

On the Other Hand

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Metropolis University freshmen Lois Lane and Clark Kent are destined to meet, but are they destined to fall in love? Set in the early twenty-first century, will they end up together or will Utopia have to find another way?

A few notes:

Thanks — as ALWAYS — to my *fabulous* betas: Alisha, Beth, Nancy and CarolynK. They put in hours of hard work [or something like that ;)] helping me brainstorm this fic. Carolyn, in particular, put her legal knowledge to work on my behalf and Nancy's world travels also came in very handy when I spent hours upon hours deciding which type of plane the flights were on to make the seating work best for me. Alisha and Beth plotted and cajoled and encouraged in chat more times than I can begin to recall. You ladies ROCK! And Queenie. Always Queenie ;). Even if there's no Italians.

Thanks also go to SheilaH, who gave some great insights and suggestions that contributed to many of the edits made to the archive version.

And to the GE who took this on, Tricia, you are my hero, especially for putting up with my edits while you were... editing ;).

A couple... warnings may not be quite right, but informational tidbits perhaps.

One of the definitions M-W.com has for saga is 'a long, detailed account'. This is one of those. It covers several years, in great detail in places, less detail in others. And it's long. Very long. Very, very long. And since I added at least three chapters worth of scenes, etc. to it, this version is different than the one on the boards. Think of it as the 'director's cut' or something ;).

Most people have traumatic events in their lives over the course of several years and Lois and Clark are more likely than most to have trauma in their lives [and if you don't think so, just look at what happened between 'Just Say Noah' when they got back together and the end of 'Swear to God...' /beginning of 'Brutal Youth' when they finally made it to their wedding night]. So there is some trauma here. Some is based in things that happened in the past, some happens here. Some is explicit, some is implied. Some is blown out of proportion by characters, some is practically repressed. It's all part of life. Especially life with Lane and Kent. Er, and explicit there means that it's spelled out and you see it and all that rather than something 'behind the scenes' or 'off camera', not like *explicit* in an N sense :D.

But I always put my toys back where they belong, or where they started anyway ;). I like to make them happy. Of course, what makes them happy doesn't always make me happy, but that's a different issue all together. ;)

Two chapters of this fic will also be available as the stand-alone fic [insert title later :D].

This story is told in first person, something new for me, from the perspectives of Lois and Clark.

POV changes are found between two sets of ~~~~~.

Chapters are noted: ~*#*~.

Jumps in time without POV changes are noted by ~*~.

Month and year is noted where appropriate, either at the beginning of a chapter or offset with ~*~*~.

<> Denotes thoughts — not many but there are some.

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things that might otherwise be in italics — conversations Clark overhears, flashbacks, etc.

More notes, relating to individual chapters, can be found at the end.

And so, without further ado...

Part I
August 2002
Clark

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"Can you believe it, Clark? We're finally here!" Lana spun in a circle — arms spread wide — after we stepped out of the truck.

"Yep. Metropolis University." I looked around before moving towards the other side of the truck. "We're sure not in Kansas anymore."

Lana giggled as I came to a stop behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. "Of course not, silly. That's the whole point of being here. Neither one of us wanted to stay in Kansas."

"Well, now, you know I wouldn't have minded going to Midwest, but I wanted to be where you are and Met U *does* have a good journalism program so here I am."

Lana turned in my arms so that she could face me. Her hands rested on my biceps until she slid them up to play with the hair on the back of my neck. "I'm glad you came with me."

I smiled at her. "I am too." Her lips looked so shiny and I just had to see what kind of lip gloss she had used last. I lowered my lips to hers and kissed her. Being in public kept the kiss unfortunately short and relatively chaste, but was more than enough to taste her lips. "Mmmm... Raspberry," I grinned.

Lana smiled back at me. "I know how much you like raspberries." She patted me lightly on the chest. "We better get moving if we're going to make it to the dorms anytime today." She stepped out of the circle of my embrace, linking her fingers with mine as we headed across campus, following the signs to the Lane Athletic Center where registration was being held. "I still can't believe our parents let us come all this way by ourselves. I mean we're both eighteen but... they're so old fashioned."

"I know. They mean well and if we hadn't spent the first night with Aunt Opal in St. Louis and last night with your uncle in Pennsylvania, they probably wouldn't have let us." I let go of her hand and wrapped my arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to me. "They probably still wouldn't have if they'd known you'd want to use every truck stop between here and Smallville as our own personal make-out spot."

Lana smacked me lightly. "Hey! I only wanted to use half of them. The other half were all you, Mr. Kent."

I laughed then kissed the side of her head. "Just don't tell your dad, okay?"

"No problem. He'd probably fly right out here to defend my honor."

"Your honor? What about my honor?" I held my hand to my heart and pretended to swoon.

Lana looked me up and down, a look of what could only be described as appreciation in her eyes. “It may need defending as well before too long.” I groaned as she continued. “As long as these city girls keep their hands off, you’ll be okay.”

“What about defending me from you?”

Lana grinned wickedly. “Who said anything about defending you from me, Kent?”

I groaned again, but my retort was stopped by the crowd of people in front of us. “I think we’re here.”

Lana sighed. “Well, I’m off to the ‘L’ line.”

I looked at it. “It’s shorter than mine. It’s still going to take us hours to get through here though.” We watched as the brunette at the front of the ‘L’ line walked off in a huff. “One down, two thousand to go.”

“Now, Clark, it’s not that bad. The faster we get done here, the faster we can go unload the truck and get something to eat.” She gave me a quick kiss before moving to get in her line. “Now scoot.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said with a wink and a mock salute. “See you in a bit.” I gave her another kiss and then moved over to the ‘K’ line. This was going to be a long afternoon.

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I pulled my old truck up in front of Weller Hall and waited for an opening. There. The Jeep Cherokee was moving. I pulled in to the spot it vacated and hopped out. Lana had finished before me and had said she was going to walk over here and try to check-in and get at least one key. I wasn’t sure if she’d had time yet or not.

She hurried out to meet me. “Clark! Over here.”

I walked towards her, but she held up her hands to stop me, so I waited for her to work her way over.

“I got a key to our suite. You’ll have to check in too, but as long as we can get in, you don’t need to yet.”

I frowned slightly. “Are you sure that’s okay? Will we be able to get into my room or just yours and the suite?”

Lana ran a hand up my arm. “What if we can convince our roommates to let you stay in my room?”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Our parents would flip.”

She sighed. “I know. But it was worth a shot.” She turned.

“And yeah, we can get into all of it. They said that was fine as long as you checked in later tonight. Let’s see if we can get a cart to load some of this on.”

An hour later, we had moved all of the boxes and bags into the main room of our suite.

I sighed as I looked at the pile. It was going to be a long night and I couldn’t speed through it — not here. “Let me move a couple of boxes into your room so you can get started and then I’m going to go move the truck so someone else can get in and then I’ll come help you with all this.” I picked a couple of boxes labeled ‘Lana’ and moved them into the still empty room she would share with another girl.

I set them on one of the desks and was stopped by arms wrapped around my waist. I turned easily in them until I could look in her beautiful blue eyes. “I’m not going to get anywhere like this.” My arms slid around her showed that I didn’t really want to leave.

“I know,” she said, a husky tone to her voice. “Alone at last and probably not for long.”

I groaned as she kissed me. Strawberry this time. How many different lip glosses did she have? By my count — which admittedly might have been a bit muddled by the intensifying kiss — this was the sixth or seventh one since we left Smallville. I moved my hands to her hips and used gentle pressure to move her farther away from me, as I pulled my head back from hers. Even I needed a minute to catch my breath. “As nice as this is, honey, I think we have other stuff we need to get doing.”

“Spoilsport.” She kissed me again, quickly this time.

“I liked the strawberry, though.”

“You like them more than raspberries.”

“I do.”

She patted my chest. “Remember those words, Kent. You’re going to need them.”

I pulled her back into my arms for a hug, then kissed the top of her head. “You bet I am.”

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Several hours later, I lay in my bed. My roommate had been and gone before I’d even arrived and had taken the top bunk. I wasn’t very happy about that but there was nothing I could do about it at the moment. Maybe I could convince my roommate to trade with me. If I hadn’t gotten hopelessly lost once we neared Metropolis, I might well have been there early enough to claim it. Lana had offered to share her top bunk with me, but I’d known she’d only been half serious about it. She would have let me if I’d really wanted to, but that was taking things way too fast for both of us, besides the fact that she had a roommate to deal with.

The last three days had been nice; spending time alone with Lana. We’d never spent that much time together and it was nice to know we could without killing each other. We’d left two days before in the middle of the afternoon. The trip to St. Louis was only about six hours and we were at my Aunt Opal’s house by nine or so. We hadn’t really stopped at *every* truck stop on the way to Metropolis to make out, but every time we’d stopped... well, we could never linger too long because our parents were expecting phone calls when we arrived and knew how long it should take. I would, however, under extreme duress, admit to pushing the speed limit a bit more than strictly necessary in between stops. The truck stop in Independence, Missouri had been cotton candy, I remembered.

We’d spent the night in Foristell, Missouri, just outside St. Louis. I’d slept on the couch, but Lana had snuck down to ‘get a drink of water’, she’d said, though why she’d need fresh watermelon lip gloss to do that, I’d never know. I grinned to myself at the memory. We’d left early the next morning for Carlisle, Pennsylvania where her Uncle Henry lived. That was closer to a fourteen hour drive. The truck stop in Terra Haute, Indiana had been pink lemonade and Zanesville, Ohio had been marshmallow and had looked kinda shimmery. We’d left Foristell early and arrived at her uncle’s house about nine in the evening. I’d slept on the couch again, but her Aunt Jane was a light sleeper and their room was between Lana’s and the stairs, so she hadn’t been able to ‘get a drink of water’ that night.

That morning, we’d gotten gas in Carlisle before heading out. Bubble gum. Carlisle to Metropolis University should have taken about four hours, but the unfamiliar streets and highways and even traffic had made it into a six hour, extremely frustrating drive full of muttered expletives that would have made my mother wash my mouth out with soap. But she’d never tried to drive in Metropolis, I was sure. I’d have to watch that. Lana hadn’t been crazy about it either, but since she was the one who left the map on top of the car so it could blow away, she didn’t say anything.

I missed my parents though. Part of me wished this could have been a family trip — though how all three of us would have fit in my truck and been remotely comfortable was beyond me. And Lana’s parents couldn’t come either so that would have been difficult too. But, my dad’s back surgery had only been a couple months earlier and, while he was doing well, a cross country road trip was out of the question. My mom couldn’t afford to be gone that long either. Lana’s dad had a town meeting tonight and since he was mayor and they were talking salaries, he had to be there. Lana’s mom didn’t go anywhere without Lana’s dad.

And so we’d been allowed to travel across the country by ourselves. I wasn’t quite sure what to make of Met U just yet, but one thing was sure, there was no way it was going to be boring.

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I woke at precisely 6:30 a.m. That was 5:30 in Smallville, but it was a big day and I had to be up and around early — Metropolis time. Five-thirty in the morning wasn't completely out of the ordinary on a farm, but I preferred to sleep a bit later most of the time.

I could hear my roommate breathing in the bed above me. I moved quietly, pulling a pair of shorts on over my boxers and grabbing a shirt, socks and a pair of shoes as I went. I scribbled a note and taped it to the door, exiting into the living area.

Lana was sitting on the couch with a cup of black coffee in her hand.

"Hey," I said quietly.

She glared at me. "How come you're always so chipper in the morning?"

I stood behind her on the couch and gave her a quick upside down kiss. "It's the best time of day. Anything's possible first thing in the morning."

She grunted a response.

I laughed. "It won't be so bad once we get adjusted to the new time zone."

"I hope not."

"How's your roommate?"

Lana shrugged. "Fine, I guess. She got in late last night after I was in bed. You?"

"Came in after I was asleep. Still sleeping now. I tried to be quiet when I left."

"Boy scout."

"You love it," I grinned.

"Yeah, I guess." She yawned and stretched. "Okay, Kent, let's figure this place out."

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Lana and I managed to duck out of orientation a few minutes early. We were sitting near a door on the side of the auditorium and decided that leaving ten minutes before orientation ended would give us a twenty minute head start on our suitemates — maybe even more, depending on where in the mass exodus they would get caught.

We'd spent the morning finding our way around campus — finding buildings and even some classrooms. Lana wondered idly who the Lane family was and why they were so all-fired important that half the campus was named after them. I reminded her that one of the reasons we weren't at Midwest was because she'd qualified for the Lucy Lane Memorial Scholarship. She grudgingly admitted she was grateful for that because Midwest was just too close to Smallville.

We made record time — at least for us, we had no idea how long it should actually take for someone to get from place to place on campus — in getting from the auditorium back to Weller Hall. The plan had been for a bit of a make-out session because we figured we might actually meet our roommates in a little while and, if we spent time together as suitemates that evening, making out wasn't going to happen.

And so we'd been kissing on the couch and things were just starting to heat up when we heard a noise in Lana's room.

"Damn, she made it here fast," I muttered.

"Clark! Watch your mouth!"

"Sorry, Baby." I grinned at her. "I was just hoping for a little more time with you before we got interrupted by roommates."

"I know." She kissed me swiftly. "But we have all year."

"I know." I sighed and stood up. "I'm going to take a quick shower since I didn't get one this morning." I leaned over to kiss her one more time then headed to the shared bathroom. I stopped and went to my room and grabbed a few things and then winked at her as I started to close the bathroom door behind me. "I liked the pina colada, by the way."

Lana giggled. This was going to be some school year.

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I sighed. There just wasn't much room in the bathroom for getting dressed. I'd showered and towed off, but space, apparently, was at a premium in Weller Hall. I glanced through the wall to make sure there was no one in the common sitting area. Giggles were coming from Lana's room so I figured it was safe to run the gauntlet to my own room. I turned my eyes that direction. Nope. No roommate yet.

I grabbed my clothes — old and new — and headed to my room. I was just getting ready to drop the towel and pull on a pair of boxers when I heard the key in the lock. Best wait on that, I decided. Sure, guys generally had a locker room mentality but I hadn't even met my roommate yet. In the buff probably wasn't the best way to do it and who knew if anyone else was there or walking by in the hallway?

Well, here went nothing.

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Part 2

Lois

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"No. It's Lois. L-O-I-S. Not Louis. L-O-U-I-S. Lois." I glared at the woman seated in front of me. "Lois Lane. Lane. As in Dr. Sam Lane. As in Lane Hall and Lane Athletic Center and the Ellen Lane Memorial Medical Building."

"I'm sorry for the mix-up, Miss Lane. Whoever entered your information in the computer must have slipped and misspelled your name."

"Well, duh. I get that. Now can we get it fixed?" I thought I was intimidating her just a bit and tried not to smile slightly at the thought — it would ruin the whole intimidation thing...

Good.

A few more clicks on the computer and a new piece of paper came out of the printer at the end of the table.

"All done. You're Lois Lane as far as the University is concerned."

"Thank you. Now, my dorm. I specifically requested to be on the academic floor of Lane Hall — an all girls dorm with a strict no men policy on the floor and enforced quiet times for studying with a private room and bath. This says I'm in a co-ed dorm, with a roommate and two more suite mates sharing one bathroom." Part of me wished my father was there to straighten all this out. With the obscene amounts of money he'd donated to his alma mater in the years before he almost went broke, he still held some influence and he'd used it to get me on the short list for the dorm I wanted. The rest of me was proud of myself for handling this on my own.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lane." I could almost see fear in her eyes. Not... fear maybe but something. Maybe she knew who my dad was after all. "All the dorms are full. The last two years have seen the largest numbers of freshmen by far and since most sophomores and virtually all freshmen are required to live on campus, we have a bit of a shortage. That floor in Lane Hall is overflowing. There are no private rooms there at the moment and many of the suites actually have six residents instead of only four. I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you there."

"I want to talk to the head of Housing." I crossed my arms and tapped my foot annoyingly.

"I understand, Miss Lane, but he's going to tell you the same thing and he has a line of about..." she glanced at a group of people behind her, "...fifty students who are in the same predicament you're in. They're all unhappy about their dorm assignments too. When you sign in here, you're logged into the system. If I don't confirm your dorm assignment at the same time, there's a chance that it may be given to someone else and you won't have a room at all."

I sighed. "Can you at least tell me if my suitemates are males or females?"

A few more clicks on the computer. “Female.”

“Can you tell me who they are?” I knew a few girls from school who were planning on attending Metropolis University and living in Weller Hall and I didn’t want to be room or suite mates with any of them.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Lane. Confidentiality laws forbid me from revealing that information. You’ll have to wait until you meet them.”

I sighed again, ignoring the calls of ‘would you hurry up already? There’s a line here’ coming from behind me. “Fine. I’ll take it.”

I pulled my graduation present — a slightly used, but still very nice silver Jeep Cherokee — into the unloading zone in front of my new — temporary — home. After checking in at the registration desk, Joe, my on again, off again boyfriend, met me and began to help me move my things into my room. I was grateful that it appeared that none of my suitemates had arrived yet.

I unpacked and took the dresser, closet, desk and bed I wanted the most. Weller Hall was equipped with bunk beds and there was no way I was taking the bottom bunk. I liked to be on top. I called my dad who said he’d see what he could do, but that he knew about the housing crunch and doubted there was anything he could do to change things this semester, but he’d look into at least getting me into the other dorm in the Spring.

It didn’t take too long — I hadn’t brought everything with me and most of the rest I did have in the car would come up trip by trip. My dad’s house was close enough that if I needed anything, I could run over. For instance, I hadn’t brought my winter clothes with me. There was really no need and storage space on campus was at a premium. My school supplies and books had yet to be purchased and probably wouldn’t be for a couple of days yet so my desk was easy to set up. Mostly just a pen holder, a CD player and a couple of notebooks in it to tell my roommate to back off. And a wireless keyboard and mouse to go with my laptop, which I wasn’t about to leave unguarded until I met my roommate. My suitcase was quickly unpacked into the drawers of one of the dressers and most of my hang up clothes were put in the closet as Joe and I brought them in. He’d wanted to try out my new bunk as a make out spot but I’d shooed him away saying the sooner he got his stuff out, the sooner we could go to dinner. I quickly made up the top bunk and stowed the rest of my things.

Joe had finally left me to my own devices while he finished moving in to his room three floors down — I hadn’t been very happy that he wanted to be in a co-ed dorm, but now I guessed it was for the best. At least he knew his roommate — his best friend from high school, Les.

Joe and I went out for dinner that night with Les and Peggy, his long time girlfriend. We were out late and by the time I returned to my room, my roommate had already moved in and was sound asleep on the bottom bunk. I changed clothes and climbed into my bed.

The sun woke me up entirely too early and I buried my head under the pillow. My roommate, it seemed was already up, but at least was trying to be quiet. The door opened and closed and I heard both male and female voices in the suite’s common living room. Great. One of my suitemates must have already had her boyfriend stay the night.

I looked around and saw precious little to tell me about my roommate. A non-descript gym bag sat on the desk I hadn’t claimed and a couple of boxes were visible next to the other closet. I glanced at the alarm clock I’d put on the little shelf attached to the top bunk. 6:45 in the morning. Even better. My roommate was a morning person. Just what I needed.

With a sigh, I decided that it was probably best to go ahead and get up. My dad was likely to be calling before long and it

wouldn’t do for him to know I’d been out late the night before. Even though classes didn’t start for a couple of days, he wouldn’t be happy about it and now that his practice was back on its feet, he was paying for me to be here. Well, for the little that wasn’t covered by scholarships. And gas. And spending money.

I climbed down and noticed a note taped to the door.

“I’m heading out for the day but hopefully we’ll catch up later. Looking forward to meeting my roommate for the next year,” I read aloud. The only signature on the note was my roommate’s initials and that didn’t tell me much, but it was written on a piece of sticky note paper that proudly proclaimed the name of a high school in some town I’d never heard of. I scribbled ‘See you later’ and my own initials and left it there.

I sighed again and got dressed, grabbed my purse out of my closet and headed out to meet Joe, Les and Peggy for breakfast. There were two doors to the room — one to the living area and one to the hall. Unless I had to go to the bathroom or take a shower, that was the door I planned on using for the duration.

It had been a long day. Even though I had a pretty good idea of where things were on campus, Joe had insisted we actually walk our routes so we had a better idea of how long it would take to get from class to class. We’d walked my schedule and then his. Then there was freshman orientation — four hours of information that I could have gleaned in ten minutes with a good pamphlet or the handbook they handed out at the end of hour three. But I had to sit there through the entire thing.

And it was so hot.

But Dr. Monroe informed us that using the handouts of the schedule as fans would burn enough energy that we’d actually end up warmer than if we didn’t use them. The output of energy would be greater than the offsetting breeze created by the papers.

And so there I was — Freshman Orientation — the highlight of my day. I used the time to people watch, something I often did, making up stories about the people as I went.

Like there. A redheaded girl wearing a halter top was actually making out with her blond boyfriend who was likely on the football team given his Metropolis University practice jersey. They may as well have been sharing a seat.

Or there. Two science or math nerds sat next to each other. Twins by the looks of it, complete with pocket protectors and calculators. Both had glasses that had seen better days and dark hair that needed a barber desperately.

Behind them were a couple of high school cheerleaders who probably hoped to make one of the squads at Met U. I actually almost snorted. Good luck. Competition was fierce and Met U’s cheer squads regularly placed in national competition. The blondes with school colored ribbons around their pony tails probably didn’t stand a chance.

I looked to the other side of the large auditorium.

There was a blonde country girl — evident by her hair and clothes that were at least two seasons out of style and probably not really in style then. Well, I amended mentally, probably a small town girl. The dark haired boy next to her put his arm around the back of her seat and whispered something in her ear. The girl blushed. Probably whispering about what they could do in their co-ed dorm now that they were away from Mommy and Daddy. He looked up and straight at me. For just a second our eyes met and then he turned back to the speaker at the front of the room.

My eyes narrowed. What was that all about?

I moved a few rows behind the couple from Podunk, Iowa. Goths.

Behind them a few more football players and then a guy I knew had been recruited for the basketball team. Playing ‘this is your life’ with them was no fun — it was too obvious.

Another blonde. This one was going to be a doctor.

The brown haired jock behind her was probably going to be one, too. I could tell he was a jock, but this one was probably fairly intelligent judging by the book in his hand. He was paying less attention to the orientation than I was and the book he was reading was as thick as a phone book. Squinting, it looked to be one of the Lord of the Rings novels, but I wasn't sure.

Behind him was a mousey brunette female. Probably barely made it out of high school and was here because if she wasn't her parents would stop paying for her car insurance and make her get a job.

My gaze moved roamed the room again, not stopping as I noticed the dark haired country boy glancing my way. I passed by them, until I saw a green mohawk I'd managed to miss the first time around. He was asleep. Real college material.

I sighed and realized that the handbooks were finally coming around. I took one from Joe and passed the box on.

Joe put his arm around me and asked if I wanted to go out to dinner again.

I shook my head. I needed a good night's sleep and if there were going to be boyfriends over regularly, I was going to have to get to my room early and stake out my space. There was no way I was going to let my roommate keep me out with a rubber band or tie or some such nonsense on the door knob.

Finally the meeting broke up. I was grateful my dad had bought me a mini-fridge and a microwave and that I'd had the foresight to have it stocked already. The food service my dad used for his meals gladly packaged some up into single servings, but they would only be good in the fridge for a few days. They'd last longer in the freezer, but the freezer on that thing wasn't even worth trying.

Joe and I separated as he found Les and they headed off for dinner then a football meeting.

Now I stood in front of the door to my room. Someone was moving around inside.

Here it went. Time to meet the roommate. I checked the door again to make sure there wasn't some sign that I was supposed to stay out and came up with nothing.

I stuck my key in the lock and turned it, opening the door as I went.

I was taken aback by the sight in front of me.

The country boy from the auditorium was there. His hair was damp and he was wearing only a towel.

Something in me snapped.

"Who are you and what the hell are you doing in my room?"

Part 3

Clark

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I could feel my eyes narrow. It was the brunette who'd been staring at me and Lana during orientation. "Your room?"

"Yeah, Einstein. My room." She glared at me. "I'll ask again. Who are you and what the hell are you doing in my room? Do I need to go slower?"

I glared back. Who did she think she was? "No, I understood you the first time. I just wondered what psychiatric disorder you're suffering from."

"Why on earth would you think I have a psychiatric disorder?"

"Because you're clearly delusional."

She scowled at me and walked all the way into the room, slamming the door behind her. She tossed her purse onto the top bunk. "I don't know who you think you are, standing in my room basically naked, but if you don't get out, I will call security."

"Go for it. And then they'll tell you that *you're* the one that's in the wrong room."

"What?"

"Who are you and what the hell are you doing in my room?"

"Excuse me?" I could see the color rising in her face.

"Yeah, Einstein. My room. I'll ask again. Who are you and what the hell are you doing in my room? Do I need to go slower?" Somehow, I couldn't stop myself. It was really a good thing my mom wasn't here or she'd grab me by the ear and drag me off for a good talking to. It amazed me that nothing else hurt me but one tiny Kansas woman grabbing my ear made it prickle for days.

"So you're a parrot?" She crossed her arms in front of her. "That still doesn't explain why you're in my room."

"This is *my* room, so why don't you get out and go find your own?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I think you're the one who's delusional. This is *my* room."

"Would you like to see my room assignment form? Then will you get out?"

She held out her hand.

I sighed and moved to my desk. I pulled out the folder they'd given me when I registered the day before and pulled out my room assignment form. "See?"

She reached for it and I pulled it back.

"What do you say?"

"Excuse me?" It was a good thing *she* couldn't shoot fire out of her eyes or I would have been burned to a crisp right then and there.

"What do you say?"

She rolled her eyes and put on what had to be a fake smile. "Excuse me, kind sir, could I please see that paper, please, sir?"

"Much better." I handed it to her.

I saw her eyes narrow again. "This is impossible," she muttered.

"What?"

"This is your room."

I grinned for the first time since she'd opened the door. "Told you."

She walked to the other desk and pulled out a similar folder and another room assignment form. She glared at me as she handed it over.

I looked at it. Lois Lane. Could she be related to all the Lane stuff on campus? I shook myself. What was it she wanted me to see? I looked further. Dormitory: Weller Hall. Okay. Room number... I looked again. "This is impossible."

"I already said that, Captain Obvious."

"You're my roommate?"

"Looks that way. For now. You'll be moving out."

I scanned the rest of the paper then handed it back. "Nope. I'm staying. You can go."

"What makes you think I'm going anywhere?"

"Well, you're local. I'm not. There are no dorm rooms anywhere on campus and we both know it."

"I'm not local."

I'd taken note of her home address. "Pittsdale isn't that far from here."

"It's way too far to commute."

I shrugged. "It's a lot closer than Kansas."

"You can go live with my dad and I'll stay here."

"Nope. I want to live here and my form is correct so..."

"What do you mean your form 'is correct'? Are you implying mine isn't?"

I looked her up and down and raised an eyebrow. She really was an attractive young lady. In another universe — one without a Lana — I might have even asked her out. "You don't look like someone who should have checked 'male' on her forms."

"What?"

I pointed to the form. "It says 'male' under gender."

She looked at the paper more closely. "I am not a male and I certainly never checked male on any form."

“Well, I figured you’re not a male. I’m not blind you know.” The blouse she was wearing certainly emphasized that — without flaunting it.

I was glad I was invulnerable because the look she gave me could kill a lesser mortal.

Her face fell and she sank into the chair she’d pulled out when digging for her folder. “The name thing.”

“What name thing?”

“Um... listen, before we go on... would you mind putting some clothes on?”

I glanced down. I’d forgotten I wasn’t dressed yet. “Yeah, sure.” I grabbed my things. “I’ll be right back.” I was back less than two minutes later to find her sitting at the desk with her face in her hands. She swiped at her face before turning to look at me.

“They had my name spelled wrong in the computers. They must have changed my gender, too.”

“Easier said than done,” I couldn’t help saying, earning me another look that could kill. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“They had me down as Louis instead of Lois. We got it straightened out yesterday when I checked in at the gym. I wasn’t even supposed to be in Weller. I was supposed to be in an all girls dorm on an academic floor, but they must have moved me after they changed it.” She sighed. “And, of course, there’s no empty dorm rooms anywhere. I asked if my suitemates were girls and they said yes. It didn’t even occur to me to ask about my roommate.”

I sat in my own desk chair. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For giving you a hard time. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I started it,” she admitted, still refusing to look at me again.

“My parents raised me better than that though and I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.” She took a deep breath. “But what do we do now? One of us has to move and there’s nowhere to go.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll call my dad. He might be able to do something.”

“How could your dad help?”

She glanced at me but then returned to staring out the window over her desk. “He’s a distinguished alumnus who’s donated a lot of money to the school over the years. He has some pull.”

“So you are related to all the Lane stuff around here?”

She nodded. “That’s us. The Lanes. And this is just the latest in the series of mishaps that is my life.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mom and sister were in a car accident when I was a kid. That’s why it’s the Ellen Lane *Memorial* Medical Building and the Lucy Lane *Memorial* Scholarship Fund. My dad made a lot of money on some invention to help with sports injuries and stuff.”

“Wait. Is your dad Dr. Sam Lane?” I asked, incredulous.

“That’s him. You’ve heard of him?”

“Anyone who’s ever read the sports pages has heard of him.”

She shrugged. “Anyway, he made a ton of money and donated a bunch of it to the school over the years. After my mom and sister died, he went into a deep depression and lost nearly everything when his partner took advantage of his misery. We managed to keep the house and cabin and enough to keep paying some employees he had but that was about it. He went back to private sports medicine practice and is doing very well again and even has some other new invention, but he signed over all the rights to everything from before without realizing he did it. Once he realized what happened, he sued his former partner and got a settlement — a pretty good one — but that’s it.

“I’ve already been accused of getting into the journalism program because of who my dad is and not because of my abilities, which is a load of bull. I’m a good writer and I’m going to be a great reporter, but that doesn’t matter.”

She was a Journalism major? Well, we had that in common.

“And... Anyway, a bunch of other stuff I’m not about to confide in you that has made my life one mishap after another.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your mom and sister and what happened to your dad.” I really meant it.

She shrugged. “It’s been a long time now. I still miss them, but that’s just part of life.”

“So what do we do?”

“I’ll call my dad, but I doubt there’s anything he can do. I already called him yesterday when I found out that my dorm assignment was wrong and he said the campus is overflowing.”

“That’s what I heard, too.”

There was a knock on the door. “Clark?” It was a girl’s voice.

“Who’s that?”

I groaned. “My girlfriend who happens to be one of our suitemates.”

“The blonde?”

“It was you looking at us.”

She shrugged. “I looked at lots of people.”

Another knock. “Clark? Can I come in?”

“Yeah, come on in.”

The door opened and Lana came in. I saw her eyes narrow when she saw Lois. “Who’s this?”

“This is Lois.”

“What’s she doing in your room?”

“Don’t you mean what’s he doing in my room?” Lois retorted.

“Excuse me?” The sarcasm dripped from Lana’s voice.

I sighed. “There was a mix-up with Lois’ paperwork and they’ve got us in the same room.”

“Well, Lois. It’s nice to meet you and I wish we’d have the chance to get to know you better, but since you’ll be moving, I don’t guess we will.” I cringed slightly at the fake sweetness I heard coming from Lana.

“I’m not moving.” She turned one of those looks Lana’s direction.

“You have to. Clark’s not. We made arrangements to be suitemates a long time ago and this is a co-ed suite floor so... that means you’ll have to find somewhere else to live.”

I sighed again. “Lana, give her a break. She didn’t do this. It was a mix-up.”

“And I’m not moving so you’ll have to get used to me,” Lois told her.

“Well, Clark’s not moving either,” Lana shot back.

“Lana, can you give us a few minutes so we can straighten this out?”

I saw her glare at Lois then she turned to speak to me. “Can I see you for a minute?”

I walked over to the door. “What, Lana?”

“What are you going to do?” she hissed.

“What do you mean?”

“You have to get her out of here. Or better yet, she can move to my room and I’ll move in here.”

I sighed. “That’s not going to happen, Lana, and you and I both know it. Our parents would flip and the money we’re getting from them would disappear.”

“We won’t tell them.”

“I’m not going to lie to my parents.” I put my arms around her. “How’s your roommate?”

“She’s nice.”

“What’s her name?”

“Linda King.”

“Linda King is your roommate?” Lois interrupted. “Oh this just gets better and better.”

Lana didn’t move from my arms. “You know her?”

“We’ve met. So you can forget any plans that you might have to make me move in with her so you two can be together. It’s not gonna happen.”

“So you’re an eavesdropper?”

“If you didn’t want to be heard, you should have moved a little farther away and whispered,” Lois retorted.

“Lana,” I said, pulling her farther out into the living area. “We can’t be roommates regardless. Our parents were upset enough when they found out we were suitemates and wondered how that happened. If they find out we requested it, they’ll be even more upset.”

“So what are you going to do?”

I sighed. “I don’t know, but let me figure it out okay?”

She nodded and kissed me.

I heard Lois clear her throat behind me. “Do you mind?”

I pulled back. “Why don’t you go ahead and go to the cafeteria and I’ll catch up with you in a bit?”

“Fine.” She kissed me again, more quickly this time. “Don’t be long, okay?”

I nodded. “I won’t.” I leaned in closer to her and whispered. “I like cookie dough.”

She grinned. “I know.” Another quick kiss and she left.

I moved back into his room and shut the door behind me. “So what do we do?”

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Lois

I fought to keep the tears from spilling over. This was great. I was in the wrong dorm with a roommate of the wrong gender and Linda King was one of my suitemates. What else could go wrong? And it looked like I was going to have deal with Clark and Lana sucking face every time I turned around.

“I don’t know, but I can’t move home right now,” I told him.

“I’m not trying to say that’s what you should do, but why not?”

“I just can’t, okay. It’s too far away and it’s not going to happen.”

“Well, I obviously can’t commute.”

“No.” I watched as he sat back in his chair.

He took a deep breath. “Well, there’s one obvious solution, but...”

“We share.”

“Well, I was going to say we stay roommates, but... yeah, basically.”

“Do we report this to the campus people?”

“What will they do if we do?”

I sighed. “Probably make me move home and I can’t do that.”

“Then we won’t tell them.”

“We’ll have to come up with some ground rules.”

“Of course.”

“Like no walking around in towels.” That was one distraction I certainly didn’t need. Joe wasn’t going to be any happier about this than Lana was.

I watched a smile cross his face. What was that about?

“No walking around in towels,” he agreed.

“Why don’t you go meet Lana for dinner and we’ll talk about it later?”

He nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll be back in a bit — what about you?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got some food in the fridge...”

“We have a fridge?”

“No, we don’t. I have a fridge.”

“Ah.”

“If you ask nicely, I’ll share.”

He laughed and then smiled at me. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He grabbed his keys and wallet and stuck them in his pockets. “Sure you’ll be okay here?”

I nodded. “Yeah. My boyfriend may be by in a while anyway.”

He grinned and winked at me. “Good thing I’ve already got a girl or I might be jealous.”

I glared at him. “Whatever, Kent. Go find your girl and I’ll see you later.”

“See ya.” And he walked out the door.

I climbed to my top bunk and stared at the ceiling. At least he seemed like a nice guy. Too bad his girlfriend and her roommate were evil.

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Clark

How on earth was I going to tell Lana that Lois wasn’t moving?

I jogged down the stairs and headed towards the cafeteria. She was not going to be happy about it.

Neither were my parents. How was I going to explain it to them? Actually, that might be the easier of the two. I contemplating finding an alley or something and taking off really fast and heading back to Kansas to talk to them, but I knew that wasn’t really an option. We’d talked about it before I left and we agreed that any visits would have to be at night and then only sparingly. I didn’t think the second day I was here would qualify as sparingly.

On the other hand, this was pretty big so maybe it did qualify as worthy of a trip home. Maybe tonight, if I could get away without anyone noticing.

Finally I made it to the cafeteria and spotted Lana. Deciding I didn’t really want to eat, I just went to sit with her and a girl I guessed was Linda.

“Hey,” I said, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“So is she gone?”

I sighed. “No.”

“When is she leaving?”

“She’s not, Baby.”

“Don’t ‘baby’ me, Clark Kent.” She refused to look at me.

“She can’t move home and there’s no other place to live on campus. What’s she supposed to do?”

She finally looked me in the eye. “That is not your problem.”

“Come on, Lana. Don’t be like that.”

She sighed. “You’re too nice for your own good — for my own good — you know that?”

I grinned at her. “It’s why you love me.”

She finally smiled back. “Well, one reason.” She looked at the other girl sitting at the table. “I’m sorry — Linda, this is my boyfriend, Clark. Clark, this is my roommate Linda.”

I held out my hand and Linda took it. “Nice to meet you, Linda.”

I didn’t really like the way she looked me up and down as much as she could since I was sitting, but I realized I’d done the same thing to Lois — not something I would normally do, but I was being kind of a jerk at the time. I hoped I hadn’t made her as uncomfortable as Linda was making me.

“You know,” she said. “I went to high school with Lois.”

“Really?” I said. My first impressions were usually pretty good — and had been since I was little, my mom told me — and my first impression of Lois, claws towards Lana notwithstanding, was much better than my impression of Linda who seemed to be regarding me as a piece of meat. It wasn’t the first time a girl had looked at me like that and Lana usually got very possessive, but she didn’t seem to notice this time.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t recommend letting her stay your roommate. If I were you, I’d let the housing people know as soon as you can,” she advised.

That sort of set me on edge a bit. “I’ll take that under advisement,” I told her. “But usually I like to make my own mind up about people.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she said with a shake of her head.

I still wasn’t sure what I’d been warned about, but one thing was sure — I was going to keep as much distance between

myself and Linda as I could.

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Part 4

Lois

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When he'd called, I'd told Joe that I didn't feel well, which was the God's honest truth. Clark did seem like a nice enough guy once he put some clothes on. Before that, he'd been kind of a jerk, but he had apologized. And then, he threw my attitude back in my face without being mean or anything like that. He'd make a much better verbal sparring partner than Joe ever did.

I was lying on my stomach on my bunk reading the day's edition of the Daily Planet when Clark got back from wherever it was he'd gone with Cruella and Madame Medusa. I hadn't decided who was who yet. One would skin puppies and the other was cruel to little orphan girls and then sicced her crocodiles on them. Or were they alligators? Eh. It didn't really matter — they were both sick and twisted, just like Lana and Linda.

I barely glanced at him as he walked in. "So, did the Ice Princess forbid you from sharing a room with me?"

He sighed. I really shouldn't push him if I wanted this semester to go smoothly and hope that he wouldn't report this to the housing people.

I folded the paper and sighed as I sat up. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Linda just rubs me the wrong way and the idea that I'm going to be sharing a suite with her for the next year has been irritating me all night."

"For what it's worth, she doesn't seem to like you either."

I snorted. Gee, that was ladylike. "That's not surprising. She's hated me ever since I told our history teacher she was cheating off of me. And the same day that Paul, our editor at the paper, asked me to Homecoming instead of her. She didn't care that I turned him down because he was a creep."

"Was she cheating off of you?" he asked with a raised brow.

"I wouldn't have turned her in if she wasn't. She wouldn't know John Adams from John Kennedy if her life depended on it. She said something once about Henry Ford and Ben Franklin being presidents."

"That's pretty bad, but Lana made the Henry Ford slip once too. It's probably not that uncommon — right last name and all. And Ben Franklin *was* one of the Founding Fathers," he pointed out — just to irritate me, I was sure.

"She also said John Lennon invented Communism and Nixon was impeached."

Clark grimaced. "Well, probably 75% of the American population believes Nixon was impeached."

"But he wasn't," I pointed out. "Andrew Johnson and Fred Garner *were*."

"You made your point. She has good reason to dislike you, even if she was wrong to start with. And you have good reason to dislike her."

"Who are you? Jimmy Carter? Don't bother trying to negotiate a peace treaty between us."

"I won't."

I sighed and leaned my head back against the wall. If I had to be roomed with a guy, at least he was intelligent enough to hold his own with me. Part of me wished he wasn't nearly as good looking, but Adonis had nothing on this guy. I didn't know if I'd ever get the sight of him in a towel out of my mind. I'd never seen Joe in a towel, but I knew he didn't look like that.

"So, ground rules," I started. "No walking around in towels or otherwise undressed." There. That should take care of that — I wouldn't be seeing that again. And that was good. Really it was. Why again? Just because I was going out with Joe didn't mean I couldn't appreciate a well-built guy, right? I *knew* he looked at other girls but that he wouldn't do more than look while we were dating. Somehow I doubted Clark would even look at another girl

while he was in a relationship.

"Sounds good. What else?"

"Lights out at ten."

He raised a brow. "Ten?"

"Ten-thirty. You want to study later than that, go to the other room."

He nodded. "No alarms before six-thirty except for special events of some kind."

"Not a problem."

"And no girlie stuff lying around." He waved an arm vaguely towards the room. "No froo froo pillows or anything."

I raised an eyebrow. He could see my very not girlie navy blue comforter set. Did he really think I was going to be hanging lace curtains? "You might want to mention that to Lana before you get hitched, Farmboy." I'd peeked in their room and it looked like a cotton candy machine had thrown up all over the place. That I'd picked the lock wasn't the point. I needed the practice.

He glared at me. "None of your business, Lane."

I rolled my eyes back. "No leaving your stinky sweat socks all over the place."

He countered with, "No loud music."

"No girlfriends spending the night in your bed," I countered back.

"No boyfriends spending the night in *your* bed," he was quick to reply.

"Not that it's any of your business, but it won't be a problem," I assured him.

"For me either."

I wasn't sure I believed that. "Fine. Sleep in her bunk if you must, but not in here."

He smirked. "Don't worry about it."

"Do we need a 'keep out' system?"

"A what?"

"Well, a do not disturb sign might be a bit obvious, don't you think?"

"I guess."

I knew Joe and I weren't going to need any system, but I really didn't need to walk in on him and Cruella going at it. "Innocuous note on the outside white boards."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." I might do it every once in a while just because I could.

"So, for the sake of discussion, Lana and I wanted some privacy for some reason..."

For some reason? Surely they taught the birds and the bees on the farm.

"...I'd write 'Call Mom' on the white boards on the outside of both doors."

"That won't work."

"Why not?"

I glared at him. "My mom's dead, Rainman."

His face changed and he actually looked a bit sympathetic.

"Right. Sorry. How about 'Call Dad'?"

I shrugged. "That works. Real phone messages go on the inside white board and all phone messages get written down and delivered. No exceptions."

He raised a brow. "You think I won't deliver your messages?"

"I think you might be a little too involved in determining what kind of lip gloss Ellie Mae is wearing to remember to write it down."

He started. Just a bit. I was right. I'd seen three different kinds in the bathroom and I knew that wasn't Linda's style so they must have been Lana's. It was disgusting on more levels than I knew what to do with.

"Do you call everyone names?" he asked.

"Only the people I like," I said sweetly. Too sweetly I knew. "Sorry. It's been a rough couple of days and I had a fight with

Joe.”

“Just Joe? He doesn’t get a nickname?”

“Eh. Sometimes he’s Elway, or even Farve, when he ticks me off.”

“Why Elway?”

“Joe’s a quarterback, but he prefers Steve Young. He’s really not a Broncos or Packers fan.”

“So the boyfriend is a jock, huh?”

“At least he knows the difference between the car guy and the former president. And I’m sure you’ve never picked up a football in your life.” I stared at him. He had to be a jock so making fun of Joe — even if I wasn’t particularly fond of him at the moment — wasn’t really nice of him.

“I have. I played football, basketball and baseball in high school, but I’m here on an academic scholarship.”

“Whatever.” I sighed.

“So, Lana and Linda get nicknames — and I’m guessing you had a couple others you won’t say out loud too; like the wicked stepsisters from Cinderella or something. I’ve gotten a couple nicknames already and Joe gets called Elway or Farve every once in a while. What gives?”

“He’s nice to me.” That wasn’t the real reason.

“I don’t buy it.”

“It wasn’t for sale.”

A puzzled look crossed his face for a second. “I still don’t buy it — for sale or not.”

“Fine. Generally, I only give nicknames to people who stir up strong emotions — when they stir up those emotions — or who catch me when my emotions are already stirred up.”

“And your boyfriend doesn’t stir up strong emotions in you?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

I sighed. “Not really. He’s not Mr. Right. I’ve known that for two years and he knows that I’m not about to get serious with him. He wants someone to make out with on Friday nights and I don’t really want to sit at home. That’s about it.”

“So you make out with him just to get out of the house?”

This guy was too intuitive for my own good. “He’s not a bad kisser. He doesn’t push my limits and if either one of us found someone else, it wouldn’t be a big deal at all.”

“I see.” He looked at me contemplatively. “Well, I hope that you find someone who stirs up those emotions in you. Someone who loves you for you — nicknames and all.”

I shrugged. “If that kind of love exists, maybe I’ll find it, but if not that’s okay too. I have a career ladder to climb anyway.”

“What? No family?”

“I dunno. Maybe. Someday. Not till after the first Pulitzer I win for some big expose in the Daily Planet.”

“Wow, you aim high, don’t you?”

“So what if I do?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” He shrugged. “Go for it. If anyone can do it, you can.”

He was right. If anyone could do it, I could.

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Clark

It was a several hours later before I could sneak away. I’d called my folks — just a casual call to see what they were up to, to say hi and I missed them — and ascertained that they were getting ready to turn in for the night and I knew that, if I was going, I better get there before they did that. Knowing my folks, they were taking full advantage of me moving out. I shuddered, while at the same time hoping that Lana and I were still like that when we’d been married as long as they had.

I found a deserted part of campus and took off as fast as I could, finding myself in Kansas mere minutes later. I turned my hearing on and heard only Mom and Dad talking about their plans for the next day, so landed quickly and knocked on the door. Mom answered it a minute later.

“Clark! What are you doing here? Is everything okay?” She pulled me inside quickly, glancing around nervously before shutting the door.

I thought it was kind of funny; the closest house was nearly two miles away after all and it wasn’t like they got many unexpected visitors this time of night. Well, except Granny Kent but I’d landed on the opposite side of the farmhouse from the house where she lived for a reason.

She didn’t appreciate my smirk.

“Clark Kent, what are you doing here?”

I shrugged. “I needed to talk to you guys and I wanted to do it in person. It’s nothing too serious or anything, but I need some advice and I didn’t really want to do it over the phone.”

“Well, come on in and sit down. Do you want a drink?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’m fine, thanks, Mom.” I pulled her into a big hug. “I’ve missed you.”

She put her arms around me and hugged back. “I’ve missed you, too, son, but it hasn’t even been a week. And we did talk to you fifteen minutes ago.” She kept her arms around me — a sure sign that she’d missed me — and looked up at me. “Why did we talk to you fifteen minutes ago if you were planning on coming here?”

I knew my face was as red as one of her tomatoes. “I knew I was coming, I just wanted to make sure you guys were home and not... busy.”

She laughed. “Well, I’m sure your dad’s wondering who’s here.”

I kept my arm around her as we walked to the kitchen. I knew Lana wouldn’t understand how much I’d missed her — and Dad, too — but I had. Lana also didn’t understand wanting advice from my parents either. She rarely asked hers about anything. As far as I knew, her mom had never had *the* talk with her, and I *knew* her dad hadn’t. Thank goodness for health class or something. Me, on the other hand, my parents had always been honest with me. I knew far more about their love life than I would have preferred but a big part of that was because I hadn’t told them right away when I started hearing and seeing things I shouldn’t. I knew they’d been a lot more careful once I had told them about it — at least until I’d gotten the strange powers under control. They had both, however, talked to me about that kind of stuff, but I knew Lana’s parents hadn’t. I guess it was part of the close relationship with my parents that she just didn’t understand because she didn’t have it with hers. I hoped that someday she’d have that kind of relationship with my mom.

“Look who’s here, Jonathan.”

Dad looked up from the jigsaw puzzle sitting on the table. So that’s what they’d been doing when I called; I hadn’t been able to figure it out from the background noise. “Clark, what’re you doing here?”

Mom hated it when I turned the chairs around to straddle them, but I did it anyway. “There’s something I need to talk to you guys about and I’m not sure what to do.”

“Lana’s not pregnant, is she?” Dad asked furiously.

“What?! Dad! No!” I shook my head emphatically. “We aren’t even... you know. Trust me. Lana *cannot* be pregnant!”

Dad breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good to know.”

“Besides, even if we were, you guys raised me to be a lot more careful than that,” I pointed out, not really wanting to make this a conversation about my lack of sex life. “That’s *not* why I’m here.”

“Then why are you here?” Mom asked from the counter where she was pouring herself another cup of coffee — decaf at this time of night, I was sure.

“Remember I told you I hadn’t met my roommate yet?”

They nodded.

“And how unhappy you were to find out that they’d put me

and Lana in the same suite?”

Mom’s eyes darkened and Dad’s jaw set as they nodded. Maybe it would have been a lot smarter to not request the same suite, but it was too late now.

“Well, there was a paperwork mix up.”

“Is Lana your roommate?” Dad wasn’t very good at hiding it when he was starting to get mad.

“No!” I shook my head. “Will you let me talk and stop jumping to conclusions?”

“He’s right, Jonathan.” Mom took a deep breath and I knew she wasn’t as calm as she projected. She was worried about what I was about to say, too.

“Lana’s not my roommate, *but...*” I paused wondering how they were going to take this. “...my roommate is a girl.”

“How on earth...” Dad started but Mom put her hand on his and he stopped.

“There was a paperwork mix-up in registration. Her name is Lois, but someone stuck a ‘u’ in there and made her Louis and had her down as a male, which she obviously isn’t, but there aren’t any empty rooms on campus and even though she’s from the Metropolis area, she says she can’t move home.” I blurted it all out and then took a deep breath, waiting for their reactions.

There was nothing for a minute and I took that as a bad sign.

“What does Lana think?” Mom finally asked.

I shrugged. “She’s not happy about it, but she doesn’t have anything to worry about. Lois seems nice, but my heart belongs to Lana, you guys know that.”

Mom sighed. “I still worry about you two being so serious so young.”

I rolled my eyes. We’d had this conversation more times than I cared to remember. “You were this serious younger than we are, Mom,” I pointed out.

“Maybe, but somehow I don’t think you’re planning on waiting until you finish college to propose to her, are you?”

I didn’t say anything, but stared at the table.

“Or to get married,” Dad stated.

“We’re not you guys. I love her and she loves me,” I said defensively. “We’re going to the same college so there’s no long distance issue and I’m not going into the Navy like Dad,” I pointed out.

“No, you’re not,” Mom agreed, “but still...”

I sighed. “I’m not here to discuss me and Lana. I just wanted to let you know that I had a girl for a roommate and see what you thought and how I should handle it.”

“Well, is there any way to get another roommate?” Dad asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t think so and if we bring it to their attention, then they’d probably make her leave since she’s local and I’m not and my gender was right on my forms and hers wasn’t, even though it wasn’t her fault.”

Mom looked at me quizzically. “If she’s local why can’t she move home?”

“I don’t know. She just said that she couldn’t move home. She was in tears over it.”

They shared a look before Mom spoke again. “And you always are a sucker for tears, aren’t you?”

“Well, Lana said I’m too nice for my own good.”

“Now, that I believe. Are you sure she wasn’t just turning on the waterworks?”

I shook my head. “No. She was really upset. She said that her mom and little sister had died when she was a kid — and something’s going on with her dad but she didn’t tell me what. Her dad’s a bigwig alumnus but even he couldn’t get her back into the dorm she’d originally requested. You know Lana’s scholarship — the Lucy Lane Memorial Scholarship?” They nodded. “That’s her sister.”

“That’s rough, but what does that have to do with not moving

home?” Dad asked.

I sighed. “I don’t know. She just said that she couldn’t move home and started crying. She didn’t want me to see her, I don’t think, but I’d gone to put some clothes on and when I came back...”

“You weren’t dressed?” Mom raised an eyebrow.

I turned red again. “I’d just gotten out of the shower and went to get dressed and she walked in before I took my towel off. It’s good she wasn’t a few seconds later,” I pointed out. “I don’t know what else to do. I mean sure, I could report it to the housing people, but I told her I wouldn’t and she’d have to move home which she obviously doesn’t want to do or we can stay roommates, which Lana’s not happy about...”

“Obviously.”

“Obviously,” I repeated. “She seems nice enough and we agreed to some ground rules — get dressed in the bathroom, for one. And a couple other things. She said something about a signal on the whiteboards on the doors if... one of us doesn’t want to be disturbed.” I couldn’t believe I said that. It earned me a glare from Dad. “Hey! It was her suggestion. I didn’t say I’d need it.”

“We trust you, Clark. To be responsible at the very least. And we know you haven’t told Lana everything yet and you know that we’d be very disappointed if you didn’t tell her first.” That came from Dad.

“I know. And Lana and I are planning on waiting until we get married. I’ve told you that,” I reminded them. “We decided that a long time ago.”

“We know that, but we also know that things change. Your dad and I just want to make sure you know where we stand.”

“I do. I have since I was like five.” At my mother’s disapproving stare, I amended my statement. “Okay. Fifteen, but still.”

“We certainly didn’t discuss those things with you when you were five,” Mom said, indignant.

“But you did make out in front of me all the time,” I told her.

Dad gave me a look that made me wish I’d had this conversation over the phone.

“Okay, fine. Making out is a bit strong, but it was always embarrassing to have my friends over.”

Secretly, I’d... not liked that they were half all over each other the whole time I was growing up, but at least I never doubted that they loved each other.

Dad took Mom’s hand and looked at her the same way I remembered him looking at her when I was five. “When you’re married, son, you’ll understand.” He raised a brow at me. “And I seem to remember a time or two when you and Lana were a little closer on the couch than you should have been and a few guilty looks when we walked in.”

I turned beet red, I was sure. “We never crossed the line. Any line,” I mumbled.

Mom patted my hand. “We believe you.”

I stood up and flipped the chair back around. “I better get back. Lana’s probably looking for me by now.”

Dad frowned. “It’s a bit late, isn’t it?”

I shook my head. “We don’t have to be up with the roosters like you two do.” I gave them both big hugs and after a few more minutes chatting, took off for Metropolis.

\*\*\*

Part 5  
October 2002  
Lois

~~~~~  
I slipped on my favorite pair of jeans and buttoned them. They fit perfectly, which was part of the reason why they were my favorites. I pulled on my favorite Daily Planet sweatshirt. It hung almost to mid-thigh and was long enough that when I held my arms at my sides, the sleeves covered my hands; those were

just two of the reasons I loved it.

I quickly pulled my hair back into a pony tail and put on some lip gloss — none of the flavored junk Ellie Mae favored, but rather my favorite color. I didn't really care if Joe liked it or not. Well, I cared, but I didn't really *care*.

I was ready not a moment too soon because no sooner had I finished application, than there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," I called.

"Hey, beautiful."

"Hey, yourself," I said, smiling at him.

He leaned on the doorframe. "You ready?"

I nodded. "Where are we meeting Les and Peggy?" I stuck my ID and some cash in my back pocket.

"At the trail — they're both home for the weekend." He shut the door behind me after I pushed the button to lock it from the inside. "Where's Dylan and Brenda?"

I shook my head. "Nice try," I smiled at him as he leaned in to kiss me.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close as he kissed me again.

"You don't like my 90210 reference?" he asked when he moved back. "You have all the seasons on DVD."

I grinned. "No, I don't. They've only released the first few seasons."

"You don't like my 90210 reference or you don't have all the seasons or both?"

"Both." He took my hand as we walked down the hall to the elevator. "Dylan and Brenda is a good reference, but I liked both of them, so I wouldn't use them. I'd go with Chandler and Janice."

"Why is that? Why not Ross and Rachel?"

I wrapped my arms around him as we waited for the elevator. "I like Chandler but not Ross. I like Rachel but not Janice. So Chandler and Janice are it." I kissed him lightly as the doors opened. "What's with the questions about the nicknames?"

He shrugged. "You've been using them a lot more lately, especially where your suitemates are concerned. Thought I'd figure out the rules."

We exited on the main floor and I looked around to make sure no one was around. "I like Clark, so he gets a good guy nickname. I don't like Lana, so she gets a nickname of a girl I don't like. Other nicknames just sort of depend on the situation."

"Got it." We walked out towards Joe's Mustang. "So what if I like Lana but not Clark. Then could I use Ross and Rachel?"

I glared at him. "Not if you want a date for next weekend."

He put his arm around me and tugged me towards him. "You know I do."

"Good. Then you won't use Ross and Rachel." I wrapped my arm around his waist and rested my head on his shoulder. No, we weren't soul mates or anything like that, but he was a great guy and my best friend, besides being a *very* good kisser.

"Fine, I won't use Ross and Rachel. But you never answered my question."

"Which was?" I asked.

"Where Chandler and Janice are."

"Oh, that." I shrugged. "Not sure. She usually volunteers on Saturdays, but I have no idea where or doing what. I think anyway." I glanced around. "Clark probably drove her; I don't see his truck anywhere. He was gone before I woke up this morning."

"Well, are you ready for this?" he asked as he opened the car door for me.

I just looked at him. "You should know better than to ask me that, Joe. We're going to practically be in my own backyard."

He laughed. "I know."

~~~~~  
Clark

I watched as Lana sat on the floor with the four and five-year-olds. She was totally in her element. The twelve or so children were completely captivated with her and the story she was reading. It was the second story of the morning and I was sure it wasn't going to be the last.

I was leaning against one of the tables, legs stretched out in front of me crossed at the ankles.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. She was beautiful and, someday, she was going to be a great mother to our kids and a great preschool teacher.

She turned the page and her voice changed to reflect a different character. The kids all giggled at her rendition of an ant. Before long, the book ended and she set it to the side. There was a chorus of 'one more, please, Miss Lana' and she pretended to think about it for a minute before she gave an exaggerated sigh and picked up another book.

The kids giggled as she smiled and read the title of the book. I pushed up from the table and headed towards the study area as I noticed one of the older kids walk in. "Hey, Darryl," I said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Hi, Clark," he answered with a smile.

"How'd you do on your English paper?"

His grin got even bigger. "B+!"

"Hey! That's great!" I was genuinely happy for him. We'd spent several hours the weekend before working on it. "I knew you could do it."

"You helped."

I shook my head as we sat at one of the tables. "You did all the work. I just helped guide you a bit." I watched as he pulled his backpack out. "What are we going to work on today?"

"Geography, if that's okay."

"Whatever you need." I lowered my voice. "If I don't know how to do something, I know how to Google."

He laughed. "Me, too." He looked over at the little kids. "My little sister loves her," he told me, nodding at Lana.

I grinned. "Me, too." I turned back to the table. "Geography it is, my friend."

For the next couple of hours, we covered Geography and U. S. History. The kids rotated in and out of Lana's reading group and she also read one-on-one with some of them, including Darryl's little sister. I kept track of her heartbeat as I worked with him.

When Darryl and I were finished, I hunted her down. She had just finished a making a construction paper crown with a little girl.

"Ready?" I asked her.

She looked up at me and smiled. She leaned over and whispered something. They both giggled before Lana put the crown over the little girl's brown curls.

A minute later, we were headed out to the parking lot. "So what did you tell her?"

"Who?"

"The little girl with the crown." I wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"I told her you were my prince." She leaned against me as we walked.

I groaned. "As long as I don't have to wear tights or something for Halloween so you can be some Medieval princess or something."

She laughed. "Don't worry. I wouldn't want you to put yourself on display like that."

I groaned again. "Thanks." I opened the door to the truck and she slid to the middle so I could get in after her. "Where to now?"

~~~~~  
Lois

Joe sat against the rock and I sat against Joe. His arms were wrapped around me and I rested the back of my head on his

shoulder.

“You made it,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “How many times have we made this hike? And I use the term ‘hike’ loosely. It’s a two hour *walk* to get here.” We looked out over the nearly pristine lake in New Troy National Forest. Les and Peggy had taken off for another area to have a picnic and, probably, to do things I didn’t want to think about. Joe and I had already eaten the lunch we brought with us. “The most difficult part of the trail is easy enough for a two-year-old.”

He laughed. “True.”

The house I’d grown up in — I couldn’t bring myself to call it ‘my house’ anymore, not with *her* living there — backed up to the NTNF. I could never remember how many acres Dad owned, but the back part of it was forested and melded seamlessly with the park. We’d been looking at one of the maps provided at the check-in station one day and realized that we could connect to this particular trail by following one of the streams near the back edge of the property. Since then, we’d been here many times — both as friends and as a couple. I wasn’t sure what his assorted girlfriend of the week would have thought about us hiking up here together, but he was faithful to a fault. He never cheated on a girlfriend, though most of the relationships didn’t last very long.

In fact, our relationship — if you added up all the separate times we’d been a semi-couple — was probably the longest relationship by far. A couple of others, one before me and one after, had lasted a couple months each, but that was it. Regardless, they’d had nothing to worry about.

“So what’re we going to do for the next hour until it’s time to start back?” Joe whispered in my ear.

“What do you want to do?” I asked him, knowing his answer and knowing he’d already know my response.

“You know what I want to do.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “And you know it’s not going to happen.”

“Aw, come on.” He sounded like a little boy who didn’t get the cookie he wanted. “You never want to go skinny dipping. Even when it is just the two of us.”

“First of all, it’s October. And while it’s a fairly nice October, the water is sure to be way too cold. And second, I know what you’ll want to do if you ever see me naked — to skinny dip or for any other reason — and you already know the answer to that.”

“So you’re gonna make me wait until we get married?” he asked, his face buried in my neck.

I snorted. “You really think we’re going to get married?”

“You never know.”

“Then fine. I’m going to make you wait until we get married.”

“And if we don’t get married?” he asked.

“Then you’ll never get to sleep in my bed.”

“Aw, come on. Just once, I want to sleep in your bed at the cabin.”

“Go some time when I’m not there.”

“Will you at least be my back up?” he asked me, running one hand over my arm.

“You mean if we’re both forty and not married, we hook up?”

“I was thinking more like thirty-five if we want kids.”

I thought about that for a minute. There were worse things. “Okay. If neither of us is married at thirty-five, we’ll get hitched.”

“Wanna kiss on it?”

I groaned. “You’d rather do a lot more than that.”

“You know I would, but I also know how you feel about that.” That was one thing I’d always respected about Joe. He’d never made it a secret that he wanted to have sex with me, but he also never pushed once I told him no.

“We’ll shake on it later. For now are we just going to stare at

the lake or are we going to get out that Frisbee?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” he said.

“What’s that?” I relaxed more against him.

“Let’s make out for a while.”

I laughed. “Let’s do that.”

~~~~~

Clark

I laughed. My arm rested lightly on the back of Lana’s chair, my thumb rubbing her shoulder lightly. We’d gone to Steak and Shake for lunch and run into Ryan and Molly. Lana knew them from one of her classes.

We’d laughed and talked about professors and wondered how someone had turned the fountain by the administration building into red, yellow and blue suds without anyone noticing.

Ryan and Molly left a few minutes later, but Lana and I lingered over milkshakes.

“What’s the plan for the rest of the day?” I asked her.

“I’d like to watch Friends, Survivor and ER. I taped Survivor and ER but haven’t watched them yet.” She bit her bottom lip. “I was hoping we could watch Friends on Lois’ TIVO.”

I shrugged. “Dunno if she’d care. I think she and Joe went for a hike so she won’t even be there. Could watch it first. As long as we don’t delete it, she won’t care.”

She rested her head against my shoulder. “What do you think a show about our lives would be like?”

“Huh?”

“You know, like Seinfeld. Where they proposed a show about nothing and really that was all they ever did. What would a show about our lives be like?”

“Like one of those reality shows where they follow us around with cameras?” I frowned at the idea. That would be a very bad plan.

She shook her head. “No, if our lives were a scripted show.”

“Now? Or someday?”

“Five years from now.”

I thought about it for a minute. “Are we in a comedy or a drama?”

“Drama. Not enough serious in a comedy.”

“They can do serious in a comedy. Look at the Monica and Chandler baby thing,” I pointed out. “Or anytime they do one of those ‘don’t do drugs’ episodes. Remember the whole boyfriend who drank thing on Growing Pains? Wasn’t he played by Matthew Perry?”

She rolled her eyes. “They only do that in a ‘very special touching episode’, but dramas can have comedy more than comedy can have drama.”

I thought about it for a minute. “Well, then, I guess we’d be married.”

“In five years? We better be.” She kissed me lightly.

“We will be. Do we have kids yet?”

“In five years?” She thought about it for a minute. “First one’s on the way.”

“Then you’re barefoot and pregnant in a preschool.”

“And you’re a highly successful investigative reporter at the Daily Planet.”

I raised an eyebrow. “In five years? In five years, I’ll be lucky to be writing obits and covering dog shows. Fresh out of college, that’s about the best I can hope for.”

“Well, by the end of the show’s run, you’ll be a highly successful investigative reporter with a few Kerths and a Pulitzer or two under your belt.”

“You have high expectations for me, Ms. Lang.”

“Oh, I certainly do. You’ll have to keep us fed while I stay home with the kids while they’re little. Or only work part-time.”

“How many kids are we having?” I asked.

She grinned. “At least four or five. Since it’s a television show, I’ll start showing two weeks before the baby’s born and be

skinny again two weeks after with no stretch marks to worry about.”

“You’ll be gorgeous pregnant and after, even if it does take you more than two weeks to get your figure back.” I kissed the top of her head as it rested against me.

She sat back and looked at me with a grin. “I know what can hook the show so that we’d attract millions of viewers.”

“What’s that?”

“You can have a secret identity and be a superhero in tights.”

I stared at her. The idea of a secret identity and being a superhero had never occurred to me but it might be more real than she knew if I ever felt the need to do that.

She looked chagrined. “Sorry. No tights. Okay, so no superhero.”

