

Little Secrets, Finale

by **Kala Lane Kent**

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Rating: T

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Upon a Midnight Clear

The *Daily Planet* Christmas party was one of those events, the legend of which both preceded and exceeded it. All throughout the month of December, tales were told of Christmas parties past - Lois and Richard getting engaged, the spiked punch from seven years ago, the two interns who'd gotten into a brawl in the parking garage, Loueen ambushing Perry under the mistletoe, and the time the power had failed and the party was held by the light of thirty laptop computers.

This year was shaping up to be *very* interesting. Lois found Loueen by the punch bowl, looking annoyed. "What's wrong with you, Ms. Former Secretary?" the reporter asked. "Is the old man refusing to take his blood pressure meds?"

"No, I've got some miserably persistent stomach flu," Loueen grouched. "I'm trying to decide if the punch is good enough to drink now, knowing I'm gonna be sick off it later."

"Then why are you here?" Lois asked, pouring herself a glass of punch. One sip told her that it was heavily spiked; thankfully, she had taken a cab to the party, intending to drink if she felt like it and demand a flight home. "And no, it's not worth it."

"Thanks for the warning," Loueen sighed. "As for the virus, I've gotten over the worst symptoms. Now it's just the nausea. I'm living on water and club crackers."

"Great. The diet of fashion models. Beautiful. Thanks for sharing your germs."

"Seriously, though, the rest of the symptoms all went away about a week ago. Just the damn stomach, now." Loueen shook her head, eyeing the punch ruefully.

"Your immune system must be shot," Lois told her. "Get some vitamin C."

"From what, orange juice?" Loueen snarked.

"Pills, you twit," Lois growled. "Either that, or stay away from Perry. God knows the two of you are enough to make everyone *else* nauseous."

"Shut up, Lois," Loueen sighed. Then she smirked; just because she wasn't in the office as often since she'd married the boss didn't mean she had to give up harassing her rival for the Official Office Hot Chick title. "You're just jealous. I keep telling you, age means experience."

"No, trust me, I'm not." Lois smirked, remembering that week in Kal-El's apartment. *Anything that ends with having to replace a ripped mattress has got to be good.*

"Speaking of that, you can tell me the truth." Loueen crossed her arms and stared at Lois intently. "What's up with you and Kent? All I've heard for years is how he's your best friend, big teddy bear, no possible spark of romance. And now all of a sudden, you're smooching him in the office and telling everyone the kids are his. And my *nephew* believes this bull, too. What the hell, Lois?"

The raven-haired reporter rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh. "So I finally admitted I like the good guys. How come everyone acts like this is breaking some cardinal rule?"

Her friend gave her an incredulous look and dropped her voice. "Hello? There's only one good guy I've ever seen you go for, and he wears a cape. To be honest, a lot of people thought *he* was the twins' father, me and Perry included. And not that long ago, you were fishing his spandex-clad behind out of the ocean. So what gives?"

Lois blinked in shock. She'd never realized that *Perry* suspected the twins were Kal-El's. He had seemed to accept the story she'd spun... How many others had nodded politely and let her believe she'd convinced them? She stammered a bit as she replied, "Jeez, Loueen, I know you can both *count!* On top of that, he's not from this planet - what would make you think that'd be possible? And trust me, I know *exactly* who their father is. I just didn't want anyone to know... I mean, *Clark?* Who would've believed me? Even though they *both* look like him."

"Yeah, well, we both believe you now," Loueen said. "The whole one-weekend-stand story was way out of character for you. Not that you wouldn't give some randomly-chosen stranger the night of his life in revenge for the guy who screwed you over - I can *definitely* see you doing that - but that you'd let yourself get pregnant and then keep the kids."

"That's kinda harsh," Lois told her, crossing her arms. Thankfully no one else was in earshot.

"You can be pretty damn harsh when you want to," Loueen pointed out. "Nah, the old goat and I always knew the kids' father had to be someone you cared about. And there's no one on this planet you love more than Clark. Sure, you were obsessed with Superman, but Kent's your best pal, and as much as you've picked on him, you never let anyone *else* say one wrong word to him. It makes perfect sense to me."

Lois just shook her head slightly. "Yes, well..." Before she could finish her sentence, she caught sight of a very familiar blonde head moving through the crowd. "Dear God, I thought my sister would stay home. We'll be lucky if she doesn't drop this kid right here."

"If she *does* go into labor, she's just buying in to the family tradition of office drama," Loueen taunted.

"False labor," Lois corrected. She decided to make that her parting shot before moving off to intercept Lucy.

Her sister greeted her with the usual hug and dazzling smile. "Don't squeeze too hard, I'll pop like a tick," she said cheerfully.

"I believe it," Lois replied, stepping back to look at her. "What've you got in there, quadruplets? Or is it one kid and all the toys she'll need for the first year?"

"You're never gonna forgive me for that 'twins and a swingset' remark, are you?" Lucy asked genially. "No, this is one little girl - and probably a typewriter. None of the other three are showing any kind of journalistic bent, so Ron's been whispering to her that she wants to grow up to be a reporter like Daddy. He wants at least one to follow in his footsteps."

"Is that why you had a fourth? I thought you were going to stop at three." Lois flinched a little, wondering if the question was a little too abrupt - she'd been making snappy comebacks with Loueen, and she'd spoken as the words had occurred to her without thinking of how Lucy would take the comment.

Luckily, Lucy laughed. "No, she was a surprise. I'm thinking of taking a page out of my big sister's book and having a tubal ligation afterward, though. Ron and I are entirely too fertile."

"Yeah, well, you two are doing your part to make the next generation gorgeous," Lois replied with a grin. "I thought I had the monopoly on pretty kids, but yours are lovely, too. Must be a Lane thing."

"Well, you were always the stunning one when we were kids, so it's only fair that my children are striking. Not that the twins aren't totally adorable - that's one title I'll share with you." Lucy was sipping nonalcoholic punch, and she glanced at Lois' glass knowingly. "Drinking the high octane stuff, I see? Is Clark driving you home?"

"If he's lucky," Lois replied archly.

A familiar voice spoke at her elbow just then. "All three of us wore black? That's it, we have to start planning these things." The Lane girls turned to see Lana looking at them in amusement.

"First official meeting of the Matching Monograms Club is in session," Lucy said. "And I want it noted that of all of us, I have the best reason for wearing black. It's slimming, and my

dear sister keeps telling me I look like the broad side of a barn."

"Yes, well, black always looks good on a redhead," Lana told her with a small grin. "Lois, what's your excuse?"

"I'm in mourning for my sanity," the reporter deadpanned, making the other two chuckle.

"You're late," Lucy said. "You've been crazy as long as I've known you."

"Yeah, but getting roped into hosting the Lane Family Christmas is a special kind of madness," Lois retorted. "I can't believe you and Mom shanghaied me into it. Speaking of which, did you find those videos?"

"I dropped them off with Mom," Lucy replied. "Besides, if I had a house the size of yours, I wouldn't mind hosting every family gathering." She shrugged and added for Lana's benefit, "We're working on it."

"And if you had a kitchen like mine, you'd probably open a catering business from home," Lois said quickly, leading her sister off that topic slightly. "You know, Lana, if you can talk Richard into it, the two of you would be more than welcome to help me deal with my mad family. Plus Ben, Martha, and that godforsaken beagle."

"You know I would, but he promised his father." Lana shrugged, and then Lois saw her gaze track sideways, eyebrows going up. "Hmm. Well, I must say getting involved with you has been very good for Clark's wardrobe."

Lucy and Lois turned to see Clark walking in the door in a new charcoal-gray suit. For once in his life, the cut was flattering, and the Matching Monograms Club grinned in unison as he greeted Ron and Richard. "You know, we have some seriously good taste in men," Lucy opined.

"Amen to that," Lana replied, winking at Lois.

Lois smirked at both of them, whispering, "Just remember he's *mine*, cheerleader," as she headed over to Clark. Greeting both Ron and Richard, she stood on tiptoe to kiss Clark's cheek. "Hello, handsome. Fancy meeting you here."

Richard rolled his eyes. "Good Lord. C'mon, Ron, let's go find our girls before these two give us sugar-shock. Clark, I don't know what you drugged her with, but Lois has been positively *cute* ever since she got back with you."

"Yeah, I'd like to see you call me cute when I scoop your stories," Lois snapped affectionately. "Remember I can still out-drink and out-cuss you, Richard White."

"Oh, I've been cussed out by you," Richard replied, elbowing her shoulder lightly. "Not an experience anyone would forget. I'll grant you that, Lois. Clark, have fun." With that he and Ron left them, and Clark eased Lois away from the crowd to talk to her.

"You're late," she said, and added in a whisper, "Trouble?"

"Nothing major," he replied in the same low tone. A little louder, Clark said, "I got tied up in traffic. Did I miss anything?"

"Nope. Don't drink the punch, it's lethal." Lois linked her arm through his, aware of all the eyes in the crowd on them. She'd thought it would be a bit strange to be affectionate with Clark in public, but it actually felt oddly normal.

They circulated around the party, letting everyone see them together as yet more proof that the unthinkable had happened - Kent really *had* gotten the girl. Lois finally talked him into dancing with her when a slow song was playing, and though Clark had to step on her toes once to stay in character, this was the improved version of their waltz at the Pulitzers. "Maybe I ought to go request *Heart and Soul*," Lois teased him gently.

Clark smiled down at her, and then his expression became suddenly distant and

distracted. "Lois ... I've got to go," he whispered.

She groaned, dropping her head onto his chest. Even disappointed, her mind was racing, and she murmured very softly, "Take your cell phone out and look at it so people think you got called. I'll cover for you."

"Lois," he sighed, kissing her forehead as he obediently took the phone and glanced at its screen. Louder, he added, "Ma says the kids are refusing to go to bed - want me to handle it?"

"Please," she replied, proud of him for improvising on short notice, and then amused at herself. He *ought* to be good at inventing abrupt exits by now... "Hurry back, though?"

"Soon as I can," Clark promised, kissing her, and then he was gone.

Lois heaved a sigh, trying very hard not to be angry. She'd known things like this would happen, and she'd also known she would find it very upsetting. *This is what you get for falling in love with Superman*, she told herself sternly. The memory of his arms around her, that amazing smile, the warm look in those sapphire eyes, all of those things were worth inconveniences like this, however. Lois left the space cleared for a dance floor and readied herself for the first round of making excuses and waiting for news.

The first, but not the last.

Goodbyes were never easy, but Jason and Kala were relatively comfortable with letting Richard go to Florida for Christmas. He'd already left once and come back as promised, much sooner than expected, so though they were sad to see him leave they were also confident in his return. That confidence didn't make the parting any happier, however.

The morning they left, Richard and Lana went by the Riverside house for one last visit - and because the seaplane was docked there.

Lana dropped to one knee and hugged both twins tight. "You two be good while we're gone, all right? Listen to your mom."

"Yes, ma'am," they chorused, Kala adding, "Are you gonna bring us back presents from Florida?"

The redhead crossed her arms and gave Kala a serious look. "Is that why you're always so happy to see me, hmm? I buy you things?"

"Nuh-uh!" Kala said, looking hurt. "I *like* you!"

"Me too!" Jason added.

"Good," Lana said. "Just so you remember that presents are a *gift*, and it's not fair to expect people to get you something every time they go away. You two are *not* spoiled little brats, and I refuse to start spoiling you now." Both children nodded, and she relented a little. "Besides, I bought your Christmas presents in Milan. That's cooler than Florida because it's in a whole other country."

Identical beaming grins met her remark, and Jason and Kala both hugged her again. "Thank you, Miss Lana," Kala said.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Lana told her, rumpling her raven curls. "I love you both, you know that?"

"Love you, too," Jason replied, and his sister echoed him.

Richard had been saying his own goodbyes: a firm handshake for Clark and a brief hug for Lois, smiling when she whispered that she *would* miss him. It wasn't until he pulled back to see her face that he saw a tell-tale glisten in her eyes that confirmed that that was the honest truth. Hugging him tight once more, Lois saved face by dashing the tears that lurked before they pulled away to share a grin. Another secret safe.

He turned to Jason and Kala, dropping to his knees so they could both hug him, while Lana got up and gave Clark a hug. Neither Richard nor the twins were eager to let go, holding each other close while their wordless murmurs of affection were all that the others could hear. It was the first time in three years that they would be apart on Christmas, and if it was hard for Lois to be without him, it was worse on the twins.

That somehow left Lois and Lana facing each other. After a moment, the redhead simply hugged Lois, saying warmly, "Take care of yourself, all right? Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone."

Lois just chuckled, returning the hug easily. When they stepped back, she pointed at Clark with a grin. "Don't worry, if I *do* get in trouble, I have him."

Lana's eyebrows rose, and she smiled mischievously. "Really? Lois, sometimes *you* have to rescue *him*. And once in a great while, you need someone ordinary and practical like me to help the *both* of you."

"Yes, I remember who fished us out of the ocean and made sure I didn't die of hypothermia," Lois replied, but it was with honest gratitude, not the swift sarcasm Lana had expected. "And I wouldn't call you ordinary, either. Tell you what - I'll make you a deal, cheerleader. *I'll* promise to be sane and cautious and reasonable while you're in Florida, if *you* promise to go out and kick up your heels a little bit, okay? You can't be rational and responsible and level-headed *all* the time."

"I think I can manage that," Lana replied with a grin. The laughter in her eyes faded, replaced by something serious and a trifle surprising. "Because I've just realized I'm going to miss you this Christmas. *And* Clark and the twins." She paused while both women adjusted to that; neither of them tended to make friends this quickly. Lana had a great many friendly acquaintances, but few who were close to her heart, and most of Lois' relationships with other women were adversarial, at least in the beginning.

"We'll miss you, too," Lois said. She jerked her head in Richard's direction with a smirk. "And that son-of-a-gun over there who's too cute for his own good and *knows* it, the pest. Bring him back in one piece, if you can. Death by nagging mom and yapping dogs isn't the kind of obit he wants."

"I will," Lana said. Richard was still snuggling the twins, for once not reacting to Lois' teasing as he kissed Jason on the forehead and whispered something that made the boy smile. Lana glanced at Clark speculatively, and asked Lois, "Christmas in Smallville next year?"

"Sure," the reporter replied. "We'll paint the town red."

"Got to give the gossips something new every now and then," Lana said, and then Richard let go of the kids reluctantly. She smiled affectionately at them and added, "Don't let us rush you, darling. It's not as if we have to check our bags."

"Yeah, like I really want you and Lois trading quips all morning," Richard said. "Sooner or later you'll talk about *me*, and if you're gonna do that I'd like it to at least be far enough away that I don't have to hear you laughing."

"Then don't be such a joke," Lois retorted instantly, and all of them laughed as they made their way out to the lawn and the dock beyond.

Lois had been insanely busy ever since the Christmas party, her schedule twice as hectic with the usual glut of holiday news and Perry's continued demands of two editorials a week, especially now that she had garnered major attention not just with the Superman article, but when news broke of the return of her Pulitzer. Clark used that fact to his advantage, sneaking

a few extra gifts for the twins into the house and getting some last-minute shopping done for Lois herself. There had to be gift boxes she could *see* to take her mind off the main present, which had never left his pocket since he purchased it. *I'm basically terrified to let it out of my sight. It almost seems like it's not real. I mean, Clark Kent proposing to Lois Lane? No one at the office would believe I have the guts. Although I'm sure one or two of them would believe that even Superman is nervous about asking Lois to marry him...*

Thank God, with Lois, she's getting the whole package and she knows it. It's not just the dashing hero she loves, and I feel like a fool for never realizing how much she cared about Clark. He tucked the last of the twins' gifts into the back of the highest shelf of the linen closet, and grinned to himself. *That should just about do it. Now all I have to do is make it through this evening without letting her know what I plan to do ahead of time. This will not be easy.*

Sighing, he paused to listen to Lois' heartbeat; she was close to the house and her heart rate was picking up, which probably meant she was trying to slip in a last-minute gift of her own. Clark smirked in amusement, certain that nothing she had planned could top *his* little surprise, and trotted into the kitchen.

Kala and Jason were both standing atop chairs, 'helping' Ben mix cookie dough. Busying them with that task kept them from eyeing the other cookies cooling on racks atop the dining room table and from trying to snag a slice of the pumpkin bread or banana nut bread loaves currently occupying the counter. Martha watched them in amusement, stirring the large pot of beef bourguignon she had been slowly simmering for the past several hours.

"Ma, that smells incredible," Clark said, coming up behind her to enjoy the aroma.

"I'm still not letting you taste it," Martha teased gently, smiling up at him. She touched the tip of the wooden spoon she'd been stirring with and licked the drop of sauce off her fingertip, scowling. "Ben, honey, would you get me some of that black pepper? And Clark, if Lois has any, a splash of sherry would bring out the flavor."

"I don't know about sherry, but she might have something else," Clark offered, moving toward the liquor cabinet.

Ben patted Jason's shoulder and said, "Get down the baking powder and put this much in, all right, son? I'll be right back." He turned his back on the twins for only a moment while he took the black pepper to Martha. Jason reached into the cabinet in front of him and took down the box that said 'Baking' on the side, measuring out the proper amount and pouring it into the bowl proudly. Kala stuck her tongue out at him as he put the baking soda back. She wouldn't let him see her making faces, not after having gotten flour all over her dress earlier when her brother shoved her shoulder.

Clark offered Martha the choice of eighteen-year-old single-malt scotch or twenty-year-old cognac. She sniffed both liquors before pronouncing the cognac the better match, and poured a small amount into the beef bourguignon. With a little black pepper stirred in, she tasted it again and pronounced it perfect.

"We did it," Jason told Ben with a huge grin. "What's next?"

"Let me see," he said, reading the recipe. "Kala, sweetheart, take that flour sifter there - the thing with the screen on the bottom and the handle on the side - and hold it over the bowl.."

Clark's cell phone rang, distracting him from his pleasant contemplation of his children's culinary education. "Hello, Lois," he said into the receiver.

"I'm just now about to turn into the driveway, thanks to the snow bank out on Holden

Drive that no one seems to be too worried about. That idiot mayor of ours..." she said with a sigh. "And you'd think that people in Metropolis would know how to drive in this weather. It took me twice as long as usual to get through mid-town. And don't peek in any packages I bring in, all right? None of it's for *you*. I got started on your present a month ago and it's safely packed away in a lead-lined box, Mr. X-Ray Eyes." The smile in her voice was clear, that little hint of a juicy secret that was hers alone. Seemed he wasn't the only one taking pains to hide a 'perfect gift'. "I just had to find something for Ben and your mom. *Anyway*, come open the door for me, please? I've got to park in the freakin' driveway until we get the garage door fixed and I'll be a snow figure before I get in the door if I don't get some help."

"Gladly, love," Clark said, aware that he was smiling at the sound of her voice in spite of her crabby tone. "Dinner's almost ready. I'm getting the door now." He hung up the phone and opened the front door just as Lois parked the Audi. The falling snow was already whitening her trench coat's shoulder and her hat as she quickly popped the trunk to gather her purchases.

The reporter hurried to the door, cursing under her breath at the weather, the traffic, and the large packages she was carrying. Seeing how much she had, Clark was tempted to help her, but knew it would just irritate her at this point. It was easy to see from her expression that it had been a long day, as Thursdays usually were. As she would be out through Monday, she had been driving herself mad making sure that every article was prepared to go to press the next morning, as well as clearing her work schedule for the rest of the week. And knowing Lois, since Perry was still on his enforced five o'clock leave-time, she was the last one out of the building. He, with the rest of his department, had been gone by five; he had finally left after the third time she had told him to go home.

The moment she stepped inside, however, Lois froze, her eyes going wide.

First of all, it was *warm*, almost balmy compared to the frigid wind outside. Secondly, the entire house was permeated with good smells, and her mouth started to water with anticipation. "Wow," Lois said softly, letting loose a long and exhausted sigh. "My God, I'm hungry! I mean, I'm two hours late getting home and all, but..."

Clark chuckled, taking the packages from her and setting them on the table, and then started helping her out of her coat. "It's the cold," he said absently. "Dinner will warm you up. Not as well as I could, but..."

Lois gave him a tired smile as she tossed her hat onto the coat rack. "Hugging me would help," she said, giving her head a brisk shake to dislodge the snow caught in the ends of her raven curls before holding her arms out. He laughed softly, pulling her into his embrace and letting his warmth soak into her. With another sigh, this one of contentment, Lois rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, making herself forget about everything except this, the holiday, and the absolutely luscious smell coming from the vicinity of her usually-empty kitchen.

"Mommy's home!" Kala called, sounding a little affronted. She'd been told not to eavesdrop while Ben was around, and she had been so preoccupied with cookies that she'd just then heard Lois.

The next thing Lois heard was the thumping of little feet - whoever thought children pitter-pattered had never heard *her* twins on a wood floor. The reporter had no time to pull back from Clark, so Kala and Jason just hugged them both. "No peeking in the bags," Lois said quickly, raising the bags above their heads.

"Mommy, is Santa really comin' tonight?" Jason asked, clinging to her knee.

"Yes, sweetie," she replied, hearing Clark chuckle and wondering how many times *he'd*

been asked that. "So you two have to be on your very best behavior. Not only is it Christmas Eve, but we have company."

"They have been very good," Clark reported. "They've even been helping Ben and Ma bake."

"Huh. Maybe they inherited my only culinary skill," she quipped. "Hey, darlings, let Mommy put the shopping down, okay? Then I'll have hugs for both of you."

They finally did, and she managed to escape to the master bedroom while Martha enlisted the twins to set the table. Lois reached into the smallest bag with a fond smile and drew out Clark's main gift. She'd mostly gone shopping for Ben and Martha today, but this present was finally ready just in time and she'd had to pick it up. Looking down at the professionally-mastered DVD in her hands, Lois sighed and thought, *God, I hope he likes this. I hope it means as much to him as I think it will...*

Downstairs, Kala looked up at her father and whispered, "Didja ask her yet?"

"Not yet," Clark murmured in reply. "Later tonight. *Don't* give her any hints, okay?"

"We won't," Jason whispered, giggling. "I just wanna see Mommy's face when she sees her present."

Dinner that evening was a success, right up until dessert. Nothing would satisfy the twins except that Daddy should try the cookies they baked, and Clark bit into one expecting his mother's delicious chocolate-chip recipe. He paused, a faraway look on his face, and then quickly ate the rest of that first cookie as Kala and Jason stared up at him. "Wow, you guys," he said. "Those are so good, we're gonna save the whole batch for Santa."

The twins were ecstatic, and only Lois saw the look on Clark's face the moment they were distracted. She couldn't help chuckling, but none of the adults could even begin to discuss what had gone wrong in the baking. Not with Kala's hearing, and not considering that this was the first batch of cookies the twins had made all by themselves. "I'm sorry," Ben managed to whisper to Clark.

"It's all right," he replied, rubbing his belly with a wince. *Thankfully I have a stomach of steel, too, or I'd probably be sick right now. Tastes like baking soda.*

Several hours later, the twins were in bed (having asked their father *again* when he planned to propose), and their presents were set up in the living room after a last-minute rush to put their bicycles together. Now Kal-El's heart was racing. He'd lured Lois outside with a spurious story about some gift he'd forgotten; it hadn't been easy to keep up the ruse in the face of her clear reluctance and even clearer annoyance with him. Now she was going to the car, and he stopped her by calling her name.

But not in the nervous voice she associated with Clark; not even in the mellow tone he used when it was just them. Now he called her in that deeper, richer timbre, the one he only used when he wore *this* suit, and Kal-El was gratified by the startled look on her face when she whirled around. "As fast as you drive, I can fly faster. Come here, love."

Her expression flowed from surprise to sardonic amusement, one fine dark brow rising as she came toward him. "And you're going to go shopping in the uniform?" Lois asked lightly.

Kal-El smiled at her; he could hear the quickening of her heart when she'd seen him, and he knew how much the sight of him in uniform still affected her. *It's one thing to know the man you love is a superhero, and another to be reminded of it. I guess even the imperturbable Lois Lane can be impressed.* Wrapping his cape around her, he replied teasingly, "Who said we were going shopping?"

"But you said..." Her outraged expression was adorable, and he couldn't help chuckling fondly at her. Lois just glared at him even as she cuddled closer to his warm body. "Fine. Where are we going to pick up this present you forgot, wise guy?"

Snow was drifting down onto her hair; she'd forgotten a hat. Kal-El kissed her forehead and murmured, "You'll see." He was holding her so close that Lois seemed not to notice the fact that they were already rising, and he kept their ascent gentle so she wouldn't feel it.

"Okay, be cute, keep secrets..." Lois said, trying to sound annoyed and failing while she was in his arms. She moved as if to step away, and realized for the first time that her feet were no longer touching the ground. Kal-El chuckled again as she gasped and clung to him, her lovely hazel eyes going wide as she stared down at the house below them. "Very funny," Lois muttered, and he felt her forcing herself to relax. "What next, you pretend to drop me as an excuse to hold me tighter?"

Now he spun them in a gentle spiral, smirking. This familiar banter was easing the knot of tension in his belly, and he actually managed to stop thinking about what he planned to ask her. "Do I *need* an excuse?" Kal-El whispered, giving her a knowing, wicked smile.

Lois' eyes widened; she always got flustered when he flirted while in uniform, and it always amused him. But she could no more admit to that wide-eyed romantic silliness than she could miss a deadline, so Lois swatted his shoulder and growled, "You're just determined to be a wiseacre tonight, aren't you?"

He could hear the hint of strain in her voice as she tried to sound irritable, and Kal-El relented, kissing her forehead. "Love you, too, honey."

She huffed at the nickname, but rested her head against his chest, and Kal-El sighed in pure contentment. They rose into colder, purer air that offered an astounding view. Beneath their feet were the snow-laden clouds, smoothed into fantastic shapes by the wind. Above them, seemingly just out of reach, was the inky night sky, spangled with a million stars. Everything else had vanished, seeming to leave the two of them alone with each other at last. Lois looked at the secluded beauty around her and gasped in amazement, her breath frosting.

Kal-El had spent the last week worrying and planning and fretting over how to propose. It had to be romantic, but not so much that Lois started to feel as if she was being patronized. The proposal had to be unique, had to refer to the history between them, and had to encompass all of who he was. At last, he'd decided to bring her up here. No other man on earth could carry her in his arms to these heights. No one else could look into those beautiful hazel eyes and see only starlight reflected in them.

Starlight, and a sense of awe that few would believe of the cynical reporter. "My God," Lois whispered, still peering around her. It was very cold, though, and she tucked her forehead under his chin, huddling close to his warmth. "It's so beautiful."

"This is my gift to you," Kal-El told her, and he spoke in the smooth, slightly formal cadences she had once heard him use in the Fortress, speaking to his father. "The custom of this planet is for a man to give diamonds to a woman he loves. But you, my love, have never liked those stones. I give you the stars instead, whose fire burns like your spirit, shining across miles and years, and whose beauty comes close to your own."

He smiled as she looked up at him, her expression softening as she returned the smile. "Since when are you poetic, hmm?" Lois asked mischievously.

"Since you inspired me to be," Kal-El replied, perfectly honest.

That made Lois smile even more. "I love you," she murmured, hugging him tightly and leaning her head against his chest again.

"I love you, too," he replied, and for a long moment they hung there in silence, sharing warmth and beauty and an embrace that seemed meant to be. Kal-El wondered what Lois was thinking. Did she know he'd brought her up here for something more than stargazing? Or was she so caught up in the moment that her keen journalistic mind had finally stopped racing, letting her simply enjoy the company and the wondrous sight?

"We can't stay up here forever, looking at the stars together," he murmured, kissing her hair again. "I want you to have something to remind you of my love when we come back down to earth. Because I always love you, no matter where we are or what I'm doing or *who* I have to be at the moment."

Lois' eyebrow rose, and he felt the warmth of her cheek even through his uniform - was she *blushing*? "What is *with* you tonight?" she asked with a breathless chuckle. "Not that you aren't usually romantic. But tonight..."

She trailed off, and Kal-El took a deep breath. He hadn't wanted her to guess what he had planned, but he hadn't expected her to be quite so in the dark. Lois had no idea what he was about to ask, and there was no more time to plan and hope. This was the perfect moment, now or never, the most frightening thing he'd ever done in his life... "Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

That dark hair flew as she whipped her head up, staring at him wide-eyed. Lois, who made her living with words, was shocked speechless by that softly-spoken question.

Kala breathed shallowly, her eyes squeezed shut, and all of her mind and will focused above her. *Far* above her, further away than she'd ever tried to hear before, but she could stick pick out her parents' familiar voices from all of the other sounds around her.

The most distracting sound was Jason's quick heartbeat and noisy breath. At least he'd stopped fidgeting - the soft thumps from his heels against the side of the bed sounded like a giant's footfalls to her when she was straining her hearing this much.

The wait was suddenly too much to Jason. "What're they sayin'?" he whispered urgently.

"Shut up! I can't hear 'em!" Kala hissed angrily. Boys were so *stupid*... She redoubled her concentration on her parents. Distantly, she hoped that after this she'd be able to tune out everything she was hearing. And then she heard her father's voice, rich and clear. "He just asked her!" she whispered excitedly, holding her breath as she listened for her mother's answer.

Lois stared at him for so long that Kal-El began to worry again. He *knew* how she felt about marriage; it was foolish to even ask. Now he'd put her in the position of having to say yes and hope to prolong the engagement indefinitely, or having to refuse him...

She started to tremble, and when she spoke her voice was shaky. "Kal-El, if ... if this is about the twins... I... You don't..."

He blinked, seeing the panicked look in her eyes. That wasn't 'no'; it sounded more like 'please tell me this is real'. Or even 'please tell me you're not just trying to make an honest woman of me'. Before she could stammer out anything else, Kal-El said, "Lois. This is not about the twins. This is about you and me. I've always loved you, and I meant to ask you this a long time ago. That night in the Fortress, as a matter of fact."

Lois actually blushed slightly. "Kal-El..."

Silencing her with a gentle kiss, he continued, "I'm not asking because of our children, or to make our mothers happy, or anything like that. I'm asking you to marry me because I love

you, I want to be with you forever, and I want everyone else to know it, too."

Her eyes had gone so wide with shock and wonder that she looked almost frightened, peering up at him. But Lois still didn't answer, just bit her lip as she looked searchingly into his face. "Lois?" he asked, hoping for an answer to the proposal.

"Tell me we're awake?" she whispered. Starlight glittered on the tears swimming in her eyes. But not tears of sorrow.

Kal-El chuckled and kissed her again. This was the side of his beloved that almost no one ever saw - Lois unsure of herself, afraid to trust in what appeared to be a dream come true. All too often, her dreams had turned into nightmares. "Lois... Yes, you're awake. This is real. I want you to marry me - I've wanted that for years. Will you?"

With that, he brought out the ring, deftly opening the little black velvet box. That seemed to be enough to convince her of the reality of what was happening. Lois' hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp as the large emerald reflected the starry sky above them. The two diamonds on each side, and the diamond chips surrounding the main stones, sparkled even in the faint light, all of it supported by the elegant Victorian scrollwork setting.

Lois' hazel eyes flicked back and forth between the emerald and his face, her expression still overwhelmed. She looked as if she was fighting her emotions, trying not to burst into beleaguered tears. Finally she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to compose herself, and gave a small nod of her head.

"Is that a yes?" Kal-El asked gently. He'd never seen Lois this uncertain of anything; she was clearly torn between wanting to say yes and the fear that fate would never let her have this.

She blinked up at him, biting her lip, and then broke into a smile. Lois chuckled, some of her usual certainty coming back into her expression even as a tear ran down her cheek. "Yes," she whispered, and sniffled as she flung her arms around his neck. "Yes, I'll marry you. Yes. Oh my God..."

He kissed her hair, hugging her tightly with one arm around her waist. The other hand was still holding the ring. For several long moments they simply hovered there in each other's arms. Every time Lois tried to pull back and look at him, she would start laughing, and Kal-El couldn't stop chuckling at the way Lois blushed when she looked at him. Finally, still avoiding his eyes, she took the ring gently out of the box and met his gaze at last despite her uncertainty. Slowly, she slipped the emerald ring on her finger even as her cheeks blazed.

"I love you," he murmured, and his warm smile made her blush even more. "And you said yes. I hope you realize you won't be able to get out of this now. We *will* get married."

"Unless you decide to leave the planet," Lois muttered, hiding her face. "You made your point - no more terminal engagements."

"I have no reason to leave again," Kal-El told her. "Everything I ever wanted, everything I need, is here."

"Hopeless romantic," Lois teased, smirking up at him.

"It takes one to know one," he replied, and kissed her again.

Lois sighed in contentment. "Besides, this was the right way to ask me. You gave me time to answer - no pressure, no guilt, no cheering witnesses. This was just between you and me, as it should be."

"No witnesses?" Kal-El chuckled. "Lois, we're directly over the house. And the kids are still awake - although if they're still awake when Santa comes by, he won't leave them any presents." He smiled slightly, and whispered to Lois, "They're scrambling into bed now."

Lois was still staring in shock. "The twins know?"

He grinned mischievously. "They helped me pick the ring. Over a week ago, as a matter of fact."

"I'd accuse you of making my kids devious, but they kept both of us from finding out for a month that they knew you were their father *and* knew you were Superman." Lois tried to look cross, but she was far too delighted, the corners of her mouth curving up.

"They must get that from both of us," Kal-El replied. As he spoke, he began flying again, leveling them both out as they moved through the cold air.

"And where exactly are you taking me in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve?" Lois asked archly, cuddling close to his warm side.

"I have one more present for you." He smiled again, his sapphire eyes twinkling.

"Do I get a hint?"

His expression was positively wicked now. "This gift is one you have to unwrap ... well out of Kala's hearing."

Lois gasped when she caught his meaning. "I thought we were going to behave..."

Kal-El turned to look at her, his grin broadening. "This engagement calls for a celebration, don't you think? Besides, I have something planned."

"Good thing we got all the gifts wrapped, huh?" Lois replied, a fey gleam in her eyes.

"She said yes," Kala told her brother. "*Finally*. First she had to say a lot of stuff about how she didn't want him marryin' her for us."

"What does that mean?" Jason asked, his brow furrowed.

"I dunno," Kala replied. "Grownups are weird."

The twins thought about it in silence for a while, growing more and more sleepy. The excitement of Mommy and Daddy getting engaged was over for now, and the long, busy day was beginning to get the better of them.

"Where d'ya think Mommy and Daddy are going?" Kala finally asked, yawning.

"Gonna help Santa deliver presents," Jason replied. "Duh. How could Santa get to *every* house in one night without Daddy?"

