand in his. "Goodbye, Lois." He didn't shake her hand; he just held it in his.

Lois looked him in the eyes. "Goodbye, Clark."

They stood there for a moment, just holding hands and staring at one another, before she stepped away. Lois always stepped away first. "I'd better call Kal… Clark and make sure he's still at the office."

As she dialed the *Daily Planet*, her stand-in silently pulled off her wedding and engagement rings and handed them to her. Sighing, the younger Lois then went to open the window. "My fortune cookie the other night said I was 'about to embark on an adventure.' And here I thought it was parenthood."

Clark smiled, scooping her up into his arms.

Lois turned towards them with a thumbs-up signal. She mouthed a 'thank you' to him. Clark nodded, took an extra moment to gaze upon her for one last time, before he and the stand-in took off through the window.

They landed at the park, a few feet behind the Kents and Lanes and the stroller. Lois jumped out of his arms and ran up to the stroller. "Hi, sweetie." She unbuckled her daughter and held her tight.

"Lois!" gasped her mother. "What are you doing here?" Then she noticed him. "You!"

Superman swallowed. "Lois wanted to introduce me to her daughter," he said. "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Lane. Dr. Lane." He turned to the Kents. "Martha, Jonathan."

Martha looked at him with a raised brow, but said nothing.

"You know who I am?" Ellen asked, dumbfounded.

Superman smiled. "Of course, Mrs. Lane. I haven't forgotten how you and Sam…" Ooops. "Dr. Lane saved my life a couple of Christmases ago."

"Right, of course." Ellen nodded.

Lois turned to him. "Superman, this is my daughter, Lara Lucia Kent."

Clark snapped his attention back to the substitute Lois from Lara. "Her middle name is Lucia? Lucy?" Did Clark know? He looked at Martha, who was gazing at him curiously. Had she told him?

"That was Clark's idea. After my sister Lucy."

Superman nodded, holding out his arms. Lara was reaching for him. "Hi there, beautiful." She reached up and touched his face. "No, beautiful. Your daddy's at work. It's your Uncle Superman." Clark closed his eyes and told her telepathically how much he and Aunt Ultra missed her. She started filling him with images and emotions. "You've had quite a weekend, I see. But your mommy wants you back now. We just stopped by to say hello."

While Superman was holding her, the younger Lois hugged her mom and dad. She gladly took her daughter back, hugging and kissing her again. "I love you so much." She turned to Martha. "Thank you, Martha. I know this couldn't have been easy on you."

Martha was at a loss for her meaning. "What, dear?"

The younger Lois stared at her. "Oh, my God. It's gone. You don't remember." She glanced at Superman. "She doesn't remember. The Bummer-B-Gone wiped it away."

Clark had no idea what the Bummer-B-Gone was. He glanced at Martha. Did she no longer remember him? No longer remember Ultra Woman? His fight with Clark? Lucy? Her own grandchild? He felt so bad for her that he wanted to hug her, but didn't think that was something this Superman would do.

Martha just stared at them.

"What are you talking about, Lois?" asked her mother.

"My Bummer-B-Gone works?" said Sam. "Really?"

The younger Lois shook her head. "It's broken now, Daddy. Fat Head fried its circuits."

"Oh." He seemed disappointed. "No more colds?"

"Fit as a fiddle," Clark replied.

Jonathan's brows came together as he stared at him. Had Jonathan figured out he wasn't his son?

"We should be going, Lois."

She nodded, setting Lara back in the stroller. "You be good for Grandma, Grandpa, Grammy, and Pops." She took a deep breath and released it. "I'll see you when you get home, sweetie." Lara took hold of her finger and smiled. "Oh, she's smiling at me again." She kissed her daughter's cheek. "I love you, too, my sweet baboo."

Lois grabbed the Kents and hugged them, quickly. "Okay. Let's go."

"We're going to your Uncle Mike's café for lunch. Do you want to join us, Lois?" suggested Ellen.

The younger Lois pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I'd love to, Mom, but I've got to go do something. Maybe another time." She nodded to Clark.

He caressed Lara's cheek, one last time. "Bye bye, little one. Take care." Then he scooped Lois up and disappeared into the air.

The younger Lois wrapped her arms around his neck. "Promise me I won't remember any of this."

"I promise."

The younger Lois took a deep breath. "Lara is wonderful, isn't she? And to think Dr. Klein told Clark he couldn't have children."

"*What?*" Clark stammered.

"Daddy double-checked his results and everything. I'm going to have Clark's baby. Wow." She smiled, resting her head against

his chest.

Dr. Klein messed up Kal's test results, too? He told Kal that he couldn't have children? Why didn't Lois tell him that earlier? That could mean that his Dr. Klein may have made a mistake as well. That he, too, could father children. That someday he could have a Lara of his own. He spun them into the air with a whoop of delight.

"Clark!"

"Sorry, Lois. My Dr. Klein told me I couldn't have children, either. Perhaps he was wrong too. Ultra will be thrilled." He grinned.

"Ultra?" The younger Lois raised a brow. "Do you mean Ultra Woman?"

"My Lois," he corrected.

"Right. Your Lois is also Ultra Woman?"

He shrugged. "Lightning."

"Oh. Resplendent Man syndrome. Wow! This is going to be quite a year for us." She laughed.

Clark set them down in the alley behind the Daily Planet, next to the time machine.

Mr. Wells released a sigh of relief at their appearance, shutting his pocket watch. "Cutting it a bit close. Ready?"

The younger Lois nodded. Clark sat down next to Wells and patted his knee in invitation to her.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she said.

"Clark, do you know what you need to do?" Mr. Wells asked.

"Yep. You explained everything on the walk to the townhouse."

"Okay. Let's go."

"Lois," Clark whispered, so Mr. Wells couldn't hear. She leaned closer so he would be speaking directly into her ear. "There was something I've wanted to tell you for a while now. When we were together, it was *you* I made love to, not my Lois."

The younger Lois's eyes grew large as she turned to him. "*What?!"*

Then they dropped into that jello feeling and were back in time.

Clark watched as Lois got bumped by the car and hit her head against the lamppost. She would no longer remember. There was the clone and the gun. Then Lois escaped and jumped into the plumbing truck. He sighed and floated down to the time machine.

"Mr. Wells, I believe I owe you a glass of champagne."

Wells grinned. "We did it, Clark. We saved Lois, the baby, and Superman." He exhaled. "I could use that drink." He pushed some buttons, turned a knob and pulled the lever disappearing them into the future.

***

Clark had arrived into the *Daily Planet* newsroom that morning with a big smile on his face. He was happy. He wanted to float through the air and tell everyone about his terrific weekend and his wonderful new daughter. He greeted everyone he passed with a friendly smile and a warm hello.

"Clark." Perry stopped him. "You seem to be in a good mood. I hope it's because you've got a hot lead."

"Nope," Clark beamed. "Great weekend though."

"Oh?" Perry said, clearly expecting details. "Where's Lois?"

"She told me to tell you she was too sick to come into work this week. Cough, flu, highly contagious stuff." He sighed with delight.

"Really?" His boss raised a brow. "What's she *really* doing?"

That stopped Clark short. He had never been good at the lying thing. He should have known that Perry wouldn't buy an illness. "She was still in bed, asleep, when I left this morning, Chief. She hasn't slept well all weekend and was up half the night last night." All that was true. She was up half the night with Lara. Lois and Lara. He had the best family. His grin slipped back on his face.

Clark had wondered at first how Lois was going to take to motherhood, and those first twenty-four hours were tough for her. He had had months since his epiphany and discussion about Lucy El with his folks to mentally prepare. Lara was basically dropped in Lois's lap.

On Sunday, he had caught Lois sitting on their bed talking to her daughter. She had turned and beamed at him. "Clark, she smiled at me."

He knew she would be fine from that point onwards. Lara had captured her heart. It was harder for Lois, since they couldn't connect telepathically. Lois couldn't feel her daughter's strong bond between them like he could. He almost pitied human parents who would never be able to feel with their children emotionally from the first touch what he had felt with Lara. He sighed again, before he realized that Perry was still watching him.

"You gonna explain this one, son? Your wife was so sick that she spent the weekend in bed and…" Perry stopped himself. "And you had a restful, quiet weekend for a change. No wonder you're so happy." He chuckled.

"Not really. It's pretty noisy and hectic at my house right now." Clark grinned mischievously. "Both my folks and Lois's folks are still visiting."

"Lois is sick. The in-laws and folks are visiting and you had a *good* weekend?"

"The best," Clark confirmed.

"Want to explain that one?"

Clark wanted to tell Perry. He had begged Lois to let him share their news at work, but she wanted him to make sure nobody else had lost a baby and tried to claim Lara as theirs, before they introduced her around. He agreed to keep mum for Lara's safety. "No, not really." He moved on to his desk.

Perry followed him. "What are you working on?"

"Lois wanted me to do some research on this piece we're thinking about, but I don't really want to discuss it in case it doesn't pan out."

"Uh-huh," responded Perry suspiciously. "Want to give me some idea?"

"Not yet, Chief."

"Okay." Perry wandered off. Clark knew that wasn't going to be the end of his inquiries.

Later, after the morning meeting, Jimmy came up to him. "So, CK, go anywhere fun this weekend?"

A-ha! Perry had put Jimmy on the case. "Nope. Stayed home mostly. How about you? Did you and Penny do anything?"

"Yeah, we caught the new art exhibit at the Met."

Clark leaned back. "Chinese art, right?"

Jimmy nodded. "Penny loved it." He shrugged. "Not my sort of thing, but it made her happy."

Jimmy was finally learning what it took to make a relationship work. Clark grabbed his briefcase. "She's not still searching for Superman's secret identity, is she?"

Jimmy chuckled. "I hope not. That'd put a little crimp in our relationship. And I really like her, CK."

Clark pulled a roll of film out of his briefcase and palmed it in his hand. "Jimmy, if I asked you to do something for me, would you be able to keep the results from everyone else? Just for the time being."

"Sure! What are you talking about, CK?"

Clark handed him the roll of film. "Personal and private."

Jimmy lowered his voice. "How personal?"

"Very."

Jimmy sat down in the chair next to his desk. "Does everyone have their clothes on?"

Clark thought about that. "For the most part."

Jimmy cleared his throat and looked at the roll of film as if it contained ooze. "How private?"

"Very."

Jimmy raised a brow at him and set the film canister back on his desk. “CK, what kind of photos are these?” His voice was down to a whisper now. “Do they have anything to do with the story you’re working on?”

“A little,” Clark replied cryptically.

“Just tell me that both you and Lois are clothed in the photos and I won’t ask any more questions.”

Clark laughed. “No, Jimmy, they aren’t *those* kind of photos.”

Jimmy sighed in relief, grabbing the canister. Clark set his hand on top. “Very private, Jimmy. No one can know.” He stared at his friend.

Jimmy nodded.

“Even Perry.”

Jimmy’s eyes opened wide. “But your story?”

“We’ll tell him when we’re ready. I’m trusting you with my life here.” If Jimmy told anyone, Lois would kill him.

“Okay, CK. Whatever you say.”

Clark lifted his hand and Jimmy took the roll of film. “And I want all the negatives back,” he called. Jimmy nodded.

He hoped Lois wouldn’t be too angry with him for involving Jimmy. He was dying to have a photo of Lara to put on his desk and Jimmy was his best friend. He sighed. Two hours and he already missed her.

Clark spent the next few hours checking the wire service and the archives of the last three months. The only missing children were the orphans the Toyman had abducted and the children of the S.T.A.R. Labs Board of Directors. And they had all been recovered. After lunch, he would broaden his search to areas outside of Metropolis.

That phone call from Lois still weighed heavily on his mind. She seemed sad. She missed him. *She missed him?* Clark sat up. She had some time to herself? He gulped. Had the missing Lois called him? Was she back? Had she returned to him at last? He was about to call her back, before he realized he had no idea how he would be able to tell one from the other, especially over the phone. He couldn’t ask her point blank, because if he was wrong, the stand-in Lois would think he was crazy. And if she had never gone to the other dimension at all, if his mom was wrong, then she would be right.

A beautiful blonde woman walked by his desk. He glanced up. Penny. He turned toward Jimmy, who was watching her go with a satisfied smile on his face. So, his girlfriend had stopped by to see him. Good for Jimmy. He wondered if she was still out of work since the CEO of her company had been arrested for Steve McBride’s murder and Diticom closed its doors.

Ralph stopped next to Clark’s desk and whistled. “I’d like that covered with whipped cream, eh, Kent? Come to daddy, sweet thing.”

Normally, Clark would just roll his eyes at such a comment from Ralph, but suddenly he saw red. He picked Ralph up at the knot of his tie.

“Penny is a nice, intelligent woman. She is hard-working, well-educated, and accomplished. She is a human being and deserves more respect than your asinine comment afforded her.”

Ralph gasped for air as his feet dangled off the floor.

“CK,” Jimmy called. “Lois, line two.”

“Tell her I’m busy,” he growled.

“Okay, CK. It’s your life.”

“Lois,” Ralph gasped. “Should talk…”

“She can wait, Ralph. There are those of us who would appreciate it if you would stop treating women as fodder for your sick fantasies. Actually, if it isn’t relevant to a news story we don’t want you to talk at all. I want you to apologize to every, and I mean *every,* woman at the *Daily Planet* from Mona at the switchboard to my partner, Lois Lane. Or I will tie you up and hand out tomatoes until every woman, lady, and girl in Metropolis whom you’ve ever insulted has had a chance to show you how you’ve made them feel.”

“Kent…” Ralph gasped.

“Wow, Lois,” Jimmy laughed from across the room. “How much cough medicine are you on?”

Clark’s brows came together.

“Oh, now you remember her name. It only took you almost a year.”

Clark dropped Ralph and said, “And I’m betting Jimmy’s girlfriend would like an apology as well.”

Ralph looked up at him from the floor, rubbing his throat. “Channeling Lois today, Kent?”

He raised a brow and Ralph scurried away.

“CK, line two still holding.” Jimmy laughed. “She’s cracking me up today.”

Clark picked up line two. “Lois!”

“Too busy to speak to me, eh, Clark Kent?” Lois teased. He was surprised she wasn’t angrier.

“Ah…” He didn’t know what was going on with him. Honesty was the best policy. “I was explaining to Ralph how unwelcome his comments about women are.”

“About time,” she commended. “But I don’t want to talk about him. I want to know why you didn’t tell me why you can communicate with Lara telepathically.”

His jaw dropped as he fell into his chair. “How?” Had his mom said something?

“Because she can with me, too, Daddy,” she whispered.

“She spoke to you?”

“She’s only three months old, Clark. I wouldn’t call it speaking.”

Lara telepathically communicated with Lois. “She’s amazing, isn’t she?”

“Magical.”

“What did she say to you?”

Lois paused. “Actually, she played me a memory of you, saying you loved me.”

Clark heart filled with warmth. “Well, she’s right. I do.”

“I love you too, handsome. My parents and your folks have taken her for a walk in the park, so I’m here all alone,” she murmured.

“Good. You need to catch up on your sleep.”

Silence. “Clark, I want to try something. I want to see if I can connect to you like I did with her.”

“Right now?”

“Of course, Clark. If she can hear me from across town, why not you? Close your eyes,” she ordered.

Clark swallowed. “I don’t think this is the best…”

He heard his wife going up the stairs. She must be on the cordless phone. “Humor me, Clark.”

Clark sighed. “My eyes are closed, Lois.”

“I want you to see if you can sense what I’m feeling.”

“Okay.” He needed to get back to work searching for lost babies. He really shouldn’t be playing games with Lois.

His wife was silent for a few moments as he heard her going through the dresser drawers. “I’ve found it.”

“Found what?” Clark asked.

“The image I wanted to communicate with you.”

“Image?” He thought she was going to talk to him.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“Uh-huh.” Clark could sense her smiling, but not telepathically.

“As a backup plan, I want you to picture me wearing that black teddy that I didn’t have a chance to wear for you in Atlantic City.”

Clark swallowed, remembering the one. His mind filled with images, but they were all memories.

“And I want to repeat again that I’m by myself at our house.

No parents. No baby. Just me and the black teddy. The clock is ticking and every minute we continue talking on the phone is a minute closer to the time they return."

"Lois, I don't think that—"

"Are your eyes closed, Clark?"

"Yes."

Suddenly, without hearing a word, Clark sensed Lois's desire. She wanted him at home, immediately. He pictured her running to him at the newsroom, jumping into his arms and tearing off his clothes in uncontrollable passion. Not caring that she was revealing his blue suit underneath. Not caring who saw them. Lois wanted him and she wanted him naked now. The phone dropped out of his hands as he gulped.

As Clark picked it up he heard his wife whisper, "You have five minutes," before she hung up.

He hung up the phone and grabbed his jacket.

"Kent!" Perry yelled.

"Not now, Chief," he said, loosening his tie.

"Yes, now, Clark. What's this about you throttling Ralph?" Perry stood outside his office like thunder.

Clark shrugged. "I overreacted. Sorry." He pointed over his shoulder. "Lois has a hot lead. I've got to go." He ran out of the room.

"*Kent! I want you in my office with that hot lead when you return!"* Clark could hear Perry yelling as he dove out the storage room window.

A minute later he landed in his living room. He spun into his business suit and ran up the stairs. "Lois! I'm home."

His wife, dressed only in the black teddy, jumped into his arms, kissing him. "Clark."

"Lois. Wow! That's…"

She kissed him again. It felt almost like an Ultra Woman kiss. Jerking off his jacket, Lois started loosening his tie. "Don't know the next opportunity we'll have to be alone," she murmured. "Could be weeks."

Clark set her on the bed and took a step back. No time to waste then. Instantly, he spun out of his clothes and into his PJ shorts.

Lois smiled, tugging him back to her.

"I always loved your spontaneous side," he whispered as she pulled him onto the bed.

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"Wow! Lois," Clark said, lying down next to her. "You're unbelievable."

"You're not so bad yourself, hot stuff." Lois rested her head on his shoulder. She released her breath. "That will hold me for a little while." She lifted her chin and kissed him again. "Or not."

"Lois!" Clark laughed. "Where do you get all this energy?"

"You," she whispered. "Everything about you turns me on."

"Good to know." He smiled. "Lois, that image you sent me telepathically. Wow! How did you do that?"

"Image? I didn't send you an image. I told you I want you. Wanted you." Lois kissed his shoulder. "What did you see?"

Chuckling, Clark admitted, "I saw you attacking me at the newsroom and tearing off my clothes. Guess it was someone else thinking that."

Lois stopped mid-kiss. That was what she had been thinking about when she sent the other message. "Oh, no. That was me, Clark. I was debating whether or not I should meet you here or at the office. You must be a powerful receiver. I'll be more careful with my thoughts next time."

Clark exhaled. "Next time? Lois, you cannot contact me like that ever again. I'm liable to have a mid-air collision with a building with thoughts like that forced into my head."

Lois smiled naughtily. "I didn't force them on you, you just took them out of my head." She paused, tapping his chest. "I want you to stay out of my head. Some of my thoughts are private, Superman."

"Trust me, I don't want to go into your head, Lois. Who knows what dangerous stuff you've got cooking up there?" Turning on his side and facing her, Clark propped his head up on his hand. "Do you think our life is going to change drastically because of Lara?"

Lois faced him, mirroring his position. "It already has. Did you see all her gear?"

"Are we going to be one of those couples who change completely because they have kids?"

Lois scooted closer, kissing him. "Some of us have already changed, Clark. Just knowing Lara has changed you."

"How?" Her husband seemed surprised.

"You're sexier."

Clark laughed. He'd accept that answer.

"Happier. More content. Complete."

"I thought you made me all those things." He kissed her nose.

"I knew there was a reason I loved you." Lois kissed him moving closer yet to him.

"I feel like I'm playing hooky." Clark grinned.

"So do it."

"I can't," Clark groaned, flopping onto his back. "As I was leaving, Perry wanted to meet with me about strangling Ralph. Telling him you had a hot lead for me was the only way I could escape."

Lois kissed her husband. "A hot lead, huh?" She giggled. "Wait a minute. Did you say that you strangled Ralph?"

Clark looked away. "I lost my temper."

"You never lose your temper, Clark." She cupped his jaw, turning his face back to hers. "What happened?"

"He made an asinine comment about Penny."

Lois waited.

"Well…" He looked embarrassed. "He told her to come to daddy. He wanted to cover her with whipped cream."

She grimaced. "What made you lose your temper?"

Clark shook his head. "I don't know."

"Daddy."

He sat up. "No!" He buried his face in his hands.

Lois chuckled, sitting up and wrapping her arms around him. "It's official, Clark. You're human."

"I could have killed him."

Lois had had this conversation before, hadn't she? With the other Clark when he had almost strangled Jefferson Cole. "You didn't, Clark." She kissed him.

Clark released a breath. "I just pictured some guy saying that to Lara someday and I saw red."

She kissed his cheek. "I know."

"I could build a huge stone tower out at my parents' farm with a window at the top that only I could access."

Lois laughed. "You'd make her Rapunzel?"

"It would keep her safe."

"She'd resent you until she learned to fly and then she'd be gone."

Clark sighed. "I want to protect her."

Lois kissed his cheek again. "Then love her, trust her, and teach her to protect herself." She shrugged. "Or you could just tell the world her dad is Superman. No man would dare touch her then."

Clark laughed. "We'll keep that as a serious Plan B." He kissed Lois. "I love you."

She smiled. "So, you need a hot lead?"

Her husband rolled on top of her. "Don't mind if I do."

"Clark!" Lois laughed, playfully slapping his shoulder.

He stopped kissing her and looked down at her. "It's quite difficult to make love to you while you're laughing, Ms. Lane."

She grinned. "Sorry. I'll be good."

Clark kissed her again. "That I already know." Then he

stopped her giggles with his mouth.

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Lois lay in Clark's arms. He had fallen asleep, the naughty boy. Their parents and Lara would be back soon. She was surprised they hadn't returned already.

She was home. She smiled. This was quite the homecoming. It almost felt like she hadn't left, except for all the lovemaking. She knew that playing hooky from work wouldn't be a regular morning activity, especially after the grandparents left. It felt odd to be home, joking and laughing with Clark again. Holding, kissing, and making love to him like it was normal. It wasn't normal for her. Sure, in her dreams and memories it was normal. But in reality, it was new, quite new and wonderful.

Lois was going to have to use one of her other-dimension leads to get Clark off the hook at work. She had wanted to research them a bit before using them. She shook Clark awake. He needed to go back to work soon, before Perry started calling to check up on him. She blew in his ear. "Clark. Time to wake up, handsome."

"Ssshh. I'm dreaming I'm making love to Lois," he murmured.

She kissed him. "Wake up, Prince Charming. You've already made love to me."

Clark wrapped his arms around her. "More, por favor."

"Clark!" Lois laughed. "Our parents and Lara will be home soon."

"Uh-huh." He continued kissing her.

"Perry's going to wonder what happened to you."

"He knows I came to see you," Clark murmured.

Lois laughed. "Exactly. Do you really want to have *that* conversation with him?"

Clark groaned, setting his head on her chest, floating just enough not to crush her. "There's something extra hot about you today."

Lois smiled. The pint of Ultra Woman blood perhaps? The fact that he hadn't made love to her in a year. A year! "Clark, what's the date?"

"May 17th. Oh my God. Do you know what today is?"

Lois knew. It was the day they had conceived Lara. The day he had said goodbye and left for New Krypton. The anniversary of their *first*, first time. And here they were again. Making love. Only this time neither of them would disappear.

"It's the day my parents found me in Shuster's field."

Oh, right. That too. Lois swallowed. She wouldn't tell him. It didn't really matter anyway. It had only been a year since they had been together, really together — no dreams or play acting or pregnancy. One year ago today. She bit her lip. "Tell Perry I'm going to e-mail him a story."

Clark winced. "You don't have a hot lead for me, do you? I kind of promised Perry one."

"I have tons of hot leads for you."

Still floating just above her, Lois's husband crossed his arms under his chin and looked at her with a smile. "Tons of hot leads, huh?"

Lois swatted his shoulder. "I'm serious."

"Me too, beautiful." He kissed her nose and rolled off her. He didn't believe her!

"I think Lex Luthor, Jr. had a twin."

Clark propped his head up with his elbow. "What's that?"

"I did some research of my own on the Luckaby name. Junior's mom's name was Linda. According to what I found out, Linda Luckaby gave birth to two children."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to, but then Fat Head erased our parents' memories and Lara arrived. I got a bit distracted."

"Oh my God! Lois!" Clark kissed her, deeply. "I can't take this lead. It's too hot."

"I get to stay home with Lara. You have to go to work. It's only fair," Lois said, biting her bottom lip. "There's more."

"More?" He gasped. She had his full attention now.

"Remember how Jaxon was interested in the names of the children Lex and I had picked."

Clark waved for her to continue.

"I was thinking how Alexander wasn't among them. You know how obsessed Lex was with Alexander the Great."

"You think Lex, Jr.'s twin's name was Alexander?" he questioned skeptically.

"It's just a hunch." She shrugged. "Yes."

Clark thought about this. "Lex was obsessed with Alexander the Great, he quoted him and collected his sword and he had an X in his name; yet, it wasn't on the list and he didn't name his two known sons Alexander. Unless Lex is short for Alexander?"

"Nope. It's not," Lois told him. Ultra Woman had told her it wasn't.

"It's a good hunch. I'll have Jimmy check out Linda Luckaby, see if we can find her."

"She died in childbirth. I'd have Jimmy check out Hong Kong and Australia for the birth and death certificates." And here was the biggie. "He should check Singapore, too."

***

Clark looked at her. Really looked at her. "Singapore? Why Singapore?"

"Because it's a huge financial center between Hong Kong and Australia. I can see Lex having investments and possibly a home there."

"Right." He nodded. "Lois." He ran his hand down her face and cupped her jaw. "I love you."

His wife wasn't listening to him. Her eyes lit up and she kissed him. "They're back!" Lois jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes and then looked at him, still sitting in bed, staring at her. "Lara's home."

Clark blinked his eyes. Lois? His missing Lois. Was it really her? Was that why she told him to come home to make love to her? His wife, mother of his child? Was his life finally in balance once again? Singapore. What had the other Clark's Lois said about Singapore?

"*Don't you, remember, Mr. Amazing? You rescued me in Singapore. Took me away from Lex and back to Clark's old house in Smallville. I came into your shower and…"*

Singapore. It couldn't just be a coincidence, could it?

Clark heard a key in the lock and the front door opening. They *were* home. Lois ran out of the bathroom and down the stairs. How did she know they were home? Crap. He was still in bed. He jumped out of bed, took a twenty second shower, dried off, got dressed in his multiple layers and ran down the stairs after her two minutes later.

Lois was holding and kissing their daughter. "Oh, I've missed you. I missed you so much. You'll have to tell me everything." She leaned over and rested her head against her daughter's. "Oh, I know, Princess, he is wonderful. I love your daddy, too."

Clark came up behind them and wrapped his arms around the two of them. "Always wonderful to hear," he murmured.

"Clark? What are you doing home?" asked his mother.

"I missed my family," he replied, kissing first Lois's cheek and then the top of Lara's head. Suddenly, he felt a connection, a bond between the three of them he had never felt before. Lara was happy. Ever so happy that Mommy and Daddy were finally back together again.

"Me too, Lara. Me too," he whispered. He gazed at Lois, his Lois. His missing wife. How much she must have gone through in the past year. He pulled Lois towards him and kissed her, deeply, passionately.

Lois smiled at him and passed him their daughter. She turned to her mother and hugged her. "Mom, I've missed you so much. I

never knew what I put you through. I'm sorry, please forgive me."

"Well… of course, dear. What are you talking about? And what happened to that beautiful pink silk suit you were wearing earlier?"

Lois shrugged. "I spilled something on it." She hugged her father. "I love you, Daddy. You're the best. Promise me you'll be Lara's pediatrician."

Sam smiled weakly. "Princess, I'm not a family doctor."

"You're this family's doctor. You said yourself… no, wait, I guess it was Mom… she's one special baby." Lois looped her arm through Clark's. "And a very special baby needs a very special and private doctor."

Clark glanced at her and then at his folks. Did Lois just announce to everyone present that Lara was his and her baby? And he was Superman? It sounded like that to him. His parents didn't seem at all fazed or chagrined. Perhaps it wasn't clear at all. *People see what they want to see. Hear what they want to hear,* Clark thought.

"So, you agree with me? That this is Ultra Woman's and Superman's child?" Ellen asked, delighted to be taken seriously. "Did he tell you it was his?"

Lois smiled at Clark. "No. But she seems Super to me."

"Lois," her mother gasped in frustration. "Why didn't you ask him?"

Lois's eyes still focused on Clark's. "Because it really doesn't matter who Lara's birth parents were, what's important is that we will love her as if she were our own child." She broke her gaze at him to look at his folks and smiled.

"We're Lara's parents," he said, believing every word as truth. "And Lara's our child."

Ellen rolled her eyes and shook her head, wandering into the living room.

Lois hugged Martha next. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You are the best mother-in-law ever."

His mother laughed. "I guess we should give Lois time to herself more often." She leaned over and winked at Clark when she said *herself*. He could never slip anything past his mother. "Clark, dear, Lara's due for her next bottle."

Clark nodded but Ellen volunteered to make it. "Thank you, Ellen," he called to her as she disappeared with a wave of her hand into the kitchen. Sam followed her.

Lois was staring at his mother. "Martha?" she asked, glancing at Clark.

"The Bummer-B-Gone got her and my dad, too."

Lois's jaw dropped. "What doesn't she remember?"

"Bits, here and there. She remembers Clark — the other Clark —"

"Thank God!" answered Lois.

"But not that he's found his Lois."

Lois covered her mouth. "Oh, Martha. I'm so sorry. There's stuff from this past year I wish I could forget, too." She hugged his mother again.

Clark stared at her. What happened in her life she would like to forget?

Lastly, Lois hugged his father. "I'm sorry for anything I've done to drive your wife batty this year."

His dad chuckled. "Don't be ridiculous, Lois, you've been a perfect angel this year. We've enjoyed having you in our family."

Her mother returned from the kitchen. Lois sat down on the sofa and Clark handed Lara to his wife. Lois tested the milk on her wrist and then gave it to her daughter. Clark couldn't stop staring at her. How lucky he was that she would give up everything for him and their child. How lucky he was that she loved him.

Lois glanced up from Lara and smiled. "You'd better get back to the newsroom. Perry's going to wonder if I'm at death's door. Thanks for coming home."

Clark grinned at her and he knelt down beside them. "Any time. Thanks for the hot lead. You saved me."

Lois reached up and ran her fingers down his cheek. "Always. Now, be good and keep your hands to yourself. And stay away from creeps like Ralph."

"What happened?" asked his mother, concerned.

"I lost my temper." He smiled sheepishly.

"Clark!" His father gasped.

Lois glanced at her mom. "He had his 'a-ha' moment."

Ellen looked at Lois and Martha with an 'I told you so' expression.

"Is he okay?" Clark's mom asked him.

"I hope so." Clark sighed. "Oh, Lois. Ralph might call. I told him he needed to apologize to every woman who worked at the paper."

Lois shook her head. "Mind if I don't hold my breath?"

Clark kissed her cheek and then the top of Lara's head. "I love you," he whispered to both of them. He didn't want to go. He really didn't want to go. He hugged his mom and dad.

"Clark, your hair is damp," said his father. He wasn't as quick as mom.

"I took a shower." He grinned at Lois. "Thanks again for the hot lead."

"Anytime, handsome." His wife returned his naughty grin. "And, Clark?"

Clark kissed her again. He couldn't stay away from her. He was afraid if he left, it would all turn out to be a dream. "Something is so different about you today."

"I love you too, honey."

"Mmmm," Clark murmured, still kissing her.

"Go to work," she teased, pushing him gently away. "Any luck with the research?"

"No missing babies in Metropolis. I'm going to check the other big cities next. Chicago. Gotham. New York."

Lois chuckled.

What's so funny? thought Clark.

"Maybe you should suggest that Perry send Ralph to Gotham City for some peace and quiet."

Clark raised a brow. "There isn't any peace and quiet in Gotham City. I'll be lucky not to be banished there."

"No. You can't go. Metropolis needs you. Anyway, there's already a superhero in Gotham."

Clark rolled his eyes. "If you can call him that."

His dad cleared his throat with a glance at Lois's parents. Ooops. "Right. Thanks, Dad. I'll try to be home for dinner." He glanced down at Lara. "I'll be home." With a wave, he ran out the door.

"*What took you so long to get home anyway? I missed my girl,"* he heard Lois ask.

"*We told you we were stopping by Uncle Mike's café for lunch, remember?"*

"*Oh, yeah. Sorry, I forgot. So, what did Uncle Mike say about you being a grandpa, Pops?"*

Clark flagged down a cab. He wanted to stay home with his family. But at least he got his Lara fix. He grinned with satisfaction. And he had gotten a 'hot lead' too.

***

"What in blue blazes is wrong with you today, Kent? You're lucky Ralph isn't pressing charges."

Clark looked down, honestly chagrined.

"What I should do is take your hot lead and hand it over to him," Perry continued.

Clark's gaze snapped up. "No! It's Lois's hot lead. I wouldn't have taken it, except she begged me because she was so sick."

Perry raised a brow. "So sick, huh? Still in bed?"

Clark smiled. "Just got up."

"And this hot lead required you to take an hour and a half, two hours at home with Lois?"

Clark tried to wipe the smile off his face. He didn't owe Perry an explanation, but he could distract him from that line of thought. "Lois found out about Lex, Jr.'s mother."

"And?"

"He has a twin. Lois has a hunch, a good hunch, that the twin's name might be Alexander."

Perry's jaw dropped. "How does she do that? Sick in bed and still comes up with the name of our new publisher."

"She's pretty terrific," Clark agreed.

"Okay. This is *your* top priority. We need to find this Alexander person." He shook his head, opening his office door. "Jimmy!"

This lead was too hot to hand over to Ralph.

Jimmy walked up to the office without his usual bounce. The young photographer looked at Clark, his eyes wide and questioning. He must have developed the photos. "Yeah, Chief?"

"What's up with everyone today? Clark's dancing off the walls with giddiness and you're dragging your feet."

"Giddy?" questioned Clark. He wasn't that bad, was he?

Jimmy looked at him, studying him. "No, CK, I'd say the Chief's right. You're giddy."

Clark smiled with a shrug. Jimmy shook his head.

"Nobody is going to tell me, huh? Jimmy, I want you to drop what you're doing and research an Alexander Luthor or Luckaby and a Linda Luckaby in…" Perry looked at Clark.

"Hong Kong, Australia, and Singapore. Birth certificates and death certificates, especially."

"Another Luthor?" Jimmy groaned. "Do you think this one is any good?"

"This might be the future owner of the *Daily Planet*!" Perry growled. "And it would be a miracle if this one was any better than the other lot."

"Okay," Jimmy said, hesitating. "CK, I've got those photos you asked for." He glanced at Perry, holding out the envelope. "You want to explain them?"

Clark's eyes darted to his editor as he reached for the envelope. "Not particularly. They're pretty self-explanatory."

"Those on the Luthor story?" Perry asked.

"No. That other thing I was working on before lunch," Clark murmured, barely restraining himself from glancing in the envelope.

Perry crossed his arms. "Uh-huh."

Clark pocketed the photos. "It can wait."

"Do I get to see the photos?"

He glanced at Jimmy, who swallowed. "Nothing interesting, Chief. Although, I'm dying to know the story that goes along with them."

Clark jumped up and tugged Jimmy out of the office. "We've got a story to research, Jimmy. No need to bother Perry any longer with this."

Perry raised a brow. "Uh-huh."

"Conference room, now," Jimmy said after they left their editor's office.

"Jimmy, I think Perry wanted us to work on the Luthor story," Clark said, heading for his desk.

His friend held up the negatives. "I've still got these. And you aren't getting them until I get an explanation for those photos." Jimmy went into the conference room.

Clark followed, shutting the door and closing the blinds. Jimmy stood next to the table, arms crossed.

"Where did you and Lois get a baby?"

Clark pulled the photos out of his pocket and sat down at the table with them. There was no way he was ever telling anyone where Lara really came from. "She's adorable, isn't she?" He flipped through the photos. "Awwww. This one with Lois and I — that's the one for my desk."

"CK!" Jimmy slammed his hand on the table. It wasn't like him to stand up to Clark that way. "I went out on the line for you, I deserve an explanation."

Clark sighed. "Someone left her by our front door."

"You aren't planning on keeping her, are you?" Jimmy gaped.

"Why not?" he asked.

"She belongs to someone else."

"No, the note clearly read 'Lois and Clark, this baby belongs to you.' Finders, keepers." Clark grinned.

Jimmy shook his head. "CK."

"What do you want me to do, Jimmy? Put her up in an orphanage? That's never going to happen."

"Find her parents."

"We are her parents." About this one point Clark would never waver.

"What's with all the secrecy, then? Why not tell the Chief?"

"Perry will make us contact the police and the paper will run a big story about someone leaving a baby on our doorstep. The loonies will come out of the woodwork to claim that the baby is theirs. The government folks will send in their bureaucrats. The tabloids will follow us everywhere, claiming we stole Lara, trying to get a photo. Lois wants us to be prepared for all eventualities."

"Lara?" Jimmy sat down next to him, looking at the photos.

"Lara Lucia Kent." Clark smiled, picking up a photo of him and her. "My daughter."

"Wow, CK! This is news."

"Exactly." He gathered up the photos and slid them back into the envelope. "That's what we're trying to avoid."

"You've got to tell Perry."

"We will. It just happened late Friday night. It's still new. If you have time, maybe you could help me research any missing babies. Make sure that she wasn't kidnapped and then dropped off on our doorstep." She wasn't, but they had to have proof that wasn't true.

"Inspector Henderson would be able to research that easier than me," Jimmy told him.

"Just give us a few days, Jimmy, please. Remember the craziness surrounding our weddings. Imagine what would happen if we announced we found a baby and we're keeping her."

"You've got guts, CK." Jimmy shook his head. "Fatherhood. Wow. That means you're a grown-up."

Clark smiled, pulling out that photo of Lara again. "She's worth it."

"No more parties. No more fancy restaurants. No more spur of the moment weekend getaways. No more all night stakeouts. No more taking chances with bad guys. No more fun."

The new father chuckled. "Different kind of fun, Jimmy."

Jimmy held up his hands. "Glad it wasn't my doorstep."

Clark put the photos in his pocket, standing up. "We'd better get to work on that Alexander Luthor story."

"Right." Jimmy opened the conference room door and found Perry standing outside. "I know, Chief. Back to work." He slid past him and jogged to his desk.

"You're keeping something from me, Clark. I don't like that."

Clark felt bad. "I know, Perry. I promised Lois I wouldn't tell anyone. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course. Couples need to have their secrets." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "You told Jimmy, though."

"Lois will probably kill me for that," Clark grimaced. "But he's my best friend."

Perry chuckled and put his arm around his shoulder. "I understand, Clark. Secrets in a marriage or a relationship are important. Just as long it doesn't disrupt your working relationship." He lowered his voice. "She got morning sickness?"

"Chief!" Clark gasped. He couldn't believe how close Perry's

guess was.

His editor continued to chuckle. “There are only so many secrets a young couple would want to keep from their boss.”

“No, Perry. The flu,” Clark insisted.

“Still going with the flu.” Perry nodded. “Okay. Tell her I hope she’s better soon.”

“I will,” said Clark, returning to his desk.

“Do you think you could get me an article on something before the evening edition comes out?”

“Oh, Lois said she would be e-mailing you a story.” He had almost forgotten about that.

“You can give a reporter a few days off, but half-dead Lois wouldn’t miss a deadline.”

Clark grinned. “Not my Lois.” His Lois. He sighed. *His Lois*. Home, again.

***

Lois entered the guest bedroom where Martha was folding up her clothes to put back into her suitcase. She shut the door and sat on the bed.

“Martha, do you really not remember?”

“Remember what, dear?” Martha asked, glancing up.

Lois sighed. Her one confidante, memory wiped clean. “Do you remember coming to visit me last summer?”

Martha shook her head. “As I told Clark, vaguely.”

“Clark?” Lois swallowed. Why would Clark ask his mom about a visit she made to Metropolis the previous summer?

“Yes, he asked me about that trip the other day. Is that the one you wanted to know about, dear? Sorry. It’s there at the tip of my tongue and then gone.” She shook her head. “I’m trying.”

“What do you remember about this past year? Starting from last summer.”

Martha sat down and thought. “Clark came back from New Krypton. Zara and Ching realized they were in love and wanted to be together. They overthrew whatshisname and brought Clark home.”

That’s some revisionist history, thought Lois, *but all right.*

“Then you two got married up on that hill at sunset. That was nice, wasn’t it?”

Lois smiled at her.

“Then you and Clark moved into this new house. We came out and met the other Clark while he was visiting. Then you came to our house for Thanksgiving.” She thought some more. “You had gotten a promotion at work before that. Temporary editor, but then you decided you’d rather work with Clark.” Martha smiled. “You came out to visit in December and so did Clark and then we came to visit you at Christmas.” Her brow furrowed. “No, that’s not right. That couldn’t have been you.”

Lois leaned forward with anticipation. “Why not?”

“Because you looked heavier. It must have been that huge sweater you were wearing.” Martha nodded. “Have you lost weight?”

So close. Lois sighed again. She remembered her visiting, but not why. “Yes,” was all she could say.

“I don’t remember much from this year, except that you and Clark decided to start trying to have children. That’s why I sent for the bassinette when Jonathan and I came out for our anniversary.”

Lois placed a reassuring hand on her arm. “Clark — the other Clark — will be happy to know you haven’t forgotten him. He loves you so much.” Clark. She had her husband back, but there was still a part of her that missed that other Clark.

“Oh, right. Because we remind him of his missing parents.” Martha nodded. “We had a good conversation while he was here in Metropolis.” Her brow furrowed. “I don’t recall why he was here.”

“Tempus,” Lois whispered.

Martha shrugged. That name meant nothing to her. She elbowed Lois. “He had a girlfriend he was mad about.”

Lois swallowed. “No. We didn’t find his Lois until December. He visited here in November.”

“That’s right. Shortly before you and Clark visited us for Thanksgiving.”

She was the only woman the other Clark was involved with at that time. Lois gulped. Martha didn’t remember she was pregnant with her grandchild, but she remembered that the other Clark told her that he had fallen in love with her daughter-in-law. How could Clark tell Martha about them? She was itching to slug him. She could just kill her father for developing the Bummer-B-Gone.

“She was pregnant or something…”

“Yes!” Lois grabbed Martha’s shoulders. She did remember.

“Oh, my God!” Martha gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. “Lara is the other Clark’s child. And Clark is so sure that Lara is his.” Martha shook her head. “Although, I don’t know how that could be possible.”

So close, again. Lois sighed. “The pregnant woman wasn’t the other Clark’s girlfriend; they were just friends.” Most of the time.

“He loved her, but you’re right.” Martha pointed at Lois. “I distinctly remember telling him that she wasn’t his wife. So, she was married to someone else?”

Lois put a hand to her head. “Let’s just keep this between us, Martha. That Clark is in love with his Lois, now.”

“Oh, good. He found her. I know he was looking for her.” She smiled. “You hated that he was always alone.”

“He’s much happier now,” Lois agreed. She and the other Clark had been in love, but never happy.

“You even told me once that you couldn’t stay in Kansas because you needed to go back and help the other Clark.” Her brow furrowed and Lois looked at her. “No, that can’t be right.”

“Yes.”

“You went to the other dimension?” Martha asked.

“Yes!” *She remembers!* Lois thought

“Why did you go to the other dimension? Why didn’t you want me to tell Clark?”

Lois sighed. “I went to help the other Clark find his Lois, Martha.” She patted her mother-in-law’s arm. Martha really had no recollection of her being pregnant. “It took Lois Lane to find Lois Lane.”

“How nice of you,” Martha said. “To do that for the other Clark.”

Lois hugged her. So much for spending a year away and having one person know she was gone. She could have just disappeared completely and nobody would have been the wiser. Why had Clark asked about his mother visiting the previous summer? She shook her head. She would have to ask him why. Someday.

***

When Clark arrived home that night, he took Lois into his arms and kissed her as if he hadn’t seen her in a year.

“Miss me much?” Lois laughed. Without a word, Clark picked his wife up and carried her upstairs. “Clark!”

He set her down in their bedroom and kissed her again. “I read your editorial piece on a year without Superman.”

Lois looked down. “Oh.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that’s what you were referring to, when you asked what the date was?”

“I liked your answer better. It was a happier memory.”

Clark pressed his lips together. “I don’t know. I consider our first time a pretty good memory.”

Lois sighed. Did she? Making love with him, yes. Most definitely, yes! But the reason they made love wasn’t a happy one. The resulting year wasn’t too terrific either. Lara fussed in her bassinette. Lois went to pick her up. The end result was worth

it; definitely a happy memory. Clark wrapped his arms around the two of them.

"I missed my girls. I have something for each of you." Clark grinned, pulling a rattle shaped like a gavel out of his pocket. "I found it in the gift shop near the courthouse."

"What were you doing at the courthouse?"

"Bumping into Constance Hunter," he admitted.

"Who?"

"Our lawyer."

"We have a lawyer?" Lois asked.

Clark laughed. "Well, we do now. Superman recommended her."

"Oh, right. Her. I liked her." Lois wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him, but her hands were full. "Here, take her," she said, handing him her daughter. Then she kissed him.

"Does she have a full diaper?" Clark asked suspiciously.

Lois batted her eyelashes and sashayed out the door with a smile.

Clark changed Lara's diaper, changed out of his business suit and joined her and the folks downstairs. He handed Lois the envelope of photos.

"What's this?" she asked, then glanced inside. "Clark Kent! You weren't supposed to tell anyone."

Her husband grinned. "I wanted a photo of my girls."

"Clark! You told Jimmy." Lois shook her head, swatting him with the envelope. "He's on a direct line to Perry's ear."

Clark opened the envelope and handed a photo of his folks with Lara to his mom. "For you."

"Oh, Clark. Thank you. I only wish we could stay longer. But we've been here forever and you know spring is the busy season down at the farm."

"It's okay, Mom. I understand."

Martha knew they would fly out whenever they could.

Clark handed a photo of Lara with her Grammy to Lois's mother and Lara with her Pops to Lois's father. He pulled out another one of him and Lois and Lara and handed it to her. "That one is for my desk."

"I can't believe you went behind my back and told Jimmy about Lara."

"He's my best friend. I've spoken with him and he's not going to tell Perry," he informed her.

The doorbell rang. Lois raised a brow. "Who is it? Five bucks says it's you-know-who."

"How should he know who it is, Lois? He doesn't have x-ray vision," Ellen replied, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, Lois," Clark reminded her with a wink, opening the door.

"Clark!" It was too late. He had opened the door, while holding his daughter.

Standing on the other side of the door were Perry and Alice. Alice held a paper bag.

"Awwww, Clark. What a cutie! Perry never said that you had a baby. What's his name?" asked Alice.

"Alice?" Lois said, coming to Clark's shoulder. "Perry?"

"I was just taking Alice to dinner and she suggested we bring you some chicken soup, being so sick and all," Perry said, handing over the bag with soup. "So this is your little secret, Kent."

"Jimmy won't tell Perry, huh?" Lois rolled her eyes. "Well, the cat's out of the bag, I guess, come in." Lois introduced Alice to her parents and Clark's folks.

"Don't get mad at Jimmy, Lois," Perry warned her. "He didn't say a thing. Clark was acting too strange for a man with houseguests and a sick wife."

"I knew you should have been the one staying home sick. You just can't lie well enough," Lois accused Clark.

"Everyone has a flaw." Clark shrugged. "I'll stay home with the flu tomorrow. Can I catch it from you?" He kissed her cheek, but she only glared. "Well, you've met everyone except Lara. Perry, Alice, this is our daughter Lara Lucia Kent."

"Daughter?" Perry raised a brow at them. "Where did you get a daughter, Kent?"

Clark looked at Lois and smiled. "The old fashioned way."

"Excuse me?" Perry stammered, glancing at Lois.

"The stork brought her." Clark grinned. "Left her on our front doorstep."

Lois went to the desk and retrieved the note that had come with Lara and handed it to Perry.

"You weren't kidding," Perry said, passing the note to Alice. She smiled and handed it back to Lois.

"I think the bigger story here is…" Lois said, placing the note back on the desk. "What you two are doing going out for dinner."

"You are changing the topic," said Perry.

"Darn tooting, I am."

Alice took Perry's arm. "I answered his Lonely Hearts Ad and realized how foolish I was to let such a catch go."

Perry blushed, but pushed on through it by changing the topic back to Lara. "Did you contact the police? This should have been your hot lead."

"She's not a hot lead. She's our daughter," Clark said, moving into the living room.

"You're too close to this story."

"This isn't a story, Perry," Lois said, stepping between Clark and their boss. "This is our daughter."

"Who would leave their child on the front doorstep?"

"Someone who knew that we wanted a child and would take good care of her," Lois replied.

"Exactly. And who knew that information? Who knew that you couldn't have children and that County Adoption said Lois was too high a risk?"

"Lois too big a risk for what?" Lois's mother asked, standing up.

"Adoption, Mom."

"You did, obviously." Clark's brow came together. "Do you have the conference room bugged, Perry?"

Lois gasped and looked at Clark, moving to his side. They had had many a private, Super private, conversation in that conference room.

"Of course not. You two might report on the world outside that office, but nothing happens in that newsroom that I don't know about."

Clark looked down at Lois.

"Nothing?" asked Martha. Clark's mother also knew of their private conversations.

"Why are you too big a risk?" her mother asked.

Lois rolled her eyes. "I'm a thrill addict. Adrenaline junkie." She threw up her hands in disgust. "Not suitable enough to be a mother."

"This is what you weren't telling me the other day. This was the big secret?"

Lois looked at her mother. Completely wiped were the memories of Dad cheating, but she remembered them sneaking around her back the other day. "Yes, Mother, that was the big secret."

Her father lifted up a finger. "I thought…" But his eyes went blank and then he shook his head. "Never mind."

Jonathan released a breath of relief.

"Congratulations, Lois. She's beautiful. You and Clark are going to make wonderful parents, if half the things Perry keeps saying about you are true," said Alice.

Lois hugged her. She didn't know why, she hardly knew the woman, but it was nice to hear that someone believed in her. "Thank you."

"Now, hold on a darn minute. They can't be parents. They are my top investigative team. They need to get to the bottom of this. Find out who left this child here and get her back where she belongs."

Clark wrapped an arm around Lois. "She is where she belongs, Chief."

"It doesn't matter to us where she came from. She's ours," replied Lois, smiling up at Clark.

"But she could be sick, injured…"

"Family doctor, right here," piped up her father. "I've already done a full medical on her. She's perfectly healthy."

Perry wandered over to the sofa and sat down. "You're both going to want time off, aren't you? Time to be with your new daughter? Get everything resolved."

"That would be great, Perry. Thank you," replied Clark.

"I knew it was wrong for the two of you to get together."

"You were rooting for us the whole time," Lois reminded him.

"Wrong for the paper," their editor amended. "What am I going to do without my crack investigative team for a couple of weeks?"

"Six weeks, I believe, is the term for maternity leave," Lois corrected him.

"Six weeks! I've already had the two of you gone for two weeks on a honeymoon a few months ago and now you want six weeks? Right when I need you the most. When we don't know who owns the paper. Lois. Clark. You're killing me."

Lois had already taken almost a year off. She was champing at the bit to be back at work. "Tell you what, Perry, how about we work two, three days a week until we get everything settled here?"

Clark looked at her in surprise.

She shrugged.

"I should have known you wouldn't take time off," her husband murmured.

"How about this, Clark? I'll work and you stay home with Lara full-time." He was more of a homebody than she was anyway.

"Ah, no, Lois, I don't think that's a great idea," said Jonathan.

"Why not?" asked Ellen.

Jonathan looked at Martha and then at Clark.

"Don't start with his job is more important than Lois's," defended her mother. "There's no reason he shouldn't be able to stay home and care for Lara for six weeks any more than Lois."

Lois understood what his folks were trying to say, but couldn't. Superman couldn't take six weeks off. Lois sighed with a gaze at Clark. Guess she would be staying home after all. Yippy.

"We'll talk about this later," Clark suggested.

"Good idea," agreed Lois.

"Now, just hold on a minute. You two are still assuming that everything is hunky dory. That there isn't anyone looking for this little angel. Until you do what's right, I can't approve any time off."

"That's what I was researching this morning, Chief. Nobody has reported a missing infant in Metropolis."

"Well, that's good news for you two. Still you should double-check with the authorities before you start changing your lives. I'd hate for you to make plans for the future and then have her wrenched out of your hands."

Lois stepped forward and growled. "Nobody is taking our child away from us. Nobody."

"Lois," Clark whispered, resting his hand on her arm. "That's not what he's saying."

"He's saying for us not to get attached. Well, tough, Perry. Lara is our daughter. We're already attached."

Perry put up his hands. "Okay. Okay. I see that you have everything under control." He glanced at Clark and stood up. "We've got dinner reservations. We'll talk more after you've talked to the authorities, Lois. Why don't you and Clark take the rest of the week off to figure out what's going on?"

"That would be great, Perry. Thank you." Clark smiled. Under his breath, he murmured, "Lois, you're acting like a rabid bulldog."

Lois didn't want to attack Perry, but she was mad. She had been left home, with nobody but an infant to talk with for three months already. She loved her daughter, but she needed to use her brain or she was going to go insane. She was eager to go back to work and they were telling her that she had to stay at home longer, because Superman's job was more important than spending time with his child? Actually, to say she was mad was an understatement. She couldn't be there, she couldn't do this anymore. "Excuse me," she murmured and ran up the stairs to their bedroom.

"Lois?" Clark called after her. She heard him apologize to Perry and Alice again. Then she heard him coming up the stairs and entering the bedroom. "I'm sorry."

"This is hard for me, Clark," Lois whispered. "I feel like I'm supposed to be someone else. Act a certain way." She reached out to him and saw that her hands were shaking. "I don't know who I am anymore."

Clark took her hands in his. "You are Lois Lane. My wife. The woman I love more than anyone else. Mother to our wonderful daughter Lara. Everything else will just fall in place."

"Will it?" She looked up at him. "I feel so out of place, uncomfortable in my own skin."

Clark wrapped his arms around her. "As long as I love you, you will never be alone, Lois."

And how long will that be, Clark? Lois wondered, staring at him. *How long exactly will that be?*

***

The phone rang and Clark picked it up. "Hello?"

"Yo, Supes!"

He cringed, stepping away from Lois. What was Jack doing calling him? "I told you not to call me that." Clark glanced at Lois. Her brows came together. Had she heard Jack? "What's up?"

"The other one is about to pop, Clark. Doc Ross wants you to be there this time," Jack answered. "No ifs, ands, or buts. He needs you."

Clark had no idea what Jack was talking about. "Hold on. Back up. The other one what?"

He could sense Jack rolling his eyes. "Didn't the folks tell you? I called them Friday morning, spoke to Dad."

"No." Great. What else had been wiped from his folks' memory banks? "Fill me in."

"A group of townies got raped by some of the New Kryptonian hordes that invaded Smallville last summer. A few of them got pregnant. A couple of them made it to term. One popped last week. Dr. Ross said he couldn't cut the umbilical cord. Invulnerable. He couldn't reach you in time. Well, the last one just went into labor this morning. Ross needs you there."

Clark's knees weakened and he slid down the wall to the floor. New Kryptonians had raped some Smallville girls? They had gotten pregnant? He was just hearing about it now, when the last one went into labor? "What?" Clark stammered. "Why didn't Pete tell me?"

"Doctor-patient confidentiality or some other crap like that. When the baby didn't survive, he hunted down your folks, but found me instead. I passed the message onto Dad. I can't believe he didn't tell you."

Clark could understand why his folks wouldn't want to remember that message. He wished he didn't know about it.

"Mom and Dad got kidnapped by some guy last Friday and he erased all their bad memories for the past year or so."

"Still fun and games in Metropolis, I see." Jack chuckled. "You'd think I'd miss it, but I don't. I really don't. Thanks for the heads-up, bro."

"Sorry. I don't know what I can do," Clark whispered, shaking his head. It was too much. First Lara showing up and now this. He felt like he was drowning.

Lois sat down next to him on the floor. "Tell him you'll be right there."

Clark stared at her. How had she… "I'll be right there," he told Jack and hung up the phone, but didn't take his eyes off Lois.

"You'd better go. The girl is probably scared; especially if she heard about her friend," Lois said, taking hold of his hand. "You can do this. Superman has delivered babies before."

"Yes, but…" Clark stared at her.

"You can explain what Jack is doing in Smallville and who Pete Ross is when you get back. You'd better go."

Clark lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I love you."

"You'd better," she said, leaving the bedroom.

He followed her, completely in awe. She was taking this all quite calmly, which either meant she was in shock, had gone through it herself, or was so mad her head was about to explode. "Lois, are you okay?"

"I'm not liking Dr. Klein much at the moment," Lois replied tersely.

"Me either." Clark sighed, glancing around. Perry and Alice must have left.

"Mom. Dad. Could you help me in the kitchen?" Lois called, entering the kitchen. She had known he would want to talk to his folks in private. He loved her even more in that moment.

"What's up?" Ellen asked, following her.

"I don't know what kind of help I could be," said Sam, pushing himself to his feet.

As soon as they were in the other room, Clark turned to his dad. "That was Jack. Did he call you Friday morning?"

His dad's eyes went wide as he shook his head with a shrug.

"It's okay. Don't be surprised if Lois asks you what Jack is doing in Smallville, though." He spun into his blue suit.

"What's going on, Clark? Something up at the farm?" his mom asked.

"I'll explain when I get back." He glanced over his shoulder with his x-ray vision at Lois in the kitchen. "She's going to be mad I didn't tell her about Jack." He sighed and took off through the living room window.

***

Lois was still awake when he returned in the middle of the night. Clark felt like his heart had been broken into a thousand pieces. Lara was no longer unique. He spun into jeans and a t-shirt. Lois set down the cards she had been using to play solitaire and opened her arms. She always knew what he needed.

"Come on. Let's go to bed," Lois said after she held him for a minute. "And you can tell me everything."

Clark draped his arm around her shoulder. "I don't deserve you."

"Hey, I'm far from perfect."

"Who are you?" he asked, pausing mid-step. "And what have you done with my Lois?" He meant it as a joke, but she didn't take it that way.

At the top of the stairs, Lois held out her leg. "Do you need to scan my ankle?" She wasn't teasing him. "Check for the fracture?"

Clark joined her and kissed her. "No."

She raised a brow. "So, you agree that I'm imperfect?"

"No. I agree that you think so. To me you are perfection," he said, kissing her again and pushing open their bedroom door.

"Softly," his wife murmured, shutting the door after they passed through. "Lara's asleep."

Clark gazed over at his daughter. Was Lara who he had always known her to be? Was she his daughter with the missing Lois or had someone else given birth to her? For the first time, he was unsure of Lara's parentage. Not that it mattered, he was so in love with her.

He sat down on the bed, putting his face in his hands.

Lois sat down next to him and put a hand on his knee. "Do you need a few minutes? How about a shower?"

"I feel numb. I knew New Krypton was far from the ideal civilization I had once pictured, but this…" Clark sighed.

Inside he felt like everything he thought he was, his whole history and his whole belief system, was crumbling. A tiny, infinitesimal part of him had still hoped that he came from this race of basically idyllic people. That he had been put on Earth for a reason, to help those less fortunate than him, because he had been given these rare gifts from these wonderful people. Most of that hope had been wiped away last summer when the New Kryptonians took over Smallville and tried to take over Metropolis. There had only been a fraction of that hope left. That little part was now gone.

Kryptonians were not any better or any worse than Earth people. When they went to war, they did things they shouldn't, that no good people should ever do. He had finally realized that besides his powers, he was who he was because of the kindness, love, and support of Martha and Jonathan Kent. In that way he was more human than he was Kryptonian, more their son than that of Lara and Jor-El, more Clark Kent than Kal-El. Earth was truly his home.

Lois rubbed her hand on his leg and his wandering thoughts returned.

"Pete was my best friend throughout elementary and high school. He went to medical school and returned to Smallville as an obstetrician. Although I never told him specifically about Superman, he knew enough about me and my abilities to know it was me. When Luthor blew up the *Daily Planet* and framed Jack, I knew I needed to get Jack a fresh start out of Metropolis. Jack had figured out I was Superman back when we were held hostage by those terrorists."

Lois shook her head. "A whole year before me."

"I didn't know he knew until later, when he started calling me 'Supes.'" Clark shook his head. He really hated that nickname. But he had gotten used to it. "I was able to get the juvenile courts and foster care to move him and his brother Denny to Kansas. My parents took Jack in while he finished high school on the condition that he never tell anyone about me. I got Pete to take in his brother as a foster child. After Jack graduated from Smallville High, he wanted to stick around town to be near his brother. So my dad hired him to help out around the farm."

"The 'hired hand' who sent the bassinette?"

Clark nodded. "I've been meaning to tell you," he smiled sheepishly. "Since you found out, actually, but you were so angry that I never told you earlier. I thought you'd be hurt that Jack knew before you."

"It still hurts," Lois murmured.

Clark winced. He had promised himself never to hurt her. "Once you and I decided to marry, things got so hectic, I forgot for a while that you didn't know about Jack. Then Lex kidnapped you and everything spiraled out of control."

"Then you left for New Krypton."

He nodded. "It got to the point where it was almost too late to tell you the truth."

Lois shook her head. "It's never too late to tell the truth. You know that."

"I'm sorry, Lois," he said. Clark truly was sorry. No amount of excuses would justify his behavior. His parents had been telling him all year to tell Lois and he kept putting it off and

putting it off until Jack's phone call made it impossible to hide the truth any longer.

"I love you and I forgive you, Clark," she whispered, gazing into his eyes. "You had your reasons. And even though I don't agree with them, I understand."

Clark felt like he did not deserve Lois or her forgiveness. But he would willingly accept both. He pulled her to him, kissing her. "I love you too, Lois," he murmured, kissing down her neck, pulling her robe back and kissing her shoulder.

"Clark," she said, tugging her robe back on.

He gazed into her eyes, seeing her desire. Why did she stop?

"Lara."

Clark gulped. That's right. They had a roommate until his parents left and they could convert that guestroom into Lara's room. He stared at Lois. He wanted her, needed her to hold him like no one else could.

Lois stood up and taking his hand walked him into the bathroom. She turned on the shower and then closed the door. Slowly, she pulled off his t-shirt. He finished getting undressed. Then Clark smiled, cupping her face in his hand, kissing her. Silently, he stepped into the shower, she dropped her robe and joined him.

***

Later, Clark was sitting at the dining room table waiting. Lois said she would heat some leftovers for him. He sighed; she really knew how to build up his appetite. She entered with a steaming plate of lasagna and a side of salad.

"This looks good. Did you order out at that new Italian place downtown?" he asked as she returned with two glasses of red wine. He took a bite — it was delicious.

"I made it," Lois said, sitting next to him.

His fork stopped halfway to his mouth. "You?" He shrugged and dug in. "Where did you learn to cook?"

Lois smiled. "I've been taking private lessons."

Clark raised a brow. "Really?"

"Really."

He didn't mind. Guess he wasn't the only one with secrets. Clark smiled at her. This would be a nice change from heat vision roasts.

"So, what happened in Smallville?" she asked, taking a sip of her wine.

Lois had relaxed and distracted him so thoroughly, Clark had allowed his nightmare of an evening to slip from his mind. He sighed, taking a sip of wine. He heard steps on the stairs. "We're not alone."

His folks came into the dining room and he released a breath.

"We thought we heard the shower," his mom said.

Clark smiled at his wife. He loved her spontaneity.

"Would you like some wine?" Lois asked.

"No. It's a little late…" started his mom.

"Or early…" corrected his dad.

"For wine," finished his mom.

"Coffee?" suggested Lois. His parents nodded.

After she went into the kitchen, he leaned towards his mom and quietly asked, "Did you help her with dinner?"

"No. Ellen did," she replied.

Clark paused and then soaked up some sauce with a piece of garlic bread. "Really? She did this on her own?" He shrugged. Who knew Lois had it in her? He certainly wasn't complaining.

"Really." His mom smiled.

His dad reached over and stole a piece of his garlic bread. "We should let her do Thanksgiving this year."

Clark leaned back. "She made me Christmas dinner once. I should have known then…" He sighed. "Is it possible to love someone more than one hundred percent?"

His mother rubbed his dad's tummy. "A woman knows how to keep her man happy."

"Mom!" Clark rolled his eyes.

Lois came back in. "It will be ready in a minute." She sat back down next to him and waited.

Clark wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Pete told me that three girls… women… two teenagers and one divorcee had come to him this past fall after being raped by New Kryptonians during the siege of Smallville."

"Oh my God!" his mother gasped, covering her mouth.

He glanced at Lois. She didn't seem shocked, but she must have heard what Jack told him earlier in order to say what she had to him, encouraging him to go. He reached over and took his wife's hand. "Well, more had come to him, but those three were the only ones he knew about that had actually gotten pregnant."

"Pregnant?" His father leaned forward. "But Dr. Klein…"

"Was wrong," Lois finished his sentence. "It happens all the time in science."

"I thought your father double-checked the data last week?" Martha asked Lois.

Lois nodded. "Who knows what he found out? Bummer-B-Gone erased all his memories of Clark's dual identity."

"Oh, right."

"Apparently, the New Kryptonians dragged the women into the woods under the impression that captives were equal to concubines," Clark continued.

Lois shook her head. He squeezed her hand.

"The divorcée went insane, claiming she was hearing voices and tried to kill herself by crashing her car into a tree."

"Mrs. Williams?" His mother gulped.

Clark didn't know. Pete hadn't given him names. "Her baby died, but she was able to walk away from the accident. She went home and shot herself in the head. Again, she survived, but was in a coma, essentially brain-dead, until they turned off the respirators at the end of last year."

His mother nodded. "I didn't know about the gun shot. Everyone just said it was due to the car accident. Poor Rhonda." Martha sighed. His dad wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Was she hearing voices?" Jonathan asked.

Clark shook his head and noticed Lois doing the same. He turned to her.

"Let me guess. Super hearing?" suggested his wife.

He nodded. "All the girls… impregnated women developed the same symptoms. That's how Pete knew. The two teenagers are seniors at Smallville high. Good girls. Honor roll. They didn't come forward at first. After Mrs. Williams' accident they both came to him about their pregnancies. Eventually, they admitted the same concubine rape story as the others. As their pregnancies developed, other symptoms did too. Increased strength, super healing abilities, not invulnerability, but fast healing, and they could fly… well, float in the air."

Clark glanced over at Lois. She had been quiet during his narrative. She was listening. She was always listening but she seemed a million miles away. As he continued to gaze at her, her focus returned to the dining room. She rubbed his shoulder and smiled weakly at him to continue.

"Sounds like the girls' bodies adapted to the half-Kryptonian fetus," said his mom. "Happens in nature sometimes. Increased hearing and flying to help protect the baby from danger. Strength and super healing to be able to carry the strong kicker."

Lois leaned towards his mom, taking her hand. "Martha?"

"What, dear?" She looked at Lois curiously.

His wife shook her head and let go of his mom's hand. "Never mind."

Had these things happened to Lois, too? Had Clark's mother known of those abilities? Was that why his dream Lois floated above him? Clark wished he knew for sure that this Lois was his missing Lois, so he could talk to her about her life in the other dimension. He felt he was getting a glimmer of her life with the

other Clark. Not *with* the other Clark. He shook his head. Where had that thought come from?

Clark took another sip of his wine, trying to wash the bad taste from his mouth before he continued. “Other than those enhancements, the pregnancies were normal. Neither girl wanted to keep her child and Pete offered to find adoptive parents. He and his wife planned to adopt both children and raise them as twins. The girls kept the secret of who the fathers of their children were from everyone else. They naturally didn’t want to talk about it. They didn’t want anyone to know. They just wanted to finish their senior year of high school, and go on to college and their lives.

“That’s why we never heard a thing about them,” Lois said. “You’d be amazed at what good secret keepers teenage girls can be.”

“Pete also said that the girls were huge Superman fans and they didn’t want people to shun me because of what the New Kryptonians had done.”

Lois smiled, setting a hand on his shoulder again.

“At least the girls didn’t claim you as the father of their unborn babies,” said his dad.

Clark sighed. “I have Pete to thank for that as well. As soon as he and his wife, Nicole, decided to adopt the children, they made sure those girls wanted for nothing. He was broken-hearted when the first baby died in childbirth.”

“What?” gasped his mother. “No!”

Lois let go of his shoulder and wrapped her arms around herself, a tear dripping down her cheek.

Clark nodded. “Pete hadn’t known how to contact me with you out of town. That’s why he contacted Jack and had him call you.”

“And the mother?” Lois whispered. “Did she…”

Clark wrapped his arm around his wife. She was shivering. “She’s well. Discharged from the hospital with no knowledge that her daughter died. She gave it up for adoption and Pete wanted to save her that pain.”

“The mother survived?” Lois held on to Clark.

“And so did the second mother.”

Her eyes flashed up to his. “She survived as well?” Lois squeezed him tighter. “No complications?

“No complications. The baby boy as well.”

“A boy?” clarified Martha with a glance at Clark’s father.

“Peter Kent Ross.”

“Wow! Lara won’t be alone in this world,” Lois murmured.

“She has never been alone, Lois.” Clark looked into her eyes.

“Parents are one thing, Clark. Friends, siblings, and peers are another.”

“Siblings?” inquired his mother with raised brows. “Lois, are you trying to tell us something?”

“One infant at a time, Martha, please.” Lois chuckled with raised hands. “We now know it’s possible.” She looked at Clark and he kissed her.

“Who knew you’d be a glass half-full person after all, Lois.” Clark laughed with delight, taking her out of her chair to hug her. “Every time I think I couldn’t possibly love you more, you go and disprove me.”

“What am I at now, one hundred and fifteen percent?” she inquired humbly.

“Four hundred thirty or there about, and rising.” Clark grinned. “I told Pete he could call us or you with any questions,” he said to his folks.

“Of course, son. We’ll help in any way. What about his wife, will she know?”

“Pete’s not going to tell her my secret, Dad, if that’s what you’re asking. But he’s told her that we’ve also adopted a half-Kryptonian child.”

“Is that what Lara is?” asked his mom. “You’re sure she’s not full Kryptonian, like you?”

“I think Ellen’s right. Lara was born on Earth. Probably a Kryptonian father and an Earth mother.” He glanced at Lois, but she wasn’t looking at him.

Why wouldn’t Lois give him the answer Clark knew she had for him? Perhaps he had been wrong. She seemed genuinely surprised that both baby and mother had survived. *We now know it’s possible,* she had said. Had she not known it was possible before? Had Lara come from another New Kryptonian castoff? One from Metropolis? But how could the umbilical cord have been severed? Maybe it had just fallen off a week later, like a human baby’s — if left attached. Clark had had to use his heat vision to detach Peter from his cord.

“I’ll go get the coffee,” said Lois, standing up. She went into the kitchen.

Clark watched her with his x-ray vision. He just couldn’t keep his eyes off her. She put the coffee, cream, sugar, and mugs on a tray. Then she slid down the cabinets to the floor, wrapped her arms around herself, sobbing. He was at her side in an instant.

“Lois?” Clark sat down next to her.

She put her head on his chest and continued crying, unable to stop. Lois had been fine just a moment before. Happy even, he had thought. It was too much, he knew. Lara coming suddenly into their lives, unique and now not. The lack of sleep wasn’t helping either. “Come on, Lois. Let’s go to bed,” he whispered, picking her up.

They passed his parents in the dining room.

“Is she all right?” asked Martha.

Clark shrugged. He didn’t know what was going on with Lois.

He was afraid to ask if she was his missing Lois because if she wasn’t, then what would Lois think about him? About herself? And if she wasn’t his missing wife, did that mean H.G. Wells would return at some point to put this Lois in her correct spot in the timeline, leaving him a single father?

What if his mom was wrong? His mom could no longer tell him what happened. What if there had been no missing Lois after all? Clark couldn’t confront Lois and ask her point blank if she had spent the last year in the other dimension with the other Clark while pregnant with his child, if he wasn’t one hundred percent sure that she actually had done that.

If it wasn’t true, then he would make his wife paranoid that H.G. Wells might come at any moment and to take her away and drop her back into the worst time of her life… even if it meant that she would die in childbirth so Lara could live (which was the only reason he could think of that the baby showed up without Lois). There was plenty on his plate at the moment that he didn’t want to open this can of worms or Pandora’s box, until he knew for sure or he could no longer ignore the issue. He hoped Lois would just tell him the truth and save him this agony of not knowing.

These were the thoughts keeping Clark company as he walked up the stairs and set his wife down on their bed. Curling up into a ball, she put her back towards him. He lay down next to her and kissed her cheek.

“Do you know what I miss, Clark?” she murmured.

“No,” he whispered, softly stroking her hair.

“I miss when you used to lie next to me and wrap me in your red cape to keep me warm. It always made me feel safe, and close to you. It always helped me sleep.”

Clark’s hand stopped midway through her hair. He had never cuddled with her in the Superman suit, never covered her with the red cape while she slept. Moving his arm, he pulled her against his chest and whispered as he kissed her neck, “I miss that too, honey.” He closed his eyes and felt daggers of pain stab him in the chest.

***

Lois took Clark's hand as they walked down the block. "Thank you. This is what I needed. Some fresh air and sunshine."

Clark smiled at her. Lara was strapped to his chest in a snuggly. Lois watched as he kissed his daughter's head. "Just needed to remind you that our life isn't so bad," he told his wife.

"I know. I'm sorry about last night… this morning. I don't know what came over me." Lois sighed. She knew what had come over her. All the pain and suffering she had gone through, almost dying in childbirth, having Ultra Woman donate a pint of her blood just to survive. Then both those kids in Smallville coming through it with no problems. The depression, loneliness, and the anger, the hate that spiraled away from her, which she focused on Lex Luthor. She wanted to push it all behind her but it kept coming back, rearing its ugly head.

"It was nice of Perry to give us the rest of the week off," Clark said. "Especially with my folks heading home today. We need some time to bond as a family. Just the three of us."

"Do you think it's wise? Us walking the streets of Metropolis with Lara. What if someone like Nunk sees us? We'll be tomorrow's headline."

Clark wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Nunk's dead, Lois."

Right, in this dimension, Nunk was dead. "Someone *like* Nunk, I said." She turned and grinned at him. "I feel like some ice cream. Let's go to that place around the corner. They've got killer Double Fudge Ripple."

"What place?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

They turned the corner and Lois stopped for a brief moment. The ice cream shop was a money lending store. The ice cream store had been in the other dimension. Crap. She shook her head, so Clark wouldn't notice her stunned expression. "My mistake. I thought… well, I wonder where that ice cream parlor was?"

Clark glanced at her. He probably thought she was losing her mind and he was right. Lois didn't know what was worse, being the one with the lost mind or living with someone losing her mind. She loved Clark so much. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it. He was being so patient with her.

She would get her bearings soon. She had to or she was going to have to tell him the truth. That she had spent the last year with the other Clark in the other dimension, carrying Lara, because of the curse. Lois wondered if her husband was going crazy insane wondering where Lara came from. If he was, he hid it well from her.

"How about that place on the next corner that has the smoothies? I'm still so addicted to smoothies."

Clark's brows came together. "Lois, when have you ever had a smoothie?"

Backpedal. "Last summer, when I gave up coffee for a week, I switched to smoothies and became totally addicted." She grinned, hoping that was believable.

Clark turned her towards him, placing a hand on each shoulder and staring into her eyes. "Last summer? When you were on that crazy banana and yogurt diet?" He had a strange expression on his face, almost like he was pleading with her.

"Can I help it if I wanted to look nice for our wedding? You don't know how many quarts of double fudge chunk ice cream I went though when you left. It was not pretty."

Her husband sighed and took hold of hand again. Crisis averted.

Something gnawed at the back of her mind. "How did you know about that anyway?"

Clark grinned. "I've got my spies everywhere."

Wasn't that what Perry used to say about Alice? "Ah. Jimmy."

They went around the corner and the smoothie shop was right where she remembered it was. Thank God. She didn't need a strike two. "Want one?" she asked. "You'd love the strawberry cream."

He smiled. "Mmmm… strawberries." Clark pulled her in for a kiss. "Strawberries always remind me of making love with you," he murmured.

"Clark!" Lois gasped, covering Lara's sleeping ears. Then she smiled. "Strawberries, huh?" He had liked that? Good to know. "When we get her room fixed up, we should find out what other fruits you like." She winked and went into the smoothie shack.

"Deal," she heard him murmur.

Lois wondered how often she had missed hearing him say sweet and romantic things, because of her normal human hearing. It was something she could quite easily get used to.

She came out of the Smoothie Hut a few minutes later to see a couple of women cooing to Lara. A growl escaped from her throat.

Clark glanced up and grinned sheepishly. "There's mommy now."

Lois didn't know if he was speaking to the women or Lara. Through pinched lips she handed over his smoothie, tempted to dump it over his head instead. "Leave you alone for two minutes…"

"Can I help it if women find Lara adorable?" Clark asked, sipping his drink.

She raised a brow. "Yeah, right. *That's* who they found adorable. Not the sexy man with a sleeping baby strapped to his chest?"

He threw her a 'gotcha' grin. "Sexy, huh?"

"And to think I was going to tell you how much I loved you." Lois shook her head.

Clark grabbed her hand and pulled her close. "Go ahead."

"Nope. Sorry. That moment's gone."

Her husband cupped her jaw and placed a tender kiss on her lips. "How about now?"

Lois closed her eyes and savored the moment. "Oh, Clark. No one kisses like you do." Then she bit her bottom lip and grinned. "Well, there *is* someone else who can sweep me off my feet with his kisses. Literally."

"Lo-is," Clark warned.

She sighed, leaning close to him. "I hate tabloids."

Clark kissed her again. "Is that so?"

"Can I help it if I can't resist a man in blue?" Lois winked at him, taking a sip of her smoothie.

"Lois! Clark! Just the intrepid reporters I was looking for."

Lois froze. She knew that voice. Inspector Henderson. Her eyes narrowed into slits. She was still ticked off at him for snapping at her about touching 'evidence' at Clark's apartment after Mayson's car exploded. She took a deep breath. *Other* dimension, Lois.

"Look, honey, a man in blue." Clark chuckled. "Hello, Inspector. What can we do for you?" He held out his hand. Henderson shook it.

"Perry said you found something. Oh, hello there." Henderson noticed Lara.

Thank you, Perry White. Lois swore at him under her breath. She would bet there was going to be an article in the paper this afternoon, too.

"I know it's been a while since we've seen each other. Is this why you rushed to get married last fall?" Henderson continued with a chuckle. "So, what did you guys find? A diamond? A gas leak? No, you would have reported that. An EPA disaster? Jimmy Hoffa? Superman's spaceship? The Fountain of Youth?"

Lois was sensing a pattern. Did she and Clark have a reputation for strange stories?

Clark and Lois looked at each other and smiled, keeping quiet. Clark caressed Lara's head.

"What's his name?"

"Lara," Lois replied. Why did all men assume babies were boys? "Lara Lucia Kent."

"When did she come into your life?"

"Three months ago," Lois answered, truthfully.

"Friday," Clark also answered truthfully.

Lois glared at her husband.

Henderson raised a brow. "Well, which is it? Friday or three months ago?"

Clark sighed. Busted.

"She's three months old," Lois explained.

"Uh-huh." Henderson looked to Clark, the beacon of truth in their relationship. It really should bother her more that people looked at him after she spoke.

"Someone left her on our doorstep late Friday night."

Damn Clark and his honesty gene.

"So, this is what you found? Ever think about calling your friends down at the police department?"

Lois and Clark grinned innocently and in unison.

"She's ours. The note said so," replied Lois.

"You're kidding me, right?" Henderson scoffed.

They shook their heads.

"Okay. Let's go. Show me this note." Henderson turned them around and headed them back to their townhome.

***

Inspector Henderson handed Lara back to Lois. They were standing in the living room of the townhome. Lois's parents had been there when they arrived with Henderson and they were all waiting for his verdict.

"She checks out. She looks well cared for," announced the policeman.

"What did you expect?" Clark said, perhaps a tad too defensively.

Henderson raised his hands. "No offense, Clark. Just protocol."

"Right, sorry."

"So, you want to keep her?" Henderson asked.

"Of course we want to keep her. She's our daughter." Clark grabbed Lois as she stepped angrily towards the Inspector.

"And if her real parents come forward?"

"They won't," murmured Ellen.

"What?" inquired Henderson, glancing at Lois's mother.

"Nothing. She means that Lois and I are Lara's real parents." Clark shot Ellen a sharp look.

"You gave birth to her three months ago?" Henderson asked curiously — sarcastically — looking at Lois.

She modestly covered herself. "If it means this whole investigation is dropped," Lois replied. "Then yes, I did."

"Lois!" That outburst came from her father. Sam, too, didn't think Lois appeared to have given birth recently.

Even Clark gave her a second look. Had she? He had been sure, positive — especially after her comment last night — that this woman was his missing Lois, but suddenly another doubt arose. She looked the same as she had the day they captured Fat Head, the same as she had when he froze her to save her from Lex, Jr. He thought of the woman who telepathically called to him to make love to her. He hadn't noticed any stretch marks on her taut body.

Lois caught him staring at her and raised a brow. "Look pretty good, don't I?"

Henderson chuckled.

"Exceptional," Clark answered truthfully, kissing her cheek.

"Good save," her mother murmured.

"She can stay with you for now."

"For now?" Clark interrupted.

"Until the formal investigation has run its course."

"We're starting the adoption process. Constance Hunter is our lawyer."

"That shark who defended Superman?" Henderson chuckled. Clark couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"He did recommend her, yes."

"Okay. I'll send any formal requests through her."

Lois stepped forward again. "Better her than Superman."

Clark looked at her. What in the world was she doing? Superman couldn't get involved in this.

"No. Certainly wouldn't want to go through him." Henderson elbowed Clark. "That kid must be the luckiest one on Earth."

"I agree," Clark said, not understanding his meaning.

"I mean, she's probably the only kid with Superman as her guardian angel." He tapped Clark with his notebook and with a grin, he went out the door.

Clark hugged his wife and child. "Yep. Superman's your guardian angel."

"Let them just try to take her away," she said, handing Lara to Clark.

"Lois, he didn't say that. Actually, you were a little rude."

"Rude? Rude? I hate that I have to jump through hoops just to keep my own child. I hate that I have to stay home by myself with a nonverbal baby, changing diapers, and letting my brain rot, while everyone else gets to go off and continue their lives. I hate that I'm not allowed to be mad at you for loving your job so much. So pardon me for being a little rude. Plus, he was rude to me first when Mayson's car exploded. I'm still pissed about that."

Clark stared at her as if she grew a third head. "Lois, what are you talking about? Henderson didn't work Mayson's death."

Lois froze. "What?"

"Henderson didn't work Mayson's death."

She turned and looked at him, a hint of fear behind her eyes. "Did I say that?"

Clark nodded, wondering what she could be afraid of.

"Gosh, I must be tired. My brain is playing tricks on me." She yawned dramatically. "I think I'm ready to turn in." Then without further adieu, she ran up the stairs.

Clark handed Lara to Ellen and followed Lois up the stairs. He found her sitting on the bed, tears streaming down her face. He shut the door and knelt down next to her. "Lois?"

His wife grabbed hold of him, wrapping her arms around him. "I hate that you can't stay home and watch Lara because someone might call for help and you would have to choose between the safety of your child and the safety of someone else."

"I hate that too," Clark murmured. "I don't answer every call now. I *can* be selective."

Lois shook her head. "No, you can't. And you can't strap Lara to your chest and take her with you. When you are watching Lara, *you are watching Lara*. Nothing else can be allowed to distract you. You can't run down the street to help the people being mugged or the fire at the factory across town, just because she's asleep. You wouldn't be able to leave. Would you be able to say 'no' to helping others, because you are watching your own child?"

"How can you even ask that, Lois?"

His wife looked him in the eye. "Because I *have* to. When it was just you and me, I didn't say anything when you took off in a streak of blue, though it killed me that I wasn't your first priority. I know that I cannot stop you from being who you are nor would I want to do so. I love who you are… all of you."

Clark took her hand to his face and kissed it. "You and Lara are always my first priority, Lois. Only when you are safe, can I help the rest of the world. Why do you think I'm always saving you?"

"Clark," Lois paused, swallowing her words and looking away.

What she would not allow herself to say? Clark wondered.

"Some people would call me a danger magnet," she finally finished.

"So, that's what it is. I've always wondered." Clark grinned in amusement. "Good thing I'm your other half, then."

Lois kissed him gently. "It's frustrating staying at home, not being able to leave, not being able to help, knowing what you are doing is important, but not feeling appreciated or wanted. Ignored."

Clark didn't think she was talking about him anymore. "You sound like you speak from experience, Lois. Who did that to you?"

Lois opened her mouth, but then closed it. She bit her lip. "No one. I was picturing my life as a stay-at-home mom."

"No one said you had to stay at home with Lara," he whispered, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

"Who else will stay with her, Clark? *My* mother?" Lois rolled her eyes. "Look what a great success she was at raising me."

"I think you're pretty terrific."

Lois waved off his words. "And we couldn't put her in daycare. We couldn't. Not Superman's child. That wouldn't be safe."

Clark nodded. "Probably not. We wouldn't get any work accomplished speculating if anyone else had figured out my secret identity, yet again."

Lois closed her eyes and he could hear her counting to ten under her breath. She did not explode, but her words were carefully spoken. "Do *not* discount what I have to say, Clark."

"I'm not, Lois. I'm teasing you. You are being far too serious. Honey, you've been home from work with Lara for a total of two days. Both days you had my parents and your parents to help you. You weren't alone for a second, except…" He smiled. "Don't you think you're overreacting just a bit?"

Lois pressed her lips together. "One day is like a month for me."

"So, are you saying you've been watching Lara for over two months already?" The smile slipped from his lips and he looked more closely at her. "Is that what you are telling me, Lois?" *Please, please*. Clark begged her with his eyes. Tell him the truth.

Lois looked away and took a deep breath, slowly releasing it. "No. Of course not, Clark. Don't be ridiculous. You're right, I'm overreacting. Lack of sleep probably." She sighed and lay down on the bed. "I should go to sleep."