I recovered quickly, pulling her back to me. “I’d watch any show you were in, Baby. Superhero or not.”

~~~~~  
Lois

I yawned. The walk to the lake hadn’t been a hard one — it never was — but for some reason, I was extra tired today.

I shook my head slightly. At least I had a back up now. I wouldn’t end up alone for the rest of my life. That had never been a real concern of mine. I figured when the time was right, I’d find Mr. Right.

I crawled under the covers of my bunk. Clark and Lana were watching ER — which had outlived its usefulness a couple years earlier — in the common room. I’d set the TV on my dresser, on top of my TIVO, so if I rolled right, I could see it without it being too awkward. I flipped it on, scrolling through the options until I found this week’s NCIS episode and hit play. I watched as Tony tried to decide whether he was ready for his own team and everyone reacted to Gibbs being back permanently as they searched for a missing Naval officer, but I wasn’t really concentrating.

After it was over, I clicked the TV off and rolled onto my back, staring at the ceiling.

What would life with Joe be like if we got married?

One thing that bothered me was the lack of commitment he’d shown. Yeah, we were young but he’d never stuck with a girlfriend very long at all. I didn’t think it would be an issue once he was truly committed to a girl.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought he’d be attentive and caring. He’d want kids. I wasn’t sure that I wanted kids, but I wasn’t completely set against them either. That was something that could be decided later.

What about careers?

He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do with his life, but unless ‘the girlfriend’ of Dad’s cheated him out of house and home, money wouldn’t really be an issue. I mean, we’d have to support ourselves and all that, but if we ever truly fell on hard times, Daddy would let us live with him. And once Daddy... I couldn’t bring myself to think it. Someday, I’d probably be very wealthy.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine life with Joe. I could see us sitting at the kitchen table in the morning eating breakfast — something out of the freezer, most likely because neither one of us could cook. That wasn’t hard. He’d gone with me and Daddy to the cabin a number of times and we’d eaten breakfast together. He’d slept in his own room though.

He’d mentioned wanting to sleep in my room at the cabin. Dad had always said Lucy and I would be able to use it for a romantic hideaway someday. Lucy no longer needed it of course, but I would. I hoped I would. What would it be like spending a weekend with Joe there? I rolled my eyes. It would probably involve a lot of being mostly unclothed together. That wouldn’t be a bad thing if we were married, I guessed, but still made me a bit uncomfortable — just because it was something I didn’t have a whole lot of practical experience with.

I sighed again. It was a pretty pointless exercise at this point. Maybe in ten years, I’d think about it in more detail, but for now...

I wasn’t getting married until after I won the first Pulitzer.

Part 6

Clark

~~~~~  
“Hey,” Lana said as she walked through the open door into my room. “Anyone here?”

“Nope,” I said with a grin. “Just you and me, Baby.”

“Really?” she said, a slow, sexy smile crossing her face, moving to sit next to me on my bed, one leg across my lap as I wrapped an arm around her.

“What do you suggest we do until they get back?”

“Hmmm... I don’t know. What do you think?”

“You know the longer we play this game, the less time we have to make out,” I told her as I moved to kiss her.

“Good point,” she whispered before my lips came into contact with hers.

Before long we were stretched out on my bed, exchanging lots of gentle kisses, always cognizant of the boundaries we set for ourselves.

The door opened and then slammed shut. Lois was apparently on a rampage. I looked down at Lana, an apology in my eyes over being interrupted.

“Do you two ever stop?” Lois asked us.

“Nope,” I said with a grin.

She opened her closet and dug something out and then headed to her desk, rummaging through it and pulling out a notebook before slamming the drawer shut and heading back towards the door.

“As you were,” she called over her shoulder before she left.

Lana hadn’t moved except to follow Lois with her eyes. “You didn’t put a note on the door, did you?” she asked.

I shook my head. “She wasn’t supposed to be back until after we left so there was no reason to.”

She nestled into my arms, her head resting on my shoulder. “She could have been a little nicer about it.”

“Why don’t you like her, Baby?”

She shrugged. “It’s not that I don’t like her...” She didn’t continue.

“Then what is it?”

“She’s a very pretty woman,” she finally said not looking at me.

“So?”

“So? She’s your roommate.”

“So?”

“So...”

“Lana, look at me.” I used a finger to tilt her face towards me. Tears were shining in her eyes. “I love *you*. I’ve always loved you. Even when you told me never to kiss you ever again.”

“I was five,” she whispered. “I didn’t know what I was saying.”

“I know.” I grinned at her. “That’s why I did try again.”

“You waited long enough.”

“We were fifteen. We weren’t allowed to go on an official date until you turned sixteen.”

“So?”

I laughed and then moved her so I could stand up. I closed the other door before I went to the CD player and turned one of my favorite jazz CDs on, pushing the button until I found the song I wanted. I flipped the light off and plugged in the white Christmas lights Lana’d put in there for mood lighting.

“Can I have this dance?” I asked, holding a hand out to her.

She nodded, tears still shimmering in her eyes, placing her hand in mine.

I pulled her to me, her hand in mine, my other arm wrapped around her, holding her close. She rested her head on my shoulder as we moved slowly around the open area of the room. Nat King Cole filled the air.

"You are unforgettable, Baby," I whispered. "I love you and only you."

"I know," she whispered back.

"So talk to me."

She was silent for a long time as we continued to dance. "I don't want us to end," she finally said in a voice so low even I had to strain to hear it.

"What are you talking about? We're not going to end. Not until we're old and gray."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I love you."

"How do you know I'm the one for you, Clark?"

"I just do," I told her.

"I've seen the way you are with her."

"What are you talking about?"

"The way you two fight."

"What about it?"

"It scares me."

I stopped moving and looked in her eyes. "Why does the way I fight with her scare you?"

"She's smarter than I am. She knows more. You two bicker like cats and dogs, trying to one up each other in the intelligence department." The tears were flowing down her cheeks. "I've always been second best, why should now be any different?"

She tore my heart out when she said that and I pulled her to me, her tears soaking my shirt. When the torrent finally slowed, I spoke. "I know you've rarely come in first at whatever you try, but you are smart. You're funny. You're beautiful. You care about people. You care about *me*. You worked hard to get through high school when you did. You bought your own car even though your parents probably would have because you didn't want the strings that came with it. You always try so hard and you always do so well, even if someone else does just a bit better."

"Second at state in the 100 and 200 meters. Vice President of the Senior Class. Co-captain of the cheer squad. Second in the art contest. Second in line for the Lucy Lane Memorial Scholarship. The only reason I'm here is because number one went somewhere else."

"You were better than all but one person. How many hundreds of girls wanted that scholarship and didn't get it? You got a scholarship for girls who want to make a difference in the world and you outlined how you wanted to do that in your essay. That's why they chose you. You love little kids and you're going to be a great teacher. You can change the lives of those kids. You can give those little girls approval where you didn't get any. You can give them hope that they can be anything they want to be and not *just* the wife and mother your parents expected you to be. You're going to be a great wife and a great mom, but you're so much more than that. You've always been number one to me and you always will be," I said gently.

"How do you always know the right thing to say?"

"I know *you*. I know how much it hurt when you lost by half a step or came in second in girls in the senior class by .01. I know how much it hurt when your dad wasn't quite happy with second."

"He never was."

"But I love *you*." I tipped her face to mine again. "I love you, Lana, and I hope that over the years I can help heal the hurt. You *are* good enough. You always have been and you always will be."

I kissed her, hoping to convey how I really felt about her. When I pulled back, she smiled at me.

"Thank you."

"It's what I'm here for." I brushed the tears off her face with

my fingers. "Once we get married, you'll really be family with my folks, too."

She smiled slightly. "I know and I can't wait until I can actually call Martha 'Mom'."

"I don't think she can either. Neither can Dad."

"I like your dad a lot better than my dad," she confessed, resting her cheek on my shoulder again.

"I know. And listen, I know the claws come out with Lois because you feel threatened, but, honey, there is absolutely *no* reason for you to be threatened by her."

"My head knows that, but my heart..." She sighed. "And when she's around, my heart wants to defend its territory and that's you and then the snide comments come out. I'll try to do better. I promise."

"Thank you. She really is a nice person."

"I'm sure she is and if it were other circumstances, I'm sure I'd like her better, but since she's the one who's actually living with you right now..."

"It's not forever. You're the one who's going to live with me forever."

"You mean that?"

"I do," I said with a smile, remembering our conversation when we first arrived in Metropolis.

"Remember those words, Mr. Kent. You're going to need them." She looked up at me with a big smile.

"You better believe I am," I said just before I kissed her again.

~~~~~

Lois

I sighed. I'd planned on staying in my room and studying or maybe curling up on my bed for a good cry and an early bedtime, but the Siamese Twins were in Clark's bed — attached at the lip.

It was just one of those days.

I'd still managed to avoid telling Daddy that Clark was my roommate. I talked about my friend Clark but never mentioned that he was my roommate. When he asked specifically about the person who shared my dorm room, I avoided pronouns.

But... My shoelace broke first thing in the morning and Clark was still asleep and I didn't want to turn the lights on to look for a new one.

My pen ran out of ink in my first class. I managed to get one from Joe, but he was with someone else. I wondered if he was still planning on taking me to the party Thursday.

It had been about ten weeks since school started. Midterms were over and there was a big Halloween toga party at one of the frat houses. Joe was going and had asked me. He'd gone out with a couple other girls since school started, but I didn't really care. I studied instead and my grades were showing the effects of that.

I'd mentioned the party to Clark who mentioned it to Lana and so all four of us were going. Not exactly a double date but something like that.

Of course, Joe was going to have to show up to be my date first. I wasn't about to ask him. But if he'd suddenly decided he didn't want to and didn't mention it to me and I got stood up, I'd never hear the end of it from Cruella but Madame Medusa even more so. Linda had a huge crush on Joe since we were two or something. We'd been in the same kindergarten class and they'd done some square dance thing in the musical and she'd been smitten ever since. She'd liked Paul, too.

Paul she could date and I wouldn't care. Joe and I weren't exclusive or anything like that but he was my friend and I didn't want him to end up with her on any level at all.

On the other hand, I didn't know why I cared so much.

We weren't destined to be together like the Bobsey Twins and I didn't *want* to 'settle down' the summer after my freshman year in college like I suspected Clark and Lana were planning.

And then, after seeing Joe kissing Pippi Longstocking,

someone had tripped and bumped into me. I'd landed hard on my wrist and thought that it might be sprained. Of course, it was my right wrist so taking notes was going to be difficult. Not impossible, but more difficult. I'd broken my right arm in both third and sixth grades and had to learn to write left handed. I still did every once in a while, just in case, and I was glad now that I had.

I sighed. If Dad's girlfriend would just go away I could move home. That would be better, but it wasn't going to happen as long as *she* was there.

I sat on a bench outside the library for a long time — a very long time. Finally, I decided to head back to the dorms. If Rhett and Scarlet were still going at it, I'd have to throw a bucket of cold water over them or something.

~~~~~  
Clark

How had I let myself be talked into this? I asked myself for the umpteenth time.

A toga party.

Seriously.

A frat party.

What was I thinking?

Oh, I knew. Lana had said she wanted to go to *one* frat party during her college career and if we went to this one we could get that out of the way.

I adjusted the sheet I'd draped over my shoulder and tied with a piece of rope I'd found. I wasn't wearing a shirt, but was glad it would be nice enough out that no one would notice.

Except Lana.

I grinned to myself. Lana would notice I wasn't wearing a shirt and I was sure she'd comment on it. She liked my chest and my arms and I was glad she did.

Before long we were walking across campus. I was walking behind Lana, my arms around her, moving in tandem. I kissed the side of her neck and she giggled.

"Well, when you leave your shoulder bare like that, what do you expect?" I whispered.

"Sometimes I wish we could just run off to Vegas," she whispered wistfully.

"I know. Me, too. Maybe we will someday, but not yet. I don't even have a ring for you yet." I kissed her shoulder.

"I know, but I don't care. I just want to be your wife, ring or no ring."

"I know, Baby. And you will be."

"I know."

The noise reached us long before we actually made it to the frat house. I didn't think I was going to enjoy this but it was something to fill an evening and Lana wanted to come — just once — so it would be okay.

~~~~~  
Lois

It really wasn't my scene but I didn't feel like staying home on Halloween. Even though it was a Thursday, I needed to cut loose a little bit. I was sure there would be alcohol — and lots of it — at this shindig but I didn't drink. I didn't know if Clark or Lana did. Joe would probably have a beer or two, if the graduation party we went to was any indication.

I adjusted the sheet I'd draped over my shoulder and tied it with some bright yellow rope I'd gotten my hands on. I could have gotten an actual toga from a costume shop or something if I'd really wanted to, but it wasn't worth the effort. I had a tank top and shorts on underneath the sheet. It was a decent night out — wasn't supposed to be too chilly — and there were a couple of Canadian Arctic cold fronts or something coming through in the next couple of days so I needed to enjoy it while I could. One was going to freeze us out and the other was going to give us several inches of snow.

A knock on the door interrupted the adjustments I was making to the sheet. "Come in," I called. "It's open."

"Heya, Gorgeous."

"Hi, Joe," I said frowning at my reflection again.

He moved to stand behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. "You look great."

"Thanks. So why'd you ask me to go with you tonight?"

"I missed my make-out buddy," he said with a shrug.

Well, there were worse things. I knew he wouldn't expect me to put out and I knew that the other girls he'd gone out with either had or probably had, but he knew there was no way I was going anywhere near that far with him. "Gina and Leslie weren't good enough?" I asked.

"Oh, they were fine, but you're the best kisser I know."

"Well, that's something I guess."

"What about Dan?"

"What about him?"

"Who's the better kisser? Me or Dan?"

I shrugged. "Dan only kissed me once and when he found out he wasn't going to get any further than that, he took off. It wasn't long enough to really evaluate his kissing skills, but my first impression was that you're better."

Clark opened the door from the suite's living area. "Hey, Joe. Thought I heard you."

Clark wasn't wearing a shirt under his sheet. Joe wasn't either, but Clark was definitely a bit more impressive.

I sighed. This wasn't going to get any better. "Is Lana ready?"

Clark shrugged. "I think so. She was tweaking her toga a couple minutes ago."

"Well, let's go then."

Clark went to go get Lana and I wasn't surprised to see that her toga was from a costume shop or something rather than a sheet. She even had some sort of gold leaf crown thing on her head. I'd just stuck my hair up in a clip.

Before long we were walking across campus. I was trying to ignore Clark and Lana's PDA as we did. He'd told me once that they were waiting until they got married to really be together, but sometimes it sure seemed like they needed to go get a room somewhere. As long as it wasn't mine. Joe had his arm draped around my shoulders but that was as close to PDA as we usually got.

Before long we got to the frat house where the party was held and I soon lost track not only of Clark and Lana but Joe as well. I sipped on my soda and looked around the room but didn't see any of them. If I didn't come across any of them in the next fifteen minutes, I was going home.

Part 7

Clark

I couldn't find Lana anywhere. This was different than what I'd expected, but I wasn't really sure what I'd thought it was going to be like so...

Looking around some more, I thought about trying to locate her heartbeat, but the music and loud talking — and what I was sure was going on upstairs — discouraged me from trying.

Was that Lois? She was going up the stairs with Joe right behind her, his arms around her and it looked like he was kissing her neck as they moved in unison.

It struck me as odd because Lois had said she and Joe didn't do the kinds of things that would lead to them walking up the stairs like that. I shrugged. She was a big girl.

I moved through the crowded room towards the kitchen to get another soda. I ran into Linda who told me that Lana told her she was heading back to the dorms since she couldn't find me. I frowned and thanked her. I started to head for the door and go back to the dorm myself when I noticed Joe sitting on the couch

making out with a red head.

I frowned again. Then who was Lois with? I squelched the panic I was starting to feel on behalf of my roommate. I moved quickly towards the stairs. Once up them, the noise from the party was muffled enough that I could try to find her heartbeat. I tried to tune out any other sounds that were coming from the rooms around me, but was only partially successful.

Finally, I located her heartbeat coming from one of the common areas on the third floor. I called her name, softly then louder. I saw someone jump up from behind one of the couches and take off at a run. I thought about going after him, but I was more concerned about Lois as she wasn't yelling at me. If I'd interrupted something, she'd have been on my case.

"Lois," I called softly. I heard a groan and walked around the couch. There she was, struggling to sit up.

A flash of something out the window caught my eye, but I didn't see anything when I looked more closely.

"Clark?" she asked. "Is that you?"

I moved to her side and supported her as she sat all the way up. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. What happened?"

My face was grim. "I thought I saw you go up the stairs with Joe, but then I saw Joe downstairs and I got worried about you." She shook her head. "I think I'm okay."

I looked around and, if possible, my face grew more serious. "You'll probably want these," I said handing her shorts to her.

Her eyes were wide as she looked back up at me. "Was there someone else here with me?"

I nodded. "I didn't see who it was but he took off as soon as I got up here." I looked around for any possible evidence of what he might have done and saw several empty condom wrappers under the couch but had no idea if any of them were new or old or what.

She sighed and rested against my chest. "Will you take me back to the dorm, Clark?"

Her voice sounded kind of funny.

"Sure. Let's go."

She giggled. Lois didn't giggle. "Can you turn around while I get dressed?"

I nodded and stood to stare out the window. A minute later, her arm linked through mine and her head rested on my arm.

"Take me home, Clark." She sighed deeply.

I looked down at her. "Lois, look at me." She looked okay, slightly sleepy maybe, but that was it. I grasped her lightly by the shoulders. "Did you take a drink from anyone?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Got my own soda."

"Did you leave it alone?"

She bit her lip and frowned. "I don't think so."

"Is there any way you could have been drugged?"

"I don't think so."

I sighed. I wasn't sure I believed it. "Why don't we take you to the hospital and see what they say?"

"No. I just wanna go to bed." She leaned into me and rested her head against my chest. "Will you take me to bed, Clark?"

"I'll take you to the hospital."

She shook her head against me. "No. I just wanna go home."

I sighed again. I should probably just take her anyway. I scooped her into my arms and carried her down the outside set of stairs I'd noticed on our way in earlier. I headed towards the Ellen Lane Memorial Medical Building. The path took us right by the dorms.

"Clark, there's the dorm," she said as I walked past.

"We're going to the hospital. I think you should get checked out."

She struggled against me until she managed to get to her feet. "No, I'm not going to that building. It's named after my dead mother and I won't go." She started towards the front door of

Weller Hall.

Resigned, I ran after her. "Fine. I won't make you go, but at least let me get you upstairs."

"Fine."

I scooped her up again and this time she rested her head against my shoulder immediately, snuggling down into my arms.

"You're so strong, Clark," she sighed. "Joe's not anywhere near as strong as you are and he's pretty strong."

"Sure he is."

"And you're better looking, too, but Lana's got her claws in you."

"Lana doesn't have claws, Lois."

"No, she has a funny looking car."

"She doesn't have a car. Well, she does, but it's in Smallville," I told her as I managed to open the door to our room.

"Yep. It says 'De Vil' on the plates."

"You call her 'Cruella'?" I asked, unable to keep the shock out of my voice.

"Shhhh... Don't want her to know that. She hates me already."

"She doesn't hate you." I wondered how I could get her onto the top bunk without floating her up there and decided it wasn't going to happen. I sighed and laid her gently on my bunk.

"Sure she does. She told me so."

"She did?" Lana was a lot of things, but I didn't think she hated Lois.

"Yep. Not long after we moved in together. She told me not to get any ideas about ever seeing you naked." She giggled. "She doesn't know the first time I met you, you were only wearing a towel, does she?"

Okay, warning another girl to stay away from me did sound like Lana. She tended to be kind of territorial sometimes, but I didn't like her hanging out with other guys and I knew if the situation had been reversed, I probably would have had a few choice words for her male roommate. "No, she doesn't," I finally said, pulling a chair up near the bed.

Lois sighed again. "If you ever want to drop the towel and come up..." Her voice trailed off again.

I looked down and she looked like she was asleep. Good. She could easily embarrass herself this way. She didn't smell like alcohol and she said she didn't drink it, but I guess it was possible that a beer for someone her size could have had that kind of effect on her. She wasn't necessarily drugged and she'd kill me if I took her to the hospital. I thought I got there before anything happened to her.

I climbed into the top bunk. A glance through the walls on the way in had shown that Lana was sleeping and I didn't want to bother her. We all had class early the next morning as it was.

November 2002

Lois

~~~~~

I tried to open my eyes, but they weren't working right. I groaned and looked at the clock but it wasn't there.

I wasn't in my bed.

I was in Clark's bed.

So where was Clark?

I cautiously felt behind me and was relieved to discover that he wasn't there.

I heard a creak above me.

"Clark?" I called softly.

A pair of bare feet appeared over the edge of the top bunk and then Clark was standing there, having jumped off my bed. He moved to sit next to me. "How're you feeling?" he asked quietly.

"My head hurts. And why am I in your bed?"

"What do you remember?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I remember walking across

campus with you and Lana and Joe. I remember getting a Pepsi and drinking it. I couldn't find any of you and I was going to head back here in a few minutes and then..." I struggled to remember. "Nothing. What happened?"

Clark sighed. "I saw you going upstairs with Joe..."

"I've told you, Joe and I aren't..."

"I know," he interrupted. "But you're a big girl. For all I knew, you'd changed your mind or something. I ran into Linda who said Lana had left when she lost track of me. Then I saw Joe sitting on a couch making out with a redhead and realized that it wasn't him who you were with. I went upstairs to look for you and found you behind a couch in a common area on the third floor."

Bile was rising in my throat as he told the story. "Was I alone?" I whispered.

"No," he whispered back.

"Who was it?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. He took off pretty fast and I was more worried about you."

"Did he...?" I couldn't bring myself to finish the question.

"I don't know. I don't *think* so. It wasn't that long between the time I saw you going up the stairs and the time I found you. You weren't wearing your shorts and underwear though." He didn't look at me as he said it. "I gave them to you and you got dressed and I carried you back here. I tried to get you to go to the hospital but you refused."

"Why?" That didn't sound like me. Not with a doctor for a dad and a nurse for a mom.

He shrugged, but didn't say anything.

"What? Why didn't I want to go?" He was keeping something from me.

He sighed. "You refused to go to the building named after your mom."

It was my turn to sigh. "I don't like going there for that reason, but I wouldn't not go just because it's named after my mom if I needed to. That still doesn't tell me how I ended up in your bed," I pointed out.

"How was I supposed to get you up to your bunk?" he asked. "You were practically asleep when we got here."

"And you didn't take me to the hospital? You didn't think I was drugged?" I didn't understand why he would have let me saying I didn't want to go stop him.

"You flat out refused. I was going there and we passed the dorms and when I told you where we were going, you actually managed to stand up and tried to walk to the dorms. You weren't going to let me take you."

I threw an arm over my eyes. "Well, thanks for trying."

He started to say something, but a knock on the door interrupted him. "Come in," he called.

Great. It was probably Lana and she was probably going to have an earful for both of us.

"Hey, hon..." She stopped mid-sentence. "Why is Lois in your bed?"

I groaned. "Must you be so loud?"

"Hangover, Lois?" Her voice dripped sweetness. Fake sweetness. Maybe I should call her Sweet-n-Low.

"No," I told her. "I didn't have anything harder than Pepsi last night."

Clark had moved to her side and taken her in his arms, kissing her lightly as he did so. It was disgusting. "I think someone slipped her something, Baby."

And really. Baby? What kind of nickname was that?

"And you rescued her?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. I saw her go upstairs with some guy and he ran off when I found her. I don't know who he was or anything."

Lana smiled at him and patted his bare chest. "Boy Scout."

"Eagle Scout," he said with a grin.

I rolled my eyes and groaned, pulling Clark's comforter over my head and trying not to notice that it smelled like him. "Get a room," I mumbled, knowing they wouldn't be able to hear me.

But it made me feel a little better.

~~~~~

Clark

I heard what Lois said, but Lana obviously didn't, so I didn't say anything. Since Lois was now huddled under my blanket, I took the opportunity to give Lana a much better good morning kiss than I could with an audience.

"We better get ready for class," I finally said.

She nodded. "It's a lot colder out today than it was last night. The first cold front already came through I guess."

I nodded. "That's what I heard."

She kissed me again. "Since we lost each other last night, whaddya say we go to that bonfire on Saturday?"

I sighed. "I don't know if we'll be back in time."

"Back? Where are we going?"

"Lois and I are going to Bremerton, remember?" I'd told her about it on Monday. "We're covering that Fall Fest for the school paper. Two hundredth anniversary or something."

"Two hundred and second," came a voice from my bed. "It started the same year the school was founded so it always gets a write up."

"Okay, two hundred and second. Anyway, we're leaving at like six in the morning. I'm not sure when we'll be back but it'll probably be at least seven or eight."

Lana smiled at me. That slow sexy smile I loved. "Well, then, it's a good thing the bonfire doesn't start until 8:30."

I smiled back. "I guess so. I'll try to make sure we're back by eight." I kissed her again. "We'll talk about it later, but right now we have to get ready for class." I kissed her one more time. "You better go get dressed."

She kissed me. "You too." She turned and headed for her room.

I waited until the door shut behind her to shut our door. "You okay under there?" I asked Lois.

"Fine."

"Are you staying under there for a minute?"

"Probably."

"Then I'm going to change real quick, as long as you promise to stay put."

"Don't worry," came the muffled reply.

I grabbed some clothes and changed as quickly as I could. I hated changing in the bathroom; it was just too small. Once dressed, I sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"Hey," I said, pulling the comforter back. "Are you okay?"

She rolled back over onto her back. "Yeah. I just need some Tylenol and some caffeine and I'll be fine. That and I need the opportunity to read Joe the riot act for making out with someone else."

"I thought you didn't care that much."

"I don't, unless he's on a date with me and then he better not be kissing anyone else."

Well, that made sense. I didn't really understand their relationship, but it worked for them. Or seemed to anyway. "Maybe he was drunk?"

She glared at me. "Don't defend him in some sort of brotherhood bond thing. I don't care if he was drunk. He shouldn't have been making out with someone else while he was on a date with me and my roommate shouldn't have been the one to rescue me — if, in fact, I actually needed rescuing. My date should have."

"You're right. Read him the riot act. And if you want me to punch him for you, I will. Or I'll hold him while you do." I smiled at her. I wouldn't really punch him and she knew it. But if

he treated her poorly, I would come to her defense if she needed it. And she knew that, too.

Or I thought she did.

“That’s okay. If he needs taking out, I can do it myself without you holding him. I’ve been studying Tae Kwon Do for several years now.”

I smiled again. “Then remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Don’t ever get on my bad side,” she muttered. “And get out of my way. I have to get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t ‘ma’am’ me, Kent,” she said as she moved towards her dresser.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said with a grin.

I caught the shirt she threw my way easily. She was going to be fine.

Joe, on the other hand... Him I worried about.

Part 8

Lois

“Joe, wait up.” I called to him as he headed out of our last class before lunch. He was avoiding me and I knew it. And he knew I knew it.

He stopped and waited for me. “What’s up, Lo?”

I glared at him. “Where’d you go last night?”

He shrugged. “I lost track of you, Gorgeous.”

“So you decided a redhead could take my place?”

“Who told you that?”

“Clark. He said he saw you making out with a redhead.” My arms were crossed in front of me, waiting for an answer.

“I was making out with someone...” he started but I interrupted him.

“Listen, we’re not exclusive. We both know that. We go out when we both need something to do and you — apparently — want someone who knows how to kiss right.”

He nodded and opened his mouth but I didn’t let him speak.

“That does *not* mean you get to dump me while we’re on a date. You meet someone you like while we’re out together, you make plans with her for another night. And you don’t make the plans while we’re out together and you don’t do it while you’re trying to count her teeth with your tongue.”

“Lois, take a breath. I didn’t start kissing anyone else until I saw you going upstairs with some guy. I figured you’d found someone else you wanted to be with, so what was the big deal?” He shrugged as he said it.

Tears filled my eyes and I turned and stalked off. He ran after me.

“What?”

“You have no idea, do you?” I hissed.

“What?”

“If I’m not going to sleep with you, why would I go upstairs at some frat party?”

“I don’t know.”

“Clark found me. Some guy was with me and he took off as soon as Clark showed up. He had to *carry* me back to the dorms. I was drugged and my *date* — who has been my boyfriend off and on for two years and my friend a hell of a lot longer than that — didn’t care enough to check up on me when he saw me doing something completely out of character.” I looked at him with disdain. “I know we’re not soul mates or anything, Joe, and that doesn’t bother me in the slightest, but I would have thought I meant a little more to you than that. Even if it is only because I’m your back up.”

I turned on my heel and stalked off again.

He grabbed my arm before I got too far. “Look, I’d had a couple of beers and wasn’t really thinking clearly and then Jen started kissing me. I did go look for you, I swear, but it wasn’t

until probably twenty minutes or so after I saw you.”

“That was too late, Joe. If Clark hadn’t found me when he did, who knows what would have happened to me.”

“I’m sorry, Lois. Really. I am.”

I sighed. “I know you are.” I knew he cared about me. A lot. Even if we weren’t going to have happily ever after together. I allowed him to pull me into a hug and I rested my head against his shoulder. I felt safe with Joe. I knew he’d never push me and he knew I’d never let myself be pushed.

“Listen, let me take you to the bonfire Saturday night.” He kissed my head. “I promise I won’t leave your side all night.”

I nodded. “I have to go to the Fall Fest in Bremerton, but if we get back in time, I’d love to.”

“We?” he asked.

“Yeah. Paul’s making me take Clark with me.”

“Should I be jealous?” I could almost see his smile.

“Nah. Didn’t you see the way he and Lana were all over each other?”

“True.” He kissed my forehead. “Besides, you kiss much better than Jen.”

I smiled. “Well, that’s good to know.” As much time as Joe and I had spent practicing over the last couple of years, it was good to know that at least I’d figured something out.

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Clark

I glanced at my watch again, wondering where Lois was. As low men on the totem pole, we’d managed to grab the exceptionally exciting story of the Fall Fest in Bremerton this weekend. How exciting. And Lana was thrilled that I was going to be spending eight hours in a car with the girl who’d slept in my bed two nights earlier. That I hadn’t been in it was irrelevant. I loved her, I really did, but this possessive thing was getting a bit old. Of course, I would have been the same way if she had a male roommate, I reminded myself. Especially a good-looking one and the biggest problem she had with Lois being my roommate was that Lois was a very pretty girl. We both knew it, but that didn’t matter. I loved Lana.

Now it was nearly six in the morning and Lois still hadn’t shown up. After going to the toga party in shorts — a lot of people had even though it was a little on the cool side for that — winter had come in with a vengeance. Today, I even had on my ski coat. I couldn’t wait for Lois to get here with the paper’s car so I could take it off. I didn’t need it and I hated pretending that I did.

Finally, she pulled up in the older model Ford and I was suddenly glad that the snow wasn’t supposed to start until very late that night or even early the next day. It didn’t look like it would make it through a dusting much less the several inches we were supposed to get. One forecast I’d heard the day before said we could get as much as a foot, but no one really believed it. Most forecasters were calling for three to four inches.

I figured I’d drive — I always did with Lana even when we took her car — but Lois made no move to exit the vehicle after she stopped so I climbed in the passenger side.

“Ready for a day of hilarious fun?” she asked.

“Something like that,” I answered as I threw my coat into the back seat. “Any good music in this thing?”

She shrugged. “Here in Metropolis it’s not too bad, but in about an hour we’ll get about four country stations and that’s it. And the CD player doesn’t work.” She took a big sip out of her Styrofoam cup of coffee. She motioned to another cup. “There’s one for you — grand latte, full caf, whole milk, three sugars. I know you’re still on that health food kick,” she said with a large dose of sarcasm.

“Life’s short, Lois. Order what you want.” I took a big sip.

“Life is long, Clark. You are what you eat.” She looked me up and down out of the corner of her eye and muttered, “Most of

us anyway.”

I smiled to myself. That was one benefit of coming from a defunct planet. I could eat whatever I wanted and I didn't have to worry about it. I pointed to her cup. “Let me guess.” I closed my eyes for a minute. “Short non-fat mocha, decaf, no foam, no sugar, no whipped.” That was her usual.

“Nope. Large, full caf with lots of sugar at this time of morning.”

The stars still twinkled down at us. Or they would if we weren't still in the city. Maybe they'd still be out when we made it away from the city lights.

Lois obviously knew where we were going and she quickly maneuvered us onto I-43 North towards Bremerton.

“So are you one of those early morning drive people who talks or is just grumpy until the sun's been up for a few hours?” she asked.

“Oh, I'm a chipper morning person.” I grinned at her. “Lana hates it.”

“So do I,” she mumbled.

“Comes from growing up on a farm, I guess. There's always lots of chores to be done before school.”

“And Lana didn't grow up on a farm?”

“Lana?” I asked her, incredulous.

“Yeah, you know the blonde you're always hanging all over.” I was sure there was a wicked gleam in my eye. “You mean Cruella?”

“What?!” That earned me one of the worst Lois looks I'd gotten yet.

“The other night you mentioned that you called her Cruella sometimes.”

“I can't be held accountable for something I said when I may or may not have been under the influence of mind altering drugs.”

“That's good because right as you were dozing off you started to invite me to... what was it?” I pretended to ponder.

“What?”

“Your actual words were, ‘if you ever want to drop that towel and come up...’ and then you dozed off.”

She turned eight shades of red. “I don't believe you.”

I held up three fingers. “Scout's honor.”

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Lois

Stupid boy scout. And why did it make me want to cry?

Could I really have said that to him?

Of course I did. Clark wouldn't lie about something like that.

“You are annoyingly chipper in the morning,” I finally said.

“Lana's right about that. And, no, I've never called her Cruella.” At least not to her face, I added mentally.

“That's not what you said the other night,” Clark said with that annoying smile on his face.

I turned to glare at him, knowing I was on a straight stretch of highway with no traffic. “And how do I know you weren't the one to slip me something?”

Ouch. The look on his face told me I'd gone too far.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “That wasn't fair. I know you wouldn't do that.” I picked up my coffee and took a long sip. “I'm still waking up.”

“Are you sure you should be driving then?”

“I'm fine for driving, but conversation before about two cups of coffee is out. You should know that by now.”

He nodded.

I decided that changing the subject might be a good plan. “So, Lana didn't grow up on a farm?”

He shook his head. “No, she grew up in Smallville. Her dad's the mayor and has been as long as I can remember. I think I was about three when he was first elected. He was a teacher at the high school before that. Big house on Main Street and all that.”

“And you?” I asked quietly.

“Well,” he amended. “It's a house on Tank Avenue, but you know what I mean. Me? Typical farm, I guess. Lots of corn, a few cows, couple horses sometimes, chickens, barn, couple of outbuildings, big tractor, couple of trucks, Mom's art work.”

“Art work?” I raised an eyebrow his direction.

He grinned. “Yeah. Mom's an aspiring artist. She has a degree in Art from UMKC.”

“UMKC?”

“University of Missouri at Kansas City. She got her degree in Art, came back to Smallville, got married, put her art on hold while she worked to raise me and help on the farm, and now that I've flown the coop, she's doing some of her art again. Dad sent me some pictures. She's done some welding sculptures over the years that have done pretty well at the county fair and one that one first prize at the Corn Festival.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up. “Corn Festival? Ritual crop worship?”

He laughed. Way too chipper for this time of morning.

“Something like that. It was started in the 1800s as a way to celebrate the end of the harvest. There's about 947 different kinds of corn — creamed corn, corn on the cob, just about any kind of corn you can think of. There's carnival games like the softball toss and stuff and contests like the husk off and corn-o-rama and the Corn-o-poly tournament and the Scarecrow Decorating Contest for the kids, things like that. And, of course, there's the dance one night.”

“Let me guess. Two-step and Tush Push?” I asked.

“Yep. You know how to line dance?”

“Sure do. A friend of mine last year convinced me it was a good way to meet guys.”

“Was it?”

“Define guys,” I said wryly. “So, crop worship. Tell me more. It's an interesting religious topic. Maybe I'll go for my religions class.”

“Well, you missed it this year. It's the first year I've missed since I was born.” He sounded a little bit sad. “But if you ever make it, I promise to Tush Push with you.”

“What'll Lana think?”

He shrugged. “It's one dance. She gets pretty much all the rest of them.”

“Who else gets a dance with all around good guy Clark Kent?”

“Oh, my mom for one.”

“Of course.” Boy Scout.

“Rachel.”

“Who?”

“Sheriff's daughter. She graduated with me and Lana last year. She's going into law enforcement herself. We went to prom together because Lana was grounded.”

“Why was Lana grounded?”

It was his turn to turn eight shades of red. “Um, her dad caught us making out one night.”

“She got grounded for making out?”

“Not exactly. She was supposed to be home by ten — and she was — but I snuck inside and we were on the couch in the living room. I wasn't late for curfew or anything like that and they hadn't actually said that I couldn't come in or anything. Mom and Dad weren't happy about it, but technically I hadn't done anything wrong so I got lectured about controlling my hormones, but didn't get grounded. Rachel was supposed to go to prom with Pete, but he had mono and couldn't go so we ended up going together.”

“Okay, so your mom and Rachel — who else?”

“Well, Grandma Davis if she's there and her arthritis isn't acting up. Nana. Granny Kent. My aunts. Just depends on who's around.”

“Doesn’t sound like there’s much time for Lana,” I said.

“Well, the dance is like four hours long and it’s not like I’m going to dance slow dances with any of them. Well, maybe my grandmas, but that’s different. They can’t Tush Push anymore. Granny Kent can if she really wants to but she doesn’t always. Depends on the day.”

“Well, if I ever make it to the Smallville Corn Festival, save a Tush Push for me.” I was sure it would be a cold day in... the Sahara before I made it to the Corn Festival.

“Will do.”

“Tell me more about small town life.” I couldn’t believe I was actually interested, but I was.

“What do you want to know?”

“What’s the most unusual thing to happen in Smallville since you were born?”

He laid his head back on the head rest. “Well, last year’s senior prank was the best in a long time.”

“What did you do?”

“Um, *someone* put a cow on the top floor of the school.”

“Someone?” I asked with a raised brow. “And why is that a big deal?”

“Well, cows won’t go down stairs.”

“Who knew?”

“Anyone with cows,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

“That’s why they have ramps into trailers and stuff.”

“That’s the biggest thing that’s happened in Smallville in nineteen years?” I asked with a raised brow.

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Clark

I took a deep breath. “There was a meteor shower the night I was found.”

“What? Did the stork drop you off?”

She had no idea how close she was. “No. I’m a foundling,” I said quietly.

“Oh,” she said in equally quiet tones. “I didn’t know.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. I was found by a couple of wonderful people and I wouldn’t trade my life for anything.”

“That’s good.”

I stared out the window as we turned off I-43 and onto US-80. A few minutes later, we drove through the small town of Alberton. A few miles past that I noticed Lois staring at one particular turnoff onto a narrow strip of asphalt. The sign said ‘Lane Lane’. I wondered what that was about, but I didn’t ask and she didn’t volunteer.

“Listen, I need another cup of coffee,” she said. “We’ll be in Johnsonville in a few minutes. It’s a one horse town, but they do have a restaurant that makes a mean cup of coffee and decent pancakes.”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“It’s about an hour from there to Bremerton and then we can have all kinds of Fall Fest fun.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm again.

“Hey, it could be fun,” I told her.

“I’m sure it could.”

About an hour and fifteen minutes after we stopped for coffee and breakfast in Johnsonville, we pulled into the Fall Fest in Bremerton.

“Well, Farmboy,” she said. “Let’s go have some fun.”

It sounded like she believed the next few hours would be anything but.

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Part 9

Lois

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I had no intention of enjoying this. Based on the flyer I’d seen in the Met U newsroom, it was probably going to be suspiciously like the Corn Festival Clark had told me about.

When I’d originally volunteered to cover this, I was going to drive to Daddy’s cabin on Friday night, spend the night soaking in the tub and relishing the quiet away from Cruella and Madam Medusa, drive up here for a few hours Saturday and then spend another 36 hours or so relaxing at the cabin again. Unfortunately, Mr. ‘I’m Senior Editor and Better Than Everyone Else’ Paul decided that Clark and I should do this together. I’d told Clark that he didn’t need to come and he’d still share the byline, but he insisted that if he was going to get the credit, he was going to come. That way he wouldn’t get part of the blame if I screwed it up, he said.

Like I’d screw it up.

We spent the first couple of hours looking at some of the craft booths and we went through the barn to see the prize winning heifers or whatever. As we were walking around, Clark explained to me why one pig was better than another.

“So why aren’t there any webs with words like ‘Radiant’ in them?” I asked.

Clark rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on. You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“The literacy rate among common New Troy barn spiders is notoriously low. And spell check just doesn’t work very well on webs. If you want to find truly smart, sophisticated spiders who know how to spell *without* using spell check, you have to go to Kansas. You should come see some time.” The corners of his mouth were twitching and I glared at him.

Yeah — the Sahara was getting warmer by the minute and the chances of me two stepping at the Smallville Corn Festival were getting slimmer with each breath I took.

We grabbed some hot dogs and sodas as we walked around. I was exceedingly grateful that most of the activities had been moved inside due to the cold weather. The high for the day was something like 35 and that had been at midnight. It was supposed to stay steady for most of the day in the upper-20s and then drop into the low-20s and upper teens as the snow started overnight.

“Ladies and Gentlemen.” A voice came over the loudspeakers. “Time to grab your partners as this year’s Fall Fest Dance Contest is getting started. If you’re not yet registered, you’ve got ten minutes to sign up at the table. Time to two-step and Tush Push your way to the five hundred dollar prize.”

Clark looked at me with the big puppy eyes I’d seen him use on Lana a time or two. “Come on. Let’s do it.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “And what would Lana say?”

He smiled. “When I bring home \$250, she won’t care.”

“You really think you’re good enough to win this thing, Fred?”

“Fred?” he asked.

I sighed. Really. Did he not watch old movies? Ever? Maybe they didn’t have VCRs or DVD players in Smallville. “Astaire.”

“Well, Ginger. Fred didn’t two-step, but if you’re good enough, I know I am.” Okay, he knew enough to know Fred and Ginger went together.

I resigned myself to dancing with Clark. “Okay. Let’s go.”

~~~~~

Clark

Well, I probably wouldn’t tell Lana how much fun line dancing with Lois was. Fun, yes. Lots of fun... Probably not.

She was good at this, I noticed as we stomped and twirled our way around the floor. After thirty minutes, it was down to us and three other couples. Ten minutes later, it was us and one other couple. They gave us a five minute break to get a drink before the finals.

We sat at a little table just off the dance floor. “You’re good, Ginger.”

“You’re not bad yourself, Fred.”

“Ah,” I said. “But I was learning to two-step from Nana as soon as I was old enough to walk. I’ve got quite a head start on

you but you're keeping up pretty well."

"I'd say so, Farm Boy." She took a long sip of water. "So what are you going to do with your money when we win?"

I shrugged. "Probably save it for Christmas presents." Actually, I'd stick it in savings for Lana's engagement ring, but Lois didn't need to know that. "You?"

She shrugged. "The same probably."

"Okay. Teams number eight and thirty. Time to dance your tushies off."

I stood up and grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later, we stood next to the announcer with Team Eight on the other side.

"And the winners of this year's Fall Fest Dance Contest are..." He paused to increase the drama. All hundred people in the building were waiting with bated breath, I was sure. Of course, only ten of them were gathered around the dance floor and I thought all of those were related to Team Eight.

"Lois Lane and Clark Kent!"

I broke into a big grin and Lois squealed and threw her arms around my neck. I wrapped my arms around her waist and swung her around. They handed us our trophy and asked us to fill out a couple of forms so they'd know where to send the tax forms come April. A few minutes after that, we each had a check for \$250 tucked away.

"What else do we want to look at?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "We haven't looked at the jewelry yet."

"Looking for something for Mary Ann?" she asked.

It took a second but then the Gilligan's Island reference clicked. "Maybe. Or my mom. Or one of my grandmas. Who knows," I said with a wink. "Maybe I'll even find something for you." She'd been more fun to hang out with away from campus than I expected.

She snorted. "Yeah. Right. You'd buy me a piece of jewelry. No matter how innocuous, you'd be in Lana's doghouse until graduation."

She had a point. I'd probably better stick with something for a relative.

We wandered towards the jewelry and art section of the Fest. My stomach didn't feel quite right which struck me as odd. The last time my stomach had felt off, I was five and I threw up all over my dad. I shook it off. I didn't want to throw up — it hadn't been any fun at all and I was glad I didn't feel this way often. Surely it was a fluke of some kind and I'd feel better in a few minutes.

Lois had moved on without me and was looking at a piece of artwork with a green stone in the middle of a number of other colors. As soon as I got within about ten feet of her, my whole body began to ache. My head began to spin.

And then everything went black.

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Lois

I was staring at something called 'Irish Eyes Are Killing'. The green stone in the middle was shaped like an eye and had sort of a glowing quality that gave me the creeps. The artist, it turned out, had grown up in Smallville, moving about eight years earlier. This particular green rock she'd found as a teen and had spent a long time trying to decide what to do with it. She wasn't sure what gave her this idea, but she was pretty proud of it. I turned to call to Clark — surely they knew each other if they both came from Smallville — when I heard a thud.

I turned to see my dance partner lying on the ground.

"Clark!" I yelled, rushing to his side. "Clark, what's wrong?"

There was no response.

The artist was with me. "Clark Kent?"

I nodded.

"He's my cousin! Clark, wake up!"

Two of the local firefighters happened to be on the scene and

rushed over. They decided to move him to the dance floor where they'd have more room to work.

Tears were running down my face as I followed them. I shouldn't be crying. I didn't care that much. I cared, but not that much.

By the time they laid him on the dance floor, he was starting to groan. A minute later, he opened his eyes. "Lana?" he mumbled.

I sat next to him. "Clark, it's Lois. Can you hear me?"

He nodded. "Lois?" He looked at the artist. "Danielle? Am I seeing things?"

The tears were flowing down her face. "No, Cuz. It's me."

"What happened?"

"I was talking to Lois here and then we heard you collapse."

He pushed himself up to a sitting position, despite the firefighters' protestations.

"I'm fine, really," he told them. "I don't know what happened, but I'm fine."

He spoke with the firefighters — and the paramedics who arrived a minute later — but insisted that nothing was wrong with him.

Finally, he convinced them to let him go and he sat at the table we'd used earlier. He and his cousin chatted for a few minutes when he admitted that his head was throbbing. He turned down some Tylenol, saying it never agreed with him.

"Okay, then. We're going to get in the car and head to the nearest hospital."

He shook his head. "No. Let's just head back to Metropolis. I'll be fine."

Danielle helped me help him to the car and soon we were back on the road. I noticed with some concern that there was already a dusting of snow on the cars in the lot. They'd said flurries were possible this afternoon but the main storm wouldn't hit until late tonight. We had plenty of time to get home before the worst hit. Didn't we?

I kept an eye on Clark. He didn't seem to be getting any worse, but he did appear to be asleep. His color wasn't right, but I figured some rest would fix that.

I had to turn more and more of my attention to the road as the snowflakes came down thicker and harder. I tuned the radio to one of the country stations I'd mentioned to Clark to see if I could find out what the weather was doing.

The storm had come in hours early I finally heard. I thought we could make it to Metropolis before it got too bad so I kept going, but as we neared Johnsonville again conditions deteriorated rapidly.

Then the news came over the radio that I-43 would likely be closed soon. I wanted to cry. Hopefully, we'd make it to Alberton before they closed US-80, too.

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Clark

I couldn't believe it when I opened my eyes and saw Danielle there. She was my Aunt Jenny's oldest daughter and probably ten or twelve years older than me but my head hurt too badly to remember exactly. I hadn't seen her in several years.

My head cleared a bit and I could see the tears still running down her face and Lois'. I must have given them quite a scare but I insisted I was fine. The paramedics who showed up wanted to take me to the hospital, but there was no way that was going to happen.

I finally convinced them that I was going to be fine and they left me alone.

"Are you sure you're okay, Clark?" Danielle looked concerned.

I smiled at her as best I could, squeezing her hand gently. "I'm fine, Elle." I looked at Lois. "Lois, this is my cousin Danielle. Danielle, my roommate, Lois."

Danielle smiled and shook Lois' hand, then turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "I didn't know Met U had coed rooms."

"They don't," I told her. "There was a mix-up with Lois' paperwork and nowhere else for her to go. Campus is full, so we just didn't tell anyone."

"Not even your folks?" she asked, incredulous.

"No, they know."

"And Lana?"

"She's one of our suitemates. She's not happy about it, but I wouldn't be happy if she had a guy roommate so..." I shrugged, wincing at the pain that shot through my head at that small movement. "What're you doing here?"

"Showing off some of my artwork. Maybe sell some of it. Tom and I live a couple hours from here so..." She shrugged. "Here I am. You?"

"We're covering it for the school paper." I grinned at her — or tried to anyway. "It's a good thing Tom isn't here."

"Why's that?" she asked, still holding my hand.

"Lois and I never would have won the dance contest if you two had been in it." I tried to smile but could tell it wasn't a normal one.

"You two won?" She looked back and forth between us. "Congratulations. I heard the couple that won was really good, but I didn't have a chance to catch any of it."

Lois finally spoke up. "Clark, do you want some Tylenol or something?"

I shook my head. Even though I didn't have any of my special abilities at the moment, I didn't know how medicine would react with my Kryptonian system. "I think I just want to go."

"I'll take you to the closest hospital," Lois said, pulling the keys out of her pocket.

"No!" I said more strongly than I intended. "I mean, if we get back to campus and I still don't feel very good, I'll think about it, okay?"

"That's right — you and your hospital phobia," Danielle said.

"It's not a hospital *phobia*. I don't mind hospitals; I just don't like to be the patient."

Lois sighed. "Fine. Danielle, would you help us to the car?"

I hated it but I had to admit that it was easier to walk with an arm around each of their shoulders.

Finally, I relaxed into the seat and pulled my seatbelt around me, resting my head against the window after Lois shut the door.

I had no idea how long we were on the road when I realized that I was starting to shake a little bit.

"What's wrong?" Apparently, Lois had noticed too.

I shrugged, not bothering to open my eyes. I felt the back of her hand on my forehead.

"Clark! You're burning up!"

Fever and chills. Great combination.

"I don't feel so good," I finally mumbled.

"Really, Hawkeye? Nice to know."

"Who?" I wasn't up to her name games right now.

"Dr. Benjamin Franklin Pierce. Hawkeye."

"Right. M\*A\*S\*H."

"Yep."

"Just tell me what happened with Joe the other day. I saw you hugging him."

She sighed. "He apologized. We're supposed to be going to the bonfire tonight, but I don't know that we're going to make it in time. I think we're going to be lucky to make it at all."

"What?"

"The snow."

"Huh?"

"Look out the window."

I opened my eyes slightly to see that we were in near white out conditions. "Can you even see the road?"

"Well enough," she said, but I heard her add 'for now' under her breath.

Great. I closed my eyes again; unable to keep them open any longer.

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Part 10

Lois

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What was happening to him?

I had no idea, but I did know if I didn't get him somewhere warm soon, it wouldn't be good. I didn't think we could make it all the way back to Metropolis. No, I *knew* we couldn't make it all the way back to Metropolis, especially if they closed I-43. So what were we going to do? I squinted at the sign. Alberton — 6 miles. The cabin. If we were six miles from Alberton then the turn off to the cabin should be... I squinted again. Lane Lane. Dad had thought it was funny when he stuck the sign on the private road leading to the cabin when we were kids. I took the turn carefully. Okay, two more miles.

The snow was deeper here, even though there were trees on both sides of the road and it was only wide enough for one car at a time. There hadn't been any plows or salt trucks to help ease the drifting.

"Where are we?" Clark mumbled.

"On our way to Daddy's cabin. There's no way we'll make it home in this mess. It's only about another mile. Daddy paved the road, but it's still pretty bad and I'm not sure we'll make it all the way to the cabin. We may have to walk a ways."

"Getting out to walk in a blizzard probably isn't the best idea."

"No, but neither is staying in the car when we have somewhere to go. As long as we stay on the road, we'll hit the cabin soon. It's almost two miles from the turnoff and we've gone nearly a mile already."

It was another half mile before the car got stuck in a drift.

"Clark." I reached over and shook him.

"Wha'?" He woke up slightly.

"We're going to have to walk the rest of the way."

He looked out the window. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"We can't stay here. No one knows where we are and we're only half or three-quarters of a mile from the cabin.

"Too far," he whispered.

"We don't have a choice," I told him grimly.

"I can't make it. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I don't think I can make it that far." His head leaned back against the headrest.

"We have to try, Clark."

"No, someone will come."

"We're almost out of gas so we can't keep the heater going much longer and no one knows where we are."

"Where are we again?"

"Daddy built a cabin not too far from here when we were kids. I knew we wouldn't make it anywhere else but I thought we could make it there."

"We'll get lost."

"No. The road is pretty narrow, and it's surrounded by forest so if we hit the trees, we're going the wrong way. The road literally ends in front of the cabin steps. We don't have a choice," I reiterated.

He finally nodded. "Okay. Are there any blankets or anything in here to help us try to keep warm?"

"I don't think so. We've both got pretty heavy coats, hats, gloves, all that good stuff that we need to put on before we get out of the car, though."

"Yeah."

I sighed and reached out to feel his head again. He was

burning up. That wouldn't last long once we got out of the car. The temperature had to be in the mid to high 20s outside. I twisted around in my seat and grabbed his coat. He'd shoved his hat and gloves inside one of the sleeves and I pulled them out. I yanked the stocking cap over his head. "You're going to have to help me with the gloves."

He nodded and held out one hand. Working together we got both of his gloves on and then I managed to get his left arm into his coat. I realized his seat belt was still on so I took care of that and he leaned forward so I could get the coat around him.

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Clark

I could feel her breath on the side of my face. I still felt like I'd been hit by a ten-ton truck. She was muttering under her breath and I managed to help get my other arm in my coat. How far did she say it was to this cabin? She pushed me back against the seat and zipped the coat all the way up, pulling the hood over my stocking cap and tying it in front so it covered my neck and the lower part of my face. I leaned against the door as she put on her own coat and stuff. How was I going to make it to the cabin?

"Okay, listen. I don't want to have to walk around the car to try to help you out so I'm going to climb over you and go out the passenger door. Then I'll help you out, okay?"

I nodded. I heard her muttering something that sounded like curse words and then she was straddling me trying to get the door open. Despite the situation and multiple layers of winter clothing between us, Lana would not be happy to catch us like this. The door seemed to have frozen shut but she leaned against it until it opened. It left her off balance and she tumbled into the snow. I reached out to try to help her up, but she was already scrambling to her feet.

She grabbed my hand. "Come on." I managed to get out of the car, shut the door, and she put her arm around my waist while mine went around her shoulders.

"You're just the right height, Lane. We should do this more often," I told her.

"Yeah, Meriwether. Getting stuck in a blizzard is something we should do every year. It'll be like a tradition."

"I'm not Meriwether. I'm Clark."

"I know, Meriwether."

One foot in front of the other. That was all I could do. It was cold outside and this walk was going to seem like forever, I was sure.

I had no idea how long we'd been walking, but I knew I was leaning more heavily on Lois. Then I didn't lift my foot quite high enough and I landed face first in a pile of snow. I pushed myself up to find Lois had landed next to me.

She struggled to her feet then helped me to mine. It almost felt like the wind was working with us for a moment; like it was helping me stay upright as I swayed and tried desperately not to knock me and Lois over again.

"Come on," she said. "It's not too much further."

"How do you know? All the snowflakes look the same to me."

"Because if it's much further, we're not going to make it."

I tried to take a deep breath but couldn't. I had been shivering for a while and I knew that was a bad sign. "Then leave me and go."

"I'm not leaving you."

"At least go see how far it is."

"I'll never find you again if I do that."

"Fine, but promise me something."

"What?"

"If I fall back down and don't get up, don't stay with me. Try to get there yourself."

"Don't worry, Casanova. I have no intention of dying because you won't move, so let's go."

We started walking again and I counted at least six more falls into snow drifts before she really said anything again. Each time it took us longer to struggle to our feet. Each time, it felt like the wind helped us stay on our feet. I wasn't sure why, but it was reassuring.

"We're almost there."

She sounded cold. "That's what you said last time, Ms. Conquistador," I reminded her weakly.

"I know, but we're at the clearing. It's not much further."

"Okay, McNally. Lead the way."

"McNally?"

"Yeah. Like Rand."

"Got it. Keep talking to me, Clark." She sounded weak, but not as weak as I felt.

"Why?"

"To help you stay awake."

"Wanna sleep." I did. I could fall asleep standing up right now but I knew what a bad plan that was.

"Not yet. Once we get inside, then you can sleep. Maybe. If there's power so we have heat. Otherwise, you're going to have to help me start a fire, Farmboy."

"Can't start a fire with my eyes right now," I told her.

"Of course not. But you were a Boy Scout right?"

I could feel her supporting more and more of my weight. I was going to knock her over again before long. "Yeah. When I was a kid."

"See? You'll have to show me how to start a fire."

"You don't know how?"

"Oh, I know how, but since I've carried you the whole way, you get to start the fire."

"You're not carrying me," I protested with as much feeling as I could muster, which wasn't much. "I'm walking." I shuffled forward again as I said it.

"You're running the 200 meter dash, Michael."

"Michael?" I wasn't sure she could hear me, my question was so quiet.

"Michael Johnson. Holds the world record in the 200 meter dash. You're going to beat him."

"I'm sure I..." I tripped again, but this time landed on something solid and I wasn't face first in a foot of snow.

"See. I told you we were almost here."

Steps. I must have landed on the steps of the cabin. Now to get inside. I tried to stand up, but couldn't and collapsed again. "I can't move," I whispered.

"Come on, Clark." She tugged on my arm and sounded close to tears. I couldn't make Lana... no. I couldn't make Lois cry. Lana wasn't here. Was she? "You have to help me out here."

I pushed up with one foot, trying to at least move myself up another stair. With Lois helping, I managed to make it to the top of the stairs onto the porch. I thought I heard keys, but that was the last thing I remembered.

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Lois

I couldn't let myself cry. The tears would freeze and that would just make things worse. We'd made it to the cabin but Clark was still outside. Well, first I had to get my keys out. I really didn't want to have to break one of the windows in the door if I didn't have to. Daddy would understand, but it would also let the cold air in.

My teeth were chattering as I managed to drop the keys in the snow. I'd jammed my wrist again when we fell on the porch and just couldn't hold onto them. I smothered a scream. I was never going to find them. I jiggled the handle. Maybe Daddy had forgotten to lock it last time he was here. I nearly collapsed with relief with the knob turned. "Come on, Clark." He was up the stairs, now to get him inside. "You have to help me out here."

He managed to grab hold of the railing and I helped him

stand up and we half shuffled, half walked inside. He wanted to stop, but I made him keep going until he finally collapsed in front of the fire place, where I wanted him. I was going to have to start a fire and soon. I hoped Daddy kept the fire starters stocked even this early in the winter. I didn't think he'd been out here in a while.

I thought about taking my gloves off, but I wouldn't have any more dexterity if I did at this point and the protection they offered against the rough firewood would be welcome. I managed to put four or five pieces in the large fireplace and breathed a sigh of relief when I found a fire starter in the bin. I pulled one glove off with my teeth — at least they weren't chattering as I did that — and, after a dozen tries with nearly frozen fingers, managed to light the paper. I slid it in between the logs and leaned on the mantle with a sigh of relief.

That was the first order of business.

What did I need to do next? Thermostat. Before heading to the hallway, I flipped the switch for the blower by the fireplace.

Nothing.

I flipped it again. And again. And again.

No power, but I left it on for whenever the power did come back.

I should have known. At least I hadn't made it all the way upstairs to the hall first. That was too far to walk if I didn't have to.

I looked at Clark. He wasn't unconscious, but he wasn't entirely conscious either. His jeans were soaked through — so were mine. That wouldn't do.

I pulled my other glove and my coat off to find that my shirt was somehow soaked. I had no idea how that happened with my ski coat over top of it.

Okay, no power. No thermostat to worry about. So next on the list.

Daddy.

Had to let Dad know where we were. I hoped the phone lines weren't down too.

I called the house. No answer. Left a message.

I called his office. No answer. Left a message.

Called his cell phone. Straight to voice mail. "Daddy, it's me," I managed to squeak out. "Clark and I got stuck in the storm. We made it to the cabin, but there's no power and Clark's sick and I'm afraid he's hypothermic and I'm probably not far behind. I've got a fire going but the car's stuck on the road to the cabin somewhere and almost out of gas anyway. Can you send someone to help? Please." I barely managed to get the last word out, but hung up the phone. I leaned back on the couch. I had to get out of these wet clothes and I had to get Clark out of his.

Lana would love that. I mentally rolled my eyes — physically doing so would take too much energy.

I started as I thought I heard something upstairs. There was a loud cracking noise and then a crash. A limb must have fallen outside — or nearly a whole tree from the sound of it — and that must have been what I heard. It was enough to get me moving.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered.

Before I started on his clothes, I grabbed all the blankets I could find. I was sure there were more in the bedrooms, but that was too far away, and there were several lying on couch. That was odd but I didn't question it.

I don't know how long it took, but I managed to get the top of him half undressed. As much as I hated fumbling with the tiny buttons, I was glad I didn't have to try to pull it over his head. One arm was completely out of his shirt. I'd have to get him to roll over to get the other half out.

He did that for me, flopping onto his back. I breathed a sigh of relief and pulled the other arm out of the coat and flannel shirt — which was as wet as mine was.

I wished desperately that I had something to wrap my wrist as

it throbbed more with nearly every movement, but I didn't have anything handy.

Jeans.

Had to get the jeans off him.

Boots first. That was safer. I managed, with fumbling fingers, to get his boots and then his soaked socks off.

Why was he wearing a belt with his jeans? I managed to get it off and undo the button and zipper. I tugged until they slid down his legs.

Well, that was one question answered. Boxers.

With one final tug, the jeans were off.

And now...

The boxers had to follow.

They were soaked, too, and clinging to his upper thighs. The thought of a completely naked Clark wasn't entirely pleasant, but there was no choice. I managed to toss a blanket over him and reached under it, carefully, to pull them off. They came off easier than the jeans did and I breathed a sigh of relief just as I realized my teeth were chattering more violently than before.

I managed to take my own shirt, shoes, socks and jeans off fairly easily. Well, easily compared to how difficult it was to get Clark's clothes off. I used the tongs to put a couple more logs on the fire that was now roaring. By the time I was done with all that, my wrist ached even more.

I hugged myself in front of it, letting the warmth seep in, but it wasn't enough. My legs were like rubber and I knew I wouldn't be able to stand much longer. My own bra and underwear were soaked, too, and they needed to come off.

Naked with Clark. I guessed there were worse things in life, but this certainly wasn't what I'd expected to be doing tonight. I pulled the rest of the blankets over him. He'd rolled so that he was facing the fire, allowing me to move his shirt and coat from where they'd been lying under him. He needed to be closer to the fire more than I did, I knew. I stripped the rest of my clothes off and moved behind him, arranging the blankets over the top of me and finally wrapping an arm around his chest, hoping that somehow, we'd warm each other up.

A small smile crossed my face and my last conscious thought was that I was sleeping naked with Clark before Lana did.

Part 11

Clark

~~~~~

Someone was trying to wake me up, but I didn't want to. Lana and I were finally alone together. I didn't remember proposing or getting married, but we were alone in a mountain hideaway and I wasn't sure what exactly had happened, but I didn't think I was wearing any clothes and there weren't any clothes on her either. I could feel her soft, warm skin against mine, and I wanted to stay here forever with her in my arms.

I finally opened my eyes just a bit to see dark hair spilling over my chest and felt rough hands shaking me.

Dark hair?

Lois?

The events of the night before came rushing back to me. Well, I guessed it was the night before; I didn't know how long we'd been there. I remembered falling onto the steps of the cabin, but nothing after that. She must have taken my clothes off and started the fire I could hear crackling on one side of me.

But that voice was telling me to wake up again.

"Clark! Clark!"

I looked up to see Lois' dad kneeling next to me. The bright sunlight streaming in the window hurt my head and I closed my eyes tightly.

I tried to say something but nothing came out. I wet my lips and tried again. "Dr. Lane?" I whispered. "Is she okay?"

"She's breathing," he said grimly. "Your temperature isn't as

low as I'd expect for either one of you, but still not great. Do you remember what happened?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I wasn't feeling well. I remember her saying we had to walk and it seemed like forever until I landed on the steps and I don't remember anything after that."

He nodded. "That's not unusual with hypothermia."

A groan made both of us look at the head of tousled dark hair still resting on my chest.

"Princess?" He shook her shoulder gently.

"Daddy?" she whispered. "Clark's so cold, Daddy. I don't know if I can get all the way to the cabin with him leaning on me."

Dr. Lane's face was grim. "Lois. Honey. Wake up."

Her head moved slightly off my chest. "Daddy?"

"I'm right here, Princess. Can you look at me?"

~~~~~  
Lois

Daddy was here. It was going to be okay. I tried to open my eyes, but it hurt. "No. My head hurts. Everything hurts." I felt an arm tighten around me. Whose arm was that?

Clark!

"Clark. Daddy, is Clark okay?"

"I'm okay."

I felt the words spoken as I heard them. That must be Clark's arm around me and I must be on his chest. But where were his clothes? And mine?

I groaned again. "Are we naked?"

"I think so," the chest underneath me mumbled. "Any idea how that happened, Lane?"

I held a blanket against my chest and pushed up with my other arm, grateful that at least it seemed we'd been covered when Daddy showed up. I kept my eyes squeezed shut as I sat up, feeling for the couch. "Can you make sure that I didn't take all the blankets and that you're all covered up before I try to open my eyes again?" I asked him as I leaned against the furniture.

"Didn't get a good enough look last night?" he teased.

"I didn't look," I mumbled. "I put a blanket over you before I managed to get your boxers off."

I felt the blankets move and then Clark's arm brushed mine as he leaned against the couch too.

"You can open your eyes now, Aurora."

"Who?"

"Aurora. Sleeping Beauty."

I groaned. "Don't think that makes you Prince Charming, but at least I know you're going to be okay if you're calling me names again. Even if it is a nice one." I slowly opened one eye and then the other.

The fire was roaring and I knew Daddy had to have had something to do with that because I didn't think Clark and I had been in any shape to put any more logs on.

I looked up and saw my Dad's worried face. "Are we going to be okay?"

He nodded. "I called anyone I could think of as soon as I got your message, but all the emergency services were busy and couldn't get here anyway. As soon as the snow died down, I got in the big truck and came up here. You two are actually in better shape than I expected from your message, Pumpkin." I could tell he was choking up. "I was afraid I wouldn't get here in time," he whispered.

"I'm okay, Daddy." I smiled at him through my own tears, knowing he was thinking about another time when he'd been too late — or thought he had. There was nothing anyone could have done to save Mom and Lucy and he knew that. "I'm still tired and weak and I think I'm going to be sore from carrying Paul Bunyan here to the cabin."

"Can you walk me through it, Little Girl?" he asked. He only

called me 'little girl' when he was very emotional. He must have not slept all night waiting for the weather to clear enough to get up here. He looked tired.

I sighed. "I didn't realize how bad the weather was when we left Bremerton. I heard on the radio that I-43 was probably going to be closed soon and I didn't know how else to get to Metropolis. Then I saw a sign and knew we were close to the turnoff. The car got stuck in a drift about a mile and a half later. We put our coats and stuff on and walked the rest of the way."

"I think you carried me," Clark interrupted.

"Well, sort of, but you were at least half walking because I couldn't have carried you. You didn't actually collapse until we made in here then you landed on the floor in front of the fireplace. I built a fire, realized that there was no power. Called you." I couldn't look at Clark as I mumbled through the next part. "Managed to get Clark's clothes off..."

"And you couldn't have left my boxers on?" he asked without looking at me.