"Oh," Kala said. "Guess that's why they wanted us in bed."

"Uh-huh." Having expressed the utter surety of his belief, Jason rolled over and buried his head under his pillow. His voice was muffled as he said, "Night, Kala."

His sister was already mostly asleep, but she managed to murmur, "Night, Jason."

Tidings of Great Joy

A strange, low grunt woke Kala from her sleep. She bolted upright, her heart racing, and listened as hard as she could. Her keen ears catalogued everything in the house. In this room, four sets of breath and heartbeat: her own, Jason's just a few feet away, Gazeera's slower heart where the lizard drowsed in his cage, and Captain Jack's quicker pulse in his cage by her bed. Just up the hall, Grandma slept soundly, her heart beating slow and steady. In the next room were Mister Ben and a quicker, slightly unsteady beat that took Kala a moment to identify: Barkley.

She listened to the entire house and heard no other living thing, then cautiously extended her reach. No reindeer prancing on the roof, no quick, merry beat of Santa's heart as he touched down. No Mommy or Daddy either, but she'd heard them going away somewhere. Daddy must have taken Mommy with him to help Santa - it seemed as though Jason was right for once. "Mommy must be really excited," Kala sighed into the quiet of the room, using her own voice to try to scare away the boojums. "She's gonna get married, *and* she gets to see Santa Claus."

The weird noise didn't repeat itself, and Kala couldn't identify it. She was fairly sure it had come from inside the house, though. Sometimes Daddy Richard had told her that noises in the night were just the house itself settling, and that seemed as likely an explanation as anything else. Sighing in contentment, Kala burrowed back down under her covers and let her amazing hearing fade...

...only to be disturbed by the same low grunting sound, repeated twice and getting louder. It sounded like it was coming from the hallway, but as Kala trained her hearing in that direction, she caught only a loud thump that silenced the creepy grunting and made her sit bolt upright in bed with terrified eyes. And just to make it worse, there was nothing else after that - no new heartbeats or breathing sounds in the house.

Completely spooked now, Kala scrambled out of bed to make a beeline for the one next to her. Glancing at the door to their room worriedly over her shoulder, she attempted to wake her brother. "Jason!" she hissed softly, leaning into his face. "Get up! Somethin' made a noise!"

Jason, however, had no interest in her worries. "You're dreamin'," he managed sleepily, swatting at her. "Go back t' sleep, big baby."

She shook his shoulder roughly, then pulled on his pillow when he ignored her. "No I'm not! I'm awake, Jason, and there's somethin' in here making noises! I heard it! You gotta wake up!"

Jason's blue eyes opened slightly, to glare at her in disgust before looking out into their bedroom. That petulant look didn't change as he listened. Usually either Gazeera or Captain Jack moved around in the night, but not even that caught his attention as he stared into the dimly-lit darkness. "I didn't hear anythin'," he growled, going to close his eyes again.

"*I did!*" Kala whispered urgently, shaking him again. "I mean it! An' I can hear better than anybody 'cept Daddy!" After a moment, Jason's blue eyes opened again and Kala tugged his arm. "Jason, *come on!*"

"All right," Jason groaned, flinging back his covers and sliding out of bed. His hair was sticking up everywhere, and he rubbed at his eyes, his mouth set in a sleepy pout. "Better really be somethin'. If we miss out on presents 'cause you made us both get up..."

Both twins froze, and Jason came awake all at once. They'd seen a lot of holiday movies recently, but there was only one with a child waking up to strange noises in the house on Christmas Eve. "The Grinch," both twins breathed, eyes going wide. "But he only comes *after*

Santa," Kala added. Then the implication struck her, and her mouth dropped open in dawning horror.

"If it's th' Grinch, we better have a way t' stop him," Jason whispered back. "Or he'll take them! We gotta save the presents, Kala." His sister looked at him worriedly, then nodded.

As they rushed downstairs to form a plan to protect their presents from the thieving Grinch, trying to keep quiet, neither of them considered for a moment that the sounds might have a perfectly explainable origin. Say, an elderly beagle starting to bark in his dreams, and his owner throwing a shoe against the wall to silence him before he could start howling and wake Martha.

Kal-El woke slowly, curled around Lois in the circular bed at the Fortress. The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Lois' hand resting on his chest and the emerald ring sparkling on her finger in the dim light - the only thing she was wearing at the moment. Smiling, he kissed her forehead and chuckled as she grumbled at him sleepily before nuzzling her face into his shoulder again.

But the ring reminded him of the other reason he had brought her here tonight. So far, Kal-El had not told his father exactly what had happened almost seven years ago, when the Fortress had been first been discovered by Luthor and then destroyed by Kal-El himself. The last time they'd talked, Jor-El had been intent on finding out where his relationship with his son stood, trying to relive more than a decade's worth of conversations between them. They simply hadn't gotten around to Lois, the loss of Kal-El's powers, and the arrival of the three Kryptonian criminals.

Now Kal-El got out of bed, gently disentangling himself from her arms, and dressed himself in the spare clothes he'd always kept there. Just as he turned to go, Lois rolled over into the warm hollow where he'd lain, cracking one eyelid open to stare at him. Just barely awake, she murmured fuzzily, "Where're you going?"

"Hush, love," he replied. "I'll be back soon. Sleep."

Blinking, the reporter seemed to consider his answer before she lifted her head and asked, "Kiss?" Once he obliged her, gladly, she curled back under the covers with a happy sound and promptly resumed her sleep.

That left him to go into the main room and face Jor-El. Taking a deep breath, Kal-El placed the father crystal into the central slot of the console, and watched Jor-El's face appear in midair. "My son," Jor-El said, and pride warmed his voice.

"Father," Kal-El replied. "I have come to tell you more about the past."

Jor-El nodded. "Please continue, Kal-El."

"It is a tale with much darkness, Father," Kal-El cautioned. "Folly, treachery, deceit, and danger." He had already decided not to accuse Jor-El of lying about the supposedly permanent loss of his powers; he would simply tell the story, and let his father come to his own conclusions.

Kal-El's voice never rose or wavered as he reported the plain facts of what had happened back then, concluding with General Zod, Non, and Ursa in maximum-security prison facilities and himself returning to his usual duties as Superman. "I believed that I must give up the woman I loved to protect the world I also loved," he said. "And I did so. I erased her memories of our time together, in an effort to spare her grief, and not longer after, I left the planet. Scientists had discovered what appeared to be Krypton itself, whole and undamaged."

"Krypton was destroyed," Jor-El said softly. "The earthquakes had begun even as I laid

the last crystals into your ship. My son, if there was any chance of our planet surviving, of being able to raise you on your homeworld..."

"The planet had cracked in half, Father," Kal-El informed him. "The scientists had seen the side that *looked* undamaged, but the other side was a jagged ruin. And all of the crystal had become radioactive with the death of the red sun Rao. Those crystals were green instead of clear, and the radiation from them nearly killed me. Kryptonite - for that is what the deadly substance is called now - is fortunately very rare on earth. After years of exposure to a yellow sun, it is the only substance that can harm me. But the planet that I might have once called home had become one gigantic mass of this radioactive crystal. I was fortunate to escape with my life."

Jor-El was driven speechless by that, unable to respond. That the world he loved and had tried to save had nearly been the death of his own son...

"I was able to make my way back to Earth and safety," Kal-El continued. "But on returning, I found that much had changed in my absence. All things changed but one - my love for Lois Lane."

"My son, this attachment you feel for the human..."

For the first time in his life, Kal-El cut his father off mid-sentence. "It is an emotion more powerful than any other I have felt, Father. And when I faced my old enemy Lex Luthor again, this time on an *island* made entirely of kryptonite - made with *Kryptonian* technology, stolen from this very Fortress - it was my love for Lois that aided me. Duty gave me courage to face Luthor, but love gave me strength to survive the encounter. And then Lois herself literally saved my life, rescuing me from death in the ocean at the risk of her own life. Father, I cannot and will not turn away from her."

"Again you would defy me? Did you learn nothing from your prior mistake, my son?"

Jor-El spoke with an edge of worry in his voice.

"Father, I love her," and the warning was clear in Kal-El's tone. "And I will *not* be denied again."

"Kal-El, when you once before spurned your duty for her ..."

Once again, he didn't get to finish the sentence. "Why can I not have both?" Kal-El interrupted him. "The woman I love and the mission I am sworn to fulfill?"

"The world needs you," Jor-El's disembodied head scolded. "Will you turn your back on them yet again?"

"They need me, but I need *her*," Kal-El argued. "How can you deny me this, Father, when even you were married? Your marriage didn't interfere with your calling, and neither should mine. It is through loving her that I come to love all of humanity even more."

"You are not one of them," Jor-El replied. "Loving a mortal will not make you mortal, either. Even if you sacrifice your powers, you can never truly be one of them. Your Kryptonian heritage will always set you apart."

"You are wrong," Kal-El retorted, the first time he had ever spoken those words to Jor-El. And he spoke with conviction, unaware that Lois had woken up and was watching the confrontation. "I can never forget where I have come from or the legacy you bequeathed to me, but this is my world, Father. *This* is my home, and *these* are my people."

He sighed heavily, looking down, then turned resolute eyes to his father's visage. "I am not asking your permission, Father. I am telling you, as one grown man to another. Lois is the woman I love..." He took a deep breath, and added, "She is also the mother of my children. When I left the planet in search of Krypton, Lois was already with child. Because of my great

folly in leaving her, I missed the first six years of my children's lives. But now the legacy of Krypton lives on in my son and daughter, and I as their father must guide them. I will make Lois my wife and raise our twins, who will carry Krypton's heritage after I am gone. This is my will."

Jor-El's expression seemed caught between surprise, distaste, and anger. "You cannot..." he began, and then the hologram flickered. "Not one of them ... not..."

Kal-El winced as his father's image vanished. Apparently he had just exceeded the limits of the artificial intelligence programmed into the crystals. Sadly, he started to turn away, his heart aching for some kind of resolution. Could his father not accept that, being raised as a human, he would want the same things humans wanted: a wife, a family, people who loved him for himself and not for his wondrous powers?

"My son."

He whirled around to see the hologram of Lara in place of Jor-El. "Mother," he whispered, shocked. He had seen her image in the teaching crystals, but never programmed into the artificial intelligence.

"Your father does not know I am recording this," she said, and her voice was slightly rushed. "He has great plans for you, but he is a man of logic and science. Perhaps he has not thought enough about the state of your heart." She paused, and glanced away, then back. "Very well. He has considered that you may think yourself in love with one of these humans, and he has devised a plan to discourage you. But I am your mother, and I think this idea will fail. If you are seeing this recording ... it has already failed. You have lost your powers once, and regained them. Perhaps you have learned that the effects of our sun are not permanent, and can be reversed by high-intensity exposure to a power source derived from the rays of a yellow sun. Most importantly, you have come here again to question your father about this woman you love. All of those conditions had to be met for this recording to be accessed."

"If the human you love has been with you through these trials and remains at your side, then your relationship can stand the many tests you will face together. It will not be easy to balance the needs of the world against the demands of your heart, but your love is strong enough to defy your father's will. It shall be strong enough to endure all else. And there is one more thing..."

The image flickered. "So you have spoken of children. My grandchildren, whose dear faces I will never see, whose voices I will never hear. Know that they may inherit your great powers, my son, and see to it that they also inherit your mission, your responsibilities." She sighed, and the smile she gave her son was heartbreakingly beautiful. "Through you, Kal-El, our glory lives on in your new home. Upon you and your family, I bestow a mother's blessing of love. Love is the key that unlocks so many doors, my son. Cherish it..."

Lara faded, but just before her holographic projection disappeared, she turned her head to glance up and to her left. Kal-El followed her gaze, and saw Lois standing there above them, one hand pressed to her lips as she watched. In the last instant before her image disappeared, his mother's blue eyes seemed to be locked on the hazel pair he adored. And it was clear that Lois was just as effected as he was.

For a moment, neither could speak; this was so far from anything they ever expected to hear. Kal-El was struck speechless by the sight of her there, her ruffled hair, wearing only his uniform shirt, most especially when she smiled at him and shrugged a little guiltily. All he wanted was to take her in his arms and tell her he loved her, forever and ever...

But despite the solemnity of the moment, he heard someone stirring back at the Riverside

house. The twins were drifting toward wakefulness; they had been up during the night, Kal-El knew, and from the sounds they'd made, they had gone down to peer at their presents. That he could live with, as long as they didn't *open* anything, and he had fallen asleep listening for the sound of crinkling wrapping paper.

While he was listening to the twins, Lois said in a soft yet matter-of-fact tone, "So you went ahead and told him."

"Yes," Kal-El replied, floating up to the ledge on which she stood. "He has to know. And I hope he'll get used to the idea, although I'm glad my mother approves." Lois smiled, and he kissed her before she could ask anything else. For a long moment, neither spoke, only held on to each other tightly. As he reluctantly pulled back to look down at her, he added, "We can talk on the way home - the twins are going to wake up soon."

"You can hear ..." she started to say, then rolled her eyes without finishing her sentence. "Well, duh, Lane. Of course he can. Damn! What time is it? They usually sleep in until seven!" Lois turned away to start back toward the other room, already muttering, "Where are my clothes?"

Kal-El chuckled softly at her. "We have a little time," he said, following her. "Their heartbeats are just a little faster, not all the way up to fully conscious speed." He caught the sleeve of his own uniform before she had gone more than two steps and pulled Lois into his arms, kissing her quickly. "I love you, beauty."

"And I love you," she replied with a soft smile, clinging to him for a long, breathless moment. "So what are we waiting for?"

"Lois, I need my shirt." He glanced meaningfully down at the blue uniform emblazoned with the S-shield.

She arched an eyebrow, looked down, then looked up again with a smug smile. "Sounds like a personal problem."

Ben had slept soundly, waking only slightly to shush Barkley some time in the wee hours. So when the full-throated baying of the old hound shattered the predawn silence, Ben nearly fell out of bed, his heart thumping crazily.

Barkley howled at the bedroom door, all his fur standing on end, his neck stretched out stiffly as the power of his voice shook his elderly frame. "Barkley! Hush!" Ben called, hurriedly getting out of bed and rushing over to his dog. Faintly from next door, he heard Martha exclaim something in mingled surprise and disgust. He picked up Barkley and shushed him roughly.

Some kind of commotion was going on downstairs, and that seemed to be what had woken Barkley. Leaving the beagle in his room, Ben pulled a robe over his pajamas and headed out to see what the matter was. He met Martha in the hallway and both of them came downstairs to see Clark carrying a sleepy but protesting Kala. "But, Daddy, we're awake now!" the little girl pleaded.

"No presents before dawn," her father responded, trying to keep his tone stern.

How familiar that sounded. Martha couldn't resist shooting him a fond grin. "She gets that from you, you know. I remember you once set all the clocks ahead and tried to convince us the *sun* was late."

Looking abashed, Clark's face showed it when he replied, "Well, I was really hoping for a pony that year."

Lois followed him, carrying a rather snuggly Jason. He didn't even bother to hide his

yawn. "Don't blame my daughter. I've seen this sort of thing far too many times not to suspect who was the ringleader. *Your son* put her up to this, I'll bet." Lois glanced down at her armful of sleepy little boy. Jason looked properly woebegone under the indirect chastisement, ducking his little face under her chin to avoid further persecution.

"But what happened?" Martha asked, reaching out to smooth Kala's dark hair. "I was asleep until that idiotic mongrel started yowling."

Clark looked down at both children. "Someone apparently thought the Grinch had come to steal their presents. We went outside for a bit and walked back into a trap. They'd hung their jingle-bell wreath on a piece of string across the doorway, and when I set it off they jumped for me. *Someone* had the idea that they had to protect their gifts. Now these two are going back to bed until it's time to open presents."

"I heard a *noise*," Kala complained, already starting to pout. "It wasn't you an' it wasn't reindeers so it had t' be the Grinch. He prolly knew you an' Mommy were off ... weren't here, so we had t' protect everybody's presents."

"With a frying pan," Lois sighed. "You could've hurt someone, Kala. You're lucky your father's not all banged up."

"She didn't hit me that hard," Clark added, squeezing Kala's hand to keep her from saying anything in front of Ben.

Kala, however, was more preoccupied with the fact that she had just attacked her father with a frying pan. "I didn't mean t' hit Daddy!" she wailed, sniffing. "Jason said if th' Grinch came in we hadta get 'im! An' ... an' I heard the bells ring so I went t' hit the Grinch an' it ... it was *Daddy!*"

"It's all right," Clark soothed, hugging her as he kissed her temple. "Munchkin, I know you didn't mean to hit me. It's okay."

"Come on, sweethearts," Martha said softly, stroking both of their backs in calming circles. "Your father's right. You should go back to bed for a while and let us all wake up. I'm sure your parents are fully awake in spite of the hour," she added with a shrewd glance at Lois' still-rumpled hair. "But Ben and I still need to wake up a bit more."

With that, Lois and Clark took the twins upstairs, while Martha and Ben headed down to get coffee and breakfast started. Kala and Jason were still sleepy enough that they got back into their beds with only token protests - until Lois stroked her son's unruly hair, and he glimpsed the ring out of the corner of his eye. "Kala!" he said excitedly. "Kala! She's wearin' the ring! She said yes!"

"Told you," came the grumpy mutter from Kala's bed, snuggling her cheek into her pillow. She had to fight a yawn before she could add, "Mommy's *smart*."

That made Clark laugh softly. "See, honey? Agreeing to marry me just proves your brilliance."

"And last night proves why I agreed to marry you," Lois said with an arched eyebrow as she watched her daughter stretch out and drift off. Jason finally settled, falling back asleep with a wide grin on his face, and his mother headed out with a last fond glance at her babies before closing the door.

"That's not the only reason," Clark whispered, kissing the top of Lois' head as she passed him.

"No, it isn't," Lois said seriously, pausing to lean against him and let him hug her tightly. "You're also a pretty good cook. And I would never have gotten those freakin' bikes put together without you."

"I see," Clark replied against her hair. "So you keep me around as a lover and a domestic servant?"

"Pretty much," Lois teased, tilting her head back to smile at him. "Makes you wonder why *you* keep *me* around, doesn't it?"

She had expected some sweetly romantic answer, or some teasing about Clark's fondness for surly caffeine addicts. Instead he grinned and replied, "Broodmare, mostly. The House of El must go on..."

Lois yelped and swatted him. "Oh, really? Just for that, you big jerk, I'm going to go get a shower. *You* can make my breakfast. See if you get another night like the last one anytime soon..."

"Not until we're married, I won't," Clark replied softly. At Lois' startled look, he only smiled and kissed her forehead. "We were trying to behave anyway..."

"You were the one who started that last night, not me," Lois said a tad defensively, pulling away slightly to look up at him.

Clark only smiled at her. "Yes, well, last night was a special occasion. Lois, if we're going to do this, let's do it right. No more indefinite engagements - let's set a date and go through with this. And until we're married... Well, we survived being apart for six years; we should be all right for a few months of me not sleeping over. Right?"

Lois looked up at him dubiously, but she knew that his scrupulously moral heart was still bothered by the fact that the twins had been born out of wedlock. She finally gave a dramatic sigh and muttered, "Sometimes I hate you, Boy Scout."

"I love you, too," he replied, kissing her forehead.

After the twins came down four times in two hours, each time insisting that they were wide awake (even while they yawned) and they'd been waiting for *hours* to open their gifts, the adults finally relented. Kala and Jason, whooping with delight, dived on the presents - a larger pile of loot than ever before, thanks to the newly-extended family. Ben and Martha were there to witness it, but it was clear to Lois at least that Ben had not quite recovered from being prematurely wakened by Barkley.

The matching bicycles were a huge favorite and the first gifts to be examined, but the lure of unopened boxes soon drew Kala and Jason away from the biggest gifts. The next presents unwrapped were from Martha, and the twins squealed in delighted surprise at the tiny matching sweaters for Gazeera and Captain Jack.

"No, don't bring the animals down here to try them on," Lois cautioned. The mere thought was enough to break her out in a cold sweat. "Save the sweaters until after you're done."

Sighing, Jason picked up the next box, a very small one. "Mommy, for you," he said, crossing the floor on his knees to hand it over. Lois blinked; someone had done something very elegant with silver paper and pricey ribbon. While she contemplated the small box and the unfamiliar script on the tag, Jason tore open the bigger box it had been sitting on. "Yay! A puzzle!" he cried, tearing off the rest of the paper to expose the front of the box and the picture.

"All right!" Clark quickly said, the very instant the paper fell away. "Daddy Richard got you a Superman puzzle. Awesome, Jason."

The little boy's blue eyes met his father's, brightened by the shared secret. Lois, however, caught Martha's glance and rolled her eyes with a sigh. "Richard is such a fanboy," she sighed, opening her own present.

A pair of earrings and a matching pendant lay nestled in white velvet, made from silver so delicately worked that it looked less like jewelry than like the *gleam* of jewelry, made briefly solid. "Wow," Clark said, impressed.

Thinking quickly, Lois turned the box over and grinned. Exactly as she had thought... "My investigative reporting skills strike again," she said. "Made in Milan. Remind me to actually write Lana a thank-you note."

Everyone wanted to see the jewelry, except Kala. She had wormed her way under the tree itself, her eyes fixed on a large box in the back. It looked almost big enough to be the karaoke machine she wanted so badly... To her disappointment, the card read *Jason*. Pushing that box out to her brother, she picked up the next one, rather smaller. That was hers, and she didn't bother coming out from under the tree to open it. She did, however, notice that the tag showed it was from Mommy.

Kala actually shrieked when she saw the iPod. Only a few other girls at school had one and they were all older. "Oh, thank you, Mommy!" she yelled, scrambling out from under the tree and jumping into Lois' lap. Amidst the shower of kisses and hugs, Lois could hear her exclaiming, "Thank you, thank you, thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

Martha and Ben couldn't help laughing as Kala covered her mother in enthusiastic gratitude, Lois managing somewhere in between to reply, "You're welcome, baby." In the meantime, Clark opened one of his gifts, chuckling at the cologne Lois had bought him. "CK One," he said, shaking his head. "Lois, you're something else."

Shortly after, Kala dived back onto the floor, and she and Jason were tearing open gifts in a frenzy of glee. While the kids exclaimed over each present, Clark quietly handed Martha and Ben several of their gifts to open, and got a couple more of the ones for himself and Lois. The adults were mostly quiet in their appreciation and gratitude, watching the kids with smiles of delight.

It took almost an hour to open all the gifts. Everyone came away with new clothes as well as more frivolous gifts; Clark couldn't help laughing at the *four* new suits Lois had gotten him, and Lois rolled her eyes when she saw the L. Lang label on the red blouse - but that didn't stop her from running upstairs to try it on. Kala had found her big gift, the iPod, early, but Jason waited until the end to open the big box from Daddy Richard. When it revealed a remote-controlled Godzilla almost Jason's own height, his excited yell was nearly as high-pitched as Kala's.

At last, it seemed the gifting was over, and both twins lay blissfully passed out on the carpet amid their spoils. Only then did Lois touch Clark's arm with a fond smile and say, "I have one more gift for you."

"Oh?" Clark asked curiously, looking even more bewildered when Lois handed him an unmarked black DVD case. "What's this?"

"You'll see," she said gently, a warm light in her eyes. "Go on up to my office and play it there."

Clark gave her a dubious look, which made her smile all the more, but did as she asked. Was this something he couldn't watch in front of his mother? What on earth could it be?

Sitting down at Lois' desk upstairs, he booted up her laptop and logged in with her password, which was still A-R-T-I-C. He slipped the plain DVD into the computer's drive, and sat back to wait.

The first image on the screen froze him in his seat, eyes wide, his breath caught somewhere in his chest. Two infants lay in the same crib, one with a few wisps of blond hair,

the other with a surprising thatch of black curls. *The twins*, Clark thought, his heart aching for what he'd missed.

Kala was obviously asleep, but Jason was awake and cooing at the camera, waving his tiny hands and kicking his feet. Lucy cooed right back at him; from the sound, she was the one holding the camera. "Who's a big boy, then?" she asked, and Jason gabbled. "Who loves his Aunt Lucy?"

From just offscreen, he heard what could only be Ella comment, "Lucy, he loves everyone. He loved the nurse who gave him that shot yesterday. That is the *happiest* baby on the face of the earth."

"Yeah, makes me wonder if he's mine," Lucy teased, reaching in the crib to tickle him. Jason had only laughed, smiling hugely as he grabbed Lucy's finger.

Clark gasped. He had known they were little by the easy way they shared a crib, but seeing Lucy's hand in the shot gave him a better idea of the scale. Jason and Kala had been born *tiny*, so small it seemed a miracle that they even existed. He didn't have much time to wonder at that, though, because his son got excited enough to wave his free hand around wildly, and bopped his sister on the head.

Before Kala even opened her eyes, she opened her tiny rosebud mouth and mewled. Her face screwed up, and she let loose with a high wail that seemed impossible from something so minute. "Oh, crap," Lucy hissed. "Kala, Kala, little Kala, hush, baby, it's okay. See, it's all right, he didn't hurt you..."

Kala's face was starting to turn red, and her crying got louder by the second. Jason was trying to look at her, but he hadn't mastered the art of turning over, and could only squirm.

Offscreen, Clark heard a haggard but well-loved voice call out from just beyond the camera's view. "Oh dear God, give her to me before she wakes the whole building," a voice that could only be Lois sighed grumpily.

"You need your rest," Ella began. She had already picked up Kala and was rocking her, but the little girl was still crying, and still getting louder.

"And I won't get it with my very own fire siren going off," he could hear Lois retort before her mother could go any further. "Give her here, Momma. Since you two woke her up with that damn camera, at least let me get her back to sleep so *I* can sleep."

Clark felt a moment's pain, wishing he had been there to help Lois - his absence was one of the reasons for her surliness. As Ella moved offscreen carrying Kala, Lucy kept the camera on Jason, tickling his toes to distract him. "Hush there, little boy," she whispered. "Your sister's doing all the yelling for both of you."

In the background, Kala's fretful wails slowed and suddenly got quieter, and Clark heard Lois speaking to her. "Oh, I know, *I know*. It's just awful, isn't it? But it's okay now, little one. It's okay, my Kala. My Kala Josephine." She almost sang the names, and the crying stopped, peace descending on the little family.

For a moment. Lucy had taken the camera and come up behind Lois; all Clark could see of her was the back of her head and her shoulder. She'd let her hair grow out, and the raven waves tumbled partway down her back. As Lucy carefully eased around the side of the chair, Lois kept crooning to her daughter.

The camera showed Lois in profile first, that face he loved so well drawn by fatigue and seclusion. Clark felt his heart seize again, the agony of knowing this had happened while he floated through space toward the remains of a planet that could never again be home. He had never seen Lois look that weary and heartsore, and he loathed himself for having abandoned

her.

But in the next moment, Lucy took another step, and Clark saw Lois' face more from the front. She was smiling down at the baby in her arms, a tired smile to be sure, but one full of tender adoration. Clark felt tears well up in his eyes to see that wondrous expression on Lois' face as she whispered to their daughter, and he silently thanked her for letting him see this alone. He didn't have to worry about what anyone thought of his reactions, he could just try to weather the storm of emotions.

Lois had opened her blouse and tucked Kala mostly inside it, and the little girl was now busily nursing. Her suckling was audible on the tape, and Lucy couldn't help chuckling. That made Lois look up and yelp with surprise at the nearness of the recorder, the protective look in her eyes clear. "Lucy! *Knock it off!* What the hell are you trying to film here? Move that damn thing!" The reporter twisted to the side, trying to hide from the camera.

Lucy laughed out loud. "Chill out, Lois! Nursing is perfectly natural. Besides, I thought you were the woman with no modesty whatsoever?"

"About as natural as me cramming that camera somewhere that'll make it difficult for you and Ron to have any more kids," Lois snapped, eyes blazing now. "The kids are barely two weeks old and they're already dodging paparazzi? Get lost, Lucinda! My daughter is trying to eat!"

"Mom!"

"Lucy, leave her be," Ella said firmly. "If she doesn't want to be filmed nursing, then quit bothering her. Come over here and film Jason, he loves the attention."

Lucy sighed dramatically, but the camera swung away from Lois as Lucy headed back over to the crib, which Ella was leaning over as she played with Jason's toes. He watched her tickle him with an air of utter absorption, just discovering his own feet. The little boy kicked and reached, but he was still too uncoordinated to grab hold of his foot to look at it. "This one's going to wind up chewing his own toes like you did, Lucy," Ella proclaimed, smiling down at her grandson.

"I never chewed my toes!" Lucy exclaimed from beyond view, while Lois laughed nastily in the background.

"Yes, you did," Ella informed her. "Once you could get your foot in your mouth, you'd rather suck your toes than your thumb. We had to keep socks on you for about a month to break you of it."

Lois was actually wheezing laughter by then. "Oh man, Lucy, and you've never *stopped* sticking your foot in your mouth since! Priceless!"

"Bite me, big sis," he heard Lucy retort, trying to sound regal and aloof.

Unfortunately, Lois' laughter had jostled little Kala, and the baby started to whimper. She was quickly winding up to her siren impression, and Clark heard Lois muttering, "Oh, no, you don't, baby girl. Here, you can't eat and scream. Go on, I know you're hungry..."

Jason, however, had heard his sister wail, and seemed to realize she wasn't beside him anymore. His face took on an expression of horrified shock, and he opened his mouth to cry out once.

"She's okay, my big boy," Ella hastened to murmur, rubbing his belly. "Oh, Jason, *Jason*. You don't have to cry, your sister's fine, she's just trying to get attention..."

Jason howled. He was louder than Kala had been, and Clark heard Lois saying, "For the love of God, you got him wound up too! Bring him over here and quit harassing my child! I swear, you two were supposed to be *helping* me, not wrecking the only decent rest I've gotten

in the last month by making the kids fussy. Bring him here, *now*."

Ella did the honors, Lucy filming over her shoulder as she carried the little boy to his mother. "It's okay, sweet boy. Mommy's here. Yes, Mommy's here and they'll leave you alone. Hush, Jason," Clark heard Lois coo to him. She quickly got him settled under her shirt as well, and once he had his sister beside him and dinner in front of him, he quieted down to nurse. Lucy had wisely chosen a camera angle that was a little less revealing this time, but Lois still glared up at her warningly.

After several moments, the reporter sighed heavily. "Dammit. Look at me," Lois' voice was tired again, almost resigned. "Ever since I was sixteen years old, I wanted to win a Pulitzer Prize. And now look - my greatest life achievement so far is nursing both twins simultaneously. I'm just a damn vending machine."

General Lane's widow was not interested in putting up with such fatalistic self-deprecation. "Well, would you rather give them up for adoption?" she asked, crossing her arms and staring at Lois.

Lois looked absolutely taken aback, her eyes suddenly wide. She seemed just as shocked as he himself was by Ella's words. But Clark could see the stubborn way her jaw tightened, her chin went up. "*Mother!* Don't you *ever* say such a thing again! I swear, if I hadn't just gotten them both quiet, I'd get up from this chair and..."

"Well, you keep going on about how much trouble they are," Ella replied in an almost offhanded way.

"And they *are* trouble," Lois growled, the look on her face positively irate. Clark knew her well enough to know that tone meant she was readying herself for a battle royale. "I never wanted kids, I was never particularly *good* with kids, and now I have two. One's fussy, they're both delicate, and I have no goddamned idea what I'm doing half the time! Not to mention my career's been derailed. But these are *my babies*, and I don't care whether they understand what you're saying or not, don't you *dare* ever even *mention* giving them up again. Don't even hint at it. I won't have them thinking they're not wanted, because they *are*. I wouldn't trade either of them for the world."

Lucy had kept the camera still and her mouth shut during the tirade, and she had both Ella and Lois in the frame. She captured Ella's slow smile. "That's my girl," she said quietly. "Lois, I know you're worried, but everything's going to work out. You're going to be a wonderful mother."

"And a wonderful vending machine," Lucy added with a chuckle.

"Shut up, you toe-sucking broodmare," Lois growled at her, and the image started to fade along with Lucy's indignant yelp.

Clark clicked on the pause button, rubbing his eyes. Wonder, delight, sympathy, guilt, longing, and laughter warred within him. *I should've been here*, he thought to himself fiercely. *She should never have had to face that alone...*

But the gift wasn't intended to make him feel guilty on Christmas Day, and Clark forced himself to get past that to the wonder of seeing the twins as babies. So young, and their personalities were already evident: Jason the cheerful and inquisitive one, Kala the cranky drama queen. And Lois - he had only ever seen the one photograph of Lois while she was pregnant. Seeing her like this, even as careworn as she had appeared, was a revelation. A certain radiance clung to Lois, the beauty of a new mother bonding with her children, and the sight made him want to go downstairs and hug her. The twins, too - he wanted to snuggle them and hold them and never let them go again. He could go downstairs now...

Taking a deep breath, Clark decided to watch the rest of the DVD first. When he pressed play, the next scene came up, and the twins were older. Now Ella held the camera, calling to Jason as he crawled across the carpet toward her. Right behind him was Kala, occasionally grabbing his feet as she crawled. Clark just watched through a haze of wistfulness; most of the clips were only a few minutes long, but his avid gaze captured every nuance as the twins got older. All the milestones were on film: first steps, first haircut, first tooth, and first words.

Clark had to laugh when Kala looked up and clearly said, "Mama!" for the first time. Not just because of the dazzling smile on her face when she said it, but also because of the way Jason turned to look at her wide-eyed. A moment later, he looked up at Lois and repeated it; both children speaking that all-important first word on the same day had brought tears to Lois' eyes. Ella, who had been filming the twins in the bath when Kala unexpectedly decided to say the first word, set the camera down abruptly to go shower her daughter and grandchildren with hugs and kisses.

He got to see their birthdays, several outings, all of the clips arranged chronologically. The videos stopped with the twins' arrival in Metropolis, meeting their cousins for the first time, and when Clark turned the computer off he was momentarily overwhelmed by a wave of longing. *Why stop there?* he wondered. There had to be videos of the twins past their third birthday... And then the answer came to him. *Richard*.

Instead of being upset, Clark found himself touched by the gesture. Of course, at some point he would want to see whatever videos existed; he and Richard were coworkers already and were becoming friends, after all. Sighing, he composed himself after the emotional roller coaster of the DVD, and headed downstairs.

Lois was in the kitchen, brewing another pot of coffee, and Clark simply hugged her without a word. Nothing needed to be said - she turned in his arms, kissed him, and let him hold her as long as he liked.

"I love you," he murmured. "Thank you so much, Lois."