Lois was sleeping a lot lately. True, that was because she was only allowed an hour or two at a time. But she always seemed to use sleep as her excuse for not talking with him. She had been acting so strangely for the last two days. Saying odd things. Not remembering some stuff and remembering stuff that had never happened. He knew she was his Lois. He knew it at the core of his being. But something inside of her had snapped. It was like she was desperately trying to hold on to her sense of reality. He knew he should give her time, but he wished she would talk to him about what was bothering her.

"Okay, Lois. You sleep. I have some research I need to do on the Alexander Luthor story." He kissed the top of her head and covered her with a blanket. He wished he knew what it was she wanted, what he could give her to make her all right.

***

Clark was out most of the following nights. He would stay with her at home during the day, but he was gone at night. He flew to Hong Kong and Australia doing research on Alexander Luthor. He was able to get a record of Linda Luckaby Luthor's death certificate. She hadn't died in childbirth, but in a car accident like Lex had told her. But the child in the car with Linda Luckaby Luthor had not died. That was Lex, Jr., deformed and unloved, whom Lex hid away in Australia.

The Kents had gone back to Kansas and Lois's father went back to living at his apartment. Their only houseguest, if Lois could call her that, was her mother. She was driving Lois nuts, mostly about redecorating Lara's room. If Ellen hadn't been there, she and Lara could have gone out for an afternoon stroll and come back to a completed room, thanks to Superman Construction & Decorating. She sighed.

Lois missed Superman. *Her* Superman. She missed seeing the glimpse of blue and red whenever he came and left. She still had Clark, kind of. She felt him starting to drift away. Lois didn't want him to go. She hated waking up to find herself alone in bed. She had slept alone long enough. She wanted him home, not away on assignment.

The week passed. The police didn't have anyone claiming a missing child. Perry's story on the baby left with an anonymous couple had been, thankfully, buried on the fourth page. Constance started filing the paperwork for them to legally adopt their child and they had finally moved Lara out of their room and into her own room.

Her mother spent the night at Sam's apartment and Lois had Lara to herself all night, because Clark was on the other side of the world doing Luthor family research. She knew her husband could only do this research at night, because it was day there when it was night here. The loneliness was overwhelming for her and Lois felt herself falling back down that black hole that was her life in the other dimension.

Lois woke up to find a red cape draped over her. She smiled. *Superman*. She rolled over and kissed his lips. "Hello, handsome. I feel naughty with you in my bed. What will my husband say?"

Clark barely opened his eyes and smiled. He looked exhausted. She ran her fingers down his cheek. "Go back to sleep," he whispered.

Her husband must have forgotten to change. Still. She kissed his lips. There was something about having him home, having him to herself. She felt like she was on fire. She kissed him again. She should really let him sleep, but he hadn't let her kiss Superman in so long, it felt like giving in to temptation, ill-gotten fruit. Mmmm. He tasted good. Lois couldn't stop kissing him and he slowly started to respond in kind. He had missed her, too.

As she pulled off her pajama top, she started to hear Elvis singing, "*One night with you… That's what I'm praying for…"*

Lois gasped and sat up in bed. She was alone. It had only been a dream. She covered her eyes with her hands. God, she didn't even know if she had been dreaming of her Clark or the other Clark.

Lara started to cry. Lois sighed, pulled on her robe, slipped on her slippers and went to get her daughter. As they sat on the sofa in the living room, Lara enjoying her middle-of-the-night bottle, Lois zoned out the windows, wondering when her husband was going to come home.

Lois stood up and walked to the wall by the easy chair and tapped it. The secret compartment with Superman's suits appeared in the wall. She walked over to them and ran her fingers down the fabric. She smelled them, but — thanks to Superman Laundry Service — they were all clean. She pulled a red cape off its hanger and went back to the sofa, closing the secret closet. She lay back down on the sofa, Lara tucked carefully in the crook of her arm. Lois draped his cape over them, feeling the soft fabric with her fingers. Her eyes began to close and she drifted away.

She thought about all those times she and Superman had spent together. That weekend he was blind and stayed at her apartment. Dancing in the air with him after the Cost Mart Ball. Kissing him when he told her he loved her, drunk on *Revenge*. Kissing him when he left to save Earth from the Nightfall asteroid. Holding him when he was sick and dying that one Christmas. Chateau Roberge, pre-tabloid furor. When he broke into that vault at the gold depository and almost kissed her. When he carried her into the newsroom that first time. The first time she ever saw Clark change into Superman. The first time she kissed Clark knowing he was Superman. Kneeling in the rain, asking her to marry him, telling her he would never leave her, even if the

world opened up at his feet, he wouldn't leave her.

Lois felt herself floating into the air. It felt good to fly again. Slowly, she came down and she felt a pillow under her head. She blinked her eyes and saw Superman.

***

Clark came in through the living room windows and quietly shut them behind him. There was a light on and he could see that the secret compartment was slightly open. That was odd. As he went to shut it, he heard a soft sigh. He turned around and saw Lois and Lara asleep on the couch under one of his capes. Guilt tugged at his chest. He had been leaving his wife and child alone at night all this week. He hadn't meant to, but he was curious about Alexander Luthor. The only time really to do research on the other side of the world was during the night here.

Lois had been acting so oddly, he hadn't wanted to leave her alone during the day. Not that he worried for Lara's safety, but he hoped he could catch her saying or doing something that gave him a definitive answer on whether or not she was his missing Lois. The not knowing was killing him. He wanted her to tell him. It would explain so much of her strangeness lately. But then, so could the newness of suddenly becoming a mother.

Clark lifted Lara up, setting her against his shoulder, rubbing her back. He set her empty bottle in the sink and after her little burp, carried her back to her crib. He kissed her cheek and rested his head against hers.

Daddy? Her hand touched his cheek. *Daddy, why are you dressed like Uncle Super?* She didn't say the words exactly, but showed him a picture of Lois saying those words to her.

Clark smiled. Uncle Super? He hadn't changed out of his Superman suit, distracted by the open secret compartment. This was the first time his daughter had seen him dressed as Superman. "Sometimes I dress like Uncle Superman, sometimes he dresses like me," he replied.

Lara closed her eyes, accepting his answer, and falling back asleep. He set her down on her back in the crib.

A chill went down his spine. *Uncle Superman?* Was she talking about the other Clark? Her uncle? Or had Lois been telling her that Superman wasn't her father, but her uncle? That might solve some future problems, once Lara started talking, of Lara addressing Superman as Daddy in front of others. It would be just like Lois to be so forward thinking. He sighed. For a second there, he thought he had proof that Lois and Lara had been in the other dimension and it had once again slipped away through his fingers.

Clark zipped back downstairs to where Lois was asleep under one of his capes. She had said that made her feel safe, close to him. He had been spending many a night traveling recently. He thought she wouldn't miss him so much at night, being asleep and him being there during the day, but maybe he was wrong. He picked her up and held her close to him, floating them up the stairs and to their bedroom.

He lay Lois down on the bed, still covered by the cape. He didn't want to remove it if it made her feel closer to him. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

Lifting her hand, she touched his face. "Is that really you?"

Clark smiled, guilt wrenching his gut. "Did you miss me?"

"I dreamed you were here, sleeping with me, but then I awoke and it was only a dream. So I ask again, is that really you?"

He spun into his PJ shorts and did a ta-da movement with his hands.

"It's you." Lois sighed, sitting up. "Where's Lara?"

"Asleep. I put her back in her crib. What's with the cape?" Clark raised a brow, before heading into the bathroom.

Lois pulled the cape over herself. "If you must know, I missed you."

He came out, his toothbrush still in his mouth. "Me or Superman?"

"I'll take whoever I can get," she replied, as he returned to the bathroom.

Clark came back out, wiping his mouth. "Who do you want?"

"Ohhhh. You mean I get a choice?" Lois grinned. "I'll take whoever can bring me strawberries first." She licked her lips.

Strawberries? Clark was back a minute later, jogging up the stairs, a bowl of strawberries in his hand. "I just happened to pick some strawberries up yesterday at the store."

Lois picked up the cape and draped it over his shoulders. "Super Clark it is, then."

He laughed. Picking up a strawberry, he dangled it over her mouth. She bit it and smiled. "Mmmm… tastes yummy." She licked her lips. Suddenly, his lips were covering hers. "Super Clark!"

"Mmmm… strawberries," Clark moaned, sitting down next to her. She slid her leg over his as she reached for the bowl. She sat down in his lap and fed him another strawberry. "These strawberries are tasting better and better."

Clark gazed at her, sitting on him, feeding him strawberries, and he flashed to that dream of the pregnant Lois feeding him strawberries. As she took a strawberry and put it between her teeth, he slid his hand under her PJ top and felt her stomach. Flat. He lifted up her shirt.

"Looking for something?" Lois asked, biting into another strawberry.

He smiled. "Just admiring the view." Not an ounce of flab or a stretch mark anywhere. Clark dropped her shirt and she fed him another strawberry.

"I wonder, do you think the super healing powers that come should you ever get me pregnant mean I won't get stretch marks?" She smiled mischievously and bit into another strawberry. "Bonus!"

Clark just stared at her. Was she teasing him or was she serious? He took the bowl of strawberries out of her hand and set it on the side table, then he quickly flipped her over. "I guess we'll have to get you pregnant and find out." He kissed her. She responded, deepening the kiss. Was she calling his bluff? He didn't care what she was doing, she tasted like strawberries. He just wanted to keep kissing her.

Then Lois pulled back. "Better use precautions. If you get me pregnant now, they'll be exactly a year apart. Too close together. Ask me again at Christmas, after I've survived the next six months with Lara."

Clark felt like she splashed cold water in his face. "Wow. Some mood killer you are."

"No. No. No! Clark, please, make love to me. Forget I said anything." She reached up and kissed him. "Please."

Was Lois Lane begging him to make love to her? Clark raised a brow, unfastening the cape from around his neck and dropping it on the floor. What happened to his self-assured, confident, go-getter of a wife?

"Please, don't leave me again," Lois whispered, clinging to him. "Please, Clark, I need you."

"Lois, is everything all right?" He ran his hand over her hair.

"I need to feel something. All I feel is numb. My brain is numb, my body numb, my soul…" She closed her eyes. "Kiss me."

"I think it's time to get you back to work," he replied.

Lois opened her eyes. "What?"

"You've spent enough time at home with Lara. Let's ask your mother if she'll watch Lara during the day while we're at work. See how that goes."

"What if she says no?" Lois asked. Clark could hear his wife's voice quivering with fear.

"Then we'll look into hiring a nanny."

Lois raised a brow. "We cannot have a stranger in this house

with our daughter. You know that. I know that."

She had a point. "Well, then. We'll hope your mother doesn't say no. I cannot watch as you disappear before my eyes. You need sunshine, Lois. You need adrenaline. You need to get back to work."

Lois covered her face. "I'm a bad mother."

Clark wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "A bad mother would stay home even though it killed her soul. What would that teach our daughter? I need your soul alive. My soul cannot live without you. We'll figure this out together."

Lois kissed him. She kissed him so hard, it almost felt like Ultra Woman was back in town. Clark smiled. There was his soul mate.

***

Clark sat down with his mother-in-law, who was reading a magazine. Lois was in the bathroom, giving Lara a bath. He wasn't quite sure how to broach the subject, but he needed to do it while Lois was out of earshot.

"Lois needs to go back to work, Ellen," he started, looking at his hands clasped together over his knees. "Staying home isn't working out for her. She's not herself."

"Yes. Motherhood isn't for everyone," agreed Ellen.

"Lois is a wonderful mother," Clark rebutted.

"She loves Lara. No doubt about that, but I loved my children too, Clark. Some of us aren't hardwired for women's work: cooking, cleaning, Mommy-and-me classes, the isolation of motherhood. She takes after me in that way."

This conversation was not heading in the direction he hoped. He would never compare Lois to her mother in or out of her hearing. Clark cleared his throat. "She needs something to wrap her brain around."

Ellen looked him directly in the eyes. "And you want me to stay here and watch Lara while you're both at work?"

Lois's mother must have expected they would come to her.

Clark swallowed. "Lara isn't like other children."

"Sure, she is."

His jaw dropped. Wasn't she the one who was always insisting that Lara was Superman's and Ultra Woman's child? He stared at her.

"Other than her fast heartbeat, she acts just like any other baby her age. She doesn't fly, she doesn't shoot laser beams from her eyes, and she hasn't once squeezed my finger so tightly that I thought it would break. She's normal." Ellen had a point there.

"But we don't know when any of those traits might develop. Anything could happen."

"All you have to do is ask Superman when he developed his strength and other abilities," she said, flipping the pages of her magazine. Ellen had a point there, too.

Most of his abilities developed when he was a teenager, except for his strength, which had grown exponentially in toddlerhood, and his speed in his pre-teen years.

"Even so, Clark and I made many enemies over our years at the *Daily Planet* and we'd feel safer if Lara was at home with someone we trust," Lois said, coming down the stairs and carrying Lara wrapped in a towel. She must have been listening. How did she do that?

Ellen smiled at her daughter. "I'm glad to hear you trust me, Lois, but no. I've raised my children, you need to raise yours."

Lois stopped midway down the stairs and Clark could see her eyes cloud over. He didn't want her to fall over the cliff of despair. He went over and took Lara from her. "We'll figure something out, Lois," he whispered. "Don't worry."

"I'll give you a month," her mother said. "I've signed up to go on a two week cruise through the Panama Canal in a month. You have until then to find someone else."

Lois rushed down the stairs and hugged her mom, an action that seemed to shock both of them. "Thank you, Mom. Thank you."

Lois grinned at Clark, took Lara from him, and returned upstairs to get her daughter dressed.

"Thank you, Ellen. I need my wife back."

Ellen looked up over his shoulder towards where Lois disappeared and lowered her voice. "She's like her daddy — Type A. Can't stop working or they die. I love her; I love them both, Clark. But I can't do it again. I just can't." Her eyes focused on him and for the first time, he saw Lois reflected in her mother's eyes. "You understand, don't you?"

Clark nodded, understanding her better than he ever had before.

***

Lois stopped under the *Daily Planet* globe and looked up, her skin beginning to tingle. She took a deep breath and smiled. Finally, she was coming home. She loved Clark, she loved Lara — they were her life. But this, *this* was her home.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked. He had been walking on eggshells around her lately. If he kept asking her that, she would soon explode.

But today, today Lois smiled at him. "I love the smell of newsprint in the morning."

He laughed and relaxed.

"Do you think we should have brought Lara in? Introduced her around to Jimmy and Barry and the others?" Lois said nervously, walking through the doors.

Clark chuckled. "Barry? Barry Balson? I didn't know you knew him."

"He could be a pretty decent reporter, if Perry gave him half a chance."

"Really? Huh." Clark shrugged as they stepped into the elevator. "I'm okay with keeping our personal life personal and away from work."

Lois took his hand. "Remember that elevator ride up after our honeymoon?" she whispered.

He grinned. "I distinctly recall you couldn't keep your hands off me."

She pulled him towards her, wrapping her arms around him. "Liar."

Clark kissed her like she knew he would. The elevator stopped and she picked up her briefcase again.

"I love you, Clark Kent," she murmured under her breath, knowing he would hear her.

"Right back at you, Lois Lane," he mumbled back. She turned and grinned at him.

Stepping out of the elevator a few paces, Lois stopped. Essentially, it was the same newsroom she remembered. Modern, updated a bit from the one in the other dimension, since this building had been bombed and rebuilt. Home. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes to let all the sounds and smells permeate her senses.

Jimmy walked up. "Welcome home, mommy."

Her eyes opened and she saw him. "James!" Lois ran up and hugged him. "How have you been? Still dating Penny? We've got to have you two over for dinner soon to meet Lara." Okay. She was officially rambling.

"You all right there, Lois? You're acting like you haven't been here in a year, instead of a couple of weeks." Jimmy laughed.

Clark raised a brow, staring at her. "James?"

Crap. "Jimmy. I knew that."

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," Perry said, coming out of his office. "I knew you couldn't stay away for six weeks. If I remember correctly, you sent us all into shock when you went on vacation to the Bermuda Triangle a few years ago."

Lois glanced at Clark. Ah, the Kryptonite bullet. She walked up to her editor. "Perry, forgive me for being an emotional train

wreck and for this." She hugged him.

"Well, thanks, little lady," Perry stammered, stepping away. "Are you back for good or are you still on leave?"

"Trial separation, Perry," Clark explained.

Perry raised a brow. "Trial separation?"

"Let's see how she does away from Lara today and we'll let you know."

"I've hardly been away from her since…" Lois swallowed. She almost said since birth. "Since we met." Except for those couple of days, when Lara had returned to Clark early. She placed a smile on her face.

Suddenly, she heard Elvis music drifting out of Perry's office and a chill crept down her spine. An image of a mustached Superman grinning at her in a dark ballroom flashed before her eyes. She backed up, away from Perry, and practically ran to her desk.

"All righty then," said Perry, turning to Clark. "You still working on the Alexander Luthor story? Any leads?"

Clark nodded. "I'll fill you in on what we've found out in a minute, Chief."

Lois sat down at her desk, her head in her hands. *I can do this. I can do this. I can do this,* she repeated to herself.

"Lois?"

She glanced up at her husband. Her Clark. No fake mustache. No obvious Superman suit. Just Clark. The man she loved. The man she cheated on. She would never forget the other Clark, would she? "I just need a minute. Okay, Clark?"

"Sure."

Lois closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly released it. Perry rarely brought the music out of his office. If she avoided his office, she wouldn't be reminded of the other Clark holding her, comforting her, kissing her. She sighed. Her eyes flew open. Crap! She needed to get him out of her head.

Looking around the newsroom, Lois found her husband talking to Jimmy by the coffee machine. He was holding two cups of coffee. She sighed. He was always thinking of her. She turned and looked at her desk. Shrugging out of her jacket, she hung it up and set her briefcase down in the drawer. She took a deep breath, smelling the beautiful bouquet of flowers Clark had bought her. She also found a framed photo of her and Clark and Lara with a big red bow on it. She picked up the photo, pulling off the ribbon and bow. She set it back down with another sigh. That wasn't her. Well, it *was* her. The younger her, the stand-in her. It wasn't *her*, her.

"Coffee, milady," said Clark. "Decaf, non-fat, with no sugar."

Lois scowled, but then smiled at him. Had she really drank that? She had gotten so used to heavy cream recently. She pulled down the card that came with the flowers. She glanced at the note and then at her husband. *Husband*. She set down her coffee and walked to his desk. "I need you," she said to Clark.

"Sure, honey. What for?"

"Supply closet," she mumbled, walking in that direction.

His brows came together. "Is there something you can't reach?" he asked as she opened the door.

"No." Lois shut the door behind them. "I need *you*." She wrapped her arms around his neck and slammed him against the door, kissing him.

"Lois! We're at work." He resisted for about half a second and then shrugged, kissing her back.

A few minutes later, she let go of him. She had no idea what had come over her. "Sorry."

Clark grinned, straightening his tie. "No, you're not."

Lois touched the flash of blue under his shirt and it sent electric shockwaves through her. Her eyes darted to her husband. "Clark," she moaned, grabbing his tie and pulling him towards her again.

There was a knock on the door and Jimmy cleared his throat. "Guys? Perry wants to know if you're coming to the morning meeting."

"Be right there," called Clark, lowering their feet back to the floor. "You ready, Lois?"

She smiled at him. "The last time I was here…" They weren't married. She shook her head. "Whenever you are, Husband."

"Are you sure you're ready to be back here?" Clark asked once again, straightening his tie and hair. "You're starting to act like you did when we came back from our honeymoon."

"Oh, yeah." Lois grinned, the memories filling her mind. "We need another one of those."

"Another what?" he asked, opening the closet door.

"Honeymoon. Perhaps we could actually make it to Hawaii this time."

"Morning meeting, Lois," Clark's voice cracked as he reminded her, like a splash of cold water.

"Right. Thanks." She stopped by her desk and picked up a pile of messages she had missed after her first perusal. At the door of the conference room, she touched his arm. "Clark, Bobby Bigmouth wants a meeting. He says he has information for us."

Clark grinned sheepishly. "I might have bumped into him on the street and mentioned you make a mean lasagna."

"Well, look who decided to give us a few minutes of their time," Perry said as they entered.

***

A few minutes earlier, Jimmy had cornered Clark at the coffee machine. "What's up with Lois?"

"What do you mean?" asked Clark, knowing exactly what he meant. She was acting unusually unusual.

"She lose her memory again?"

Of all the things he expected Jimmy to say, that wasn't it. "Why would you think that?"

"Because she's acting like she did when she came back from that amnesiac clinic. You know the one, the one with Dr. I'll-Steal-Your-Girlfriend."

Clark got a bad taste in his mouth. "I know the one." He swallowed. "No, she hasn't lost her memory."

"Man, it was weird, her calling me James. It reminded me of that time you called me Mr. Olsen."

Clark paused while pouring Lois's coffee. "I did *what*?"

"Don't you remember, CK? You said you thought I owned the *Daily Planet*." Jimmy laughed, shaking his head.

Clark looked at him blankly.

"Did John Doe do a number on you too, CK?"

"That happened, me calling you Mr. Olsen, after John Doe got elected president?" Clark asked.

"Yeah, right before you asked me to find you all the old bomb shelters in town. John Doe kidnapped President Garner and had stolen the launch codes for the nuclear missiles. Lois stumbled onto the plot and then disappeared. You and Superman were searching for her. Don't you remember any of that?"

"Sure. Of course." Clark patted Jimmy on the back. That wasn't him. That was the other Clark. He had been lost in time at the time. He placed a smile on his face, hoping it would placate Jimmy. "Lois is fine. Motherhood has just thrown her through a loop. Just be patient with her."

Clark looked over to Lois, sitting at her desk. She picked up the photo of their new family he had placed there. She took off the red bow and looked at the photo, then she set it down.

Jimmy was right, she was acting strange. His friend was on the right track, but it wasn't as though she had lost her memory. The memories were there. She knew right from wrong, day from night. But Lois couldn't remember Jimmy wasn't James, that Henderson hadn't worked Mayson's death, where the ice cream parlor was where she bought Double Fudge Ripple, and that Superman had never cuddled with her in bed… well, except that one time. Her brain was a pea soup of information, and she didn't

know which memories were the right ones. Also, she had learned to cook along the way. She wore less makeup than she did a couple of weeks ago, despite sleeping less. She wasn't as fashion conscious. Still quick to anger, but working harder to manage it than he had ever seen her do before. And she was more prone to melancholia.

Clark arrived with her coffee. "Coffee, milady. Decaf, non-fat with no sugar." Was that a scowl before she smiled at him? Had she changed the way she drank her coffee, too? She ate dessert after dinner last night, as well. And the night before. And the night before. When had she stopped being so worried about her weight? She hadn't gained a pound as far as he could tell. Huh?

He sat down at his desk and started flipping through his messages. Lois approached.

"I need you," she said, looking at him intensely.

"Sure, honey. What for?"

"Supply closet," Lois mumbled, walking in that direction.

His brows came together. "Is there something you can't reach?"

"No." Lois shut the door behind them. "I need you." She wrapped her arms around his neck and slammed him against the door, kissing him.

"Lois!" Clark gasped. "We're at work." But then he shrugged. She was kissing him like they were newlyweds. He didn't mind that her passion for him had returned. Then she started tugging at his tie, loosening it. Perhaps her passion was a little more pronounced than before.

Lois stepped away a few minutes later. "Sorry."

He grinned, straightening his tie. "No, you're not."

Lois reached for him again, this time slipping her fingers between the buttons of his shirt. Her eyes went to his. "Clark," she moaned, grabbing his tie and pulling him towards her again. For a moment he thought that she might tear open his shirt to get to his blue suit. But then he wasn't thinking, he was kissing, just making out with the most beautiful woman on earth. She made him feel like a teenager again.

There was a knock on the door and Jimmy cleared his throat. "Guys? Perry wants to know if you're coming to the morning meeting."

"Be right there," Clark called, lowering their feet back to the floor. Oh, God! She was sweeping him off his feet. "You ready, Lois?"

"The last time I was here…" Lois shook her head. "Whenever you are, Husband."

The last time she was here they wrote about Fat Head. It wasn't romantic. Their parents had lost their memories. Clark didn't even think she kissed him at work that day. What was she thinking of? Was she talking about before she went to the other dimension? Back before they were married? That would explain the ardor of her kisses.

"Are you sure you're ready to be back here?" Clark asked once again, straightening his tie and hair. "You're starting to act like you did when we came back from our honeymoon."

"Oh, yeah. We need another one of those," Lois said.

"Another what?" Clark opened the closet door.

"Honeymoon. Perhaps we could actually make it to Hawaii this time."

Lois wanted a second honeymoon? Or did she want a first, since she missed the original one? Clark swallowed. He thought about making love to Lois for two weeks without stopping on their honeymoon. Had it been her? Or had he made love to the younger her from the past? Who was still technically her, but not. Should he feel guilty about making love to the woman he married, who wasn't the exact woman he had left behind when he left for New Krypton? Either way, her flirtation this morning was driving him wild. "Morning meeting, Lois," his voice cracked as he reminded her. He was having trouble thinking straight with her acting like this around him.

"Right. Thanks."

She was making him dizzy with all those kisses. He needed to concentrate; Perry was going to ask him what they had learned about Alexander Luthor. Where was his notebook with all his notes? At the door of the conference room, Lois touched his arm. The electric current between them was still as hot as ever. How was he ever going to make it through this meeting?

"Clark, Bobby Bigmouth wants a meeting. He says he has information for us."

Was that all Lois wanted? Thank God. "I might have bumped into him on the street and mentioned you make a mean lasagna."

She laughed.

"Well, look who decided to give us a few minutes of their time," Perry said as they entered. "Want to tell us what you've learned about our possible new publisher Alexander Luthor?"

There were groans shared around the conference table.

"I know, I know. I dislike the thought of another Luthor owning the paper, too. But unless Lex, Jr. left the *Daily Planet* to someone else specifically in his will — the lawyers are having a dickens of a time finding a Last Will and Testament for one Lex Luthor, Jr. or a Leslie Luckaby — all his assets go to his next surviving heir; in this case, a sibling. What have you got, Clark?"

"We found Lex, Jr.'s birth certificate in Hong Kong, stating in fact he was born as a multiple, that he has a fraternal twin. There are no references to any Luckaby or Luthor in Australia, except Lex, Jr. or Leslie Luckaby. So, this twin wasn't raised with him or even near him. In Singapore," Clark glanced at Lois, who had been spot on with the Singapore guess, "We found multiple references to an A. Luthor and one specific reference to an Alex Luthor."

"Great shades of Elvis, Lois. Your hunch was right."

Lois smiled modestly and shrugged.

"The last reference was a graduation announcement of one Alex Luckaby Luthor from high school in 1980. After that, nothing in Singapore."

"How about a photo? A yearbook? Anything?" Perry asked.

"Picture withheld from the yearbook. Sorry."

"So, what has Alexander Luthor been doing for the last eighteen years?" Perry pointed at Jimmy. "What do you have?"

"Wedding photo of one Lex Luthor, Sr. to one Linda Luckaby." Jimmy slid the grainy photocopy across the table to Perry.

It was intercepted by Lois, who picked it up. "Clark. He hasn't aged. He looks exactly the same, except for the baldness." She looked at him and handed him the photo.

"You mean at his death?" Clark asked, raising his brow. He glanced at the photocopy and handed it to Perry.

"No…" She winced. "Yes, of course. Lex is dead, isn't he?" She looked at Clark as if for verification.

"Let's hope so. They did have a body to bury this last time." He shrugged, taking hold of her hand. *But one never knows with Luthor.*

"I thought Lex had hair," said Jimmy, confused.

"Of course, he had hair. But then he lost it. I guess he grew it out again, didn't he? Or was he wearing a toupee?" Lois looked to Clark again. She was completely lost. He didn't know about Lex's hair. Personally, he didn't care.

"While all this is interesting and fun to gossip about, none of it is a story. I need facts, hard facts, people. Where is Alex Luthor now? What does he look like? Did he follow in Daddy's footprints? Did he diverge? Did he know about Lex, Jr. and, if yes, did he know about his plans to rebuild LexCorp? And most importantly, what is he going to do with the *Daily Planet*? Run it or sell it?" Perry clapped his hands together. "Jimmy, see if you can get the original photo that photocopy was taken from; if so, scan it or take a photo of the photo. Good find, son. Why don't

you write up a short piece on that photo? But no original, no story."

"Right, Chief. Find that photo. Wait. Me write the story?" Jimmy gulped.

"There's not much to write about except the photo," Perry explained.

"Right."

"Lois and Clark, continue hunting Alexander Luthor. Lois, any word from Inspector Henderson on that foundling child case?"

She smiled with a nod. "No news is good news, Perry."

"No, it's not, Lois! No news means no newspaper. All right, everyone go out and find me some headlines!"

Perry stepped up to Lois. "You feeling all right, darling?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Lois growled.

"We're just worried about you," Perry replied, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Because you forgot that Lex Luthor was dead."

Ooops. Perry picked up on that too.

"I had a dream about Lex Luthor the other night, Perry. In the dream, he was not only alive, he was bald. I'm still trying to catch up on my sleep. I'm fine, Perry, really."

"Glad to hear it, Lois."

Clark followed her out to her desk. "Dreaming about Lex?"

Lois shrugged. "Got me. It was a nightmare." Then she smiled, lowering her voice, "Except the part where you rescued me."

He sat down on the edge of her desk. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not now, little boy blue. Don't you have some cows in the field?"

"Cows in the corn," Clark corrected, standing up. "Speaking of which, we should pick up a nursery rhyme book for Lara. The earlier we start reading to her the more she'll love to read."

Lois turned on her computer. "I've already read her *Wizard of Oz*. You pick the next book."

Clark stared at her. When had Lois read *Wizard of Oz* to Lara? Did they even own a copy of that book? He kissed her cheek. "I'm always available to listen, whenever you have anything to say."

Lois patted his cheek with her hand, but otherwise didn't respond. How was he ever going to get her to admit that she had spent a year in the other dimension, if she didn't want to tell him? Why didn't she want to tell him? What was she hiding?

***

Lois felt the ground more solidly under her feet. Being back at work felt like eating a pastrami on rye after months of morning sickness. So good. She thanked her mother every day when they returned home. She wanted to make sure her mother knew that Lois appreciated her sacrifice. At the office, she missed Lara with all of her heart and caught herself looking at the photo that Clark had given her of their little family more and more.

Lara was so precious, the embodiment of her love with Clark and every time she looked at her daughter, she was reminded how much she loved her husband. How much she had sacrificed for him. Lara was lifting her head really well now, during tummy time, but still was nowhere near crawling. They had started sitting her in the high chair with toys during meals. While they ate, Lara chewed on her fingers or shook her gavel. A future judge, perhaps.

The doorbell rang. Lois ran out of the kitchen to answer it. Clark was upstairs changing yet another diaper. She still couldn't believe how many diapers a baby went through in a day. She felt like they were buying a box of diapers every week. She glanced through the peep-hole, but couldn't believe who she saw. She opened the door.

Bobby Bigmouth rubbed his hands together. "What are you serving for dinner tonight, Lane?"

"Good evening, Bobby, inviting yourself to dinner?" she asked with a raised brow.

"I've been waiting for your call. It's been over a week and I needed to see if the rumors about your cooking were true," he said, letting himself in.

"Who is it?" called Clark from upstairs.

Lois shook her head. He knew darn well who it was. "Bobby Bigmouth."

"Do I get to meet the little one?" He grinned.

"No."

"If you keep me well fed, I won't ever say a word about her to anyone." He held up his hand. "Scout's honor. I hear Lara's quite the looker, like her mommy."

Flattery. Did men think that still worked with her? Lois shook her head. "Clark, Bobby wants to know if he can stay for dinner?"

"Only if he has information for us," he called back down.

They had hit a wall with Alexander Luthor. It had been over a week since they had discovered anything new.

Bobby sniffed the air. "What's that I smell?"

"Chicken stir-fry with rice," Lois replied, crossing her arms.

Bobby shrugged. "Not lasagna, but it still smells good. Where did you learn to cook, Miss Pickles-and-Mustard?"

"Correspondence course. What do you have to exchange?"

"I hear you're looking for Alex Luthor," he started.

"Come on in, Bobby," Clark said, coming down the stairs with Lara in his arms.

Bobby held out his hands. "Can I?"

Clark raised a brow that clearly read 'no' and Bobby dropped his hands and sighed.

"Maybe after dinner Daddy will let Uncle Bobby hold you," he muttered.

Lois rolled her eyes. *Uncle Bobby Bigmouth?* She didn't think so.

"Your mother joining us?" Clark asked Lois.

"No, she's catching a movie with Daddy," she replied. They only had two and a half more weeks before her mother left on her cruise. Lois took a deep breath, not wishing to think about that. "Go wash up, boys, dinner's ready."

Bobby rubbed his hands together and let Clark show him the way to the downstairs powder room. Then Clark strapped Lara into her highchair.

Their guest returned and gazed at their daughter. "Rumors about her beauty don't do her justice. Clark, you're going to have your hands full when she goes to high school."

Clark glared at Bobby, but relaxed when Lois set her hand on her husband's arm.

"Better get that membership at the gun range and get started with your target practice," Bobby laughed.

Her husband pressed his lips together. "We don't want guns in our house, Bobby."

"Just joking. Just joking," said Bobby, holding up his hands.

Lois set a spot for him at the table, away from Lara and Clark. Then she brought out the serving dishes.

Bobby rubbed his palms together. "Family style. My favorite." Reaching for the food, Lois slapped his hand.

"Do you mind if Clark and I serve ourselves first?" she asked. "I know that's not proper etiquette, but your reputation precedes you." She smiled graciously.

"Of course." Bobby held up his hands. "Can I have a fork? I'm not good with these sticks."

Clark poured some tea as Lois exchanged Bobby's chopsticks for silverware.

Bobby took three bites. "So, I hear you're looking for Alex Luthor."

Clark nodded.

"In all the wrong places."

Lois and Clark exchanged a glance.

"Wrong how?" Clark asked.

"Well, firstly, Alex isn't an Alexander, but an Alexandra."

Lois coughed. "Lex, Jr. had a twin sister?"

Clark shivered. "Lex with a daughter. That's a scary thought." He caressed Lara's cheek and she smiled at him.

"Secondly, she doesn't go by Alex anymore; she's got a couple of aliases. From what I hear, she is as blonde and beautiful as Lex, Jr. is dark and hideous. A deadly combination." Only more so when combined with the Luthor name.

"You think you can get me a photo?" Clark asked and Lois kicked him under the table. He looked at his wife. "I personally prefer brunettes."

"Mayson was blonde," she muttered. "Lana's blonde." Toni Taylor was blonde. Dr. Antoinette Baines was blonde. She could go on, but decided she didn't need the ulcer.

Bobby's fork paused on its way to his mouth as he looked between them. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Of course not," Lois replied with a smile. "What are her aliases?"

"Working on that. My sources fear her. Apparently, she's scary, *really* scary. She gets what she wants or you die or everything you love dies. They didn't want to tell me that much."

"Great. Just what we want in a new boss." Clark sighed. "Do you know where she's located? Where we can narrow our search?"

"According to the grapevine, she studied acting with Sebastian Finn."

"Mr. Makeup?" Lovely. Lois gazed at Clark. They would never find her.

"But she's definitely local."

"Local?" asked Clark, brow raised. "How local?"

"As in the U.S. New York. Gotham City. Chicago. Metropolis, maybe. I'm working on that. She doesn't like snoops."

Lois shook her head. "I can't believe Alexander is Alexandra. That just blows my mind." Ultra Woman had told her about Alexander, but that Alexander was a woman in her dimension and a man in the other was too much. Fate was weird sometimes. Ultra Woman never said she had met Lex., Jr.'s twin, only what Lex and Junior had mentioned of him in passing. If Alex had studied with Mr. Makeup, she could disguise herself or himself either way. "Are you sure that Alex isn't a man? A drag queen?"

Clark, taking a sip of his tea, coughed. "You really hate being wrong, don't you, Lois?"

Bobby shrugged. "From what I understand, she got married a few years back. Took over her new family's business from the inside, rolling heads." He grinned. "So if she's a guy, what a story that would be."

Lara threw her gavel rattle onto the floor and Lois went to retrieve it.

"She looks like you. Lara."

"You mentioned that, Bobby," replied Lois, handing the gavel back to Lara.

"No, both of you. She's got your eyes, Clark, but Lois's smile. Do you know that there's not word one on the streets where she came from? It's like she appeared out of thin air." Bobby shook his head.

Lara threw the gavel rattle back on the floor. This time Clark retrieved it. As he returned it to Lara, Clark looked at Lois with such a gaze of love and devotion, she felt zapped by his heat vision.

"You guys didn't hire a surrogate, did you?"

Lois shot him a look.

"No. Okay. It's just that usually there is some whisper, something to learn, but nobody knows anything about her or where she came from. Even a couple, three years back, there were rumors running around for a while that Superman had a twin brother and the two of them dueled on the backlot of the Metropolis Movie Studio."

"I remember him," Lois murmured with a nod. "I always wondered what happened to him. Or where he came from. You never told me." She looked at her husband with curiosity.

Clark gulped. "Superman never told me either, Lois. We should ask *him*."

"Oh." Lois shrugged, taking a bite. "I thought he had."

Lara threw the rattle back down on the floor. Lois retrieved it and set it back on her tray table with a smile at Clark.

"You two don't read minds, do you?" Bobby asked, moving his fork between them. "Because it looks like there's a whole conversation going on between you I'm not hearing."

Lois looked at him with a raised brow.

"But then again you're husband and wife now, so I probably…" Bobby coughed. "Never mind."

Clark chuckled. "This is delicious, honey. That must have been some correspondence course."

"Oh, yes. Sorry, Lois. This is great. I'm just going to take some seconds," Bobby said, reaching for the serving dishes.

"Thank you." Lois smiled, reaching down and picking up Lara's rattle again.

***

Clark walked up to Lois at her desk. "Well, I found a Thalia Thor, who went to business school in 1985. An Ali Lucky, who took acting classes in New York in 1987. And a Mindy Huckaby who went to nursing school in 1988. I've tried every combination of Luthor and Luckaby I could think of. This is like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

"Any photos?" Lois asked. Clark was suddenly looking very sexy. She needed to be closer to him. She stood up and stood right next to him.

"Good idea. I'll see if I can get Jimmy to find any to compare. If only Bobby could get us some names."

"Hmmm." Lois closed her eyes. Slowly, she started rocking back and forth. Her husband smelled good. Musky with a hint of smoke. It must have been that fire he put out on the way to work this morning.

"Lois?"

She ran her hands over his shirt. He felt so nice. So, strong. "Are you wearing a new cologne, Clark?" she asked.

"I don't wear cologne, you know that."

Lois grabbed his tie and pulled him towards her for a kiss.

"Lois," he whispered. "We're in the middle of the office, honey."

She wrapped her arm around his waist and started swaying back and forth, resting her head upon his chest, her fingers playing with the buttons of his shirt.

"You feel like dancing?" Clark asked, a slight chuckle to his voice, setting his hand over hers.

"Yes," Lois practically moaned. Oh, that music was making her want to dance. Move. She wanted… no, Lois *needed* him. Superman. She gulped, pulling herself out of her daydream. What was she doing? Her head turned towards Perry's office. ELVIS! "Can't Help Falling in Love" was softly playing.

Once Lois knew what was making her feel this way, it was as if she stepped into a flashback. She and Clark were slow dancing at Perry's Superhero costume ball. Only for some reason, Clark hadn't worn his Superman suit. She needed to take off his shirt, get to that suit. As she continued to sway, she started to loosen his tie.

"Lois!" Clark said more sharply, putting his hand over hers.

She snapped out of it and was suddenly back in the newsroom, her dimension, her husband. Clark looking at her like she had lost her mind. She *had* lost her mind. Lois had no control

over what she was doing. It was like the music was controlling her. Telling her what to do. And it was telling her to kiss Superman, not Clark Kent. "Fly away now," she murmured.

"What's the matter, Lois?" he asked, not moving.

The music switched to "Burning Love." That song belonged to her and the other Clark. Lois felt like ripping off his shirt, just to feel that soft blue suit, run her fingers over his 'S'. She felt like pushing him down on the desk and doing things she really shouldn't do at work. "Clark. Go. Now. Please." She gulped, her hands started to shake.

"Lois, no. What's going on?"

Suddenly, her ears picked up another sound, the TV. *Thank God, an emergency.* "Go. Clark. Now." Lois pointed up at the TV.

Clark turned and looked.

The standoff at the National Bank of Gotham started right before 9 a.m. this morning.

He smiled. "Oh. Thanks. I thought…" Clark shook his head, then kissed her cheek. "Love you."

Lois watched as he ran off towards the storage room, loosening his tie. Then she fell into her chair. She couldn't do this anymore. She was out of control.

***

Lois walked into Perry's office with a pained expression on her face and shut the door.

Perry was instantly concerned. "What is it, darling?"

"Could you turn that off?" she asked, referring to his constantly playing Elvis music.

"Sure, honey, whatever you say." He turned around and switched off "Burning Love."

Lois exhaled, able to breathe again. This super hearing and his Elvis music were a bad combination. She had waited until Clark was out of the office so she could do this without worrying about him overhearing her. "Can I make a confession, Perry?"

Her boss nodded.

Lois swallowed. She didn't want to do this, but if she didn't speak up at this moment, the rest of her life would be a living hell. She might not be able to stop herself next time.

"Recently, I was listening to the Elvis CD you bought me for my birthday a couple of years ago, and going through my old case files, cleaning up, organizing, making room for Lara's stuff."

Perry nodded; he was with her so far. Let's see how well this lie would work. "I came across the file of that perfumer Miranda." She swallowed.

Her editor covered his face with his hand. "Oh, Lois! Not *Revenge*? I still have nightmares about those forty-eight hours."

Lois nodded. "Somehow, I had a sample of *Revenge* in the files and it spilled and now…"

"Elvis?"

"Yes, Perry. Every time I hear Elvis singing almost anything, I get…" She coughed. "Distracted."

Perry was trying hard not to laugh. She could tell by his pressed lips. He raised an eyebrow. "*How* distracted, Lois?"

The pained expression returned to her face. Lois closed her eyes and pictured herself jitterbugging with the other Clark, kissing the other Clark. She started fanning herself. "Very distracted."

"I see," he said with half a smile. "And if I were to turn, let's say, 'Burning Love' back on?"

"Please, don't!" She pleaded with him, holding up her hands to stop him. "Especially not 'Burning Love.'" Lois swallowed. "You see, Perry," she glanced out his office window at Clark's empty desk, "Clark wasn't home when I spilled the sample of *Revenge*. Someone else stopped by… first."

"Lois, honey, are you trying to tell me that you cheated on Clark while drugged on *Revenge*?"

Lois looked down, biting her bottom lip. "A little."

"Do I want to know who stopped by?" Perry asked.

"Oh, no. No. No!" She shook her head.

"And when I play 'Burning Love' you think about this other man?"

Lois nodded.

"Does Clark know about this, honey?"

Lois head dropped again. "Clark has a lot on his plate right now. I'd rather just eliminate Elvis from my life than explain to Clark…" Her voice faded.

Perry finished her thought. "Why you find Elvis suddenly so romantic?"

"Not romantic, Perry. It makes me think of another man. Of pressing my body against him and kissing him, like there was no tomorrow." She swallowed. "I lose control."

"Oh."

"I love Clark. I will always love Clark. I don't want to think of… *him*. Not that way."

"And what did this man think of your sudden affection?"

Lois closed her eyes and pictured herself slow dancing and making out with Superman.

"Oh."

"Oh, what?" Lois gasped, opening her eyes. What had Perry seen?

"Nothing." Perry looked like a cat that ate the canary.

She gave her boss a sharp look. "Perry, this is my life, my marriage I'm talking about here."

"Then, honey, you need to take Elvis home and you and Clark need to make new memories. Make his music your own."

Lois gulped, hanging her head down in shame.

"You should be ashamed, Lois. Not knowing that The King is the King of Romance. Shame on you! Get out of my office."

Embarrassed and chagrined, Lois darted from Perry's office. He stood at his office window and watched her. She sat down at her desk and buried her face in her hands. How was she ever going to make it through this? Why had she ever told Perry? If Clark ever found out…

"What was that about?" asked Jimmy, handing her a file.

"I asked Perry not to play Elvis around the…" She closed her eyes as "Devil in Disguise" started playing. She grabbed her head again, groaning. "Very funny, Perry."

"Just checking, sweetie," Perry said with a wave to Jimmy, turning off the music.

"Do I want to know?" Jimmy asked, glancing toward their editor before returning his gaze to Lois.

"No. Just know I will *never* open my big fat mouth around Perry again." She grabbed her briefcase and stormed out of the office. Fresh air, that's what she needed. And Double Fudge Crunch bars — a whole box of them.

***

Superman landed outside the National Bank of Gotham and surveyed the scene inside with his x-ray vision. Standing in the center of the bank lobby was a man dressed entirely in black, wearing a mask. Superman was about to enter and take him down, when something stopped him. He took another look at the man. The man's mask had two protrusions that almost resembled ears. A flash of black cape blocked his vision momentarily as the man raised his arm and shot out a kind of silent weapon, covering the face of a traditionally dressed robber with a thick, dark gooey substance. The robber let go of the teller he had been holding and dropped to the ground, gasping for air.

A-ha. So, Superman has finally set eyes on the Caped Crusader, Clark told himself. The caped and masked 'superhero' of Gotham City, known for his martial arts skills, his use of fancy weaponry, and his own form of justice.

Superman burst through the window as the man in black gave him a disdainful glance. "Subtle," the man told him.

Superman glowered at the other crime fighter. This guy didn't like Superman's time-honored methods, huh? He heard the click

of a machine gun clip; instinctively, he zipped between the gun and its target. As the pieces of metal flashed off his chest, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man he was protecting zoom up to the ceiling on some sort of zipline.

Reaching for the robber's gun, Superman bent the barrel so it would stop firing. He whooshed to the other side of the gun and picked up the bank robber. He needed something to tie the robber up with, since he didn't wear a utility belt like *some* modern vigilantes. Looking around, he spotted the thick rubber rope used to mark the line for the tellers. He tied up the robber and went to see where that vigilante had disappeared off to.

Superman heard a gasp as he jumped over the counter. A female gasp. Turning around, he saw a female teller next to the body of the still gasping robber. The man was covered in some sort of black goo. This was the man he saw attacked while he was outside.

"Are you all right?" Superman asked the teller.

He could tell by her frightened eyes that she was in shock, but she nodded.

"Let's get you out of here." Superman picked her up and carried her out the window he had entered, setting her down behind the line of police vehicles.

"How many employees were in the bank when the robbery started?" Superman asked.

She started to shiver. "I don't know. We were about to open when they burst in. Ten, maybe?"

"Were you able to see how many robbers there were?" he asked as a yell made him turn back around. A man flew — well, it was more like hurled — out of the hole he had made in the side of the bank and landed with a splat on the sidewalk outside. The man was still alive, but he would definitely be taking a trip to the hospital.

The teller turned and with a wave of hero worship in her voice, whispered, "Batman."

Superman grimaced. Obviously, this woman would be no help.

Zipping back inside, Superman did a quick circuit around the bank. He found the bank employees lying on the floor outside the vault. The robber who had been guarding them was lying in a puddle of his own blood, breathing heavily; the blood was from a gash in his shoulder caused by a bat-shaped throwing star. Superman shook his head. Someone needed to teach this so-called superhero the rules.

Superman tried to x-ray the vault, but it was lead-lined. Who lined their vaults with lead? He saw a pregnant woman among the employees and for an instant saw the pregnant Lois. He quickly picked her up and took her outside to the waiting ambulance.

"Thank you, Superman." She smiled at him.

"Did you see how many robbers there were?" he asked.

"At least five, maybe six. Or more. Sorry, it happened so fast."

Superman nodded. Four had been taken care of, so at least one to two more inside the vault. Batteries recharged from the victim's gratitude and a bit of sunshine, Superman whizzed back inside. After a couple more trips, he had rescued all the bank employees and the robber, still breathing and holding his wounded shoulder. The other robbers had been awfully quiet, too quiet in fact.

Inside the vault, Superman found two more robbers tied together with some sort of utility rope, unconscious and bleeding over the stacks of money, but still technically alive. He x-rayed the robbers and found a couple of broken ribs, but nothing life-threatening. A third man was strung up from some sort of zip line from the top-most safety deposit boxes, twitching to show Superman he was also still alive and trying to escape. He among the robbers was the only one physically unharmed.

"That's all of them," a voice from behind him announced. "Thanks for your help with the hostages, though."

Superman turned around and looked up to the man in black. "So, we finally meet. You know, someone needs to teach you some manners. If you are going to be a crime fighter, you need to work with the system."

"Even the police use excessive force sometimes, Superman." The man was crouched on top of a cabinet.

"You shouldn't hurt people. Capture and hand them over to the authorities," Superman told him, hoping with a few lessons the man might end up doing more good than harm.

"Who put you in charge of our democracy, Superman? I didn't get a chance to vote."

Superman pressed his lips together, taking a step forward.

The man in black raised a finger and shook it at him. "Gotham City is no Metropolis. My city isn't as nice and clean as yours. The crimes are darker, the villains meaner, and they need someone…" He looked Superman up and down. "… who understands the darker side of life better to find and capture them."

Superman raised a brow and took another step forward. *What? He didn't like the blue suit?*

"Don't try to detain me, Superman. I work with the police in my city. They aren't going to arrest me. *They* like me." The man actually smiled at him. It was the only expression Superman could read with that ridiculous mask. "I'm not the bad guy."

Superman took another step forward. He wasn't quite sure what he would do with this 'superhero'. True, he could have him captured by now, but Batman was telling the truth about working with Gotham City's Police Department. Of course, that wasn't a very good recommendation from what Clark knew of that city's police corruption. The man pulled out a small metal vial dangling from a chain around his neck.

"I'm sure you are familiar with Kryptonite, Superman."

Superman paused, glaring at him. "If you aren't the bad guy, then what are you doing with Kryptonite?"

The man started to unscrew the metal vial, which Superman realized, almost too late, was made of lead. "You see, Superman, I thought we could work together. We both want to keep our cities clean of the scum of the earth. We just go about it in different ways."

Superman saw a flash of green before the headache set in. "Put that away."

"I don't take orders, Superman, even from you. I just wanted you to know that. And I don't need a boss and I'm nobody's sidekick."

Superman's knees weakened and he fell to the floor.

"I don't want to hurt you but I will protect myself. And I do find it much easier to talk with you when I know you can't use your abilities on me. We're on the same side. Do us both a favor — don't go around thinking you're better than me because you have a set of rules you follow. We have our different methods. Accept that and we can work together. Be friends, even." The man jumped down from the cabinet and stood over Superman, holding out his hand. "Deal?"

Superman looked up at him, ignoring his hand, and turned on what was left of his x-ray vision, before the pain of the Kryptonite was too much to keep his eyes open and his powers failed. This guy was crazy if he thought Superman would become friends with anyone who pulled Kryptonite out so they can have a conversation.

"Well, think about it. I'm not really that bad of a guy, once you get to know me," said Batman, disappearing into the shadows.

***

"Okay," said Clark, turning to his wife. They were sitting in their living room on the couch. "That was the final one. What did

you think of her?"

Lois stood up. "I hated her."

"Lo-is."

"Well, all right. I didn't *hate* her. I hate the idea of her… of any of them. Clark, we cannot have a live-in nanny, end of story. We just can't."

"Your mother is leaving on her cruise in less than a week, Lois. We need someone to watch Lara." Clark wrapped his arms around his wife.

"Not a live-in, Clark," Lois whispered. "I can't. I need you…" She swallowed. "And you need one place where you are free to be yourself. And that one place should be your home."

"We all make sacrifices for our children, Lois."

She turned around and kissed him. "I have… I will stay home with her before I let you give up the one place you can be you."

Clark smiled. "I love you, too."

"What we need is someone who can watch her during the day, but doesn't need a room and won't be around on the weekends. Yet, someone we can trust."

"Agreed. Someone we can trust, who has her own place, no room and board, who doesn't work at night or on weekends. Sounds like a cushy gig to me. Someone will jump at the chance to watch Lara."

"Ha-ha, Clark." Lois scowled at him.

"We'll have to pay extra if we don't include room and board," Clark informed her.

"I know. But I was thinking since we basically don't eat out anymore." She shrugged. "Oh, God! Jimmy and his girlfriend Penny will be here any minute." She batted her eyelashes at him. "Can you run and get us a baguette?" Only when she said 'run', she made the hand signal for fly.

Clark kissed her. "Need a bottle of wine, too?"

"If you can find one. Red, please." His wife smiled, running into the kitchen. "Love you!"

Clark sighed and then flashed her a hopeful look. "Can I take Lara with me?"

"Don't you dare!" Lois called back. "Just what we need is to have someone see Superman with a baby strapped to his chest."

Clark picked up his daughter out of the playpen. "Sorry, sweetie. Mommy says no flying tonight. Maybe we can go see Grandma and Grandpa this weekend." He smiled, kissing her head. He set her back down and then disappeared out the living room window.

Lois's husband returned a moment before the doorbell rang, instantly spinning back into his everyday clothes. Lois came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel. "Cutting it a bit close, aren't you? Just what we need is Miss Ninety-Seven-Percent to see you fly in the window as they walk up the front stoop."

Clark kissed her cheek, handing her the baguette and wine. "You're welcome."

His wife smiled her thanks as she opened the door for Jimmy and Penny. Lois quickly greeted them and then rushed back into the kitchen to throw the baguette into the oven.

"So, is this her?" said Penny, bending over the playpen. "Hello, there. She's adorable." She swatted Jimmy. "Why didn't you tell me how cute she is?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes at Clark. "Nothing personal, CK. But Penny, all babies look alike… like babies."

Penny picked her up. "Don't be ridiculous, Jimmy. Of course they don't."

"Wow," said Clark. "She usually hates it when strangers pick her up."

"Oh. I'm good with kids. Three nieces, two nephews, six cousins. Plus, I'm not a stranger, am I, Lara? I'm Auntie Penny."

Jimmy swallowed. "Beer, CK?"

"I'll go find you one," Clark said. In the kitchen, as he pulled a beer out of the fridge, he said, "Penny has lots of experience with kids."

"No, Clark. She isn't going to want to be a professional babysitter. Don't even think about it."

"I'm just saying…"

Lois gave him a sharp 'shut up' look.

"All right. Got it. I'm going." He swung through the door to the dining room and handed Jimmy the beer. "Would you like a glass of wine, Penny?"

"I'll wait until dinner. I allow myself two glasses per day only with meals."

"Really?" answered Clark.

"I heard that," he heard Lois whisper in the kitchen. "We didn't invite them over to interview her for our nanny position, Clark. Stop it."

Clark grinned at their guests. How did Lois always know what he was thinking?

Lois came out carrying a platter of crackers and cheeses. "Dinner's almost ready."

"Nice," said Penny, helping herself.

"Well, Clark loves his French cheese." Lois chuckled.

"So, have you found yourself a job since Diticom?" asked Clark.

Lois shot him a glare as she watched Penny bounce Lara on her knee. Her daughter laughed.

"I've got a retail job selling clothing for now, but the hours are really all over the place and the pay is nil. Nights and weekends mostly. I was hoping to go back for my masters in computer science. I could take night courses at Met U. if I could find a day job. Something brainless, where I could get a few hours of studying in." She shook her head. "Like that's possible."

"Computer science, huh?" Lois replied, looking at her daughter. Lara reached for her mother and Lois gladly picked her up, rocking her back and forth on her hip.

"Well, I kind of got interested in programming computers when I made my Superman database." Jimmy's girlfriend smiled weakly. "If I had had the proper skills…." She shrugged.

"Penny," Jimmy warned.

"I might never have met Jimmy," Penny said, reaching over and taking his hand.

"Are you still looking for Superman?" Lois asked, with a sharp glance at Clark.

"No. I've got all the super man I need, right here," Penny replied, kissing Jimmy on the cheek.

"Also, it would be a big downer on our relationship," Jimmy added under his breath.

"Of course. Jimmy's a wonderful guy." Lois smiled at her friend.

"He sure is," agreed Clark.

Jimmy pulled on the neck of his shirt. "Whoa, guys, I'm suffocating here."

They laughed.

"Clark, if you could take Lara…" Lois handed their daughter over to him. "I'll go get dinner served." She disappeared into the kitchen.

"She's come a long way, CK. No more of those twitches she had the first week back," Jimmy said, his voice lowered. "I was really thinking she was losing her mind there for a while."

Clark smiled, but couldn't help agreeing with Jimmy. Lois had calmed down since he got her back to work, able to focus her energy on a story. The glitches in her personality were still there and would pop up at the most unexpected times, reminding him that she still could have spent a year in the other dimension with the other Clark. It was one of the main reasons Clark was trying so hard to find them a good nanny. She couldn't go back to being a stay-at-home mom. The darkness that had surrounded her those first few weeks was but a weak shadow now. Lois wasn't a solitary soul. She needed to be surrounded by people, interacting

with people, especially people who could answer her when she let them get a word in edgewise.

Clark set Lara down in her high chair at the end of the table.

"Is she eating?" Jimmy asked.

"No, she won't start solids until after six months," Clark informed him. He handed Lara her preferred throw toys. Pick-up was still one of her favorite games. "She's teething though. Chews on anything and everything." He grinned at his daughter.

"She looks just like you," said Penny.

"Thank you. But she's adopted," Clark replied, then corrected himself. "In the process of being adopted. Although with this blonde hair I don't know why people keep saying that." He tousled Lara's hair.

Lois arrived with the lasagna.

"Here, let me help," offered Clark, following Lois back into the kitchen.

"*He's the sweetest,"* he heard Penny say to Jimmy. "*He just dotes on Lara."*

"*He's a changed fellow. Well, not really changed, CK's always been like that. It's strange that a baby could make the happiest guy on earth happier."*

Lois smiled up at Clark, hugging him. He had no idea where she had gotten her super hearing from — well, improved hearing — which is what he was sure she had, because she never could hear like that before. He had gotten used to it. He even used it to his advantage at times to whisper sweet nothings to her under his breath, just to make her smile.

"*How long has he worked at the Planet?"* Penny asked Jimmy. "*Did he start before or after you?"*

"*After. His first big story was the Messenger explosion,"* Jimmy said. "*Perry partnered him with Lois. It was love at first sight."*

"*Wait. The Messenger explosion? Didn't Superman show up right after that?"*

Lois slapped Clark on the arm and gave him the 'told you so' look. She could be so paranoid.

Clark rolled his eyes and carried the bottle of wine back out to the table, uncorked. "Ready for that glass of wine now?" he asked Penny. She was staring at him — really staring at him. He smiled politely and Penny nodded. Right, the wine. Clark poured her a glass and then filled the others.

Lois joined them with the salad and baguette. "*Bon appétit*, everyone."

"So, Lois, how long have you and Clark been together?" Penny asked, taking a sip of her wine.

"Four years," Lois answered, serving the lasagna.

"Partnered together, four years. We didn't start dating until eighteen months later or so," Clark corrected. Four years? Where had she come up with that answer?

"Right." Lois nodded, but she seemed distracted, thinking. *Adding?* "Three years."

"Just over two years, honey."

"That's what I meant." She smiled and then shook her head. "Married almost two years."

Jimmy stared at her. Then he glanced at Clark with a raised brow. "I guess a year with CK really feels like two." He laughed.

"Ha-ha, Jimmy. Very funny." Clark chuckled, but still stared at Lois. She had added a year to their marriage without even realizing it.

Lois seemed lost in space for a moment, then her focus returned and she smiled at him. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

"Aw, thanks, honey." Clark reached down, picked up the gavel rattle, and set it back on Lara's tray table.

"Lois, what year is it?" Jimmy asked her.

"1997," she replied, looking at him like he was nuts.

"Okay. Just checking." Jimmy looked at Clark, who shrugged.

"Who watches Lara during the day? Do you have her in daycare?" Penny asked.

"My mother has been watching her since I went back to work," Lois replied. They were on safe ground now. No more dates.

"Your mother? Lois, you hate your mother." Jimmy laughed.

"She's mellowed since our wedding," Lois said, defending Ellen and then she chuckled. "Anyway, it's amazing what you can forgive when you need a babysitter."

Clark took a deep breath and plunged ahead, knowing the rocky waters he was sure to encounter along the way. "But she's leaving on a cruise next week. Gone for two weeks. We're searching for a nanny or babysitter, someone more permanent."

"Not daycare?" Penny asked.

"No, Lois is a bit paranoid about daycare. We've had so many wackos who treat our reporting as a personal vendetta against them. We think it would be safer for Lara to be at home." Bait on the hook.

Penny nodded. "Makes sense."

"This is really good lasagna, Lois."

"Thank you, Jimmy. I had a good teacher," replied Lois, before she winced.

"Who?" Clark couldn't stop himself from asking. Lois still refused to tell him where she learned to cook.

"Me." Lois grinned sheepishly.

"Lois couldn't boil water before she met Clark," Jimmy teased.

"Don't listen to him, Penny. I could make pasta salad. I just ate a lot more microwave food back then, because I didn't have a life. Having a family changes one's priorities. I've slowed down. I relax more. I don't jump in front of runaway buses as often."

"Thank God," Clark murmured.

"For a while there, it seemed like Lois was getting rescued by Superman at least once a week," said Jimmy.

"Sometimes once a day," Clark muttered. Lois kicked him under the table.

"I don't take as many risks as I used to," Lois growled. "I have more to live for." She smiled at Lara, caressing her cheek. Then she bent down and picked up the gavel rattle, setting it on the tray table.

"So, are you looking for a live-in nanny?" Penny asked.

Jimmy's girlfriend was nibbling at the bait. Clark looked at Lois with a pleading look, but his wife was ignoring him.

"Heaven forbid!" laughed Lois. "We need our privacy. I, for one, would go crazy with a complete stranger here twenty-four seven, because then Clark couldn't—" She stopped herself, before finishing with how much he needed his privacy.

Jimmy looked at him with a raised brow and Clark suddenly found his lasagna extremely mesmerizing. He could just think what things might be running through his friend's mind to end that cliffhanger. '*Walk around the house naked*' was the one he guessed Jimmy chose.

"No, we're looking for someone just while we're at the office, on weekdays. Nights and weekends off," Lois replied.

The women were either completely blind to Jimmy's smirk or just ignoring it. *Thank God!* thought Clark.

"Wait. Penny, didn't you say that you were looking for a daytime job, so you could do evening classes at Met U.?" inquired Jimmy.

"Well, yes…" Penny hesitated.

Lois looked at Clark with a 'see, I told you she wouldn't be interested' glance. She turned to Penny. "We couldn't possibly consider taking advantage of your friendship like that. We completely understand that you're looking for an office job. At least, *some* of us do."

Clark was on the receiving end of another glare. He smiled

sweetly at Penny. They already knew her background. They had done a check on her for the Diticom article.

Penny was staring at him again. She looked at Lois and then she looked back at him. And then she covered her mouth. Crap. The fish had gotten away.

"I could do it," Penny suddenly volunteered. Hooked! "I need a job during the day with nights and weekends off to study and be with Jimmy. I'm great with kids, especially one as mild-mannered at Lara. And you could trust me."

Lois raised a brow at Clark. He grinned. *Success!*

"Well, I don't know, Penny." Lois was hemming and hawing.

"At least, give me a test run. Go out this Friday night for dinner and a show. I'll watch Lara. You'll see. I can do this," Penny was practically begging them to hire her. Clark felt he was the King of Subtlety.

"I don't know, Penny." Lois was still not sold. "Friday nights are bad for us." Busy Superman night, true. They had never had a successful Friday date night yet.

"Right. What was I thinking?" Penny shook her head. "Thursday. I hear the new revival of *My Fair Lady* is terrific."

"*My Fair Lady*? I've already seen that. Remember, James, you took me when your date…" She snapped her fingers. "What's her name? The fashion model…" Lois closed her eyes for a moment to think. "April! April Stephens canceled at the last minute? Who knew Arnold Schwarzenegger could sing?"

Jimmy stared at her and then turned his gaze to Clark. "Arnold Schwarzenegger?"

"Yeah, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michelle Kwan. The dancing was so beautiful. I had *Get Me to the Church on Time* stuck in my head for our entire wedding day. Remember, Clark, you had…" Lois stopped and all the color drained from her face as they all stared at her. Her finger still pointed at her husband.

"Fashion model?" Penny asked, turning to her boyfriend, eyebrow raised.

Jimmy just shrugged, perplexed. "I've never had a date with a fashion model, especially not April Stephens!"

"Lois?" Clark inquired, softly. Where had that story come from? The other dimension. He wanted so desperately for that to be true. "Lois?"

His wife swallowed and then placed a big grin on her face. "Fooled you!" She laughed. "And you all bought it. What a riot!"

Jimmy and Penny laughed, but Clark just stared at her. Lois didn't play practical jokes like that or at all. It had to be a memory, a very distinct memory. *Damn*. He wished he could say he was positive, but he couldn't. Why wouldn't she just tell him the truth?

"Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michelle Kwan." Jimmy wiped a tear from his eye. "I should have known, Lois. But when you called me James, I thought you had fallen completely off the deep end."

"Yeah." Lois sighed, taking a sip of her wine. "The deep end. That's me, all right."

"Lois, may I see you in the kitchen?" Clark asked, wiping his mouth on his napkin and pushing back his chair.

"Of course." Lois smiled innocently.

As they entered the kitchen, he swooped her up into his arms and kissed her deeply.

"Clark!" she gasped.

"The truth, Lois. Was that a memory?" he asked. He had to know. He was going crazy, not knowing.

"Kind of," she whispered, looking away. "It was a dream."

"A dream?" Like the dream about the bald still-living Lex Luthor she had told Perry? Had that also been a memory from her time in the other dimension?

"Yes." Lois turned away from him and started wiping down the counter.

He set his hand over hers. "Go on."

"I had a dream about going to see a revival of *My Fair Lady* with Jimmy, who happened to be a really wealthy man, who owned the *Daily Planet*."

"Like the Jimmy in the other Clark's dimension?" Clark clarified.

"Oh, yes, I guess that explains why it was so weird, so *Twilight Zone*." Lois nodded. "I couldn't understand why you had a date with Mayson on our wedding day." That was what she had stopped herself from saying out at the table. *Clark, you had a date with Mayson.*

He got a chill. That letter — the fake suicide note from the other Lois had mentioned the other Clark's ex-girlfriend, the still-living Mayson. Had she also been hurt in a car explosion which Henderson, the other dimension's Henderson could have investigated?

"Clark. It was just a dream," she stressed.

"Was it, Lois?" Clark murmured, pulling her into his arms. "I love you so much, Lois. Why won't you tell me the truth?"

"I can't," Lois whispered, holding on just as tightly to him. "I can't."

That was as close to a confession that his wife had spent the last year in the other dimension as Clark was liable ever to get. He kissed her cheek and held her close. What had happened that was so horrible that she couldn't tell him about?

"*He just took her into the kitchen to kiss her. They are so in love."* Penny sighed. "*I don't know why I didn't notice it before."*

"*They're kind of obvious about it, Penny. The whole world knows how in love CK and Lois are."*

"*I know. Right before everyone's eyes. How could I have been so blind?"*

Lois looked at Clark. Was she hearing what he was hearing? What was Penny talking about?

"*Have you ever seen Clark without his glasses on?"* Penny casually asked Jimmy.

Lois pulled back, out of Clark's arms, and turned toward the door to the dining room at the exact same moment he did.

"Crap!" she murmured. His sentiments exactly. Penny was still searching for her missing three percent.

***

"Still working on that profile, Lois?" Perry asked, stepping out of his office and putting on his jacket. "You should be home with your family."

"I want a full background before my interview with Bruce Wayne tomorrow. Clark's home watching Lara." Lois shifted some papers around on her desk. "Good night."

"I'll leave you a little night music to help you make his music your own." Perry grinned, turning on the boom box to Elvis.

"Perry, don't!" Lois stammered, but Perry waved heading down in the elevator. "Great. Thanks, boss." Scowling, she went to the boom box and turned off the CD. She turned the radio to an oldies station, playing "She Works Hard for the Money" by Donna Summers.

Lois started organizing the papers on her desk. She began to sway to the music, its beat catching her. Soon she was singing and dancing along to the music, the papers forgotten. As the song ended, she heard a solitary person applauding. She turned around to see Superman glide down from the tall windows above the newsroom from which he liked to make his grand entrances and exits.

"Hi." Lois smiled, returning to her papers. "What are you doing here?"

"Your dad volunteered to give us the night off. I thought I'd come see the most beautiful mama in Metropolis, take her out to a late dinner."

Lois glanced around, lowering her voice, "Clark. Someone is going to hear you."

Superman stepped up right behind her.

"You shouldn't do this here. We're out in public," she continued.

"No one's here, Lois," he whispered in her ear.

"I'm here and I say no. I was the one that got burned last time. No one baked *me* brownies."

Superman laughed. "But you still ate them."

"Ha-ha."

The radio came back from station break and "Burning Love" blasted through the boombox speakers.

"Perry!" Lois growled under her breath. She started marching over to the stereo, when Superman took her hand and spun her back to him.

"When's the last time we danced?" he murmured, touching his chest to hers.

As soon as their chests touched, Lois looked deep into Superman's eyes. Passion seared through her. She could not control this urge. She wanted him. She *needed* him. Superman. Lois grabbed his face and pressed her mouth against his, pushing him against a nearby desk and climbing on top of him. "Oh, Clark," she moaned, softly. Yes. Yes. Yes! This felt so right.

Superman lifted her off him and stepped away. "Lois?" Even he knew that was too much. "I'll be right back," he whispered, disappearing through the windows.

Lois covered her mouth. Oh, God! What had she done? Which Clark — in her mind — had she been kissing? Did she even know? If someone saw…

"Hi, Lois."

She quickly spun around and saw Jimmy standing outside the darkroom door.

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Chapter 9 — Don't Be Cruel

Author's Note: In this story, Lois and Clark were married in July 1996 instead of October 1996, as shown on their wedding certificate in canon.

***

Lois's whole world shattered around her. Had Jimmy seen Superman? Had he seen her kissing him? Had he seen her push him onto the desk and…. Lois swallowed. She didn't need Jimmy to read her the riot act, but she knew she deserved it. She had cheated on Clark. Not on this night, but before. "Burning Love" was still throbbing her brain into a headache.

"You working late tonight?" Jimmy asked. He seemed stiff. Uncomfortable. Or was she just imagining it?

"Yes," she replied, placing a smile on her face. "You?"

"I forgot something. Just stopped by for a moment," he said, shuffling his feet.

"Uh-huh." This conversation was awkward, she could feel the tension. Would he say anything?

"Is someone else here? I thought I heard voices," Jimmy asked her, glancing around.

Did he really not know? Lois almost sighed in relief. "Clark. He stepped out for a moment."

"CK?" He looked skeptical of her response. Not good.

"Of course. Who else?" she replied innocently.

Jimmy raised a brow. "Who else, indeed?"

Lois decided to ignore that comment and turned back to her desk. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You working on the Bruce Wayne background?" he asked, coming closer.

"Yes." Safe topic. Work.

"Clark suggested that I come with you to take some photos," Jimmy said. Was his voice cold or was it just her imagination?

"He wanted to come, but I don't need a partner on this," Lois replied.

"Maybe he doesn't trust you. Bruce Wayne is rumored to be sophisticated and handsome. Perhaps Clark's afraid you might get swept away by his charm."

Lois closed her eyes. "Clark trusts me. Why wouldn't he?" If Jimmy saw something, they might as well get it out in the open tonight.

"Should he?" Jimmy inquired.

She turned and faced him. "I would never do anything to hurt him. I love Clark, Jimmy. He knows that."

"Do you really, Lois? You have a funny way of showing it." Jimmy looked at her like she was garbage, then walked over to the stairwell.

Lois bit her bottom lip as a tear crept down her cheek. She picked up her stapler and threw it at the boombox, silencing Elvis forever.

***

CK and Penny were standing there in the hall by the stairwell.

"CK?" Jimmy gasped. "Penny?" He had totally forgotten that Penny had come with him.

Penny jumped up. "You ready, Jimmy? Finished?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah."

Oh, God. Poor CK. How would he ever be able to tell him? The man looked like he had already been slashed through the heart. Had he seen what his wife had done?

"Jimmy." Clark smiled in a weak greeting. "Excuse me."

Jimmy watched as his friend went into the newsroom. *Poor CK,* he thought again.

"Is everything all right?" Penny asked.

"You didn't see him?" Was he the only one who saw Lois's deception?

"Who?"

He swallowed, not able to keep quiet any longer. "Superman."

"Yeah. I saw him," she murmured.

Jimmy's eyes flashed to hers. She knew. Oh, thank God, he could talk to someone about this. "I can't believe Lois cheated on CK."

"No, she didn't, Jimmy," Penny stated.

"Didn't you see…?" He pointed back towards the newsroom. She nodded. He would never be able to get the image out of his brain.

"She would no more cheat on Clark than Psyche would cheat on her husband."

"Who? What?" Jimmy shook his head. *What's with the obscure reference, Penny?* "I know what I saw."

"You saw the lie, Jimmy. Not the truth."

"No, I think I saw the truth for the first time, just now."

Penny turned him around and made him face his friends in the newsroom. Clark was holding Lois, comforting her. "That, Jimmy. That's the truth."

Jimmy sneered. "How? Why isn't he yelling at her? He doesn't know what she did."

"He knows, Jimmy," she stated.

"But, then… why?" Jimmy was at a loss. How could CK allow Lois and Superman…?

"Because he loves her. He knows she would do anything for him, as he would for her."

Jimmy pointed at them. "She *kissed* Superman, Penny. More than kissed him. You cannot excuse that."

"Yes, well… that was a mistake."

"You *are* trying to excuse it." What was *with* everyone tonight?

Penny sighed, looping her arm through his and starting back towards the stairs. "Even I kissed Superman once, thinking he was you. Everyone makes mistakes."

"Wait. Are you saying that Lois Lane thinks CK is really Superman?" He laughed as she shrugged. "Oh. You're funny, Penny." Then her words sunk in. "You don't still want to kiss him, do you?"

She shook her head. “No. I’m over him. Anyway, I only date single men.” She smiled at him.

“What? Superman’s married?” He laughed. “Like he could keep that a secret. You’re a riot.”

Penny patted his cheek.

“He’s never been on a date. How can any woman marry Superman?”

Penny shook her head and sighed. “By saying ‘I do.’”

***

A few minutes earlier, Clark had skipped up the stairs. He couldn’t believe he had done that. They had been so careful since January… since that tabloid photo. Why hadn’t he spun right into his Clark clothes like he usually did? Lois shouldn’t have kissed him like that, but he was equally to blame. She had fallen in love with all of him, but since the beginning of the year he had been keeping half of himself more and more away from her. She hadn’t complained, per se. She had been pretty adamant about them needing privacy for him to be himself at home. With her mother visiting for the past month, watching Lara, he hadn’t been able to be himself at home for quite a while. Tonight she had shown him how much she had missed that side of him.

Clark got to the floor with the newsroom. As he walked away from the stairwell, a voice stopped him cold.

“Clark.”

He turned around. Penny. How long had she been there? Had she seen them? She stood up from where she had been sitting on the stairs.

“Penny. What are you doing here?” he asked. Was she spying on them?

“We stopped by for a few minutes, because Jimmy forgot to clean up in the dark room,” she told him.

Lois had been right. They hadn’t been as alone as they thought.

He heard Jimmy talking to Lois in the other room. *Is someone else here? I thought I heard voices.*

Clark winced. Oh, crap. He had made her the bad guy again. How were they going to get out of this one? This wasn’t some photo that could be faked. This was live and in front of his best friend. Sometimes he could be such an idiot. Well, he had better go intercede.

“Tell Lois that if you hire me, I won’t kiss Superman again,” Penny was saying.

Clark stopped and turned back to face her. That was an odd thing to say in these circumstances. “What?!”

“I wouldn’t have kissed you the first time, if I’d known you were married,” she continued.

“Excuse me?” Did she just say what he thought she said?

“I should have realized. The strong connection between Superman and Lois Lane. It was more than just friendship.”

“Excuse me?” This time, he growled. Who said something like that to the husband?

“I won’t tell anyone, Clark,” Penny said, trying to reassure him. It wasn’t working. “I’m not trying to extort you, I just thought we could help each other. You can trust me.”

“Blackmail,” he corrected automatically. “And *what* won’t you tell anyone?”

“You want me to spell it out for you?” Penny shrugged. “Okay. I know who Superman is when he’s not in his blue suit.”

Clark stepped towards her, lowering his voice. “Who?”

Penny looked at him straight into his eyes. “The man whose wife is talking to my boyfriend,” she replied, batting her eyelashes innocently.

Clark glanced over his shoulder at his wife. “I should go,” he said, neither admitting nor denying her theory.

Jimmy walked up. “CK?” He seemed shocked to see him there. “Penny?”

“Jimmy, excuse me.” Clark left them standing there. He didn’t know what to do with Penny’s proposition.

Clark saw Lois lower her head down in shame. Jimmy knew; he must have seen them. He could tell from Lois’s body language. She picked up her stapler and threw it at Perry’s boombox, knocking it to the ground and silencing the music with a crash. Then she covered her face with her hands and started to cry.

Clark walked up to his wife and wrapped his arms around her. “I’m sorry, Lois. It’s as much my fault as it is yours. Please, forgive me.” For some reason, his apology made her cry harder. He had promised himself never to make her cry, but he kept breaking that promise recently.

He glanced at the broken boombox and could understand her anger. She had alienated one of their best friends. *They* had done it together. She wasn’t the only one to blame. He held her as she cried. “I love you, Lois,” he murmured. “I’m sorry I left you to face the music by yourself.”

“Stop it, Clark. Just stop it,” she demanded.

“What?”

“Stop being so good. I don’t deserve it.”

“Don’t deserve it? You’re going to shoulder the fallout of both of our actions again. Personally, I think you deserve someone to treat you well. I might be the only one for a while.” He ran his fingers over her hair.

“Did you talk to Jimmy about keeping quiet about me and you-know-who?” she asked hopefully.

“Not yet. I can’t imagine he’d go behind my back with that story, though.”

“I just wanted to kiss you,” she whispered as an excuse, looking away.

“Kissing me wouldn’t have been so bad. It was the pinning me across the desk and straddling me that pushed it beyond pale.” Clark chuckled, cupping her cheek in his hand. “You were hot. Smoking hot. If I hadn’t been in the blue suit, Jimmy might have walked in to quite a different scene.” Waggling his eyebrows, he grinned.

Lois covered her eyes. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

He kissed her. “Too much stress over this Bruce Wayne interview. Why don’t you let me take it?” He wasn’t sure what he saw behind the Caped Crusader’s mask, but it sure looked a lot like Bruce Wayne. He would love to test his theory on the identity of Mr. I’m-Not-The-Bad-Guy.

“You heard Perry. He specifically asked for me. And I’m not going to turn down the opportunity to interview one of Gotham City’s most celebrated philanthropists. Maybe I can convince him to spend some of his money here in Metropolis.”

“He can keep his money,” Clark snapped.

“Clark, what’s going on here? Why don’t you like this guy?” she asked, reaching up and caressing his face.

“Besides being extremely wealthy, he’s a notorious playboy. Why come to Metropolis? Why now, all of a sudden? And why ask to be interviewed by my beautiful wife, who was once engaged to another wealthy philanthropist?”

“Those are some good questions.” Lois jumped up and found her notepad.

“I’ve got a thousand of them.” Clark leaned against her desk. “Which is why you should take me with you to your interview tomorrow.” A pleading smile graced his lips.

She glanced at him, brow raised, whispering, “Jimmy thinks you don’t trust me.”

“You, I trust. Wayne, I don’t.”

“I can handle those handsy, old-money types.” Lois grinned at him.

“He better not put his hands on my wife!” Clark growled.

“Whoa, Clark. What did he ever do to you?” Lois scrutinized his expression.

Clark hadn't told her about what happened in Gotham City. He knew he should, but he had been embarrassed by letting that man get the upper hand. "Let's just say he rubbed me the wrong way and I don't like him within a hundred miles of my city, let alone my wife."

Lois crossed her arms and waited.

Good time to change the subject. "By the way, I bumped into Penny in the hall."

"Oh, great. Two witnesses. I'm dead." She placed a hand on his chest. "What did Miss Ninety-Seven Percent want?"

"To tell me that she found the last three percent and that she wants us to hire her as our nanny."

Lois set her head against his chest. "Clark, she kissed you. I don't want her anywhere near you, especially if she thinks you're you-know-who."

Clark kissed the top of her head. "There's only one woman for you-know-who."

"That's part of our problem." His wife sighed. "Jimmy's not going to want her to work for us… for me. He's especially angry at me; well, angry for Jimmy. Nothing more than I deserve. I should have kept my lips to myself."

"Penny told me to tell you that she wouldn't kiss me again." Clark grinned. He hadn't meant to, but a part of him was pleased that Lois felt possessive of him. "She never would have kissed me if she had known I was married."

"I don't like this, Clark. I'm feeling backed into a corner."

"I know."

"You didn't tell her she was right, did you?" Lois asked, starting to look at the papers on her desk again.

He let go of her. One couldn't distract Lois long from a story. "Of course not."

"Good." She smiled in relief. "Why don't you fly off and get us something to eat, then you can help me finish up here?"

Clark swept her up into his arms. "How about I take you someplace where we can finish what we started?"

"Down boy," Lois said, pointing to the floor. "I've got to get back to work."

He set her down and started to hum "She Works Hard For The Money." She slapped him gently on the chest. "Chinese sounds good."

Clark sighed. "Yes, dear."

Lois grabbed his tie and pulled him toward her for a kiss. "You can show me your blue suit when we get home," she whispered.

He picked her up and deepened the kiss. "Forget Wayne, he's not worth it. I am."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't mean I'm going to skip my preparation." She slid down his body and returned to her desk.

It was difficult being married to a sexy woman with a Type A work ethic. Clark knew he wouldn't be able to change her mind. He kissed her cheek and zipped off to San Francisco's Chinatown for some late night take-out.

***

Lois and Jimmy arrived at the Metropolis branch office of Wayne Enterprises together and in silence. Jimmy hadn't said word one to her all morning, let alone looked her in the eye. In his eyes, she was mud. At least he hadn't told Perry his scoop about Lois and Superman. He respected his friendship with Clark too much.

As they waited in the lobby, Jimmy adjusted his camera lens three times. Lois sighed.

"I can't believe you did that to CK," he murmured.

She closed her eyes. "This isn't a good time, Jimmy."

Bruce Wayne entered the lobby and extended his hand. He was everything the photos and articles said about him: tall, dark, handsome, and dressed in clothes that cost more than a month of paychecks. She knew some women who needed that in a man; not her.

"Well, hello." He smiled with a debonair swagger, handing her a corsage rose. "You must be the beautiful Lois Lane. I can see what keeps Superman in Metropolis," he said, kissing her hand instead of shaking it.

"You don't know the half of it," scoffed Jimmy under his breath.

She elbowed her friend and smiled politely at Bruce Wayne, taking back her hand. "This is Jimmy Olsen, my photographer."

"Howdy." Jimmy waved. She could tell he was trying to act cool around the celebrity extraordinaire. Lois resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"Okay. My limo will take us to the restaurant," Bruce Wayne said, extending his hand out the door of the office.

"No tour?" Lois asked. "Do you have something to hide?"

"Of course not. You want a tour, a tour you shall get." Wayne led her through the offices at breakneck speed. There wasn't anything except offices in the building. He stopped in his huge, colossal space. "See anything you like?"

"This is killer!" Jimmy exclaimed, his anger at Lois forgotten for the moment as he found the vintage pinball game in the corner.

"Everyone needs an escape every once in a while." Bruce Wayne shrugged. "I can't be serious all the time. What's the fun in that?" He held up a quarter. "Want to take her for a spin, Jimmy?"

"Do I ever!" Jimmy grabbed the quarter and rushed back to the game.

Lois looked at Bruce Wayne with a raised brow. "What exactly does Wayne Enterprises do, Mr. Wayne?"

"Anything it wants to, Miss Lane. Or can I call you Lois? You may call me Bruce." He smiled, perfect teeth exposed, as he sat down in his chair behind the desk.

"It's Mrs. Kent," Jimmy called from the corner. Okay, so Jimmy hadn't forgotten he was mad at her. Or why.

"Oh, that's right. You're married now, aren't you?" Bruce stared at her, really stared at her. He leaned back in his chair, placing his fingertips together. "Tell me about yourself, Ms. Lane. How long have you and Mr. Kent been married? Do you have any children?"

"I believe I'm here to interview *you*, Bruce," she replied, sitting down and pulling out her notepad. "What do you mean when you say Wayne Enterprises does anything it wants?"

"Besides owning several smaller companies, Wayne Enterprises also has a charitable side, Wayne Foundation. I try to give at least half of Wayne Enterprises' yearly net income to charity."

"Admirable. It must be quite substantial to still accommodate your lifestyle on only half your yearly net income."

"I do well, yes." He smiled.

"What kind of charities do you sponsor?" she asked.

"Well, Lois, I have many of my own charities under Wayne Foundation. I sponsor relief work all over the world, feed the hungry, clothe and educate the poor, clean up the environment, fund medical, technological and scientific advancement, help the victims of crime, things like that," he said, waving his hand airily.

"Do you get your fingers dirty?"

"Excuse me?" She caught him off guard with that question. He sat up.

"Do you just put your name on Wayne Foundation or do you actually get involved with your charitable giving? Do you see the faces of those you help? Do you just throw money at a problem and hope it goes away?"

"I do what I can," he replied vaguely.

"And what is that?"

"A little of this, a little of that."

She raised a brow. "Such as?"

"You're tenacious." He leaned forward and gave her a dazzling smile. "I can see why he likes you so much."

"Excuse me?" *Who* likes her?

Bruce shook his head as if he misspoke.

Jimmy came over to them at that moment. "Oh, that brings back my childhood, Mr. Wayne. That totally rocks."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." Bruce stood up. "Shall we go to lunch?"

"I should probably snap a few pics while we're here," replied Jimmy, lifting his camera.