"They were soaked. All of your clothes were soaked. All of my clothes were soaked. I added a couple more logs to the fire, took my clothes off and lay down by Clark with as many blankets as I could find without climbing the stairs to get any out of the closet, because I knew I didn't have that much energy. The next thing I remember is waking up a few minutes ago."

I hoped they wouldn't notice my face turning red. That wasn't entirely accurate, but I wasn't about to tell them about the dream I'd had — about kissing Clark, naked, in front of the fire... I shook myself mentally, not wanting to remember the rest of it.

"What, Princess?"

"Nothing," I mumbled.

"Well, you two are going to be fine."

"Good." I breathed a sigh of relief.

~~~~~  
Clark

I tested my senses and realized that, while I wasn't in pain like I had been the night before, I couldn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary. And for me, that was unusual.

And had I really said something to Lois about starting fires with my eyes?

"Did you leave any clothes here last time we were here?"

I guessed Dr. Lane wasn't talking to me.

"No." Lois answered the question.

"Well, the power's back on, so why don't you go take a shower and I'll see if I have some sweats or something you can wear and I'll put your clothes in the washer."

Lois must have agreed, because she moved.

I finally took the time to look around. 'Cabin' was a bit of an understatement. We were in a large room easily as big as the entire first floor of the farmhouse I grew up in, and probably a lot bigger, with high vaulted ceilings. On one side was a large kitchen with a big breakfast bar island and what looked to be granite countertops. A large table was in a dining area and the rest was filled with comfortable looking furniture arranged around the fireplace or looking out the picture window. I couldn't see out it from where I was sitting but I was sure the view was spectacular.

About six feet to one side of the fireplace was a short staircase of no more than five or six steps and that was where Lois had disappeared. Six feet on the other side, the kitchen side, was a full staircase and open balcony on the second floor. I saw at least two doors up there and one set of large double doors under the balcony. I guessed there were several bedrooms around behind at least a couple of those doors.

"I'll see if I have anything for you to wear, too. At least until your clothes are dry." Dr. Lane came back from somewhere — I hadn't seen where, but all of the clothes that I'd noticed strewn about were gone so I guessed he'd put them in the washer.

“Thanks,” I said as it finally sunk in that he’d walked into the cabin to find Lois asleep in my arms in front of a fire, naked. “Listen, sir…”

“Please don’t ‘sir’ me, son. Sam is fine.” He sat in one of the big chairs near the fireplace.

“Okay, Sam. I honestly don’t remember anything about last night. Not after we made it to the porch. But, I promise, I didn’t take advantage of your daughter.”

Something flashed in my mind. Lois. Kissing Lois. But then the vision morphed and I was kissing Lana. I must have dreamed about her while we were sleeping in front of the fire.

“Well, I don’t see how you can promise that, Clark. You don’t remember what happened after you got here and neither does Lois, but for the record, I doubt either one of you had the energy to do any taking advantage of the other one.”

I nodded as another flash of Lois flitted through my mind. I shook my head to clear it. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Do you think you can walk?”

I nodded.

“Well, I won’t make you climb the stairs, but my room is through those doors and there’s a bathroom off of it. There’s towels and stuff in there, if you want to go take a shower. I’ll see if I can find some clothes for you and I’ll leave them on the bed.” “Thanks.”

I waited until he stood up and then I made sure the blanket was well-wrapped around me as I followed him into his bedroom.

~~~~~  
Lois

I was sore in places I didn’t even know existed, but the shower had helped.

There was something comfortable about wearing Daddy’s clothes. There always had been.

The sweats he’d left on my bed were way too big, but that wasn’t surprising. I’d have to remember to leave a change of clothes here just in case something like this ever happened again. Daddy obviously did. And he must not have thought to get some clothes for me out of the dresser at home.

At least he hadn’t brought his girlfriend with him.

I sat on the bed wearing only the sweatshirt and a pair of bike shorts I’d found and pulled my legs to me underneath it. I stared out the window that covered nearly the entire wall. It was a winter wonderland and if we hadn’t come so close to dying, I probably would have enjoyed it more.

The dream I’d had the night before came screaming back to me.

The cabin was incredibly romantic. I knew that. Daddy had brought Mom here on many occasions for a weekend getaway and he’d always said that when I was married, I’d be welcome to use it, too. But to dream about *Clark* like that…

He was a good-looking guy. And pretty nice most of the time. He had poor taste in women, but other than that he was a good friend.

My face turned red just thinking about how vividly I remembered that dream.

One thing was sure, I wasn’t about to tell him what I’d dreamed about when I was sleeping in his arms, without any clothes on either of us.

I knew he had to be feeling better. The slight dip in water pressure while I was in the shower meant that someone else was running water too. I guessed it was Clark taking his own shower.

I wondered how he was going to explain to Lana that he’d spent the night in my arms and without any clothes on at that. The frosty atmosphere in our suite was almost hypothermia-inducing as it was; this was sure to make it rival one of the ice caps. On an extra cold day.

And I didn’t care. I’d done what I had to do and if I had left him in the car, he’d be dead. She should be grateful.

I snorted. Yeah, right. Grateful. Cruella was never grateful to anyone for anything. Except maybe Clark.

~~~~~  
Clark

True to his word, Sam left some clothes out for me on the large bed in his room.

The bathroom was something out of a magazine — slate tiles, steamer shower big enough to fit the entire senior class at Smallville High and large Jacuzzi tub. I could see why they’d bought the place.

Part of me was jealous. The only way I’d ever be in a place like this was because I was friends with a rich kid.

Lois didn’t act like the stereotypical rich kid, though. She was funny and smart. She wasn’t working her way through college and probably wouldn’t work over the summer like Lana and I would, but she wasn’t spoiled either. She worked hard at her studies and would probably do an extra internship or something.

I wouldn’t change my childhood for anything, but surely there was something to be said for growing up with money.

The sweat pants were too long so I rolled the cuffs but otherwise they fit fine. The T-shirt was actually a bit on the snug side. Sam Lane was taller than me, but apparently, my chest and arms were a little bigger.

I exited the room he’d been kind enough to let me use feeling better than ever. I walked over to the large window that filled almost the entire wall. I was right. The view was spectacular. I closed my eyes and soaked in the winter sun. Even though it was getting low in the sky and the window was in the way, I could feel it rejuvenating me. I still didn’t know why or how, but I always felt better after spending some time in the sun.

“Hey, you look better.”

I turned to see Sam walking through the room.

“I feel much better. Thank you,” I said with a smile.

“I see the pants are a bit long and the shirt a bit small. I was afraid of that.”

“They’re great. Really.”

“Well, the clothes you and Lois wore here are almost ready for the dryer, but I don’t think we’re going to get out of here tonight. We probably could, but I’ve got a friend who has a snow plow who can get the car out for us tomorrow or the next day.”

I nodded. “At least the power’s back on.”

“I think it came back on not long after you two got here, at least based on the time flashing on the clock when I got here. You two were probably asleep for about twenty hours before I made it here.”

“We shouldn’t have left Bremerton,” I said shaking my head. “I didn’t think the storm was supposed to come in until late last night.”

“It came early. And was much, much worse than anticipated.”

“I figured,” I said with half a smile. “I really don’t remember a whole lot about it though. I just remember my head suddenly hurt and I felt horrible.” I shook myself. “I haven’t really been sick since I was five.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “I’ve just always been healthy. But that time, I threw up all over my dad in the back of the truck while we were star-gazing one night. That was it. I don’t get headaches or fevers or anything. I probably could have handled it better if I did. Since I never get sick, I don’t know how to deal with it.”

Sam nodded. “I’m going to go get some more firewood from outside.”

I stood up. “I’ll help you.”

“No, you’re still recuperating. I’ll get it. Would you mind to check on Lois for me while I do? Her shower turned off a little while ago, but she hasn’t been out yet.”

“Sure.”

“Her room is up the steps on the other side of the fireplace by the window.”

I nodded and headed over there. Sam disappeared under the full staircase and I walked up the short staircase. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

I slowly opened the door. “Lois?” There was no answer. Slightly worried, I pushed the door open further. “Lois?” I called again. When the door was open far enough, I saw her lying in the middle of a big bed in the middle of a large room. She was wearing what I guessed was one of her dad’s sweatshirts and was sound asleep. Her legs were bare and even with the power and heat back on, she was sure to be cold. I saw a blanket lying on one chair and I picked it up. Laying it gently over her, so as not to wake her, I realized how close we’d both come to losing everything.

As it suddenly hit me, I sunk down onto the bed. I wasn’t supposed to get sick. If I hadn’t been sick, this wouldn’t have happened. I could have gotten us wherever we needed to go, even if it meant telling Lois my secret. I knew I could trust her — she’d proven that when she practically carried me a half mile or more to the cabin. I remembered telling her to leave me and I remembered the stubbornness in her voice when she said she wouldn’t.

It was enough to make me dizzy. I carefully lay down — just until the unusual sensation passed. I closed my eyes just for a minute to try to come to grips with what had happened. When I opened them again, there was a blanket over me and a weight holding me down.

I looked to see that tousled dark head of hair resting on my chest again. I really should get up and go somewhere else, but I didn’t want to wake her up. A glance out the window showed that it was probably the middle of the night and I knew she needed her sleep. I probably did too.

Without really making a conscious decision to do so, I fell asleep in Lois’ arms for the second night in a row.

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Part 12

Lois

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The sun was way too bright. Again. I groaned and pulled the blanket over my head shutting out the offending light. I must have fallen asleep after I got out of the shower and slept all night.

I tried to roll over and face away from the window, but was stopped by something solid and a weight around my waist.

I cautiously checked to see what it was only to find an arm wrapped around me.

Clark.

It had to be Clark.

But why was he in my bed?

As though sensing I was awake, his arm tightened around me and I felt him burying his face in my hair. “Morning, baby,” he mumbled. “I haven’t slept that well in ages.”

I ran my hand up his arm — noting with one part of my mind that he wasn’t wearing a shirt, and praying he was still wearing pants — until I reached his face. I laid my hand on his cheek. No fever. That was good.

He mumbled again. “Maybe Mom and Dad will let you stay in my room now that you’re my wife. I think I want to wake up like this every day.”

Great. He thought I was Lana.

Lana.

Had he even called her to let her know where he was? Had Daddy thought to contact the dorms to tell them we were okay? What about Clark’s parents?

“Clark,” I said quietly. “It’s time to wake up.”

When his only response was to tighten his hold on me and mutter, “Don’t wanna,” I silenced a scream of frustration.

“Clark,” I said more forcefully. “It’s time to wake up.”

Still no real response.

I finally lifted his arm off of me and slid away from him and out from under the covers.

“Come back to bed, baby,” he mumbled. “It’s our honeymoon.”

“Clark!” I said sharply, tugging Daddy’s sweatshirt down as far as I could as I did, grateful once again that it came almost to my knees.

He sat straight up. “What?” He shook his head. “Lois?”

“Yeah. You were dreaming.” I crossed my arms in front of me. “I would like to know what you were doing in my bed though.”

His brow furrowed as he thought. “I came in to check on you — your dad asked me to — and I felt kinda dizzy so I sat down for a minute. I remember waking up and your head was on my chest and I didn’t want to wake you up by moving and then... now.”

The blanket had fallen to his waist, showing off the broad expanse of his chest.

“Then where’s your shirt?” I asked.

He looked down. “I have no idea. I was wearing one of your dad’s, but I don’t remember taking it off.” His eyes took on a wicked gleam. “You didn’t take my clothes off again did you, Princess?”

“*Only* Daddy gets to call me ‘Princess’ and don’t flatter yourself.” I turned on my heel. “I’m going to go to the bathroom. Could you please be somewhere else when I get back?”

I shut the door to my bathroom behind me. What would Daddy think?

~~~~~

Clark

Note to self: don’t call Lois ‘Princess’.

I could call her just about anything else, but not that.

I could see the pain in her eyes as she said it. I wondered what had happened to put that pain there. Maybe it had something to do with her mom and sister.

I flopped back on the bed with a sigh. I honestly didn’t remember taking my shirt off. I remembered sitting down because I was dizzy and not getting up when I woke up because I didn’t want to disturb her, but that was it.

I’d had another disturbing dream. The hypothermia induced one had flashes of being on the floor in front of the fire with a beautiful woman who was at times Lois and at other times Lana. That was disturbing enough. But this time...

This time, I’d been in this room, in this bed, and telling the woman in my arms I didn’t want to get up because we were on our honeymoon. This time the woman was Lois — only Lois. Lana was nowhere in sight.

I didn’t even want to think about what it might mean on some Freudian psychobabble level and decided it was just because I knew that’s who I was with. Yesterday, I’d thought what a great romantic getaway this would be then fell asleep with Lois. That was the explanation I was going with. Nothing deeper than that.

I sat up and looked around, finding my shirt on the floor. I pulled it on as I left the room, shutting the door behind me.

“Sleep well?”

Sam’s voice came from across the large room. I sighed. So much for hoping he didn’t know.

“Um, I went in to check on her like you asked me to, but I got dizzy and sat down for a minute and I guess I fell asleep,” I told him as I walked down the stairs.

He shrugged as he took another sip of coffee. “You’re both adults, but I don’t recommend hurting my little girl.” His voice was devoid of inflection. I wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“I don’t intend to. I have a girlfriend I love very much and I honestly didn’t mean to fall asleep in there.” I groaned as I

crossed the room. “I don’t suppose you called the dorms to tell them where we are?”

He shook his head. “No. Sorry, it didn’t occur to me.”

“Can I use the phone?”

He nodded. “Go right ahead.”

I dialed the number for Lana’s room. “Hello?”

“Lana?” It sounded like she was asleep.

“Clark! Where are you?! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, honey. Lois and I got caught in the storm on the way back from Bremerton and holed up in her dad’s cabin near Albeton.”

“You’re alone with Lois in a cabin in the woods?”

“No. Her dad got here yesterday.”

“So you were alone with her?”

I sighed. “Listen, baby, I’ll tell you the whole story later, but by the time we got here, we were both hypothermic. I was so sick and she saved my life by getting me here. I don’t remember anything until her dad got here yesterday.”

“So why aren’t you on your way home?”

“We can’t get out until a friend of Sam’s gets here with a snow plow either today or tomorrow.”

“Then how’d he get there?”

“He’s got a big four wheel drive, but we have to get the car out of the snow before we can leave.”

“Well, you need to call your Mom and Dad. When they couldn’t get a hold of you, they called me and I told them I had no idea where you were.”

I winced. “I’ll call them.” I heard Lois’ door open and I glanced over at her walking down the stairs, still wearing just her Dad’s shirt.

With the whole big room available for her to walk through, she chose to walk right by me. What was she up to?

“Morning, Clark. Do you know where my clothes are?” Lois said in a breathy tone as she walked by.

I glared at her then winced as Lana’s sharp voice came over the phone. “Clark, is there something I need to know?”

“No, baby. Sam loaned both of us some clothes while ours are in the laundry.”

“And since when do you call Lois’ dad Sam?” she demanded.

“Since he told me to.” I sighed. “Listen, I better call my folks. I’ll try to give you a call when I know when we’ll be back, okay?”

“Fine. Just tell me you didn’t sleep with her.”

“Don’t you trust me?” I couldn’t tell her I didn’t sleep with Lois, but I didn’t really want to get into all of this over the phone. With Lois and her dad in the room.

“No, I trust you. I don’t trust her. Did you have sex with her?”

“No!” A question I could answer honestly. Unless hypothermia dream sex where the woman morphed between Lois and Lana counted, and I really didn’t think it did. And I certainly wasn’t going to tell her that I’d woken up this morning dreaming of telling Lois to come back to bed because we were on our honeymoon in this very cabin. “I gotta go. I love you.” I meant it. “I love you, too.”

“I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Okay. I love you, Clark.”

I smiled. “I love you, too, Baby.”

She hung up and I depressed the disconnect switch. “Is it okay if I call my folks in Kansas? Danielle probably talked to them and then Lana told them she hadn’t heard from me so I’m sure they’re worried.”

Sam nodded. “Go right ahead. And if they want independent confirmation that you’re okay, I’ll be happy to talk to them.”

“Thanks.” I dialed Smallville, knowing it was even earlier there than it was in Metropolis. Knowing my parents they were either up getting ready to do chores or worrying about me.

“Hello?” Dad’s sleepy voice said. Or more likely they’d stayed up as long as they could and then collapsed.

“Hey, Dad. It’s me.”

“Clark! Martha, it’s Clark.”

Mom’s voice came on the line. “Clark! Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Mom.” I told them the story — leaving out the part where Lois and I ended up naked in front of the fire; though I wondered if Mom suspected — and where we’d slept in the same bed together last night and the dreams. I didn’t mention the dreams.

“Danielle told us you were sick, but how did you get sick?” Mom finally said in a very quiet voice. “You haven’t been sick since you were five.”

“I know. I don’t know what happened. It just came on all of the sudden. I hurt all over and couldn’t hardly stand up, much less... anything else. Lois got me in the car and I felt better enough that I didn’t want to go to the hospital...”

“That’s a bad idea anyway,” Dad reminded me.

“I know, but I felt a lot better, just very tired. So we headed back to Metropolis but ended up here instead. She said I was burning up at one point, but I don’t remember that part.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re both okay, son,” Dad said.

“Me, too.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Listen, I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Wait, Clark,” Mom said.

“Yeah?”

“What about... are you feeling better or *better*?”

“Just better, not great. Not back to normal.”

“You mean, you can’t...”

“I won’t be running any marathons or leaping tall buildings in a single bound anytime soon, but I feel okay.”

“Ah.” That came from both of them.

“We love you, Clark,” Mom said.

“I love you, too. Both of you,” I told them.

“We’ll talk to you soon.”

“Okay. Love you,” I told them one more time before hanging up.

I leaned back on the couch. “What was that all about, Lois?”

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Lois

I put on my best innocent face. “What?”

He glared at me. “You know what. Lana’s gonna be all over me about it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said seriously, my eyes wide. “I didn’t mean to get you in trouble with Lana. How was I supposed to know who you were talking to? Besides, you’re the one who slept in my bed uninvited.” I had to make sure Daddy knew that too.

He sighed. “I told you what happened. I got dizzy and sat down. I woke up with you half on top of me and didn’t want to wake you up, then you woke me up this morning.”

Daddy sighed. “Is all you two do is bicker?”

I smiled sweetly. “No, Daddy. Sometimes he insults me.”

“You start it,” Clark shot at me.

“You fight like an old married couple,” Daddy told us.

Neither one of us said anything to that. I took a big bite of my cereal, grateful I’d found that pair of bike shorts in my room last night. I didn’t even know when I left them here.

“Pumpkin, why don’t you show Clark the room above yours? We’re going to be here at least another night.”

“That’s Lucy’s room,” I said glaring at him.

“Well,” he said slowly. “Lucy won’t be using it and it has its own bathroom.”

“So? It’s not like anyone else is going to be using the other upstairs bathroom. He can have it all to himself.”

“Lo-is.” His voice held a warning tone I knew not to mess with.

“Fine.”

“It doesn’t matter. Really,” Clark said. “Any room is fine. I can even sleep on the couch if I need to.”

“Nonsense. There’s five bedrooms in this place. You can have Lucy’s room. Go up the stairs and there’s a half stair case on your left. That’ll take you to the room above Lois’.”

I shoved my last bite of cereal in my mouth. “I’ll show you,” I mumbled around my Cheerios.

I put my bowl in the sink and walked towards the stairs. “Are you coming?”

I heard both of them sigh and Clark moved to follow me. Up the stairs, on the left were two half stair cases — one up and one down. I pointed to the down one. “That leads to my room. This one goes to Lucy’s room,” I said pointing to the other one. I walked up it, opening the door when I reached the top.

I had promised myself on the way up here that I wouldn’t cry. The room was just as Lucy had left it. Mom and Daddy had never decorated our rooms here like they were for little girls and I was sure Clark would be grateful for that. In the middle of the queen bed sat a little brown teddy bear. When I saw it, it was too late. The tears came.

I crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, picking up the bear and holding it to my chest.

I didn’t hear Clark follow me but he must have because before I knew it he was sitting next to me. He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me to his side. He kissed the top of my head — something I certainly hadn’t expected — and then just sat there with me.

I don’t know how long we sat like that before I spoke. I didn’t move because I actually felt safe and comfortable like this. Ha. With another girl’s boyfriend. Wasn’t that just the way my life went? “I don’t think I’ve been up here since the accident,” I finally said. “Obviously, Vicki has been. Most of Lucy’s stuff is gone, but this was her favorite bear.”

“Who’s Vicki?” Clark asked quietly.

“Daddy’s housekeeper. She comes up here once a month or so with her husband or family and they spend the week or the weekend or whatever and she dusts and stuff while she’s here. Otherwise, it’s a vacation of sorts for them. They use one of the other two bedrooms above Daddy’s when they’re here.”

We sat there for a few more minutes before I spoke again. “We were all up here one weekend. Daddy couldn’t get off work until late so me and Mom and Lucy came up early Friday afternoon. We were on some sort of long weekend or something — Veteran’s Day, I think. Daddy drove up that night. Monday rolled around and we were going home, but Dad and I were embroiled in a very serious game of Monopoly. Mom wanted to get Lucy home before bedtime so they left and we stayed to finish our game. The call came about an hour later. A tractor trailer lost its brakes on one of the downgrades and then slid on some ice, right into Mom and Lucy. The car was crushed. There was nothing anyone could do and they said that they died instantly.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said quietly. “How old were you?”

“Ten. Anyway, I told you how Daddy lost almost everything, but this place and the house were both paid for so all we really needed was money for upkeep. It’s not too much here because we’re not here a whole lot so utilities aren’t too high and stuff. He was able to hang on to enough to take care of the house and keep Vicki and her husband paid until he got back on his feet.” I sighed. “He built this with all of us in mind. They weren’t going to have any more kids. When Mom was pregnant with Lucy, it was really hard on her physically and she had her tubes tied so it was just the two of us. He had it built with three master bedrooms so that Lucy and I could come up with our husbands someday and still have some privacy.”

“That’s thinking way ahead.”

“That’s Daddy for you. He’s always prepared. Plans ahead.” I picked at the bear’s ear. “This was Lucy’s favorite bear. I didn’t know it was still here. She must have forgotten it when they went home.” I stared at it some more. “We used to come every year for Christmas, but Daddy and I didn’t come that year or the next. It was nearly two years after they died when I made him bring me here because I thought it would help snap him out of his depression. He spent the whole weekend locked in his room but he came out of it somewhat better and things started going back uphill.”

“That’s good.” He shifted his head where it was resting against mine. “Will you be coming for Christmas this year?”

I stood abruptly and walked to the large window looking out over the mountainside.

“What?”

“Sorry.” I said staring straight ahead. “I don’t know about Christmas this year. The dorms will be closed so I can’t stay there, but I don’t know what the plans are. I bet that they’re probably planning on coming.”

“They?”

“Daddy and his girlfriend.”

“Ah. Is that why you couldn’t move home?” He’d moved to stand beside me.

“Yeah. She doesn’t like me but has Daddy wrapped around her finger.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to talk about her.” I turned and leaned against the window, really taking in the room for the first time.

Clark leaned next to me. “It doesn’t look like a little girl’s room,” he commented.

“No. The cabin always had kind of a rustic thing going even when we were little.” I looked at the four poster bed that Lucy had loved. Made of knotty wood, it looked like something out of a hunting lodge catalog. The rest of the furniture matched. The bathroom door was off to the side, but I knew what was in there. A really nice bathroom, just like mine directly below it.

I knew that someday I’d bring my husband here and we’d spend romantic weekends and Christmases and everything else just like Daddy had planned for both of us. There was a pang in the middle of my heart as I realized again that Lucy wouldn’t ever get that chance.

The tears started falling again and Clark put his arm around me once more, pulling me to his side. Before I knew it, I’d moved to stand in front of him, my arms around him, crying into his chest.

Part 13

Clark

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She’d been through so much. I’d lost parents I didn’t remember, I knew that. But this was different. She’d been ten when she lost her mom and little sister. Somehow, I didn’t think she’d ever really let it out. She’d probably tried to be strong for her dad and never let anyone see the vulnerable little girl who was still hurting over losing half her family.

And so when she started crying, first on the bed and then leaning against the window, I felt compelled to comfort her, but I hadn’t expected to find myself actually holding her in my arms.

She was shorter than Lana, one part of my mind thought. Just the right height to rest my chin on the top of her head.

I didn’t know how long we stood there, but she finally moved back.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, moving back to sit on the bed.

I smiled at her as I gingerly leaned against the window again. “I bet that’s the first time you’ve really let that out, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Yeah.” She motioned vaguely to the rest of the room. “Anyway, welcome to your home away from your home away from home for the next day or two.”

“Thanks. This really is a great place.”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “Daddy doesn’t do things halfway.

There’s the great room — which you’ve seen — then this half is split into two sides. This side has Lucy’s room up here, mine in the middle and the garage and storage area below it. The other side has Daddy’s room and above it two more, smaller bedrooms and a bathroom.”

I looked around. “I think this room is bigger than my room and my parents’ room and the guest room and both bathrooms put together.”

“Told you. My room downstairs is just as big. My room at home isn’t quite but there are a couple of bedrooms that are this size or bigger — besides the master suite.”

“It must be quite a place,” I said softly.

“It is. Long, gated drive. Three or four horses, right now, I think. A guest house by the pool. It was Mom and Dad’s dream house — and then some. Robin Leach’s people looked at it once but decided it wasn’t quite big enough for ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous’.”

“Wow.” That was impressive, but more importantly, “You’ve got horses? I didn’t know that!” I loved horses. Always had.

She nodded. “Mine’s name is Strawberry. I miss her.”

“Why don’t you go see her more? You can’t have been back more than once or twice since the semester started.”

She shrugged. “I don’t want to run into the girlfriend.”

“Ah.”

I was going to say something else, but footsteps stopped me. We looked towards the open door to see Sam coming up the stairs. “Hey, kids. It’s going to be two days before we can get a truck out here to dig out the car. I need to get back to Metropolis. Do you want to come with me or stay here and wait to drive the car back?”

Lois spoke first. “I’ll stay. I signed the car out so I’m responsible for it.”

“Well, then I guess I’m staying too. I don’t like the idea of leaving you here by yourself,” I told her.

Relief was evident on Sam’s face. “I don’t like the idea of her staying by herself either.” He looked more closely at Lois. “You okay, Princess?”

She nodded. “I just haven’t been up here since…” He nodded back at her. “It just hit me hard; that’s all.”

“It hit me hard the first time too.” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Well, I’m going to be leaving here in the next half hour or so. All of your clothes are in the dryer and I’ll get some more of mine out for both of you before I go.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” Lois said.

We watched as Sam left.

“You don’t have to stay you know,” she said as soon as he was out of earshot. “I can take care of myself and I’m sure Lana doesn’t want you staying here with me. All alone. And I’m sure she doesn’t know we spent the night together in our birthday suits. That would make it worse.”

I sighed. “I didn’t want to get into that over the phone, but just because she’s my girlfriend and I love her doesn’t mean she runs my life. I *don’t* like the idea of you staying by yourself and we were on this trip together, so I’m staying.”

She stood up. “Okay. But if she gets mad at me, you get to run interference and remind her that I probably saved your life. Somehow I doubt she’ll get past the ‘Lois slept naked with my boyfriend’ thing long enough to be grateful.”

“Well, I think she will be, but even if she doesn’t say it, I’m grateful and I know my parents are.”

“That’s something, I guess.” She moved towards the door.

“I’m going to say good—bye to Daddy.”

I nodded and watched as she left. She was right. Lana wasn’t going to be happy about this.

Lois

As I snuggled under the blankets, I couldn’t help but think about waking up this morning, in Clark’s arms. Even though it was unexpected and kind of weird, it was also nice. I had never really wanted to wake up with Joe, even if all we’d done was sleep. And I’d never really wanted to… not sleep with him either. He was something to get me out of the house on Friday nights and I was someone for him to make out with and help him look good in front of his friends.

That’s all it had ever been. Oh, maybe not the first few dates, but after that… We’d broken up several times. I went out with Les once or twice and he went out with Julie a few times then we dated again until he decided he wanted to go out with Debbie. There was no real commitment or anything remotely close to what Clark and Lana had.

Part of me was jealous of Lana. She had a great guy like Clark completely committed to her — to spending his life with her.

The rest of me was continuing to plan my career as an award winning journalist. *Then* maybe I’d settle down with a guy and start a family.

But not until then.

Though it wasn’t the weekend I’d planned, it was turning out okay. I’d soaked in the tub earlier until my fingers looked like raisins. It had helped with the sore muscles from walking through the snow half carrying Clark. I’d have to do that again before we left. And another long hot shower would be good too.

I’d told Clark I was going to my room and not coming back out until morning. Part of me felt a little guilty about it. There was no television reception and Daddy didn’t bother with satellite for the little bit of time we were here. There were plenty of books and I knew he loved to read so he could keep himself occupied. There was even a copy of ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ which he’d said was his favorite.

I was completely relaxed and was asleep before I knew it. I dreamed the same dream Clark must have been having that morning when I woke him up — we were married and on our honeymoon in my room. It should have disturbed me more than it did but for some reason it seemed right. I pondered that as I laid there first thing in the morning, sunlight streaming in through the window. Why was that? Must just be the emotion of the weekend.

There was a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” I called.

Clark poked his head in. “Did I wake you up?”

I shook my head and pushed myself into a sitting position. “No, I was awake, but I finally got the bed warmed up just right and didn’t want to get up.”

“Do you want some breakfast?”

“I’ll just have a bowl of cereal.”

“Nonsense. Your dad brought a whole bunch of supplies with him when he came. I can whip up breakfast in no time.”

I shrugged. “Fine.”

“So, pancakes or bacon and eggs or both?”

I was suddenly ravenous. “Both. Did he bring stuff for biscuits and gravy too?”

Clark laughed. “Yep.”

“And you know how to make all that stuff?”

“Mom made sure I knew how to cook.”

“That’s good because I burn water.”

He laughed again. “Breakfast in twenty.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

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Clark

I flipped one of the pancakes over when I heard the door to Lois’ room open. I glanced over to see her walking down the stairs from her room. “Almost ready,” I called.

I pulled the biscuits out of the oven — making sure to use

one of the pot holders — and checked the gravy. Almost done. I turned the bacon and then another pancake, before scooping the scrambled eggs into a bowl. “Have a seat. Do you want OJ or milk?”

“Both.”

I got four glasses out and set them on the breakfast bar, filling two with milk and two with OJ. I loaded two plates with everything and set one in front of her, then moved the rest of the dishes to the bar where we could reach them easily if we wanted seconds. I knew I would. “Syrup?”

She shook her head. “Powdered sugar if we have any.” She pointed to the cabinet. “It would be in there.”

I pulled a bag out and handed it to her. “That’s a new one.”

She shrugged. “It was my mom’s thing. It stuck.”

I set the syrup on the bar but decided to try the powdered sugar thing, too. “Not bad,” I said after taking my first big bite.

We ate in silence, both of us very hungry. I realized we hadn’t eaten much of anything since the hot dogs in Bremerton. We’d slept until Sunday night and we both went back to sleep pretty quickly. Neither one of us ate much on Monday and now it was Tuesday morning.

Lois drizzled syrup over her third pancake. “Do you think we’re missing classes or is it bad enough that the school shut down?”

I shrugged. “I need to call Lana here in a bit anyway if that’s okay. I can ask her.”

She was silent after that, but continued to eat like she hadn’t seen food in a week. I guess the near death experience was enough to give her a huge appetite. Now that I was feeling better, I knew I’d be eating a lot more too.

I finally spoke. “So when did your dad say his friend would be here?”

She shrugged. “I talked to him last night and he said hopefully by Thursday afternoon, but he wasn’t sure. He said it could be Friday or Saturday.”

“Wow. A full week here.” I shook my head. It wasn’t an unpleasant thought, but unexpected.

“You should have gone back with my dad,” she told me between bites of biscuits and gravy.

“I didn’t want to leave you here by yourself. I stand by the decision.”

“You’re going to be in Lana’s doghouse.”

I shrugged. “I know.”

She groaned.

“What?”

“It’s election day.”

“So?”

“It’s supposed to be my first election,” she said. “And I’m not going to get to vote.”

I grinned at her. “I voted.”

She glared at me. “How’d you manage that? Absentee ballot?”

I nodded. “I knew I wouldn’t be home to vote so…”

We spent the next twenty minutes arguing about who she should have voted for. We didn’t have any Senators up for election in Kansas, but New Troy did. I only voted for a member of the House of Representatives on the federal level.

Of course, I’d also helped Rachel’s dad get reelected. Again.

It surprised me how much we agreed on — and how much we didn’t. On some topics I wouldn’t have thought we’d agree we did. On those I thought we’d have similar views… we didn’t.

“There’s the guy who wants more of my money and the guy who wants more of my money but not quite as much,” she said between bites. “I don’t mind helping people who need help and Daddy’s always donated lots of money to charity, but it’s not *their* money…” She sighed. “They’re all the same. Republican. Democrat. There’s not that much difference and most of them

have been in Washington too long to remember what real life is like.”

I had to agree with her there.

“And I know every vote counts and everything, but let’s be honest, me not getting to vote isn’t going to change the outcome of this election.” She sighed. “I was just looking forward to it, you know?”

I nodded. I understood.

We finished breakfast and loaded the dishwasher. I wanted to just hand wash them, but Lois insisted that’s what the dishwasher was for. When I asked what we were supposed to do since there was no television, she walked over to a large cabinet on one side of the great room.

“Here.” She opened the doors wide. There, on the shelves, sat just about every movie ever made and a bunch of board games.

“Sorry I didn’t think to mention these last night, but Lucy’s room doesn’t have a TV in it. Mine and Daddy’s do as does one of the other rooms.”

“Wow.” I moved over and looked at the collection of movies, running my finger over the spines as I read the titles. Mel Gibson movies. Harrison Ford movies. Bruce Willis. Comedies. A bunch of girly love story movies. More action adventure. Sci-fi. Romantic comedy. I didn’t see any horror movies, but they weren’t really my cup of tea anyway. I moved to the games. Board games. Word games. Card games. “Game or movie?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “Don’t really care. What do you want to do?”

“Well, Webster. How about a game of Scrabble?”

“Prepare to lose, Merriam.”

Maybe I should have called her Merriam. I pulled the Scrabble game out and she grabbed one of the comedies.

“Let’s go,” she said shutting the cabinet and heading towards her room.

I hesitated slightly but it made sense. If we were watching a movie it wasn’t going to be in the great room.

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Lois

What had I been thinking, grabbing a movie?

I was surprised Clark was following me.

Okay — I knew what I had been thinking. Subtle mentions in front of Lana about how Clark and I spent all day in my room one day we were here. Just because I knew it would make her mad.

There was plenty of room on the floor so it wasn’t like we were going to be on my bed. There was even a table in there. And a fireplace though it had never been used. Daddy had put them in all the bedrooms — for ambiance and out of necessity in case we were ever stranded in a snowstorm. Providing we weren’t hypothermic when we arrived, of course, they should help prevent us from freezing. Thankfully, we’d never had to use them. I’d also figured I’d use it when I came up here for a romantic getaway with my boyfriend or fiancé or husband some day but that day hadn’t come yet.

And Clark sure didn’t count.

I left the door wide open. Not that shutting it would have made a difference. We were the only two people there.

I put the movie in and grabbed the remote, turning the TV on as I did so.

I sat down on the floor, my back against the footboard of my bed. “Set it up, Farmboy.”

An hour later, Clark challenged my word. “There is no such word as ‘chumpy’.”

I glared at him. “It’s a word.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Use it in a sentence.”

“You are a chump. That makes you chumpy.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “I’m a chump?”

I shrugged. “Call ‘em like I see ‘em.”

He shook his head and reached for the dictionary. He opened it then flipped it around. “Not there.”

I glared at him again and took my letters back. I sighed as I stared at the board. Finally I stuck the ‘M’ after an ‘A’.

Got tons of points for that one.

Clark used his last four letters to turn ‘more’ into ‘evermore’.

“That’s all of them. You get one last turn.”

I stared at my c-h-u-p and then the board and then my letters and then the board and then my letters... Finally I stuck the ‘h’ above the first ‘e’ in ‘evermore’. “I’m done.”

Clark added up the final scores and subtracted points for my c-u-p a bit too gleefully for my taste. He held up the score pad.

“So sorry, Lolo.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I heard Joe call you that once.”

“You’re not Joe.”

“No, I’m not.”

Together we put the game up. “What do you want to play next?”

He shrugged. “Surprise me.”

I took Scrabble back out to the other room. I glanced through the games and finally pulled a couple of boxes out.

~~~~~

Clark

I watched the three ‘City Slickers’ riding the range while waiting for Lois to come back.

I raised an eyebrow when I saw what she had. “Poker?”

“Relax. It’s not strip poker,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Strip poker. Now there was a thought. That could be fun under other circumstances — and with Lana, of course. Someday. Maybe next summer after we got married. Well, if we got married next summer, but I thought we would.

“Fine. What’re we playing for?”

She shrugged. “Bragging rights.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Then what do you want to play for?”

“KP.”

“What?”

“Kitchen Patrol. Loser makes dinner.”

She snorted. “Not sure that’s the best plan.”

“Why not?”

“I burn water remember.”

“Oh, right.” Forgot about that. I looked at her contemplatively. “Do you have any other thoughts?”

“Haul wood?”

“What?”

“Loser brings more wood in.”

“Deal.”

Part 14

Lois

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Clark had gone up to Lucy’s room to go to bed. He’d lost the poker game and had brought plenty of wood in. Then he’d spent nearly an hour on the phone with Lana. At least he’d gone upstairs so I wouldn’t have to listen to him cooing at her. We’d eaten sandwiches for lunch, played some more games, he made dinner and then he said he was turning in.

I decided to build a fire in my room. I’d looked and there were no obstructions in the chimney. After tossing a fire starter in, I’d grabbed a romantic comedy and curled up in the big chair. And since I was still starving, I made popcorn. When it was gone, I paused the movie and made more. What was the deal with that? By the end, I wasn’t sure ‘Return to Me’ counted as a comedy, but I did end up with a good cry.

I *didn’t* want to be in love like Bob and Elizabeth had been

and like Bob and Grace were by the end. I *didn’t*. I had college to finish and a career to start.

I had exposes to write.

Criminals to indict.

Businessmen to hound.

Senators to harass.

Governors to hoist by the petard.

Heads of State to dethrone.

Scandals to uncover.

Corruption to reveal.

Kerths to win.

Pulitzers to be awarded.

I didn’t need a man to do any of that.

I didn’t.

So why was I crying even though the credits were over?

Because I loved Daddy and he loved me — more than anything except maybe this new girlfriend. If push absolutely came to shove, I thought he’d choose me, but...

I wanted someone to love me like Daddy loved Mom.

Like Rhett loved Scarlett.

Like John loved Abigail.

Like Romeo loved Juliet.

Like Rob loved Laura.

Like Jacob loved Rachel.

Like Gomez loved Moriticia.

Like Marc Antony loved Cleopatra.

Like Barney loved Betty and Fred loved Wilma.

Like Ricky loved Lucy or Chachi loved Joanie.

Like...

I sighed.

Like Clark loved Lana.

But why?

Lois Lane did *not* need a man.

I didn’t *need* a man, but it would sure be nice.

Someday...

Maybe if Joe ever got over his teenage hormonal thing, we could have something good together.

Maybe if I slept with him.

That was one of the big reasons we originally broke up in the first place.

If I was sleeping with him, maybe he’d love me like that.

One rational part of me knew that was crazy but another part of me — the part of me that liked waking up with someone the two of the last three mornings — wondered.

I ate the last of the popcorn and wondered if Daddy had brought any chocolate ice cream.

Then the lights went out.

~~~~~

Clark

I was in that netherworld between asleep and awake when something pulled me out.

Surprised, I tried to extend my hearing and, even more surprising, it worked. I tried to float and could. I tried to look through the wall and saw Lois feeling her way through the Great Room.

It was her muttered curses that must have woken me up.

So where were the lights?

I watched her grab a flashlight and click it on. A glance at the clock showed me that the power was out again. A falling tree branch must have hit the power line.

I swung my feet over, wearing a pair of Sam’s sweat shorts, but didn’t see my shirt. Shrugging, I headed down the stairs.

“Lois?” I said as I neared the bottom.

“What?” she snapped.

I wondered what had happened to make her so grumpy. She’d been in a decent mood when I’d gone upstairs.

“Power’s out again?”

“You got it, Franklin.”

I sighed. Franklin experimented with electricity. Of course she’d choose him this time. This could be a long night. “Well, I guess I can build a fire out here and we can grab some blankets and pillows and stuff.”

She sighed. “No, I’ve already got a fire going in my room. You can sleep on the floor in there.”

One of my eyebrows went up. I never knew what possessed me to say what I said next. “How about we flip for the bed?”

“Excuse me?”

She shined the flashlight at me. “I said, how about we flip for the bed.”

“It’s *my* bed,” she retorted. “I get the bed; I’ll lend you a pillow.”

Oh, not only was she going to kill me for this, but Lana would if she ever found out. “It’s a big bed, how ‘bout we share again?”

My mom probably would too.

Lois just glared at me and stalked off towards the kitchen.

I grinned. It wasn’t like I actually thought she’d give me her bed — and even sharing was out — but it was too easy when she was like this. I knew I shouldn’t do it, but it was too much fun.

“And must you walk around half-naked?” she threw over her shoulder.

“I couldn’t find my shirt in the dark.” Well, I hadn’t looked very hard either, but that was irrelevant. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for ice cream.” She used the flashlight to search the freezer, pulling a tub out when she found it.

“Your dad brought ice cream?”

“He knows that there’s nothing like chocolate ice cream when I’ve been sick.” She got out a bowl and soon had it nearly overflowing with ice cream.

I watched her with a raised brow.

“What?” she said around the spoon in her mouth.

“Nothing. I’ve just never seen you like this.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you had a huge breakfast, mid morning snack, two sandwiches and a bunch of chips for lunch, a whole bag of baby carrots with French Onion dip for an afternoon snack, a ton of spaghetti for dinner.” I looked in the trash can. “You’ve had two things of popcorn since then and now you’re having a big bowl of ice cream.”

She shrugged. “I’m hungry,” she said around the spoon she’d stuck in her mouth. She put the ice cream back in the freezer and headed towards her room.

I trotted after her and found her throwing one of the king sized pillows off of her bed onto the floor. “There’s an extra blanket on that chair.”

I picked it up and a movie case fell to the floor. “Return to Me”? I haven’t seen it. Is it any good?”

“It’s a sappy romance. You probably wouldn’t be interested.”

“You never know.”

“Well, Lana’s not here for you to get all cuddly with so...” She crawled under the covers, leaning against the headboard as she worked on her bowl of ice cream. “You’re closer to the fire so you’re in charge of making sure it keeps going all night.”

“Not a problem.”

I lay there, staring into the dancing flames of the fire while she finished her ice cream. I heard her set her bowl on the side table. “Night, Ben,” she called.

“Night, Deborah.” I waited to see if she’d question me on that. I knew the great love of Ben Franklin’s life was Deborah Read — did she?

When she didn’t question it, I figured she did.

I’d dozed off and wasn’t sure what woke me up this time. It took me a minute to realize that it was whimpers coming from Lois’ bed.

“No! Can’ ‘ave ‘im! No!”

She sat straight up in bed.

“Where is he?!” she practically yelled.

I was by her in an instant. “Lois?”

She grabbed at me. “Clark! Where is he?”

“Who?”

“My baby!”

“What baby?”

“Our baby!”

Our baby? “Lois, you need to relax. I think you’re having a nightmare.”

Slowly her breathing returned to normal as she crumpled against me.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shrugged. “I just dreamed that I had a baby. Not that I had a baby, but that I was a mom and someone was trying to take my baby away from me.”

“Are you okay?”

~~~~~

Lois

Was I okay?

Someone had just dreamnapped my baby. How could I be okay?

But it was a dream.

A nightmare.

But still just a dream.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself.

“What do you remember?” he asked quietly.

I shook my head. “I know I was married. I mean, I don’t remember getting married, I just knew, you know? Like you just know things in dreams.”

He nodded against my head. “Yeah, I know.”

“So I was married and we had...”

“We?”

“Me and my husband.”

“Who was your husband?”

Had I said something to him about ‘our baby’? The guy in my dream had looked suspiciously like Clark — at least what I saw but I never got a good look at him. “I don’t know,” I replied honestly.

“Okay. So you and mystery man had a baby...”

“And someone was trying to take him.”

“Who?”

I shrugged, grateful for his arms around me. “I don’t know. I just remember it being dark and running and... Someone was chasing us. I couldn’t let them get my baby. And then I woke up.”

He relaxed his hold on me and the fear suddenly rose again.

“Please don’t leave,” I whispered.

“Okay. Just a minute, alright?”

I nodded.

He moved so he was sitting against my headboard. “Come here.”

I moved so that I was curled next to him, his arm wrapping around me, holding me close to that dratted bare chest I’d tried to banish the first night we shared a dorm room. If I had to have a guy roommate, why couldn’t he have been smart but ugly? Or at least scrawny.

And why did I have to feel so safe with him?

And if I did, why did he have to be taken?

It wasn’t like I wanted him to stay because I was attracted to him or wanted to take him from Lana or anything like that. I honestly felt safer with him than I ever had. Anywhere but with Daddy and maybe even safer than that.

What did that say about me?

Was I secretly hoping that he and Lana would break up and he’d suddenly realize I was the love of his life?

I almost snorted.

I was *not* hoping Clark would suddenly realize that Lana was all wrong for him and that I was all right.

All that said — or thought — I did feel safe with him and I did hope that someday I would meet a super guy who would love me like that.

Before I knew it, I must have dozed back off.

~~~~~

Clark

I sighed. She was asleep, which was good. I was still on her bed, which was not.

Well, we were grown-ups. We'd slept together twice already since we got here and nothing had happened.

And by slept, I meant slept.

And the power was out. And we did need to stay warm.

It sounded like rationalizing to me. Even if it was true.

Of course, now that my powers were back, I wasn't in any danger, but Lois could be if the power didn't come back on.

At some point, I must have dozed off as well because the next thing I knew, sunlight was streaming in the window and Lois' head was on my chest again.

It made me uncomfortable how comfortable this was.

Her hair was tousled and spilled over the top of my chest and my shoulder. One leg was crossed over one of mine. My arm covered one of hers as it rested on my stomach and the other was wrapped around her back holding her to me.

The way we fit together like this, how comfortable it was, scared me. Lana and I had never slept together — literally or metaphorically — but we had lain together on my bunk or hers at school and the couch at home and in the hayloft more than a time or two and we always had a hard time finding the right spot. It seemed that it came much more easily for me and Lois and I was pretty sure I didn't want to analyze that on any level.

Of course, it was possible that it had taken us all night to figure this out and I just didn't realize it.

I didn't want to wake her up. Somehow I knew she still hadn't slept very well the rest of the night.

I wasn't a dad and wasn't planning on being one for quite a while but the thought of someone trying to take my child was a scary one. Even being dreamnapped was enough to be scary. It would have surprised me if she'd been able to sleep well after that and it didn't seem unreasonable that she wouldn't want to be alone after that.

Lana wouldn't understand that though.

I sighed. How was I going to tell her about all of this?

I'd talked to her for quite a while the day before, but I still hadn't mentioned the whole 'I *slept* with Lois' thing. I didn't really want to do that at all, but I knew I had to. It was going to be in person and somewhere she could yell at me without being interrupted. I'd have to tell her the whole story — maybe even play up the bit where, if the cabin had been much further away, I could have died. It didn't need much playing up — it was scary enough as it was — but if I could get her grateful to Lois first, it might help.

That bothered me. The idea that I had to censor — or felt I had to censor — what I told Lana. I should be able to tell her anything and everything and if she really loved and trusted me, it shouldn't matter if I slept in the same bed with another woman under extenuating circumstances.

How would I react to know that Lana had woken up in the arms of another man three out of four days?

A knot formed in my stomach.

Not well. I knew that. But I also knew that if it came down to life or death — like Saturday night had been — I would understand they'd done what they had to to survive.

The other two nights...

Felt dizzy, fell asleep, rolled together during the night.

Don't like it; can live with it.

Lana wakes up screaming from a nightmare and I'm not there to help her.

I'd hope that he'd do what he needed to do to help her feel safe, especially if I knew it was a purely platonic relationship like mine with Lois.

Still didn't mean I'd like it, but I'd understand.

Would Lana?

Did the fact that I felt I needed to edit things with her say something about our relationship? Maybe I should fly to Smallville and talk it over with my folks first. But would that show them that there's a rift between me and Lana or something?

Maybe I'd talk to my dad.

That was a plan. Tell him the whole story, birthday suits and all. Tell him why I didn't want to tell Lana everything but that I knew I should. That I hadn't meant to *sleep* with Lois again. And get his opinion.

That was definitely a plan.

Whether I'd follow through with it or not was another story.

Part 15

Lois

~~~~~

I didn't want to move this time.

The dreamnapping was still forefront in my consciousness and here I felt safe.

It was nice — waking up in someone's arms when I wasn't recovering from hypothermia and still half delirious.

It wasn't that it was Clark's arms, I told myself. It was anyone's arms that I felt safe with.

I felt safe with Joe most of the time and I was sure that waking up with him — if we ever fell asleep together for some reason — would be just as nice.

But, since I was here with Clark, I'd enjoy this. I didn't open my eyes or make any other movement. I kept my breathing even and imagined myself waking up in the arms of my husband in this room like this someday.

I felt Clark shift slightly underneath me, his arms tightening slightly around me — one on my back and the other on the arm that was thrown across his stomach. He was probably imagining I was Lana.

And then my stomach growled.

"Are you awake?" he whispered.

I nodded against him. "Getting there."

"Did you sleep okay?"

I shrugged. "Still felt like someone was chasing me and my baby but not as bad." I rolled onto my back, my fingers trailing over his abs as I did.

"That's good."

My stomach growled again.

"Hungry?"

"Starving."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"Do we still have enough stuff for breakfast like yesterday's?"

"Yep."

"Then pancakes, bacon, eggs, biscuits, gravy, OJ and milk. If you don't mind cooking again, of course." There was no way I could pull that off.

"Not a problem. Why don't you go take a shower..." He paused. "Is the power back on?"

I looked at the side table to see that my alarm clock was still turned off. "Nope."

He frowned. "Well, the stove is gas and so is the oven, so breakfast isn't a problem as long as I can light them, but we've got lighters so... What about the water heater?"

"Gas."

"Good. Why don't you go take a shower and I'll make

breakfast?”

I nodded. “Sounds like a good plan to me.”

I started to roll away from him even further, when the phone rang. It was on my side of the bed, so I grabbed it as I sat up. “Hello?”

“Lois?”

I cringed. “Yeah.”

“Is Clark around?”

My eyes narrowed slightly and a slight grin creased my face. “Clark,” I said over my shoulder. “Are you awake enough to talk to someone?”

I purposefully didn’t look at him as I spoke. “Yeah,” he said.

“Can I ask who’s calling?” I asked into the phone.

“This is Lana,” came the irritated voice.

“Oh, hello, Lana.” My voice dripped sweetness — I’d known who it was. “Here he is.”

Clark glared at me as he took the phone.

“I’m going to go take a shower while you make breakfast,” I said as I climbed out of the bed.

He glared at me some more before turning back to the phone. “Hey, Baby.”

I smiled to myself as I walked to the bathroom. He was going to kill me, but it was so worth it.

~~~~~

Clark

Lana was going to kill me.

“What was all that about, Clark?”

“What?”

“Were you sleeping with her?”

I pushed myself up so I was sitting against the headboard.

“Sort of. The power went out again last night and she already had a fire going in her room so I slept in here. I told her I’d make breakfast while she took a shower.”

“Were you in bed with her?” she demanded.

“It’s not like that, Baby.”

“So you were in bed with her?”

“Not at first.” I sighed. “I was sleeping on the floor when she woke up screaming from a nightmare. I was sitting with her for a few minutes and we dozed off, that’s all.”

“Uh huh.”

I ran my free hand through my hair as I heard the water start in the other room. “I promise. That’s all it was.”

“Promise?”

“On the life of our firstborn child,” I told her.

“Okay.” Lana sighed. “I believe you. So when are you coming home?”

“I don’t know yet. Hopefully tomorrow. As soon as Sam’s friend gets here to clear the road and dig the car out.”

“I miss you,” she said softly.

“I miss you, too, Baby,” I told her. “I meant to ask you yesterday — did they cancel classes this week or are we missing a bunch of stuff?”

“Well, we got a ton of snow here, too. Most of the on campus students are in decent shape as far as getting to school goes, but a lot of the staff and professors are having a hard time getting in so they canceled the whole week.”

“At least we’re not missing anything.” I heard the shower stop running. “Listen, Baby, I need to get up and go to the bathroom and I told Lois I’d make breakfast.”

“Do you have to share a bathroom with *her*?”

I laughed lightly. “No. Cabin is a bit of a misnomer. This place is twice as big as both our houses combined, I think.”

“Then why did you sleep with her?” I could hear the hurt in her voice.

“Because she already had a fire going in her room and there was no power so I was on the floor in here and then she had a nightmare...”

“Did she really?” she interrupted.

“Yeah, she did.”

“She didn’t just want to get in bed with you?”

“No. She was scared.” And I could hear her moving around in the bathroom. “But I really do have to go. I’ll try to call you later, okay?”

“Okay. I love you, Clark.”

“I love you, too, Lana.”

~~~~~

Lois

I heard Clark talking and waited until he was done and I heard the door shut before leaving the bathroom.

Why did I say stuff like that?

Clark and Lana were the perfect, happy couple and part of me hated that. She irritated me to no end, but I knew that Clark loved her and he was my friend and I hated that Lana had her claws in him. Not because I wanted him but because I thought he deserved better than Cruella.

I sighed and pulled one of Daddy’s shirts on. Surely breakfast was ready.

I left my room sniffing the air as I did. “It smells good.”

He glanced at me but didn’t say anything. He must have paid attention the morning before, because he’d dished up an almost identical breakfast for me.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem,” he answered with a shrug before sitting down next to me at the breakfast bar.

We ate in silence, unlike the morning before.

Finally, I sighed deeply. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” he asked not looking at me.

“For getting you in trouble with Lana. For not letting you go back to the floor last night.” I poked at my scrambled eggs with my fork before stabbing at a piece of biscuit with gravy on it.

He shrugged. “I didn’t mind staying with you. You were scared.”

“Still. I’m sorry I got you in trouble with Lana.” I didn’t look at him again either.

“You should be. It was uncalled for.”

“I know.”

“So why’d you do it?”

I sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”

“What?”

He shrugged again. “You know why you did it.”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do. You won’t tell me, but you know. I think it’s because you just don’t like Lana.”

“I don’t.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just don’t. And she doesn’t like me either.”

“I know.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes longer.

“Do you remember anything else about your dream?”

I thought about it for a minute. “Not really. Just that I was married and I had a baby and somebody was trying to take my baby from me — from us. From me and my husband, whoever he was.” I wasn’t about to admit to him that the more I remembered, the more he looked like Clark.

But I didn’t want to think about that.

“So what do you want to do today?” I finally asked.

He shrugged. “Watch a movie. Play games. Read a book. Whatever you want.”

“No power, Edison. But, yeah. Sounds like fun.” The tone of my voice and the words I said were exact opposites.

I speared the last bite of pancake on my plate. Fun. Right. That’s what we were having.

Clark wiped his mouth on his napkin before tossing it on the counter. “Come on,” he said.

“Where are we going?” I asked. He’d suddenly switched scripts without telling me.

“You’ll see.”

~~~~~  
Clark

I don’t know what possessed me to come up with this idea, but it was the right one.

Yeah, Lois had made me mad with the Lana stuff, but Lana was going to be annoyed whenever she found out. It could work one of two ways: the excitement of seeing me after a week would push her annoyance to the background or she’d spend the next couple of days stewing and she’d be even more annoyed when I finally saw her.

There was nothing I could do about it now, so I was determined to enjoy myself with a good friend in a winter wonderland.

“What *exactly* are we doing?” Lois asked as she pulled her gloves on.

“You’ll see,” was all I would say.

We stomped out the front door and she sort of glared at me.

“Your choice. Snowman. Snow fort. Snow ball fight. Igloo.”

She just stared at me. “Are you serious?” she finally said.

I shrugged. “Yep. So what’s it going to be?” I moved out to the walk. Or where the walk would have been if it wasn’t covered by tons of snow. I bent down and picked up a handful of snow, packing it carefully. “Because if you don’t choose, snow ball fight it is.”

She sighed. “Fine. Snowman.”

We spent the next while making a snowman. We argued over whether the base was big enough or whether it was round enough. Over who was going to lift the second snowball onto the first. Over whether we should try to find a carrot for a nose or use snow to try to fashion one. What to use for buttons.

But it was fun bickering and not mean and malicious like I knew we both could be.

We finally agreed that he was finished and started head inside. Just before I opened the door, something cold hit the back of my neck. I turned to find Lois looking another direction, the picture of innocence.

Right.

Lois.

Innocent.

My eyes narrowed and before she knew it, there was snow all over the side of her head.

“Hey!” She shook her head. “What was that for?!”

I just grinned at her.

If I didn’t know she couldn’t move as fast as I could, I would have sworn she could have. Before I knew it, I was hit again.

I fired back, laughing as I did.

In minutes, we were in a full blown snowball fight, that didn’t confine itself to the small clearing at the front of the house.

For someone who didn’t have the advantages I did, Lois sure knew how to get around in deep snow.

~~~~~  
Lois

I was hiding behind a tree when I heard the snowball hit it.

“Come on out, Lois,” Clark called.

“Never,” I called back.

I’d hit him good a few times, and he’d managed to hit me, too, but so far, I’d given better than I got and he was looking for a bit of payback, I was sure.

He couldn’t see me from where he was, but I couldn’t see him either. I was almost ready to sneak back out, when a snowball caught the back of my head. It didn’t hurt, but it did startle me.

I turned around, snowball in hand, but couldn’t see Clark anywhere.

Oh, he was good.

Afterwards, I still had no idea how he ended up chasing me with what was essentially a snowball roughly the size of a basketball — much less how he managed to catch me while carrying it — but it probably had something to do with the snow booby trap I’d set.

Okay — I hadn’t set it, but a bunch of snow did slide off a tree and land on him when I’d sort of made it by pulling on a limb as I ran by. He thought if he’d been doused in snow, I should be, too.

Before I knew it, he’d managed to balance the snowball on one hand and grabbed my arm before breaking it over my head.

I mentally congratulated myself for taking martial arts in high school and before he knew it, we were both on the ground in the snow.

And not just in the snow, but in a big ol’ snow drift next to the house. It had to have been five or six feet deep, easy.

I pushed a little harder on him, trying to sink him just a bit deeper, as I struggled to stand up.

How I ended up flipped and flat on my back, I had no idea, but I found myself breathing heavily and looking up at a smiling Clark.

For half a second, maybe even a little longer, the desire to pull him down on top of me and kiss him was very real. And for slightly less than a nanosecond, it looked like he might want to.

I pushed that out of my mind before glaring at him. “Nice, Kent. Now help me up before we freeze again.”

That illegal grin of his got even bigger as we struggled to get up. I brushed as much of the snow off as I could before I realized my teeth were starting to chatter just a bit. “I think I need a hot shower,” I told him as I stomped towards the front porch.

“I think I do, too.”

“Well, you can use the bathroom upstairs. Even though the power’s still out, the gas water heater is tankless so we don’t have to worry about one of us using all the hot water.”

We managed to get inside and get our boots and coats off without tracking melting snow all over the cabin.

And then my stomach growled.

“How long has it been since breakfast?” Clark asked, a slight look of shock on his face.

I shrugged. “Couple hours?”

“And your stomach’s already growling?”

I shrugged again. “I’m hungry.”

“Well, go take a shower and I’ll fix something when I’m done.”

“Thanks,” I said as I headed for my room and he headed towards the stairs.

I tried not to think about the breath that caught in my throat when we’d landed in the snowdrift and the nearly overwhelming desire I’d had to tug him down to me and kiss him like I’d never kissed Joe.

What in the world had come over me?

Or almost come over me?

Surely, it was just still a little bit of an unsettled feeling left from the nightmare the night before and the fact that I’d slept naked with Clark a couple days before and the overwhelming emotions that had come with nearly dying.

A knock on the door shook me out of my thoughts.

“Lois?”

“What?”

“Are you okay? You’ve been in there a long time.”

I sighed and turned the water off. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

I heard footsteps that told me Clark had moved away from the door and out of my room. I dressed in one of my dad’s big sweatshirts and my bike shorts again and headed out to the

kitchen.

Suddenly, I was starving.

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Part 16

Clark

I knocked on the door and waited for it to open. Linda answered. "Clark!" She turned. "Lana..."

She didn't have time to finish her sentence before Lana launched herself into my arms. She held on like she hadn't seen me in a week, because... well, she hadn't.

"Hey, Baby," I whispered in her hair.

"I missed you. And I'm so glad you're okay," she said, holding me even tighter.

"I'm fine, too," Lois told her as she entered the common room. "Just in case you care." She headed into the bathroom.

Lana kissed me and I kissed her back, but was always conscious of where we were and who was around. I whispered to her, "We'll go somewhere more private in a bit okay?"

She nodded.

We were sitting on the couch, Lana curled up next to me, when Lois came out of the bathroom and made a beeline for our room. When she shut the door behind her, Lana turned to me.

"Are you really okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah, Baby, I am."

"Was it really that bad?" she asked, settling back down next to me.

"I don't remember part of it. I know I was burning up when we got out of the car and I remember making it to the cabin steps, but I don't remember anything after that until Sam woke us up the next afternoon."

"What happened in that time?"

"Lois managed to get me inside and in front of the fire she started." I was dreading telling her this next part. "She, um..." I ran a hand through my hair. "We were in a really bad place, Baby. I was unconscious and Lois wasn't far behind. We were soaking wet and there was no power. We were both hypothermic..."

She didn't say anything and neither did I. Finally, she spoke, but she didn't look at me. "Did she take your clothes off?"

I ran my hand up and down her arm as I pulled her towards me. "Yeah."

"All of them?"

I nodded against her head. "Everything was soaked. She said she put a blanket over me before..." I didn't finish. "Then she covered me with more blankets."

Lana didn't say anything again for a minute. "What about her?"

"What about her?"

"Did she take her clothes off and get under the blankets with you?"

I sighed. "Yeah, she did. She probably saved my life, Baby."

"So when you said you slept in front of the fire with her..." She took a deep breath. "You were naked?"

"I was *unconscious*. I don't remember anything until Sam woke us up."

"And she was still next to you? Naked?"

"Yeah," I said quietly. "She moved pretty quick though and we both kept blankets and..."

"You don't remember anything about what it was like to have her skin on yours?"

She was fighting tears. I knew she was. Lois had slept next to me, both of us without any clothes on, and Lana felt she should have been the only one to ever do that.

And she was right.

Once we got married, I was sure we'd sleep like that on a pretty regular basis, but Lana wouldn't ever be the first one.

I shook my head. "No. Not really."

"Not really?"

I sighed. "I remember waking up and thinking it was you and wondering when we got married and why your hair was dark all the sudden. And that my arm was around her and her back was bare and then that Sam was there telling me to wake up. I remembered what happened — sort of and I asked about her, she woke up enough to ask about me and then she moved."

"Promise that's all you remember?"

"Promise," I told her, kissing her hair. I didn't mention the dream. Part of me thought I should tell her I'd dreamed about making love to her in front of the fire, but I also knew that my dream woman had been Lois part of the time and I didn't want her to know that.

Lois

There was a knock on the door that came in from the hall. I didn't feel like moving from my bed. "Come in," I called. The door opened and Joe was standing there. "Hey," he said quietly. "How are you?"

I shrugged. I wasn't feeling well at all, but didn't know why.

"Can I come up?"

"Sure." I scooted over towards the wall so he'd have more room to sit.

But he didn't sit. He stretched out next to me, his head propped up on his elbow. "You scared me, Lois."

"Scared you?"

"You didn't get back last Saturday. No one knew where you two went, but Lana had heard from Clark's folks. His cousin said Clark was sick and told them what time you guys left Bremerton. We all realized there was no way you'd have made it back here, but your cell kept going straight to voice mail and..."

He choked up a bit.

I reached a hand out to brush the hair off his forehead. "I'm okay. You know there's no cell reception out there."

"I know, but still... When I finally called your house, Vicki said that your dad had heard from you but that it wasn't good. You were both sick and hypothermic and he was trying everything to get someone to you but couldn't find anyone to go. He was waiting at the on-ramp when they reopened the highway." He kissed my forehead. "I was so worried about you."

"I'm sorry I didn't call," I whispered. "It was a very weird week."

"It's okay. Lana called me after she talked to Clark the first time. I figured I was probably the last thing on your mind."

I shook my head. "No. Not the last thing. I thought about you. Quite a bit. I don't know why I didn't call, but..." I sighed. "I felt better, but now I feel worse again. And the whole week was just weird."

"Come here." He settled himself on his back and I snuggled in next to him. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"You're not the only one."

"Hey, did you talk to your Dad about the Europe trip?"

I nodded. "Yeah. He said I can go."

"That's great. Will you be my seatmate?" he asked seriously. I laughed. "Talk about *deja vu*."

"It's been a long time since we rode that bus to camp together."

"Ten years? Something like that."

"Do you know who else is going?"

I groaned. "Clana."

"Who?"

"Clark and Lana. Clana."

"Does that make us... Jois?"

I groaned again. "Okay, fine. No Clana. The Clampetts are going."

"Ah. Well, we'll steer clear."

"Sure you won't find another girl between now and then?" I

asked, not looking at him.

“Even if I do, you’re the one I’ll be with on that trip. We’ll have a *frinaissance*.”

“You borrowed my ‘Friends’ DVDs, didn’t you?”

“Maybe.” He stroked the hair at my temple with the arm around me as I yawned. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Tired, but that’s it.”

“Is that normal after being hypothermic?”

I shrugged. “I think so. Daddy said we might be.”

“Mind if I stay here with you for a bit? You get some sleep and I’ll just stay for a while?”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

~~~~~

Clark

Joe was lying on Lois’ bunk with her when I made it back to our room. I knew Lois had been tired and she must have fallen asleep with him there and he didn’t want to wake her up.

How reminiscent of what happened the other day.

I started to say something to him, when the phone rang. I snagged it quickly, hoping that Lois wouldn’t wake up. “Hello?” I said quietly.

“Is Lois there?”

“She’s sleeping, can I take a message?”

“This is her dad. Who’s this?”

I sighed. He still didn’t know we were roommates. I think he thought Lois and Lana were. “Hi, Sam. It’s Clark.”

“Hey, there. How’re you feeling?”

“Much better, sir. Thank you.”