Nuzzling his cheek, she whispered back, "I love you, too." The somber tone wasn't one she could stand for long, so Lois drew back slightly with a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "So, did you get a kick out of that first clip? At the extra special bonus of nursing twins? I damn near killed Lucy."

Clark laughed, hugging her tightly. "Lois, I was watching the love of my life and my infant children, not ogling your chest."

"That's why I love you," she sighed, cuddling into his embrace.

"I ogled your chest enough last night ... and did a lot more than look..."

Lois pulled back to frown up at him, swatting his shoulder. "Clark! Don't make me tell your mother."

That night, when Lois *should* have been sneaking downstairs to eat up the last of the pumpkin pie, she found herself munching on donuts from a vending machine instead. "What a day," she sighed to herself, leaning back in the waiting room chair.

Lucy, Ron, and their three kids had come over with Ella, which woke the twins and incited a huge romp in the snow outside. Clark and Lois had played just like kids themselves, making snow angels and helping the five children build snowmen while Ella, Martha, and Lucy cooked. Ron and Ben, it turned out, were both baseball fans, and spent most of the afternoon companionably arguing the merits of each major league team.

There were more presents to open as well, gifts from and for the Troupes and Ella. And a

surprise as well; Lois had sensibly worn gloves outside, and only when she took them off to open packages did Lucy notice her ring. The reporter had seen Clark wince as everyone crowded around her with congratulations; last night, before falling asleep, she had told him she wanted to take a little time in letting their mothers know they were engaged.

*So much for **that** brilliant plan*, Lois thought, sipping Mountain Dew to wash down the donuts. Martha, Ella, and Lucy had all grabbed her hand, talking excitedly. She'd seen, out of the corner of her eye, Ron hug Clark and slap him on the back. Probably welcoming him into the family.

They had also heard from Richard just before dinner; he had sounded tired but happy, and after hearing about the twins' Christmas, had rather vaguely promised that he was bringing them back an extra-special present. Lois kept the conversations short, partly because of the hint of exhaustion in Richard's voice, and partly so as not to strain the twins' hastily-given promise not to tell Daddy Richard about Daddy Clark and Mommy getting engaged. Lois wanted to break the news to him herself, gently.

The chattering about the wedding continued through dinner, the two mothers already discussing gowns and cakes and party favors. But when Lois bemoaned her fate one time too many, Martha and Ben had tried to take some of the spotlight off of her - by announcing *their* intention to get married. On Valentine's Day, which made it one less date to remember.

Lois chuckled softly at the memory of Clark's expression. 'Horrified shock' described it, or perhaps simply 'dumbfounded'. She had grabbed his hand under the table and squeezed, forcing him to remember that he *liked* Ben, and that he and the older man had come to something of a truce while she and the twins were in Smallville.

He still looked startled, but he managed to congratulate his mother and her boyfriend in an almost natural tone. The rest of dinner had gone very well, a hint of the future; the Lanes, Kents, and Troupes all at one table, enjoying each other's company and some truly splendid food.

Afterward, when Lois and Clark were trying to steal a moment to cuddle in the kitchen while everyone else had dessert, Lucy had chosen to display her impeccable Lane timing by going into labor. That was how Lois had wound up here at the hospital with her sister, her mother, her brother-in-law, and her newborn niece, Michelle. Clark, Martha, and Ben were taking care of the five kids back at the Riverside house, and Lois had stepped out of the maternity room to grab something to eat. Driving here over icy roads and then holding her sister's hand through the labor had left her feeling drained and in need of sugar and caffeine, which had led her to the tiny break room and limited assortment of vending machine food.

She made her way back to the room only to find Lucy and Michelle asleep, and Ron nodding off in a chair by the bed. Only Ella was awake, and she smiled warmly at her oldest. "I think you and I ought to head out, sweetheart," she whispered.

"Yeah," Lois yawned. "I hope Clark and Ben and Martha got everyone to sleep."

"I'm sure they did," Ella replied. "Come on, baby girl. I'll drive you home and take Lucy's van back to my house."

"Momma, I don't like you driving that late," Lois protested as Ella slid an arm around her waist and guided her out the door. "You can stay over with me. We'll find room."

"That's probably a better idea," Ella admitted as they walked down the hallway. She turned to her daughter with a smile and said, "Well, this has certainly been a Christmas to remember..."

"It's been one helluva year," Lois replied, thinking back to this time last year. She had

been newly engaged to Richard and still occasionally staring at the sky, though she would never have admitted it. Now, she and Clark were engaged, Richard was in Florida trying to woo Lana and appease his mother, and the group of people the twins called family had expanded significantly. Looking back on everything, Lois added decisively, "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"That's my girl," Ella told her.

Auld Lang Syne

Lois chuckled softly to herself as Perry ranted. Not even on the Monday after Christmas would he let up on the Monday Morning Massacres. Several junior reporters were wide-eyed, and one intern was literally shaking. *They'll get over it*, Lois thought disdainfully. *We all did. If you can't handle a little pressure, journalism is not the career for you, my friend. And your editor yelling in your face is nothing compared to, oh, interviewing convicted serial killers. Toughen up, kids.*

She caught Clark's eye and smiled. As usual, he was standing, while she had quickly nabbed one of the seats around the conference table. Only the most senior reporters dared to take a seat during the Massacres; they were closer to Perry and thus more likely to get singled out. Lois, of course, had figured out ten years ago that Perry was actually quite fond of her, and his bellowing wasn't a real threat. Also, no sane reporter ever tried to *answer* him.

"Freizon, why didn't the twenty-car pileup on the Douglas Interchange get covered for more than ten lines?" Perry barked at Bill, who merely shrugged. "Troupe, I realize your wife was in labor, but *how* could you let the Christmas Day bombing in Iraq pass you by?" Perry had snarled that at his usual tone and volume, then softened his voice just a trifle to add, "Congratulations, by the way." Ron just nodded, trying not smile, as Perry turned around and snapped, "Lane, why the hell are you chewing a pen and not taking notes?"

"I missed breakfast," she deadpanned, smirking.

"You don't eat breakfast," Perry shot back. "You might be assistant editor, but dammit, you'll pay attention in meetings!"

"Yes, Chief," Lois replied with a staged yawn.

Perry sighed heavily. He and Lois - as well as several senior reporters - knew that he'd yelled at her for the same thing for several years. Lois still only took notes when she felt like it, and she had *never* forgotten anything from the meetings. Still grinning mischievously, Lois leaned back in her chair and sipped her coffee. As soon as Perry turned away to harangue someone else, Lois turned to glance at Clark, giving him a sly little grin.

"Any questions?" Perry said at last.

To everyone's surprise, Jimmy spoke up. He'd been standing at the other side of the conference table from Lois, and when she leaned back in her seat his eyes had narrowed. "Sure, Chief," the photographer said. "What's that on Ms. Lane's finger?"

Ron burst out laughing as everyone else turned to look. Lois realized only then that she'd been holding the coffee mug in her left hand, the pen in her right. All that morning, she'd worn the engagement ring backwards, with the stone toward her palm, and hidden her hands as much as possible. But the emerald had clinked uncomfortably against the mug's handle, and Lois had subconsciously turned the ring back around during the meeting.

Now every reporter in the place leaned forward to stare. "Well I'll be damned," Perry said. "Kent! You call that an engagement ring? That's no diamond."

"Yes, sir," Clark replied calmly, and Perry had to look at him askance for the complete lack of stuttering nervousness in his voice. "Lois and I are getting married."

"Eventually," someone wisecracked from the back of the room.

"Hey, Clark," Bill chuckled. "Is that kryptonite?"

The entire room erupted in laughter, as Clark looked embarrassed and Lois grinned, winking at him. Once the roar died down a bit, Lois stood up. "I will have you pack of jackals know that he actually talked me into a spring wedding," she said, daring them to laugh. "I wanted fall, but *oh no*, the sooner the better. Not like the kids aren't already six years old..."

"Smart man," Ron muttered, elbowing Clark fondly. "Don't let her get away."

"I won't," Clark replied. "Not this time."

Lois caught that, and laughed, her eyes blazing with amusement and good humor. In the midst of everyone talking at once and trying to see the ring, Perry's phone rang, and he irritably pointed at Jimmy to go answer it. "This is not a goddamned circus," the Editor-in-Chief barked. "You can all irritate Lane on her own time. Worse than a bunch of gossipy old women, I swear..."

"Chief, it's your wife," Jimmy called across the bullpen.

Perry sighed dramatically. "For the love of God, tell her as often as she bitched about my girlfriends calling me at work when she was my secretary, *she* calls me more than *all* of them ever did!" Jimmy bit his lip as he went back into Perry's office to relay that. The Chief continued to his assembled reporters, "What do you think this is, the *Star*? Sit down and shut up! We were having a meeting here before Lane had to flash her rock around the place!"

He got something close to silence, only to have Jimmy interrupt again. "Uh, Chief? She says it's important."

"She *always* says it's important," Perry bellowed back. "Last time it was what kind of air freshener to buy. Tell her if the house isn't on fire and no one's bleeding or dead, it can damn well wait!" Once again, Jimmy sighed and trudged back into Perry's office.

"So have you guys set a date?" someone asked, taking advantage of Perry's momentary distraction.

"No, our mothers are doing that," Lois replied, rolling her eyes. "They've been waiting so long to marry off their firstborns, I'll be lucky if I get to pick my own dress."

More laughter at her remark, but it died away as Jimmy came out into the bullpen again. His face was white with shock, and his eyes were wide. "Uh, C-Chief?" he stammered. "You *really* wanna take this call."

"What the hell's the matter now?" Perry growled. Olsen opened his mouth but hesitated, and the Editor-in-Chief snapped, "Out with it!"

"She's pregnant!" Jimmy yelped, wincing.

Perry's jaw dropped. Absolute silence descended on the newsroom, with most of the men looking at Perry in admiration, and several of the women staring in horror. The first to recover was Lois, who roared with laughter, slapping both palms down on the table. "*Holy shit!*" she cried, wheezing. "Old man, I didn't know you had it in you!"

Several coarse comments were whispered in the back of the crowd at that, but at last Perry recovered his wits enough to speak. "I'm gonna shoot our mailman," he snarled, and stalked to his office.

Two days before the New Year, Richard arrived back in Metropolis, tanned and immensely pleased with himself. He came up to the *Daily Planet* on his first day back, just to visit - he would come in to actually *work* the next day. Greeting everyone with a broad grin, the sight of him was enough to bring Lois and Perry out of their offices. "I see Florida was good to you," Perry grumbled, while Lois just grinned.

Richard hugged his uncle and his ex before replying, "Actually, I wasn't in Florida for more than a day."

"Then where the hell *have* you been?" Lois asked, surprised.

"The Bahamas," Richard said, his eyes alight with mischief.

"*Richard!*" Lois exclaimed. "The whole *point* of you missing Christmas this year was so

you could see your father! And then you went to the islands instead?!"

He ushered them both into Perry's office before answering her - Richard had learned his lesson regarding the office rumor mill. Once the door closed behind them, he explained, "No, see, I went home and saw Dad, and we spent most of the first day together. Problem was, while he and I were out having father-son time, Mom had gotten suspicious because I was staying at the hotel instead of the house."

"Anybody sane would stay at a hotel," Perry interjected. "Those damn dogs of hers are a curse on mankind. Miserable little rats."

"Well, Mom was suspicious enough that she snooped around the hotel," Richard continued. "And she found out I'd checked in with a woman who definitely *wasn't* Lois. Now, I haven't actually talked to my parents about everything that's gone on the last month or so, so she jumped to conclusions. And it was one hell of a jump."

"Oh?" Lois asked, one eyebrow going up.

"The same one your mother came to when she first met Lana, only Mom was nowhere near as polite as Ella," Richard said, taking a deep breath. "When I walked in the door, Mom was waiting for me. I don't remember her *exact* words, but it was something along the lines of 'I can see why that Lane woman would drive you to stray - Lord knows she's the meanest-tempered shrew I've ever met - but I do *not* appreciate you bringing your light-skirted friends home with you, Richard James White.' And she went on to tell me that I was supposed to be coming home to spend time with the family, so on and so forth, et cetera, and she didn't appreciate being used as a convenient cover-story for my cheating."

Lois' jaw had dropped. She had never liked Sylvia, but if the woman had been in front of her just then, she would've dropped all semblance of propriety and *punched* her in the face. How dare she even *suggest*...

Perry was fuming just as much as Lois, his eyes flashing in anger and his brow furrowed. Before he could work up a scathing bellow of fury, Richard continued, "Mom had just managed to insult Lois and Lana in the same breath, and I wasn't gonna stand for that. So I looked at her for a minute, turned to my father, thanked Dad for a lovely day, and told him I was sorry, but I wasn't going to listen to that kind of trash talk about two women I love. And I also told him - not Mom - who Lana is, and that she was exactly the kind of woman he always wanted me to meet and settle down with. The kind of woman I still figured I wasn't worthy of, but I intended to do my best to live up to her standards."

"Atta boy," Perry said. "I feel sorry for Theo, but..."

"He's coming up to Metropolis next year," Richard said. "Without Mom. As for her, it turns out she's actually quite a fan of some of Lana's clothing, so she was properly humiliated. I didn't wait for an apology, though - Lana and I checked out of our hotel and went to the Bahamas. After a couple days on the beach, I was almost ready to forgive my mother."

"Well, sounds like you had an interesting vacation," Lois said, trying to find a way to segue gently into the news about herself and Clark.

Unfortunately, Perry was standing beside her, and he rarely broke things gently. "Almost as interesting as staying here," the editor-in-chief said casually. "Lois and Clark got engaged on Christmas Eve..."

That was the moment that Clark walked in, presumably coming by to welcome Richard back. The International editor just stared at him, and then turned a look of open-mouthed shock toward Lois. "Thanks, Perry," she grumbled. "Richard, I was trying to find some polite way to tell you..."

He looked at Clark instead, and cut off Lois' attempt to salvage the situation. "Dammit, Clark, you copycat! Why'd you have to go and get engaged on Christmas Eve just like me?!" With so much surprise in his tone, it was hard to tell whether he was exasperated or amused.

"Hey, wiseguy," Lois snapped, getting defensive. "You and I got engaged at the office Christmas party, the week *before* Christmas..."

"I'm not talking about *you*," Richard replied quickly, making a shooing-off gesture in her direction. "Lana and I got engaged Christmas Eve. C'mon Clark, pick something original for the wedding date, okay?"

Perry groaned, and even though Richard was clearly chuckling, Clark was too flustered to reply. Lois' sharp eyes had noticed a thin line of white around Richard's left ring finger, though, and she called him on it. "I see you must've gotten jewelry for Christmas, Richard. Or are they giving out engagement rings to men now?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes, reaching into his pocket. "Well, Lois, I was trying to find some polite way to tell you..." The ring he took out and placed back on his hand was a simple gold band. "We got married Christmas Day," Richard announced. "At least I can't forget my anniversary."

Now it was Lois' turn to stare thunderstruck. "You crazy sonofa..."

"Congratulations," Perry said, slapping his nephew on the back. "I've still got you beat."

"You do?" Richard asked.

"You're gonna have a cousin," Perry told him, grinning.

Confused, Richard looked at Lois doubtfully, and she swatted him. "Not *me*, you idiot. We haven't been back together that long, and I *can't*, remember? You bitched about the surgery for *days* when you found out. *God*. No, blame *him*, your psychotic uncle. Loueen's knocked up."

"*Lois*," Clark scolded, scandalized by her word choice.

"Well? That's exactly how she phrased it to me." The raven-haired reporter folded her arms and glared.

Richard was just staring at Perry. "You're *how* old and just now getting around to having kids? Jeez, Uncle Perry! I mean, Lois practically counts as yours, but..."

"Be glad she's not mine," the Editor-in-Chief replied. "If she was, she'd be your cousin, and that would've made the last three years illegal. In this state, anyway."

Lois and Richard exchanged a dubious look, then they both burst out laughing. "Yeah, well, now that I'm married and you're about to be - watch her, Clark, don't let her pull the indefinite engagement trick on you," Richard warned, turning back to Lois after the aside to Clark, "I guess I can call you my cousin. But I'm probably the only guy I know who has an aunt younger than his wife - and now I'm gonna have a cousin younger than my kids."

"I guess you and Lana will have to do something about that, then, huh?" Lois teased. "Where is she, anyway? Lounging at the Centennial?"

"Waiting in the car," Richard said.

Lois had to fight a smile. Typical Lana. Don't face conflict; hide from it. "Oh, hiding from me?"

"Being polite," Richard corrected. "All right, then. All gossip aside, Uncle Perry, Clark, tell me how things have been going in International while I was gone."

While the three men started talking business, Lois quietly excused herself. But she didn't head back to her office like they expected - she went to the elevators and then the garage. Richard's parking spot was right next to hers, and she strolled up to the Saab with a little smile

on her lips.

The redhead in the passenger seat was reading the newspaper and didn't hear Lois approaching, so the reporter rapped on the half-open window, letting the emerald in her engagement ring strike the glass. Lana startled, looking up wide-eyed, and Lois just grinned and held up her left hand. "I'm not gonna kill you, cheerleader, so get the hell out of the car," she said, half-affectionately and half irritated. "It takes a good ten minutes just to get to the office from the garage to the office, and you *know* Richard's gonna be gossiping with the boys half the morning. There's no sense in you hiding down here all that time."

Lana just sighed as she opened the door. "I wasn't sure how you'd react. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time, and I don't regret it in the slightest, but..."

"So you eloped with my ex," Lois said. "Yeah, I was a little pissed off at first, but Richard's not mine anymore. And I'm more than happy with the man I have."

"I'm glad," Lana replied. "I wouldn't stand for Clark being with someone who doesn't love him with all her heart." Her tone held a hint of steel at those words, but she softened it with a smile. "Don't worry. I have no intention of telling anyone that fearless reporter Lois Lane is an absolutely moony-eyed romantic at heart."

Lois gave a snort of laughter. "Yeah, right," she muttered reaching in to catch Lana's hand and drag her out if necessary. "Nobody'd believe you."

"Very true," Lana said, letting herself be helped out of the car as if it were her own idea. "Still friends?"

"Are you still alive? Obviously the answer's yes." They both chuckled at that, heading for the elevators companionably.

"So, how's everyone taking the news about you and Clark?" Lana asked.

Lois' smile was pure devilry. "One of the perks of working for the *Planet* is that you get a certain amount of free advertising space each quarter. A bunch of the guys pooled their ad space together and ran a quarter-page photo of me and Clark, with the word 'Congratulations' above it."

"How sweet," Lana said, giving her an amused look. "Jimmy Olsen took the photograph, right?"

"Of course," Lois replied with a grin. "It was a recent one - from the Christmas party, in fact. I didn't know he'd taken it. You ought to ask him, he's probably got a few of you and Richard together. Anyway, it's all romantic and lovely and classy - until you look at the very fine print at the bottom of the shot. It's got our names, but instead of saying something like 'Engaged,' it says 'About Darned Time.' I guess they have a point."

Lana laughed out loud. "Only you, Lois."

Lois heard her cell phone chirp for the millionth time that day and smiled. All the family and friends had her number, and most of them had been sending her voicemails and text messages during the day, trying to coordinate tonight's New Year's Eve party at her house this evening. This time, it was probably Clark, letting her know that he was getting ready to take the twins to the Fortress and would be back in time to help her set up. They had quarreled slightly over it, but after several whispered reassurances, Lois relented in the end despite her misgivings. No matter how much she distrusted Jor-El, Kala and Jason still deserved to see the Fortress and their grandfather. To understand who they were. And to begin to learn about their legacy. She had to admit that he was right on that.

The subject line read, "Should old acquaintance be forgot?" Not Clark, then. Someone

else, probably one of the friends she hadn't heard from in a while - Cat Grant, maybe. Already grinning in anticipation of the blonde news anchor's hilarious messages, Lois opened the text message.

This old acquaintance has not forgotten your phone # - or who fathered your kids. Come to 42 St station if you want your little secrets to remain secret. Alone - the alien isn't invited.

She felt her heart stop, gazing down at that screen. The chill of *deja vu* roared through her. Oh God, not again...

Luthor.

Kal-El landed lightly within the Fortress of Solitude, setting Kala and Jason down beside him. These days, the Fortress was no longer as accessible as it had once been; he had activated several of the security features in spite of his qualms. A human who trespassed here now would find himself rendered unconscious by a force field and flung into a cell in the lower levels. Kal-El had always left those devices off in the past, judging it unlikely that any random wanderer would find this place. Now, though, there was a very slight possibility of someone who meant no harm being injured by the force field, but he considering that an acceptable risk in light of the fact that Luthor *knew* where the Fortress was - and it had regenerated itself once, so there was no point in destroying it again. No, he had to use other means of protecting its secrets, even if those methods meant he had to fly carefully in via the interlocking crystals that made up the roof.

Besides, if he had razed the Fortress, he wouldn't be able to see the looks of wonder on his children's faces right now. Both twins, having been full of questions and excitement during the flight up, had fallen silent and somber as their eyes took in their surroundings. They could seem to decide how they felt about what they were seeing. Jason stared around him, his jaw hanging open in awe, while Kala craned her head back to peer up at the interlaced crystals above her. "Wow," the little girl said wonderingly, a trifle louder than she meant to as a small smile curved her lips.

Both flinched as the whispery echoes of Kala's word revibrated. Never in their short lives had they ever seen anything quite like the shelter that loomed before them, never been in an open space quite this large, bigger than a convention center and several stories tall. The scale dwarfed them all, even Kal-El, and inspired a cathedral hush. His interest captured, Jason took a few tentative steps as if to explore, marveling at the geometric arrangement of the crystals. *Curiosity overwhelming fear; I wonder who he gets that from?* Kal-El smiled slightly at his son...

"Hello!"

The sound came suddenly, yelled, just to his right. It was obvious when he looked that Kala had shouted, finally succumbing to temptation. She was looking out across the chasm below the platform as if testing the length in her mind. Her eyes widened as her voice echoed back to her, multiplied and resonating strangely among the crystals.

"Kala!" her father called sharply, only adding to the echoes, while Jason giggled. Kala could only stare around her, awestruck by the layers of sound, before she glanced up at her father with a guilty smile and a shrug of her little shoulders.

Sighing, Kal-El shook his head affectionately. This wasn't exactly what he had expected when he had pushed for this trip alone with them. Then again, how could he have known their reactions? At first, he'd been worried that the twins would fear the Fortress. After all, the only Kryptonian architecture they'd ever seen was Lex's damned island, and that had been an exact

copy of this. Although now that the Fortress was fully functional again, it was warmly lit, the antithesis of Luthor's creation.

Instead of being frightened, Kala and Jason were curious and excited, as their giggling at the echo proved. "All right, you two," Kal-El said gently. "Do you want to see your grandfather?"

The twins turned to look at each other at that, both grinning. "Really?" Jason asked as he looked up at his father, wide-eyed and a little confused. "But you said..."

"Not in person," Kal-El told him, shepherding them gently toward the console with its array of information crystal now intact. "It's like a movie, but instead of being on a screen the image floats in midair. And he can talk to you."

"Cool!" the twins chorused.

At the 42nd street subway terminal, Lois waited and wished for a cigarette. Her nerves were strung so tightly she almost screamed whenever a passerby bumped into her, but she had to control her fear. *Had* to. If she let herself get so wound up that her heart raced, Kal-El might hear and decide to cut short the twins' introduction to Jor-El to come down here and see what was going on. And Superman's presence just now would *not* be welcome.

You are a total idiot for meeting Lex alone and on his terms, part of her mind hissed. What if he decides to kill you right away? Just put a bullet in your head and be done with it? You couldn't stop him if he did.

A colder voice in the back of her head whispered, *Lex would never just shoot you. He wouldn't make it that easy. No, if he's hinting around about secrets and demanding to see you, he wants exactly what he says he wants: a deal.* That was one thing she didn't have to fear. Lex had no intention of killing her when he would much rather let Lois live and watch her - and his nemesis - suffer from whatever diabolical plan he'd dreamed up now. He was too sadistic for a simple assassination.

Every facet of her personality agreed on one thing: *Too bad the bastard didn't get himself killed over the last couple months.*

At least she had been able to get away with a minimum of fuss. Kal-El was busy with Jason and Kala at the Fortress; she had resisted that idea at first, but as it turned out, that saved her from having to explain her whereabouts. And it kept all three of them well out of harm's way. Oh, sure, this probably wasn't the *smartest* thing she had ever done; a wiser woman would have kept Kal-El on standby. But Luthor had kryptonite and the will to use it, and he wouldn't have called Lois here if he didn't have some plan set up in case Superman did arrive. Lex was never that unprepared, as Lois had learned the last time they crossed paths.

Just then, her cell phone rang. "Lois Lane," she answered sharply.

"Hello, Lois," Lex purred. "And are you at 42nd Street?"

"Yes," she ground out. "Where the hell are you?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out, Lois," he replied. Lois gritted her teeth; he was plainly enjoying this, and she had no intention of making it more fun for him by getting openly frustrated.

"Fine, Lex," she sighed instead. "What is this, a scavenger hunt? You wanted to see me. How am I supposed to find you?"

"Head downstairs and take the uptown line," he replied. "Get off at the Cleveland station and call this number back." With that he broke the connection, and Lois muttered a few choice

words as she hurried down the steps to comply. Precious time was wasting, and she couldn't risk Kal-El coming down here. She *couldn't*.

Barely twenty minutes later, she used her caller ID to call Luthor back. "I'm here," she said, trying to keep down the tension in her voice.

"Very good," he replied. "Now, you know where the temporary storage lockers are? Head over there. I'll hold - you wouldn't be tracing this call, would you?"

"Of course not," Lois snapped. "You probably stole the phone anyway."

"Very smart," he commented.

Silence reigned until Lois reached the lockers; it was the kind of place that made her nervous. Half-deserted and poorly lit, these tiny storage units were rarely used anymore.

"Okay, Luthor, here I am," she said into the phone. "Where are you?"

"First, a question. Do you happen to have a gun on you? In that purse perhaps, or concealed under your jacket?"

Lois' blood ran cold, and she whirled around, staring wide-eyed. The sonofabitch could *see* her! But where *was* he? Nowhere in her vision - and not knowing exactly where he was made her more uneasy than facing him. His voice chuckled in her ear. "Don't try to spoil the surprise, Lois. You'll see me when I want you to. Now, are you armed, or aren't you?"

"You've got my gun, or don't you remember?" she replied, letting anger burn away fear. "You shot two men at point-blank range with it. Two *helpless*, tied-up men. Somehow I'm not surprised you'd shoot someone in the face when they couldn't even raise a hand against you."

"They both let you get the drop on them," Lex replied. "They'd outlived their usefulness, and I think we both agree that they knew too much to be allowed to live. Besides, tell me you weren't tempted to pay Riley back, just a little, for all he'd done to others and all he meant to do to you. I understand his signature move was branding his initials on a woman's breast with a lit cigarette. Quite stupid, to use his *real* initials."

Lois couldn't help shuddering. "Yeah, he was a charmer. Just the kind I'd expect you to make friends with. Let's get on with this, Luthor. How could I be armed if *you* have my gun?"

"You have another by now, Lois. Don't try to fool me - I know you. Put the purse and your coat in a storage locker. Do it now. And if you have another pistol or a knife in your boot, I suggest you leave that as well."

The reporter had no choice but to comply. She *was* carrying her new Ladysmith in her purse, and she *did* have a weighted blackjack in the pocket of her coat. No knives in her boots, though. With that done, hastily, she picked up the phone again and locked the locker. "All right, Lex, it's done. Come on, enough bullshit. Cut the cat and mouse."

"Last instruction," he said. "Go to the platform for the red line and wait for the next train." With that, he hung up the phone, and Lois swore under her breath.

The next train was already whistling in the distance, and a sizable number of commuters were waiting for it. Lois elbowed her way to the front, wondering where Lex wanted her to get off this time. If her cell phone didn't work while the train was moving, would he just call the whole thing off? Or...

Doors opened in front of her, a flood of passengers getting off as others tried to get on. For a moment, the crowd was in flux, and Lois had to fight to keep her feet. In spite of being in the front of the crowd, it looked like she might not get on this train.

And then a man stepped off, just after the last of the disembarking passengers, and caught her around the waist as easily and naturally as if he'd been planning it for days. Lois looked up, startled, and recognized Luthor's cruel, mocking smile.

Just a little while later, the twins weren't quite as excited. "Father, this is my son, Jason, and my daughter, Kala." The little boy gazed up at the image looming above him, barely listening to Daddy. When the giant floating head had first appeared, he and Kala had jumped back, saucer-eyed with shock. The expression on the face wasn't particularly friendly, either, and that made Kala gasp and duck behind Daddy.

Jason, however, didn't shrink back as Daddy introduced the white-haired man. "Jason, Kala, this is my father, Jor-El. Your grandfather."

"Welcome, Jason and Kala of the House of El." The voice seemed to come from everywhere, smooth and very formal. Jason felt more than saw Kala, who was now peering around Daddy's hip, flinch again; with the echoes in here, his voice was also rather loud.

Usually, his sister was the first to investigate any new thing; Jason had held back from trying the echo earlier, knowing that she wouldn't resist shouting. But since she was afraid now - and he couldn't blame her, since Jor-El did look a lot like the Wizard of Oz, just a big glowy head floating around - Jason had to be the bold one. He took a step forward, craning his head back to meet his grandfather's gaze. "You're from Kryp-tin, like in Mommy's story," he stated, trying to make his small voice just as grave.

"Yes," Jor-El replied, his tone not changing. "I, and your father Kal-El, are Kryptonians."

"You two are Kryptonians also," Kal-El informed them, stroking Kala's hair. "Half, at least, since Mommy's from Earth."

Kala had edged out to stand in front of her father and was stealing nervous glances at Jor-El. "Daddy?" she finally whispered, looking up at him with a expression that was obviously worried. "When we get old, are we all gonna turn into big floaty heads like him? Even Mommy?"

"No, sweetheart," Kal-El chuckled, then looked to his father's image. "Father, they are not accustomed to this holographic projection. Would you be so gracious as to assume human size?"

"Of course, my son." With that, the floating head vanished, replaced by a slightly-flickering image of the same white-haired man, but now he stood about Daddy's height, wearing strange reflective white robes. Jason, however, grinned. "Neat! How do you do that?"

Pure shock froze her, and Lex's arm around her waist pulled her out of the crowd and back toward the maintenance areas. After those few seconds of utter astonishment, though, Lois' heart started to race. She'd never expected him to *touch* her, and his nearness was vile - and terrifying. But the pounding of her heart reminded her that Kal-El could *not* find out about this. She had agreed to meet Luthor to keep him and the twins safe, and having him show up here would be the end of that. Lois forced herself to breathe deeply, even as she grabbed Luthor's wrist. "Take your hands off me," she growled.

"Hush, now," Lex replied, just as softly, not releasing her. "I'm not kidnapping you, so there's no point in letting yourself get upset. I just don't want to be overheard. Imagine the shock and outrage if Clark found out you were down here."

Ice trailed down her spine and frosted her skin, but she didn't let that show. "What the *hell* are you talking about? Clark's a damn good reporter, but if I can shake Superman, I can keep Smallville off my tail."

They were in a shadowed alcove now, and Lex halted, taking a slight step back to observe her. To Lois' horror, he smiled. "You're good. You're *very* good. How many years

have you had to lie about this, Lois? If I didn't know better, I'd almost believe you myself."

She made herself roll her eyes and sigh. "What cracked-brain maniacal notion has bitten you now, Luthor?"

His smile broadened. "Clark Kent. Kal-El. There's a certain similarity even to the sound of both names. Did you *really* think I wouldn't catch on?"

Lois kept her breathing deep and even, although she wanted very badly to hyperventilate. Or to scream and fling herself at Luthor with teeth and nails, if necessary. *Everything was going so well*, she thought, *just when I thought we'd broken that curse, here it is again. Every time it looks as if he and I will have a happy ending, something comes along and blows it up in my face.* But aloud, she simply said, "You're smoking something, Lex. Clark would laugh himself senseless if I ever suggested it - and Superman, noble as he is, would probably be a little insulted."

"Lois, Lois, Lois," Lex sighed, shaking his head. "Come now. I know better, and you know it. Kal-El is the twins' father. Why on earth would meek and mild Clark Kent marry you and claim them as his own, unless they *were*?"

"To protect them from assholes like you," Lois replied swiftly. "People have *always* had suspicions about Jason and Kala. But with all of us claiming Clark as their father, maybe fewer megalomaniacs will try coming after us."

Lex nodded. "I see. Clark is so humble and so charitable that he will not only raise another man's - excuse me, an *alien's* bastards, he's also going to sit mildly at home watching the kids while you cuckold him with said alien? *No one* is that meek."

This was the one thing Lois and Clark hadn't discussed, and they should've seen it coming. Ella had known that Superman was the twins' father, and she hadn't accepted the polite fiction about Clark - she'd had to learn the secret in order to help them keep it from everyone else. But Lex also knew the truth, and he had come to a sinister conclusion. Lois hated herself for missing that shot at him on the yacht - if only she'd been able to kill him then...

"Besides, your friends at the paper were so kind as to run an ad celebrating your engagement," Lex said, smirking now. "And this Clark Kent looked very familiar to me, even with those silly glasses and that dreadful suit. I ran that picture through a sophisticated scanning program that can recognize facial features - the next thing in security measures."

He paused, looking deeply into her eyes and savoring the dawning despair he found there. "And there are so many photographs of Superman in the world, Lois. It was *easy* to match them. Ninety-nine percent probability. Congratulation, Lois. Your dream finally came true - Superman agreed to marry you."

She could tell he wasn't bluffing - he was gloating far too much. But even so, she wouldn't come right out and agree with him. "What do you want?" Lois hissed through clenched teeth.

"I have the results of that computer scan," Lex told her softly. "And I have copies of your children's birth certificates, showing the blank line next to *Father*. Now, if the story you're spinning for everyone else is true, a simple blood test would prove that Clark Kent is the twins' father. But since he's Superman, he can't even *take* a blood test. You can't get a needle into his veins unless it's made of kryptonite. So the mere *suspicion* created by publishing those documents would be enough to ruin your happy little family. The general public would go mad."

"What makes you think they'd care?" she retorted, flinging the words into his face from inches away. Their low voices and the roar of the trains necessitated a much closer

conversational distance than she would've liked.

"If they wouldn't care, then you'd just marry him openly," Lex replied. "You'd probably do something ridiculous such as say your vows in midair. And besides, if you openly admit that you're the alien's lover, and that those children are his, every enemy he's ever made will strike at you *and* them."