Bruce Wayne leaned on his desk and smiled. Obviously, he had had his picture taken once or twice.

"We have that shot, Bruce. How about one by the pinball game?" Lois suggested.

Bruce reached into his pocket and retrieved another quarter. "Only if you'll give her a spin." Charming.

So he wanted to dazzle her. She wondered why. Did women really fall for this phony act? After Superman, men like this were a dime a dozen. "Why don't you show me how it's done?" she said sweetly. When he stepped up to the machine, she nodded to Jimmy to snap his photo.

"You won't be able to see anything from way back there, Lois," said Bruce. Hesitantly, she stepped closer. She didn't want to be in the photo, but he obviously wanted her in it. He grabbed her hand and pulled her in front of him. "You pull this lever here to get the ball rolling." He placed his hand over hers. Oh God, what kind of idiot did he think she was?

Lois didn't like that he was touching her so much, like she was some plaything of his. His hands were over hers and his front brushed against her backside. After ten seconds, she had had enough. She stepped back onto his toe with the sharp point of her heel, her elbow to his ribcage. "Excuse me. Where may I find the little girl's room?"

He pointed out his office door, rubbing his chest. "Just down the hall on the right."

"Thank you." She smiled politely at Bruce as she shot daggers at him with her eyes. What she wouldn't give for a day with her Ultra Woman powers? Bruce baby had gotten off easy.

Turning to Jimmy, she grimaced, pretending like she wanted to throw up. He didn't smile like he normally would. Jimmy sneered at her as if he thought she was enjoying Bruce's attention. He really had lost all trust in her. She sighed and left the office, searching for the restroom.

She was beginning to wish she had brought Clark and his x-ray vision on this interview. Bruce was definitely hiding something. She didn't know what, but whatever it was, it probably wasn't here at the Metropolis branch of his offices. This guy was really too much.

Lois found the restroom and walked on past it. She closed her eyes and listened as she passed office after office. Nothing much of interest, people chatting on the phones about this event, organizing that party, purchasing supplies, paying bills. Boring. She pushed open the door of the office of the woman purchasing supplies.

The woman held up her finger, finished her call and hung up. "How may I help you?"

"I'm so sorry, I got totally turned around. Which way to the ladies' room?" Lois inquired.

"Let me file this and then I will show you the way," the woman answered. She had a slight lilting Spanish accent, the other side of the Atlantic's Spanish, not this side. The woman walked over to the filing cabinet.

"Thank you." Lois glanced down at the invoices on the woman's desk. Zippers? Kevlar fabric? What would Wayne Enterprises need with zippers and Kevlar? "Does Wayne Enterprises have a fashion division?"

The woman looked at her and then closed the folder on her desk. "This way."

"Thank you."

The woman went inside the ladies' room, so Lois went in as well.

"Mr. Wayne makes Kevlar vests for his employees who work in danger zones."

"Oh." Admirable, and therefore no longer suspicious. "Why doesn't he just buy them ready- made?"

"He's particular," the woman said, leaning against the counter. "You don't work here. No ID badge." She flipped her badge fastened to the hem of her shirt.

Lois smiled. Caught. "Lois Lane, *Daily Planet*." She held out her hand.

"Ah, the reporter." She shook her hand. "Margarite Javez. What do you want to know?"

"You don't mind talking with me?" This surprised Lois. Usually there was a memo sent around warning employees of her visit to an office whenever she and Clark had an interview with a CEO.

"I have nothing to hide and neither does Mr. Wayne."

"Have you known Mr. Wayne long?" Lois asked Margarite, wetting her hands and splashing some water on her face. She felt dirty after Bruce Wayne's pinball lesson.

Margarite pulled out her lipstick and started to fix her makeup. "I have worked for Wayne Enterprises since graduating from business school ten years ago."

"And yet he is still Mr. Wayne, not Bruce."

"Do you call the owner of the *Daily Planet* by his first name?" she replied with a raised brow, putting Lois in her place.

Normally not, thought Lois. *Lex, Leslie Luckaby, and James Olsen being the exceptions to the rule.*

Lois decided to try another approach. "Mr. Wayne seems a little overly flirtatious. Does Wayne Enterprises have problems with sexual harassment?"

"Most women like his attentions." Margarite shrugged. "They all want to be the first Mrs. Bruce Wayne. But no, he has never taken any liberties with me nor tried. I have never heard of anyone else disliking his attentions."

Lois felt anything but honored by his interest. Margarite was definitely someone that would attract a man's attention, even Clark's. With her hourglass curves, red lips, long dark curls, exotic voice, and intelligence, if Bruce hadn't hit on her, he must be somewhat of a gentleman. Maybe he only liked married women. If he liked women at all.

"He *has* met you, hasn't he?" Lois asked to make sure.

Margarite laughed. "Of course. I'm Mr. Wayne's Senior Personal Assistant."

"He has more than one?"

She shrugged. "A few."

"When you interviewed with Mr. Wayne for the position, what were your first impressions?" Lois leaned against the counter.

"I wish I could say he was the silly little frat boy he pretends to be, but he has a serious side. I would guess it was because his parents were killed at such a young age. He had to grow up quickly. He conducted our interview in Spanish, French, Japanese and English, so I knew he was well-traveled. I've heard rumors that he traveled extensively after breaking out of boarding school."

"He broke out?" Lois sputtered.

"I mean graduated." Margarite smiled. "He never speaks well of those years."

"Oh." Interesting.

"My mentor, the former Senior Personal Assistant, said that Mr. Wayne disappeared for so many years, everyone at Wayne Enterprises wondered if he would ever come back. But he returned and took over from the Board of Directors that was put

in charge at his parents' death. He hired me about a year later."

Lois pulled a business card out of her pocket and passed it to Margarite. "I'd love to talk to you more, but Mr. Wayne is probably wondering if I've fallen in."

Margarite laughed. "Come with me." She walked Lois back to her office and handed Lois her own business card. "Feel free to call me with any questions. As I said, Mr. Wayne has nothing to hide."

Lois thanked her and headed back to Bruce Wayne's office. It was Lois's experience that men with 'nothing to hide' usually had more to hide than anyone else.

***

"Did you find anything interesting on your self-guided tour?" Bruce Wayne asked her in the limo.

Jimmy looked out the window a little too innocently. Had he told Bruce that she was snooping? Probably. Had Jimmy really thought she liked having Bruce's hands all over her? She was sure that would be the story Clark was going to hear. She shook her head.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I met one of your employees, Margarite, in the restroom and we got to talking. I liked her."

He grinned. "Margarite. Now there's a beautiful woman. I should have introduced you, Jimmy. I'm sure you two would have hit it off. My lawyers have asked that I never date at the office. It saves me the expense of replacing employees and sexual harassment lawsuits."

Lois watched him. Was Bruce acting like a scuzzbucket on purpose? Everything that Margarite said about him made her suspect today's interview was a giant act. But for what purpose? "Jimmy does well enough on his own."

Jimmy grinned at the compliment. "Hey, no harm in friendly introductions, Lois. I'm still single, officially. My girlfriend is going to be Lois and CK's new nanny while she goes to graduate school."

Lois's jaw dropped. What in the world had gotten into Jimmy? He might be mad at her, but that was no reason to go dropping information to an interviewee about her personal life. And since when did having a girlfriend make a guy 'single'?

"We haven't made any decisions yet, Jimmy." She glared at him.

This seemed to interest Bruce. He leaned towards her. "So, you do have children, Lois. I would have thought with your busy and dangerous careers…"

"You had an interesting childhood yourself, Bruce. Lost your parents at an early age, sent to boarding school, college, and then headed off on a grand tour. Where did you go?"

"Shall I send you one of my biographies?" he asked, repressing a yawn.

"The last man who said that to me was Lex Luthor. How would you say your life compares to his?" Two could tango.

Bruce grinned as if he thought the comparison funny. "We were both orphaned young, came from old money, and appreciate everything that it entitles us to: good food, private planes, nice clothes, fast cars, and a fine set of chestnut eyes." He stared into her eyes. "But I think that's where the comparison will have to end. I'm still alive. I have no children I'm aware of. He was a paranoid evil genius, and I'm the opposite."

"You're a gullible but good-hearted idiot?" Lois asked.

"Lois!" Jimmy gasped, embarrassed by her brazenness.

Bruce chuckled. "Obviously, to be caught with my foot in my mouth by the lovely Lois Lane."

"How does coming from old money entitle you to a 'fine set of chestnut eyes'?" she inquired, her eyebrow raised.

He cleared his throat. "Or caught twice."

"Lex was a self-made man and not from old money. Should I send you *his* biography?" Lois asked. She had a few copies left. She and Clark used them for kindling on cold winter nights.

"The man was a notorious liar and yet you still believe he told you the truth about his upbringing?" Bruce zinged her back with a pointed expression. "And perhaps you're correct, Lois, if you look at his life from a certain point of view. Let's agree that we disagree on the subject of your former intended."

Lois decided to let the matter drop and turned the focus of her questions back on him. "Do you speak any languages other than English?"

Bruce pressed his lips together and tilted his ear upon his hand. "A few, passably. It's easier to pick up women in their native language."

"Go, BW."

Lois looked at Jimmy as if he had lost his mind.

"Sorry." Jimmy swallowed, realizing he might have stepped over the line.

"Wouldn't it be funny, if my middle initial was M? Then at least five of my cars would have my initials on them." Bruce chuckled.

Lois sensed his dense act was exactly that, an act. No one in his position could be that brainless.

"How many cars do you own?" Jimmy, the intrepid reporter, asked. Who was supposed to be doing this interview anyway?

"A few," Bruce replied. Vague. Indistinct. Subtle. He didn't like to give direct answers. Why had he asked for this interview again?

"You told me about the charitable side of Wayne Enterprises, how about the industrial side? What kind of stuff does Wayne Industries produce?" Was he sneering at her question? Did he not appreciate her labeling Wayne Industries products as 'stuff'?

"Planes, boats, technology, computers, software, biochemical marvels, genetically modified foods…" He looked up at the ceiling of the limo as if he were thinking. "Electronics, medicine, and other *stuff* like that."

"Weapons?" she asked.

He grinned. "Classified. If I told you about that, I'd have to kill you."

Lois returned his malicious smile. "My husband wouldn't like that."

"Lois!"

She turned to her colleague. "Well, he wouldn't."

"Among other people," her so-called friend murmured. Oh, so now Jimmy was mad at Superman too. *Great*.

Lois shook her head. "Jimmy, if you have something to say to me about last night, I would appreciate it if you could hold it until we were back at the office."

"Fine," he growled, crossing his arms.

Bruce raised an eyebrow at this exchange and then smiled. Terrific. "Something interesting happen last night?"

Jimmy opened his mouth, but then caught her glare. "No."

"Something to do with another story, not important," clarified Lois, then she turned to look at her supposed friend. "Perhaps we need to drop Jimmy off at the Daily Planet before lunch."

"Lois, CK wanted me to stick like glue to you," he murmured under his breath.

She rolled her eyes. "Clark trusts me."

"Ha!" Jimmy scoffed.

"Perhaps it's me your husband doesn't trust." Bruce chuckled for a moment, then his smile slid off his face as he turned and faced her, studying her.

"You do have a reputation as a ladies' man," Lois replied. "I know how to defend myself."

Bruce rubbed his chest where she had elbowed him earlier as he continued to stare at her, then asked out of the blue, "You have a child? How is that possible?"

Lois stared at him, amazed at his gall. Even Jimmy stared at him. What in the hell was he asking? Did he know about Clark?

He couldn't possibly know about him. She decided to go with Clark's answer. "The old-fashioned way."

"Excuse me?" Bruce stammered.

"The stork brought her."

"Oh, Lois, that's rich." Jimmy laughed.

Bruce smiled. "Touché."

"I think this interview is over now," Lois said, tapping on the glass to the chauffeur. "You can drop both of us back at the Daily Planet."

"What about lunch?" Bruce asked, stunned.

"I'm wasting my time." Lois closed her notepad and stuck it into her briefcase. "There isn't anything of interest about you worth writing. If that changes, feel free to contact the *Daily Planet* and my partner and I will be more than willing to come and do another interview at that time."

"I'm sorry, I crossed the line. I just meant that I thought you've been married less than a year," Wayne stammered. "But you are absolutely correct, that's none of my business."

"Tell your driver to stop the car," she demanded.

The limousine pulled over to the side of the road. Lois opened the door.

"We can drop you off at the Daily Planet, Lois. Please, forgive me. I should never have said what I said."

"Well now, we learned the two things money can't buy you, Mr. Wayne. Manners or tact. Come on, Jimmy."

Jimmy climbed out of the car with an apologetic shrug. Bruce Wayne leaned out to say one last thing, but Lois slammed the door in his face.

"Ouch!" Jimmy winced. "Lois, that was rude."

"Rude? *I* was rude? That man asked how my daughter was created. That's rude." She stormed off down the sidewalk with Jimmy following after her.

"Okay. Yeah. That was a bit of a shocker," Jimmy agreed with her on that at least.

"Plus." Lois shivered. "The man was all hands. Did you see the way he pressed himself up against me at the pinball game? Ugh." She shivered again. "I need a shower, he was so disgusting. A total pig."

"I thought he was cool until that last thing."

Lois rolled her eyes.

"Shouldn't we hail a taxi?"

"The walk will do me good. It's only ten blocks or so." It would give her a chance to cool off before telling Clark what happened.

Jimmy groaned. "More like fifteen."

She was already a half block ahead of him when he sighed and went to flag down a cab.

***

"Why are you back so early?" Clark asked Jimmy when he walked into the newsroom before noon. "And where's Lois?"

"She decided to walk," Jimmy replied.

"Jimmy?"

"Mr. Wayne said something she didn't like, so she had him pull the limo over on the way to the restaurant and ended the interview."

Clark smiled. *Good for Lois. Not one of the bad guys, huh, Wayne?* Then his brows came together. "What did he say?"

Jimmy looked away. "It would be better if Lois told you."

Clark felt his blood begin to boil as his hands became fists. "What did he say?"

A delivery man arrived with a huge bouquet of yellow roses. There must have been around two dozen of them. He set it on Lois's desk. Clark signed for it and then grabbed the note. *Please forgive me, Bruce.*

The elevator chimed and Lois stormed out. "Jimmy Olsen! How dare you flag down a cab and leave me on the street!"

"You said you wanted to walk," he replied nonchalantly.

"Another thing. You were completely unprofessional back there."

"I was completely unprofessional?" Jimmy snapped back. "He was so totally cool. And you slammed the car door in his face."

"Lois," Clark interrupted, stepping between them. "What did he say to you?"

Lois closed her eyes and took a deep breath, setting her hand on his chest. "I'll tell you later, Clark. Trust me, you're not going to like it." Then she turned back to Jimmy. "What was with all those wisecracks about me? I was trying to interview the guy and you kept mumbling under your breath."

"Well, excuse me if I had something to say."

"You had no right to tell him about my life, my child," Lois said, glaring at Jimmy.

Clark wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and faced Jimmy, looking at him as if he had never seen him before. "You told Bruce Wayne about Lara?"

Jimmy smiled weakly, possibly a little chagrined. "We were talking about Penny. And it slipped out that she was your new nanny."

"Are you nuts? That guy could be a psychopath!" Clark glared at him. "When you think of Bruce Wayne, think Lex Luthor."

"Come on, CK. The guy was totally unreal. The women he's dated, the things he does, the people he's met. He had a vintage pinball machine in his office. He wasn't old like Lex. *He* acknowledged my existence."

Lois shivered with disgust.

"Lois?"

"You will never hear me say this again, Clark, so listen closely." She took a deep breath. "You were right and I was wrong."

Clark's brows came together as he growled, "What. Did. He. Do?"

"I'll tell you the details later, but let's just say the man is scum, lower than pond scum." Lois shivered again. "He did everything possible to make me utterly despise him. He was handsy, overly flirtatious, probing with his questions about my life, and just plain rude." She turned to Jimmy. "And what's up with you telling him that I was snooping around, when I went to the ladies' room?"

Jimmy shrugged. "You were gone for over ten minutes, Lois. What was I supposed to tell him?"

"Jimmy?" Clark was dismayed. That didn't sound like his friend. "I asked you to shield her from that rodent and you bonded with him."

"You weren't there, CK. You didn't see…" He pressed his lips together, looking at Lois with disgust. Then he walked off.

Clark sighed. Jimmy was still angry about the previous night. "Are you okay?" he asked Lois with a hug.

Lois shook her head. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Clark. Jimmy has never treated me like that before. He sided with that guy on everything, except…" She closed her eyes and took another deep breath.

"What did he say, Lois? Or do I have to go over there and pound it out of him?" Clark asked, completely serious.

Lois smiled for the first time since entering the newsroom. "Tempting, but no. He isn't worth the effort."

"Lane. Olsen. My office, pronto," Perry yelled, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb.

Jimmy rolled his eyes and didn't come within five feet of her as she set down her briefcase under her desk. She sighed and then kissed her husband. "Thank you, Clark. I'll tell you everything when we're alone. If Jimmy explodes we'll have enough gossip floating around here today. You need to talk to him."

Clark nodded, but he had no idea what to say. He watched his

wife enter Perry's office and sat back down at his desk, staring up at the ceiling. Lois was his wife and Jimmy should let them deal with it on their own. The kiss didn't mean anything. He shook his head. It *did* mean something. It meant Jimmy was never going to trust Lois again. If this kept up, he might have to tell Jimmy the truth. He sighed.

Help! Superman, help! Well, he had other things to do than think about his own problems. Clark stood up and jogged towards the storage room.

***

Lois dragged her feet into Perry's office and sat down in the chair next to Jimmy, who scooted his chair farther away.

Perry shut the door and sat down on the corner his desk, crossing his arms. "Okay. Spill it."

"Spill what, Chief?" Jimmy said, obviously lying. Clark was lucky to have him as a friend.

"What's going on between you two? Why were you sabotaging Lois's interview? Did you not like Mr. Wayne?"

"No. Of course not. Bruce Wayne is super," Jimmy gushed. He looked at Lois with a scowl. "Lois was completely unprofessional."

She ran her tongue over her teeth but said nothing.

"Uh-huh," Perry stated with disbelief before he turned to her. "Lois?"

"I have no problem working with Jimmy." She pasted a smile on her lips. "As long as he remembers we are supposed to work together as a team, support one another, and cover for one another."

"Jimmy?"

"She crossed a line and I'd feel more comfortable not working with her anymore."

"Uh-huh." Perry nodded. "What line?"

"It's personal, Chief."

"It's not personal when it affects your work relationship." Their editor stared at Jimmy. Great, he was going to cave. Nobody would outwait Perry when he looked at them like that.

Jimmy swallowed. "Off the record?" His voice was barely a whisper.

Lois leaned back and glanced towards Clark, who looked as if he was listening to their conversation from his desk while he stared at the ceiling. She stood up. "I really don't need to be here."

Perry pointed at her chair and she sat back down.

"Lois kissed someone other than CK last night."

Lois scrunched down in her seat covering her face. There would be no escape.

"Who?" Perry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The who isn't important," stammered Lois with a glance at Jimmy. "It meant nothing. It was a mistake. Clark and I have already discussed it and moved on. So should you."

Jimmy's lips were pressed together. "It meant *nothing*? Lois, you and I both know that wasn't a nothing kiss. I can't look at you without being disgusted. You climbed on top of the man!"

Lois's eyes squeezed shut and she covered her face with her hands. *Please, let this be a horrible dream.*

"Lois. Does this have anything to do with what we discussed last week?" Perry asked calmly.

Eeep! She covered her mouth and looked away with a nod. *Clark, rescue me now! Have some hot story you need me on right this moment, please.* She looked around Jimmy and Perry, but Clark's desk was empty. Great. No backup.

"Lois?"

"Yes, Perry?"

"Who broke my stereo, darling?"

Lois gulped. "Me."

He nodded. "Which song was playing?"

"'Burning Love'," Lois murmured. Their song. The song she and the other Clark had danced to and made out to at Mayor White's Superhero Costume ball. The song that made her want to make love to him. The song that made her cheat on her husband with Superman.

Perry slammed his palm down on his desk. "Damn it, girl, I told you to fix this. I told you to make the music your own and you didn't listen to me."

"You knew about this, Chief?" Jimmy was stunned.

"I didn't have time. My life hasn't been exactly my own recently. I never see him alone any more. I thought I'd have time… before I saw him again… but then there he was and there I was and the music started. He just wanted to dance and I… I …" Lois's voice shook as the tears crept down her cheeks.

"Shoved him onto a desk and climbed on top of him," finished Jimmy.

"Jimmy stopped you, then?" Perry asked.

Lois shook her head. "*He* stopped me. I couldn't control myself."

"I'll give him this much. He, at least, knew what they were doing was wrong. Then he just took off, faster than a speeding bullet." Jimmy motioned with his hand.

Lois winced, cowering lower into her seat. *Please don't catch the hint. Please, for once, don't know.*

"Superman?" Perry stood up and pointed out to the newsroom. "Lois, are you telling me that the man… the man that you are brainwashed to kiss is….?"

"Brainwashed?" stammered Jimmy. "Lois has been brainwashed? Oh, thank God. I knew there had to be a reason." He sighed in relief.

Lois glanced at Jimmy. He was her friend again. Her being brainwashed, he could understand. Her cheating on Clark, not so much.

"I'm so sorry, Lois. If I knew you had been brainwashed, I never would have… no wonder CK forgave you so quickly. It made no sense. How could he forgive you for that?" Jimmy shook his head. "I'll never get that image out of my head."

Lois covered her face. Nor would she.

"Off the record, huh?" Perry was thinking this one over.

"It isn't news, Perry. It would ruin her. It would ruin him. It would crush CK if this got out," Jimmy defended her.

Lois wanted to hug him as the tears that fell from her eyes were of joy at having her friend back. Brainwashing. So simple. Why hadn't they thought of it?

Perry held up his hand. "This isn't news, it's gossip. The *Daily Planet* isn't a gossip rag." He turned to Lois. "If it happens again, it will no longer be gossip. It will be news. Do I make myself clear, young lady?"

Lois nodded.

"Are you sufficiently motivated to deprogram yourself?"

Lois nodded again, still unable to speak.

"Okay." Perry thought about that, shaking his head. "Superman. Hmmm."

"Do you know who's behind it?" Jimmy asked.

Perry and Lois exchanged a look, before their editor answered, "Well, yes, Jimmy. It's complicated."

"I get it, Chief. No hard facts." Jimmy sighed. "I hate that."

"You and me both, Jimmy. Why don't you go develop those photos from the Wayne interview?" Perry suggested.

"Okay, Chief. Lois, if you or CK need anything, anything at all, call me night or day."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Jimmy."

The photographer left the office, closing the door behind him and Perry sat down in the chair he vacated. "So, Lois. Superman?"

She gulped. "I told you, you wouldn't want to know."

"You used to be obsessed with the fellow."

"I know."

"We need to nip this in the bud, yesterday. Understand me?"

"Yes, Perry."

"We're going to have to tackle this head-on. I'm sending you and Clark to Memphis. No questions asked, no excuses. You are going."

Lois swallowed. She had to expunge this compulsion from her life. She had to move on.

"I know this little hotel where Alice and I used to go. They have a package that plays Elvis music twenty-four seven in your hotel room. You cannot escape it. You cannot turn it off. Do you understand me?"

Lois nodded.

Perry shook his head. "Superman. Who knew?" He sighed. "What did you tell Clark?"

She smiled weakly. "I told him I wished it hadn't happened. That I'm sorry. That I love him and only him."

He patted her hand. "Clark's a good man, Lois. Once he might forgive. Twice…" Her boss shrugged. "You need to ask for his help. Tell him what happened. Tell him the truth."

Lois nodded. She would never be able to tell Clark the whole truth.

***

As Clark returned from the store room, Lois was just leaving Perry's office. She wrapped her arms around him and sighed.

"Lois, are you all right? You look like you've been crying."

She took a deep breath. "Don't worry about Jimmy. He's forgiven me."

"He told Perry about last night?"

Lois nodded.

"Everything?"

She nodded again.

Clark looked sympathetically at her. "I'm sorry I left."

"No. It's okay. Did you help someone?"

"An elderly lady fell down, broke her hip, and couldn't reach the phone."

"Then don't be sorry." Lois glanced at her desk and her face lit up. "Roses? Clark, you are the sweetest. I love you."

"I love you, too," he said. "But they aren't from me."

Lois took the card from the bouquet. Her teeth gnashed together as she read it and then tore it to pieces.

Clark noticed a flower on her lapel. "Where did you get the corsage?"

Lois grimaced, pulling it off and dropping it on the ground. As she smashed it with the heel of her shoe, a high-pitched electronic whine escaped from the flower, causing Clark to grab his ears and cringe, and then the sound disappeared into nothingness.

"What's the matter?"

Clark picked up the flower and looked at it, really looked at it. Disguised as part of the stamen was a microscopically small microphone in the shape of a smashed bat. *Really? A bat? Can you announce your secret identity any louder there, Mr. Wayne?* The flower was certainly bugged. Correction, it *had* been bugged. "Wayne," he snarled and then showed Lois the bug. She didn't have his microscopic vision and couldn't see its shape, but she could see enough to tell that it was an electronic listening device.

She nodded to the bouquet of roses. He scanned them. They were clean. "I should check the whole office to be on the safe side."

Lois nodded again. "Um, Clark?" She held out the corsage. "Shall we do some target practice?" she asked under her breath.

He laughed softly, pocketing the flower. His heat vision didn't need practice. "When did he give it to you?"

"When I arrived at his office."

Clark nodded and made a circle with his finger. He walked around the entire newsroom, scanning here, scanning there, scanning here and there, scanning everywhere. No more bugs. He sighed in relief and returned to Lois at her desk.

Lois was staring at the bouquet of yellow roses. Then she glanced at her watch, her brows coming together. "When did this get here?"

"Just before you did."

"Clark." His wife pulled the pieces of the note out of the trash and set them on her desk, trying to reassemble the pieces. "He may be rich, but there is no way this bouquet could have been prepared and delivered in less time than it took me to return to the office." She looked at the pieces of the note with a shake of her head. "Some help here."

Ten seconds later, he had the note reassembled and that was at normal speed. "Metro Flowers."

Lois opened the phone book, found the flower shop listing, and dialed. "Hello, this is Lois Lane at the *Daily Planet*. I received some flowers today around noon. Could you tell me when they were ordered?"

"Yes… oh, I see… no, it's okay… I understand. Mistakes happen… thank you." She set down the phone. "They were ordered two days ago, and weren't supposed to arrive until four o'clock this afternoon."

Clark raised his brow and he leaned against her desk. "Tell me everything."

"The whole interview felt fake. Like he was trying to be someone he wasn't." Lois pulled out her notebook. "He made us wait at least fifteen minutes in the lobby. And then he didn't apologize for being late. Then he gave me the flower corsage and suggested we head straight for lunch. I insisted on a tour of the office. No, wait, before that. He said something strange." She looked Clark straight into his eyes. "He said he could see why Superman stays in Metropolis."

Clark smiled at his wife and lowered his voice, "Well, it's true."

She caressed his cheek. "I met his Senior Personal Assistant."

"He has more than one?" Clark asked. "Excessive."

Lois shrugged. "Margarite has been with Wayne Enterprises for ten years. She was hired shortly after his trip to find himself. I asked her initial impressions of him. She said that when he interviewed her, he spoke to her in English, Spanish, French, and Japanese."

"Japanese? That doesn't sound like the idiotic playboy we researched last night."

"Exactly. When I asked him about it, he brushed it off as an extra way to pick up girls."

Clark raised a brow, not knowing what to say to that piece of information.

"She also said that he was serious, not like the frat boy image he projects. She said that they — Wayne Enterprises and Bruce Wayne — have nothing to hide."

Clark pulled the smashed flower out of his pocket. "Obviously, they do."

"That was my feeling as well. He said something else odd. He said, under his breath, almost to himself, something like *I can see why he likes you so much* or something to that effect. But Jimmy interrupted us before I could ask him about whom he meant. When we got into the limo, he said a bunch of useless stupid stuff, but he also was really vague with his answers, not responding directly to anything. He spoke about not dating within his company, some stuff Jimmy enjoyed about his car collection… oh, I asked him if Wayne Industries produced weapons. He told me that information was classified. And joked that if he told me, he'd have to kill me. I retorted that you wouldn't like that much."

"Again, true." Clark took her hand in his. He liked it when his wife chose honesty over lies. It made him feel like he had been a good influence on her life in more ways than one.

"That's when he got strange, almost too focused in his

attention on me. Like I was some puzzle he was trying to solve. But what made me stop the interview was when he said, and I'm quoting, 'You have a child?' This was after Jimmy told him that we were considering Penny for our nanny. He said, 'You have a child? How is that possible?'"

His jaw fell open.

"My thoughts exactly. I thought, who in the world would ask that kind of question? How could he be so crass? Unless he knew we couldn't have children. But then how in the world could he know?"

Clark swallowed. "What did you tell him?"

Lois grinned wickedly. "The same thing you told Perry about the stork and then I told him to pull over the car, because we were getting out."

"Wow." Clark shook his head. "He's really looking for me. I'm surprised he didn't invite both of us to the interview."

"I think he blew off my husband and partner as inconsequential." Lois covered her mouth. "Oh, Clark, he heard. In Perry's office. About me and you-know-who." She gulped, lowering her voice. "About the kiss."

Clark grinned naughtily, kissing her hand. "It will throw him off course. I must be your beard."

"Of course." Lois laughed. "Why didn't I see it before? Why in the world would I marry someone as pleasant and funny and smart as you?" Her brows came together as she stopped laughing. "Why, Clark? Why would some wealthy playboy want to track down you-know-who, just to find him, or to find his secret identity? It doesn't make sense."

Clark shrugged. He had a pretty good idea on the why, but he wasn't ready to share it with Lois. If Batman was good, as he claimed, it wasn't Clark's place to reveal his secret, even to Lois. But if Wayne turned out to be bad, like Luthor, all bets were off and Clark would let Mad Dog Lane have at him. What Clark couldn't understand was why Batman was interested in getting in contact with him? It didn't make sense. Especially in light of what the man had done at the bank.

Jimmy walked up. "Lois, the photos are drying. There's a great shot of Bruce Wayne trying to nail you against the pinball machine."

"What?" Clark was on his feet, his teeth grinding together. "He did *what*?"

Jimmy swallowed and glanced nervously at Lois. "Sorry, CK. I thought she told you."

"I hadn't gotten to that part yet," Lois sniped.

"Tell me now," he demanded.

Lois told him about the pinball game and how Bruce had insisted on showing her how to play. Then she shivered in disgust. "But the heel of my shoe and my elbow told him I wasn't interested."

"Perhaps my fist would be more persuasive."

His wife put her hand over his fist. "No, Clark. It's what he wants." She covered her mouth. "That's it. That's why he wanted the interview. He didn't want the PR. He didn't care about answering questions, he spent the whole time just trying to piss me off. The flowers proved that. It was all premeditated. He's searching for Superman and he thought he'd anger me enough to run to Superman and have him jump to my defense."

"Even more reason for me to punch his lights out," grumbled Clark.

"Whoa, CK!" Jimmy was suitably impressed at Clark's jealousy. Perhaps it was Clark's lack of jealousy at Superman that had knocked Jimmy through a loop. "Bruce Wayne is looking for Superman? He really is an idiot if he thinks that someone treating Lois badly would make Superman go pummel a guy." Their friend glanced at Lois. "Or is he?"

"You're right, Jimmy." Lois turned to Clark, staring him in the eyes. "Superman would always take the moral high ground."

Clark scoffed. "Who cares what Superman would do? I'm going to go down to Wayne Enterprises and give him a piece of *my* mind." He pulled Lois in for a kiss. "Jimmy, the photographic evidence, please."

Jimmy pointed to the darkroom. "It's drying."

"Clark, don't," Lois begged. "He's not worth it."

"No man's going to treat my wife like that." Clark marched off towards the darkroom.

He could hear Jimmy say to Lois, "Do you think it's delayed reaction to last night? I mean, Clark knows that he wouldn't win in a fight against Superman. At least with Bruce Wayne, he has a fighting chance."

"No, Jimmy," Lois replied to Clark's surprise. "If Clark ever fought Superman, he would win."

Clark stopped mid-stride and turned back to look at her. What in the world was she talking about? She knew he couldn't fight Superman.

"Because despite his strength, Superman would know he was in the wrong and Clark was right."

"I don't know, Lois. I don't think Superman was the only one to blame."

She winced. "I'm sorry, Jimmy. I couldn't stop myself. Really, I've been trying."

"I know. Brainwashed." Jimmy looked like he wanted to say something else, but was stopping himself. Then he couldn't hold it in any longer. "Just out of curiosity. What's the trigger?"

Lois turned away from him, started shifting papers around on her desk. "I don't want to talk about this."

"The music? Is that why you smashed Perry's stereo?"

Clark continued to stare at Lois, frozen in the middle of the newsroom, his anger at Bruce Wayne pushed to the back of his brain. What was going on with Lois? Brainwashed? Then he thought again of that Bat pressing himself against his wife and marched into the darkroom for the photo.

***

Clark stormed into the Wayne Enterprises offices, stopping in front of a tall, extremely beautiful woman. "Tell Wayne I need a word with him."

She looked him up and down. "Do you have an appointment?" she asked with a lilting Spanish accent.

"I'm Clark Kent. He'll want to see me."

She nodded and sashayed down the hall. The receptionist's phone buzzed a minute later. "Please wait for Ms. Javez to take you to Mr. Wayne's office."

The beautiful woman returned. "Hello, Mr. Kent. I am Margarite Javez, Mr. Wayne's Senior Executive Personal Assistant. Please, follow me." This was the woman who gave Lois all the goods on Bruce Wayne? She knew four languages? Long before he met Lois, he would have been tempted to follow a woman like this anywhere. "In here." She knocked on a double set of doors and then opened them. She did not follow him inside, but closed the door behind him.

Sitting behind the mammoth desk was Bruce Wayne, just as his photos showed him. Well coiffed, well dressed, and adjusting an emerald pinky ring on his right hand. "What can I do for you, Mr. Kent?" he asked simply.

As if he didn't know!

Clark threw the photo he had taken of Bruce showing Lois how to play the pinball game across the desk. "What makes you think you have the right to insult or touch my wife?" His hands were in fists. He was clenching his jaw so strongly his head was starting to hurt.

Bruce smiled in a relaxed manner. "That does look damning, but I assure you it was all innocent. I was teaching her the fine art of the game."

Clark reached across the desk and pulled Wayne out of his chair by his lapels. "Any seven year-old knows how to play

pinball, you ignoramus. You owe her an apology."

"I sent flowers," Wayne replied calmly.

"She got them." Clark pulled the corsage out of his pocket and threw it in Bruce's face.

The billionaire's eyes glanced down at the flower that had fallen onto his desk. "Oh."

Clark dropped him, with a slight push, landing Wayne back into his chair. "Lois is right. You're not worth it." He turned away from him, heading towards the door, his stomach starting to churn. Lois was right. Revenge wasn't him; so much so that this little bit was making him sick.

"So, only superheroes are allowed liberties with her?" Bruce replied with a snigger, bringing himself to his feet and brushing off his suit.

Clark turned around and before he knew what he was doing, he had punched the guy across the jaw, sending him flying across the room. His anger was really causing his head to throb now.

"Guess not." Bruce rubbed his jaw. "I deserved that."

"Stay away from my wife," Clark growled.

"Or you'll what?" Bruce stepped up to him, clearly unafraid. "Kill me? I thought that was against Superman's credo."

Clark looked him up and down in disbelief. *Does Wayne know that I'm Superman or is the man just guessing? And what is he trying to prove by goading me if he thinks I am the Man of Steel? That even Superman gets angry enough to draw blood sometimes?* That was a dangerous game to play and Clark didn't play Russian roulette. He shook his pounding head and turned towards the door again. "You've got your lines crossed, Wayne. I'm no superhero. Just a jealous husband."

"You should at least let me get one punch in. Make the fight fair," Bruce said, still rubbing his jaw.

Clark ignored him. As he reached the door, Bruce kicked him with a flying leap, spinning Clark around and knocking his back into the heavy wooden door that didn't even groan at his weight. Then the man hit him across Clark's cheek. The chop didn't knock him down at first, but then his head began to throb in earnest and his knees weakened.

He felt doubly the fool. First for letting his jealousy get the better of him, and secondly, for walking into such an obvious trap. That was no emerald ring. And Clark's head hadn't been pounding due to his anger. Wayne was again letting him know not only that he had Kryptonite, but he had more than one piece. Was he trying to find out how much of that stuff it took to weaken him? Was this just another test? He glared at that man's triumphant face, then opened the door, leaving him behind.

Stumbling out the door and down the hallway to the lobby, Clark made it to the elevator. But it wasn't until he was outside, and felt the sunshine on his face, that he started to feel better.

When he got back to the office, he found a Post-it note on the 'article' Lois had written from her Bruce Wayne interview. He glanced at what she had written and the first smile in an hour appeared on his face. Sadly, her words would never see the light of day.

Perry walked out of his office and glanced around. "Clark, where's Lois?"

"She went home early. Her mom leaves on a cruise tomorrow and she's meeting with a prospective nanny."

"Oh." Perry stared at him. "Good. Clark, can I talk to you in my office?"

"Sure." Clark grabbed Lois's article and entered Perry's office.

"Close the door," his editor told him.

Clark closed the door and sat down.

"Son, I was wondering how you're doing?"

"How I'm doing, sir?" He was confused. "Oh, here is Lois's article about Bruce Wayne."

Perry looked at him with a raised brow, then came around to the other side of his desk. "Where did you get the shiner?"

"What?" He didn't get black eyes. Clark looked around the office for something reflective and finally settling on the glass covering Perry's Elvis stamp poster. He had a definite cut under his eye. Proof positive that it wasn't an emerald ring on Bruce Wayne's finger. He was still surprised that Bruce Wayne would reveal his secret identity as Batman so clearly. Clark would think he would want it kept secret like he did.

He touched the sore area around the cut and glanced back at Perry, smiling weakly. "I paid Bruce Wayne a visit this afternoon."

Perry shook his head, setting down Lois's article. "I know this must be difficult for you, son. You know Lois wasn't herself last night, right?"

His boss wanted to talk to him about his wife and Superman. Clark was unsure how to act. He knew that she didn't really cheat on him, though it looked that way to everyone else. Everyone thought his anger at Bruce Wayne was because of Lois's Superman kiss. No, he really was mad at Bruce Wayne. But he took the Get Out Of Jail Free card when offered. "Jimmy said something about her being brainwashed."

"That's the cover story I came up with to get Jimmy back on the right page," Perry explained.

Clark looked up at him. "She wasn't brainwashed? She…" He let that fragment of a sentence hang for dramatic effect.

"Well, she was… sort of…. She was drugged, unable to control her actions."

"Drugged? Lois was *drugged*?" This was the first he had heard of it. Why hadn't she told him? Or was that just *her* cover story?

"By mistake. She'll explain it to you better herself, I'm sure."

"Okay," Clark replied with hesitation and doubt. Lois hadn't been forthcoming on a lot of things lately.

"You need to forgive her this transgression and move on."

"We've already discussed it and put it behind us. She made a mistake and it won't happen again." Clark nodded. He would make sure of that.

"That's very big of you, Clark."

"She loves me, Chief. We'll come out of this stronger, I know."

Perry sighed and smiled uncertainly at him.

"You and Lois have always covered Superman together and I believe, for the time being, we need to put someone else on the Superman beat. And Lois agrees."

"She agreed?" This stunned Clark. Lois didn't give an inch when it came to her journalistic territory. Ever. Especially if it concerned Superman. "But she…" He caught himself. He almost told Perry that "she loves Superman" and, in this situation, that would probably be interpreted the wrong way. "… and I have always written those stories together."

"Do you think you can be impartial, now?"

About as impartial any man living a dual life could be. "I have loved Lois since the moment you introduced us four years ago, Perry. Was I impartial about Superman, even when she was obsessed with him in those early years?" he asked.

"Yes, son. But this is different. She's your wife now," Perry explained. "And you are trying to adopt a daughter together. It would be better for everyone involved if there was a little distance between you two and him. I mean, for heaven's sake, Clark. The man made out with your wife."

"He didn't make out with her!" Clark said forcefully, before he realized what he was saying.

Perry gulped. "You saw the kiss?"

Clark looked away. "Yes. I was there."

"I'm sorry, son," Perry said, setting a hand on Clark's shoulder. "Jimmy said that Superman pushed Lois off him, but…"

Clark winced at Perry's words. Had he really pushed his wife away? He really had made her into the bad guy in all this. Again.

"But that's not important. I know this incident is going to affect your and Lois's relationship with Superman, whether you want it to or not. Could you get in touch with him and tell him I want to meet with him tonight? I'd do it myself, but you and Lois seem to be the only ones with his contact information. I need to introduce him to Barry."

"Barry? You're assigning Barry Balson to Superman?" Clark's eyes popped. He shook his head. "Lois."

"Yeah. I was surprised by her suggestion too. But it's only temporary, a month or two, until the dust settles."

"I don't really know him," Clark mumbled. Superman preferred to give his exclusives to Lois.

"You'll show Barry the ropes, right, Clark?"

"Of course, Chief." He sighed. He felt like he was being punished for the whole kiss episode, but maybe he should be. After all, he was partially to blame.

"There are plenty of other stories, Clark."

"I know."

"I'm putting you and Lois on the bullet train story. You two will take the initial run to Memphis, spend a few nights at the Hotel Teddy Bear."

"Hotel Teddy Bear?" Clark repeated incredulously.

"It sounds worse than it is. You guys need a few days, just the two of you. Consider it an early anniversary gift. Take the train back here on Monday."

"Wait. *This* weekend?" Clark stammered.

"You'll leave Friday, come back Monday, relaxed, ready to move on with your lives.

Clark's head started spinning. "Okay. I guess we could bring Lara."

"Just the two of you," Perry insisted.

"It's not just the two of us any more, sir. We don't even have a nanny lined up to replace Lois's mom. We've been talking to Penny about watching Lara during the days, then Lois and I would have her at night and weekends."

"Penny? Jimmy's Penny?"

Clark nodded. "We could fly Lara out to my folks for the weekend…"

"Wait. Wait. Wait. You're thinking of taking a plane to Kansas, dropping Lara off, flying back and catching the bullet train? That's insane, Clark."

Clark shrugged. It would be for someone else without their own airline. "You and Alice wouldn't want to take her for the weekend, would you?" Clark grinned. "Practice for those grandbabies?"

Perry blanched. "Hire Penny. Let her watch Lara for the weekend."

"I don't know, Perry. We haven't even given her a test run yet."

"Sam Lane lives in town, right? See if he can watch her at night and Penny and Jimmy will watch her during the days."

"I don't know, sir," said Clark. "I don't think Lois will go for it."

Perry opened his office door. "Olsen!" He turned back to Clark. "She doesn't have a choice in the matter. I've already explained that much to her."

Clark's jaw dropped. What in the hell was going on? Why hadn't Lois warned him?

"Yes, Chief?" Jimmy said, coming into the office.

Perry put his arm around his shoulders. "You feel really bad about the whole brainwashing incident and sabotaging Lois's Bruce Wayne interview, right?"

Jimmy glanced at Clark. "Yes, Chief."

"Good. To make up for it, you and Penny will be watching Lara all weekend. I'm sending Lois and Clark here to Memphis on the bullet train story."

"Memphis?" Jimmy stole a look at Clark and lowered his voice. "That's where Elvis is from, Chief. Do you think that's such a good idea?"

"Don't worry, Olsen. Clark will be with her the whole time. Won't you, Clark?"

There was more going on here than he had been told. "Of course. Won't let her out of my sight."

Perry patted Jimmy on the back. "Good. It's all settled."

"What's all settled?" Jimmy asked.

"You and Penny will be watching Lara while Lois and Clark spend a romantic weekend in Memphis," repeated Perry.

"Oh, no! Chief. CK. I can't babysit a baby. I don't know anything about babies. How about Penny and I go to Memphis and Lois and CK stay home?"

"Penny knows about babies, right?" Perry asked.

"Hopefully," said Clark.

"So, what do you have to fear?" Perry asked.

"Besides having my girlfriend see me with a baby all weekend? Nothing." Jimmy gulped and turned to Clark. "You owe me. Big."

"I can see if Superman can fly you and Penny somewhere next weekend?" Clark suggested. "He owes me."

"Oh, no! I don't want him anywhere near my girlfriend," Jimmy replied.

"You don't trust Superman, Olsen?" Perry asked.

Jimmy shook his head. "No, I don't trust Penny with him."

Clark sighed. Superman suddenly had a bad reputation at the *Daily Planet*. He wondered if Lois would trust Penny, either. He feared the Jimmy and Penny relationship was heading into rocky waters.

Clark wanted to fly home and ask Lois what was going on, but his mother-in-law still had one more night under his roof. He wanted his house back. His life back. His wife back.

***

Before he could return home, Clark needed a little more sunshine. He flew up out into the atmosphere, closer to the sun. He felt the sun's rays heal his black eye and hoped he wouldn't even have a scar by the time he returned home. He didn't want to worry Lois and he had a meeting as Superman this evening with Perry. The Chief was bound to suspect something if Superman had an identical scratch to Clark's.

Clark landed in an alley a block away and walked home. He opened the front door. "Hi, honey, I'm home." He checked his cheek in the mirror. All healed. *Thank you, yellow sun.*

"In here, Clark," called Lois from the kitchen. He kissed her cheek. Their house felt homier since Lois learned to cook. Not that he would ever mention that to her.

"Where's Lara?"

"Mom's changing one last diaper. Personally, I think she's going to be begging to watch her again when she comes back."

That was a pipe dream, Clark knew. Ellen had made it clear to him this was a one-shot deal. "You and Penny come to an arrangement?"

Lois sighed. "She swears she wasn't trying to blackmail us into hiring her. She only thought it would give us peace of mind to have someone who knew your secret with Lara. It would be something we wouldn't have to fear her discovering."

Clark thought about that. Penny might have a point there. "I'm not admitting anything to her."

"Good idea. I told her no matter who she thought you were, we needed someone we could trust completely around our daughter." Lois wiped her hands and returned to the dining room. She picked up a few papers from the table. "She brought these. Financial information. Family background. Full bio."

Clark quickly glanced through them, before setting them back down. "Why does she want this job so badly?" It really was only

a glorified babysitting position.

"I don't know. The hours work with her school schedule. Nights and weekends off. Big paycheck." Lois placed a hand on his chest. "Or maybe the thought of helping Superman or his child holds some appeal."

Clark wrapped his arms around her. "Perry's putting us on the bullet train story. We get to spend this weekend in Memphis. Just you and me."

"Sounds nice." Then she froze. "Who's going to watch Lara? I guess we could fly her out to Kansas."

Clark shook his head. "Do you think your dad could watch her at night?"

"Why? Why can't she go to Kansas?"

He explained what happened back at the office.

"I don't like the idea of leaving her for a whole weekend," Lois murmured, leaning against this chest.

"Me either. But maybe the Chief's right. We need some time alone, just the two of us. Of course, I don't know why it would have to be in Memphis."

"You know Perry." She laughed. "Anything Elvis is more romantic."

"At least it wasn't Gotham City."

Lois smiled. "It might be like a second honeymoon."

"So it doesn't matter where we go." Clark grinned.

***

Superman landed quietly in the middle of the deserted newsroom. Had it really only been one day since Lois pinned him to the desk? He knocked on Perry's office door. "You wanted to see me?"

Perry waved him in and offered him a seat. Superman preferred to stand, arms crossed.

"Thank you for coming." Perry looked uncomfortable. Superman hoped knowing about the kiss wasn't going to change their relationship. The editor cleared his throat. "What did Clark say to you?"

"He left me a message that you wanted to see me." The more vague he could be, the more he might learn from Perry. Lois was pleading innocence yet again.

"Okay. You know that Lois means the world to me."

Superman nodded curtly. Perry wasn't going to bring up the kiss, was he?

"She told me what happened, in confidence."

He glanced down a moment. Then he looked Perry in the eye. "I don't know what came over her. I know she loves Clark."

Perry raised a skeptical eyebrow. "That's not quite true, is it?"

Superman returned a stern eyebrow back.

"I mean, of course Lois loves Clark. That's not what I was referring to. I meant she told me about the other incident… I just didn't know it was you until today."

Other incident? What other incident? Superman stayed quiet. Sometimes, it was good to be known as the strong, silent type.

Perry swallowed. "At her townhouse. With the Elvis music and the *Revenge* sample."

Superman shifted from foot to foot, but didn't respond. How could he? He had no idea what event Perry was referring to.

"Gosh darn it, man. Lois told me about spilling the *Revenge* perfume sample on herself just before you stopped by. And how the two of you came under the influence of the drug and things happened…"

This time Superman glanced away. What in the hell had Lois told Perry? He was embarrassed for his friend and boss.

"She didn't tell me what, but I'm suspecting more than kissing was involved. I'm sure she would never have told me, but somehow, because the Elvis music was playing during the first incident, every time she hears his music she becomes distracted with thoughts of you."

Superman had no idea what Perry was talking about. This event had never happened… not with *him*. He had been able to control himself when Lois was last inebriated by *Revenge*, so if she had been dosed and if he wasn't her husband… but that was a lot of 'ifs'. Had Elvis even been playing when she had kissed him last night? Yes, it had. Was that why she broke the stereo? Not out of anger, but because of this other reason? What man was Lois thinking of when she heard Elvis?

He thought back over the past few weeks. Had there been other episodes when Elvis music was playing? Perry played his music almost constantly in the office and Clark tuned it out most of the time… The kiss last week, when she loosened his tie and told him to leave. No, she had been referring to the National Bank of Gotham. *Hadn't she?* Her first day back at the office after they got Lara. She had practically dragged him into the supply closet. He thought she was just being romantic. Was there another reason behind her behavior? There couldn't be another man. But she told Perry about another man. Why would she do that if it weren't true? He swallowed, glancing at Perry, who was watching him closely. "She asked you to stop playing his music?"

Perry nodded.

Lois must be thinking of him, because it was always him she attacked. Thank God. He didn't remember her playing Elvis at home recently. Why would she have a sample of *Revenge* at home? And *Revenge* didn't have any effect on him anyway, even though Perry thought it did.

Superman grabbed the back of the chair in front of him. He had pretended that *Revenge* had made him lose control, too. Told Lois he loved her, willingly accepted her kisses. He had loved it when she kissed Superman back then, before he became jealous of his alter ego. Had he ever told her that *Revenge* had no effect on him? That was old news by the time they had finally gotten together. What did it even matter? The incident she told Perry about had never happened. Then why this reaction to Elvis music?

"It's obvious that you still care for her."

"I will always care for Lois." True statement.

"I also know you don't want to come between her and Clark," Perry continued.

"Never." Again, true.

"You need to let her go."

Superman looked at Perry. "What do you mean?" Never see her again as Superman? No, Lois wouldn't allow that.

"I mean, if I hear that you've followed them to Memphis this weekend, I can no longer sit on this story. It means that this wasn't a one-time thing and that you're having an affair with a married woman."

He gulped. Perry was completely serious.

"She and Clark need some time alone to help her recover from this *Revenge* episode. So, even if Graceland itself catches fire, you are not to go to Memphis."

Superman raised a skeptical brow at this statement.

Perry thought it over as well. "Okay, only if — God forbid — Graceland catches fire can you go to Memphis. Any other sighting and you and Lois are Monday morning's headline. Do I make myself clear?"

Superman nodded. He would have to leave the blue suit behind. Go native. He could do that. He had done it before. For Lois, he could do anything.

"Another thing," Perry paused.

There was more?

"I'm taking Lois and Clark off the Superman beat. They will no longer be covering you for the time being."

He nodded again, already knowing about that. "I trust Lois and Clark, but I understand your decision."

"Lois recommended one of the other city beat reporters, Barry Balson." Better him than Ralph. "This is only temporary, a

few months, until Lois can get her head on straight again." Perry shook his head. "I don't know when this *Revenge* event between you two happened, but it sure would explain her odd emotional behavior over the last six weeks. The guilt from cheating on Clark must be eating her alive."

Superman crushed Perry's guest chair. They both looked down at the pieces. "I'm sorry, Mr. White. I'll replace it."

The editor waved off the suggestion. "Don't worry about it, Superman."

"If there isn't anything else…"

"No. No. Thank you for meeting with me."

Superman opened the office door.

"And remember, stay out of Memphis this weekend," Perry called. Just like he was ordering around one of his reporters.

Superman looked back at him with an intense expression and then disappeared through one of the tall windows above the newsroom. He flew to the top of one of the tallest buildings in Metropolis; not the tallest, but one with gargoyles to keep him company. He needed to think. The idea of Lois cheating on him crushed him like he had crushed Perry's chair.

Lois had been acting oddly.

Perry and Jimmy had both noticed it.

Even Sam Lane noticed it; it was why his father-in-law had volunteered to watch Lara the previous night. He thought the two of them hadn't been spending enough quality adult alone time.

And Clark himself had noticed it, in the little things, like how she was more casual about her clothing and appearance. About how she no longer was afraid of sugar and cream. He noticed it in the big things, her dark moods, how she no longer could spend time alone without crying. The spacing out on events in her life. And all those so-called dreams, which she treated as reality, until someone called her on it.

Clark had come to the conclusion that she *was* his missing Lois, mother of his daughter, almost one hundred percent certain. If she was his missing Lois, maybe the incident with *Revenge* she had told Perry about could be true. He wrapped his cape around himself. And if it was true… oh, God! If it was true…

Something had happened between his wife and the other Superman, the other Clark.

Superman blasted off the building and landed in the middle of the Arctic, where he screamed, "No!" until a chunk of glacier dropped into the sea. Then he fell to his knees in the snow and buried his face in his hands.

He felt numb. Lois. The light of his life. His own personal sunshine. Had cheated on him. Clark knew it to be true. It explained everything. His missing Lois, mother of his child, the woman he loved more than his life itself, had been intimate with another man, while she was married to him. Or did it start before he returned from New Krypton? Before they were married? After they had promised to stay faithful to one another while he was away? While he wore her wedding ring around his neck?

No. The other Clark was dating Mayson when he and the stand-in Lois had gotten married. But it most certainly happened while Lois was pregnant with Lara. She had lived in the other dimension for almost a year, lived with that other man in his apartment, slept in his bed. How long did they share a bed? From her remark about sleeping under his cape, he knew it was more than once. Did the other Clark caress her pregnant belly? Images flashed in his mind and they were not pretty.

Had the other Clark begged for Lois to stay in the other dimension? He wanted to be Lara's father; the other Lois stated that much in her 'suicide' note to his mother. Had his wife only returned to this dimension after they found the other Lois? Or because they knew they had to return the stand-in to her rightful place in history or she would disappear? The other Clark had been intimate with both Loises, he knew, because the other Lois had been pregnant as well. Clark knew what he had seen that day she had visited his parents' farm. Had the other Clark still been intimate with …?

No! Clark rubbed his temples. Enough. No more speculating. He was torturing himself, corrupting his image of his wife, whom he still loved — although he could not fathom why. Lois needed to tell him the truth. Tell him everything. The truth couldn't be worse than what his imagination was suggesting, could it?

He ached in every fiber of his being. He wished there was another asteroid out there on its way to Earth, so he could erase these thoughts from his head with amnesia. Whoever said that ignorance was bliss had gotten it right. Knowledge was the root of all evil.

Clark did not want to go home. He did not want to see Lois. He did not want her to touch him or whisper sweet nothings to him, act like everything was all right, like nothing had happened, like she hadn't ripped out his heart and stomped on it.

Everything about these last six weeks was a lie. How could she lie to him after begging him to always be honest with her? She had betrayed him. Did she still even love him? Did he still love her? Did he want to? He had no idea where to go from here.

Clark felt numb. Lois. The light of his life. His own personal sunshine. Had cheated on him.

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Lois awoke covered in sweat, breathing heavily. Jason Trask had pushed her out of an airplane and she had fallen to the ground screaming. She had been alone in the airplane. No goodbye kiss for Clark Kent. No Superman coming to her rescue. She had almost hit the ground when she woke up.

"Clark!" She reached over for him, but he wasn't there. She took his pillow in her arms and held tight to it. Where was he?

***

Lois sat down at a bay of four seats with a table in the middle. "Which way will the train be heading? I don't want to ride backwards."

Clark shrugged and sat down. He had been quiet all day. Lois sat down next to him. He had seemed excited about the trip the evening before when he came home from work. But then he flew off somewhere and came back after she had fallen asleep.

She had stayed home that morning to see her mother off. Then she walked Penny through Lara's day. How to make her formula. When she took her naps. How to give her a bath. Which toys were her favorite. How to get through the gates at the top and bottom of the stairs. How to give Lara her bottle and how to burp her.

Lois didn't want to go. She knew she would miss her daughter more than anything. But she also knew she and Clark needed this weekend. She needed to work through her Elvis issues. She never wanted to think of the other Clark ever again. Not in the way she thought of him when Elvis played.

She took hold of Clark's hand and rested her head on his shoulder. "After flying with Superman, this bullet train will seem slow."

Clark shrugged her off his shoulder. "Could we not talk about him this weekend, please?"

"Something bothering you, Clark? You've been quiet all afternoon," Lois asked.

"Maybe I have nothing to say," her husband murmured, reaching into his travel bag and taking out a magazine.

Lois looked at him. He was mad at her. He was acting like he had when she was named acting editor over him. She didn't know what he was so angry about, but she would give him time to cool off.

An hour later, he closed the magazine. That was the slowest she had ever seen him read. She stirred herself from looking at the blur outside their window.

"I wonder where we are?" she asked.

He glanced out the window for a brief second. "It looks like

Ohio." Then he reached into his travel bag and pulled out a thick book.

Lois raised a brow as he settled back into his seat to read.

"Clark."

He glanced at her.

"Are you going to spend our entire trip reading?"

"I really don't feel like talking, Lois. Perhaps you know what I mean."

Yep. Most certainly angry at her. Probably more angry than he had ever been. "Are you implying that I have been less than forthcoming lately?"

Clark raised a brow. "Lois, a river that has been frozen solid would be more forthcoming than you have been."

Okay.

His book was open again. Lois closed the book. "All right, Clark. What do you want to talk about?"

"For starters, why don't you tell me why we're going to Memphis?"

She swallowed. "To write an article on the bullet train for the paper."

Clark reopened his book.

Lois pressed her lips together. Obviously he didn't believe the official story. She closed his book again. "Why do you think we're going to Memphis?"

He looked straight at her. "Let me give you a hint. A good reporter knows the answer to a question before he asks it."

Her hand slipped off his book as he opened it up again. "Clark," she whispered. "What are you saying?"

"You know exactly what I'm saying. The question is, when will you say it?"

Lois froze. Did he know about the other Clark? Did Martha mention their conversation about the other Clark being in love with the pregnant woman? Or… her mind drew a blank. Could he be angry about something else? Lois thought and thought, but she could not think of another reason he would be so mad at her.

"What do you want me to say, Clark?"

Her husband lowered his book for a moment. "The truth, Lois." He turned a page. "You always expect it from me."

She sighed. "Where do you want me to start?"

"I told you the question I want the answer to."

Lois clasped her hands together in her lap and focused her attention on them. "How did you find out?"

"I'm not going to lead you towards your next lie, Lois." He turned another page.

The truth, then. "We are going to Memphis because Elvis's music…"

"We love Elvis, too!" another woman said, sitting down across the table from them. "Are you going to Graceland? We've been dying to go. We actually wanted to have our wedding in Memphis, but we couldn't afford it. Finally, after five years of marriage, we've saved up enough to go."

This woman's husband looked less than thrilled with the prospect of the trip to Graceland. Lois saw Clark give him a sympathetic nod.

"Allison and Gene Sekat," the woman said, holding out her hand.

"Lois and Clark Kent," Lois replied, shaking hands.

Clark shifted positions and reopened his book.

Lois didn't want to be stuck conversing with Allison and Gene Sekat any more than Clark did, but she didn't know how to escape. They still had four to five hours before their train stopped in Memphis. "Sweetie, are you hungry?" she asked Clark. "We should head down to the dining car?"

"Oh, we just came from there. It's a total zoo. The line is out the door," Allison told them.

Clark rolled his eyes. "I can wait."

Lois closed her eyes. She hated that Clark was mad at her. The one constant she could always count on was Clark and his love for her. It was what had gotten her through the past year. Someday, when they were old and grey and could escape the chit-chatting Allison Sekat, she would tell him that.

Another hour passed by and then another. Allison Sekat broke out her deck of cards, while Gene pretended to sleep in the seat next to her. Clark slowly and steadily turned the pages of his book.

"Gin!" called Allison, laying down her cards.

"Again?" Lois shook her head. She didn't want to be there, let alone with Allison Sekat, so her heart wasn't in the game.

***

The book slipped from Clark's fingers. "Lara!" he gasped.

"What about Lara?"

"She's crying. She's hurt. I've…" He grabbed his shirt, but then his hand stopped. He was wearing a t-shirt. He hadn't brought his Superman suit.

"I knew we shouldn't have left her with Penny," Lois said, digging into her briefcase and pulling out the cell phone.

Clark grabbed it out of her hand and speed dialed home.

It rang four times before Penny picked up.

"Why is she crying?" Clark asked.

"Subtle," murmured Lois.

"It's nothing, Clark. She got a paper cut, that's all," Penny replied. "She's fine now."

The phone slipped out of Clark's hand and landed on the floor next to his book. He turned to Lois. "She got a paper cut."

"I heard," she replied, picking up the phone off the floor. "Penny, it's Lois. How is Lara?"

"She's fine. I told Clark. We were reading that new nursery rhymes book you got her and she got too excited about turning pages. It was just a little cut. So little… where did it go? She had a cut just a minute ago across her palm and now it's gone. I mean, completely healed. And I don't mean just stopped bleeding. I mean there's no scab or opening or anything. Lois, I'm looking at both hands and I can't tell which hand had the paper cut. How is that possible? She *is* adopted, right?"

"Yes, Penny." She didn't want to elaborate with Allison and Gene Sekat staring at them. "But she's fine now?"

"Yes, totally fine. She's stopped crying and everything. I'm going to have to show this to Jimmy. He's not…"

"Penny," Lois warned.

"Going to hear a thing about it from me. Right, confidentiality clause in my contract. I won't say a word to anyone. Wow!"

"Can I talk to her?" Lois asked.

"Uh, yeah. Sure. Let me switch hips." Lois heard some shuffling around. "Here's your mommy."

"Hi, Lara. It's Mommy. I miss you. I miss you so much. Daddy misses you, too. Are you having fun with Auntie Penny?" She turned to Clark and smiled. "She giggled."

Clark nodded that he heard.

"I love you, my sweet baboo, so much. I'm so sorry you got an owie. I wish I was there to kiss it better… be careful with those paper books. Paper cuts sting like the dickens, but they go away quickly." She turned to Clark. "Do you want to say 'hello'?"

He took the phone out of her hand. "Hi, sweetie, it's Daddy… Yes, I did hear that you got an owie… it's all better now. I'm glad to hear that… can you pass the phone back to Penny? Penny, I don't know if this is such a good idea. Maybe we should fly home from the next stop."

"She's fine, Clark. Now, go have your romantic weekend. We're fine. Lois's dad will be coming by at eight and I'll have him check her hand, okay?"

Clark reluctantly agreed. "We'll call when we get into Memphis. Take care of our girl. She's special." He hung up the

phone and handed it to Lois. “I can’t believe it. We missed her first owie.”

Lois hugged him, glad his anger had subsided with his worry. Lara had bled. So, she wasn’t invulnerable. She looked at Clark.

“A paper cut, too. Do you know how old I was when I got my first paper cut?” he asked her.

“I remember, Clark.” Lois motioned her head towards the Sekats, who were still actively listening.

Clark turned and looked at the couple across from them. “New parents,” he explained with a weak smile.

“How did you know she got hurt?” Allison asked, her eyes focused on him.

Lois rolled her eyes and patted Clark on the arm. “He didn’t, really. That first hour of the train ride, he called our nanny… what was it, five times?” She looked at Clark.

“I don’t think it was over four,” he corrected, feigning embarrassment.

“It’s the first time we’ve left her overnight,” Lois explained. “I’m starving. Clark, let’s see if the dining car has cleared out any, shall we?”

“I could stretch my legs,” he said, standing up.

Lois grabbed her briefcase and Clark his travel bag. “We’ll see you later,” said Lois with a wave. When they got to the end of the car, she glanced back over her shoulder at them. “Do you think they bought it?”

“Keep moving,” Clark murmured. “Before they decide to follow us.”

She laughed. Between cars, he took her in his arms and kissed her. She willingly, gladly accepted his embrace.

“I love you, Clark Kent. And only you,” she whispered.

Clark looked up and around. “It’s that Superman fellow I’m worried about. Do you think he followed us? I hear he’s been having an illicit affair with my wife.” He let go of Lois and continued on to the next car.

Perry. Perry had told him what she had told her boss in confidence. That she had kissed Superman under the influence of *Revenge*. Lois closed her eyes. It hurt that her husband knew. It was loud between cars and Lois could hardly hear Clark, enhanced hearing and all. She decided to take a chance and whispered, “It was only the one time, Clark.”

It felt so good to say those words, to finally get them off her chest. Lois felt like a huge boulder was taken off her back.

Clark turned around and looked at her with shock from inside the next car. He had heard her. The hurt in his eyes felt like a knife puncturing her lungs. He looked away and continued through the next car, leaving her standing there alone.

***

They arrived at the Hotel Teddy Bear at ten o’clock that night. Clark had hardly spoken another word to her for the rest of the journey. He couldn’t think of anything to say. She had cheated on him. She had admitted it, but not in so many words and not to his face. He felt numb again. They walked up to the counter, tired and exhausted.

“Mr. and Mrs. Kent,” he said, handing over his driver’s license.

“Ah, our honeymooners,” the man behind the front desk beamed at them.

“Honeymooners?” Clark asked. Oh, God. Did Perry reserve them the honeymoon suite?

“Just sign here.”

Clark signed.

“Here are your keys. Top floor.” Actual keys with teddy bear key chains. Quaint. “Do you need help with your bags?”

Lois shook her head adamantly. She remembered the bellhop from their stay at the Lexor hotel.

“No. We can manage,” he replied.

The front desk clerk pointed the way to the elevators. Clark nodded and picked up his small bag, leaving Lois and her two bags behind.

“A little help here, please, Clark.”

Clark glanced back at his wife, but then continued on. He didn’t really feel like helping her. She could manage. He heard her grab her bags and drag them to the elevator.

“Clark, please.”

He rolled his eyes with a sigh and pushed the door open button, allowing her into the elevator with him.

“Thank you,” Lois said, dragging her suitcases inside.

When the elevator arrived on the top floor he picked up her bags with his, more out of habit than any other reason, and trudged down the hall to their room.

“Thank you, Clark.”

Clark opened the door to their room and threw their bags inside. Then he turned around to face her. “Do you need a lift, Mrs. Kent?”

Lois smiled expectantly.

“Tough,” he replied, entering the room and leaving her out in the hall.

***

Lois closed the door behind her and came to stand next to him. The room was a federal disaster. It made the honeymoon suite at the Lexor seem high class. There was a red heart-shaped tub. A pink sleigh bed, with rose petals in the shape of a heart on the silk cover, was wedged into a little alcove. A lavender love seat faced a guitar-shaped coffee table. A huge portrait of The King loomed over a fireplace. A dining table for two overlooked the balcony. It was all in one room, not really a “suite” kind of honeymoon suite. The shower was glass-enclosed, no privacy. At least there was a separate room for the toilet.

“It must have changed since Perry and Alice stayed here,” Lois said, breaking the silence that filled this room. Well, it wasn’t completely silent. The soft sounds of Elvis music permeated the whole room. This was why they had come here. To listen to Elvis and to make love, erase the other Clark from her mind. She would at least still get to listen to Elvis. Great.

“I believe it’s my turn for the bed, since you got it both nights at the Lexor,” said Clark. “You can sleep on the sofa this time.”

“There isn’t a sofa, Clark. We’ll have to share the bed.”

He looked at her with a raised brow. “We can fill up the bathtub with pillows.”

“Fine. I’m going to take a shower,” she said, starting to take off her clothes. “It’s been a long day and it looks like it’s going to be an even longer night.”

Lois took a long hot shower, hoping he would eventually break down and join her. But she had caused him too much pain. He wasn’t going to forgive her any time soon. She stepped out of the shower and rubbed her hair and body dry. Then she pulled on the skimpy nightie she had brought, thinking that this was to be a romantic weekend.

Clark had filled the bathtub with all the throw pillows around the room. It was practically overflowing. He was lying in the bed, eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. Lois knelt down beside the bed and took hold of his hand.

“I know you will never forgive me, Clark. I could use the thousand and one excuses out there to convince you otherwise, but I won’t. I’m not proud of what I did and I have regretted it every day since. Dreading what would happen if you ever found out.” Lois paused. “I came to Memphis to try to erase him from my life once and for all. But you are bound and determined that I never forget.” She stood up, letting go of his hand. “If it means anything, I never stopped loving you and I never will, even if you do throw me out with yesterday’s trash.”

Lois walked over to the heart-shaped bathtub and stepped down into the pillows and tried to sleep. She didn’t know how long she lay there, before he walked over and pulled her out and

carried her over to the bed. She watched him slide into the bed next to her.

"I want to forgive you," he said. "Tell me one of the excuses."

Lois shook her head. "No, I promised myself never to try to get out of what I did. I deserve any punishment you dole out."

"You did the crime, so now you must serve the time?"

"Something like that."

"Can you just answer me why?" her husband whispered.

"No, Clark. Any of the reasons I come up with just sound like excuses. Hurting you was inexcusable and I refuse to try."

"Oh." He wiped a strand of her hair from her forehead. "Good night, Lois."

"Good night, Clark."

***

The sun was already up in the sky when Clark woke up. Lois was still asleep in his arms. He still loved her. He tried to hate her, but it just didn't work. But he wasn't ready to forgive her. He wanted her to suffer, then remembered what Star had told him. *She was in a black hole, don't let her suck you in.* Lois had been punishing herself since Lara was born and she still punished herself when she returned here. He missed his wife. And he feared the only way to get her back was to forgive her.

That flimsy nightie she was wearing was extremely sexy. He ran his fingers down her arm and back up again. There on her right shoulder was a small round scar, almost the size of a cigarette burn. It was the same scar he vaguely remembered seeing on her shoulder when the dream Lois visited him. This was her, his missing Lois. He had officially reached one hundred percent. No doubts left. How come he didn't feel like celebrating?

Clark kissed her shoulder. "Oh, Lois, what happened to you? Why won't you talk to me?" He realized he couldn't stop with that one kiss. He kissed her shoulder again, then up her neck and then her lips. She moaned, but not with desire… well, except the desire to sleep some more… and rolled onto her side facing the wall. He continued to kiss her shoulder and noticed a similar scar on the back side of her shoulder. He returned her to her back.

"Lois?" Clark asked. "Who shot you?"

"Junior," she murmured and rolled back on her side.

"Who?" he gasped.

"Lex's son."

Clark sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed. Lois had been shot? He buried his face in his hands. What else had happened to her? First, he thought she'd had a pleasant vacation in the other Clark's dimension. Her stomach growing round with Lara. Relaxing. Okay, maybe not resting; Lois didn't know how to relax. She had been working undercover as Clark's research assistant Lucy. But she had been shot. What other hardships had she endured? Besides cheating on him?

Most of the time Lois had been gone, he hadn't even known she was missing. He had his substitute Lois here. All she had was the other Clark. She said she only slept with him once. Only once in the whole year? How many times had he slept with the substitute Lois in that time? True, the substitute Lois was technically still her from earlier in the time. The other Clark wasn't him. Well, it was him, only it wasn't. It was as if she had made love with his twin brother. Oh, he couldn't think about this. It made his head throb.

Lois must still be lying; it must have been more than once. How could it have been only the one time? She mentioned before, how she missed sleeping with his red cape covering her. So, they had been together in bed more than that one night. Clark had known then, but he hadn't wanted to think about it. He had pushed that thought to the back of his mind, hoping beyond hope that he had been wrong. How was he ever going to trust her again? He sighed, standing up. He found one of the hotel's robes in the closet and pulled it on.

Digging through his travel bag, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom," replied Clark, stepping out onto the balcony. He needed to feel the sun on his face.

"Clark! How's Memphis? Are you and Lois having a good time?"

He didn't want to tell his folks about Lois's infidelity. It would bring up too many issues he really didn't want to discuss.

"Clark? Is everything all right?" his mom asked. She always knew how he was feeling.

"No, Mom. I found out that Lois lied to me and… and… I can't forgive her."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Clark. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. That's not why I called." It felt good to talk to his mom. She always understood him better than anyone. "Lara got a paper cut."

"Oh, sweetie. Is she okay?"

"Penny said it healed right up, but Mom, she bled."

"It happens, Clark."

"Did it happen to me?"

"Well, no, Clark, but remember you're special."

"Lara's special, too, Mom." He couldn't believe that the trait he had most wanted for his daughter to inherit, his invulnerability, was the one trait he could not pass on to his child.

"Of course she is, Clark. She's special in a completely different way. Maybe it will take her longer to develop a thick skin like yours."

"Maybe she'll never develop one," he whispered, looking out at the view. Their hotel was next to a park and this balcony overlooked trees instead of streets. It was pleasant.

"Maybe not. The hardest part of parenting, I hear, is learning that your child is fragile, breakable. I luckily never had to learn that lesson until we found out about Kryptonite. We had different problems to overcome with you."

"You mean me benchpressing the truck."

She chuckled. "Yes, there was that one."

"Thanks, Mom. You always know what to say to make me feel better."

"Talk to Lois. There has to be a reason she lied to you. I know she loves you," his mom tried to reassure him. She didn't like him hurting any more than he did.

He sighed. Lack of love wasn't the problem. "I'll see if she'll open up to me, Mom. It's complicated."

"Are you coming out next weekend? I miss my grandbaby."

"I miss you, Mom." He took a deep breath. "We'll see. Let's survive this weekend first, okay?"

"Okay. Bye, Clark."

Clark closed his phone, slipping it into the pocket of the robe. He didn't want to go inside. The sunshine felt so good. He wished it healed emotional trauma as well.

He heard her moving around inside the room, but he couldn't face Lois yet. He wasn't ready to hear more of her lies.

Lois came to the door and leaned against it. "I ordered us some breakfast. I thought we could talk. You deserve the truth."

She was still wearing that skimpy nightie. His mind flashed on an image of her standing in the doorway to his bedroom at his old apartment in that negligee the night they got married. The *real* night they got married, not the night of the clone marriage. God, she was always so sexy. He swallowed. "You need a robe."

"What? You don't like this old thing?" Lois smiled, her hands on her hips.

Clark zipped inside, took the pink robe from the closet, put it on her, and was back on the balcony less than seven seconds later.

"Thanks."

"Did you think you could seduce me into trusting you

again?" he asked, his brow raised. Inside his chest, he still felt numb.

His wife shrugged, sitting down at the table. "I hate that you're mad at me. The one constant in my life over the last year was that I knew you loved me and that you'd always love me."

"Is that why you did it? Because you thought I'd forgive you anything?"

It was as if he had struck her. He hated causing her pain, but this burning in his chest hurt too much for one person to endure alone.

She stood up and started pacing in front of the balcony doors. "Okay, yes. I had sex with the other Clark. Is that what you want to hear?"

No, actually, that wasn't what he wanted to hear. He wanted it all to go away.

"You felt the pull toward his Lois that day you brought her back from here. You lasted what, two hours?" Lois scoffed. "Try living with that pull for days, weeks, months. Resisting someone who looked and sounded and smelled like the person you loved, but wasn't. I had a moment of weakness. Yes."

Clark stepped inside and held onto her arms, stopping her pacing. "It wasn't just a moment, though, was it?"

She looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"You let him into your bed more than just that one time, didn't you?" Clark let go of her and went across the room. He couldn't look at her.

"No, Clark. We only had sex that one time. We both knew it was wrong and it never happened again."

He shook his head. "Still sticking with that story, are you?"

"It's the truth!"

"You lived with the guy for almost a year, Lois. And you expect me to believe it only happened just the one time." Clark looked at her incredulously.

"I didn't live with him for more than that first week," Lois grumbled, sitting back down at the table. "He wanted me to, but I couldn't. I knew it was a recipe for disaster."

Clark sat down across from her. "Where did you live?"

"In the other Lois's apartment. Perry kept paying the rent, hoping she would return someday."

"Oh." A little dust particle of weight lifted off his chest. "But you still slept with the guy on numerous occasions."

Lois threw up her hands, standing up and pacing again. "No! Clark."

"I know you're lying."

"I'm not," she pleaded with him with both her eyes and voice. "Please, believe me."

"Why should I? Lois, you told me that you missed sleeping under my cape. You said it always comforted you, always helped you sleep. I have never slept with you as Superman. Not once."

His wife froze, her eyes squeezed shut in pain. "Clark comforted me a few times, when I was distraught. I may have cried myself to sleep, wrapped in his cape. But that was just sleep. Not sex."

Clark's brows came together. "Distraught about what?" There was so much that she hadn't told him.

Lois bit her lip and took a deep breath. "When you were disintegrated by the New Kryptonians for one."

"Distraught about me? I was in another dimension from you. What happened here happened in your past."

She sat back down. "I have all of my stand-in's memories. I knew everything that was going on in this dimension, because I lived it every night in my dreams. It didn't feel like the past to me; it felt like I was living two lives."

Taking her hand in his, Clark realized how difficult her year had been. It explained why she felt like she had been married two years; she lived two years during the course of one. He thought she had been all alone, except for the other Clark, in the other dimension. But she had had him, her Clark, in her dreams. He hadn't left her completely alone.

Lois was staring at their linked hands, a tear trickling down her cheek. He reached over and wiped it away. She grabbed his hand, holding it against her face. She gazed at into his eyes. "Clark, I—"

A knock at the door interrupted her. Clark went to stand up, but she didn't let go of his hands. He sat back down, staring at her. "I love you, Clark."

He kissed the top of her head. "I know." Then he went to answer the door.

The waiter rolled the cart of food into the room, giving the tub full of pillows an extra glance. "Hard night?" he whispered to Clark.

Clark glanced over at the tub. "Safety hazard. My wife sleepwalks."

"Oh." The waiter nodded, accepting the tip and leaving.

Lois looked at him. "Clark Kent, you lied to that waiter."

He smiled with sheepish embarrassment. "It was none of his business."

***

Clark lifted the lid on the first serving dish. "Pastrami on rye, yours."

They had been talking since breakfast and it was now lunch. Well, she had been talking. Her voice felt hoarse. She didn't want to talk any more. But Clark hadn't forgiven her yet. She wondered when he would. She knew that come Christmas, they would still be together and that gave her hope. How she was ever going to get him to trust her again, she didn't know. Everything would be normal again, someday. Well, normal for them.

He opened his platter. Fish and chips. "So, what was the best thing about living in the other dimension?"

Clark was a sponge, his thirst for knowledge insatiable. He wanted to know everything.

Lois took a sip of her lemonade. She thought about that. There was so much sadness in the other dimension, it was difficult to pick a good thing. Finally she chose something. "That Lex Luthor wasn't the benefactor of Metropolis. I went months without being reminded of him. LexComm is MetComm. Luthor News Network is Metro News Network."

Clark bit into a French fry. "We take it for granted, I'm almost blind to it now. That must have been strange."

She nodded. "In a good way. It was nice to forget about Lex for a while."

"But he's still alive there, right?"

Lois shrugged. "Last I heard." He had been arrested as an accomplice in the kidnapping of James Olsen.

"You didn't…" Clark pressed his lips together.

"Didn't *what*?" She raised a brow at him. He'd better not be implying what it sounded like he was implying.

"Interact with Luthor, did you?" he finally finished.

Lois released a breath of relief, but her hand paused as she raised a chip to her mouth. "Once or twice." Or four or five times.

Clark shook his head. "Lois."

Complete honesty, right. She put the chip into her mouth. "When we realized that Lex was holding the other Lois hostage, I tracked him down in Singapore and called him to set up an interview with the other Clark."

"So, you just talked to him on the phone that one time?" He seemed almost relieved.

"Then he kidnapped me before Christmas." Lois thought for a moment. "Christmas Eve, I guess it was."

Clark froze. "Lex kidnapped you?"

"He thought I was his wife… the other Lois."

"When he realized you weren't, he let you go?" her husband guessed hopefully.

Lois took a bite of her sandwich and shook her head. “I escaped.”

“If he had realized you were carrying Superman’s child…”

“Save your breath, the other Clark already read me the riot act. I wasn’t allowed to leave the apartment without police escort for a month.” She rolled her eyes.

“Police escort?” Clark was impressed.

“Yeah, well, Mayor White set it up. Poor Lois was practically under house arrest for her protection. She was going nuts. That’s why she cut her hair and impersonated me… to escape.”

“How can you be so casual about this?” he asked.

“Well, for one, I lived through it already. And secondly, living there was completely surreal. It was like living in Jaxon’s virtual world for a year.” Lois took a sip of her drink.

“That sounds like hell.”

She smiled, reaching across the table to him. “It was. You weren’t there.”

Clark moved his hand away. “But *he* was there. Do you know how much it kills me, hearing you? Clark this. Clark that. And know you aren’t talking about me.”

Lois dragged her hand back with a sigh, her smile gone. She pushed her plate away, no longer hungry. “I need some fresh air. I’m going to get dressed and go for a walk.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Is that all?”

Lois looked down at his hand and then back to his eyes. “No. That’s not all.” When he didn’t let go, she pulled her hand away. “I need a break.”

She had taken a shower the night before, so she pulled on a pair of shorts and a tank top. She threw her wallet, cell phone, and teddy bear keys into a smaller purse. He hadn’t moved. Obviously Clark could use a break, too… from her.

“Do me a favor and don’t get mugged. Superman won’t be coming to your rescue.”

Lois winced and took another deep breath with a nod as she headed for the door.

As she put her hand on the knob, her husband continued. “It’s nothing personal, Lois. Perry told Superman last night that if he showed up in Memphis this weekend, he would publish the story about your affair.”

Lois leaned her head against the door for a moment, then turned back around to him. “What did Perry tell you… him?”

“He said he knew about the affair.”

“I never said ‘affair’,” she interrupted.

Clark rolled his eyes. “Fair enough. Perry said the initial incident was you spilling *Revenge* perfume on yourself right before I stopped by. That you had been listening to Elvis music at the time, so every time you hear his music now, you think of me… him.”

Lois nodded. “That’s what I told him.”

“You still haven’t told me what happened.”

Her hand on the knob, she looked back at him. “Stop torturing yourself, Clark. You and I both know you don’t want to hear the details.” She opened the door and left the room.

“Not knowing is worse, though,” he murmured.

***

Lois walked around the park next to the hotel. She looked in the shops up and down the street. She stopped and got herself an ice cream cone. Nothing helped. This hole in her heart ached constantly. She didn’t want to hurt Clark. She loved him. She hadn’t told him because she knew it would hurt him… and her, him knowing. But keeping the knowledge to herself wasn’t any better. She wished he would forgive her already.

If she could go back in time and change things, never make love to the other Clark…. No. She would do it all over again. That was the problem. It wasn’t just the sex. It was the intimacy that she felt for the other Clark. That was why her husband wouldn’t forgive her. Clark knew there was more than just the sex. She sighed. This wasn’t going to go away overnight.

Two hours later, Lois returned to an empty room. Clark had gone out. Was he looking for her? She hoped so, but she doubted it. He would have found her. She called Penny and checked on Lara and found out that Clark had called recently, too.

Jimmy knew something was up. Why weren’t they together? She didn’t know if Clark had said something to him. She hoped Clark hadn’t told Jimmy the truth, that she had done more than kiss Superman. Their friends didn’t need to know. Lois wished she had a best friend she could turn to, but Clark was her best friend. She had no one else. The sad thing was, the next runner-up to her husband was the other Clark.

The room had been cleaned while she was walking. Maybe that’s why Clark went out. The tub was empty and all the throw pillows were back in their proper places. She shrugged. Why not? What else was she going to do this weekend? Obviously making love to Elvis music was off the agenda.

Lois found a bottle of bubble bath in the bathroom and poured the entire little bottle into the tub as the water filled it up. When the bubbles reached the top of the tub, Lois slipped in. Oooh, that felt good. All it was missing was a glass of champagne and a box of chocolates and her husband. She closed her eyes and listened to the ever-present Elvis music wafting through the room. Lois heard a key in the lock and she sunk lower under the bubbles.

Clark walked in, carrying an ice cream cone. He must have found the parlor, too. He looked so good in those shorts. She rarely got to see his legs because he always had to hide the Superman suit. She drifted across the tub and leaned on her arms, watching him move around the room. He set his wallet, cell phone, and keys on the dresser. He hadn’t realized yet that he wasn’t alone. Or had he? As Clark passed her, heading again for the balcony, she couldn’t stop herself and whistled a cat call. He froze and turned around.

“Hi there, handsome. Want to join me?” Lois smiled seductively at him.

Clark swallowed. “Hello, Lois.”

Lois looked him up and down. “You look good in shorts. You should wear them more often.” She licked her lips.

“Lois? Are you feeling all right?”

“Um-hmmm.”

“You want me to join you in the tub?”

Lois nodded.

“You do realize that I’m still mad at you, right?” Clark asked with a raised brow.

“Um-hmmm.”

“Lois, has the music messed with your mind?”

She shook her head. “I love you. I will always love you. And I know, somewhere deep inside all that pain you’re feeling, that you still love me. So I was thinking that we could try a different kind of anger therapy.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Clark replied, walking towards their luggage. She watched as he pulled his thick book out of his travel bag and sat down on the loveseat.

“I gave up a year of my life for you, Clark Kent. You have to give me a second chance.”

“I *have* to?” he asked, cracking open his book.

“You have to, because I need you to help me get past this… to move on… to find myself again. I don’t think I can do it on my own,” she admitted.

He looked back down at his book.

“Help me, Clark. Help,” Lois murmured, sinking into the water, her head resting on her hands. “Help me.”

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath, shutting his book. Kicking off his sandals, he walked over to the edge of the tub and sat down, dipping his feet into the water. “This doesn’t mean that I forgive you.”