“What did I tell you about calling me ‘sir’?”

I laughed slightly. “Sorry. My parents ingrained that deep.”

“Listen, I was looking for my daughter, but you’ll work. What are you and Lana doing for Thanksgiving?”

“Um, staying here, I guess. We’re not going home. We’re saving to go to Europe over break instead.”

“Ah. Lois mentioned that trip. She and Joe are both going.”

“Joe’s here, if you want to talk to him.” I winced. Should I have said that?

“He’s coming with Lois to the cabin for Thanksgiving. You and Lana are invited as well.”

Wow. “Thanks, Sam. I’ll talk to Lana and let Lois know.”

“Okay. Now, you both need to rest up a bit still. Take it easy a bit longer, would you?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry. Yes, Sam.”

He laughed. “That’s better. Tell Lois to give me a call, would you?”

“Of course.”

We hung up and I looked up at Joe who was looking at me as best he could without bothering Lois. “She’s supposed to call her dad?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah. He asked me and Lana if we wanted to join you guys for Thanksgiving.”

“Ah. Cabin’s nice, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

“Well, it’s nothing compared to their house, but it’s great.”

“I haven’t been over to her house yet.”

“You’ll be impressed.”

“I’m sure I will.” I started back towards the common room, before turning back to him. “Listen, I know Lois and I have a ‘no other half spending the night’ rule, but if you don’t want to bother her, it’s fine with me.”

I didn’t look at him as I said it, but left to find Lana.

She was still sitting on the couch, staring into space.

“Hey.”

She looked up. “I thought you were going to bed.”

“I’m getting ready to. I just talked to Sam. He asked if we wanted to go to the cabin with him and Lois and Joe for Thanksgiving.”

She shrugged. “Do you want to?”

“The dorms are closed. We have to go somewhere.”

“That’s fine then. I guess. I know Linda’s going to New York with her family so that’s not an option.”

“And since we’re going to Europe...”

“Right.”

“He also said Lois and Joe are going on that trip, too.”

“Exciting.”

I held out a hand and she grasped it. I tugged her to me and wrapped my arms around her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

~~~~~

Lois

Something didn’t feel quite right when I woke up.

Not *bad*, but not *right*.

I tried to roll over, but couldn’t.

I opened one eye and saw Joe lying there, sleeping next to me.

I leaned up to see the clock and groaned. At least it was Sunday and there was no class. If it had been a school day, I would have missed a couple classes already. I looked towards the window and noticed a dark sheet draped over the curtains to keep the light out.

Joe yawned and opened his eyes to look at me.

“You’ve been trying to get me to sleep with you for years,” I whispered with a smile.

He put an arm around me. “I succeeded. You even asked me to stay.”

“Not all night,” I reminded him.

“Clark said it wouldn’t bother him if I did last night.” He shrugged with one arm. “I fell asleep and didn’t worry about it.”

“Did you put that sheet up?”

“No, Clark did that when he went to bed.”

“Ah.”

“Your dad called to check on you. He also invited them to Thanksgiving with us.”

I groaned. “Great.”

“It’ll be okay.”

“I know. Just promise you’ll come even if your parents get back early.”

“Not a problem.” He leaned over and kissed me gently.

“You’re going to have a hard time getting rid of me.” He kissed me again.

He wanted more. I could tell. I could always tell when his kisses changed.

I rested my hand on his chest and pressed lightly. “No, Joe,” I whispered.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying?” he whispered, kissing my forehead.

“Joe,” I said, a warning in my voice.

“I know.” He pulled me closer until I rested on his chest again. “You sure you don’t want to give us a real shot again?”

I shook my head. “That’s not us. You’re my best friend.

Always have been. Always will be.”

“I know.” He kissed my forehead. “I love you, you know.”

“I know. I love you, too.” And I did. Just not like that.

“So, what do you want to do the most while we’re in Europe?”

I shrugged. “Find a big story and write it? Get a Pulitzer for it.”

He laughed. “Only you would think that.”

“Not like I’ll have any leads or anything.”

“Well, I’ve never been to Europe and I know you’ve been to Paris, Rome and London all before, so you’ll have to make sure we do the good stuff and not just the tour-y stuff.”

“Yeah. Daddy and I have gone several times to all three places. Bet we fly in a lot more comfort though.”

“We’ll make sure we get seats together and not in the middle.” He shuddered lightly. “We need a side seat.”

“Yep. I’ll even let you sit by the window.”

“Thanks.”

“So what’s gonna be our biggest thing in Paris?”

“Well, the night we can eat wherever we want, I’ll take you to my favorite restaurant.”

“Is it one of those sidewalk cafés or what?”

“It was Mom and Daddy’s favorite place to eat. It’s where he proposed when they were there on a school trip.”

“Ah, so nice and romantic?”

“Yep. Just promise me you won’t propose to me there.”

“I promise. At least not this trip.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

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Part 17

Clark

~~~~~

I wondered what the sleeping arrangements would be.

We were driving to the cabin to spend Thanksgiving with Lois and her dad. It seemed pointless to take two cars so we’d all piled in Lois’ Jeep and were on our way. Of course, Joe was with us, so that left me with the discomfort of the back seat. Sure, Lana was there, too, but my long legs just didn’t do well back there.

Before long, Lois pulled off on to Lane Lane and I heard Lana’s intake of breath as she realized this cabin had its own private drive.

About a mile and a half down, Lois said something about how this was where the car had gotten stuck. It amazed me again how far we’d made it in a blizzard. A few minutes later, she pulled up in front of the large cabin and followed the drive as it snaked around to the garage under her room. She expertly negotiated the winding road and pulled the Jeep inside. That done, we headed in from the garage.

Lana’s eyes were wide as she took it all in. Sam was already there and welcomed me with a hearty handshake hug thing. He did the same with Joe, but just smiled a welcome to Lana as he stood with one arm around Lois’ shoulder. “Clark, why don’t you show Lana to the room you stayed in last time and you and Joe can each have one of the rooms above mine?”

I saw Lois stiffen a bit as he spoke. It made sense. She didn’t want me in Lucy’s room and she liked me. She and Lana were like oil and water. Of course she didn’t want Lana in her sister’s room. Sam, though, wouldn’t understand. I picked up Lana’s bag and she followed me up the stairs. I’d scouted out the other two bedrooms the last time we were here and knew which one I wanted. Neither were bad, but the one closer to the stairs was more my style. I couldn’t really define why but it was closer to Lana anyway. I set my bag in there before showing Lana to Lucy’s room.

“Here you go,” I told her with a smile. “Whaddya think?” She looked around. “Not bad.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, it’s a bit better than ‘not bad’ and you know it.”

She sighed. “It would be better if you could stay in here with me.” She moved in front of me and trailed one finger down the front of my shirt until she reached the middle of my stomach then hooked it in between two buttons and pulled me to her. My arms found their way around her, holding her close to me. “You slept with Lois while you were here. Why can’t you sleep with me?”

I kissed her gently. “You know why. And you know I never *meant* to sleep with Lois while I was here. It just sort of happened.”

“Three times?” she said with a raised brow, before kissing me again.

“You can’t blame me for the first time — I was unconscious.

And I was still sick the second time and the third time just sort of happened. I explained it all to you.”

“I know, but why can’t you stay here with me? Is her dad that much of a prude?”

“I don’t think so, but Joe isn’t staying with her so why should I stay with you?” I pointed out. “It probably didn’t even occur to him.”

“So tell him.”

I kissed her again. “I can’t do that, Baby.”

This time she kissed me. “Well, you could always accidentally fall asleep up here,” she said continuing to play with the buttons of my shirt without ever actually unbuttoning one.

I smiled at her. “I *could*, but let’s just play it by ear, okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“So what do you really think of this place?”

“I think growing up with money would have been nice.” She turned in my arms so that we could stare out the window at the snow topped trees.

“Money doesn’t buy everything, though,” I reminded her quietly. “Both her mom and her sister died when she was just a kid and her dad nearly lost everything. I wouldn’t trade my mom and dad for any amount of money.”

“I know, but still... it can make life a lot easier.”

“You’re right about that, but you still can’t buy love or happiness.”

“Her dad seems to love her.”

“He does.”

“So why couldn’t she move home?”

“She hasn’t really told me too much — a little bit but not much — but apparently there’s a good reason.”

A voice called up the stairs, telling us that dinner was almost ready. I kissed the side of her head. “Ready?”

“I guess. But if you want to accidentally fall asleep in here with me, I’d be okay with that.”

I laughed. “I would be too.”

“Then let’s make it happen.” She smiled at me — that slow, sexy smile I loved so much.

~~~~~

Lois

I tossed my bag on the chair in my room and glared at the ceiling where I could hear footsteps.

Why did Daddy have to give Cruella Lucy’s room? Couldn’t Clark have stayed in there again? Or even Joe would have been better.

And why was I so cynical about Joe? He was a good friend and — toga party notwithstanding — had been there for me since I could remember. We’d talked about it a bit more the next day and he’d awkwardly asked a few questions about how I was feeling that seemed to confirm what Clark had said — that he’d gotten there in time. I wasn’t... sore in... places and other stuff that should have occurred to me given the birds and bees talks I’d had with both Dad and Vicki. Even knowing how uncomfortable it made both of us, he’d asked.

Joe was a good friend when Mom and Lucy died and had always been a shoulder to cry on — even after we started dating but weren’t together at the time. Like when Dad’s new girlfriend moved in and Joe was going out with Lisa for a few weeks. The girlfriend told me I’d best move out and I’d cried on Joe’s shoulder. Of course, that was part of the reason why Lisa broke up with him. I’d called in the middle of what was apparently a pretty heated make out session and he’d taken her home to come be with me.

I’d planned on living on campus anyway but the girlfriend made sure I had no choice in the matter. Joe went for a midnight horse ride with me that night and let me cry on his shoulder in the middle of New Troy National Forest near the lake we often hiked to. But our friendship went back much further than that. He’d

stood up to Donny Johnson when Donny tried to kiss me in first grade. Joe had decked him and gotten suspended for three days defending me. Of course, I hadn't really needed defending. Donny had caught me off-guard but if Joe hadn't hit him, I would have.

I flopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling, waiting to see if there was some sort of tell-tale creak as the Siamese twins started making out on my little sister's bed.

There was no creak, but that didn't mean they weren't going at it up there.

I heard Daddy call out that dinner was ready and I decided that I probably should put in an appearance at least.

I was glad that whatever it was from the near-death experience that made me eat everything in sight was over. I poked at the lasagna and finally excused myself, saying that my stomach didn't feel quite right — which was the truth.

I went to my room and lay down, curling up under a blanket. A knock on the door a few minutes later, made me sit up. "Come in," I called.

"Hey." It was Joe. He shut the door behind him. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Not feeling all that hot. That's all."

He sat next to me and pulled me towards him. I rested my head on her shoulder. "And it doesn't have anything to do with Lana staying in your little sister's room?" he asked quietly.

I didn't say anything to that.

"Hey, it's me. You can tell me anything."

"I know and no, I'm not crazy about her being up there."

"I know. You think Clark'll sleep in there tonight?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. Don't care."

He grinned suddenly. "I could always sleep on the floor in here. Because I can if you want me, too."

"What'll Dad think?"

He shrugged. "He probably thinks we've slept together already."

I shuddered. "I never told you what happened while Clark and I were stuck here, did I?"

"No," he said slowly. "Do I want to know?"

"Well, the first night, we were both practically unconscious and I managed to get all of our soaking wet clothes off and we slept together under blankets in front of the fire so we wouldn't freeze to death. The second night, I fell asleep in here and Clark came in to check on me, got dizzy and sat down, and then fell asleep and slept in here with me. The fourth night, the power went out." I didn't look at him as I picked at an imaginary piece of lint. "He slept on the floor in here and I woke up completely freaked out by a nightmare. He came and gave me a big hug and sat with me for a few minutes while I calmed down and we fell asleep again."

"Should I be jealous?" I could hear the hint of a smile in his voice.

"Nah. Yeah, he slept with me naked, but he's never kissed me."

"That's good. I'd hate to lose my make-out buddy."

"You're not going to, unless you find someone else. Then you'll make out with her."

We settled a bit more on the bed. "You know, Lois," he said slowly, his hand rubbing my shoulder. "I know we said a long time ago that we weren't going to be the great love affair of the new millennium, but sometimes I wonder if we don't end up back together all the time for a reason."

I thought about that. "No one knows me better than you."

"And no one knows me better than you."

My voice was small as I finally voiced the thought that had been bouncing around my head. "Would you stay with me tonight?" I turned slightly towards him. "I really don't want to be alone. And you're my best friend."

"Anything for you, Lo."

"Stop calling me 'Lo' and I'll even let you share the bed with me." That was, of course, what I meant when I asked him to stay with me and he knew it.

"No more 'Lo'," he promised, kissing the side of my head. "Sit up for a minute." I complied and he pulled his shirt off and we crawled under the covers.

"You do know I meant only to sleep right?"

"Don't worry. I'm not about to try anything. Not tonight. Not when you need a friend."

"Thanks, Joe."

He pulled me close to him and I rested my head on his chest, tears falling. "I know Clark stayed up there when we were here, but why does the first real visitor to Lucy's room have to be her? Any why does it bother me so much?"

He shrugged, one hand playing with the hair at my temple. "I don't know, babe. But I do love you."

"I know." That was my last conscious thought until the sun came up the next morning.

~~~~~  
Clark

I pulled a shirt and sweatpants on and headed out of my room. It was pretty early, but I ran into Joe.

Coming up the half staircase from Lois' room.

Looking rather tousled.

He brushed past me without saying anything and headed to his room.

Interesting.

Lois had told me — repeatedly and vehemently — that she and Joe weren't sleeping, or *not* sleeping, together.

I headed down the stairs just in time to see Lois, also looking fairly tousled, coming down the stairs from her room into the living room.

"Good morning," I said with a grin. "Sleep well?"

"Fine."

"Joe sleep well?"

"Joe slept fine." She glared at me. "What?"

I shrugged. "Was just surprised to see him coming out of your room, that's all."

"And you didn't fall asleep in Lana's room last night?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Well, not that it's any of your business, but we were talking and fell asleep. That's it."

She was lying about something, but I wasn't sure what. I didn't think it was about what had happened between them, but it was something.

"Are you making breakfast again this morning?"

I shrugged. "I can. Are you still eating as much as you were last time we were here?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what the deal with that was, but I've never been that hungry before or since. Must have been the near death experience or something."

I nodded. "Must have been." I headed to the kitchen to start breakfast while Lois grabbed a cup of coffee and headed to one of the chairs that looked out the large picture window. I didn't know where Sam was, but I was sure Lana was still asleep.

I wasn't paying attention to the noises behind me, so the arms that slipped around my waist and the cheek that rested against my back caught me a bit off-guard.

"Good morning," I felt, more than heard, Lana say. "Making breakfast?"

"Yep." I turned to face her. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy Thanksgiving," she said before she stretched up to kiss me.

"Want a cup of coffee?" I asked her. She nodded and I quickly fixed her a cup the way I knew she liked it — black. It was easy.

The rest of the day passed in relative peace. We had a big

traditional Thanksgiving dinner and took turns being thankful.

Sam was thankful his daughter and her friend had survived the blizzard.

Joe was thankful he had somewhere to be because his parents were overseas for a few weeks.

Lois was thankful to be alive and for good friends. I noticed she didn't look at Lana when she said that.

Lana was thankful that she got out of Smallville and to Sam — but apparently not Lois — for the Lucy Lane Memorial Scholarship that was helping her attend Met U.

I was thankful for new friends and old and a place to spend the holidays away from home.

Lois said she wasn't sure why but was exhausted and took an afternoon nap in her room. Lana, Joe, Sam and I played Trivial Pursuit. Sam won. But it was the Millennium Edition and he'd lived through a lot more of the millennium than the rest of us. We didn't mention that part to him though.

Joe and I brought more wood in for the fire.

We all had leftovers for dinner. Except for Lois, who woke not feeling much better and without much of an appetite.

Sam had bought a new TV for the great room — a big HDTV that I was sure cost almost as much as a year's tuition at Met U — as well as a DVD player, so we all watched 'Miracle on 34th Street' as a way to get us in the holiday spirit. I noticed Joe and Lois sitting closer together than they had been recently. Maybe things in their world were getting better.

We only had a couple more weeks of school and then Lana and I would be heading home for the break. I wondered what Lois was going to do. She'd let it slip a couple weeks earlier that her dad's girlfriend was the reason she'd had to move out and why she really wasn't looking forward to Christmas like she usually did.

I was looking forward to going home and seeing my family and finding a way to buy Lana a ring without anyone knowing and talking to her dad and getting ready to propose when we went to Europe on the school trip right before the first of the year. We wouldn't get to spend New Year's at home because we had to leave Metropolis December 29, but a two week trip through Europe with Lana was worth it.

I couldn't wait.

Part 18

December 2002

Lois

~~~~~

It was Christmas Break and I had to be at home.

I flopped on my bed and stared at the sheer canopies that draped down from the four posts. Left over from my 'princess' phase when I was a kid, I hadn't bothered to redecorate when I outgrew it. Redecorating took energy away from more worthwhile pursuits and was too trivial to mess with.

I looked around and noticed a few things seemed slightly off.

Had someone been in here? Maybe Vicki had cleaned up or something. It wasn't anything I could put my finger on, but something just seemed... off.

I sighed and curled around a pillow. Even after all the things he'd said over Thanksgiving and even though I'd slept in his arms and felt safe and loved, Joe had met someone new. Maybe. Well, he'd met someone and wanted to get to 'know her better', he'd said. Of course, I'd told him that I wasn't sure I agreed with his assessment that we always ended up back together for a reason so it wasn't surprising that he'd moved on.

It just meant that he'd be getting lucky over Christmas and I wouldn't. Not that I would have if he hadn't found this other girl, but that wasn't the point.

After he spent the night in my bed, I'd found myself wondering what it would be like if we did... I hesitated to even

think 'make love' because I loved him, but I didn't *love* him — at least not at this point in my life — but I also knew that it wouldn't be 'just sex' either — we meant too much to each other regardless of our romantic attachment or detachment or whatever.

What would it be like to sleep in his arms after we'd done that?

What it would be like to do that with him?

I sighed. I wasn't going to think about that anymore. I was going to go to sleep and try to forget that I was here with the wicked almost-stepmother who was bound and determined to make my life miserable.

She'd mentioned the possibility of a summer wedding the last time I was here. Daddy hadn't mentioned it at all, but that didn't mean anything. I was still relieved she hadn't come to the cabin for Thanksgiving with us. The more time I spent with her, the more I hated her and hated that she was pulling the wool over my dad's eyes.

And now I was going to be living at home for two weeks.

Was it possible I could avoid her until then? Somehow I doubted it. Daddy would expect us to eat together sometimes and then there was Christmas. I was sure I was expected to get her something really nice or something like that.

I was going to have to go shopping. And I hated shopping. Especially when I was shopping for someone I loathed. And I had no idea what on earth I could get her that both she and Daddy would think was appropriate.

I closed my eyes and prayed sleep would come quickly.

~~~~~

Clark

I hugged Mom tight for a long moment as I stood in the kitchen of my childhood home.

"Oh, Clark, I've missed you."

"I know, Mom. I've missed you, too." I hadn't flown home often — less than once a month, really, and I hadn't been back since right after the whole thing at the cabin when they wanted to see for themselves that I was okay.

"Did you drop Lana off on your way here?"

I squeezed her a bit more tightly, before letting her go. "Yeah. She was anxious to get home, though she did say she wants to come over sometime next week to see you guys."

Mom frowned. "We're going to Kansas City next week. Didn't I tell you that?"

I groaned. "Yeah, I just forgot."

"Well, we have some shopping to do and Aunt Opal is meeting us there and we're all going to Uncle Joe's in Excelsior Springs to do Christmas with that side of the family one day."

"Yeah, I know. I'll call her."

"I do wish you were going to be here for more than two weeks though," she said, as she turned back to dinner. "You've been gone too long."

I stuck my finger in the sauce and noticed her wince out of the corner of my eye even though she knew I wouldn't burn myself. "Mmmm," I hummed as I tasted it. "I have *missed* your cooking. Lois' dad has a service that makes her food, too, and she shares sometimes, but even it's not this good. And the cafeteria is pathetic."

"You know how to cook," she reminded me.

"I know, but where am I supposed to do that?"

"Good point."

"And I'll be home for Spring Break and I'll be here all summer," I reminded her. I didn't tell her I was probably going to be getting married sometime this summer. Lana and I had talked about it and she'd indicated more than once that she would be happy to get married the summer after our freshman year. I felt a slight frown crease my brow. If we moved home for the summer, as planned, then got married in June or July, where would we live until it was time to go back to school? The thought of Lana

moving into my room was both pretty freaky and slightly exciting at the same time. Or maybe we could get married just in time to go on a honeymoon before we headed back to Metropolis and maybe just stay here for a night or two.

I stuck another finger in the sauce and the old doubts about telling her about myself assailed me again. Would she understand? Should I tell her before I asked her to marry me or after? I wanted to propose in Paris because it seemed like something we'd always remember and would be incredibly romantic and all that stuff, but a school trip certainly wasn't the place for this discussion. The hayloft in the barn was probably one of the best places, unless I flew her to somewhere in the Andes or a deserted island or something like that.

I sighed. "I'm going to take my stuff upstairs."

I could feel Mom's eyes on me and knew that she knew something was on my mind, but I wasn't about to tell her what it was. I knew they thought Lana and I were too serious, too young despite their own life stories. I also knew that Mom would tell Lana herself before we got married if I didn't tell her myself. And Dad might disown me.

I grabbed my stuff and zipped up the stairs, anxious to be out of her eyesight.

~~~~~  
Lois

I'd seen Clark and Lana sucking face near the gate and was praying that I didn't have a seat near them. I wasn't sure what their seat assignments were but Joe and I were in the very back row in the two seats on the left side of the plane. I'd even promised him the window seat.

Joe had called me two days after I got home from the dorms for Christmas. It — whatever 'it' was — hadn't worked out with the new girl and he'd come running back to me. Okay, that might have been stretching it a bit. He'd asked if I still wanted to go see the new 'Lord of the Rings' movie that weekend. It came out the week of finals and neither one of us had had a chance to go yet.

We'd gone and he'd apologized to me, saying that he was looking forward to the plane ride because we could talk and asked if we could try to get seats for just the two of us. I'd gone online to find the best seats for something like this and on a 747 — if we weren't able to be upstairs like Daddy and I usually were — the best place was the back two seats on one of the sides. The seats still reclined, but did have moveable armrests so I could use Joe as a pillow, and were close enough to the side of the plane that he could rest on it.

Because we were at the back of the plane, we got to board first if we wanted to. I didn't. I knew we were going to be on board the plane for eons anyway — why get on any sooner than necessary?

Apparently Clark and Lana didn't realize this and they were among the first on board. Well, all of our group was in the back of the plane, so it made sense, but I still hoped they weren't either in front of or next to us.

As the departure time finally neared, Joe and I boarded. I groaned aloud when I realized that Clark was going to be sitting right across the aisle from me.

"What?" Joe asked from right behind me.

"Look who's sitting next to us," I told him, glad that we weren't close enough to our group to be heard by any of them.

"I thought you liked Clark," he said confused.

"I do. I don't like the person sitting on the other side of him. And they're probably going to be playing tonsil hockey over the Atlantic."

"And we won't?" I could practically see his grin as he whispered in my ear.

"It's possible," I conceded. "But don't hold your breath."

"I won't."

We reached the back of plane, said 'hi' to Clana — as I'd

taken to calling them in my head since we got back from the cabin, regardless of what I'd said to Joe before — and stowed our stuff.

Joe leaned down to whisper in my ear. "Do you want me to take the aisle seat? I won't mind."

I nodded. "Thanks." Before I could slide into my seat, I heard the sickeningly sweet voice come from across the aisle.

"Lois. Joe." I turned to see Lana smiling innocently at us. "Would you two trade seats with us? Clark and I wanted to talk about something and would appreciate a little bit of buffer from anyone else."

Clark shifted in his seat, looking slightly uncomfortable.

Joe smiled at her. "Sorry, Lana. No can do. Lois and I already have a big, long talk of our own planned and since we thought ahead enough to get the seats..." He shrugged. "We're going to use them. I'm sure you two will have plenty of time to talk when we get to Europe." He paused, his brow furrowed. "Didn't you two just drive in from Smallville? What's that? A twenty-hour drive?"

Lana covered well, but I was sure she was furious. She just wanted a little space to be slightly more alone with Clark.

I slid into the window seat and rested my head against the plastic.

This was going to be a long flight.

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We were well over the Atlantic before Joe took my hand in his. "Can we talk now?"

I glanced around. Most people were either asleep or had headphones on or both so I nodded. "Sure."

He took a deep breath. "Since Thanksgiving, and really before that, I've been doing a lot of thinking. About us."

He'd shifted so that his back was to the aisle and spoke quietly.

"What about us?" I asked softly.

"We've been off and on for what? Three years now?"

I nodded. "Something like that."

"Do you ever wonder why we always find our way back to each other? I mean, I've dated other girls that I liked a lot — who knew how to kiss and whatever — but I've never wanted to date any one of them again after we broke up."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. But I never dated any other guys seriously or anything. Barely kissed the few I did go out with. Dan was the only one I thought might turn into something more and... Well, you know how that turned out."

He rubbed his thumb over my knuckles. "I don't want you to think I'm saying this just to get in bed with you, I'm not. Not that I would mind someday, but I know how you feel about that and I don't want to pressure you into anything you don't want or aren't ready for or anything like that."

"Well, you also know I won't let you pressure me."

"I know. And I respect that, really, I do. That was part of what I was thinking about the last few weeks. I've slept with just about every other girl I've dated since I was sixteen. There hasn't been *that* many and it's not like it was ever on the *first* date, but after a couple dates..." He looked at our joined hands. "I don't want to get into all of my sexual history right now and you already know most of it anyway, but I wonder if that's not part of why we keep find our way back to each other. That it's not just about sex with us."

I rested my head on my seat. "I guess that's possible."

"And then... you almost died. And when your dad told me what happened... Did you know I called your house that night? He was so scared and so was I. I don't think I've ever breathed a bigger sigh of relief than when Lana told me you were okay. I started thinking then and after Thanksgiving, I started thinking more seriously. And you said you were happy the way things were, so I left it alone and I started dating Denise, but only a

couple times because I didn't want to be with her. I wanted to be with you.

"Could we..." He took another deep breath and almost looked scared. "Do you think that we could try again? I mean, for real and not just so we have something to do on Friday and Saturday nights or whatever? I promise that I won't push you or anything, but I realized when I was going out with her this month... I kissed her and she kissed me back and she was willing to do a lot more than that and I just... I had no desire to do that with her. All I could think about was you and how I would rather be with you watching a movie than doing... other stuff with her."

He leaned over and kissed me softly. "Think about it for a while. I don't want an answer right away. I know it's something we haven't talked about in years, but I would like you to think about it and see if you think there might be a chance for us." He kissed me again — a long, soft, sweet kiss. Almost like our first kiss a couple years earlier. "I've got to go to the bathroom and then I'm going to get some shut eye, okay?"

I nodded. "Okay. And I will think about it. I promise." I stared at the blackness out the window while he was gone, but stood when he got back. "Why don't you take the window seat and you can lean on it? If you don't mind me leaning on you, that is."

He smiled. "Not at all." He settled in the window seat with one of the little airline pillows and a blanket. I handed him my pillow and he used it, too. One arm wrapped around me as I sat next to him and rested my head on his shoulder. We each pulled a rough airplane blanket around us. He kissed my head. "I do love you, Lois."

"I know, Joe. I love you, too."

"I know."

We closed our eyes and settled in for some sleep.

~~~~~  
Clark

I wanted to shift uncomfortably, but Lana was resting on me and I didn't want to bother her.

This flying in planes things was for the birds.

I was meant to fly under my own power.

Really.

Of course, no one else would understand that, but that was okay. Lana would soon enough. We'd be in Paris and, in a couple days, she'd be my fiancée — there was nothing that I could think of that would lead to her saying no — and we'd have three days before classes started once we got back to the States. We'd talk about me and my alien-ness then. And then she'd understand.

And hopefully, she'd like to fly with me sometimes.

I sighed and shifted my aisle side leg slightly.

"You okay?" came a soft voice from across the aisle.

I looked to see Lois watching me, concern in her eyes.

I nodded. "I'm not real fond of flying and there's just not enough leg room in these things. Honestly. It's worse than your Jeep."

She smiled at that. "My Jeep has plenty of legroom."

"Only because you always drive."

"True. But Joe's Mustang has plenty of leg room, too, and I never drive it."

"Not in the back."

"You've got me there, but I've never been in the back seat of his car."

"Really?" I asked her, a gleam in my eye.

She glared at me.

"Sorry," I said immediately, a grin on my face. I sighed and turned serious. "I didn't mean to listen in a little while ago but..." I glanced around. "This isn't exactly the best place for trying *not* to listen in."

She blushed a bit. "I'm sure."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Are you going to give it another chance?"

She chewed on her bottom lip. "I think so." She glanced up at Joe, who was sleeping against the window, his mouth slightly open. She smiled. "He's my best friend. He has been for a long time."

"I'm glad. He really does seem like a good guy."

"He is."

We talked for a while longer, laughing and joking quietly as the sky in front of us lightened. We were landing at nearly noon, Paris time, so it would be daylight long before we landed. Fortunately, for those trying to sleep, most of the shades were pulled.

Lana and Joe both began to stir at about the same time, as did just about everyone else as we started our descent into Paris.

Part 19

Lois

~~~~~  
I hugged the pillow to me and groaned slightly.

I was finally visiting Paris with a boyfriend who wanted to see if things between us could turn serious again and I had the flu.

At least the faculty advisors were a little more lenient than the ones in high school had been. As much as I wanted to explore Paris, I'd been there before — several times — and right then, my bed was much more appealing.

There was a knock on the door and I groaned again, getting up to answer it.

"Hey," Joe said quietly.

I raised one hand and turned back to the room. I flopped on the bed and he sat next to me.

"Feeling any better?" he asked brushing the hair off my face.

"A bit," I said, truthfully. "Not nearly as bad as I did this morning."

"That's good." He leaned over and kissed my forehead. "Any chance you'll be up to that dinner tonight?"

I nodded. "I may not eat much, but maybe."

"Good."

We hadn't had a chance to talk since we got off the plane. I grasped his hand in mine. "I've thought a lot about what you said on the plane," I said, not looking at him.

"And?" he asked quietly. He sounded a bit afraid.

"I want to give it a shot..."

"But?" he prompted as my voice trailed off.

"There's a couple of things I want to be clear on first."

"Okay," he said, shifting so he could stroke the hair off my forehead as I continued to stare at his denim-clad thigh.

"No pushing me for sex. That doesn't mean we can't talk about it at some point in the not-too-distant future or about moving the boundaries we've had set for the last couple years sometime soon, but I know you're ready for that whenever I am and I don't want you to push me. And we never make any decisions about it in the heat of the moment or when we're not fully clothed."

"Deal."

"And..." I took a deep breath. This was the one that could be a deal breaker eventually, I thought. "If you break up with me at some point because I'm not ready for sex yet and you go out and date around a bit and scratch the itch or whatever, don't expect to come back to me like you have the last couple years. It's different this time." I still hadn't looked at him. "If we break up for other reasons and not that, then maybe if we can work those issues out, but you better not cheat on me or break up with me so you can go have sex with someone else and expect me to take you back. If this is a serious relationship, it's a serious relationship, not the on-again-off-again thing we've been for the last few years."

“Deal,” he said without hesitation.

I finally looked up at him. “I mean it, Joe.”

“I know you do.” He kissed my forehead again. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep and I’ll meet you downstairs at eight? Leave me a message if you’re not up to it, but if I don’t hear from you, I’m taking you to dinner in Paris tonight.”

“Well,” I said with a smile. “It would be kind of hard for you to take me to dinner in Metropolis now, wouldn’t it?”

He laughed. “Yeah. That it would.”

I smiled at him. “Love you, Joe.”

“Love you, too.” He kissed me — for real this time — and then stood. “Get some rest.”

I closed my eyes as he left.

~~~~~  
Clark

I set my backpack down on the floor next to my chair. I sat where I could see the elevators because Lana was going to be coming off of one any minute.

Instead, I found myself distracted by Lois sitting next to me and hiding her face in my shoulder.

“Pretend we’re in some kind of deep, romantic conversation or something,” she hissed.

I hadn’t seen her all day. Joe said she had a bit of the stomach flu, but she seemed fine. “What?” I whispered back.

“She can’t see me.” She tugged at my other arm so that my body turned and hid her a bit more.

“Who?”

“Dad’s girlfriend.”

I started to turn and look, but a quick shake of her head stopped me. “Don’t look.”

I could see her tracking someone with her eyes.

“Okay, now you can watch her. Blonde, high heels, shiny pink shirt and white leather pants.”

“I see her,” I whispered.

“She’s up to something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, but…”

“She’s leaving.”

Lois whipped her head around. “Come on.”

“What?”

“I’m following her. I’ll explain later.”

“Lois, I’m not following your Dad’s girlfriend with you. I’m supposed to go out for dinner with Lana, and you’re not exactly dressed for undercover operations.”

She glared at me. “I’m going. Tell Joe I’ll call him when I get back, okay?”

I groaned and grabbed my backpack as she practically ran across the lobby. “I’m coming, but we’re not going to be gone long.” I saw Tom, one of the guys in our group and asked him to let Lana and Joe know we’d be back in a few minutes and he agreed. Surely, I’d be able to talk her out of this before we got too far.

We ended up in a cab and followed a dark sedan to the airport, but not the main terminal.

Thanking the cabbie and paying him, Lois climbed out.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“Following her,” she hissed back.

I could see the blonde talking to someone who looked a bit… hinky but that didn’t mean anything. Maybe.

The guy handed her a large briefcase and I slipped my glasses down to look into it.

Cash.

And lots of it.

There weren’t very many reasons — legitimate reasons — to handle large briefcases of cash at night at a deserted part of a foreign airport.

A pallet was loaded onto an airplane and before I knew it,

Lois was dashing through the shadows.

What on earth did she think she was doing?

When no one was looking, she nimbly jumped up onto the ramp and into the cargo hold.

Was she planning on flying with this stuff?

Were cargo holds even pressurized?

I sighed and hitched my backpack a bit higher and followed her.

~~~~~  
Lois

I heard something behind me and a glance showed that it was Clark. I breathed a sigh of relief. I wasn’t quite sure what I was doing, but I was glad I wasn’t doing it alone.

“Lois,” he hissed.

“What?” I hissed back.

“We have to get out of here.”

“In a minute.” I tiptoed through the pallets, looking for another one to catch my eye — away from the loading hatch where we could be seen. Finally, I found one.

I tried to pull the lid off, but apparently, it wasn’t budging.

Suddenly, Clark grabbed my arm and pulled me down.

“What?”

“Someone’s coming.” He held a finger to his lips as we crouched behind the pallet.

A couple of men climbed into the hold and fastened down the last pallet that had been loaded. As soon as they were done, they hopped down and the loading ramp began to close.

We looked at each other — wide eyed. “We have to get out of here!” I whispered.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious,” he whispered back. “How?”

“I don’t know. Are cargo holds pressurized?”

“I think so — they ship pets don’t they?”

“Yeah.”

I dug around in my jacket pocket and pulled out my iPhone.

“What’re you doing?”

“Looking it up.”

I was glad Daddy always paid for the best services and I had internet access on it even here. On the way to the cabin… it had been useless, but here I had service.

Clark’s hand clamped over mine before I could connect.

“What?”

“Won’t it interfere with the plane’s electronics? And tip them off that we’re here?”

“Does it matter if we die from exposure if we don’t?”

He sighed and suddenly the whine from the engines changed and we started to move. I toppled onto him and we landed flat.

Fortunately, there were still a few small lights on in this area. We could hear footsteps above our heads and we stood up, looking for a way to get to the main deck.

Clark tugged his glasses to the end of his nose. I’d seen him do that a few times before, but had no idea why.

He grabbed my hand. “Come on.” Quickly, he led us to a spot near the front of the plane, where, incredibly, there were a couple of jump seats.

He dropped his backpack to the ground and sat in one. I sat next to him. “I guess if there’s seats here, we’ll survive the trip.”

His face looked grim. “It probably won’t be real comfortable though. It’ll probably be a lot colder down here than up in the cabin.”

I rested my head on the bulkhead behind me and sighed. “I’m sorry.”

He sighed, too. “I know.”

“Joe was supposed to take me on our first real date since… well, you heard us talking.”

“Yeah. So you were going to see what happened with him?”

“Yeah. I told him that there were two conditions and he agreed to them so…” I shrugged. “I thought I’d see where we

went.”

“What were the conditions?”

I didn’t say anything for a minute. “Well, that he doesn’t push me for sex and if he breaks up with me because I’m not ready and goes to some other girl, don’t expect me to take him back.”

“Good for you.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? You’re not going to tell me in some sort of male bonding moment that I should just jump him next time I see him?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s not something to take lightly.”

“So how long did you and Lana wait?” I didn’t look at him when I asked.

“We still are,” he said quietly. “We decided to wait until we get married.”

We were both continuing to scan the area, hoping that something would catch our eye for a way to get out of there, but we were suddenly pressed against the backs of our seats as the whine increased and we, apparently, took off.

~~~~~  
Clark

I sighed. This so wasn’t what I had planned. I should have been walking along the Seine or gazing at the Eiffel Tower with Lana and then asking her to marry me.

A plane on the way to — literally — God only knew where, wasn’t on the agenda.

“So why exactly did you insist on following her?”

She shrugged. “I can’t explain it. She... she’s not above board. I know that. Daddy said she was going to see her family in Little Rock, Arkansas. She shouldn’t have been in Paris.”

“Ah.” I didn’t understand, but I knew Lois and the girlfriend didn’t get along at all. I knew that she was the main reason why Lois hadn’t felt she could move back home when she found out I was her roommate.

I dug around in my backpack and found a pack of gum. I held it out to her. “Here. Should help with the air pressure.”

She nodded her thanks as she took a piece and popped it in her mouth.

“So what were you and Lana up to tonight?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t about to tell her my real plans. “Walk along the Seine, see the Eiffel Tower at night, kiss at midnight, that kind of thing. You and Joe?”

“We were supposed to go to our favorite restaurant. Well, mine and Daddy’s. It’s where he proposed to Mom on a trip when they were in college.”

“College sweethearts then?”

She shook her head. “High school. He proposed when they went on a trip to Europe over Winter Break their freshman year. They got married that summer and lived in the dorms on campus until he graduated from medical school. I came along about five years after they got married and Lucy three years after that.”

The similarities were eerie, though neither Lana nor I were planning on working in the medical field and I didn’t think we’d wait that long to try to start a family.

We sat for a while, each lost in our own thoughts, until a while after we’d leveled out.

“Do you have any idea where we’re going?” I finally asked her.

“No,” she sighed.

I’d tried to listen in to some of the conversation above us, but I didn’t recognize the language and none of it sounded like the name of any cities I was familiar with.

She snapped her seatbelt off and headed towards the back of the plane.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Checking to see what they’ve got loaded on here. We’re probably going to be here for a couple hours, we may as well look around.”

I lowered my glasses and could feel my face tighten when I saw what was in the crates.

She carefully walked to the last pallet that had been loaded and suddenly pulled a flashlight out of her pocket. “Can you help me open this?”

I shook my head. “We’re not opening that.”

“Why not?”

Because I already know what’s in it, I tried to communicate to her without saying anything. And it’s not something we want to get involved with.

She flashed her light around and found a tool box of some kind attached to the wall. She managed to open it and pulled a crowbar out of it.

“Are you really going to do this?” I asked her.

“Yes.”

I decided I better help her. I could probably get it open so that I could shut it again later and no one would know that we’d opened it. “Here.” I held my hand out and she glared at me. “I’m taller. I’ll have a better angle on it.”

She sighed and handed it over.

Carefully, I pried up one side enough that we could peek in.

She shone her flashlight into the crate and gasped as she realized what I already knew.

We were in way over our heads.

~~~~~  
Lois

I needed to call Daddy.

Not to tell him what we’d found, but to have him send someone to rescue us whenever we got where we landed.

I scrambled back down and wandered towards the jump seats without really paying attention to what I was doing. I guessed Clark put the lid back on as best he could and then I heard a slight clanging sound as he put the crowbar back.

A few minutes later, he held a bottle of water out to me.

Boy Scouts had nothing on Clark Kent.

“What do we do?” I whispered.

“Try to get out of this alive,” he said, his voice grim.

I nodded. “That’s a good plan.”

He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me to his side. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Maybe we’ll land in London or something and we can sneak off the way we got on when no one’s looking.”

“Somehow I doubt we’re headed for somewhere nearly as civil as London.”

“Probably not,” he agreed, his cheek resting on my head.

“We’ll figure something out.”

“I hope so.”

I giggled. “I figured we’d have to be seasoned investigative reporters before we ended up in this kind of situation.”

He let go of me and rested his head against the wall behind him. “Somehow, I don’t envision Lois Lane waiting for anything to happen to her. I think she makes things happen.”

“Well, it would be nice if I had a clue what was going on. I saw that logo on some paperwork at home, but I have no idea what it was.” I pointed at the snake coiled on the side of one of the crates.

“I think that may be a good thing.”

I sighed. “At least we know what’s inside and we can try to be prepared.”

“As long as they don’t use them on us.”

“Right.”

Because they could.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I’d seen when Clark got that lid off.

Guns.

Lots and lots of guns.

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Part 20  
January 2003  
Clark

~~~~~  
Lois was starting to shiver a bit.

I wondered if I could shoot a blast of heat vision at her without her noticing.

Deciding it probably wasn't worth the risk just yet, I pulled my jacket off and warmed up the inside with a bit of the lasers or whatever it was that shot out of my eyes and tucked it around her.

"Won't you be cold?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "I'm a bit warm actually. Must be the adrenaline."

"Thanks."

I lowered my glasses and looked through the floor of the plane and zoomed in on the ground below. It wasn't as far a zoom as it might have been. We were over mountains. The Alps? I guessed so. No other mountain ranges came to mind in Europe.

We didn't say much for a long time.

"Any ideas?" she asked.

I shook my head. I knew I could get us out easily and probably unseen if I was willing to risk what I knew about myself. I knew I could trust Lois, or thought I could. I was still worried about what Lana was going to say when I told her. I guessed that if I managed to get Lois out of a potentially life or death situation, it would go a long way towards making her feel friendly towards me.

If it came down to it, Lois and I would just disappear. Literally. There one second and gone the next and the people watching would never know what had happened.

Or something.

If I could make myself go through with it and hope that we didn't leave behind any evidence that would lead to us.

Her head rested on my shoulder and, unbelievably, she dozed off.

I sighed and used my vision again to see how far away I could see and see if I could recognize any landmarks or anything. There was water nearby and I thought maybe it was part of the Mediterranean, but I had no idea. I looked around some more and realized that there was no rising or setting sun to help me figure out which way we were headed or anything like that.

The North Star.

I'd never tried to find it while looking through a plane and from a different hemisphere.

No luck.

Was it really a different hemisphere or just a different angle? I sighed. It didn't matter.

I turned my hearing back on and heard something about Latislan. I hoped we weren't headed there. They were in the middle of some kind of conflict with... Podansk, I thought.

It would explain the guns though.

I wracked my brain to remember what I could about the small country in south-eastern Europe. Run by a military dictatorship. Not a pleasant place to be. And probably not a good place to let someone get their hands on Lois. I wasn't too worried about myself, but for her...

An indeterminate amount of time later, we finally started to descend.

~~~~~

Lois

The wheels touched the tarmac of some foreign country. I was sure I looked frightened. I felt it. We were in some other country and I knew I didn't have anything but my driver's license on me, certainly not my passport. I didn't know if Clark had his or not.

Of course, gun runners probably wouldn't care that we were

American citizens or that we wanted to contact our embassy.

It was my fault we were in this mess; maybe I could distract whoever I needed to, to let Clark get away safely.

He grasped my hand lightly and whispered in my ear as the sound of the engines began to slow down as we taxied somewhere. "We'll figure something out but don't do anything stupid."

"Do you at least have your passport with you?"

He nodded. "You don't, do you?"

I shook my head. "Here." I slipped my license in his hand. "You keep it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. My gut feeling says I shouldn't have it on me. They may be able to connect me to my dad's girlfriend."

"Right."

We unbuckled our seatbelts and hid as far forward in the plane as we could.

My stomach flu decided to pick that moment to come back with a vengeance. I managed to keep from actually throwing up, but I wasn't sure how long I was going to be successful.

I handed him my cell phone. "I don't think I should have that either," I whispered as the rear loading ramp began to lower.

He nodded and stuck it in his pocket.

"If you can find a way to do it without letting anyone see you, call my dad and tell him where we are." I paused. "Do you know where we are?"

"I think we're in Latislan," he said with a grimace. "I heard someone say something really loud while you were sleeping."

I nodded. We'd heard murmurs and a few words here and there but I hadn't been able to figure any of it out.

"Do you think we can send him a text message?" he asked.

"I don't think he knows how to check them."

Latislan. That explained the guns, but it wasn't good.

The pallets were being off-loaded one by one.

I whispered to him. "If you can, the phone book on there has Dad's cell Europe on it. That'll dial him from here. Country codes and all that. Call him over and over until he answers."

He nodded. "Can we find a way upstairs now?"

"Maybe they'll only unload half or something."

My stomach was roiling. I was going to throw up. I wasn't going to be able to stop it next time. I knew that.

I had to do something. I couldn't let them find Clark when I started puking my guts out again. He had to be able to get a hold of my dad or someone.

He was squatting precariously, his backpack straps in his thumbs.

I took a deep breath and whispered, "I'm sorry," before I shoved him.

He made a loud clattering sound when he landed and I didn't take the time to register the look of shock on his face before I started making my way towards the rear of the plane.

"Help me!" I yelled.

The two men who had jumped on the plane when they heard the noise grabbed my arms and I was sure they were immediately sorry, when the little I'd had to eat that day decided it was a good time to come back up.

~~~~~

Clark

I cursed under my breath.

What the hell was she doing?

She threw up on the two men holding her arms. She must have still been sick and was afraid she'd give both of us away if she threw up back here.

She was crying that she wanted to call her dad.

Call her dad.

I dug the phone out of my pocket and tried to figure it out.

I found the phone book and then the listing she'd given me.

“Hello?” came the voice on the other end of the line.

“Princess?”

“Sam, it’s Clark,” I whispered.

“Clark? What’s wrong?”

“I can’t explain now, but we’re in trouble.”

“Aren’t you in Paris?”

“We were, but it’s a long story I can’t get into. We’re in Latislan.” A scan of the area had confirmed that.

“What?!”

“Lois doesn’t have her passport and left her ID and phone with me when she made a break for it.” Or something like that. “Can you get a hold of the embassy and get them down here or something? We’re at the main airport in Skopje.”

“Is she okay?”

“A couple of guys have got her right now. I’m going to do whatever I can, but I wanted to call you first and have you start working on things there. See if you can get a hold of someone to get down here.”

“I will.” He paused for a second. “Take care of my little girl, Clark.”

“I will, sir.”

“Be careful.” He clicked off.

Hopefully, he had enough connections that he could get the ball rolling or something.

I made sure the phone was on vibrate and stuck it back in my pocket.

I looked through the crate to see where they had taken Lois. They were half-dragging her towards the hanger nearby. I looked around and no one else was close. I took the chance and snuck out of the plane and zipped to a hiding spot near the hanger, using a plane landing to help cover my wind gust.

They sat her in a chair in an office and were arguing over what to do with her, I guessed.

She threw up again and one of them stuck a trash can in front of her.

When she was done, she started talking again immediately, telling them again that she was an American and she wanted to talk to her embassy or her dad or the president or just about anyone else.

The phone in my pocket vibrated slightly about ten minutes later. Not much had changed, though I wasn’t sure Lois had actually taken a breath except for the two times she threw up again.

Looking around to make sure I was alone, I pulled it out of my pocket. A text message from Sam.

He didn’t go into details but said that help was on the way in the form of a member of the ambassador’s staff but it would probably be thirty minutes before anyone got to us.

I sent a message back that we were both still okay for the time being, but that I was still hiding and watching.

I hated text speak or whatever, but found myself using abbreviations I’d sworn I’d never use and some I doubted even existed, but hoped Sam would understand what I was trying to say.

Ten minutes after that, car lights caught my attention. It was too fast to be the embassy personnel. I zoomed in and confirmed that. I wasn’t sure who it was, but he didn’t look happy.

They’d tied Lois to the chair, but it wasn’t the best job and she didn’t look like she was in pain.

She was looking around, probably wondering where I was and hoping I was okay.

There was shouting from the tarmac and one of the men scampered out of the office and headed towards the yelling man.

There was more yelling and it sounded like he was ‘yes, sir’-ing a lot in whatever language it was.

One of the men in a military uniform came into the office and untied Lois. I breathed a quick sigh of relief until he grabbed her

arm and forced her out of the chair and towards the angry... general it looked like.

He better not hurt her. I seriously thought about just grabbing her and taking off, literally, but that guy had a tight grip on her arm and I didn’t want to take him with us or hurt her, so I waited.

~~~~~  
Lois

I didn’t want them to think I was nearly as scared as I was.

“I want to talk to my embassy! I’m an American!” I shouted over and over as the new bully dragged me out of the hanger office.

I didn’t know where Clark was, but I hoped he’d gotten a hold of my dad and that help was on the way.

“I want to talk to the ambassador! No! I want to talk to the president! I’m an American!”

“Shut up!” The man practically spat at me in heavily accented English.

“Will you let me call the embassy?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t shut up! I want to talk to my embassy. You can’t hold me like this.”

He leered at me, looking me up and down and practically undressing me with his eyes. It made me very uncomfortable and I almost prayed that I’d throw up all over him.

“Shut up!”

One of the men I’d thrown up on said something to him that I didn’t understand.

“You’ve thrown up on my men, have you?”

“I’ll throw up on you,” I threatened.

“Are you sick?”

“Why?” He obviously didn’t care about my welfare.

“You must have brought a vicious disease into my country. I’ll have to have you quarantined until it can be figured out. I think three months should be sufficient.”

He ran a finger down the side of my face, but I didn’t flinch no matter how badly I wanted to.

And then I got my wish.

I threw up all over him.

I was sure his smell didn’t help because he smelled like spoiled beets. It was his own fault.

He looked like he wanted to hit me but he didn’t dare. If I was an American and I managed to get out, it wouldn’t look good.

Of course, if he managed to get me quarantined, that wouldn’t help much either.

Inspiration struck.

“I’m not sick,” I told him, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. Well, Clark’s sleeve. I apologized mentally for ruining his jacket.

“Then why are you throwing up all over my country?”

“I’m pregnant. You wouldn’t want to treat a pregnant American woman poorly would you?”

It was all bluff and bluster, but it had to work.

A sinister grin spread across his face. I didn’t understand why that would please him.

“There is no record of you entering our fair country,” he reminded me.

“So?”

“You have been here for several weeks now, have you not?”

“I have not.”

“Ah, I think you have. And while you were here, you...” His face took on that leer again. “You made yourself available to me, no?”

“No.” It was nearly a whisper.

“You carry my child and in Latislan, that means I have full custody of the child unless I relinquish that custody. You will not be allowed to leave until the child is born and I can retain physical custody.”

I was sure the blood had drained from my face. “There is proof that I entered Paris yesterday,” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “It wasn’t you. It was a friend of yours who looks much like you.” He leaned in until he could whisper in my ear. “You could always marry me so our child will not be a bastard.”

“Never,” I hissed.

I heard cars approaching and saw headlights. They screeched to a stop nearby. Someone got out and called out, “General Navance! That young lady is an American citizen.”

He didn’t move as he yelled back. “She is carrying my child. She will remain in my custody until I can take physical custody of the child.”

“Go to hell,” I whispered between clenched teeth as I brought my knee up sharply, connecting with his most sensitive parts.

Hands grabbed me from behind before everything went blessedly dark.

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Part 21  
Clark

~~~~~

Pregnant?

Lois said she was pregnant?!

I knew that wasn’t possible. Unless...

She had to be saying that just to avoid the quarantine.

I winced as he told her that he believed her to be carrying his baby.

That wasn’t good.

And what was that about custody?

I heard cars coming and prayed they’d be fast enough.

I heard whoever it was get out of the car and tell the man — General Navance apparently — to leave her alone.

He reiterated the baby stuff and Lois told him to go to hell and then kned him.

Even though he was a pig and I was invulnerable, I winced in slight sympathy.

But then Lois collapsed.

“Lois!” I called without thinking as I ran from my hiding spot.

“And who is this?!” thundered the general.

“I’m an American,” I told him as two of his goons grabbed my arms. “So is she.” I nodded towards Lois who was lying on the ground.

“It does not matter,” he said, a gloating look on his face. “Her child is Latislani and that means I retain custody of her.”

“It’s not your baby,” I told him. “We just got here.”

The government official was at my side. “Mr. Kent?” he whispered.

I nodded.

“We’ll get her out of this, but don’t antagonize him. That won’t help either one of you.” He turned back to Navance. “If you say she’s carrying your child, shouldn’t you be a bit more worried about her welfare? She needs to get to a hospital immediately. Of course, if you’d rather, I could take her and have one of our corpsmen look at her.”

“That is just a trick to get her to the embassy,” he thundered. “And I would never see my child!”

Boy, he was really getting into this ‘she’s having my baby’ thing.

She must have really pissed him off about something, but I wasn’t entirely certain what it was.

He motioned to someone off to the side. His car pulled up. “We will take her to the closest hospital.”

“I’m going with her,” I said instantly.

“Someone from the embassy will ride with her in the car,” the man next to me said. “And we’ll be right behind. Someone will stay with her at all times, understood General Navance?”

Whoever the guy was, he was someone to be reckoned with.

The general gave a quick nod and one of the men climbed in the front seat of the car as Lois was loaded in the back.

“Mr. Kent, please come with me.” The hand on my arm was insistent as I stared at the car with Lois in it.

I finally allowed myself to be led away.

I watched Lois through the car using my vision and tried to listen to the conversation I was having.

“I’m Daniel Scardino,” the man told me.

“Hi, Dan. How do we get Lois out of here?”

“It’s Daniel, but that’s not important now. We’ll get her out.”

“Sorry, Daniel.”

“How far along is she?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think there’s any way she *can* be pregnant. She and her boyfriend don’t... you know.”

“Ah. Then why did she say it?”

“He was threatening to have her quarantined for bringing a disease in. She probably thought it was a way out.”

Something kept niggling at the back of my mind.

“And you’re sure she’s not pregnant?” he asked again.

I groaned and closed my eyes. “She may have been raped.”

“*May* have been?”

I nodded. “Halloween. She was drugged. I found her with some guy but we didn’t know if he’d managed to... you know. She refused to go to the hospital. But that would make her... what? Three months pregnant by now. That’s a big difference from barely like he’s saying. And surely she would have suspected it by now.”

He nodded. “Well, I’m sure they’ll do tests at the hospital. We’ll have to make sure we get the real test results and not the ones Navance wants us to have.”

“He’d doctor them?”

Daniel sighed. “He’s on a real power trip. Your friend’s in a lot of trouble.”

“Why?”

“He’s essentially a dictator, even though he’s nominally elected. He does what he wants. There’s a law on the books that says that any child he says is his... Well, as long as he claims the child, it doesn’t matter. Of course, it doesn’t say ‘Navance’ in the law — it says the Chairman of the Supreme Council or something like that. And in Latislan, custody always goes to the father, except in extreme cases. And in Latislan, that custody starts before birth.” He sighed. “It’s all legal and technically legit.”

“That’s crazy!”

“I know. And even if we got her out of the country, as long as he claims the baby...”

“Is there any way around it?”

“Well, if she’s not pregnant, that’s a start. And I’ve got a guy back at the embassy looking into it. Jack,” he nodded to the front of the car, “is... security. He’s already made some phone calls.”

Security. Right. CIA or something was more likely.

We pulled up to a hospital that made me cringe. I wasn’t sure it was worthy of the name. Lois was taken out of the car and put on a stretcher.

I hurried after her. She was moaning, but not aware of her surroundings. “Lois.” I grabbed for her hand.

I was shoved to the side by someone.

Daniel put his hand on my arm. “We’ll wait in the waiting room, but he’ll stay with her.” He nodded towards Jack.

I trained my eyes and ears on Lois’ room as much as I could. I averted my eyes when they undressed her and started an IV but watched everything else. Before long, a doctor came out and asked to speak with me.

One of the men who came with Daniel was acting as an interpreter.

“When was the last time she ate?” the doctor asked through

the embassy official.

I shook my head. “We had some water and a protein bar on the plane a few hours ago but she was sick most of the day in Paris. I don’t know what she ate yesterday. I wasn’t with her.”

The doctor turned and conversed with a nurse for a moment and she scurried off. He said something else to the translator and then left.

“He said her blood tests should be back shortly but the baby seems to be fine.”

I sank to the chair. “She’s pregnant?” I whispered.

He nodded. “That’s what he said.” He leaned closer and whispered. “I don’t think he’s fond of Navance but he doesn’t dare cross him.”

Daniel and I both nodded. “So what do we do?” I asked.

“We wait for the moment,” he said grimly. “Do you have any idea who the father might be?”

I shook my head. “No. Why?”

“If we knew who the father was, that might help with the paternity claims that Navance is making.”

“Ah.”

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Lois

Where was I?

I tried to lick my lips because my whole mouth felt like it was full of cotton balls.

The room was dimly lit and there was someone over to the side.

“Hello?” I whispered.

“Hello, Ms. Lane.”

An American by the sound of it. Why was that a good thing?

Everything flooded back to me.

Dad’s girlfriend.

The airplane.

The guns.

The airport.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Jack. I work for the embassy.”

“Ah. Where’s Clark? Is he okay?”

He nodded. “He’s fine.”

I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. “When can I go home?”

He shook his head. “Not sure yet. Navance is claiming your baby. That throws a wrench in the works.”

“What baby?” I was confused. I’d told him I was pregnant but I wasn’t.

Was I?

When was my last period?

I wracked my brain but didn’t remember. I knew it was after the last semester started but...

“Halloween,” I whispered.

He nodded again. “Clark told us about that. Do you have any idea who it was?”

I shook my head. “I don’t remember any of it.”

How could I not have thought I might be pregnant? I should have thought of that a long time ago — to check to be sure even if I didn’t really think anything had happened that night. Joe and I had talked about it and I hadn’t felt weird or... sore or anything that might indicate I really had been... I couldn’t even think about what must have happened. And what about STDs? As soon as I got home, I’d have to get tested for those and HIV and...

Tears overwhelmed me and I tried unsuccessfully to swipe them off before Jack noticed.

Too late.

He handed me a box of Kleenex.

But they were yucky, generic, hospital-in-a-foreign-country Kleenex and scratched.

“So what now?” I finally asked.

He sighed. “Not sure yet. We’ve got people looking at Latislani law. You’re an American citizen but there’s no record of your entry into the country. He says you’ve been here for weeks and a friend used your passport, and around here what he says goes. We’re trying to find a way around it.”

“I can’t just sneak into the embassy or on a plane or something and get out of here?”

He shook his head. “You could but under Latislani law, he can still claim the baby. No U.S. court would send you or the baby back here, but the PR would be a nightmare for you and the baby and everyone you know. Better to find a way around it that’s legal under Latislani law.”

“Is that possible?” I whispered.

“We’ll figure something out. If nothing else, we’ll find a way to get you out of here, but we’re exploring that first.”

I nodded. It made sense. “He’s not the father though. Just a sonogram showing how far along I am should prove that. My fingerprints will be all over my hotel room in France, so it couldn’t have been a friend using my passport.”

“DNA doesn’t matter under Latislani law.”

“That’s stupid.”

“That’s the way it is.”

“Can I see Clark? Or did he already head back to Paris?”

“I’m right here.” The voice from the doorway startled me.

“I’m sorry, Clark.” Tears overflowed my eyes again.

He reached into his backpack and pulled a mini-pack of real Kleenex out.

“Boy Scout,” I mumbled, taking them gratefully.

“That’s me.” He pulled a chair up next to me and grasped my hand lightly. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like an idiot. I’m sorry I ruined your night with Lana and got you stuck here.”

“I already talked to her. I hope your dad doesn’t mind me using your cell phone.”

“He won’t.”

“Hopefully, we’ll be out of here soon and we can get back to our European tour.”

I stared at our clasped hands. “I’m pregnant,” I finally whispered. “I didn’t know when I said it...”

“I didn’t figure you did,” he answered quietly. “You were just trying to keep him from quarantining you, weren’t you?”

I nodded. “Halloween.”

“Yeah. The doc talked to me about when the last time you ate and stuff like that. Said you’re about ten weeks along, I think.”

“That’d be about right.”

The tears flowed even more freely and Clark moved to sit on the bed next to me and pulled me to him.

“Oh, Clark. What am I going to do?” I whispered between tears.

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Clark

“We’ll figure something out,” I whispered back as she sobbed in my arms.

I could always fly her home as soon as the docs said she was stable enough to be moved. If that was the only way, I’d do it. As soon as I could get her away from everyone else, we’d just vanish.

The door thudded open again.

“Get away from her,” the silhouette thundered.

I moved away from her, as requested, but only placed myself between her and the nearly-murderous looking general. Jack was standing next to me.

“Move,” he ordered.

“No,” I said quietly.

If looks could kill...

He was obviously not a man used to having people stand up to him.

“You will move or I will have you arrested,” he threatened.
 “You’ll do no such thing,” came a mildly amused voice from behind him.

Daniel.

I breathed a small sigh of relief. Somehow he knew how to handle this guy.

“Only I can say who visits my child,” he said, his voice menacing.

Why was this guy so enamored or obsessed or whatever with Lois?

“The mother is an American and entitled to visits from her embassy regardless of what you think the status of the fetus is.”

“Are you standing in my way, Scardino? I *will* revoke your diplomatic status.”

“You’ll do no such thing. You don’t want to anger the Americans after all,” he said, brushing by the angry man.

“How’re you feeling, Lois?”

“Better. Thanks.”

“I’m Daniel Scardino. I work for the State Department and we’re going to get you home.”

“Thank you, Dan.”

He smiled at Lois. “Please call me Daniel.”

“Thanks, Daniel,” Lois said and smiled weakly at him.

I watched Mr. Latislani — whatever his name was — out of the corner of my eye. He was furious.

“Mr. Scardino,” he hissed in his heavily accented English.

“You know very well that the father retains custody of the child, even prior to birth, while the mother is in Latislan.”

“Still haven’t proven it’s your baby, General,” Daniel called back, smiling at Lois.

“I don’t have to. My word is enough.”

“Even if we can prove she was in Paris as recently as several hours ago?”

“Yes.” He moved a step closer to Lois and I tensed. “She’s in Latislan illegally at the moment, who’s to say how long she’s been here? The imperialist American government? Who has the French officials wrapped around their little fingers?”

“Which has,” Daniel corrected calmly.

“Excuse me?”

“You said ‘who has’. The American government isn’t a ‘who’. It’s an ‘it’. So the correct thing to say would be ‘which has the French officials wrapped around their little fingers’, except the American government doesn’t have fingers, so I’m not entirely certain who, or what, you’re talking about.”

General Navance growled. “I do not need an English lesson!”

“Apparently, you do,” Daniel replied as calm as ever.

“What I *need* is for all of you to get away from my child!” he roared.

Lois glared at him. “I am not pregnant with your child,” she announced. I could hear her heart racing, belying the quiet tone of voice.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” he somehow managed to thunder between clenched teeth as he advanced towards the bed. “I say you are and that is all that matters.”

“I’m not pregnant with your baby. I’m an American, pregnant with an American baby and DNA tests will prove that and you and your slimy little country can fall off the face of the Earth for all I care,” she practically spat at him.

“You will not leave this country until I say you can.” He moved closer to her.

“Stay away from her,” I told him, moving directly between him and the bed.

“Or what? You can’t keep me from my child,” he reminded me.

He sounded like a broken record. Or a scratched CD.

“It’s not your child,” I reiterated quietly.

“How would you know?” he sneered.

I hoped I could project a sincerity and calm I didn’t feel with my next statement. I didn’t know what was coming over me, except that I had to protect Lois. I took a deep breath and jumped into the deep end without checking the water.

“How would you know?” he demanded again.

“Because it’s my baby.”

Part 22

Lois

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What the hell?

What did Clark just say?

The silence was deafening and apparently the smug general felt the need to ask the same thing.

“What?” He moved a half step closer to Clark.

“It’s my baby,” Clark said, without backing down. “We went to a cabin in the woods the first week of November and...” He shrugged. “I’m sure you know how babies are made. Middle of a blizzard, no power, fireplace, alone for a week. I’m a man. She’s a woman. Do I need to draw you a diagram?” He crossed his arms, daring the general to contradict him.

“You are no man. You are a child.”

Clark shrugged again. “I’m old enough to father her child. And I believe you said that in Latislan the father retains custody and controls who has access to the mother, so I think you better leave.”

Part of me wanted to strangle Clark for acting like he could control who could and could not see me.

The rest of me wanted to kiss him for finding a way out of this.

Well, not *kiss* him.

But hug him and thank him. And it wasn’t like I’d hold him to the paternity declaration later.

But the general was smiling. Or leering. One of the two. “I am afraid that’s not how it works, child.”

“How what works?” Clark was clearly confused.

“Paternity. Are you married to this woman?”

“No.”

“Then your claim of paternity...”

Another man entered the room and whispered something to him.

General Navance turned back to the rest of us. “I must go, but there will be a guard outside the door at all times and she is not allowed to leave.”

I started to protest, but looks from both Clark and Daniel made me shut my mouth. Somehow, they managed to convey that pissing this guy off even more wasn’t the way to go.

He spoke in whatever his native language was to the man who’d come in and I saw him take up a post outside the door.

“What’s going on?” I asked as the door swung shut.

Clark sat back down next to me and grasped my hand. “How are you? That’s the most important thing.”

I pushed myself up a bit higher with my other hand. “I’m fine, but what’s going on?”

Daniel sat in one of the other chairs and ran a hand through his hair. “In Latislan, the Supreme Ruler of All or whatever it is Navance calls himself only has to claim paternity for the child to be considered legally his. And in Latislan, the father retains custody — even prenatal custody.”

“That’s crazy!” Clark and I exclaimed at once.

“So even though I claimed paternity, it doesn’t matter?” Clark asked.

“And what were you *thinking* doing that?” I demanded.

“Lana is going to *kill* you!”

He shrugged. “The cabin was about the right time, even if...”

He stopped as Daniel tugged on his ear and pointed to the room.

Great. They were listening.

“Even if,” Clark continued, “he claims the baby, we can prove Lois wasn’t here that long ago and a paternity test will rule him out as the father anyway.”