That struck too close to home, and silenced Lois' protests. Lex bored in. "Not to mention, if he admits to being a deadbeat dad, it rather tarnishes his image - *and yours*. So much for objective reporting, hmm? You were sleeping with your subject and you have the half-breed bastards to prove it."

The point struck home, and Lois couldn't help the tiniest wince. She had always striven to keep her Superman stories unbiased in spite of her personal feelings, but if it became widely known that she had *children* by him, every word she'd ever typed would be called into question. Like the editorial she had just turned in...

Luthor continued, "That's another thing - you think bigots in this country get upset when two people of different races marry? Wait until you see what they think of two people from different *galaxies*. No one will trust him again, now that's he's revealed his intention to breed his dead race back into life with the help of an earthling too smitten to care that he's an alien."

"It wasn't like that," she hissed.

"No one will believe you," Lex said, almost gently. "You're a reporter, you *know* what rumor and half-truth can do. People will believe the worst; they always do. Furthermore, if you tell the world that their father is Superman *now*, it'll be revealed that the hero has been lurking amongst them disguised as Clark Kent. Even those who can tolerate your interspecies union will never trust him for that. Their fearful minds will invent all sorts of reasons for the subterfuge, and the world will never accept him as blindly as it has up until now."

He was right; Lois felt her throat tighten. She had fought to remain unaffected, but that ploy no longer worked. Despair settled on her, and she bit her lip as she realized that Luthor had her trapped - again. She couldn't allow the secret to be revealed; any price was worth protecting Kal-El and the twins. "What do you want?" she asked again, her voice almost breaking.

Lex came closer, taking hold of her shoulders and leaning in to whisper into her ear. "I can destroy you, Lois Lane, and everything you love. Your beloved boss would have a heart attack, literally, if he found out the truth, and where would that leave his pretty young wife and the child they're expecting, hmm? The truth would force Martha Kent into hiding, and your twins would miss their Grandma, wouldn't they?"

She was striving to hold back tears now, trying to control her breathing so Kal-El wouldn't hear. But Lex's cold voice kept on pouring poison into her ear, soft as a lover's endearments. "And your ex, that hotshot pilot - he and his new wife would be in trouble, too. She knew Clark in high school, and they helped rescue you both. Some - such as his former superiors in the Air Force - would say it's their duty to share what they know with the government. And I'm sure the government would be *very* interested in hearing about those kids. What a disgrace to your mother, the General's widow, that she betrayed her country's interest to protect a couple of hybrids. Why, your whole family would be embroiled in the scandal - even Lucy and the new baby."

The mention of her sister - her innocent sister, who didn't even *know* the damned secret - broke the spell holding her. Lois put one hand up to his chest and shoved, her hatred of Lex burning hotly. Tears still glittered on her cheeks, but her eyes were hard and bright with fury

now. "Tell me what you want, you sadistic sonofabitch," Lois growled, and the rage had completely drowned the terror and despair. "Tell me and we deal, or I'll bring it all down around your ears right now. One scream and he'll be at my side, and if I tell him what you told me he *might* just lose his temper and vaporize you. No loss for the world."

"You're the killer, not him," Lex said just as flatly.

"After the things you just threatened, it doesn't matter," she replied scathingly. "If I scream for him now you'll die one way or another. Sure, you'd have the satisfaction of ruining me, but the police have a copy of Riley's film. There were *four* cameras, and they've got a very clear image of you shooting a bound, unarmed man in the face." She bared her teeth in a savage grin. "So if Kal-El doesn't fry you, Old Sparky down at Stryker's Island *will*. And I guarantee you I'll be there to cheer."

He took it calmly, watching her eyes. "So. Mutually assured destruction, that's what this is. If you call him, I'll go down - but not without ruining you. And that's no fun for anyone, now is it?" Lex paused for only the briefest second, just long enough to return her feral smile. "This is what I want: leave me alone. Don't try to find me; don't help the police track me down. Stay out of my life and out of my way completely. And don't set your caped hubby on my trail, either. If anything happens to me, your secret's out."

Lois nodded gravely, not quite trusting herself to speak. Lex continued, "In return, I'll leave your little family alone. I'll pull back the watchers I have following the Kents, the Whites, the Troupes, and even the Langs and the Hubbards. You can stop looking over your shoulder, wondering when I'll appear. That's no way to have your twins grow up, now, is it? Besides, I have other interests now, and I'm going to be far too busy to pursue vengeance. So we have a ceasefire, essentially. Will you agree to that, Ms. Lane?"

"Yes," Lois replied, her tone deadly calm. "But I want one more thing. Forget about Katherine. Let her go; she'll never bother either of us again. After what you did to Eve Teschmacher - don't think I didn't find out about that - I don't trust you not to hunt Katherine down. Bad enough you left Eve to the polar bears..."

Wrath flashed in his eyes like summer lightning, brief and unpredictable, and then it was gone again, leaving his gaze as impenetrable as a snake's. "As you wish. Kitty can continue her sad little life without further interference from me. Now, do we have a bargain?"

"Yes." This time Lois didn't hesitate or demur. Forgoing vengeance was a small enough price to pay for her family's safety. Infinitesimal, really.

Lex looked at her and nodded. "Very well," he said quietly.

Without warning, he lunged at her, pinning her to the rough brick wall behind her. Lois gasped, and Lex's mouth was on hers, a greedy rapacious kiss that stole her breath and turned her stomach. For one second she was too shocked and too disgusted to fight him, and he wound one hand into the hair at the nape of her neck.

Then Lois returned to her senses, feeling more violated than she had ever imagined possible. She bit down savagely on his lip and shoved, spitting his own blood back into his face. "How *dare* you!" she snarled.

Luthor tightened his grip on her hair, forcing her head back so she had to meet his eyes. "Consider the bargain sealed," he told her. "And remember this: I could have asked for so much more. What *wouldn't* you give to protect them, Lois?"

The thought was so revolting that Lois had to shove him, hard, and he stumbled away from her. Lex wiped the blood from his lips and laughed. "Goodbye, Lois," he said, a cruel mocking gleam in his eyes. "You know I've never hesitated to lie - but you have no choice but

to trust me now. Make the first move, and you're guaranteed to fail. Still, you've bought those you hold dear some peace until I go back on my word. A dozen years? A score? I may just decide to leave you alone for good. Think on that, when revenge grows tempting."

With those words he stepped out of the little alcove and was gone. Lois didn't even try to follow him, shaking with rage and fear and nausea. She spat again and scrubbed at her mouth, thinking coldly, *If you come back, we'll be waiting. I may have made a deal with the devil, but if he tries to renege, he'll learn the meaning of 'hell hath no fury.'*

After leaving the subway, Lois had gone back to the *Planet* and sat in her parked car for a long time, thinking about the last two hours. Trying to push away the sick and angry feeling in her gut at the secret she was going to have to keep. What other choice did she have? Could she tell Kal-El the truth? That she had bought their freedom with Lex's? That she had been forced to make the choice he couldn't have?

*You did what you had to do to protect those you love. No one can fault you for that, the General's Daughter growled at her. Stop being a twit. Luthor's gone; it's done. Live your life now. You've paid your price. Now **let it go**. It's the only thing you **can** do.*

Finally, disgusted with herself, she had rubbed away her tears of misgiving and started the Audi. Her mind racing, she forced herself to lock those dark memories away in her heart as the vehicle roared through the snowy twilight through town and out toward Bakerline. She would be late getting home, later than expected, but would still have enough time to get ready for the New Year's Eve party. If Kal-El and the twins had made it home by then. After that confrontation, the thought of her family made her ache with longing. If ever she didn't feel up to being social, it was now. But they couldn't know; couldn't suspect...

The moment she opened the door, Lois heard Kala come racing up the hall as always, and she had barely dropped her keys before the little girl leaped at her for a hug. "Mommy! We got to meet our other grandpa and he's a giant floatin' head sometimes!"

The barrier she had built around herself in the car, protecting herself from what she had done in the growing darkness, shattered as she held her daughter to her. Startled laughter kept the fear and tension at bay at last. "Yeah, I thought that was kind of weird myself," Lois said, rumpling the child's curls as Jason and Clark arrived. Her smile grew brighter as they moved toward her. Funny how she had been so scared of their going up there earlier. Kala having nestled in against her shoulder, Lois kissed her temple and asked, "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah!" Jason said as he hugged her as well, hanging onto her waist like a monkey. He raised his chin on her hip to look up at her as he continued, "I got to learn all about hollow-grams an' makin' pictures with light. Jor-El is really really smart."

Her sense of humor starting to return, Lois quirked a grin down at her little boy. "Oh, really?"

"But he kinda talks funny," Kala added against her mother's shoulder. She picked her hair up to give her father a speculative look and then continued, "Daddy does too, up there. Is that how Creep-tonians talk to each other?"

How could she dwell on dread at a moment like this? Still hugging both kids, Lois finally arched an eyebrow and looked over at Clark. The lure was just too irresistible. "Wait, how *who* talk to each other?" she asked in false misunderstanding, making Clark roll his eyes.

"Creep-tonians," Kala replied importantly, sitting up in her mother's arms to explain. "Daddy says me and Jason are Creep-tonians just like him. Are we gonna talk funny when we get bigger?"

Before Lois could say anything else, Clark interrupted. "Kryptonians, sweetheart. From Krypton. And eventually you'll learn Kryptonese so you can talk to Jor-El a little easier."

"Oh," Kala said gravely, and hugged her mother again before changing the topic slightly. "I like Daddy's Fortress. It's pretty, like an ice palace."

Another smirk aimed at Kal-El, the day's poison draining away more moment by moment. "Me, too."

"And we got to see the roar - the oror - Daddy, what's it called?" Jason said.

"Aurora Borealis," Clark supplied, smiling faintly.

Lois looked at them with honest surprise. Well, that was a great extra bonus for the munchkins. "Really? Wow, that's lucky," she said, slipping Kala down to the floor as they started out of the foyer and into the living room. Immediately the twins grabbed her hands to walk on either side. "I never got to see the Northern Lights from the Fortress."

"You've been to the Fortress, too, Mommy?" Jason asked, impressed. "Wow."

Lois' eyes sparkled with mirth. "Only twice, baby. And the first time I went up was a *very* special occasion. You know, Daddy doesn't take just *anyone* up there. But," - she grinned over her shoulder at Kal-El, who was following behind - "Mommy still never got a light show."

"I'll make sure you get the chance," Clark told her. The twins finally released Lois to run to the bag of supplies for the party on the couch, and she went into Clark's arms gladly, hugging him tight. She pressed her face against his shoulder to hide the release of tension she felt at being safely home.

And then Clark himself nearly undid her relief. "You're late," he murmured against her hair. "And whoever made you angry at work, I hope you didn't strangle them. You were mad enough to."

"I didn't," Lois whispered, biting back the sudden wave of terror and regret that washed over her. "We worked something out. Glad to be home, though."

"Glad you're here," he replied, pulling back slightly.

Lois couldn't quite hide the haunted look in her eyes, and to cover it she kissed him hungrily. Clark, though surprised by the intensity, held her close and thoroughly enjoyed it. When she finally pulled away - after making him very grateful for his lungs of steel - she looked up at him and whispered, "You know I love you more than anything else, right?"

His handsome face took on a quizzical expression. "What brought that on?"

It took Lois a moment to think of something plausible, but she smiled and shrugged. "New Year's resolution to tell you more often."

Clark just grinned. "Wait 'til see what *I've* resolved to do more often. Early spring, right?"

The twins, bored by Mommy and Daddy making kissy-faces, were nosing around the decorations for the party later that night. "Mommy! When do we get to throw the confetti?" Kala called.

Lois laughed and rubbed her nose against Clark's. "Second week of April, you pushy sonofagun. And I'll hold you to that resolution, now that our little lady of super-eavesdropping has music to distract her."

In the living room, Jason had picked up a noisemaker and blown into it, making his sister yelp. In seconds, the twins were embroiled in one of their perennial squabbles, Kala chasing Jason while he blew the noisemaker in between taunts. Lois just glanced toward them, leaning against Clark with his arms still around her waist. *This is why you did it, Lois. Why you would have done anything he had asked. Because anything was worth it for this*, she thought gratefully as Clark kissed her hair.

Old, Borrowed, Blue

Three months 'til...

The realtor was one of those women who smile constantly, no matter what her clients do or say, and by the fourth apartment Lois was beginning to worry about her. *Has she overdosed on antidepressants? Or is she just a serial killer trying to cover her deeply maladjusted psyche? My God, not even Clark is this chipper.*

"And this next one is very cozy," she said with a grin that bared too many teeth. "It has a lovely view..."

"Whoa," Lois said. "We've got two growing kids and two adults who are used to having their own offices. I'm looking more for spacious than cozy."

The briefest flicker of consternation passed over the woman's features, and then she smiled anew. "Well, if you really want spacious, there is one other apartment just a few blocks from here. I wasn't going to show it to you, because it's a penthouse, and you said you have small children, but..."

"We've lived on the riverside for two years," Lois interjected, worrying both about the cost of a penthouse and the fact that she could *not* remember this woman's name. "I'm sure they'd be safe... We ought to look at the penthouse, anyway." *And if it's a penthouse, that gives Kal-El a convenient landing space.*

"Of course," the woman chirped, still with the manic grin. "It's not far, if you'd like to walk. I always say walking is very healthful..."

Lois quickly learned that the realtor, in addition to being bubbly and nerve-scrapingly cheerful, had no sense of distance. 'A few blocks' turned out to be more like ten, through Metropolis street traffic, and in spite of her shorter height, the realtor walked faster than Lois. *I will kill Clark for recommending her to me, she thought. 'She's very sweet, ' he says. She's a freakin' psycho, is more like it.*

But further musings in that direction were cut off when Lois recognized her old neighborhood. "Where exactly are we headed?" she asked, hustling to keep up.

"Reeve Plaza," the realtor replied, and Lois actually skidded to a halt.

"Seriously?" the reporter asked, which made the other woman turn and look at her bemusedly. "I mean, you're not kidding. The penthouse at Reeve Plaza Apartments?"

"Well, yes," she replied. "Is something wrong?"

Lois didn't reply, looking up at the sky silently. Her old apartment was on the market *now*... It had to be a sign. She looked back down, forcing herself to approach this objectively, and heaved a sigh. "Let's go look."

Fifteen minutes later, Lois stood in her old living room, looking out the French doors onto her terrace. She even recognized some of the same plants in the planters out there. The rest of the apartment had been remodeled and enlarged, but what she'd jokingly called Superman's landing strip was still the same.

"This is the combined living room and dining area," her realtor said. "Through this door here is the master suite..." Lois followed her, feeling as though she was in some strange dream. There used to be a mirrored wall there, and behind it had been her cramped study. Now it had been expanded into a master suite that included a full bath, and the bedroom would easily hold that king-sized bed.

The tour continued through the kitchen, still as small as ever, and down the hall past to what used to be the master bedroom. It looked as though the landlord had converted his storage space and added it to this apartment's square footage; there were two rooms on the

same floor as the rest of the penthouse, and one more above it. "The last tenant was using this room as a home gym," the realtor continued as Lois eyed it with visions of her future home office in mind. "The two rooms below were a study and a guest bedroom. They both have closets and plenty of windows..." *Perfect for the twins' bedrooms, when they decide to separate*, Lois thought.

Heedless of the realtor's voice, Lois headed back downstairs, drifting through the rooms in a haze of nostalgia. She'd eaten standing up in this kitchen and sat staring out of these doors when she was single, and now she was contemplating the place in the context of her husband and their kids.

"Of course the terrace is a wonderful feature," the realtor said when Lois stepped outside, but the reporter wasn't listening. She went straight to the edge and peered over, feeling the breeze whip her hair back and sting her eyes. Turning, she caught a glimpse of the *same* damn patio table, and heard a voice in her mind say *Good evening, Miss Lane*.

Lois interrupted the woman's prattle to say, "I'll take it." *To hell with the cost, as long as it's not completely ridiculous we'll manage it somehow. This is the home we're supposed to have, this is where I'm supposed to be. Back where it all began.*

"I take the afternoon off to go apartment-hunting, and I run into a major story on the way to get my kids," Lois muttered under her breath, elbowing her way through the journalists gathered on the courthouse steps. Kal-El grinned slightly; he could hear her easily over the roar of the crowd. He hovered slightly above the top step; for some reason, even reporters tended to stand back a bit when he was in the air, and he preferred not to be mobbed just now.

Still, they were lobbing questions at him, microphones thrust toward his face. Kal-El raised one hand slightly and got an approximation of silence. "Ladies and gentlemen of the press," he said in that voice they all knew so well, and continued with his prepared speech about the reconstruction efforts. Metropolis wasn't back to its old self, three months after the disastrous day of blackouts, earthquakes, and fires, but the major portion of the rebuilding was complete. And today, after much effort, he had finally stabilized the crack in the seafloor caused by Luthor's island.

After his statement, and the typical question and answer sessions with the press, everyone expected Superman to simply nod, wave, and fly off, as he always had. He, however, had other plans, and even though his heart gave a little twinge at what he was about to do, it was necessary.

"There's one more thing," Kal-El said casually, seeking a certain pair of hazel eyes in the crowd. He smiled, and it wasn't his usual flirtatious grin; this was a much more sober expression than any journalist had seen on his face when dealing with Lois. "If I may, I'd like to take this opportunity to offer Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent my sincerest congratulations on their engagement."

The shocked look on her face cut through him like kryptonite; Kal-El *hadn't* warned her at all. He couldn't. The old rumors had started up again, and even in the *Planet* bullpen there was a certain amount of whispering about Lois and Superman. Some people still believed Clark was a fool for getting engaged to a woman who clearly loved someone else - someone for whom Clark was supposedly no competition. That had to stop before someone noticed the resemblance between Clark and Superman, and this public and unexpected breakup was the only way he could end the whispers.

Lois blinked at him as every other reporter turned to stare at her. She rallied quickly,

shaking off the stunned look and giving him an approximation of her usual jaunty smile. "Thank you, Superman," she replied, just as casually. "I'll be sure to tell Clark you did."

"You're very welcome, Ms. Lane." He inclined his head to her slightly, and with that rather formal gesture he took to the skies.

Behind him, Lois left the press conference abruptly, whispering under her breath, "Kal-El, I'm gonna *kill* you for doing that to me!" She was walking fast, and he heard her choke back a sob.

Worried, Kal-El tracked her from above, and when Lois ducked down an alley several blocks from the courthouse, he quickly touched down and went to her, dressed as Clark this time. "Lois?"

His favorite tough-as-nails reporter was leaning up against the rough brick wall, trying to smother her weeping. Wordlessly, Clark went to her and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her hair and whispering how much he loved her.

At last, she pushed her hair back and looked up at him with reddened eyes. "You probably think I've lost my mind," she said, sniffing.

"Not you," he replied, gently stroking the tears away from her cheeks. "Lois, I'm sorry to spring that on you. We said we needed to put an end to all the gossip, you know, and I thought if I warned you, your reaction might not be genuine enough to convince the press..."

That made her laugh, if a little brokenly. "Yeah, well, you got a genuine reaction outta me, hero," she said, her voice bleak.

Then the full impact struck him as well, and Kal-El could only hold her tight and rest his forehead against hers. It was *ridiculous* to feel his heart breaking, when he was going to marry this woman and be with her and their *children* forever after, but a part of him grieved for the end of Metropolis' favorite romantic fairy tale. The hero and his chronicler had broken up - Lois and Superman were over. No more public flirtation, no more sly in-jokes in front of other reporters, no more flying where anyone could see them... This was the end of an era, and he couldn't help mourning it even while he yearned for the next step.

"You know the truth," he whispered into her ear. "You know you won the man *and* the hero. And this way we can be together without worrying about Luthor or someone else like him..."

Just the mention of the criminal's name made Lois' heart skip a beat. "Quit trying to be rational," she pleaded, pressing her face against his neck. "Just ... do me a favor? Shut up and hold me."

Chuckling, he did so, letting the steady beat of his great heart sooth her until her tears stopped. "Two things to think about," he murmured as he tilted her face up for a kiss.

"Mmm?" Lois replied, still seeming a bit distracted.

"One, we only have to be that... distant with each other in public, and only for a while. Once people get used to you being married, we can stop being so darned professional. And two, you *know* Superman will never take up with another woman. Which does a lot for your reputation, Ms. Lane. Speaking of tough acts to follow..."

That made her smile even through the last of her tears, and she swatted him on the shoulder affectionately. "Cute, Mr. Kent. Very cute. Well, since you so fortuitously showed up, you can walk me to my car while I tell you about our new apartment."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh, so you did find one," he said. "I assume you're fairly certain I'll like it if you're already calling it ours." He'd secretly envied the house on Riverside Drive, and longed to live in a big house in the suburbs. Some place where the twins could have a big

yard to play in...

"Very sure," Lois said, grinning wickedly. "I already paid the security deposit."

"You *what*?!" That was *awfully* presumptuous of her, and while he admired her boldness, this was to be *his* home too. Didn't he even get a say?

But she turned those mischievous eyes on him, full of devilish good humor, and said, "Wait 'til you *see* it. That's all I ask. Tell you what: if you don't like it, I'll forfeit the deposit. It's *perfect* though. You just have to see it..."

Two months 'til...

"*Not* white. Absolutely not. No way. We've already had this discussion. Forget it," Lois insisted, pitching the bridal magazine back across the table at her sister. Ella Lane and Martha Kent both sighed in disappointment; Richard, Ron, and Clark were all trying to look helpful while actually staying out of the discussion as much as possible. Lana just leaned back in her chair and let the Lane girls fight it out. Honorary sibling and Matching Monograms Club notwithstanding, the dress argument was really none of her business. She'd been helping with wedding plans, which just happened to be on the agenda for the family meeting.

"But Lois-" Lucy pleaded.

"*No*. Maybe you failed to notice, but two of the kids playing in the living room are *mine*. I don't exactly qualify for a white wedding dress anymore, Lucy!"

Clark chuckled softly, knowing this argument could last awhile. *Somehow I don't think this family meeting is going to go quite as smoothly as the last.*

Speaking of the last family gathering, a couple weeks ago... *That* had been interesting, even though it had only been himself, Lois, Lana, Richard, and the twins. They'd gotten together mostly at Richard's request - he'd had an announcement to make. A rather shocking announcement, in fact. Clark remembered perfectly his own feeling of astonishment when Richard told them he would be resigning from the *Daily Planet*. His expression must have mirrored the disbelief and guilt on Lois' face, because Richard had grinned at him, slapped his shoulder, and said, "And guess who I'm suggesting to take my place?"

"Richard, you *know* I can't take on that much responsibility in addition to my duties..." Clark had begun to protest, but the International Editor had a response for that already.

"Actually, it'll be *easier*. You know International isn't the seething cauldron of controversy and backbiting that City is. You and Ron practically ran it while Lana and I were in Italy and the Bahamas, and nothing exploded. Besides, if you're the boss of the department and you have a handful of really good folks like Ron backing you up, you can disappear *any time you need to*. Perry knows full well I wasn't at that desk eight hours a day, and as long as the work gets done, he'll let you do the same."

Clark grinned slightly to remember it; Perry had thought the idea of letting him have International was brilliant. Several staffers disagreed, but to their very great shock Clark had delivered a serious, even-toned lecture that left them feeling as though they were back in grade school and had just misbehaved in front of the principal. No longer being just one of the reporters was very odd, but there was at least one spot of familiarity: in spite of having backed him up at that lecture to his department, Lois was still as competitive as ever. Now they were fighting over whose department got which stories instead of which one of them personally covered a given story, but it was the same principle. And Clark had won even more respect from his staff for standing up to Lois. He'd never so much as raised his voice to anyone, but he didn't back down from her now that they were engaged. Not even her most profanity-laced

tirades fazed him when he had a point.

Of course, satisfying as the results had been, there was an unpleasant reason why Richard was leaving his uncle's paper, and he had admitted it only reluctantly. "You two are trying to be polite," he'd said, and continued with a grin for Lana, "and God knows I am the most *happily* married man on the face of the earth..."

Lois had cut in to finish the sentence when he couldn't seem to find the words. "It bugs you, seeing us together."

Richard had sighed and sat back in his chair. They'd held that particular family conference here at the Riverside house, over Clark's famous secret-recipe pasta sauce, and Richard had laid down his fork in surrender. "Yeah. It bothers me a lot, in fact. I kept telling myself not to let it, that this is the best way for everybody, but... It sucks seeing you with someone else."

"You're not exactly alone in that," Lois had pointed out gently. "That doesn't mean I want you to run off. It's just... It's not easy. We haven't gotten adjusted to the new status quo yet."

"And Clark's probably more secure than I am," Lana had added, just as diplomatically, "but I can't say I'm thrilled to have Richard working with the woman he meant to marry. I *know* I'm being a jealous shrew, and I *know* I have nothing to fear, but you're right - I haven't quite gotten my mind around it yet. And none of that is *your* fault, Lois."

Lois just snorted. "Right. I'm gonna go get some coffee." She had stood to leave, but Clark knew her well enough to realize that she *was* blaming herself, and caught her arm.

"Lana's right, it's *not* your fault," he'd told her then. "It's circumstances, and they have a way of being very inconvenient."

He'd let her go, and when she came back with coffee for all of them, Lois was a little more on an even keel. "Okay, so, what are you doing if you leave the *Planet*?"

Richard had just sighed. "Well, I'm thinking of job-hunting in Gotham. I've got enough in my savings that I can be picky in looking for a new job, and I think my wife will let me crash at her place in the meantime." Another grin between him and Lana - they really were entirely too sweet sometimes, and Lois had made retching noises until she got Richard's attention again. "Now, about the twins," he said, giving Clark a significant look. "Gotham's only about two hours by seaplane - twenty minutes by super-flight. So we can still work out the weekends and holidays thing like we planned. I know they're not gonna *like* me being that far away, but they'll adjust, too. Once they realize I'm not gone forever it should be okay."

The memory brought a sigh from Clark. Jason and Kala had *not* been understanding; they'd gotten very surly during what was now known as the Brat Phase. It had been so stressful for him, to hear them arguing with Lois over the smallest things, and even worse, after they fought, to listen to the twins sobbing in their room and Lois sniffing in hers. That seemed to be *mostly* over now; Jason and Kala were seeing a psychiatrist to deal with all the rapid changes in their lives, as well as the nightmares that still lingered from being kidnapped.

Clark wasn't particularly delighted by the doctor Lois had chosen: her ex, Elliot Marrin. But Lois did have a point - if the twins accidentally let Clark's identity slip to Elliot, Lois had enough incriminating photos from their relationship to buy his silence. Clark didn't exactly approve of her potentially blackmailing the man, but he didn't want to discuss it too deeply with Lois. He also remembered Elliot far too well from the days when he and Lois had been dating. Luckily for everyone, Elliot had been very professional with the kids, and their sessions with him seemed to be helping a lot.

After Richard's entirely too optimistic pronouncement, though, Lois had simply thrown

her hands in the air. "Fine," she'd said. "But you know Clark and I can't keep this house. We were gonna sell it, but *when*? The housing market's down..."

Lucy yanked Clark's attention out of his memories and back to the present moment. "I don't *care* if it's traditional in China. You're not Chinese, Lois! You are *not* gonna wear a red wedding dress!"

"Amen," Martha said dryly, echoed by Ella.

"Keep it up and I'll wear black," Lois said poisonously, glaring at both moms. "Clark likes me well enough in black..."

"Not getting into this discussion," Clark said quickly. "Not at all. I don't care what color the dress is, as long as Lois is in it. That's all I want. I was lucky she agreed to marry me; I'm not pushing my luck any further. You guys fight it out amongst yourselves."

Lucy just sighed theatrically. "*Fine*. You can just be hard-headed - I'm going to go make snacks in *my* kitchen."

That made Clark grin again; at least one of the recent changes in their lives had been unequivocally for the better. The final decision on the Riverside house had been to let Ron and Lucy take over the payments. With the new baby, they needed the extra space, and within a few weeks the home had gone from being the house full of unpleasant ghosts of the past, to Lucy's own personal kingdom. With different furniture, a fence around the yard, and the Troupes' personalities stamped into every surface, even Clark felt comfortable here now.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You house-proud little broodmare," Lois called after her affectionately. She found herself, however, facing stern looks from both Ella and Martha. "Look, you two, this is *my* wedding. I told you I don't give a damn about all the fiddly little details - you can pick cocktail napkins to your hearts' delight - but I'm not budging on the dress. *Not white*. And *not* frilly. Just go ahead and scrap any ideas you've been cherishing about taffeta and chiffon and ruffled sleeves. Forget it."

"Lois, do you think you could compromise a *little*?" Ella asked in that so-polite voice that automatically raised her daughter's hackles.

"No," Lois retorted. "And the Army-trained hostage-negotiator voice won't make me. I already let you swindle me into a big wedding instead of something small and private, I agreed to have a memory candle for the General, and I backed down on the colors, too."

"Red and black are *not* wedding colors," Martha said archly.

"Which is why I threw white in there," Lois replied. "With silver accents. Lovely, and it all matches. And *nobody* can screw up black, white, and red."

The coffee finished brewing, and Lucy brought the entire pot in to pour refills for everyone. Ella had flipped the bridal magazine open to a very classic, traditional wedding dress, something with seed pearls and ribbons and several skirts. Lois saw her look down and snapped, "No. No way. Not even if you were boiling me in oil. That dress looks more like a freakin' cake than a bridal gown - I'd be too worried someone would wander up with a knife and cut a slice out of my ... butt."

Ron and Richard both cracked up, trying to smother their laughter and not succeeding. This particular discussion was seriously pushing the 'no swearing in the Troupe house' rule, for Lois at least.

She glared, pointing at Richard. "Shut up, Mr. I-got-married-on-a-beach. *You* got out of all this nonsense. Clark, why couldn't we elope?"

"That'd be copying," he said, smiling. "Besides, then you'd have to be married and settled down sooner."

"Good point," Lois said to him, and added with a glare, "I hate you. You're getting entirely too much amusement out of this."

"Well, Lois, it's a nice change to see you *not* completely determined, with everything planned out ahead of time," Clark told her gently. "Although I think the rest of you might have to concede defeat on the dress - Lois is the one who has to wear it. She should be able to pick what she wants."

"And you're not gonna stuff me in that monstrosity," Lois added, snatching the magazine back and rifling through it. "The Thanksgiving turkey has more dignity than that woman has in that dress. It's got a freakin' *bustle*. Do I *look* like I'd wear a bustle? *Ever*? No. Now, hook me up with something modern and sleek like..."

"Oh no," Ella and Martha said in unison, glancing at the page she had open. Martha continued, "Good heavens, Lois, you can't even tell it's a wedding dress!"

"Why, because it doesn't look like some psychotic designer - we love you, Lana - vomited tulle all over it?" Lois slapped the open page, while Lana just chuckled. The redhead had taken a small sketchpad out of her purse several minutes ago, and was basically ignoring them all.

Lucy leaned over her sister's shoulder and laughed. "No, Lois. It doesn't look like a bridal gown because it shows too much leg - and too much cleavage. Every single man in the place would be trying to steal you!"

"They can *try*," Clark said softly, giving Lois a secretive grin. "It wouldn't be any different from a normal day at the office."

"I love you," Lois purred.

"Lois, you are *not* wearing something that could pass for a cocktail dress..." Ella began, and her daughter rolled her eyes.

"Momma, keep it up, and I'll find myself an ivory sundress and wear *that* to my own wedding," Lois replied hotly. "And when everyone asks, I'll tell them *you* drove me nuts."

"Copycat," Lana murmured, then leaned across the table and held her sketchpad in front of Lois. "What about something like that?"

Lois had already opened her mouth to make a sarcastic comment along the lines of, *if you're not gonna help me fight this battle, stay out of it*. But the dress Lana had quickly sketched silenced her, and Lois leaned back in her chair to regard it. "We've got this lovely Venetian lace, in ivory," Lana said. "I could tailor the bodice so it would have those clean lines you like in the modern stuff, but leave the train long and lacy for a more classic look. Not a lot of flowery little details to clutter it up - the lace, backed by satin, would be decoration enough. And a train like that will make you look taller, too, even if you can't flash a lot of leg." Lana grinned. "There's always the tossing of the garter if you want to show off your legs. It would take about a month or so to make, and you can't gain *or* lose more than two pounds if you want it strapless, but I think you'd be happy. And it is *your* wedding." The last was said with an arch glance at the moms.

"*Strapless*?" Martha said, wincing.

"Nuh-uh, the designer hath spoken," Lois said quickly. "And she's unofficially been the wedding planner, too. The bride agrees, so it's a done deal. Lana, go ahead and show them the sketch of *my* wedding dress."

Chuckling, the redhead handed the sketch around to the moms, sitting back with a smile. "Yes, well, you needed someone to keep the details straight and run interference between all interested parties," Lana said. "I'm actually having fun helping you plan your wedding - considering *I* eloped to the Bahamas and wound up getting married barefoot on the beach."

She arched one eyebrow at her husband with the last remark.

"I didn't hear any complaints at the time, *Mrs. White*," Richard said, smirking. When she only grinned at him, he reached for the sketchbook - and Lois pitched a napkin at him.

"Hey! Lucy, snag that from him" Lois said quickly. "None of you guys get to see the dress before the wedding."

"What? Why not?" Richard gave her a quizzical look as Lucy swiped the sketch and made appreciative noises.

"Because you'd tell Clark, and I want it to be a surprise," Lois said, giving Clark a sly grin that said, *Don't you dare use the x-ray vision to take a peek, hero.*

Clark just chuckled. "I'm still surprised that you're going to marry me, Lois."

"And you think *Richard and Lana* are too cute for words," Ron said, sipping his coffee to hide his smile.

Lana cleared her throat quietly. "Well, since I've just been *officially* named the wedding planner regardless of how much in love I am with my husband, let's get organized, shall we? Lois, Clark, how's the guest list coming?"

Nearly identical sighs answered her, while Ella and Martha grinned to see their kids taken to task. Soon, everyone at the table found themselves involved in the discussion. Some of the broader details had been decided already - the wedding colors, the venue for the wedding and the reception, and Kala and Jason as flower girl and ring bearer. But to Lois' evident dismay, a great deal remained to be done.

"Bridesmaids," Lana said some time later, while Ron and Richard were outside keeping the five older kids entertained. Ella was holding Michelle, who had decided that she liked Nana's white hair and kept trying to play with it. "Are you going to have a maid of honor, or have several bridesmaids?"

"Well, I *would* pick Lucy, but she got herself married off first," Lois said.