"I know," she whispered, standing up still entirely covered with bubbles. Lois leaned onto him, kissing him gently at first. She put her hands under his now wet t-shirt and lifted it up and over his head, before kissing him harder.

"Lois." Clark swallowed. "I can do this faster."

"Sshhh," she whispered, pulling him, still partially clothed, into the bubbles and under the water.

***

Clark dangled a chocolate-covered strawberry over Lois's waiting mouth. She arched up off the bed and took a bite, licking her lips.

"Mmmm. Who knew there was something better than plain strawberries?"

He kissed her, moving closer. "Lois, I had doubts about your anger therapy at first, but I must tell you, I do prefer this to being mad at you."

"Sshhh. Silence," Lois whispered, covering his mouth with her finger.

He didn't say another word as they made love all night long.

When Clark tried to get up in the morning to take a shower, Lois followed him and pinned him against the wall of the shower. She was insatiable. Like she had been waiting a year to make love to him. He realized, in some ways, she had.

Lois was right. She had given up a year of her life for him and their daughter. Mistakes were made along the way, lies told, hearts broken, but her love and desire for him was still unchanged. Knowing that she still loved him and desired him helped soothe this ache inside his chest, but he doubted it would go away any time soon.

As they sat, later, eating breakfast at noon at the little table by the balcony doors, Clark cleared his throat. "Okay, Lois. Break's over. I need to know more."

Lois shook her head. "My turn."

Clark raised a brow and waited.

"How did you know where I was? Did your mom tell you?"

Her husband shook his head. "Only after I figured out that you were Lucy El."

"That seems a lifetime ago." She chuckled softly to herself with a shake of her head.

"What started the ball rolling was the dream Lois with the strawberries." He smiled.

Lois picked up a strawberry and fed it to him.

"You were so real. I became preoccupied with you. My dad thought you were my subconscious desire to have children rearing its head."

"You spoke to your dad about me?" This seemed to shock her.

"It wasn't the kind of dream a boy shares with his mother." Clark took hold of her hand and squeezed it. "Then you visited me again, under the guise of the other Lois. That really messed with my head, thinking I had wanted to make love to… *her*."

"I told you who I was," she stated.

"Yes, but after you left, my mom convinced me that you really were the other Lois. Then I met the other Lois. And she talked about Lucy El and how much Lucy missed her husband, Kal-El." Clark closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "And then Clark told me about his pregnant friend Lucy, for whose fiancée/husband he would do anything. And then there was the other Lois's 'suicide' note."

"You weren't supposed to read that."

"I gathered as much. And then Jimmy told me about this nervous breakdown you had last summer where you ended up calling my mom for help."

Lois shrugged.

"All these things were swimming around in my head and one night in early February, I had a dream that made it all crystal clear. I woke up realizing that Lucy El was my wife, hiding in the other dimension, because of the curse."

She raised her hands in a ta-da fashion.

"I flew out to Kansas and had my mom tell me the rest. I couldn't go to you or contact you. I just had to wait to hear from you or the other Clark to tell me that I was either a father or a widower or both. I'm not very good at waiting."

"You're getting better." Lois squeezed his hand. "I wanted to save you that pain."

"February ended and then March passed and April, I was beginning to think you two would never arrive. That it was all a figment of my imagination. That somehow Mom was wrong. That I had been wrong."

"We couldn't get the time machine started. I thought I was trapped forever over there. That I'd never see you again. I…" Lois shook her head as if she were about to say something more, but changed her mind. "It turns out Lois's — the other Lois's — genetic fingerprint changed when she became Ultra Woman, so the security system stopped the time machine from working for her. Clark never went to check the machine to see if what she said was true. Don't get me started," she said, holding up a hand while she took a deep breath. Slowly, she exhaled. "Finally, Mr. Wells returned." She smiled.

"Then Lara arrived without you and I didn't know if you were alive or dead or still a figment of my imagination, but I couldn't ask Mom because her memory had been erased." Clark reached out and cupped her jaw. "Then you came back, sending me hot telepathic messages." He kissed her.

"I still cannot believe that worked. Since finding out that Kryptonians were telepathic, you don't know how many times I tried to send messages—" She bit off the rest of that sentence and looked away.

Her husband raised a brow, his lips pressed together. "To Clark? The *other* Clark?" he asked tersely.

Lois closed her eyes and nodded. "It never worked," she mumbled. "Not once."

"What kind of messages did you send him?"

"Help messages usually. When I started to disappear on our wedding day…"

"What?!" he gasped. "Back up there. Disappear?"

Lois nodded. "Remember when I told you to keep your wife safe, because she was a younger version of me?"

Clark nodded.

"Well, that was because when the Wedding Destroyer electrocuted her… it caused me to phase out of existence, like you did when Tempus covered the infant you with Kryptonite."

"Oh my God, Lois."

"Luckily for me, I was phasing out of existence when Lex, Jr. shot me." She pulled the right side of her robe over to reveal the bullet hole. "Otherwise this could have been worse."

Clark ran his fingers over the small scar.

"Also, I was fortunate to have the super healing abilities that come from carrying a Kryptonian child."

His hand slipped down to her stomach and pulled her into his lap. He rested his head against hers. "I wish I could have been there for you."

"Me, too."

"I hate that you had to call someone else to come help you," Clark murmured, kissing her forehead.

"Me, too." Lois picked up another strawberry, feeding it to him.

"Obviously the curse was gone the night of the dream you. You could have come back to our dimension, why didn't you stay?" he asked, chewing the berry.

"I couldn't. There were two Lois Lanes. One clearly pregnant and one not. Clark said he wouldn't take my younger self back to her rightful place in the timeline…" Lois took a breath. "… without her agreement."

"Passive-aggressive, isn't he?"

"Clark, please." She set a hand on his arm. "He said it would be tantamount to kidnapping… to take me away from you and return me to one of the worst days of my life. She had to agree to go."

Clark thought about this. It was the same thing his mom had told him. He would have said the same thing. "How did you…?" He knew the answer right away. "Lara."

She nodded with a smile.

"That's why she came back before you did."

Lois nodded again. "I knew that once the younger me had fallen in love with our daughter, she would do anything for her." She sighed. "Even go back and be Wanda Detroit."

"Why come back and visit at all, then? Just to torture me?"

She winced, moving back to her chair. No! He hadn't meant…

"I missed you." Lois looked at him with those big brown eyes, then looked away. "I got sick. I had to come back."

"Sick?" Clark gulped.

"I lost my mind. Mr. Wells called it Interdimensional Time Sickness," she whispered. Then she took another breath and plowed on. "Delusional was more like it. I attacked Ralph for saying something against Superman and got fired, naturally."

Clark stared at her. "Huh?" That didn't sound delusional; it sounded like the normal Lois to him. Except the part about getting fired.

"I lost my ability to tell one dimension from the other. Mr. Wells said he's experienced it as well. If you stay in a time or dimension other than when or where you belong, after a while your brain starts to compensate and convinces you that you actually belong there." She took a sip of her juice. "It got so bad while you were lost in time that I went off the deep end. Started spouting off top secret Superman information at the drop of a hat. I even visited S.T.A.R. Labs to see Dr. Klein and told him I was pregnant with Superman's twin brother's baby, but that wasn't important. What I really needed was his help to find Lois Lane, who also happened to be me. In other words, I had no self-control."

Clark swallowed. When was this? Was this when she and the other Clark…?

"The only cure was to come back to my own dimension, interact with those I knew and loved. Reboot my brain, in a way," Lois continued.

"So, when you were delusional, did you think the other Clark was me?" he asked, not really wanting to know the answer, knowing his pain must be evident in his eyes.

"Sometimes," she said apologetically. "I thought my dreams were just dreams. Or possibly memories, but memories from that dimension… that I had gotten amnesia and was trying to sort through what was real and what was not. I was very confused."

"And it was during this time, you and Clark…" He couldn't say it, but he was getting angrier by the second. If that other Clark…

"No. No. No!" She held up her hands. Then her expression changed, like she was contemplating his idea. "Well…. Maybe a little bit."

"*Maybe?*" her husband growled. He would rip the other Clark's arms off.

"No," she said decisively. He wondered if it was more for his benefit or for hers.

Clark rubbed his brow. They would revisit this time sickness period, if need be. *Maybe a little bit.* He closed his eyes and asked the question that he had been wondering about since he met the other Lois. "Why did you tell him about Ultra Woman?"

Lois stiffened. "Ultra Woman?" she whispered with a gulp.

Clark leaned back and looked at her. He had hit some kind of nerve. "Yeah, Ultra Woman," he said, his voice rougher.

"When I first arrived in that dimension, Clark and I decided to share information. I'd tell him all I knew about Superman's abilities and all the bad guys we had come across and he'd do the same for me."

"That's cheating."

She smiled indulgently at him. "We thought we could save lives. So, Ultra Woman came up when I spoke about Red Kryptonite."

Clark waited. He knew there was more to this Ultra Woman story. Lois picked up another strawberry and took a bite. Clark continued to wait. When she started to concentrate on the food, instead of their conversation, he said, "Then how did the other Lois find out about her?"

Lois closed her eyes, stopping mid-bite. She swallowed. "She mentioned Ultra Woman to you?"

Clark nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off her face.

Lois set down the rest of her strawberry and wiped her mouth with a napkin. "On Halloween, Mayor White had a costume party. A 'come as your favorite superhero' party." Her voice started to shake. They were definitely on the right track here. "Clark had an Ultra Woman costume made for me. I had brought some pictures of us, from our dimension, and one of them was of Superman and Ultra Woman."

Clark nodded, urging her to continue.

"He, of course, went as Superman." She chuckled. "To disguise himself, he wore a fake mustache. There were hundreds of Supermen at the party. Clark was finally able to go out in public and just be himself. It was hard for him always being recognized everywhere he went. He couldn't date anyone without it becoming a tabloid headline. Any event where Superman helped to any significant degree, Clark couldn't write an article about. He would have to pass his notes to Barry. Barry was in charge of the Superman beat."

Ah. That explained her recommendation of Barry to Perry. She knew he could do it.

Lois wasn't looking at him anymore. Her eyes were focused out the window. "I was only about six months along, just beginning to really show. But the belt of the costume covered my tummy bulge and the mask covered my face, so nobody knew it was me. I didn't feel like I was my secret identity, Lucy El. I could be myself, Lois Lane, for once. We had fun." She cleared her throat, but did not continue.

"What kind of…" Clark closed his eyes. "Mayor White… Perry White?"

She nodded.

"He played a lot of Elvis music, didn't he?"

Lois pressed her lips together as she nodded. A tear tracked down her cheek. "We danced. We laughed. We ate whatever we wanted." She smiled weakly. "I don't know when we got spritzed with *Revenge*, but the atmosphere in the ballroom changed. We were slow dancing, cheek to cheek, to "She's Not You." I was thinking about you and he was thinking about his Lois… he had become obsessed with her when Perry assigned him to look for her three years earlier. He fell in love with her." She looked down. "We went up to the roof for some fresh air to clear our heads, but it didn't work. We had been fighting against the pull, the attraction for months. We kissed."

Clark felt like he had been stabbed. This was it. This was the night. She was drugged on pheromones, he told himself. This was the excuse she didn't want to tell him about.

"No, that's not right. We *almost* kissed on the roof, but we didn't, because we knew it was wrong. He flew off and I ran down the stairs. I was a mess, crying, knowing he wasn't you, but still…" Lois swallowed, looking down.

Still what? He wondered. Still wanting him? Desiring him… what? But Clark didn't speak. He needed to know this… He needed to hear the truth.

"I ran into him at the bottom of the stairs, literally. 'It's Now or Never' was playing in the ballroom and we kissed." She sighed, like she was replaying the moment in her mind and it was a satisfying moment. That wasn't regret on her face. She shook her head like someone trying to erase an image from an Etch A Sketch. "We went back to the dance floor and we danced and danced and danced." She smiled. "I was having fun for the first time in I don't know how long. Clark's one hell of a jitterbug partner." Lois swallowed. "Then 'Burning Love' came on. We looked at each other and kissed and kissed and kissed. The effects of the pheromone perfume had gotten to us by that point."

Clark looked down at his hands. He told her he wanted to hear this… needed to hear this. But the knife in his heart had grown spikes and was slowly starting to turn.

"I don't know how long we kissed," his wife continued. "A couple of songs, at least. Because before I knew it, we were floating up in the air, above the dance floor, above the other party guests. I realized he wasn't the one who pulled us up into the air, but me. I discovered that night that flying was another side effect of the pregnancy. As we were up there, I noticed Miranda heading for the exit. I recognized her at once. I told Clark, but he had no idea who I was talking about. I swooped down and captured her, turning her and her bottle of *Revenge* over to security. She called it *Animal Magnetism.* Then I flew up above the crowd and waited for him. We left the crowd to cheers, flying over the city, side by side." She chuckled. "Oh, that little stunt as Ultra Woman cooked his goose good in the press." Lois shook her head. "We went back to my apartment and…" She exhaled. "He left for a train derailment in India at the crack of dawn the next morning. He took my Ultra Woman suit with him. He wanted to make sure I didn't fly off to capture any more bad guys."

Clark felt like tearing a mountain in two. That other Clark was lucky he didn't have a time machine to go and visit him. He took a deep breath, trying not to raise his voice in anger. "He took advantage of you when you were under the influence of the pheromones."

"No, he didn't, Clark. I told you. We both had been spritzed well and good. We were both out of control."

"Lois," he growled. "*Revenge* has no effect on me whatsoever."

Lois smiled indulgently at him. "Of course it does. You told me you loved me for the first time after you got sprayed by Miranda's *Revenge* plane."

"I never said it affected me, Lois. That was just your assumption. I told you I loved you, because I wanted to," he said through clenched teeth. "If I had been affected by the perfume, believe me, I would have shown you when you did the Dance of the Seven Veils."

"You weren't? That means he wasn't…" Lois stood up and starting pacing. She raised a hand to her mouth. "Oh, my God."

"It means he took advantage of you when you were not in control."

Lois held up her hands as if stopping those words from reaching her. "No, Clark. It doesn't."

"That was when you said you went full-on delusional. Had you been feeling the effects of the time-sickness before then? Were you confusing him and me all the way back at Halloween?"

"Yes, maybe a little bit." She was still pacing, her hands starting to shake.

"Lois, admit it. He took advantage of you."

"Stop saying that. He didn't, Clark," Lois insisted.

Clark stared at her. "Lois, why can't you admit that you had reduced capacity and weren't in control? He was to blame and the next time we see him, I'll pulverize him into concrete."

"Did he remind me of you? Yes. Was I under the influence of *Revenge*? Were the effects of the time sickness starting to play with my memories? Did I miss you so much that I wanted someone to hold me and touch me and make me feel like a woman again? Yes. Yes. Yes. Those are just excuses, Clark. What I did was inexcusable."

"Lois, he took advantage of you," he reminded her.

"No, Clark. He couldn't do that anymore than you could. He is kind and sweet and gentle, just like you. He didn't take advantage of me. I knew you wouldn't understand."

Something clicked in Clark's brain and he stood up, facing her. "What wouldn't I understand, Lois? Why don't you think he took advantage of you? What exactly did you do that was so inexcusable?" Clark took hold of her arms, stopped her from pacing. She looked up into his eyes and he saw the tears there. Suddenly, his throat was dry and he felt like he had been dipped into a vat of liquid nitrogen. "You didn't just have sex that night. You made love."

Her whole face crumpled in pain and she nodded just one barely perceptible time.

"He didn't take advantage of you, because you wanted him before that night?"

"Yes."

"And after that night, after…" Clark swallowed. "… after you recovered from your time sickness, you still wanted him?"

"Yes."

"And this darkness and depression you fell into after Lara was born and after you returned home, was it because you knew you had to leave him and come back to me?"

"No!"

"Because you wanted him more than me?"

"No! Never, Clark."

"Because you felt guilty for cheating on me by falling in love with him?"

Lois closed her eyes and whispered, "Yes."

Clark dropped his hands from her arms and spun into his clothes. He picked up his wallet and cell phone from the dresser and the thick book on the loveseat.

"Clark, I love you. I have never stopped loving you. I will always love you. Please understand that just as I am destined to love you, I am destined to love him, too. All those good qualities that you have, that I love in you, he has too, because he *is* you. I fought it, resisted it the entire time I was there, except for that one night. I set him up with Mayson Drake, made him date fifty women for charity, went out of my way to find his Lois for him, so he wouldn't be alone… because I knew he wasn't my soul mate. You are."

Clark picked up his travel bag and dropped his book inside. He retrieved his toiletries from the bathroom and put them in his small suitcase.

"Clark?"

He zipped around the room, picking up his clothes and other items he had brought with him, filling his suitcase.

"You *wanted* the truth, Clark. You *asked* me to tell you the truth." Lois rolled her eyes. "Clark said to tell you that it was his fault. He said he deserved it if you came to his dimension to kick his butt for sleeping with your wife."

Clark grabbed his suitcase and travel bag and headed for the door.

"Please! Clark. Don't go." She fell to her knees. "I'm begging you, Clark. Stay. Let's work this out."

He didn't turn around when he opened the door. "Goodbye, Lois." Then he shut the door behind him.

Clark could still hear her crying twelve blocks away.

***

Lois slow danced with Clark, her Clark. He held her in his arms, rocking her back and forth. Slowly, they started to float into the air. He lifted her chin, kissing her lips. "I love you, Wife."

"*I love you, Husband," she whispered.*

Suddenly, there was the crack of a gun and they fell to the ground. Clark lay there in a puddle of red. Lois looked up from where she sat on the ground and Jason Trask stood in the doorway with a grin on his face.

"*Finally, I got you, alien scum," he said, lifting up the gun and pointing it at her. "I know you're still partially human, but these Kryptonite bullets will kill the Ultra Woman in you."*

Lois saw the flash of the muzzle, heard the bang and she…

Woke up. Once again, Lois was drenched in sweat. She crawled out of the empty bed and walked over to the balcony door. It had swung open from a strong breeze. She had left it unlocked, just in case Clark decided to return. She sighed. He wasn't returning. She shut the door and locked it, heading back to bed, where she lay in the dark, trying to get that image of her dead husband lying on the living room floor out of her mind.

***

The next morning, Lois returned to Metropolis alone on the bullet train. Clark never returned to the hotel, not that she really expected him to after he took all his stuff and stormed off. She arrived back at the Planet just after lunch, typed up the bullet train story — such that it was — and asked Jimmy to turn it in for her. She didn't think she could face Perry. She could hardly face Jimmy. He asked her where CK was, but then backed off when she looked at him with her dead eyes. Or at least that was what it felt like. Her world felt grey and cloudy, devoid of color without Clark.

Lois knew she had broken Clark's heart into a thousand jagged pieces; a puzzle too difficult to put back together by even the most accomplished of archaeologists. This pain was what she had hoped to avoid by not telling him. His pain and hers. Instead, her lies had pushed them further apart. If she had been honest with him at the beginning… told him the truth when she first came back… she closed her eyes. He would have started hating her all the sooner. Clark said he wanted the truth and then he punished her for complying. Just as she had punished him after she learned he was Superman. Some truths just took time to heal. She hoped this was one of those truths.

After turning in her story, Lois went home. She needed to see her daughter, hold her, remind herself that no matter the pain, it had all been worth it.

Lois was still sitting on the couch holding their daughter when Clark came home that evening. She had tried to talk to him, but he silenced her with one glance. He took Lara out of her arms and upstairs for a diaper change, then brought her back down for a bottle. After their daughter fell asleep in his arms and he put her down in her crib, Lois had hoped that they could finally talk. But he come back downstairs, spun into his Superman suit and left out the window without a word.

Lois fell asleep on the couch waiting for him to return, only to discover him fast asleep in their guest bedroom in the middle of the night. When she awoke in the morning, he had already left.

The Chief called them both into his office first thing that next morning. There was only one visitor chair in Perry's office and Lois took it, her knees weak. Clark stood next to her, his arms crossed.

"What's going on between you two? I send you out on a romantic weekend to put this whole Superman incident behind you and I don't get one story on the bullet train, but two. Plus an extra story about a new high school for five thousand students built inside an old mall. Interesting article, Kent, but that's not why you were sent to Memphis."

Clark turned around and looked at Perry's boom box over his shoulder. The box started to smoke.

"Dagnabit! That's the second stereo in two days," Perry said, unplugging it with a shake of his head.

Lois could breathe easier without the Elvis music playing as well. Perry's idea about reprogramming her brain had worked. Only now some of Elvis's songs reminded her of making love to Clark, her Clark, and all the others reminded her of causing him pain and disappointment in her, of breaking his heart. All Elvis songs must remind her husband of her betrayal.

"I had some time on my hands," Clark replied.

"Time?" Perry gazed at Lois, but she could only look down, ashamed. He glanced between them. "What happened?"

Clark looked uncomfortable, but never gazed her way. "It's personal, Chief. Between man and wife. You understand, sir."

"Of course. Of course. Just don't let it affect your work."

"It won't." Clark turned towards the door. "If there's nothing else, Chief, I need to work with Barry about covering Superman."

"Right. Go on, Clark," Perry said with a nod.

After Clark left the room, her boss sat down on the corner of his desk near Lois. "Lois, honey. Everything all right?"

Lois swallowed. "No. Apparently, something happened Thursday night and Clark realized that it wasn't just the one incident in the newsroom."

"And he changed his mind about forgiving you?"

She nodded. "I thought the romantic ambiance of the hotel had softened his resolve. But on Sunday morning, he insisted on hearing the details of that first incident and after I told him the truth, he left and never returned."

"Give him time, Lois. He'll forgive you. I've never seen a man more in love."

Lois shook her head. "I'm afraid my pedestal is broken, Perry."

"I should send him out to take another swing at Bruce Wayne." Perry chuckled. "That seemed to do him a world of good."

"What?" she stammered. He fought Bruce Wayne? Clark didn't get into tussles with other men. She thought he had stopped himself from going to confront the billionaire.

"Yeah, after you went home, he came back to the office with a nasty shiner and a gash under his eye. Guess it healed over the weekend."

Lois was on her feet and out the door. *Clark Kent doesn't get black eyes. He doesn't get gashes.*

She looked around the newsroom and found Clark next to Barry's desk. "I need to talk to you."

"Not now, Lois. I'm busy." He brushed her off.

"Yes, now, Clark. This cannot wait." Lois grabbed his tie and pulled him into the hall by the stairwell. When they were alone, she looked up at his perfect face. "You fought Bruce Wayne?"

He exhaled. "Oh, that. Yeah."

"Perry said that he gave you a black eye with a gash under it. You didn't think that was important enough to share with me?"

Clark shrugged. "We both have our secrets."

"This isn't about that and you know it. This is something completely different. How did you get a black eye? The gash?"

Clark pressed his lips together and looked away, not wanting to answer her.

Lois grabbed his jaw and turned it towards her. "I am still your wife. I still love you and care about what happens to you. Tell me."

"It's not important, Lois. It was stupid of me to go down to his office. It won't happen again." He raised a brow as if to imply that he would never feel like defending her honor again. "I'm fine."

"How am I supposed to help you figure out what he's up to if you won't talk to me, Clark?"

"I don't need your help, Lois," he said, shrugging off her hand. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." He walked off, dragging her heart along behind him.

The next few days felt like one neverending day that just repeated itself over and over. She would try to talk to Clark at work and he would just walk away. At home, he never spoke a

word. He was beyond angry.

Perry was going crazy as well. Every time he put on his Elvis CD, something happened and the new boom box would short out and die. She heard Jimmy suggesting to their editor that it was the ghost of Elvis himself, punishing him for causing more pain than pleasure at the office. They then looked out the windows of Perry's office at Lois and Clark.

It was clearly true. Every time Lois heard the music she started to cry, and Clark would zap the boom box with his heat vision or just leave the building entirely. She didn't know how they were ever going to recover from this.

On Friday afternoon, Clark walked up to her desk. She set down her phone and glanced up at him. He wanted to talk. Her heart wanted to sing.

"I'm taking Lara to Kansas this weekend," he told her.

She smiled. "That sounds great. That's just what we need to clear the air."

"I'm not taking you, Lois."

"Clark, please. Don't shut me out. We need to move past this," she said.

He swallowed. "I don't see how we can, Lois, when you clearly aren't over him." Then Clark walked back to his desk.

Lois buried her face in her hands and gave herself forty-five seconds to delve into the pool of self-pity. Then she started flipping through her rolodex. If he wouldn't talk to her about this, she would have to find someone who would.

***

"Go on," said Dr. Friskin, steepling her fingertips together.

"Then I came home to Clark and it was like we were never apart. Fireworks." Lois sighed. "But at this time we also found Lara, whom we're now trying to adopt."

"I would suggest that this isn't the best time to bring children into your marriage," said Dr. Friskin.

"As I said, it's complicated. Lara was left on our doorstep shortly after I returned. Clark and I instantly fell in love with her. We knew she was meant for us even without the note from her parents telling us that she was now our child. Since Clark can't have children of his own and with our jobs being what they are, we're considered too high-risk to adopt normally."

"I bet this has put an extra strain on your marriage."

"Not really. The strain on our marriage was because of my trip to visit Kal. I never told Clark that I was there, but he figured out where I was anyhow. He was waiting for me to tell him the truth and I was just trying to forget it. It all came to a head last Friday, when he discovered that Kal and I had been intimate together."

"How did that make him feel?"

"How do you think?" Lois snapped. "I cheated on him. He felt betrayed and abandoned, when he had done nothing but love me unconditionally."

"Go on."

"We went away together, just the two of us. It was really the only time alone we'd had since we got Lara. I realized that he knew about my visit to Kal and he would never forgive me until I told him everything about my trip."

"And did you?" Dr. Friskin inquired.

Lois looked down. "I started to, but after I told him about that night with Kal, he left and didn't come back."

"I thought he already knew about it."

"He did know about it. He accused Kal of taking advantage of me since I was drunk. I leapt to Kal's defense, and that's when Clark realized that it had been more than sex between Kal and me."

"Ah." Dr. Friskin nodded, making a note on her notepad. "So, where do things stand now?"

"Clark won't talk to me unless forced to at work. At home he doesn't acknowledge my existence. He moved into the guest room. Today he told me that he's taking Lara to his parents for the weekend and he doesn't want me to come."

"And how does that make you feel?"

Lois threw up her hands. "Horrible! I just want us to move on with our lives. I made a mistake by sleeping with Kal and I regret it. I have never stopped loving Clark and I know he loves me, but he says we can't move forward because I'm still in love with Kal."

Dr. Friskin raised a brow. "And are you?"

Lois stood up and started pacing again. "I don't know if you believe in soul mates, Doctor. But Clark is my soul mate. We are destined to be together. I love him with every fiber of my being. Yes, I still love Kal, but I know it's not meant to be. He has Lucy now and I have Clark. Kal and I love each other, but aren't as totally in love as I am with Clark or he is with Lucy. It's like Kal's my soul mate from another lifetime, one where I'm not in love with Clark and he's not with Lucy. We weren't supposed to meet in this lifetime, but since we did we naturally fell in love, even though we aren't destined to be together."

"Sounds complicated."

"You have no idea," Lois grumbled.

"What do you think you should do about it?" Dr. Friskin asked.

Lois sighed, dropping back on the couch. "I have no idea. I was hoping you could help me with that."

Dr. Friskin opened her agenda and flipped a page. "How about you spend the weekend brainstorming ideas and we'll meet again Monday morning at eleven?"

Lois nodded. "Okay. It's not like there's anything else for me to do this weekend." She buried her face in her hands.

***

Clark landed by the steps of his parents' front porch. Lara was strapped to his chest in a snuggly, a blanket covering her. She had slept most of the trip, a natural flier. He opened the front door and called to his mom.

"Upstairs, Clark," she replied.

He carried Lara and her suitcase upstairs. "Mom, have you figured out where we should put her? I could get the old crib from the basement."

His parents were standing at the top of the stairs. They looked like they had seen a ghost.

"Is something wrong?" Clark asked.

"This…" his mom said, turning the knob of his old bedroom and letting the door open.

His old bedroom had been magically transformed. It was now a bright yellow with a blue ceiling. His old dresser had been painted a light green. An airplane mobile hung from the ceiling over a crib. There was a changing table and a soft, fluffy rug in the middle of the floor. Farm animals were painted all along the edge of the baseboards. The old rocking chair had been moved up from the basement as well. There was a bookcase of his old children's books and his old toy box was there, too.

"Wow, Mom, Dad. This looks terrific." He grinned at them.

"Clark. You didn't do this, then?" his mom asked, her eyes wide.

"No. This is all you," he said, setting down Lara's suitcase on the toy chest. He unbuckled his daughter from his chest and lay her down in the crib. Then he shut the door and hugged his folks. "You're the best."

"Clark, are you sure we did this?" his dad repeated.

"Well, I certainly didn't. It's a surprise to me."

"It's a surprise to us, too. After you called, we went to clean up the room and we found it like that."

Clark jogged down the stairs. "You must have done it before you had your memories wiped," he called.

His parents followed him down the stairs.

"Clark, I thought the Bummer-B-Gone was only supposed to

get rid of our bad memories?" his mother asked.

"Let's have a cup of tea," suggested Clark.

His father looked around. "Where's Lois, son?"

Clark sighed. "She's not coming."

"What? Not coming for the Fourth of July?" his mom inquired with curiosity. "Why not?"

He sat down at the table as his mother set the kettle on the stove. How was he going to explain what was going on with Lois to his folks without making them hate her? He still loved Lois, but he just couldn't be around her. Being around her reminded Clark that she had been intimate, more than intimate with the other Clark. Just thinking about what she told him upset his stomach.

"Does it have to do with that lie she told you?"

Clark nodded, still having no idea what to say.

"She has never been as honest as you, Clark. Nobody is."

True. "It's more complicated than that, Mom."

"What baby did we forget, Clark?" his dad asked, changing the subject.

"Lois and I had been discussing our options recently and I guess you went crazy, before Dr. Klein told us I couldn't have children of my own." He didn't really feel like talking about Lois's trip to the other dimension.

"You not being able to have children, I could see forgetting that." His dad nodded.

"Clark, you told me that Lara was biologically your baby. That she spoke to you telepathically. This was before you learned about the other Kryptonian babies. Did we know she was coming?"

Clark sighed. "Yes, Mom. You knew. You told me."

"I did?" The kettle whistled and slowly she stood up to retrieve it. "How did I know before you did? Does this have something to do with last summer? When I came to visit Lois?"

"Something." Lois still hadn't filled him in on all the details. Mr. Wells had arrived, told her about the curse and suggested she go to the other dimension until they could resolve the curse problem. There was still so much about her year over there he didn't know.

His mom filled up the mugs of tea and passed them out, before sitting back down. She shook her head. "I really don't remember. I've been trying. Clark, when did Lois go visit the other Clark to help him find his Lois?"

He practically spit out his tea. "What? You remember that?"

"No. Lois told me about it. Was it after the two of you visited last December?"

"They visited last December?" Jonathan inquired with a glance at Martha.

"You remember that, Mom?" he asked, surprised.

"Vaguely. I have an image in my head of her in this huge sweater and a smile on her face. She seemed happy about something."

"Yeah. That was her," he said, unable to stop the smile from coming to his face. She was so sexy pregnant. "Lois told you about going to help Clark find his Lois?" Why would she tell his mom about that?

"Yes, she wanted to help him, because the poor man had fallen in love with another man's wife. A pregnant one. She felt bad for him, being alone and all."

Clark covered his face his hand. *She felt bad for him.* He scoffed with a shake of his head. He stood up. "I'm going to chop some firewood."

"Clark, it's almost July, son. We won't be needing firewood for quite a while."

"I know, Dad. I just feel like doing something." Hitting something was more like it. When was this feeling ever going to go away?

***

Monday morning, Lois came into the office early and set a new boombox and an Ella Fitzgerald CD on Perry's desk. She hoped he took the hint. She couldn't go another day with Elvis playing in the background. If she never heard his music again, it would be too soon. She was at her desk with coffee and a donut when Jimmy came in.

"Good morning, Lois. What are you doing here so bright and early this morning?"

She sighed. How could she tell him that she couldn't stand being alone in that empty house another minute? Clark had promised to bring Lara back right before Penny arrived this morning and the thought of breakfast alone again upset her stomach. "Early bird catches the worm, Jimmy."

"Okay. Hey, did you see that folder of photos of those names from the Alexandra Luthor file I came up with?"

She looked around her desk. "No, where is it?" Anything to distract her from Clark.

"Oh, I must have set it on CK's desk," he called, heading for his desk.

Lois reluctantly got up and moved over to Clark's desk. She hadn't been to his desk in over a week. It felt like no-Lois-land to her. She saw his framed photo of her and Lara and she picked it up. She had missed her daughter so much this weekend. But she couldn't deny Clark the opportunity to spend a weekend alone with their daughter after all she had put him through. She was kind of surprised that it remained his photo of choice on his desk. Perhaps a part of him still loved her. She sighed, starting to search his desk. She found the folder and returned to her desk, flipping it open. Without enthusiasm, she went through the photos to see if any of the faces seemed familiar.

Lois glanced up to see Clark enter. She missed him bringing her coffee in the morning. She missed seeing him smile. His wacky ties. His sense of humor. Everything. She missed everything about her husband. As he passed by, she caught his eye. "How was your weekend?"

"Good." He nodded. "Relaxing."

"I'm glad." Lois went back to the folder, stopping at one of the photos. She walked up to Clark's desk, more out of habit than anything else. "Clark."

"What is it, Lois?" Clark snapped.

She raised a brow. So much for his relaxing weekend.

"I just wanted to ask if this photo reminded you of someone we know?" She held up a photo of Mindy Huckaby.

He glanced at it. "That's Mindy Church, the dizzy blonde who married Bill Church. What about her?"

"According to this, that is a photo of one Mindy Huckaby, nursing student."

"Huckaby, you mean like Luckaby… like Alexandra Luthor?"

Lois nodded. "She's also blonde and gorgeous, if I recall. I never liked her. 'Pookey.' Ugh. I always thought she took over Intergang after framing Bill Church and son for trying to blow up the museum and then again after Church, Jr. kidnapped Perry and before you got sick…"

"I could kiss you!" Clark said, before he could stop himself. "I mean…"

"Actually, the photos came from Jimmy's research. He's first in line for your kiss." Lois turned around and walked back to her desk. A smile crept to her lips for a moment before she removed it. Her husband still loved her. There was hope.

Clark had followed her back to her desk. "Lois, I—"

"Lois Lane!" Perry called.

"Excuse me, Clark." Lois darted off before he had a chance to say he would never kiss her. She didn't need to hear that. Not now.

"Yes, Perry?" she inquired, sticking her head in her editor's office.

"What's this?" he questioned, pointing at the boombox.

Lois smiled. "I felt I needed to replace the one I broke, Perry."

"What's with the Ella Fitzgerald, Lois? Don't you like Elvis anymore?" He raised a brow towards her.

"I just thought we could broaden your musical horizons. Anyway, you'll like this. It's not rock 'n roll, but give it a try." She came back out and almost literally bumped into Clark. Had he followed her to Perry's office?

"That was nice of you," Clark said.

"Why does it surprise people that I'm a nice person?" she replied. He was standing too close. God, he smelled good. She scooted around him and tried to get back to her desk.

"I was thinking we could have lunch today and talk." Clark was in front of her again.

Lois wanted nothing more than to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him. She was sick of talking. Lunch with Clark would be… oh, crap, she had that appointment with Dr. Friskin. "I'm sorry, Clark. I've got a dentist appointment today. We can talk at dinner, though."

His brows came together. "Dentist? Didn't you just go two months ago?"

"Technically, no. It's been over a year." She should really see if she could move up her next appointment.

"Oh, right."

"I really need a cleaning. I couldn't brush my teeth for months. Just the thought of toothpaste made me sick those first few months. Excuse me." She dodged around him and went back to her desk.

He stared after her, then followed, sitting down next to her desk. "What else?"

She raised a brow. "We should see what else we can find out about Mindy Huckaby, aka Mindy Church. Do you want to do the early stuff, or what's she been up to lately?"

"Lois. I feel like I don't know you anymore."

"I'm still me, Clark. A few more bumps and bruises and scars, but still me. Still the woman you fell in love with all those years ago."

"No, you're not. Something inside of you is gone. Your zest. Your zeal. Your zip."

"Deary me. Where could I have placed my three z's?" She looked under a couple of folders on her desk. "Oh, yeah. My husband doesn't trust me anymore. I have a daughter I can't claim as my own. A year of experiences I cannot share with anyone. Memories swimming around in my head like pea soup. Now if you'll excuse me, Clark, I have work to do." It was just like him. Wanting only to talk on *his* terms. Where had *he* been all weekend when she was more than willing to talk? Oh yeah, Kansas. He was cranking up her anger knob.

"Why are you pushing me away, Lois?"

"*I'm* pushing you away?" Her anger flared. "That's rich, Clark. I told you I'm sorry. I told you that I love you. That I want to move forward past this. I told you the truth even when I knew you couldn't handle it. I even got on my knees and begged you to stay. What more do you want from me, Clark?" She knew she was melting down in the newsroom again, but she couldn't control herself when she was this livid. At this point, she didn't care what anyone other than Clark thought of her.

He stared at her, clearly without an answer.

Lois scoffed with a shake of her head. "When you figure that out, let me know." She shooed him away.

"What are you so angry at me for?" he asked soft as a hiss, standing up. "You're the one who betrayed me, remember?"

Lois closed her eyes. She had no idea why she was angry. Then something flashed into her head and she spoke it without thinking, "You haven't asked me one question about our daughter. Not one." She covered her mouth after she said it. She hadn't meant it. The look of pain that shot across his face told her that her barb had hit its mark. He backed away from her and returned to his desk without another word.

Needless to say, Lois wasn't surprised when Clark didn't come home for dinner. She didn't know if the mudslides in Southern California really required his help or if he was once again avoiding her.

***

Clark went to Lois's favorite boulangerie in Paris and bought her some croissants for breakfast. He could still hear her words echoing in his head, *You haven't asked me one question about our daughter. Not one.* She knew more about Lara than anyone and he hadn't asked her one question about her pregnancy or the delivery or anything. He had been more interested in all the other activities she had participated in while in the other dimension, especially her night with the other Clark. Here she had spent a year 'abroad' and he hadn't asked her about one of her main reasons for being there. He scanned the living room as he approached the townhouse. It was empty. He touched his feet down just inside the window and then closed it before spinning into his work clothes.

Penny walked into the living room from the kitchen with Lara's bottle and jumped with a start, almost dropping the bottle. "Clark! I didn't know you were here. Lois said that you left already."

"I didn't mean to startle you. Where's Lois?"

"She already left for the office."

"Oh. I ran out to get some croissants for breakfast. I'll just bring them to her at work."

Penny smiled. "How sweet." She sighed.

Great, just what he needed.

"Are you done fighting?" Penny continued.

Clark raised a brow.

"Right. None of my business. Just that Jimmy mentioned some tension at work. Wow, I think I hear Lara calling for her bottle. Excuse me." She ran half way up the stairs and then stopped. "You knew she wasn't crying, didn't you? Super hearing and all. Sorry. You probably don't like to be lied to." She turned around and finished going up the stairs.

Clark shook his head. "Not as a rule. No." He let go of a breath he didn't know he had been holding. That was close. They still hadn't admitted to Penny that he was Superman nor did they want to. But she didn't need to actually catch him flying into the house. Out the front door, then.

Clark stopped at the coffee cart outside of the *Daily Planet* and wondered how Lois was taking her coffee these days. He would have to watch her more closely. Perhaps croissants would be enough. He ordered his heavy cream, three sugars and extra caffeine coffee and went inside.

Getting out of the elevator, he scanned the newsroom for his wife, but did not see her anywhere. Didn't Penny say Lois left early for work? Maybe his wife had some errands to run. He took one of the pastries out of the bag and then set the rest on her desk.

Clark's heart still hurt. He wasn't ready to move back into their bedroom, let alone their bed. But he felt bad for giving her the silent treatment for over a week now. Even though he missed Lois, his wife, his best friend, he wasn't ready to forgive her.

Half an hour later, Lois still hadn't arrived at work. He sat at his desk, staring at her empty desk. Where was she? He closed his eyes and listened. No cry for help. Not that she would expect him to come if she called nowadays. He sighed. What a mess they were in. Jimmy came by and dropped a folder off on Lois's desk.

"Jimmy, you seen Lois?" Clark asked him.

His friend grinned. "She called in and said she had a dentist appointment this morning and would be running late."

Dentist appointments two days in a row? That was strange,

unless she had a toothache she hadn't mentioned. Although if she had mentioned it, it wasn't like he was around to listen. He groaned.

Clark watched as Lois sailed in an hour later. He held up a folder and then watched her with his x-ray vision as she unloaded her briefcase and noticed the croissants. She glanced over and him and smiled. Who else would bring her croissants and pain au chocolat from Paris? She slid her chair towards him.

"Thank you," she said, raising her pastry.

"I wanted to apologize for missing dinner last night. Last minute emergency."

"It happens," Lois acknowledged, taking another bite.

"I hate breaking dates with you. Disappearing without explanation," he said. "I know how much that bothers you."

She raised a brow. "Was that a date?"

Was it? Lois had refused lunch because of a dentist appointment and rescheduled for dinner, hadn't she? "How are your teeth? Any cavities?"

His wife shook her head. "You'd think that they'd be in worse shape after this past year. But nope, clean bill of health." She held up the folder that Jimmy dropped off on her desk. Clark had already read it, but he didn't tell her that. "Background check on one Mindy Huckaby. She didn't exist before nursing school. I've requested to see her application. She didn't get financial aid either. Paid her tuition in cash."

"Who does that?" Clark asked, reaching over to her croissant bag to steal another.

"A Luthor," Lois said, pulling the bag away as she rolled back to her desk. "Hey, these are special apology croissants. I'm not sharing."

Was that a smile? His wife was so beautiful when she smiled. It lit up her entire face. Then he remembered that she cheated on him. His smile died on his lips and Clark returned to his desk.

Then his brows came together. How had she gotten a dentist appointment so soon? It took months to book with their dentist. And if she had a clean bill of health, why had she gone back this morning? Had she been to the dentist at all? If not, where had she been going instead? Lois was still lying to him.

His wife went to the nursing school later that morning when they refused to fax over Mindy's application, citing privacy laws. When Clark asked Lois about having lunch when she returned, she admitted catching a bite while out. He would try that night at dinner, then.

But that night, Sam Lane joined them for dinner, cutting off any opportunities for him to ask Lois more questions about her missing year. She fell asleep in the rocking chair with Lara. Clark carried one and then the other to bed. He held Lois in his arms a few minutes longer than necessary. He really did miss cuddling with his wife. She had been gone for a year, but he felt like he missed her more now that she had returned.

The next morning, he was gone before dawn. Earthquake in China. He hoped Lois would still cover for him at work, even though he hadn't asked her to. He was gone until late in the afternoon. When he finally sat down at his desk, he was too exhausted to work. Natural disasters were some of the worst things to deal with. They drained the sunshine right out of him.

He glanced over to his photo of Lois and Lara. There was a post-it note stuck on it. *Valentine's Day. 12:04 a.m. Bobby BigMouth dinner* was written in Lois's hand.

Clark stared at the note. What did it mean? Bobby BigMouth came to dinner after midnight on Valentine's Day? Not in this dimension.

Clark turned to ask Lois, but she wasn't at her desk. Gone, again. He continued to stare at the note as he wondered where Lois disappeared off to.

"CK, you don't need me tonight, right?" Jimmy asked. "Lois said that Bobby Big Mouth was coming tonight for dinner. I promised Penny I'd take her out and she just called, so I'm going to break out early."

Clark waved him off. If Penny was off work, then Lois was at home. Oh, right, cooking dinner for Bobby Big Mouth. No conversation again tonight. He covered up that part of the note and looked at the top section of the note again. *Valentine's Day. 12:04 a.m.* What did that mean? He plugged the date into his computer, but nothing pertinent to any of their stories came up. He glanced back at the photo of Lois and Lara and picked up the phone, dialing home.

"Okay, I'm stumped," Clark said. "What does 'Valentine's Day, 12:04 a.m.' mean?"

Lois laughed. "Clark, it's the answer to the question you've been wanting to ask me all week." A buzzer sounded. "Got to go. See you at dinner." She hung up.

"The question I wanted to ask her?" Clark leaned back and tapped his finger on his forehead. His eyes scanned his desk again, stopping on the photo of Lois and Lara. He felt a chill down his spine as a smile spread over his lips. Lara's birthdate! His daughter was born on Valentine's Day — February 14th, 1997, at 12:04 a.m.

Sitting up, Clark clipped off the section of the note reminding him of their dinner guest. Then he picked up his — Clark's — agenda and flipped over to the middle of February, adding the Post-it note to the Valentine's Day page. He ran his finger over the note again.

How did Lois know he would need a pick-me-up when he got back from China? Because she was Lois Lane, his wife, the woman who knew him better than he knew himself. Clark grabbed his suit jacket and ran out of the office. There was a girl to whom he owed a kiss.

He landed in the living room, spun back into his business suit and ran up the stairs. The crib was empty. She must be down in the kitchen with her mommy. He went down to the kitchen and found Lara sitting in her high chair playing with her gavel rattle. "Hello, beautiful."

"Hello, hand…" Lois started to say automatically and then realized he wasn't talking to her. She turned back to the stove. He picked up their daughter, kissing her cheek.

"Lois, can I borrow you for a moment?"

She turned around, her eyes damp. "What is it, Clark?"

He hated it when she cried, especially when she hid it from him. Especially when he knew he was the one who caused the tears. Clark held open his free arm. "Lara needs a hug. Let's make a sandwich."

Lois stepped up to them and kissed one of her daughter's cheeks as he kissed the other. He enclosed his other arm around his wife. Lara filled them with her love.

His wife broke away and ran out of the kitchen.

"Ooops, sweetie. Mommy must need to fix her face."

Lara touched his face.

"Yes, sweetie. I know I'm making Mommy sad. She made Daddy sad, too." Clark rested his head against his daughter's. "Yes, I still love Mommy… I know. I'd like to see Mommy happy, again, too." Clark kissed her cheek. "Can you show Daddy a picture of Mommy? Your favorite memory of Mommy?" He closed his eyes and watched her show him the memory of when she ran down the stairs and pulled Lara into her arms. Then he saw himself, wrap his arms around the two of them, a family at last. Surrounded by Lara's grandparents. That was the day his missing Lois had showed up, the day of the 'hot leads'.

Clark cleared his throat. "That was a good memory, Lara, sweetie. Do you know what one of Daddy's favorite memories of Mommy is? Let me show you." He closed his eyes again and thought of their wedding day and how Lois looked up on that hill with the sun setting behind her. "Yes, that's Mommy. That's a memory of Mommy before she was your Mommy… what? After

she was your Mommy? Okay, let me think." He closed his eyes and showed Lara a picture of Lois's face when they first saw Lara in the bassinette.

"What do you mean, that's not Mommy. Of course, it is." Lara touched his face. "You couldn't hear that Mommy and she couldn't hear you?" His brow wrinkled in thought. "I don't know, sweetie. Why could this Mommy hear you but that one could not?" Was it because this Lois gave birth to Lara and the other one hadn't, yet? Had her biology changed with carrying his child? Is that why she had semi-super hearing and could communicate with Lara while the stand-in Lois could not?

The door bell rang. He shifted Lara to his hip. As he approached the door he scanned to see who their guest was. "Lois, Bobby's here," he called.

Clark could hear her sniffling. "Be right down," she called back. He didn't want to make her cry, especially around Bobby Bigmouth, or their marital woes would be all over town by morning.

He opened the door. "Evening, Bobby."

"Hi, Clark. Hello, angel. Does Uncle Bobby get to hold you this time?" Bobby said, holding out his hands.

Clark shifted his daughter away from Bobby. "No."

Lois came down the stairs wiping her eyes. "Hi, Bobby. I made lasagna. I'm sure it's not as good as your mother's, but it's edible."

Bobby leaned towards Clark. "Modesty? I thought you married Lois Lane?"

"I heard that," she called from the kitchen.

"Wow? Does she have Ultra Woman's hearing or what?" Bobby chuckled.

Clark smiled. "What."

"Oh, no. Of course not," said Bobby, holding up his hands in self-defense. "I mean that's one of the biggest mysteries of the decade: what happened to Ultra Woman? God, she was hot. I mean, Superman's super, but who wouldn't want to be rescued by Ultra Woman?" He nudged Clark.

"Bobby, my daughter."

Bobby covered his mouth. "Oh right, sorry, Clark. That was PG talk. I'll tone it down. I forget that these little nippers are like sponges. They soak up everything around them."

"You have no idea," murmured Clark, heading for the dining room. He shifted Lara back to his shoulder and as he did so, his daughter touched his face. Suddenly, an image of Ultra Woman and Superman both touching Lara at the same time came into his head. They were slightly blurry, but he could still recognize them.

"Oh my God!" Clark gasped. She was showing him images from the other dimension. Of the other Clark and the other Lois. Uncle Superman and Aunt Ultra Woman.

"What's the matter?" asked Bobby.

Clark cleared his throat. "Diaper change. Excuse us," he stammered, rushing her upstairs, albeit slowly for him. He sat down in the rocking chair in her room. "Okay, sweetie. Can you show Daddy that picture again? Of Uncle Superman and Aunt Ultra Woman?" He closed his eyes. Why was this image so blurry, he wondered. The room was dark, except for one bright light behind them. He could feel the warmth and love that Lara shared with them. Then he heard a voice that sounded like Sam call to the other Clark. They turned around and through Lara's eyes, he could see the blurry outline of Lois laying on some sort of surgical table.

Clark gasped and the image went away. That was the day she was born. That was why the image was so blurry. Her eyes hadn't developed enough to see well yet.

"Wow, Princess. That was a great gift you gave me. Was that the first time you met Uncle Superman and Aunt Ultra Woman?" he asked, kissing her forehead. "You can show me more pictures of them later. Okay, sweetie? When it's just the two of us."

"Clark?" Lois called.

"Just a minute," he said, then lowering his voice. "We should probably check your diaper while we're up here."

Clark came back downstairs a few minutes later, still a little stunned by the information he had learned about his daughter this day. Her birthdate. That Superman, Ultra Woman, and Sam Lane were all present at her birth. That shouldn't surprise him. But Lois hadn't yet told him anything about Lara's birth. For a second, it actually felt like he was there. True, he saw it through his daughter's eyes, but it was more than what he knew before.

Lois and Bobby were already seated at the table. Clark set Lara in her high chair and smiled at them.

His wife raised a curious eyebrow at him. As she began to serve the food, Clark kissed her cheek and whispered into her ear, "You look beautiful tonight, honey." She dropped the serving spoon.

"Excuse me. Clark." She stared at him. "Not while we have guests, please."

"You're right. I'm sorry," he said with a smile, sitting down.

Lois's hand began to tremble as she scooped food onto Bobby's plate. She cut another piece of lasagna. Clark held out his plate as her noticeably shaking hands placed food onto his plate and onto his thumb.

"Oh my God, Clark. Are you okay? This food is scalding," said Bobby.

Clark looked down to his thumb under the steamy food. He raised his eyes to Lois's. "Ow. Ow. Ow." Wasn't that what a human would say in this situation? He set down his plate.

Lois jumped up and grabbed his arm. "Come on, cold water is what you need," she announced, dragging him into the kitchen. She turned on the cold water tap and stuck his hand in the water.

"Lois," he whispered with amusement. "I'm fine."

"I'm not," she hissed, slapping his chest. "You hardly talk to me for two weeks and then you whisper compliments in my ear? How could you do that when I'm sitting next to Bobby Bigmouth? Are you crazy? I almost burst into tears right there on the spot, Clark."

He took his hand out of the water and lifted her jaw, placing a soft kiss on her lips. She slapped his chest.

"I told you not to do that," Lois stammered, tears running down her cheeks. "Clark, now look at me!"

Clark turned off the water and lifted Lois into his arms. "Lara showed me an image from the day she was born," he said, smiling.

All the color drained from Lois's face. "What?" she murmured. Taking a swallow, she tried again. "What did she show you?" The tears had stopped and her hands began to shake again.

"Bonding with Ultra Woman and Superman. And then a brief glimpse of you."

Lois exhaled and placed a smile on her still pale face.

"Lois, is everything all right?" he asked, setting her feet back down on the floor.

His wife nodded yes, but did not speak the word. "Water," she whispered.

He got her a glass of water and she drank a large gulp.

"Okay," she whispered, setting down the glass and drying her cheeks. "How do I look? Like I've been crying?"

Lois indeed looked like she had been crying after a terrible fright. He needed to do something to add color back to her cheeks or Bobby would be sure to ask. He pressed an intense kiss onto her lips, a Superman kiss, likely to cause dizziness in the faint of heart. Lois wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him back with almost matched intensity.

"Are you all—" Bobby asked, pushing open the kitchen door. "Ooops, excuse me." He disappeared back into the dining room.

Slowly, Clark pulled out of the kiss, wondering for a second

why he had ever stopped kissing this woman. “Wow.” Then he remembered, but the tingling feeling from the kiss had melted some of the edge off his anger.

Lois fixed her hair, then straightened her clothes, her cheeks now quite rosy. She smiled at him, saucily, and returned to the table.

Clark took a deep breath, trying to erase the desire to pull her into another such embrace. “Wow,” he murmured again, shaking his head. He straightened his tie and then he, too, returned to the dining room. He sat back down, a smile still on his face.

“How’s your thumb?” Bobby asked.

“Thumb?” Clark repeated. “Oh, yes, my thumb.” He held it up. “All better now. All it needed was a magic mommy kiss.” He stared at his wife. She blushed demurely and started to eat her food.

Oh God, Clark realized. He loved that woman. He needed to forgive her and get her back into his life. He just didn’t know how.

***

After Bobby kindly filled them in about the current exploits of one Mindy Church and they filled him with food and sent him on his way, Clark carried a sleeping Lara up to bed. He caught Lois’s wrist as she passed him in the hall on the way to the bedroom.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked.

“Always.” Lois smiled.

Clark followed her to the threshold of the bedroom, not wanting to enter. Knowing if he did, he would stay and he wasn’t ready to do that yet. She sat down on the bed and started to undress. *Focus*, he told himself. “Lois, can you tell me about Lara’s birth?”

His wife froze halfway between being dressed and undressed. “No, Clark. It’s late. We’ll talk about it another time.” She placed a smile on her face and continued changing her clothes. “I’m tired.”

It wasn’t a real smile that she put on her face. Lois didn’t want to tell him about Lara’s birth. He would have to press it another time, but for tonight he didn’t want to force the issue. Clark stepped into the room and kissed her cheek. “Good night, Lois.”

She sighed. “Good night, Clark.”

Clark closed the door behind him and released a breath. He closed his eyes and listened for his wife’s cries, but didn’t hear any. He walked down the hall to the guest room.

***

Lois held the hands of a little blond girl with ringlets, who couldn’t be more than three. They were spinning around in a circle, dancing in the field out behind the Kent farmhouse. The little girl’s laughter echoed in the air. Suddenly, her feet flew into the air as Lois spun faster and faster and faster.

“*Fly! Fly! Fly!” the girl called.*

“*No, Lara, you’re too young to fly.” Lois chuckled. “Daddy didn’t start flying until he was eighteen.”*

Martha leaned against the kitchen door, watching them. “Who wants some strawberry shortcake?” she called.

“*Me! Me! Me!” the little girl called, letting go of her mother’s hands.*

“*Lara, no!” Lois gasped as her daughter flew through the air.*

Clark appeared out of nowhere, catching her in mid-air. “Did someone say strawberry shortcake?”

“*Daddy! Take me flying!” begged Lara.*

“*Not right now, little one, Grandma’s got shortcake.” He smiled adoringly at Lois. “Strawberry.”*

Lois wrapped her arm around his waist and walked with them to the picnic table out back of the farmhouse. Martha brought out a big bowl of strawberries and a platter of biscuits. Lois ran inside and grabbed the bowl of whipped cream and a pitcher of lemonade. Plates and cups were passed around.

Clark zipped inside and brought out his father. “Come on, Grandpa. Strawberry shortcake. You can tie flies anytime.”

“*No whipped cream for you,” said Martha to her husband. “You know what Doc Simpson said about your cholesterol.”*

Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“*Roll your eyes all you want, Grandpa Kent,” said Martha, scooping berries onto Lara’s plate. “I want you around for a long time.”*

“*Martha,” Lois said, pouring the lemonade. “Is this lemonade or limeade?”*

“*Lemonade.”*

“*It almost seems green in the light.”*

“*It’s because we are surrounded by Earth’s plenty, my wife,” said Clark, holding up his hands to all the green things growing around them.*

Lois started tossing and turning in her sleep. “No, Clark. Don’t drink that!” she mumbled.

“*It’s just lemonade, honey. I’ve been drinking my mom’s lemonade for years.” Clark tilted back his head and took a long swallow.*

“Clark, no!” Lois screamed.

“*Lara. Don’t drink the lemonade, baboo,” said Lois, taking away her cup. “This doesn’t feel right. Martha, where did you get the water for the lemonade?”*

“*From the well, like all the water on the farm,” answered Martha, looking at Lois like she had lost her head.*

“No. No. Not well water,” Lois murmured, tossing and turning.

“*See, honey. Tastes like lemon…” Clark started coughing. “Lemonade…” He coughed some more. He looked at Lois with a trace of fear in his eyes.*

“*The ground water. It must have been contaminated by the chunk of Kryptonite that you destroyed in the creek.”*

“*No.” Clark shook his head, still coughing. “Couldn’t be.” He pulled himself off the picnic table bench and stumbled for the kitchen. Lois followed him. He passed through the kitchen and lay down on the sofa. “Lois.” He held up his hand to her. “I can’t breathe.”*

“*What can I do? Tell me what to do!” she urged.*

His back arched as if in pain. “Kiss me goodbye, honey.” He cupped her jaw in his palm.

“No, Clark! No. Don’t die. You can’t die. I can’t live without you. Clark! Clark!” Lois screamed.

Clark rushed into the room and took hold of her hand, shaking her shoulder. “Lois, honey. I’m right here.”

“Oh my God, Clark! No!” Lois cried, waking herself up, hitting him in the chest.

“Lois. It’s all right.” He grabbed her fists. “It was just a dream. I’m right here. I’m fine.” Clark ran his fingers over her hair.

“Clark?” Lois’s eyes focused on him. He was there, sitting right next to her. Alive. Well. She wrapped her arms around him. “Oh, Clark! You didn’t die.” She laid her head on his shoulder and cried.

***

On Friday, Lois had an appointment at the hair salon. *All right*, thought Clark. Her hair wasn’t too long. It was a perfect pixie. He offered to take her to lunch and then drop her at the salon afterwards, but she declined. She would just order something and eat at her desk, she said. Lois was going though the financial statements of one Multiworld Communications, aka Intergang, looking for something, anything, that would link LexCorp to Multiworld Comm. She was sure there was a link, almost doggedly sure.

Clark set down a bag of sandwiches on the conference room

table. “Why don’t you take five minutes, Lois?” He handed her a soda, but she shook her head, preferring her bottle of water.

“I’m not going to discuss that here, Clark. Please, don’t ask me to,” she said, reaching into the bag and pulling out a ham and brie sandwich on a baguette. She raised a brow at him. “Just zip out for lunch, Clark?”

He shrugged with a smile.

“Did you bring me Belgium chocolates as well?” she asked, taking a sip of her water. “Since you were in the neighborhood?”

“Ha-ha.” Clark took his sandwich out of the bag.

“Pity.” Lois sighed.

“Just tell me one thing, one itty bitty thing?” he asked.

She chuckled. It was good to hear her laugh. “I could tell you what your brother got his girlfriend for Christmas.”

Clark growled, dropping his sandwich back into the bag, standing up.

Lois sighed, rolling her eyes. “Not me, Clark. Mrs. Lola Luthor.”

But Clark’s appetite was already gone. He didn’t want to hear what a wonderful boyfriend the other Clark was. He didn’t want to hear anything about the other Clark.

“Fine. Be that way. But he’s in most of my stories.” She shrugged, taking a bite of her sandwich. “You’re just going to have to accept it and move on, if you want to learn what happened to me.”

“Why don’t you tell me about Mayson, then?” Clark asked.

“Ugh. Clark, I’m eating.” Lois made a face at him. “Anyway, that’s a long story and I’d like to get some work done today.”

“She lived?” he asked quietly, looking down. “*His* Mayson?”

“Yes. But only because I warned him that she hadn’t survived in our dimension. He kept an ear out for the signs. But even then, he was almost too late. One second more and he would have shielded her from the blast. One second less and she’d have still been in the car.”

How different would their lives have been if he had gotten to his Mayson in time? Dan Scardino would never have entered the picture. Good riddance. Would he have been able to date both Lois and Mayson? Would he have wanted to? Clark loved Lois and had since the first moment… but Mayson had liked him. Clark, him. True, she didn’t like the other side of him. He shook his head. It never would have worked. There was only one woman for him. Clark looked at his wife and smiled.

“Lucy says she’s dating Dan Scardino now. Small world, huh?” Lois chuckled.

He raised a brow. Mayson Drake and Dan Scardino? Yeah, he could see that. Better than Dan and Lois.

“Mayson and Lucy are fast becoming friends. I don’t understand that. I never got along with Mayson. Either of them.” Lois took another bite of her sandwich.

Clark stared at her. He knew why his wife hadn’t gotten along with his Mayson. She didn’t like that Mayson had liked him and that he had liked her. Was that the same reason she hadn’t gotten along with the other Mayson? Because she was jealous. The knot forming in his stomach told him he was on the right track.

“Would you stop calling her that?”

“What?” Lois asked.

“Lucy. Lucy El is you, not her.”

“Actually, she is now. She took over my secret identity. Lois Lane is dead.” She took another bite of her sandwich.

“Don’t say that,” Clark whispered.

“I know all these dual names can be a bit confusing. It takes a little getting used to.”

“Don’t say that Lois Lane is dead,” he repeated. He couldn’t hear that phrase.

“Not me.” Lois took hold of his hand. “I’m fine, Clark.”

Clark looked at her. “Are you?”

His wife smiled. “Only batty twenty-five percent of the time.” He knew she was joking, but a part of him wondered. “Oh, time for me to leave for my hair appointment. Thanks for the sandwich.”

“Why don’t I walk you?” Clark still wasn’t sure that was where she was going.

“No, Clark. Lex Luthor is dead. It’s safe to walk the streets of Metropolis again.” Lois patted his arm with a chuckle. “Except for Metro cabbies.”

Clark still followed her from a safe distance, but she turned into a hair salon after a five minute walk. He was just being paranoid. He shook his head, ambling back to the Daily Planet.

***

Lois took a deep breath and walked out of her bedroom. *Please, be home. Please.*

She went into Lara’s room, but her crib was empty. *Oh, no! Not again*. She couldn’t spend another weekend like the last weekend. All alone. She just couldn’t. Not this weekend.

Reluctantly, she walked down the stairs. She heard a rustle of newspaper and practically sprinted into the dining room. “You’re home,” Lois gasped with delight.

Clark glanced up from the newspaper with a curiously raised brow.

So much for nonchalance, Lois, she scolded herself.

Lara was sitting in her playpen in the corner of the room.

Lois picked her daughter up and kissed her cheek. “Good morning, baboo.”

Her daughter accepted her kiss, then squirmed as if she had enough already. Lois set her back down.

Lois sat down at the end of the table, next to Clark. She hated what their relationship had become. There was once a time when she was in control, when he would have done anything to make her happy. Those days were long gone. She hated being in the doghouse. Hated the silence. Hated that she caused Clark so much pain. There was a time that breakfast meant burnt sausages due to too much passion. Now, she was lucky if he was home when she came down stairs.

Dr. Friskin said that Lois needed to give him time to heal. She sighed and poured cereal into her bowl. “Good morning, Clark.”

He shook the paper. “Good morning, Lois.”

Good beginning. Lois knew the polite thing to do was ask him if he had any plans, but she didn’t want to give him an out. She wanted to ask him for a favor, even though it felt like begging, but doubted she had any chips left to cash in.

“I was thinking,” she plowed ahead, pouring milk on her cereal, then adding a handful of blueberries. “That we should do something as a family today.”

Clark folded the newspaper and set it down. “Such as?”

Lois was prepared with her answers. “We could go to the town of Tombstone, Arizona, see what life was like in the old west.”

“Lois.”

“I know it will be scorching hot. Arizona in July, ugh, but if we all wore hats and brought plenty of sunscreen…” She took a bite of her cereal and looked up at him. He was just staring at her.

“No? Okay.” On to idea number two. “There’s a Renaissance Fair at Mid-West University this weekend.”

“A Renaissance Fair?” he repeated back to her. Was that a hint of a smile on his lips? Did he know what she was doing?

“People dressed up in medieval clothing, old-timey music and dancing, sword-fighting, pigs roasted on a spit. Lots of fun to be had.” She took another bite of cereal.

“Lo-is.”

Okay. Strike two. “I was going to suggest Disneyland, but it’s really hard to go on rides with an infant. We’ll have to wait a few years.”

"Disneyland?" He seemed surprised by this suggestion.

"Or Disney World, whichever. Well, I thought it might be fun. The silly romance of the Fairy Tales, Sleeping Beauty's castle, Mickey Mouse…" Lois glanced up at him. "No?"

"No. How about we just stay home? Take a walk in the park. Go out for ice cream."

Lois smiled. "That sounds nice, too."

"We've been traveling so much the last few weekends. Did you want to get out of Metropolis?"

Yes! They never made it out of town, or even out of the Clinton Street apartment, last year. She didn't want to be reminded of that. She still wanted to go to Hawaii, but they would save that for a real second honeymoon.

Out loud, Lois said, "No, not particularly." As long as they spent the day together, speaking, but not arguing, that would be enough. And if she could skip being shot this year. That was all she really needed.

***

Lois rested her head on Clark's shoulder as they sat on the couch and watched *Jurassic Park* on video. It had been a good day. She had been able to keep her foot out of her mouth and Clark had almost been his charming self again. They had gone for a long walk in the park with Lara in the stroller. They ate hot dogs and ice cream cones and sat in the grass. It had been leisurely and laid-back. Practically playful. And no appearances or disappearances from the Man in Blue.

Lara had gone to sleep early. She had started sleeping through the night recently, for which they were both thankful.

Clark and Lois ate pizza and drank red wine and watched videos. Action movies, not romance, but at least they were together. Lois wanted to tell him that *Jurassic Park* had never been made in the other dimension, but she decided not to bring up the subject.

Lois's eyes grew heavy and drifted shut. Clark turned off the TV and lifted her into his arms. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

Suddenly, Lois didn't feel sleepy anymore. Had he said what she thought he said? *Oh, please!* That would make this day perfect.

Clark lay her down on the bed, covered her with a blanket. Then he placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "Good night, Lois."

Lois wasn't going to let him go that easily. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a more intense kiss. "Stay."

Clark hesitated for a moment, then started to move away. "I can't, Lois."

She pulled him back, kissing him again. "Yes, you can."

"Lois, please don't. I'm not ready," her husband whispered.

Lois let him go. "I'm sorry, Clark."

"For cheating on me or for being caught?" he said and then winced.

Lois caressed his cheek. "For hurting you."

He rested his head against hers. "Me, too."

"I love you, Clark," she whispered, kissing him again. "Happy Anniversary."

Clark closed his eyes. She wondered what he was thinking. He couldn't have forgotten. Not Clark. He kissed her again and again and again. She slipped her hand under his shirt, feeling his bare skin. No, Clark hadn't forgotten. He had taken the day off. She wanted to tell him thank you, but was afraid the sound of her voice would stop the kisses.

Five minutes later, Clark pulled away. She could see the desire she felt matched in his eyes. "Happy Anniversary, Lois." He swallowed and super sped out of the room.

Lois flopped back on the bed in utter frustration. "Clark Kent," she mumbled. "You tease."

***

On Monday, Lois had an appointment with an eye doctor.

"Why do you want to see an eye doctor?"

"Because I got used to wearing my John Lennon specs every morning. I still catch myself feeling for them. I should just make sure those non-prescription lenses didn't damage my eyes any."

"Why don't you see my doctor?" Clark asked.

"Because I want to see a doctor who can tell the difference between Clark Kent's eyesight and Superman's. Thank you very much."

This time Clark followed her from the air. He didn't think she had caught him the time before, but he wanted to be sure. Good thing that he did, because Lois got in her car and drove several miles, before pulling into an underground parking lot of building of medical offices. He had been there before, he was sure of it. But he couldn't place the reason. He dropped to the ground, spinning back into his business suit. He went inside and read the names of the doctors. No optometrists, but he did catch the name of a psychologist. Dr. Friskin!

No. Lois couldn't be going to see his old shrink. Maybe. His wife had recommended her to him. He had to think about that for a minute. What in the world was Lois telling this woman? Did he want to know? And the sixty-four thousand dollar question, was it helping? He pushed the elevator button, but then heard a siren. He ran out of the building and was in the air seconds later.

***

Clark flew back to the doctor's office. He would sit in the waiting room and wait for Lois. Perhaps listen in… he grimaced. How could he even contemplate doing that? Breaking doctor-patient confidentiality like that? But Lois was his wife and Clark wanted to know the things she was afraid to tell him. She kept avoiding certain topics about her year in the other dimension. It was the not knowing that was driving him crazy. He needed to know what she was keeping from him and why. He would wait. He wouldn't actively listen in, but if he happened to hear by accident…

The elevator doors opened and Clark walked down the hall to Dr. Friskin's office. The receptionist was gone from her desk, so he sat alone in the waiting room. The last time he was here was before he had proposed to Lois, back when he was first exposed to Red Kryptonite. As Superman, he told Dr. Friskin how much he loved Lois and how much it angered him to see her with Dan Scardino. He had punched a hole in her wall. Clark sighed. That was a long time ago.

Clark realized his super hearing hadn't picked up a peep from Dr. Friskin's office. Was he wrong? Was Lois going to another kind of doctor's office after all? Or had she already left? That robbery had taken him longer than he thought it would. He stood up and lowered his glasses. Nope. Dr. Friskin was alone. He stood up and turned to leave when she opened the door.

"Yes? May I help you?"

Clark was caught. There was so much he wanted to know but he knew Dr. Friskin wouldn't tell him. He let go of the doorknob and held out his hand.

"Dr. Friskin? Clark Kent, *Daily Planet*." Why in the world had he said that?

She raised a brow, shaking his hand. "Are you here in an official capacity, Mr. Kent?" she asked. "Because my files are confidential."

"Sorry. Force of habit." He smiled sheepishly.

She waited.

"My wife is Lois Lane."

Dr. Friskin continued to wait, not saying a word.

He felt embarrassed. What was he doing here? He turned back to the door. "Sorry. This was a bad idea."

"What makes you think she came here, Mr. Kent?"

Clark paused, looking down. "I followed her here," he admitted.

"Why don't you come in and sit down?"

He walked into her office and sat down in one of the chairs by her desk. He wasn't a patient. He wasn't going to lie on that couch again.

Dr. Friskin shut the door and sat down next to him. "Do you not trust your wife, Mr. Kent?"

"Of course, I—"

She raised a brow.

"Okay. Maybe not one hundred percent," he confessed.

"What did you hope to learn by following her here?"

"Anything!" Clark stood up and started pacing. "She won't talk to me."

"*She* won't talk to you?" Dr. Friskin repeated back to him.

Lois had clearly told Dr. Friskin about his recent silent treatment. Clark closed his eyes and sat back down. "I admit I haven't been the best listener lately."

"If there is something you want to know, Mr. Kent, you should ask your wife; or are you afraid of what she might say?"

He gazed at the doctor. "Why? What did she tell you?"

"I'm afraid that's not how this works."

Clark stared at Dr. Friskin. Which story did Lois tell her? "Did she tell you about kissing Superman?"

By her startled expression, he knew he had guessed incorrectly. "Not unless your twin brother is Superman," she told him.

"No! Of course not! That's ridiculous," he replied adamantly.

Dr. Friskin raised a brow and waited. Okay. Maybe he had said that a little too forcefully.

"She told you about sleeping with *him*." He couldn't call the other Clark his brother. "Did she also tell you that he was dressed as Superman at the time? Because they had gone to a costume party?"

"Ah." She nodded with comprehension.

Clark released a breath, having gotten himself so easily out of that mistake.

"Which bothers you more, Mr. Kent? That she slept with your brother or that he was dressed as Superman at the time?" Dr. Friskin looked at him and he felt like a fish caught in a net. How had she come to the crux of the situation so precisely?

"Are you afraid she looks at the real Superman differently now?"

Clark hated that when Lois saw Superman now, she might not be seeing him, her personal hero, her husband, but the other Clark's Superman. She had always loved Superman. Always. From the first moment she met him. He hated that some of the obsession for his other self might be shared with the other Clark.

"I know he was once a suitor for your wife's affections," Dr. Friskin informed him.

"How do you know about that?" he snapped. Was Dr. Friskin revealing to a stranger what he had told her in confidence as Superman?

"Lois told me."

Of course, Lois. Clark relaxed. Had she also told Dr. Friskin about his dual life? His secret identity? He tensed at this thought.

"Do you think your wife is hiding something else from you?"

Dr. Friskin had a point there. What could be worse than Lois cheating on him? Falling in love with the other Clark? He put his face in his hands. "I don't know. I really don't know."

"Do you still love her?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust her? I mean, you aren't keeping anything, any secrets, from her?"

Clark swallowed. Well, there was what he knew about Bruce Wayne. But that really wasn't her concern. "Nothing of importance."

Dr. Friskin appeared a bit skeptical of his response. "Do you want to get past this incident? Continue your marriage? Start a family with her?"

"We already have a family, Dr. Friskin," he growled, glaring at her.

"My apologies, Mr. Kent. Of course, Lara. Let me rephrase my question. Do you see Lois in your future?"

"Yes. As both my wife and mother of my children. Lois and I will grow old together." Well, as best they could. "She *is* my soul mate."

Dr. Friskin nodded, making another note on her pad. "What is stopping you from forgiving her, then?"

"The betrayal. I keep imagining them together."

"So she has shattered your trust in her. Are you afraid that when Lois and Kal see each other at holidays, vacations, weddings, and christenings and such, the old sparks will fly?"

Kal? "No." Clark swallowed. "We aren't likely to bump into him."

"Why is that?"

"Because he's not family. We were separated at birth, adopted by different couples, far apart. We only found each other last year by accident."

"Oh. So you aren't close?"

"No. I hardly know the man. Lois…" Clark squeezed his eyes shut. "… discovered him. I have only met him a couple of times."

Dr. Friskin looked perplexed. "Then why did she go to him for protection when your life was in danger?"

"*Me?*" What was she talking about? "You mean Lois. Her life was in danger."

The doctor shook her head. "No. She said that she wouldn't have gone to him, because she knew how he felt about her, except that it was the only way to protect you, to save your life."

"My life?" He laughed. "But I can't—" He gulped.

"Can't die, Mr. Kent? Immortal are you?" Dr. Friskin raised a skeptical eyebrow. "We're all mortal. Even Superman. You should know that. You cover him for the *Daily Planet*, don't you?"

Clark nodded. "I meant, I can't think of why Lois would think my life had been in danger."

"So, this man from her dreams." The doctor flipped some pages of her notebook. "… this Jason Trask? What can you tell me about him?"

On a list of all the things, all the names he might have considered Dr. Friskin asking him about, Jason Trask's name wasn't on it.

"Lois is having nightmares about Jason Trask?"

Neither confirming or denying this statement, Dr. Friskin waited.

"Jason Trask was a crazy alien chaser for a secret government agency, Bureau 39, who thought Superman was the advance team for an alien invasion. He thought I was hiding Superman's identity and tried to kill me and my parents. He died almost four years ago."

"Hmmm." Dr. Friskin made a note on her pad. "Interesting."

Clark leaned forward. "No, not interesting. Important. Did she see Jason Trask at my brother's?"

She glanced up from her notebook and looked him in the eye. "I thought you said he was dead?"

"So was Lex Luthor once too, but he came back," Clark clarified.

"Oh, yes, she mentioned Luthor. His ex-wife made an exact duplicate of her and tried to kill her. Made her very distrustful of therapists."

"You don't know the half of it," he mumbled and then cleared his throat. "So, Lois didn't see Trask?"

"Not outside her dreams that she's mentioned to me."

Clark thought about this. Why would Lois be having nightmares about Jason Trask? He thought that man was long dead and buried. "What do you think it means? That she's dreaming about him?"

"He represents someone who tried to kill people near and dear to her. You, your family, and Superman. Perhaps he symbolizes the unknown, the bogeyman if you will, out to destroy what's left of her happiness."

Tempus he could see, like the dreams he had of him, before he reappeared as John Doe. But Trask?

A buzzer sounded. "Oh, Mr. Kent. My next appointment is here. This has been very informative." Dr. Friskin held out her hand and he shook it. "May I recommend that you accompany Lois the next time we meet? Perhaps together we can rebuild those trust bridges. Shall I pencil you in?" She flipped open her black appointment book.

He stood up. "No! God, no. It would crush her, if she knew I followed her."

Dr. Friskin looked at him. "I will not keep your appearance today a secret from her, Mr. Kent. She needs to know you are concerned about her. May I recommend that you reconsider?"

"I'll think about it." He swallowed. "I'd better be getting back to the office."

"Good day." She smiled as he left the room.

Clark put a hand to his head. Lois was going to kill him for spying on her.

***

Clark wrapped their new baby in a blanket and walked back to Lois. "Mommy, meet your son," he said, showing his wife the puckered face of the newborn as he passed their baby to her. Their son had their dark hair. He yawned and then screamed. He had his big sister's lungs. Clark chuckled, kissing his son's head. Lois leaned over and kissed the baby's head at the same time. The baby, feeling their intense love, calmed down almost immediately.

Then her husband kissed her dry lips. "I love you, Mommy."

Lois gathered up her strength and pulled him back for another kiss. "I love you, Daddy."

"*Aww, isn't this heartwarming?" said a familiar voice from the doorway. A man dressed in surgical scrubs and mask entered the room. He lowered his mask and pointed some sort of aerosol spray can towards them.*

"*Trask!" growled Clark, leaping over the table.*

But the instant he moved, Trask pushed the button on the aerosol can and filled the air with a green mist. Clark began to choke, falling to the ground. "Lois," he gasped, turning towards her, pleading. "Our son."

Lois had just given birth. There was no way she could move. She held their son as tightly as her weak arms could, covering his face with his baby blanket.

"*I'll just be taking this," said Trask, pulling their gasping son out of her arms.*

"*Daddy!" she called to her father, but Sam Lane just stood there shaking in fear, not knowing what to do.*

"*Good day, folks!" Trask called as he and their newborn son left the operating room.*

"*Lois!" Clark gasped, reaching for her before collapsing in a heap on the ground.*

"No!" Lois screamed. "Clark!" She was awake now. She pulled her legs up to her chest and cried. "Clark."

He was in the bedroom a second later, still dressed in his Superman suit. "Lois, what's wrong?" Clark asked, kneeling down beside her.

She held out her hand to him. "Clark."

He took hold of her hand and pulled her into his embrace. "I'm here."

Lois laid her head on his chest and cried.

Clark held her, wrapping her in his red cape. He had promised himself he would never do this, because it was what the other Clark did. But when she cried out to him like that, changing his clothes was the last thing on his mind. It must have been the same for the other Clark. When she screamed in terror, everything else took a backseat. He had actually dropped a couple of criminals off at the nearest police precinct, outside on the steps, because he had heard her scream. As he told her before, he could only help the rest of the world when he knew she was safe. That still held true.

Her crying calmed down and he kissed her forehead. "Lois, we need to talk."

His wife sniffled. "What about?"

Clark actually had to stop himself from chuckling. "What do you think? These nightmares."

"I'm fine now. You can go." She pushed away from him and went to lie back down.

"Lois." He spooned her, so his front was pressed against her back. "Tell me about your dream. It's not good to keep it bottled up. Something's bothering you. Tell me what it is."

She sniffled. "No."

"Lois, please. Tell me about your dream."

Lois was quiet for a few minutes and he wondered if she had gone back to sleep. "Trask kidnapped our newborn son," she whispered.

Clark froze, stiff as a board. "We have a son?" She had had twins?

"In the dream, Clark."

He relaxed. Right, the dream. "Oh."

"In the dream, I had just given birth to the most adorable son with dark hair and eyes. Lara's little brother. You brought him over to me and we bonded with him."

Clark kissed her hair. So far, a good dream.

"Then Trask walks in, dressed in surgical scrubs, sprays you with a Kryptonite mist and steals our son, leaving you to die on the floor. I'm too weak to get up, let alone chase him."

The rest of the dream was really, really bad, horribly bad. Clark cleared his throat. "It was just a dream, Lois."

"I know."

"Trask is dead," he reminded her.

She sat up. "You don't think I know that? I've searched the database, trying to figure out who this shadowy Trask figure is. He abandoned his wife and son in 1980, when the boy was three. The son is twenty, twenty-one now. A junior at Met U., English Literature major. He's into theater and renaissance fairs. It doesn't exactly scream psycho with a vendetta to me."

Clark leaned on his palm staring at her. "You researched Trask's family?"

Lois nodded. "These dreams mean something, Clark. I don't know what yet. I'm afraid if I don't find out soon, something real is going to beat me to it."

"Real?" he repeated.

"You'll die for real, before I can figure out these dreams."

Clark wrapped his arms and cape around her once more. "I'm not going anywhere, Lois."

Lois placed a hand on his cheek. "That's sweet, Clark. Not true, but sweet."

"I mean I'm not planning on dying anytime soon," he corrected with a snicker.

Elbowing him, she said, "Nobody plans on dying, Clark. It just happens, usually when you least expect it."

"So, I die in all these dreams?" Nice.

"No. In the first one, you just weren't there. Trask threw me out of the plane, only there was no Clark Kent, no Superman, and I just fell to my death."

Clark pulled her against his chest. "But I was there. I did save you."

"Just a dream, Clark. Not a change in history."

"Right." He nodded. "And Trask was in all these dreams?"

Lois shook her head. "Most of them. The one I had after Bobby Bigmouth came to dinner, Trask wasn't in that dream

directly."

"Uh-huh."

"We're out at your parent's farm, enjoying a warm summer's day. Lara's about three. Your Mom has made strawberry shortcake."

"Yum!"

"But Kryptonite seeped into the groundwater, polluting your parents' well. So, when your Mom made the lemonade in the dream, it looked green in the light. That's how I knew something was wrong."

"Kryptonite in the groundwater?" He shivered, just the thought…

"That chunk of Kryptonite you threw against that rock, while you were fighting Trask, remember?"

"Not something one forgets easily, Lois."

"You said it shattered, pulverized by the impact, right? Well, what happened to all that Kryptonite dust? I cannot believe you fought Trask in that water and survived to tell me about it." He could hear the disbelief in her voice.

"I'll take soil and water samples the next time we're in Kansas. I promise. We'll send them to Dr. Klein for analysis and put your worries to rest."

"Thank you." Lois closed her eyes and snuggled against his neck. "I've missed you."

Did she mean him or Superman? Clark hated that this old question had come back.

Still, it felt good to have Lois so close, in his arms. The other night he almost wasn't able to stop himself from getting closer, all the way closer. But every time he got close to his wife, desired her in that way, he wondered if she was really thinking about the other Clark, wanting him instead of her husband. Would she be pretending in her mind that he was the other Clark, like she had when she heard the Elvis music? Having her so close though, her scent was overpowering. There was always something quintessentially Lois about how she smelled.

She cheated on you, a voice inside his head reminded him.

But how close had he been to cheating on her as well? What if that pregnant woman at his folks' farm *had* been the other Clark's Lois like his mom had told him? He had felt a connection to that other Lois when she kissed him, even though it had only been two seconds before the other Clark burst through the door. If he hadn't known she wasn't his wife, would he have known? What if that pregnant Lois had taken him up on his offer to run away using the time machine and make love, and then turned out to be the other Clark's girlfriend, instead of his own wife? True, Clark would have thought he was making love with his wife. But he would have been equally guilty of cheating as his wife currently was. Thankfully, the pregnant woman had turned out to be his Lois, his partner, his wife. And, either way, they had not gone off together.

Clark pressed his lips together. But Lois *knew* the other Clark was another man, not her husband Clark, when she slept with him. He closed his eyes trying to push these thoughts aside as he savored Lois's sweet essence, but a picture of her kissing another Superman — as the other man laughed at him — flashed in front of his eyelids. He swallowed the bad taste in his mouth and opened his eyes. Clearing his throat, he murmured, "Lois."

She sighed and withdrew, lying back down on the bed. Lois took one last look at him before closing her eyes. A moment later, they flew back open. "Hey!" His wife pointed at him. "You forgot to change. You're in your blue suit."

Lois hadn't noticed. Really? Some of the ice around his heart cracked.

She smiled, reaching up to his cheek. "I love you, Husband."

And I love you, Wife, he thought, kissing the palm of her hand.

Lois closed her eyes and murmured, "Always."

He continued to lie next to her until she was fast asleep again.

***

Lois and Penny walked along the path to the auditorium.

"It was so sweet of Clark to volunteer to stay home with Lara, so you could come to this lecture with me," said Penny.

Lois raised a brow. Penny had an annoying habit of describing her husband as 'sweet'. "He and Jimmy are watching the game."

"Still, if there was an emergency, he wouldn't be able to leave." Penny sighed.

Again, Jimmy's there, Lois thought, wishing she could defend her husband out loud. Instead, she said, "Really, Penny, you've got to stop believing this ridiculous notion that my husband moonlights in blue tights."

Penny shook her head. "Right, Lois. Good try. I don't know why you guys won't just admit to me what I already know to be true."

Time for a change of subject. "What interests you in Bruce Wayne?"

Penny sighed again. "You mean, besides the fact that he's dreamy?"

Lois controlled the impulse to gag. "Did you tell Jimmy who was hosting tonight's lecture?"

Penny blushed. "No. I just told him the subject was 'Women in Technical Fields.' After that, I could have told him Brad Pitt was dancing a naked hula and he wouldn't have heard. Did you tell Clark?"

Oh, definitely not. "Let's just say the topic didn't come up. What he doesn't know won't kill him."

Penny seemed surprised. "I thought you told each other everything."

"He doesn't really like Bruce Wayne," Lois admitted.