Daniel shook his head. “The paternity test won’t matter.”

“It won’t?” I asked him, surprised. I knew if Clark took a paternity test, the results would be negative, but if Navance did... Those results would be negative, too.

Daniel sighed. “The actual paternity doesn’t matter if Navance says the baby is his.”

“What kind of crazy law is that?” Clark asked. “This is my baby and I’ll be damned if he’s going to get anywhere near him.”

I knew Clark was playing along with the paternity ruse, but I thought that it would be a lot nicer if I knew Clark and I really had been together at the cabin so that he was the father of this baby instead of some unknown frat boy. I rested my head against his shoulder, glad he was there with me.

Daniel pulled his PDA out of his jacket pocket and typed something in. He held it up for us to see. ‘We’ll figure something out’, it read.

Clark and I nodded. “I’m staying here,” Clark told him.

Daniel shook his head.

Clark gave him an intense look. “I’m the father of her baby. I’m staying.”

Daniel nodded slightly. It probably would look weird if Clark didn’t at least try to stay.

“Okay,” Daniel acknowledged. “Jack will stay, too.”

Daniel and Jack conferred quietly in the corner. Clark shifted uncomfortably.

I moved farther to one side of the bed so he’d have more room.

Daniel came back over and held his PDA back up. ‘You’re lovers having a baby. Remember that.’

Tears sprang to my eyes. He had a point, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to pretend that kind of thing with Clark. I glanced up at him to find that his face had blanched a bit.

His mouth suddenly set into a line. “It’ll be okay,” he murmured against my hair. “Get some rest.” He wrapped an arm around me tucked me in next to him. I got as comfortable as I could with an IV coming out of one arm.

“Happy New Year,” I finally said.

“Happy New Year,” he said back.

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Clark

What on earth had I been thinking?

That I had to protect my friend.

And her baby.

That — for the moment, at least — was also my baby.

Like my parents had protected me.

And we were going to have to pretend that we were together or at least having a baby together.

And what had he meant by that ‘married’ comment?

For now, though, I had to protect Lois and the baby. I held her slightly tighter and wondered how on earth I was going to get her out of there.

I rested my head against hers and before long I dozed off, too.

We both woke up when a nurse came in to take Lois’ vitals. Jack had been sitting in the corner with a magazine but was still paying close attention to what was happening.

After having her temperature and blood pressure taken, she rested her head against me again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, barely above audible.

“I know. It’s going to be okay,” I said with as much conviction as I could. It would be. Flying was still an option, after all. “Are you going to be able to go back to sleep?”

She shook her head.

“Then it’s my job to keep you entertained. I tried watching TV in the waiting room, but it’s all in some language I don’t understand.”

“So what’re we going to do?”

“Tell jokes,” I told her.

“Jokes?” She sounded skeptical.

I leaned closer to her and whispered. “Once we get out of here, I’ve got a few about Eastern European and Soviet dictators, but I think I better keep those to myself for now.”

She smiled slightly. “Probably.”

“How about this one? My cousin’s daughter told it to me over Christmas. There’s two muffins in a microwave and one says ‘Man, it’s hot in here’ and the other says, ‘Whoa, talking muffin’.”

She rolled her eyes. “Did you hear why the blonde got fired from the M&M factory?”

“She ate all the ‘W’s.”

“What do UFOs and smart blondes have in common?” she asked me.

I hesitated before admitting I didn’t know.

“You keep hearing about them, but never see any.”

Subtle dig at Lana? And Linda? Sure was. And aliens, too. Wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that — given what I knew...

So I just laughed lightly with her.

“What’re we going to do, Clark?” she asked quietly.

“I’m sure your dad already has a lawyer or two or two dozen working on it,” I tried to reassure her.

“What about...” She didn’t say it, but instead traced Lana’s name on her lap.

“Don’t worry about it.” I’d talked to her and she wasn’t happy that I’d ended up stuck in a foreign country with Lois. She’d have been even less happy if she’d known I was going to ask her to marry me last night.

“Sure?”

“Yeah.”

A knock sounded on the door and Daniel came in. “Clark, can I talk to you for a minute?”

I nodded. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, *Sweetie*.” I put extra emphasis on the endearment. Lois rolled her eyes. I kissed her forehead before following Daniel out of the room.

“How is she?” he asked quietly.

“She wants to go home.”

“I bet.” He sighed deeply.

“What?”

“We figured out a way for you to legally claim the baby so that Navance can’t claim him.”

“Great. What is it?”

He sighed again and didn’t look at me as he spoke. “Marry her.”

“What?!”

“If she’s married, her husband is the father, regardless of whether Navance claims the baby or not.”

I ran a hand through my hair and reached for his PDA. ‘How long would we have to stay married?’

‘Long enough to get her out of the country. You shouldn’t have any problem getting an annulment when you get back to the States.’

I nodded.

‘Is there someone else who would claim the baby who we could get here? Her boyfriend?’

I hesitated. Would Joe marry her? Would it matter if we were just going to get it annulled once we got back? It wasn’t like it was going to be permanent. And getting Joe here would take time — and probably a long time. I took the PDA back. ‘Any chance we’d have to stay married?’

‘I don’t think so. We’re still looking at it, but it’s unlikely.’

I paused for only a second. What it all came down to... I couldn't let Navance get his hands on Lois and her baby. 'I'll do it.'

He nodded. 'We'll make the arrangements. Don't tell her yet.'

I nodded back and sighed. Lana wasn't going to be happy about this, but I simply couldn't let this guy get his hands on Lois.

He showed me the screen again. 'We'll get her out of here. Sneak out in a couple days once everything's set. Needs to stay for a while anyway. Health and baby's. Make it look good. Rings, etc.'

I sighed. I had very little cash. No credit cards or anything like that I could use to buy something with. Getting money from Sam wouldn't look good. I wasn't quite sure why but my gut was telling me that we had better do this on our own so there was no suggestion by Navance later that this had all been... scripted or something. I only had one thing of value. I closed my eyes for a minute and made a decision. Protecting Lois and the baby was the most important thing at the moment. I typed into the PDA. 'Is there somewhere I can pawn a ring for cash?'

He glanced at me, confused. 'Don't want to use it?'

I shook my head. I wouldn't give Lana's ring to Lois. And even if I did, I wouldn't have been able to give it to Lana once Lois gave it back. If I sold it, I was sure Sam would pay me back for it later and I could get a similar one or maybe find one in Metropolis I liked better. Even if he didn't pay me back though, that wasn't the most important thing. Getting Lois and the baby out of here and to safety was.

'Diamond?'

I nodded.

'I know a guy. Embassy Marine.'

I sighed. It was what I had to do.

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Lois

I'd been sitting in the hospital for two days.

Clark had been there most of the time. He'd run a few mysterious 'errands'. I wondered what that was all about.

Navance came by two or three times a day to threaten me and yell and scream. Clark made sure that he was there whenever Navance was and continued to claim that he was my baby's father.

Daniel and Jack both kept reassuring me that they were working on a plan and Clark had said something, too, but none of them would tell me what it was.

I hadn't talked to Daddy at all. I wanted to. I wanted to talk to Joe. I wanted to spend hours on my bunk making out with him. I wanted to date him and see where things went, but now...

I couldn't see Joe sticking around now that I was having a baby. That would be a ready-made family and I couldn't see Joe wanting that.

I cried a lot during those two days.

It was the third night when something finally happened.

The American who had been sitting with me — Martin? Something like that — disappeared. That scared me.

Especially when a man dressed in scrubs walked in, carrying a syringe.

His eyes looked familiar but I couldn't quite place him.

He set the syringe carefully on the floor and held up a PDA. 'Clark is meeting you downstairs,' it read. 'Follow me.'

I nodded, wondering if this was a good guy or a bad guy pretending to be a good guy.

He smiled slightly behind his mask and pushed a button on the PDA and held it up again. 'Clark said to tell you to save a Tush Push for him.'

My eyes closed for a second, in relief. There was no way the bad guys would know about that.

He quickly disconnected my IV, but didn't remove the loop from my arm. He plugged it up with something and handed me a bag with some clothes in it.

I pulled the scrubs on quickly and stuck my hair in the cap.

He jerked his head towards the door and I followed him out.

We walked through the halls as nonchalantly as we could — as quickly as we could without drawing attention to ourselves.

It seemed like an eternity but was probably only about ten minutes before we exited out a small side door.

"Clark's waiting around the corner," he whispered. "He'll get you to the embassy."

"Thank you," I whispered.

"Go." He pointed in the direction of an alley and I moved as quickly as I could.

I rounded the corner and glanced around.

"Lois, over here." I heard Clark calling to me.

I turned and saw him. I practically flung myself into his arms and he held me for a few seconds.

"We've got to get out of here," he whispered, taking my hand and leading me down the alley.

I followed him through the streets of Skopje. More than once we ducked into an alley or the doorway of a store, always with Clark between me and the street — his dark clothes covering up my lighter scrubs.

"What's the plan?" I whispered.

"Just get to the embassy and we'll talk more there," he whispered back.

It seemed like forever and my legs were starting to hurt by the time we made it to a wall.

"We're going over," he said quietly, clasping his hands together.

"What?" I just stared at him.

"We're going over the wall." He indicated his hands. "Foot in. Let's go."

I looked at the wall. "I can't make it."

"You'll be fine." He looked around quickly. "We've got to go though."

I put my hands on his shoulders and put one foot in his hand. "On three." He counted as I bounced and then pushed off on three.

I wasn't sure how I made it that high, but I did. I grasped the top of the wall and managed to pull myself over the top, one leg on either side. I turned to help Clark to find that he'd managed to scale the wall by himself.

"Wait," he said, jumping down before reaching back up to help me down. He grabbed my hand again and I followed him through the courtyard or garden or whatever it was and into the building.

Once inside, I leaned against the wall and breathed a huge sigh of relief. "I'm safe?" I asked, a big smile on my face, certain I knew the answer.

His face was still grim. "Not quite. There's something else."

"What?" I asked but he was already heading down the hallway.

I hurried behind him until he stopped in front of an open door.

I looked inside and then turned to look him in the eye.

"What exactly is it that we have to do, Clark?"

He stared at the ground as he took a deep breath and blurted it out.

"Get married."

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Part 23

Clark

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She stared at me.

Or I was sure she did. I didn't look.

Finally she found her voice. “What?”
I ran a hand through my hair. “We have to get married.”
“Why? That’s insane!” she hissed at me.
“I claimed the baby. That’s all well and good.” I leaned against the wall by the open door to the chapel. “But Navance is claiming the baby, too. And in Latislan, if he does, that’s all that matters.”
“Right. Daniel told us all that. What does that have to do with us getting married?” She crossed her arms and ducked slightly so she could see my eyes.
“If you’re married, the husband is the legal father no matter what Navance claims,” I told her.
Her breath hitched just a bit. “So we have to get married? Why can’t we just leave the country?”
“Because then, Ms. Lane, he can claim all kinds of nasty things about you and the American government and taking his child from the country because legally, in Latislan, at the moment, you’re carrying his child, and all sorts of other ugly stuff,” Daniel said, walking up.
“He could still try to claim he’s the father if I’m at home and DNA tests prove he’s not?” Lois asked, stunned.
Daniel sighed. “I’m afraid so. It’s on record in Latislan that he’s the father of your child. That’s all that matters under Latislani law. It doesn’t make sense at all, but that’s the way it is. No American court would send you or the baby back here, but the international relations...”
Lois interrupted him, angrily. “So you’re going to disrupt my life and Clark’s life and my baby’s life by making us get married because of international relations?”
He shook his head. I closed my eyes as Daniel talked. We’d been over all of this repeatedly and we hadn’t found any other way.
“It’s not just international relations, Lois. The PR is going to be a nightmare as it is, most likely. We’ll do our best to keep all of this out of the news, but if he has a *legal* claim, even in Latislan, he can make things miserable for you and the baby for a very long time. Drag you through the media and the courts and the baby, too.”
I could hear tears falling down Lois’ face and heard her swipe at them.
“So we have to get married?” she whispered.
“You don’t *have* to,” Daniel told her. “But... it’s probably the best way to protect both of you.”
“How long?”
“How long what?”
“How long do we have to stay married?”
I answered that one. “Just till we get home. We can get it annulled when we get back to the States.”
“If I’m pregnant and you’re claiming the baby, will we be able to get it annulled or will we have to get a divorce?” Lois asked.
“You should be able to get an annulment when you explain the circumstances,” Daniel told her.
“What about Lana?” she asked me.
I shrugged. “She won’t be happy about it, but it’s not like we’re going to have sex or anything like that.”
“Why are you doing this, Clark?” she asked me without looking at me.
I sighed and pulled her into a hug. “I can’t let him get to you and the baby. I promised your dad I’d protect you, but even if I hadn’t, I won’t let anything happen to you.” I couldn’t tell her what else Navance had said.
She wrapped her arms around me and rested her head on my chest for a long minute. I could feel her tears soaking through my shirt.
“It’ll be okay,” I told her. “We’ll get you home and get an annulment and it’ll be over.”

“Are you sure?” I could barely hear her.
“Yeah. I’m sure.”
“Okay, then.” She pulled back from me and wiped her face.
“Let’s do this.”
“Do you want to change first or anything?” Daniel asked her.
“We got your stuff from Paris.”
She sighed. “I would love to get out of these clothes and into something of my own and...” She blushed. “I could really use some clean underwear, too. And get rid of this IV.”
Daniel nodded and motioned to a Marine standing nearby.
“Will you show Ms. Lane to her room and have the corpsman meet her up there to get that out of her arm?” He turned back to Lois. “Don’t take long. We need to get this done before Navance shows up.”
She nodded and turned to the Marine.
He smiled at her. “This way, Ms. Lane.”
I watched her as she walked away. “Are you sure this is the only way, Daniel?”
“Yeah, Clark,” he answered softly. “It’s the only way.”
~~~~~  
Lois  
I sat on the bed and held my arm out as the corpsman removed the IV from my arm. I held the cotton ball on the inside of my elbow as I curled my arm, willing the tears to stay put.  
He put a piece of tape over the cotton ball. “All set, Ms. Lane.”  
“Thanks,” I whispered.  
“Mr. Scardino said to tell you that time is of the essence,” said my escort.  
I nodded. “I’ll hurry.”  
“There’s a bathroom through there,” he told me, pointing towards a door in the corner of the room. “Your suitcase and backpack are in the closet.”  
“Thanks,” I told him as he left.  
I closed my eyes and steeled myself for what was about to happen.  
I was about to get married.  
To Clark.  
To protect me and my baby.  
I was pregnant.  
I sighed and made myself get up and opened the closet door. I closed my eyes again at the sight that greeted me. Clark’s clothes were in there, too.  
We were going to be expected to share the room — which made sense because we were getting married and I was sure it had to look good until we got home at least.  
I dug through my suitcase and found a pair of slacks and a decent shirt.  
I headed into the bathroom and splashed some water on my face and used a washcloth to scrub off some of the grime I felt I had accumulated just from being in that so-called hospital.  
I changed clothes, feeling better than I had in days. It was amazing what clean underwear could do to make a girl feel a bit better.  
I ran a brush through my hair. I didn’t put any make-up on in the interests of time and because I knew it was pointless given the tears I was sure to be crying.  
No wonder I’d been so emotional lately.  
Hormones would do that to a pregnant woman.  
There was a knock on the door. “Ms. Lane?”  
“I’m coming,” I called.  
I looked myself in the mirror.  
Not exactly how I pictured my wedding day.  
I sighed and headed towards the door.  
I followed the Marine escort back to the chapel. Clark was sitting in one of the chairs in the front row.  
“Ready?” asked Daniel.

I nodded and we walked to the front where a Marine chaplain stood.

Clark stood but didn't look at me. His hands were stuck in his pockets and he stared at the ground in front of him.

Jack was standing off to the side. I guessed he and Daniel were our witnesses.

Didn't you need witnesses to get married?

"Dearly beloved," the chaplain started. "We are gathered here this evening, in the presence of these witnesses, to join Lois Lane and Clark Kent in holy matrimony. It is commended to be honorable among men and not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly. Into this holy estate, these two persons shall now be enjoined. If any person can show just cause why these two should not be joined together — let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

I held my breath just waiting for the doors to burst open with the Latislani army in full force.

They didn't.

We all breathed a sigh of relief as the three-count ended.

"Clark, take Lois' hand..."

He turned towards me and took the hand I held out.

"...and repeat after me. I, Clark, take thee Lois to be my lawfully wedded wife."

After a slight pause, Clark repeated the words.

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health."

Clark's voice was quiet as he said the time-honored vows.

"I promise to love, respect, honor, and protect you and keep myself only unto you as long as we both shall live."

I could hear the hesitation in his voice. This wedding wasn't a ceremony that was creating the marriage of a lifetime. It would last a few weeks at most.

He must have finished because the chaplain turned to me.

"Lois, would you please repeat after me?"

I nodded and repeated the same vows Clark had.

"May I have the rings?" the chaplain asked.

I started slightly, but still didn't look at Clark. He dug a box out of his pocket and handed it over.

"The wedding ring is a symbol of the commitment which binds these two together. There are two rings because there are two people, each to make a contribution to the life of the other and to their new life together. Let us pray."

We all bowed our heads and I closed my eyes. I guessed everyone else did, too.

"Bless, Oh Lord, the giving of these rings that they who wear them may abide together in your peace." He turned to me and handed me a plain gold band. "Lois, place this ring on Clark's finger and repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed and pledge my life and my fidelity."

I stumbled slightly over the words, but managed to get the ring on Clark's finger, without ever looking at him.

A minute later, he'd slipped a band on mine and said the same thing.

"By the powers vested in me, by the State Department, I now pronounce you husband and wife." He grinned at us. "Clark, you may kiss your bride."

I could tell he was trying not to cringe, but he managed to brush his lips against the corner of mine.

The tears that had been sneaking down my face picked up and I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down.

"I need you two to sign the marriage certificate," Daniel said, handing a clipboard over.

I took the offer pen and signed my name on the line indicated before handing it to Clark. He signed and handed it back to Daniel, who wrote his name with a flourish and passed it on to Jack and then the chaplain.

"There you go. All legal," the chaplain said.

"Are you hungry?" Daniel asked me.

"No. Thanks, though."

"When was the last time you ate?"

I shrugged. "A while."

"Come on," Daniel said, putting an arm around my shoulder. "We'll get something in your stomach and then let you get some rest."

I hesitated slightly then nodded as he led me away from Clark.

My husband.

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Clark

I watched Lois walk off.

Daniel was right. She needed to make sure she took care of herself. For her sake and the baby's.

Jack and I talked a bit about the plan for the next several days.

We had talked about trying to get us out of Dodge immediately, but the plane that was supposed to take us was having problems and so we were stuck. Daniel, Jack and I were hoping that we could even wait until we were out of Latislan to get married — or that we could get around it once we were out of the country — but the plane wasn't going anywhere and it was going to be at least the next morning before they could get us another one.

The four of us — and the ambassador, who I'd met the day before — were the only ones who knew the true nature of what was going on so the rest of the embassy had to believe that this was all real — at least until we got home and got it annulled.

We were going to go to another small, eastern European country — possibly Podansk, but probably not because relations between the two were already very strained — where it would be hard for Navance to track us. Then we'd head back to Metropolis sometime the next week and get back probably before the rest of our tour group did.

And the first thing we were going to do when we got back was get this annulled and I could try to get Lana to understand and ask *her* to marry me.

Once I was done talking to Jack, I went up to the roof and stared at the stars for a few minutes.

I had done the right thing. I knew I had.

I'd had two days to think it over.

I'd sold Lana's ring and paid the fees to get the certificate or license or whatever and wedding bands for each of us.

I fiddled with the unfamiliar adornment on my finger. It was weird. I'd imagined a ring there before, but it had always been placed by Lana in my daydreams.

Navance was scary. The longer we were here, the more certain I was that he hated Lois. I didn't know why he'd latched onto Lois and the baby, but he had and then Lois threw up all over him and kneed him where it hurt. And in front of his men, too. He wasn't about to let go now.

And what he'd said to me in the hallway...

I shook the thoughts of that conversation out of my head.

Short of me flying the two of us out of here, this was the only solution we'd come up with and no one else knew that was an option. This was the only option that Daniel and his team of lawyers or whoever he had working for him and who Sam had working on this wherever they were had come up with.

I hoped Lana would understand. I couldn't let Navance get his hands on Lois or the baby. I just couldn't.

I'd thought about flying home and talking to my parents, but there hadn't been a good time when I thought my absence wouldn't be noticed.

They had taken me in.

Two people had found a spaceship in the middle of a field with a baby in it and had taken that baby in.

Both of them — separately and together — had decided that taking care of me, adopting me, raising me with my secret and the inherent risks that went along with having an alien for a child — no matter how human I looked... They had decided that I was worth the risk. That they would protect me and love me and take care of me, no matter what.

Marrying Lois for a few weeks to protect her and another innocent baby was the least I could do.

Keeping Lois in the dark about the plans hadn't been easy. She wasn't happy about it at all, but there wasn't much she could do about it. She was in a room with microphones and the three people who really knew what was going on weren't saying anything. I was sure she was going to let me have it when we were alone somewhere without microphones. I could probably figure out if there were any in our room here at the embassy but I didn't know how to do so without letting on what I could do. It was probably safest to think that any and everything was being recorded until we got home.

Our room.

It suddenly hit me.

I knew that we were going to share a room intellectually, but knowing that Lois was likely to be there any minute, waiting for me and that we had to put on a good show in case anyone was listening...

Not that kind of show but the 'I'm tired and still don't feel well' show.

I sighed.

This wasn't going to be an easy week or so until we could get home, but then she and Junior would be safe and that was what mattered.

I had to keep telling myself that.

Part 24

Lois

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I managed to get a little bit of soup down along with some crackers.

Daniel walked me back to the room I was apparently sharing with Clark for at least the rest of the night.

He was vague about what the plan was for getting me and Clark out of Latislan. I wasn't sure if that was because there wasn't a plan or because they weren't telling me what it was.

I'd try to weasel it out of Clark when he got back from wherever he was.

I wanted to talk to Daddy but that wasn't happening. I didn't know why. I think they thought all of the phones were bugged and that the Latislanis could pull cell phone conversations right out of thin air, but I wasn't really sure. The whole embassy was probably bugged, though I wouldn't put money on who was doing the bugging — us or them.

I closed the door behind me and did my best to avoid looking at the bed. I went to the closet and got out my favorite pair of pajamas.

I went to the bathroom to change and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

I pulled the waistband of my pants down slightly and pulled my shirt up, staring at my still-flat stomach.

There was a baby in there.

A little, tiny baby who was going to be my child to take care of, to raise, to love.

By myself.

As soon as Clark and I got an annulment, I was going to be a single parent.

How was I going to tell Joe?

Not only that I'd married Clark — though I'd tell him that it wasn't a real marriage; it wasn't like I was doing anything with Clark I'd always refused to do with Joe, but I'd also have to tell

him that I was going to be a mom. Joe wanted kids. We'd talked about that in a Family Living class our senior year in high school. We'd even been 'married' for one of the projects.

But to take on another man's child his freshman year in college...

I just couldn't see him doing that.

I couldn't even see Clark doing that and it was much more a 'Clark' thing to do. He was only taking on this responsibility for a few weeks until we could get away from this madman.

No, Joe wouldn't take this on.

If he did get a girl pregnant, I had no doubt that he'd take responsibility for his own child, but someone else's...

I wouldn't ask him to do that.

I wouldn't ask anyone to do that.

Instead I was going to have to figure out how to do this alone, possibly with a little help from Daddy, while trying to finish college and start my career.

I rubbed my hand over my exposed abdomen, wondering what it would look like in a few months.

"It's okay, Junior," I whispered, talking to him or her for the first time. "We'll make it together. You and me."

I looked longingly at the shower and decided that, while it was a very good idea, I didn't think I would be able to stay awake long enough.

I put my pajamas on and exited the bathroom.

I took a pillow and rummaged through the closet until I found a blanket. I lay down on the couch, curled up under the blanket and cried myself to sleep.

This wasn't how I pictured my wedding night.

Not at all.

~~~~~

Clark

I was quiet as I entered the room I was sharing with Lois for the night. I figured she was probably already asleep and I was right.

I just didn't expect her to be on the couch.

The tear tracks were still evident on her cheeks.

And she had one of the pillows from the bed and a blanket which meant she'd fallen asleep there on purpose.

I sighed.

Should I move her? She couldn't be comfortable lying there like that.

Finally, I decided to get ready for bed myself and then make up my mind what I was going to do with her.

I dug through my suitcase and went to the bathroom, taking a shower and doing other getting ready for bed stuff.

I pulled on a pair of shorts over my boxers and then a sleeveless T-shirt. I headed back out into the bedroom and sat in one of the overstuffed chairs in the corner, watching Lois as she slept.

This was my wedding night.

It hit me suddenly as she shifted and light glinted off the wedding band I'd put on her finger.

I flashed back to the chapel downstairs. She hadn't looked at me once during the ceremony, but I hadn't really looked at her either.

I fiddled with the band on my finger again. Part of me wanted to take it off. It wasn't real; it wasn't from Lana.

But at the same time, it meant that — for the moment — Lois was my responsibility. Her and the baby. I knew she wouldn't see it that way, but I had to do what I could to take care of both of them.

Because she was my wife.

And this was my wedding night.

A feeling came over me I couldn't quite describe. There was an underlying sense of... something. Trepidation, fear, awe, responsibility... disappointment.

It was my wedding night and I wasn't making love to my wife and my wife wasn't the woman I'd been dreaming of for years.

Part of me said that this wasn't my 'real' wedding night, but it was my first one. I'd be a man who had been married more than once. I'd never pictured that for myself. I'd marry Lana and we'd grow old together. And now, even if Lana was my first — and only — lover, she wouldn't have the distinction of being my first wife.

How was I going to tell her about this?

Had I really thought this through?

I closed my eyes and saw Lana lying next to me on the quilt in the hayloft where we'd spent so many hours together. We'd kissed and talked and kissed and dreamed and kissed and planned and kissed some more. Sometimes in the morning. Sometimes in the afternoon. Sometimes by moonlight. In the heat of the summer, the cool of the fall, the chill of the winter and the freshness of the spring. We'd been through everything together.

I shook my head slightly and looked back over at Lois.

My wife.

And sighed deeply.

Finally, I decided that I was going to go to bed. Lois had obviously decided that was where she wanted to sleep — probably so that she wouldn't make me uncomfortable, though she couldn't have known that I'd planned on sleeping on the couch or the floor — and who was I to challenge her on that?

"Clark?"

I heard her sleepy voice as I was turning back the covers.

"Yeah?" I said quietly.

"Nothing," she answered. "Never mind."

I moved to her side and squatted down near her. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. We'll talk about it later."

I tugged on my ear and she nodded. So she thought the place might be bugged, too.

"How're you feeling?" I asked her.

"Fine. Tired."

"You need to go to bed," I told her gently. "I know you dozed off on the couch, but it can't be comfortable."

"I'm fine," she said, but wasn't very convincing.

I shifted and before she could protest, slipped my arms under her and carried her over to the bed. I stood at the end. "Which side do you want?"

She shrugged. "I don't care."

I took her to the side where there was still a pillow and set her down.

"Thanks," she whispered.

"That's why I'm here, Sweetie."

She rolled her eyes at me as she curled up on her side and pulled the covers up over her.

I moved to the couch and pulled the blanket back.

"Clark?" she called.

"Yeah."

Her eyes pleaded with me to keep up the ruse, just in case the military dictator was listening in. "Come to bed, please. I'm not feeling well, but I want you here with me."

A tear slipped down her cheek. She didn't mean it, not really, but she said it anyway.

I sighed. "I'll be there in just a minute."

She nodded and settled back into the bed.

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Lois

I woke up with sunlight streaming on my face.

Apparently, we hadn't pulled the curtains closed.

And someone was knocking on the door.

I looked at the other side of the bed. Clark was still sleeping.

I rolled myself up and padded barefoot over to the door.

I cracked it and saw Daniel standing there. I opened it further.

"Good morning," he said with his annoying, ubiquitous cheerfulness.

"Yeah," I said.

"Is Clark up?"

I shook my head.

"We have a video conference in twenty minutes. I need both of you there."

I nodded. "Okay."

"I'll have someone knock in about fifteen minutes so you can get downstairs."

I nodded and shut the door. I should have asked who we were conferencing with. I opened the door to call after him but he was gone.

"Clark," I called quietly.

He didn't move.

"Clark," I called a bit more loudly.

"Huh?" he mumbled, without moving.

"We have to leave in fifteen minutes for a video conference."

He pushed up off his stomach and turned to look at me. "With who?"

"Daniel didn't say." I moved to the closet and pulled out a pair of pants and one of the nicer shirts I'd brought. I didn't know who we were meeting with but I was sure it wasn't Lana.

I headed to the bathroom as Clark rolled over and sat up. "I'll be a few minutes if you want to change."

He nodded again as he swung his feet over the side of the bed. "How're you feeling?"

I shrugged. "I feel fine at the moment."

"That's good. I'll holler when I'm done."

I nodded as I went into the bathroom to change.

Fifteen minutes later we were on our way to an office, led by one of Daniel's aides.

Daniel showed us to a couple of seats at the end of a conference table. "Navance isn't happy," he said without preamble.

"We didn't expect him to be," Clark said.

"We're going to get you two out of here today when the ambassador heads to Podansk for talks. You'll go wheels down, wheels up pretty quickly. You'll stay at another embassy for a few days and then we'll get you home late next week."

"That's what you'd said."

"Why didn't anyone tell me about this?" I demanded. "You get me out of the hospital and are getting me out of the country — and I'm grateful for that, really I am — but no one talked to me or showed me written PDA messages or anything else to tell me we were going to have to get married or sneak out of the country. I did expect that we were going to have sneak out, but why didn't anyone tell me? And what the heck does wheels down, wheels up mean?"

"Because we were afraid of how you were going to react," Daniel said. "We didn't want to tip off Navance. And it means that the wheels of your plane will land there and then they'll take off again pretty quickly."

"Oh." I slumped back in my seat. They had a point. I wouldn't have taken the news quietly. "Who are we meeting with then?"

"Navance. We're not about to let him in the embassy and he doesn't want to come. And we're not letting either of you go anywhere just yet." He looked at me. "I want both of you to keep your mouths shut and let us deal with it. Act married."

I nodded as Clark wrapped an arm around me. "Fine."

A few minutes later, the screen came to life.

The florid face of the Latislani general filled the screen. "I want my child back," he said without preamble.

Daniel shook his head. "Mrs. Kent does not carry your child."

Mrs. Kent?

Who?

Right.

Me.

“Who?!” he bellowed, echoing my own sentiments.

“According to Latislani law,” Daniel said, almost bored, “the child a woman carries is the child of her husband.”

“The mother of my child is not married.”

“Ms. Lane married Mr. Kent and that makes the child his.

Period. That is what Latislani law says, isn’t it?”

He sputtered, obviously caught unaware by the news. “They will not be allowed to leave the country with my child.”

“You will not order an American couple having an American baby around.”

Clark’s other hand gripped one of mine, knowing, I was sure, how much I wanted to tell this man where he could go and how he could get there.

“This is not a real marriage,” he hissed.

“It was legally performed. All the paperwork is signed, sealed. Is are dotted and ts are crossed. This conversation is over.” He made a slashing motion across his throat to a man sitting at a computer on the other side of the room. Colored bars filled the screen.

He turned to us. “We’re going to have to get you two military uniforms for when you get out of here in a couple hours and see what else we can do to disguise your appearance.”

“What? Am I going to be a redhead or something?” I asked.

He shook his head. “We’re not sure yet, but we better get on it.”

Three hours later, we’d made it to an Air Force jet with the ambassador who I finally met for the first time. Apparently, another plane was meeting the ambassador in Podansk so that we could take this one to some undisclosed location.

I stared out the window as the plane took off into the wild blue yonder. My first real look at the country of Latislan.

I could only pray it was also my last.

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Part 25

Clark

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Daniel was wrong.

He probably purposefully misled us — and everyone else at the embassy, too. We didn’t go with the ambassador to Podansk. The ambassador didn’t go to Podansk. We ended up on an Air Force base in Europe somewhere. We were put in a hanger before we were allowed to deplane.

They wouldn’t tell us where we were going or when we were going to be able to contact our families or anything like that.

For now, at least, they were keeping us completely under wraps.

In the day and age of electronic media and 24-hour news cycles, it was probably a good idea if we had any hope of keeping our privacy.

We were met by a dark sedan and were huddled into the rear seat and headed towards an office building. Once there, we were met by a media relations lady.

“Hi,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m Jill. I’m with the State Department Public Relations office. I’m going to be your liaison for the time being.” We both shook her hand and she led us down the hall. “This isn’t Latislan, but…” She tugged on her ear. “I’ll let you know where it’s safe.”

“Thanks,” I said.

We walked into a conference room and she gestured towards the chairs. “Have a seat. The story is starting to leak. Navance put out a press release that Americans had helped the mother of his unborn child leave the country. We’re working on a press release of our own saying that his claims are completely unfounded — that the woman in question married the father of her child and that Navance is trying to take advantage of her for some reason

we don’t understand. We’re doing our best to keep your names out of the media but…” She sighed. “Hopefully, no one from your tour group will put two and two together and decide they want their fifteen minutes of fame.”

She pulled a piece of paper from the folder in front of her and handed it to Lois. “Look over it and see what you think.” She folded her hands on the table in front her. “I talked to Daniel. He said the baby was conceived in very early November when you were on a school newspaper road trip and got stuck in that blizzard that hit Metropolis.”

I glanced at Lois, but she didn’t look at me. Instead, she focused on the paper. “Yeah. Something like that,” I told Jill.

Lois handed me the sheet. It was the press release that basically said what Jill had. “It looks fine to me,” I said. I guessed that was what she was looking for — approval from us — but I really had no idea what I was doing. Public relations for something like this was outside my expertise. Far outside.

“When can I talk to my dad?” Lois asked.

Jill sighed. “We’re working on it. We have to get you both to a secure line.”

“What about my folks?” I asked. “I talked to my girl…” I stopped. I couldn’t call her that. Not right now. “A friend,” I amended. “I’m sure she told them something’s going on.”

She nodded. “We have talked to them and told them that you’re fine but that we’ll let you tell them the whole story and that you should be home next week.”

“Can I talk to them soon?”

She sighed again. “It’s a bit harder to get them somewhere with a secure line because they live in such a rural area. If nothing else, you’ll be able to talk to them on the way home in a couple days.”

“So what do we do until then?” Lois asked.

“Hang out at the hotel, mainly. There’s American TV, a restaurant, game room, Internet access, though you really shouldn’t access your email or chat rooms or any message boards you normally go to or log in anywhere or anything like that. General surfing is okay, but we don’t want to let Navance know where you are just yet and he may have some ‘net gurus around that can trace that stuff. Things like that. You can’t use your own laptops to get online for the same reason. The rooms there are clean.” She tugged on her ear again.

We both nodded.

Lois rubbed her eyes with her fingers before running her hands through her hair. “What about my dad? What does he know?”

“More than Clark’s parents, but not much. We haven’t told him much, except that you were stuck in Latislan but we were working on a way to get you out of there. They’ve all been told that you’re out of the country. Clark, your parents weren’t told what country you were in — I don’t think so anyway. I wasn’t involved in contacting them. They shouldn’t connect you with the story Navance is putting out — not from anything we told them anyway. Lois’ dad on the other hand… He knows you were in Latislan, so it’s much more likely that he’ll make the connection, even though we’re trying to make it sound like you’re much older than you are — thirties or so rather than late teens.”

“Navance didn’t release our names?” I asked, a bit startled as that hit me.

She shook her head. “No. He wants it to look like we helped a Latislani citizen out of the country for as long as he can.” She tapped on her PDA for a minute. “Okay. That is being released to the press.”

“Where are we anyway?” Lois finally asked.

“Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.” There was a knock on the door and Jill pushed back from the table. “We’ll get you two settled in the hotel and you can get some rest or explore or whatever, but we’d prefer that you try to keep to yourselves and

stay at the hotel, keeping a low profile. Feel free to order room service instead of going down to the restaurant.”

We followed her to the car that had brought us to the office building and were driven across the base. It pulled up behind an impressive hotel and we were ushered through a back door to our room. We were left alone at that point. Jill said she’d be in touch and they’d get us home in a few days.

Our suitcases were already there and I quickly decided that getting out of the uniform I’d worn out of Latislan was a good idea.

“I’m going to change out of this,” I said, unbuttoning the uniform shirt and shrugging out of it, tossing it on the chair before tugging the T-shirt out of the uniform pants. I dug through my suitcase and pulled out a pair of running pants and a long sleeve T-shirt.

I headed for the bathroom to change while Lois flopped on the bed.

What could I do at this point to make things easier for her?
Anything?

It seemed obvious now that she’d been sick because of the baby — though it seemed odd to me that she hadn’t been sick until now. Didn’t women get sick at the beginning of their pregnancies?

What did I know?

But what could I do to make it better for her?

Nothing occurred to me. I’d have to ask her.

I finished changing and headed back into the room.

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Lois

I flopped back on the bed. Changing clothes probably was a good idea, but I just didn’t have the energy. I was just glad I wasn’t throwing up. I was still slightly queasy and hadn’t eaten breakfast for that very reason. I wondered if there were any peppermints around here or something.

A minute later, Clark emerged from the bathroom in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Okay.”

“Stomach bothering you?”

“A bit.”

He sat on the couch. “How’re you dealing with everything else?” he asked, much more quietly this time.

“Everything else what?”

“The baby.”

I shrugged again from where I was lying on the bed. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“I bet.”

I rolled so I could look at him, asking him what had been on my mind since the night before. “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Claim the baby. Marry me.”

He sighed. “Claiming the baby...” He stopped for a minute, thinking. “He was just standing there, so smug and sure that we were going to acquiesce to whatever he wanted. It suddenly occurred to me that if I was the father of the baby, then it wouldn’t matter what he said. I didn’t know about the whole ‘I’m the Supreme Ruler of All so unless she’s married, it’s my baby’ thing at the time.”

“Would you have still said it if you knew?”

He hesitated slightly. “Probably. I wouldn’t have thought we’d actually have to get married — just get you out of the country.”

“When did you know we’d have to get married?”

“Later that day.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Daniel told you why. We didn’t think you’d take it well and we didn’t want to tip off Navance.”

“Ah. But why did you go through with it?” I didn’t actually

look at him as I asked.

He stared at his hands for a long moment before answering quietly. “I couldn’t let him get to either one of you.”

“Well, thank you. I’m sure Daddy’ll get us a lawyer to get an annulment as soon as we get home.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry I got us into this,” I told him quietly.

He shrugged. “It’s okay. It happens.”

“To me.”

He smiled. “Maybe.”

We were quiet for a minute.

“What’re you going to do?” He didn’t look at me as he asked.

“About?”

“The baby.”

“Have a baby. Try to figure out how to raise a baby and go to school.”

“Not adoption?”

I shook my head. “No. I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

I sighed. How to explain it? Should I?

“You don’t have to answer that,” he said before I could respond.

“No, it’s okay.” I pushed myself up and moved against the headboard. “When my parents were seniors in high school, they broke up for a while when my mom moved from Metropolis to New York with her family. She went out with another guy who pushed her into having sex pretty early in their relationship — before she was ready. I’m still not clear on whether she and my dad had at that point or not, but they’d known each other since kindergarten so...” I shrugged. “Anyway, she got pregnant and this guy said it wasn’t his baby. My dad had written her and said that he wanted to get back together, even long distance, because he loved her. She didn’t believe in abortion and neither did my grandparents so she decided she just wouldn’t tell him and put the baby up for adoption. After Mom and Lucy died, Daddy found out about it. She’d written him a letter to be delivered on her death and it told him all about it. About three years ago, he went looking for her son.” Tears filled my eyes and I couldn’t continue.

“What happened?” he finally asked, handing me the Kleenex box.

“He’d died about eighteen months after Mom and Lucy. He needed a bone marrow transplant and they couldn’t find a match. Daddy found out, somehow, that Mom and I would both have been a match. I’d have had a half-brother. Daddy would have a son, even a step-son. He’s always wanted a son. Don’t get me wrong — he loves me very much and he’s proud of me and he loved Lucy — but he always wanted a son, too. If Mom had told him, he would have married her as soon as they were eighteen and figured out a way to get through school and raise a family together. I just can’t...” I couldn’t go on at that point. The tears on Daddy’s face when he’d told me about it... That Mom had had a son. That we could have saved him if the adoption hadn’t been sealed tighter than Tupperware, Daddy had said. I swiped at the tears with a Kleenex.

Clark nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“I would have liked to get to know him. Daddy talked to his parents and they said that if and when we’re ready, they’d like to get to know us. I’m their son’s sister, after all. But... neither one of us were ready for that. Maybe now...” I shrugged. “Maybe I’m ready.”

He nodded. “I’m not trying to say that’s the wrong decision, but open adoptions are a lot more prevalent today.”

I shook my head. “No,” I whispered. “I may not know who the father really is, but this is my baby.”

“What about Joe?”

“What about him?”

"You guys just got back together."

"So? It's not like I cheated on him."

"What's he going to think?"

"It doesn't matter. If he still wants to be my friend, great. If not... well, I can't imagine him leaving my life all together."

"But you don't think he'll still want to date." It was a statement of fact.

"Would you take on another man's child? If you found out that Lana was pregnant from a night she didn't remember..."

"I'd still marry her," he said quietly.

"Yeah, well Joe and I haven't been in love since we were born," I snapped back. "I wouldn't expect him to do that and I don't think he would."

Clark didn't look at me and didn't react to my snarky comment, instead choosing to focus on Joe. "You won't give him the option?"

I shook my head. "I won't ask him to do that."

"And if he wants to anyway?"

"I don't think he will."

"Maybe you underestimate him."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

He sighed and looked over his shoulder out the window.

"What do you want to do?"

"Doesn't matter. You?"

"Are you hungry?"

"I am, but I don't think I can keep anything down."