"Excuse me for having found true love and being smart enough to know it for what it was," her sister teased.

"Actually, a couple of friends and I swore years and years ago that we'd be each other's bridesmaids," Lois admitted. "At the time, it didn't look like any of us would ever get married... I already asked them when I told them Clark and I were engaged. But I still want Lucy to be a bridesmaid, even if she is a brat."

"Okay," Lana said, ignoring the blonde sticking her tongue out at Lois. "How many bridesmaids is that, total? And Clark, think about best man versus having an equal number of groomsmen."

"Three," Lois answered. "Lucy, Cat, and Tobie. I *told* you we thought none of us were ever gonna get married. Loueen will be more than six months pregnant on my wedding date, and she said she doesn't want to be the pregnant bridesmaid in the lineup. So it's just three, unless..."

When the reporter trailed off, Lana just smiled and shook her head. "The wedding planner doesn't get involved in the ceremony, Lois. I'll be backstage making sure the caterers are doing their job and the right music is playing. Now, Clark..."

"Well," he said, pushing his glasses up. "My two closest friends are Jimmy and Ron. I guess we can go with groomsmen instead of a best man, because I don't want it to seem as if one of them is more important than the other."

"Great, but we need a third for symmetry," Lana said. "Is there anyone you can think of...?"

"I don't think Richard would," Clark replied, "and he's about the only other man I know that well..."

"I might have an idea," Lois said, eyeing Martha speculatively. "Clark, we do have a mutual friend who could be talked into a tux... And who would give us perfect symmetry, considering who the bridesmaids are..."

At first Clark misinterpreted her glance at Ma. *She's not talking about Ben*, he thought, frowning slightly. *Who the bridesmaids are...? Oh!* "You think Lieutenant Sawyer would?"

"I actually asked her about being a bridesmaid, since Tobie is, but she refused point-blank to wear a bridesmaid's dress." Lois transferred that intense hazel gaze to Martha, and said flatly, "Maggie Sawyer and Tobie Raines are a couple. Even if Maggie doesn't wind up one of the groomsmen - and I think she'd find it hilarious - I hope you won't object to the two of them dancing at our wedding."

"Just what kind of narrow-minded backwoods hick do you take me for, Lois?" Martha replied in the same bland tone, smiling faintly at Lois' discomfiture.

Lois dropped her face into her hands and sighed. "Martha... I don't know *what's* normal for Kansas, all right? There are still places where people freak out about that."

"No worse than they 'freak out' about unwed couples with six-year-old twins, or interracial couples, for that matter," Martha replied easily.

"I'm trying to be polite," Lois ground out. "Which, *you* ought to know, I'm not necessarily good at. Or used to."

Martha reached across the table to pat her hand. "Lois, what other people do with their lives and their loves is no business of mine. 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' I was only ever upset about the twins because my son is their father. And since he's finally making an honest woman of you..."

"Speaking of honest women," Lois replied, "has everyone in town quit talking about Ben Hubbard and the widow Kent now that you two tied the knot?"

Clark groaned. He and Lois had attended the ceremony just last weekend. Seeing Ben marry his mother had made him quite uncomfortable, but he'd gotten over it. Now if only Lois and Ma would stop heckling each other...

"Wait a minute," Lana said, heading off any more bickering between Martha and Lois. "This is the same Lieutenant Sawyer who got you into the treatment area at Metropolis General, right?"

"Right," Lois said, trying to give Lana a significant look.

The redhead caught her meaning. "I'm already a fan. Any policewoman smart enough to recognize that you're the most knowledgeable person regarding certain superheroes... I didn't realize you two knew each other, though. You must have friends in odd places all over the city."

"Yeah, the guest list includes the custodial staff at the *Planet*, the bartender at Dooley's, and a U.S. Senator," Lois said. To their disbelieving looks, she added, "For once I cleared someone's reputation instead of exposing a scandal - go figure."

One month 'til...

"I feel like I'm back at prom," Ron joked as the groomsmen headed into After Hours Formalwear to buy their tuxedos.

"What's a prom?" Jason asked, tagging along at his uncle's heels.

"A big dance for high school kids," Richard replied. "You have to dress up to impress

your girlfriend."

The little boy looked up at him worriedly. "Is *everything* about growin' up really about girls?"

"Only for Richard," Clark muttered. The remark provoked laughter from the guys and a heavy sigh from Maggie.

Lana waited for the laughter to die down before turning an utterly wicked smile on Richard. "I have no objections to your obsession with women, love," she purred, and had the satisfaction of making Richard blush.

Jason didn't get any of that, so he sighed and rolled his eyes like his mother, provoking still more amusement.

A clerk came up to them quickly, and Lana turned her considerable charm on the young woman. "We've got an April wedding, and this is the groom, the groomsmen, and the ring bearer," she said, indicating Clark, Ron, Jimmy, Maggie, and Jason all following her. Then she elbowed Richard slightly and added, "Plus one friend of the family who needs a new suit for the wedding. Now, for the groom's party, I need something both classic and contemporary. Oh, and notch lapel, because quite frankly I loathe shawl lapels and I'm none too fond of peaked. And the groom will have a vest and necktie instead of a bow tie as well."

Jimmy gave her a quizzical look and whispered under his breath to Ron, "What the heck is she talking about? I didn't know buying a suit was this hard!"

"I have no idea, man, just roll with it," Ron muttered. "She's the designer and the wedding planner, we're just here for the measurements."

Richard, who heard that, snickered. Not that he knew half of what Lana was saying, either. *If this pretty young thing is going to be our customer service person, I bet Olsen leaps out of his skin when she measures his inseam. Poor kid.*

Lana and the young woman were communicating in designer-speak, and the rest just let themselves be carried along bemusedly to be measured and to try on tuxedos. Jason, the smallest and first fitted, quickly got bored and tried to wander off, so Richard kept him company as he browsed among the displays. That meant he did miss the look on Jimmy's face when the girl measured him, and the rest managed not to snicker.

Clark had to actually stand up straight, and the clerk's eyes widened when she saw his height. "Hmm, you're really tall," she said appreciatively. "We do carry big & tall sizes, but I think you might need some tailoring for the best fit. And of course, a tux has to be adjusted for a woman. We offer tailoring..."

"That's fine," Lana interrupted her. "I'll take care of it."

When she finally found *the* tuxedo, none of them could deny it. It had a faint pinstripe that made Clark grin to think of Lois' beloved pin-stripe suit, and in spite of the fact that it was sized for a heavier man, it still hung well. "Perfect," Lana said simply, and the red vest and tie she found matched both it and Lois' chosen color scheme. The rest of the party was easy to suit, and Richard came back just as Lana picked out a suit for him as well. "Hey, don't I even get to look at my clothes anymore?"

"No, darling," Lana replied. "Trust me, you'll like it." Then her gaze dropped to Jason and her eyes widened. "My goodness, Jason, where did you find that hat?"

"Isn't it great?" Jason beamed from under a wide-brimmed black fedora.

"That has got to be the biggest pimp hat I have ever seen in my life," Ron said, and Jimmy looked askance at Clark. After all, the mild-mannered reporter had once worn a gray fedora almost daily... Even Maggie was charmed, Jason's enthusiasm too infectious for her to keep

worrying about taking a long lunch break.

Lana just stared at her husband, unamused. "Richard, sweetheart? *This* is why you don't choose your own clothing anymore."

"What? It's cute on him," Richard said. "Not like I'd wear it or anything..."

She ignored him and turned to look at Jason, currently showing off his hat to Clark. "I used to have one like that, son," Clark was saying. "But I don't think your mother will like it."

"But I like my hat!" Jason said. "It's *cool*."

Richard sighed heavily. "Oh well, we can't upset the bride. She might shoot us all. C'mon, Jason, give me the hat and I'll put it back." Jason pouted, but the moment Lana turned her attention back to the suits, Richard winked at him. At that he surrendered the hat, which Richard handed over to their clerk while mouthing 'Hold this for me' behind his wife's back. The young woman just grinned with amusement.

All that was left was picking out shoes, and with that dispatched the group headed up to the counter. Their salesclerk was smiling even more as she scanned their purchases; she worked on commission, and this represented a substantial amount.

Before anyone else could even open their wallet, Lana had handed the young woman her credit card. "All on the same order, please," Lana said, and with a smile at the boys she added, "I get frequent flier miles."

"Of course, Mrs. ..." The girl glanced at the card for the name, and her eyes went comically wide. "Lang? Lana Lang, as in *L. Lang*? Oh, wow ... what an honor..."

The rest of the group tried not to snort laughter, Richard especially, but Lana just reached across the counter and took the girl's hand gently. "Now, don't," she said gently. "I'm no different from you, except I design the clothes and you sell them. We work in the same industry, remember?"

"Yes, but you're ... you're..." the salesclerk stammered.

"Rich, famous, and gorgeous," Richard supplied, still chuckling.

"And you're biased," Lana said. "Ignore my boy-toy. I'm just another customer."

Richard's indignant squawk at that remark made the girl laugh and regain her composure, and they finished the transaction and headed out of the store with him still grumbling. "You don't have to go and call me your boy-toy in front of every single fangirl you meet, Lana."

"Oh, please, Richard," she sighed. "That *was* how you introduced yourself to my seamstresses, remember?"

"Yeah, but I'm your husband now," he griped, and then stopped suddenly. "See, you just ticked me off so much I forgot something." With that he darted back inside, only to return moments later with Jason's hat.

The little boy, who had cast pleading looks at him while Lana paid for their purchases, had started pouting the moment they left the store. Now he jumped up to hug Richard, who let him wear the hat to their car. Lana groaned in horror. "Oh, no, Richard. No. Lois is going to kill us all."

"Nope, only Richard," Clark said, slapping his former rival on the back and making him stagger only a little. Opening the car door for Jason, who practically bounced into the back seat, he added, "When Lois asks where he got that hat, *you* get to tell her, Richard."

"Fine," he replied, still grinning at Jason's gleeful smile. Richard glanced around to see who was in earshot before continuing. Everyone had somewhere to be in the middle of the day, and Ron and Jimmy were waiting to give Clark a ride back to work. Maggie, the most pressed for time, had simply waved and called goodbye, her squad car already disappearing

out of the lot. Safe enough for what he meant to say. "Hey, Clark. If the girl in there went nuts over Lana, what do you think she would've done if she knew whose inseam she *really* just measured? Faint, probably."

"Richard," Lana sighed, as Clark looked slightly horrified. "I swear to you, anyone who works in the fashion industry for more than a month no longer notices where their hands are on you. It's really not sexy when you've done it forty times before your first coffee break, and every single man claims he wants his trousers cut extra deep regardless of whether he actually needs it."

"Oh, I think she'd notice if she knew," Richard said salaciously. "There are days when I'm very glad I'm not you, Clark. The temptation would be terrible ... and besides, I happen to prefer my wife to yours."

"I know, Richard," Clark said, shaking his head. "I remember what you said about having too much fun with my x-ray vision, so for the sake of humanity, I'm glad you're not me. And now I'm going back to work."

Richard got into the car, still chuckling, and Lana swatted his shoulder. "Ow! What?"

"*Why* do you have to be so ... so...?" She trailed off, glaring at him.

"Devilishly handsome?" Richard suggested, and Lana sighed in annoyance.

"Devilish, anyway," she muttered, glancing into the backseat. "Is your seat belt buckled, Jason? Then let's get you back to school so I can tell your dad what I think of him." Richard snickered at that, and Lana gave him a tight-lipped, annoyed smile. "I might even use a few of Lois' driving words."

"Ooooooh!" Jason called out in a singsong voice. "Daddy's in *trouble!*"

Two weeks 'til...

Clark woke with his face buried in Lois' hair, the pair of them still tangled together the way they'd finally fallen asleep last night, lying on their sides like a pair of spoons, the top of Lois' head under his chin.

Last night... He sighed gustily. At the company party - really Perry's birthday party, but no one admitted it - Lois had intimidated Grizzly Lombard into paying up on the bet he'd made years ago with Jimmy. Unfortunately, she did it by dressing very, very provocatively when she went to confront the sportswriter, and Clark had been just as affected as everyone else. She had also had a few drinks, which led him to bring her back to her apartment, and one thing had led to another...

So much for not fooling around before the wedding, he thought. With a slight smiling of remembrance, he amended, *Well, no fooling around past a certain point. We've never stopped riling each other up, it's just that we weren't going to go this far. But then Lois had to come to the office party looking like a million bucks and acting like she owned the heart of every man there...*

No, it's not her fault. I started it. And she even tried to remind me that we'd said we wouldn't until we were married. But she looked so tempting and I wanted her so much - wanted to remind her and myself who she belongs to after that nonsense with Lombard - and it's been three months since we... In her sleep, Lois cuddled back against him with a soft groan, and Clark just chuckled at himself. *I may have failed to prove that true love waits ... but oh, what a failure.*

On that note, he had to get out of bed before he wound up breaking their promise *again*. Her warm, soft curves pressed against him and inspired tempting ideas. Gently, he tried to

disengage from her, which made Lois whimper in her sleep and try to cling to his arm around her waist. Clark tried to be careful, but in the end, Lois wound up practically falling over onto her face.

That woke her up. "Where'r you goin'?" she muttered, her eyes only half open and her hair falling forward over her face as she sat up to stare at him.

"Lois," he sighed, starting to get dressed. "I can't stay. We said..."

"Yeah, we said, but we broke that pretty well last night," Lois grumbled. "Three times, as I remember. Heck of a way to break in the new apartment." That made her smile wickedly, but the serious look on his face brought her back to the topic at hand. "Look, Kal-El, the only time I get *good* sleep is when you're here with me. C'mon, it's only two more weeks, and I *miss* you."

"Lois..."

That gentle tone seemed to irritate her, and Lois huffed at him, falling backward onto the bed and crossing her arms. "Fine. Go, then."

"Don't," he said, sitting beside her and resting his hand on her shoulder. "Lois, please don't. You know how I feel about this. I mean, I fully intended to marry you the first time around, and look what happened..."

"That was before we sent out two hundred invitations," Lois snapped. "It's a fact now - we've already got the license, I'm *not* going to turn up pregnant, and your mom can damn well get over it if you're worried about *her* being disappointed! This is supposed to be *our* apartment, this is where the famous interview began, and this is where *we* began. And all of the history here just makes me miss you more." Under her breath, she added, "Now I remember why I sold the damn thing - there are too many memories of you, and not enough *you*."

Ah, yes. That had been another reason why he couldn't make himself hold back last night - this apartment. This was where he'd daydreamed of revealing his identity, and this was where he had sometimes, in the middle of the lonely night, imagined finally making love with her.

"Lois, listen," he said quietly. "It's none of those reasons. The whole reason I wanted to wait until we're married was out of respect for the relationship itself. What we have together ... it's something special. And I wanted it to *stay* special."

She looked up at him, her brow knitting slightly. "I think I get what you're saying," Lois murmured, and then her hazel eyes filled with that look of determination that he knew so well. "If that's what's bothering you, then, I've got the cure. Finish getting dressed; we're going out."

With that vague pronouncement, Lois got out of bed and headed for the shower. Clark could only watch her, perplexed. What on earth did she have in mind?

One week 'til...

Lois woke up with a groan, her head throbbing and her mouth dry. She could smell strong coffee somewhere nearby, and she blearily raised her head from the pillow to peer around. This wasn't her bedroom ... but there was coffee on the table beside her, and she sipped it gratefully.

Memories began to trickle back in. Last night had been the bachelorette party - that explained why she was waking up on someone else's sofa. She vaguely remembered drinking wine with dinner at the very upscale restaurant, and then Loueen and Lucy had gone home sober in deference to their children. The rest of the women, however, had gone out on the town - and that somehow included *Lana*, Lois remembered with a worried frown. "God, how much did I drink?" she groaned.

"Enough to kill a horse," Maggie Sawyer's voice came from somewhere behind her. "Is it safe to get near you, or are you still gonna snarl and try to smack me?"

"I'm awake," Lois grumbled, shoving her ruffled hair back from her forehead. "God. Why did I let you guys talk me into this? *Why?*"

"One last wild night out with the girls, and *I* didn't talk you into it, Tobie and Cat did," Maggie replied, coming further into the room. She looked at Lois critically and then shook her head with a sigh. "You look like hell, Lois."

"Bite me, Sawyer," Lois growled, sipping the coffee.

"Be glad I was there," the lieutenant sighed, sitting down on the chair opposite Lois. "I was the only one halfway-sober enough to make sure you and the rest of the boozers got some hydration before you went to sleep. Your head would be twice as bad if I hadn't."

Lois vaguely remembered whining as she was forced to drink an entire quart of some sports drink. "Yeah, you were also the one who said I couldn't go back to my apartment," she replied. "Which is why I've got this knot in my shoulder from sleeping on your sofa."

"I'm not having you get sick in your sleep and choke to death a week before your wedding, Lois," Maggie said seriously. "We see it all the time. I wasn't going to leave you alone to sleep it off. If anything happened, you would've been glad to be here."

I think Kal-El would've flown to my rescue if anything drastic happened, Lois thought, but she merely yawned and shuddered at the taste in her mouth. "Thanks, Maggie," she said. "I'm sorry you got elected to be the responsible one last night..."

"Well, I think Lana had planned to stay sober and keep an eye on everyone," Maggie told her, "but Tobie bought her a Long Island Iced Tea and didn't tell her what was in it. From what I gathered afterward, Lana decided she liked them and bought herself three more. She was totally smashed by the end of the night - you and I had to practically carry her up to her hotel room."

Lois sat up all the way at that. "Is she okay? Lana's not a drinker..."

"She'll be fine," Maggie reassured her. "Probably about as hung over as you are, but basically okay. If your ex ever finds out it was *Tobie* who got her started, though, he'll never forgive her."

"Richard will get over it," Lois said. "Nobody held a gun to Lana's head and made her drink. It's high time she got a chance to kick up her heels, anyway." She yawned again and grimaced. "Ugh. Maggie, do you have some mouthwash or something? Yuck."

The lieutenant chuckled. "Go take a shower, Lois. It'll clear your head and rinse off the cigarettes-and-spilled-beer perfume you're wearing. There's a travel toothbrush on the sink you can use, and Listerine in the medicine cabinet. I haven't woken Tobie yet, so you'll have hot water."

"Thanks," Lois replied, smiling for the first time that morning. "I owe you, Mags."

"You've been in debt to me for years," Sawyer replied. "And if you don't quit calling me that I'm gonna pitch you out the front door without a shower, *or* the rest of your coffee."

"*That* would be police brutality," Lois joked weakly. "Seriously, though. Thank you for looking out for all of us. I don't think anyone expected to get as drunk as we all did, and I'm glad you were around to keep us off the front page of someone else's newspaper."

Maggie grinned. "Any time," she said. "Besides, getting to watch the four of you sing karaoke - badly - was worth the trouble."

"Oh, *God*," Lois groaned. "I thought that was a nightmare!"

"Nope, it was real. Including 'Stand by Your Man' and other hilarious classics," Maggie

laughed. "Anyway, scram. I've got to leave for work; you're a lucky sucker for having two weeks off. I'm gonna wake Tobie for I head out, so she'll probably drink the rest of the coffee by the time you get out."

"I'll take another cup into the shower with me if I have to," Lois replied, arching an eyebrow. *Thank God, Clark has the twins at his place. I'm just going to go home and sleep this off. Oh, my head - I haven't been this bad off since college.*

"See you at five for final fittings," Maggie said, still amused. "Altering the freakin' tux is taking almost as long as making the bridesmaids' dresses from scratch."

"Well, if you could show up for more than half an hour at a time," Lois teased. "The rest of us have been subjected to tailoring torture for a couple hours at a stretch, and the dresses were started before you guys bought the tuxedos."

"Speaking of clothes," Maggie added, "your stuff's on the back of that chair, freshly laundered. I know, I ought to run a halfway house for drunken reporters. Now go on, stop talking and get showered - some of us have jobs to go to."

"I didn't *want* the week off," Lois replied testily. "Perry made me take the time."

"Hey, he's giving you away at the wedding; that makes him an official father figure. So he can do that," Maggie shot back.

Left without a suitable retort, Lois just rolled her eyes and gathered up her clothes. "This is gonna be a *long* day," she muttered under her breath. "As if the last two months haven't been..."

Promises to Keep

The day before...

Patrolman Murray, coming off-shift after delivering evidence to the S.C.U. offices, lingered around the precinct for a few moments. He made small talk with the detectives, discussed a few cases, and paused for coffee on his way out. As was his habit, he parted the blinds and peered out into the parking lot before heading back to his cruiser. Getting surprised once by the drunk, angry brother of a man he'd just arrested had left him with a lasting caution.

What he saw today, however, was no cause for worry. Quite the contrary; the young cop grinned at the view. Detective Kurland, also coming off shift, saw him and said casually, "See something funny?"

"Grand slam in the parking lot," Murray replied, never shifting his gaze.

"What's a grand slam?" Kurland asked.

"It's a hunting term," the younger man told him. "When you bag one of each subspecies - like a whitetail, a mule deer, and a blacktail."

"You tryin' to say we have deer in the parking lot?" Kurland gave him a dubious look.

"No, but there's a blonde, a brunette, a redhead, and a girl with black hair, all leaning up against the same car," Murray said, peering out for a better look. "Nice. I hope they like men in uniform..."

Shaking his head, Kurland parted the blinds next to Murray and took a look. He, however, wasn't pleased. "You rookie, those are *reporters*," he snapped. "Shit, that's Tobie Raines from the *Daily Star*, Lois Lane from the *Planet*, Cat Grant from WGBS News, and ... well, I dunno who the redhead is, but I don't like her choice of company. Hey! Anybody know why we've got a media invasion in the parking lot?"

One of the older officers, Lieutenant Dan Turpin, laughed at both of them. "Raines, Lane, and Grant? They're not here for a story. Hold on, boys." With another chuckle, he turned and yelled down the corridor, "Sawyer! Your entourage is here!"

"They're here for *Sawyer*?" Murray said. He glanced back outside, looking at the lineup in disbelief. "You mean Maggie Sawyer? She's..."

"*Lieutenant Sawyer*, boy," Turpin scolded him. "Hey, Mags! The natives are restless!"

"Tell them to hold on a minute," Maggie's voice floated out to them from somewhere in the back of the office. "I'm doing paperwork."

"Goddamn forms in triplicate," Turpin muttered companionably. He looked at the two younger officers, grinned, and winked. Raising his voice, he called back to Maggie, "You want me to invite 'em in for coffee while they wait?"

"Hell no!" she yelled back. "Reporters are like stray cats - give 'em coffee and they never go away. I already made that mistake once."

"Twice," Turpin retorted. "Lane's got clearance to use the shooting gallery, thanks to you."

"Would you rather Lois be running loose *knowing* how to shoot and in good practice, or just throwing lead around like any other civilian who's watched too many bad cop movies?" Maggie asked, coming up the hallway. "Dan, I'm out of here - we're already gonna be late to the rehearsal."

"Yeah, and you're off tomorrow for Lois' wedding, unless something big goes down - in which case the bride'll postpone it herself to chase the story anyway." Turpin chuckled again and clapped Maggie on the shoulder. "Go on, get out while you can. I just never figured you for a bridesmaid."

"Who said I was a bridesmaid?" Maggie asked him, and gave him one of her rare smiles. "I'm one of the groomsmen."

That startled a laugh out of Dan, and Maggie turned to go. Murray stopped her at the door. "Um, Lieutenant? Ma'am? Mind if I shake your hand?"

"Not at all, Patrolman?" Maggie said, doing so with a mystified air. "Mind if I ask why, though?"

"Hoping some of your luck will rub off?" he said apologetically.

She gave him her best level, steely-eyed cop glare, wondering if he was about to make some crude sexist remark. When the rookie just looked abashed instead of sneering, she relented; he meant no offense. "Trust me, that crowd is more trouble than it's worth most times," Maggie told him. "You gentlemen take care; Dan, see you day after tomorrow."

With that she was out the door and heading toward the car, a dark green Mercedes she didn't recognize. To her surprise, she saw Lana sitting outside with them; then again, no one at the precinct would've known who the designer was. Probably thought she was another reporter. "All right, I'm gonna have to ask you lot to move on," Maggie said in her sternest voice. "You're disturbing the peace and possibly inciting a riot amongst the single male officers."

That prompted an amused grin from Lois, pulling herself up from her leaning position against the Mercedes. "Well, *that's* a line I've never heard before," she drawled sarcastically as Maggie reached the car.

"So arrest us," Tobie teased. "I saw somebody peeking out the window; did they think we were about to storm them with questions?"

"No, but one rookie thought he was gonna come out here and try to pick all of you up," Maggie said.

That brought a round of derisive laughter from the three reporters. Lois pushed her sunglasses up as she grinned even wider. "Oh, someone overestimates his appeal. Especially if you told him who we were."

"Dan called you all my entourage," Maggie said with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Then the kid wanted to shake my hand in case having a bunch of women follow you around is contagious or something. Poor boy, I still don't think he gets it..."

"Not from us, he's not," Tobie laughed nastily. "*Your* entourage wouldn't do him any good. Me and two married women..."

That brought Lois' hazel eyes over to Tobie sharply. "Wait just a minute, there, Raines. One married woman and one engaged woman. I'm not married *yet*."

"Close enough," Tobie said. "If you *try* to skip out on this one, your wedding planner there will probably tie you to a handcart and let Perry *roll* you down the aisle."

"I wouldn't have to," Lana said. "Martha certainly would, though."

Seeing an opportunity to harass the news anchor, Tobie said, "Well, at least the rookie's skills aren't *totally* botched. There's always Cat, who lives up to her name."

"I do have a boyfriend, you know," Cat said loftily.

"Who is it this week?" Tobie asked her, feigning innocence while Lois snickered and Maggie tried not to.

Lana cleared her throat quietly. "Ladies? We're going to be late to the rehearsal as it is." Over the past four months, she'd gotten to know Lois' circle of friends well enough to realize that if they got started with sarcastic comebacks, they'd never stop.

"Let Lois drive," Maggie suggested. "She'll get us there faster."

"Are you sure?" Tobie asked, looking from Lois to Lana dubiously.

"Why not?" Maggie said, shrugging. "I'm off duty."

That little addition seemed rather cryptic to Lana ... right up until the moment Lois got behind the wheel, revved the Mercedes' diesel engine, and smiled a slow, evil smile. But by then, it was too late - Lana had already agreed to let Lois drive and handed over her keys.

Arriving at the Centennial Hotel, Lana was the first out of the car once they slipped into the parking space, resisting the urge to bolt indoors. "What's wrong, cheerleader?" Lois asked her merrily.

"I will *never* ride in a car with you again," Lana said. "*Never*. I'll baby-sit your daughter's insane shirt-diving ferret for a year before I get in a car you're driving. And under absolutely *no* circumstances *including* the end of the world as we know it will I ever let you drive *my* car. Heck, I'll let Tobie take me out drinking before I do *that* again! You are the most reckless, lead-footed..."

The reporter shook her head, eyes skyward, as she slid out from behind the wheel. "Why is it that all you people from Smallville, with the exception of one kid, are a bunch of light-weights scared to *drive* a car?"

"That's not driving, that's completely reckless..." Lana began.

Tobie overrode her. "Look, I didn't mean to get you drunk," she explained. "I'm sorry, all right? Besides, I'm not the one who went back to the bar and ordered *three more* freakin' Long Island Iced Teas!"

"You should've told me what was in them," Lana reminded her, but without rancor. "Gin, rum, tequila, *and* vodka? Do I look like I drink any of the above on a regular basis?"

"You're married to Richard," Tobie replied. "That'd drive anyone to drink."

Lana glared, but Lois hit her fellow reporter in the shoulder. "Tobie, shut up! You know how I feel about that topic," she snapped. "Some of us are rather fond of Richard. Do you remember what I told you about him? Hmm? Remember what I said to you the first time you met him - it still applies."

"Someday I'm going to ask you what that was," Lana said, noting the embarrassed expression on Tobie's face with interest. "I'm just glad we did the bachelorette party the week before, not the day before. *Lois* was hung over the next morning, and I can't imagine how horrible that would be tomorrow."

"It was my fault," Maggie said as she got out of the backseat, slipping on her sunglasses. "I was supposed to be staying sober enough to keep an eye on all of you so no one ended up in the hospital or in jail."

Remembering that morning, Lois had to groan. "Yeah, well, from what I can recall, we three didn't exactly help you much in that arena. *Who* dared me to do tequila shots? And *why* did I agree to it?"

"Tobie dared you," Cat said. "And you did it because you left your good sense three vodka sours behind."

"Maggie, I'm not trying to assign blame," Lana told the policewoman gently as they headed to the door, ignoring Tobie and Cat sniping at each other in their wake. "If anyone's at fault, it's me. I didn't *ask* what was in the drink - I thought it was like hard lemonade, just with iced tea instead - and I *never* should've gone back for three of *anything*. We have a saying back home: if you can't run with the big dogs, stay under the porch. And I definitely should've stayed under the porch."

"I don't know about dogs," Tobie said, leaving Cat and Lois alone for the moment. She patted Lana's shoulder with a grin, and continued, "But you're welcome to run with this gang of crazy bitches any time."

"Thank you," Lana replied warmly. "Still, next time I'll stick to something non-alcoholic for the sake of my own sanity. Lois, my keys, please? I'm sure my poor car is traumatized after that..."

"It's a freakin' E320 with a V-6 engine," Lois complained, tossing the keys to her. "That's how it's *meant* to be driven! It ought to be illegal to drive it like someone's grandma's Buick. *Jeez.*"

"Right," Lana said, shaking her head. She'd never wanted to know what it felt like to drive seventy miles an hour on surface streets. "Shall we, ladies? I believe everyone else is already here... Lois, I need you for a few minutes for the final fitting on that dress."

That stopped Lois in mid-stride just outside the entrance. Sighing, she rolled her head back to stare at the ceiling of the garage. *Not again...* There had been several fittings over the last month and no matter how glorious the dress had turned out, she was just about over the poking and prodding. The look on her face was all too akin to her twins' faces when they were told they had to clean their room. Even the tone of her voice was the same, that plea for mercy. "Do I have to? I've got a doctor's note..."

"I thought we were done with final fittings," Tobie groaned. "Is it just Lois, or are we all gonna be subjected to tailor torture?"

"I didn't hear you complaining when we were all lounging around in our underwear, Tobie," Cat teased.

"Yeah, well, why would I?" the *Star* reporter replied. Maggie just sighed heavily, rolling her eyes as she held the door for all of them.

"For the record, Lois is the only one getting 'tailor torture' this afternoon," Lana said. "The rest of you just get to rehearse the wedding until I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"Wedding advice from the woman who got married barefoot on the beach in the Bahamas," Tobie shot back. "Hey, that's got a nice little alliterative ring to it..."

"The *second* wedding," Lana corrected. "For the first I had a big church wedding with all the usual trappings. *Far* worse than this."

Slowly, the reality of how many things were left to do and how much of it revolved around her was closing in. Lois was the last one through the door, dragging her feet again. It was starting to feel too real, too close... "Is it *really* too late to elope?" she muttered.

"The caterer and the band have already been paid, so yes," Lana replied, catching the reporter's shoulder. "Come on, it's not so bad. At least you got Pachelbel's *Canon in D major* instead of '*Here Comes the Bride.*' I *hate* that piece of music, personally, but my mom..."

That effectively cancelled out any jitters that were creeping up on her. "Any song with the alternative lyrics 'Here comes the bride, big fat and wide,' is *not* a good thing," Lois commented sourly, the expression on her face and the tone of her voice making the bridesmaids snicker. "My cousin Eric had seen *Sixteen Candles* on DVD recently and kept singing it all through Lucy's rehearsal. I'll have classical, thanks."

"And I'll completely support you in that," Lana replied, one hand in the middle of the reporter's back to get her moving again.

Lois sighed and stepped forward, remembering how that little debate with her mother had gone. "Thank God, I have *someone* to back me up."

They didn't even make it all the way across the lobby before the daily round of crises

began. Kay, looking as if she wished she'd never gotten involved in this wedding, hurried up to Lana with a notebook in hand. "You want the bad news or the worse news?" were the first words out of her assistant's mouth.

"Both." Now it was the redhead's turn to sigh, still heading for the ballroom with Lois being marched before her. "And I'll go on record as saying that *I'm* starting to wish you eloped, Lois."

Kay laughed shortly before listing the current issues. "First off, the florist screwed up the flowers - some of the roses were pink instead of red. I got that one handled, I think, but if they don't pull through on the correction we might have to run out to another florist and pick up some red roses and hope no one notices that the professional arrangements were tinkered with. Next, the caterer is freaking out because they lost the check."

"They *what*?" Lana asked in clear amazement. Lois' expression said more than words ever could.

"Lost the check," Kay replied, shaking her head slightly. "They know they *received* it, and they know they didn't *cash* it, but they lost it somewhere in the shop and now they're totally bouncing off the walls."

Lois just stood there with crossed arms, her brows knitting. She could feel herself growing annoyed, but she had promised Lana that she'd leave the person-to-person issues to the redhead. Lois had enough stress just going through with the event; she was the wedding planner. Lana had said she could handle it.

Right. More like, 'I can't have you going medieval on the staff before I get you married off, you heathen', Lois thought with a grin. Nevertheless, she weighed in with, "I'd imagine. What kind of idiot loses a check that amount?"

Just then, she heard her thought confirmed out loud. "Thank God Lana's handling this," Cat muttered softly. "At least *she* has a personal assistant to keep track of everything. And less of a tendency to cuss people out for being stupid. Can you imagine *Lois* doing all this herself?"

The mere thought provoked a snort of amusement from Tobie. "They would've eloped. Seriously, look who we're talking about here. We both know Lois wouldn't put up with this herself; she'd bail in a heartbeat and say to hell with the moms and their fancy-schmancy wedding."

"Oh, dear," Lana was meanwhile groaning to Kay, ignoring the whispered conversation behind her. "Remind me who paid the caterer?"

"The mother of the groom," Kay said. "And speaking of moms, that's the best news of all. Mrs. Lane just called a few minutes ago. Her car blew a tire - and I mean it blew out the whole sidewall. She said she ran over something, she and Lucy are fine, but it's going to take at least half an hour for Triple-A to get to where she is. More like forty-five minutes to an hour, in this traffic. They're not that far from here, though."

Hearing that, it was Lois' turn to groan. Closing her eyes in irritation, she threw her hands up, muttering, "Figures. I just told her to take it to the dealership to get it checked, but *no*. She wanted to wait until *after* the wedding. And it blows the day before. *God, Mother...*"

Lana came to a decision in seconds. "Fine." Opening her purse, she took out her car keys and wallet, and handed both to her assistant. "This is what we'll do. Kay, take my car and go meet Ella and Lucy. If you don't mind, I'd like you to let them drive the Mercedes back while you wait for Triple-A."