"Really? Why not?" Penny asked, full of curiosity.

Lois wished she could tell Penny it was because Bruce was a pig, but Clark had expressed a dislike of the man before she even went on that sham interview. "That's exactly what I'd like to know," she finally replied.

"Bruce Wayne seems so genuine."

Lois was beginning to wonder which screw in Penny's head had come loose.

"Believe me, he's anything but. A real slime ball. A tactless pig." Lois shivered remembering their so-called interview. She was also curious. Interested in why a man would order *I'm Sorry* roses two days before meeting someone. Why wouldn't he want her to like him, when he seemed to ooze charm for everyone else? Especially since she wasn't the type of woman whom men tried to repel. Bruce Wayne must have a reason. Anyone who possessed Kryptonite expected to cross the wrong side of Superman. And anyone who crossed the wrong side of Superman should expect an exposé written by Lois Lane to follow soon thereafter.

What was Bruce Wayne hiding from Superman? Did Clark already know Bruce Wayne's secret? If Clark knew what Bruce was hiding, why hadn't he told her?

***

Lois rose and picked up her purse from the floor.

Penny was still applauding.

The reporter in her had to admit Bruce Wayne put on a good show. She would write up an article for Perry when she got home. Tugging on her nanny's arm, Lois said, "Come on, let's go."

Penny's face was flushed with excitement. Graduate school had better watch out. "I want to go introduce myself to Professor Hodgins. Meet me in the lobby?"

Lois waved her on. Idly, she wondered when she had lost her youthful exuberance for knowledge. For a story, yes, but for learning new things in a classroom, no. It made her feel old. Maybe it was because she hit the thirty-year mark earlier than her

birthday dictated. Everyone would be making jokes about her leaving her twenties behind when, technically, she'd left her twenties last year, in the other dimension. This year she'd really be turning thirty-one. She sighed; some days she felt more like sixty.

"Lois? Lois Lane!" a voice called to her.

She turned and saw Bruce Wayne bearing down on her. Just what she needed, a headache in a suit. "Mr. Wayne."

"Oh, come on. Why so formal? I apologized. Let me do so again. I treated you horribly the other day and I'm sorry." He held out his hand. "I'd really like us to be friends."

Lois looked at his hand, but did not shake it. "Friends? Why would you want to be friends with me? We don't exactly move in the same circles, Mr. Wayne."

"You'd be surprised," he said as a big grin slipped onto that chiseled face.

She raised a brow. Curious.

"And I insist you call me Bruce."

"Well, Mr. Wayne, you want to tell me the truth now? If you want us to be friends, why order an apology bouquet two days before we met? A day before you even asked for the interview."

If he was startled by her investigative skills, it didn't show. He smiled. "You always impressed me with your intelligence and perseverance." He coughed. "But I wouldn't want to turn your head with flattery."

Lois scoffed. "Fat chance of that happening."

Bruce's smile grew as if that was exactly what he wanted to hear. So, he didn't want her admiration. Good. He wasn't going to get it. He rubbed his jaw. "Your husband is a jealous man."

"Yes, he is."

"I needed to prove to him that I was a different kind of billionaire philanthropist than he was used to dealing with. Guarantee him that his wife wouldn't be charmed by my handsome face and all my money. That he had nothing to fear from me on that front."

Lois crossed her arms and stared at him, trying to figure him out. "Why all this interest in Clark? You're Bruce Wayne, billionaire playboy. He's Clark Kent, hardworking family man. I can't see why you would be concerned with some average Joe reporter from Metropolis."

"When you put it like that…" Bruce chuckled. "I admit it sounds strange, but I like him."

"Clark is nice."

"He is. A darn nice guy."

They both looked at each other and shivered. That had been John Doe's slogan.

Bruce continued. "Even when he burst into my office to tell me to stay away from you… he's so admirable."

"You obviously don't listen well, do you?"

Bruce grinned. "I've always had trouble playing by someone else's rules. But then so do you. You accepted my invitation, did you not?"

"What invitation?" Lois questioned.

"To the lecture."

"No. A friend invited me."

He glanced around. "A friend?"

"Aww. Were you planning on abducting me?" Lois yawned. "It's been so long since I've been kidnapped, I'm beginning to feel that the bad guys don't care anymore."

Bruce chuckled. "You're funny. No, I'm not going to abduct you, Lois. Really, I'm one of the good guys."

Lois saw Penny from across the lobby and waved. She turned back to Bruce with a shake of her head. "Good guys don't have to tell people they're good, Mr. Wayne. They demonstrate it with their actions."

"Thanks for the constructive criticism, Lois, I'll work on that. Well, hello there." Bruce grinned at Penny, giving her the full once-over.

Penny stared in shock to be standing so close to him.

"Penny, Bruce Wayne. Mr. Wayne, the friend I mentioned, Penny Barnes."

Automatically Penny held out her hand. Bruce took it in his and instead of shaking it, kissed it. "Enchanté," he said.

Penny surprised both of them by replying in perfect French.

Bruce responded in kind and then switched back to English. "Lois is having a hard time following our conversation, Penny." Then he got a inquisitive expression on his face. "Penny? Where have I heard… *Jimmy!*" For the first time all evening Bruce Wayne looked shocked. "No." He shook his head. "There is no way that cub photographer caught you on his own. I don't believe it." He studied her, then glanced at Lois with a slightly worried expression.

"Actually, I caught him," Penny replied, smiling.

"That I can believe, but *why*?" Bruce Wayne actually looked like he had a bad taste in his mouth.

"Jimmy's a great guy," Lois defended her friend.

"You could say he's *almost* super." Penny bubbled. "Ninety-seven percent super in fact."

Bruce glanced at the two women in dismay as they burst into laughter.

After a minute, Lois said, "Private joke."

"It's really a funny story," Penny started.

Lois put her hand on her arm. "Bruce Wayne isn't interested in how you and Jimmy met."

"Actually, I could use a good laugh," he corrected her.

Penny glanced at Lois, who shook her head slightly. The young woman smiled at Bruce. "Another time, perhaps."

Forward, thought Lois, especially for someone with a steady boyfriend. Then Lois glanced at Bruce for his reaction.

"I would like that." He smiled.

No. No. No. No. No. That wasn't good.

"Shall we go, Penny? The boys are probably wondering where we disappeared to."

Penny was staring at him as much as Bruce was staring at her and she didn't hear a word Lois said. Definitely not good.

"What do you do, Penny?"

"I'm—"

"In graduate school," interrupted Lois with a sharp glance at Penny, who was clearly oblivious. "She's studying computer programming."

"Beautiful, talented, and intelligent, a trifecta. Do you study here at Metropolis University?"

Penny slowly nodded. "I start in the fall."

"Did you ever consider University of Gotham? Our computer science division is one of the best in the country."

"Don't even think of stealing Penny away from Metropolis, Mr. Wayne," Lois warned. Lara loved her and she would hate to have to replace her so soon after finding her.

Bruce glanced at Lois. "Of course. A woman like Penny belongs among the sunshine and flowers of Metropolis. Gotham City would eat her alive."

Penny seemed annoyed that they spoke as if she wasn't there. "I *am* from Gotham City originally, you know, Bruce. Did my undergraduate work at Gotham City College."

"And how did we lose you to Metropolis? A job?"

"Well, yes. Diticom did offer me a data entry job, but…" Penny blushed. "I came here after a man."

"Diticom? Are you *the* Penny Barnes that single handedly brought down Garret Grady, CEO of Diticom?"

"He brought himself down," Lois mumbled. "With a little help from Superman."

Penny nodded. "Anyone stupid enough to try to blackmail a superhero deserves any punishment he gets handed."

Bruce grinned, taking her arm. "I completely agree. Shall I

give you ladies a lift home?"

"We'll manage, thank you," said Lois, taking Penny's other arm and tugging. "Goodbye, Mr. Wayne."

"Yes, thank you for the invitation," cooed Penny. Lois gave her a sharp look. So that's what happened to her 'invitation'.

"Lois, please, wait," Bruce followed after them, but then pressed his lips together as if he really didn't want to say what was on the tip of his tongue after all. Glancing at Penny, he took Lois's arm and moved her away from her friend, lowering his voice. "Is everything… is he okay?"

"Who?"

Bruce took another step forward, lowering his voice again. "You know who."

Lois turned to walk off. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"He's canceled all but a handful of his public appearances in the past two months."

She froze. He was talking about Superman.

"And over the last three weekends, he's only rescued that oil tanker in the Gulf and the people of Fuji when that volcano exploded. The rumbling on the streets is growing. I have to know. This doesn't have to do with my pinball lesson, does it?"

Lois laughed; she couldn't believe this guy. "Self-centered much, Mr. Wayne? Why would he care one way or another what *you* do?"

"He cares about you," he murmured.

"My *husband* cares about me," she reproached. "Superman and I are just friends."

Bruce stepped closer. "Look, Lois, I know you don't trust me, but please know that I'm not out to hurt you. I heard about that incident between you and Superman—"

"Of course you did. You bugged my corsage." Lois glared at him.

He plowed on, ignoring her statement. "Once I heard that you hadn't been covering him at the *Daily Planet* since our interview, I did some investigating of my own. I also heard that Clark walked out on you during your romantic weekend in Memphis and took an alternate means of transportation home." He raised a brow.

Penny gasped, covering her mouth.

"You seem extremely well-informed, Mr. Wayne, for an innocent bystander," Lois replied sharply.

"I like to keep an eye on my friends." He smiled. "I wanted to make sure that he didn't blame you for my inexcusable behavior."

Lois ground her teeth. "My husband trusts me. He knows that there isn't a single person in this universe who'd even tempt me away from him, especially your charming face," she said, not so lightly patting his face.

"He doesn't think you have a cape fetish, then?" Bruce chuckled.

Her brows came together. What was he talking about? "I didn't realize you wore a cape, Mr. Wayne."

Bruce waved off the comment.

Not taking her eyes off him, Penny took hold of Lois's arm and started to move away from him. "Let's go, Lois."

"You're right, Penny. This conversation has gone on too long."

Bruce took a few steps to keep up with them and asked Lois point-blank, "So, Clark didn't tell you?"

"Tell me *what*?" Lois asked.

He dodged her question. "What we talked about when he visited my office, of course. It wasn't important."

As she and Penny headed towards the door, Lois heard Bruce comment to himself, "Interesting. Very interesting."

Lois scowled. Clark found out something about Bruce Wayne and hadn't told her. What other secrets was he keeping from her?

***

Pizza, beer, and a baseball game. Clark leaned back on the couch and grinned. Heaven. He couldn't remember the last time he and Jimmy had had a guys night. Definitely before Lara and Lois arrived back from the other dimension. He patted the baby asleep on his shoulder; technically, they did have a girl here. He carried his daughter upstairs and laid her in the crib with a sigh. He couldn't believe how much pleasure one little being had brought to his life. He jogged back down the stairs for the ninth inning.

"CK, I can't believe our first game night in *months*, man, and we're friggin' babysitting," Jimmy complained.

Clark grinned. "It could have been worse. We could have been dragged to the seminar on 'Women in Technical Fields.'"

Jimmy covered his ears. "Num. Num. Num. I cannot hear you," he said with glee, dropping his hands. "The Gotham Knights are up by two runs."

"No! I was out of the room for less than two minutes." Clark shook his head, sitting down. He heard a key in the lock of the outer door. Lois and Penny must be back.

"*Are you going to tell him?"* Penny asked Lois.

"*No, I don't think I will."* Lois sounded annoyed. Great. What now? They were just starting to get back on solid ground.

"*He should know. At least, be warned. That guy knows things. More than I know and I'm here every day."*

Clark's brows came together. What guy? Knows what things?

"*I'll suggest that he ask Superman do another sweep for bugs, just in case. What did you think about that crack about the cape?"* Lois scoffed. "*No, I'll fill Clark in as soon as I know he's not keeping any more secrets from me."*

Clark winced. Oh, crap. Which secret had she found out about? Wait a minute. He wasn't keeping any secrets from his wife.

"*There's only one other man I know who…"* Penny started, but didn't finish. Who, what?

Lois pushed open the front door. "Hello, boys. Did the Monarchs win?"

"Down by two runs," said Jimmy, not turning away from the game.

"Did you have fun?" Clark asked, glancing over his shoulder. Lois kissed his cheek.

"It was amazing!" gushed Penny. "So many opportunities. So many fields."

"That's great, dear," Jimmy said, completely focused on the TV.

Penny looked at him with a raised brow and lowered her voice, leaning towards Lois. "I'm surprised he didn't ask for my phone number."

"Do you think he has to? He'll probably know your measurements by morning," Lois whispered back, heading up the stairs.

"*Do you think he'll call?"* Penny asked as soon as they were upstairs.

"*If he does, I wouldn't take it,"* Lois replied. "*She's so sweet when she's asleep."* Ah, they were checking on Lara.

"*I don't know. I could use his connections to get a scholarship."*

"Oh, man! The Knights just got another run."

Clark turned to Jimmy. Right, guys night, the game.

"*I wouldn't use his connections to get a cup of coffee. I don't care how handsome a man like that is, if he gives you something, he'll want something in return. You remember that."*

"*Sounds like he already has your measurements,"* chuckled Penny.

What?! Clark stood up, his hands in fists.

"*He'd better not or Clark will bring brass knuckles next time, to make sure he broke his jaw. The guy's just creepy."*

"Wayne." Clark snarled.

"*I think he's cute."*

"Huh?" Jimmy said, glancing over at him.

"I said it looks like rain," Clark said, pretending to cough and tuning out the rest of the women's conversation.

"Rain? No way, CK. Besides it's the top of the ninth. They wouldn't call a game in the ninth inning for a hurricane."

"You're right. My mistake."

What was Bruce Wayne doing at a 'Women in Technical Fields' seminar? He walked over to where Lois had set her purse on the little table by the door. He scanned it and found a notebook. He opened her purse and pulled out the notebook. *Wayne Foundation presents Women in Technical Fields*. He tucked the notebook back inside her purse and returned to the couch.

Clark couldn't believe she wasn't planning on telling him she ran into Bruce Wayne, after all the lies she had told him. He shook his head. But, he realized reluctantly, when she *had* told him the truth, he had pushed her away, even harder. Clark leaned forward over his knees and rested his head in his hands. He and his wife needed to rebuild their trust and fast. He couldn't let guys like Wayne start to push them further apart. Perhaps he would stop by Wayne's hotel room tonight after lights out and give him another piece of his mind.

***

Lois shut the door with a sigh.

"Everything all right, Lois? You seem far away."

She glared at him. "I'm still here… in this dimension. Just because I have something on my mind doesn't mean it's *him*."

"That's not…" Clark closed his eyes. They had to find a way out of the vicious circle. He wrapped his arms around her. "A kiss for your thoughts."

Her anger was so hot, he was glad she didn't have heat vision. "I have to buy your affections now?"

Ouch! Clark stepped back but kept his arms around her. "Of course not." He needed to change the direction of his inquiry. He cleared his throat. "You and Penny seemed chummy when you came home. Have a good time?"

Lois raised a brow. "Were you eavesdropping?"

He gulped. "I really don't have control over—"

"Don't give me that. We both know that's not true." She pushed out of his arms and snatched her purse off the table by the door. "I have an article to write." She grabbed her laptop off the desk.

What had Wayne told her? Well, if Lois wouldn't tell him… he spun into his Superman suit. "I should patrol."

"Fine," she snapped. "Do that."

"Fine. I will." He zipped out the window and floated outside. What was he doing? Running away from the issue. Just as he had when she turned down his first marriage proposal. He looked back at the house with his x-ray vision. She had covered her face with her hands and was crying. She didn't want to fight any more than he did. He flew back inside and wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm sorry," Clark whispered. "Sometimes, I think we've forgotten how to be us. Maybe we need some professional help."

Lois looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

He pressed his lips together. "We should call Dr. Friskin and see if she takes couples."

"Dr. Friskin?" Lois stiffened in his arms — just fractionally, but he could feel it nonetheless. "You mean that psychologist I recommended to you when you were having all that trouble with the Red Kryptonite."

"That's the one. She really helped with my anger over my jealousy of Dan Scardino," he reminded her and felt her relax.

Lois ran her fingers over the 'S' shield on his chest. "I don't know. What would Clark think? Us getting couple's therapy without him."

Clark chuckled. He loved it when she teased him like this. "You're right. Probably best if you two go instead."

They stood there a minute, quiet in their embrace. Then he took a step back. "I really should…"

"Clark," she murmured. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better," he replied. "But I've also been worse."

"You've canceled almost all your public appearances lately. I thought that's how you recharged your batteries."

Clark smiled. She noticed that? "I needed to reprioritize a few things after Lara arrived. I'm a father now; I can't go flitting all over the world cutting red ribbons all the time. I'm needed at home."

Lois looked at him with such love, another chuck of ice broke off of his frozen heart. She patted his chest. "Just make sure you're getting enough juice for those batteries. I wouldn't want you to burn out."

Clark pulled her into a deep kiss. She pushed him away. "You really shouldn't kiss me dressed like that. That's how this whole mess started in the first place."

He gazed at her with shock, but her smile told him she was only teasing again. "You're right. The next time I kiss you like that, I should be naked."

Lois looked at him with such hunger that it shouldn't have surprised him when she jumped on him, pushing him to the floor.

"Lois. Lois," Clark said, chuckling between her kisses. "Lois!" She paused and looked down at him. "I was only joking."

She sat up, but not before he saw the flash of hurt in her eyes. "I knew that." She stood up and returned to her laptop.

Clark mentally kicked himself. He had only made things worse with what he said. He hated this awkwardness between them. They used to be able to make jokes and he missed that. What would it take for him to get past this feeling of betrayal? "Lois."

"I'm fine," she lied. "Don't you have some rounds to make?"

"Please, don't be mad."

"I'm not mad," she grumbled.

Right. Not mad. Hurt. Which was worse than mad. "I'm just not ready, Lois. I need more time."

"More time. Gotcha!" She nodded, pulling her notebook out of her purse.

"I'm not going to feel guilty about needing more time."

Lois slammed her notebook down on the table. "Of course, *you* aren't. I'm the guilty party here. You've made that abundantly clear."

"I don't want to fly away with you mad."

She glared at him. "Then I guess you aren't going anywhere, are you?" She flipped open her laptop.

Well, that went badly. "We'll get through this, Lois," Clark told her, then took off through the window. Why did he have to open his big mouth?

***

Dr. Friskin opened her office door. "Mr. and Mrs. Kent."

Lois was still furious at him. How many times did she have to tell him she was sorry? She marched into Dr. Friskin's office. Clark followed behind her reluctantly. Had he forgotten already that this had been *his* idea?

"I'm glad you changed your mind, Mr. Kent."

"Please, call me Clark."

Lois looked at him. Changed his mind? About what? She sat in a chair and Clark sat down next to her.

"Where do you think the biggest problem lies? Lois?"

"He doesn't trust me," she replied, looking down.

Clark shrugged as if saying that was true. Great. Hit the nail on the head with the first answer.

"Clark?"

"Honesty. I need to know she isn't keeping anything from me. That she isn't lying to me anymore."

The nerve of that man. "*Me?* I'm not the only one with secrets in this relationship, Clark."

Her husband gulped. "There is still so much you haven't told me, about your trip to visit…" He pretended to cough. "My brother."

"Did you ever think that maybe I haven't told you some things because *I* need more time?" She raised her eyebrows at him. He wasn't the only one who needed space. Only she needed it between her and her memories.

Clark closed his eyes. He didn't believe her. "We can't move forward until you tell me, Lois."

"I can't," she whispered, clenching her hands together in her lap. How could she tell him that she almost died the day Lara was born? That she needed Ultra Woman's blood just to be alive? That she had gone crazy again and almost shot Lex Luthor and son? That she got so depressed, she became skin and bones and almost couldn't return to him because her physical appearance had changed so drastically? That a small part of her had still loved the other Clark when she returned home to her husband, that she had even kissed the other Clark the day she returned? How could she ever speak about that newspaper photo and the article about what happened to her and Lara after they died… when Clark hadn't come home? There were just some things she could never share with him.

"Let's start with a risk-free confession."

"Excuse me?" Clark asked.

"It's risk-free, because you will not be punished for whatever you tell your spouse. Clark, why don't you go first?"

Lois looked at him. *Yeah, Clark, you go first. What's your big secret?*

Her husband swallowed, looking down. "Lois, I know you've been seeing Dr. Friskin for weeks now."

Lois's jaw fell open.

"I know, because the other day when you said that you had an eye doctor appointment, I followed you."

Lois glared at Dr. Friskin, her blood beginning to boil. "Did you tell him…?"

"I did not share any of your confidences, Lois," Dr. Friskin reassured her.

Lois released a breath. She had told Dr. Friskin about the newspaper article, the funeral notice… of course, she told her it was a dream. Many of the things she told Dr. Friskin had to fall under the guise of dreams or nightmares. Otherwise Dr. Friskin would have her locked away. As it was, Dr. Friskin probably thought she had narcolepsy.

Clark was staring at her. "Oh, so you can't tell me what happened, but you can tell Dr. Friskin?" Now he was mad.

"Clark, I don't judge her for her feelings and actions," the doctor said calmly. "Can you say the same thing?"

He growled, but did not answer.

"You should be happy that I can talk to someone, get my feelings out in the open. It's not like you've really been there for me lately." Lois looked at him and then away.

"I am always there for you, Lois, except…." His voice trailed off. She knew his exception.

"I know. I know. Except when you aren't." She sighed. "I still feel that you aren't open to hearing what I have to say because of Kal."

"You fell in love with him. I can't get my mind around that."

"Yes, I did. I fell in love with a man who looks like you, dresses like you, smells like you, and who shares your DNA. The only thing about him that isn't you, is that he isn't you."

Clark flipped up his hands as if to say, 'well there you have it.'

"Except that he is you. He *is* you, Clark. If your parents hadn't survived, and you bounced around from foster home to foster home, if you didn't have your self-confidence and a tendency for junk food, wouldn't you like to know that I still would have fallen in love with you?" She looked at him, pleading for him to understand. "Even if I was married to another man whom I love with all of my heart."

Clark stared at her. "Is that how you justify it to yourself?"

Lois's heart fell to her toes. He still didn't understand. "Clark, you want me to stop loving him — I understand that. But you need to understand that I can't. I love you with every fiber of my being. Explain to me how to stop loving just the fraction of you that is him and I will try, but I just can't stop loving you. I don't know how."

Dr. Friskin held up her hands. "Okay. I think we've gotten off track here. Lois, it's your turn to tell Clark something you kept from him, risk-free."

Lois looked at Dr. Friskin. Hadn't she just done that? She sighed. "I ran into Bruce Wayne at the lecture the other night."

"I know," he replied.

"Really, Clark? Did you follow me again? Did you think I was having another affair? Is that why? Do you think that there is another man out there I could even look at when I have you?" she snarled.

"Risk-free, Lois," reminded Dr. Friskin.

"Risk-free? It was my confession!" she snapped.

"That he felt the need to follow you because he doesn't trust you enough was his confession."

Lois rolled her eyes. Everyone always sided with Clark.

"No, Lois. I did not follow you. I overheard you and Penny the other night and figured out who you were speaking about." He leaned closer to her. "What did he say to you?"

"That he knows about us," she whispered.

Clark seemed perplexed. "Everyone knows about us, Lois."

Lois resisted the urge to roll her eyes again. "He knows about our marriage problems, that you walked out on me in Memphis, that I kissed…" she swallowed and looked down. "…*Superman*."

"How?" He was stunned.

"He said he liked to keep an eye on his friends."

"Friends!" Clark scoffed.

"He was afraid that you blamed me for his little pinball stunt and that the reason you were a little… off… lately was because of troubles at home."

Clark shrugged. "He might have a little valid point there." Then his eyes flashed back to hers. "Do you think he knows?"

"He thinks he does. I refused to confirm his suspicions."

"Good. What else?"

"He wanted to apologize again for being a jerk. He wanted to prove that he wasn't out to steal your wife away from you."

"Like he could," grumbled Clark.

"He says that he wants us to be friends. He likes you because you're nice and admirable, despite being insanely jealous. And that he's essentially one of the good guys."

Clark rolled his eyes. "That's still up for debate."

"Clearly. I don't trust him." Lois had this sneaky feeling that Wayne might be the Trask figure from her dream. The one who was out to kill her family, steal her children. In too many ways, he reminded her of Lex Luthor.

"Good. Go with that gut feeling."

Lois paused, unsure how to broach the last thing Bruce Wayne had said.

Dr. Friskin watched this exchange with curiosity. "What happened with this guy, Lois?"

She looked up, almost having forgotten the psychologist was there. She glanced at Clark. "He hit on me when I went to interview him."

"He hit on you?" the doctor repeated.

"He was a little touchy-feely and I told him to lay off," Lois replied. With her elbow and the point of her high heel shoe.

Dr. Friskin turned to Clark. "You knew she would never cheat

on you with that guy?"

Clark nodded. "Lois loves me. I have never doubted that for a moment. I trust her."

Lois's heart began to sing. He trusted her.

Dr. Frisken raised a brow. "But you agreed with her when she said that you don't trust her?"

And then the singing stopped. Lois sighed. He doesn't trust her.

"It's complicated," Clark explained.

Lois and Dr. Friskin waited, Lois with her arms crossed.

"All right. I admit I get jealous when some guy pays her too much attention. She's a beautiful woman, with intelligence and street-smarts and a sense of humor. And yes, there is a little part of me that's afraid one of these men will take her away from me, because more than one has tried to." Clark sighed, looking down.

She reached over and took his hand, reassuring him that no one would ever take her away from him again. He looked at her with a smile.

"Lois would never be interested in a man like Wayne, who treated her like mud," he continued. "I know this will sound unbelievable, but I know what happened with… my brother… was a fluke, because of extenuating circumstances, and it will never happen again. But it still hurts. What does *he* have that I don't, that attracted her to him?" Clark looked down, lowered his voice. "How do I compete with a man who is essentially me for her affections?" He cleared his throat. "She went to him for protection and he betrayed that trust by sleeping with her, by falling in love with her."

Lois winced, closing her eyes. They had really tried to stay apart, she wanted to tell him. They fought it for months, but after that night, they couldn't deny their feelings anymore. No matter how hard they tried to do just that.

Clark was still speaking. "I don't like that she doesn't trust me enough to tell me the truth about what really happened on her trip, and that she still keeps things from me even now. I'm unable to trust that she won't hurt me again."

"Ah," said Dr. Friskin, leaning back.

Ah, what? How in the hell was Lois supposed to work past that kind of trust issue? There was no magic pill she could take or button to push.

"Only time will heal that kind of wound," admitted Dr. Friskin. "And talking."

Time? Really. *More* time? Lois shook her head, letting go of her husband's hand. "Wait a minute here, buster. I'm not the only one with secrets. Wayne practically admitted to me that you have something on him. Mind sharing that tidbit with me?"

Clark looked uncomfortable. "Practically admitted, Lois?"

"'Didn't Clark tell you?' he asked me. So, big boy, tell me." Lois had Cheshire cat grin on her face, feeling like she had him pinned against the wall.

He glanced at Dr. Friskin before staring Lois in the eye. "About what?"

Lois pressed her lips together. "Bruce said that it was something you discussed, something in his office which you obviously didn't share with me. But also I think he was lying about that."

"Something we supposedly discussed which you think he was lying about?" Clark repeated back to her, seemingly confused.

"It's more than that. I heard him talking to himself after we left," she confessed.

Clark raised an eyebrow in disbelief, before getting to the question he had wanted to ask for a long time. "How?"

Lois glanced at Dr. Friskin and then back to him. "I can't, Clark."

He looked at the doctor and back to her. "Okay. Later tonight then?"

Lois closed her eyes. "Someday," she whispered. "When the hurt isn't so sharp."

"What happened to you?" Clark asked, sounding both confused and concerned.

She shook her head. "I can't, Clark. I can't."

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"I can't, Clark. I just can't," Lois repeated.

He couldn't believe his wife. Standing up, Clark started to pace. "Lois, you got sick, shot, kidnapped, and had an affair with… with my brother. What could possibly be worse than all that?"

"Clark," said Dr. Friskin.

"What? Did you witness a murder? Did you kill someone? What I'm imagining in my mind can't be worse than what really happened. So, please, tell me."

"*Clark!*"

"What?!" he shouted, turning towards the doctor.

Dr. Friskin raised her hand towards Lois, who appeared to have turned into a statue, staring off into space, not hearing a word he said.

"Clearly, your wife isn't ready to tell you what happened."

Clark knelt down beside his wife. "Lois?" He shook her arm. "Lois?" She still didn't snap out of it. Actually, she seemed to be shivering. Taking off his jacket, he placed it over her shoulders. "I'm sorry, honey." He picked her up and placed her on his lap, holding her tight. "I'll stop pressuring you. I'll wait until you're ready to share. Okay, Lois?" He rocked her back and forth. "I'm so sorry, Lois. Come back to me."

Lois blinked her eyes and smiled at him. "Clark." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

"Uh, Lois. You okay?" he asked hesitantly.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" she replied and then glanced around. "How did I get here?" She stood up and moved back to her seat, pulling his jacket tighter. "Did someone shine a bright light in my eyes? Did I get abducted by aliens?"

"Maybe we should keep her overnight for observation," suggested Dr. Friskin.

"No. Clark, no!" His wife looked at him with genuine fear.

Clark looked the doctor straight in the eyes. "Dr. Friskin, a couple of years ago, some scientist beamed a light into her eyes, basically freezing her in place for almost fifteen minutes. Then almost a year later, another guy kidnapped Lois, hypnotized her to make her lose her memory and think she had been abducted by aliens. She's not crazy." He turned to Lois. "We were talking and you spaced out, honey. Where did you go?"

Her eyes wide, she shook her head. "The future? Another dimension? A memory? I don't know."

Another dimension? "Do you remember anything? Anything at all."

Lois shook her head. "It was cold. Really cold. Then I felt something warm." She felt her left arm. "There was a baby crying. Then I heard your voice and I was back." All expression disappeared from her face as she stared at him. She reached for his face. "I heard your voice…"

Was she thinking about one of the times when he froze her? He took the hand on his cheek and held it. But there wasn't a baby crying either of those times, unless… was there a baby near the alley of the Daily Planet when he went to stop the bomb set off by Lex, Jr.? He couldn't remember. Possibly.

Lois put her tear-streaked face in her hands. "And you weren't there. You weren't there."

Clark felt a chill down his spine. A baby. "Lara?" he whispered.

She stood up and walked to the window. "Take me home, Clark."

"Lois, it's the middle…" What was he saying? "Okay, Lois. I'll take you home."

Lois glanced over her shoulder at him. He walked over to her

and wrapped his arms around her; she was still shivering.

"Stay, Clark. Don't leave me again."

"You left her?" Dr. Friskin asked, her eyebrow raised.

"I was gone on assignment last summer." He shook his head.

"Ten months," Lois whispered, still staring out the window.

"Six weeks."

"Ten months?" Dr. Friskin flipped over the pages of her notepad. "Lois, didn't you have a dream, where Clark…"

"No! No!" Lois adamantly shook her head, before shooting a glare at the doctor. "No, I didn't."

"My mistake." Dr. Friskin closed her notepad.

He glanced between them. Where he *what*? He wasn't gone ten months.

Then he remembered what Star had said. That he would have returned almost a year later. What did Lois know about that possible future, the future where Superman never returned? What had Wells told her? Was that what terrified her? Was that what was giving her nightmares of Trask? Not a real bogeyman, but one from another possible future? Clark wished Lois would… could tell him, but he couldn't push her. Reluctantly, he decided that if she could wait for him, he could wait for her.

***

Penny turned on the radio and set Lara on the blanket spread over the living room floor. Just two more weeks until her graduate classes started. Lois had been acting strangely since their night at the seminar. She had asked Penny twice if Bruce Wayne had called. He hadn't. And four times more her boss had warned Penny against dating Bruce, if he did call. Not once had she pleaded Jimmy's case.

Did Lois know what Penny knew, that her relationship with Jimmy was a lost cause? Once, Lois had described Jimmy as being full of potential. Potential that would never be tapped, apparently. Penny sighed. Jimmy Olsen would never be more than a reporter, if he was even that lucky. Especially since she had discovered, if she interpreted everything correctly, another highly eligible superhero. Yes, Jimmy was sweet and caring, but he was still a little boy at heart and would be for years to come. Penny needed a man. Had Lois seen that, too?

The one problem with Superman was that he had always been obsessed, aka in love, with Lois Lane. Gotham City's Caped Crusader (Penny cheered up just thinking about him), on the other hand…. Okay, he wasn't as bright and cheery as Superman, but when he took out crime, he wiped it out. He didn't do PR speeches or charitable events, he just fought crime and then went back to his life — whatever that was. Penny had her suspicions, but they were just crazy. She had been working on her computer program all summer. Thanks to the Kents, she had been able to concentrate almost solely on that for a few hours every day.

When Penny met Bruce Wayne at the seminar, she had been really tempted to move back to Gotham City. He was just the kind of benefactor she needed to help her with her computer science degree. But despite the connection that Penny felt with him, that even Lois had noticed, she never heard back from him. She sighed. Win some, lose some.

The music stopped and it was time for a short newsbreak. Lara was into scooting at the moment. If Penny took her eyes off the kid, she would be across the room before the nanny knew it. Not that there was anything for Lara to get into. Clark had babyproofed the townhouse right after Penny started working there.

Penny shook her head and glanced back at her laptop. It probably took him two minutes, if that. She wished Lois and Clark would just admit to her that which she already knew: Clark was Superman. It was so obvious, Penny didn't know why she hadn't seen it earlier. She had no idea what they were so afraid of. It wasn't as though she would tell anyone.

"*Bruce Wayne, head of Wayne Enterprises, said that nobody was hurt when the computers in the biomedical division of Gotham Laboratories, a subsidiary of Wayne Enterprises, exploded last night. He said that the computers had overheated due to a clogged vent. In other news…"*

Penny froze, riveted by what she had just heard. Her brother Matthew worked at Gotham Laboratories. He was working on a new antibiotic cream to help heal cuts and wounds, including surgical scars.

She glanced around. Where had Lara disappeared to? She looked around the living room, checking under the fish tank, under the sofas, coffee table, and Lois's desk.

"Lara," Penny called, feeling almost ridiculous doing so. It wasn't like the kid was going to respond at six months.

Penny went into the dining room, checked under the dining room table and all the chairs, even inside the playpen, despite Lara having been next to her on the blanket not two minutes before.

The kitchen door was rocking back and forth. Penny raised a brow. Slowly, she pushed the kitchen door open. "Hello? Clark, did you come home?"

There, on the counter, was a bunch of bananas. And when she meant a bunch, she meant an entire bunch from a banana tree. Penny shook her head again. Like Clark would find that bunch of bananas in Metropolis. Lois explained them away as a gift from Superman to Lara, when he learned their daughter was starting solid foods. Uh-huh.

Penny heard a soft thump and a whimper. There was Lara. She had scooted and scooted until she came to a stop at the breakfast nook. "How in the world did you get all the way in here so fast, little one?" She laughed, scooping up the little girl. "You certainly have your daddy's speed."

Penny gulped, staring at the baby in her arms. Running into the dining room, she set Lara down in the playpen. She grabbed her cell phone out of her purse and dialed her brother's number. On the fourth ring, he picked up.

"Matthew!"

"Hi, Sis. Just the person I wanted to talk to."

"Shut up, Matthew. I need that blood sample back. ASAP. Put it in an envelope and send it overnight," she demanded.

"Penny."

She took a deep breath to try to keep her voice from shaking. "Matthew, I need that tissue back," she said more slowly.

"I'm fine, Penny. Thanks for asking. Just a slight concussion," he told her.

"What? Were you in the lab when the computers exploded?" Penny whispered, sitting down at the dining room table, glancing over at Lara. The baby was hitting her gavel against the floor of the playpen.

"As a matter of fact, I was running that blood sample you sent me."

"Oh, no. No. No!" Penny gasped, covering her mouth. "Did the entire mainframe get destroyed in the fire?" she asked hopefully.

"Pretty much. Luckily, Mr. Wayne tells me the files are all backed up nightly. We only lost a day's work."

"Oh." She cleared her throat. "And that blood sample?" Please. Please. Please, say it was destroyed in the fire.

"I was able to save that."

Damn. "Oh, good. Send it back to me, before you do anything else today."

"It's the find of the century, little sister."

"No, it's not. Send it to me or I'll tell Mom what really happened to her car on prom night."

Her brother gulped. "You wouldn't."

"I'm serious, Matthew."

"Penny, that blood sample overloaded the computer and crashed it."

She gasped. “No. No. No! Matthew, that blood sample needs to come back to me, ASAP. If you tell anyone about this, I’m dead. D-E-A-D, dead. Understand me?” Penny heard a shuffling over the phone line. “Matthew?” Penny whispered.

“Hello, Penny. I’ve been meaning to call you,” a new voice said.

“Who is this?” she asked as a chill passed down her spine.

“Bruce Wayne, dear.”

The phone slipped out of her fingers. Bruce Wayne, she sighed. No! She might like him but the Kents certainly did not. Clark was going to kill her.

“Penny! Penny!” She heard Bruce calling to her.

She picked up the phone again, clearing her throat. The best she could manage was a hoarse whisper. “Hello, Mr. Wayne.”

“Why, Penny, have you become so formal? I was Bruce just a few weeks ago.”

Her face flushed. “You remember me?”

“Of course, Penny. Now, Matthew here was telling me you sent the blood sample that crashed my biomedical computer. Where did you get it?”

How gullible did he think she was? “A friend of a friend of a friend of mine has a boyfriend who has this great immunity. You see, Bruce, I didn’t have his permission to share his blood with Matthew or Gotham Labs and now he’s threatening to sue if I don’t give it back. Turns out, he was on special medicine…”

“Penny, you and I both know that’s not where you got this blood sample.”

“Of course it is, Bruce. Why don’t you just overnight it back to me,” she suggested, adding a softness to her voice. “We wouldn’t want Gotham Labs embroiled in a huge lawsuit. You know those lawyers, once they smell blood… please, Bruce.” She threw that last plea in for good measure.

“O-kay,” Bruce said slowly. “You’ll have it back ASAP. Where shall I send it?”

Penny exhaled. He bought it. Always best to mention lawsuits to the filthy rich. “Matthew has my address. And thank you, Bruce. You’re a lifesaver, literally.”

“Uh-huh. See you soon,” said Bruce, hanging up.

“See me soon?” Penny stammered, looking at Lara. She picked her up and held her to her chest. “I’m so sorry, sweetie.”

Penny set her back down in the playpen and just stared at the child. Lois had told Penny that they were in the process of adopting Lara, even when Penny asked her point blank after Lara’s hand healed completely within minutes. Jimmy had said something about Lara being found on the Kents’ doorstep. There was no way Penny could have known Lois was lying. What Penny did was wrong, very wrong — so very, extremely wrong — but how was she supposed to know Lois had lied to her? Maybe Lois hadn’t lied to her? Maybe she didn’t know that Superman had had a child with another woman. Penny shook her head. That didn’t sound like Clark. He adored his wife.

The nanny gasped. Maybe Lois did know. Maybe that was why the Kents were sleeping in separate bedrooms. And had been since Penny had started working there… since that weekend in Memphis, the one Bruce mentioned where Clark had walked out on his wife. What if Lois had kicked him out when she learned the truth about Lara?

Penny lifted up her phone and dialed.

“James Olsen, *Daily Planet*.”

“Jimmy,” she breathed his name.

“Hey, Penny. I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

“This is important, Jimmy.”

“O-kay. What’s up?”

She couldn’t tell him the truth. He was Clark’s best friend and the sooner Clark knew, the sooner she was dead.

“I need you to tell me what happened at the Bruce Wayne interview.”

Her boyfriend laughed. “Important, huh? Look, Penny, I’m really busy. I’ll tell you my war stories later, okay?”

“Jimmy, have you ever seen Superman mad?” Penny asked, noticing she was chewing on her nails. She pulled her hand away from her mouth. She only did that when she was stressed. Oh, right, sending Superman’s daughter’s blood off to Gotham Laboratories for her brother to use in his medical research. That couldn’t possibly be considered stressful.

“I thought you were the Superman expert, not me.”

“On paper, maybe, but you know him in person. Please, Jimmy.” Oooh. That sounded a little to desperate.

“Is everything okay, Penny? Lara okay?”

Penny sniffled. Oh, great. Now she was getting emotional. “She’s fine, Jimmy. Scooting up a storm.” She smiled. She really did love the little nipper.

“Scooting?”

Penny laughed through her tears. “Yes, Lara does this alligator belly scoot move instead of crawling. If she keeps this up, she’ll be flying next.” She covered her mouth. Why had she said that? She looked at Lara and covered up the mouthpiece on the phone. “Don’t you be getting any ideas.”

“Hey, CK. I’ll have those numbers for you in a minute. I’ll talk to you later, Penny. All right?”

Had Clark heard her talking about Lara to Jimmy? Was that why he went to Jimmy’s desk? Did he hear her ask about him getting mad? Or about Bruce Wayne?

“Penny? Penny?”

“Bye, Jimmy,” she mumbled and closed her phone.

What was she going to do? What was she going to do? She couldn’t run off and leave Lara. She couldn’t run off and take Lara. Both those ideas were off the table. Superman would hunt her down no matter where she went if she took his daughter. Anyway, it would only make him angrier. From what she knew about Superman, he was a good, decent person, who would *never* kill someone on purpose. Penny always liked that about him. His kind soul.

But that was before Clark became a father. She knew people did crazy things to protect their kids. Like tell people that they had found them on the doorstep and go through the insane paperwork and hoops of adoption, instead of admitting the truth: that Lara was half-Kryptonian. Lara couldn’t be full Kryptonian — she bled. But being half-Kryptonian would explain why her cut had healed in a matter of minutes.

No wonder Lara’s DNA had caused the lab’s computer to overheat. Penny bet it was chock-full of interesting genetic material any lab in the country would *kill* to get their hands on, if her charge’s father didn’t beat them to the punch. Punch. Yep, one of his punches would be enough to kill her.

Why, oh why, had she sent a sample of Lara’s blood to her brother to help him with his research? Sure, Lara’s awesome immunity would certainly have helped Matthew’s search for a new medical salve to heal wounds. Of course it would, it contained Superman’s DNA. But her brother was a full-grown man. He didn’t need her assistance. Penny had been big-sistering him again.

Bruce Wayne had a sample of that blood. He hadn’t bought her flimsy excuse. *Friend of a friend of a friend.* Ha! He didn’t need to hurt her to get a sample. She closed her eyes and thought again of the man she met at the conference. She just couldn’t see him hurting anyone… well, hurting her.

But Gotham Laboratories wasn’t the only medical research facility in the world. There were so many ways Penny could get killed by someone from one of those crazy medical labs intent on the next medical breakthrough. Shot. Stabbed. Strangled. Drowned. Just any ol’ way, dead was dead. And the nanny would be first in line on that hit list, too, if anyone found out about

Lara's origin. If she had known the truth then, she would have asked for hazard pay. Would she even have taken the position? Penny glanced at Lara and the girl looked up at her and smiled. It was her daddy's smile. She loved Lara. She hated that her own stupid, albeit innocent, mistake had put both of their lives in danger.

Maybe Penny should just take Lara to Lois at work. Plead that she had a family emergency and book it out of town. She had no idea where she should go. China? It was a huge country and she knew the language. She could dye her hair so she didn't stick out. Yes, that could work.

Lara would be safe with her parents and Penny would lead Bruce Wayne or any other whackjob away from them. Bruce already knew too much about the Kents, but luckily he didn't know everything. He didn't know about Lara. Penny sighed. It was too bad, Bruce had seemed so pleasant, so genial, so handsome. But there was no way Penny was going to tell him where she got that blood sample.

***

Penny walked into the Daily Planet. She had been there several times before to visit Jimmy, but today the atmosphere seemed different, the light harsher, the noise level louder. She pushed Lara and the stroller out onto the newsroom floor. Lara giggled. The little girl loved going outside for walks, she loved noise and activity, she loved people. She was just like Lois that way. Penny pushed the stroller down the ramp towards Lois's desk. It was empty. Oh God, she wasn't there. Clark glanced up from his desk.

"Hi, Penny," he said at their side an instant later, picking up his daughter. "Hello there, beautiful." His daughter.

Penny swallowed. How come she had never noticed how much Lara looked like Clark, especially around the eyes?

"Hi, Clark."

He spun Lara in the air and she giggled.

"Where's Lois?" she asked, trying to sound casual, but knowing she failed miserably when he turned and looked her directly in the eyes.

"At a doctor's appointment. Everything okay?"

"Family emergency. My brother was in an accident and I need to go home to Gotham City." Actually, she would head as far away from Gotham City as she could get.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Clark said, placing a reassuring hand on her arm.

Penny jumped and took a step back, looking at him with fear. She took a deep breath. *Act normal*, she told herself.

"Penny?"

"I was hoping I could drop Lara off with Lois and you at the office. I know that's totally inconvenient, but…" She started backing up. "I really should go."

"Are you okay, Penny?"

She forced a smile on her mouth. "Of course. Just worried about my brother." She looked at the little baby in his arms and a pang of guilt thumped in her chest. She held out her hands for Lara.

Clark handed his daughter back to Penny and she hugged her and whispered, "You'll be safe here with Daddy, little one." *Goodbye*, she thought silently.

Lara placed her hand to Penny's face. She was always doing that. Penny kissed Lara's palm and went to hand her back to Clark, but he wasn't paying attention. He was looking up and off to the left. He grabbed the knot of his tie and then looked back at Penny and Lara, pausing as if suddenly remembering that they were there.

"Penny, there's something I've got to do first. Can you watch Lara for another hour? I'll send Lois home as soon as she gets back. I'll even ask Superman if he can give you a lift to Gotham City." Clark smiled coaxingly. "I promise you'll get there faster than if you were able to catch a flight."

Penny gulped. A ride with Superman? No thanks. Too many opportunities to be dropped from 20,000 feet. She needed to leave town, now. But someone must need Superman's help. It was only an hour. When her boss arrived, she could tell Lois that she wouldn't be needing that ride with Superman. Penny pasted another smile to her face and nodded. "Sure. I can wait one more hour." She hoped she could. She hoped she hadn't just signed her death warrant.

***

Penny paced in the living room. She looked at her watch again. Where was Lois? She needed to leave. The longer she stayed in Metropolis, the sooner Bruce Wayne would catch up to her. And the sooner he caught up with her, the sooner he would discover that she was Superman's nanny. There was a knock at the door. Finally! She opened the door. Instead of finding Lois on the other side, she found Bruce Wayne.

"Bruce? What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Penny. It's nice to see you again," he said, full of charm. Look at all those perfect teeth.

"I'm at work. I can't let you in here," she said, stepping into the vestibule. She shut the door behind her. Then she held up her hand. "I'm not allowed to have guests."

Bruce took her hand and kissed it. "Still as beautiful as I remembered."

His compliment threw her a moment. "You didn't need to fly all the way out here, Bruce." Then she remembered what Clark would do to her if he found this man so close to his home, his family. She shook off his hand. "The tissue, please."

"I admit I wanted to see you again. I didn't call because you are still dating that pup photographer and it would be wrong to steal you away from him." Bruce had no qualms that he could steal her away from Jimmy.

Penny backed up against the door, staring at him. He had wanted to call her? Was he really not interested in the blood sample at all? Was he just using it as an excuse to see her again? "Wrong?"

"Well, I know how close Clark and Lois are to Jimmy, and Clark would certainly *frown* on me hurting his friend." For some reason Bruce sneered at the word 'frown.' "He's highly protective of his friends."

"Clark?" Penny gasped. Did he know Clark's secret? She had to get Bruce Wayne out of here.

"I'm working on my image, you know."

"It looks good from where I'm standing," she whispered. Oh God, had she said that out loud?

Bruce's smile turned into a grin. "I've got quite a nice view, myself." He took a step closer to her.

Penny tried to take another step back but she was pressed against the door already and when she stepped back the door opened and she fell inside with a thump.

"Oh, sorry. Are you all right?" Bruce asked, stepping inside the townhouse. He held out his hand to help her up.

Penny took his hand. It felt warm, but rough. "Your hands are rough," she said, looking more closely at him, at his hand in hers.

He shrugged, pulling his hand back. "I work out."

"So does Jimmy, but his hands are soft. He spends most of his day in an office like you."

Bruce actually seemed uncomfortable by this change of subject. "I rock climb."

"Oh." That would explain it. "How did you find me?"

"I thought you said you were studying computer science, not journalism." He was trying to charm her. It was working.

"Double major with criminal justice," she explained, staring at him. "You still didn't answer my question."

"Matthew said you'd been babysitting recently and then I remembered Jimmy mentioning you were Lois's new nanny."

And of course he would have *their* unlisted address written down somewhere.

"You shouldn't be here," she said, taking a step towards him, trying to move him back out the door. "The Kents aren't going to want you in their home."

"We're friends."

Penny shook her head, taking another step towards him, but he stood his ground. "No, you aren't."

"I understand you are an expert on all things Superman," he said, abruptly changing the subject.

So he had researched her after all. Lois warned her that he would. Damn! Did he know about Clark? "I'm a fan."

"Me, too. I figure it must be a lonely life, that of a superhero."

"I thought that too, until Jimmy introduced us. Then I realized Superman has lots of friends, including Lois and Clark," Penny added for good measure. She grabbed Bruce's arm and tried to move him towards the door, but he didn't budge. The man must be all muscle.

Bruce raised a brow at this information. "I understand that you had quite a crush on the guy," he said, running a finger down her cheek. "Wrote a computer program to track him down."

"Don't touch me!" She snapped. "I don't know you."

Bruce dropped his hand. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"A schoolgirl crush. That was a long time ago. I've moved on." *Just like you should be doing,* she wanted to add.

"To Jimmy Olsen?" he scoffed.

"For the time being, until a better man comes along," she replied. Bruce was too close. That musky scent he was wearing didn't smell designer, could it just be him? Her cheeks felt warmer with those thoughts. *Lara*, she reminded herself. "Now, time for you to give me back my tissue and for you to leave."

Bruce smiled down at her. Wow, Penny hadn't realized how tall he was. Most men were shorter than her, including Jimmy. She swallowed.

"I'm a better man."

Now? Now, he was going to hit on her? Where had he been the past month? She pushed him towards the door. "Nope. You haven't convinced me of that."

"Yet." Bruce still wasn't moving an inch.

Time for another approach. She took a step back and held out her arms. "You want access to this, I need that blood sample back."

His eyes showed merriment and his lips pressed into a real, genuine smile. "Interesting proposition, but no. It would be safer if I held onto that tissue for the time being."

"*Safer?* For whom?" she scoffed, moving into the room, pacing. "You didn't bring it, did you." She guessed even smart men made stupid mistakes. Clark was going to kill her. Maybe not on purpose but accidents happen when people get angry. Especially someone with super strength. And Penny could just see Superman getting angry over this.

"Whose blood is it?" Bruce asked, following Penny into the room, watching her.

She knew she was acting nervously but she wasn't an actress, she was a computer programmer. "I told you. A friend's." Penny put her hand to head. "You should leave. They'll be here soon."

"Who?"

"The Kents."

"Do they normally come home for lunch?" Bruce asked, watching her.

"No, but today they are. I've got to leave."

"Why?" He drew out the word.

"I just do. That's all." Penny started wringing her hands. "If you had just brought back that blood sample, I could have destroyed it and he'd never know."

"You should never have sent it to your brother."

"Yes. That was stupid. So very stupid. I thought it could help him with his research. How was I to know…" Penny glanced at him, realizing almost too late to whom she was speaking. "You need to leave. If he finds you here, we'll both be dead."

"Who?"

Penny stopped pacing and stared at him. "You know who."

A mocking smile slipped onto his lips. "He's not going to kill you, Penny. And he certainly isn't going to kill me."

"Yeah, well, excuse me if I don't take that bet." She shook her head and continued pacing.

"He has rules against such things and the man is quite a stickler for his rules." Bruce chuckled.

Okay. Bruce knew, or thought he knew. Penny rolled her eyes. "He punched you in the jaw for making a pass at Lois Lane. What do you think he's going to do when he finds out you have a blood sample of—" She almost had done it again. That man was unnerving her. She was the worst nanny ever.

"Whose blood?" he asked, taking hold of her arms. He wasn't being rough, and for some strange reason, her kneecaps tingled at his touch.

"Trust me, Bruce. You don't want to know."

He raised a skeptical brow at this statement. "And yet, I keep asking."

"I'm not going to tell you, so just stop. Leave now. Destroy the sample in your vault. Forget about Metropolis. If he ever finds out you have it, I'm as good as dead and you'll be next on his list. Please, Bruce."

"He doesn't scare me."

Penny was shocked by that announcement. "Well, he scares *me*."

Bruce wrapped his arms around her. "I won't let him hurt you."

Penny sighed. It felt good to be held by him. To actually rest her head on a man's shoulder for once. *What in the hell are you doing?* She pushed herself out of his embrace. "Leave. Please. He and Lois hate you. If they find you in their house…"

He started playing with his pinky ring. She had never noticed the emerald stone in it before. "Really? Hate me? That's a little strong, don't you think? I'm really not a bad guy."

Lara started to cry. Penny ran over to her playpen. She had almost forgotten the girl was there; she had fallen asleep on the stroller ride back to the house and had been so quiet. She picked her up and put her on her shoulder. Lara just cried harder.

"What's the matter, little one? You never cry." Penny rocked her back and forth.

"Is that her? Clark and Lois's adopted daughter?" Bruce asked, stepping up to her and running his hand over the baby's head.

Lara only screamed louder.

"Get away from her!" Penny insisted, moving away from him, holding the baby protectively.

Bruce stared at her. "She *was* found on their doorstep, wasn't she?"

Penny nodded. Yep, that was what they had told her and their family and friends. "Calm down, Lara. Everything will be okay." She kissed Lara's forehead. "I've told you to leave, Bruce. You can't be here."

Bruce stared at her and Lara, the blood draining from his face. "The sample?"

Suddenly, Clark flew through the window. Not Superman… Clark.

***

A few minutes earlier at the Daily Planet…

Clark returned to the office after stopping that robbery at the jewelry store. Mazik's Jewelry Store, the same one he'd robbed two years earlier when one of the Mazik brothers kidnapped his parents. What a small world.

Lois was sitting at her desk. She looked drained. Tired.

He sat on the edge of her desk. “Are you all right?”

She nodded.

Clark moved a lock of hair off her forehead. “Any time you want me there with you, you let me know.”

Lois looked up at him with such an expression of love, he cupped her jaw in his palm and kissed her. “I love you, Clark Kent,” she whispered.

He rested his head against hers. “Not as much as I love you, Lois Lane.” He winced as soon as he said it. She was going to take it the wrong way. *Please don't explode. Please.* He pulled back and looked in her eyes.

Lois stared at him for a minute and then seductively licked her lips. “We'll just see about that.” Oh God, she was a beautiful woman.

He smacked his hand upon his forehead. “Penny!”

“Penny?”

“She came by while you were at your appointment. Her brother got hurt and she wants to fly out to Gotham City to see him. I told her you'd go home when you got back.”

Lois raised a brow. “Oh, so the little woman—”

“Because I volunteered…” He adjusted his tie and lowered his voice. “To have you-know-who fly her over there, if she would just wait another hour.”

“Gotcha.” She patted his leg. “Hey, doesn't her brother work at Gotham Laboratories? The same division where the computers exploded last night?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Why?”

“Because Bruce Wayne announced this morning that no one was hurt in the explosion.” She rolled her eyes. “Another reason why we can't trust that guy. Just another rich man out to save his company over his people. Lex Luthor all over again.”

“Bruce Wayne better not be another Lex Luthor,” Clark replied, scowling, not quite sure what the man was yet. He was still an enigma. The ‘Bat’ claimed to be on the side of truth and justice, but still, the man pushed Clark's buttons.

Lois shrugged, reaching down to grab her briefcase and fill it with the files she was working on. “I'll just let Perry know where he can reach me.”

Clark nodded, rubbing his temple.

Lois set a hand on his arm. “Is something wrong?”

“All of a sudden, I got this splitting headache.” He pinched his eyes together.

“Clark, you don't get headaches.”

“I know.” He shook his head, trying to shake the sensation. Lowering his voice, he said, “It almost feels like Kryptonite.”

“Kryptonite?” Lois swallowed. “Here?”

“Only….” Clark closed his eyes. He could hear his daughter crying out in excruciating pain. His eyes flashed to Lois's. “Lara!”

Clark ran out of the newsroom in a gust of wind and jumped out the storage room window. He approached his living room windows seconds later.

“*I've told you to leave, Bruce. You can't be here,”* Penny was saying.

Perhaps he had been wrong about Bruce Wayne after all. He pushed his way in through the windows. “Get away from my daughter,” he snarled, moving towards Bruce Wayne. His feet returned to the ground halfway across the room. Kryptonite.

“Clark!” Penny gasped, backing up towards the dining room with Lara in her arms.

Bruce looked pale, like all the color had drained from his face as he faced him, but he didn't back down. Wayne raised his hands slightly in an act of surrender that Clark doubted the man possessed. “There's been a terrible misunderstanding, Clark.”

“You've got that right.” The splitting headache that he had felt at the office got stronger as he got closer to Bruce. “Penny asked you to leave, Wayne.”

“How could I know, Clark? I had no idea,” Bruce spoke calmly, glancing over at Penny.

Clark took another step towards him, wincing from the sharp pain of Bruce's Kryptonite ring. “Didn't know what, exactly, Bruce?”

“That she was your daughter. Your flesh-and-blood daughter.” Wayne swallowed. “How would I know? I thought she was a foundling child, just like you told everyone.”

“Why does that make a difference to everyone?” Clark glared at him, stumbling into a side table with a lamp, accidentally breaking it. “She *is* my daughter. No matter who her birth parents were.”

Bruce glanced over at Penny and Lara again, doubt in his eyes. “Clark, I didn't want to hurt her.”

“Too late.” Clark continued to slowly move towards him, fighting to stay on his feet through the pain.

“Clark, I know you're furious at me right now.” Bruce still held up his hands. “I'm sorry. I should never have come uninvited to your home. Please, Clark, remember who you are. And what you believe in.”

“I know who I am,” Clark growled, picking Bruce up and pinning him against the wall. “I also know who you are and about your kind of justice.”

“Clark!” Penny gasped from the other room.

Bruce Wayne swallowed. “I know you do, Clark. That's why I've been trying to make contact with you. So we aren't so alone out there. Just us against the world.”

Clark tried to throw him, but his strength was so drained from the Kryptonite, he merely dropped him. “I'm not alone, Wayne. If you feel so alone, get yourself a sidekick.”

“Right. You've got Lois and your daughter,” Bruce nodded, rubbing his shoulder and taking a few steps away from Clark.

“Stay away from my family.” Clark stumbled towards him, pinning him to the wall again, this time with his shoulder. “Stay away from my wife, my daughter, and my nanny. Stay away from my parents, my in-laws, my friends, and colleagues. Stay away from my home and my city, Bruce.” He lost some more strength and Wayne was able to push his way free. Clark tried to grab hold of Wayne's shoulders, but he felt too weak to push him aside. Instead, he fell to his knees, tearing the man's jacket.

Lara was still screaming across the room in Penny's arms. “Stop it! Bruce, stop it,” Penny yelled. “Please.”

Clark tied the cuffs of his jacket together, so Bruce was unable to move his arms, like he was in a strait-jacket. Then Clark collapsed, writhing on the floor.

Bruce looked over at Penny, pleading. “I would never… I was just… I'm stuck, Penny. I can't reach my ring.”

“Here, let me…” she said, coming out of the dining room.

Clark held up a hand to stop her. “Keep… Lara… away…”

Penny backed towards the kitchen, still holding the screaming Lara in her arms.

Bruce backed up towards the front door. “Clark, if I had known I never, ever would have come to your house. Please believe me. I was trying to protect you. I want us to be friends. I want us to be able to work together.”

Clark glared at him. He sure had a funny way of showing it.

“Let Penny help me, so I can cover up the Kryptonite stone on my ring,” Bruce implored.

“No! Penny… stay… away.” Clark groaned, kicking his legs at Wayne, but the man was able to leap aside. He had to keep his daughter away from the Kryptonite.

“Hold on! Hold on!” said Bruce. “I think I got… damn, the ring fell off my finger.” Bruce shook his hands, trying to get the sleeves to fall off his arms. He spun around in circles, he tried to hook the end on the doorknob, finally, he tried to catch the cuffs with his foot. As he pulled the sleeves of his jacket off his arms,

causing the ring to go flying into the air, there was a screech of tires and a slamming door outside the townhouse.

"No!" Clark groaned. *Not Lois!*

Lois pushed open the cracked front door, hitting Bruce in the back. This caused him to fumble the Kryptonite ring in his outstretched hand.

"Clark!" she gasped running to him. The ring landed on the foyer floor next to them.

"Go! Save Lara," he moaned, wincing from the pain.

Lois glanced up and saw Lara and Penny in the dining room. "Penny, take Lara upstairs away from all this. Then call my father and have him come over."

Penny nodded and ran upstairs, carrying their daughter.

Lois kissed Clark on the cheek. "I'll take care of Bruce, Clark."

"No, Lois!" he groaned, knowing he would never be able to stop her. "You don't know…"

Lois stood up and faced Bruce Wayne, pointing an outstretched finger in his face. "You brought poison into my house. Where my family eats and sleeps and lives and where my child plays. I don't care how special you think you are or even what your motives are, you will be sorry you ever set foot in my house, near my child."

Clark gazed at the ring a mere foot from his face. He took as deep a breath as he could manage and blew. The ring jiggled and slowly rolled another foot away from him, right next to Bruce.

Bruce Wayne lifted his foot above the ring. "Someone once told me that actions speak louder than words."

"Stop!" Lois shouted, holding up her hands. "Men." She shook her head before bending down to pick up the ring. "My child plays on this floor." She held the Kryptonite ring in her palm, staring at it. Mesmerized.

Bruce snatched it out of her hand and turned the top, causing a lead cover to shut out the Kryptonite radiation.

Clark collapsed onto the floor with relief. Still too weak to move, at least the thousands of invisible swords were no longer attacking him and the throbbing in his head lessened. He watched as Wayne put the ring back on his finger. He wanted to stop him, but his energy was still too drained, and he knew his voice would not carry.

Lois punched the billionaire in the nose and held out her hand again. Not a karate chop, not a slap — a punch. And a good one at that. Clark was impressed. Bruce's image would be marred for the near future with a swollen nose and possibly a matching set of raccoon eyes.

Wayne nodded in acknowledgment that he deserved the hit and handed her the ring, rubbing his nose. Lois again stared for a moment at it in her palm, just as she had when she had picked it up from the floor. She had seen Kryptonite before, even held it in her hand. Why did it cause this strange reaction in her today? Was it because it had been fashioned into jewelry? Then, as if remembering herself, his wife ran outside and threw the ring into a passing garbage truck, making it into the back of the truck just as the compactor pressed down.

Lois returned inside. Clark had never seen her so livid and he had seen her angry more times than anyone else, even Perry. Mostly because her husband had been on the receiving end of that anger more than once. She stared at Bruce Wayne and pointed out the door.

Bruce took off what was left of his jacket and draped it over his arm. "I really am sorry, Lois. I'll make it up to you and Clark somehow."

"Wait!" Clark mumbled from the floor, finally finding his voice and trying to push himself up to his elbow. "He has another piece."

Wayne paused and turned around.

Lois stared at her husband, too. She was going to ask him how he knew this.

"He wears it around his neck in a lead vial," whispered Clark.

Bruce held up his hands and Lois loosened the billionaire's tie, popping open the neck of his shirt. He wasn't wearing the vial necklace.

Lois crossed her arms and stared at him with a raised brow. "Well?"

Bruce shrugged sheepishly. "It's with my other suit."

Lois threw up her hands. "The one with the cape?" she said skeptically.

Clark heard a gasp from the stairs and saw Penny standing on the landing.

"I'll leave it at home the next time I come to Metropolis," suggested Bruce. This was the guy's peace offering?

Clark pulled himself to his feet and Lois wrapped her arm around her husband's waist to help him stay there. "You aren't welcome in Metropolis, Wayne," he said.

Penny ran down the stairs and up to them, staring Bruce Wayne in the eye. "Bruce, please. I'm begging you. Haven't you put this family through enough?"

Bruce nodded. "I'll leave it in the vault, where it will be safe. All right, Penny?"

She sighed in relief. "Thank you."

Clark wondered how his nanny had a vested interest in all of this. Then he remembered the look in her eyes when she held his daughter earlier that day. Penny loved Lara; she wanted her kept safe.

Bruce gazed at Penny with such intensity that Clark wanted to step between them, protect her from that rodent, but Lois held him back. "Penny, you were heading to Gotham City to see your brother?"

Clark had completely forgotten about that. There was no way he could fly her now.

"Matthew Barnes is fine. A little concussion, a slight scratch on his forehead," said Bruce to her. "I can give you a lift, Penny, if you still want to go and check on him. I happen to be flying that way. I've got a chopper waiting."

Penny turned to look at them, her eyes wide, anxious, nervous. Was she asking their permission?

"After all he's done today, are you sure that's what you want to do?" Lois asked their nanny. Clark had a strange feeling that his wife wasn't talking about the flight. Poor Jimmy.

Penny smiled, glancing back at Bruce Wayne. "Okay." She opened the closet, removing her purse and overnight bag. "Lara has stopped crying. Your father was out, Lois. I left a message on his answering machine to call you."

"We'll need you back by Monday morning," Lois reminded her.

Penny nodded, gazing up at Bruce Wayne with admiration. The look made Clark sick to his stomach. He wondered what it was about the man that attracted her. Personally, he couldn't see it. *Some women just have bad taste in men*, he guessed. But then he remembered Penny had admired Superman once. Maybe his nanny had a thing for men in capes. This thought brought a chuckle to his throat. Penny didn't even know about Bruce's cape.

Oh, wait. Clark glanced at his wife; Lois had mentioned something about Bruce's cape. Did she know? Clark shook his head. When it came to superheroes, Lois was blind as a… chiroptera. Maybe it was petty, but Clark felt a little mean satisfaction in not telling her that Bruce Wayne was Batman's true identity. After all, there was a whole lot his wife still wasn't telling him.

Clark felt he should warn his nanny away from Bruce, but it wasn't his place and, thankfully, not in his job description. Wayne kept telling him he was trying to do the 'right thing' and he did seem to be attempting to clean up Gotham City. Clark didn't like

his methods, but he couldn't fault the man's motivations.

Lois walked Clark over to the couch, before she kissed his cheek, murmuring, "I'm going to go check on Lara." She turned with a glare at Bruce, waiting until he reached for the door before moving away from Clark. He leaned back as a smile tugged at his lips. His wife still hated Bruce. He had married one smart woman.

"I'm sorry," Bruce said to him again. "I was only trying to help."

"We don't need your kind of help, Mr. Wayne," Lois said from the base of the stairs. "Next time you want to visit, don't."

Bruce nodded, rubbing his nose. Clark thought Lois was lucky not to have broken it and ruined the man's image permanently, although he personally wished she had.

As they opened the door, Penny looked back at her employer almost with pity. Clark didn't understand her. He could have sworn she was frightened of him at the newsroom this morning and now? He shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he heard her whisper and Clark wondered for what? For being afraid of him? Or for going off with the idiot who brought Kryptonite into his house?

Clark speculated what he had done to earn both her pity and her fear. Bringing Bruce to their house, perhaps? Or was it something else? He would have to have to have a meeting with the Bat one of these days and find out what exactly this afternoon had been about. He didn't feel like talking it out at the moment. He just wanted the man out of his house.

"*Are you hungry?"* Bruce asked Penny as they walked outside.

"*Famished."*

"*Do you like Chinese?"*

"*Love it. Are you flying me to Beijing?"*

Clark shook his head. That was a multi-hour flight via airplane.

Bruce chuckled. "*Ah, no. I'm not Superman."* He could say that again. "*But I know a great restaurant in Gotham City."*

"*Which one? Hunan Palace on Third, or Ming Dynasty on Eighth, or Zung Zu on Thirtieth and Elm?"*

"*You* are *from Gotham City.*" Clark could hear the admiration in Wayne's voice. *"Ming Dynasty, if you must know."*

Clark stopped listening as Lois came down the stairs. "Lara's fine. All that screaming exhausted her and she's asleep. Let me help you upstairs. You should really lie down."

"I'm…" The word 'fine' died on his lips as he looked at his wife.

Lois had shown no fear when dealing with Wayne. That man had been hurting her husband and child and she just ran in and took charge and saved the day once again. She had even punched Wayne in the nose. How many times had she saved Clark now? He felt lucky to have someone like her in his life. What had she said the other day? "*I just can't stop loving you. I don't know how."* He didn't know how to stop loving her either.

"You're what?" she asked, concern in her eyes.

Clark smiled. "You're right, Lois, I should go lie down. Why don't you help me upstairs?" Just gazing at Lois filled him with energy. She was his sunlight.

"My dad could be here any minute."

Damn! He forgot that she had asked Penny to call her father. He had no idea what the man could do for Lara, but it was probably best to have her vitals checked. "I'll just change out…" He looked down at his brown suit.

Lois raised her brows. "Change?"

"Lois, I didn't change into my blue suit." He swallowed.

"No, you didn't." They stared at each other for a moment.

"I flew into the living room window in this suit," he said, stating the obvious. He couldn't believe he had made such a mistake. Lara had been in pain. Clark didn't think, he just acted.

"Oops." Lois didn't seem so surprised.

"That means that Penny and Bruce Wayne know I'm Superman. No more denials. No more cover-ups."

She nodded. "Yep."

"They both already knew, didn't they?"

Lois nodded again. "They had their suspicions. I'm not worried about Penny, if she keeps her mouth shut, but do you think that Bruce will say anything? There's something about that man that just gives me the willies." She shivered. "Like that stupid stunt he pulled today. I just can't figure out his motives. Why is he so interested in you, us… Superman? Is his life that boring?"

Clark swallowed a grin, pushing himself to his feet. *About as boring as ours*, he was tempted to say. "He won't say anything," he said.

Lois wrapped her arm around his waist. "How can you be sure? I don't trust that man."

Music to his ears. Clark pulled Lois to him and placed a soft kiss on her lips. That kiss set fire to his nerve endings. "Let's just say, I've got something on him he doesn't want revealed."

"Newsworthy?"

"Definitely."

"Blackmail, Clark? That doesn't seem like you."

He smiled at his wife and shrugged; it was all he could do to stop himself from pulling her into another embrace. He didn't want to talk, let alone think about Bruce Wayne. He wanted to wipe the man — everything — from his mind. All he really wanted to think about was her. This beautiful, strong-willed woman who had consented to be his wife. His body ached for her in a way he hadn't allowed in a long time, too long.

"Not blackmail. More of a hot lead," he replied. A hot lead that would never see the light of day.

Lois paused on the landing and waited.

"Speaking of hot leads," Clark whispered in her ear. "Why don't I float us up to bed?" Then he proceeded to kiss down her neck.

"Clark, if you think you can…" She swallowed. "… distract me…"

He kissed her lips, wrapping his arms around her waist, pulling her tightly against him.

"Did you say float?" she whispered between his kisses.

"Uh-huh."

Lois swallowed again. "As in float, *float*?"

He tried to hover them off the ground, but the Kryptonite exposure was still too recent. So, Clark lifted her into his arms instead, walking her up the stairs and setting her down outside their bedroom door.

"Clark! You're still weak from the Kryptonite exposure," she chastised him.

"You're not an elephant, Lois. I can carry my wife easily, even without super help."

Lois cleared her throat. "Did you say something about floating?"

Clark pressed her against their bedroom door, kissing her. Did he really need to answer that question? He was pretty sure that Lois had the ability to make him float, even if he had been born on Earth to human parents.

Lois held her hand against his chest. "Are you sure, Clark? No teasing this time? You really want me?" She looked at him, unsure she could handle more rejection. He loved his wife and was embarrassed at how cruel he had been at times lately.

Again, he didn't answer. Clark merely picked his wife up once more while he continued to kiss her. He carried her into the bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

Clark set her down on the bed and took a step back to spin out of his clothes. Before he could start spinning, Lois placed a hand on his shoulder and shook her head. "Here, let me."

"My way is faster," he murmured as she kissed him again.

"You're tired," she whispered with a slight smile as she untied his tie, tossing it on the chair. "Faster isn't always better, Clark."

"You are talking to the fastest man on Earth, Lois," he replied as she tugged off his jacket.

A smile graced her lips. "Fast at some things, true, but not all things."

He raised a curious eyebrow. What things was she referring to? His wife kissed him again. Oh, right. He felt himself flush. *That*. Yes, he did know how to enjoy and draw out every nanosecond of that. By the time she stepped back, his shirt was unbuttoned and had joined his jacket and tie on the chair. How had she done that? "Do you have super speed, Mrs. Kent?"

She grinned naughtily. "I have what I call super distraction." Then she pushed him down onto the bed.

"That sounds interesting, tell me more," he said, using one of his favorite interview lines. His shoes hit the floor.

"You're supposed to be resting," murmured his wife, motioning with her head that he should move more onto the bed.

"Right, rest." Clark scooted up more onto the bed until his head was lying on the pillows.

"Super distraction goes hand in hand with super determination," Lois informed him, crawling onto the bed and on top of him. He liked the way her mind was going.

"Uh-huh," he mumbled as she kissed him, her chest pinning his to the bed. He liked those super qualities, so far. Her hands caressed up his body and then down his arms to his hands. She pulled him into a sitting position and then wrapped her legs around him. When he next opened his eyes, he saw a flash of red float through the air. She had taken off his cape. She was good at that super distraction ability.

Next came his suit pants. Lois grinned at him. Now, he was down to his blue suit and red… okay, just the blue suit. He liked what she was doing to him. Slow was delightful. Super enjoyable.

Lois lay down next to him, so he had to turn to face her. She kissed every spot on his face and then worked down his neck. Before he knew it, he could feel her tugging on the sleeve of his suit. He hadn't even felt her unzip his suit. Magic fingers.

A window in his mind opened a sliver. Doubt entered. How had she become so talented at removing his suit?

"Do you need some help?" he whispered between her kisses. He didn't really want to help. He loved what Lois was doing to him. He tried not to think about the doubt that was tugging on his mind. He only wanted to think about his wife and what she was doing to him. He tried not to think that she had done this same thing with the other Clark.

But there it was: full-blown doubt. Was Lois thinking about the other Clark or was she thinking of her husband? He should have taken off the suit himself. It was too late now.

She pulled him back into a sitting position and sat down on his lap again. He liked that part. Her kisses went down from his neck now, his shoulder, his pecs, his stomach. Clark swallowed.

"Lois, I don't know if I can…" Clark's eyes opened. He had to look at her, convey his true feelings.

Lois was gone. He was alone in the room and lying naked on the bed. "Lois?" He felt very exposed and wrapped himself in the comforter. "Lois?" Had she noticed his indecision? Did she think he was being cruel? Did she think he was teasing her?

Clark loved Lois. He wasn't trying to be cruel and he hadn't been teasing her. He wanted his wife. He wanted to make love to her, but now he wasn't sure that he could.

He heard a sound coming from the hallway. Wrapped in the comforter, he walked down the hall to Lara's room. From the doorway, he saw his wife watching their daughter sleep.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Can you hear her heart beating?" she whispered, catching his eye. "Does it sound normal to you?"

Lois wasn't thinking of the other Clark. She was worried about their daughter. Clark's heart filled with love for his family. His wife. His daughter.

"It's so strong I could hear it all the way from the other room," he told her.

"That's due to your hearing more than her heart, Clark." She smiled at him indulgently. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

Clark walked up next to her and wrapped her inside his arms within the comforter. Even fully clothed, she felt good against his bare skin. "The exposure is the worst part, Lois. All that crying, plus the relief from the pain being gone, she'll be out for a while."

Lois raised a brow at him. "One-track mind, much?"

"Hey, you're the one who took off my clothes," he reminded her. That window was now firmly shut; the doubt gone. He loved his wife and he was going to show her how much.

She grinned, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I admit I liked having you at a disadvantage. The super spin can take away some of the fun for me. Next time, though, don't wear so many layers."

He chuckled. *Next time*, he liked the sound of that.

Lois turned around. Kissing her fingers, she transferred the kiss to her daughter's cheek. Then she rested her hand on her daughter's tummy. "I love you, baboo. I'm glad you're okay." Taking Clark's hand, Lois led him out of the room and shut the door behind them.

"Are you mad at me?" Clark whispered, unsure why she had left their bedroom so abruptly. Had she sensed his doubt? Heard his hesitation?

Lois cupped his jaw in her hand. "Of course not. Why would I be?"

"You left me naked…" he stammered. Oh, why had he brought this up? "… in the bedroom."

His wife smiled, holding up a bottle of lotion. "I thought you would like a backrub."

"You don't have to pamper me to get me to love you, Lois. And you don't have to make pasta every night for dinner, either."

"Who me?" Lois innocently batted her eyelashes. "You noticed that, huh?"

Clark wrapped her in his comforter embrace again, kissing her. "That's what I get for telling you what pasta does to me."

"Come on, Superman. First one to the bedroom gives the first backrub," she teased.

"You're on!" replied Clark, disappearing into their room.

He heard Lois laugh as she slowly entered their bedroom and shut the door behind her. She leaned against the door frame and grinned.

Clark was already lying underneath the comforter on his stomach. "Where have you been, honey? I'm ready for my backrub."

His wife tossed him the bottle of lotion. "We should have Dr. Klein check your hearing. I said the *first* one to the bedroom *gives* the first backrub, Clark. You can start with my shoulders."

Lois started to unbutton her blouse and he decided giving her a backrub might not be so bad of an idea after all. Skin against skin. Rubbing. Heating. His imagination went wild.

Clark crawled over to her at the edge of the bed. "Faster isn't always better, huh?" Then he proceeded to show her how slow, gentle, and loving he could be.

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Chapter 10 — Full Circle

"Lois! Clark!" Perry shouted at them from his office door.

Lois glanced over at her husband and smiled. How could she not smile? He loved her again, in every imaginable way. Trusted her again. Desired her again. Clark glanced at her and caught her

gaze, grinning because they were both thinking the same thing. Another early night at the Kent house. Yippy!

"Ms. Lane! Mr. Kent!" Perry called a second time. "Could you stop making googly eyes at each other and get your butts in my office?"

This time Lois jumped.

Clark wrapped his arm around her waist. "Googly eyes?"

She elbowed her husband. "Yes, Perry?"

"Shut the door." Oh, no. This couldn't be good.

Clark shut the door and stood behind Lois, who sat in the sole visitor's chair.

"What's this I hear about Multiworld Communications being the new owners of the *Daily Planet*?"

Lois glanced at Clark and gulped.

"I can't have Intergang as my boss," Perry groaned.

"The *Daily Planet* was owned by Lex Luthor, Jr.," explained Clark. "When he died without a will, his assets were held until a living relative came forward to claim them."

"The happiest four months of my life, working in publisher limbo. Tell me something I don't know."

"We discovered that Lex, Jr. had a twin sister Alexandra, and that she was his likely heir," continued Lois. "When she never came forward, we started looking for her. Mindy Huckaby, aka Mindy Church — head of Intergang — came out looking like a possibility. She fit the description we'd been given for Alexandra Luthor, but we didn't have any proof until this moment that our guess was accurate."

"Mindy Church — that ditzy blonde Bill Church married — is our new boss?" Perry asked, plopping himself into his seat.

"If it's any consolation, sir, we think her lack of intelligence has been greatly exaggerated," said Clark.

"No, Clark. It isn't a consolation." Perry looked at him in disbelief. "Don't you two think a little heads-up would have been nice?"

"Yes, Chief," Clark replied.

"We didn't have any hard facts. All we had was conjecture," began Lois.

"Next time you get anything that's even a whisper of a rumor about the *Daily Planet*, conjecture or otherwise, I want to hear it."

Clark patted Lois on the arm. "Yes, sir."

She stood up.

"I just got this memo from upstairs," Perry continued, sliding a piece of paper across his desk.

Lois sat back down. "What's this?" she asked, picking it up.

"It's a list of topics we're no longer allowed to write about."

"No!" Lois gasped, glancing back at Clark.

"And this," Perry said, sliding another piece of paper across the desk. "Is about some of the minor changes that will take place."

This time Clark leaned over her shoulder. She guessed that he finished reading it before she even picked it up.

"Mandatory drug testing?" Clark gulped.

"Yep. Next week. I'm supposed to warn everyone to stay away from poppy seeds, because they often create a false positive."

"I've heard that," Lois murmured, glancing at Clark. He hated any type of testing.

"I can't take a drug test. This is like Trask all over again. Violation of my rights." He pretended to cough. "Our rights."

"Trask?" Lois whispered, feeling an icy chill creep down her spine.

"I'm sorry, honey," said Clark, resting a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She covered it with her hand.

Perry looked at them with a raised brow. "I hate this too, but you two certainly don't have anything to worry about… do you?"

Focus on the problem at hand, she told herself. "Of course not, Perry. But Clark's right, as long as we do our jobs and turn in our stories, I see no reason to violate our privacy."

"Okay." Perry put his hands on his desk and pushed himself to his feet. "Just wanted to give you a heads-up. The less rocking of the boat there is, the fewer waves that splash us and get us wet. We'll weather this storm, until we can find a new owner on our own. I have fought too long and too hard for this paper to let it stay in the hands of Multiworld Communications. Keep writing whatever you see fit. I'll take the heat." He sighed. "Now, I've got to tell everybody else about our new parent company." This didn't look like a job he relished.

As soon as Perry left his office, Clark wrapped his arms around her. "Lois, I can't give them my urine."

Lois lowered her voice. "Have Dr. Klein check it first and see if any anomalies show up. If they do, we'll figure out a way to explain them to Multiworld Communications."

"Why do they want to do drug testing?" her husband asked, shaking his head.

"Blackmail opportunities, my guess," she replied.

They walked out of Perry's office as he finished his announcements.

Jimmy came and stood beside them. "Can you believe this?"

Lois wrapped an arm around his shoulders and squeezed. "How are you holding up?"

That morning Jimmy had discovered a photo in the *Gotham Gazette*'s page six society page of Bruce Wayne and Penny Barnes on the town in Gotham City. *Thank you, Ralph*.

Jimmy grinned. Not the response she had expected. "How cool is that?! Bruce Wayne! Bruce Wayne stole my girlfriend." He laughed.

Lois and Clark looked at him with startled expressions.

"You aren't upset?" Clark asked hesitantly.

"Are you kidding me? This gets me total street cred with the ladies."

"What?" stammered Lois.

"Penny and I have nothing in common, except my desiring her hotness and her liking my super cool friends." He shrugged. "I've been trying to figure out a way to break up with her for a while now. But how do you dump a hot babe like Penny?" He wandered off back to his desk.

"He still must be in shock," murmured Clark with a shake of his head, before kissing her cheek. "I'm off to see Dr. Klein."

Lois watched him jog out of the newsroom with a sigh. Perry headed back to his office and nudged her. "It looks like you finally checked out the Heartbreak Hotel. Is that why you disappeared Friday without a word?"

She smiled at him. "Family emergency."

"Right," he said, not buying it.

Lois shrugged, returning to her desk. In spite of Bruce's actions, she had had a good weekend. And now, she had a spy in the Bruce Wayne camp.

***

Superman stared at Dr. Klein. "Excuse me?"

"It's pee, Superman. What else do you want me to say?" Dr. Klein looked down at his chart.

Superman crossed his arms and raised a brow.

"You aren't sick, so no blood. You don't drink or do drugs, so nothing artificial to show up. It's simply pee."

"So, my urine is exactly the same as human urine?" That couldn't be right.

"Well, no. Of course not," Dr. Klein clarified.

Superman hadn't thought so.

"A normal human male's testosterone level, let's say is about here." The scientist held a hand up about hip level. "Your testosterone level is closer to here." He held his other hand about chest level."

Not so similar. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No. It seems to work for you. In a human male, with that level of testosterone I'd worry about excessive anger, rage, violence, and horniness, but you aren't human and we know you don't have any of those traits. Your Kryptonian genes must balance it out."

Superman thought about this for a minute. "But there isn't anything non-human about the urine?"

Dr. Klein shrugged. "It's pee." He picked up his clipboard again, stopping. "Superman, why all this sudden interest in your…" The researcher slapped his forehead. "Those test results from last spring. You're trying to find another explanation for the result. Still hoping—" He couldn't complete that sentence.

Superman raised a brow, crossing his arms. "I'm still hopeful that a mistake was made and you were wrong." He knew Dr. Klein was wrong. What other explanation for Lara and Peter, the other half-Kryptonian child he helped deliver in Smallville, could there be?

"I'm not infallible, Superman. I have made mistakes from time to time," Dr. Klein replied. "At least once that I can think of, off the top of my head."

Better make that twice, thought Superman.

"If you want, you can give me another sample of your swimmers and I can throw it into a Petri dish with a human egg and see what happens. I could be wrong." Dr. Klein sounded like he was talking about making breakfast instead of making a baby.

Superman didn't know quite how to respond to that blasé suggestion, except with his expression of disgust. "I'd rather not," he finally replied.

"It's up to you. If you and this woman you're seeing become serious, you can always try the hope-and-pray method. In any case, always use precautions." Dr. Klein paused. "I'm betting that the same protection applied to your suit, your uniform, would apply to the condom, making it indestructible while so close to your skin. Hmmm."

Superman had already come to this conclusion. Not wishing to continue this line of discourse with the good scientist, he said, "Thank you, Dr. Klein." And departed quickly.

***

Lois picked up the phone. "Lois Lane, *Daily Planet*."

"Hi, Lois. Is Clark there?" It was Penny. She sounded nervous.

"Is something wrong, Penny? Lara okay?" Lois asked, leaning forward in anticipation of bad news.

"No. Nothing like that. I…" She paused.

Lois waited. Something was clearly upsetting her.

"My brother Matthew called. Some men came into the lab today, questioned them about the computer explosion, about what they were researching… I really should talk to Clark about this."

"Why?" Lois asked her slowly.

"They had search warrants and were about to take the back-up servers when… when will Clark be back, Lois?"

Lois started to be annoyed. "Clark and I are partners. Anything you want to tell him about these policemen that came to your brother's lab, you can tell me." Then she waited.