He reached over and picked up a binder. "Let's see what they've got that you might be able to deal with."

~~~~~

Clark

Lois was taking a nap on the bed so I headed downstairs to see what the hotel at Ramstein had to offer.

I bought a cup of coffee and settled down with a magazine.

The news on the television nearby caught my attention.

"Next on ANC, why is Latislani dictator General Navance claiming the Americans have stolen his unborn child and have we?" The blonde anchor was replaced with a commercial about one of the prime time shows.

I waited the requisite two and a half minutes or so until they came back on the air.

The blonde was back. "Good afternoon. I'm Meredith Keller and this is the American News Channel. Early this morning, General Navance, the President of the Latislani Coalition to Govern, put out a press release saying that the American embassy in the capital city of Skopje helped the mother of his unborn child leave the country against his wishes; that the child is a Latislani citizen and can't leave without his approval. About three hours ago, the State Department released a statement of its own saying that the woman in question is an American citizen who was in Latislan with the American father of the baby and the two were married last night. Joining us is Liz Wheel, American News legal correspondent. Welcome, Liz."

"Hi, Meredith," said the brunette who was apparently live via satellite. I watched more closely. This was one of those mid-morning, mid-afternoon, overnight, whatever shows that had more opinion and such than a straight news program.

"So tell us what's going on here."

"Well, since the report came out early this morning, several of us have been digging through Latislani law and under Latislani custody laws, the father has custody of all children, born and unborn."

"Isn't that unusual?" Meredith said as the shot cut back to the studio.

"Yes, it is," Liz replied, coming back on the split screen. "But what makes even less sense than that is how the law is written. All the President of the Latislani Coalition to Govern has to do to get custody of a child is claim that it's his. It doesn't have

anything to do with who the actual father of the child is. Even a DNA test wouldn't make a difference and the mother has no say in the matter. He even controls who has access to the mother as long as she's pregnant and how much access she has to the child after birth. The *only* way we've found to get around that is if the mother is married, then the husband is the father, again regardless of what the DNA says."

"So these two Americans got married last night to make him the legal father?"

"That's what it sounds like. Navance's claims are null and void if she's married."

"The press release from the State Department says the two of them had only been in country for a few days and that they can prove that. It also says that she's in her late first trimester. How on earth can he claim that this is his child?"

"None of that matters under Latislani law."

"Wow." Meredith shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense at all. How does he get away with it?"

Liz nodded. "It doesn't, but we also don't know who these two people are so we can't find out anything else. Are these two people who were already engaged? Who had been dating for a long time or is there something else going on that would make Navance a little more annoyed than he usually is. And, for all intents and purposes, he's a dictator. He can do what he wants."

"Liz Wheel, thanks for your help and we'll be back with you as this story continues to unfold. In other news..."

I tuned out whatever it was they moved on to. So they still didn't know who we were. That was good. The American response was pretty much the same as mine and Lois'.

He was crazy.

And that was scary.

Part 26

Lois

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After four days of doing next to nothing in Germany, we were finally on a flight out. We were being taken to London's Heathrow Airport, I thought. I still hadn't had a chance to talk to Daddy and Clark hadn't talked to his parents either. At least I didn't think he had.

Clark sat next to me as we flew. He was still uncomfortable. He had been uncomfortable on the way to Germany, too, but I had been a bit preoccupied then. I still was.

We finally landed and this time we weren't rushed into a dark sedan.

We walked into a lounge in the terminal and my breath caught in my throat. "Daddy," I whispered as I ran towards him, flinging my arms around his neck and crying into his shoulder.

"Little Girl." He sounded choked up and I thought he was crying, too, as he held me tightly.

I didn't know how long we stood there, but it seemed like forever.

And I finally felt safe.

Daddy wouldn't let anything happen to me.

Finally, I relaxed my hold on him and he let me go.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"I'm so glad."

I couldn't tell him how we ended up in Latislan. That I'd followed his girlfriend. That there were guns on the plane.

Guns.

Could that have been why he fixated on me?

To try to keep attention away from what Clark and I could have seen there?

I'd have to mention that to someone.

Jill had come with us and handed Clark a phone. I heard him talk to his parents for a minute, but then we were told it was time

to go already and he had to cut his conversation short.

We were loaded into a long golf cart and whisked across the tarmac until we reached a waiting 747. Jill joined me, Daddy, and Clark as we walked up the outside stairs to the jet way and boarded the plane.

I breathed a small sigh of relief as we were led up the stairs by a stewardess. Well, Jill stayed on the main level, but the three of us went upstairs. Daddy said she'd come join us if there was enough room, but for now she had a seat down there.

The leg room was nice. The flight to Paris had made me appreciate First Class even more. I glanced over at Clark. His eyes were a bit wide. Maybe he'd feel more comfortable here.

I settled into the fairly large chair next to Daddy. Clark sat facing us and before long we were in the air.

Daddy held my hand for quite a while.

"We're going to need to get an annulment as soon as we get home," I told him. "Can you help us find a lawyer to do that?"

He paused slightly. "Of course, Princess." He looked over at Clark. "I haven't said thank you to you yet, Clark. Thank you for helping her and keeping her safe."

"No problem, Sam." He smiled at Daddy. "I wouldn't let anything happen to her if I could prevent it."

"How's Lana taking all of this?" There was a glint of something in Daddy's eye but I wasn't quite sure what it was.

Clark sighed. "I haven't talked to her since right after we got to Latislan. I told her we were stuck in another country unexpectedly but I didn't tell her where. I doubt she's connected the news stories to us."

He turned back to me. "How're you feeling?"

"Not too bad, today, thankfully."

"How're you doing?" he asked quietly and there was no doubt about what he was talking about.

"Caught off-guard," I said honestly.

"Have you decided what you're going to do yet?" He didn't look at me as he posed the question.

"What do you think I should do?" I had pretty much made up my mind already, but I wanted to know what he thought.

"I think it's up to you, Sweetheart. And Clark, of course, but I'll support you whatever you decide."

"I want to keep the baby," I told him, though I couldn't tell him yet that what Clark wanted didn't matter. "After what happened with mom... With my half-brother..."

"Yeah," he said.

"I think I'd like to talk to them."

He nodded. "I think I would, too."

"Can we contact them when we get home?"

"Yeah, I'll get in touch with them here pretty soon."

The stewardess came around and asked what we wanted to drink and before long, I dozed off.

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Clark

Lois fell asleep holding her dad's hand.

I glanced around the First Class upper deck cabin and was again impressed. Having money was nice.

And I had leg room.

It was a little easier flying in a metal tube up here.

Sam and I chatted easily about the recent moves by the Monarchs and the upcoming football playoffs, but he finally caught me off-guard.

"Clark..." He paused. "What are your intentions with Lois?"

I shrugged. "We're planning on getting an annulment once we get home. We only got married to keep Navance from claiming the baby."

"Are you planning on being a father?"

I opened my mouth to tell him 'no, why would I?' when I remembered that no one but Jack and Daniel knew that I wasn't the father of Lois' child. We'd agreed over the last couple of days

that, for now, at least, we should probably let that assumption live on. We hadn't talked about what we were going to tell our parents or when.

When I didn't answer, he continued. "I know you've got a girlfriend, or had one or whatever, but you're having a baby with Lois. How does Lana feel about that?"

I paused again. "I haven't talked to her about any of this," I said honestly.

He looked over at his sleeping daughter. "She's been through so much," he said quietly. "First, losing her mom and sister. Then, we almost lost everything when my former business partner took advantage of my depression. We found out about her half-brother that she never got to know. She worked so hard to get through school and get great grades and get a scholarship so that she wouldn't have to use my money to get through school. I can afford it, no problem, but she wanted to do it on her own. She asked me to help her get onto the academic floor in Lane Hall and she never said why she didn't move home when the paperwork got screwed up. And now... planning on being a single mom..."

He stared at their still joined hands. "I managed to get you two an apartment on campus. Your scholarships will cover it; that's not a problem. But that's when I thought you were staying married to the mother of your child. I know you and Lois are friends — good friends — and there's a lot worse things when it comes to the foundation of a marriage. I'd appreciate it if you would at least consider staying married to her and trying to make a go of it for her sake and the sake of your child."

I wasn't sure what to say. No one knew the true nature of what was going on except me and Lois.

"Will you please just think about it?" he asked.

Finally, I nodded. I'd think about it, but not for long and the outcome of that thinking was a foregone conclusion.

Jill chose that moment to join us in the empty seat that made up the quartet. "Clark, your parents wanted to join us in London for this part of the trip, but with your dad's back, they decided it wasn't a good idea."

I nodded again. "Yeah. His back couldn't handle this." I looked around. "Not even up here. Especially not with the quick turn around."

Lois woke up as our meal was brought around.

We all chatted quietly about miscellaneous topics until we started our descent into Metropolis International Airport. Once there, I was going to have to find a way to pull Lois aside and convince her that we needed to tell at least our parents the truth.

No sooner had we walked in, than Jill got a phone call before pulling Lois and I aside.

"We have a problem," she said, without further preamble. "I got a call that it was coming earlier, but that one confirmed it."

Sam watched from the other side of the room, but didn't try to insert himself into the conversation.

"What's that?" Lois said wearily.

"Navance."

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"He's changed the law," Jill told us grimly.

"What?!" we exclaimed in unison.

She nodded. "The law said that he can claim a child but it also said that the husband is the father regardless of who the biological father is."

"Right," I said. "That's why we got married. So why does it matter if he changed it? That was the law when we got married, so changing it shouldn't change anything for us."

"And here that's right. But in Latislan things are different. He changed the law and it applies to you guys, too."

"What did he change it to?" Lois asked, fear in her voice.

"He can claim a baby even if the mother is married?"

She shook her head. "No. The way the law reads now, the

husband is only the biological father regardless of any other challenges if the marriage lasts at least five years after the child is born.”

Lois’ jaw dropped.

“What?” I whispered.

“Daniel thinks that’s because when you left the country the baby was legally Clark’s and Navance couldn’t just make a law that said any baby he says is his is legally his regardless of anything else. Daniel also said that you two were planning on getting an annulment once you got back here. If you do, your child can be claimed by Navance again. The U.S. wouldn’t send either of you back there, Lois, but he could make your life a living nightmare if he tries to take the baby from you. And Navance probably suspects you’re planning something like that. Five years is long enough that you won’t want to stay married just to keep away from him but not so long that his motives are completely transparent.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, my head spinning.

“The other new part of the law is that if the marriage is solely for the purpose of keeping him away from his child, then the husband’s claim of paternity is invalid. And he really only needs circumstantial proof that it’s only for that purpose to invalidate that claim — at least in Latislani courts. He also reminded us that he has a nephew who is attending Met U this year and that his nephew will be keeping an eye on you two and he’ll have others keeping an eye on you, as well.”

Lois wiped at the tears flowing down her face as I spoke again. “Why? Why is he doing this to us? We all know there’s no way this is his baby.”

Jill shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“The guns,” Lois whispered.

“What?”

“I forgot about it with everything but it hit me earlier and I wasn’t sure who to tell and it’s probably too late now but... When we were on the plane that took us to Latislan, there were crates and crates of guns. I wondered if he didn’t latch onto me and my baby as a way to distract someone from what was on the plane.”

Jill nodded. “I have no idea, but I’ll make sure that information gets to the appropriate authorities.” She sighed.

“Regardless, he’s going to make your lives miserable if you don’t convince him that you’re committed to your marriage and it lasts until the baby is five.”

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “How can he do this? Why would it matter what a dictator from somewhere halfway around the world says?”

“Under U.S. law, it doesn’t. But the bigger concern is safety for all of you, as well as your private lives. International relations play a role as well, but that’s not my area of expertise. Once you two get an annulment, he can claim the baby is legitimately his because he claimed the child while you were under that jurisdiction and the marriage didn’t last long enough for Clark to remain the legal father under Latislani law. He can try to take the baby by force if he wants to and if he gets him out of the country, you’ll never see him again.”

The tears continued to flow down Lois’ cheeks and I could feel myself deflating as I realized what was happening.

Lois and I were going to have to stay married to protect her and the baby.

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Lois

He was going to come back and get us.

Clark wouldn’t stay married to me for five and a half years. There was no way. He was going to marry Cruella long before then.

Jill paused in her destruction of my life. “I’ll let you two talk about it. You don’t have to decide right now or whatever, but we just wanted you to know before you contact the lawyer about the

annulment.” She opened her mouth to say something else, before she thought better of it and turned and walked away.

“I won’t hold you to it,” I told him before he could say anything. “Daddy’ll get security or whatever to protect me and the baby.” Or I thought he would. Who knew what the girlfriend was capable of convincing him to do or not do, especially if she was connected to Navance. “I’ll tell him to call the lawyer.” I turned to walk away, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Wait.”

“Let’s not drag this on any longer than we have to.”

“I can’t let him get to you. I’m not leaving.”

He didn’t sound very convincing. I didn’t believe for a minute he’d want to stay married to me and how else would he keep the insane dictator from getting to me?

“No, it’s okay. We’ll figure it out. You don’t have to worry about it. I’ll tell Daddy the truth about the baby and he wouldn’t think of trying to pressure you into staying married to me.”

He put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face him. “Lois, I’m not going to let him get you.” He took a deep breath and tried to sound convincing. “And that means that we stay married and do our best to make it look good until he moves on to something else and the law gets changed or some other guy he’s ticked off takes a shot at him and gets lucky or whatever.”

“I can’t ask you to do that, Clark. I won’t. I won’t ask Joe to be a parent to a baby that’s not his even without a lunatic involved. Why would I ask you to do this?”

“You’re not asking me. I’m volunteering.”

There was something more he wasn’t telling me. I wasn’t sure what it was, so I finally asked him. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“What do you mean?” That didn’t sound convincing either.

“You’re hiding something from me and I want to know what it is.” I crossed my arms in front of me and stared at him.

He sighed. “You didn’t see Navance when he was at his worst. I can’t give him any reason to be able to get at either one of you.”

“We’re not your responsibility,” I informed him. “I can take care of myself and if it gets to the point where I can’t, Daddy’ll help. And what are you talking about — his worst?”

He chose to ignore the question. “You are my responsibility,” he said quietly. “I promised to protect you for better or worse. I know we didn’t really think that it was going to last, but I did promise that before God in a chapel in front of a chaplain.”

“You didn’t answer my question, but you didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it and I won’t hold you to it.”

“I won’t sign the papers. Whatever it is we have to do to get an annulment, I won’t do it.”

“This isn’t even your baby,” I reminded him. “Why would you even think about doing this?”

He paused. “My parents didn’t have to take me in, but they did. They protected me and I can’t let another baby go unprotected when there’s something I can do to help. And I won’t agree to an annulment.”

I hated that I was still bawling.

I sighed.

“I’ll get an annulment anyway. There has to be a way.”

“Please, Lois. Don’t put yourself in danger. Don’t put your *baby* in danger when there’s a way to protect both of you.”

I didn’t want to admit it but Navance scared me. And apparently, I hadn’t seen him at his worst.

“Are you sure, Clark? You won’t see Lana in a couple days and suddenly decide that you want out? If you want out, get out now.” There was no way that he’d be willing to do that.

“I won’t change my mind.”

“You won’t see Lana and decide you want to leave?”

“I won’t leave,” he said. “I promise.”

I took a deep breath. I hated what I was about to say. “Okay,

then. I won't ask you not to see her, but I do ask that you be discrete." I hurried on. "If you're sure, then thank you."

"I'm sure."

"Can we please agree to keep all of this to ourselves then?" I asked, more tears leaving my eyes. "Can you let her believe that I'm actually having your baby? Can you not tell your parents? We can't let anyone know the truth." I knew how close he was to his folks.

He hesitated. "Okay. You're right. The best way to keep this all quiet and away from Navance is if no one else knows. Not your dad. Not Joe. Not my folks. Not Lana."

I nodded. "Okay, then."

"We'll stay married. We'll convince him that it's real and I won't let him near either one of you." He sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as me.

I swiped at my face again. "Well, let's go then."

He nodded and after a brief second, grabbed my hand and we headed back towards Daddy.

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Part 27

Clark

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I couldn't tell Lois the things Navance had said to me when it was just me and him.

How he'd take her and the baby and no one would ever see them again.

How he wouldn't make her his wife — which would offer her some legal protections — but would torment her and have his way with her on a regular basis and show her just enough of her child to make her realize how he or she was being raised until she finally begged him to kill her.

And more.

The man was an animal.

I couldn't let him get his hands on Lois or the baby.

My heart was breaking at the same time. I'd have to break up with Lana. I wouldn't be able to marry her this summer like I'd planned. I was going to break her heart, even if I did tell her the whole truth.

Except I couldn't tell her the whole truth.

I couldn't tell my parents the whole truth.

I had managed to make myself grab Lois' hand as we walked towards her father, but Jill had intercepted us and taken us to another room.

"This is a secure conference," she told us as we sat in front of her laptop.

Daniel appeared on the screen. He looked tired. "I'm sorry, you two. I knew he wouldn't be happy, but I didn't think he'd try anything like this."

"It's okay, Daniel," I said. "You couldn't have known."

"Have you two decided what you're going to do yet?"

I realized Jill had left the room giving us some level of privacy.

"No." "Yes."

Lois and I spoke at the same time.

I glanced at her but continued quickly. "We're staying married."

Lois glared at me.

Daniel breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good. I hate what it's doing to you two but it's the safest way for everyone. But that also means you have to make it look good. I'd recommend not telling anyone the whole truth until the five years are up unless something happens. Let everyone believe the 'hypothermic at the cabin' story as long as possible. That means you need to change your name as soon as you can, Lois, and no hyphens or anything. You should probably consider at least partially naming the baby after someone in Clark's circle — a family member or long-time family friend or mentor to solidify the idea that the baby is

Clark's and that you two are serious about this. It means you can't be seen alone with either Lana or Joe, regardless of whether you continue the relationships on the side. And I would strongly encourage you not to, because you never know who might see something they shouldn't."

He looked at something over the camera out of our view. "I have to go, kids. Your names won't be released from here. It's already blowing over in the States so hopefully you won't end up in the limelight."

"Thanks, Daniel."

Lois was still glaring at me.

"I wish I could have done more," he said. "Good luck and let Jill know if there's anything you need."

Before we could say goodbye the connection was cut.

"Why?" Lois asked quietly.

"Why what?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I care about you. I care about your baby. And I can help protect the two of you from him. I won't give him any reason to come after either one of you."

She sighed, as though finally accepting it. "What're we going to do?"

"Stay married."

"Where are we going to live? What are you going to tell Lana? Your folks? How do we act like it's 'real'?" She used finger quotes to emphasize her point.

I closed the laptop. "Your dad said he'd already arranged for an apartment on campus before he knew we were planning on getting an annulment, so that's taken care of. Our scholarships will cover it, he said. We won't tell anyone anything but the public story, but we should still keep it as close to the truth as possible. That we were together in a hypothermic induced haze at the cabin that night, but we both thought we were dreaming." I put thoughts of the dream I'd actually had out of my head. "You didn't know you were pregnant until we were in Europe and we'd gotten lost and ended up in another country." I sighed. "You didn't have your passport with you and knowing that you were having my baby, we decided to do the right thing and get married before we came home."

I ran a hand through my hair. "As for pretending it's real... I guess living together will go a long way towards that. Holding hands. Not seeing Joe and Lana in public without each other." I tried not to cringe. "Kissing when we see each other or one of us leaves when we're in public."

She nodded. "I guess that's all we can do." She sighed.

"Daddy's probably wondering what happened to us."

"Probably." Should I tell her what he'd said? I probably should. "You should probably know that while you were asleep, he asked if I was planning on being a dad to your baby. He asked me to at least think about staying together and trying to make this work for the sake of the baby." I didn't think Lois would take it well if she knew he'd also asked me to consider it for her sake.

"That doesn't surprise me," she said. She scrubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I guess we better get this show on the road." She pushed back from the table and stood up.

I stood up, too, and after a slight hesitation, took her hand as we left the room.

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Lois

Why was he agreeing to stay married to me?

If it was anyone but Clark, I'd say it was to get in bed with me. Even Joe would have had that in the back of his mind.

But Clark...

If there was one thing I was sure of it was that Clark had no desire to... Not get me into bed, because we'd slept in the same bed more than once and it seemed likely we would again at some point in the future.

I was sure Clark had no desire to make love to me.

I knew that if it was Joe instead of Clark, he'd want it at some point, before too long, and if Joe was my husband, we probably would have — if not on our wedding night then not too long after. But with Clark...

I couldn't explain the twinge of... something. Disappointment? Regret? Envy? Something that knowing my *husband* didn't think about me like that — would never think about me like that — stirred deep inside me. It wasn't that I wanted to get naked with him, but it wasn't something I would rule out either — now that we were married. But I knew he didn't feel the same way.

And while that *shouldn't* bother me... it did.

I had to end up married to the one guy...

I shook my head as we neared Daddy. There was no point in even thinking about it.

"Everything okay?" he asked as we got there.

I nodded, trying to look convincing. "Everything's fine." I pasted a smile on my face. "Just ready to get out of here."

Clark nodded. "What do we need to do to get into that apartment on campus?"

Daddy stared at both of us for a long minute. "I'll call Darrell. He's the head of housing. He had a couple move out unexpectedly and there's no waiting list for that building. I'm not sure why. It's where your mom and I lived when we were in college and it was pretty nice. I know it's been renovated at least once since then, but..." He shrugged. "I'll let him know that you two want it. You probably won't be able to get in until tomorrow though since it's already after five." We'd started walking towards the front of the airport, a porter pushing our luggage on a cart. "You can stay at the house tonight, if you'd like, rather than your dorm rooms."

I didn't look at Clark and he didn't look at me.

It was one thing when we thought this was temporary — and he'd slept on top of the sheet anyway — but this was a whole new ballgame now.

"Thanks, Sam," Clark said hesitantly.

"I don't know, Daddy," I said uncomfortably. Had his girlfriend put two and two together yet? Had Navance or one of his minions contacted her yet? Or had *they* put two and two together?

He got a knowing look on his face. "Tell you what? Why don't I put you two up at the Lexor for the night? As a wedding present?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

Clark was looking at me oddly, but I didn't want to discuss it here. I shook my head slightly and he kept his mouth shut.

Before long we were standing in front of the counter at the Lexor and we were being checked into the honeymoon suite as Clark and Lois Kent.

Daddy gave me a big hug and whispered, "Congratulations, Princess." He pulled back and said in a normal voice, "I'll call Darrell and pick you two up about eleven — that's checkout — and we'll work on getting you into the new place."

A minute later, we were in the elevator and I slumped against the wall.

"Want to tell me why we're here?" Clark asked quietly.

I took the scrunchie out of my hair, running a hand through it before pulling it back into another ponytail. "I don't really want to spend the night all happy in front of my dad and everyone else and we have no idea what the girlfriend knows about us — if anything — and I didn't think that was going to be a good idea."

He sighed and nodded. "Good points."

The elevator opened and let us out onto our floor. I used my key to open the door and walked in without really looking around. My stomach suddenly roiled and I bolted for the bathroom.

"Are you okay?" Clark called a few minutes later.

I left the bathroom and settled on the big chair. "I've been better." I pulled the throw blanket over me, hugging my legs to me. Under the blanket, I fiddled with the still-unfamiliar wedding band. "You?"

"It's a big adjustment," he said, stretching his legs out on the couch.

"I'm sorry."

"For what? You're right. Going to your house..."

I shook my head. "For everything. For getting on that plane. For following her. For all of it."

He sighed. "It's not your fault. You're not the insane dictator."

"No, but I'm the reason we were there and I'm the one who apparently ticked him off."

"Look, we're friends right?"

I nodded.

"Okay. I wasn't going to let you go by yourself and I'm glad I didn't. What would you have done if I hadn't been there?"

I shrugged.

"Okay, then. Let it go. We are where we are and we have to deal with the hand we've been dealt at the moment."

"Well, the day after the baby's fifth birthday, we can file for divorce. I doubt we'll be able to get an annulment after that long, even if we haven't..." I waved a hand towards the bedroom.

"You're probably right."

"And I won't hold you to any paternity claims or child support or anything like that either."

"Thanks."

"Do you want that in writing?" I asked, suddenly wondering if he'd believe me.

"No. I believe you and that's probably not a good idea even if we used a lawyer with confidentiality and all that." He looked around the room. "Can I get you something to drink or something?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine. Thanks."

"Do you want to play some games or something?"

I shook my head again. "No. I'm getting pretty tired and I'd like to get the travel grime off of me."

"Why don't you go take a shower then get some sleep?"

I sighed and pushed up from the chair. "Sounds like a good plan."

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Clark

I could hear the shower running. I'd reassured Lois that we'd deal with the hand we'd been dealt, but I wasn't quite sure how we were supposed to do that — how *I* was supposed to do that.

How was I supposed to pretend that I was in love with Lois when every time I closed my eyes I saw Lana?

How was I supposed to stay married to her for five and a half years?

How was I supposed to do this?

One day at a time was the only answer I could come up with. One hour at a time. One night at a time.

Maybe the apartment would be big enough for a decent couch or a fouton or at least have clean carpet so I would have some place to sleep. Or maybe we'd have room for an air mattress.

I couldn't just float in my sleep. It would be a lot easier if I could. Or maybe I could just say I was sleeping on the floor and really float an inch or so off the ground. Except I'd never been very good at intentionally sleep floating.

Before long Lois came out of the bathroom and said it was my turn. I nodded and headed to the bathroom with some clean clothes and assorted toiletries. After a very long, very hot shower, I headed back out into the suite.

I figured Lois would be asleep in the very big bed but she was nowhere to be found. I glanced through the wall and saw her

sound asleep on the couch.

I sighed. I felt slightly guilty but she actually looked pretty comfortable. I floated myself onto the bed and stretched out. I wasn't too sure about the whole satin sheets thing and figured that sleeping on top of the comforter was probably the best bet.

Except I'd seen those 20/20 or 48 Hours or whatever reports on hotel comforters and suddenly decided I'd best sleep like a normal person. In bed. Between the sheets.

I glanced around a bit more — my eyes resting on the heart-shaped tub. I'd hoped I'd be able to take Lana someplace like this for at least one night on our honeymoon. Not our wedding night because we'd probably stay in Smallville for that — unless I flew us somewhere — because I knew neither one of us would want to wait long enough to drive to Kansas City or Topeka or Wichita or Branson or something. We'd want to get somewhere alone, preferably with a bed, as quickly as possible.

I closed my eyes.

I was married to Lois.

I was going to stay married to Lois.

I probably shouldn't be thinking about Lana like that anymore.

No.

I *knew* I shouldn't be thinking like that about Lana anymore.

I'd vowed before God to be faithful to Lois for as long as we both lived. I'd mentally added something along the lines of 'or until we get home and get this annulled' but that wasn't the point.

And I was sure that being faithful meant I didn't think about my girlfr... my exgirlfriend like that anymore.

Ex-girlfriend.

I was going to have officially break-up with her. I was going to break her heart. It was breaking my heart.

I was going to have to tell Lois — my wife — that I was going to have to see the woman I loved — who I had loved since I was six — when she got back from Europe and tell her that it was over.

For the first time in a very, very long time, I actually cried.

Part 28

Lois

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I sighed and looked around the dorm room. I'd liked it here, for the most part, but I was really glad that we were moving out before Cruella got back from Europe and Madame Medusa got back from Winter Break. I was also glad I hadn't brought a whole lot with me when I moved in. Packing wasn't going to be all that difficult.

The apartment was furnished, which was nice. I hadn't heard anything about that particular building, but Daddy thought it was pretty nice so it couldn't be all bad.

I put my clothes in boxes, not caring if I did so neatly or not. They were only going to be packed for a couple hours until we got to the new apartment. I stripped the bedding off my bunk and folded it more neatly into the plastic bag it had come in. I loved it, but it would be a while before I used it again — if ever. Maybe my son or daughter someday...

I wondered if the apartment came with bedding and I suddenly hoped not. The idea of sleeping on sheets someone else had... A hotel was one thing, this was another.

Clark came in just then.

"Got it all taken care of?" I asked, shoving the pillowcase into the bag.

"Yeah. I pulled my truck up downstairs. I figured we could load everything in the back of it and be done in a couple hours.

I nodded. "I'm almost done. I guess we've got a fridge there?"

He shrugged. "I'd guess so but I didn't go over there yet."

"Well, I guess this can go in the truck and I'll take it home

later." I pulled a water bottle out of the fridge and took a long swig.

He nodded. "I've got a cooler that we can put anything you want to keep in."

I looked around. "I think I'm done."

"That was fast," he said, impressed.

"There wasn't much. Not like we're moving a whole house or anything." I picked up a box and headed towards the cart I saw waiting outside the door Clark had left propped open.

"Are you sure you should be moving that stuff?" he asked me.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm pregnant, not an invalid. And I'll let you move the heavy stuff."

He grabbed a box and started packing his clothes. I moved the rest of my boxes out to the cart. It was kind of pitiful, actually, how little there was. I knew Clark would have more, but that was, in large part, because he didn't live close enough to bring only one season of clothes, for instance.

"Why two carts?" I asked.

He glanced up. "Well, no one else is moving so it's not like anyone else will need them and I didn't think one would be enough."

I moved the rest of my boxes onto the cart and then took another box over to my desk and started filling it. It didn't take long and I folded the flaps over before taking it out to the cart. "That's all of my stuff, except my hang up clothes."

He put his hands on his hips and looked around. "I'm almost done. Why don't you sit down and rest for a few minutes?"

I looked around for a place to do so, but the only real spot was Clark's bunk. Well, I'd slept there before and he wasn't my husband at the time so I figured it was probably the least of our worries. I lay down and closed my eyes. I could see the picture of me and Joe that I'd taken off the desk. It had been taken at the party after graduation — when we'd been on again. We'd looked good together.

I struggled to keep stay awake, but it was a losing battle and before I knew it, I was asleep.

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Clark

I was glad when Lois fell asleep. Packing wasn't hard, but trying to keep my mind off of what it represented...

I could practically smell Lana's favorite perfume and if I went through the door into the common area, I probably would be able to, but fortunately, I'd cleaned all my things out of there when we left for Break. I had avoided my desk, but now that Lois was asleep, I moved to sit in the chair.

I picked up the picture of me and Lana. It had been taken at the fair the summer before and was one of my favorites. I was standing behind her, my arms wrapped around her and we were smiling. The wind was blowing her hair and I remembered how we'd kissed at the top of the Ferris Wheel. I blushed at the memory. Both because of the memory and because I shouldn't be thinking about it with... my wife lying a few feet away.

I sighed and tucked the picture in a box of summer clothes where I wouldn't have any reason to find it for a while. I pulled my wallet out of my pocket and took the picture sleeves out. My eyes filled with tears again as I looked at the picture of me and Lana when we were six. Our first day of kindergarten. She'd looked so cute with her blonde pigtails. Swiftly, I removed the pictures that had her in them, leaving only one of my parents, me and my mom, me and my Grandma Davis, and Pete and his girlfriend. The rest went in the box.

There wasn't much left to do and I moved the refrigerator onto the cart before moving the rest of the boxes. I took the carts down the elevator and loaded it all into the truck, before returning the carts and heading back up to the room. The truck was a bit overloaded but we weren't driving far, just a couple blocks away.

I didn't really want to wake her, but we did need to try to get all this done before it got too dark or cold. I shook her gently and once she woke up, we worked together to fold up my bedding.

I glanced around as she left in front of me. I wanted to look through the wall into Lana's room, but I didn't let myself.

I couldn't let myself.

Ten minutes later, we pulled up in front of Abby Apartments.

I was glad to see they had a cart we could use to help move everything and soon it was loaded.

"Okay," I said with a sigh. "Let's go see this place." I handed her the key and the paperwork folder.

The lobby and elevator looked like they'd seen better days. I only hoped the apartments looked better.

I'd noted there were no balconies like some of the other married housing buildings — and even some of the regular dorms — had. I maneuvered the cart into the elevator and Lois pushed the fifth floor button.

"Which one?" she asked as we got off.

"5A," I told her. I pointed to a door near the elevator.

"There's a laundry room on this floor." We walked past apartments K through C. B was on the end on the left. A was on the right.

"Here we go. Home sweet home." She sounded like she was holding out about as much hope as I was for this place. She stuck her key in the lock. She had to jiggle it a bit before it finally opened. The hinges creaked as the door swung open.

This didn't look good.

She walked in ahead of me, past the — very small — bathroom on the right. I left the cart in the hall as we explored our new home.

On the wall against the bathroom was a small loveseat and about two feet past it, on my right, was a bed.

A small bed.

Not much bigger than the twin bed I'd had growing up.

Across from the foot of the bed was a chest of drawers that had two more drawers than the ones we'd had two of in the dorm room, but we were going to have to share this one it looked like.

On the other side of the dresser was a desk that butted up to the closet that jutted out into the room. The closet extended past its door and against the closet wall was the refrigerator. There were beads hanging over the opening to the closet; I was sure someone had removed the door because it interfered with the refrigerator. The refrigerator itself looked to be older than I was. Past the fridge was a two burner stove, a foot of counter, a sink and two more feet of counter with a microwave sitting on it. In the corner, between the counter and the wall, was a small table with two chairs. There was barely enough room to pull either chair out — one would hit the edge of the counter and the other would hit the sole nightstand. Above the sink was a small window and on either side of it was a few more cabinets that all looked like they'd seen better days.

The kitchen at home was at least three times the size of this thing.

Heck, Lois' bathroom at the cabin was the size of the whole 'apartment'.

I glanced at the floor. It was industrial carpet — no surprise there, but it was ripped in places and there was duct tape over more than one spot and a stain or two that I didn't want to speculate on.

Lois sighed and tossed her purse and the folder onto the bed. "Well, I guess we better get unpacked so you don't get a ticket."

I could hear the trembling in her voice, but also the determination underneath it. I didn't say anything but started moving the boxes in.

"I don't suppose you have any sheets that'll fit this," she asked without looking at me.

"No. I guess that means that you don't either."

She shook her head. "Maybe at home, but I have a queen size bed there and I think most of the other beds are bigger than that, too. I guess a visit to CostMart is in order."

"We'll need to get some food that you can have, too."

"Our meal plans are still intact," she reminded me.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Your stomach has been acting up a lot lately and you think cafeteria food is going to help?"

"Good point."

I set her boxes next to the dresser as she opened the fridge.

"I'm not sure this thing works very well," she called. "It's on, but it's not very cold."

"Is there somewhere we could put your mini-fridge?"

She looked around. "The closet? As a nightstand on that side of the bed?" She pointed to the side by the loveseat.

I looked at that side of the bed. "That might work. There's an outlet over there." I took the last of the boxes off of the cart. "I'll go get the rest."

She nodded. "I guess I'll get started on this." She picked up a few hangers and headed towards the closet as I left.

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Lois

This place was a sty.

I quickly hung up the clothes Clark had left on the bed.

The mattress looked clean enough. That was good.

It was small. Which was not.

I was sure that my dad hadn't been in the building in ages or there was no way he'd have recommended we'd live here. I thought about unpacking my clothes from the boxes Clark had left, but I figured I'd at least ask him which drawers he preferred this time around. Same with the desk stuff.

I sat on the bed and opened the folder of information Clark had given me. Rental agreement he'd signed. Information on parking and the campus shuttle that stopped across the street. List of rules and regulations. I scanned through that to make sure the mini-fridge wasn't going to violate it or anything.

Something else caught my eye.

No children.

Well, not no children specifically, but only two people allowed per apartment and only married couples allowed to live in the building.

We were going to have to move this summer.

I sighed and stuck it in the pile next to me.

The next sheet was a notice. It looked like we'd have to move before summer. There was a reason why there was no one on the waiting list for this apartment building and it wasn't just that it was a hole. It was being closed the week after finals for renovations that were expected to take most of the next year.

Clark chose that moment to walk back in, TV in his arms.

"Where do you want this?" he asked. "On top of the dresser."

I nodded. "Seems like the most logical place for it."

He set it up there. "We could rearrange if we wanted to, I guess, but I don't know how."

I looked around the small room. "Me either." I held out the piece of paper. "This is why there was no waiting list."

He took it from me and sighed. "Well, at least no one else will have to live here."

"We'll have to figure something else out by then, I guess. See if we can get into one of the other buildings that allow kids or something. This one doesn't anyway."

He nodded and headed back into the hall, bringing the rest of the boxes and the mini-fridge in. "I'm going to take this back downstairs and move the truck."

"I'll start unpacking clothes, I guess. Which drawers do you want?"

"Doesn't matter. Whichever ones you don't is fine. Just leave me some space." He tried to smile as he said it.

"Don't worry, Kent. You've got more stuff than I do," I called

as the door shut behind him.

I thought about taking the bottom drawers since he was taller, but I figured I wasn't going to be able to bend over easily to get to them before long. I took one of the half drawers on top and quickly unpacked my... unmentionables before he got back. I'd just finished filling two of the drawers when he returned. I explained why I'd taken the drawers I did and he said that was fine with him.

I moved to unload the cooler into the mini-fridge. "How do you want to organize the desk?" I asked him.

He looked up from where he was moving boxes to the closet. "However you want. We've both got laptops so that's not an issue. I can work pretty much wherever."

I unpacked my desk stuff into one of the drawers, sticking the CD player on top with the TIVO and DVD player on the dresser. My Friends, Dawson's Creek, 90210 and NCIS DVDs were stacked on top of it as were the other favorite movie DVDs I'd brought with me. The CDs were stacked in the corner against the closet.

Clark broke down another box. "That's all of my stuff except for one box for the desk. Do you want to go get something to eat?"

I pondered that for a minute. "Yeah. My stomach feels okay right now." I avoided looking at the bed. "Let's hit CostMart and pick up some stuff there. We can eat at their cafe."

He raised his eyebrow at me. "The CostMart cafe? Seriously?"

I nodded. "They have the best pizza."

"Really?"

"Don't knock till you've tried it. We used to eat there every Sunday."

He shook his head. "If you say so."

I grabbed my jacket and purse. "Let's go."

I headed out the door and heard it creak as Clark shut and locked it behind us.

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Part 29

Clark

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Lois was right.

They had good pizza.

I'd been skeptical when she said CostMart had good pizza but it did. She'd decided to go with a chicken wrap thing instead, but a big slice of Supreme called my name. Before long, though, we were done and it was time to do some... household shopping.

We grabbed a cart and headed into the store.

"You know how much I cook," she told me. "So I'll trust you on the food end. As long as we have chocolate, I'm good. And peppermints."

I nodded. "Okay. So where do we start?"

She sighed. "Bedding, I guess. We have to have something to sleep on."

"Well, you do anyway. I'll get an air mattress. It'll slide under the bed during the day but there's enough room for it over by the door at night. I can use the sheets and stuff I already have for that." I didn't look at her as I said it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her give me an unreadable look before she spoke. "If anyone's going to sleep on an air mattress, it's me. I'm not letting you do that."

She had to know I wouldn't let her do that and I told her so.

She sighed. "Well, then. I guess we'll share the bed."

I grudgingly agreed. Given how stubborn we both were, it was probably the best solution. "Okay then. Bedding it is."

She pushed the cart towards that part of the store. "Any color preferences?"

"Nothing girly froo froo."

"You should know me better than that by now, Paige."

I looked at her quizzically. "Paige?"

"Did you never watch Trading Spaces when it was still good?"

I shook my head. "What's Trading Spaces?"

"Never mind. Colors?"

"Let's see what they have," I suggested. I made myself put my last shopping trip for sheets and stuff out of my mind. Lana and I had gone to CostMart in Parsons and she'd picked out pink froo froo stuff and I'd picked the dark green, but we'd looked at stuff we both liked — for 'someday'.

I was glad that it didn't seem they had many of the same choices here.

"What color do you want?" I asked as we headed into the aisle.

"Why don't you pick?" she asked. "If I don't *hate* it, get whatever you want."

I didn't really have much of a preference as long as it wasn't girly. I looked at all the choices before finally deciding on one. I'd been glancing at the prices, too, and there was another one I thought I'd like better, but it was more expensive, too. And I still wasn't sure how we were paying for all this. I smiled to myself. "How about that one?" I pointed to a comforter with flowers all over it.

She glared at me. "Try again."

I laughed and pointed to a different one. "How about that one?"

She pulled it off the shelf and set it on the top of the cart before unzipping it. The comforter had stripes of chocolate and a slightly lighter brown. She pulled it partway out. "It feels pretty thick and somehow I doubt the heater in that place works very well."

"Probably not."

"It's fine with me," she said, zipping it back up before turning back to the shelf to get matching sheets and pillowcases. "Did you look to see if there's any dishes and stuff there?"

"There's not," I told her.

She sighed. "I guess we need some of those, too, then."

It wasn't long before there was a set of dishes and glasses in the cart, too, along with some silverware, cups, a pot and skillet. They were plain but functional, which was the most important thing. We grabbed a trash can and a new curtain for the closet 'door' — the beads had to go. There was a silverware tray and an iron and ironing board — something that had been provided for us at the dorm. We got some trash bags and a couple new notebooks for her for the semester. Lois also grabbed some kitchen towels and let me pick out the utensils — spatulas, measuring cups and spoons, mixing bowl, whisk, mixing spoons — because she knew she had no clue what we needed. She picked out a vacuum cleaner. That hadn't even occurred to me to get.

Lois had insisted on a couple of TV trays and a bookcase/media shelf thing. There was enough room on the door side of the dresser for it, but barely. She also decided that she wanted a popcorn maker because real popcorn was better than microwaved. I agreed with her there but it was more fun popping it with my eyes in midair. I couldn't tell her that though. I pushed thoughts of my... uniqueness aside as we headed toward the food side of the store, but not before I picked up a crock pot. Lois had no clue what we'd do with it, but I knew I could toss some stuff in first thing in the morning and have a late lunch or dinner ready when we were.

I had to grab a second cart before we picked out a little bit of food to take back with us, too. A gallon of milk and some cereal for breakfast, some Ramen noodles, string cheese and some chicken soup for Lois. And popcorn stuff. We did grab a couple of frozen meals — the freezer had seemed better than the fridge — and I picked up barbecue sauce and some beef to make in the

pressure cooker the next day since the cafeteria wasn't open yet. I got some spices and bread and cheese to go with it. Her dad had said he'd keep sending some meals from his meal service so we really didn't need too much. We didn't trust the big refrigerator just yet, anyway. And crackers for Lois. We got a bunch of them. She also thought to get carpet cleaner and some stuff to spray on the bed. There was Febreze and we agreed on a couple of scents for candles and air freshener.

After that, just when I thought we were done, she headed back to the paper goods to get paper towels and toilet paper and napkins before getting dish and laundry soap, dryer sheets and color safe bleach. She crossed back to the bathroom part of the store and picked up a couple of soap dispensers to go with the hand soap she'd also gotten. She also grabbed a toothbrush holder before heading to the rugs and stuff. She grabbed a floor rug that matched the bedding and some stuff to cover the toilet, too. She picked up body towels — including a couple of really big ones, bath sheets I thought she said — and a couple of hand towels and wash clothes.

By then both carts were overflowing and I was starting to blanch a bit at what was sure to be a very large total. I still didn't know how we were paying for all of this, but that probably wasn't something Lois had ever really had to worry about. She went a couple aisles over and together we picked out a few area rugs, before heading back to bedding and getting a couple of extra blankets and new pillows — something we both needed — as well as an egg crate and mattress cover. She grabbed a dish drainer and I got some contact paper before we headed towards the front of the store.

I was surprised at how she knew what to get. Somehow, I hadn't figured that she'd know the kinds of little things we'd need. I knew I would have forgotten half — or more — of them. Of course, the things she would have forgotten, I'd remembered.

I refused to think too deeply about that.

We got to the checkout line and I wondered again how to broach the subject of how we were paying for all this. Lois answered that question before I asked.

"Dad said to get whatever we need and put it on his credit card."

"That was nice of him."

She shrugged. "He said it was the rest of our wedding present. He knew we'd need some stuff."

Before long we'd loaded it all in the truck and headed back to campus. "We need to pick up your Jeep at some point. Do you want to go do that now?" I asked.

She hesitated then nodded, reaching into her purse to pull out her cell phone. "I'll call Dad and let him know we're on our way."

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Lois

I was glad I got to drive back to campus by myself. I'd only seen Dad for a minute and the girlfriend was nowhere to be seen. That was good news. He'd actually met us halfway so we didn't have to drive all the way to Pittsdale. That was good news, too.

Shopping with Clark hadn't been bad, but not exactly fun and I kept remembering things we'd need. I wasn't looking forward to the rest of the evening. I thought about going straight to bed, but I figured we'd want to toss the sheets in the washer first. At least I would. And that meant it would be at least two more hours before I could get some sleep. Besides that, we'd need to get all of the purchases put away.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Clark was still right behind me and he looked about as serious as I felt. This couldn't be easy for him and I still didn't understand why he'd insisted on doing it, why he'd insisted on staying married, but he had.

I'd told him to be discreet if he was going to keep seeing Lana and I meant it. I was okay with it — or thought I was

anyway — if he still saw her on the side, as long as he was careful that no one else knew. If Linda knew though... That would be bad. I'd have to mention that to him.

The tour group would be back in two days. I'd have to talk to Joe, but even worse, Clark was going to have to talk to Lana. Breaking up with Joe, officially, wasn't going to be easy, but Clark and Lana...

It wouldn't surprise me if they broke their 'wait till the wedding night' vow; if they made love in the next couple days, I would have no place to complain, regardless of what our wedding vows had said. It wasn't like this was a real marriage.

I stopped at the stop light leading onto campus and fiddled with the wedding band on my finger, staring at it.

I was a married woman.

And I was contemplating whether or not I should tell my husband it was actually okay for him to cheat on me.

I sighed as the light turned green and I headed towards the parking lot nearest to my new home. Clark loaded everything on a cart and brought it inside while I started a load of laundry — sheets along with some of my clothes that I'd brought back with me from Europe.

He looked up from the bed where he was sitting with pieces of the new shelving unit. I noted the Febreze sitting out. "The cold stuff is put up. Want to put this together?"

I shook my head. "Not if we want it to actually work when it's done. Aren't you a farmboy? Shouldn't you know how to make stuff?"

He laughed. "Fences? Sure, no problem. Prefab furniture? That's a whole different ball game." He handed me the instructions. "You read. I'll try to figure this out."

We laughed as we tried to figure it out and when the time came to switch the laundry, it was done. There was very little room to walk in the area near the door, but I squeezed through and headed to the laundry room at the other end of the hall. By the time I got back, Clark was moving my DVDs and CDs to the new shelf where they joined the ones he'd taken out of his box of desk stuff.

He leaned back against the bed, staring at the furniture along the wall. "Could we rearrange any of this you think?"

I sat on the loveseat and immediately regretted it. I wouldn't be sitting there often. "I don't know," I said, looking around. "I'm not sure how we would rearrange it, but we probably want to before we get the rugs out and stuff."

He nodded. "What if we switched the desk and the table over there? Or put the bookcase where the desk is and the table on this side of the dresser and the desk over where the table is?"

I glanced next to me. "Well, the mini-fridge isn't going to work over here. The side table can move over here, but there's not enough room for the door of the fridge to open."

"I noticed that earlier." He moved to sit on the bed, leaning against the wall so he could see the whole room a bit better. "The table's pretty useless right there. Neither one of us actually use a desk much so it wouldn't matter if we couldn't get a chair in and out easily. What if we put the desk there, with the bookcase on top of it? It might not be pretty..."

"But it would be more functional that way. The mini-fridge can go on that side of the bed, but the drawers on that side of the desk..." I sighed. "That won't work."

"We could put the fridge by the closet and whoever's on this side of the bed could just use the desk as a night stand. We could even turn the desk this way instead if we're moving the nightstand." He gestured along the wall next to him. "Then we could use the chair still and put the bookcase on top of it in the corner so there's some space on this end for an alarm clock or something."

I nodded and pointed to the wall across from the bed. "So table, dresser, fridge against the closet. Desk against the same

wall as the bed with the bookcase on top. What about this monstrosity?" I asked, patting the loveseat.

He sighed. "Unless we want to push the bed up against the wall so that one of us is up against it, I think this is probably the best place for the bed and loveseat."

I nodded my agreement. "Okay," I said, standing up. "Let's get moving."

He stood up then pointed to the bed. "Sit. You're not moving furniture."

I rolled my eyes but sat down. "Get the desk and bookcase moved first and I'll work on getting it set up a bit better."

Clark easily moved the nightstand and table, setting them on the bed out of the way before he effortlessly scooted the desk next to the bed. I moved all the stuff he'd already situated on the bookcase to the bed until he had it in place, snug against the corner. I moved the CDs and DVDs back onto the top shelves, stretching to reach that high. I grabbed the box with the rest of my school stuff in it and situated a bunch of books and notebooks and assorted other things on one of the shelves. "Want me to unpack your box?"

He'd shoved the loveseat out of his way so he could move the fridge, but stopped long enough to look at me. "I'd appreciate that. Thanks."

His things went on another shelf and into the other set of drawers. I didn't see his picture of him and Lana anywhere and I breathed a small sigh of relief at that. By the time I was done, so was he.

"Better?" he asked.

I sat in the desk chair. "As good as it's going to get, I think." I noticed that he wasn't breathing heavily and hadn't even broken a sweat. "Thanks."

He pushed the loveseat with his knee and nudged it over another couple of inches. "Ready to unload the rest of this stuff?"

I nodded. "Let's get it done."

He pointed to the bed again. "Sit and tell me where you want everything."

"I think we should probably wash the dishes and stuff before we use them, shouldn't we?"

He hesitated. "Probably. I'll move all the kitchen stuff onto the counters and we'll do everything else first."

He did so then grabbed the vacuum cleaner box. "This is probably the best place to start." He glanced at the floor. "We'll want to vacuum before we put rugs down." He opened the box. "Did you know you have to assemble this?"

"Seriously?" He nodded. "You do that and I'll start on the bathroom. How's that?"

I was working on getting the tank cover onto the pink toilet — what were they thinking when they installed those? — when I heard the vacuum cleaner start. I spread the chocolate rug on the floor and glanced at the shower. The inside of it couldn't be more than two, two and a half feet square at most. That was going to be fun. I hung the hooks for the robes over the door and stuck the hooks for more towels up as high as I could reach. A couple towels went over the rack and a couple more went above it on the hooks. I filled the soap dispensers and arranged the rest of the stuff. I was glad I'd remembered to send Clark back for a toilet brush and cleanser. I was even more glad that he'd informed me that he'd take care of it.

"All done," Clark called, as the vacuum shut off.

"Good." I handed him the ironing board hook and pointed to the wall behind the door. "There please." He stuck it to the wall as I set the ironing board next to it. "The iron will have to go under the sink in the bathroom, I guess." I grabbed the pillows and tossed them onto the loveseat so they wouldn't be in the way when we made the bed. "Where do we stick the laundry baskets?"

"The closet?"

"One maybe, but I don't think both will fit in there. Another over by the counter?" I sighed. "Maybe we should get a couple hampers. That'd work better I think."

"Probably." He grabbed the biggest of the rugs. "Where do you want this one?"

I gestured to the area between the bed and the dresser. "Right there," I told him before grabbing two of the smaller ones and putting one in front of the desk and one of the runners along the 'kitchen'. Clark put the other two runners between the bed and the loveseat, lifting each corner of the loveseat to slide it partially underneath, and the other coming straight out from the door. I sighed. "Well, at least most of that's covered up." I glanced at the alarm clock I'd put on the desk. "I'm going to go get the laundry. You mind to clean the rest of this up?" I asked gesturing to the bags and boxes lying around.

He nodded and I left the room.

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Part 30

Clark

I finished taking the trash down to the dumpster and wondered how we hadn't run into any of our neighbors. I could hear some of them moving around in their apartments.

Lois was struggling to get the bottom sheet on the bed. She had already put the mattress cover on and the egg crate on top of that. She looked up as I walked in. "I didn't put the dust ruffle on. I didn't want to try to move the mattress by myself."

I nodded. "We can do it tomorrow." I moved to the side of the bed and helped tug the sheet over the corners of the mattress. We worked together to put the top sheet and then the comforter on. She tossed me a pillowcase and I tossed her the pillow she'd picked out.

"Which side do you want?" she asked, without looking at me. "I mean, I know you had that side when we were in Europe but... long term..."

I shrugged. "This is fine for now. If either one of us decides we want to switch we can talk about it later."

She headed towards the dresser and pulled some clothes out. "I'm going to change and then I think I'm going to go to bed."

"You should. It's been a big day. You've got to be tired."

She nodded as she headed towards the bathroom and I sunk onto the love seat. Lois was right. It was a monstrosity. And exceptionally uncomfortable at that.

I looked around the room. It was amazing how much we'd managed to cram in here. I looked at the picture of me and my parents I'd set on the nightstand that was now on what was officially my side of the bed. I'd talked to my dad for about a minute and a half while we were in London and hadn't told him anything except that I was okay. I'd called again when I knew they wouldn't be home and left a message. I knew I should talk to them, but I wanted Lana to be the first one to know, even before them. It helped that they were going out of town for nearly ten days.

I was going to have to tell Lois that I needed to see her when I told her. I couldn't do this over the phone or email or something like that.

I wouldn't say that the evening had been *fun*, but it hadn't been too bad. We'd laughed and talked like we hadn't since we were at the cabin and we were going to have to be friends if we were going to make it through the next five years.

Five years.

That was a long time.

I kicked my shoes off and propped my feet up on the bed, my head falling on the back of the seat. It was only a couple minutes before Lois came back out of the bathroom, leaving the light on in there, for me I was sure.

"Do you mind if I turn the light off?" she asked.

“Go ahead.” I said as the room darkened and she moved to the other side of the bed, flipping the covers back as she crawled in. “Good night.”

She rolled over to face me. “Good night, Clark. And thank you again.”

I nodded and she closed her eyes, burrowing under the covers. After a few minutes, I went to the kitchen sink and ran the water, filling the sink before adding soap. Lois’ quiet breathing told me that she was asleep and I sped through the dishes, washing them as fast as I could before drying them with my eyes. I’d have Lois help me figure out where to put most of them in the morning.

I rested my hands on the counter and leaned against it, my head hanging and my eyes closed. I’d imagined doing these things with Lana, not Lois, and the image of the two of us putting together our first apartment came unbidden to mind. I could see us laughing and kissing and even abandoning our efforts to get things done in the pursuit of more... interesting things. And since she’d know about me by then, I could have had it all done in seconds, lifting the desk over my head with one hand as I moved it or things like that.

And I was sure Lana wouldn’t wear flannel pajamas to bed.

I sighed and decided it was time for me to change and go to bed, too.

I wasn’t sure what our plans for the next day were, but it was going to be a very long week.

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Lois

I was glad we had two more days before Lana and Joe got home. I had a feeling that it was going to hit the fan when they did. For now, Clark was my friend and we were enjoying spending time together — though bed was a bit awkward — but I was afraid that was going to change once he came face to face with Lana again.

I was even a bit afraid that he was going to leave.

He’d never said or done anything in the five or so months that I’d known him to give me any indication that he wasn’t a man of his word, but once he actually saw Lana again...

Clark had offered to go get our textbooks and stuff before the crush hit. We could get decent used books — hopefully — because they wouldn’t be all picked through.

The phone rang and I picked it up off the desk. “Hello?”
“Lois?”

I didn’t recognize the voice. “Yes?”

“This is Dr. McConnell.”

“Hi,” I said, surprised. “How are you?”

“I’m good. I got a call from your dad the other day and he asked me to give you a call.”

I sighed. “I need to get in to see you. I think I’m nearly twelve weeks along.”

“Well, I’m at the hospital today — I’m covering on-call for another doctor. Would you like to come on over and we’ll take a look and get started?”

“That would be great. When’s good?”

“Well, right now, I have a couple patients here that are in labor, but both are very early on so now would be good, if that works for you.”

“I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes,” I promised.

“Come on in to labor and delivery and I’ll see you then.”

I said good-bye and hung up. I put my shoes on and wrote Clark a note telling him I had an errand to run before heading out. I drove across campus and pulled into a parking spot near the Ellen Lane Memorial Medical Building. I ran into Dr. McConnell in the hallway and she gave me a warm hug.

Ten years earlier, she’d worked with both of my parents as she finished medical school and she had been my mother’s doctor the last couple years of her life. We moved into an empty labor

and delivery room where an ultrasound machine was set up. I sat on the bed and swung my legs slightly.

“Can you tell me what happened?” she asked quietly.

Tears sprang to my eyes. “Can you tell my dad anything that I tell you?” I asked her. The thought of telling her the whole truth was running around my head and had been for a couple of days.

“No. Anything you tell me is completely confidential.”

I nodded. “I don’t know who the father is,” I whispered, using the Kleenex she handed me to wipe at my cheeks. “I don’t remember much of anything about Halloween. Clark found me behind a couch in the common room of a frat house with a guy. He wasn’t sure that the guy had done anything to me, but...”

“It seems pretty likely now that he did.”

“Well, I’ve never had sex with anyone,” I told her. “Not that I remember. I talked to...” I hesitated. “Another friend and there didn’t seem to be any evidence that he’d done anything — I wasn’t sure or anything like that. But it had to have been then because...”

“That’s not the story your dad told me.”

“I know.” I wiped my nose and refused to look at her. “Did you hear about the whole thing with General Navance in Latislan trying to claim an American baby?”

She nodded.

“That was me. Clark was with me and he claimed the baby hoping that Navance would leave me alone. It turned out he had to marry me and that we have to stay married for five years or he can come after the baby legally under Latislani law.” I took a deep breath to steady myself. “A few days after Halloween, Clark and I were caught in that snow storm. We barely made it to the cabin and neither one of us remember much about that night. Clark was already sick before that. The story we’re telling everyone is that we were together in a hypothermic induced haze and that’s how I got pregnant. There’s only two other people who know the whole truth, maybe three. The ambassador to Latislan is a maybe but two of his people do. Daddy thinks Clark is the father.” I wiped at my face again.

She squeezed my hand. “Well, you’re still early enough that you could get an abortion if you wanted to,” she said hesitantly.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Good. That’s rarely what I would choose for any of my patients though some do choose that route. Adoption?”

“Not after what happened with my half-brother.”

She nodded again. “That’s what I figured. So you’re going to have this baby and you and Clark are going to raise him or her.”

“That’s the plan. At least for the next five years...” I shrugged. “After that, I guess it’ll just be me.”

It looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn’t. Instead, she chose to continue the exam. “Why don’t you lie back and we’ll take a look?” She hesitated again. “Are you sure you don’t want Clark here?”

I shook my head before I rested it on the pillow and lowered the waistband of my pants while raising my shirt. The goop was kinda cold but not as bad as I would have thought.

“Normally, ultrasounds are done by a tech, but I wanted to get this one done and see how you and the baby are doing. And since I’m just kinda hanging out here right now...” She put the wand on my stomach. “Let’s see what we’ve got.” After a minute, she pointed to the screen. “There you go,” she said with a smile. “There’s your baby.”

My eyes filled with tears again as I saw the heart beating and what I thought were arms and legs. I could see the head and, if I looked closely enough, the eye sockets. She clicked the keyboard a few times and then frowned. “It appears the sound isn’t working on this machine so we won’t get to hear the heartbeat without hooking you up to monitors and I don’t think that’s necessary. We’ll listen when you come in for your next appointment. It *looks* good on here.”

“Can you tell if it’s a boy or a girl?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not yet. We’ll do another ultrasound in a couple months and we should be able to tell then if you want to know.”

After a few more minutes, she removed the wand from my stomach and handed me a washcloth to clean up with before helping me sit up.

“Here you go,” she said handing me a couple slips of paper. “Your first baby pictures.”

“Thanks.”

“Everything looks great. Really. I’ll write you a prescription for prenatal vitamins. You need to get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids.” She squeezed my hand gently. “You’re twelve weeks today — your first trimester is over. That puts your due date at July 26.”

“Wow. And I missed it completely.”

She sat next to me on the bed. “I’m sorry your mom’s not going to be here to see this. She would have been a great grandmother.”

I stared at the pictures. “Yeah. She would have been. And Lucy would have been a great aunt, too.” She wrapped an arm around me and I rested my head on her shoulder. “I told Dad I wanted to talk to Dave’s family. They said they wanted to get know me if I was ever ready for that because I’m his sister. I think I’m ready now.”

“Your mom would like that.”

“Thanks, Dr. McConnell. For everything.”

“After everything we’ve been through, Lois, you can call me Kristi, you know.”

“I know.”

“Did you know that Kevin and I are having a baby?”

I shook my head. “No. When?”

“In September.”

“Congratulations. That’s great.”

“We’ll have to have you and Clark over for dinner sometime, okay?”

I nodded.

“And I promise, that even if I’m not on call, I’ll be here when the baby’s born, okay? Even if it’s three in the morning, this is one delivery I’m not going to miss.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Ten minutes later, I was back in the Jeep and headed back to CostMart. I picked up a few things I realized we’d forgotten the day before — a coffee maker and all the things that went along with that, a couple of laundry hampers, deodorant and toothpaste, and ice cream. The freezer seemed to work okay on the big fridge so I thought I would trust it with some ice cream. If it didn’t melt on me, everything would be okay. I also bought new mini-blinds for the window, as well as a set of curtains and a curtain rod. Even though the window was small, it was entirely too bright first thing in the morning. I even thought to get a drill and drill bits so Clark could put it up. A step stool rounded out the items.

When I got back to the apartment building, I pulled up in front of it and unloaded everything into the two hampers before moving the Jeep to the parking lot across the street. One at a time, I moved the hampers next to the elevator. I got them into the elevator and, one by one again, down the hall until they were both outside the door. I messed with the lock, trying to figure out the trick to it, when the door opened from the inside.

“Hey.” Clark looked at the hamper. “What’re you doing?”

“I picked up a couple more things at CostMart,” I told him, more than willing to let him manhandle the hampers inside.

“Was that the errand you had to run?”

I hesitated slightly. I wasn’t sure I was ready to share the pictures of my baby with Clark, no matter what he’d done for me. Finally, I told him an abridged version of the truth. “My doctor called and said she could see me this morning. I went to the

hospital to see her first.”

“Your doctor called you?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“She was a friend of my mom’s. Dad called her this week.”

“Ah.” He set the second hamper down. “Ready to get all this put up?”

I nodded. “I think that’s everything then. I mean, I have no idea what else we might need.”

“Well, we’ll see, I guess,” Clark said as he started emptying the hampers.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’ll see.”

Part 31

Clark

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It was our third night in our ‘new’ apartment.

The plane with the rest of our European tour group had been delayed and wasn’t going to get in until late. Very late.

I was glad. Under other circumstances, I would have met Lana at the airport, but I didn’t think that was a good idea. I’d left her a message saying I’d talk to her in the morning.

“I left Joe a voice mail,” Lois said suddenly from her side of the bed.

I rolled until I was facing her, but her back was to me.

“I told him I was going to see him in the morning. I want to tell him in person.”

“Have you talked to him at all?”

“No.”

“I left Lana a message telling her I’d see her in the morning, too,” I told her.

She didn’t say anything for a long minute. “Well, maybe we can walk over together.”

“Maybe.” I sighed. “We probably should.”

“Probably.” She took a deep breath. “Are you going to be able to let her believe that you’re the father of my baby?”

I was silent until I heard her breath hitch slightly. “I have to,” I whispered. “If I don’t…” My voice trailed off.

“Yeah. I’m going to tell Joe the official story.”

“That’s probably the best plan.”

“Good night,” she said.

“Good night.” I closed my eyes but knew sleep would be difficult that night.

“And Clark?”

“What?”

“I meant what I said the other day. I understand if you want to keep seeing her, really I do, but if you’re serious about protecting me and the baby at the same time, please be discreet.”

I didn’t say anything and before long her even breathing told me that she was asleep.

We didn’t talk much as we got ready the next morning. Lana hadn’t called, but she wouldn’t know where to call. I’d purposefully locked the door to our old dorm room from the inside so she wouldn’t be able to get in and see that Lois and I had moved out.

I knew I should probably hold her hand or something as we walked across campus without speaking, but I couldn’t bring myself to do that. I was glad that Lana’s window didn’t face the direction we were coming from. We still didn’t speak as Lois poked at the up button on the elevator. We got in and she punched the ‘three’ button for Joe’s floor and the ‘six’ for our old one.

The door slid open on the third floor and she paused before exiting. “I’ll see you in a bit.” She didn’t wait for me to respond before she left the elevator.

I slumped against the wall. This wasn’t going to be easy, but I had to remember the look on Navance’s face when he threatened Lois and the baby — what he’d said when it had just been me and him.

All too soon, the elevator doors opened. I pushed myself

upright and headed down the hall, hesitating before I knocked on Lana's door. I listened carefully and sighed when I only heard one heartbeat. Linda wasn't back yet. That was good.

And it didn't sound like Lana was asleep.

I took a deep breath and knocked.

The door was thrown open and Lana flung herself at me.

I wrapped my arms around her and buried my head in her shoulder, knowing we were having very different reactions to this meeting. I could tell that her heartbeat had sped up and I knew she was excited. We were saying hello.

On the other hand, though, I knew that we were really saying good-bye. At least for now.

"What's wrong?" she whispered. "Where were you? I knocked on your door last night but you didn't answer."

I sighed and moved back, heading further into her room as she closed the door. "I wasn't there."

"Where were you?" I could hear fear in her voice. "What's going on?"

"Lois and I had to move." I knew I should just tell her — rip the Band-aid off — but I couldn't. It was going to break her heart.

"The housing people made you?"

I sighed. "Something like that."

"But if they found out you two were roommates, why did they make you move? Shouldn't they just have made her?"

"They didn't find out we were roommates." I stared out the window. I couldn't look at her.

"What's going on, Clark? I don't understand why, but I'm scared."

My head hung and I took a deep breath before I spoke again. "We didn't move because they found out we were roommates. We moved because we got married."

~~~~~  
Lois

I knocked on Joe's door and waited for an answer. It was a long minute before it opened. It didn't surprise me that Joe was still asleep.

"Hey!" He grabbed me for a hug and I buried my head in his shoulder, unable to stop the tears. "What's wrong?"

I didn't say anything, but instead clung to my best friend. His arms tightened around me and he just held me for a long time. Finally, I moved back, putting my left hand back in my pocket and wiping my face with my right. "Sorry," I said.

"It's okay. But what's wrong? What happened to you and Clark? You guys just disappeared. Someone even speculated that you two were the ones in Latislan."

I tried not to show my shock that someone had made the connection. "It's a long story. Basically, we got stuck in another country and I didn't have my passport."

"Ah." He sat on the bottom bunk. "That doesn't explain why you're crying though."

I sat next to him, close but not touching. I took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

He didn't say anything for a long minute. "What?"

"I'm pregnant." I wiped at my cheeks. "I don't want you to think that I cheated on you or anything like that. I didn't go out and sleep with someone else when I told you I wouldn't sleep with you. That's not what happened."

"Was it at the frat party?" he asked quietly.

I hesitated. He was right but I couldn't tell him that. "No," I finally whispered, shaking my head. "Clark's the father. We both thought we were dreaming but apparently in the cabin, when we were hypothermic... Our clothes were soaked and the power was out. I built a fire and got our clothes off because Clark was practically unconscious and it was so cold... We were under the blankets and somehow... in the middle of the night... I brushed it off as a dream. Clark said he'd had a dream about Lana..."

I couldn't look at him. "I'm so sorry, Joe."

He stood and started pacing the room. "Wow."

"Tell me about it."

He paced for what seemed like an eternity, thinking. Finally, he stopped and looked at me. "Marry me."

"What?" I was confused. "Why?"

"You're my best friend. I love you, maybe not quite like that, but I do and I could. Easily."

"It's not your baby. Not your responsibility," I told him.

"What if I want it to be? We said we were going to try again. Whenever I've imagined myself having a family, you were always there. I never admitted it to myself, but you were."

"It's so sweet of you to offer..." I wasn't sure what else to say.

"Say yes. We'll get married and we'll raise the baby."

I smiled a small, sad smile at him and tried to joke. "You just want to get in my bed."

He grinned at me. "The thought crossed my mind, but you know me better than that."

"I know."

"And it's not like Clark's going to marry you. Is he even acknowledging that this is his baby?"

"That's the other thing I have to tell you."

"What?"

I took a deep breath. "We got married in Europe. He wanted to do right by me and the baby."

He looked sucker punched. "What? You married him?"

I nodded. "He's the father of my baby," I whispered. I finally pulled my left hand out of my pocket to show him the wedding band.

"Oh, Lois." He moved to sit by me and wrapped an arm around me. "This isn't going to be easy for you, is it?"

He surprised me. I'd expected him to be mad or hurt, not concerned about me. "No, it's not."

"Are you sure you really want to be married to him, though?" he asked, rubbing my shoulder. "He's in love with Lana."

"I know. It's not going to be easy, but he promised he's going to help take care of us and all that."

"Will he be faithful to you though?"

I hesitated. I couldn't tell Joe that Clark didn't have to be. "I think so." I rested my head on his shoulder. "Will you still be my friend, though? I think I'm going to need you."

He kissed the side of my head. "I'll always be your friend, Lo."

"Thanks, Joe."

"And if you change your mind, if you and Clark decide not to try to make it work for whatever reason, let me know. I'll be here for you."

"Thank you," I whispered, wondering why Joe couldn't be the father of my baby. At least I would know that he wasn't running off with another girl. He'd never cheated on any of his girlfriends or me. Ever. And if I was married to him, I probably wouldn't be just about the only woman ever to give birth while essentially still a virgin.

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Clark

She stared at me for the longest time. I wasn't able to look at her but I knew that was what she was doing.

Her voice was strangled when she spoke. "What?"

"Lois and I got stuck in another country and she didn't have a passport and we had to get married to get her home," I whispered, hands in my pockets as I turned around and leaned against the window.

"So why are you still married to her?"

"It's not real, but we have to stay married for a while," I started, but I couldn't finish because her arms were around me and her lips were on mine.

And then I kissed her again, as though my life depended on it, because in some ways it did. I wasn't quite sure how we'd gotten to this point, but we had. I'd told her that I was married to Lois and the next thing I knew she was kissing me.

And I was kissing her back.

My tears mingled with hers and I could taste the salt on her lips. "I love you, Lana. More than anything." I meant the words. I did. Would she wait for me? It would be five years before we could safely divorce — before that psycho couldn't try to claim the baby as his own. And by then there would be the baby — a little child involved who would truly believe I was his or her daddy. How could I do that to an innocent child? But how could I hurt Lana like this?

If there had been any other way, I would have found it. We'd tried. The only way to get Lois out of that God forsaken country was to get married.

I pulled her to me and held on as tight as I could. I crushed my lips against hers, trying to sear everything about her in my arms into my brain.

"Can't we be together anyway — in secret? No one would have to know — not even Lois," she whispered.

"I can't, Baby. I love you, but I can't. I promised. I vowed that I would be faithful to her as long as we were married and I can't do that to her or to myself. Or to you. I can't make you the other woman and I can't break a promise like that."

"What about me? What about the promises we made?" Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"I know, Baby," I said, wiping her cheeks with my thumbs. "I'm so sorry. We had no idea we'd have to stay married. We were going to get it annulled as soon as we got back."

"In my heart, you're my husband. You have been..." Her voice broke.

My heart shattered to pieces as she said it. We'd told each other that for years — that it was just a formality until we'd be together for the rest of our lives. "And in my heart, you've always been my wife," I whispered, barely managing to get the words past the lump in my throat.

"You promised you'd never make love to another woman."

I kissed her again, trying to leave her no doubt where my heart truly belonged. It was minutes before I moved away far enough to whisper, "I'm not going to make love to her, Baby. It's not like that. It's temporary."

"I'll wait for you. If you want me to."

I could hear the uncertainty in her voice. Of course I wanted her to wait. How could I not want her to? But was that fair to her?

"I'll always love you, Baby, but I can't ask you to wait that long for me."

She kissed me this time. Desperate. Hungry.

"Make love to me, Clark. Please. Before you go. Before we never see each other again."

"We'll see each other, but I can't. You know I can't do that. I can't break my wedding vows, no matter what circumstances they were under."

"Aren't you already? Just by being here with me?"

She had a point. One I hated to hear. "I told her I was coming to say goodbye to you. She knows I'm here. She's talking to Joe right now."

"Does she know you're kissing me like this? Like your life depends on it?" She kissed me again, her hands holding my face.

When she finally pulled back, she spoke again. "Did you tell her you were going to kiss me like that?"

Suddenly, I longed for the days when I counted the different types of lip gloss she used. When I wasn't kissing every inch of her face, tasting her tears, trying to memorize it to get me through the next five years. Lois was nice enough, but she wasn't Lana. She wasn't the love of my life. The woman I'd known I was going to marry since I was six. The woman who wouldn't be

sharing my bed for the next few years. The woman who wouldn't be having a child everyone thought was mine.

I don't know when I started kissing her again, but I had. My hands were under her shirt, on the small of her back. Nothing I hadn't felt before, but I couldn't stop myself from running them up and down her back, realizing that she wasn't wearing a bra under her T-shirt.

I wanted her.

I wanted to be with her, just once, before my life of imposed celibacy — as opposed to the life of celibacy by choice Lana and I had decided on until after our wedding.

But I couldn't. I couldn't do that. Even if I hadn't wanted to marry Lois, I had. I had promised her my fidelity. I couldn't break a vow I made in a church, before God.

I'd grown up in church — nearly everyone in Smallville did — but I hadn't ever considered myself overly religious. And it wasn't that my wedding vows would have been any less valid in front of a justice of the peace in the middle of a dirt road, but something about saying them in a chapel in front of a chaplain before God took it to another level.

And I just couldn't break that vow.

With a groan, I pushed her away.

"I can't do this, Baby. You have no idea how much I want to, but I can't." I crushed her to me, one more time, kissing her again. After long minutes, I pushed her away. I leaned my forehead against hers and closed my eyes. I couldn't bear to see the tear tracks and the anguish written on her face. I finally released her and turned to walk towards the door. I paused with my hand on the knob. "I love you, Lana. I always will. And I'm so sorry for what I've done to you." I couldn't look back at her. My resolve would break and I couldn't do that. "I love you, Baby," I whispered again.

And I left.

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Part 32

Lois

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I'd said good-bye to Joe after one last long hug. I'd wanted to stay with him forever, but I knew that wasn't a good idea.

And so, I'd left and headed back to the apartment, knowing that my husband — such as he was — was a few floors up from where I'd been, probably making love to his girlfriend. I figured it would probably be a couple hours before I saw him again. At least. Probably longer.

I tossed my purse on the loveseat — that was about all it was good for — and kicked my shoes off before hanging my coat up on one of the hooks we'd hung on the wall of the closet over the mini-fridge. I crawled onto the bed and curled up under one of the blankets.

I was tired. I hadn't slept well the night before knowing what was coming. I reached into the desk drawer next to the bed and pulled out the picture frame. Once it had held a picture of me and Joe, but now it held two of the ultrasound pictures. I still hadn't shown them to Clark. Even though he was claiming to be the father, I wasn't ready to share this with him. Was that fair? I didn't really care and I wasn't sure he would either.

I stared at the picture in the frame for a long time and didn't even realize when I dozed off.

I wasn't sure what woke me up but I did notice that there wasn't any light coming in from around the curtains in the kitchen. I twisted the knob on the small lamp on the desk next to me and sat up picking the frame up and moving to put it back in the drawer.

"When did you get those?" Clark's voice stopped me.

"The other day," I said, setting it on the desk.

"Can I see?"

I shrugged and handed it to him as he sat down on the

loveseat.

“Wow,” he said.

I didn’t want to ask him where he’d been all day. I already knew. With Lana. Probably wearing a lot less clothes than either one of us were now. And as long as he didn’t get her pregnant and put my baby in danger...

I didn’t care.

I didn’t.

He handed the frame back. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think you’d care. I was going to show you later.”

“Why wouldn’t I care?”

“It’s not really your baby,” I said, not looking at him. “I mean, eventually, I thought you’d want to see them and all that, but I didn’t think it would be a big deal to you.”

He didn’t say anything. And I still wasn’t going to ask him where he’d been.

“How’d it go with Joe?” he asked, changing the subject.

I shrugged. “He offered to marry me.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t have expected him to, but he did. I think he still would. We could get an annulment and I could marry him instead, then he’d be the legal father and...”

Clark shook his head. “It’d never work. Navance would be all over it.”

“Probably. Anyway, he said he’d still be my friend if I ever needed him and that there’s no hard feelings or anything once I told him how I got pregnant. I mean, the whole cabin thing so it’s not like I was sleeping with someone else when I wouldn’t with him.” He’d also said he’d beat the crap out of Clark if he hurt me, but I didn’t feel the need to tell Clark that.

“I ran into him.”

Or maybe Joe had told him. “Really?”

He nodded. “He really cares about you. Told me he’d beat me up if I hurt you.”

“He’d do it, too.”

“I’m sure he would.” He sighed. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I nodded and grabbed the TIVO remote off the table, clicking the TV on and thumbing through my more recently recorded shows. I’d missed a couple weeks of new shows while we were in Europe and hadn’t caught up yet. I’d missed one episode of NCIS before we left and one since the new shows restarted. I hit play on the one from December and watched as a Naval officer was killed by her computer-driven vehicle. By the time I reached the second commercial break, Clark was out of the shower. I hit the ‘live TV’ button and tossed him the remote. “Watch whatever you want.”

He tossed it back. “Go ahead. I heard it through the door and it sounded interesting. I watched NCIS with you a time or two last semester, remember?”

I filled him in on what had happened as I restarted the episode. He plumped his pillow behind him and his legs stretched out in front of him as he leaned against the wall. Part of me was dying to know how his conversation with Lana went, but I wasn’t about to ask. And I really didn’t think he was going to volunteer that he’d technically cheated on me earlier that day.

Neither one of us spoke until the next commercial break.

He didn’t look at me when he finally broke the silence.

“Don’t you want to know how it went with Lana?”

I shrugged. “If you want to tell me, you will,” I said, silently hoping he wouldn’t. We watched the rest of the episode in silence. I finally spoke again. “I’m going to take a shower and go back to bed. I didn’t realize how tired I was.”

He nodded and took the remote, flipping back to live TV as I gathered some clothes and headed towards the bathroom.

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Clark

I rested my head against the wall. I was surprised she hadn’t wanted to know how it went with Lana. I knew I was curious about how it went with Joe until I ran into him. Apparently, she’d done a good job convincing him I was the father.

I reached over and picked up the ultrasound pictures. I knew she’d gone to see her doctor — apparently an old family friend — a couple days earlier, but she’d never mentioned an ultrasound.

I wasn’t quite sure why it hurt that, not only had she not asked me to come, but she hadn’t even told me about it afterwards.

She was right in the sense that I wasn’t really the father of her baby, but I was the one who had put my life on hold for the next five years to help protect the two of them. Shouldn’t I have been there for that if everyone was supposed to believe I was the father of her baby? Or could she have realized that her doctor was bound by confidentiality laws and *couldn’t* tell anyone and decided to tell her the truth?

I stared at the two pictures in the frame. Could I do this? Could I really convince Lana and everyone else that I had been with Lois at the cabin?

I groaned inwardly.

I hadn’t told her about the baby.

I’d told her that Lois and I hadn’t moved because the housing people found out we were roommates; we’d moved because we’d gotten married but that was it before we’d kissed.

Repeatedly.

I shook my head, trying to clear thoughts of Lana out of my mind.

My *wife* was in the bathroom. I shouldn’t be thinking about another woman no matter how we’d ended up in this situation.

I’d told Lana that I’d promised Lois my fidelity and I had. And that meant I probably needed to keep my thoughts under control too. At least, I was sure that was what my parents would say if I ever worked up the nerve to tell them.

I closed my eyes, but all I could see was Lana’s tear stained cheeks as I broke her heart.

I looked back at the frame I held in my hand.

The baby.

I had to remember why I was doing this. To protect Lois and the baby.

The water in the shower shut off and I put the picture back on the desk — face down, just like she’d left it.

I found an old movie on TMC and left it on.

The door to the bathroom opened but Lois didn’t come out. I could hear her brushing her hair and teeth, but I’d noticed over the last few days that Lois liked to let the steam out as soon as she was dressed. If we were a ‘real’ married couple, I doubted she’d close the door at all.

I sighed and pulled my legs to my chest and slid the covers down before sliding underneath them. I moved far enough down that I could rest my head on the pillow, fingers laced behind my head as I watched the movie. It cut to commercial and, restless, I turned the TV off.

I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes, willing myself to banish Lana from my mind.

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Lois

It had been a very long week.

We’d talked to Lana and Joe on Monday. I hadn’t seen Clark again until fairly late Monday night. He was gone virtually all of Tuesday and Wednesday, coming home late enough to find me throwing up again, but that was about it. I had no idea where he’d been — not officially anyway. I was sure he and Lana were making up for lost time.

Classes started on Thursday but I hadn’t even made it out of bed until nearly noon. Clark didn’t make it home until I was

asleep. Friday was the same.

Saturday morning I made a comment about how glad I was to have so spent so much time with him that week. The comment was made with as much sarcasm as I could muster. A few minutes later, he grabbed his backpack and headed out, saying he'd be back in a bit. Finally feeling a little better, I decided to get some fresh air and head to the library to get one of the books I was going to need for my literature class.

I really did feel badly that Clark had essentially given up his life to save me and my baby. I should apologize to him the next time I saw him. I didn't really mean to be snarky, but I missed my friend Clark. I knew it was hard on him but the only way we were going to get through the next five years was to be friends right?

I sighed as I walked across campus, hoping the book I needed was in.

Once there, I could only stare. Okay. I knew this was the farthest thing from a conventional marriage there had ever been, but this wasn't exactly the most private place in the world. It was the library, for crying out loud. And there, in plain sight for anyone who walked by — including me — to see was my husband kissing his ex-girlfriend.

And by kissing, I meant tonsil hockey. Or it would be except I knew Lana had her tonsils out as a kid. Seriously. It was disgusting on many levels, not the least of which was the broken promise.

I knew that Lana would still be his girlfriend if it weren't for the mess we'd found ourselves in and — to be perfectly honest — I'd walked in on a more intense make-out session a time or two when we were sharing a dorm room and they thought I'd be home later than I was. At least they weren't on his bed.

His bed?

Our bed.

He didn't have his own bed anymore and I didn't have my own either. Unless you counted the one at my dad's house and it didn't. Count that was. I didn't think so anyway. Technically, I supposed it could still be considered mine, but it was a white four poster with sheer canopies that spoke of my fascination with princesses when I was younger.

Regardless, at least they weren't on — or worse, in — our bed.

Had they been?

Had he taken her back to our apartment? He couldn't have. Not yet anyway. School had only been back in for a couple of days and I hadn't gone to class either one. But next week... they had lunch at the same time every day, and I didn't. Maybe I'd skip class and pop in. No... I wouldn't. Sure he'd said he wasn't going to continue having a relationship with Lana, but it wasn't really any of my business, was it? The only reason we were married was to protect the baby and if he wanted to be with Lana, there wasn't anything I could — or should — do about it. It was only these hormones that were making me crazy and possessive of something — or someone, rather — that wasn't really mine in the first place.

I knew they'd promised themselves they wouldn't have sex until after they got married, but me and someone I didn't know had gotten both of us into a mess and now Clark *was* married — just not to Lana.

When he'd gone to say good-bye to her last week, I figured they'd be together — just once — before he was sentenced to a life of celibacy with what had to be the stupidest woman alive.

I mean, I must have taken a drink from someone I didn't know. I had no recollection whatsoever of having my virginity taken from me — something I'd routinely denied Joe because I was never serious enough about him to do that with him. The make out sessions weren't bad — they were pretty good even — and even when we'd gone a little bit further than that it wasn't *bad*, but I never had any desire to let things get carried away like

I knew Clark and Lana had.

And now, I was pregnant. Married to a man who I thought could have been a good friend, but who had barely spoken to me in the last week; who huddled up on his side of our now-shared bed and refused to look at me when he did say something.

I couldn't blame him for trying to stay as far away from me as possible in the middle of the night — I did the same thing. Living somewhere else would have been nice, but it was the only apartment available that our scholarships would cover. It was furnished. It was also only one room and the bed doubled as the couch so it wasn't like I could relegate him to the place legend said husbands went when their wives wanted to kick them out of the bedroom. Well, there was the tiny loveseat, but I'd sat on more comfortable cement benches.

Maybe I would sleep on the floor after all. There were rugs on the floor so I would be on the carpet that looked like it had been installed sometime before the Industrial Revolution.

I finally tore my eyes from the window into the room where my husband was kissing another woman like he was a dying man in a desert and she was a tall glass of water.

Stupid? Maybe. A fool? Never.

Clark Kent was just like every other man. When he couldn't get it at home, he'd go somewhere else.

I turned on my heel and stalked off. I'd stay married to him, but only because I had to. The minute we could get a divorce, we would. And then he could go running back to the blonde bimbo.

See if I cared.

Part 33

Clark

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Just another minute, I'd told myself when we'd hurried in to the side room. Just one more minute. One more long, sweet kiss with the woman I loved before I had to walk away from her.

I had no idea how many minutes ago that had been.

And then the Musak switched to an annoying country tune. People always thought that because I'd grown up on a farm, I must love country music. I liked it fine, but I liked lots of other music too.

But why was I thinking about music when I finally had Lana in my arms again?

Because it was a song I'd heard many times and the words of the chorus were finally sinking into my kiss-addled brain.

'On the other hand,'

No. Don't listen.

'There's a golden band.'

Block it out. Lana. Concentrate on her.

'To remind me of someone'

She wouldn't care, would she? It's not like I was going to be kissing her or making love to her if I wasn't here. She'd said be discreet after all.

'Who would not understand.'

Damn Randy Travis! Or was it George Jones? Who cared which one it was?

'On one hand I could stay'

Lana. I loved Lana. I had always loved her. I didn't remember a time when she wasn't in my life. I'd spent more time apart from her the last two weeks than I had the first nearly nineteen years of my life. Combined.

'And be your lovin' man'

All I'd ever wanted was to be her lovin' man. There was a reason I'd planned on asking her to marry me in Paris. And we'd always said we didn't plan on a long engagement.

'But the reason I must go'

Go? No. I wanted to stay. This was where I belonged. With Lana. My blonde haired, blue eyed beauty.

'Is on the other hand.'

What was on the other hand? Nothing. Lana. I belong with Lana.

Golden band.

That's what was on the other hand. An image of my dad dancing with my mom, her hand in his — in his left hand, with his wedding band on it — popped into my head.

And then there was another image.

A brunette, her hair falling forward so I couldn't see the tears that ran down her face, sliding a gold band on to my finger.

I moved my hands to Lana's face and slowed the feverish pitch of our kiss. We were in the library. There was a big window looking into the study room where I'd pulled her.

Where I'd pulled *her*.

Not the other way around.

Something I knew I really shouldn't have done.

Even if it was the middle of the afternoon on a Saturday when there was a big game being played on the other side of campus, anyone could walk by. Even Lois. My wife.

A few more soft, gentle caresses of her lips with mine and then I held her face still as I moved back.

"I can't," I whispered hoarsely. "I can't do this." I rested my forehead on hers. "I'm sorry. I never should have pulled you in here. I can't do this and I can't ask you to."

"You're not asking me to do anything, Clark," she whispered back. "I'm here with you because I want to be. I love you."

"And I love you, Lana, but I can't. I'm married and no matter what else, I have a wife. I have a baby on the way and I..." My voice broke. I wanted to tell her the truth — that the baby wasn't mine — but I couldn't risk it. It was bad enough that I'd told her the marriage wasn't all it was cracked up to be. "I can't do this, Baby."

I felt her hands on my chest — comfortable, comforting hands that abruptly shoved me away.

"You have a what?" There was fury in her voice.

I looked at her and could see warring emotions in her eyes. Pain, confusion, hurt, anger. "What?"

"You have a *baby* on the way? Lois is *pregnant*?"

I sighed. How could I have forgotten that I hadn't told her that part? I lowered my head and closed my eyes again. I ran one hand through my hair and shoved the other one in the pocket of my jeans. The hand with the golden band on it. I couldn't see it. I couldn't look at it and its accusing shine while I talked to Lana — who was now, technically, the 'other woman'.

And then I nodded.

"I'm the one who's supposed to have your babies." I could barely hear her.

She was crying. I knew without looking that she was. I knew her that well. Unlike my wife, who I really barely knew at all.

My wife.

The golden band.

"I can't believe she's pregnant," she said louder, stronger.

"You're the only one I want to have my babies, Lana. You know that."

Her tone of voice changed to one of pure anger, instead of anger tinged with hurt and everything else. "We've waited our whole lives to be together — literally — and last week, I begged you to make love to me — just once — before you went back to her; to a marriage you promised me was a farce — and you wouldn't because you're married. I get that. I really do. I don't like it, but I get it. And now..." Her voice became strangled.

"Now I find out, you've already been with *her*. You've kissed her and touched her and made love to her and now she's having your baby. And it had to have been before you got married, because you haven't been married long enough to know if you'd knocked her up on your wedding night in some European hotel. So..." It sounded like something was dawning on her. "You've told me for years that in your heart, I was your wife. Right?" she demanded.

I nodded, not sure what to say to her, but knowing I deserved whatever she dished out.

"So you had no problem cheating on me — who you promised forever to first — but you won't cheat on her because... why? Because you actually have a wedding ring? We said our own vows to each other when we were sixteen. Remember?"

I remembered. I remembered like it was yesterday. We weren't foolish enough to believe that there was no chance at all that we'd break up someday and what we'd said to each other had reflected that. There was no 'till death do we part', but there had been a promise to love, cherish, honor and be faithful to. And now Lana believed I'd broken the promises I'd made her in the hayloft on my parents' farm.

I could still see her, lying there on one of the quilts Great Grandma Davis had made knowing she'd never see her grandson marry my mom. It was our first real make-out session and we realized how easy it would be to get carried away and neither one of us was ready for that. Then and there, we'd promised each other that we'd wait until our wedding night to consummate our relationship but we'd also promised those other things.

I nodded again, unable to find my voice, to find the words to tell her how it really was.

"So, your word means nothing. You've already proven that by sleeping with her in the first place so why her and not me? Why can you cheat on me with her, but you can't cheat on her with me?"

"What? That's convoluted, Baby. And it wasn't like that."

Her eyes flashed at me. "Don't you *dare* call me that, Clark Jerome Davis Kent. I am *not* your baby. Not anymore."

I winced. She didn't just middle name me; she whole named me. Even Mom didn't 'Davis' me very often. How had I screwed this up so badly?

Could I just blurt out the truth? No one knew that Lois wasn't really carrying my child. Except maybe her doctor. Even Sam and Joe believed that I was the father of Lois' baby.

"It's not my baby." I guessed I could blurt it out.

"What?" The look Lana gave me just then rivaled the worst one Lois had ever given, and she gave some doozies. "You just said you're having a baby. Lois, your *wife*, is pregnant, and it's not your baby?"

Okay, she had a hard time believing it. I guess I could understand that.

"I can't tell you anymore that that and if you tell anyone, I'll deny it. I have to. But I swear to you, I never cheated on you. I've never made love to another woman."

I moved to where she was sitting and squatted down in front of her. "I promise you," I said. "That's the God's honest truth. I've *never* cheated on you. Ever. And I can't cheat on her either. No matter what it is I really want." I tipped her head up with one finger hooked under her chin. "What I really want is you, but I can't do this."

The glint caught my eye. That damn band.

"I can't," I told her again. "I love you, but I can't do this. I can't see you outside of class anymore." My voice broke.

"We can't be friends?"

I shook my head.

"Why not?"