"No problem," Kay said, trying to hide a smile at the scowl on Lois' face. "And?"

Tobie had crossed her arms, watching Kay closely. "Wish I had somebody to run around

following my orders," she whispered under her breath.

Finding an outlet for her exasperation, Lois couldn't let it pass by. "They'd quit and file sexual harassment in a week," Lois snarked from where she stood, unable to resist letting them know she heard them this time. "This is why you'll never make editor, Raines. Tradition holds that every editor makes a pass at their secretary at some point, and you'd have to go one step farther to prove you're better than the boys."

"I *am* better than the boys," Tobie said drolly, looking bored. "And I don't *want* management. That's only for people too old and too lazy to report."

"So you keep telling us. Probably so *much* better that you'd drag your poor secretary off to the supply closet," Lois returned. Now thoroughly distracted from the current crisis by this line of discussion, she walked over to confront her with a smirk. "And you know what? You can *bite me* about management - I didn't really get much *choice* in the matter!"

Before Lois had a chance to think about her choice of words, Cat was on her. "Oh, speaking of supply closets, you mean like *you* dragged a recently-appointed International editor off to the supply closet last year?" the news anchor interjected sweetly.

"Hey!" Lois shouted, only now realizing how she had set herself up. "I think you're misinformed, *as usual*, Ms. Grant. I was already *in* the supply closet legitimately; he came in to find me and, well, it was barely more than a kiss no matter *what* you heard. And if you know about it, it was likely you heard plenty. Besides, I'm marrying him - what more do you want?"

"Wait a sec," Cat replied, eyes gleaming, "isn't that what Perry White said about Loueen? And now your boss has a baby on the way..." Lois just glared, unable to make a snappy comeback to that.

"After that, run by the caterer's and pay them with my debit card," Lana was saying to Kay. She was aware that Lois had stepped away, could hear the whispering behind her but couldn't make out the words, and on the whole she preferred it that way. "My PIN is 5784. I'll tell Martha to put a stop payment on the check she wrote to the caterer's, and she can pay me the amount. Oh, and while you're out, stop by an ATM and pull some cash for tips - I think one of the empty company lockbags is in the trunk of my car anyway, so you can use that to carry the cash. About three hundred ought to do it."

"Sure thing," Kay replied, grinning. "I'll get right on that, boss."

"You know I hate that," Lana scolded as Kay went to carry out orders. "And *don't* get a speeding ticket in my car!"

"C'mon, it'll burn the carbon out!" Kay called jokingly.

"Lois already did that on the way here. The car - and I - will never be the same," Lana replied, getting a laugh from her assistant. Then she turned to the reporters and one policewoman following at her heels. "All right, you ladies. You get a reprieve from rehearsal until Ella gets here. Lois, come on, let's do the final fitting. You look like you lost a pound or two."

That pulled Lois right out of her joking with the other girls. "Bull," Lois said, looking affronted at that and then a little guilty. "You *cannot* tell that by looking." It always happened when she was worried. And, with the big day drawing nearer and nearer, her stress levels were creeping up as well.

Lana didn't argue with her, just shaking her head slightly. She turned back to head into the ballroom, and nearly ran into Richard. The rest of the bridal party filed past them as Lana gave him a quick hug. "Hello, darling."

"Hi," he said, stealing a kiss. "Not that I'm complaining, but you *do* realize you just gave

your assistant your money and your car, right? I would've gladly gone and gotten Ella and Lucy."

The redhead just chuckled and caught his lapels gently. "Did it ever occur to you that I might want you here?" she purred, and kissed him again lingeringly. "C'mon, I've got to do Lois' final fitting and see what the decorators have been up to since I left to pick up the girls..."

This was becoming a very familiar sight whenever this particular pair of newlyweds was around. It had taken some time to get used to it, for the slight feeling of wounded jealousy to fade; both Lana and Richard had been chagrined any time they thought Lois had seen it. Now, four months later, she could only be happy for them. Especially Richard. But that didn't mean she didn't heckle them about it. Watching the two of them with an affectionate shake of her head, Lois rolled her eyes at Cat and Tobie and said in a raised voice, "Oh, for the love of God, here they go again... Quick, someone pass me the insulin."

And they were getting pretty good at ignoring her. Sliding her arm around his waist, Lana nudged Richard toward the ballroom. He draped his arm around her shoulders - she happened to be the perfect height for them to walk like this - and they walked into the ballroom together.

Chaos reigned, as expected. With the wedding so close, everyone was trying to manage the last-minute adjustments to the ballroom itself; the flower arrangements Kay had mentioned, the seating, the placement of the musicians, the positioning of the aisle itself. And this wasn't even going into the garden outside, which would play host to the reception. The mere thought of all of the things that could go wrong roared up in Lois while she tried, with little success, to fight it back. And then she heard the sound of running feet and giggling voices nearby.

She had known that Richard was bringing Ron and Clark from the office, her fiancé being allowed to work until the day of the wedding. The reminder set Lois' teeth on edge, but knowing that they would have the two weeks following this to themselves did a bit more for her morale. The boys had also picked up the twins from school, and they were currently chasing each other around the huge space, Jason in his Official Ring-Bearer t-shirt and Kala proudly wearing her Flower Girl tracksuit. Ron and Clark were supposed to be outside somewhere, setting up *those* decorations for tomorrow, although most of the reception decorating would be done the morning of the wedding. *Tomorrow*, Lois thought, biting her lip.

She forced her attention back to the present, determined to take this moment by moment. Watching Jason and Kala dodge adults gleefully, their mother sighed. All things considered, the two of them had been remarkably well-behaved throughout the last few weeks. And really, could she blame them for their excitement? Every effort had been made to make the twins a part of this event, up to and including a unity candle for both the adults and the children.

Just then, Jason nearly collided with the florist and Lois was forced to put an end to their little game. "All right, enough, you two," Lois called, crossing the grandly-decorated room to her little balls of energy. "Me and Daddy already told you that you had to behave. No running. C'mere, you two. I swear it's like I adopted you from the zoo or something..."

"Can Captain Jack be in the wedding?" Kala asked breathlessly as she ran up to her mother and jumped into her arms for a hug. "Betcha they make *tuc'cedas* for ferrets!"

"Gazeera too!" Jason called, latching on to Lois' leg. For a moment, Lois staggered at the onslaught of twin before she righted herself. Thank God they hadn't decided that they both wanted to be held in her arms at once.

If the mere notion of the upcoming wedding made her queasy, this just made it worse. "Hell no, no animal mascots of the apocalypse at the wedding," Lois said, kissing Kala's cheek

before letting her slide down and kissing Jason on top of his head. Just as the two of them began to fuss about calling their pets that, Lois stopped and seemed to think about it seriously for a moment. "No, wait. Now that I think about it, sure, Kala. I bet everyone would love it if I threw the weasel into the crowd instead of the bouquet. And instead of tossing the garter, Clark could toss the lizard."

Both twins crossed their arms and frowned up at her, mirroring the stern position that Kal-El used when scolding their mother. So used to them mimicking her, Lois had to laugh at the sight of Kala and Jason both in the 'Annoyed Superman' pose. "Mommy! Don' be mean to Cap'n Jack!" Kala pouted.

Lois just snickered, then caught sight of the person to blame for those godforsaken beasts being in her life in the first place... "Perry! You know one of these days I'm gonna throttle you for buying my kids *wild freakin' animals* as pets!"

"What now?" the older man grouched as he came toward her, one arm around Loueen's quite expanded waist. "Did that little bitty lizard nip you again? I swear, Lois, you used to be a tough-as-nails reporter, but the last few months I've had more whine from you than Napa Valley produces annually."

Lois growled incoherently, but not even that could mask her obvious affection. "You realize Loueen saved your life, right, old man? If she hadn't slipped up and caught pregnant, I wouldn't feel the least bit guilty about strangling you with your own tie. Now the kids want their pets in the wedding. Thanks a freakin' lot."

"Slip up, hell," Perry retorted, tousling Jason's hair and kissing Kala's cheek. "She *planned* this. Didn't you, you scheming minx?"

"You love it, you crusty old sonofagun," Loueen teased right back. "Lois, you should've seen him with the baby name book the other night - it was actually cute."

"Woman, I've never been cute in my life," Perry protested just a little too much.

"Sure, Chief, you were born with a cigar in your mouth and a scowl on your face, and your first words were, 'You call this a maternity ward?' Riiiiight," Lois snarked, one hand on her hip as she grinned at him skeptically.

"Shut up, soon-to-be Mrs. Kent," Perry growled.

"Mrs. *Lane-Kent*, thank you very much," Lois shot back heatedly, that left eyebrow arching.

Before she and Perry could really get into their usual round of acidic banter, Lana caught her elbow lightly. "Perry, Loueen, thank you both for being here," she said smoothly. "Unfortunately, we can't start the rehearsal yet. Ella and Lucy aren't here; they were having car trouble. Kay's on her way to get them, but until then, I need to kidnap Lois for a few minutes. May I?"

"Sure," Perry said with a genuinely fond smile for his niece. "Stab her with a pin for me, will you? Might let out some of the grouchiness."

Loueen just rolled her eyes. "Oh dear God. If we don't stop them they'll grouse at each other all day. Lois, scram."

"Do I *have* to?" Lois grumbled as Lana led her away, the twins tagging along.

Lana noticed that Richard was trying to unobtrusively follow them as well. Trying to sneak a glimpse of the dress, which so far they'd managed to keep all the men from seeing. "Hey, Jason, sweetheart? Why don't you and Richard go check on the caterers for the rehearsal dinner for me?" She gave Richard her most charming smile, and added, "If you could, love, make sure the guest book and the commemorative silver platter are up front. Oh,

and check on the place cards..."

"Hey, I thought we eloped so I didn't have to deal with all of this," Richard said.

"No, we eloped because you didn't want to give me the chance to run away to Italy again," Lana replied. "Besides, *you* got married without having to worry about all these details. The least you can do is help Clark and Lois - especially considering his other obligations?"

With a grin, Lois added, "Forget it, flyboy. That dress is staying top secret until tomorrow afternoon. Don't make me call security. "

Sighing, he admitted defeat. "C'mon, Jason. Help your poor Daddy Richard get through this madness." With hugs and kisses for their mom and Lana, he gladly went with him.

"Nosy devil, isn't he?" Lana commented, all three of them watching the boys go. "All right, Lois, come on. Looks like the coast is clear. Soonest begun, soonest done."

They hurried toward what was normally a small conference room, which had been commandeered into the bridal room because it connected to the larger space. Kala had kept hold of her mother's hand, grinning; only the girls were allowed to see the dress before the actual wedding, and she had been absolutely arrogant about the privilege. "Can I wear *my* dress?" she pleaded. "It's so pretty."

"It is very pretty, but not half so much as the little girl who's going to wear it tomorrow," Lana told her. "Wait one more day, sweetheart. We want it to be a surprise, remember?"

"I think Daddy's gonna like Mommy's dress," Kala whispered. "But I think he's gonna like the first one best."

"He'd better," Lois muttered, while Lana chuckled. It had been Kay who absolutely *insisted* that Lois have two dresses - the first and only L. Lang original bridal gown would *not* be worn to an outdoor reception. So a second gown had been purchased and altered, something slightly more in line with the mothers' expectations. On one thing, though, Lois utterly refused to compromise: the reception gown was also ivory, not white.

They were headed for the makeshift bridal room and found the bridesmaids already there. "Figured you might need a lookout," Cat said. "The boys have been trying awfully hard to see the dress, haven't they?"

"Thank you," Lana said as she shepherded Lois and Kala inside. Cat, Tobie, and Maggie followed them in, the *Star* reporter leaning against the door protectively. "Clark's been behaving, but Richard acts as though we have the Ark of the Covenant in here or something."

"It's driving him nuts that his wife designed a dress for his ex, and he hasn't seen it," Maggie told her. "These reporters can't stand a secret. They'll risk their lives to find out whatever you tell them they're not allowed to know."

"Amen," Lois, Cat, and Tobie all said at once. Lois gave a snort of laughter, and then caught Lana's meaningful glance as the redhead carefully unzipped the garment bag containing The Dress. Just seeing it brought the jitters back, although she refused to let the others begin to guess. "All right! Sheesh. Lana, it's got a corset back - it's meant to be adjusted. Can't we leave this 'til tomorrow?"

"No," Lana said. "Lois, it's not that bad. C'mon, hurry up."

As the raven-haired reporter sighed theatrically and started unbuttoning her blouse, Tobie grinned evilly and said, "Hey, I've got a couple twenties in my purse. Want me to wave 'em at you so you feel more at home?"

The ensuing conversation got Lois out of the dress suit she'd been wearing and into the bridal gown quickly, but even Cat was slightly disturbed by the amount of profanity she knew was only averted for Kala's sake. "All right, lighten up, you two," she said at last. "Miss

Munchkin there is gonna start thinking that Mommy and Aunt Tobie aren't really friends."

"And this innocent Midwestern girl might lose her hearing," Lana said, adjusting the long, lacy skirt. She moved on to the corset-style back of the dress and commented, "It's a wonder your children haven't acquired a taste for soap."

Kala, who had dismissed the irritated grumbling as business as usual between the rival reporters, piped up to remark, "Both our daddies say not to use Mommy's driving words. *Ever*. 'Cause they're really, *really* bad an' they know we're not bad kids so we shouldn't use bad words."

"Thanks for the news-flash, Kal," Lois retorted, casting her daughter a sardonic look as she tried to stand ram-rod straight.

Cat grinned and hugged Kala as she misapprehended her mother's comment and preened. Lois just snorted and shook her head as the blonde woman praised her child. "Sounds perfectly logical to me. Smart girl, listening to your Daddy - both of them. Clark never swears, does he?"

"Never has," Lana responded, not looking up from her task. "With the possible exception of damnation. Neither do I, as a matter of fact, and you'll be shocked to learn it's possible to make yourself understood without cursing."

"That look on Lois' face means she's resisting the urge to bellow something that would set your tender little Kansas ears on fire," Tobie said drolly, as Kala scuffled her feet and looked reproachfully at her mother. "Some of us just feel the need to blow off steam every now and then, and swearing is better than shooting your boss."

"Amen. You have no idea how often that's saved Perry's life." Lois heaved a sigh, and that little bit of relaxation made it clear that she had, indeed, lost a pound or two.

She might as well have committed treason from the look the designer gave her. "Didn't I tell you not to lose weight?" Lana scolded, lacing up the back of the wedding dress more tightly. "Lois, you fret too much."

It was clear from the uncomfortable look on her face that Lois was aware that she had done it, too. Extreme stress always had that effect on her and this week definitely went into the 'stressful' category. "Did you just say 'fret' in a sentence that didn't involve guitars?" Lois snarked back, changing the topic. "What the heck is up with Smallville, anyway? Does the local TV station only run shows from the fifties or something? Next thing you know you'll be trying to get me to swap recipes or something."

"Only if I want my kitchen to explode," Lana told her, grinning. "Although I'd gladly pick up that pumpkin cheesecake recipe if you're willing to share..."

"Bite me, cheerleader," Lois retorted.

"You do realize that your only insult is incredibly outdated, right?"

The bridesmaids all snickered at the pair of them. At first, Tobie and Cat hadn't quite believed that Lois and Lana were really friends. It sounded like a strange way to befriend someone, by marrying their ex, but it seemed to have worked for the two women. Mutual respect and admiration were very much evident, and unlike the rest of Lois' friendships, the relationship didn't border on combative. Even Tobie and Cat, her long-term friends, had to admit that Lois' competitiveness and keenly sarcastic sense of humor could be a little abrasive at times. But Lana seemed able to shrug off Lois' sharp remarks without needing to respond in kind, and Lois in turn curbed her tongue around the redhead.

Not that Lois didn't pull her chain, as well. It was just that she didn't do it so hard. Making a face, she shot back, "Well excuse me if I can't give a proper comeback to Ms. Oh-So-Virtuous-and-Pure. *You* could've worn a white dress..."

"And did," Lana returned the volley easily, grinning as she pulled the laces tight. "In spite of the fact that I kissed *your* husband back in high school."

"Yeah, and we all know I kissed your husband, too. For the last three years." Her tone was superior until they saw her flinch, Lana putting a little more pressure on the laces. "Hey, I need to be able to breathe."

"You need this dress not to fall off halfway through the ceremony. And the funny thing is, Richard's never complained. Imagine that." Everyone saw Lana's little grin and Lois' unamused glare over her shoulder at her. "Okay, take a deep breath for me."

"He's not stupid enough to tell *you* that," Lois muttered under her breath to save face, obeying with a heavy sigh. The dress fit just tightly enough through the body, but was not uncomfortable. "Are we done here?"

Lana walked around her, eyeing the dress critically. "Thankfully we won't have to take in any of the seams. But you listen to me - if you lose another *ounce* I will be very disappointed in you."

"Okay, *mother*," Lois said, glaring at her. "What am I, six?"

"I am!" Kala said, beaming.

"And amazingly, you're better behaved than your mom," Lana said, ruffling Kala's hair lightly. "Okay, hair down. Let's get an idea of how the final look of it will be, even if we don't have the veil with us at the moment."

"Hey Lois, were you that cute at that age?" Cat asked, sharing a conspiratorial wink with Kala.

"Almost," Lois replied as she pulled her hair out of the topknot it had been in, shaking the length of it out so it fell around her shoulders. Catching the wistful look of awe her daughter was eyeing the dress with, she smiled fondly at Kala. *One of my little miracles*, she thought, looking at that small face. "But I think my little girl there far exceeds any record of cuteness I ever set. Love you, baby."

That caught Kala's attention, making those hazel eyes meet hers. "Love you, Mommy." The huge grin that broke over those rosebud lips made Lois momentarily forget about all of this wedding nonsense.

Until suddenly the bridal room door came open, almost knocking Tobie over. She whirled around and grabbed the frame, holding the door nearly shut and also blocking the view of whoever was outside. "Who the hell... Oh. It's *you*."

"Hi," Richard said. "I'm looking for my wife - the decorators have a question for her. Mind getting out of the doorway, Raines?"

Lois groaned, rolling her eyes. Just when they were almost done... "I knew it was too good to be true. Richard, for the love of God, you can wait five minutes! We're *busy* in here!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Tobie purred in her most saccharine voice. "The bridal room is girls-only ... Dick. Don't worry; we'll be done in a second." The way she smiled at him was merely an excuse to bare her teeth; Tobie was the only one of Lois' friends of whom Richard had never approved, and the feeling was definitely mutual.

"Stop it! Stop it right now! Tobie! Richard! *It still applies!*" Lois yelled.

The *Star* reporter got her meaning instantly, giving a disgusted sigh, but it took Richard a second longer to remember. "Oh for the love of... Lois, c'mon. No way."

"*You're* saying no way?" Tobie hissed, wrinkling her nose. "Sick."

"Then knock it off, both of you," Lois retorted. "This is my wedding rehearsal and I don't want you two stirring each other up. So can it."

Richard gave a long-suffering sigh. "Hey, Lana - when you get done here, come back to the Land of the Sane, please? We miss you."

"Goodbye, Richard," Lois called in her most firm tone, staring at the half-open door in vexation. "Your wife will be out in a minute and so will we. Close it, Tobie."

Tobie shut the door on him, muttering, "You don't even have a summer home in Sane, you psychotic flyboy."

Lana just arched an eyebrow at her as she helped Lois out of the bridal gown. "That *is* my husband you're talking about, Ms. Raines."

"Oh crap, you used my last name, watch me tremble," Tobie replied sarcastically. "Look, I've never gotten along with the guy - and *he* started it."

"Yes, but *you* could stop it," Lana pointed out, keeping her voice neutral. "You bait him, Tobie. I've watched you do it."

"Yeah, well..." Tobie began, only to get cut off by Lois.

"Lana, forget it. It's no use. There's a sure-fire cure for what ails them both," the *Planet* reporter said, with a glare for Tobie. "And they both know what it is and that I have no problems *reminding* them what it is."

"In his dreams," Tobie snapped. "And my nightmares."

"Enough, girls," Maggie finally said. "Lana's got a point, Tobe. You do egg him on, and if you wanted all this nonsense to stop, you could make that happen. And quite frankly, I'd be delighted if you would stop harassing him."

"Okay, *fine*," Tobie said grudgingly. "I'll try to be civil to him. For your sake, Mags. If it was just Lois I'd drive him nuts just to tick her off."

Now it was Kala's turn to utter that long-suffering sigh. Those little arms were crossed again when Lois looked over that her child. "How come everybody's mean to Daddy Richard?" Kala asked her mother worriedly, her lower lip pouting just a bit.

But it was Lana who answered her. "Aunt Tobie and Daddy Richard have way too much in common for their own good," she said, ignoring Tobie's indignant squawk and the knowing chuckles from everyone else. "With that, everyone, it's time to go out there and rehearse. If Ella and Lucy aren't here yet, we can at least get started blocking things out."

That was met by groans from everyone but Kala, who cheered and started looking around for her little flower basket.

"Someone get her a top hat and a whip," Richard muttered, rearranging the rows of chairs. "I didn't know I was marrying the ringmaster of this circus..."

"I need a little more clearance down the central aisle," Lana called out. "Thank you, love. Clark, hon, if you're finished with the podium, give Richard a hand, please?"

"You're welcome," Richard called back, and gave Clark a long-suffering look over his shoulder. "I wouldn't do this for anyone else, you know that?"

"Maybe I'll autograph your plane," Clark joked gently, grinning as he set the chairs in the next row back a little farther. "Seriously, though. Thank you."

"Yeah, well, I *still* haven't gotten a look at that damn dress," Richard grouched. "No one else has, either, and the girls won't say anything except how awesome it is. And none of the groomsmen has any idea - except Maggie, and she won't tell, either." Giving Clark a speculative look, he added, "I know you haven't stolen a look ... that doesn't bother you?"

"Not at all," Clark said. "I'll see it tomorrow. In the meantime, I trust Lana's sense of style. Besides, I'm marrying *Lois*, not the dress. She may never wear it again, but I'll see her

every day."

Richard just shook his head. "How the heck can you be so *calm*? I mean, you're patient about the dress, you don't mind being ordered around by my wife and the two moms, and you even get along with *Raines*. It's like you're some kind of Zen god or something."

"Technically, none of the Buddhist faiths have gods," Clark informed him. When Richard gave him a speculative look, Clark just smiled. "I studied all the major religions - it was part of the world culture lessons from my father. I couldn't limit myself to understanding just *one* society, even if I do spend most of my time here. This *planet* is my home, not just this country or this city."

"Heavy," Richard remarked. "Next time I write an article, I'm gonna call you a citizen of the world."

"Lois did it eight years ago, shortly after we met. May 11th, page four, third paragraph. That was the fifth interview."

Richard had to stop and stand up, staring at Clark. "Perfect recall, too?"

"Yes."

"Does *she* know that?"

"Yes."

"And she still argues with you, knowing you can quote her chapter and verse if she contradicts herself?"

Clark leaned on one of the chairs, chuckling to himself softly. "Nothing stops Lois from something she wants to do. It's one of the reasons why I love her."

Richard just stared at him for a few moments longer, shaking his head slowly. "Man, if you weren't my hero before, you are now. I *know* Lois, and in some of her moods, wanting to marry her qualifies you for sainthood."

"Boys, a little less chatting, a little more chair-arranging, please," Lana called out. "I don't know about you two, but I'd like to get done so we can all have dinner..."

They both looked at her and shared an amused laugh, redoubling their efforts on the seating. Perry and Ron came to lend a hand, and even the bridesmaids got involved, complaining the entire time. The only person missing was the bride; Lois had taken the twins out for a walk. They hadn't seen Clark on his way in to help with the interior decorations, and he was starting to miss his fiancée.

Once the aisle was widened to Lana's specifications, everyone got set up to run through the rehearsal one last time. "I'll just go find Lois and the kids," Clark said quickly, shoving his glasses up. He hurried off to the garden to look for them before anyone could stop him, wanting a moment with his family before they all got swept up in the mad rush to get things done.

His family. At last, he and Lois and the twins were finally here; tomorrow they would be a family in fact as well as in the heart. He had legally adopted the twins, at last silencing that little bit of doubt caused by the blank lines on their birth certificates, and both children had elected to take his name - though they didn't exactly give up being Lanes, either. Kala was hyphenating like her mother, and Jason had taken Lane as his middle name. With tomorrow's ceremony, they would officially be the Lane-Kents, and it wouldn't be a moment too soon for Clark.

He found the three of them just outside the doors, Lois sitting on one of the benches in the garden while Kala and Jason chased each other, blowing bubbles with stolen wedding favors. Clark smiled to watch them, remembering the discussion a couple of weeks ago. Lois

had blanched when she'd seen the cost of environmentally-friendly dissolvable rice, but Lana had insisted that they would *not* have a bunch of exploding pigeons to herald their wedding. Lois had completely lost it, laughing so hard at the image that Lana had to thump her on the back, and they had gone with a mixture of bubbles in bell-shaped containers and the bird-safe rice.

Clark must've chuckled out loud, because Lois turned to look at him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She had been a little shy the last few days, the enormous reality of all this crashing down on her, and he half expected her to be coy now. But Lois saw the grin on his face and smiled in return, the bright and open smile she so rarely wore. Seeing that, Clark glanced around for witnesses, and finding none, he rushed to her side and swept her into his arms.

Lois yelped, clutching his neck as he kissed her, and both twins laughed as Daddy spun Mommy around.

Let No Man Put Asunder

The morning of...

Richard unlocked Lois' apartment door early in the morning and headed inside, whispering to Lana, "Be quiet. If she's not up yet, I don't want to wake her."

"She's your ex, not a hibernating bear," Lana whispered back. "Besides, *someone* has to wake her if we're going to get her and Kala to the spa in time."

"Just let me put coffee on and get the kids up," Richard replied, moving easily through the apartment. They'd been over often enough to visit, and were planning to stay here for a week to watch the twins while Lois and Clark went on their honeymoon, so both of them were comfortable in the apartment.

While Richard started brewing coffee, Lana glanced through the latest pictures the twins had made and hung on the refrigerator. Jason seemed quite the portraitist - she quickly recognized several drawings of Lois and Clark. And then, to her immense and unexpected joy, she saw a drawing titled 'My Family' which included *everyone*. Both grandmothers, the Troupes, and even she and Richard were represented. "Richard, look," she whispered, nudging him.

He grinned just as broadly as she had, and then opened the fridge. "Damn, she's got Panera bagels," he said to himself. "And that hazelnut spread..."

"Leave that alone," Lana hissed at him. "We're not here to raid her fridge, Richard!"

"Speak for yourself," he replied. "Besides, who says I'm taking these bagels for me? I'm just making the twins breakfast."

"Yeah, right," Lana sighed. "Richard, shoo. Go make her coffee and I'll fix the bagels for everyone - you included, you shameless mooch."

He rolled his eyes but set about making three cups of coffee. Not without a final mutter of protest. "We're house-sitting and twins-sitting for a week; the least she owes me is a bagel."

"Hush," Lana scolded him as she spread the hazelnut cream on five bagels. "We both leaped at the chance to have the twins all to ourselves for an entire week, and you know you love the chance to be back in Metropolis again."

"You're right," Richard conceded, "as usual. Besides, you realize that that balcony out there is the one where the first Superman interview took place? It should be on the national register of historic places."

Lana took Lois' coffee and her own from him, picking up two bagels for herself and the reporter. "Sometimes you are *such* a fanboy, love," she commented, kissing him. "I'm going to get Lois."

"Seriously, put the coffee down and leave," Richard told her. "Lois is *dangerous* in the morning. Let me get the twins up and sic them on her."

"So she can yell at them instead of you? Let me handle it." Shaking her head at his silliness, Lana headed into Lois' bedroom, expertly balancing the bagels and coffee.

"I love you," Richard called after her as he went in the opposite direction to wake Jason and Kala. "I'll miss you - I'll write you a great obituary."

Rolling her eyes, the redhead went into the darkened room, where Lois was merely a lump under the covers. "Good morning, Lois," Lana said gently.

Lois growled in her sleep, moving around just a bit, which gave Lana pause for a moment. This might actually be as dangerous as everyone claimed... *Oh, please. Lois isn't half as vicious as she lets people think she is. You know perfectly well that most of it is a front.*

Besides, she wouldn't harm anyone who brings her coffee. That's a proven fact,

according to Clark. With that comforting thought, Lana sat down on the edge of the bed, placing the bagels on the nightstand, and held Lois' coffee mug just in front of her while sipping from her own. "Come on, it's time to wake up," she said soothingly. "You have a busy day ahead of you. Coffee and breakfast await."

For a long moment, Lois didn't move or acknowledge her presence. Lana sipped coffee patiently, barely able to hear Richard at the other end of the house coaxing the twins out of bed. She knew Jason was sometimes as difficult to wake up as his mother, but Kala at least ought to be excited to start the day...

While she wasn't looking, Lois reached out from under the covers and took the coffee mug from her, sipping the hot black liquid before she even sat up fully. Lana had to chuckle at her; that wavy hair was currently a mass of tangles, and those keen hazel eyes were mere slits in her scowling expression, pausing in inhaling her coffee just long enough to let out an enormous yawn. Giving a low groan in the back of her as she stretched slightly, she happened to glance at the redhead's face. "Wha's so funny?" Lois grumbled.

Lana fought to hide her smile. "Your hair is an absolute wreck," she told her, unable to conceal all of her amusement. "Come here, let me see if I can do something with it. Breakfast is on the table there - we broke into the bagels. Sorry."

"That's why I bought 'em," Lois replied, a trifle less grouchy as she sighed and turned her back to Lana in defeat. If it was as bad as she said, the designer might have better luck than she would. "Having bagels keeps Richard out of the éclairs in the freezer. You might wanna learn that bait 'n' switch trick, living with him. He'll steal your food."

Lana chuckled as she started gently untangling Lois' hair. "I'll remember that."

In Jason's bedroom, Richard had disentangled the twins from each other and gotten them to at least sit up. They now had separate bedrooms, though they were still sleeping in the same bed, simply alternating rooms. Dr. Marrin said that was fine for now, and their comfort and security was of primary importance. He had turned out to be utterly professional where the twins were concerned, and luckily Jason and Kala hadn't spilled the truth about their father.

It almost garnered him a little respect from Richard - and considering that he'd seen the blackmail photos, it took a *lot* to respect Kinky Briefcase. Richard smirked a little as Jason hopped out of bed, his sandy hair still tousled. He was *still* wearing the Godzilla pajamas he'd gotten for Christmas. Kala saw her brother getting up, and in an effort to beat him she dove out of bed and raced past him.

Richard blinked in amazement; she was *fast*. She'd gone by like a greyhound, her feet thumping loudly on the carpeted floor, and Jason just glared at her with a surly expression. "Girls," he grumbled, scrubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"C'mon, tiger," Richard said, patting his son's shoulder. "Up and at 'em. Today's the wedding, remember?"

The transformation that came over the little boy's face was amazing. From grumpy and sleepy he went directly to wide-eyed and excited. "I get to carry the rings today!"

"Exactly. And you have to look your best, so hop to it." Richard shepherded him into the bathroom, where Kala was already standing on the footstool and brushing her teeth. She gave Richard a wide, foamy grin when he tousled her hair.

Fortunately, the twins were fairly quick about their morning routine once they were out of bed. Richard had them ready in less than half an hour - although *not* dressed in their wedding finery. They would change into those clothes at the last minute to keep them from getting dirty.

Once Jason and Kala were seated on the patio, eating bagels and drinking juice, Richard went to check on Lana. He hadn't heard any snarling from Lois or calls for help from Lana, but that didn't necessarily mean that his ex hadn't killed his wife silently.

To his surprise, Lois actually looked halfway awake, drinking her coffee like a normal person instead of hunching over the mug like an angry hawk. Wonder of wonders, Lana was actually sitting there untangling her hair - which Lois generally wouldn't let anyone do. The slightest pull on one of those knots would make her yelp and curse and swat at the offender. As it was, Lois actually looked slightly blissed out, leaning into it. Richard shook his head in disbelief. "The kids are up," he said conversationally. "Lana, I don't know what kind of horse-whisperer mojo you have goin' on here, but you should seriously take this act on the road. That right there is the equivalent of sticking your head in a lion's mouth."

Well, obviously it hadn't blissed her out *that* much. Although by the sparks flaring in those eyes, that woke her up just a bit more. "Shuddup, you big jerk. You come over here, I dare you."

"Hush, Lois, just ignore him," Lana soothed, then gave her husband a disapproving look. "Richard, it's not difficult. All you have to do is keep quiet until she gets some caffeine in her system."

"Yeah, well, I've tried that, and I got coffee burns all down my leg."

"Because you bonked me in the nose, jackass. Not only that, I didn't get to sleep until three in the freakin' morning! And then I didn't even get the damn coffee because you spilled it when I hit you!" Lois snapped, glaring at him savagely.

He remembered why she'd been awake that late ... unfortunately, he tended to wake refreshed after a long night, while Lois woke up grumpy. "Hey, I was trying to hasten your evolution from primordial ooze to human," he said, grinning slightly.

"Richard, hush," Lana scolded. She didn't see Lois' evilly amused little smile - any comeback Richard wanted to make was stifled by the presence of his wife. "You're just making her worse."

"Fine," he said, taking a step closer. "I'll take Jason out - the groomsmen are having brunch together. You ladies have fun at the spa, and watch Kala; she's hyper this morning."

"I wonder who stirred her up and made her that way?" Lana asked rhetorically. "Go on, darling. I'll see you at the Centennial. Love you."

Daring Lois' proximity to kiss his wife, he replied with a grin. "Love you more."

Once he was gone, Lana managed to coax Lois the rest of the way awake despite her muttering. A second cup of coffee had helped this state of affairs along. She got Kala dressed in her flower girl tracksuit again, since the little girl insisted on it, and when Lois came out of the shower Lana ambushed her with the hooded shirt the bridesmaids had purchased. "Lana, come on! No," Lois protested vehemently, trying not to notice the redhead's reflection in the mirror as she brushed her hair. "You are not getting me in that thing; I *told* Cat she was a sick woman for even buying it. It is *not happening*, Lang. Get over it."

"Lois, it won't hurt you to wear it for *one morning*," Lana said cajolingly. "Please? All the bridesmaids are wearing their matching shirts for the trip to the spa."