Finally, Penny spoke again. "They weren't policemen. They said they were government agents. I told Bruce I think they were the same men you and Clark wrote about after Superman showed up. He thinks I'm being paranoid."

The phone dropped out of Lois's hand. "Bureau 39."

***

Clark was at her desk the next moment, picking up the phone. He had been downstairs at the coffee cart when he heard her whisper those two words. She hadn't had a nightmare in the two weeks since the Bruce Wayne incident, since he had moved back into their bedroom. He thought that maybe she had worked through her fears with Dr. Friskin or because she felt safer with him sleeping next to her again.

"Hello?" he said into the phone.

"Clark!" Penny's voice gushed with relief. "We need to meet with you — all three of us."

Clark glanced at his wife. She was still frozen in fear, just as she had been in Dr. Friskin's office. "What are you talking about, Penny? Me, you, and Lois?"

Penny paused. "Me, you, and Bruce."

Clark growled. "I want nothing to do with him."

"I think we should meet at his house this time. He could have his chef make dinner."

"Penny, I know you are dating the guy, but that doesn't mean I have to like him or attend his dinner parties. We live in different cities and lead separate lives. Let's keep it that way."

"I'm not… it's not a dinner party, it's dinner. It would just be you and us. Clark, I think those men were after…" She swallowed, before lowering her voice. "… you-know-who."

His brow came down. "What men?" He hadn't heard the whole of Lois's conversation, just her final analysis.

"Lois will fill you in. I can't talk on the phone any longer, Lara's scooted off again. Tell me your answer when you come home tonight. Please, Clark. This is important." Penny hung up.

Clark hung up the phone and cupped Lois's jaw in his hands. "Lois, honey. I'm right here. Are you okay?"

No response.

Clark took her hands in his, kissed her lips gently. "Lois?"

Her eyes blinked. Once. Twice. She looked at him and smiled. "Clark." Then she jumped up and started throwing files into her briefcase. "I've got to go home. To Lara. Now."

"Lois. Lara's fine. She's home with Penny."

His wife shook her head adamantly. "No. Clark. I need to see her. Hold her. I need to know she's okay." She hugged him briefly. "Don't do anything stupid." Then she ran out of the newsroom.

Don't do anything stupid? She had never said anything like that to him before in his life. When had he ever done anything stupid? Usually, it was her. He caught up with Lois at the elevators. "Can I come with you?" he asked, not wanting her to drive in her present agitated condition.

Lois smiled in agreement and held out her hand to him.

***

Clark handed Lois a cup of tea. She took it happily. Life had been so good these last two weeks. *Why now?* she thought. She had been so sure that Bruce was the man Trask represented in her dreams; now, she was no longer sure. Clark trusted him enough to let him go after that Kryptonite episode… or was it because he now knew their secret?

"Your brother said government agents wanted to take the lab's back-up servers. What were they looking for?" Clark asked Penny.

Penny glanced across the room at their daughter and then went to bring her back to the living room. "Lara, we've talked about this. If you keep leaving the living room, I'm putting you back in the playpen."

Did Lara just look at her with a scowl? Lois handed her tea back to Clark and then held out her arms to Lara. Her daughter gratefully came to her.

"I'm guessing they are looking for the reason the computers crashed," Penny finally said.

"Didn't Bruce say it was a clogged vent?" Lois responded, giving her daughter a silly smile.

"That's the official story." Penny pressed her lips together. "Clark, I'm sure Bruce would come, if you agreed to a meeting."

Clark raised a brow. "So this whole meeting plan wasn't his idea?"

Penny blushed, looking down. "No. It was mine. He thinks I'm still a little too obsessed with Superman." She waved off that idea. "Just because I know everything about… *him*… doesn't

mean I'm obsessed."

Since that day with Bruce and the Kryptonite, Lois had noticed that Penny had been vigilant not to even suggest the hint of Clark being Superman, even to them. She was extra careful with Lara since then, as well. Always calling them before taking her for a walk. Giving them a call when she returned to the house. Never letting anyone into the house, including refusing to sign for packages, telling the deliverymen to return after the owners were home or to leave the packages in the foyer. Then calling her bosses to inform them, if indeed packages were left.

"According to Matthew, the search warrants were bogus. They weren't government men. That's why I thought they might be the same men who came after you… looking for Superman, at the beginning."

Lois hugged her daughter tighter. She saw Clark glance her direction. He was worried about her, Lois could tell. Apparently, Lois had blanked out again. Clark set his wife's tea down on the dining room table and then returned to the couch to hold Lois's hand. She smiled at him.

Clark had been so careful around Lara since she had started moving about the house, ever since he learned she wasn't invulnerable like him. No hot beverages or knives or tools or coins left out where she could knock them down. The house was cleaner than a doctor's office. Everything locked up so tightly that Lois had to ask him to open the cabinet under the kitchen sink.

"Who did Bruce think they were?" Clark asked.

Penny rolled her eyes. "Rival company. Corporate espionage, he said."

"That's a gutsy move for corporate espionage. A little blatant, don't you think?" Lois said, turning to Clark.

"Corporate espionage is the logical answer, or I hate to say it, maybe another news organization, but I can't see anyone sending an entire team to get a news story. If it had been Bureau 39, or some group like that, they would have infiltrated S.T.A.R. Labs instead. Gotham Laboratories doesn't have any connection to us." He glanced at Penny. "Or Superman."

Penny wasn't looking at Clark, she was staring at Lara. "That's what Bruce said."

"He knows what he's talking about. If you want, I can fly over to Gotham City and talk with your brother. Interview him for our story. Would he agree to that? Would Bruce?"

Penny looked down. "I don't know. Bruce thinks I'm being paranoid, ever since I found out—" She swallowed, then glanced up quickly at Clark, then away again. Lois had noticed the fear in her eyes. She was definitely scared of something.

"Bruce doesn't scare you, does he?" Lois asked, leaning forward and passing their daughter to Clark.

Penny shook her head with a slight smile. "Hardly."

Clark chuckled, bouncing Lara on his knee. "I'd love to see his reaction to that statement," he murmured under his breath.

Lois glanced at him and he pressed his lips together, innocently. Sometimes he forgot that she had picked up extra keen hearing while over in the other dimension. She wondered what Clark had on Bruce. Every time she brought it up, he would change the subject or hear someone crying for help and sometimes the sneak just kissed her. She would worm it out of him one day.

"What's scaring you?" Lois asked her.

Swallowing, Penny's eyes went wide. "Jimmy said that these Bureau 39 guys tried to kill Clark, his parents, and his neighbor. That they were the ones who discovered Kryptonite."

"They were disbanded after the attack in Smallville that killed their leader, Penny. They don't exist anymore," Clark's words were directed to Penny, but Lois could tell he was trying to reassure his wife.

Only Lois knew they still existed. She knew what that story Perry wrote the day of the funeral read. Well, her funeral in the future that didn't happen. The future that didn't occur because she went to the other dimension so Clark and Superman could return to Earth. That other, no longer possible, future where Bureau 39 had discovered that she had been pregnant with Superman's child after she and the baby had both died in childbirth, even though Lois had claimed to be carrying Clark's child until the end. She guessed she died of the same problem she had had in the other dimension — excessive blood loss. Lara must have died because she couldn't be separated from the placenta, since the doctors couldn't cut the umbilical cord. That must be how Bureau 39 knew for sure that Lara was Superman's child.

Lois shivered. She didn't want to think about what else the article had said about what happened. She didn't want to think about what Ultra Woman had had to do so she could be sitting in her living room at that very moment. Lois pulled her daughter back into her arms and held her tightly again. She knew the men from Bureau 39 were still out there, waiting, lurking like vultures, searching for a way to steal her child.

***

A tall, golden-haired woman entered Perry's office. She wore a skintight black dress with a leopard skin jacket which, on almost any other woman, would have looked trashy, but somehow she was able to pull it off elegantly. She held a puffy white dog. The dog also wore a leopard skin jacket.

Perry glanced up and then jumped to his feet, stammering, "Mrs. Church!"

She smiled at him and batted her eyelashes, shutting the office door despite it being quite late and them being alone in the newsroom. "Hello there, Mr. White."

"What can I do for you?"

Mindy licked her lips and then pouted, speaking in her baby-doll voice. "Hunky said that you were a good friend to him, Mr. White. That you would do anything I asked you to do for me." She batted her eyelashes again.

Perry cleared his throat. "Mrs. Church, that was before I knew he was the head of Intergang. But I understand you are owner of the *Daily Planet* now and, therefore my boss. What do you want?"

The blonde thought about what he said. "Clark Kent."

Perry snorted with laughter. "What do you want Clark for?"

"He's a good writer, despite working with that woman. I want him to be my personal reporter." Mindy widened her smile. "Plus, he's one good-looking man."

"Mrs. Church, that woman is his wife and partner. And journalists don't work as personal reporters. They find news stories and write about them."

"I need someone to write what I want them to write about. And I want him." Her expression made Perry think it wasn't only for journalistic reasons she had chosen him.

"Then I recommend you buy the *National Whisper*, Mrs. Church. This is a serious newspaper, where we only print the hard facts and hard truth," Perry reminded her.

Mindy opened her clutch purse and removed a golden paper, handing it to Perry. "Clark Kent's drug test results." She grinned wickedly. "Unless he has a reasonable explanation for this, he *will be* my personal reporter, writing the news *I* find important. Like how Superman is bad for Metropolis." She waved to him on her way out the door. "Ta-ta."

***

Perry shut the door to his office. Clark sat in the chair uncomfortably as he watched his boss pace, before resting on the corner of his desk. Was he about to be fired? A message from above about his recent article on increased crime in Metropolis? Usually when Perry called him into his office, he called Lois as well.

"Is it the raid on Gotham Labs story?" Clark asked hopefully.

Perry waved off those concerns. "Son," he started and then paused as if not knowing how to continue. He cleared his throat.

Clark was reminded of when Lois had been caught kissing Superman. He hoped it wasn't anything like that. No. He glanced at his wife sitting at her desk with a smile. He could trust Lois.

"I'm worried about you."

Worried about him? Clark was confused. Nobody but Lois and his folks worried about him; it was Lois they always worried about. "Sir?"

"I just don't understand the need…" Perry shook his head.

"What need?"

"The need… to take performance enhancing drugs, Clark."

Clark stared at him. "Excuse me?" This was about his drug test? He thought he had passed that with flying colors. Dr. Klein had almost promised him…

Perry lifted off his desk a sheet of golden paper. "Your testosterone levels are off the chart, Clark."

"Oh." Clark looked down. He closed his eyes and thought, *Lois, I need you. Help me, please!*

Clark heard his wife gasp, then a crash. Glancing out to her desk, he saw a pile of papers fluttering through the air and Lois sitting on the floor, staring at him. Had she heard him? They hadn't tried using the telepathic connection since she'd first returned. Clark looked at her, pleading with his eyes.

"What in the Sam Hill?" Perry opened the door to his office. "Lois, honey, you all right?"

"I'm fine; I just slipped."

"Okay, then." Perry shut the door with a shake of his head.

"Maybe I should go out and—" Clark stood up.

Perry pointed to the chair. Clark sat back down. He didn't know the drug testing would check testosterone levels or he would have had an excuse ready. He wasn't any good at thinking up excuses on the spot. That was Lois's specialty.

"You're a good-looking kid. Your wife loves you. Why would you need steroids?"

Oh, that was what he thought.

"I'm not on steroids, Chief."

"What other explanation do you have?" Perry looked at him, but he didn't have an answer. "You don't know the kind of trouble…"

The office door opened and Lois came in. "Here's my copy on the extra husband story."

"Lois, we're in the middle—"

"The Chief thinks I'm using steroids, Lois." Clark looked at her, beseeching.

A smile exploded onto her face as she giggled and looked away, while shutting the office door. So, she thought it was funny, the idea that their boss thought *he* was on steroids. *Great. Thanks, Lois.*

"Did you tell him?" she asked her husband.

"Tell me what?" Perry stammered.

Lois came and stood behind Clark, her hands on his shoulders. "They weren't that kind of performance-enhancing drugs, Perry."

Clark was mortified. Did she just say what he thought she just said? To Perry? He looked down.

"What kind of performance enhancing…" Perry started and then noticed Clark's expression, his discomfort.

Earth open up and swallow me whole. Right now, please!

Perry cleared his throat. "Well… um…"

"You know Clark and I were trying to conceive before Lara showed up."

Clark covered his face.

"Clark, sweetie. This is nothing to be embarrassed about. We were trying to raise your…"

Clark jumped up. "Chief, if there's nothing else…"

"No. No. That was it, Clark," Perry replied just as quickly, wading up the golden paper and shuffling back to the other side of his desk, avoiding eye contact.

Clark left the office as fast as a human could, despite wanting to leave faster. He sat down at his desk and tried to refocus on his work. He hadn't been that embarrassed since Dr. Klein had explained to Superman in detail about the final fertility test and what was required of him.

Lois walked up and ran her fingertips lightly across his shoulders. "You're welcome."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her into his lap, kissing her. "What would I do without you?"

Lois smiled. "Learn to do your own lying." She shook her head. "Scratch that. You're horrible at it." She rolled her eyes. "I've got to return this video," she said, clearly trying to impersonate him.

He winced. He really was a horrible liar. "There could be worse traits in a husband." He smiled at her with love.

"Yes, you could be like Janelle's husband and rent out your marriage bed one night a week to a buddy without informing your wife, while you snuck off, playing in the casinos and hanging out with call girls."

"So, she wasn't crazy? There really was another man in her house impersonating her husband, when the police showed up to notify her of her husband's death?"

Lois stood up and raised a brow. "I just can't believe that Janelle didn't recognize it wasn't her husband for over five months."

"They obviously didn't have a relationship like ours." He smiled as their passionate evening from the night before flitted across his mind. "I'd know if a double of you showed up in our bed."

Lois expression resembled someone sucking on a lemon. "Is that so? What you're saying is that you didn't try to make love to the clone on your first wedding night?" she asked, arms crossed.

Clark turned around quickly and focused on the files on his desk again, avoiding eye contact, picking up the phone, pretending it had rung.

"Just as I thought." She shook her head. "Would recognize your own wife, would you?" She spun Clark's chair around so he was facing her again. She pulled the neckline of her shirt away from her shoulder. "Just in case Lucy El comes to visit someday, big boy. I'm the one with the bullet wound."

Clark's jaw dropped. "You don't think she'd try…" He gulped. "…with me?" Lois hadn't told her much about the other dimension's Lois, but he couldn't believe she would…

"Don't you?" His wife shook her head with a slight chuckle. "She kissed you after knowing you for less than two hours, Clark. She isn't called Hurricane Lane for nothing."

"Hurricane Lane?" He grinned wickedly at Lois, lowering his voice. "And she has super powers now, too, huh?"

"Clark."

He swiveled his chair back to his desk. "I'm just saying… how interesting that must be for her boyfriend."

"Clark." Lois snarled.

"You brought it up, Lois." Clark leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers together and pretended he was considering that option. "Hmm." Then he sat back up. "Nah. Who would want Ultra Woman when he's married to Lois Lane." He smiled reassuringly at her.

"Nice save," Lois said, but she still glared at him. She must really have thought he was considering it. On the other hand, if Lois had *her* Ultra Woman powers back for one night… he wondered.

"What's this about Ultra Woman?" Jimmy said, stopping by Clark's desk. "Has someone seen her?"

"Well, Lois? Has anyone spotted her around our neck of the

woods?" He tried to stop the sneaky smile creeping onto to lips, failing miserably.

"Shut up." She scowled at him.

Jimmy glanced at Clark, then at Lois and then back at Clark. "What's up, CK?"

"Lois had a dream where Ultra Woman was my girlfriend." He laughed quietly. "And she wondered…"

"That's not funny, CK," Jimmy warned him with a glance at Lois.

Clark looked again at his wife. *Oh, great*. She was getting her about-to-explode expression on her face. "I was only teasing, Lois. That will never happen."

"Chill, Lois, it was just a dream," said Jimmy, siding with Clark.

"Just a dream? A nightmare is more like it." Lois slammed down a book, catching the attention of the newsroom. "For three months, I was stuck in the apartment, taking care of a newborn, while he's off flitting around with Ultra Woman. Paris for croissants, why not? Catch some bad guys in Buenos Aires? Sure, let's type it up for the morning edition. Sunsets in the Bahamas? Sounds like fun."

"It does sound like fun." Jimmy agreed with a big smile.

Lois shook her head, shifting her focus to Clark. "It was not fun. It was torture. After Lara was born, Ultra Woman was there… always there. She couldn't get enough of Lara. Except when she was off making the earth tremble with Clark."

"Earthquakes?" stammered Jimmy. "Really? Wow, CK!"

"Lois," Clark warned her, stepping closer.

"It was only a dream, Clark," his wife snapped at him. "You wanted to hear all about my… *dream*… well, here it is. They left me alone. They didn't talk to me, except to ask about the baby. Did I nurse her yet? Did I change her diaper? When did she take her nap? Did they ask me for my help on any stories? No. It was as if having a baby turned my brain into cottage cheese as far as they were concerned. They didn't want to be reminded of me, of what I represented to them. They were too wrapped up in each other. They were still on their honeymoon, with our daughter being the whipped cream on their blissful sundae. The child they wanted, but could not have."

Clark took another step forward, resting a hand on her arm. She closed her eyes with a wince, turning away. "I couldn't even look at him. Everything about him reminded me of you. His silly smile. His gentle caress. The way I could feel him looking at me from across a crowded room. He was my best friend and then he wasn't there for me anymore. He wasn't mine, he was hers. I didn't want to see him with Ultra Woman, happy, laughing. It's not like I didn't hear the giggling. The plans being made. Them making love in the next room."

"Burn," chuckled Jimmy.

Clark glanced at Jimmy and shook his head. His friend pressed his lips together and mouthed a 'sorry.' Clark's hand still rested on Lois's arm and she covered it with her hand.

"I didn't want to see him at all. Every time I saw him, all I could think was that he wasn't mine. He wasn't the man that I love with my entire body and soul. He wasn't the man who got my jokes, and knew my every thought and desire sometimes before I did. He wasn't the father of my child. He was a stranger. My husband was gone, but this lookalike was there to remind me of what I lost, what I had, what I still had to lose."

Clark took another step forward, wrapping her in his arms.

"I had to stop nursing Lara, because she was sucking the life out of me. I was down to a hundred pounds before they even noticed me again. Then I became their pet project. Time to get up, Lois, you need to get out of bed. Has Lois taken a shower today? Did Lois finish her meal? They stuffed me with food and I still couldn't gain weight. And until I gained weight I couldn't come home. Couldn't get out of their lives. I couldn't come back to the *Planet* weighing a hundred pounds, any more than I could have come back when I was eight months pregnant. And always in the background was Lex Luthor. I couldn't leave the apartment for fear that he might kidnap me again."

"Wow, Lois. You have one active imagination." Jimmy shook his head.

Ignoring Jimmy, Lois looked at Clark and sighed. "I lost the will to live, Clark. What did I have to live for? A child who cried every time I picked her up? Who preferred Ultra Woman to me? A husband who didn't miss me? All I had were my dreams. I clung to sleep like an addict to drugs. My life meant nothing. Nothing." Her voice caught in her throat. When she continued speaking, it was in a whisper. "They didn't want me there. I was an inconvenience. The houseguest who couldn't leave. I was stuck in that hell of a dimension with no way to go home. And all I wanted was to come home."

Clark kissed her cheek, murmuring, "It's over now, Lois, you're home. I'm here and I love you. Lara is our child; no one is going to take her away from us."

Lois looked at him, blinked once, and burst into tears on his shoulder. He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the conference room.

"Whoa, CK. Lois needs some serious therapy. She has some nasty nightmares," said Jimmy before wandering back to his desk.

"You have no idea," Clark mumbled, before shutting the conference room door behind them.

He set Lois down on the settee inside the door and closed the blinds to shut out the lookie-loos. Then he held her in his arms while she cried. That was why she didn't want to talk about what happened after Lara's birth. They had ignored her, left her alone to live their own lives. Lois was too social a creature to spend over a month in solitary confinement, locked up in an apartment.

Clark felt guilty. Part of him had wanted to stop her embarrassing rant; the other, more dominant half wanted to hear what she had to say. She had put too much on her shoulders and she didn't know how to tell him, to let it go. If she kept it bottled up, Clark knew, someday it would have all come crashing down on top of her like it had today. He wished she hadn't feel the need to keep it from him.

Clark ran his fingers over her hair. "I'm so sorry, Lois."

"It's not your fault, Clark," she replied, wiping her cheeks. "You didn't know."

"I knew, but I couldn't get to you. You were going through hell and here I was living my life with the other you. Doing all the same things you saw him doing with Ultra Woman. You must have felt like we all abandoned you."

She nodded. "Don't feel bad, Clark. The memories of you from that time are some of the best I have. I missed you so much, some days I didn't get out of bed. All I wanted to do was sleep and dream of you… us." Lois leaned her head against his. "When Sam pointed out to them what happened to me, they put me on a schedule, just like a baby. I did what was asked of me, but my heart wasn't in it. I couldn't see the point."

"Lara…" Clark whispered.

"I didn't think she liked me. For Ultra Woman she was the sweetest child. For me, she cried constantly. I had no idea what I was doing. Every little setback frustrated me. I wanted to be the perfect mom; instead I was everything but. And I wouldn't let Ultra Woman win. I didn't give up on Lara. I did all I could for her. Sometimes, it felt like an unwinnable battle."

"Star told me that you were depressed. 'In a black hole' she called it." He ran his fingers over her hair. "I even tried to have her send you a message. Telling you…"

"You loved me, you missed me, and you wanted me to come home." Lois nodded. "I got it."

Clark's jaw dropped. "You got my message?" He pulled her

into his arms and kissed her. “You actually got my message! That’s insane.”

“Actually, Lara got your message. Through the other dimension’s Star — Moonbeam. I told you the first time I heard her telepathically she showed you telling me you loved me. That was the first time. It was the first time Lara and I truly bonded.”

“Oh, Lois.”

“I knew that you still loved me. I knew that Lara loved me. After that, things got easier, but it was still an uphill climb.” She swallowed. “I did something I’m not proud of.” She pulled back out of his arms and looked him in the face. “I went a little crazy and almost killed Lex Luthor.”

He ran his fingers down her face. “You didn’t though?”

His wife shook her head. “I wanted to. I really wanted to. Sam bought me a gun for protection. Guns are all over the place in that dimension, it’s unreal. He was afraid that Lex would kidnap me again.”

“Did he?” Clark swallowed.

“Vixen kidnapped James… James Olsen, owner of the *Daily Planet*, right in front of me. I had just learned that H.G. Wells had returned and I knew Lara would be safe. But I couldn’t leave, knowing what Lex and Junior did to those other executives who got in their way. I had to save him.”

“Vixen?”

Lois nodded and then told him the whole story. About lying to Vixen, about Lex drugging her and her pulling the gun on him, forcing him to have Junior bring James up to the penthouse. About communicating with Lara telepathically.

“But you didn’t shoot him,” Clark repeated.

“I wanted to, Clark. Every time I turn around, there he is — or someone related to him somehow — and I just wanted it to end. Enough already. We’re still dealing with him… with Mindy.” She shook her head. Taking a big breath, she continued. “Trask was there.”

“What?” Clark stammered. “Trask and Lex?”

“He was working as a henchman for Junior, undercover for Bureau 39, I think. Although he denied it.” She looked him in the eye. “I almost shot them, Clark. The gun was cocked. My aim steady. My rage red-hot.”

“What stopped you, Lois?”

She looked down. “Clark wouldn’t let me. He said you wouldn’t like it.”

“That’s the nicest thing I’ve heard you say about him in a long time. I was beginning to wonder if the other Clark had any redeeming qualities whatsoever.”

Lois set a hand on his shirt. “Don’t, Clark. Please.”

“I mean, he seems like a bit of a jerk. How could you ever have fallen for him?”

She sighed. He could tell she didn’t want to answer this question.

Clark raised her chin with his fingers. “I’m just curious. I’ll still love you.”

Looking him straight in the eye, she said, “Imperfect that he is, he is still a better man than everyone else in the whole spectrum of dimensions, save you.” She stood up and walked to the door of the conference room. Then she gave him a evil little grin. “Plus, he’s got that Clark Kent sexy hot thing going for him.” She waggled her eyebrows and disappeared out the door.

Teach him for asking a question he really didn’t want answered.

***

Superman landed on the second-story balcony of Wayne Manor and waited. The sun had just dipped down over the horizon, giving a rosy glow to the gardens below.

He heard the security alarm switch off and the balcony door locks turn a moment before the French doors opened. An elderly gentleman in formal attire stood at the threshold.

“Good evening, sir. My name is Alfred. I am Mr. Wayne’s butler. He is expecting you in the library. Right this way.”

Superman followed, but was having second thoughts. If Lois knew he had come here…. It was too late for second thoughts.

He needed to know if Penny’s hunch was true and if so, what did they want with Gotham Labs? He had quickly dismissed her theory, but it was still there, festering in the back of his mind. Lois had had another Trask dream the night before and it brought Penny’s concerns back to the forefront of his mind.

Alfred opened a door to a huge room lined with books. Superman shook his head. Did people really live like this? It reminded him of a movie set.

Across the room, Bruce was sitting at a desk with several computer monitors. As soon as they entered, he pushed a button and the monitors disappeared into the desk. High tech. The man was known for his toys. Well, his alter ego was.

“Thank you, Alfred. That will be all,” Bruce said respectfully.

Alfred nodded and disappeared out the door, again.

“Clark!” Bruce held out his hand for a handshake, but Superman folded his arms across his chest. “Good of you to come.”

“Don’t call me that,” Superman corrected him.

Bruce nodded. “Of course. Sorry. I would want the same respect afforded to me.”

Superman didn’t say anything, sizing him up. He wished he could say the man was nervous but his heart rate was not elevated one beat.

Bruce sat back down. He offered Superman a chair, but Clark preferred to stand. “To what do I owe this pleasure?” Gone were his usual smiles and charm; gone was the façade he put on for the ladies. Clark liked this no-nonsense man better.

“Tell me what happened at Gotham Laboratories.”

“Ah. Penny told you.” He put the tips of his fingers together.

Superman nodded curtly.

Bruce pushed a few buttons on his desk and one of the monitors returned. “The security tapes.”

Superman moved closer for a better view.

“These men came in first thing in the morning. They interviewed my staff, had search warrants for my back-up server and the mainframe that exploded.”

“Pause it.”

Bruce pushed a button.

Superman studied the frame. One of the men, blond, reminded him of that man who shot him on the plane — right after Lois had kissed him for the first time. *Don’t think about that, Clark,* he told himself. He didn’t remember seeing him in Smallville all those months later, though. “Go on.”

Bruce pressed play again.

“Why did the mainframe explode?”

“Clogged—”

Superman interrupted. “The real reason.”

Bruce thought about that for a moment. “It got overloaded. Too much data all at once.”

“Freeze it.” He recognized a second man.

Bruce stopped the video again. “I have the warrants. I’m running them for fingerprints and DNA.”

Superman nodded for him to continue. “You won’t find any matches.”

“Was she right?” Bruce asked with surprise.

“Yes. Those men are Bureau 39. Only a stupid man would let a woman’s beauty distract him from her intelligence, Wayne,” Superman reminded not only Bruce, but himself as well. “Penny tracked me down. Don’t be surprised if she already knows who you really are.”

“She knows I’m Bruce Wayne.”

“I meant the other you, not this public image.”

“You don’t think she’d be interested in me if I was only just

me?" Bruce raised a brow, chuckling. He must have found that thought amusing.

"I don't give dating advice," replied Superman. Nor would he encourage his nanny in that regard. "What was the mainframe processing when it overloaded?"

Bruce thought longer and harder about this question. He seemed not to want to answer. Finally, he made a decision. "This."

The multi-billionaire pressed a few more buttons on his desk and Superman expected one of the portraits to move aside to reveal a wall safe, but it didn't. Bruce then walked to a bookcase, selected a title and seemed to be flipping through it. The computer had been overloaded by a book? As Superman focused his attention on the book, he realized it wasn't a book, but a small computer laptop with a holographic pages. Then Bruce returned the book to the shelf.

Superman laughed softly to himself. The title was an H.G. Wells book, *The Shape of Things to Come*. If Wayne only knew…

To Superman's surprise, one of the bookcases then moved forward revealing a safe door. He scanned the safe, but it was lined with lead. He took a step backwards toward the exit.

Bruce must have noticed. "I have to keep some things private, even from you, Superman." A retinal scan done at the same time as his palm print scan finally allowed a hidden keyboard to be revealed. He typed in his access code and the door unlocked. He glanced over his shoulder. "I only have thirty seconds to get what I want out of the safe before it relocks, so pardon me if I allow you only a brief glance."

Superman was by his side before Bruce could touch the handle. The billionaire pulled open the door and stepped inside. Typing another code into yet another, smaller, safe, he removed a used facial tissue with blood on it and handed it to Superman.

Superman focused on it to a microscopic level. Definitely blood, not human, but not Kryptonian either. "Whose blood is that?"

Did Bruce know about the babies of Smallville? Did Bureau 39? He would need to call… no, *visit* Pete the instant he left here.

Bruce held out his hand and Superman returned the tissue to him, hesitantly. Once it was securely locked in both safes and the bookcase was back against the wall, Bruce answered. "It was sent to the labs anonymously."

"Anon…" Superman picked up Bruce by his collar. "Don't lie to me about this." Still Bruce did not say a word, staring him directly in the eyes. Superman dropped him and walked to the other side of the room. "Penny."

"If she had known Lara was your natural daughter, she never would have sent the sample to her brother. She would have destroyed it," Bruce explained, returning to the desk and switching off the monitor.

That certainly explained Penny's change of behavior as of late. Guilt. "It still should be destroyed," Superman growled.

"As you can see, it is quite safe," replied Bruce, raising his hands to his library.

Superman's brow rose. "Destroyed would be safer."

"Well, yes. But you never know when it might come in handy."

Superman growled again, his eyes closing into slits. Was Wayne speaking of his daughter's blood sample or the Kryptonite?

"I have a question, though. Who is her mother? She must be human because Lara isn't invulnerable."

Superman glared at him so intensely that Bruce's heart rate actually increased for the first time and he swallowed. "Who. Do. You. Think. Wayne?"

This startled Bruce. "How?" he stammered. "Surrogacy?"

Superman shook his head and a hint of a smile touched his lips. "Wayne, if you want to play in my league, you are going to have to think outside the box of jesters and mutant animal people."

"The Joker and Penguin are not minor pests," Batman's alter ego retorted.

Superman shrugged, lifting himself into the air. "Should they return, let me know."

"I don't need your help protecting Gotham City."

Superman sighed and then clarified, "Bureau 39. And I'd like photographs of those two and any other faces you can get off the surveillance tape sent to me."

Leaving the way he had come in at half super speed still caused three separate alarms to go off. Wayne Manor was a fortress, but he still didn't like that his baby's blood was locked inside there.

***

Lois typed away on her story, wishing the strange looks from her co-workers would just stop. How many of them made a wide berth around her desk, now? Okay, so she had had a loud meltdown at work again. But that was par for the course for her, wasn't it? Sure, usually her diatribes were in defense of Superman (and the latest breakdown had been about Clark). A nightmare about Clark as far as anyone but them knew.

She put a hand to her head. What was wrong with her? When was she going to be herself again? She needed to focus her energies so her life from the other dimension didn't ruin her life in this one.

Lois glanced over to Clark's desk. He had run out, loosening his tie, about ten minutes before. She hoped he would be back soon.

It had worried her when she started spouting off about how the other Clark and Ultra Woman treated her, but she couldn't stop. Did her husband think she was being jealous of the other Clark's attentions to his new girlfriend? There had been some of that, but if her Clark had caught a whiff of it, he had been kind enough to let it pass. She sighed, thinking again how she was the luckiest woman in the world.

Perry walked out of his office with another man. "Oh, Lois. Where's Clark? I wanted the two of you to meet…"

Lois turned around. "Mr. McTinney!" She gasped, her head spinning. *No! Not the man who had become Editor-in-Chief of the* Daily Planet *in the other dimension.*

The man grinned, flattered at her knowing his name, and stretched out his hand. "You can call me Gareth."

"Lois is one of our best investigative reporters."

"She needs no introduction, Mr. White."

Lois smiled politely, shaking his hand. *Hold your tongue, Lois*, she told herself. *Don't jump to conclusions.*

"Lois, can you give Gareth a tour of the newsroom? I've got to return a call upstairs," Perry said, disappearing back into his office.

She stared after Perry. Was it just her or was his exit a bit abrupt? Shaking her head, Lois returned her focus to Gareth. "What brings you to Metropolis, Gareth?"

"A job." He grinned.

Lois glanced back at Perry in his office. *Please, don't let it be the editor's job.* She just couldn't survive a shake-up at the office like that. Not now. Perry knew her like the back of his hand; he would forgive her odd behavior. She came back to herself with a jerk. *Right, give Gareth a tour.* She wandered around the bullpen pointing out the different departments and making introductions. They made it back to the coffee station. Still no Clark.

"*No!*" She heard Perry shouting on the phone. "*That isn't reporting. That's slander and gossip and that's not what the* Daily Planet *is about.*"

"Sounds like Mr. White is butting heads with the Multiworld execs," commented Gareth. "He should be careful if he doesn't want to lose his job."

The fragile string holding Lois's control in check started to unravel. "What do you mean? What have you heard?"

"Nothing," he replied, a little too casually.

"Oh my God! It *is* true." She turned on Gareth, her string completely broken. "You came here to take Perry's job. Did Multiworld hire you as Senior Managing Editor of the *Daily Planet*? Are you just getting the lay of the land before unpacking your boxes? Moving the wife and kids over?"

Gareth held up his hand. "No! I didn't, I swear, Lois. Perry hired me as Foreign Correspondent."

"Yeah, right. Like you wouldn't jump at the chance to give up the war zone and settle down in a nice cushy office job, be home while your kids are young," she snapped. "I, for one, know you wouldn't leave your wife to go gallivanting around the world. You would do anything for her."

He paled, taking a step away, staring at her like she was nuts. "Who *are* you?" he murmured.

Damn! She had said too much. "Lois Lane?"

"Well, Lois Lane, my wife is dead."

Oh, no! An uncontrolled tear escaped from her eye. "Oh, God! Gareth. I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I swear, I didn't. I wouldn't have said… you must think I'm the worst person. The kids must be crushed. You must be…"

His glare hardened. "What kids?"

Lois gulped, stammering, "Missy Penny, Austin, and little baby Martin."

"And they would be?"

"Your children."

Gareth took another step back away from her. "My wife died in a car wreck a month after we were married. I don't have any kids."

Lois stood there frozen in shock. "But… but… they were your life. Your love and devotion to them was the quality I admired most about you. It reminded me of Clark." She reached out to pat his arm, but he took another step back. With a nod of understanding, she turned back towards her desk. "I'm sorry to hear about Teresa. I liked her."

"*Who?*"

Lois stopped and glanced over her shoulder at him. "Teresa. Your wife." She walked back to her desk.

Gareth followed her. "My wife's name was Anne."

Lois sat down in her chair. "I'm sorry about Anne, then." She buried her face in her hands.

What had she done? Maybe Dr. Friskin was right. Maybe she did need to be institutionalized, where she could not hurt anyone anymore.

"Tell me about Teresa."

Lois glanced up. Gareth was sitting in the chair next to her desk. She tried to brush him off. "I was mistaken. I'm sorry, Gareth. I shouldn't have said anything."

His look was almost pleading. "Please."

Lois glanced around. The crowd from her outburst had dissipated. She lowered her voice. "You can't tell anyone I told you this."

Gareth nodded eagerly.

She closed her eyes for a moment and searched her memory. Lois knew she shouldn't do this, but she felt she owed him something after treating him so cruelly.

Opening her eyes, she gazed at him with a sigh. "Mind you, I only met her the one time. She came into the office to drag you off to lunch. You were on the phone and we got to talking. She had baby Martin with her; the older kids were at home with the au pair you had brought with you from London. Teresa was still nursing, so Martin went everywhere with her."

Gareth's eyes widened as she started talking, but he did not interrupt.

"He must have been about two, three months old at the time. He had your eyes and his mama's red hair."

He swallowed. "Red hair?"

Lois nodded and continued. "She let me hold him, while she searched her purse for something. He was the first baby I could remember holding. I know I should have been practicing, what with Lara coming and all, but…" She shrugged.

"Lara?"

Lois picked up the photo from her desk of her, Clark and Lara. "My daughter."

"Oh." Gareth suddenly looked older and sadder. "Then it wasn't the future you saw?"

She shook her head, setting down the photo. "I'm sorry, Gareth."

The Englishman looked dejected, like she had killed his hope. "Then what? How?"

Lois patted his hand. "Another life, perhaps. I can't explain." She shouldn't have told him that much.

"Tell me more about her."

"She designed jewelry. Earrings, necklaces, bracelets. Simple, folksy, Earth mother stuff. She used to sell it at Saturday markets and such. She tried to get me to buy some." Lois laughed softly with a shake of her head. "It wasn't my style."

"And this woman, Teresa, was my life?" Gareth asked, engrossed in Lois's tale.

Lois nodded. "You acted differently around her. Normally, you were gruff and bossy, a no-nonsense guy, serious about the news, but when I saw you look at her…" She smiled wistfully. "You turned to mush. You loved her, absolutely, completely." The smile fell off her face. "Oh, my God. Why didn't I see it before? That's how you knew! You saw me with Martin. Idiot! Idiot!" She berated herself.

"Excuse me?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." That was how the alternate him knew she was pregnant.

"How did we meet, Teresa and I?"

Lois thought about this. "You never told me, but I think you went out with Clark and James for drinks or something one night."

"James?" he inquired.

"The owner of the paper." She waved off that information as unimportant. "I think you told them that you and Teresa met at a James Bond movie marathon. You talked all night with her."

"Wait. Red hair? Earth mother type? James Bond fanatic? About your height?" He jumped up, pulling her into a hug. "Are you sure her name was Teresa?"

Lois nodded, unsure what had happened.

He picked her up and spun her around. "You're amazing, Lois Lane!"

"I'm Clark Kent. Lois's husband," Clark said, suddenly at their side. "Have we met?"

Gareth shook his hand. "Not in this lifetime, Clark. I'm Gareth McTinney." He turned back to Lois. "And I love your wife! I met her two weeks ago, Lois. We talked all night and I never got her name. Have you ever met someone and known, just known from the first moment that they were the one for you?"

Lois smiled sheepishly at Clark.

Clark draped his arm over her shoulders, protectively. "Yes, I do."

"Oh, God!" Gareth grabbed his head. "This is too much. I'm supposed to be in Berkistan in two days. Tell Perry I had to go back to London." He turned to Clark. "I don't know if she's psychic or what, but hold on to her. I see why she's the best damn reporter around. Amazing! Simply amazing." Gareth ran out of the bullpen.

Lois bubbled with laughter and went to sit back down, but Clark was still holding onto her.

"Lois. What did I miss?" he asked hesitantly.

She was sure her husband wouldn't want to know, but she was trying this new tactic with Clark, compete honesty. "I had another meltdown," Lois replied casually, kissing his cheek. "I almost had to cry for super help, I stuck my foot so far in my mouth, but…" She shrugged. "I didn't. Who knew Gareth McTinney was just another lost soul looking for his mate?"

"Lo-is."

She batted her eyelashes innocently. "Yes, Clark?"

"Who was that guy and why does he think you're psychic?"

Lois pressed her lips together with a sigh, then gave her husband a quick rundown on what happened.

"Lois. You can't tell people about where you were," Clark warned her.

She looked down, chagrined. "I know. I just felt bad for accusing him of abandoning his non-existent wife and kids. I always wondered how he — out of everyone at the *Daily Planet* — he figured out I was…" She made an arch over her belly. "I mean, hello! I was out to here and no one else saw it but him." Then she tilted her head. "And James. No. I told James about the baby, but he figured out I was Clark's date at the costume party."

"What?" Clark pulled her into an embrace. "Lois, this isn't the place to discuss this."

She sighed. "I know. I'm just so sick of hiding. I hid for almost a year there and I'm still hiding now. I just wanted something positive to come from my year abroad."

"Something did. Her name is Lara." Clark kissed her nose. "Now you know how I feel each and every day of my life. About how hard it was not to tell you. This thing with Gareth could have ended completely differently."

"I know, Clark. I'll be more careful. I promise," Lois whispered, resting her head on Clark's chest, still enthralled that this wonderful man loved her above everyone else.

***

Perry came out of his office in a fury. Now Mindy Church wanted Barry to rewrite the Superman hostage story to focus more on the damage Superman had caused to area businesses rather than his rescue of the illegal Berkistan refugees.

That woman was still hopping mad that Clark had come up with a viable excuse for his testosterone levels. She had wanted to blackmail the poor lad into doing her bidding. Clark was made of sterner stuff than that. Much sterner stuff, Perry was beginning to suspect. Should he warn Lois and Clark what Mindy Church was up to?

Perry shook his head. The last thing their rocky marriage needed was Mindy Church. Every time they seemed to be back on the road to Graceland, Lois would have another one of her meltdowns. During the last one, according to office gossip, she accused Gareth McTinney of trying to take his Senior Editor position. Though the man claimed there was no truth to the allegation, he sure had skedaddled back to England fast enough.

Clark and Lois were working through things. Perry just wished they didn't always do it right outside his office door.

Perry turned the corner; Jimmy's desk was covered with soda cans, candy wrappers, and empty snack bags. "Jimmy Olsen!" he shouted. He opened the drawer and then another. It was a train wreck. Papers shoved inside, a filing nightmare. "Jimmy!"

"Yes, Chief?" said Jimmy, appearing next to him. Then he saw what Perry was yelling about. "I can explain."

"I don't want an explanation, son. I want you to clean out your desk. A disorganized workspace leads to a disorganized mind." He picked up a piece of trash and dumped it into the trash can. "See, not that difficult."

"Yes, Chief."

"If I have to tell you to clean out your desk again, it will be the final time! Am I making myself clear?"

Jimmy nodded, his face pale. "I'll get right on it, sir."

Perry stomped off, feeling bad for yelling at the kid. But that desk was a disgrace.

***

Jimmy sighed, picking up his trash can and dumping the contents of his desktop into it. "Jimmy, if Lois and Clark don't need you, can you help me out logging the nutritional content of these popular food items?" He rolled his eyes. That was the last time he would help the food editor.

After he cleared off the top of his desk, he started on the drawer Perry had pulled open. Okay, true, that was his mess. That was where he dumped stuff he wasn't quite sure where to file. If it stayed there for six months, Jimmy knew the circular file was the place to go. He hadn't gotten to it in the last few months. Time to check the contents. Save. Trash. Trash. Save. Trash.

Lois walked by. "What's got Perry's knickers in a twist?" she asked quietly.

"Don't know. He's been arguing with the men upstairs for days now. I even heard a rumor from my source in janitorial that Mindy Church stopped by the other day."

She knelt down. "Really? Mindy Church was in the newsroom? She hasn't made an official announcement that she's the reason why Multiworld Communications owns the *Daily Planet* now. My guess is that she wants to keep her Luthor heritage a secret. Hmmm."

Jimmy pulled out another pile of papers from his drawer.

Lois grabbed the top one. "What's this?"

It was a computer drawing of a baby's face. "Jimmy? Why are you drawing Lara's face on your computer?"

The junior reporter's jaw dropped. That wasn't Lara, that was… he gulped, seeing the initials written on the back. He guessed all babies looked the same, right? "Surprise." He placed a smile on his face and hoped she believed it was a genuine one. He grabbed the paper back. "Actually, I was testing a new photo sketch program. For doing witness sketches. Just doodling, really."

"Well, it's a good likeness. The eyes are a little off though. And her hair is a lighter shade, too." She patted his shoulder and moved towards the coffee area.

Jimmy turned over the paper she had been looking at. In Ralph's chicken scratch he saw the initials SM & LL. He quickly flipped through the other pictures in the pile. There were at least seven other baby pictures. None of them looked alike. None of them looked anything close to Lara, except the one in his hand. No, it had to be a coincidence that this mock-up of the child of Superman and Lois Lane would come anywhere close to Lois's real baby, right?

He had gotten the program at the beginning of the year. One day, a bunch of them had been playing around and discovered that there was a way to merge two photos and come up with a reasonable facsimile of what those two people's children would look like. It was around the time Lois's and Superman's images were being splashed all over the tabloids.

Jimmy had run to the photo lab with Lois and when he returned to his desk, Ralph had done a mock-up of Superman and Lois Lane. That was when Jimmy had kicked him and the others off his computer and made that program password-protected. He had taken all the baby mock-up pictures and dumped them in that drawer, because he had to process that information for Lois and CK.

Picking up the baby mock-up picture, Jimmy wandered over to Lois's desk, taking another glance at her photo of CK, Lois, and Lara. He swallowed. He glanced between the photo and his mock-up and again at the photo. Yep. It looked like Lara, all right.

"What's up, Jimmy?" CK asked, suddenly behind him.

The younger man jumped into the air, almost dropping the computer mock-up picture.

"Aww, Jimmy. Lara," CK continued, pulling the picture out

of his hands before Jimmy could stop him. “Her nose is a little wider, about here.” Lois’s husband pointed to the picture. “Like mine.” He nodded. “But otherwise, a good sketch. Her hair is lighter, too.” He handed back the paper.

Jimmy swallowed. “Thanks.” Lara’s nose was a little wider — like *his* nose? Jimmy stared at CK. Really stared at him. “CK, do you think I could…?” He shook his head. “Never mind.”

Running back to his desk, he opened another drawer filled with photos. He flipped through the pile until he found two. One of CK and one of Lois. He flipped them over to his scanner and ran them through his program. If the mock-up of CK and Lois looked like Lara, too, then he could stop being so paranoid that the kiss between Superman and Lois Lane had led to more than a kiss.

A half hour later, Jimmy stood at the printer holding up the mock-up picture he had just printed out. It couldn’t be right. It didn’t make sense. How could it be identical? If that was right, then… his eyes opened wide as his jaw fell open. Slowly, he walked back to his computer. He pulled up the scanned photo of CK and put it next to a stock photo of Superman. He shook his head. It wasn’t possible. Not CK.

The photographer stared at the pictures longer. Hesitantly, his hand found his mouse and he moved the glasses from CK’s photo over to the photo of Superman. He swallowed and cleared his screen, closing out the program. He picked up both the mock-up picture that Ralph had done and the one he had done and walked them over to the shredder, sending them through.

***

Lois blinked her eyes. The light from the window told her it was morning. Had Clark let her sleep in? She could feel his warmth next to her. He was still there. She felt the mattress descend slightly and then return. She heard Lara giggle with delight.

“Bounce… bounce… bounce,” Clark repeated softly.

Lois smiled. They were playing. She wanted to watch, but she didn’t want him to stop because she was awake, so she continued to feign sleep.

Clark set Lara on his knees. “So, little one. Thursday is Mommy’s birthday. What should we do to celebrate?” They were silent for a minute.

“A birthday? Oh. Every year, we celebrate the day when a person is born, usually with cake, ice cream, presents, and a party. Your birthday is Valentine’s Day, February 14th. Mommy’s birthday is this week. What should we do?”

Lois smiled. She enjoyed eavesdropping on their conversation. She only wished she could know what Lara responses were.

“Maybe we should just ask Mommy.”

Suddenly, a little body was crawling on top of her and Lois laughed. “Caught me?”

“You can’t fool me,” Clark said, cuddling up behind her as Lara started playing with her nose.

“Good morning, Lara,” Lois said, trying to kiss her daughter’s hand, but Lara always kept pulling it away with a giggle. “Such her father’s daughter.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much.” Clark reached out and over her to catch Lara as she leaned a little too far back. He lifted her up with the one hand and set her back on his chest, where she proceeded to hit his pecs like bongo drums. “So, what do you want to do for your birthday?”

Lois snuggled up with him. “This is nice.”

Clark kissed her forehead. “What did we do last year? For the life of me I can’t remember.”

“You broke me out of jail and we stayed the night in that godawful motel with the leaky roof,” she replied, sneaking her fingers up and tickling Lara’s tummy.

“No! *That* was your birthday? Oh, Lois. I’m sorry.” He looked crushed and ashamed.

“I’m not. I got to spend the night with you. What more could I ask for?” She kissed his cheek.

“Jeez, Lois. I didn’t even get you a gift.” He shook his head. “This year I’ll make up for it, I promise! Anything you want, just name it. We’ll go anywhere you want, eat anything you want, do whatever you want.”

“It’s okay, really, Clark. I had a good time on my birthday. Clark gave me a gift from you, so don’t beat yourself up.” As soon as she said the words she wished she could retract them.

Her husband sat up, catching Lara as she fell off his chest. “*He* gave you a gift from me?”

Lois swallowed. “Yeah.” She didn’t want to elaborate, but knew her husband would want her to.

“Can I ask you what it was?” His voice almost sounded terse. She didn’t know if he was angry at himself that he had forgotten her birthday or that he was shown up by the other Clark or both.

“A ring,” she whispered, taking Lara out of his lap and setting her daughter on hers.

“*He* gave you a ring?”

“A wedding ring.” She closed her eyes and waited for the explosion.

“*He* gave you a wedding ring?” He was out of bed, pulling on his robe. “Please, don’t tell me it was in Las Vegas.”

“Clark.” She looked at him, pleading. “Sit down.”

Clark paced quickly back and forth across the room. “I can’t.” He growled.

She patted the bed, but he ignored her. “I was upset about the guilty verdict. I refused to get out of bed. Refused to eat. Angry that you had to break me out of jail, that they were calling me ‘Mad Dog Lane’ on the radio, that I might be ruining Superman’s image, that I was going to disappear and die if they imposed a death penalty on me, and you would never know that you were going to be a father. He dragged my butt out of bed, made me get dressed and took me out to dinner. He said that since my secret identity was that of Kal-El’s wife, I should have a wedding ring to wear, to represent your love for me. He told me over and over that I was to think of the ring as coming from you, not him.”

Clark sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand into his. “Where is the ring now?”

“I gave it back to him.”

He raised a brow.

“Because it was his mother’s wedding ring and it wasn’t mine to keep,” she whispered.

Clark stared at her. “His mother’s wedding ring?”

She nodded.

“You wore *his* mother’s wedding ring?”

“Yes.”

Her husband stood up and started pacing again. “You were wearing this ring when you came to visit my dreams?”

Lois nodded.

“You were wearing this ring when you came to see my parents last Christmas?”

She nodded again.

“When did you give it back to him?” Clark asked, his eyes squeezed shut as if he didn’t want to know the answer.

“The night Ultra Woman and Mr. Wells brought Lara here.”

He stared at her. “Did you kiss him?”

“Yes.”

Clark’s shoulders fell. His voice was weak when he murmured, “Did you two…” He cleared his throat.

“No! Absolutely not, Clark. I told you, it was only the one time.”

Clark shrugged. “It could have happened. I mean, Ultra Woman was over here. She and I would never have found out.”

Lois hugged Lara to her chest, glaring at him.

“Did he want to?” Clark rolled his eyes. “Of course *he*

wanted to. Did you?"

She continued to glare at him, but did not reply.

Her husband threw up his hands and left the room.

"No," she whispered, a tear dripping down her cheek. "I only wanted to make love to you."

Clark was next to her again, holding her in his arms. "Really?"

"I love him, Clark, but I'm *in love* with you."

Grinning, he took Lara from her, tossed her into the air, kissed his wife and then caught their daughter again.

"You're insane, Clark Kent." She shook her head.

Lara giggled, raising her arms as if she wanted Daddy to toss her into the air again.

Clark snuggled up against his wife, bouncing Lara on his knee again. "So, what do you want to do for your birthday this year?"

Lois sighed. "If it's okay with your folks, can we spend the weekend in Smallville?"

She didn't think it was possible for his smile to get any larger. "I love you, Wife."

"And I love you, Husband." She ran her fingers over his jaw and gently placed a kiss on his lips. "Only you. My one and only husband."

***

Clark spent all week trying to figure out the perfect birthday gift for his wife. He had to make up for blowing it the previous year. And it had to be better than the other Clark's gift of his mom's wedding ring. Lois tried to tell him once what the other Clark had gotten the other Lois for Christmas last year, but he hadn't wanted to listen. Argh. That man must be the best gift giver ever.

He ground his teeth together. How he hated competing against that man for Lois's affections. Clark knew that wasn't what he was doing. He had Lois's love. She told him so. Over and over and over again. Even if it was just one percent of her heart that the other Clark claimed, it was still too much. *Damn it!* It felt like he was competing for his wife's love. If only he hadn't messed up so badly last year.

Clark called his mom for advice, under the guise of telling her they were coming out that weekend. "Mom, what can I get the most perfect woman in the world for her birthday, when I screwed up and forgot her birthday last year?"

"Humility."

"Very funny, Mom," he groaned.

"Lois is not perfect, Clark. She's human. All she wants is your love. Give her that and she'll be happy."

Thank you, Mom, for the non-specific extremely vague advice. "She's mad at me," he admitted.

"Uh-oh. What did you do now?" his mom asked. Why was it always his fault when Lois was mad?

"That's the thing, Mom. I don't know." Clark shook his head. "I don't know."

It all started after their conversation about Lois's birthday from the previous year. He thought that they had forgiven each other and moved on. Apparently not.

When they had gone to bed that night, Lois kissed him good night, turned her back to him and went to sleep. He didn't think that much of it at first. Maybe she was tired. They had spent all day at the park. Maybe she ate too much, although he didn't think she finished her plate of pasta. Maybe she was coming down with something.

Lois had acted the same as she always did at work the next day. She wasn't coughing or sneezing. Actually she hadn't been sick since returning from the other dimension.

But then Monday night, the same thing — a quick kiss good night, then directly to sleep. No cuddling. No snuggling. No…

"Clark, have you talked to Lois? Asked her why she's mad?"

"Mom, I can't ask Lois why she's mad. That will only make her angrier," he explained.

"Oh, I see, Clark. She wants you to guess, then?"

Just like his mom to cut straight through his arguments. "Okay. I'll talk to her."

Perry had approved them to take a four day weekend. Actually, he seemed thrilled whenever they asked to use vacation days. No, not thrilled; shocked. He would look at Clark like he was some kind of miracle worker and then approve the time off, even at short notice.

At work on Tuesday, Perry announced that Multiworld Communications (it made Perry cringe to say the name) was holding a blood drive. Participation was actively encouraged. Lois glanced at Clark. They both wondered if there was ulterior motivation for the "active encouragement."

"CK, you still scared of needles?" Jimmy asked curiously. This had been Clark's excuse for not donating blood in the past.

"Not scared, Jimmy," Clark corrected. "I have a problem with them though." Like they broke when people tried to use them on him.

Jimmy nodded. "Right. A problem." He nodded again, obviously not believing his co-worker. "Lois, what time do you want?"

"I'm not donating blood," she told him.

"Why not?" Clark asked, intrigued. Lois was usually one of the first to volunteer for the blood drive. She had told him once that because Superman couldn't donate blood, she would donate for the two of them. Was she angry at Superman?

"I can't," Lois simply stated.

"Let me suck your blood," Jimmy joked with his best vampire impersonation. "If we can't have CK's, we must take yours."

Lois glared at their friend with an expression that read 'discussion closed.' "No."

"What's the matter? You sick, honey?" Perry asked, sitting on the edge of her desk and reaching out to her forehead. "Flying and colds don't go well together, you know."

Lois was starting to look annoyed by the time Clark stepped in to defend her position. "Hey, if she doesn't want to donate blood this year, she doesn't have to. Does she? It's not mandatory under the new management, is it?"

"No. No, of course not, Clark." Perry held up his hands. "Sorry, Lois. Maybe next year," he said and then turned to Jimmy. "Find your next victim, Dracula."

Jimmy stared at Lois for a moment, then with a shake of his head, started to follow the next person to walk by. "Barry, what time can I suck your blood?"

"Buzz off, Olsen," retorted Barry.

Lois watched Jimmy depart with a shiver and a shake of her head. "That's just creepy."

Clark took Perry's spot against her desk. "Are you feeling okay?"

She swatted him away with a folder. "Never better."

"Is it because Multiworld Communications is hosting the blood drive?"

"Partially." She was avoiding eye contact.

"Lois." Clark lowered his voice. "Or are you angry at Superman?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not everything is about *you*, Clark, or him."

"Lois?"

She stopped moving papers around on her desk and said, "I have an *Ultra* good reason. Let's just leave it at that, okay?"

Clark took her elbow. "We need to talk."

Lois sighed and set down her papers, following him into the conference room. He shut the door.

"Now, tell me. What's the reason?"

"I told you."

Clark raised a skeptical eyebrow at her.

"Right. Complete honesty." His wife took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eyes. "I have Ultra Woman's blood running through my veins."

"What?" Clark chuckled. "From two years ago? Lois, you've donated blood since then."

Lois bit her lip. "Not since giving birth to Lara, I haven't."

"Oh." He hugged her. "Do you think it changed your genetic makeup? Of course it did." He hit his forehead. "That's why you have super hearing." He couldn't believe he hadn't put two and two together sooner. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Lois." He didn't realize becoming pregnant would change her so drastically.

His wife stared at him for a moment and then smiled, releasing a breath. "Don't be. I'm not. My hearing is a little better than it used to be. I'm also a little more resilient. I heal faster, too. Not as fast as Lara or while I was pregnant, but…"

Clark smiled with merriment, pulling her in for a kiss. "Invulnerability is the only super ability I could ever want for you… but I'll take super healing over regular healing any day of the week." He kissed her again.

"Well, I'm also a little stronger and a little faster and I have the best metabolism of my life."

"That explains why you never pass up desserts now and yet you still look so delicious." Clark kissed her again.

"Down, boy," Lois teased. "And why it took me over two months to gain enough weight to come home. For a while there, Clark, I ate chocolate bars six times a day. I didn't want to see another Double Fudge Crunch bar for over a week after I returned home. Ugh. I still can't look at them like I used to."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked softly.

Lois sighed. "I thought it was temporary. I didn't know how long it would last. I still don't. I could wake up tomorrow and be just plain old Lois again."

These sounded like excuses to him, but Clark didn't care. She was more resilient in just the way he wanted her to be. He picked her up and spun her around. "This is great news, honey. You don't know how happy I am to hear this." He kissed her again.

"Clark. Clark. Clark!" Lois pushed out of his arms. "Stop it. People are going to think I'm pregnant." She bubbled with laughter, resting her hands on his chest.

"So, you aren't mad at me?" He grinned sheepishly.

The smile was wiped from her face. "No." She pushed past him and went back to her desk.

Right. Like she wasn't mad at him for hiding he was Superman from her, either. Clark followed her. "Lois?"

"Okay. I'm a little peeved about something. But it's probably nothing. I'm reading too much into it, I'm sure. But still I can't stop thinking about it. And it just grates on my nerves."

"What?"

"Just something you said the other day when we were discussing my birthday," Lois replied, a bit tersely. "I'm sure it was an innocent remark, possibly even meant as a compliment. And yet…"

Clark waited, reviewing their whole conversation word for word. What had he said that would annoy her? He hadn't a clue, except for the part that he accused her of lying to him again. But that wasn't complimentary.

"You know what, Clark? I am mad." She pointed at him, poking his chest. "I hate that you just assume things about people without any basis in fact and that makes me furious."

Okay, they were getting someplace, only he had no idea where. When had he ever prejudged someone?

"I hate that you might have been wrong, but also that you might be right. And if you were right, what does that mean about you? Can I even trust *you* anymore? And the thought that I can't trust you, that I have to watch you around other women makes me so mad I could scream. I have never — almost never — doubted your feelings towards me, but all this changes that."

"What did I say?" Clark stammered. It must have been bad. How come he was blocking it from his memory?

Lois ran her tongue over her teeth with annoyance. "You said and I'm quoting here, '*of course **he** wanted to'*."

Clark felt pleased. "That's it? That's what made you so mad?" He laughed softly to himself. "You are mad at me because I assumed another man wanted to make love to my wife?" His chuckles turned to outright laughter. "You are mad at me because I love you so much, that I cannot fathom another man not wanting you in that way?"

Lois was not laughing. She put her hands on her hips as she glared at him. "No. Just *that* man."

"Just *that* man in particular?" he asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

His wife nodded. "Because if *that* man would consider cheating on the woman he loves more than any other soul in all dimensions combined, what does that say about *you*?" Lois crossed her arms, glaring at him.

"Oh." Clark swallowed, the laughter gone. He hadn't thought about it in quite that manner before. The other Clark wouldn't cheat on the other Lois any more than he would cheat on his wife. "But he kissed you."

"And you kissed her," Lois explained, flipping up her hands.

"She kissed me," Clark clarified with a raised index finger.

"Uh-huh, is that so?" Lois tilted her head and gazed at him skeptically. "No possible way for you to have escaped from her kissing you, was there?"

Clark swallowed; she had him pinned against the proverbial wall. "I'm sorry, Lois. It will never happen again."

"Damn straight it won't. You are my husband and no two-bit trollop is going to fool you into kissing her again because…"

Clark pressed his lips together to stop himself from smiling. It didn't work. Did Lois just call her other self… the other Lois, a two-bit trollop? "Because there is only one woman in the whole universe for me," he finished. Pulling Lois to him, he kissed her. Then he whispered, "And she has a scar on her right shoulder."

Lois simply smiled. "That's right." She sat back down in her seat and swatted his butt with her folders. "And don't you forget it."

Clark headed back to his desk. Lois didn't trust Ultra Woman at all. He sat down in his chair and started going through papers when the reason struck him. If his wife was fated to cheat on him with the other Clark, the only thing stopping the other Lois from being tempted to cheat on her boyfriend with Clark was himself.

***

Wednesday morning when Lois arrived at work, she found a small wrapped gift sitting on her desk with a pink rose lying on top. She hesitated before picking up the rose. Didn't Junior previously leave her roses? Junior was dead. It wasn't from him. She picked up the rose, smelled it, before opening the card on the gift. *To: LL, From SM*.

Lois felt happy and surprised he had signed the card that way. He hadn't signed a card like that since before she knew. Maybe he was trying to make up for missing her birthday last year by giving her an extra gift. Last night had been nice. Very, very nice. Her smile grew into a grin. Spectacularly, exquisitely nice. She slipped the ribbon off the box and opened it.

Inside was a beautiful red crystal heart pendant at the end of a long gold chain. Not really her style, true, but still very nice. She lifted it up and slipped it over her neck. The chain was so long that the pendant slipped into her shirt. Perhaps her husband wanted her to wear this heart next to her heart. That was a lovely thought, so she would always have him close to her heart.

Clark wandered in a few minutes later. He had been sneaking out early every day this week. Still trying for that perfect birthday

gift. She would tell him the heart was enough. He was enough. She grabbed his elbow as he passed and pulled him in for a kiss. "Thank you, handsome."

"There's more where that came from," her husband replied with a casual smile. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head. Wrapping his arms around her, Clark pulled her in for an even more intense kiss.

Lois laughed. "I meant…" She held up the rose.

"Where did you get that?" He looked at her, accusation in his eyes.

"On my desk this morning. It's not from you?"

"No! It's not from me. Maybe your boyfriend sent it." Clark sneered and stomped off.

Whoa, that was harsh. She didn't have a… *Oh, crap*. The blood drained from her face. The other Clark wouldn't do that to her. Wouldn't put her in that position, would he? She felt sick to her stomach.

Pulling the little white box out of the trash, she slipped off the necklace and threw it back into the box, dropping it into her top desk drawer. She would get rid of it later.

***

Jimmy wandered up to Clark's desk, staring at Lois.

"Hi, Jimmy. Do you need something?" Clark asked. He had seen Jimmy staring at Lois a lot lately. He hoped the kid wasn't getting crazy ideas into his head about his wife's mental stability.

His friend shook his head quickly, as though shaking a thought from his head rather than answering his questions. "CK, do you know who Psyche is?"

That was a strange question, but then again, Clark was known for his knowledge of obscure and/or historical facts. "Psyche was a human back in the Greek pantheon, married unknowingly to Cupid, who had forbidden her to look upon him. Her sisters told her he must be a 'horrible monster', so Psyche snuck a peek at him by oil lamp, discovering his true identity, and accidentally spilling some hot oil on him awoke him. But since he was a god and she was human, they weren't technically supposed to be married. Also, by discovering his secret identity in this way — by disobeying her husband's wishes — she lost him. Psyche then went to Aphrodite to beg for her husband back, but Aphrodite — Cupid's mother — refused to grant her wish until Psyche completed some Herculean tasks and also some pleading on Cupid's part. At which point Psyche was made immortal and they were allowed to live happily ever after. Their story is commonly thought to be the basis for the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale."

Jimmy pulled his eyes off Lois and focused on Clark. "Cupid? Of course, Cupid. Who else?" He rolled his eyes. "Just like her," he mumbled. "Thanks, CK." He patted Clark on the shoulder and wandered back to his desk.

Clark watched his friend, wondering what that had been all about. He was tempted to go ask him, but then he heard an alarm go off. He loosened his tie and jogged to Lois's desk. "Cover for me?"

She smiled at him as she reached into her desk drawer to pull out a pair of scissors. "Always."

Clark kissed his wife's cheek and jogged out of the room. Then he jogged back, picked her up into his arms and gave her a full-on, intense pre-honeymoon kiss with a sly grin, before setting her back down and disappearing from the room. Wow, there was something simply irresistible about Lois today.

Clark could still hear her heart racing as he dove out the window, a satisfied grin on his face.

***

Jimmy watched as CK got a deep expression on his face and then left the office, towards the storeroom. Then he watched him return. Wow, CK, that was quite a kiss for your wife, he thought with a shake of his head. CK had done the same thing the day before, too. Well, without the kiss. And twice the day before that. CK had always been known for his disappearing acts.

Jimmy walked up to Lois. "Where's CK? He was here just a minute ago."

Lois glanced at him with a smile. "He told me he's meeting with a source." Then she leaned over to him. "But between you and me, I think he snuck out to find me a birthday present." She smiled and returned to typing up her notes.

Okay, that was possible too. CK had asked his advice on her gift that morning. CK had said he felt guilty for missing her birthday the previous year. Jimmy sighed. They all had. Jimmy had suggested a surprise party, but they all knew how horribly that went on CK's birthday. Anyway, CK said they were flying out… flying?

Jimmy shook his head. *No. It wasn't possible. Stop thinking that*, he told himself for the four hundredth time. He thought about the baby mock-ups he had done on his computer. There had to be another explanation. Another explanation of why the computer spit out the same image for a baby made from Superman and Lois Lane pictures as it did for CK and Lois Lane pictures. It didn't make any sense. Anyway, he reminded himself, Lara was adopted. She was left on their doorstep.

Jimmy glanced at Lois again. *Or was she?*

"Was there something else, Jimmy?" Lois asked him.

He shook his head. The elevators dinged and he automatically glanced up. "Henderson."

Lois's head jerked up. "No!" She gasped and then swallowed. "He's not here about Lara. He's not here about Lara." Jimmy could hear her whispering to herself as the Inspector walked up.

"Hi, Lois. Clark around?" Inspector Henderson tried to look pleasant, but the smile fell right off his face. Uh-oh, Lois was right. He had bad news.

Lois shook her head. "He stepped out for a minute. What's up?"

"Can we talk in private, Lois?" Henderson asked her.

She nodded and slowly walked into the conference room. Jimmy watched them as they talked behind the glass walls. First, she was in shock, then the anger came and then the tears. Jimmy backed up to Lois's desk and dialed her home number.

After two rings, Penny answered.

"Hi, Penny."

"Jimmy!" She was plainly shocked to hear from him. They hadn't spoken since she called him that week after she dumped him and asked about Bureau 39. "Is everything okay?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he replied softly. "How's Lara?"

"Fine. Taking her nap. Why?"

"Just checking. Thanks." He went to hang up the phone when Penny called out to him. "What?"

"Why did you call, Jimmy?"

Jimmy watched as Lois called out to CK. He could actually read her lips. She was definitely calling 'Clark'; not loudly enough for Jimmy to hear out by her desk. Surely not loud enough…

"Jimmy!" Penny yelled into his ear.

"Lois just got some bad news. I just wanted to make sure you guys were all right," he replied, having forgotten he was still on the phone.

The young reporter heard a roar of wind and glanced over his shoulder to the big windows over the bullpen, seeing a blur of red and blue. Superman paused long enough to glance inside, then was gone again.

"Bad news?" Penny gasped. "About what?"

Ten seconds later, CK jogged into the newsroom from the stairwell and looked at Jimmy. "Lois?"

Jimmy pointed at the conference room. CK nodded his thanks, then turned toward Lois and Henderson with a sharp wince, before entering.

"Jimmy!" His ex-girlfriend snapped at him again.

"Got to go, Penny. Cupid just got here."

For a moment, Penny didn't say anything. "You know."

"Thanks for telling me," Jimmy added sarcastically.

"I did tell you, Jimmy. You just weren't listening."

He still didn't want to hear how his ex-girlfriend told him so and hung up the phone.

CK was holding Lois, comforting her, while talking to Inspector Henderson. Lois's husband didn't look like his normal cool calm self. He appeared to be angry at Henderson, not shouting but barely restrained.

He was holding his wife, just as CK had after Jimmy had caught her kissing Superman. That was what Penny meant when she said CK knew Lois would do anything for her partner. Like take the blame for kissing her own husband, the superhero.

Jimmy shook his head. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before.

Perry stepped out of his office and over to him. Jimmy was still leaning against Lois's desk and staring at the couple behind the glass walls. "Son, don't you have work to do?"

Jimmy nodded at the conference room. "I'm doing it."

His boss stood next to him and watched. "What's Henderson doing here?" Then he answered his own question before Jimmy could. "Someone came forward about a missing baby."

Jimmy glanced at him. "You think so, Chief?"

"I know so, son." His boss sighed and patted Jimmy on the shoulder. "Back to work. Give them their privacy."

Jimmy nodded, heading back to his desk. As he sat down and looked at his screen saver of the *Daily Planet* globe rolling across his screen, he wondered how Lois and CK couldn't be Lara's natural parents when his mock-up clearly showed they were. Then he wondered how they could be her parents when Lois certainly hadn't been pregnant in the past year. With Lois and CK anything was possible. The clone who stole their wedding proved that. Lex Luthor coming back from the dead… and so did CK, as a matter of fact. Of course, since he was the Man of Steel, he had never died in the first place.

***

Earlier that morning…

Superman landed next to the man with the glass cutters, standing in the middle of the Metropolis Art Museum, trying to access a glass case containing an ancient vase. Superman crossed his arms and watched the man work.

Did Lois have a new perfume? He couldn't get the thought of her scent out of his mind. And her body… whoa, why hadn't he noticed how that suit clung to the curves of her body before?

Right, criminal needing to be stopped. Superman cleared his throat, getting the thief's attention. "Really? This piece? Mid-morning? Public museum? Security cameras rolling? And you *still* thought this was a good idea?"

"How?" the man stammered, raising his hands.

"Silent alarms are only silent to some." Superman took the glass cutters out of the man's hands. He turned the criminal around and started marching him out of the room. "And a security guard, too. Tsk-tsk." He shook his head. What was it with people these days? Were criminals getting dumber or just more brazen?

The thief then elbowed Superman in the gut and tried to make a run for it. Superman rolled his eyes and stopped him, almost yawning. Well, *that* question answered.

The thief rubbed his elbow. "They weren't kidding about Man of Steel, were they?"

Suddenly, Superman heard Lois calling to him. *Clark, honey. Clark? I need you. Come back. Please.*

"Oh, man. What does she want now?" Superman grumbled, tossing his hands up the air. "I'm working here. *Women!* Does your wife or girlfriend do that to you? Always calling you when you're out on a job?" he asked the thief.

The man's jaw dropped. "I turn off my cell phone," the criminal responded. "Not a good idea to have it on when I'm working."

"I don't have that luxury. Super hearing always on." Superman tapped his head and shoved the robber towards the head of security, who was just showing up to the scene. The hero looked at them with a shake of his head. "Ever hear of a background check?"

Clark! I need you. Please.

Superman rolled his eyes again. "Coming, honey," he called out to the universe. "Got to go." Giving the guards a wave, he flew off, dropping the glass cutter at their feet.

Seconds later he stopped at the large windows overlooking the *Daily Planet*'s bullpen. Superman glanced around, but didn't see Lois at first. Then he realized she was in the conference room with… Henderson. *Oh, no. Not that. Not today.* He zoomed off. Clark Kent jogged into the newsroom ten seconds later.

As Clark entered the room he saw Jimmy leaning against Lois's desk. Actually the young photographer was staring at him.

"Lois?" Clark asked, straightening his tie.

His friend pointed to the conference room.

Clark opened the door. Lois was sitting at the conference table looking like she had just been informed of a death in the family. Head down, tears streaming down her face. She glanced up at his entrance. "Clark!" She rushed to him as fast as he rushed to her.

"Oh, there you are, Kent. I was just telling Lois…" The Inspector swallowed.

"A couple has reported a missing baby and our adoption has been put on hold until they can determine Lara's parentage," Lois finished as she clung to him.

"Now?" he said, turning on Henderson with a growl. "Lara has been with us since May. It's September and this couple is only *now* reporting their baby missing?"

"Clark, I know you are angry but it's standard procedure in cases like this," Henderson explained.

"Who are they?" Clark snapped.

"Clark?" Lois looked up at him, concerned. Oh, so *she* was allowed to be emotional about this, but not him?

Henderson pressed his lips together.

"We have a right to know about the couple who is trying to steal our child," Clark stated.

The Inspector sighed.

"You know we'll find out who they are on our own, if we have to," Clark reminded him.

"They were a couple of the Berkistanian refugees scooped up in the raid the other day by Superman. Apparently, the wife gave birth while they were indentured servants."

"Slaves, you mean," Clark corrected him.

"Yes. The baby was taken by one of the bosses. They were told she would be returned once they had paid off their debts."

"Oh, Clark." Lois buried her head in his chest. "How awful for them."

Clark winced. That was why the couple had never reported the missing baby; they couldn't. "When was their daughter born?"

"Sometime in February by their calculations. They didn't have access to calendars or any other such things, so they weren't quite sure of the exact date."

Clark nodded, sitting down. "Lara is not their missing daughter. But Lois and I will not stop until we find her. I guarantee you of that."

"Yes." Lois agreed with him. "We'll start today. This afternoon. Oh, we were going to leave for your parents tonight for my birthday."

"You'll have to cancel that trip, Lois, Clark. I'm sorry, but

Lara cannot leave Metropolis for the foreseeable future," Henderson told them.

"We aren't criminals," Clark growled. "We're responsible, loving parents and well-respected citizens of this city. Certainly we will be allowed to go on a short weekend trip to my parents."

Henderson shook his head. "I'm sorry, against procedure."

Clark kissed Lois's forehead. "I'll contact Constance. We aren't skipping your birthday again this year."

"You are welcome to go," replied Henderson reluctantly. "But you would have to leave Lara with County Services."

Clark bolted out of his chair, but Lois grabbed him in time. "Clark!"

"We are good parents. We would not go on vacation and leave our daughter with County Services. She is *our* daughter, not anyone else's. She was well-fed, well-cared for, and loved when she was left at our house. She didn't have any scars or bruises or any other examples of neglect or abuse. Nor does she now. She is *not* their missing daughter."

Henderson held up his hands. "I'm just the messenger. I'm sorry." He walked to the door. "We'll be in contact about when to bring Lara in for her blood test."

"What?" Lois gasped, gazing at Clark. "No!"

"Blood test?" Clark swallowed.

"Yes. The couple obviously has no photos of their daughter or any footprints or handprints. All they have is a small section of her umbilical cord to use for blood comparisons."

"No, absolutely not. That's out of the question," replied Clark. "You aren't drawing my daughter's blood."

"Clark, it's standard procedure in cases like this. Don't you want to make sure Lara isn't this couple's child?"

"She isn't," Clark stated matter-of-factly, holding on tightly to Lois's hand. "She's our child."

Lois nodded in agreement.

Henderson shook his head in pity before leaving the room. There was nothing more he could say.

***

Lois held Lara. She had been holding her since they came home at lunch. She did not want to let her go. She didn't even touch the sandwich Clark made for her. He had hardly touched his either.

They had gambled on their daughter's secret identity and lost. Lois knew there were only three options left. 1) Give up her daughter without the blood test. 2) Give up her daughter's blood and expose her as Superman's daughter. 3) Run away. Or in their case, fly away… far, far away. None of those options seemed like viable solutions to her and she hoped Clark would have more ideas once he returned from visiting with Constance Hunter, their lawyer.

The phone rang once. Twice. Lois sighed, picking up the cordless extension next to her.

"Lois Lane?"

"Yes," Lois replied warily.

"Windy Wing, *National Whisper.*"

Lois sighed. And so it begun. "I bet you can't say that five times fast," she mumbled.

"Excuse me?" the woman asked.

"No comment," responded Lois.

"Come on, Lane. Professional courtesy here."

Lois groaned, not really wishing to debate Windy Wing's professional capacity as a tabloid reporter.

"At least wait until I've asked my question before you 'No Comment' me. Please," Windy requested.

Oh, *that* professional courtesy. "Shoot."

"What did you want from Superman today?"

Superman? Windy was calling about Superman? Lois posed that same question to Windy.

"Of course. What, you thought I was calling about you?" Windy started laughing. "Nobody's interested in Lois Lane unless it has to do with Superman, Lane. Didn't you get the memo?"

"Not imbuing professional courtesy, Wing," responded Lois.

"Sorry. What did you want Superman for today?" Windy repeated.

Everything, thought Lois. "Superman?" she asked again. Why was Windy asking about him?

"Yes, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dreamy himself. Looks good in blue."

"I haven't seen Superman today," she replied honestly. Let the tabloids chew on that.

"What?" Windy actually seemed excited.

"We're just friends. I haven't seen him in…" God, when was the last time she saw Clark in the blue suit? "I want to say days. It may have been longer."

"Really? Can I quote you on that?"

Lois had no idea why her not having seen Superman in days would be considered newsworthy, even for a tabloid.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't, but I don't see why not." She sat up. Something didn't feel right. "Windy, what haven't you told me? Is he okay?" Lois could feel her heart slamming against her chest. *Clark?*

"I'd say he is. He's got himself a new girlfriend." Windy laughed.

"What?" Lois snapped. "Superman most certainly does not date."

"I've got three witnesses who distinctly heard him talk about one."

No! "Superman does not talk about his personal life. Ever," Lois sputtered. *Not today. Please, Clark. Not today.*

"He did today. Thanks for the quote, Lane," replied Windy, before hanging up.

"Clark." She snarled. No. She wouldn't call to him. Not about this. She would wait until he got home. Then, she would kill him.

Lois picked up the phone again and dialed.

"James Olsen, *Daily Planet*."

James. That always threw her into another dimension. "Jimmy! Great. Is Barry in?"

"Nope, Lois. Just left for lunch."

"Do me a favor and find out what Superman's been up to today, will you?"

Her friend didn't respond right away. "Why don't you just ask him?"

"Because I don't like to call him unless it's an emergency."

"Oh. He's…why don't you just ask CK? He always seems to know how to get a hold of him."

"Yes. But Clark's not here right now, Jimmy. When he gets back in, I'll definitely ask him. Just get me that info, okay?"

"Anything in particular?" Jimmy asked.

"Windy Wing from the *National Whisper* just called and wanted my comment on something Superman said."

"What did he say?" her researcher wanted to know.

"That's what I want you to find out."

"O-kay," Jimmy said hesitantly. "How can you comment on something if she didn't tell you what he said?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Just get it, Jimmy."

"Yeah, sorry. Right on it. Bye."

Lois hung up the phone with a shake of her head.

She carried the sleeping Lara upstairs to her crib and sat down in the rocking chair. What were they going to do about their daughter? If Clark had said something about his private life as Superman, it could mean only one of two things…

Either between Lara and this craziness he was putting on himself about his wife's birthday, he was stressed. Or… it was the other Clark visiting from the other dimension. Why would the other Clark be visiting her dimension? When she questioned her

husband about this new girlfriend, she would have to go about it in a way where she didn't lose her temper, just in case.

***

Jimmy called back almost an hour later. Clark still hadn't returned. That wasn't a good sign.

"Okay. Get this: when Superman went to Met Art Museum today and caught a guard in the act of stealing an ancient Greek vase, apparently Superman heard someone nagging him."

"Nagging?" repeated Lois. *Oh, no. Not good.*

"That's what this guy said. Superman started moaning how this woman was interrupting his work, as if it were a frequent occurrence," Jimmy told her. "Complained about not being able to turn off the super hearing so he could work in peace."

Lois's heart thunked into her shoes. Nagging? "Jimmy, Superman doesn't complain. Ever." Clark, yes. Superman, no.

"I'm just telling you what this guy said."

"Windy Wing said something about three witnesses."

"Apparently, that part of the conversation was just between the thief and Superman, but when they reached the head of security and the other guards, Superman rolled his eyes and said, 'Coming, honey,' as if responding to someone calling to him," Jimmy told her. "This was heard by the crook and at least two of the security guards."

Lois buried her face in her hand. "Got it. Thanks, Jimmy." She took a deep breath. "What time was this?"

"About ten-thirty this morning."

About the time Inspector Henderson had paid his visit. Definitely her Superman.

"Ah, Lois," Jimmy said, his voice soft. "I'm sorry."

"I don't know what could have gotten into him today. That just doesn't sound like Superman." Or Clark, for that matter. Something was definitely wrong.

Jimmy cleared his throat. "You know, Lois, CK was acting kind of funny today too."

"He was?"

"Yeah, that kiss he gave you seemed a little more…" The researcher coughed. "More intimate than the kisses that he usually gives you at work."

"Oh?" Frankly, she hadn't noticed. Now that she thought back upon that particular kiss — the one before he flew off — it sent her heart racing. She had been distracted for a good five minutes after he left. She lifted up a bill off her desk and fanned herself, just thinking about it. Okay, it had been a bunch more intimate.

"Didn't notice, huh?" Jimmy chuckled.

Lois laughed, blushing. "Maybe a little bit."

"Something bothering him?"

"Just the usual. Me, Lara, the fate of the world," she said with a hint of irony.

"Yeah. I bet it does." Jimmy sighed.

"Jimmy, I'm just joking."

"Right. Of course, you are. I got that. Well, if I hear any more strange news on Superman, I'll pass it on, okay?"

"Please do," she said, hanging up the phone. Where was Clark?

As if he heard the thoughts in her head, her husband flew in the living room window. Without spinning out of his blue suit, Superman rushed over to her, picked her up and pressed a kiss to her lips. "Lois," he moaned.

"Well, hello there, stranger." Lois laughed, running her fingers down the arms of his blue suit. There was just something about Superman that always seemed to turn her on. Always had. Always would.

"Sorry I'm late," Clark explained, walking her up the stairs in his arms. "I stopped to tell my parents what was going on with Lara."

"Clark?"

Her husband kissed down her neck. "Yes, beautiful?"

"You feeling okay?"

Superman grinned naughtily. "More than okay. There is just something about you today, Lois." He kissed her again and when she opened her eyes, they were in their bedroom and she was lying on the bed. Clark lay down on top of her, still in the Superman suit. Suddenly, they spun in mid-air and she was down to her underwear.

"Clark!"

He was still kissing down her neck.

"Stop! Put me down. Now!"

Superman looked like she had struck him across the face but he set her down on the bed. She jumped off and ran into the bathroom to throw up.

"Not quite the response I was hoping for," her husband said when she returned. He looked crushed.

"Nothing personal, Clark, you just made me dizzy." Lois pulled on her robe and continued to wipe her face with a towel. "Not all of us were built to spin like that."

"Sorry." Her hero pulled her into his arms again.

Lois pushed him away. "I need a break first. All right?"

Superman disappeared for a moment and returned with a glass of water.

"Thanks, Clark," she said, taking a sip.

"How about a shower?" Her husband raised his brows anticipating her answer.

Lois sighed. "That does sound nice. After the day we've had today."

Superman zipped into the bathroom and a moment later, she heard the water running.

She laughed as he returned. "Well, thanks again."

As Lois stepped into the shower, she heard him talking to her. "I spoke to Constance. She thinks she might be able to convince the powers that be to let us leave town with Lara for the weekend if Superman promises to fly us there and back. Apparently, he has a good track record for hunting people down." Lois sensed her husband's grin. "Our departure might be delayed twenty-four hours while we await approval. I'm sorry, Lois. I wanted this year to be different."

Lois sighed as the hot water ran down her chest. It was just what she needed. She felt one hundred percent better. Clark always knew just how to pamper her. Suddenly, she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her middle.

"Call me?" he asked innocently.

Lois smiled. Yep, Clark always knew what she needed.

***

Clark relaxed for what felt like the first time all day. Lois leaned against his shoulder, her fingertips dancing around his chest. He sighed, pulling her closer. It was good to have Lois close; he always felt better with her near. His emotions had been bouncing off the wall all day. Finally, he felt like himself again. No, not all day… it had started when she had shown him that rose.

"Lois? Where did you get that rose this morning?"

"Hmmm? Oh, that. I don't know. Someone left it on my desk," his wife murmured, interrupting her humming to answer him. "I thought it was from you."

Was it the rose? Did that rose remind him of the ones that Junior had left on her desk? Was that why he had been so jealous? Why he had snapped at her? "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Lois whispered. Clearly, her thoughts were still focused on the here and now, not earlier that day.

Clark smiled, kissing her forehead. The here and now. Wow. He had just flown in the window, seen her standing by the desk, and known he wanted her, right then. No waiting, no distractions, just Lois. And he had taken her.

He frowned. That wasn't like him — he didn't act like that,

let his animal urges take over. True, he had stopped when she asked him to; he hadn't been completely out of control. Okay, technically, he had paused when she had asked him to stop. But still…

Lois's hand slapped his chest. "Clark! I just had an idea. I thought we were trapped, but if we find this couple's missing child before the authorities ask for the blood test, maybe we could avoid the whole thing."

"Lois. How are we going to find this child?" he asked, knowing full well not to mention the needle in the haystack analogy.

"We're the best investigative reporting team in Metropolis, plus you're Superman. If we can't find that missing baby, nobody can." Lois jumped out of bed and ran into the bathroom. "Let me take a quick shower."