"Because, if we were ever alone in a room without a window, I don't think I could stop myself from making love to you and I can't do that," I told her as honestly and simply as possible.

"And you never made love to her? Ever?"

I shook my head. "No. I've never made love to her."

"Not even when the two of you were trapped naked in that cabin?"

The dream I remembered from that night came flooding back — dreaming of being in front of the fire with someone who was Lana but was Lois but wasn't either one. Apparently it took me

too long to shake my head.

“Go.” It was barely a whisper.

“What?” I needed to leave. I knew that. She knew that. But that didn’t mean I wanted her to tell me to leave.

“You’re right. In our hearts, we made vows to each other, but it’s not the same a piece of paper and rings and up in front of a church. You can’t break them and you won’t allow me to help you break them — even though I would in a heartbeat right now.”

It wasn’t the same and we both knew it. I looked her square in the eyes. “I love you, Lana. I always have. And you should know that we’re telling anyone who needs to know that it was that night in the cabin, but I swear to you...”

She sighed then nodded. “I know. I love you, too.”

I leaned towards her to kiss her one last time — this time knowing beyond knowing that it was the last time I would be able to until I was free again. If I ever was.

She moved away from me. “No. You have to go. Now.” Her words were soft, and I almost didn’t catch them even with my enhanced hearing.

Enhanced hearing. Oh boy. I sure hoped I wasn’t about to start floating in my sleep.

“I love you,” I whispered again.

“I know. But you have to go back to your wife before we do something all of us will regret.”

I nodded and stood, turning to walk out the door. Like last week, I couldn’t turn back or I knew I’d never leave.

“I love you, Lana,” I whispered and walked out the door, the sound of her sobs trailing behind.

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Lois

I sat in one of the chairs at the tiny kitchen table and glared around the apartment. Apartment? Ha. Once again, I realized this thing didn’t deserve the name. It wasn’t much bigger than our dorm room — maybe time and a half, but no more and probably a lot less. The kitchenette certainly didn’t deserve the name either. A full refrigerator. A microwave and two burners.

Not that I cooked, but that wasn’t the point.

Could Clark cook?

Yeah, he could. I remembered the meals he’d made when we were trapped at the cabin. And he’d made a barbecue brisket or something the weekend before.

We got along pretty well in our dorm room, why couldn’t we get along here?

Because the dynamics had changed. Considerably. We weren’t roommates anymore. We were married. And not by choice.

He’d much rather be with Lana. This afternoon’s kiss had proven that.

And to think, I was actually planning on apologizing to him.

But even as I thought it I knew it wasn’t fair. I’d told him he could still see her, that I’d even understand if he wanted to, so it wasn’t fair of me to be mad at him.

But I was anyway.

I sighed. Dinner was something married couples did together right? But I was starving. I wasn’t going to wait much longer for him. It was Saturday, for crying out loud. He’d said he’d be back in a bit when he left this morning, but didn’t define what bit was. It was nearly three hours later when I’d seen them in the library. And it was four hours after that now. Apparently, ‘a bit’ meant more than seven hours to him.

He was probably still with her, I realized again. Once he told her we had to stay married for five years, they’d probably decided that waiting to make love wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. And now that they knew what it was all about, they couldn’t keep their hands off each other.

I shuddered. At least they hadn’t known while we were all suitmates. Who knew what I would have walked in on then?

So why was there a huge hole where my heart should be? We’d gotten married out of desperation, to save me and my baby from a madman, and we’d fully intended to be well on our way to an annulment or a divorce or something by now. Once we realized that wasn’t going to happen, I’d asked him to just please be discreet with Lana.

And except for this afternoon, he apparently was. I knew if Linda suspected anything, I would have heard about it in a nanosecond.

So my *husband* was off with the love of his life, making passionate love to her — when I’d essentially told him it was okay as long as I didn’t hear about it — and I was in a crummy apartment trying to decide which of the dinners Dad had his service still make for me — for us — I wanted to rehear. Was it a Beef Stroganoff night? Or Spaghetti?

Or maybe I’d just go puke my guts out.

Whoever called it morning sickness was a twisted individual. And whoever said the first three months were the worst and then it would get better was sadly mistaken. My hormones had kicked into overdrive in the last three weeks — even before I realized why — and now, there was little point in eating after about three in the afternoon.

Maybe I could stand a little bit of that soup I’d had for lunch from the cafeteria. I opened the mini-fridge and realized that just the sight of the leftover lasagna was too much and I bolted towards the bathroom.

Fortunately, there was nothing but a little bit of bile to actually come up, but dry heaves were certainly no fun.

And then, when I was so ceremoniously draped over the toilet, he finally decided ‘a bit’ was up, and Clark walked in the door.

When I was done retching, I wiped the corners of my mouth with a piece of toilet paper and asked him, “Where have you been?”

Part 34

Clark

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What? She wanted to know where I’d been?  
What business of it was hers?

She certainly didn’t want to hang out here all day with me; she’d made that perfectly clear. So I’d left. And now that it was mid-evening, I was back. Period. End of discussion.

“I was out,” I finally told her.

“Gee, Captain Obvious, I couldn’t have figured that out by myself.”

It finally hit me that she was still sitting on the floor in what passed for a bathroom in this place and I realized that she must be having evening sickness again — I’d noticed it the two nights I’d been home before she was asleep earlier this week too.

“Is there anything I can do?” I finally said.

“Tell me where you’ve been all day.”

I shrugged and set my backpack on the floor on my side of the bed. “I was out. Studying and stuff.”

Her head leaned back against the wall and I heard her mutter, ‘and stuff’ under her breath. What was that about?

“Fine. I spent most of the day on an iceberg in the Atlantic. Is that what you want to know?” Yeah. Like she’d believe it. It was the truth, of course, but she wouldn’t buy it.

“Fine. Don’t tell me. You don’t have to answer to me for your whereabouts anyway.”

I flopped on the bed and didn’t say anything. After I’d left Lana, I flew to the North Atlantic and spent some time melting icebergs. It took a long time to melt a whole iceberg and I didn’t want another ‘Titanic’ on my conscience. It was my civic duty to humanity.

And the tears and the huge empty spot inside me had nothing

to do with it whatsoever.

What I really needed was to talk to my parents. About all of it. Everything. About how Lois and I got married and how long we'd have to stay together and how the baby wasn't really mine, but I couldn't do that. They were going to be disappointed enough when they found out what had happened, but even if they understood and supported the decisions that had already been made, they'd never support or approve of how close I'd come to violating my wedding vows, no matter why they'd been made.

Of course, I hadn't told them I was married yet either. I hadn't really talked to them since I left for Europe. Since the very short conversation with Dad in London, I'd left a few messages, knowing they were at Aunt Opal's for about ten days and they should have gotten back... I glanced at the clock. About an hour ago. I'd told them I was back and fine but that I'd had to move for reasons I didn't explain and left the new number.

Given that Sunday was usually the day for phone calls, I'd probably hear from them tomorrow.

I groaned.

Except that Lana usually talked to her mom on Saturday afternoons. And as soon as they hung up, her mom would call mine and read her the riot act over what I'd done to her daughter.

Maybe I should just try them again.

The sharp ringing of the phone jolted me.

"I don't suppose you'd mind getting that?" she called from the bathroom. "If it's for me, tell them I'm trying to decide if I'm going to puke or not."

I winced. I'd seen lots of different Lois faces since I met her, but this was the first time I'd really seen cranky, sick, pregnant, hormonal, throwing up Lois. I didn't think I liked her.

I doubted she did either.

I rolled towards her side of the bed, where the phone was, and picked it up.

"Hello?" Maybe I'd get really lucky and it was a crank call or wrong number.

"Clark Jerome Kent, what the hell were you thinking?"

Nope. That was Dad, all right. And he *never* middle named me. Only Mom did that. And sometimes Lana. The only good thing was that he hadn't full named me. This was not good. Not that I'd expected it to be.

"Now, Jonathan." Good. Mom's voice sounded much more reasonable. "I'm sure Clark has a perfectly good explanation for why he got another girl pregnant and married her while dating Lana."

Or maybe not.

I covered my face with my hand — the one with that band on it — and groaned again. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Good to hear from you, too."

"Clark, why on Earth did we have to hear this from Laura Lang and could you please tell us what happened?"

Oh, I didn't think Mom had been this mad at me since I was twelve and set the living room carpet on fire. I sighed. Here went nothing.

"Lois and I..."

Dad interrupted me. "Your purely platonic roommate Lois?"

"Yeah. Will you let me talk?"

"Jonathan, I'm sure there's a good reason why he's taken leave of his senses. Now let him explain," Mom said.

I sighed again. "Lois and I ended up in another country while we were in Europe. How we got there is a very long story I don't want to get into right now but she didn't have her passport with her." I ran a hand through my hair. "Lois was sick and ended up in the hospital and that's when she found out she was pregnant."

"So when are we going to be grandparents?"

Subtle, Mom. Wanting to know the due date so she could do some mental math and see if I'd been cheating on Lana before or after we came home for Christmas.

"July something."

"I see." Yep, definitely mental math. I could practically hear her gesticulating in Dad's direction.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with that night at the cabin would it?" Dad asked. Yep, she'd been gesticulating, all right.

"Probably." Oh, man. Why had I said that? Probably meant there was more than one possibility. I could see them forgiving one night of indiscretion when we were both practically out of our minds with hypothermia. "Yeah. That night at the cabin." Hopefully, they wouldn't notice my slip.

"Probably?" Leave it to Mom to notice.

"It was the night at the cabin, okay? Trust me on that."

"I don't think your word means much right now, Son," Dad said quietly. I'd take loud, yelling Dad over quiet Dad any day.

"I know, Dad."

I wished I could tell them the truth. The whole truth. That Lois wasn't pregnant with my baby. That we'd gotten married to keep that Latislani creep away from her and get her home. That we'd planned on having it annulled by now. That if we didn't stay married for five years, he could still come after the baby under Latislani law and if he suspected this was a marriage of convenience, he could do the same. And that, while U.S. law might prevent him from actually taking the baby, it would probably be a long, drawn out, public court battle and that wouldn't be good for anyone. But Lois hadn't told her dad or Joe the whole truth and I didn't see how I could tell my parents without talking to her about it first. I'd told Lana *way* too much.

"So do we get to meet our new daughter-in-law?" Mom asked.

I winced at her tone. "I don't know when we'll make it to Smallville, Mom. I don't think I'm going to be able to make it home for Spring Break after all."

"You're supposed to be giving Lana a ride back, Clark. How is she supposed to come home if you're not?" Mom had a point.

I hadn't really thought about that. "I'll find a way to get her there — if I have to buy her a plane ticket myself. It's not her fault. None of this is her fault," I said quietly.

"You broke her heart." That was Dad.

"I know. And I can't tell you how much I regret hurting her."

I heard a noise in the bathroom. A gasp and then Lois was calling my name. And it didn't sound good.

"Mom, Dad. I gotta go. I'll call you later."

Lois called again, more urgently this time.

"We're not done with this, Clark," Dad said firmly.

"I know, but I gotta go. I'll call you tomorrow." I didn't wait to hear anything else, but hung up and hurried to the bathroom.

Lois looked up at me with tear filled eyes. "It hurts." She had grabbed her abdomen and was doubled over, grimacing as she did.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but I don't think it's good." The tears finally overflowed and made tracks down her face.

"Do you want me to call your doctor?"

She shook her head. "I think I need to go to the hospital. Something's not right. I know it."

"Okay," I said grimly. I bent down and picked her up easily, moving her to the bed. "What do you need?" She pointed to her purse and her keys. Yeah, she'd probably be more comfortable in her Jeep than my old truck. "Do you mind if I drive your car?" She shook her head. I looked around for my wallet — fortunately, there weren't many places to look and it was in my pocket in an instant. For a minute, I wished I could just scoop her up and fly her to the hospital. We'd certainly be there a lot faster. I shook myself mentally. I handed her the purse and keys and scooped her back up.

"I can walk," she protested.

“I don’t think so,” I told her. I walked to the door and she was aware enough to open it and then close it behind us, locking it as she did. I carried her down the hall to the elevator where she pushed the button and we waited.

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Lois

I didn’t think I’d ever realized how strong Clark was. He picked me up like I was nothing. I didn’t really want to be this close to him, but I didn’t have much choice at the moment. Something was wrong, I knew it was. But still... I couldn’t help but rest my head on his shoulder. I’d known he was solid, but I actually almost felt safe again.

The elevator arrived and before I knew it, he was standing me next to my Jeep, holding one hand out for the keys and keeping the other arm wrapped around me. Once he opened the door, he helped me inside, even asking if I needed help with my seatbelt. I didn’t. I could do that myself.

We weren’t going too far. The hospital was on campus after all, but it was still way too far for me to walk.

Ten minutes later we were in front of the emergency doors at the Ellen Lane Memorial Medical Building. How fitting. Her oldest daughter, knocked up by an unknown male and now in need of medical care.

“Don’t move,” Clark told me. He needn’t have worried. He pulled a wheelchair up next to my door and helped me into it. He left the Jeep where it was and wheeled me inside. “My wife is pregnant and something doesn’t feel right,” he told the two nurses at the desk.

His wife. That slipped out awfully naturally. Or maybe he’d been bracing himself for it the whole way here.

One of them looked at me and handed me a clipboard, telling Clark to go move the car and she’d help me get started. After he left, she asked me a few questions about what was happening and reassured me that I’d done the right thing by coming in. It was always better to be safe, she said.

It was pretty slow in the ER, given that it was a Saturday night, but I guessed the drunks wouldn’t come in until later. As soon as Clark returned, they took me to the little triage room behind the desk and asked routine questions and did things like take my pulse and my temperature and things like that. I tried to fill out the paperwork while they did that. When they needed my finger to check my oxygen levels, I thrust the clipboard at Clark.

It wasn’t that I wanted him to fill it out for me; I just didn’t know what else to do with it.

I didn’t quite understand the look he gave me, but he started filling in the forms. The pen hovered as they stuck a thermometer in my mouth and he skipped over a question or two. Once they were done weighing me, I was back in the wheelchair and he’d handed the clipboard back to me.

He hadn’t said a word.

At least I’d gotten him out of being yelled at by his parents. At least that’s what I imagined they were doing when I started to feel weird.

I looked at the form. The first word he’d written jumped out at me.

Last name: Kent.

Back that train up. We’d never talked about me changing my name. I’d certainly never filled out any paperwork to do so. Maybe that was some other obscure Latislanian law I didn’t know about.

I closed my eyes as I remembered the conversation at the airport. Daniel had mentioned that it would probably be a good idea, but I hadn’t done anything about it yet. One more thing on this week’s to do list.

I picked up the pen to fill out some of the rest of the information — he didn’t know my Social Security Number and hadn’t filled in anything about my next of kin or emergency

contacts. Maybe he wasn’t sure if I wanted to put him or my dad. Or maybe he just didn’t get to it.

Quickly I filled it in, then decisively, scratched through Kent and replaced it with Lane, crossing through the check he’d put by the ‘Mrs.’ box and checking the ‘Ms.’ one instead.

If he noticed, he didn’t say anything.

We stopped moving in a small room. The nurse told me to keep my bra and underwear on and change into a gown that was only slightly thicker than paper. She also handed me a cup and pointed me in the direction of the attached bathroom.

Great.

I hadn’t kept any fluids down in hours and they wanted me to pee in a cup. And I wasn’t quiet about what I thought about that.

Clark cringed.

Who cared? He wasn’t the one dealing with all of this. He was probably just upset that he couldn’t sneak off to see Lana again tonight.

I managed to get something into the cup and changed clothes, holding the open back of the gown closed as I made my way to the bed.

“Okay, Lois, lay on your left side for me,” the nurse — her name tag identifying her as Angie — told me.

I nodded and lay down. I’d read that the left side made for better blood flow to the baby or something. Fortunately, that also meant my back was to the wall. That was good.

“From the sound of it, you’re probably dehydrated and that can cause cramping.”

“Yeah, I read that,” I told her.

She smiled at me. “You did the right thing by coming. The doctor will be in in a few minutes and if he agrees, we’ll get an IV and some meds started for you.” She set an emesis tray on the bed. “Just in case.”

Clark was studiously ignoring me, instead focusing on the exciting pattern of spackle on the wall. Finally, he said something. “Lois...” And then the doctor walked in.

Part 35

Clark

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Surely I’d get a chance to talk to her in a few minutes, but for now, I needed to focus on the doctor.

“Ms. Lane,” he started.

He kept talking, but I tuned out for a minute. Lane. Well, I guessed we’d never discussed her changing her name after Daniel mentioned it. It shouldn’t have mattered — the marriage shouldn’t have lasted this long. And she probably just had not gotten around to filling out the forms yet so, legally, she was probably still Lois Lane regardless of what her long term plans were.

I heard the doctor mention something about IVs and then he left. I muttered something about being right back and followed him. He stopped at the counter nearby.

“Doctor?” I asked.

He turned to look at me. “Yes, Mr. Lane?”

I cringed. “Actually, it’s Kent — Clark Kent. Lois hasn’t changed her name since we got married.”

“I see. What can I do for you, Mr. Kent?”

I waved vaguely in the direction of Lois’ room. “Is she going to be okay? I mean, really. And the baby?”

He turned more fully towards me. “Has she been eating regularly? Even if she’s been sick in the evening?”

I ran a nervous hand through my hair. “We haven’t been married long and I haven’t been home much this week,” I said honestly.

He regarded me intently. “Mr. Kent, she’s going to need your help to get through this. She’s going to be fine, and so is the baby, but she hasn’t been taking care of herself. I don’t know why the

morning or evening or whatever sickness hasn't hit her until her second trimester, but it's hit with a vengeance now. You have to make sure she's eating as much as she can. Small meals are better than big ones — grazing throughout the day — and drinking. Water is good if she's keeping food down too, but when her stomach's upset, some flat ginger ale or Sprite might help. Gatorade is good, but no caffeine. I've also had women tell me that chewing grape bubble gum helps sometimes. I'm going to tell her all of this, too, but you're going to need to make sure she does what she needs to do."

I nodded.

"This isn't my first rodeo. I don't know what's going on with the two of you, but she's going to need your help to get through this, so you need to put aside whatever it is that's bugging you and be there for your wife and baby. Got it?"

"Yeah," I said quietly, feeling — probably appropriately — chastised, and returned to the room. I pulled the chair over beside the bed and sat down. "Feeling any better?" I finally asked.

She didn't look at me as she shrugged. "They're getting me some meds."

I couldn't help but remember another hospital where I'd actually sat next to her on to her bed. The standards here were much higher and I wasn't concerned about her contracting some sort of communicable disease in a building named after her mom.

But times were different then. Even though it had only been a couple of weeks, things were very different now.

Then I'd held her hand and joked with her — trying to lighten her mood. It was easy then for her to sink into a depression and wonder how on earth we were going to get home. But, here, in the safety of the good ole United States, things were actually much more grim. She couldn't have known it, but if it came right down to it and there was no other way to get home, I would have flown us. I had no idea what the consequences would have been — would she have looked at me like the freak alien I was? Or would she have just accepted it as another facet of my personality? Fortunately, we didn't have to go that route.

Or maybe things would have been better if we had. Sure, she might have hated me or even outed me to some secret government agency, but I didn't think so. But we wouldn't be married now. Though, I supposed it was possible that the Latislani creep would still be after her even over a few thousand miles. I don't know how I would have — or could have or even should have — protected her then.

Maybe Joe would have actually married her.

But instead... Now she knew she was pregnant and there was a baby depending on her. I think, if pushed, she'd say she hadn't really wanted this baby, but I also think she'd say that she wanted him or her now.

So why couldn't I comfort her and joke with her now? Take her mind off things?

That was easy. She wasn't Lana. And she knew I still loved my girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend, I reminded myself. There was no me and Lana anymore. Not now, and somehow I thought not ever. There was no way she'd wait five years for me. And I hadn't actually said five years to her either.

The nurse came in then and interrupted my musings. She emptied a syringe of medicine into the tubing that led to Lois' arm. It would stop the nausea, she said, but it would probably put her to sleep too.

That might not be such a bad thing. At least she'd sleep through the next few hours instead of us sitting here in painful, awkward silence.

~~~~~

Lois

I pretended the medicine put me to sleep long before it actually did. I didn't know how I was going to survive another six or seven months of this much less another five years. And with a

baby in the mix.

I knew he didn't want to be here, but couldn't he at least pretend not to be completely horrified by the idea of spending the next few years with me? And we were really going to have to work on the whole 'pretend we're in love in front of others' thing or *he* would be after the baby — and me — faster than you could say Latislan.

Hot tears stung the back of my eyelids and I willed them to stay put. I didn't want him to see me cry.

It was all these stupid hormones. I didn't care that he didn't love me; that he loved Lana. I didn't. I did care that he didn't even want to be my friend anymore. That's what hurt more than anything. I'd lost a good friend when I married him.

What could be worse than that?

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Clark

It was midafternoon by the time we made it back to the room that was supposed to pass for an apartment. The nausea had passed, but the cramping hadn't stopped so they'd kept her for a while to keep an eye on her.

She'd refused to let me help her out to the car or out of the car or into the building or anything else. I knew she couldn't have slept well while we were there — I sure hadn't — but I felt like there was more to the frosty attitude than just that, but for the life of me I didn't know what it was.

"I'm going to take a nap," she told me as I shut the door behind us. "I know the medicine knocked me out, but I didn't really get much sleep and I'm exhausted." As though to emphasize her point, she yawned.

I nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. You couldn't have been comfortable with tubes running out of your arm and nurses checking your pulse every fifteen minutes."

She shook her head. "No, not really."

"Listen, I'll let you get some sleep." I jerked my thumb towards the door. "I'm not all that tired, so I'll get out of here and let you have some peace and quiet."

She was heading for the bathroom as I spoke. When I finished she paused for a second, then continued. "Thanks," she finally said.

"Hey, Lois," I called. She stopped, but didn't look at me. "I'm glad you and the baby are okay. Really. I am." I may not have been really happy with things being the way they were, but I didn't want anything to happen to either one of them.

"Thanks," she said again and she went into the bathroom.

I grabbed my backpack and left. Surely I could find somewhere to study.

Maybe there was a quiet spot on the Great Wall somewhere.

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Lois

Part of me was glad Clark had left. I could sleep in peace.

I could cry in peace.

I managed to keep it together for about ten minutes after he left. I figured by then he wasn't coming back because he forgot something. His backpack was gone so he was either going to study or pretending he was going to study when he was really going to see Lana.

The tears flowed until the pillow under my cheek was soaked. While he was gone to get something to eat, Dr. McConnell — I couldn't bring myself to call her Kristi — had stopped by and listened for the baby's heartbeat. One hand moved protectively to my stomach. I'd heard the heartbeat for the first time. I'd seen it at the ultrasound she'd done a couple days after we got back, but hadn't heard it then because of the problems with the machine. She'd offered to wait until Clark got back, but I'd told her it wasn't necessary — I didn't know how long he'd be gone. Part of me thought he probably should have been there, after all he was sacrificing to claim the baby as his — especially after he seemed

slightly upset over the ultrasound thing — but part of me also felt that it was something very private to be shared only with a man I loved someday — when and if I was carrying his baby. Clark should have no part of it. Maybe if he'd still been acting as my friend but...

Something that might have been disappointment had flitted across his face when he'd arrived just as Dr. McConnell was leaving and she told him that he'd missed it but she was looking forward to seeing him in her office at my next appointment. I didn't tell either of them I'd scheduled it while he was in class.

I curled up further under the comforter — grateful that the heater seemed to be functioning properly in this place. It was getting renovated starting this summer for a reason. I could only hope it held out long enough. I couldn't deal with another night like the one at Dad's cabin huddled up against Clark trying to stay warm. No, I'd pile more blankets before I did that.

I didn't know how long I'd been asleep when the shrill ringing of the phone woke me up. I reached for it.

"Hello?" I knew I sounded grumpy. I didn't care.

"May I speak with Clark Kent please?" came the voice on the other end of the phone line.

I glanced around. "He's not home." I feigned politeness.

"Can I take a message?"

"This is Laura Lang. Could you have him call me please? He has the number."

Great. Lana's mom. And she sounded snippy. Big shock there. "I'll tell him you called."

"Thank you."

She hung up without saying anything else. Not that I blamed her necessarily. I certainly didn't want to talk to her anymore. I was surprised she hadn't given me a piece of her mind. Maybe I'd caught her off guard when I answered the phone.

It took a while before I could doze off again, but I did. This time, I knew it hadn't been long before the phone rang again.

"Hello?" I wasn't quite as grumpy this time — or at least I didn't sound it. I didn't think.

There was a hesitation on the other end. "Can I speak with Clark please?"

"He's not in," I told her — whoever 'her' was. "Can I take a message?"

"Is this Lois?"

I almost groaned. Who would want to talk to me? "Yes," I finally said.

"This is Martha Kent, Clark's mom."

I closed my eyes. "Hello, Mrs. Kent." I'd only talked to her once or twice while Clark and I were roommates.

I could hear the hesitation again. "Please, call me Martha."

"Hi, Martha." I tried it on for size. It sounded okay. Better than calling *me* Mrs. Kent anyway.

"How are you?"

I pushed myself up until I was sitting against the wall. "I'm okay. Thank you for asking. Would you like me to tell Clark to call you?"

I heard a sigh. "Yes, I would. But I'd like to talk to you too."

Great. My first conversation with my mother-in-law. "Okay."

There was an awkward silence that I finally broke. "I'm not really sure what to say," I confessed. "I'm sorry..." I couldn't continue, tears getting in the way of the words. I was sorry for ruining her son's life. I was sorry for getting us into this mess. I was sorry that I wasn't the daughter-in-law she'd planned on having. I was sorry that Clark's heart had broken in the process. I was sorry that they were disappointed in Clark and I knew how they must see him now, without knowing the truth about what happened and I was sorry that he hadn't been able to tell them everything. But mostly... Mostly I was just sorry.

"No. No need to say you're sorry. What's done is done and we can move on from here."

"Yes, ma'am."

She continued as though she hadn't heard me. "Jonathan and I would love to meet you sometime soon, but I don't know when we'll be able to make it to Metropolis."

"I'd like to meet you, too, but I don't know..." I did want to meet them. Sort of. But I didn't really want it to be in Smallville. I didn't want to go there where everyone would look at me and whisper things like 'that's the girl who seduced our perfect Clark Kent when he had hypothermia and made him marry her, not caring that it broke both his heart *and* our beloved Lana's in the process'. That was how small towns were. Clark had told me as much and I couldn't do it.

"It won't be easy for you to come here," she said quietly. "I'm sure Clark's told you how small towns can be."

"Yeah," I said softly.

"If you are able to come here, you can always just stay on the farm with us — you wouldn't have to go to town if you didn't want to. I know it's a long ways to come, but we really would like a chance to get to know you."

"I don't know. I don't know if we can."

"Well, you are always welcome in our home. I mean that."

"Thank you." I meant it. She was being nice. It sounded like a strained kind of nice, but nice nonetheless. She could have made this difficult on all of us.

"You're the mother of our grandchild. You're *always* welcome," she reiterated then paused. "Well, maybe Spring Break. I know Clark was planning on coming home, though last night he said he wasn't sure."

"I don't know," I said evasively. "I was supposed to go skiing in Vermont with Daddy, but that's out now. There's no way I'll be able to ski in March."

"Probably not."

"So, I don't know what my... our plans for Spring Break are. We haven't talked about it." We haven't talked about much, I added mentally. Since we got married, we hadn't really talked about much at all.

"Well, when you do, let us know if you can come. I'm guessing the two of you are going to stay in Metropolis over the summer, right?"

I hadn't even thought about that. Clark would have gone to Smallville if we hadn't gotten married. He would have spent the summer at home. It only made sense. I sighed. "I guess. My doctor is here but they're closing this building the week after finals so I don't know where we're going to go. We haven't figured it all out yet." That was more honest than she knew.

"Well, then we'll plan a trip to Metropolis — if it's okay with you — for late summer. Probably mid-August or so, before the fall semester starts so you won't have us in your hair with school starting. And it'll still give you a few weeks to recover after having the baby before your in-laws show up."

"Okay."

"I have to get going, but tell Clark that he needs to call us. We weren't done talking last night. We want to understand, but we need to hear it from our son."

I closed my eyes. They were mad at him for something else and it was my fault, too. Maybe telling her would help some. "That was my fault. I'm sorry he didn't get to finish talking to you, but I needed him."

"Well, of course you come before us. You're his wife. Was something wrong?"

"Nothing too big, but I'd started cramping and ended up in the ER until early this afternoon."

"That's not nothing. Do they know why?"

"Dehydration," I said simply. "I can't keep anything down these days. I haven't been able to for a few weeks now."

I could hear the frown in her voice. "How far along are you?" She paused. "If you don't mind my asking."

“This *is* Clark’s baby,” I said defensively, feeling badly about lying at the same time. I could see the wheels turning in her head. If I had only been experiencing nausea and stuff for a few weeks, then she probably thought I wasn’t as far along as I said I was — since all this went away by now for most women.

“I’m not saying Clark isn’t the father. I’m just curious,” she said calmly.

“Thirteen weeks, but I’ve only been sick for three or four. That’s part of the reason I didn’t know I was pregnant until then.” I was still defensive. “That and I’ve always been very irregular. I mean, I’ve never even really kept track.” I put my head in my hands. I couldn’t believe that I’d said that to my mother-in-law.

“I wonder why it’s hitting you so hard in your second trimester instead of the first,” she said contemplatively.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But I do know how far along I am. I’ve had an ultrasound to confirm it after we got back from Europe and I heard the heartbeat when my OB stopped by the ER this morning.”

“Lois.” Her voice was surprisingly gentle. “You don’t have to be defensive. Every woman reacts to pregnancy differently and every pregnancy is different. I’m not trying to say that you conned Clark into thinking this was his baby when he’s not really the father or anything of the kind.”

“I…” I didn’t know what to say.

“I know that’s what you were thinking. That I was trying to find some way to prove this isn’t Clark’s baby, but I trust my son. Even if he’s made some poor decisions recently, he’s doing his best to make things right and if you and he say you’re carrying his baby, I have no reason to doubt you.” She sighed. “Please don’t take that the way it sounded. I don’t mean marrying the mother of his child was a poor decision. That’s not it at all, but I’m sure the situation with me and Jonathan and Lana could have been handled better by Clark once the decision to get married for the sake of the baby was made.”

I was closer to tears than I wanted to admit. I was making their son out to be a cheat and a liar, and he was neither — unless I counted that he was still seeing Lana after he told me he wasn’t planning on it, but I’d told him he could so he must have changed his mind and just not told me about it yet. “I knew what you meant.” And I did. Sort of.

“Now, I’m glad he got off the phone with us. You and the baby are much more important than any conversation with us. And you’re probably exhausted. Did you get any sleep last night?”

“Not much,” I said honestly.

“Were you sleeping when I called?”

I hesitated. “I was dozing. I had… another phone call earlier that woke me up.”

“It doesn’t sound like it was a pleasant call.”

She was intuitive. Maybe a trip to Smallville was a bad plan for a lot of reasons. She’d probably see right through everything. I shrugged, even knowing she couldn’t see it. “It was short.”

“Can I ask who it is that called that’s upsetting you?”

See. Intuitive. Clark must not have gotten away with anything growing up. “Lana’s mom,” I finally told her.

I heard a noise that sounded something like a growl. “I told her to leave you two alone. She loves Clark, has for years and loved the idea of Clark and Lana together. But the three of you are adults now and anything that needs to be worked out needs to be worked out between the three of you not through parents.” She paused. “If you ever need someone to talk to, we’ll be here for you, but we’re not going to fight your battles for any of you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.” Clark, on the other hand, was fighting my battles. That’s why we were in this deal.

“Well, Laura has a hard time accepting that this is between you and Clark and Lana and not her. Don’t let her get to you.”

“I’ll try.”

“Well, I’ll let you rest some more. You have to take care of yourself and that grandbaby of mine.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I heard a key in the lock. “I think Clark’s home. Do you want to talk to him?”

“Not right now. Tell him to call us sometime this week. He knows our schedule.”

“I will.”

“Bye, Lois. It was good to talk to you.”

Clark walked in the room and shut the door behind him as I spoke. “Bye, Martha.” His head shot up and his eyes were wide. “It was nice talking to you, too.”

Part 36

Clark

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Martha? Had she been talking to my mom? And was that a good thing?

“Who was that?” I finally asked.

“Your mom. She seems nice.”

“She is. Most of the time.”

“I bet you didn’t get away with much as a kid, did you?”

I laughed. It felt good. It had been a while since I laughed. “No. I swear she has eyes in the back of her head and even the barn cats worked for her. Nana and Pop Pop sure did.”

“Nana and Pop Pop?”

“Her folks. We lived with them for a while when I was little. Usually she knew when I’d been doing something I wasn’t supposed to but they sure confirmed it. Well,” I conceded.

“Usually. Pop Pop would let me get away with more than Nana ever did — I guess that’s because she was a mom, too.”

She stared at her hands. “I’m sorry you’re in the doghouse with them.”

I shrugged. “It’s not the first time and it probably won’t be the last.” I set my backpack down and then sat on the loveseat.

“Still. You’re only there because of my stupidity.”

“What?”

She swiped at her eyes. “If I hadn’t taken a drink from whoever it was that slipped me something, we wouldn’t be here.”

She had a point, but this wasn’t her fault. “If you want to blame someone, blame whoever it was that drugged you and then had sex with you without your permission and apparently without protection.”

“But Latislan was my fault.”

“Because they have archaic laws and corrupt officials who bow to whatever whim the ruling general has? That’s ridiculous.” It was.

“It was my fault we were there in the first place.”

Well, maybe. “But I went with you willingly and I’m glad I did.”

She looked at me at that, questions in her eyes.

“What would you have done if I hadn’t been there?” I asked her gently.

She shrugged. “I would have figured something out. Regardless, I’m sorry you’re in trouble with your parents.”

“It’s okay.” I stretched my legs out in front of me. The bed was close enough that I could prop my feet up on it. “What else did she say?”

“She was hoping we might be able to go to Smallville for Spring Break.”

“I thought you were going skiing with your dad.”

“I’m not going to be able to ski.”

Another good point. “Are you going with him anyway?”

“Well, part of the whole ‘pretending it’s real’ thing means we probably need to whatever we do together.”

I’d forgotten about that. I knew we needed to pretend this was real, but the reality of that hadn’t set in. Lois hadn’t been feeling well enough to go to classes on Thursday or Friday so I’d

spoken with the professors that we shared and she'd emailed all of them, so we hadn't been in public together since this started. Not really. I closed my eyes. That meant I was going to need to hold her hand or put my arm around her while we walked around campus and probably even kiss her hello or goodbye. The thought turned my stomach. It wasn't that Lois wasn't attractive — she was, that was one of Lana's chief complaints the semester before — and I was sure that kissing her would be nice. Joe had sure looked like he enjoyed it. In fact, he'd often looked like he would enjoy more than that, but I knew Lois had always told him no. At least, kissing her would be nice under other circumstances. Kissing her under these circumstances, and in front of the woman who should be my fiancée right now...

Lana. I almost groaned. I had three classes with her. Lois was in two of those and the two of them had another class together. That was going to be fun. Lana had sat next to me in the big lecture hall for our biology lecture on Thursday, but somehow I didn't think that was going to work long term. I'd meant what I told her the day before. If we were alone together anytime soon, I don't know that I could stop myself from making love to her. I probably shouldn't have kissed her when I told her about me and Lois and I *really* shouldn't have kissed her in the library.

Friday, we'd sat in desks next to each other in English Lit and Poli Sci. Lois was in both of those classes with us. I guessed I'd probably end up sitting next to Lois and probably as far away from Lana as we could get. And those classes were back to back so we'd be walking together from one to the other which is where the handholding and arm slinging would have to come in. And I'd have to do it in front of Lana.

Of course, Lois and I were in another class together without Lana — something she hadn't been happy to hear about when we'd looked over our schedules together. I wasn't sure if they'd be easier or harder. We wouldn't know anyone so maybe we wouldn't have to keep up as much of a pretense, but at the same time Lana wouldn't be there either and, even though I knew Lana knew the marriage wasn't truly real to me, I also couldn't let her see any cracks between me and Lois. Not now.

"Clark? Earth to Clark?"

I looked up. Lois was snapping her fingers in my direction. "I'm sorry. What?"

"I *said*, whatever we do for Spring Break we probably need to do together."

"Right. You're right." And she was. Which was why I'd told my folks that I probably wouldn't be home.

"So, your mom wanted to know if we could go to Smallville for Spring Break."

My eyes widened. "Are you sure you want to do that? I've told you what small towns are like. They probably won't be very nice to you."

I could see tears in her eyes. "I know and your mom said the same thing, but she also said that they'd like to get to know me and I could hide out at the farm the whole time if I wanted to."

I sighed. "How about a maybe for now? I'll talk to them and you think about whether you really want to make a cross country trip six months pregnant."

She nodded. "She also indicated that they weren't mad about last night — not after I told her why you had to go so abruptly. She said that me and the baby were more important than a conversation with them, but that they did want to finish it sometime soon. You're supposed to call them this week."

I nodded. "Well, she's right. You two are more important than a phone call." I shrugged. "You needed me."

"Yeah, I guess we did," she finally said softly.

"So did you get any rest?" I really hoped she had.

She shrugged. "I slept a little bit, but the phone woke me up."

"You should have told her. My mom would have understood even without knowing about last night."

"The first call wasn't your mom." She didn't look at me, but played with the comforter that was still pulled over her legs.

"Who was it?"

"Lana's mom." I almost couldn't hear her.

"What did she want?" I really wasn't surprised to hear from her, but I was surprised that she hadn't hung up when I didn't answer.

"To talk to you. You're supposed to call her."

I laid my head back. "I don't know that I will. She's always tried to interfere in my relationship with Lana. I mean, she always approved of me, but... She stuck her nose in if we were fighting or whatever."

"Your mom said not to let her. She told her to leave us alone — that it's between you and me and Lana, not her. But I guess she didn't listen."

I snorted. "Laura Lang doesn't listen to anyone but Laura Lang. And maybe Lewis from time to time. She certainly doesn't listen to Martha Kent."

"Why not? Your mom's nice."

"But my mom's a farmer's wife. Laura is First Lady of Smallville and has been for as long as anyone can remember."

"Your mom sure seems smart."

"She is. She has a Bachelor's degree from UMKC and is getting her Master's but that's not the point. No farmer's wife is going to tell her what to do."

"That's... stupid," Lois finally said.

I nodded. "It's ignorant, is what it is, but that's Laura for you." I sighed. "I'm sorry if she gave you a hard time."

"Who? Your mom? She was nice as could be, especially given the circumstances."

"I have no doubt she was. My mom is very adaptable. I meant Laura."

"Oh. She didn't say much of anything, just to have you call her. But she was kind of snide about it."

Snide probably didn't begin to describe Lana's mom, but I let it drop. "So you didn't get a whole lot of rest did you?"

"Some." She shrugged. "Enough that I feel better."

"That's good."

"What about you? Where did you go?"

I sighed. "Great Wall of China," I finally said. It was the truth but I wasn't sure why I'd said it. We'd just had the first real conversation in over a week and I had to ruin it. I tried to back track. "I was studying. Thought that getting a jump start on the semester was a good idea."

She didn't look like she believed me but finally she nodded. "That's a good idea. I probably need to do the same thing."

"You need to get some rest." She suddenly looked more tired than I'd seen her in a long time — since we'd left Europe. "Tomorrow's going to be a big day with your first day of classes and everything." Regardless of how it happened, the doctor was right. She was my responsibility. Knowing Lois, she probably wouldn't see it quite that way, but that's the way it was. I leaned over and picked up my backpack. I pulled something out of it and tossed it on the bed next to her. "I got you some grape bubble gum."

The expression on her face was priceless. I could tell she wanted to be grateful, but she wasn't quite sure why she should be.

I couldn't help but laugh, which didn't help matters any. "The doctor said that some women find that grape bubble gum makes morning or whatever sickness easier."

She still looked skeptical and I raised my hands in surrender. "That's what he said, I swear."

She picked up the pack and stared at it. "Well, thanks then."

"Have you eaten anything since we got home?" I asked gently.

She shook her head. "I probably need to though."

“How about we start with some crackers and I’ll see if I can’t make some chicken broth? It’s like soup but without the chicken and noodles. See how you do with that.”

She nodded and I moved to my self-assigned task, hoping it would be enough to get something in her.

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Lois

I couldn’t do this. I stood in front of the full length mirror on the door to the bathroom and realized that I wasn’t going to be able to wear these jeans. They’d fit last week but now... Now, they steadfastly refused to button. I sighed and moved until I could flop back on the still unmade bed.

Clark emerged from the bathroom as I did so. “What’s wrong?”

“My pants don’t fit,” I told him.

“That surprises you?”

“They fit just fine five days ago and they’re my favorites.” I covered my face with my hands, realizing but not caring at the moment that doing so raised my shirt enough that most of my rapidly growing stomach was showing and the fact that my jeans were undone probably meant my underwear was visible too. Right then, though, I just didn’t care. I’d already done my makeup and I really didn’t want to have to fix it. I didn’t have time to anyway. And I still had to figure out what I was going to wear.

“Can I get something else out for you?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “No, I’ll get up in a second and find something.”

“Where’s your first class at?”

“Lincoln. You?”

“Addison. Right next door. I’ll wait for you and we can go together.”

This was it. The start of ‘real’. “Thanks.” I managed to stand up and rummaged through the closet until I found a pair of tan pants with a drawstring waist. I turned my back to Clark and hoped that he wasn’t looking as I tugged my jeans down. I put the pants on, fastening the flat hook and tying the drawstring. They were actually pretty comfortable. They wouldn’t fit forever, but for now... For now, they’d work. I put my tennis shoes on, even if they weren’t the best match now that I wasn’t wearing jeans, but I didn’t care. I grabbed my coat out of the closet and shrugged into it. I finally turned back to find Clark staring out the small window over the sink. “Ready?”

He turned and smiled at me. “Let’s go.”

Before I realized what he was doing, he’d grabbed my backpack as well as his and slung both of them over his shoulder. He opened the door and waited for me to go through before shutting and locking it behind him. By then, I was halfway to the elevator. We both smiled politely at the other couple standing there but none of us said anything. When we reached the ground floor, I headed for the front door when Clark’s hand on my arm stopped me.

“Are you *sure* you want to walk?”

I glared at him as I shoved my hands into my gloves. It was the third time he’d asked me. “With traffic and one way streets, it’ll take twice as long and the walk from the parking lot to the building is almost as long as walking from here. I promise I’ll take the shuttle back if I need to.”

He nodded and took my gloved hand in his. “Okay then.”

It took about fifteen minutes to get to Addison and our path took us directly past Weller Hall. I don’t think either one of us realized it until Lana stepped out in front of us. She looked right at us and even I could see the hurt in her eyes. Clark’s hand tightened around mine until I wondered if he might actually break it. Once Lana turned away, his grip loosened. I glanced at his face but couldn’t read what was written there.

Unfortunately, Lana and I were headed to the same place.

Several months ago, I hadn’t been thrilled to find out my first class of the week was with her and I really wasn’t looking forward to it now.

She sped ahead of us and I unconsciously slowed a bit to give her more of a head start. I still thought I’d be early enough that I wouldn’t get there and discover the only empty seat was right next to her.

Clark seemed to sense my hesitation and his steps slowed with mine. “It’s going to be okay,” he muttered, but I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself.

“Yeah,” I replied without certainty. “Okay.”

We reached the sidewalk between the two buildings and stopped. “This is it,” he said without looking at me.

“Yeah.” I chewed my bottom lip. What was he going to do? Kiss me? Kiss my cheek? My forehead? My... my lips were suddenly occupied. It was fleeting, but it was a real kiss.

“See you in a bit.” This time he kissed the side of my head before taking my backpack off his shoulder and handing it to me.

“Bye.” I watched him walk towards his building, then sighed and headed towards mine. I’d see him in little more than an hour, but Lana would be there too.

I was grateful to see that Lana was in the far back corner of the room when I walked it. She was avoiding watching the door, I was sure, but I also knew she was aware the minute I walked in. The instructor was already there, so I set my bag on a desk near the front corner by the door and dug out a doctor’s note. I headed to talk to him.

“Dr. Whitt?”

He looked up and smiled at me. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m Lois Lane. I’m sorry I wasn’t here last week, but I’m three and a half months pregnant and Friday was a really bad day for me.” I handed him the paper. “I know it doesn’t cover Friday, but I did spend part of the weekend in the ER because I was dehydrated.”

He read it over and frowned. “It also says you’re not supposed to be here until Wednesday.”

“I know, but I really am feeling much better and I’ve been able to keep some food down both last night and this morning and with a good night’s sleep... I don’t want to miss any more than I have to and I’m afraid that another bad day might hit so I need to be here every time I can.” I motioned towards my seat. “I’m planning on sitting near the door just in case, but I hope I don’t have to run out.”

He nodded. “Keep me informed of any time you need to miss and we’ll see if we can work something out if you do miss anything big.” He pulled a few papers out of folders on the table. “Here’s the syllabus and some other information you need. I trust you’re capable of reading it over so I’ll let you do that. If you have any questions, please ask.”

“I will. Thank you.”

He stopped me as I turned, handing me a piece of paper. “Just in case you do get sick, could you write down who would be best to call if you need someone?”

I took the paper and wrote down Clark’s name and the number of the room he was in during this class. “That’s my husband. He’s just right across the way if anything happens.” He thanked me and I returned to the desk I’d staked out and waited for class to begin.

An hour later, I was the first one to bolt out the door. I wasn’t sick; I just wanted to make sure I avoided Lana. It wasn’t going to be easy, I knew. Our next class was together. With Clark. So was the one after that.

He wasn’t there when I got to the classroom, so I took a desk near the front door for the same reason I had in the other class and then went to talk to this instructor as soon as she walked in the door. I saw Lana come in while I was deep in conversation and, hot on her heels, was Clark.

Okay, that might have been a bit of a stretch, but he came in just a minute after she did.

He was leaning against the wall when I moved back to my desk. I realized that all the spaces around me were taken. And I was nervous. Was he going to kiss me here? In front of everyone? In front of Lana? Wouldn't she know it was fake? I remembered how he'd kissed her when they met in our shared class last semester and I knew he wouldn't go there.

He pushed away from the wall as I approached, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. I'd never seen him do that to Lana.

"Hey," he said quietly. "How was class?"

I shrugged. "Fine. Both profs have been pretty understanding so far." I glanced at the clock. Three minutes. I looked around the room. There were a couple of seats together but they were all the way in the back and nowhere near a door. "Do you want me to move?"

He shook his head. "You need to be near a door, just in case. I'll try to get here earlier next time and get a seat next to you." He leaned down and kissed my temple, then moved until his mouth was next to my ear. "I'm sorry. I know we need to be more convincing than that, but I just can't." His voice wavered a bit as he spoke.

"It's okay," I whispered back. "The whispering probably goes a long way anyway."

He pressed his lips against the side of my head and was gone.

This class went much slower than the last one. I knew I would enjoy it — I loved reading and had read several of the books on the reading list already. The problem was that I couldn't see Clark or Lana and had no idea if they were anywhere near each other or exchanging longing glances or what.

I shouldn't care, I told myself, but I did. I didn't want to be played for a fool. Even if they stayed together secretly, I prayed they could avoid each other in public.

Part 37

Clark

I let out a deep breath as I settled into my seat. I was closer to Lana — and farther from Lois — than I would have liked given the situation. I was close enough that I could smell Lana's shampoo with my enhanced senses. I unconsciously tuned into her heartbeat. I couldn't help it; it was something I had done for years, but as soon as I realized I had done it, I stopped. I tried to listen for Lois' instead. I'd learned over the years that everyone had a unique heartbeat, but I was still learning hers. Sleeping in the bunk beneath her had helped, but... What was that? It was light and fast, like the fluttering of butterfly wings and coming from Lois' direction.

Then it hit me.

The baby.

I could hear the baby's heartbeat.

I was floored, but I schooled my emotions so they didn't show. I'd have to take a closer listen later, because class was starting.

I half paid attention as we started discussing a couple of early American poets. Most of my attention was focused on what I was going to do when class was over. Lois, no doubt, would want to be the first one out the door. And I should be with her, but I was too far away for that.

I had to figure out a way to be more convincing about our relationship with Lana around. I shoved the thoughts out of my mind and turned my thoughts more fully on the letters between John and Abigail Adams.

Before I knew it class was over. I moved as quickly as I could without getting any extra attention but I still got stuck in the crowd.

Lois was still in her seat when I got there and she looked a little pale.

I squatted down next to her. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "My stomach is a little queasy."

I frowned. "Did you bring any crackers with you?"

She shook her head again.

I pulled my backpack around and dug some gum out of the pocket. "I kept a pack just in case. Want to try it?"

She took a piece. "I'm willing to try anything."

"Can you walk to Poli Sci?"

She nodded and moved to pick up her backpack, but I beat her to it. There was no reason for her to have to do that. I held her coat for her as she put it on then wrapped an arm around her waist to help support her as we headed out of the classroom.

When we reached our destination, I could feel Lana's eyes on us. There was one seat available near the door and another a couple rows down. The guy in the seat closest to the door had been in one of my fall classes and seemed like a decent guy. I asked him if he would mind moving and he said no. I set our backpacks down and helped Lois with her coat.

"Feeling any better?" I asked quietly.

She nodded. "The cool air helped quite a bit actually."

I'd have to remember that. "What about the gum?"

She smiled weakly at me. "Maybe. I'm not sure yet, but I was never much of a gum chewer so... I'm going to..." She pointed to the front of the class. I glanced at the clock and nodded, taking my seat as I did.

Before long we were embroiled in discussing democracy and how to define politics and then class was over.

This was it. I *had* to make this convincing. We were heading different directions now. I held Lois' coat, but she shook her head. Her next class was in this building, she reminded me. It was time for me to have lunch. It was time for Lana to have lunch, too, I remembered. An idea occurred to me, but I'd have to see if it would work.

I picked up her backpack then reached out and took her hand. "I'll walk you," I said simply. She gave me an odd look, but nodded. Two flights of stairs later and we were at the door. I didn't say anything but followed her in and set her bag on the desk closest to the door and mine on the one behind it.

She gave me another look, but pulled out another copy of her doctor's note and went to talk to Dr. Grant. I'd interviewed him a couple of times during the fall and he seemed like a good guy. I gave her a minute to explain her situation then followed her as he started digging through the folders in front of him.

He smiled at me as I walked up. "Hi, Clark. You're not in this class are you?"

I shook my head. "No, but my wife is," I said pointing at Lois. Something flitted across his face — questions maybe. He'd had Lana in class in the fall. "I was hoping I could switch sections so we could have lunch together at least a couple of days a week. And with her being sick, I like the idea of being able to keep a little closer eye on her." I made myself wink at her.

Lois stared at me and I shrugged. "It just occurred to me, honey." Saying that hurt. Lana's face the first time I called her that flashed before my eyes. Her bright smile and laughing eyes lying in that hayloft. I pushed the image out of my head. I wasn't allowed to think about her like that anymore.

He looked at the roster. "That shouldn't be a problem. Right now there's an open seat in here. You'll need to go do the paperwork though. If you get over there and that's changed, get me an overload form and I'll sign it for you. There's always a student or two who never shows up so it shouldn't be an issue."

"Is it okay if go ahead and stay in here instead of the next one today?" He nodded. "Thanks, Dr. Grant."

We went back to our seats, Lois taking the one in front. She turned to face me. "You didn't have to do that."

I shrugged. “It made sense. We can have lunch together if you want to.” Maybe she didn’t want to. “If you want to,” I repeated slowly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that without asking you first. If you don’t want me to, I won’t. I just thought it might be nice to have lunch together. As part of the whole ‘real’ thing, you know?”

I thought I saw tears spring to her eyes, but I wasn’t sure before she nodded and turned around. Why she might be close to crying, I had no idea.

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Lois

Of course. Part of being real. For half a second, I’d thought it was because he wanted to spend some time with me instead of Lana. But no. He could spend time with Lana the other days or other times, but this would make us look more real. That’s all it was.

And that must have been what that whole ‘honey’, wink thing was about.

This was my last class of the day. I couldn’t remember if Clark was supposed to have one after his new lunch break or not, but he was going to have to go to Administration to get his schedule changed. I was more than ready to head back to that shabby little hole in the wall and take a nap. If I could just make it through the next hour without throwing up.

An hour later, I sighed with relief. I could go home now. I put on my coat and reached for my backpack to find that Clark already had it on his shoulder. He took my hand and we walked in silence. It was warm enough outside now that I didn’t need my gloves. I was glad because I found that I liked holding Clark’s hand. I wasn’t sure what that meant and I wasn’t about to analyze it after fifty minutes of Psychology.

I realized he was walking with me towards our apartment. “Don’t you need to go to Admin?”

He shook his head. “I’ll go later. I want to make sure you get home okay and get something to eat. And then you’re going to take a nap before we go to your dad’s house.”

I groaned. I’d forgotten about that. “Do we have to?”

He looked puzzled. “Don’t you want to?”

I shrugged. “Mindy’s going to be there,” I said as though that explained everything.

“Who?”

“Surely you remember her.” At his blank stare I continued. “His girlfriend. She’s a gold digger. She’s told me as much. I’m afraid she’s going to be even worse than his ex-partner. She’s going to take everything from him and make him think it was all his idea.” I could practically feel fire flashing in my eyes. “She plays the perfect blonde bimbo calling him ‘pookie’ and acting like she doesn’t have a clue about anything, but I swear, the woman could run a crime syndicate and no one would ever suspect her. It wouldn’t surprise me if she set my dad up to take the fall at the same time. Maybe even for those guns.” I shook my head. “You still haven’t met her yet, have you?”

“You’ve mentioned her and I saw her in Paris but that’s it. I don’t think I’ve heard her name.” He squeezed my hand lightly. “That’s why you didn’t want to move back home, isn’t it? I mean, you’ve alluded to it before, but you’ve never actually told me the whole story.”

I nodded. “She moved in about two weeks before I moved here. She told me in no uncertain terms that I needed to leave the nest. Oh, she worded it like she was clueless, but she’s not. I guarantee that. Daddy’s the one who’s clueless.”

“Well, maybe we can figure out a way to show him.”

I shook my head. “Thanks, but he’s not thinking straight around her. I just hope he comes to his senses before everything’s gone.”

He stopped and put his arms around me, pulling me close to him. “We’ll make sure he doesn’t lose everything. I don’t know

how, but we will,” he whispered to me.

“I don’t care about the money,” I said honestly. “I mean, I know when he dies, unless something happens, I’m going to be very wealthy, but I really don’t care. I just don’t think he could handle losing everything again. To be honest, I’m very surprised he didn’t attempt suicide after the last time. He was so depressed over Mom and Lucy that nearly losing everything almost sent him over the edge. If it happened again...”

“We won’t let it.”

“I don’t know how we’re going to stop her.”

“We’ll figure something out.” We stood there for another minute, before he let go of me and spoke again. “Come on. You need to eat and get some rest.”

~~~~~  
Clark

We hadn’t walked more than five feet when we were stopped by a swarthy, dark haired student.

“Hello,” he said with a thick accent.

I nodded and smiled, tugging on Lois’ hand as a signal to go around him. Something about him bugged me already.

He stepped in front of us again. “My uncle said I should get to know you.” He leered at Lois. “After all, you are having his baby.”

“Who are you?” I asked, my eyes narrowed.

“I am Vladimir Navance.”

“What do you want?” Lois asked, her hand gripping mine more tightly.

He shrugged. “I just wanted to introduce myself. To let you know that I know who you are and that I look out for my uncle’s interests.” He leered at Lois. “You should be my new aunt by now.”

I could feel Lois’ anger mounting and mine was, too, but before I could say anything else, Lois pulled on my hand and went around him calling over her shoulder as we walked away.

“Tell your uncle I said he can go to hell.”

We walked quickly towards our apartment. “Are you okay?” I asked quietly.

She shrugged. “At least now I know who to avoid.”

“That’s probably a good idea.” We walked in silence until we made it to the apartment. I unlocked the door and opened it, letting Lois walk inside in front of me. By the time I’d shut the door behind me, she was on the bed, curling up with a blanket over her.

“You need to eat,” I reminded her.

“Later,” came the muffled reply.

“Why don’t you get something to eat now and then take a nap?”

“Because if I eat something now, I’ll probably throw it right back up.”

“You don’t want to end up back in the ER do you?” I asked gently.

She rolled over enough to glare in my direction. “I don’t need you to be my mother, Kent.”

“I know.” I sighed and sat in one of the wooden chairs. “Have you thought any more about what Daniel said?”

“Which thing? He said lots of stuff.”

“About changing your name.”

She didn’t answer for a long minute. “I have,” she finally said. “And I like being Lois Lane, but I guess I probably need to be Lois Kent until we can get a divorce in a few years. I can change my name back afterwards, I suppose.”

“Yeah.”

She looked thoughtful as she rested her hand on her stomach. “The baby will be a Kent though. Probably until he or she is old enough to understand what really happened, because I don’t think I’d want to do that to a five-year-old. Change his name or whatever. He wouldn’t understand.”

I nodded. That was a good point.

She didn't look at me as she posed her next question. "What about the baby's name?"

"What about it?"

"Daniel recommended we use something from your family or family friends or something. Do you have any thoughts on it?"

Did I have any thoughts? Of course I did, but I wasn't sure I wanted to use any of them at this point. They were names that Lana and I had talked about.

Jonathan after my dad.

Clark Jerome Jr.

For boys at least.

I did my best to hide a smile as a girl's name occurred to me.

"Well, my favorite aunt is Aunt Opal."

Her eyes grew wide. "You're kidding right?"

I finally broke into a grin. "No. My favorite aunt is Aunt Opal, but I wouldn't want to use that for a name."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "I know we're supposed to be thinking about a name from your family but if this is a girl, I think I'd like to name her after my mom or sister, if that's okay with you. Maybe use your mom's name as a middle name or something."

"That would be okay with me."

"What if it's a boy?"

I knew instantly what name would be my choice if this baby was a boy.

"Christopher."

Part 38

February 2003

Lois

~~~~~  
How could I let her get to me like that?

I practically ran across campus, willing the tears to stay put until I got to the apartment. Or at least to the elevator.

It had been two weeks since classes started and each day had been worse than the last.

Clark had been practically bi-polar. In public, he seemed to be sweet and attentive. He never looked Lana's way — not that I saw anyway. He carried my backpack and helped me with my coat. He gave me quick kisses on the corner of my lips when Lana wasn't around and whispered something — usually something inane — in my ear or tucked my hair behind it, or both, when she was.

But in private... Well, there wasn't a whole lot of 'in private'. He was gone as much as possible, though he mentioned once that he snuck in and out the back door so as not to be seen if possible. He was probably sneaking in and out the back door of Weller Hall to see Lana. But when he was home... I sighed. We barely spoke. I curled up on my side of the bed — as close to the edge as I could get without falling off — and he did the same. If we ever even touched in the middle of the night, it didn't register with me.

I couldn't count how many times I'd cried over the last few weeks. When he was there — usually after we went to bed — the tears were silent, but no less real, as I curled around my pillow. When I was home alone, I often found myself crying and going through old sappy, movies I had stored on my external hard drive and played through the TIVO. When I felt good enough, I ate ice cream and drank Pepsi. When I didn't, I ate crackers and drank flat Sprite. When I couldn't deal with the sappy movies, I popped in a Friends or NCIS or Dawson's Creek or 90210 DVD.

But I wouldn't do any of that this time. As soon as I locked the door behind me, I kicked off my shoes and curled up on the bed in as small a ball as I could with my stomach getting in the way. The tears flowed freely. It wasn't like she'd been saying things I didn't already know but for some reason it got to me.

Stupid hormones.

I *had* to get myself under control before Clark got here and I had *no* idea when that was going to be. Maybe I could manage to be asleep by the time he got here.

No such luck.

The key was scraping in the door. I wondered where he'd been this time?

In the last few weeks, he'd said he'd been to icebergs twice, the Great Wall once, the North Face of Everest once, chilling with penguins on Antarctica, Siberia, Alaska, the Barrier Reef, the North Pole — where he did *not* see Santa or Rudolph — and the Mediterranean.

Fake sleep.

Maybe that would work.

I closed my eyes and willed myself to breath normally.

He must have seen me and assumed I was sleeping, because he shut and locked the door as quietly as possible — which was hard to do when it creaked every time you moved the stupid thing.

And then I hiccupped.

"You awake?" he asked softly.

I wanted to not say anything and just lay there, but instead I hiccupped again. That wasn't going to work. I rolled over onto my back with an arm thrown over my face.

"Yeah, I'm awake," I finally said.

I heard him sit down on that stupid little loveseat and felt the mattress give a bit as he propped his feet up on it. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I told him and then hiccupped again.

"Why don't I believe that?"

"I don't want to talk about it." What would I say? 'Oh, by the way, your girlfriend decided to remind me that you love her and the second our divorce is final the two of you will be back together and I'll just be a footnote in your life. And I don't know why I care so much — it's not like I'm in love with you and want you to stay with *me* forever — but these stupid hormones make it impossible not to cry over everything.'

Yeah. That would be smart. We were having a hard enough time acting like this was real in public. Any sign that it wasn't and I just knew that the Latislani general would be all over us in a heartbeat.

I felt the mattress depress even more as he moved to lie down next to me. Then he was tugging my arm down from my face and I only just managed to cover it with my other arm before he could see how distraught I was. If it hadn't been Lana that had upset me, he probably would have been sweet and supportive, but since it had been... telling him would just make everything worse.

Of course, then he managed to get the other arm down too.

~~~~~  
Clark

What on earth could have upset her this much? When I finally got both arms out of the way, I noticed how red her face was and how swollen her eyes were. Whatever it was, it was serious.

"Is everything okay with the baby?" I finally asked.

She shrugged. "As far as I know."

"You ate lunch?" She still skipped sometimes I knew. I got up and ran a washcloth under cold water.

She shook her head. "No. Not yet. I haven't been home very long and I don't think I could hold anything down right now anyway."

"And you're not going to tell me what happened to upset you so much?" I asked gently, hoping to break through the wall she'd put up around herself. I wrung the cloth out and folded it up, setting it gently over her eyes before returning to stretch out next to her.

She sighed. "Fine. I need new clothes. I need to go shopping

for maternity clothes and I hate shopping and that's going to make this whole thing all that more real and I'd like to stay in denial just a little bit longer, but unless you're going to let me wear some of your clothes, I have like two pairs of pants that fit. Sort of. For now."

That wasn't it. That might be bothering her, but that wasn't what had her crying her eyes out in the middle of the day.

"So, we'll go shopping." I'd go with her, if she wanted me to. "With what money?"

She had a good point. Neither of us had jobs. Well, paying jobs. Her dad gave her a bit of spending money every month, but it wasn't much when compared to a new wardrobe. My parents did the same with me, though they'd indicated last summer that if Lana and I got married before we finished school, we'd be on our own. So far they'd sent one more check, but I didn't know if they were going to cut me off after that or not. We didn't have many expenses. We could eat on campus as part of our meal plans, but Sam still had his meal service provide us with four or five meals a week. I had no doubt that was out of concern for his grandchild rather than my welfare. That left gas for the cars and a little bit more for food and that was it. The money from our parents was enough to cover that — and actually Lois had a gas card from Sam so it was really just for the truck which I didn't drive all that much.

I looked down at her, lying there with a wash cloth over her eyes and the occasional tear still leaking out and suddenly a vision of Lana popped in my head. What would I do if this was Lana instead of Lois?

Well, first I'd kiss her. And if she wanted me to, I'd make love to her and help her forget about all of this for a while and show her how beautiful I still thought she was — though I knew she'd have been griping about losing her figure. I closed my eyes and saw her there. Yes, I'd kiss her and then I'd kiss every one of her stretch marks because they were badges of honor brought about because she was carrying my baby.

I shook myself mentally. I couldn't go there. Not even in my mind. But if this was Lana... and we needed money, what would I do? I'd probably be working three jobs if I had to. But here? With Lois? I wasn't working at all. I felt a bit guilty about that, all of the sudden.

<But her dad has money,> a stubborn inner voice told me, <and lots of it. Why can't he buy her clothes?>

<Because she's my wife and it's my responsibility to make sure she's taken care of,> my conscience told the voice I now recognized as my inner teenager.

<She wasn't supposed to be your wife,> he argued back. <You were supposed to be engaged to Lana by now.>

<It doesn't matter,> my conscience snapped at him. <I went into this marriage willingly and vowed before God to take care of her. I couldn't *not* do that.>

Lois spoke and interrupted the argument between my two selves. "My dad gave me a credit card a long time ago to use to buy clothes and stuff when I needed it. He always said as long as I didn't abuse it and buy stuff that was ridiculously expensive or go way overboard on the wardrobe, I could use it whenever I wanted. He hasn't told me I can't use it anymore, so I'll use it to get some maternity clothes."

"Are you sure?"

She shrugged and adjusted the wash cloth slightly. "I don't know why he wouldn't let me. He doesn't even look at the statements. His accountant does and tells him if there's anything unusual."

"Okay then. Do you want me to go with you?" Did I really want to go? I didn't know, but I would.

"We'll see. I probably won't go until this weekend."

"Well, if you want to borrow some sweats or something until then, you can." I surprised myself when I said that.

"Thanks." She didn't sound like she really meant it.

"So are you going to tell me what's really upset you?"

She moved the wash cloth enough to glare at me. "You don't think not fitting into my clothes isn't enough to upset me?"

I shook my head. "Not this much."

She sighed but didn't say anything. Finally, she changed the subject. "So, did you go swim with the whales today? Or was it polar bears? Or penguins? Or play in a big pit of venomous snakes? Or maybe you just spent a nice day conversing with some Sherpas."

I winced. I should have known telling her where I'd actually been wasn't a good idea. I'd tried to play it off a joke, like it could be coming a standing, running joke that was ours — me coming up with creative places I'd been to study. I thought we could probably use something like that, but apparently she didn't appreciate what she thought was my sense of humor. Fortunately, today's truth was a bit more tame. "Just studying at the library."

I saw the tears coming out from under the wash cloth increase significantly. Why would studying at the library make her cry?

I knew I didn't really love her — not the way a guy should love his wife — but the hurt in her voice tore my heart until what she said sunk in.

"You know, if you were with Lana, just tell me. Please. Don't make stuff up and treat me like I'm clueless."

She thought I was with Lana?

"What are you talking about?" I finally asked.

"If you were with Lana, just tell me. Don't lie to me and tell me you were melting icebergs or something."

"I wasn't with Lana. I promise." Why would she think I was with Lana? "Why would you think that?"

"I told you I didn't mind if you kept seeing her — that I even understood that you would want to — but I did ask that you be discreet."

"I haven't seen her. Not outside of class. Or maybe walking around campus."

"And you were at the library just now? Studying?"