The reporter crossed her arms and glared. "Okay, first of all, I don't wear hoodies. Secondly, it says *The Future Mrs. Kent* on the back, and I'm going to *Lane-Kent*, thank you very much. Third, it's got a great big fake engagement ring attached to one shoulder. Don't I have enough humiliation coming up later today?"

Her own reply was a pleading gaze from sea-green eyes ... and then a wounded look from

the pair of hazel ones that mirrored her own. She hadn't even known Kala was in the room. "You don't wanna match with me, Mommy?" Kala asked.

And now there were two sets of disappointed eyes gazing back at her over her shoulder. *Just give in this once. It'll be easier...* Lois groaned, covering her face with her hands. "Why did you have to gang up on me?" she whispered. "Oh, *fine*. It's only for one morning..."

The rest of the bridal party, including both mothers, met them at the spa, and everyone exclaimed over Lois' shirt. Tobie, Cat, and Lucy got to wear red shirts that had the word *Bridesmaid* written across the front in glitter, and someone had found similar black shirts reading *Mother of the Bride* and *Mother of the Groom* for Ella and Martha. Even Kala strutted around proudly in her white tracksuit that proclaimed, in bright pink lettering, her flower girl status.

This trip was Lana's treat; in spite of Lois' insistence that the dress and her wedding planner services were gift enough, Lana had quietly booked them all for facials and manicures the morning of the wedding. Including Kala - the dark-haired little girl quickly became the darling of the spa staff with her excited antics. When everyone was getting clay mask facials, which they had to leave on for fifteen minutes, one of the spa attendants came by with a tray of cucumber slices and put one on each closed eyelid. Kala watched this with her head cocked and a frown line beginning to appear between her dark brows, until she could contain her curiosity no longer and asked Ella, "How come you're puttin' *food* on your *face*? That's gross!"

Ella laughed. "It keeps your eyes from looking puffy," she explained. "Gets rid of dark circles, too."

Kala scowled, looking from her Nana to her mother. "Puttin' pickles on your eyes does that?"

"Yup," Lucy confirmed, as the rest of the girls snickered.

Still frowning at her mother, Kala leaned forward and whispered, "Nana, Mommy draws dark circles around her eyes. On purpose."

"That's eyeliner, sweetie, and it's something different," Ella said. The other women tried to contain their laughter, Lucy failing conspicuously, as she continued, "The cucumbers - not pickles, pickles are what cucumbers turn into - help get rid of those nasty gray baggy spots *under* your eyes. Which you don't have, because you're young."

"Oh," Kala replied thoughtfully. "It's still weird."

"Feels nice, though," Cat told her. "Give it a try, honey."

Kala obeyed, looking suspiciously up at the attendant who placed two thin slices of cucumber over her eyes. The rest of the group realized she evidently approved when they heard her snoring a few minutes later.

Lois had been uncharacteristically silent throughout this, and Ella reached out with a mother's intuition to take her hand. She could feel the tension vibrating in her oldest daughter, and squeezed her hand gently. "Lois, it's going to be just fine," she whispered.

"Are you still stressing, Lane?" Tobie called, softening her usual harsh banter. "C'mon, it's a wedding, not a root canal. Some of us actually envy you."

"Yeah, and you're marrying *Clark*," Cat added. "He's like the sweetest guy on the face of the earth. Quite a catch; relax and take pride in it."

Lois couldn't help chuckling a little bitterly. What did *they* know, anyway? She wasn't just marrying Clark; she was marrying *Superman*, too. This was her wedding with Kal-El, and every time the two of them had tried to be together in the past, something had gone catastrophically wrong. She'd found out his identity, and the Zod Squad arrived to turn their

world upside down. They'd almost patched up their relationship while searching for the twins last year, and then *she* had gotten kidnapped and Luthor almost killed *both* of them. What would it be this time? An asteroid? His father's dire pronouncements? Or maybe that old standby of a first-time groom, cold feet? It could be as simple as that - why would he, with everything he was and could be, want to settle for her? Lois Lane, nasty-tempered over-caffeinated journalist, a woman with a permanent chip on her shoulder...

Ella was holding her left hand, and now someone else took her right. A work-worn hand, lightly callused, the joints thickened by arthritis, but the skin papery-soft as only an older person's could be. *Martha*. "I am so very glad that you and my son are getting married," she said quietly. "I'm delighted that he has found such deep and profound love, and I'm positively ecstatic that I can officially welcome you and the twins into the family. But you know, Lois, you and Jason and Kala have been family all along. This ceremony is simply that - a formality recognizing what everyone already knows to be true."

Silence met her words, until Ella asked softly, "Are you sure you don't want to run for Congress, Martha? You've got quite the gift for oratory there."

"Just saying what needs to be said," Martha replied, and Lois squeezed her hand. It didn't quite banish her jitters, but it drove them far enough away for her to relax a little.

Coming back from brunch, the groomsmen headed into the ballroom. Richard was the first one through the doors, and he came to an abrupt halt, staring around him. "Wow," Jimmy said softly behind him.

The room, which they had last seen after rehearsals yesterday evening, had been transformed overnight by Lana's team of decorators. The boys had helped set up the chairs, but the black frames and white seat cushions looked a little stark without further decoration. Now, with black candelabras holding white candles at the end of every third row and a fine red ribbon run along the backs of the chairs, the seating was elegant. The carpet running down the aisle was white, with a narrow tracery of black and silver along the edges, and the windows had been hung with sheer white draperies that bore the same pattern. They had been pulled back with wide, silver-edged red ribbon to let in the afternoon light; the ceremony would be conducted without artificial lighting, just the candles and the waning sun.

Lois wanted a secular wedding, so the various accessories were on a table up on the dais at the front instead of on an altar. Lana had covered it with two tablecloths, a black-bordered red one underneath and a lace-edged white one on top. The red and black only showed through the openings in the lace, which Richard particularly admired as he wandered in.

The flowers looked lovely, too - someone had fixed the mix-up over the roses, and the white lilies used sparingly in arrangements lent a traditional touch. In fact, the entire room spoke of Lana's particular style, grounded in classical sensibilities but with a more streamlined, modern approach. No frilly ruffles here, but plenty of rich fabric neatly gathered into soft pleats. The silver and crystal champagne flutes and serving set were ornamented with scrollwork, but even that was clean and elegant.

No wonder Lois let Lana take over the planning, Richard thought. *This is all very much to Lois' taste. Who would've thought that two women so different would have such similar styles?*

"This is pretty wicked," Jimmy remarked, looking over the guestbook and the silver platter for the guests to engrave. "Lois and Clark went all out, didn't they?"

"Funniest thing was everyone arguing over who got to pay for what," Ron told him. "Both moms wanted to foot the bill, Clark and Lois fought over how much they were allowed to

contribute, and Lana donated her time, her employees' time, and the dress. I'm sure she picked up a couple of other things, too, though no one knows exactly what. I've seen people try to get *out* of paying for stuff before, but this is a new one on me."

"Lois and I didn't *fight*," Clark corrected mildly. "We just didn't want either of our mothers spending so much on this wedding. But if I'm totally honest, I'm kind of glad she and I didn't have to pay for it all ourselves."

"Geez, I'd have gone broke," Jimmy said. "I can't imagine what it all cost."

"Wait 'til you see the reception stuff," Richard told him. "Eight kinds of dessert treats, not to mention the hors d'œuvres... Hey, wait a sec. I wonder if the caterers have been here yet."

The groomsmen all paused, the thoughts of sweet and savory snacks filling their minds. Richard grinned and ruffled Jason's hair as the boy looked up at him in confusion. "Hey, sport, how 'bout we all go make sure the reception food tastes good?"

"Lois will be furious," Clark warned.

"No, she'll just kill you all," Maggie said. "Especially if you get to it before she does. You *do* know there's cheesecake involved, right?"

"You know, once in my life I'd like to have a bite of cheesecake before Lois gets to it," Richard replied.

"Not on her wedding day," Maggie retorted. "I don't want to have to tell your wife she's a widow. Forget it."

Jason had been looking back and forth between the adults while they talked, but since no one seemed to be heading toward food, he went back to his primary concern of the morning. "Daddy, when can I wear my pimp hat?"

Ron and Jimmy immediately dissolved into laughter, while Clark looked dismayed. "Not yet, Jason," Richard said patiently. "Wait and surprise Mommy right before the wedding."

"You *want* to die, don't you?" Maggie asked. "First you try and steal the desserts, and then you want to 'surprise' Lois with that hat. You ought to have something to live for; you *just* got married a few months ago! Quit trying to get yourself killed by your ex, okay?"

"He'll get away with it," a new voice said, and they all turned to see Kay approaching them. She gave Richard a wry smirk as she continued, "I keep thinking my boss is going to completely lose her cool, but somehow he manages to make her think he's cute and funny."

"I *am* cute and funny," Richard said with his broadest grin. "Not to mention devastatingly handsome and virtually irresistible."

"Stick with cute," Kay told him, laughing. "It's keeping you alive. Anyway, to answer your question, the caterers haven't set up yet. But they *do* have a tray of samples set aside for anyone who helps with putting the reception tables in the garden, and since you all have a while before you have to get dressed..."

Jason looked up at her with wide, pleading eyes. "Miss Kay, does this mean I can have some cheesecake?"

"Maybe," Kay chuckled softly. Trying to distract him, she asked, "Where's your sister? I've never seen you two apart."

He made an absolutely disgusted face. "Gettin' her *hair* done with ev'rybody else. *Girls*. Bleah."

Everyone laughed, Ron patting his nephew on the shoulder. "You'll change your tune one of these days. Girls are kinda fun, when you get older anyway."

"*Kinda*?" Richard said incredulously, the expression on his face priceless. "You have *four* kids, man."

Everyone met up again when the girls got back from the spa that afternoon. All except Lois - she'd been forced to allow a professional to style her hair and do her makeup, and no one wanted the groom to see her before the wedding. So while the mothers and bridesmaids met up with the boys and kept them distracted, Lana hustled Lois off to the bridal room.

No one realized what had happened until Lana had already closed the door to the bridal room. *Then* Richard looked up and sighed in exasperation. "Damn! They did it again! She managed to sneak away *again*. Three months off the job and I'm losing my reporting instincts."

Tobie bit her lip on a sharp retort, while Cat gushed, "Oh, you guys, she looks *so beautiful*. You're going to be so surprised."

"Isn't that what everyone says after you have life-altering plastic surgery following a car wreck?" Richard grouched, more than a little annoyed with himself. "Either that or after you die and the mortician puts makeup on you..."

"*Richard!*" Lucy yelled, and hit him. "Get over yourself! You'll see the dress today. We *promise*."

"And nobody with a y-chromosome gets to see the bride before she walks up the aisle," Tobie added, editing the remark in deference to the children.

No one had yet noticed Kala preening; she had been giving a little bit of very light makeup while her hair was styled, mostly so she wouldn't feel left out. Jason was the first to spot the hint of blush and lip gloss, and he leaned forward, staring. Kala beamed at him, so proud of how adult she looked until he asked, "What's the matter with your *face*?"

The little girl looked as if she'd been slapped. The look of indignant rage that crossed her features came straight from her mother. "You're a stupid *boy!*" Kala yelled, the embarrassment obvious in her voice. "It's *makeup*, dummy-head! It's what grown-up girls wear!"

"But you're not a grownup," Jason protested. "You're just a little kid!"

After feeling like a princess, nearly as pretty as Mommy, this was not what his twin wanted to hear. Kala shrieked angrily and lunged at him, and Clark had to snatch her up by the waist before she revealed her super-speed. "Enough," he said sternly, looking down at the child on his hip.

"But Daddy!" she wailed, lower lip trembling.

"Sweetheart, you look lovely," Clark told her with a proud smile, chucking her under the chin. "Jason's just never seen you in makeup before. Besides, he's a kid too."

That seemed to avert the threatened tears, Kala giving Jason a superior look, as Richard pulled the boy over to him. "We've got to work on your girl skills, son," he teased Jason. "You obviously take after Clark there. It's all right, we have a few years before you start dating."

Jason didn't understand, cocking his head in bemusement, but Clark heard him and looked up. "Um, Richard?"

"Yeah?"

"What exactly are you trying to say about me?" Everyone went silent, watching the two men - everyone except Kala, who was still pouting and glaring at her confused brother as Clark set her down.

Hoping he hadn't taken it as an insult - they both knew what was real and what was an act - Richard grinned apologetically and said, "Well, you're not the most suave guy on the face of the earth, Clark. I mean, not everyone can be *me*."

Clark just looked at him steadily, seeming not to hear the nervous chuckles. "If that's the case, Richard, then how is it *I'm* marrying Lois and you're not?"

"I'm already married," Richard said quickly.

"Yes, but you *were* engaged to Lois. And now she's marrying me - that has to be the ultimate statement in the dating skills department." Only then did he smile broadly, and everyone burst into laughter at Richard's expense.

Tobie, however, particularly appreciated seeing her longtime rival knocked down a peg. She stood on tiptoe to hug Clark and kiss his cheek, snickering, "Thanks."

Clark just shot Richard a very perplexed look over her shoulder, which Richard returned with even more bewilderment.

In the bridal room, Lana checked her watch and breathed a sigh of relief. "We're running a little early - the guests won't arrive for an hour, and all that's really left for us to do is get you dressed."

"Lucky me," Lois said sarcastically, although she was grinning just a bit. "Leave me some breathing room when you lace that thing this time, okay?"

"As much as I can," Lana promised as she unzipped the garment bag that held Lois' dress. "Listen, Lois, do you believe in wedding superstitions?"

"Not really," the reporter replied, sitting down with a sigh. "I wasn't exactly planning on getting married. Ever."

"Well, there's the one about something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue," Lana began.

Beginning to get it, Lois nodded. "Okay, so *that's* why the handkerchief has blue embroidery. Well, that's taken care of."

"The dress is new and Ella's emerald pendant was handed down from your grandmother, so it counts for old. That leaves something borrowed."

Lois gave her an arch look. She had seen that thoughtful expression on Lana's face several times in the last two months. "You're plotting something, cheerleader."

Lana handed her a small jewelry box, and Lois opened it, eager for something to distract her from the impending moment of truth. Inside was a pair of emerald drop earrings, set in silver. While not a perfect match for the new ring and the antique necklace, all three pieces would harmonize well. "I know you wanted to wear the silver filigree earrings I gave you for Christmas, but what do you think of these?"

The expression on Lois' face was answer enough as she looked up at her, shaking her head. What could she possibly say? "Thank you, Lana," she managed quietly, her expression open and honest with affection. "You didn't have to do this. Any of this. You've really gone out of your way on this wedding and I don't think I could make this up to you."

Shrugging one shoulder, the redhead said, "What else would you expect me to do for the sister I never had?"

Unable to help herself, Lois felt her heart constrict. For a moment she was going to reach out and squeeze Lana's hand. *Oh, to hell with it.* Impulsively, Lois reached out and hugged the older woman. Smiling, she murmured again, "Thank you."

The bridesmaids and moms finally left Richard to his humiliation and headed off to the bridal room to help Lois get ready. "Okay, people," Kay told the groom's party. "Time to get dressed. Family members will start arriving in forty-five minutes. Hustle it!"

"You've been working for Lana too long," Richard said, giving her a quick wink before hurrying off to change into his new suit. In spite of having teased Lana about not letting him

pick out his own clothes, he couldn't fault her taste. The dark blue suit fit perfectly, and its color made his eyes stand out.

He was the first one finished, and since Clark was helping Jason get ready, Richard ran out to his car and brought back the black fedora. When Jason walked out of the men's room in his brand-new suit, Richard was waiting for him with it, and the little boy's yelp of delight was audible in the lobby.

That accomplished, Kay drafted Richard to go meet the arriving guests. Ron's family would be here shortly - two of his sisters were looking after the kids while he and Lucy got ready for the wedding. Richard was particularly looking forward to seeing Michelle and Christiana again, and when they were the first ones through the door he greeted them with a broad grin and open arms. "Michelle! Yonnie! Looking lovely as always. I see you brought the herd."

The two young women both laughed as they gave Richard hugs and kisses on the cheek, Michelle carrying her four-month-old namesake. The three older kids also hugged their Uncle Richard, who complimented Nora and Joanna on their dresses and admired Sam's new suit.

Their arrival seemed to be the cue for other friends and family members to start showing up. Perry and Loueen were next, and Richard teased his uncle about actually looking respectable for once. When the older man retorted that *Richard* was hardly one to talk about respectable, Loueen split them up before they could start bantering.

Still chuckling, Richard met the next handful of guests and directed them inside, where Kay seated them. He was just getting the hang of all this when Clark suddenly appeared at his side.

Literally appeared; Richard hadn't seen him walk up, but he felt the draft of super-speed. "I have to go," Clark muttered distractedly.

"Oh, no," Richard said, his heart sinking. "Not now. Not today. C'mon, man, *not today*."

"It's a volcano in Indonesia," Clark replied, his eyes focusing on Richard. "I can't..."

"It's your *wedding*," Richard hissed. "You *know* Lois is scared of something like this happening - the whole reason she's been acting like the tough-as-nails General's Daughter because she's out of her mind with terror. Clark, *no*. You can't leave..."

"Richard, I *have* to." The look of desperation in Clark's eyes made the conflict in his heart apparent. The lives of hundreds, maybe thousands of people, or his marriage to Lois - choosing between the two was never going to be easy. "Tell them I stepped out for a minute. I'll be back as soon as I can." With that he was gone, only the open lobby doors betraying his passage through the room.

"You'd better get your ass back here as fast as you can, or Lois will kill us all," Richard muttered, knowing Clark could hear him. He would've liked to swear pungently and extensively, but the guests started to arrive in earnest, and he had no time to himself. All he could do was hope with all his heart that Clark made it back in time...

"Flyboy just got owned," Tobie told Lois the moment she walked into the bridal room. "Utterly, completely, totally smacked down. By *Clark*."

That got her an incredulous look, and the girls had to tell Lois all about that brief exchange between Richard and Clark. Cat finished the tale by adding, "And then Tobie was so glad to see your ex get one-upped, she went and smooched Clark on the cheek. Thus proving that the apocalypse is at hand."

"Oh, stuff it, Grant," Tobie teased back. "It won't *really* be the end of the world until *you*

stay in a relationship more than six months."

Amidst more sarcastic comments, Lana chivvied Lois out of her clothes and into the bridal gown, with Ella and Martha helping make sure the fabric didn't get wrinkled. Everyone was so busy that they didn't notice how quiet Lois was. For once, the snarky reporter wasn't participating in the good-natured teasing amongst her friends.

At last, with the dress on and properly laced, everyone went silent to admire the full effect. Martha carefully lowered the tiara onto Lois' raven hair, arranging the veil. Ella stepped forward and fastened her mother's emerald necklace around Lois' neck. She paused, looking at her daughter - the oldest, the problem child, the one she never really expected to get married. The one she always worried she hadn't been able to do right by. But here was Lois, radiant in ivory lace, the silver and emeralds gleaming.

"Wow," Tobie said softly, for once without a cynical comment.

"Aw, sis, you look amazing," Lucy added, sniffing a bit.

Ella bit her lip, her eyes glistening. "My little girl," she whispered, touching her cheek. "Oh, Lois, you look stunning."

Lois looked at her mother for a long moment, her expression unreadable, and then the dam broke. Everyone reacted with shock when she burst into tears - a first-time bride was expected to cry at her wedding, but this was *Lois Lane*. She was infamous for doing the unexpected, and very few people knew her romantic side.

Fortunately, Lana had the presence of mind to grab a handful of tissues and hasten to Lois' side. "The rest of you, *out*," she snapped, the first time any of them had ever heard the redhead even slightly raise her voice. When they didn't obey instantly, Lana looked away from Lois to glare at the group of them. "If you all get weepy and sentimental she's just going feel worse. *Go. Now.*"

They filed out, even Lucy and Ella, and Lana tilted Lois' head back and dabbed at her face with the tissues. "It's okay to be nervous," she soothed. "Here, sit down for a minute."

"I'm not nervous," Lois protested weakly, trying to dash the tears from her eyes. "I'm wondering what the hell's wrong with me." But she let Lana coax her into sitting down, and held still while the redhead checked her makeup and blotted her face gently.

"Oh, really?" Lana asked. "What do you mean?"

"Something awful's gonna happen," Lois murmured pessimistically as she stared at the ceiling, unaware that Kal-El was already in Indonesia. "It always does - we *never* win. Every time things start to go good for us, something awful comes along to ruin it all. We got together the first time, and the freakin' Zod Squad came along. After he came back, when we started to get back together, goddamned Lex Luthor almost killed all four of us. Now that we're married, something else is gonna happen..."

"Lois, nothing bad is going to happen," Lana soothed, taking one of her hands. And then, trying to distract her, she teased gently, "Besides, you're not married yet. You still have almost an hour to go."

"I don't mean the..." Wide hazel eyes turned to gaze at her, Lois looking almost frightened, before she gave a self-deprecating little chuckle. "Um ... damn. That was stupid."

Lana sat back and stared at her suspiciously. *What is it with this woman and secrets?* "Um, what? Lois, what have you done now?" At least the reporter wasn't crying.

"Uh... You know the office party? When I got Jimmy's car for him?"

"Richard and I were in Gotham, but we heard about it." Lana crossed her arms and kept on giving Lois her best older-sister stare. "I hear you had the attention of every man in the

place."

"We slipped," Lois said in a tiny voice.

"You what?"

"We *slipped*, all right?" The stress she put on the word brought almost immediate understanding from Lana, who nodded. Lois gave a heartfelt sigh. "Freakin' Smallville values. Anyway, Mr. Morality was beating himself up about the next morning, and we already had the license, so we went to the courthouse..."

"Why you little sneak!" Lana said, half incredulous and half amused. "You mean to tell me you've been married for two weeks? *Lois!*"

"*Well?*" Lois looked thoroughly ashamed of herself, and finally glanced back at Lana. The other woman's expression made her laugh and drop her head in her hands. "Yeah, we've been married for two weeks and not acting like it. He hasn't even been to the apartment since."

"You mean you haven't..."

"No," Lois groaned feelingly, rolling her eyes back. "And it's killing me."

That cracked both of them up so hard that Lois wasn't the only one with tears in her eyes. "Oh, dear God," Lana finally sighed. "That's just priceless."

"Yeah, go ahead and laugh," Lois replied. "I guess this is punishment for jumping the gun."

"Jumping the superhero, more likely," Lana replied, almost offhandedly.

Not faking her shock, Lois gaped at her. "*Lana!*"

That effectively broke both of them into laughter again. When they'd managed to control their snickers, Lana asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah, I think I'm gonna be okay," Lois sighed. "I just... I never planned to be here, you know?"

"I know," Lana said, taking her hand again and squeezing it gently. "Sometimes the best things in life are the ones you didn't plan for and couldn't ever expect. Look at me and Richard. And before you make some snide remark about needing insulin to look at us, I'll remind you that you and Clark are just as adorably romantic."

"Can't argue with you," Lois replied with a rare sweet smile. "We kinda make the phrase 'star-crossed lovers' ridiculously true, don't we?"

"Yes, but you also prove that old saying, 'love conquers all'," Lana reminded her. The reporter could only smile tremulously, the enormity of this day still hanging over her. Having that certificate of marriage was one thing, but it hadn't seemed real until just now, seeing her reflection in the mirror. She looked like the princess her childhood had never let her want to be. And for today only, that was just fine.

As Lois was getting settled down, Jason burst into the room and skidded to a halt. For a moment, he just stared at Lois, and the dumbfounded expression on his face made it clear he didn't recognize his own mother. "M-mommy?" he stammered, and then slowly grinned. "*Wow. Mommy, you look beautiful.*"

Lois chuckled through the last of her sniffles. "Thank you, sweetie," she said, returning the smile. Only then did she take in his appearance, a look of slow-dawning horror on her face... "Lana, *what* is that on my son's head?"

"Uncle Ron says it's my pimp hat!" Jason replied brightly. "He says I gotta walk like this when I wear it..."

His exaggerated strut made both Lois and Lana break down laughing all over again. When she finally caught her breath again, Lois gave one last disapproving look at the hat, and

let out a deep sigh. Gathering her courage, she looked over at Lana with a small grin. "Okay, gang. Let's do this."

Once Upon A Time

Kal-El soared in a tight spiral around the cloud of searing ash and molten rock spewing from the top of the supposedly-dormant volcano. The vortex created by his flight contained the debris, and that was his primary concern at the moment. *Thankfully there's no lava flow*, he thought, adding an extra notch of speed as he rose through the air. Poisonous vapor, chunks of rock, and hot ash were enough to deal with for now; more than enough to wreak havoc on the villages tucked into valleys below the volcano. And, if not contained, the debris could spread on the wind...

Even while he worked to control the volcanic eruption, Kal-El was listening intently to events half a world away. From the sounds of things, nearly all the guests had arrived at the wedding, and Richard was growing frantic. Every few minutes Kal-El heard him mutter something along the lines of "*You'd better get back here in time.*"

I'm trying, the hero thought, gritting his teeth as he flew. Some of the heavier rocks were starting to fall under their own weight, but he couldn't help that. He blew a gust of freezing breath to cool them, so at least they wouldn't start a forest fire wherever they crashed down. *Just let me finish this - I'm hurrying as much as I can. Please, please, don't let Lois find out I'm not there...*

Richard was so wound up in thoughts of potential Lois-caused destruction that he had completely blocked out everything but that and constant reminders under his breath to Clark, in spite of the distance. So wound up, that he didn't even see the groom's mother approach.

"Richard White, where on earth is my son?"

The reporter jumped, stifling a curse. Tilting his head back, he took a deep breath to calm himself. "Martha! Oh, my God. Do you have to do that?!" With a little sigh, he started to explain. "He's ... well, he's in Indonesia."

The incredulous look on the older woman's face almost broke a chuckle from Richard, despite his high-strung state. "*What?*" Martha hissed. "What was he *thinking?*!"

"That erupting volcanoes are bad for people living under them, apparently," Richard groaned. "I don't think he realizes that *Lois* will erupt and rain fire and destruction upon us all if he doesn't make it back in time."

"She won't be the only one," Martha said grimly. "Listen, I'm going to send Ben out to greet guests; you've been at this from the start, I'm sure you need a rest. I'll go let Lana know about Clark..."

Richard glanced worriedly in the direction of the bridal room. "I sent Jason to find her, but he hasn't come back. I have this sinking feeling that Lois saw him in the pimp hat and she's having a tantrum." He actually had the nerve to look guilty.

"The *what?*"

Richard went from guilty to embarrassed in only seconds, remembering who he was talking to. "Uh, this crazy black fedora I got him. Ron named the thing," he explained quickly, moving them both toward ballroom. "Let's do this. I'll go keep the groomsmen distracted if Ben takes over out here."

In moments, Ben was standing in the lobby to greet the guests, and Richard was headed back to make excuses for Clark. He found the three groomsmen hanging around near the side door through which they would enter, Ron and Maggie trying to make Jimmy relax. The photographer clearly felt uneasy in a tux, tugging at the collar and watching the clock. "Guys, I'm not sure I wanna be up there in front in everyone," he said with obvious apprehension. "I'm

gonna screw up somehow, I always do..."

"Relax, kid," Maggie told him. "It's the *groom* who's supposed to freak out, not the groomsmen."

"You know why that whole tradition exists, right?" Richard said, beaming at Jimmy. Maybe this would distract the boy a little. "If the groom gets cold feet, the best man is supposed to marry the bride. Now, since we don't *have* a best man..."

"Already married a Lane," Ron swiftly interjected.

Maggie gave a droll chuckle. "Disqualified."

Jimmy just looked at both of them and then turned to Richard, blushing the same fiery red as his hair. "Uh..."

"Guess that's your job, Olsen," Richard said with a conversational tone, slapping his shoulder affectionately. "Word of advice: take your vitamins. You'll need 'em. Trust me."

The thought was too much for Jimmy, whose brilliant blush suddenly faded to a cheesy pallor. Ron, who knew better than the others just how long Jimmy had carried a torch for Lois, saw his expression and grabbed his shoulders before he could faint. "Easy, man," he said, laughing. "You know Richard's just messing with you. Don't faint on us."

"I'm all right," Jimmy said weakly. "I just... Don't go and spring matrimony on a dedicated bachelor, okay?"

They all laughed dutifully, Maggie shaking her head slightly. "You're a cruel man, Richard White," she said, and turned away from Jimmy and Ron. "C'mere for a sec."

Richard followed her out of earshot of the others; that steady, inquisitive look from ice-blue eyes still unnerved him. Police officer was one of those professions that were never completely off-duty, and the reporter still sometimes felt like he was some kind of suspect around Maggie. "Yes?"

She knew about his hang-ups - a lot of people were nervous around cops - but Maggie was the one of Lois' friends that Richard actually halfway got along with. "You're under arrest for damn nigh giving Olsen a heart attack," she said flatly, then smirked when he actually looked a little frightened. "Seriously. Where the hell is Clark?"

"He had to step outside for a minute," Richard replied with a shrug he hoped looked nonchalant. "Wedding jitters, I guess. It's not every day a guy marries Lois Lane."

"Yeah, and the thought was enough to make Olsen almost pass out," Maggie said. "Kinda scary - glad it's not me. But he *likes* her for the hellion she's always been. Why flake out now?"

"He's a perennial bachelor," Richard explained, trying to come up with a plausible answer off the top of his head. "It's a big change, you know? And then there's the twins to think of, too. Clark's used to taking care of himself, and now overnight he's got a wife and kids. It takes a little adjustment."

She nodded slowly, although it was clear she wasn't convinced. "And you have no freakin' clue where he is right now, do you? Because I know a bullshit story when I hear one."

"Not exactly," he admitted.

"That's what I thought," Maggie sighed, running a hand through her short blonde hair. "Well, Clark's famous for rushing in at the very last minute, so I'm not gonna panic yet. But if you think he won't show, tell me, all right? Someone had better be ready to restrain Lois if he jilts her."

"Oh, he'll show," Richard said firmly, hoping Clark was listening this way. "If he knows what's good for him, he'll be here on time."

Martha's news wasn't exactly heralded with joy. "He's not *here*?" Lana hissed as the two of them stood a few feet from the closed bridal room door, green eyes going wide. "Martha, you've *got* to be kidding."

"I wish I was," the older woman replied, shaking her head. "Something came up and Clark had to step out for a bit - how's Lois?"

"Almost ready," the redhead told her worriedly. *Why now? Oh, of all the times, God, why now?* "She's already had one breakdown; I don't want to be here if he's late. But it's almost time... We have to stall this wedding."

Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, the designer thought quickly. "Okay, this should work. Martha, the ring bearer's pillow is under the table just inside the doors. Go grab it and hide it somewhere. That should keep everyone busy looking for it instead of wondering where Clark is."

Martha hurried off to do that, and Lana took a moment to breathe deeply. "Clark, wherever you are, you'd better hurry back..."

Richard paced just inside the lobby doors, his stomach roiling. Lana had been out five minutes ago to tell him someone had found the ring bearer's pillow; she'd been forced to yank the wires from the speakers to keep the wedding from starting without the groom. And everyone was now looking for Clark. Perry kept saying that the boy had been late to everything in his life, this was no different - but he'd privately whispered to Richard that he hoped Clark did show up. The consensus was that if Clark didn't arrive, Lois would kill him. *And anyone else who gets in her way*, Richard thought, straightening his sleeves for the sixteenth time.

"We've got sound back," Lana said behind him, peering out of the ballroom. "Seen him yet?"

"Not yet," Richard replied, noticing that she had finally changed into the dress she intended to wear during the wedding. *Damn, yellow really suits her.* "How close...?"

"Lois is getting nervous," Lana said, nibbling her lower lip. "We might have to tell her-"

"*No*," Richard said instantly. "She'll bomb the place - it'll be like Godzilla on crack. Whatever you do, don't let Lois find out he's not here!"

"All right, fine," Lana sighed. "I'll go break down in tears if I have to..."

Just as she spoke, the revolving doors in the lobby whirred far faster than they should've, the mechanism letting out a protesting squeal. Clark rushed through, blue eyes glazed in panic. "Thank God," Richard and Lana exclaimed in unison. The redhead continued, "Get ready *now*. I don't know how much longer I can stall Lois."

"C'mon," Richard urged, grabbing Clark's arm and hustling him to the changing room. He unzipped the garment bag holding Clark's tux and handed it over, asking, "Did everything turn out all right?"

"Barely," Clark responded, taking the suit off the hanger. "How's Lois?"

"She doesn't know you weren't here," Richard said. "Weren't you listening...?"

"I was a little busy at the time," Clark said, giving him a look. And then he *blurred*; Richard heard fabric rustling at high speed, and suddenly Clark was dressed except for the tie. "I can't seem to knot one of these at super-speed," Clark muttered, glancing in the mirror as he rapidly knotted the tie.

"Nice trick," Richard said quietly, holding the door open so they could both get to the ballroom. Just outside the doors, he paused. "Hey, Clark?"

"Yes?" In spite of being pressed for time, in spite of having come straight from saving people's lives to one of the most important moments in his own, Clark stopped to meet Richard's gaze and give him his complete attention.

"Congratulations," Richard said, and offered his hand.

Clark took it, and pulled Richard into a hug. "Thank you," he said simply.

Those three words and that gesture would have to stand for a great deal: *congratulations on being a better man than I am; congratulations on finally having your kids officially be yours; congratulations on winning the woman I wanted to marry; thank you for being a father to my children; thank you for letting her go; thank you for being my friend.*

They both stepped back, smiling. "I'm glad it's you," Richard said. "If she *had* to trade up after me, it's gratifying to know she had to go *that* high. Besides, no one else could *survive* marrying her."

Clark laughed and thumped his shoulder affectionately. "And now you can say Superman considers you one of his best friends," he told Richard just before they opened the doors.

Richard beamed at that, but couldn't help asking mischievously, "You nervous?"

"Terrified," Clark responded, staring at the closed doors.

"Good," Richard replied, and Clark gave him a startled frown. "You're supposed to be; it's not a proper wedding if the groom's not scared out of his wits."

Clark managed a laugh at that. "Okay, let's do this."

Lana ducked back into the bridal room only to be immediately confronted by Lois, who had obviously been going to open the door herself. "Where's Clark?" the bride said with a suspicious look. "One minute, everything's fine, then I'm all alone in here. What's happening?"

"Sorry, there was a sound issue," Lana told her calmly, adjusting the chain of Lois' emerald necklace. "This is just too lovely. Lois, calm down; everything *is* fine. Clark's here, you're set, and we should be ready in just a couple of minutes. The boys are getting set up in the other room, and Perry will be along in a moment."