"I'll join you," he said, grinning. "I've got another 'hot lead' for you."

His wife peered out of the bathroom with a laugh. "That's what started this whole thing."

Clark leaned back against the pillows again. No matter how much he thought about work, he had no desire to go back there today. He would much rather spend the rest of the day and night in bed. With Lois. "Sure you don't need any help washing between your shoulder blades?" he called.

"Clark!" He heard her giggle. He loved it when she laughed. She did it so rarely anymore. More and more every day, but still not as much as she used to.

Something about this past year had knocked Lois off her axis and try as he might, he couldn't realign her again. He missed the old Lois, Clark thought, and then instantly felt guilty. She was the old Lois. She was the woman he fell in love with, just not the one he had married. He shook his head. That didn't make sense. Of course, he was married to her… wasn't he?

Let's see, they had taken the Lois from the past and had brought her to the future. He had married that younger Lois and lived with her for almost a year, then they had sent her back into the past, where he had gotten her pregnant. Then pregnant Lois had spent almost a year in the other dimension and came back to him about four months ago. So, yes, technically, they were married. Clark shook his head. No wonder he was confused.

Lois walked out of the bathroom rubbing her hair with a towel. He felt that urge to drag her back to bed. What was it about her today? He felt like he had on their honeymoon. He grinned slyly and patted the side of the bed next to him.

She shook her head with a smile. "We need to find that missing baby, Clark."

He pouted, flying over to her to cover that smile with a kiss. She took the towel off her head and wrapped it around his waist.

"Clark! Enough. My knees already feel like Jello." She slapped his bottom. "Now, go hit the shower. Penny's going to be back from running her errands any minute now."

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him with another kiss. "She came back a half hour ago."

Lois appeared to be mortified. "Really?" She swallowed. "While we?" She sat down on the end of the bed, covering her face with her hands. "What must she think of us?"

"That we're in love and can't keep our hands off each other." As he knelt down beside her and took her hands in his, the perfect birthday gift formed in his brain. A silly grin slipped onto his lips as he kissed her again.

His wife pulled him towards her.

Clark liked where her mind was headed, but he forced himself to stand up. "You're right, Lois. Let me shower and get dressed, then we can get started finding that couple's baby. Priorities," he said, trying to remind himself more than her.

As he returned from the bathroom two minutes later, she was fastening her pants. She glanced over at him and smiled. He smiled back at her. Still the luckiest man in the universe. He spun into his clothes and noticed she was still watching him.

"Clark," she said, pulling on the jacket. "I don't nag, do I?"

"Of course not," he reassured her, putting on his glasses.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Did someone tell you that? Jimmy? Perry?"

"No. Just something I overheard today." She shook her head as if it were nothing.

They went downstairs holding hands and Penny glanced up from the sofa.

"I didn't know if you knew I was back," she said. "I was beginning to wonder if I needed to make more noise."

Clark tugged on his ear. "I knew." But Lois still blushed, glancing away.

"I put your lunch in the kitchen," Penny informed them.

"Lunch! I'm starved," Clark said, darting off to the kitchen.

"What's up with him?" he heard Penny ask Lois.

"I have no idea, but whatever it is… I could get used to it," replied Lois with a snicker of laughter.

Clark beamed. So his wife had liked the afternoon delight. *There were more 'hot leads' where that one came from, honey.*

"He has never so overtly mentioned his Super skills to me before," Penny continued.

Clark paused with the last bite of his sandwich halfway to his mouth. He had done that, hadn't he? What was up with him? He shrugged, popping the sandwich into his mouth. *What's done is done.*

Returning to the living room, he tossed Lois a paper bag. "Your lunch, madam. Shall we fly?"

Lois stared at him, her jaw hanging open.

"I'll drive while you eat," Clark continued, picking up his keys and her briefcase from the desk.

She blinked her eyes and nodded. "Sounds good."

***

Back at the office, Clark stayed with his wife like a leech in swamp water. Lois shook her head. That sounded like something Lucy El would say.

What was up with Clark today? Was all this stress over Lara making him worried that something might happen to her as well? But it didn't feel like his overprotective side. Was it something else?

Lois opened her top desk drawer and reached for the cassettes for her mini-recorder. Her fingers bumped into the white box with the necklace. She opened it up and stared at the heart. It almost seemed to glow within the semi-darkness of her drawer.

Who was it from? Clearly, not from her Superman. But the other Clark? Maybe. He was a more traditional, chocolates and flowers kind of guy, though. True, it was a roomful of chocolates and a truckload of flowers. Would the other Clark come to her dimension just to leave jewelry on her desk? That didn't seem like him. Could their separation be harder on him than she thought it was? But he had Ultra Woman. He didn't need her, right? He made that clear after Lara was born. Lois didn't need this dilemma right now. She was trying so hard to rebuild her life with Clark. And she certainly didn't need her Clark seeing that necklace.

As Lois closed her drawer, a shadow darkened her desk. It was Clark, smiling that sly grin once more. Oh no, super Romeo was back again and before she could stop him, she was in his arms on the receiving end of another intense kiss.

"Clark!" she gasped, trying to catch her breath. "We're at work."

"So," he murmured. "Everyone knows we're married."

Lois pushed on his chest. "Yes, but we don't need to demonstrate the finer details to them."

Her husband chuckled, but she saw the corners of his mouth fold down. *Oh, no*. She hurt his feelings. Then that wicked grin

was back and he slid his hand into hers. “I think we need to get some pencils.”

“Clark, no!” Lois said as he dragged her away from her desk and towards the supply closet.

“No?” he asked, glancing at her forlornly.

“Work, Clark. We need to find that baby. Any luck getting permission to interview that refugee couple?”

Goodness gracious, was he pouting?

Lois chuckled and placed a light kiss on that big extended lip. “I love you, Clark Kent.”

Her man deepened the kiss, then whispered in her ear, “Let’s go home.”

“Clark!” She slapped him on the chest with a giggle, then teased, “You’re acting like you’ve been sprayed with *Revenge*.” *Oh, my God*. *That’s precisely how he’s acting. All emotion, no brain.*

“*Revenge* doesn’t have any effect on me,” he reminded her with a raised brow and pinched lips.

“Exactly. You’re acting as if it did.” She covered her mouth. “And I took advantage of you in this condition.”

Clark grinned mischievously, pulling her against his chest. “Do so again, Lois. Please.” He batted his eyelashes at her. “Pretty please. I’m begging you.” His face went serious, his voice huskier. “I *need* you, Lois.”

Lois swallowed. How was she going to be able to work with a man who was all libido? And she needed him, too. Just not in the same way at the moment. She smiled. *Let’s see if this would work…* She licked her lips. “Clark, I need you to help interview the refugee couple with the missing baby.”

“I know, Lois. But I can’t concentrate on anything but you,” her husband whispered in her ear. Then she heard him take a deep breath and savor it.

“Try. As soon as we get that interview taken care of…” She ran her fingers over his chest. “Then we can go home and make it an early night.”

“Can’t we just…” He motioned his head towards the supply closet.

“Clark.” Lois cleared her throat. “Concentrate, please.”

He started to pout again.

“Clark, work first, then reward.”

Her husband grinned, pressed a fast — Superman fast — kiss on her lips and then was back at his desk and on the phone seven seconds later. *Okay, Clark. That was too fast. Not good*.

“Wow, Lois. CK still acting up? Did you ask him about…”

Crap. She had forgotten about Windy Wing and the *National Whisper*. Lois grabbed Jimmy’s arm and dragged him into Perry’s office.

“What in the Sam Hill?” Perry said as Lois shut the door and glanced back at Clark. She knew it wouldn’t block the sound from Superman’s ears but she needed back-up.

“Clark’s been dosed with *Revenge*,” she explained in a rush.

“Oh, come on, Lois. *Revenge*, again?” Perry laughed. “You’re being paranoid.”

She rolled her eyes at Perry and then waved at her husband. Clark sighed and waved back, with a big silly grin on his face.

Perry watched this exchange. “I thought you got rid of all those samples at home.”

“I don’t know where he got sprayed. I don’t even know if it is *Revenge* or something else,” she told him honestly. “But I’ve never seen him act like this before.”

Perry turned around and pulled out a CD. “Time to play some Elvis, then.”

“No!” Lois gasped, shaking her head adamantly. “We don’t know what *Revenge* would do with someone who was angry. All we’ve seen are the side effects on desire. We don’t want Clark angry.”

Jimmy nodded. “I’m with Lois on this. Let’s not make CK mad. When I got rejected on *Revenge,* I walked in front of a truck.”

Disappointed, Perry dropped his CD. “Why don’t you just take him home until it’s out of his system?”

Lois glanced out the window at Clark, who was staring at her and nodding quickly. He had heard Perry’s suggestion. *Great*, she groaned, *he was listening*. “Perry, Clark’s trying to get us an interview with that refugee couple with the missing baby.”

“They aren’t going to let you and Clark anywhere near that couple and you know it,” Perry told her.

“Why not?” she asked defensively.

“Honey, you and Clark have a major conflict of interest. I’m assigning someone else this story.”

“But… but…” Lois stammered. “If we don’t find that couple’s child, they might take Lara away from us.”

Perry’s shoulders fell. “Okay, what do you need from me?”

“Let us work on it,” she pleaded with him. “Background stuff, anything. We have to find that child. We just have to.”

“Chief, if I could get some photos of the couple, I could run them through my sketch program, come up with a composite of what their missing child might look like,” Jimmy suggested.

Lois grabbed his arms. “I could kiss you!”

Clark threw open the office door, cracking the glass. “Did you call me, Lois?” he asked, fury just barely contained under the surface of his eyes.

Jimmy took a step back with a gulp. “Lois was just saying how much she liked to kiss you, CK.” That excuse was the weakest she had seen in years, but Clark seemed to cling to it like a life preserver.

“Really?” Clark turned to Lois, taking her hands in his. “Is that what you were saying?”

“Of course, honey. I’m always telling the guys how much I love you,” Lois said, placing a soft kiss on his lips. “I wouldn’t want to kiss anybody else but Clark Kent.”

He snarled. “You mean me or just any old Clark Kent?”

Lois swallowed. He would bring that up. “You and only you, Clark.” She kissed him again.

Perry stood there, staring at Clark, then he glanced at Jimmy and then back at Lois and Clark. “All right, you two, go home. Rest. Get this out of your system,” he told them. “Take the whole weekend, if you have to… you already were planning on taking it anyway.”

Clark grinned wickedly, pulling Lois closer. Just what he wanted to hear. “Let’s go, honey.”

“Hold on,” Lois told him, staring at Perry.

“We’ve got this interview thing covered. As soon as we’ve got that composite sketch, we’ll call you. Jimmy, how accurate is this sketch program of yours?”

Jimmy glanced at her and Clark, then back at Perry. “Pretty accurate, Chief.”

Lois’s brow furrowed. What was that look for? “Perry, who are you assigning this story to?”

“I don’t know… Ralph?”

“Why don’t you make it Barry? Nothing’s happening on the Superman front,” suggested Clark. He snuggled up next to Lois’s ear. “He’s taking the weekend off, too.”

“But, Lois, what about…”

She glared at Jimmy and he got the hint. “Right, just gossip.”

“What gossip?” asked Clark, turning Lois around to face him.

“Ow.” She cringed and he let go of her arms.

“I’m sorry, honey. What gossip?”

Lois rubbed her biceps. “Just the usual stuff. What was the latest, Jimmy? Superman has a new girlfriend?” She laughed.

“Yep, that’s the one,” Jimmy placed a grin on his face. “As if.”

“As if what, Jimmy? As if he could get a date? He’s dated before. He dated Lois,” Clark retorted with a growl.

Lois cringed again, as Perry looked at her with raised eyebrows. “That’s not true, Clark. I *never* dated Superman. We had dinner once or twice. We may have kissed a few times. But we never officially dated. Anyway, that’s ancient history. Superman has volunteered to take Clark, Lara, and I to Kansas, if we get approval to leave the state,” Lois informed them. “So, we’ll be going now.” She grabbed Clark’s arm with a glance back at Jimmy. “Call me ASAP with any news. *Any* news.”

The researcher nodded.

Lois slowly closed the cracked door behind them.

“Tell me I didn’t act like that on *Revenge*, Jimmy,” she heard Perry ask Jimmy.

“No, Chief. You were worse.”

Clark picked up Lois and kissed her again. “I’m not drunk on *Revenge*, Lois. I’m fine.”

Lois raised a brow at him. “Fine, huh? So are you going to fly us out of here and announce to everyone at the *Daily Planet* that you’re you-know-who, or are we going to take the elevator like normal folks?”

“I don’t care what anyone else thinks or knows about me, Lois.” He shook his head. “I don’t even know why I cared in the first place.”

Clark was worse than he was back at the townhouse. Had he been exposed again to whatever it was making him crazy? “Tell you what, big boy, let’s just keep that secret between us for now,” she whispered into his ear. “And I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Really? How?”

She whispered in his ear and a big grin spread across his face. He grabbed her briefcase and his jacket, heading them towards the elevators.

“Have a nice birthday,” called Jimmy.

Clark grinned back at him. “She will.”

Lois just waved.

***

The call from Constance came while they were having dinner. Lois had sent Penny home as soon as they got there. Lara was the best excuse she had for keeping out of the bedroom and even Clark conceded that point.

Constance had been able to get the approval they sought, thanks to their ‘friend’ Superman’s reassurances that all three Kents would return to Metropolis by Sunday night.

While an overjoyed Clark called his folks, Lois checked in with Jimmy.

“I got the photos, Lois, under the condition that the *Daily Planet* would not publish them. I’ll start the mock-up of their daughter tonight and send it right over to you.”

“We’re heading out to Smallville tomorrow morning. Fax the sketch there.” She gave him the Kents’ fax number. “But if the mock-up turns out looking anything like Lara, call me tonight and warn me.”

“It won’t,” Jimmy reassured her.

“Jimmy, I want a true representation of what this little girl will look like. We need it to help find her. No messing with it to make her look less like Lara,” Lois warned.

“I won’t. I just meant Lara and this little girl have different parents, so there’s no way she’ll look like your daughter,” her friend explained.

Lois smiled. Jimmy. Always her champion… well, except when she kissed Superman. Always believing in her and Clark one hundred percent. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

As they were washing up the dinner dishes, Clark got that look on his face again. *Oh, no. Superman. That could be trouble.*

“Got to go,” he said, running into the living room.

“Clark,” she called, chasing after him.

Her husband, already in his blue suit, paused and looked at her.

Lois kissed him. “Hurry home. I’ll try to get Lara to sleep while you’re gone.”

He gave her a wink, wrapping an arm around her. “I don’t need to go.”

“Sure, you do. We’re not going to bed before she is.” She ran her finger over his ‘S’ crest. “I mean just don’t stand around chit-chatting or anything.”

“Not with you here waiting in that new nightie you mentioned.” He kissed her and Lois had to push his chest to get him to stop. “Right. Bad guys.” Two seconds later he was gone.

Lois released her breath. She hoped whatever Clark was dosed with wore off before they got to Smallville tomorrow morning. She wouldn’t want to explain to Martha and Jonathan why their son was chasing her around the living room.

***

Clark woke up the next morning refreshed, despite the little sleep he and Lois had gotten the night before.

By the time Lois started stirring around nine, he had packed their bags, cleaned the house, done a load of laundry, flown to Paris for breakfast, made coffee, delivered the bags to Smallville, fed and changed Lara, and checked in with Perry at the office.

His conversation with Perry had been a strange one. Their boss guffawed when Clark told him that Lois was still asleep. “Late night, Kent?” Then after Clark’s mortified silence, the Chief said, “Just kidding.”

How in the world had… and then the memories of the previous day flooded in.

Clark made some lame excuse and hung up, staring at the phone. Had he done other crazy stuff yesterday, besides seduce his wife in front of everyone in the newsroom? He covered his face. How was he ever going to live that down?

Flying upstairs, he sat next to Lois on the bed, brushing the hair off her forehead. He owed her big time.

Her eyes slowly opened at his touch. She looked at him and sighed. “Just give me a few minutes to wake up first, Clark. All right?”

Her words cut through him. Oh, God! How many times had they made love during the night? All he could remember was wanting her more and more and more after every time. Why hadn’t she stopped him? It must have been after three in the morning before she had passed out from exhaustion.

Clark smiled weakly. “Happy birthday?” he asked.

Lois patted his hand. “So far, it has been interesting.”

He rested his head on her shoulder. “Forgive me, Lois. I’m so sorry.”

His wife caressed his head. “For what?”

“For being a wild, crazy animal last night.”

She kissed the top of his head. “Yea! I got my birthday wish.”

He looked at her with confusion.

“That my husband is back from Horny Town.”

Clark winced. “That bad, huh?”

“Only some things,” she murmured, tilting his face up and kissing him. “For the rest I was a willing participant. And no apologies accepted for desiring me. The feeling was quite mutual.”

“Willing?”

“Always.”

Clark released a breath of relief.

“Though I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to walk straight today,” she said, trying to sit up.

“Achy?”

“A bit.”

“I can help with that,” Clark replied.

Lois raised a curious brow.

“Heat,” he whispered and she relaxed. He started at her shoulders and worked down to her toes and back up again. When he reached her arms he saw matching bruises. “Lois? Did I do…”

She glanced down at her biceps. “Don’t worry about it.

They're already starting to fade."

"Lois. That is unacceptable," Clark said, burying his face in his hands. "You shouldn't have to worry about your safety around me."

"I don't. That was an accident," Lois reassured him, wrapping her arms around him.

"I don't deserve you," he mumbled.

"I don't deserve you more." She giggled. "So I guess that makes us even."

Clark kissed her soft and slow and gentle. Then he sat back, not wanting her to think he was pressuring her.

"Mmmm. Nice." Lois smiled, licking her lips. "Have I told you how irresistible you are? Recently?"

"Hey, that's my line."

His wife laughed. "Let me take my shower and get dressed, so we can get out of Dodge before you get infected again."

Clark watched her saunter into the bathroom. *Infected? Infected by what?* The only thing that ever effected his emotions like that was Red Kryptonite, but the last time it made him apathetic. Yesterday, he had been anything but apathetic. It was like any fluttering of emotion he had flooded his system. And for some reason, the biggest flutter was desire. He smiled. Well, his wife was hot.

"Do you need any help in there?" he called.

Lois stuck her head out the door. "You're on baby duty, Daddy," she reminded him and shut the door again.

"I could fly her over to Smallville and come back," he suggested, his hand on the bathroom door.

"Down boy."

Okay. Maybe he was still on the road back from Horny Town. But then again, with Lois as his wife, he would always be a frequent traveler on the road to and from Horny Town.

***

Martha hugged Lois, but when she let go, her daughter-in-law didn't.

Slowly, Lois pulled back and smiled. "I've missed you, Martha."

Martha returned her smile. "You know you're always welcome here."

Clark's mother watched as Lois looked around the kitchen, soaking it all in. "It feels like a lifetime ago."

"Last Thanksgiving," said Jonathan. "And Lara wasn't even born yet. So, I guess that makes it a lifetime."

"No. Christmas. Before Christmas," murmured Lois, before finally sitting down next to both Clark and Jonathan. Lois took Jonathan's hand and squeezed it. "How are you doing? Feeling okay?"

"Sure," replied Jonathan hesitantly. Lois never asked about his health. "Never better."

Lois glanced back at Martha as if for confirmation. Did Lois know something they didn't?

Martha patted Clark's father on the shoulder. "That's not quite true, Jonathan, and you know it." She looked at Clark. "Doc Thompson has put him on a low-fat diet."

Lois squeezed his hand again. "Glad to hear it."

Jonathan looked uncomfortable. He had never liked being the center of attention. He leaned around Lois to speak to Clark. "Low-flavor is more like it." He scowled.

Clark laughed at the comment.

"We're still looking for good recipes," Martha explained to Lois.

"I wish I could be of some help. Everything I learned to cook is full of butter, cream, cheese, and/or meat."

"I'm looking forward to tonight, though," said Jonathan, rubbing his hands together and grinning. "Your mom's rich butter cake, fudge frosting, and ice cream."

"That's right," said Martha, walking over to her hutch and grabbing the gift that the other Clark had dropped off early that morning. "Happy birthday." She set the gift in front of Lois.

"Oh, Martha! Jonathan!" Lois gasped with pleasure. "Thank you. You didn't have to do this. Your hospitality is gift enough."

"We didn't," responded Jonathan.

"The cake is my gift." She smiled. "That's from someone else."

Lois looked at the small square gift, wrapped in light blue paper covered with palm trees. She ran her fingers over the paper, but didn't seem interested in opening it. Lois flipped up the tag. *Lois, Happy Birthday! Love, Clark*. She swallowed.

Clark stood up and left the room abruptly.

"Don't," whispered Lois with a wince.

"That other Clark dropped it off this morning. He was disappointed to have missed seeing Lara," said Jonathan.

"And you, too, Lois," Martha added at her daughter-in-law's strained expression. She sat in Clark's abandoned chair. "Is everything all right, dear?"

Lois nodded, but Martha could see her lashes sparkle with tears. "Just tired. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Yes, all this stress with Lara's adoption…"

"Oh, no." Lois laughed, but Martha could sense her heart wasn't in it. "Well, yes, but no, that wasn't it." She pushed the gift away from her, still unopened and stood up, heading for the sink. She filled a glass of water and took a sip.

Clark returned with Lara. "Look who woke up."

"Hi there, beautiful!" said Jonathan, holding out his hands. Lara looked at him suspiciously and clung to her daddy.

"Give her time, Dad," Clark said. Martha saw his eyes dart to the unopened gift. He walked over to Lois at the sink and kissed her cheek. "I thought you might want to open it without me here," he whispered.

Lois wrapped an arm around her husband's waist. "I always want you with me, Clark."

Martha raised a brow at this exchange.

"Lois was just telling us about why she didn't sleep well last night," Jonathan said, clearly trying to shift the topic.

Clark looked away and blushed. "You didn't?" he stammered.

"What's this?" Martha asked, sensing a story.

Lois grinned, merriment filling her face. "You son turned into the mayor of Horny Town yesterday."

"Lois!" Clark turned away, his face redder than his mother had ever seen it.

"Oh." Jonathan turned away with a glance at his wife. Then the two of them started to giggle.

"Great. How did I go from tourist to mayor in one day?" Clark murmured.

"Oh, come on, Clark. It was funny. Your emotions were bouncing all over the place. You even broke Perry's door out of jealousy when I told Jimmy I could kiss him."

"What?" Jonathan gasped.

Lois waved off his concerns. "It was nothing. Jimmy is doing a mock-up of what the refugees' missing baby might look like."

"Clark, you were out of control?" Jonathan looked at him. "You can't be out of control, son."

"I know, Dad. Perry even sent me home early after Lois told him I'd been dosed with *Revenge.*"

"What, that stuff that made Lois do the Dance of the Seven Veils? I thought you said it didn't affect you?" Jonathan asked, confused.

"What's this?" Martha inquired, glancing between the men. "I didn't hear that part of the story."

Lois stared at Jonathan and then at Clark, mortified. "You told him about that?" She covered her face with her hand.

"You've got to admit, honey, it's a great story." Clark grinned, bouncing Lara on his hip. "At least *I* didn't take advantage of you in your weakened state."

Lois socked him in the arm. “Don’t even go there, Clark Kent,” she snarled. “You begged, pleaded, and practically dragged me off to the supply closet yesterday.”

“Clark Jerome Kent! I didn’t raise you to act that way,” Martha scolded. “Even if she is your wife.”

“I know, Mom.” He looked away again, blushing. Then he turned to Lois, lowering his voice. “I didn’t mean…”

“I know darn well what you meant, Clark, and we’ve already discussed this.”

“In this instance, I’m right,” he retorted.

“We’re not discussing this again, Clark. You want to bring it up with him, fine. But my opinion on the matter isn’t changing.” Lois crossed her arms and turned away from him. Then she noticed Martha and Jonathan staring at her. She cleared her throat. “Clark was not himself yesterday,” Lois said in her husband’s defense.

“Clearly. Well, if it wasn’t the perfume. What was it?” Martha inquired. “New and improved Space Rats? Hypnotism? Red Kryptonite?”

Lois clapped her hand over her mouth, all the blood draining from her face. Then a moment later, her hands were in fists and her face was beet-red as she started pacing the kitchen floor. “Red Kryptonite! Red Kryptonite, of course. I should have known. Argh! I knew it didn’t seem like him.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

Lois went over to the table and picked up the gift from the other Clark. “This!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yesterday, I found a birthday gift from Superman on my desk.”

Comprehension flooded Clark’s face as he nodded. “The rose.”

“Exactly. I thought it was from you. Only you told me in no uncertain terms it wasn’t.”

“Sorry, I kind of overreacted. It was just a flower. One flower.” He caressed her face. “I’m sorry.”

Lois took his hand in hers. “You didn’t overreact, Clark. You were being affected by the Red Kryptonite. It brought out your jealousy.”

“What Red Kryptonite?” he asked, his brow furrowing again.

“The rose came with a necklace. A red heart pendant on a long gold chain. I thought it was just red glass, but now…”

Clark’s lips pinched together. “When were you going to tell me about this?”

“I took it off as soon as you said you hadn’t given it to me.”

“Where is it now?” he said with a glare, reproaching her.

“My top desk drawer.”

Clark passed Lara to Martha.

“Are we ever going to be free of that man?” he said, spinning into his Superman suit.

Lois grabbed his arm. “It wasn’t him, Clark.”

He stopped and stared at his wife. “What? You just said—”

“Clark, *he* wouldn’t give me a Red Kryptonite necklace any more than you would have,” she said, holding up the square gift. “This one is from him.”

Martha looked at Jonathan, her eyes large.

“Let go, Lois. I’ve got to get rid of it.”

“No.” Lois latched on to his waist. “The necklace is safe in my drawer; more accurately, you’re safe being away from it. Stay here and I’ll get rid of it on Monday.” Lois looked her husband in the eye. “Please.”

He stared at her for a minute. “I hate thinking a piece of that rock is out there.”

“I know.”

“You’ll get rid of it?” Clark implored.

“Well…” A grin slowly appeared on Lois’s face. “I could keep it for special occasions.”

“Lo-is!” Clark gasped, a rose blush appearing on his cheeks.

His wife sighed, a slight pout hinted at her lips. “Okay. I’ll give it to Dr. Klein.” She let go of him.

Clark spun back into his jeans and t-shirt.

Lois grabbed him again and kissed him, whispering something into his ear.

“*Lois!* My parents.” Clark’s blush deepened to crimson.

She smiled. “They don’t have super hearing, Clark.”

Martha ignored that statement. “So, someone claiming to be Superman put a Red Kryptonite necklace on your desk, Lois? Knowing you’d wear any gift from Superman, thereby exposing him to the Red Kryptonite whenever you saw him?”

“Everyone knows we’re friends.” Lois shrugged, hugging Clark around the waist.

Clark shook his head. “No matter what we do, you will always be known for being in love with Superman instead of me.”

“He’s a part of you, Clark,” she told him. “And I happen to love everything about you.”

He kissed her cheek. “Nice save.”

“Actually, I’m not even on the Superman beat anymore. After that kiss, I hardly ever see Superman. This person must not know that or think we still meet in secret.”

“We do.” Clark smiled naughtily at her. “And out in the open, too.”

“What kiss?” Jonathan asked.

Clark looked at Lois and she looked down and away.

“Jimmy caught Lois and Superman kissing late one night at the office,” Clark admitted.

“*Clark!* After all that trouble last January,” Martha admonished him.

“I know, Mom.”

“My fault.” Lois raised her hand. “I can’t help it if I love my man in blue tights.”

“How come we didn’t hear about this?” Jonathan asked with a raised brow.

“I was able to convince Perry to bury the story,” Lois exclaimed, looking away again.

“Perry?” Martha asked skeptically. “Perry White buried a story? A Superman story?”

“He told me… well, Superman… that we — Lois and Superman — would be on the front page if he ever saw us together again.” Clark swallowed. “That’s when he removed Lois from the Superman beat.”

“So, who left the necklace?” asked Jonathan.

Lois shrugged. “I don’t know. Have we stepped on any toes lately?”

“Not anyone with access to Red Kryptonite.” Clark shrugged.

“Bruce Wayne perhaps?” Lois suggested.

Clark smiled. “No. I doubt that. I think he learned his lesson about Kryptonite.”

“Could it be someone hoping to scandalize Superman with a juicy headline?” asked Martha. “Instead of just knocking down Superman a peg or two.”

“Like who?” Clark glanced at Lois and they both came up with the answer at the same time. “Mindy Church.”

“But we would have heard about it if she’d been by the office. Jimmy said he heard that she came by to talk to Perry last week.”

“Perry would never…”

“Of course not, Clark. We must have a mole. Someone on her payroll.”

“We’ve had a hiring freeze since Lex, Jr.’s death, so it must be someone on the staff. She must be blackmailing someone in the office.” Clark looked at his wife. “We need to tell Perry.”

“He’s not going to like this.” Lois shook her head. “I’ll call him and tell him what’s going on.”

"No. We'll tell him next week after you've had a chance to get rid of the necklace. I don't want to chance telling him and spooking the mole, who might check your desk for the necklace." Clark wrapped his arms around his wife. "Anyway, it's your birthday. Let's concentrate on that."

"This is more important than my birthday. I'm okay if we don't celebrate it, Clark. It's not like I'm thrilled to be turning thirty-one, anyway.

"Aren't you only thirty, Lois?" Martha inquired.

Lois glanced at Clark. "Right, thirty."

"We're not skipping your birthday again, Lois." He wrapped his arms around her waist. "End of discussion."

Lois rolled her eyes, but a smile slipped onto her lips. "How about I call Jimmy and ask him to take the necklace to Dr. Klein today? Would that make you feel better than leaving it in my desk all weekend?"

Clark smiled at his wife with love. "Thank you."

"How would Mindy Church get Red Kryptonite?" Martha asked. "It isn't like the stuff is lying around… well, lying around anywhere outside of Smallville."

"Well, Mindy was married to Bill Church Sr," Clark started. When he paused, Lois jumped in.

"And who had the Red Kryptonite the first time? When you got apathetic about Perry being kidnapped? Bill Church, Jr." She shook her head. "Just what we needed, the Luthors and Churchs to join forces. Ugh. I'll be happy when we can rid ourselves of both those families and be able to concentrate on our own for once."

Clark squeezed her in a hug. "Why don't we do just that, birthday girl?"

"I hear the Feldmans have a corn maze again this year," said Jonathan, holding his arms out for Lara. "That could be fun."

Martha passed his granddaughter to him and then turned to watch Lois and Clark as they discussed possible activities for the day. Evidently something had happened between Lois and the other Clark when she went to the other dimension to help him find his Lois, something that they still disagreed about. Martha wondered if that had to do with the lie which created the big argument between them back in July. Whatever it was, they seemed to have worked it out. She sighed, pleased that her son seemed happy again.

Martha shook her head. There was something else going on, she just knew it. It was right there on the tip of her tongue, but she just couldn't taste it. If only she could remember.

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"No, Clark. Absolutely not," Lois said for what felt like the four hundredth time that week. A thousand if she added up every time he had casually mentioned it over the last several weeks since her birthday.

"It's the quickest solution, Lois. Please. Wham. Bam. They'll leave me alone again," he pleaded, clapping his hands together.

Lois raised an eyebrow at her husband. *He did not just use that phrase, did he?*

"Sorry," he instantly apologized, running a hand through his hair.

Lois took hold of Clark's hands. "It's only been a few weeks, Clark. I promise it will die down. Eventually, they'll realize your private life is private for a reason."

The media uproar from Windy Wing's article in the *National Whisper* exploded because respectable papers like the *Daily Planet* picked it up. Perry said it was gossip, and he would usually never pay any credence to anything published in that rag, but he got his arm twisted by the powers that be in Multiworld Communications (aka Mindy Church) that this was a story their readers wanted to know about.

Who Is Mrs. Superman? That was the headline that started it all. Lois and Clark had tabloid reporters following them down the street. Had they spoken to Superman recently? Had he introduced his significant other? Had he mentioned her? Was that why he seemed to be pulling back on his rescue duties and charitable functions?

It didn't help their fight for Lara. So far, they had been able to delay the blood tests. Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to make any headway with the sketch Jimmy had made of the refugee couple's missing baby. They found the slave bosses, but the bosses all denied the couple's story. They interviewed the other refugees, but no one claimed to have seen the baby or even known the mother was pregnant. The only thing that linked this otherwise non-existent child to the world was about two inches of umbilical cord that the parents had managed to save.

The *Daily Planet* had run several articles in the paper showing Jimmy's sketches. "*Have you seen me?"* He had done the basic sketch, then he had done five other possible faces using other dominant traits from the refugee couple.

They asked Henderson to show the sketches to the couple to see which one best matched their daughter, but the parents were unsure. Lois didn't blame them. A newborn's looks changed drastically by six weeks of age, let alone seven months.

They had checked the usual dumping grounds for abandoned children. Hospitals, fire stations, police stations, churches, orphanages — none of them reported a baby that matched any of the sketches in or around February or March.

Had one of the slave bosses kept the child as his or her own? There was no indication of that either. Had the person who took the baby killed her? This possibility always frightened Lois the most. Not just for the horror of it — somehow atrocities to children seemed more appalling when one had a child of one's own — but also because the dumping of a newborn could easily be overlooked and the tiny body might never be found.

They still hadn't found Mindy Church's mole. The identity of the person who planted the Red Kryptonite necklace remained a mystery. Lois liked Ralph for it, but Clark kept saying (personal opinions aside) they had no proof except for her gut, which could easily be persuaded by her dislike of the fellow. And because Ralph had been the one given the job of bringing down Superman.

Mindy Church insisted that the *Daily Planet* was not Superman's public relations firm and thus did not owe him any positive press. For every positive story Clark or Barry or, even occasionally, Lois wrote, a negative piece would be written by Ralph. The slimeball actually seemed to enjoy the extra attention.

All this lack of progress in any area of their life was pushing Clark closer to the edge. He hated all this negative publicity for Superman, especially when it showed up in the *Daily Planet.* He had been searching for a solution ever since they had first returned from Smallville and saw the newsstand showing the *National Whisper* and Windy Wing's screaming headline.

Clark got on his knees. "I'm begging you, Lois. Put me out of my misery and marry me."

Rolling her eyes, Lois walked around him and into the living room. Lara was standing up at the coffee table. She had taught herself to stand just this past week and had decided that this definitely was the way to go. Crawling, or what they called her gator scoot, had been almost all but abandoned for this new activity. Lois caught her daughter as Lara's legs gave out and she fell. "Begging does not become you, Clark. I promise you it will blow over."

Her husband jumped over the back of the couch and sat down next to her and Lara. "Hear me out. Next week, I could fly my parents to Metropolis to watch Lara. Harvest will be finished by then."

After the 'Superman has a secret girlfriend' scandal broke out, they were told categorically by Henderson and his supervisors that there were to be no more trips with Lara out of

Metropolis, Superman or no.

"You and I will fly to Las Vegas. We'll get married, have a short honeymoon, maybe save a few people, then come home," Clark suggested.

Lois raised an eyebrow. "It isn't happening, Clark. It's only going to make matters worse. Believe me. Patience is what you need."

"You promised to marry me!"

"Exactly. You asked me to marry you again on my birthday. *You!* Not Superman. You — Clark Kent. You, I'll marry in a heartbeat, a thousand times over. But I'm not going to do this media circus event you are picturing in your mind. I will never agree to that." She picked up the TV remote and turned on LNN.

"*Mindy Church, the former wife of Cost Mart CEO Bill Church, was seen again on the arm of billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne at the gala event honoring Gotham City's…"*

"Ugh," said Lois, turning off the TV again. "That man. To do that to our poor Penny." She picked up a magazine from the coffee table.

"She said they weren't dating." Clark took the remote and turned it back on. "What's he up to?"

"Making an even bigger jackass of himself is my guess."

"Lois!" Clark gasped, covering their daughter's ears. "Growing sponge here."

She rolled her eyes again but let Clark watch without further comment.

When the story about Bruce Wayne ended, Clark turned off the TV. "Should I warn him who she is?"

Lois raised a brow. "Have we become friends then?"

Clark sighed and shook his head. He shifted his position so that he was facing Lois, pulling Lara into his lap. Giggling, his daughter pulled on his ears as he continued, "It doesn't have to be a media circus."

Lois shot him a glare and returned her focus to her magazine.

"There are always people wandering around Las Vegas in costume. No one would have to know I was the real Superman until afterwards, when I blast us into the sky."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Clark, is that what this is really about?"

He smiled sweetly.

Lois recognized his innocent look and raised him an eyebrow. "If you think our marriage needs fantasy role playing…"

"No!" Her husband gulped. "Not at all, honey. I just want to have control over something in our life. This would give us control again on the Superman story."

Lois shook her head. "No, it wouldn't." She reached over and took his hand. "Clark. There have always been crazy stories in the tabloids about Superman and there always will be. Why does this one bother you so much? Is it because there is a grain of truth to it?"

"I feel like I'm lying by not addressing the questions. It's all the reporters ask about. Who is this mystery woman I mentioned when I was drunk on Red Kryptonite? How much longer does Superman have to tell them 'no comment'?"

"Forever, if need be. It's none of their business. Just because a reporter asks you a question doesn't mean you have to answer it, you know that. Superman never answered whether or not he loved me at my trial and nobody ever questioned him on it."

He leaned over and kissed her. "That's because everyone knows that Superman will always love you."

"They won't if you run off to Las Vegas with another woman."

Clark sighed. "We could go on Halloween, then everyone will be in costume. No one will know it's you. At least the tabloids would stop guessing who this mystery woman is."

Lois stood up, turned her back on him and counted to ten, before speaking. "You want me to put on the lavender suit and go out in public with you *on Halloween*. You want me to marry Superman as Ultra Woman. *On Halloween*. You want everyone to know that Superman and Ultra Woman are together forever… that she's your destiny… *on Halloween*." She turned back around, fire in her eyes. "Are you hoping some tabloid will get a shot of us kissing in front of everyone? Do you want to make love to Ultra Woman on Halloween, too? Just stop me when I'm getting close."

Clark stared at her, holding Lara to his chest, his expression blank.

"I've done that already, Clark. I know you want me to erase that night from my memory, but this isn't the way to do it. I know this tabloid mess will blow over, because I spent a year — yes, a *year* — dealing with Superman in the press on almost a daily basis. If he can suck it up, so can you." She paused and took another deep breath. "I am going to tell you this once and once only. I will never wear that suit again. *Never.* I am not Ultra Woman anymore, nor will I ever be her again. I am Lois Lane. Love me for who I am or leave me now, Clark Kent. But never ask me to put on that suit again."

Lois turned to march out of the room, but her husband was there in front of her. She glanced back at where he had been sitting a moment before and saw Lara, standing on the floor holding on to the couch. Clark pulled Lois into his arms.

She rested her head on his shoulder as she pounded his chest with her fists. "When will you forgive me, Clark? When?"

He held her tighter. "As soon as you forgive yourself."

"How can I forgive myself for hurting you?"

Clark kissed her forehead. "I love you and don't want to hurt you, either. You were right and I was wrong. I'm sorry, Lois. We'll find something else to do on Halloween."

Lois laughed softly through her tears. "I like the sound of that. Say it again."

He paused. "You were right and I was wrong?"

"Again."

***

Lois and Clark entered the newsroom, hand in hand, big grins on their faces. It had been a nice weekend after all. Clark spun her around and back into his arms for a kiss.

His mom had sewn Lara a ladybug costume, using some leftover red fabric from the last batch of capes. Actually she was a red, yellow, and blue ladybug, but nobody seemed to notice her similarity to Superman.

Lois had dressed up as a black cat and looked extremely sexy in that skintight black outfit and tail. The light sprinkling of glitter to make her more reflective in the night had been a bonus. She was still shimmery in spots, despite taking numerous showers since Halloween. Clark thought about how she looked when she'd crawled into bed that night and smiled. Yes, it had been a good weekend.

Clark had added some tape to his glasses, a pocket protector, a bowtie, and a plaid leisure suit he had found at a second hand store. Lois actually had the audacity to ask when he was going to get into his costume. She had wanted him to dress up as a cave man, but he wanted something that would allow him to wear his glasses, plus keep the blue suit hidden underneath.

Lois slid off her overcoat and was hanging it up on the coat rack, when Jimmy appeared out of nowhere and grabbed her elbow, ushering her into the conference room. Clark followed, curious.

"I thought I should warn you. I believe the fake Superman has struck again," he told them.

They both spun around and looked at her desk. There sitting up on the shelf, next to her photo of Clark and Lara was a single red rose with an attached note.

"Let me—" Clark started.

"No." Lois stopped him. "I'll go. You wait here."

"Did you see who delivered it?" Clark asked Jimmy.

"No. But I saw Ralph hovering over by Lois's desk when I came in."

Clark didn't know quite what to say to that. Sometimes he hated it when Lois's gut was right. His wife picked up the note and scowled. Then she walked back to the conference room.

"The note is more for you," his wife said, handing it to him. "Feel free to set it on fire when you're done."

Clark's brow came down as the opened the paper. *You make one sexy Catwoman, Lois. Clark's a lucky guy. Bruce*

"I hate that man," said Lois with a grimace.

"I don't know, Lois. He's right," teased Clark. "You're very sexy and I'm a lucky guy."

Jimmy glanced over at the note and squelched a laugh behind pinched lips. "Catwoman, eh, Lois?"

She raised a brow at him. "What were you for Halloween?"

"Dracula." He shrugged. "I hear they threw a 'Come as Your Favorite Superhero' party over at City Hall. Over four hundred Supermen showed up. I'm surprised you two didn't cover it."

Lois froze, the blood draining from her face.

"We don't cover social gatherings, Jimmy." Wrapping an arm around his wife, Clark informed him, "Halloween is a time for families."

"I'm just saying, that would have been a great place for Superman to take out his girlfriend in disguise. Don't you think?" Jimmy asked. "I wish I had gone and snapped some shots of the different Superman couples. I hear the *National Whisper* is offering over $1000 for a snapshot of Superman and his mystery woman; $5000 if they're kissing, plus a penny per page for residuals."

Lois's jaw dropped.

"Would you really sell out Superman?" Clark stammered. "To the tabloids, Jimmy?"

"No way, CK! I just thought it would be funny if the *Daily Planet* out-scooped them for free."

Clark sat down on the edge of the conference room table and faced his wife. "Tempting, isn't it, Lois?"

"Nope. Not even for a scoop, Clark." She turned to Jimmy. "If you ever feel so desperate for funds that offers from tabloids seem tempting, come to us and we'll help you out, okay? Promise me that."

Jimmy smiled. "Thanks, Lois. I'd never sell out Superman. No matter how much money was thrown my way." He swallowed and looked away. "But… I did do something I'm not proud of. Something I should confess to you."

Clark stood up. This didn't sound good.

"Maybe I shouldn't say anything. Nothing will probably come of it. And Perry will kill me, if he finds out I went behind his back."

"Well?" Lois asked.

Jimmy cleared his throat and rung his hands together. "I put out feelers to this guy I know about buying the *Daily Planet*."

"Who do you know that is rich enough to take the *Daily Planet* away from Mindy Church?" Lois asked, stepping towards Jimmy.

"He's not really my friend. I mean, I've met him once. He's more of a friend of a friend."

Clark glanced down at the rose that was still in his hand. "That's what he was up to. Jimmy, not him. Please, tell me, it wasn't him. I cannot work for that guy."

Lois glanced at Clark, not catching his reference. He held up the rose. "No. Absolutely not! Jimmy! No!"

Jimmy shrugged sheepishly. "He'd be better than her, wouldn't he?"

"Debatable," Lois snapped.

"There's nothing to worry about, guys," Jimmy reassured them. "He's not going to be interested in owning a newspaper. He's more into dot com than brick and mortar."

"Yeah. Right." Clark threw his hands up into the air. The Bat had made it abundantly clear he would do anything to get on Superman's good side. The billionaire had already befriended the current owner of the paper. And Wayne would relish the thought of having power over Superman's secret life, especially financial power, since he already had his daughter's heritage in the palm of his hand and Kryptonite. Clark shook his head. "Lois, I can't. I can't work for that man."

Lois looked at him for a minute and then she turned to their friend. "Oh, Jimmy." She sighed and patted his arm. "And I was tempted to tell you who Superman's girlfriend really is, too." She shook her head. "Tsk-tsk. But this is just unforgivable." She headed to the conference room door.

"You know? Of course, you know." Jimmy shook his head. "You were going to tell me? The truth?" He swallowed. "Really?"

She smiled, first at Jimmy and then at Clark. "Of course. Superman wouldn't keep secrets from me." She raised a brow at her husband. "I mean, us. Now would he, *Clark*?" She looked daggers at her husband.

Clark felt his throat go dry. She knew he was keeping something from her about Bruce Wayne and she was mad as hell he still hadn't told her. But he couldn't tell her about Wayne. It wasn't his secret to tell.

When he didn't respond, Lois nodded at Jimmy. "Okay. There's only one woman who has ever swept Superman off his feet, besides me." She turned a sinister grin to Clark. "I believe you once described her as stunning, Clark."

Jimmy's brow furrowed.

"I hear she looks pretty hot in lavender and teal, too," Lois continued, pretending to look down at her fingernails.

"No!" Jimmy shook his head. "No. No. Lois. Because that would mean… that she was… oh, my God!" He gulped. "Lois!" He turned to Clark. "Not her."

Clark glared at his wife. "Could be."

"That's our theory, anyway." Lois shrugged and sashayed out the door. "Don't tell anyone, Jimmy."

"I… I…" The color drained from Jimmy's face. "No. Tell me it isn't true, CK. That she and…" He looked at Clark. "No! I don't believe for an instant… oh, God, it's true, isn't it?"

"Blows your mind, doesn't it?" Clark looked at Lois standing by her desk and shook his head. She always had to be one step ahead of him.

"But I've fantasized about…" Jimmy gulped. "I mean, no, I haven't. No. Never. Kill me now."

Clark looked at him intriguingly. This was a strange reaction.

"I mean, *don't* really." Jimmy pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "I'm going to head back, do some research… really, CK? Earthquakes? No! Not going to research earthquakes, at all. Ever again. I'm going to go now." He placed a smile on his face and backed out of the conference room. He bumped into Lois's desk, grabbed a pen out of her pen cup and ran, literally ran, away from Clark.

Clark watched him as he approached Lois at her desk.

"And you wanted to tell the world." She shook her head, flipping through her mail.

"I can't tell you, Lois."

She glanced up at him. "I'm your wife. You can tell me anything, Clark."

He sighed. "Not this."

"That's your decision." She set down her mail and stood up, walking to the coffee machine.

Clark followed her. "You're not mad?"

Lois looked at him with a raised brow as she poured her coffee. "Why should I be mad? I just learned we're allowed to keep secrets." She smiled at him, snapped a couple of sugar

packets and poured them into her coffee.

"Lois."

"As I said, Clark, it's your decision." His wife took her coffee back to her desk.

She hadn't been kidding about being Chess Club president. Check mate.

***

Lois, you and your big fat mouth, she thought to herself. Why in the hell had she told Jimmy about Ultra Woman? *Because you were annoyed at Clark*, her conscience reminded her, *and you don't think straight when you're mad.*

Perry had just called them both into his office. He must have noticed Jimmy's strange change in behavior this past week. The young photographer had been jumpy around both her and Clark. It was almost like those days after he caught her kissing Superman. If he told Perry her theory about Superman's girlfriend, they might as well fly out to Las Vegas.

Her phone rang. Lois picked it up, listened to what the person on the other end said and then hung up. She felt as if the room started to spin as Perry called to her again.

When she entered Perry's office, Lois glanced back at Clark's empty desk. She should have known Clark wouldn't fold and tell her what he knew about Bruce Wayne. She didn't know if she was happier that he hadn't called her bluff or not.

She had told him almost everything of any importance that had happened during her trip to the other dimension. She hadn't told him the two biggies yet: that she had almost died when Lara was born, although she had tried to tell him that before and he hadn't listened, for which she had been eternally grateful. And the secret held by only her, H.G. Wells, and the other Clark — the knowledge about what really would have happened had she not gone to the other dimension. She shivered just thinking of the photo of Clark at her grave.

"Lois, honey. Are you coming in or are you going to take this meeting in the doorway?" Perry asked, snapping her out of her thoughts.

"Sorry." Lois moved into the office and shut the door. She went to sit down, but Perry still had only one guest chair in his office and Jimmy was sitting in it. "Perry, what happened to your other chair?"

Perry swallowed. "Superman broke it. Now, where's Clark? I wanted him here for this."

Superman broke Perry's chair?

"He said something about meeting a source," Jimmy explained, because Lois's brain was stuck on what Perry had said.

Superman broke Perry's chair? When did Superman meet with Perry? She stared at Perry in confusion.

"A source? Good. At least somebody around here is working."

Then she realized what Jimmy had said. Lois turned her attention to Jimmy, who grinned altogether too innocently at her. What he said wasn't true. Clark had heard something and run from the office loosening his tie.

Her hand moved to cover her mouth as she looked at Jimmy. Their friend had just covered for Clark. *Why?* She stumbled backwards and sat down on the bookshelves that lined the windows overlooking the bullpen.

"Oh my God," she whispered to herself. Did Jimmy know? Was that why he had been acting so strangely all week? She thought it was because she had hinted that Ultra Woman was Superman's girlfrie… *oh, crap.* If he knew Clark was Superman, did that mean he figured out that she had once been… she gulped and shifted her gaze to Perry. Did he know, too?

Pull yourself together, Lois thought. She blinked, trying to focus on Perry and the words coming out of his mouth. "What? Huh?"

"Darling, are you okay? You look like you had a fright."

Jimmy turned around to stare at her. "Lois. Do you need me to call Clark?"

She stared back at Jimmy. What did he mean by that? Clark doesn't take phone calls when out and about as Superman. Or did he mean call to… *oh. Oh!* She couldn't let him do that. She had to make her mouth work.

"Henderson called. We have to take Lara to S.T.A.R. Labs by four p.m. for her blood test," Lois said weakly. The world around her felt like it was swirling out of control.

Jimmy turned pale. "Blood test? Lara? Excuse me, Chief, I need to make a phone call." Jumping out of his chair, he was through the office door before Perry could react.

"Great shades of Elvis! Doesn't anyone around here take me seriously anymore? When I call a meeting, I expect people to show up!" He shook his head and shut the office door. "Lois, honey. You knew this day was coming when we couldn't find that other couple's missing baby. It shouldn't come as that much of a shock. I'm surprised you got them to delay it this long."

"But… but…" She stared at Perry. *He doesn't know. Thank God, he still doesn't know.* She wrapped her arms around her boss. "Thank you, Perry, for being the smartest, most wonderful, thoughtful, wisest man I know and what I love most about you is…"

"Ah, Lois…"

"You are completely clueless as to why I'm hugging you."

"Ah… thank you, Lois, I think." Perry cleared his throat. "Evidently, this isn't the best time for my announcement. We'll meet again when Clark gets back and Jimmy's off the phone. Maybe by then I'll have found a clue," he rumbled.

Lois let go of him. "Clark. Oh my God! Clark! He doesn't know. How am I going to tell him? This is going to crush him."

Perry raised a brow. "What is, honey?"

"Lara's blood test," Lois began, as Jimmy returned. "He's been dreading it all month."

"Why's that, Lois?" her boss inquired.

"Because Lara is…" she stammered.

"The damn cutest, sweetest, most wonderful kid in the world," interrupted Jimmy. "He doesn't want to chance losing her. Right, Lois?"

She stared at him. "Right, Jimmy."

He knew. Jimmy knew that Lara was Superman's daughter. He knew that a blood test would make public the one thing about their daughter they didn't want revealed. How did he know? "How in the hell do you know?" she demanded. "Did Clark tell you?"

Jimmy took hold of her shoulders. "Lois. Get a grip. Clark needs you to hold down the fort."

Right. Grip. They could discuss the hows and whens later. She swallowed, then smiled at Perry. "We'll get back to you on that." She exited his office with Jimmy. At her desk, she turned to him. "What are we going to do?"

Jimmy looked stunned. Had she just asked Jimmy to take point? *Oh God, I'm officially nuts.*

"Dr. Klein! We'll have to talk to Dr. Klein," Lois murmured, nodding. "He's trustworthy. He'll protect us. How many people are we going to have to tell?" She sighed, covering her face.

"I'm hoping none," said Jimmy.

"What?" stammered Lois. Then she remembered what he did after she mentioned Henderson telephoned. "Jimmy, who did you call?"

He gulped. "A friend."

"And does this friend also know what nobody is supposed to know?"

His face turned a bit red as he grinned.

"*Jimmy*, what did you do?"

He stood up and started walking backwards, away from Lois.

"*Jimmy!*"

Lois's phone rang. She turned to pick it up and when she turned back, Jimmy was gone.

"Lois Lane," she said through clenched teeth.

"Lois, it's Bobby. I've got some news for you. How about lunch?"

She looked around the newsroom; Jimmy was nowhere to be seen. She took a pad of paper and jotted down the address where Bobby Bigmouth wanted them to meet. She hung up the phone. *Great. Anything else going to happen today?*

She glanced up at the TV monitors and saw Superman rescuing people near Bogota, Colombia, where the Nevado del Ruiz volcano had exploded. Lois sighed at the realization that Clark wouldn't be back for hours. *Great. Continue holding down the fort.*

***

Lois stomped out of the elevator, first glancing at Clark's empty desk and then up at the TV monitors. *Commercial. Super.*

"Lois! Where in blue blazes have you been? Have you seen either Jimmy or Clark?" Perry thundered, approaching her as she walked down the ramp. "We need to have this meeting before your appointment this afternoon."

"Perry, we need to talk," she said, holding up a hand to his office.

He didn't say anything until they were behind closed doors. "What have you heard?"

"I just had lunch with Bobby Bigmouth."

Perry gulped, sitting down in his chair.

"Looks like things are going to change around here," Lois told him through gritted teeth. "I'm going to kill him. Yes. That's what I'm going to do first."

"Kill who?" Perry asked, leaning forward.

"Jimmy. It was his idea and it worked. I don't know how he did it, but it worked. I can't say that things are going to improve around here, but—"

"Jimmy?" Perry seemed stunned. "What did Jimmy do?"

Clark practically blew into the office. Lois hadn't even known he was back from Colombia.

"Clark!" Lois gasped with relief.

"Where's Jimmy?" said Clark, a note gripped in his hand.

Lois grabbed his arm, holding up a finger to Perry. "We need to talk about Jimmy, Clark."

"He and Penny took Lara," he announced, holding out the note.

Lara is safe. Your friends, Penny and Jimmy

"I found that on the desk at home when I went to check on Lara at lunch."

Lois hugged him. His hair was slightly damp. He had gone home to shower after the volcano eruption.

"What?" stammered Perry, grabbing the note from Lois's hand. "Jimmy?"

"I don't understand it either," said Clark with a shake of his head. He really was confused.

"Didn't you tell him?" Lois asked her husband.

"Tell him what?"

"About Lara."

Clark shook his head. "Never. I've told no one." He shook his head. "My parents, but they don't really believe me."

"What about Lara?" Perry asked with a raised brow.

Lois waved off his concerns. "Rare medical condition."

"Oh."

"Jimmy knows," she informed her husband.

"He *knows,*" gasped Clark, sitting down in the chair.

Lois nodded. "Everything."

"*Everything?* How?" He looked up at Lois.

She shrugged.

"Penny?" Clark guessed.

"Maybe. I don't know." Lois shook her head. "I thought she dumped him for that other guy." Then she turned to Perry. "Speaking of which, Bobby says we've got a new boss at the *Daily Planet*."

"What?" stammered Clark.

Perry sighed. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about this morning. But Clark went out to meet a source and Jimmy apparently left to kidnap your daughter… oh, Lois, you have to contact Henderson. Tell him you're not going to make his deadline."

"What's this?" Clark asked, starting to look as frazzled as she felt. "What deadline?"

"Lara's blood test. We're supposed to have her to S.T.A.R. Labs by four p.m.."

It was a good thing Clark was already sitting down as he turned a shade paler than she had ever seen him. "But… but… if they do that, they'll find out about…" He glanced over at Perry.

"Her rare medical condition?" finished Perry.

Clark nodded. "Is that why Jimmy…"

"I think so. We can't contact Henderson and tell him that Jimmy and Penny took Lara," Lois said. "It's a felony. They'll go to jail."

"I just can't get my head around it. Jimmy kidnapped your daughter. I love that kid like a son. Why? Why would he do that?" sputtered Perry. "He's still a kid himself."

"He's protecting her so we wouldn't have to run the blood tests."

"If you don't contact the police, they're going to think you're in on it," said Perry. "And you will end up in jail and Lara in the custody of Child Services."

"We've just got to give them time. They can't have thought this through. They'll bring her back," said Lois, pacing. "They must. They know what will happen if they don't."

Clark looked up at her as if he didn't like what she had just said. "What will happen, Lois?"

"Her father will go after them," she stated. "I've seen you mad, Clark. It's dangerous."

"When have I ever been dangerous?" His brow furrowed.

"Dangerous?" asked Perry, glancing between them. "Clark?"

Lois closed her eyes and concentrated on the other Clark, picking up Jefferson Cole by his neck and slamming him into a wall.

Clark blinked his eyes, staring at her. Had he seen the image she had projected to him? He took her hand in his. "That wasn't me, Lois. *I* won't hurt them."

"They have our daughter, Clark."

"They won't hurt her. They are trying to protect her. She's safe." He closed his eyes for a moment and then repeated, "She's safe."

"This rare medical condition, Lois, what exactly is it?"

Lois and Clark both turned and faced him, their jaws hanging open. Lois's brain was the first one to work. "A rare and potentially deadly allergy."

"An allergy?" Perry thought about this. "You must've had her tested then. To know about this condition."

"No," said Lois. "We discovered it by accident."

"Yes!" Clark said, jumping out of his seat and running out to his desk.

"*Yes?*" Lois snapped, following him. She snarled. "What do you mean, yes?"

Clark placed a call, then held up a finger as he was put on hold.

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"Margarite Javez," the voice on the other end of the phone said. *Wow, she has a beautiful accent*, thought Clark, glancing at his wife, hoping she didn't guess his thoughts. *How did Wayne work with that voice in his ear every day?*

"Ms. Javez. Clark Kent. Tell your boss I need to speak with

him immediately, please."

"Sorry, Mr. Kent. Mr. Wayne is out of the office on business today. I will pass on your message and he'll be in touch," Margarite informed him.

"Thanks," Clark said, hanging up. *Now what?*

"What was that about?" Lois asked, her hands on her hips.

Clark glanced over her shoulder at Perry who was watching them a tad too closely and lowered his voice. "You know the answer to that question already, Lois. Just review the facts in your head."

"I know that voice. Was that Margarite Javez you were speaking with on the phone?" she asked. He nodded.

Lois wandered back to her desk. She seemed to be in a daze, but he knew she was doing as he asked. Reviewing the facts. Someone had run a test on Lara's blood. Margarite was Wayne's personal assistant. Wayne had run a test of their daughter's blood? How would Bruce Wayne get a sample of Lara's blood? Where would he run such a test? Gotham Labs. Gotham Labs, where Penny's brother worked. Gotham Labs where their computers had exploded.

Lois gasped and her eyes opened wide as she turned to Clark. "No!"

"Afraid so," he replied.

"*This!* This was the secret you kept from me?" She slugged him in the arm and then shook her hand. "How could you keep this from me?"

Clark grinned sheepishly. Technically, that wasn't the secret he was keeping from his wife. He hadn't told Lois because, despite not completely trusting the man, he knew the sample was safe. His wife was right. He shouldn't have kept this information from her. She was Lara's mother. "I'm sorry, Lois. I should have told you."

"Damn straight. Anything else you failed to mention?"

He gulped, glancing away. He hadn't told Lois because of the Bureau 39 men who had tried to confiscate Gotham Lab's damaged mainframe computer and back-up servers. And he knew that if she knew for certain that Bureau 39 still existed, she would freak. She had had too many nightmares recently about them not to. She didn't need to know about his private Bureau 39 investigation. He expected her to blow up, but instead she took a deep breath and touched his arm.

"Clark. You can't keep things from me. We're in this together."

He pulled her into his arms, remembering the image she had sent him telepathically in Perry's office. What had made the other Clark so mad at Professor Cole? Had Cole done something to Lois in that dimension? Other than frame her for murder in this dimension? Had the other Clark killed the man? Cole had hit the wall so hard, he looked crumpled when he fell.

Clark tightened his arms around her. It had looked like they were in a padded cell. *Oh God! What had happened?* "We've both been keeping stuff from each other lately."

"I promise I will tell you what happened, but not now. Not today, Clark. Later. Okay?"

He smiled, kissing her forehead. "Later. Promise?"

She nodded.

***

The hours passed with still no word from either Jimmy or Penny. Neither of them answered their cell phones. It felt like Christmas Eve again, her eyes popping up to the big clock over the bullpen to see how much closer it was until four o'clock. At three thirty-five, a shadow darkened Lois's desk. She wasn't working. She was just staring at her computer. She hadn't even realized it had gone to screen saver mode. Glancing up she saw Clark.

"They're not coming."

"What? Have you heard something?" Lois asked, the pencil in her hand — that she had been tapping against her desk — breaking in two.

Clark shook his head. "We've got to call Henderson. Tell him why we aren't bringing Lara to S.T.A.R. Labs."

"They'll bring her back, Clark. They have to. There's still time. Maybe they've returned to the townhouse?" she said hopefully.

Clark shook his head and replied softly, "I just came from there. They haven't been back. I've listened. I've looked." He knelt down and rested his head against hers. "I just got off the phone with Constance, letting her know what's happened."

"Have you been able to reach her?" Lois asked, knowing he would know she wasn't talking about their lawyer. "My bond isn't as strong as yours."

"Don't say that, Lois. Lara loves you more than anyone. Our bond is different, not stronger," her husband reassured her. "She's fine. Safe. Happy." He sighed. "I only wish…"

Lois nodded. "Me, too." She picked up the phone and held it in her hand, not wanting to dial. Finally, she hung up. "I can't, Clark. I can't do it. They'll turn up."

Clark picked up the phone and dialed. "Inspector Henderson, please. Clark Kent calling." Lois could hear his voice shaking. He didn't want to turn their friends into kidnappers any more than she did.

Lois squeezed his hand and then walked away. She couldn't listen to this conversation. She went over to the coffee station, but she didn't want anything to drink. Instead she kept walking, standing at the window overlooking the break table. She never looked out this window anymore. She stood there staring out at the street below.

Once upon a time, she used to stand here every day and look for a glimpse of Superman. That was a long time ago. Now she was married to her hero and they had a daughter. Lois's life seemed so different than the one she had woken up to even that morning. Her daughter was missing. Their best friend and their nanny had taken her and soon would be fugitives. Jimmy knew. Penny had promised never to tell anyone. Had she broken this promise? How had Jimmy learned about Lara?

Lois turned away from the window and bumped into Clark.

"Henderson's on his way here."

She nodded and set her hand on Clark's chest for a moment, then moved past him on her way to Jimmy's computer. Clark followed her.

"I tried earlier. I didn't find anything. I couldn't check out the sketch program, because he's got that password-protected."

Lois sat down at the computer and double-clicked on the sketch program. A password window popped up. Her hands hovered over the keyboard.

"Nothing I tried worked," admitted Clark.

Lois typed *Ultra_Woman*. Error.

Lois_Lane. Error.

Clark_Kent. Error.

Superman. Error.

Lois took another breath. *Penny_Barnes.* Error.

Her fingers tapped the keys as she thought of another possibility.

SM_Loves_UW.

Clark raised an eyebrow at this password. Error.

She stretched her fingers. *CK_is_SM.* Lois glanced up at Clark and he closed his eyes. She hit enter. Error. She released a breath.

"Are you sure he knows?"

"He covered for you," she stated, rubbing her cold fingers together, before typing. *LL_is_UW.*

"No. How could he know that?" Clark stammered.

"Because we told him she's his girlfriend. He knows you'd never cheat on me."

Lois hit enter and the program opened. She reached back and took hold of Clark's hand.

"Oh my God, Lois."

"I know."

"How long do you think he's known?"

Lois shook her head, clicking on the directory. "Here are the sketches he did of the refugee couple's missing baby. And… Clark." She pointed the arrow of the cursor at two files entitled Lara1 and Lara2. She clicked on the first file. Up came the computer sketch of Lara she had seen him with a month before when Perry had made him clean out his desk. "Clark…"

"I see it, Lois."

The Lara1 file was a composite sketch of Lois and Superman. She closed the file. Then opened Lara2. This sketch, almost identical to the first, was a composite of her and Clark.

"Why would he do that?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't know. Either way, we'd better tell him to change his password." She deleted those files, closed out of the program and switched off Jimmy's computer. She glanced up at Clark.

"Well, now we know. It doesn't bring her back to us, does it?" Clark's voice sounded tired, withdrawn. "He was my best friend, Lois."

Lois wrapped her arms around him. "He still is, Clark. He did this to save her."

Her husband held on to her. "I wish he hadn't. I wish he had told me. I never would have let…"

"Me, either."

Perry walked up to them. "Any word?"

Lois could feel Clark shake his head.

"Henderson's here. I've put him in the conference room."

Lois let go of Clark and wrapped her arms around Perry, hugging him for the second time that day. "I'm sorry, Perry. We don't want to do this."

She heard their boss sniffle. "That boy made his bed. He's going to have to sleep in it."

As they reached the conference room, the elevator dinged. Lois glanced over at it and saw a familiar mop of tawny hair emerge.

"Jimmy!" Lois shouted, running to the elevators.

Clark beat her there, grabbing Jimmy by the arms. "Where's Lara?"

Jimmy glanced over his shoulder as Penny pushed Lara's stroller out of the elevator. Lois unsnapped her daughter and had her in her arms moments later. Clark hugged the two of them, closing the bond circle.

The moment was interrupted by a tap on Clark's shoulder. "Do me a favor, Kent. Don't hurt them."

Lois and Clark turned in unison at the sound of Bruce Wayne's voice.

"They're just kids," Bruce continued. "They thought they were helping."

Clark glared at him, putting himself between Lois and Lara and that man. "*I* don't hurt people, Wayne."

"Kids?" Penny scowled.

Lois placed a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "I knew you'd come to your senses."

Clark shifted his gaze to his friend. "You had us worried, Jimmy."

Jimmy looked down. "I'm sorry, CK. I kind of acted without thinking. Lois was freakin' and you were…"

A slight shake of Clark's head made Jimmy pause.

"Unreachable," Jimmy finished. He glanced at Penny. "We…"

"She was perfectly safe the whole time, Clark," Penny reassured them. "We were hoping you wouldn't find the note until…" She glanced at Bruce.

"Bruce, what are you doing here?" Lois said, glaring at him. "You aren't welcome here."

Bruce smiled. "It's good to see you again, too, Lois."

Perry and Henderson arrived at the elevators at this moment.

"What in the Sam Hill were you thinking, Olsen?" growled Perry.

Jimmy glanced at Clark and then back at the floor. "I wasn't, Chief."

"It seems to be a horrible misunderstanding, Henderson," said Clark. "We won't need to press charges after all."

Jimmy gulped, glancing at Clark. "Charges?" Clark was staring at him sternly. His friend shifted his focus to Perry.

"What in blue blazes did you think he was going to do, Jimmy? You took his child," the Chief reproached the young man.

"CK, I… I …" Jimmy stammered. "I was only thinking of you and Lois."

Clark patted his arm. "We know that, Jimmy, which is why we waited until the last minute to contact Henderson here. But Lois and I promised to submit Lara for a blood test if we were unable to find the refugee couple's missing baby. We were under legal obligation to do so."

Henderson sighed. "You still are, Kent. Ready?"

Bruce stepped forward. "No, they're not."

"Don't interfere, Wayne," said Clark, trying to move around him. "This doesn't concern you."

Bruce continued to block their path. "Actually, it does. As new owner of the *Daily Planet*, I cannot have my star investigative reporters distracted by personal problems."

"It's none of your business, Bruce," said Lois. "Just butt out."

"It's too late for that, Lois. You see, your nanny Penny here kindly supplied me with a sample of your daughter's blood. With this sample, I was able to get a DNA genetic match for Lara's biological parents."

Lois froze and slowly turned back to face him. "Excuse me?"

Bruce smiled. "I was able to track down Lara's biological parents. They were resolute about their reasons for leaving their daughter with you."

Lois scoffed. "*You* spoke to them?"

Nodding, he pulled out a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to Henderson. "Here is my sworn affidavit stating that I have been in contact with Lara's biological parents, that they have named the Kents here as legal guardians of their daughter, until which time the Kents can legally adopt her, and thus giving up all their parental rights at that time to the Kents and only the Kents. On that one fact, they were more than adamant."

Lois poked her finger into Bruce's chest. "You took a sample of my daughter's blood and had it analyzed without our permission? Then you tracked down her birth parents without informing us? Do you know how many boundaries you just crossed?"

Bruce shrugged. "The greater good…"

"The greater good?" Clark snapped. "What? Invading my family's privacy, so that Lois and I could do our jobs so that you could sell a few more newspapers… that's the greater good?"

"Win-win." Bruce smiled indulgently.

"Mr. Wayne… I think what Clark is saying here… you don't fight in battles to which you haven't been invited," explained Perry. "Also, did you say that you're the new owner of the *Daily Planet*? As in Multiworld Communications is gone?"

"Yes, I have been in negotiations with Mindy Church over the *Daily Planet* for the last few weeks. The papers were signed last night." He tapped on the railing to get everyone's attention. Then he announced to the newsroom, "Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who don't know me, I'm Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises and new owner of the *Daily Planet*."

"This does have a familiar ring to it," whispered Lois with

derision. Clark's lips were pressed into a line.

Perry held out his hand with a grin. "Welcome on board, Mr. Wayne. I'm Perry White, Editor-in-Chief here at the *Daily Planet*."

"Nice to finally meet you, Mr. White. Lois speaks highly of you."

"I wish I could say the same of you," Perry chuckled.

"I must admit, it was that interview that Lois gave…" Bruce coughed. "I gave to Lois several months ago that intrigued me. Never have I had such hard-hitting questions. Never one to back down from a fight or a question unanswered. I find such perseverance in this day and age to be quite rare in the media industry as a whole, especially in the age of TV, the internet, and tabloid journalism. Such qualities should be rewarded so I threw my hat into the ring to buy this dusty old paper and make her sparkle again."

"Dusty? *Old*?" growled Perry. "I'm betting you don't know anything about putting a newspaper to bed."

"Don't care to either, Mr. White. That's your job. I don't plan on making any modifications to your operations, just a few minor upgrades and no layoffs." He raised a brow at Perry, who grinned ecstatically.

Jimmy looked at Clark. "I've heard this speech before."

Clark nodded. So had he.

"I just want to make sure that there are good, honest people out there working for truth and justice and…"

"That's Superman," Perry laughed.

"And nobody works better with Superman than the *Daily Planet*. He loves you guys. Or, at least, used to. I must say, I've hated the editorial direction this paper has taken since Multiworld Communications took over and I'd like to see it go back to the good, honest truth. None of this pro and con reporting. News is facts, not opinion."

"Even if it means an exposé on our new owner?" Lois inquired, shifting her daughter over to her other hip.

Bruce's smile widened. "Clark, she's got spunk, I've got to give her that. I can see why you love her so." He stared at Lois and raised his brows. "Bring it on, honey, I've nothing to hide."

"Don't call me 'honey,'" she snarled, enunciating every word.

Clark stepped between them again. "I'm not working for you, Wayne. Not now, not ever. Come on, Lois." He walked down the ramp to his desk.

"Clark?" Lois asked, following after him. "Clark!"

He grabbed his coat. "Let's go home. Unless Henderson still…" He glanced over at the inspector who followed them down to their desks.

"I don't know, Kent. This paperwork of Wayne's looks legit. Let me talk it over with the Captain and the D.A. and I'll get back to you. If only he revealed who her birth parents…."

"Sealed and locked in my vault, Detective. Should Lara or the Kents ever wish to know, I'll give it to them and only them," Bruce Wayne had followed them, too.

"Inspector," corrected Henderson. "I'm an Inspector."

"Butt out of my life, Wayne," Clark insisted, taking hold of Lois's elbow.

"I hope you reconsider, Clark. There will always be a job here at the *Daily Planet* for you."

"Last time I checked, this is still a free country, Wayne. A democracy, not a dictatorship. I get to choose with whom and for whom I work." Clark looked at the billionaire with contempt. "And it's not you."

Bruce chuckled. "Honestly, Clark. I'm hurt. You'd work for Luthor, for Luckaby, and even Mindy Church, but not for Wayne Enterprises. I find that quite ironic."

"Don't forget, I know all about you. All your dirty secrets." Clark glared at him, eye to eye, nose to nose. "I could leave this job with a bang."

Bruce's smile grew larger. "Like you, Clark, I have nothing to hide."

"Clark?" Lois took hold of her husband's arm. "He's not worth it."

Clark hesitated a moment before shooting a final glare at Wayne, then accepted Lara from Lois as she put on her coat and grabbed her briefcase. Without another word, they walked back to where Penny stood with the stroller by the elevators.

"I'm so sorry," Penny said as Lois strapped Lara into the stroller.

Lois stood up and held out her hand. "The keys to my house, please."

"I never meant to hurt you or Clark. I was only trying to help." Penny dug into her purse and pulled out the Kent's house keys, handing them over.

"We know that, Penny. But you've crossed too many lines." Lois put the keys into her coat pocket. "Not that I really need to say this, but you're fired."

Penny sighed. "Yeah. I figured that was coming. No hard feelings, I hope."

Clark looked at her with a shake of his head. "In time, perhaps."

"Well, it wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway. Bruce has offered me a job, programming something for his secret weapons division while I attend graduate school. He's offered me a full scholarship to Gotham University."

Lois raised a brow and turned to glance at Bruce Wayne across the newsroom. "Weapons division, huh?" Didn't he tell her that Wayne Enterprises didn't make weapons?

Penny's eyes opened wide. "No. Not weapons. Top secret… Crap."

Clark chuckled. "Don't fret it, Penny. Just try harder. Some secrets need to be kept."

She nodded. "Right, I know." Then she stared Clark in the eyes, lowering her voice. "He's not that bad of a guy, you know, under that façade. You really won't work with him? He could use a friend, though I bet he'd be the last one to admit it."

"What's that old adage, with friends like that, who needs enemies?" Clark replied, pushing the elevator button.

Penny grabbed his arm. "Clark, he was trying to protect me, okay? He saw that I was scared, afraid of what you might do, because I sent that tissue to my brother. Once I realized what I had done, who she really is, I tried to have him destroy it." She glanced at Lois. "He didn't know it would hurt her. Trust me on this. He was just trying to protect me. He's a decent guy, really he is."

The elevator opened and Clark entered without another word. Lois glanced back at her, before pushing the stroller forward. "You know he doesn't date his employees, Penny, don't you?"

"Date him? This is an employment opportunity of a lifetime, Lois. There are other men out there I can date," she said as the elevator closed.

Clark wrapped his arms around his wife. "Alone at last."

Lois started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Bruce Wayne is smitten and Penny isn't going to give him the time of day."

"What? No, you heard her. They're just friends, Lois."

Her chuckles became laughter. "Clark, I've seen that expression on his face too many times. That isn't friendship."

"What expression?"

Lois turned around and wrapped her arms around his neck. "The way Clark Kent looks at his Lois Lane. I know smitten when I see it."

Clark pointed at his face. "Oh, you mean, this expression?" He kissed her.

"So, you really going to quit the *Daily Planet*?" she asked.

"I can't work for him, Lois."

She pressed her lips together. "Going to tell me why?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I can't."

"Is he really worse than Luthor? Is he Bureau 39?"

The elevator stopped and she turned around and took hold of the stroller handles again. Clark still had his arms around her. "Different, Lois," he whispered. "But not worse. I'm still not sure what he is."

"A socially inept clod with a big ego and a pocketbook to match, who wants to control his world with an iron fist?"

Clark laughed softly. "Something like that."

"Definitely not friendship material."

"Definitely not."

Lois smiled, happy to finally be heading home with her family at last.

***

In the other dimension, Professor Cole had tied up his pregnant wife in a straitjacket and held her at gunpoint in a padded cell at S.T.A.R. Labs, because she had accused him of murder while delusional. Cole had even knocked Dr. Klein over the head for trying to stop him from injecting her with some kind of sedative. No wonder the other Clark had knocked the man out.

Clark ran his fingers through his hair. He wondered what he would have done to the man, if he had seen him treating his pregnant wife like that. He remembered what he did to Ralph just for insulting Penny. What would he have done if someone else had taken Lara? Someone he did not trust? Lois told him that the other Clark didn't have his emotions in check as well as Clark did. But still… Clark wondered.

Lara fell asleep after her dinner of squash and rice cereal, never knowing how worried her parents had been the whole afternoon. It was late. Clark and Lois had spent the evening talking. She told him more tales from her year abroad. Most had been easier to hear than that one with Cole. The more distance she put between her and the other dimension, the easier it was for her to speak about it. He knew she was still holding something back. He only wished he knew what.

Lois was upstairs in the shower. *Maybe he should join her*, he thought, a smile spreading over his lips. He stood up as the phone began to ring. He didn't want to answer it. After the day they had had, he really didn't want to talk to anyone but Lois.

The machine picked up.

"Clark, we need to talk."

Clark picked up the phone. "I don't *need* to talk to you, Wayne."

"Then why did you pick up the phone?" Bruce snapped back. "Luthor Towers. Roof. Ten minutes." Then he hung up.

Clark sighed. Why had he picked up the phone?

He zipped upstairs. Lois was just stepping out of the shower.

"Lois, I'm going to patrol."

She stuck her head out of the bathroom. "Okay. Hurry home."

He kissed her lightly and then deepened it. "I love you, Wife."

"I love you too, Husband."

Clark's hand slipped under her towel and she swatted it away. "Go patrol." Lois laughed. "Naughty boy."

He grinned, lowering his glasses. His wife slammed the bathroom door shut.

"I can still see you," he teased and heard her giggle.

Clark smiled and zipped back downstairs, spinning into his blue suit and jumping out the window.

Batman was waiting for him. Superman wondered if he had called from the roof.

"What do you want?" Superman asked him, his annoyance shining through his words.

The Caped Crusader didn't speak for a minute. "Bruce was only trying to help Clark, Superman."

The Man of Steel pressed his lips together so Batman couldn't see the smile that was trying to reach his mouth. Did it sound that funny when he talked about himself in the third person? Or was this whole situation ridiculous? Two grown men in costumes, standing on the roof in the middle of the night talking about themselves as if they weren't there. The only thing stopping him from laughing was his dislike of the other man.

"He did help," Superman finally admitted. "What I don't understand is why."

Batman jumped down off his perch on top of an air conditioner unit and leaned against it. "Would it make Clark feel better if he knew Bruce did it for purely selfish reasons?"

"It might." Superman raised a curious eyebrow, wondering how helping Lois and Clark out of their adoption mess with Lara could possibly help Bruce Wayne.

"I didn't want everyone to know," Batman said, accidentally slipping into the first person. He cleared his throat. "He didn't want Clark's wife and child put in harm's way, if there was a way he could prevent it."

Superman waited to hear the selfish reasoning, but Batman had gone quiet. Clark waited and waited and then he realized what was missing. Grudgingly, he murmured, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Batman replied. "Was that so hard?"

"Extremely," Superman confessed.

"See, I told you, I'm not that bad of a guy."

Superman rolled his eyes. "I'm never working for you."

"I never asked *you* to nor would I ever assume that you would. But I see no harm in letting Clark Kent continue to work at the *Daily Planet*. It's a better newspaper with him there."

"Why buy the paper at all? Bruce Wayne has never shown an interest in media before," Superman probed.

"Again, purely selfish reasons. Mindy Church was driving you crazy, depressing you with all the negative coverage. It was showing up in your work."

"Excuse me?" snarled Superman.

"That slip-up about your wife, for one."

"That was Red Kryptonite," Superman snapped.

"I thought Red Kryptonite made your powers go all haywire."

"That's before they grazed me with that Green Kryptonite bullet. Now, it just makes my emotions out of control again."

"Again? It's happened before?"

Superman shrugged. He didn't really wish to discuss it.

"And I thought I had problems."

"It's more annoying than bad. Bullets don't harm me, but a little exposure to this rock—" Superman didn't finish that sentence.

"I hope you don't mind that Bruce purchased the paper."

"It feels like he's trying to control Clark's life," replied Superman.

"He's trying to give Clark back the control he once had in his life."

That would be nice, thought Superman. "Why?"

"So you can be the best superhero you can be without unnecessary distractions."

"Like Clark's boss trying to sabotage his every move?"

"And Social Services trying to take away Clark's daughter."

That made sense, except it didn't explain the selfish reasoning behind it. Superman decided to use the old stand-by. Crossing his arms, he waited. And waited.

Finally, Batman spoke. "Because if you are at your best, you can help me be my best."

A-ha, the selfish reasoning. "How?"

"By being my sounding board. By being someone I can talk to when something goes wrong. You've got Lois, and I guess I've got Alfred, but they don't really understand how it feels when

you do everything right, but the person you're trying to help still dies."

Superman sighed. "That's always hard."

"Alfred says I need someone to talk to who knows what I'm going through. Otherwise it's a festering wound. His words. You're the only one I can talk to about that stuff, about the drawbacks to being a hero."

"That's not true. I'm sure there are policemen, fire fighters, paramedics, and soldiers in Gotham City who know exactly what you're going through," Superman reminded him.

"True, but Bruce can't discuss things with them without being laughed out of the room. And I can't really talk about it dressed like this," he said, gesturing towards himself.

Superman nodded. He understood. The life of a superhero wasn't an easy one and it could often be lonely. If he didn't have Lois or his folks… he looked at Batman. Bruce Wayne had lost his folks when he was a kid and he didn't have a Lois figure in his life. Clark felt a chill run down his spine. In many ways, Batman was very similar to the other Clark, before Lois found his Ultra Woman. Alone and adrift.

Superman sat down on the edge of the roof and looked out over the city. A part of him wanted to have someone he could talk to about all the crap that had filled his life in the past year. Another part of him still didn't trust the man.

After a few minutes Batman came and sat down next to him. "Metropolis is really a beautiful city."

"When the haze lifts, Gotham's not half bad either," remarked Superman.

Batman chuckled. "Haze? Is that the polite way to tell me that my city is polluted?"

Superman smiled. "It could use some cleaning up. That haze is hell to fly through."

Batman's chuckle turned to a chortle. "I'm doing my best. One toxic dumper at a time. I can't clean it up too quickly or you might invade my turf."

Superman shrugged. "I don't know about that. Metropolis is my home. You're doing all right on your own."

The man in black smiled. "Thanks. Coming from you it means something."

"You could cut down on the hurting people though. There's a little good in everyone."

Batman shook his head. "Hey, I've only sent three bad guys to the hospital this month and one of them only needed stitches."

"I wouldn't go touting those numbers. We're only a week into November. There are still the holidays to make it through. It's the lull before the storm."

"What is it with villains? Why do they always have to make a big show at the end of the year?"

Superman shrugged. "Hormonal imbalance?"

"Better not suggest that around Lois."

"I'm a darn nice guy, not stupid," the man in blue replied.

"She told you about that?"

Superman nodded.

"Frankly, I'm surprised you haven't told her about me," Batman muttered.

"There's not much to tell."

"Except who I am."

Superman shrugged again. "Not my secret to say."

"That's a vote of confidence."

"Then I should fly home and tell her now." Superman leaned forward.

Batman chuckled. "That's your decision. I'm not Superman's boss."

The Man in Blue sat up again. "Lois handles information better if she discovers it for herself. I'll only tell her she's right if she guesses."

"As long as you don't play twenty questions. I hate that game." Batman shook his head. "It's a favorite among bad guys though."

"Don't I know it. 'Guess what's inside this lead-lined box, Superman. I'll give you twenty questions.' Ugh." He rolled his eyes.

A hush fell over their conversation as they looked over the city.

"It's quiet up here."

"Not for all of us," replied Superman with a sigh.

"It must be a pain hearing all the screams."

Superman shrugged. "I'm used to it."

"Are you?" Batman glanced at him. "I hear the screams even when they aren't there."

Superman didn't say anything.

"They wake me up at night."

"Me too," Superman admitted. "Me, too."

"Is Clark going to go into work tomorrow?" Batman asked after another few minutes of silence.

"Somebody needs to watch Lara."

"*You?*"

"Sure, why not? Uncle Super is great with kids."

"Uncle Super?" Batman inquired incredulously.

Superman wished he could see the man's facial expressions; it was nearly impossible with that mask on. "It's a long story."

"What if there's an emergency?"

Superman smiled wickedly. "I hear Batman's still in town."

Batman held up his hands. "Oh, no! I'm not covering for you."

"You're right. Someone might think we're friends. The locals can handle it and if it's bad, Clark can take Lara to the office and drop her off with Lois."

"We'll have to do something about that. Metropolis can't have a house husband for a superhero."

Superman looked at him skeptically. That man had a lot to learn about women. Luckily, that wasn't in his job description… any of them. They continued to sit and watch the lights in silence. Suddenly, a squeal of tires and the *Bam! Bam!* of gunfire drew their attention.

"Duty calls." Superman shoved himself off the ledge. "Call me if you ever need to talk," he said, disappearing into the dark.

"Likewise," he heard the man in black reply.

***

It was past midnight when Clark crawled into bed. He draped his arm over her and sniffed. Lois smiled, wondering if he noticed her new shampoo. He pulled her closer and kissed her neck. He noticed.

She rolled over and faced him. "How was patrolling?"

"Fine."

"Anything to write about?"

"Do you need a Superman exclusive?" her husband teased.

"Always."

"How about this: 'After a busy night of flying the skies, Superman came home and made love with his beautiful wife'?"

Lois raised a brow. "Superman's married? I missed that press release. That will certainly be newsworthy down at the paper." She grinned in jest. "If we worked at the *National Whisper*."

Clark softly kissed her. "I'm not leaving the *Planet*."

This was a change of heart. She wondered what Bruce Wayne had said to him. Was he even going to mention to her that they met? Didn't Clark realize that he left the message on the answering machine?

"For now." He kissed her again. Longer. "We are not going into work tomorrow. We need a day together as a family."