The expression on Lois' face didn't change. She still fully expected some sort of minor disaster on this of all days. "You're completely *sure* Clark's here?" Lois asked warily, arching an eyebrow.

"I just saw him a moment ago, getting ready to change into the tux," Lana replied as she did a last minute check of the dress, immensely grateful that she didn't have to lie.

"Uh-huh." Lois' deadpan tone made it very clear that she remained unconvinced.

"Seriously," Lana told her with a smile, catching her chin. "He's in the changing room right now. I wouldn't lie to you - Lois, I can't lie any better than Clark can. Stop worrying."

The reporter glared at her a moment longer, then sighed. "You've got a point."

Before Lana could say anything else, they heard a sharp knock and the bridal room door opened very slightly. "Lois, you'd better not be naked," Perry grumbled.

An instantaneous grin bloomed over Lois' lips at the sound of that voice. As always, Perry's presence seemed to immediately ground her. "Like you haven't seen most of it," she snarked back, obviously baiting him.

"Not since you were sixteen, and I didn't want to see it then," he retorted from the other side of the door. "*You* were the one who thought running around the house in a long t-shirt was perfectly acceptable. Would've thought Elinore raised you better, but she always says you're a complete heathen anyway."

"I love you too, old man," Lois laughed, while Lana marveled at the way Perry had

managed to alleviate her anxiety so quickly.

"So is it safe to come in here or not?" Perry asked. "It's almost time for your last walk as a free woman. Didja have your final meal? Got any last requests?"

Instead of answering, Lois opened the door and scanned the hallway before stepping out. "It's a wedding, not a death sentence," she quipped, halting in her tracks to wonder if she'd actually *said* that, and expecting a scathing taunt in reply.

Perry was uncharacteristically silent, staring at her. After a moment, he managed to murmur, "My nephew married a damn good designer. That's a helluva dress."

Lana couldn't help laughing. These two simply *couldn't* do anything normal. "I'm going to check on the music," she chuckled. "I'll signal for you two when everything's ready..."

In keeping with Lois' wishes for a secular ceremony, they had found a notary to perform the ceremony. Lori happened to be a friend of Ella's and perfectly willing to preside over the wedding. Just now she was making small talk with the groomsmen. "I've known Lois since she was a little girl," she told Jimmy with a fond smile. "You could say I was part of it all from the beginning. And I'm very proud to be here at the end of one chapter in her life, as well as the beginning of the next."

Clark hurried to the side entrance that would be used by the groom's party, followed by Richard, and all three groomsmen let out loud sighs of relief. Jimmy rushed to hug him, saying, "Man, Richard was telling me I'd have to marry Lois if you didn't show up. I'm too young to die!"

That got a laugh from everyone. "No, I wouldn't miss my own wedding," Clark said, taking his place. "I just hope Lois doesn't decide to, you know..."

"Oh *please*," Maggie groaned. "Seriously. We were all afraid we'd have to tranquilize her if you didn't show. She's come this far, she won't back out now."

"And if she tries, we'll sic Lucy on her," Ron said, grinning.

"Amen," Richard added. "As Lana would say, the caterer's been paid - you can't back out now."

Kay had been in charge of making sure everyone was seated, and now she saw Lana at the doors giving her a thumb's up. Turning to the groomsmen, she whispered, "Places, everyone!"

"Good luck," Richard said before hurrying to his seat in the front row.

Clark drew a deep breath, and Ron patted his shoulder. "It's gonna be okay," he said. "Just relax and pretend it's another rehearsal, only with fancier clothes."

"And a huge crowd," Jimmy whispered, and Ron elbowed him.

"Nah, don't pretend it's a rehearsal," Maggie said. "Richard was making faces at everyone the whole time, remember? We don't need that." The laughter that remark provoked helped ease the tension considerably.

The lights went down, and Clark heard Lana whisper, "One minute," to Richard as she took her seat. He tuned his keen hearing toward the main doors, where the bridal party was getting ready...

"And walk *slowly*," Kay said, as Kala bounced from one foot to the other. At least she'd stopped spinning in circles to make her skirt flare; getting dizzy wasn't fun.

The music began, softly at first, and Jason stood to attention. He actually started toward the door, but Cat caught him. "Hold on, sweetheart," she chuckled. "Candle lighters first, then

bridesmaids, then you and Kala, okay?"

"When does Mommy get to go?" he asked, looking around for her and Uncle Perry.

"Right after you and your sister," Kay replied, checking her watch. "Okay, candle lighters - Sam, Nora. Go ahead. Every third row, skip the ones up at the very front. Take your time, no one's in a hurry."

The oldest two Troupe kids nodded before stepping out into the ballroom. Kay watched them through the barely-opened door, and once they'd lit all the candles the room took on a romantic glow. "Bridesmaids," Kay whispered. "Lucy, go. When she's halfway up, Tobie, you start. Cat, when Tobie's halfway up, your turn."

Everything was proceeding according to plan. When Lucy reached the fifth row, Ron started out from the side entrance and met her precisely at the front of the aisle. She took his arm and they proceeded up onto the dais, taking their places behind the altar. The other two couples would follow in sequence, and while Kay was watching them, Lois and Perry came to the doors.

Kala turned around, and her jaw dropped. She had seen the dress, seen the makeup, and seen the hairstyle, but not altogether. Lois was taking deep breaths, clutching her bouquet as if it was a lifeline, and she managed a smile when she met her daughter's gaze. "Mommy, you look like a princess," Kala whispered.

"Thank you, sweetie," Lois murmured, flashing a bright grin for her children, who were both now watching her.

"Jason, Kala, you're up," Kay whispered, handing him the ring pillow and giving her the flower basket. "Slow and steady, let everyone see how wonderful you look." Beaming, they headed out.

Perry reached up to lower the veil, and Lois looked at him with raw terror in her eyes. "Don't worry," he muttered gruffly. "It's no worse than a root canal ... for the rest of your life."

That made her chuckle slightly, and he took his place beside her, waiting for Kay to open the doors. Without turning to look at her, Perry whispered in the gentle tones most people wouldn't imagine him capable of, "You look beautiful, Lois."

Lois had already linked her arm through his, but she slid her palm down to squeeze his hand. "I love you, too."

Clark felt his heart catch in his throat when the twins started walking up the aisle. Jason bore the rings with great dignity, head up and eyes focused straight ahead ... where the bridesmaids and groomsmen were desperately trying not to laugh at the infamous hat, which he'd somehow managed to wear into the ceremony. Kala walked at his side, keeping to the same stately pace, and scattered handfuls of rose petals along the aisle just the way she'd been coached. *My children*, Clark thought, his vision blurring slightly as he watched. *Finally, absolutely, beyond any shadow of a doubt, they are my children at last.*

The murmurs that the twins' appearance caused suddenly hushed as the room took a collective breath in awe. Clark blinked the burgeoning tears away and focused on the doors, where Lois and Perry stood. The editor looked solemn and distinguished for once, but that wasn't what had silenced all two hundred guests. Clark gasped at the sight of Lois, a thousand thoughts crashing into each other in his mind. *She's so beautiful* was one of the most prominent, followed by *So that's why they were hiding the dress and I can't believe I'm this lucky.*

In the candlelight, draped in ivory lace, with her shoulders bare and her raven hair loose

and wavy beneath the sparkling tiara, Lois looked unearthly, even divine. Absolute silence accompanied her up the aisle, except for the gentle strains of the music. Every one of the guests followed her with their eyes, but Lois looked only at Clark. Their gazes met in spite of the veil and the distance, and he knew she was walking up that aisle for him alone. Her heart was racing, and left to her own devices Lois would've bolted, but her love of him kept her steady.

As the doors opened and she got her first look at the warmly-lit ballroom, Lois' heart seemed to stutter. For a moment, all she could do was gaze around in wonder at the transformation that had overcome the room they had just finished setting up the night before. It had been a beautiful room before, to be sure, but now...

It was only Perry's gentle nudge that got her going again, glancing at him with worried eyes through the veil. Perry only gave a gruff smile and a slight nod. *It's time, Lois.* One more deep breath, one more instant to steady herself, and the bouquet of red rose and white lilies in a death-grip, they stepped forward into the glow of her wedding.

It was like being in a dream; Kala's comment about princesses hadn't felt apt until just now, the moment finally here. All eyes were on her as she and Perry made their way up the aisle to the soaring strains of *Canon in D*, the twins proudly making their way up a dozen steps before them. *This is it, kid. It's really happening. No exploding building, no earthquake, no alien invasion. This is where you get your happy ending.*

Just as she was laughing at herself, Lois looked forward and cerulean eyes met hazel, their connection immediate as always. That familiar shiver ran up her spine at the sight of him and her heart sped up; she knew he could likely hear it, knowledge that added a deep ache to the feeling. She felt tears prick her eyes just looking at him, the distance between them finally, forever, closing. *Oh my God, look at him. Kal-El. I don't think I've ever known a more beautiful man in my life. Inside and out.* Then her natural snark rose up to add, *Even in those glasses. Although they're better than that first pair.*

And he's mine. He's agreed to be mine. Her heart soared at the thought, and in her mind she spoke to him as if he could hear her. They were so close in so many ways, it wouldn't surprise her if he knew her thoughts. *How could I have ever kept my feelings from you? How could there have been a moment in time that you doubted it, if it feels so obvious to me, hero?*

Finally noticing the expression on his face as they drew closer, Lois felt her own lips curving up in an absolutely adoring grin. It was all she had not to laugh out loud. *Wow, I guess he really does like the dress. Surprise, Kal-El.*

Conscious thought broke down at the sight of Lois - *his fiancée* - in that stunning dress, coming up the aisle toward him. This was *real*, his most cherished dream coming true at long last. Only the carefully repeated rehearsals of yesterday got him moving.

They met just at the first row, both of their mothers watching them with unabashed tears in their eyes. But the couple had eyes only for each other, as Perry solemnly handed Lois over to Clark. For a moment, he held her hand and gazed into her eyes, and Lois managed a tremulous smile.

Clark tucked Lois' hand into his elbow as they proceeded up the shallow steps of the dais. He chuckled, very softly, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. That helped Lois recover her equilibrium enough to whisper, "You may wanna pick your jaw up off the floor..."

Squeezing her hand again, Clark smiled at her, and for a moment the bridal party all

understood just how Lois had fallen in love with him. The purity of love between them made them radiant in that moment, and their twins grinned at them in delight. Jason and Kala were excited to be up front with the adults, practically quivering with glee.

Lori smiled at them proudly as they took their places before her. "Friends, we are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Clark Kent and Lois Lane in matrimony, which is a most exalted union and therefore is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly - but reverently, discreetly, advisedly and solemnly. Into this hallowed estate these two persons present now come to be joined. If anyone can show just cause why they may not be joined together - let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

She paused for a moment, long enough for Clark to notice his mother dabbing at her eyes, and for Lois to think, *If that bald-headed bastard Luthor comes strolling in right now, I'll kill him with my bare hands. I will not let anything stop me now.*

No one spoke; nothing disturbed the ceremony, and Lois let out a tiny sigh of relief as Lori opened the book she carried. "Sonnet 116, by William Shakespeare," she said, and read in a clear, even voice.

*"Let me not to the marriage of true minds
admit impediments. Love is not love
which alters when it alteration finds,
or bends with the remover to remove:
Oh, no! It is an ever-fixed mark.
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
it is the star to every wandering bark,
whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
within his bending sickle's compass come;
love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
but bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved."*

It had seemed the perfect choice of reading for this ceremony, considering the tempests Lois and Kal-El had weathered. But Lois couldn't help thinking that having Shakespeare read at her wedding would mark her as a romantic forever.

Lori closed the book and looked out at the guests. "Love - true love - is a precious thing, and marriage is the ultimate expression of that love. The vows made here today are not mere words; these are the promises of the heart, made out of love and respect and the desire to honor one another, and as such the ceremony of marriages deserves its solemnity and grandeur." She took a deep breath, and gave Clark and Lois both a quick, encouraging smile as she continued. "Two hearts cannot become one, two minds cannot fuse, and two lives cannot merge seamlessly, for two separate people cannot become one without one becoming lost in the other. You are entering into a partnership of equals, one that will compromise and sacrifice from both of you if it is to work." Hazel eyes met cerulean, and for the moment both of them were thinking the same thing: *Lady, you have no idea.*

"This ceremony will not grant you an instant happily-ever-after," Lori cautioned them. "There will be trials ahead of you, as there are in every relationship. But the commitment you make today, the vows you swear to uphold, will hold you together throughout those storms. And then you will find that those oaths, far from being a binding shackle, are the strength that

supports you both." She said the last sentence with a knowing glance at Lois, and after a moment of silence nodded to the pair.

Clark took a deep breath and reached for Lois' hands. The veil was no barrier to his vision; he could see the tears standing in her lovely hazel eyes. He had been terrified that he'd forget the vows they'd chosen at this crucial moment, but one look at the face of the woman he loved erased all of his anxiety.

"I, Clark Joseph Kent, take you, Lois Joanne Lane, to be my friend, my lover, the mother of my children, and my wife," he said, his hands trembling and his voice catching slightly on the last word. "I will be yours in times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, in times of failure and in times of triumph. I promise to cherish and respect you, to care for and protect you, to comfort and encourage you, and stay with you, for all eternity."

Lois had to take another deep breath, knowing her hands were shaking worse than his, and only looking directly into those amazing blue eyes kept her from panicking. "I, Lois Joanne Lane, take you, Clark Joseph Kent, to be my friend, my lover, the father of my children, and my husband," she said, managing not to betray her nervousness or the surreal feeling that washed over her. Was she *really* doing this, really marrying the literal man of her dreams? "I will be yours in times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, in times of failure and in times of triumph. I promise to cherish and respect you, to care for and protect you, to comfort and encourage you, and stay with you, for all eternity."

Both of them sighed in relief; they'd done it, neither of them had messed up the words or passed out, and Clark hadn't been called away by duty. It was all downhill from here...

"And now, the exchange of rings," Lori prompted. Jason had started to yawn during the first long reading, and Ron had lightly tapped his shoulder. Now, at his cue, he stepped forward and held up the white satin pillow with the two rings tied to it with ribbon. Clark untied the white-gold band reverently; this had been Martha's ring. The inside was still engraved with 'Jonathan & Martha', but there was just enough room for 'Clark & Lois' as well. Offering their rings had been a special gesture from Martha, to let Lois know once and for all that she was welcomed into the Kent family.

He took Lois' left hand and gently slipped the band onto her ring finger, saying softly, "I give this ring as my gift to you and symbol of my love. As this ring is a circle without end, so is my love for you unending. Wear it and think of me and know that I love you, this day and forevermore."

Lois gulped, biting her lip to keep from crying. *This is supposed to be a happy occasion, you twit*, she scolded herself. *Keep it together*. It took her a little longer to untie what had been Jonathan's ring, but Jason's broad grin steadied her, and she stroked his hair once before turning to his father. Surprisingly, her voice didn't shake as she repeated, "I give this ring as my gift to you and symbol of my love. As this ring is a circle without end, so is my love for you unending. Wear it and think of me and know that I love you, this day and forevermore."

Their hands clasped for a moment, the rings with old and new names touching each other. As Martha and Ella both rose from their seats, each taking a candle from the candelabra at the end of their row, Lori said, "Clark and Lois are going to light their unity candle as a symbol of their marriage. The candles from which they light it represent each of them, with the wisdom and love they have received from their parents." She paused for a moment, letting the mothers light the tapers beside the central unity candle.

Lois and Clark each took up a taper, and carefully bent them to the wick of the central candle. It was inscribed with both of their names as well as Kala's and Jason's full names, and as the new flame sprang up Lori continued with the recitation. "They come into their marriage as individuals and they do not lose their identity. Rather, they create through their commitment the bond of family. Therefore, the three candles remain lighted, one for each of them and one for their united family, as symbols of their commitment to each other and their children, and to a lasting and loving marriage.

"What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined together to strengthen each other in all labor, to minister to each other in all sorrow, to share with each other in all gladness, to be one with each other in the silent unspoken memories?" Lori asked. "From 'To Be One with Each Other', by George Eliot. And now, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife." She gave them the blessing of her smile again, and said lovingly, "You may now kiss the bride."

Clark lifted the veil reverently, seeing Lois on the verge of tears. As many times as they had kissed - once with an audience nearly as large as this, that time when they'd announced their relationship to the office - he was still nervous now. Leaning down slightly, he met her gaze with all of his profound love shining in his eyes. Lois tilted her face up to him, lips curving in a smile just before she closed her eyes.

They kissed, tenderly at first, but this couple had never been able to kiss without putting their hearts into it. Lois' arms slid up around his neck as he kissed her more deeply, and the entire room broke into thunderous applause as the guests spontaneously rose from their seats.

Lois pulled back slightly, looking up at Clark in amusement. All the nervousness had vanished at the touch of his lips, hearing her friends clapping and the twins giggling. Knowing he would understand, Lois murmured, "Do you think for once they could *not* interrupt?"

Clark laughed, resting his forehead against hers, and simply luxuriated in having her in his arms at last.

"Food, glorious food," Jimmy muttered, picking up another cannoli. "Man, they went all out, didn't they?"

"Four kinds of cheesecake," Richard informed him, grinning. "I almost forgot what it tastes like."

"Shoo, I starved for this dress," Lucy said, elbowing him aside affectionately. "Wasn't that the loveliest wedding ever?"

"Incredible," Ron agreed, passing her a pair of strawberries painstakingly dipped into white and dark chocolate. The resulting pattern made the berries look as if they were dressed for a wedding. "What I don't get, though, is how she managed to get a second dress for the reception."

"It was more like what the moms wanted," Cat said, flashing Jimmy her brilliant grin as she snagged the cannoli off his plate. He hadn't been able to look directly at her since she'd caught the wedding bouquet ... and the tossed garter had landed right on him while he wasn't even trying to catch it. "Besides, the wedding dress is a custom-created L. Lang original. No way are they gonna risk someone pouring wine on it. You should've heard Kay howl."

"Yeah, that dress is worth a down payment on a house," Tobie said, strolling up to them. "And I don't know about you all, but I'm damn glad they didn't do that nonsense of smearing cake all over each other's faces. I don't think I could've respected Lois anymore. You *have* tasted the cake, right? It'd be sacrilege."

"Since when have you ever respected Lois?" Richard asked, and Ron elbowed him hard.

"Flyboy, I knew her before she'd ever *heard* of you," Tobie reminded him. "And I do respect her. I respect any woman who, at the age of seventeen, could bankrupt four pool-hustlers older and supposedly wiser than herself."

"Ancient history," Cat said. "Besides, Richard, we all love Lois. She and Tobie only fight because they're too much alike, personality-wise."

For once, Tobie and Richard were content to let it drop, especially since they heard the announcement being made that the bride and groom were about to have their first dance. The wedding party made their way over to the covered area set aside for dancing, as the band got ready.

The bride and groom had each chosen a song, and Lois' was to be played first. Almost everyone expected Clark to step on her toes a couple of times; only Jimmy and Perry had seen them dance at the Pulitzers, and both of them were hoping for that same grace to suddenly manifest here.

Lois and Clark took their places, and she looked up at him with a little smirk as the band began to play. Neither of them had told the other which song they picked, and he didn't recognize the first verse. But the refrain caught his attention, and he grinned as they danced.

*There once was love thrown into your room
But you never knew
A calendar of days just for you
But you never knew, never knew, no
And the truth that you'll find will always be
The truth you hide*

*So how do you love, how do you love
When your angels can't sing, and your world is still
Lacking of me*

*There once were eyes that only saw you
But you never knew
A portrait of a flower in full bloom
But you never knew, never knew no
And the words that you fear will always be
The words you hear*

*This space where you've been living
Has gifts you've never given
That's the face you always show
Ask me for words of wisdom
Tell me of your condition
I don't know, I don't
I don't know*

*And the truth that you'll find will always be
The truth you hide...*

To everyone's surprise, Lois and Clark danced well together. They looked simply perfect,

with him in the handsomely-tailored suit and her in the reception dress, having kept the tiara but taken off the veil. As Richard beamed at them, he felt a hand tap his arm lightly, and turned to see Lana beside him. He kissed her; no words could express how happy they both were for Lois and Clark, and how that happiness was unexpectedly free from any bitter taint. With his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist, they watched the dance with unalloyed joy ... as Lana quietly stole his cheesecake. Some traditions had to be maintained, after all.

Lois beamed up at Clark; the song spoke of how nearly she'd come to losing him, and the pain of separation they'd both endured. But they both knew how they had survived it, never quite giving up on each other even in the darkest hour. There was a brief pause while the band changed gears for Clark's song.

The first few bars sent shivers down Lois' spine, and she stared up at him, tears pooling. He didn't...

Once upon a time

Once when you were mine

I remember skies

Reflected in your eyes

I wonder where you are

I wonder if you

Think about me

Once upon a time

In your wildest dreams

He did. Lois burst into tears, shocking Clark, and he pulled her off to one side, trying to soothe her. The twins, meanwhile, had heard 'their' song being played, and they joyfully took over the dancing area. They were used to the slower, softer lullaby, and this upbeat version of the song gave them a chance to shake loose the pent-up energy of having stood still during the long ceremony. Kala especially had to twirl with every line, her dress flaring out around her.

"Lois, I'm sorry," Clark whispered, stroking the tears from her eyes.

"It's okay," she sniffled, and then laughed. "I just never... This was like my anthem of loneliness, and you just made it a thing of joy."

"You're sure?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she replied, and kissed him. "I love you so much..."

"No more than I love you." He kissed her forehead gently, stroking her raven hair, and whispered, "I'm still almost expecting to wake up... I can hardly believe this is real. We're really married."

Tilting her face up for another kiss, Lois murmured, "You're really mine at last."

"Mommy!" the twins yelled, Kala adding, "C'mon! You gotta dance!"

"Yeah!" her brother exclaimed. "It's our song, you gotta!"

"Our keepers bellow," Lois said, and they returned to the dance pavilion. As it turned out, Clark had actually requested two songs. As soon as *Your Wildest Dreams* ended, *I Know You're Out There Somewhere* began, and Lois laughed out loud.

The rest of the reception was everything the wedding party could've wished for. Jimmy, once he'd eaten his fill, roamed the hotel gardens with his camera, snapping candid shots of the guests. It seemed as though everyone danced at least once; Lois wound up dancing with Perry as well as the groomsmen and Richard. Jimmy himself had to hand over his camera for his dance with the bride, during which he blushed furiously.

He got some lovely pictures of Richard and Lana dancing together, and when Loueen politely excused herself, he even managed a shot of Perry and Ella dancing. Lois was clearly visible in the background, with her hand over her mouth and a tender expression on her face. The Chief was actually *smiling*, making that photo one Jimmy would definitely keep.

But the perfect photograph was one of the last. Lois and Clark had gotten away from the revelers for a moment, and they had paused beneath a tree. Jimmy had to zoom to even get them in the frame, and it was still clearly a long-distance shot, but so perfectly composed. Lois' arms were around Clark's neck, the two of them standing close and gazing into each other's eyes, and the shot had even captured a lovely bridge over the pathway in the background.

Not even the fact that Lois had taken off Clark's glasses and was holding them in one hand could mar the beauty of the picture...

Lois stifled a yawn and tried to stretch surreptitiously; she felt ten pounds heavier thanks to all of the rich food. "Let's see if we can sneak out," she whispered.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Clark replied. "I don't think anyone's watching that little gate at the back of the gardens. We can double back and ask the front desk to bring the car around."

Grinning like a couple of schoolchildren, they eased away from the crowd. No one seemed to notice, and the moment they reached the gate, Lois bolted through, laughing. Clark followed her, catching her hand and pulling her close, both of them chuckling at their own silliness. "Wonder how long it'll take them to realize we're gone?" he asked.

"Richard won't notice 'til the food's gone," Lois said confidently. "I'm sorry we didn't say goodbye to the twins one more time, though..."

"Me, too," Clark replied. "But I don't really want to be pelted with rice."

"Uh, remind me whose idea - other than Lana's - it was to buy the expensive-as-heck ecologically-sound rice?" Lois scolded as they continued to run.

They made it around to the front just in time to see a black limousine pull up to the hotel's port-cochère. They'd known that Richard and Lana were arranging for a rental car to drive them to the hotel in Montreal, since Clark supposedly disliked plane travel. That little story neatly covered for the fact that Superman found it extremely difficult to get off a plane in mid-flight without being noticed, and his dread of being trapped in that situation lent authenticity to his claim that he didn't like flying. He'd fly if he absolutely had to, but let everyone know that he preferred to drive any reasonable distance rather than take a plane.

But this wasn't just a rental car, it was a stretch limo, complete with 'Just Married' written on the back window and streamers flying from the windows and bumper. "They didn't," Lois said, coming to a halt suddenly. "Oh, Richard..."

"We did," Lana called, just then leaving the front door of the hotel. "The *last* thing you need on your honeymoon is a long drive, so we got you the car and driver. You two can pick up a rental to drive around the city once you're up there, but the trip itself should be a chance to relax."

"And the car's big enough to stretch out in, if you catch my drift," Richard added from behind them, sounding just slightly out of breath. Lois and Clark turned around, only to see half the wedding party with Richard, all of them grinning manically.

"You didn't think you'd get away with sneaking out, did you?" Tobie asked.

"CAUGHT YOU!" Kala yelled. She and Jason came tearing out the front doors of the hotel with the rest of the wedding party and the guests behind them. Lois and Clark literally

had nowhere to run, and rice rained down on them as everyone laughed and cheered.

Some of the guests had bubbles instead of rice, and those bright glimpses of iridescence surrounded the couple as they ran for the car. Laughing - and getting in a last handful of rice herself - Lana hugged them both and kissed Clark on the cheek. "You two have fun and don't worry too much about home," she admonished.

Ben hugged Clark, beaming with pride. "Your daddy would've been very proud of you, Clark. She's one helluva woman." Clark returned the hug unreservedly, murmuring his thanks; the remark about Jonathan had touched his heart.

Ella swept Lois into a hug next, whispering, "I'm so proud of you, baby girl," into her ear. Stifling a sob, Lois hugged her back hard and told her she loved her. Meanwhile, Martha was hugging her son and wishing him well. The twins, over-excited and full of sugary treats, bounced around hugging everyone, but Jason and Kala managed to give extra hugs and kisses to Mommy and Daddy Clark. The rest of the family and close friends managed to squeeze in for hugs, getting pelted equally with bubbles and rice by the rest of the guests.

Richard gave Clark a bear hug, muttering congratulations, while Martha hugged Lois. Then Ella hugged Clark and kissed his cheek, and Richard swept Lois off her feet into a hug, swinging her around while she screamed in surprise. He set her down only to kiss her forehead, grinning at her without a trace of bitterness. "Good luck, you surly caffeine addict," her former fiancé said.

"I guess it's true what they say," Lois replied, looking up at him lovingly. "The journey *is* worth the destination. We both got off at the right exit, huh?"

"Yeah, babe," he told her. "I don't have any regrets about us - it got us both to where we are now. And even if you're not my wife, I still love you. Always will."

Lois lifted her chin in spite of tears gleaming in her eyes, and she gave him that trademarked thousand-watt grin. "Right back atcha, Richard. No regrets."

He hugged her again, adding softly, "And I really *do* love you more now that I know the real you. Good luck, Lois. Go on, have fun."

Lana held the door for them both, giving Lois a quick kiss on the cheek as she got in the car. "I'd say don't do anything I wouldn't do, but..."

Lois burst out laughing as the door closed, shaking rice out of her hair. Clark caught the back of her neck and pulled her close for a kiss. Lois smiled, hearing their audience whoop as the limo started to pull away, and she glanced back through the rear window for one last look.

The wedding guests had spilled out into the driveway that led under the port-cochère, and everyone was waving: their mothers, Perry, the *Daily Planet* staff, all of their friends... But right out in front were Jason and Kala, jumping up and waving frantically. "Have fun at Mon Tree Hall!" Jason yelled, just as Richard caught him and held him up. Lana did the same for Kala, and that was Lois' last view before the car turned the corner.

And Ever Shall Be

Lois snarled and slammed her phone down. "Goddamn Tobie Raines! This is *not* funny! Her and her warped-ass sense of humor... I swear, when we get back to Metropolis, I'm going to *throttle* her!"

I couldn't help chuckling at her. "She had to have tipped the driver," I supplied. "There's no other way she could know the exact moment we arrived here." That had ruined our plans to take advantage of the privacy of our spacious honeymoon suite as soon as we got settled in. Lois was furious now, and the calls had evaporated the romantic mood brought on by the champagne and chocolates Lana stashed in the limo.

"Yes, well, I don't exactly appreciate being called every five minutes on my wedding night," Lois spat, raking her hands through her hair. The tiara lay on the bedside table, and her gorgeous raven curls fell freely down her back. In spite of - or maybe because of - her anger, she was beautiful to me, and I smiled warmly.

The room phone rang, and Lois stalked over to pick it up. "Grand Central Station, what the *hell* is your problem? ... Hi, Mom. Yeah, we made it in... The girls have been playing tricks... Oh, *would* you? Thanks so much! Here, let me get you their numbers... No, Lucy wasn't in on it. Just Tobie, Cat, and Loueen. I'm sure a few calls from you and Martha will settle them down." She laughed nastily, reading out her friends' phone numbers to her mother.

I just shook my head slightly; Lois and her friends had always been a handful, and if they sometimes seemed more like enemies than friends, well, you had to be around when one of them was hurt or in need. The others would close ranks against all outsiders and stubbornly defend each other ... until the status quo returned, and then they'd be back to squabbling again. I knew better than to get involved in the current war over the harassment-by-phone. It was best just to stay here on the bed while Lois and her formidable mom handled the situation.

After hanging up with Ella, Lois sighed heavily and raked her hands through her hair one more time, dislodging still more rice. "*God*," she sighed. "I can't stand this! That's it, I'm taking a shower. Clark..."

I picked up the remote and smiled at her. "It's all right, there's a Royals game on tonight." She rolled her eyes. "A *long* shower. Freakin' baseball..."

I laughed softly as she snatched up her bag and headed into the bathroom, unzipping the back of the reception gown on the way. Taking a moment to admire the view, I resolutely looked away and turned on the game. She needed a moment to calm down after getting so upset, and I was willing to give it to her.

All of this was still hard to believe; here I was, with Lois Lane, on our honeymoon. We'd pretended to be married on more than one assignment, including that memorable trip to Niagara while posing as newlyweds, but this time was for real. Lois was finally, really, *mine*, and so were the twins. *Our* children - the phrase still sent shivers down my spine. In spite of everything fate could throw at us, we were finally getting our happy ending.

I listened for the twins; I'd gotten much better at picking up on their heartbeats quickly. Luthor would never be able to kidnap them so easily - assuming he was still alive, which I privately hoped he wasn't. Shoving that dark thought aside, I tuned my hearing toward Metropolis...

The twins, giggling. And then, "*Where did that come from?*" Lana's voice, followed shortly by Richard's. "*Nowhere.*" Jason and Kala laughed again as he prompted, "*Mommy had this stuff in the fridge when we got here, right, you two?*"

Lana wasn't having any of it. "*Richard, you raided the reception buffet! I can't believe*

you! *That's so ... so...*"

"*Hey, this is good stuff. I wasn't going to let it go to waste,*" he protested.

Just then, Jason piped up with, "*We got three slices of weddin' cake, too! One of each kind!*"

I chuckled as Lana groaned at them. "*The worst part is, all of the leftovers were boxed up and split amongst everyone who helped with the wedding. Which means we have a whole box of this stuff that I already put away.*"

Richard and the twins, far from being ashamed, cheered openly. I couldn't help sympathizing with them, and briefly checked on the rest of the family. Most of them were asleep; Ma and Ben were staying with Ella, and they had all turned in for the night. Everyone else was either in bed or on their way there, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

How strange it felt to suddenly have a family, and a large one at that. For years it had been just me and Ma. Even when I dreamed of a seemingly impossible future, I had never thought further than marrying Lois. Children were out of the question; we're from different *galaxies*. I had no right to expect children...

And I hadn't realized that by loving Lois, I would acquire her family as my own. Ella was one more person to guard my secret, and seeing the developing friendship between her and Ma warmed my heart. Lucy and Ron and their children had always loved me, and I cherished that now - no one could ask for better in-laws or more wonderful nieces and nephew.

Perry and Loueen were family of a sort as well; that dance between him and Ella acknowledged it. He had been Lois' father in all but blood, and seeing him smiling proudly at us both was a moment I would never forget. Though on the topic of family I never expected to have, Richard and Lana were certainly the biggest surprise. He had gone from my rival to something like a brother, and she - while still one of the loveliest women I'd ever laid eyes on - was more my best friend than my old flame. And I love that. It's the best of all possible endings.

I was barely paying attention to the game, not even following the score while these thoughts tumbled around inside my mind. And then the bathroom door opened, and Lois stepped out shyly. I turned to glance at her...

...and stared.

Lois had changed into something I'd never seen her wear; this corset and hose must've been purchased especially for this night. With her hair damp and lying over her pale bare shoulders, she was a vision of loveliness that made my heart catch in my throat. Every thought skidded to a halt, but one:

*This is my wife. My **wife**. Mine, now and forever.*

While I stared speechlessly, she gave me a hesitant little smile. "Thought you'd be asleep by now," Lois whispered.

In answer, I picked up the remote and switched off the television, my eyes never leaving her. How one woman could be so incredibly beautiful and not *realize* it...

Lois laughed at the expression on my face, and rushed to my side. Incredibly, she was *nervous* after all this time! Her heartbeat raced, and I cupped the back of her neck to bring her face close to mine.

Finally, I managed to find words again. "I love you," I whispered, and kissed my wife.

~ Fin ~

Dedication

After this, we both just want a moment to thank everyone who's helped us along the way in the almost two years that *Little Secrets* has been in existence.

First, I have to thank Anissa (anissa7118 and Maryse Bardolph) for having put up with me being a Superman fan all these years and listening to my various cooing, fangirling, ranting, and raving for the last fourteen years. I also have to thank her bringing herself into a fandom she barely knew just because I didn't think I could capture Kal-El on my own. We've had our share of arguments about direction and characterization, but it always turned out better for the story in the end. I could have never done any of this without you.

I have to thank htbthomas for discovering my little intro and for egging me on until I had the guts to finish up Act One. Did you ever think it would go this far? *LOL* And I wouldn't have half the fans I have if you hadn't promoted us so strongly, something I can never begin to repay you for. There are so many other little things that I wouldn't have if not for you. You were even the one to get me to join LJ. Thanks, Mom, for being there every since time I needed you.