"But…"

Clark kissed her again, cutting off the flimsy excuse she had been about to mutter. She ran her hands across his bare chest before wrapping her arms around his neck. Score one for the

strawberry-scented shampoo.

***

Lois looked across the Kents' living room at her family. Lara was ringing a jingle bell at her husband's feet as he floated above her to put the ornaments at the top of the tree. Martha was baking gingerbread men in the kitchen and the aroma permeated the house. Jonathan was squirreled away in his workshop with Jack. They were working on a top-secret Santa gift for Lara.

Jack. Lois shook her head. He seemed so different from that squirmy thief who had broken into Clark's apartment all those years ago. Relaxed. Happy. Buff. A man, not a boy. She had to hand it to farming; it sure required muscles city boys never developed.

She gazed at Clark again, happy that he had grown up here, developing and toning those muscles. *Down girl*, she thought, fanning herself with the note cards she was helping Martha organize for her gift baskets.

Clark glanced over at her with a smile that could melt chocolate. He had moved on to candy canes. He handed one to Lara and she banged it on the floor into dust.

"I don't think she's old enough for hard candy yet, Clark," Lois warned him.

Her husband looked down at Lara's pile of peppermint dust and rolled his eyes with a shake of his head, before heading off to find his mother's hand vacuum.

As Martha came in from the kitchen, she removed her apron. "There! The last batch is in the oven. Once they're cool, we can add them to the baskets and we'll be done." She glanced at the tree. "Oh, Clark. How wonderful." She scooped up Lara as Clark began to vacuum up the remains of Lara's candy cane.

When he was done, he stood back with one arm around his mother's shoulders and admired his handy work. "It's nice to be home for Christmas this year, Mom."

"We're glad you're home, too, Clark," she replied with a glance back at Lois. "All of you."

If Lois had known this storybook Christmas was what life with Clark would be like, she might have kept on kissing Clark that day in Trask's plane. She swallowed, looking down. What had made her think of him? She hadn't a thought of him in over a month.

"Uh-oh. Lara's wet. I'll change her," Martha volunteered, heading upstairs.

Alone at last, Clark was by her side and had his arms around her an instant later. "Whatcha thinking about?"

She sighed. She still couldn't tell him. "About how nice it was of Perry to give us the holidays off."

"We worked last Christmas and this Thanksgiving. And that's not what you were thinking." Clark knew her too well.

Lois wrapped her arms around his neck. "I was thinking how much I'd like to sneak away for an hour or two alone with you."

"That sounds like a good idea." Clark kissed her. She knew how to distract his curious mind. "But that's not what you were thinking about." Or not.

She licked her dry lips. "Actually I *was* thinking about that." She had been, before her thoughts had turned to Trask. *Damn!*

"Ah. There again. That's what I want you to tell me about."

Lois raised a brow. "Are you reading my mind, Clark Kent?"

"I wouldn't dare try." Clark chuckled. "I was reading your eyes and I saw a shadow pass over them."

Lois sighed, glancing away. Luckily, she was saved by Martha calling to Clark.

He looked at his wife with pinched lips. "This conversation isn't over."

Yes, it is, she thought.

Lois followed Clark upstairs to his parents' room. Martha was sitting on the floor by her bed next to an open trunk. She glanced up when they entered.

"I was looking at Lara's baby blanket," his mother started saying. The blanket was lying on the floor next to her. "And I realized it looked like yours, so I brought it in here to compare them." As she pulled the dark blue blanket from the trunk, a folded newspaper fell out. "Clark. They are the same. Identical."

Clark glanced over his shoulder at his wife.

"That's because they are identical, Martha. Clark gave Lara his," she explained. "He wouldn't take no for an answer."

Clark nodded. She could tell her husband didn't want to talk about the other Clark. He rarely did.

Lois set her hand on her mother-in-law's shoulder. "The other Clark."

"Oh," Martha said thoughtfully, glancing down at the newspaper. "That's strange." She picked it up and opened it, dropping a few more items on the floor. She turned over the paper and flipped the pages with a shake of her head. "Why would I keep this?" She shrugged, tossing it to a nearby trash can.

Lois walked over and retrieved the paper. She opened it and stared at the headline of the top story. February 26th. This was the newspaper that H.G. Wells brought to her the day she had found out she was pregnant and cursed. It slipped from her fingers as she stared at Martha. "Oh, my God, Martha. You knew?"

Martha didn't follow. "Knew what, dear?"

Lois enveloped her in a hug. "I never wanted you to know, Martha. That's why I lied to you. You weren't supposed to know."

"About what?" Clark had been quiet to that point.

"The curse," she whispered.

Clark glanced at his mom and knelt down beside them.

"It's the first time I've been happy that the Bummer-B-Gone wiped her memories," admitted Lois. "I wished it had wiped mine."

But Clark wasn't listening. He had picked up the two photos off the floor.

"Lois?"

Martha glanced down at the photo. "No, sweetie, that's Lucy, the other Clark's… oh!" She gasped, covering her mouth with a quick glance at Lois. "I remember."

"What do you remember, Mom?"

"Clark — the other Clark — gave me these photos when he came to help with Tempus. This one is of Lois's secret identity. And this one…" She took the photo of Lucy, revealing the ultrasound photo. "This is Lara."

Lois hugged her. Martha remembered! Then she pulled back glancing at the newspaper in the trash can. How much did she remember? Oh, if she never remembered that horrible photo of Clark and the accompanying article. She wouldn't wish that knowledge on anyone.

***

Clark stared at the grainy photo in his hand. His daughter. Try as he might, it still looked like a grey blob. He focused his eyes on it and could barely make out the outline of a head and an arm.

"I could never see more than a grey blob," Lois admitted with a chuckle.

Clark laughed. "Truthfully, that's pretty much all I see, too. Even with my eyesight."

Lois kissed his cheek. "I'm glad I'm not—"

"Lois," Martha interrupted, staring at a number 10 envelope in her hands. His name in his wife's handwriting was written across the front.

Lois grabbed the letter and was out the door faster than he had ever seen her move before. It took a second of staring at his mom's dazed expression to connect it to his wife's reaction. He caught her on the stairs.

"Give me the letter."

"No." She pulled free and made it down a few more steps, before he blocked her path again.

"Lois."

"Clark."

"Give me the letter," he repeated.

"No." She strained against him. "Let me by, Clark."

"What's in the letter, Lois?"

"It's nothing, Clark."

He scoffed. "Nothing?"

"Nothing, Clark. It wouldn't even exist if your mother hadn't forgotten."

"Forgotten what?"

"To destroy it."

Clark glanced upstairs. The newspaper. His mind flashed to H.G. Wells showing him the newspaper of Lois's death as they were about to begin their honeymoon. Was that the newspaper of her death, if he hadn't returned from New Krypton? What had it said?

Lois pushed past him and made it to the living room fireplace.

"Lois." He was standing in front of her again, holding out his hand. "Give me the letter."

She tore it into pieces. "No, Clark." Taking his outstretched hand in hers, she said, "Clark, let it go." As she spoke these words, she tossed the remnants of the letter into the fireplace.

Clark pressed his lips together, shook her hand free, moved the fireplace gate, and retrieved the pieces of the letter. Only a couple of pieces had been tanned by the fire.

Lois stared at him as he moved to the coffee table. He removed everything to the floor and then quickly, at super speed, worked to put the pieces back together.

"Clark, don't," she murmured.

He raised a brow. "*Don't?*" He finished putting the pieces back together.

Lois put a hand on his shoulder. "You don't want to read that letter." Her warning was but a mere whisper.

He scoffed. "*You* don't want me to read it."

The hand on his shoulder tightened. "If you love me…" Her voice broke.

Clark sighed and placed his hand over hers with a glance up at her. "It's because I love you that I need to read this letter."

A solitary tear crept down her cheek. "Clark, please."

As he turned back to the letter, her hand slipped from his shoulder.

June 22, 1996

Dearest Clark;

For once I am at a loss for words. I do not know how to write this letter. Worse, I don't know how you can read it. Since you are reading this letter, it means I have not returned alive from my trip to the other dimension. Go ahead and state the obvious, Lane. Sorry.

Guess what, honey? H.G. Wells told me that our love is cursed. Big surprise there. We are cursed to love each other, lifetime after lifetime, and yet cursed to die if we act upon that love. Ooops!

Remember how I told you to forget? I hope you weren't able to do that. I know I wasn't. The way you held me in your arms. Your gentle touch. Your fiery kisses. The way we fit together so well. The way you… well, you know. I should have told you this then, but you're amazing, wonderful, fantastic, better than the best ever, worth dying for, worth living for… I'm trying to come up with a better word than Super, but I nailed it on the first try. Wow! Clark, you're a studmuffin. Don't let anyone ever tell you anything different. No matter how many curses they throw at us, I wouldn't take back that night. How could I go back in time and erase the night you and I became one? Literally. Nope. No, sirree. Ain't happening.

Growing in my tummy, too small for probably even super x-ray vision, is a little Clark or a little Lois. I don't want to go, but staying here will guarantee our death. I know going to the other dimension will take me farther away from you, so far away that I might never return, but I must try. If there is even the slightest chance that this child will survive the curse, even if I don't, I have to take this chance. For you. Otherwise I am agreeing to kill a part of you and I cannot do that. I love you too much.

My love for you is too great for words, but I'll give it a shot anyway. I give you my life, Husband. I give up everything and everyone precious to me for the chance to save you… us… our child. You promised to return to me; unfortunately, now I am unable to return to you. I have to go away, Clark. If I stay in our dimension, you will die as well. I'm hoping that by making this trip I can at least save your life.

If anyone can save me, it's Superman. Only according to H.G. Wells, you aren't returning back to Earth until the end of February 1997; by then it will be too late. Don't blame the other Clark; I know he will do everything in his power to return me and the baby safely to you. He is an honorable man. He is you. So, this will probably weigh heavily on him as it does on you.

Know that I want nothing more out of life than to be surrounded by your love and you gave me that — with your heart, your soul, and finally your body. Please know that there is not anything more that you could have given me. I have never doubted your love for me. Do you know how rare a gift that is?

For the life of me, I do not ever want to cause you pain. I know that the grief you must feel at this moment must be greater than any pain you've ever felt; know that my anguish at leaving you is equal if not greater than the knife that currently pierces your heart. It is my greatest wish that while you are reading this letter, you are holding that little bit of hope I am trying to save for you in your arms.

Okay. I can't end this letter like this. How about some happy thoughts? Country line dancing in Smallville at the Corn Festival. Hey, remember that silly woman who danced in the chicken costume? What was her name? Lola! Lola Dane. How about that woman who barged into your apartment and tried to strip for you in that harem suit? Oh, wait. That was me. Thank you for being such a gentleman. Playing games in the honeymoon suite at the Lexor. Kissing me when the maid came in. Mmmm. Did I mention what a good kisser you are? I didn't marry Lex, not because he got arrested, but because I realized that if I was going to marry anyone it was going to be my best friend, Clark Kent.

Dancing with you after the Cost Mart Ball. That Christmas we spent together, just you and me and enough food to feed the entire Daily Planet staff. That weekend you spent blind in my apartment. Okay, maybe that's not a good memory for you, but I loved that you felt you could trust me. That you needed me. Our first proper date. Our first real kiss. I knew then that you'd sweep me off my feet, Clark Kent.

Proposing to me in the rain by the fountain. Clark, I almost said 'yes'. You promised you wouldn't leave if the earth opened up at your feet. You made it through the whole proposal without bolting once. Stayed with me in the pouring rain and finished what you started. That in itself almost made me say 'yes'. Know that I wanted to say 'yes'. I was just scared. It's scary when you discover that the man of your dreams and your best friend are the same person rolled up together in one delicious package.

You know, don't you, that the first time I desired you was when I walked into that dumpy little room at the Hotel Apollo and saw you wrapped in just that towel? You thought I was going to write something about the blue suit, didn't you? Ha!

The first time you spun into the Superman suit, right there in front of me, you took my breath away. Not a small feat for a boy from Kansas. I thought, that man… that amazing man… loves me… wants me… out of all the women in the world… he wants me. How lucky can one girl get? Floating up above the clouds

and having you wrap me in your cape. You are the man for me, Clark Kent. The one and only.

Remember that vacation we took to that tropical isle? No hotel, the bugs. Did I really bring four suitcases? You took a bad situation and made it better. Just you, no powers. That's really when I knew I'd say 'yes'. Couple's therapy as Mr. & Mrs. Hawk, when you floated above the bed. Oh, Clark, if you only knew what I was really thinking. Making up. I like making up with you. Ultra Woman — oh, God, that horrible lavender suit. Knowing I was going to marry the man of my dreams. Kissing you. Kissing you. Kissing you, some more.

This is not goodbye. For I will see you again and love you again in another lifetime. Until then, I love you, always.

Mrs. Lois Studmuffin

Mrs. Lois Studmuffin? Clark shook his head and heard the back kitchen door open and close. He glanced around. Where did Lois go? He blew into the kitchen, grabbed his jacket and was out the back door a moment later. It was bright as daylight with the moon reflecting on the snow.

"Lois! Lois! Don't run away from me," he said, chasing after her through the two feet high drifts. "Tell me what that letter means?"

"Clark, please," she pleaded, running from the house, from him, towards the trees. Luckily, the thick snow slowed her down. "You were never supposed to see that. I wish you had let me burn it."

"Then why did you write it?"

"If Lara and I had died in the other dimension because of the curse, I wanted you to know the truth. I owed you that much."

"Don't you owe me the truth now?" he asked. "You didn't tell me what would have happened, Lois. Tell me now."

Lois fell to her knees in the snow, crying. "I can't, Clark. I can't tell you."

Clark knelt in the snow next to her, wrapping his arms around her. "If it's that bad, you shouldn't keep it to yourself. It's a future that did not happen. You are safe now. The curse did not kill you and it did not kill me. It was like a bad dream, Lois. Tell me and the pain will go away."

Lois gasped, pulling him tightly against her. Her words contradicted her actions. "Go away! You can't hear this. You cannot know what will happen to you. If you know your future, you may try to change something and then not survive. You need to go away now and stay the course."

"Lois, I am not going anywhere," Clark told her. "The world could open up at our feet and I would not leave you."

A male voice spoke aloud, from behind him. "*Lois Lane: DNA authorized and approved."*

"What was that?" Clark gasped, glancing over his shoulder.

"It was nothing, Clark," Lois told him, holding on to him. "Stay with me or the world will open itself up and swallow us whole."

He strained against her, craning his neck to look towards the barn. He could break free, but he didn't want to hurt her. "I definitely heard something, Lois. Someone is there."

"It's just me, Clark. When I am gone, I'll tell you the truth about the curse," Lois murmured. "Go. Or the Earth will swallow you whole."

"Lois, you aren't making any sense. I'm not going to leave you and the Earth is not swallowing you."

"*Please, Clark, listen to her. I know that you love me, but you can't see me right now. She needs you to stay with her,"* a voice whispered on the wind. It sounded almost like Lois. But he had Lois, here, in his arms. Who did the voice belong to?

"*Lois Lane: Voice Fingerprint authorized,"* the male voice of the time machine sleigh announced.

"Oh my God. That's you and the time machine," Clark sputtered. "This is where you disappeared off to that day in the barn last year, when you ran away from me."

"Yes, Clark, but remember, I always come back to you."

Clark stood up, pulling Lois off the snowy ground and into his arms. He lifted them into the air and the dark night sky. Minutes later, they arrived at their townhouse in Metropolis.

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The house was cold and dark, except for one lamp in the corner they had set on timer. Lois cupped his face in her hands and placed a soft kiss on his lips with a shiver.

"Let me just get out these wet clothes," she said, turning towards the stairs.

He caught her hand. "Is this a stall tactic or are you trying to seduce me, Mrs. Kent?"

She glanced back at him. "Yes. And always, Mr. Kent. But mostly, I'm cold." She shivered again.

"I can warm you up."

Lois grinned at his naughty suggestion and then realized he wasn't being naughty. He really didn't want her to go upstairs. "Just let me change my clothes, Clark. Why don't you light us a fire?"

Reluctantly, he let go of her hand.

"I promise I won't come down in that new teddy I picked up."

He cleared his throat. "New teddy?"

She winked and jogged up the stairs. When she came downstairs a few minutes later in sweatpants and a t-shirt, he had built a fire and opened a bottle of wine. He had made a cozy nest of blankets and pillows in front of the hearth.

Clark glanced up from where he sat staring into the fire. She noticed a hint of disappointment flash in his eyes, but he covered it up quickly.

"What?"

He glanced away, blushing slightly. "You said something about a new teddy."

Lois laughed. *Men!* She shook her head. Mention lingerie and every logical part of them flew out the window. "I said I *wasn't* going to wear it."

"Right." He nodded, holding out a hand to her.

She took his hand and allowed him to guide her to the floor. Soon, the heat from both the fire and her husband had warmed her. "I could still put it on, if you think it would make this easier for you," Lois suggested, pretending to stand.

"Sit," he commanded. "This isn't really a lingerie conversation. You're stalling again."

She flashed him a grin. "Guilty."

Clark leaned over and kissed her. "You're safe. No one is going to hurt you. Now, tell me, what was on that newspaper that Mr. Wells showed you?"

Lois shivered again, despite being quite warm. "No, Clark."

"No?" He sighed. "Why not?"

Lois took a sip of her wine, thinking about the best way to word what she had decided.

But Clark spoke first. "I know that you would have died because of the curse, Lois. I also know I would have showed up from New Krypton after the fact."

She raised her eyes to his. "How?"

"I didn't become Lois Lane's husband and partner just based on my good looks, you know." He smiled. "I have my sources."

Ah. "Star told you." And yes, good looks were only part of the package that was Clark Kent.

He nodded. "She said something strange, though, that I didn't understand completely. She said that Superman originally wasn't going to return from New Krypton, but that I would have returned from my assignment."

Lois didn't look at him. She couldn't. She focused on her wine.

"Lois. That was a future that didn't happen. It can't hurt you

anymore."

"But it could still hurt you," she whispered. "Please, Clark, let me save you from that."

Clark set down her wine glass, took hold of her hand, and kissed her knuckles. "There's a rumor floating around out there… mind you, it's only a rumor… that I'm pretty thick-skinned."

Lois looked down at their intertwined hands. "Your heart isn't invulnerable, Clark. Actually, it's quite fragile."

"Try me. I'm tougher than I look." When she still didn't speak, he tried another tactic. "How were you supposed to die, Lois?"

She picked up her wine and took another sip. "I'm not sure, exactly. Perry was pretty vague. Complications due to giving birth was the reason he gave in the article."

Clark gulped. "Complications?"

Lois nodded. "I'm guessing it's the same thing I died from when Lara was…" She winced. She shouldn't have said it like that. She should have just kept her mouth shut.

"What?" Clark clutched her, pulling her to him. She felt better enfolded in his arms. Safer. Protected. "You died?"

She had been hoping he didn't catch that part. "Almost."

"Almost?" he repeated. "Do you mind clarifying that statement, Ms. Lane?"

He had pulled back and was staring at her. He was angry.

"I don't think I like your tone, Mr. Kent," she said.

"Answer the question."

"Yes. I almost died. I'd be dead now if Ultra Woman hadn't saved me," she snapped. "Happy?"

"I just think you ought to have told me, that's all."

"I did try to tell you, Clark. You weren't listening." She pushed herself to her feet. "Actually I've tried to tell you several times, but you never heard…"

Clark turned his back to the fireplace and watched her pace. "Tell me, Lois. I'm listening now."

"I started hemorrhaging after Lara was born. My… Lois's father couldn't stop the bleeding." Her hands were shaking as she combed them through her hair. She turned and ran into Clark's chest. She wrapped her arms around him as the tears came to her eyes. "Sam was out of his depth. He isn't a surgeon. After he used up all the extra IV blood they'd brought, he could only stand there, mopping up the blood and watching me bleed to death."

"Surely the hospital had surgeons on—"

"Clark!" she scoffed. "I was giving birth to Superman's baby. We weren't in a regular hospital."

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Clark pulled back to look into his wife's eyes once again and he saw the fear in them. "Where were you?"

"Clark and Lois had set up a sterile operating room in an abandoned hospital on the outskirts of Metropolis."

He growled. "He had eight months to prepare and that's the best he could come up with?"

"Clark. We would have been fine if it hadn't been for that damn curse. I mean those girls in Smallville made it, didn't they?"

Suddenly Lois's surprise at the condition of those girls in Smallville made sense. But he hadn't been sure she was his missing Lois at that point, when they learned about those girls.

"Lara had been born at that point, right?" he asked, knowing the answer. Lara had shown him that bonding scene from her birth. Lois had seemed fine, he could tell that even if she had not been completely in focus. "He could have flown you to a hospital where a team of doctors could have stopped the bleeding."

Lois blanched. "No. No, he couldn't, Clark. I made them promise that they wouldn't take me to a real hospital."

A chill went down his spine. "Why would you do that?"

"Because that's how they found us the first time," she snapped and then gasped, covering her mouth.

"They who?" Clark asked.

Lois froze in his arms, not answering. In the silence, his mind went to work. Perry wrote the article of her death. Perry didn't write any more. It had to be big if Perry had written about it. The paper was dated February 26th, almost two weeks after Lara's birthday in the other dimension. Why would the paper report her death so late after the fact? Unless…

Clark cleared his throat. "Lois, what did Perry's article say?"

She shook her head adamantly.

Baby steps. "What was the headline on the article?"

"'Lois Lane Funeral Held Today'," she murmured.

Okay, his wife wasn't in shock anymore. Good. "Lois. Did Perry's article mention why it took so long after Lara's birth to bury you?" Clark spoke slowly, calmly, unlike how he was feeling inside.

"They had only just found my body," she whispered.

Clark stiffened. He had to remain calm or he knew he wouldn't get any more answers from her. "Where did they find your body?"

"Metropolis County Landfill."

Lois died at the hospital, but then someone, some group, had taken her body, dumping it at that landfill. He knew the answer before he even asked the question. "Lois, who took your body from the hospital?"

"You know who," she replied softly.

Bureau 39.

"What did Perry's article say they did to you?"

"Autopsy." Lois pressed her lips together. "Dissection."

Clark winced and held her closer. They had mutilated his wife and then dumped her body at the dump. He took a deep breath. "And Lara?"

"I don't know. They never found her body." Her voice was so low he almost had to use his super hearing to hear her.

"So she died at birth?" Clark asked. At least, there was that consolation. If Bureau 39 had gotten a hold of his living baby… he shuddered.

"Of course," Lois said, pulling back to looking at him. "Superman wasn't there to cut her umbilical cord."

He swallowed, his heart constricting. "Lois, did the article state that Lara had died at birth?"

"No. It just said that she was still missing."

Clark stumbled to the sofa and sat down. "So, she could have been alive when they took her?" No wonder Lois was having Trask dreams. He was probably going to start having the nightmares, too.

"No. Clark. Don't even suggest that. You weren't there to cut her cord… she probably bled to death like that first baby in Smallville."

Clark took her hand and kissed it. "Lois. That baby did not bleed to death because the umbilical cord was still attached. The cord had wrapped around her neck and it choked her to death. That's why Pete wanted me there for Peter's birth. In case something similar happened, I could try removing it with my heat vision in time to save him."

"But the cord…"

"Lois. If an umbilical cord is not cut, the child does not bleed to death. It just dries up and falls off about a week later."

She stared at him. "Why cut it off then?"

"Convenience. A small nub is easier to take care of."

"No! That can't be right," she sputtered, her hands shaking.

"Lois. I grew up on a farm. I know a little about these things."

"But if she had survived…" His wife's eyes flashed to his as she gasped. "Clark!"

He nodded. "I know."

"Mr. Wells was wrong."

Okay. He wasn't expecting that analysis. "Wrong about

what?" he asked.

"He said that you moved back to Smallville because your friends had abandoned you and Perry fired you from your job. That's not why at all. You abandoned them; you went looking for her."

"Perry and Jimmy would never abandon our friendship," he said, looking at her unbelievingly, hurt that she could have believed that.

Lois shrugged. The weight of the secret wasn't holding her down anymore. "Well, you didn't return until the day of my funeral, stating you had no idea about the baby. I had adamantly claimed you were the father of my child until my death; yet, obviously to Perry, it was Superman's baby. They probably thought you deserted me once you learned I was pregnant with Superman's child. I could see that happening… not you deserting me, but them abandoning you, especially with your denials of all knowledge of the baby. I'm sure I would have told them that you knew all about it and were excited."

Clark shook his head. "Lois."

"What?"

"You don't think Perry would have worked out that I was Superman instead?"

"Well, perhaps," she admitted with a chuckle. "He didn't become editor because he could yodel."

Smiling, Clark leaned over to his wife and kissed her. "There. Now, don't you feel better having gotten that off your chest?"

She rested her head against his. "Yes."

"I wish you had told me from the beginning, it would have saved us a ton of heartache."

"Oh, really?"

"If I had known what really happened to you, if you had stayed here, I would have been more inclined to forgive a little infidelity… especially with another me."

Lois sat up and stared him in the eyes. "You mean I could have had *more* than the one night with Clark?" She sounded way too excited by that idea.

"What? No!" he growled.

Lois laughed clearly in jest and leaned against his shoulder again. "Don't ever try to bluff a poker player, Clark. You'll never win."

Clark's heart was racing, adrenaline pumping through his veins. She was just teasing him. She had seen right through that lie. He cradled her in his arms, laughing as he stood up. "You saucy minx. You caught me."

"Shall we head back to Smallville, then?" his wife asked quietly.

"I was thinking a detour first," he said, turning toward the stairs. "I believe you mentioned something about new lingerie, Mrs. Kent?"

Lois giggled. "I might have."

"I love you, Wife."

"And I love you, Husband," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck with a kiss that floated them all the way upstairs.

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"Clark," Lois said some time later as they lay in their bed.

"Hmmm." Clark ran his fingers over the top of the strawberry-red teddy.

"You're never going to forgive me, are you?" she asked.

"What?" His eyes moved from the teddy up to her eyes.

"You said once that you wouldn't forgive me until I forgave myself. And I can't do that." Her voice was rough as if she were on the verge of tears.

This was unexpected. He thought they were good after her latest confession. "Lois, what's wrong, honey?"

Lois sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. She took a deep breath. "Can you promise me something?"

He nodded, sitting up as well.

"Stay and listen to what I have to say, all of it. Don't fly off into a rage or go off moping like a gargoyle. Can you promise me that?" Lois asked, glancing over at him.

"I don't mope," he replied defensively, her words hitting too close to home.

His wife pressed her lips together. "I know you, Clark Kent, better than you know yourself. And you certainly do mope."

Clark looked away and rolled his eyes, so she wouldn't see him. "Fine. I won't leave. I'll listen to what you have to say."

Lois took his hand in hers. "Thank you, Clark."

Clark waited as she rubbed her thumb across the back of his hand, gathering her thoughts. "Why can't you forgive yourself, Lois?" he finally asked.

She swallowed. "I hate the New Kryptonians for taking you away from me, for what they did to you and the people of Smallville, but I can't wish that they had never done that or we wouldn't have Lara and Pete wouldn't have Peter."

He nodded in agreement. They had gotten the two kids together for a play date that afternoon. Lara and Peter had instantly bonded — best friends at first sight. He wondered if they could communicate telepathically as well.

"I'd like to say I wish I had never gone to the other dimension, but I can't say that either, knowing what would have happened if I had stayed here," Lois said, her voice growing softer and hoarse again.

Clark glanced over at her. A tear dripped down her cheek as she spoke. "I can't even say that I regret sleeping with the other Clark, because a part of me doesn't."

His teeth started to grind, but he did not move. He had promised he would stay and listen.

"I regret cheating on you. I regret hurting you. And if that were all, I would wish it away if I could, but I can't. If I had the opportunity to do it all over again, standing at the precipice of that decision, knowing what I do know now, I still would have slept with him." The tears were falling in streams down her cheeks, her voice shaking. "And that is why I cannot forgive myself."

Clark squeezed his eyes closed, the pain of her words piercing his soul.

"It's not because I love him. I don't think I do any more. He'll always be dear to me as a friend, but that's all. And don't you go thinking it's because he was so good in bed." She tried to make her words sound light, but they fell flat.

He hadn't been thinking that, of course, until she told him not to. He promised to stay and listen but her words were killing him. Clark started to grind his teeth again.

"Clark," she said, reaching out and touching his shoulder, trying to comfort him.

Instinctively, he pulled away.

"Please listen to me, Clark."

"I am listening," Clark replied gruffly.

"Really? I think you would find it difficult to hear me — even with your super ears — over all that loud grinding noise you're making with your teeth."

"I'm listening," he repeated tersely. "Say what you have to say, Lois."

Lois took a deep breath, pressing her lips together. "I wanted nothing more than to come home to you, Clark, but now I can't even say I wish H.G. Wells had shown up after our honeymoon to pick me up. Do you know why I didn't run off with you last Christmas with the time machine when you begged me to?"

Clark couldn't even gaze at her. He hadn't promised to look at her, only to listen. He shook his head.

"Because when I slept with the other Clark I became…" She paused long enough for him to actually look at her. "Infected I guess would be the correct term? Yes, *infected* by his soul mate curse."

Clark's gaze became sharper. "So the curse that almost killed you in childbirth wasn't *our* curse, but *his*?"

Lois nodded. "And that's why I can't say I wish it never happened. Do you understand?"

"No! You wanted to be cursed? By him? Why?" Clark's head was starting to pound in pain from his heartache.

"Because his Lois would have died if I hadn't slept with him." Her bottom lip started to shake and the sobs escaped as Lois buried her face into her hands.

"What?!" he stammered. Surely his wife couldn't believe that?

Gasping for air between sniffles, Lois tried to explain. "H.G. Wells told us that the only reason I didn't die when you and I made love before you left for New Krypton was because I had already made love to you as your wife. It confused the curse, delaying it somehow, so I didn't die right away, giving you time to fix it in the past. The same thing happened over there. If I hadn't slept with the other Clark, his Lois would have died in the Smallville house that weekend he rescued her from Luthor. And he wouldn't have been there to save her since he was doing search and rescue in Singapore. Instead the curse was confused again and she wasn't fated to die until the day of the car accident, when she became Ultra Woman by mistake."

Clark stared at her.

"That is why I can't forgive myself, Clark, because try as I might to want that night never to have happened, I can't wish her dead." She buried her head in sobs once again.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest.

"I saved her life and then she turned around and saved mine," Lois whispered, when she was able to talk again, running her fingers over his chest.

"Lois," Clark whispered, kissing the top of her head. "How did Ultra Woman save your life?"

She snuggled closer to him, taking his hand in hers. "I told you."

Clark wracked his brain, but for the life of him could not remember her telling him that part of the story. Perhaps she told him one of those times she claimed he hadn't been listening, but he couldn't believe he had not heard her. Not about this. "Could you tell me again?"

She laced her fingers with his. "I told you, I've got Ultra Woman's blood running through my veins."

Clark pulled her back so he could look her in the eyes, a chill causing the hair on his arms to stand up. "Excuse me?"

"Ultra Lois donated a pint of her blood."

"What?" What she was saying made no sense. Ultra Woman couldn't donate blood any more than he could.

"Her blood kick-started my immune system, allowing me to heal and my blood to clot," she explained simply, like this was an everyday occurrence.

"Yes. I got that part. How did she donate a pint of blood? My guess is that she has the same problem with needles I do."

"Yep." Lois glanced away.

"Lois."

"She and Dr. Klein flew back to S.T.A.R. Labs after I started hemorrhaging and he exposed her to Kryptonite to weaken her invulnerability so he could draw her blood," she spoke quietly, but all in rush.

Clark shook his head. "She did *what*?"

Lois repeated, "She exposed herself…"

He waved his hand. "I heard you." He just needed to wrap his brain around that information. "Why? Did she know that you had saved her life with the curse confusion?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't think so. Clark and I didn't know about that until H.G. Wells brought me home."

"So why did she do it?" he asked again.

"I'm pretty loveable, Clark. People tend to go overboard to help me," she replied.

Clark looked at her with a skeptically raised eyebrow.

Lois sighed. "She did it for Clark. She knew my death would cause him more pain than he could handle. And she was willing to do anything to protect him from pain, even if it meant helping me."

"Because he loves you," he murmured.

"Yes."

"And she's okay with that?"

Lois frowned. "No. Not really, but all that stuff between us happened before he found her. She knows that Clark loves her more than anything, that he's *her* soul mate. She knew that helping me survive was the best way to ensure I'd get out their lives faster." She tittered. "In a way, it was quite selfish."

Clark shook his head. "Exposing herself to Kryptonite was not selfish, Lois."

The laughter died on her lips. "I know, Clark."

"We owe her your life."

"Scary thought that." She chuckled softly to herself. "Sorry. But you don't know her, Clark. She acts before she thinks. Dives into danger. Tunnel vision when it comes to her stories. Completely reckless. Why are you laughing?"

Clark pulled her back into his arms with a kiss. "You're right, Lois. I don't know anyone like that."

She socked him in the arm as she pouted. "Clark Kent, what are you saying?"

Clark kissed the pout off her lips. "That I love you, Lois. Only that I love you."

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It was late, very late, way past midnight late, by the time they returned to the Smallville farm house.

As they crept through the living room on the way to the stairs, Clark paused and pointed at the dark shadow that was the Christmas tree.

"What?" Lois asked him. Not all of them had super vision.

"Santa," he murmured.

Lois spun around towards the tree. She still didn't see anything. "What? Where?"

Clark laughed, wrapping his arms around her with a kiss before picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder. "Tomorrow, Lois."

"Clark, if we got an interview with Santa…"

"Listen to yourself, Lois. An interview with Santa?" He chuckled, walking up the stairs. "Santa doesn't grant interviews."

"Clark, set me down," she squealed.

"Quiet, Lois, or you'll wake the whole house."

"Clark!" she hissed.

He set her down outside his old bedroom. She instantly calmed down. He opened the door and they crept to the side of Lara's crib. Clark wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders. Lois put her arm around his waist.

"She's so beautiful," he whispered.

They both spoke at the same time. "She looks like you." Then they laughed.

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Early the next morning, Jack came into their room without knocking, ringing a loud bell and wearing a Santa hat. "Rise and shine, sleepyheads. Christmas morning."

Lois picked up her pillow and threw it at him. She missed. Clark's aim was better.

"Animals have been fed, coffee made, and Lara is already awake," he informed them as he dashed out, shutting the door behind himself in order to dodge another pillow.

Lois pulled the covers over her head. "I liked him better in the city," she grumbled.

Clark kissed her cheek. "Merry Christmas, Lois."

"I hope your parents aren't expecting me to be dressed when

I go downstairs," mumbled Lois, then her fingers slid over Clark's chest. "Mmmm. You got me my favorite present."

Clark's brow furrowed. "What's that?"

"Being here."

He smiled, pulling her in for a kiss. "Who knew you were so easy to shop for?"

They came downstairs to the living room a little while later. Martha was passing out coffee. She held up the tray to Lois who gratefully took a mug.

"Thanks, Martha."

"You two were out late last night," her mother-in-law replied.

"Sorry. We had a lot to discuss," Lois told her with a sideways glance at her husband.

Martha nodded as if she understood. Did she understand?

Clark swooped Lara up and kissed her. "Merry Christmas, pumpkin." Then he walked over to the stockings hung from the fireplace mantle.

"Ooh. What did you get?" he said, sitting down next to Lois with their daughter.

Lois set down her coffee mug, then leaned over to hug her daughter. "Merry Christmas, baboo."

Lara looked up at her and smiled. "Mama." She had no interest in the stocking at all. She picked up one end of Lois's robe belt and stuck it in her mouth.

Lois gently pulled it out of her daughter's mouth. "Eww, baboo, not that."

Clark pulled a red rubber ducky out of her stocking and squeezed it. Squeak. Squeak. Lara glanced over at the duck and took it out of his hands, still not interested in the rest of the stocking.

Clark smiled at Lois and she sighed. This was going to be a long day.

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Jack handed a package to Clark with a chuckle. "It's from Ultra Woman."

Lois wrapped the scarf from Martha about her neck as she glanced over at her husband.

He was staring at the gift. "Lois?"

"Not me," she replied. "She *loves* Christmas, so I'm not surprised."

Clark raised a brow. "Loves Christmas? A Lois Lane?" Then he ripped opened the paper. Inside was a bright blue souvenir Superman t-shirt with the words 'Lois Lane's Personal Hero' written across the back.

Lois laughed. "Clark told her he would never wear it. I guess she didn't want it to go to waste."

He held up the t-shirt. "She gave this to her boyfriend last Christmas?" his voice was incredulous. Nothing like a hand-me-down gift.

"Yes, but that was before she knew Superman's secret identity."

"Right." He set down the gift. "I'm not going to wear it either."

Lois pouted. "What? Aren't you my own personal hero?" She wrapped her arms around her husband with a smile.

"Ha-ha."

"You could wear it around the farm," Martha suggested.

He nodded. "Yes, we'll keep it here." He glanced at the box that Jack had just handed Lois with the same wrapping paper.

"I think she's upset I didn't bring these back with me," Lois said, laughing. "I'm betting mine says 'Not Lois Lane' on the front and 'Not Lola Luthor' on the back."

"You'd think she would have kept that one for herself," said Martha.

Lois was still getting used to the fact that Martha remembered. She kept expecting the woman to say something about her and the other Clark. Her brow furrowed. "Clark, if your mother was able to get her memories back, do you think it's possible my mom and dad…"

Clark's eyes widened. She knew what he was thinking. The last thing Ellen Lane realized before being zapped by the Bummer-B-Gone was that her daughter was married to Superman. "Let's hope not."

"She's already guessed that Superman is Lara's father."

"You want to tell her that you were once Ultra Woman and that you spent a year in another dimension, pregnant with my child? Go right ahead."

Lois pointed at him. "I told you not to try to bluff me, Clark."

Clark grabbed her finger and kissed it. Then he gave her that nervous, unsure look that always melted her heart. "I don't know about retelling your parents, honey. The last time didn't work out so well for us."

She scooted over to his lap and wrapped her arms around him. "How about this. Why don't we revisit this topic the next time I get pregnant?"

Clark's jaw dropped. "Lois, you aren't trying to tell me something, are you?"

Lois kissed him. "See, minty fresh. Freshly brushed. No hurling."

"Okay." He swallowed.

"Breathe," she reminded him. Clark released the breath he had been holding and suddenly the Christmas tree had a distinctive frosty look to it.

Lara glanced over at her daddy from where she and Jonathan were playing on the rocking horse he and Jack made for her in Santa's workshop, and giggled.

"Don't look now, but I think you might have a fan," said Martha.

Clark grinned, moved Lois off his lap and scooped Lara into his arms. "I don't mind a little hero worship from this one."

They laughed.

"Yo, Supes. There are more gifts here," said Jack, pulling out a large rectangular one and setting it in front of Lois.

She knew what it was and who it was from without opening it. The photo album James had made for her of her year in the other Metropolis.

"Well? Who is it from?" Clark asked, but then the humor from his expression melted away. "Oh."

Lois sighed and tore open the paper. Yep. The photo album. He must have found the stuff she had asked Ultra Woman to destroy for her. *Thanks, Ultra Woman.*

"What's this, honey?" Martha asked, moving closer.

"Photo album."

"Really?" Clark was by her side in an instant. "Pictures of you while you were pregnant? Newborn pictures of Lara?"

Lois nodded.

Clark went to open the book and Lois slapped her hand on top, glancing at him.

"Most of the pictures are of me. James got a little obsessed, but there are photos of Clark and me, too. No." She shook her head, pulling the book away from him. "I don't think you can handle it."

Clark pressed his lips together. "Lois, trust me. There is a whole year of your life I missed out on." He held out his hand. "Please."

Lois really didn't want him to see the photos, but she had promised herself she wouldn't keep anything from him anymore. She set the photo album back in her lap and opened it up. The first photo, the cover page photo, was the one they took of her and Lara shortly after Lara's birth.

"Is this…?" Clark asked, pulling the book out of her hands.

"Yes."

Clark looked at her with such love. "I wish I could have been there for you."

She reached out and took his hand. “Me, too.”

He glanced up and noticed everyone looking at them and shut the book. “We’ll look at these later.”

Lois smiled, relief filling her. “Okay.”

“Come on, Supes. At least let us see a photo of this other Ultra Woman.” Jack grinned, raising his brows. “Since I never got to meet the real McCoy.”

Lois held out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Jack.”

“Hey!” Clark snapped. “That’s my… my… my sister-in-law you’re drooling over.”

“Technically, they aren’t married yet,” corrected Lois, flipping open the book and moving quickly through it. “Clark won’t marry her until her divorce from Luthor is finalized.”

Clark jammed his hand between the pages, stopping her. “But Lois Lane is legally dead.”

“He’s a stickler for legalities. He refuses to marry another man’s wife. The divorce is still going through the channels. She had it in the will Moonbeam dreamed up for her that her divorce be finalized even post-mortem.”

“Is that even possible?” Jack asked in disbelief.

Lois shrugged.

Clark opened the album to the page where Lois had closed it on his hand. “Is that her?”

She glanced down at a photo of her double with her hair all the way down her back, standing with Sam Lane. “Yep. The other Lois. Christmas, last year.”

Jack was standing behind them now. Martha and Jonathan moved closer as well. Jack whistled.

Martha chuckled. “That’s the woman who stepped into Clark’s shower? I said it before and I’ll say it again: he didn’t stand a chance.”

“Nope.” Clark grinned with merriment. “Not a chance.”

“What?” Lois gasped. “She did *what*?”

“They didn’t tell you?” Clark asked. “No, I guess not. That first night, after he rescued her from Luthor, she joined him in the shower without invitation.” He chuckled, looking like he was imagining what he would have done if she had done that to him way back when she had been under the influence of *Revenge.*

Lois punched his arm. “And you didn’t believe me when I called her a slut?”

Clark smiled sheepishly.

“She can join my shower any time.” Jack grinned.

Clark covered Lara’s ears. “Jack!”

Lois flipped to the back of the book. There was a photo of Lois holding Lara with Superman and Ultra Woman on either side of her. “That’s what she looks like now. You want to ask her boyfriend if he won’t mind, go right ahead.”

Jack shook his head quickly. “No, that’s okay.” He whistled again. “And with super powers, too. Too bad about the hair.”

“Lex wouldn’t let her cut it the entire time they were… she was his prisoner.”

Jack grimaced with a shake of his head again. “What a waste. Married to Lex Luthor.”

“A bald Lex Luthor.”

Jack snickered, running a hand through his thick locks. “Thank God for small miracles.”

Lois closed the book again. “That’s enough for now.”

Clark cupped her jaw in his palm and kissed her. “Maybe you should let your hair grow out again, honey.”

Lois saw a heat in his eyes that had nothing to do with his heat vision and raised a brow. “Down boy,” she murmured under her breath. “This isn’t the time to comment on my hair length.”

He swallowed and looked toward the ceiling innocently.

“A couple more with that same wrapping paper,” called Jack from behind the tree.

Great. What else, Clark?

Jack handed her a CD-sized package and a larger one to Clark.

“Me? Another one for me?” He was surprised. “You open yours first.”

Lois added a fake smile to her lips. *To UW from SM.* She was going to kill the other Clark. She tore the paper, making sure she ripped through the tag. The Elvis CD Perry had given her. *Ha-ha. Very funny, Clark.*

“Do you want to put it on?” Martha asked.

“No!” Lois and Clark said at the same time.

“We can’t,” Lois explained, opening the case, showing them the broken compact disc.

Clark was staring at her, but she couldn’t read his expression.

“Perry gave me the CD before I left, which is when it got broken.” She had broken it. The heel of her shoe had accidentally smashed it. Thrice.

Her husband’s lips were pressed together. “I’m surprised he didn’t just throw it out.”

She wasn’t. He was telling her that he hadn’t forgotten, but he couldn’t have known she told her Clark about their Elvis night. She pitied the other Clark if ever those two were to meet. “How about we do that now?” she suggested, standing up.

Martha followed her into the kitchen, taking the broken CD from her. “You never opened the birthday gift he sent you.” She reached to the top shelf of her hutch and pulled it down. “He really loved you.”

“I know,” replied Lois, looking at the palm tree wrapping paper. Palm trees. Key West. He was reminding her of her birthday dinner on the beach. Sending messages that he hadn’t forgotten her without words which could be read by Ultra Woman or her Clark. She closed her eyes and sighed.

She hadn’t forgotten him either. Not only because her Clark had unintentionally not allowed her to forget him, but she missed their friendship. Their walks to and from work. Working with him. Laughing over smoothies. Making fun of Editor Ralph together… okay, that was mostly her. Discussing story ideas and talking over her life with her Clark, her Superman, and all the mad scientists and crazy criminals they had encountered together. The other Clark had been a real friend… when the sexual tension wasn’t bogging them down.

Lois sighed and tore open the paper. Ella Fitzgerald. He had remembered how much she had enjoyed listening to her music at Perry’s during Thanksgiving. Lois smiled. Other Clark could be very thoughtful. Opening the case, she noticed a note tucked inside.

You are the ocean to my sky. I could only see myself as I reflected upon you. Never the two should meet, except in beautiful water spouts or lightning or rain. How I longed to be a man swimming in that ocean, but it was not destined to be. She is my missing puzzle piece. She fits in my odd shaped hole. Now I am whole. And for that I have you to thank, my stormy ocean.

Lois shook her head. *Oh, Clark.*

“Tell the boys that lunch is ready, if they are,” said Martha, pulling a platter of sandwiches out of the fridge.

Lois folded the note back in the case and walked into the living room. “Lunch!”

“I’m starved,” said Jack, jumping to his feet.

Jonathan slowly pushed himself to his feet. “I hope it’s not something non-fat,” he muttered under his breath.

Clark watched her but didn’t move. “I thought you were throwing out the CD?”

“This is the one he sent me for my birthday.” She held it up.

“Isn’t that the same CD you gave Perry?”

“Yes,” she murmured and waited. She heard the question before he asked it. It was echoing in her head. She decided to nip it in the bud. “Ella Fitzgerald reminds me of Perry… Mayor White played Ella Fitzgerald, when we went to his house for Thanksgiving. Clark must have remembered that I enjoyed her

music."

"Mayor White?" asked Jack, glancing between the two of them. He picked up Lara and set her on his shoulder.

"Perry is the mayor of Metropolis in the other dimension," Clark explained.

"How confusing that must have been for you, jumping between the two dimensions," said Jonathan with a shake of his head, following Jack and Lara into the kitchen.

"Extremely," she murmured, walking over to the stereo. She opened the case and a piece of paper fluttered out from inside. She set the CD in the stereo and picked up the paper as the music began to play.

Lois closed her eyes and started to sway to the music, singing along, "*The way we danced 'til three… no. No. They can't take that away from me…*"

She heard Clark approach and opened her eyes. He was holding out his hand. She put her hand in his and he pulled her into his arms. Slowly, he danced with her.

"Does this song remind you of him?" Clark whispered.

Lois could feel his anguish and knew she would add to it by telling him the truth. "Only because he's not here. When I heard it at Perry's, I thought only of you, because you weren't there."

He spun her around leisurely; back in his arms, they lifted off the ground. She rested her cheek against his.

The other Clark's note floated down to the ground. If her Clark noticed it, he didn't say, only holding her tighter.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You can ask me a thousand questions, Clark. And I will give you a thousand and one answers. No secrets, remember?"

"Do I need to worry about Aquaman?" he whispered.

She pulled back and stared at him in disbelief. "What?"

He chuckled. "I'll take that as a definite *no*."

"You take that as you're lucky we're three feet off the ground, buster."

Clark lowered them down to the floor and picked up the note she had dropped, handing it to her. On the backside of his poem, the other Clark had written: *Hope you and Aquaman are happy.*

Lois laughed. "You're Aquaman, Clark."

"No," he corrected, raising a brow. "I'm Superman."

She turned over the note showing it to him. "You are the man who swims in my ocean."

He grimaced. "Ugh, Lois, this is awful. The mixed metaphors, puzzles and oceans." Clark shook his head in pity.

Lois pulled the note out of his hand and wadded it up, tossing it into the fireplace. She grabbed his hand, tugging him to her. "Come here, Aquaman." She placed a soft kiss on his lips.

"Don't call me that," he said with a shake of his head.

"Why not? Do you think there's a real Aquaman out there?" She laughed.

He shrugged. "You never know. There's a Batman."

"There's no Batman in the other dimension except in comic books."

"Poor Clark. He has really, truly been alone, hasn't he?"

"Like you and Batman are the best of buds," she added sarcastically.

"We've met. Once or twice." Clark shrugged again. "He grows on you."

Lois shivered. "That guy gives me the creeps."

"Loving you even more," he murmured, pulling her in for a kiss.

That soft, loving kiss deepened, intensified, bringing her closer still.

Mmmm. He tasted of peppermint, cinnamon, and chocolate.

His fingers caressed her cheek, down her neck, across her shoulder, over her…

"Clark," she moaned and he pulled her tighter to him. Her toes began to curl as he lifted her up into his arms, their feet leaving the floor.

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"Clark! Lois! Lunch!" his mom called and they landed back on the floor with a thud.

"Wow," Lois murmured, still clinging to him. Clark smiled. He would take a 'wow' from her any day.

"Not half bad yourself, Wife." He grinned wickedly.

"So, what was in your last gift?" she asked, glancing towards where he had been sitting by the tree. She stepped away from him, straightening her hair and fanning herself.

"Oh. I forgot to open it," Clark said, retrieving the package. He tore open the paper to reveal a couple of notebooks and his brow furrowed. The other Clark gave him notebooks? He flipped it open. It was filled with his wife's handwriting.

Dear Clark,

I know it must seem strange that I am writing you a letter I cannot mail to you, but I needed to talk to you. I miss you. And it confuses this Clark, let's call him Kal, when I speak your name aloud. I miss you more here than back in our dimension. You seem farther away. Unreachable. Untouchable…

He scanned that page and went to the next

Yes, you heard me right, Clark Kent. I am pregnant and you are the father. Remember the night I told you to forget? Well, my body remembers. I'm about five weeks pregnant as I write this letter to you…

A chill went down his spine as he turned to the next page.

Dear Clark;

Wow! What a day! Where to begin? I guess I should begin at the beginning. I found my father…well, this dimension's Sam Lane, or what's left of him. He was still living at the shelter on Fifth…

He flipped through the pages quickly.

Concubines, really! Clark, what am I going to do with you? But you do look regal in those black tights. You can bring a pair of those back home when we… sorry, you finally get rid of Lord Nor. Oh, how I hate him. And what's up with these Kryptonians? Have they never heard of privacy? Knocking? Tell me, again, how these people are civilized? Well, at least we are together. Even if I'm on a leash, Lord Kal-El…

Clark smiled as he continued to read.

Dearest Clark, you're alive. You're alive. Thank God, you are alive. The last 48 hours of you bouncing between life and death have been sheer torture. Please, promise me that you won't die on me ever again! I couldn't take another weekend like this one. I guess, you couldn't either…

The pages continued to fly by.

My dearest Clark, my love, my husband. I know today was a long day for you, what with the Wedding Destroyer and our wedding on the hill and time travel and all. I did a little traveling myself today. When you and the younger me wanted to start your honeymoon, I disappeared for awhile. Apparently, if anything happens to the younger me, it erases me from existence. I disappeared for awhile. Actually, I disappeared at least three times today…

Clark gasped, glancing up, but Lois was no longer in the room. He was tempted to look for her, but his gaze was drawn back to the notebook. He continued to read, trying not to speed read faster than a second a page, but her words, her loneliness drew him in.

Clark, you are such the sweetie giving Jimmy some of your longevity and now I won't grow old alone. I love you…

I'm in jail? Jail? Like I would shoot someone?…

Help me, Clark. I can't stand being stuck in that cell, pacing back and forth in my dreams. I can't come home to you while the younger me is under arrest…

I am four months pregnant now and beginning to show. Although you'd have to see me naked to tell. No one who does

not already know will find out. Lucy El's style of extremely baggy pants and flouncy shirts should keep my secret safe. Coat and sweater season will be upon us before we know it and the extra layers will make it easier to hide my growing belly. I miss you, terribly, and wish I could be sharing all this with you…

Clark paused on the next page.

Kal said that Jaxon told him that the Neuroscanner allowed a person to watch through the eyes of whoever's genetic fingerprint it was linked to…

He swallowed. She had known about the Neuroscanner all those months before they had experienced it in their dimension. He read on.

Mayson's car blew up today. Poor Clark was covered in her blood as he tried to rescue her. She survived, but I don't think he ever will. He went after Jaxon thinking Junior had something to do with this and Jaxon tricked him to go into his Virtual Reality computer…

Happy Birthday to me! Forget something there, Clark? No, it's okay, really. You broke me out of jail, what more could Mad Dog Lane want for her birthday than to spend the night making love with you? I never realized how naked my finger felt without your ring (I had to give mine to the younger me), until Kal gave me a ring to replace it. Now, every time I look down at my hand I think of how much I love and miss you…

Watch out! Bob's bad news, Clark. Kal told me all about his magnetism. Please, don't touch him. Please. I can't have you die on me again…

So what does it say about me that I have to be possessed to finally learn to cook?…

I'm editor of the D.P.? I finally get the chance of a lifetime and I'm stuck in this godforsaken dimension! Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! (That's me pulling out what's left of my hair.)…

Clark read page after page after page; then he stopped and reread a page over.

Clark, why am I allowed to love you in my dreams, but not when I'm awake?

He swallowed, trying to chase the bad taste from his mouth.

I can fly!

What have I done? Oh, God! What have I done? What have I done?

John Doe is Tempus! Oh, Clark, be careful. I have a bad feeling about this. That man is evil and I don't throw that word around. I can't lose you, not now…

That was her only mention of what happened on Halloween, until…

I know it's wrong to love Kal, because he's not you. But at the same time, how can I not love Kal, because he is you.

Slowly, he read her words again, wiping the moisture from his eyes.

Dearest Clark —

I know I should start out this letter with an apology for seducing you. But strangely enough, I'm not sorry. Not sorry in the least. (Picture me with a huge grin here). It was so nice to have a little Clark break. I've missed you so much. I thought having the stand-in Lois's memories would be enough, but it isn't. Even though she is me… I'm still not in control and you know how much I like to be in control…

James found Lex Luthor! I know… James? Lex is in Singapore of all places. Lois is his wife and she's blind. The bastard blinded her. We're all in agreement that we can't tell Kal. It would break his heart…

My hands are still shaking, Clark. I felt like I was speaking to someone in hell. I'm so glad that Kal was there to comfort me. I never knew how hearing Lex's voice would affect me. Often this other dimension feels like hell. The Kents dead, Kal all alone, Lois's mom abandoned her and then Lois ends up married to Lex and no Perry at the DP…

Kal is sending me to your parents while he goes to Singapore. He's worried that Lex will send someone to hurt me while he's out of town…

Oh, Clark, I want you to know how much I wanted to run away with you. To stay with you. I learned tonight that I have to stay in Kal's dimension or the curse could still kill me. We have a daughter. I was 97% sure, now I'm 100%. We'll name her Lara…

Kal is so in love with his Lois, he's completely changed. He no longer looks at me like I'm his soul mate. This is good. My life will be easier now…

We cured Lois's blindness. Infrared light. Sound familiar? Oh, and Lex kidnapped me today. But don't worry, I escaped… thank you, super biceps… and he never learned that I'm pregnant with your child. Now I've got police protection to and from work. Lovely (please note sarcasm). Sam says my blood pressure is elevated and he wants me home on bed rest for a few days. A few days of dreaming, what more could I ask for?…

Kal still hasn't told his Lois that Superman is Clark Kent and Clark Kent is Superman. I don't know what's worse, what you did by lying to me for two years or what he's doing by keeping her in the dark to what everyone else knows. She's completely humiliated at work; her career is in shambles. She's not going to forgive him easily…

Oh, my God! Clark, are you okay? How could they shoot you with Kryptonite? For a little property damage? Don't they know what that will do to you? Mankind is evil…

I'm as big as a house. I don't know how much longer I can go on pretending I'm fat instead of pregnant. You'd think someone in this newsroom would be observant to the people around them. I miss Perry.

The truth is out. The tabloids not only know I love you, but actually have the photo to prove how I love you. Oh Clark, what will we do?…

YOU KISSED HER? Hurricane Lane? How could you? Are you nuts? I'm not feeling an ounce bad for kissing him now. Not. One. Ounce.

Kal's Lois almost died in a car accident yesterday, but Kal was struck by lightning while flying her to the hospital. We've got another William Wallace Webster Waldecker on our hands.

Well, Lois finally figured out Kal is Superman. It only took her almost dying…

His Lois is taking over my Lucy El persona. She's sick of hiding from Lex Luthor and I'm just plain tired. I'm ready to go on maternity leave and I still have a month to go before this baby is born. I'm ready to come home…

His Lois has decided to kill herself… well, the 'Lois Lane' name, actually, and stick with Lucy El as her secret identity for Ultra Woman. (Who knew this dowdy, clog-wearing, gum-smacking, glasses-wearing, vegetarian, recovering alcoholic would be preferable to Lois Lane?) Kal's going to blow a fuse when he learns what we did and that we kept her transformation from him. But then, he STILL hasn't admitted he's Superman! You Kent boys. Who says only evil masterminds can be good planners?…

I spent the weekend at James Olsen's penthouse after Ultra Lois blew up the apartment while faking her death. Did I ever mention that I told him I'm pregnant? James has been my best friend here, since Kal found his Lois. All Kal can think about is her…

Wow, Kal really does have tunnel vision when it comes to Lois Lane. You aren't that bad, are you? Not that I would mind if you are…

Okay. I've been trapped in this infernal apartment alone for three days. THREE DAYS! Thanks, Kal. Thanks, Ultra Woman. Did you forget that I can't really leave due to our double identity, plus the fact that I'm bigger than a house. How do women do this pregnancy thing on a regular basis? It's damn uncomfortable.

Luckily, no stretch marks! Hidden blessings. I was originally supposed to give birth on February 15th, which is only days away. I'm counting down the minutes. I only hope I can keep a few of my enhanced abilities after the birth. Not enough to be Ultra Woman, but just enough to give you a run for your money for the next Kerth award. I've read every book on parenting ever written or so, it feels like I am actually somewhat prepared for the inevitable, (shiver) becoming my mother…. You'd better be laughing, fly boy!

Clark smiled.

Thank God, James invited me up to his penthouse for dinner. He knows about Lois's faked death; he figured it out that first weekend. It took until the funeral for Perry to figure it out; no one has bothered to tell me how. Mayson figured it out too, but she promised not to tell anyone; she recognized that the body (UW used the dead clone) wasn't this dimension's Lois by the length of her hair. Still nobody but Sam, Clark, and I know about UW, though. Let's hope it stays that way…

The handwriting changed. It still looked like Lois's, only slightly neater, and he realized the next entry had been written by someone else.

Hi Kal. Ultra Lois, Clark's Lois, here. You are now the father of a beautiful and healthy baby girl. She has flaxen hair and brown eyes and was born just after midnight on Valentine's Day, weighing slightly over seven pounds. I love her. I simply love her, she's so wonderful.

Lucy, on the other hand, isn't doing so well. After Lara's birth (oh, sorry, Lucy named her Lara Kent, after your birth mom), Lucy started hemorrhaging. My dad did everything he could to stop the bleeding; it was just more than he could handle.

Clark wanted me to take Dr. Klein back to S.T.A.R. Labs to retrieve a blood sample he had donated a while back. Men! Sorry, that probably would have killed her more quickly than helped her, but he didn't know what else to suggest. He was grasping at straws. He would have done anything, short of killing me or Lara, to save her life. Anything! That's how much she has come to mean to him. He was being crushed by the enormity of this decision.

I still don't know why Clark and Lucy were so opposed to the idea of taking her to a hospital. Lucy actually made us promise never to take her to a hospital, even if the other option was death. Did something happen to her at a hospital?

I donated a pint of my blood to her, since I knew it would be a perfect match (almost identical, except for the super genes) and fresh. This was my choice, not Lucy's and certainly not Clark's. I figure if Clark could stand the pain of the Kryptonite long enough to have blood drawn, so could I. Oh my God, Kal! Why didn't anyone tell me the extent of the pain that stupid green rock causes you? It felt like someone was turning my skin inside out, peeling it away slowly with a dull scalpel and no painkillers. I never want to feel that ever again.

My blood ended up working, but something is wrong with Lucy. Since she recovered, she's distant, quiet (I know, Lucy quiet?), almost hopeless. She's taking care of Lara, but only the rudimentary stuff. She nurses her, changes her diaper, holds her, but it's as if her soul isn't it. She seems a shell of her former self.

I miss my friend. She's the closest I've come to having a girlfriend since college. She doesn't want to have anything to do with Clark. She yells at him almost every time he enters her room, especially if he's in the blue suit. It's almost as if she blames Superman for her infidelity… scratch that. Oh, crap. Well, I guess it really doesn't matter. She's never going to give you these notebooks anyway. Even I know that.

Clark gulped. That's why Lois hadn't brought the notebook letters back with her. They had turned from letters to a diary. His eyes returned to the page, not able to stop reading after coming so far.

If she doesn't start to show signs of improvement by this weekend, I'm coming to get you to take her home. She misses you so much. I'm sure half the reason she refuses to get out of bed are all those stupid dreams of the other dimension, of you. Kal, I'm one of the first to admit you are quite a hot toddy and not a bad kisser, but to give up on life? For a man? Any man? Even… granted, this coming from the woman who faked her death to be with Superman, so I guess I see her point. But I faked my death to live, not to die. Big difference.

Lara is perfect. She can even communicate telepathically. How cool is that? There aren't words to describe the bond circle. I've never felt a part of something until Lara joined us together, Clark and me and her. But even she is worried about Lucy… her mother. She keeps asking me to bring Clark to Lucy to cheer her up. Lara must have him confused with you, because seeing Clark doesn't cheer Lucy up, it usually infuriates her.

Okay. I've rambled enough for one passage. Thanks for letting me bare my chest to you. Oh, get your head out of the gutter, Kent! You know what I meant.

Lois Lane (the other one)

PS: She's not better. Tried the time machine, but it wasn't working. It looks like she's stuck here for awhile. I'm sorry.

The next entry was in the same handwriting and dated several weeks later.

Dear Kal:

I have some bad news. Your Lois still isn't doing well. She's stopped eating. We didn't notice at first, but between my dad watching over them during the day and me watching over them at night, she's started skipping meals. Telling one of us that she had eaten with the other one of us. Kal, she's down to 100 pounds.

My father insists that Lara's higher than usual metabolism has been sucking her dry while nursing. Lois would do anything for her child, even to her own detriment. My father thinks that if Lois had kept up with her meals she would have been fine, but she's given up.

Given up hope that she'll ever return. Given up hope that she'll see you again other than in her dreams. I'm afraid she has lost her will to live.

Clark and I have been so busy hunting down Vixen, we've been distracted from Lois's overall health. I'm so sorry.

Clearly, Lois is not able to care for herself and she will be watched around the clock now, if for no other reason than to safeguard Lara. Clark and I are ever so sorry to have let you down. We will never forgive ourselves.

My father has put her on a high-calorie diet to try to bulk her up, so that should we ever get the time machine working again, we can return her home looking as she should. Let's hope this works. At the moment she's flesh-and-bones.

Ultra Woman

Clark covered his mouth with his hand. "Lois."

Clark, I heard your voice today. Your voice — not Kal's. I don't know how she did it but Lara communicated with Star (OUR Star!) telepathically across dimensions. Star was searching for me for some reason. Me! Why was Star looking for me?

You love me, you miss me, and you want me to come home. You love me, got that. You miss me? How can you miss me when you have me there with you? You want me to come home? Me, too. I'm tired of being stuck in this hellish dimension. I want to come home. But WHY would you say this to me? Unless you are trying to contact the me from Christmas. Are you?

Oh, Clark. I don't know anymore. I know you love the me right there with you… I haven't noticed anything in the way you talk or speak with her (me) to make me believe that you're searching for another me. Am I going crazy again? LL

Lois got his message. Clark shook his head. His daughter was amazing.

If I never see another Double Fudge Crunch Bar in my life — FINE BY ME! Ugh. Clark, how can you eat like this all the time?

Clark, started another entry, *watch out for Vixen and Luckaby. Luckaby is a Luthor! Lex, Jr. to be exact, and not that cute guy posing as him. Also, Ultra Lois says he has a twin, Alex(ander? perhaps); she heard the two of them discussing him once. Clearly this Lex has brainwashed all his children into helping him take over the world. UW has also given me a long list of his ex-wives; I've included their names below so I won't forget. You know, if I don't make it. And I once believed him when he said he loved only me. What a fool I was!*

Clark's brow furrowed. How could the notebooks make it to him without her? She had survived the curse. His hand started shaking as he tore that page from the notebook and started reading the next entry.

I'm worried about James. Vixen is kidnapping heads of corporations and I just know from previous experience the DP will be on that list.

Sam and I have devised a plan. Should something happen to James, I'll run out to the street and convince Vixen to kidnap me as well (tell her I'm Lola Luthor or something). It is the only way we can catch Lex and Junior red-handed, hand in the cookie jar, you might say. I know Kal and Ultra Woman will not stop looking until they find us. Sam bought me a gun to carry for protection and should I get a chance, I'll take Lex and Junior down, end the Luthor reign over our happiness, once and for all. Lara will be well cared for by Ultra Woman and Kal, should our plan go awry, until they can bring her home to you, that is.

I can no longer stay at home and twiddle my thumbs when there is evil in this world. Sam and I have decided that Lex Luthor is the root of all evil. With him out of the picture, happiness and flowers can once again bloom in Metropolis.

Clark thought about that phrase a moment. "Happiness and flowers?" He shook his head. "Delusional, Lois." His eyes popped. "Oh, God! Delusional."

It had been five months before she went delusional during the Tempus event. And it was once again almost five months since they met up in Smallville in December.

He read on.

Sam has noticed I'm showing the early signs of Interdimensional Time Sickness. We spend part of every day reminding me what's real and what's not. We have decided not to tell Kal and Ultra Woman as there is nothing they can do but worry. Since the time machine to take me home is broken and there is no sign of H.G. Wells, I'm stuck here. Anyway, if Kal knew about me getting sick again he'd try and stop me like you would. If I end up going full-on delusional I'll probably end up in a sanitarium. And I CAN'T GO BACK TO THE CRAZY HOUSE! Clark, no. No way! I'd probably end up bumping into Dr. Deter with my luck, and truthfully, I'd rather die.

I love you, Clark. You are my full circle. My beginning and my end. Take care of Lara and you will always have a part of me within reach.

And since I'm either going to burn these notebooks before I return, I hope, or you will receive them only after my death, I should probably start by telling you the truth and warn you that Bureau 39 still exists. If I hadn't come to live with Kal, Lara and I would have died in childbirth at Metropolis University Hospital. Our bodies will have been stolen before they were even cold. My body will have been dissected and dumped in the landfill. Lara was never found. You will have returned in time for my funeral, where the knowledge that we died because you weren't here to save us causes you to hang up the blue suit forever.

I couldn't let that happen to you. I love you, all of you. I couldn't be responsible for the death of even a part of you. I'm sorry if anything I did caused you pain. It was not my intention to hurt you. I would not have come to this dimension, to Kal, knowing full well the intensity of his feelings towards me, had there been any other cure for this curse.

I love you, Clark. Live long and prosper. LL

Clark shut the notebook, his brow wrinkling. "Live long and prosper?"

This last entry had been dated a week before they had found Lara in their dining room. Lois had mentioned the gun and trying to shoot the Luthors with only an offhand comment about having gone crazy.

He walked over to the fireplace and, one by one, dropped the notebooks into the fire.

"Clark Jerome Kent! Are you coming to eat or not?" His mother opened the kitchen door. "Usually you're the first to lunch, not the last."

Clark smiled briefly at her as he followed her into the kitchen. His father and Jack were sitting at the kitchen table, just starting their sandwiches. Lara was sticking her entire fist into a bowl of pumpkin pie. Lucky kid. His wife was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Lois?"

Jonathan wiped his face. "She said she needed some fresh air. So she took her sandwich to go." He nodded toward the back door.

"That sounds good to me, too," Clark replied, pulling on his coat from the rack by the back door. He grabbed a sandwich off the tray and kissed his mom's cheek. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, sweetie."

Clark ate his sandwich in the two steps it took him to walk out the door. He shut the door behind him. He was turning around, with his back to the house, when a snowball creamed him in the face.

Lois gasped from behind a tree.

Wiping the snow from his face and removing his glasses as he could hardly see through them anymore, Clark looked at her.

"Oh, Clark! I'm so sorry. I never thought you'd let it get that far."

Clark smiled at her. "It's okay, Lois. I forgive you." And in his heart he knew he had. Then his smiled turned to an evil grin. "Because I know I can catch you."

Lois squealed and started to run, quite difficult for her in the high drifts of snow.

Suddenly, the two of them were rolling in the snow, Clark cushioning their initial fall. Lois was laughing by the time they stopped rolling, her on top of him. She slapped his chest. "No fair. You cheated."

He glanced up at her innocently. "You never called no super powers."

"Ha-ha."

"I love you, Wife."

"And I love you, Husband." Lois leaned over and placed a kiss on his lips. "Always."

Rolling her over so he was on top and pressing a more intense kiss to her lips, Clark repeated, "Always."

***

Epilogue

The day after Valentine's Day, 1998

Clark watched as his daughter toddled over to Lois across the room of the *Daily Planet*'s in-house daycare. She had been walking for just over three weeks now, and there was no looking back.

Ellen had bought their girl a pink, fluffy, crinoline creation, which Lois had aptly described as "dreadful". Nevertheless, their sensible one-year old refused to wear anything else. She was definitely her mother's daughter. Clark saw plenty of head-butting between those two in his future. Thank goodness he could fly off with a fraction of a second's notice.

Jimmy approached him, holding a piece of cake. Their relationship hadn't changed since he had discovered Clark was also Superman. That boy was full of surprises. He just went with the flow and even covered for Clark sometimes.

"How was her birthday, CK?" Jimmy asked.

"Nice. Quiet. Just family. I flew my folks and Jack in." He laughed softly. "Well, as quiet as a gathering that included both Lois *and* her mother could be."

"Jack? I thought you said it was just family?"

Clark noticed a slight pout on his friend's face. Jimmy had been hurt when he had learned that Jack figured it out before him.

"My folks officially adopted him this past fall. That makes him my little brother, officially now." Clark smiled. This year had been a big one for *his* family. He had gained a wife, a daughter, a new younger brother, a twin — whom he would never forgive — and his soon-to-be sister-in-law. His cup overfloweth.

"Balson! Clark! Jimmy! Lois!" Perry called from across the daycare. He must have forgotten he was out of the bullpen.

"Yes, Chief?" Barry replied hesitantly.

Clark knew if Barry was involved in the lecture, it must be about Superman. They decided that they liked sharing the Superman beat with Barry. He covered the little everyday stuff, and it freed them up to concentrate on what Lois liked to call the 'juicy stuff.' The Man of Steel had taken the day off yesterday for Lara's birthday, so Clark wasn't sure why Perry was in such an uproar.

"Scooped!" yelled their boss, cake in hand, as he stomped over to Barry and hit his chest with a folded newspaper. "Scooped by the French Press, no less. The French!"

Clark and Jimmy gravitated over to them.

Perry turned to him. "Clark, did you and Lois know about this?" He pulled the newspaper out of Barry's hands and snapped it open to him.

There were several photos of Superman and Ultra Woman at the Eiffel Tower. In one photo that Clark was sure had already been seen worldwide, they were caught sharing quite an intimate kiss. Clark shrugged sheepishly. What could he say?

"CK? Isn't that… how is that… oh, my God!" Jimmy covered his mouth. "That's… what is he doing?"

Perry looked at Jimmy and then at Clark and then down at the paper in his hand. His brow furrowed and then he shook his head.

Lois arrived with Lara on her hip. "Boys, have you forgotten your…" She glanced at the paper and then shook her head with a titter. "Clark. Clark. Clark."

"Yes, honey?" Clark replied, hoping everyone would think she had been talking about him.

"Unca Super. Aunty Ultra!" Lara clapped.

Barry's jaw dropped.

Perry stared at Lois and then his eyes drifted over to Clark and then back to the newspaper photos. "Well, that answers *that* question. My office, after the party, you two," he grumbled with a two finger point.

Yep. I'm never going to forgive that other Clark, thought Clark. Just when the fallout from his Red Kryptonite blunder had faded from the press, too.

Lara opened her arms to Perry and their editor melted, eagerly taking her from Lois. "I always wanted a daughter, you know." He smiled, bouncing her up and down. "Happy birthday, sweetie."

***

Jimmy watched as Perry chewed out CK and Lois in his office. He had no idea how they were going to get out of this mess. They would; they always did. He just didn't know how.

Perry threw open his office door and double pointed out to the newsroom. "And, if it isn't too hard, do you think you can get an interview with Ultra Woman before she returns to whatever rabbit hole she went down last time?"

Lois pointed back at him. "On it, Perry."

"Now why don't the rest of you lollygaggers work on getting me some real news?!" Perry shook his head. "Gossip!" he harrumphed. Jimmy watched as the Chief spotted one of the more junior staffers pass by. "Janet, get me a catalogue of furniture. I need a new visitor's chair for my office."

Lois grabbed CK's tie and pulled him to her for a kiss, then murmured loud enough that Jimmy could still hear, "If they visit here again, perhaps we should give them that red heart necklace that Dr. Klein is so kindly holding for us as payback… I mean, a wedding gift."

CK chuckled. "Honey. That necklace would make their dimension implode from all the seismic activity."

"Tempting though, isn't it, Clark?" Lois grinned wickedly. Then a thought struck her and she laughed. "By the way, Clark, the seismic activity, that was just a joke. How can one have seismic activity caused while floating?"

Really? Floating while… Jimmy swallowed. *Good to know. And yet, too much information, Lois.*

CK shook his head. "Minx." He wrapped his arm about his wife's shoulder and whispered something with a laugh.

"No, Clark. I've got this covered." Uh-oh. Lois's chin was getting that familiar tension to it.

"Interviewing yourself is harder than it sounds," Jimmy heard CK whisper as he approached them.

"Oh, so I'm not up to *your* journalistic equivalent now, Smallville?"

Lois's partner backed away hands raised.

Good decision, CK.

Sitting down at his desk, CK looked up at Jimmy. "What's up?"

"Any news on when Ralph will be getting back from his 'retreat'?" Jimmy asked with interest. He and the other junior staffers were hoping the answer would be 'never', thus opening up another lucrative reporting spot.

As it was personal and highly confidential that Ralph was in rehab to work on his cocaine addiction, everyone in the newsroom knew. After Perry had casually mentioned Ralph's month-long 'retreat' at the morning meeting, Jimmy overheard Lois telling CK, 'See, I told you he was Mindy's mole.'

CK glanced at Lois, his lips pressing together, and then responded with a vague, "No news is good news, Jimmy."

Good news in that Ralph isn't coming back? No, since it's CK, the good news is Ralph's probable healthy recovery. Darn!

Jimmy quickly looked around. First, verifying to see that Perry was tucked neatly back in his office; second, checking that Lois wasn't listening (she was on the phone) and third, making sure that no one else was within earshot. The photographer lowered his voice to barely above a whisper anyway, "Was that him, CK?"

CK was concentrating on cleaning up the papers on his desk, but his brow furrowed. "Him, who?"

"The other Superman."

CK's chair rolled back and he stared at Jimmy in the eye. Clearly, he was too stunned to speak.

"When Lois recounted that story about you and Ultra Woman, I really thought it was a dream. Until I saw those photos in that French newspaper. He looks just like our Superman, but he isn't because Lois isn't you-know-who anymore, and you guys spent yesterday celebrating Lara's birthday. So, those photos must really be him and…" Jimmy cleared his throat. "*Her.*"

CK, still staring at him, swallowed and then responded, "Must be."

"You aren't sending Lois back there if she gets pregnant again, are you?" Jimmy asked cautiously. He really doubted it, especially after what he figured happened last time, but he was still curious why Lois had gone there the first time.

"Back *where*?" CK clearly wasn't ready to share this information with him.

"The other dimension… am I really the owner of the *Daily Planet* over there? A multimillionaire who dates supermodels? Was I really kidnapped by Vixen, only to be saved by Lois threatening to kill Lex Luthor with a gun? Or was that just another dream too? Because that would be so cool."

CK glanced over at his wife. She was still on the phone. "No, that's true. How do you know about that?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Simple surveillance. Bug-Pen, like the one Lois used against that rock star terrorist a few years back." He swallowed as CK's face went intense. Superman intense. "After I figured it out about you-know-who, I wondered how it was possible that Lara could truly be… you know… who I knew her to be. So I set the Bug-Pen on Lois's desk one day to see if I could find out anything." Jimmy stood up and held up his hands as his Lois Lane-type ramble took on super speed. "Just that one day, CK, I swear." Jimmy pointed at CK as he backed away from the investigative reporter's desk. "You know, you and Lois really should watch what you say at work." He flashed his friend a grin and then darted away. He didn't breathe again until he was sitting at his own desk.

Jimmy watched as CK pulled his glasses down his nose and concentrated, obviously looking to see if there were any other bugs on his desk. *Yeah*, Jimmy winced; he probably should have warned CK about that a while back, especially while Mindy Church owned the *Daily Planet*. Of course, given how much CK didn't trust the new owner of the paper, Bruce Wayne, probably a good idea to double check.

CK then walked over to Lois's desk and did the same thing. Jimmy watched as CK released a breath and then walked into the conference room. At least they were clean.

A while later, a shadow darkened Jimmy's desk. He glanced up to see both Lois and CK standing next to his desk. Uh-oh, Lois did not look happy about his Bug-Pen episode. Her lips were pressed together and her hands rested on her hips. *Whoa, total Ultra Woman flashback*. Jimmy smirked.

"Do you really want to know about Lara?" she asked, brow raised.

"Yes. Of course," Jimmy practically gushed. Okay, he actually did gush, he admitted to himself. His eyes caught sight of his computer monitor and he remembered something. "But first, let me show you this crazy photo a friend of mine from the USS Enterprise shot to me. I'd show it to you later, but I just downloaded it and it took forever." He hit a few keys to pull up his personal e-mail account with the photo open. "It looks like that helicopter is carrying a huge chunk of ice or glacier or something. Isn't that freaky? My friend said the photo was totally legit, too. No doctoring. Who would do that?"

Lois leaned forward and stared at the photo. "When was this taken? Is your friend in the South China Sea?"

Whoa! How does she do that? "Yeah, how did you know?" Jimmy shook his head, then typed a few commands and got the photo's data up on the screen. "He shot the photo the day before yesterday."

Lois turned to CK. "Remember I told you about the cyclone that hit Singapore that weekend I was visiting your folks last December? The December before Lara was born?"

"Cyclones don't usually hit this late in the year, Lois. And certainly not that close to the equator. Are you saying it—"

"—was man-made. We always assumed it was Luthor's handiwork as a diversion when you-know-who went to rescue the other me, but Luthor's dead here. And I just can't imagine Mindy doing this, so it must be someone else's innovation." Lois bumped Jimmy to the side and typed a few commands onto his computer pulling up a map of the world. She enlarged the section between Vietnam and Singapore.

Jimmy was impressed. The pre-Lara Lois hardly knew how to navigate the *Daily Planet* inner database, let alone pull up other stuff.

Lois continued, "The iceberg was dropped in the South China Sea about here." She pointed with her finger. "And Superman found windmills along these coasts of Malaysia that were taking power from the grid instead of generating it."

"Like a giant wind machine?" CK reconfirmed.

"Exactly. With the iceberg and the wind, plus a thunderstorm that came from Vietnam, Rafflesia hit Singapore as a weak category 3. It was devastating to a city which had never experienced winds that strong. Superman spent three days there helping with search and rescue."

"I thought they spent the weekend holed up in Smallville, taking showers, and enacting their version of the curse?" CK raised a brow, but Jimmy could see a grin at the corners of his friend's pressed lips wanting to burst out.

Wow! Lois recounted another event from the other dimension. Right here, in front of him. He was part of the inner-gang. Jimmy grinned with high spirits and then winced. *Inner-gang?* He would have to come up with a better description of their group than that. Wait? 'Curse?' Like hocus pocus, gypsies, and witchcraft? That kind of curse? He looked between Lois and CK. Was there something else they hadn't told him?

Lois shrugged. "Superman needs to sleep sometimes… although, I'm thinking you're right. They didn't sleep." She rolled her eyes. "Much."

CK chuckled, wrapping an arm around his wife's waist. "If they're anything like us…"

"Clark, do you think our new boss is behind this?" Lois asked, pointing at the monitor again and switching the conversation back to the topic at hand. "He's got the money and the means."

"Lois, he's really not that bad of a guy," CK told her. "He's not another Lex Luthor."

Jimmy raised a brow at this statement. CK had always hated Bruce Wayne.

Lois looked at him with the same amount of skepticism. "He's got you drinking the Kool-Aid now, I see. Next you're going to tell me he's—" But she didn't finish that thought as her eyes went wide. "*No.*"

CK smiled at her and shrugged, but didn't answer her verbally. He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "I should go. See if Superman can put that chunk of ice back where it belongs." He kissed his wife's cheek and jogged off towards the storeroom.

Lois stared after her husband with her jaw still dragging on the floor. It was the first time Jimmy had ever seen her speechless.

Jimmy thought about this cryptic exchange and then swallowed. Maybe he didn't really want to know about the curse after all. With his luck, it was probably contagious.

THE END

<u>See more of from this family in the</u>
<u>Further Adventures of Superman and Ultra Woman</u>
Coming… Eventually

Gratitude: I'd like to take this moment to once again thank all the wonderful people who helped make this story better than I made it! My Betas: Lynn S.M. (I'll never stop thanking my lucky stars for volunteering to be my first Beta!), StopQuitDont, MozartMaid (who made me make alt-Lois a more fleshed out character from the get-go), Queen Of Capes, and the ever-wonderful, ever-supportive IolantheAlias! Batman wouldn't have been who he ended up being without the help of IolantheAlias,

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Thank you all who have taken the time to read until the very end. I hope my story — despite its heavy subject matter at times (and its length) — was still enjoyable, thought-provoking, and entertaining.

Disclaimer: Inspired by the characters created by Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster and portrayed on the *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* television series, developed for TV by Deborah Joy LeVine, Warner Bros. Television, and owned by DC Comics. I would like to thank the writers on the above-referenced TV show for their inspiration, and borrowed dialogue and plot devices, especially (but not necessarily limited to) Deborah Joy LeVine, Bryce Zabel, Dan Levine, Robert Killebrew, Thania St. John, Dean Cain, Bill D'Elia, H.B. Cobb, Tony Blake, Paul Jackson, John McNamara, Kate Boutiler, Kathy McCormick, Gene Miller, Karen Kavner, Jack Weinstein, Lee Hutson, Chris Ruppenthal, Grant Rosenberg, Eugenie Ross-Leming, Brad Buckner, David Simkins, Gene O'Neil, Noreen Tobin, Michael Jamin, Sivert Glarum, Teri Hatcher, Pat Hazell, Brad Kern, Tim Minear, Brian Nelson, Michael Gleason, Andrew Dettmann, Daniel Truly, and Jeff Vlaming, many of whom I quoted directly.

The Twilight Zone was a TV show created by Rod Sterling. *My Fair Lady* is a musical version of the George Bernard Shaw play *Pygmalion*, with the book and lyrics written by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe. "Get Me To The Church On Time" is a song from *My Fair Lady* and one of the lyrics from that song is "I'm getting married in the morning…." *Jurassic Park* is a Steven Spielberg film based on the Michael Crichton novel; the screenplay was written by Michael Crichton and David Koepp. *Little Boy Blue* is an old English nursery rhyme. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a book by L. Frank Baum. Etch A Sketch is a drawing toy made by Ohio Art Company. "Live long and prosper" is the catch-phrase of Spock, a charcter from *Star Trek* created by Gene Roddenberry. The character of Spider-Man was created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko. Wonder Woman was created by William Moulton Marston. The characters of Batman/Bruce Wayne and Cat Woman were created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. The plot of the story is entirely my own.

Music Disclaimer: I would like to thank Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, Etta James, Michael Bublé and all the other great singers and songwriters who make all us fools fall in love. I have borrowed from their oeuvres to enhance my story and do not take credit for their wonderful songs or songwriting abilities, only the effects they wreak on my characters.

The following songs were mentioned in the story:

- "Hard Headed Woman" was written by Claude Demetrius, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "The Wonder of You" was written by Baker Knight, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby" music by Harry Warren, lyrics by Johnny Mercer.
- "Suspicious Minds" was written by Mark James, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "The Way You Look Tonight" was written by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Dorothy Fields.
- "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" music by Duke Ellington, lyrics by Bob Russell.
- "Don't Be Cruel" was written by Otis Blackwell, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "She's Not You" was written by Doc Pomus, Jerry Lieber, and Mike Stoller, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "Don't" was written by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "Surrender" was written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman — an adaptation of the song "Torna a Surriento" by Giambattista and Ernesto de Curtis, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "It's Now Or Never" lyrics by Aaron Schroeder and Wally Gold, music is "O Sole Mio", performed by Elvis Presley.
- "Burning Love" was written by Dennis Linde, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "Come Fly With Me" was written by Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Huseun, arranged by Billy May, performed by Frank Sinatra.
- "Love Me Tender" (a.k.a. Aura Lee) words by George R. Poulton, music by W.W. Fosdick, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "They Can't Take That Away From Me" written by George and Ira Gershwin and made famous first by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (in *Shall We Dance*), performed in my story by Ella Fitzgerald.
- "I've Got A Crush On You" music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin.
- "You Don't Own Me" written by John Madara and David White, performed by Dusty Springfield.
- "Tea for Two" music by Vincent Youmans, lyrics by Irving Caesar, from the musical *No, No, Nanette.*
- "Over the Rainbow" music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by E. Y. Harburg.
- "One Night" written by Dave Bartholomew, Anita Steinman, and Pearl King, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "Can't Help Falling in Love" written by Hugo Peretti, Luigi Creatore, and George David Weiss, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "(You're the) Devil in Disguise" written by Bill Giant, Bernie Baum, and Florence Kaye, performed by Elvis Presley.
- "She Works Hard for the Money" written and performed by Donna Summer.