"Yes." I was. I'd been there for a couple of hours.

"So that's what they're calling it these days," she muttered.

"Calling what?"

"Sex."

What on earth was she talking about? Studying at the library as a euphemism for sex?

And if 'studying at the library' was another way of saying sex and she thought I was with Lana...

She thought I was having sex with Lana?

"You think I'm having sex with Lana?" I asked her, incredulous.

She just shrugged.

It was too much. I stood up and stared down at her. "You think I'm having sex with Lana." It was a statement this time.

She didn't move.

"Don't you?" I demanded.

"Aren't you?"

Answering a question with a question. One of my favorite games to play with Lois. Or not. Not now.

"No. I'm not having sex with Lana. I've never had sex with Lana." My voice was getting louder even though I knew I needed to keep my cool.

She pulled the washcloth off her eyes and sat up, glaring at me. "When was the last time you saw her? Besides in class?"

I shrugged.

She snorted.

"What?" I glared down at her.

Apparently, she decided she didn't want to be looked down on anymore than strictly necessary, because she stood up and faced me, arms crossed in front of her. "I *saw* you."

"You saw me having sex with Lana? When? We made out on

my bed last semester a few times, but we never..."

I noticed the tears coming closer together. What was I doing? Couldn't this calm down and we could talk about whatever it was more rationally?

"I saw you two at the library. In one of the study rooms. Were you offering her a piece of bubble gum? Because that's sure not what it looked like."

I winced. I'd known at the time it was wrong, but I'd done it anyway. "You saw that?" I had to be sure.

"You mean you and your girlfriend playing tonsil hockey where anyone and their nephew from Latislan could see? Yeah, I saw it."

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. "She's not my girlfriend anymore. Technically, she hasn't been since we got married, but I saw her the day after she got back and ended things officially."

"So you *were* offering her a piece of gum then?"

"No." My heart was heavy at the thought of how willing I'd almost been to break my wedding vows. "I was kissing her."

"All I asked was that you be discreet. The library isn't discreet."

"I know and I'm sorry."

"Sorry you kissed her or sorry I saw you?"

Which was it? Was I sorry I kissed Lana? Was I sorry that Lois saw me kiss her? "Yes," I finally said quietly. "I'm sorry I kissed her and I'm sorry you saw it."

"Did you kiss her the day after she got back?" she practically demanded.

"Yes," I told her, ashamed of myself even as I said it.

"And you didn't make love to her?"

"No!" I practically shouted. "I stood in a chapel and promised before God that I would be faithful to you! And I have been." Did kissing count as being unfaithful? Deep down, I knew it probably did. No, not probably. It did count. My voice softened as I ran a hand through my hair. "I kissed her when I saw her after we got back and I kissed her in the library."

"And you didn't do more than kiss?"

"Okay," I admitted. "It was pretty heavy kissing, but just kissing. That's all." Somehow trying to justify kissing another woman to my wife didn't make it sound okay.

"You didn't throw her on your bed in our dorm room and kiss her and touch her and make love to her?"

"No! I didn't! We didn't even go into our old dorm room."

"Fine. Her bed. Linda's bed. The floor. Up against the wall. Wherever."

"No."

"You didn't want to?"

"I didn't say that," I growled at her. "I've loved her for as long as I can remember. Of course, I wanted to. I've wanted to for a long time but we promised ourselves a long time ago we would wait for marriage."

"You are married."

"Not to Lana."

"But you wanted her?"

"Yeah," I said quietly. "I did."

"Do you still?"

"What?"

"Do you still want her? If you found yourself alone with *her* in a cabin in the middle of a snowstorm tomorrow, would you want her?"

Why was she doing this to me? To herself? I just stared at her for a minute, aware but not understanding why so much seemed to ride on this answer. "Would I want her? Yes. Would I do anything about it? No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." I was. As long as I was married, I wouldn't make love with anyone who wasn't my wife. I knew that.

"You could take all of your clothes off and all of her clothes off to try to stay warm, just like we did, and not make love to her?"

"I didn't make love to you," I pointed out.

"You haven't been in love with me since you were six," she snapped back.

"No, I haven't, but no matter what — even if we both stripped down to stay warm, I wouldn't." I sank down on the love seat.

"Why not? No one would ever know except the two of you. And you know there's no possibility of her getting pregnant. You're completely naked with her and you wouldn't do it?"

"I wouldn't be *completely* naked," I said playing with my wedding band.

She waited for me to explain.

"I'd still have my wedding band on and that means I don't make love to anyone but you as long as it's on." My words were soft, but I knew she heard them clearly.

"Pretend you lost it."

I glared at her. "Are you *trying* to get me to say I'd cheat on you? That I'd deliberately put you and the baby in jeopardy from that bastard because of our 'fake' marriage? Come on, Lois, you know me better than that!"

"Then are you planning on making love to me?"

Her eyes held mine, some sort of defiance written in them. Finally, I broke the contact to stare at the ring I still fiddled with. "No," I said quietly, though I wasn't sure why it would matter — we were friends, nothing more.

"Did you promise *her* you wouldn't?"

"What are you doing? Why are you doing this?" I finally asked her.

"Answer the question," she insisted.

I leaned forward and rested my forearms on my knees. "Promised might be a bit strong, but I did tell her I wasn't planning on making love to you."

"Did you ask her to wait for you?"

"She told me she would and I told her part of me wanted her to, but that I wouldn't ask her to wait that long for me." I didn't look at her as I said it.

"What did she say?"

I sighed. "She didn't say anything else; not really."

"Do you expect her to?"

"To what?"

"To wait for you."

"Expect her to? No."

"Do you want her to?"

Boy, she wasn't going for the easy questions was she? "Yeah, I do," I finally told her honestly.

"So you are planning on make love to her someday?"

I shrugged. "Maybe someday. But not while we're married."

She took a deep breath before she asked her next question.

"Did you tell her everything? That it's not real and only temporary? Did you tell her this isn't your baby?"

My mouth opened once or twice but nothing came out.

Part 39

Finally, I sighed. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

"You *did* tell her!" she yelled at me.

"She thought I cheated on her!" I yelled back.

"You *knew* she would! We talked about it!"

"I know, but I was there and when she looked at me like that... I'd already broken her heart; I couldn't let her believe I'd broken her trust too."

She crossed her arms in front of her and glared at me. "So you broke mine? Your *wife's*?"

I hadn't looked at it like that and I sighed again. "I guess I

did.”

“And what if she blabs to everyone that you’re not the father of my baby and that we’re only married for some reason she doesn’t know but that you refuse to leave me? You don’t think Mr. Latislani won’t find that suspicious?”

“I told her I’d deny it if she ever said anything.”

She turned to the dingy little window and stared out it, hugging herself as she did so. “So, say she doesn’t wait for you. You’re chained to me and the baby for the next five years. Say she finds someone else in the meantime and she’s happily married, maybe with a baby of her own.”

The thought of that was like a knife in my gut. “Okay.”

“Do you stay with me?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“Three years from now, she’s moved on. She’s getting married to a great guy. We’ve got another two years to go. We go to the wedding of one of your oldest and dearest friends because everyone in Smallville expects it and we wouldn’t want to disappoint. She dances with her husband and you see them kissing and you know that, if they haven’t already, they’ll make love that night.”

The knife twisted.

“Do you have sex with me then?”

The way she phrased it struck me as odd. “Do you want me to?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “We’re both passably attractive people, when I don’t look like a whale.” I opened my mouth to say something but she went on. “We’ve been sharing a bed for three years. The love of your life is off making love to another man. You accidentally walk in on me naked or nearly naked. Do you have sex with me?”

There it was again. The wording. “Why is it that they’re making love and we’re having sex?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “They’re in love. You’re not in love with me and I’m not in love with you. The act is the same even if the emotions aren’t.”

“That’s a bit cynical.”

“What is?”

“You don’t think there’s a difference between just having sex and making love?”

“Not physically, I don’t guess. I think someone can be very skilled at having sex without ever actually being in love.”

“Probably,” I admitted. “But wouldn’t it be better if there was love involved?”

“That’s not the point,” she snapped at me. “Lana’s off making love with her husband day and night on some beach in Hawaii or some cabin in the mountains. You walk in on me naked or nearly so. Is there no reaction?”

Reaction? My reaction to seeing Lois — a beautiful woman — naked would probably be the same as any other red-blooded male. “Oh, I suppose there could be,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “But that doesn’t mean I’d throw you on the bed and have my way with you.”

“Okay. Lana’s off on her honeymoon and I decide I want to see what all the fuss is about. I’ve already had a baby after all, why shouldn’t I know what sex is like? So I tell you I’m tired and want to go to bed early. The baby’s asleep — and probably not a baby by then — in another room. You come in and there’s candles everywhere and I’m wearing nothing but one of your dress shirts or some skimpy lingerie or something and I kiss you and tell you that I want you but it’s just sex. Do you?”

I shrugged. “Still not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Lana’s off doing it with her husband, why can’t you have sex with your wife?”

“I didn’t say I *couldn’t*...” My voice trailed off.

“The woman you’re waiting for isn’t waiting for you anymore,” she pointed out.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

“It’s nice to know my husband finds me so desirable,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

I smothered a scream and stood up glaring at her back. “What do you want me to say, Lois? That you’re not attractive? That the biggest problem Lana had with you being my roommate was that you are? That someday, I’m going to decide that I get to have sex with you because you’re my wife and not really care what you say? That, someday, it’s possible that we’ll make love? That...”

“Yes!” She interrupted me, surprising me with her vehemence.

“What?”

She turned and looked at me, tears streaming down her face again. “I want you to tell me that there could, possibly, be some circumstances at some point in the next five years — regardless of how convoluted those circumstances might seem right now — that you could make love to me. Without either of us being inebriated or drugged or whatever. Both of us perfectly lucid. I don’t want to know that it’s probable. Not even likely. Just remotely possible. Some eensy weensy, microcosmic, although highly unlikely possibility that you’ll make love to me at some point during our marriage.”

I thought about that for a minute. Were there any circumstances under which I could find myself making love to Lois that didn’t involve us being drunk? Not that I could get drunk, but she didn’t know that. That was another point. Would I make love to her without telling her about myself? How was I going to keep that a secret for the next five years? *Should* I keep that a secret for the next five years? I didn’t think I could justify making love to her — when we were both stone cold sober or whatever — without telling her about myself. So, assuming that, at some point, I had told her about myself, could I see us making love at some point?

“Never mind,” she said interrupting my train of thought. She turned towards the closet. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I sighed. “After all that, don’t you want to know my answer?”

“I already do,” she said without looking at me.

I moved towards her and turned her to look at me. “Lois, you are an incredibly attractive woman. I’ve always thought so. Did that mean I wanted to take off my towel and jump you the minute we met? No. Of course not. The biggest problem Lana had with you being my roommate was that you’re attractive. And now we’re married and we will be for the foreseeable future. So is it possible that sometime in the next five years that we’ll make love? Yes, it’s possible. How probable? I don’t know, but it is possible.”

She crumpled in my arms. I pulled her close to me and let her cry. I didn’t know what had gotten into her or why she needed to know that it was possible that we’d make love someday. Did I consider it probable? No, not really. But it was *possible*. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about?” I asked her quietly.

“No.”

“Why did you need to know if there was a chance that we could make love someday?”

“I just did.”

“This is going to be a very long five years if you won’t talk to me,” I told her gently, feeling slightly guilty at the same time. I hadn’t exactly been talking to her or making it easy for her to talk to me when I disappeared all the time.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t talk to you, just not about this. Okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. We just had what might qualify as our first fight and now you won’t talk to me.”

“It’s not over,” she muttered.

“What do you mean?”

She moved away from me and plunked herself down in the middle of the bed. “You really want to know?”

“Yes.” I moved back to the loveseat.

“Okay. First, a question. I want an honest answer and then I’ll tell you.”

Well, now we were getting somewhere. “Fair enough.”

“I’ve fallen off the top of a building. I’m barely hanging on. You could save me and the baby. Do you?”

“Of course.” What kind of ridiculous question was that?

“Lana’s hanging off a building at the same time. We’re both barely hanging on. You can only save one of us. Which one do you choose?”

My gut twisted. “You can’t ask me to answer that,” I whispered. I didn’t know the answer myself, except that I could probably get to both of them in plenty of time. But if it really came down to my wife or the woman I’d loved since childhood — the woman I still loved?

“Sure I can. And I want an honest answer.”

“I’d try to find a way to save both of you.” That much was true.

“You can’t. You can only save one.”

“Why only one?”

“Because it’s my question, Alex Trebek.” She threw up her hands. “Fine. We’re both sitting on bombs some distance from each other. One of us moves off the chair, and the other goes boom. If neither one of us move in thirty seconds, we both go boom. Who do you choose?”

“I won’t answer that,” I told her. “I can’t.”

“So you can’t choose between us,” she said flatly.

“No. I can. I *chose* to marry you. I *choose* to be here, every night, sharing a bed with you. I *choose* not to be alone with Lana under any circumstances. But I wouldn’t want either one of you to die. And I can’t say right now what I would do if it absolutely came down to the two of you.”

“Because you love her but you’re obligated to me and if I die the baby does, too,” she said bitterly.

“No. Because I care deeply for both of you and I don’t know how I would make that choice.” I took a deep breath. She wasn’t going to let me avoid answering. “Under extreme duress, if there was absolutely no other way, no way to save both of you, I’d choose you.”

“Why?”

“You’re my wife,” I said simply. “I promised to protect you. Saving you when I can falls under that.”

“So, it’s not because you’d choose *me*, it’s because you took a vow.”

“Maybe. But right now, it’s the most honest answer I can give you. So what’s this all about? Does it have something to do with Lana?” That made sense.

She nodded.

“Did she say something?”

She nodded again.

“What happened?”

“She just said some stuff that upset me. And I don’t know why it upset me. It wasn’t anything I didn’t already know.”

Part of me was furious with Lana, but part of me knew the only reason she’d lash out was because she was hurt. “What?”

“She and Linda were walking on the quad and I walked by them and I didn’t want to talk to them so I tried to avoid them, but Linda waved me down like we were old friends. I shouldn’t have stopped but I did. She said something about Europe and how the food over there must be really fattening because I’d put on a lot of weight since last semester and Lana said something like hadn’t she heard — I’d seduced her boyfriend while you were practically hypothermic and then trapped you into marrying me because of the baby.”

More of me was furious than before. They were roommates. The little conversation had to have been at least partially scripted.

“Of course, part of that is true and the rest is the public truth,”

she continued. “Then Linda said she was going to go talk to someone and it was just me and Lana and I started to walk off but she grabbed my arm. She spoke quietly — there’s no chance anyone else heard — but she said that pregnancy didn’t agree with me and just made me look fat. That you still loved her — would always love her — and you told her two weeks ago at the library that if you were ever alone with her you wouldn’t be able to stop yourself from making love to her and that there was no way in hell I’d ever know what you were like in bed.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “She shouldn’t have said any of those things.”

She shrugged. “They’re true, aren’t they?”

“Mostly,” I admitted. “I do love her. I can’t imagine *not* loving her, though I suppose it’s possible. But pregnancy *does* agree with you, most of the time. You look great, not fat.” And that was the honest truth.

“And if you were alone with her?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I told her that’s why I couldn’t be alone with her. Because I don’t trust myself and I won’t break my vows to you, I won’t compromise my morals by being with her and I won’t turn her into the other woman. And we’ve already been over whether or not there’s a chance that we’ll make love someday,” I pointed out.

She didn’t say anything.

I sighed. “Regardless of the truth or untruth of any of the statements she made, she shouldn’t have said them. And she’s really not a vindictive person. She’s just hurting.”

She snorted. “I know we’re about as unconventional as it gets, but forgive me for not feeling terribly sorry for my husband’s ex.”

“I hurt her when I married you. If things had worked out as planned, it would have been a bit of a speed bump, but that’s about it. She would have understood. She wouldn’t have liked it, but she would have understood. When I told her we had to stay married and that we were over — at least for now, maybe forever — I broke her heart. She’s lashing out. She shouldn’t but she is.”

“Then tell her to lash out at you,” she said bitterly. “And don’t make excuses for her.”

“I’m not trying to make excuses for her. I’m trying to tell you how I think she feels and why she’s acting the way she is.”

She looked at me with tear filled eyes. “I know you don’t love me, Clark. I get that and I don’t love you like that either and so our marriage isn’t going to be conventional in more ways than just our lack of sex life. But be honest with me. If you were married to Lana and I said some of those things to her, what would you do?”

She wasn’t going for easy questions at all today, was she? “I’d tell you to back off and leave my wife alone,” I told her honestly. If that’s what I’d do for Lana, what should I do for Lois?

“Are you going to tell her that?”

I didn’t say anything as I rolled that thought through my mind.

“I mean, I don’t really expect you to,” she continued. “I wouldn’t be hurt like she is if the situation was reversed. I wouldn’t have any justification for lashing out at her like that. It’s not like you were my boyfriend who I thought was going to propose to me sometime in the next couple of years.”

“It wouldn’t have been in the next couple of years.”

She looked at me, surprised. “Really? When were you two going to get married?”

I shrugged. “Sometime,” I told her being vague, unsure why I’d commented at all.

“Tell me.”

“This summer,” I finally said. “We probably would have gotten married this summer.”

There was a short bark of laughter from the bed. “When were

you planning on proposing if you were going to marry her this summer?"

"In Paris." I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. "I talked to her dad over Christmas and told him I wanted to propose to her while we were in Europe. I didn't discuss when we'd get married with him, but it probably would have been this summer."

"So the night you went with me to Latislan was the night you were planning on proposing to her?"

"Something like that."

"Then why on Earth did you go with me?"

For a minute, I didn't say anything. Why *had* I gone with her?

Part 40

I sighed. I knew why I had gone. "I couldn't let you get hurt and I really didn't think we were going to be gone for several days," I pointed out. "The whole thing got way out of hand really quickly."

"It did that." She picked at the comforter. "You should have stayed."

"And what would you have done? If I hadn't been there, if I hadn't claimed the baby and we hadn't gotten married... what would have happened to you?" I knew what Navance had told me he'd planned for her — and the baby — but I wasn't about to tell her that.

"I'd probably be some Latislani general's love slave by now. Or more likely I'd be dead or in prison because I wouldn't be some Latislani general's love slave."

"So I should have let you and the baby die so I could propose to Lana?" I wasn't understanding her logic.

"You didn't know I was pregnant," she pointed out.

"That's not the point. I can't believe that you think I'd rather spend time with Lana — even if it was proposing to her — than save your life." I was incredulous. Sure things might not have turned out as planned, but to think that letting her die was the preferable option just didn't make sense to me.

She just shrugged. "You wouldn't be married to me now. You wouldn't be the guy that cheated on his girlfriend with his roommate and knocked her up and got stuck marrying her. And I wouldn't be the girl who seduced her half-dead roommate at her dad's cabin and then guilted him into marrying her and who's ignorant that he's still got a thing going on the side with his girlfriend."

"We don't have a thing going on the side," I pointed out.

"That's not the point either. My point is, that why was it necessary to ruin both our lives? Or really all three of them. Or four if you count the baby."

I stood again and stared at her, flabbergasted. "You think that by saving your life and the baby's life by marrying you, I ruined mine?"

"Didn't you?"

Answering questions with questions again. "I can't believe that. You're one of my best friends, Lois, even if we've been in a weird place the last few weeks. I would *die* to protect you."

"Dying's easy," she muttered.

I shook my head slightly. "What? You think it would be easy for me to die to save you?"

"A lot easier than living to save me," she shot back. "You jump in front of a bullet for me and you're gone. Dead. The end. You marry me and you're stuck with me for five years. Your love life is on hold. Your girl may or may not wait for you. Everyone thinks we're a couple of losers but for different reasons. You have to see your ex, who would be your fiancée right now, every day and convince yourself that some words you said in front of a chaplain half a world away mean that you can't take her somewhere and do what you've wanted to do for years — make

love to her. You're stuck with a wife, who's fat and pregnant and hormonal and can't take care of herself, much less you most of the time. You're trapped in a loveless, sexless marriage because of some military bastard in Europe and you can honestly tell me that it wouldn't be easier to just have died to save me?"

I just stared at her. "I wouldn't have married you if I didn't mean it — regardless of how long I thought it was going to last. It *did* occur to me that, for some reason, we wouldn't be able to get it annulled as soon as we got back and we might have to stay married for a while and there was still no question in my mind that I'd do it — I *couldn't* leave you there — no matter what."

"This wasn't supposed to be Lana's was it?" She pulled her wedding band off her finger and held it up.

"What? No. I got these in Latislan while you were in the hospital."

"I thought you were broke while we were in Europe. That you had just enough to get by on and that was it," she said angrily, putting the ring back on her finger.

I ran my hand through my hair. I hadn't planned on telling her how I got our wedding bands — or how I'd paid for the wedding even though the actual dollar amount wasn't all that high.

She called me on that too. "And how'd we pay for the wedding itself? I mean, it couldn't have been that expensive, could it? But you were broke. Do you have some huge credit card bill that I don't know about but now that we're married I'm half responsible for?"

I shook my head. "No."

"So, how'd we pay for it? There wasn't any money missing from my purse. Or did the Latislani government give us a marriage license out of the kindness of their hearts?"

"It was an American wedding license and I paid for it."

<Drop it, Lois,> I told her mentally.

I should have known better. "So how was it paid for?"

"I sold Lana's ring, okay?" I stared at the floor. I couldn't look at her. I'd saved for two years to buy that ring. Every penny I didn't need for something else went into a Smallville Community Bank savings account. I'd bought it when I went to Kansas City with my parents while I was home for Christmas. I'd even managed to do it without them knowing about it — which was a good thing now.

"You sold the engagement ring you were planning on giving your girlfriend so we could get married?"

"Yeah."

"Did you get fair market value for it?"

I looked at her, sitting on the bed, her cheeks still tear stained, looking hurt and defiant. "Close enough."

"I mean it, Clark. How much did you pay for that ring?"

I sighed and told her.

"And how much did you sell it for?"

"I sold it to one of the embassy Marines. It doesn't matter how much I got for it. He got a good deal and a ring for his girl and I got you out of there."

"It matters to me."

"Fine." I told her that, too. "It was enough to get the license and a couple of wedding bands for us. That's all I asked him for."

She rolled to her side of the bed and dug around in the side table until she pulled a checkbook out. She grabbed a pen off the top of the table and wrote furiously inside. She pulled the check off and held it out to me.

"What's that?"

"The difference."

"What difference?"

"The difference between what you paid for Lana's ring and what you got for it, plus half of what he paid you to cover my half of the license and my ring."

"I don't want it."

She shrugged. “It’s money my dad gave me access to for emergencies. If I’d known we needed it, I could have gotten to it in Latislan and you wouldn’t have had to sell Lana’s ring.”

I shook my head. “It was my choice, Lois. I’m not going to take it.”

“Take it. Daddy can afford it — at least for now — and if I’d known in Latislan, there wouldn’t have been any question about it, would there?”

I sighed. “I’m still not taking it.”

The phone rang, granting me a reprieve.

“You can get that,” she told me. “I don’t want to talk to anyone right now.”

I walked around the bed and picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Hey, honey!”

“Hi, Mom,” I said weakly.

She knew something was wrong. She always knew. That’s probably why she called. “What’s wrong?” Yep. She knew.

“Nothing.” What was I supposed to tell her? You interrupted a fight with my wife over my girlfriend — or ex-girlfriend — or whatever. Yeah, that would go over well.

“That’s not nothing.”

“Nothing I want to talk about,” I told her.

“Fight with Lois?” she asked sympathetically.

I didn’t respond immediately. “Yeah,” I finally said.

“You still owe us that whole story,” she reminded me.

“I know, Mom, and you’ll get it. I promise.” I hadn’t gotten talked to them when all three of us had time to hash this all out. But I hadn’t tried very hard either.

“Oh, I know we will. But that’s not what I called about. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

I stretched the long phone cord over the bed where Lois now lay curled up on her side and studiously ignoring me. I sat back on the loveseat. “What’s that?”

“Money.”

I cringed. “I figured this was coming.”

“We told you if you and Lana got married before you finished college, you’d be on your own.”

“I know.”

“But you didn’t marry Lana.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“But you are a married man now.”

“I know.”

“So, we’re left with the dilemma about whether or not we continue to send you financial support.”

I sighed. That sounded like I was being cut off. And they were probably right to. If I was grown-up enough to get married and get a girl pregnant, not in that order but the truth as they knew it, I was grown-up enough to take care of my wife and baby.

“Your marriage to Lois caught us off-guard — and I’m guessing it caught the two of you off guard too.”

“It did, Mom. Believe me, it did.”

“And you two weren’t financially prepared for it, were you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Is she still getting any support from her dad?”

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly. “We haven’t talked about it. I’m not even sure she knows.”

“You need to,” she told me gently. “Money fights are one of the leading causes of divorce. You have to talk about it.”

I couldn’t tell her Latislani dictators were going to be the reason for our divorce. “I will talk to her about it, I promise.”

“Do either of you have jobs right now?”

“No,” I said quietly, still ashamed that getting one hadn’t even occurred to me like I knew it would have if I’d married Lana.

“And Lois getting one probably isn’t a good plan right now, is it?”

I leaned back and put my feet back up. “No. The baby’s taking a lot out of her. I don’t think she could handle anything else on top of school.” I hadn’t taken my eyes off of Lois as I spoke and she tensed up when I said that.

“*Can* you get a job? With all your schoolwork and helping take care of Lois could you handle a job?”

“Probably. I’ve never needed much sleep so that would help, but I haven’t really looked into it yet.”

“Have you told her about that yet?” Mom asked as gently as she could.

They were disappointed enough in me, and I hated that. I knew if we told them the whole truth they’d support us no matter what and even try to help us find some kind of loophole or something, but we’d agreed that no one would know the whole truth. Lana knew too much as it was. And this was just one more reason for them to be disappointed in me. And even if we did tell them the whole truth, they’d want me to tell her about Krypton. Because she was my wife, no matter the reason, and she should know. I stifled a sigh.

“I’ll take your silence as a ‘no,’” she finally said. “But we’ll talk about that later.”

<Don’t count on it, Mom.> I said to myself. I wasn’t going to tell her anytime soon. Not if I had anything to say about it, but I wasn’t sure I was going to...

“But back to the money thing.”

Right. Back to that. “What about it?”

“Your dad and I talked about it a lot the last couple weeks and we’re going to keep sending the money we have been on a couple of conditions.”

Great. Conditions. Who knew what my mom had concocted. “What conditions?”

“As long as Lois doesn’t need you at home to help take care of her — like if she ends up on bed rest or something — you get a job.”

“That sounds... reasonable,” I told her.

“It is. We seriously considered cutting it off all together because of the way you’ve handled things, but that wouldn’t affect just you anymore and that’s something else you need to realize,” she said firmly. “It would have affected Lois and our grandbaby and you already said she’s in no shape to work right now. That leaves you and I doubt you can make enough to support the three of you at the moment, not without help from us and her dad — which you’re not sure is still coming. And she may need you to stay home with her more than either of you think and that would hinder how much you can work too. It’s not just about you anymore, son. I know you always looked out for Lana, but this is different. This is your *wife* and your *child* we’re talking about.”

“I know that, Mom. Believe me, I know that.” I ran a hand down my weary face and noted Lois’ slowed heartbeat. It sounded like she was finally getting some much needed rest. That was good and it meant she wouldn’t interrogate me about this later.

“Okay, so job. Second, you have to tell her about yourself. Soon. She deserves to know that.”

I should have known. “I don’t know if I can, Mom.”

“It doesn’t matter if you *can*, Clark. She’s your wife and she’s having your baby. She has to know. And since she’s your wife, I’m going to assume you’re making love to her on at least a semi-regular basis and we talked about that years ago. That it wouldn’t be responsible of you to have sex with Lana — or anyone else — without telling her about yourself. We talked about it and we could understand some hypothermic induced haze — and we still don’t understand how that happened to you...”

“I don’t either,” I interrupted. “And, while I’m not sure it’s anybody’s business but mine and Lois’, she hasn’t had the energy for that kind of thing.” No, I wasn’t making love to my wife on a

regular basis, but they didn't need to know why. And I *had* told the truth. There was no way Lois would have had the energy for that since we got married.

"Good. Not good that she doesn't have the energy, but good that you're man enough not to push her when she's like this."

"I would never do that, Mom!" I said louder than I meant to. I lowered my voice as Lois stirred. "She may be my wife, but I'd never push her into something she didn't want — for whatever reason."

"I didn't think so, but it's still good to hear." She took a deep breath. "And one other thing."

"What? Do you want a copy of her medical records to prove I'm the father?" My voice dripped with sarcasm — the kind my mom hated, the kind that always got me in trouble.

"Clark Jerome Davis Kent! I don't care if you are married, you will not speak to me with that tone of voice."

I knew I shouldn't have done it — it was the one thing guaranteed to get me full named. "Yes, ma'am," I said contritely.

"For the record, we believe you, but we also think a DNA test would be a very bad idea."

"I know. I do, too." And only partly for the same reasons they did. Also because a DNA test would *prove* the baby wasn't mine.

"Okay, so the other thing. We want to talk to you about all of this in person. Soon."

"I don't know when I can make it Smallville, Mom," I said evasively.

"Nonsense. You could be here in a few minutes if you wanted to. We're willing to wait until Spring Break. If Lois can't come — or isn't up to coming because of being sick or whatever — that's fine, you'll stay in Metropolis and fly out to see us one night. If she's up for travelling with you that way, she can come too. If she's up to the road trip, we want you two to come here for Break. We'll pay for gas and one hotel room each way. Nothing fancy, but a bed for her to sleep in so she's not on the road for over twenty hours straight."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, for whatever reason we still don't understand, you two got into this. You were Lana's ride home for Break so, if you do come, you'll have to at least offer to bring her with you. If the two of you aren't comfortable sharing a hotel room with her, then you'll have to spring for the second one yourself, got it?"

I groaned. Both of them would absolutely hate that. They hadn't really been friends before all of this started and sharing the same suite hadn't been a whole lot of fun. Sharing a car — probably Lois' beloved Jeep — with them for a total of four days was going to be a nightmare.

"You have to live up to your obligations, Clark. And one obligation you had was to bring Lana back here for Break. Even though you two aren't a couple anymore, you owe it to her to at least offer to bring her with you if you're coming anyway."

"I'll talk to Lois," I promised. "She mentioned that you'd said something about it when you talked to her a couple weeks ago and she said then she'd think about it."

"We love you, Clark. And by extension that means we love Lois and the baby, even though we've never met her — or we want to, at least and we want to get to know our daughter-in-law. And while you'll always be our son and part of our family, you have your own family to take care of now."

I sighed. She was right. "I know, Mom. I haven't been doing a great job at that, I know that, but I'm trying to do better. I promise. I was thinking a little while ago that I need to get a job soon."

"We love you, very much."

"I know, Mom. I love both of you, too."

"You sound tired."

"I am."

"Then why don't you get some rest and we'll talk again

soon."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I mean what we said though. If you don't get a job and tell her everything by the time you talk to us over Spring Break, the checks *will* stop."

"I know, Mom. I get it."

"Give Lois a hug for me."

"Will do." Well, I wouldn't really, but she didn't need to know that.

We said good night and hung up. She'd given me a lot to think about, but it was nice to know that they were still going to send some money. It wasn't much but it would help. And we weren't going to have a place to live come mid-May. Many of the other couples in the building — those that wanted to live on campus — had applied for the apartments that would be vacated in mid-May by graduates or couples moving for other reasons. Those now had a waiting list. Getting us into this apartment had been a minor miracle. Getting us into one for the summer was going to be impossible. Unless Sam, by some chance, decided to let us stay with him and Lois was willing to do so, we were going to have to find a place off-campus to live.

I'd had my head in the sand for way too long already. I needed to figure out how I was going to provide for my wife and baby no matter how we'd ended up here.

Part 41
March 2003
Lois

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I held the paperwork in my hand and just stared at it.

Lois Lane no longer existed.

I was now Lois *Kent*.

I couldn't even hyphenate my last name because of the Latislani bastard. At least, Daniel had recommended against it.

And I hated what my life had become. I had become a recluse. I rarely saw Joe or Les or Debbie or Julie or any of my other friends. Instead, I was in a shabby hole of an apartment virtually any time I wasn't in class or grocery shopping or something equally mundane.

But I didn't see much choice in the matter. When I was in public, I needed to be with Clark and be all lovey-dovey. I preferred a life of solitude to that. And I did still manage to chat with them from time to time — but online using AIM or Gmail, not in person. It had both advantages and disadvantages.

Of course, Clark also had my dream job. Okay, not my *dream* job, but for my dream employer. He'd managed to get on in the mail room at the Daily Planet. A foot in the door for someday, he'd said.

The key turned in the lock and I sighed as I set the papers down and picked up my laptop, popping it open. I waited for it to come out of hibernation or whatever it was called when it was closed and went back to the Word document that was waiting for me.

"What are you working on?" Clark asked as he set his backpack down.

I shrugged. "American Lit."

"Ah. The Mark Twain paper."

I nodded. "Did you get yours done?"

He shook his head. "Not quite. About half, I guess. What about your English paper?"

I sighed. "I haven't started it." It was a hard paper to write. The instructions weren't easy in the first place, but it was more than that. The topic was what was so hard.

We had to write a paper, in first person. And it had to be partially from our perspective and partially from the perspective of at least one other person. The event or events we wrote about had to be pivotal points in our lives. And — this was the kicker

— as much as possible, the other person or persons involved had to read the paper and write a note to the professor saying that they had read the paper and that it was a reasonably accurate depiction of events.

There were a number of things I could go with to write about. Heck, I could probably write about my marriage to Clark, except that I couldn't tell anyone about that — and I really didn't want to try to get in his head to write part of it from his perspective. And I really *really* didn't want to give it to him to read. The most obvious story to write would be about the death of my mom and sister, but that would entail writing about my dad's pain and suffering and then having him read it — after trying to get into his head about what he was thinking and feeling when Mom and Lucy were killed in a car accident. I sighed.

Clark was speaking. "Why haven't you started it? It's due the week after Spring Break."

"I know when it's due, Miss Money Penny," I snapped at him. I'd wondered a time or two what he was writing about and if it had anything to do with his desire to name the baby 'Christopher' if I had a boy, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to ask him about. The night he'd told me that much, he'd refused to explain any more about why that was the name he wanted, but he did promise to tell me someday.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He sighed. "Spring Break is in eight days. Have you decided if you want to go to Smallville or not?"

"Do you want to?"

"Of course, I'd like to go home and see my folks, but I'd understand if you didn't want to go."

"And since we need to do whatever over Spring Break together..." I sighed. "You wouldn't be able to go either."

He shook his head. "I should probably tell you something, though..."

"What?"

"I told you Mom and Dad said they'd pay for gas and a hotel room each way, right?"

I nodded.

He leaned forward in the kitchen chair and rested his elbows on his knees. "There was a stipulation with that."

"What?"

He didn't look at me. "Well, I told you they'd keep sending money if I got a job, which I did, but for this they said that we have to at least offer to bring Lana with us since I was supposed to be her ride home and if we didn't want to share a room with her we'd have to spring for another one ourselves."

I sighed. That would be just great. And we'd have to take my Jeep. I'd figured we would anyway, but with Lana... That would be just peachy.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

Tears filled my eyes as I thought of the letter I'd received the day before — the one I hadn't shown him yet. "Go," I whispered.

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Clark

I stared at her for a long minute before nodding. "Okay. I'll tell my folks." And talk to Lana. I didn't think she'd actually go with us. I didn't think there was any way she'd want to subject herself to that or something. "We can leave about noon on Friday, we'll probably get there sometime Saturday evening and stay until the next Saturday sometime depending on how far we want to drive on Sunday."

She nodded.

"Are you sure?" I asked her. I couldn't believe she'd really be willing to drive twenty hours each way with Lana in her Jeep — or any other vehicle for that matter.

She nodded again, before sighing and reaching into the top of the desk drawer next to her. She handed me a piece of paper.

I glanced at it and froze. "When did you get this?"

"Yesterday."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I didn't see you yesterday after I got it. I was asleep when you got home," she reminded me, a hint of accusation in her voice. "And I really didn't want to tell you before class this morning."

I read the letter from Navance. It was the third one we'd gotten since we left Latislan. The first one had come the day after the big fight Lois and I had over what Lana had said to her. The second one had come about three weeks later and now this one. It was essentially the same as the other two had been. Threatening us, the baby, everyone we knew basically. The last line caught my attention. 'Don't forget what I told you, boy.' Apparently, it had caught Lois', too.

"What does he mean by that last bit?"

"About what he told me?" I tried to play innocent.

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He practically hissed at me. "There is no way you will be able to claim her child."

"Why not?" I asked, arms crossed in front of me in the hall of the hospital.

"She will not be able to leave the hospital except under the escort of my men. And if you did manage to get her out, I would come after her and her child. You would never know when — day or night — my men will arrive and you will never see either of them again. No one will see her again and, if she has a son, no one will see him until he takes over my empire. When she leaves here, she will be taken to my house where she will live in my care until the child is born. At that point, I will decide what to do with her."

"You'd kill her?" I whispered. I'd fly her out of here before that.

He laughed — one of those evil laughs I thought only existed on TV or in bad movies. "Oh, no, child. I will decide if I want to keep her for myself or share her with my comrades. It all depends on how satisfied she keeps me between now and then. And I will make sure she sees exactly how her child is being raised and unless she cooperates, her child will die. I could marry her but that offer her some protections, and I wouldn't do that."

My stomach churned at the thought of how Lois would be treated. "How is the child going to be raised?"

"Ah, the baby will be taken from its mother at birth and raised as I wish. If the child is a boy, I will raise him to be what I wish him to be. A man after my own heart, if you will." He leered. "And if the child is a girl, as soon as she is old enough, she will follow in the footsteps of her mother. Until then, she will be a servant in my house."

My eyes went wide. "You wouldn't."

Navance moved closer to me. "There are many men who like very young, innocent women," he whispered in my ear. "I'm sure you do, as well."

I wanted to retch at the insinuation. I *had* to get her out of there. I *could not* let him get his hands on Lois or the baby.

Not here.

Not now.

Not ever.

><~><~><

"Just what I told you before. That you didn't see his face when he threatened you and the baby." I couldn't tell her the truth. Not what he'd planned on doing with her and the baby once he got his hands on them. That was why I'd helped set up the break-out and helped her get into the embassy and married her.

And why I was going to stay married her until the baby was five years old or someone else decided they'd had enough of Navance and shot him.

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Lois

I closed my eyes. I had to pee and they weren't going to let

me.

Not yet. And Clark wasn't there yet either. He was supposed to meet me at my doctor's office for the ultrasound, but he was nowhere to be seen. And my appointment, officially, was ten minutes earlier. I flipped idly through a magazine I had literally had less than no interest in. I didn't even look up when Clark sat beside me.

"Sorry I'm late," he said quietly.

I shrugged.

"I got... held up."

I shrugged again.

"When's your appointment?"

"Ten minutes ago. Thanks for being here." I tried to let *just* enough sarcasm creep into my voice. I knew he got the point.

The door opened. "Lois?"

I didn't look at Clark as I grabbed my purse and headed for the hallway. A minute later, we were in the ultrasound room.

"Ready, Mrs. Kent?" the technician asked.

I hadn't gotten used to that at all, but I nodded, pulling my pants down a bit further as she tucked a washcloth into the waist band.

Clark sat next to me and stared, seemingly unseeing at the monitor.

"Here we go." The woman pushed a couple of buttons and pressed the wand into my stomach. A minute later, she pointed to the screen. "There's your baby."

Tears filled my eyes as she continued to take measurements and pointed out things like the spine and heart and eye sockets.

"Do you want to know if it's a boy or a girl?"

I shook my head. "No. I want to be surprised." It was so counter-intuitive. I normally had to know everything, but for some reason, I didn't want to know. I had when I'd had the first ultrasound, but not this time. Maybe it was the insinuations from Navance about what he'd do with the baby if he ever got his hands on him or her. Maybe by not knowing if I was having a boy or girl, I could keep that piece of information from him and keep us both a bit safer or something.

She smiled. "That was always my choice."

A few minutes later, she removed the wand and used the washcloth to wipe off my stomach. "Why don't you go to the bathroom? There's a cup in there for you so Terri can check it for you."

I nodded and headed that direction. When I came back out, Clark was standing by the door waiting for me. We headed out to the waiting room to wait for our turn to see Dr. McConnell.

"Here," he said quietly, handing me the slips of paper with pictures on them.

"Thanks," I said in similar tones. I flipped through them, staring at each one. This was the life growing inside me.

"Pretty amazing, huh?"

I nodded, tears in my eyes. "Yeah. Pretty amazing."

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Clark

I took the pictures back from her when she offered them.

This was the reason I was doing this. This was the reason why I'd married Lois and why I was staying married to her. To keep Navance away from her and from the baby, I'd do just about anything.

I turned my hearing on and listened to the fluttering sound that had lulled me to sleep so many nights recently. I stared at the picture of the baby sucking his thumb as I listened.

I couldn't let anything happen to either one of them.

"Lois." I looked up and saw a nurse standing there, holding the door open.

"Hi, Terri," Lois said with a smile.

"How're you feeling?" Terri asked as she took us to a room.

This was the first visit I'd made with Lois. So far, she'd

managed to schedule them while I was in school, but she'd mentioned that she figured I ought to be here for this one, with the ultrasound and all.

And I'd almost missed it. I'd heard about a lost little boy in the Arizona desert and had flown out there to help find him. No one had known I was there but I was able to direct the searchers to the right place. Of course, I couldn't tell Lois that. Not yet. Not until I told her about myself. She was annoyed with me for being late and I didn't really blame her.

"We won't check the heartbeat since Lydia just did that with the ultrasound."

Lois kicked her shoes off and stepped up on the scale. "Do we really have to do this *everytime*?"

Terri laughed. "Nearly everyone says that."

"I wonder why," she muttered.

Terri laughed again and I sat in one of the chairs along the wall as Lois climbed onto the table. "Kristi will be in in a few minutes." She left and closed the door behind her.

"Does everyone call your doctor Kristi?" I asked. "Back home, everyone would say Dr. Kristi."

She shook her head. "She was my mom's doctor for a year or so before she died. She'd worked with both my parents while she was in med school. When she did that other ultrasound, she told me we'd been through enough together that I could call her Kristi." She shook her head slightly. "I still can't bring myself to do it, though."

There was a knock on the door. "Hello?" The door swung open and the woman I recognized from the brief meeting in the ER entered. "How are you two doing today?"

She seemed slightly uneasy.

"We're good," Lois said. "As long as you don't tell us that something's wrong with the baby."

Dr. McConnell smiled and shook her head. "Nope. Everything looks great. You look about three or four days farther along than you should be, but that's no big deal. It's pretty common actually. The baby could stay a few days ahead, or slow down a bit later, but either way is fine. Do you have any questions for me at this point?"

Lois glanced at me. "Is it okay for me to go to Kansas next week? We're driving."

She nodded. "You'll probably need to take frequent restroom breaks and you need to stretch your legs at least every couple of hours." She took a piece of paper out of a drawer and wrote on it. "That's my home and cell phone numbers. Call me if you need anything while you're gone."

"Thanks, Dr. McConnell," Lois said, taking it from her.

"Kristi, please." She grinned and leaned against the counter. "I talked to your dad last week. How're things going with his girlfriend?"

Lois glanced at me. "I haven't really been home much. Things have been pretty crazy."

The doctor looked Lois straight in the eye for a long moment, then nodded. "I bet." She set the file on the counter. "Why don't you lie back and we'll measure that stomach of yours?"

Lois did as she was told and a minute later the doctor said she was measuring half a week bigger than she should be, but that was in keeping with the ultrasound. She reiterated that it was nothing to be concerned about.

A few minutes of chit chat after that, Lois hopped down from the table and slid her tennis shoes back on.

Dr. McConnell gave her a hug. "Have a safe trip and I'll see you in a month."

"Thanks." Lois headed out into the hall.

I started to follow her, but a hand on my arm stopped me.

I found myself looking down into the brown eyes of the doctor.

"I know this isn't easy, Clark. Becoming a parent so

unexpectedly and all, but please... Take care of her.”

Something in her tone made me wonder if Lois, feeling comfortable with the doctor-patient confidentiality thing, had told her everything.

“I will,” I promised. “I’ll take care of her.”

Part 42

Lois

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Clark sighed. “I don’t suppose your Jeep plays MP3s.”

I looked up from where I was working on my laptop. “No. Why?”

“I can only fit like twelve songs on a CD. We’re going to be on the road for twenty, twenty-one hours. I can fit like 130, 140 songs on a CD if they’re mp3s.”

“You want to make a CD with 130 songs on it?” I raised a brow at him.

“Well, not necessarily, but more than twelve would be nice so I don’t have to change it all the time.”

I shook my head. “It’s my car. What makes you think you get to pick the music anyway?”

“Are you planning on driving the whole way to Kansas?”

I bit my lip. “Ah, actually, I don’t really do too well driving long distances. I mean, Bremerton was one thing, but halfway to Kansas... probably not.”

He leaned on one elbow and grinned at me. “Driver picks the music.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Do you still need 130 songs?”

“No, but more than twelve would be nice,” he repeated.

I set the laptop down and reached into the desk drawer.

“Here,” I said tossing him something.

“What’s this?” he asked, picking up the small, white object.

“My old iPod. I got a new one for Christmas. I have an adapter so it’ll play in the tape deck in the Jeep. You can load a bunch of your music on there and make all the playlists you want.”

“Thanks.” He sounded like he meant it. “Now I just have to figure out how to do that. An MP3 player was never real high on my ‘to buy’ list — I only have a new laptop because it was a graduation present from my folks.”

I laughed and tossed him the USB cable. “You’ll need that and your laptop. Do you at least know how to load your CDs onto the computer?”

He nodded. “That I can do.”

“That’s all you really need to know. It’s pretty easy.” I held my hand out for it. “I haven’t erased any of mine. Do you want me to?”

He shook his head. “Nah. Is there still room?”

“Half full.”

“Well, not all of your music is bad.”

“Not *all* of your music is bad either,” I tossed back as I pulled my new — black — iPod out of my backpack. “Mind if I upload some of it?”

He shook his head. “Not at all.” He walked to the media/bookcase on top of the desk and pulled his CDs off, tossing them all on the bed. He sat on the opposite corner from me. “NCIS is about to start, isn’t it?”

I nodded and turned it on, pausing it.

“Aren’t we going to watch it?”

“Wait twenty minutes and we won’t have to sit through commercials.”

“Gotcha.”

I started picking through the CDs in the middle of the bed. “Eclectic.” He had everything from Brad Paisley and Faith Hill to big band swing music and jazz to Green Day, the Beatles, 3 Doors Down, REM and just about everything else except Gangsta Rap.

“I like all kinds of music.” He held out his hand. “Give me one?”

I grabbed one. “Randy Travis? Really?”

“Hey! There’s nothing wrong with Randy Travis,” Clark pointed out. He flipped the case over and read the list of songs. I could see his face fall slightly, but he covered it well. He tossed the case onto the love seat. “Something else.”

I handed him a CD from a group I didn’t recognize.

“Ah, big band. Swing music. That’ll keep us awake in Ohio.”

He was quiet as we both loaded music onto our computers and I paused NCIS long enough to explain to him how to make playlists and transfer them. The episode was pretty gross, but I managed to stay out of the bathroom.

“Here we go. Theme song for the road.” He clicked on his computer a couple of times and Rascal Flatts’ ‘Life is a Highway’ started playing.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m taking my ear plugs.”

He grinned. “How about this one?” ‘Chattahoochee’ was next.

“No.”

“This one?”

I sighed as ‘Achy, Breaky Heart’ filled the room. “No. I’m going to wear my ear plugs the whole way to Kansas.”

He just grinned at me. “How about... this one?”

‘He Didn’t Have to Be’ cut off the smart aleck remark I was going to make about ‘Friends in Low Places’ or ‘How Do Ya Like Me Now’ or whatever other song I’d thought he was going to pick. “I like that one. No ear plugs necessary for Brad Paisley.”

“Good. He’s one of my favorites.”

“Mine, too,” I told him, amazed that we’d managed to find a little bit of common ground.

He looked like he was going to say something as the song played on, but he just sighed instead. Finally, he spoke. “Are you packed?”

I nodded. “Yep — bag’s over there.”

He stood but hesitated. “Do you want to call Lana to have her bring her stuff over or do you want me to?”

I wanted to cry. I really hadn’t thought that she’d accept the offer but she had. I wondered if there was something sinister behind it, but I didn’t have much choice at the moment.

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Clark

This was going to be a nightmare.

I loved Lana, but I was married to Lois and I had promised to protect her.

And I was getting ready to spend a total of four of the next ten days in the car with the two of them. I sighed. I couldn’t have imagined this when I’d married Lois, but at the same time I knew I’d done the right thing, no matter how hard the next week was going to be.

Lois interrupted my thoughts. “Do we really need to pack tonight? I have a suitcase that can go tonight. The rest of it — my pillow, blanket, laptop, backpack, bathroom stuff — those can’t go until tomorrow anyway.”

She had a point. “Well, I can get most of it packed in the morning before class,” I conceded. “Though it would help if I had as much of Lana’s stuff as possible by then so there’s less rearranging to do once we pick her up,” I told her. “We can’t load the cooler until right before we leave, so we’ll have to come back here anyway and can pick up laptops and stuff then.”

“Do we even have food to snack on?”

I sighed and finally decided to send Lana an email rather than calling her was the best plan. I was fairly certain she’d be online. “There. Email sent to her so neither one of us has to call her.” She nodded. “I told her a couple hours because she probably isn’t packed yet. Once I hear back, we can go hit the store and then stop and pick her stuff up.” My ‘new message’ box flashed.

“She’ll be downstairs in two hours.” I sighed and reached for my shoes. “Ready?”

She nodded and reached for her purse. “Let’s go.”

I grabbed our suitcases. “May as well take the two of these now — less to deal with in the morning.”

She nodded again and locked the door behind us.

Twenty minutes later we were pushing a cart through CostMart. We picked up some snack cakes for me and some crackers for her. We got other favorite snacks and I picked up a couple things I knew Lana would want.

“Do you think we should get drinks or stop and get them at convenience stores?” Lois asked. “Those are usually pretty cheap.”

“Do they fit in your cup holders?” Not all of them would I was sure.

“Good point. Get some and when we happen to be stopped anyway, if we want something cheaper...?”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.” I looked at the cart.

“Anything else you want? New book? CD? Movie to watch on the laptop?”

She shook her head. “I downloaded some TIVO to the laptop and have some DVDs packed in my bag. I’ve got an outlet in the Jeep and a power adapter, too so that’s not a big deal. I’ve actually got a car adapter for my laptop, too. And I, uh, downloaded a couple stories from the web I’ve been wanting to read,” she said, not looking at me as she spoke.

“Ah. The NCIS Tony and Abby stories you were reading?”

She shrugged, but turned eight shades of red.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that. I read a couple of them. They weren’t bad.”

“Well, I finally found a couple decent authors who’ve actually finished a few stories. A bunch of the first ones I found were posted in really short segments by people who had no clue about sentence structure or spell check, much less how to develop a plot or finish a story. This one lady — she goes by Beth, but I have no idea if that’s her real name or not — has written a couple that looked good and got good reviews. Another one named Bananna, Great Defender Of All That Is Daniel — whatever that means — has, too, but hers are more Tony and Ziva stories.”

“Ah.”

She changed the subject. “Did your boss give you a hard time about taking the week off?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I told him about it when he hired me, that I might be going home for Break and he said it would be fine.” I paused. “I also told him I’d be staying over the summer, so he was more willing to go ahead and hire me than he would have been if I wasn’t going to be in town after the semester ends.” I pushed the cart down another aisle. “I *did* meet Perry White today, though.”

She stopped and stared at me. “You did not.”

“I did.”

“And?”

I shrugged. “And what?”

“Tell me all about it. He’s my hero.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow. It shouldn’t have surprised me, but she *did* want to be a reporter so it made sense.

“Give, Kent.”

“Not much to tell. I finished the marketing floor early and Skip asked for help so I took a bunch of his mail and ended up in the bull pen. I dropped off mail for Norcross and Judd, but they weren’t there and then I knocked on his door. He told me to come in, I handed him the mail. He said ‘thanks, kid’ and I left. That’s it.”

“Exciting,” she said rolling her eyes as she grabbed a can of Pringles.

“Told you.”

“Still,” she sighed. “You’re two steps ahead of me.”

I leaned on the cart and turned to look at her. “It’ll be okay. You’ll make it. You’ll be there before too long. We’ll work together. We’ll be the next Norcross and Judd,” I told her with a grin.

She stared at me for a long minute before turning away. I thought I saw tears in her eyes but I couldn’t imagine why.

Before long, we’d checked out and stuck the bags in the back of the truck. When we went somewhere together — which wasn’t often — and Lois didn’t want to drive, we took the truck. When she did, we took the Jeep.

We drove in silence to campus. I could see Lana struggling to get out of the front door with her suitcase as we pulled up. “Do you mind if I help her?” I asked hesitantly.

She shook her head. “No. Go ahead.”

I climbed out and headed to the door. “Let me get it,” I said, reaching for the bag.

She paused, but then nodded. My hand brushed hers and the spark was still there. I made myself keep moving and turned to go back to the truck. I hoisted the bag easily into the back.

“Are we taking the truck?” Lana asked me.

“No, but Lois didn’t feel like driving tonight so we took the truck to the store.” I reached for the bag she had in her other hand.

“That’s my laptop. I don’t really want to lug it around tomorrow and we’re leaving right after our eleven o’clock classes, right?”

I hesitated. “Yeah. We’ll have to go back to the apartment to get the laptops and cooler and stuff, so we can keep it there for you. We’ve got hotel reservations just over the Indiana border tomorrow night so we’re hoping to be on the road no later than 12:30 or so.”

She had her arms crossed in front of her. “Do you want to pick me up or me to meet you there?”

I thought about it for a minute. “It’s a lot easier to get on the freeway from there, but it’s up to you.”

“I’ll meet you over there then.”

I nodded. “Apartment 5A. If you take the elevator, it’s all the way down on the end on the right.”

She shook her head slightly. “I think I’ll probably just meet you downstairs.”

“Okay.”

“See you tomorrow.” She paused, as though she was going to say something else, but she didn’t and then turned and walked away.

There was a hole in my heart as I watched her go through the door and wait for the elevator. Before I realized I was doing it, I tuned my hearing in and heard her heartbeat and her tears.

I sighed and climbed back in the truck. Lois was in the middle, but I figured that was just for show and sure enough, as soon as we were out of sight, she moved.

“She’s going to meet us here,” I told her as I pulled the truck into a parking spot. “Traffic at Weller is bound to be worse than here with everyone leaving for Break.”

She nodded. “That’s probably the fastest way out of here.”

We climbed out of the truck and I grabbed some bags to take straight to the Jeep. “Well, you know your way around Metropolis better than I do. Do you want to drive until we hit the outskirts?”

“If you don’t want to.” She didn’t look at me as she unlocked the Jeep and I put the bags in. She locked it back and headed towards the apartment building.

I stared after her for a long minute, looking through the wall as she waited for the elevator. I saw her swipe at her cheeks. So that was why she’d left me with the rest of it — she didn’t want me to see her cry. I didn’t mind taking the other stuff inside, not really, but I wasn’t sure what I could do to make any of it better. For either of them. For me.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I was doing what I had to do to protect all of us.

Part 43

Lois

I sighed as I stuck another DVD in my bag.

“Ready?” Clark asked as he picked up his laptop bag and backpack.

“I think so.” He held his hand out and I gave him the bag.

“Why don’t you finish with the cooler and I’ll be back up for it in a minute?”

I nodded as he left. I sat on the bed and picked up the frame from the top of the DVD player. Pictures of my baby. I thought about taking them with me, but I’d scanned them all into my computer and Clark had actually emailed them to his parents so it wasn’t like we needed them.

I sighed and headed for the ‘kitchen’. I pulled the sodas out of the fridge and the lunch meat and other cold stuff we’d bought for the trip.

I loaded it all then took the bag of ice out of the freezer and was pouring it into the cooler when the door opened. “Almost done,” I said without looking up.

“Nice place,” came a female voice.

I froze. What was she doing up here?

“Lana was already here so she came up with me to see if there was anything she could help carry down,” Clark said, uncomfortably.

I shook my head. “Just the cooler and my purse.” I purposefully picked up the frame I’d left lying on the bed and set it on top of the dresser before I picked up my purse. “Ready.”

Clark hefted the cooler. “Let’s go then.”

What followed had to be the most awkward few moments of my life to date, but I was sure that the next two days would prove to be even worse. I locked the door behind us and was grateful that the elevator hadn’t moved and we could get right in. Clark had pulled the Jeep up earlier so it was only a short walk. He stuck the cooler behind the passenger seat, making sure we’d be able to open it.

“Did you put my stuff up front?” I asked him, hoping he’d remembered so I wouldn’t have to dig around the back for it once we traded drivers.

“Yeah, it’s all in the front floorboard.”

“Thanks.”

Lana slid into the back seat on the driver’s side and I smiled slightly to myself at the perturbed look on her face. She didn’t look thrilled about it. What did she think? She was going to sit up front with Clark? Even if he wasn’t married to me, it was my car, for crying out loud.

I noticed her eyes widen a bit when I climbed into the driver’s seat. I stuck a Dave Matthews Band CD in and turned it up as I pulled onto the street.

An hour later, we were far enough on the outskirts of Metropolis that Clark felt comfortable taking over. I wondered what he’d pick now that it was his turn. I settled into the passenger side and smiled to myself. Lana had determinedly said she was fine sitting on the driver’s side, but when Clark adjusted the seat, it had left her without much leg room.

Finally, I took a swig of my Sprite and put it back in the holder. I pulled my laptop out of the bag and popped it open.

“Working on your English paper?” Clark asked.

“Yeah. I’ve got to get it done sometime this week,” I reminded him.

“You finished Mark Twain?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“Good for you.” He sounded genuinely happy for me. “I still have about three pages to go.”

I could almost hear Lana seething in the back seat. “Would you mind to proof it for me later?”

“No problem.” He glanced at me. “Um, I have no idea how to do it so could you plug in my iPod and start the first playlist?”

I balanced the laptop on my knees as I hooked it up and set the first playlist to repeat. If he wanted me to change it later, I would.

“Thanks.” His hands drummed the steering wheel as ‘Life Is A Highway’ blared from the speakers.

I rolled my eyes and dug my ear plugs out of my backpack.

“What?” He grinned at me.

“You know what.” I stuck them in and turned back to the laptop. I had planned on keeping my ears tuned to whatever conversation happened between the two of them, but with the music up that loud, they weren’t going to be conversing much anyway. The next song was ‘Chattahoochee’ and I rolled my eyes at him again as he smiled.

I didn’t really mind it, but that wasn’t the point. I’d hoped that something would happen exactly like it did. Something that would indicate to Lana that we were closer than we really were.

I could have just turned my iPod on with my ear buds, but I decided not to. If they were talking, I’d be able to at least sort of hear it if there wasn’t other music playing in my ears.

I gazed at the blank screen in front of me as we drove into Pennsylvania.

I had no idea what I was going to write about. After I’d stared at the blinking cursor for about thirty miles, I snapped the laptop shut.

“Still not coming to you?” Clark asked, sympathetically, turning the sound down as I took the ear plugs out.

“No.” I sighed. “I mean, I know what I’m going to write about, but the words just aren’t coming. I can’t get into my dad’s head enough.”

“What are you talking about?” Lana asked from the back seat.

“An assignment,” I told her. “For *our* English class.” I stressed ‘our’ slightly.

“You might try writing your part and see if you can get into his head later. That’s what I did. I mean, I wrote the stuff from my perspective first and then my mom’s. Some stuff I knew had to be from hers though,” he said, thoughtfully. “I mean, I couldn’t write about something when I hadn’t been there and there were a couple things that I wasn’t there for but still related to the overall story.”

“How long is yours?”

He winced. “Probably twenty-five pages right now. I need to edit it down some.”

“Well, he said fifteen to thirty so you’re still within that.”

“I think I’m still going to edit some of it out.”

“Am I in it?” came a voice from the back seat.

Clark sighed. “You’re mentioned, but you don’t feature prominently if that’s what you want to know.”

“What did you write about?” Lana practically demanded.

Clark didn’t say anything for a long moment, staring out at black top running through Pennsylvania. “Being a founding,” he finally said. “My parents. Them taking me in when they could have turned me over to Social Services or something. Being parents when they didn’t have to be. It ends when I was five. You still thought I had cooties when we were five, remember?”

“I remember pushing you down when you tried to kiss me and when you tried to dance with me.” I thought she sounded a bit smug.

Clark glanced at me nervously. “It was a wedding. I thought that’s what you were supposed to do at weddings.”

I sighed, wanting to stop this conversation before it went any further. “Clark, can we stop at the next gas station that looks decent?”

“You okay?”

“Just need to pee. Junior’s playing with my bladder.”

“We’ve only been on the road a couple hours,” Lana complained. “If we have to stop this often, it’s going to take us forever.”

“That’s the way it goes, Lana,” Clark said with a sigh as he pulled off the highway. “Lois’ doctor said she needs to stop and stretch her legs every couple hours, anyway. Besides, we’re only going to Richmond, Indiana tonight anyway. It’s only about a ten hour drive.”

I sighed. It was going to be a long day.

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Clark

It had been a long day.

A very long day.

And we were only halfway to our destination.

I glanced over as Lois maneuvered out of her sweatshirt. I almost groaned. She was wearing one of my Smallville High T-shirts. She had to have done that on purpose. I’d told her she could wear some of my clothes if she needed some, but she’d gone shopping for maternity clothes. I sighed as I realized that she had worn my T-shirts since then — mostly to sleep in, but still.

She’d done it on purpose, I was sure. To rub it in to Lana that we were married and at least sort of solid. I sighed again. It was probably a good idea.

I glanced over again and could feel my brow furrow. “You okay?”

Lois’ head was resting against the window and she nodded slightly. “I think so.”

“Stomach bothering you?”

“A little bit.”

I reached out and turned the heater down, cooling the air flow a bit.

“Thanks.”

I glanced in the mirror and realized that Lana was asleep. That was good. She had her pillow up against the window and had covered herself with her favorite blanket.

“You ready to stretch out again?” I asked her.

“In a bit.”

The miles stretched out in front of us and I turned the volume up a bit. Lois turned in her seat and reached for her pillow and blanket that were stashed behind her.

“Do you want anything before I try to take a nap?”

I shook my head. “I’m good.” She settled in next to the door. Over the course of the last couple of hours she’d shown me how to manipulate the iPod a bit better and I was confident that I could find the songs I wanted without driving us off the road. The playlist I’d made the night before was a good one. I had lots of other good songs, too, but I’d been careful to avoid anything resembling a love song. Things were awkward enough without tossing in ‘Unforgettable’ or ‘Time Well Wasted’ — it was one of my favorite songs and my dad and I had wasted more days than I could count out fishing and spending time with each other. One of my earliest memories of my dad was fishing, but the second verse was about a movie marathon with the love of the singer’s life. I couldn’t handle that right now and I was sure neither of these two would want to either.

I rested my elbow on the inside of the window and my head on my fist. I had no idea how this week was going to play out.

Would I be able to tell Lois about myself? About all the things I could do?

That I was found in a spaceship? About the whole ‘I’m an alien’ thing?

What if I told my parents, ‘thanks, but no thanks’ on the money they’d been sending and just didn’t tell her at all?

I could see my mom’s face as I imagined telling her that.

Falling out of the hayloft and landing on the tractor didn’t hurt, but one look from the tiny Kansas woman and I was shaking in my work boots.

Would it be easier to tell her if she was really having my baby? If something had happened at the cabin that night like we were telling everyone?

If that was the case then she would *need* to know. Who knew if a half-Kryptonian pregnancy was different than a fully human pregnancy?

What about Lana? I’d been nervous about telling her. I’d planned on proposing to her in Paris and then having a long talk with her after we got back from Europe — maybe even take her back to Smallville and tell her in the hayloft.

It was different with Lois, though. I wasn’t in love with her. I still didn’t plan on spending the rest of my life with her.

I’d lived my whole life keeping this all a secret. My dad wasn’t the one who’d first coined the phrase ‘dissect me like a frog’ if the government found out — Chris had done that — but Dad had certainly used it often enough when I was learning to control the different powers as they manifested.

Only three people had ever known about me and even though I knew I could trust Lois — she’d saved my life in November when she practically carried me through the biggest New Troy snow storm in the last hundred years — it wasn’t easy for me to come to terms with telling her about myself.

I’d had twelve years to sort of gear myself up to tell Lana and I was still scared to death to tell her.

Shouldn’t it be easier to tell Lois? The rest of my life wasn’t wrapped up in her reaction. If Lois didn’t react well, what was the worst that would happen?

She could want a divorce or an annulment sooner rather than later. And if she did, I’d have to tell her the whole truth about what Navance had said and show her the letters again and remind her about what would happen and hope that I could convince her that I could help protect her and the baby better than I could if I wasn’t invulnerable. Surely she’d accept that if nothing else.

But what if Lana hadn’t reacted well?

My heart would have been broken. Eventually, I would have picked myself up and moved on, but it would have been shattered for a long time if Lana had told me she couldn’t accept my differences.

So what was I going to do this week?

How was I going to tell her?

Could I just tell my mom I wasn’t going to and let her take care of it?

I sighed.

That was a cop-out.

I’d done enough of that lately.

I knew this wasn’t the life I’d planned for myself, but at some point I had to step up and take responsibility for it. Lois was my wife and my parents, my dad especially, had raised me better than that.

I’d started asking myself what I would do if it was me and Lana in a situation. I hated that because I knew that I shouldn’t be thinking about her or about me and her like that, but at the same time, if I knew what I should do to take care of Lana if the need had come up, then I would know what I should be doing with Lois.

Sort of.

It wasn’t like I was going to make love to her when she had a bad day or was feeling depressed about her appearance or anything like that. Of course, I really had no idea what that part of my life with Lana would have been like either, except that I figured it was something we would have done often.

I sighed as I drove across Ohio. Only another two hours or so and we’d be at our first destination. The more I thought about that, the more I thought I should have found a way to reserve two

rooms instead of foolishly believing that we'd manage to make do with one.

Lois chose that moment to stir and then asked when we were going to stop.

I looked at the road signs and decided that this gas station was as good as any.

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Part 44

Lois

Tears filled my eyes as I leaned my head against the window. Clark was inside getting us all checked in at the hotel in Richmond, Indiana, and I was sure this was going to be a miserable night.

The last time we'd stopped, Lana had been in the bathroom when I'd asked if he'd reserved one room or two and he said that his parents had reserved one but that he was going to ask for a second one when we got here.

His face looked grim as he headed back out to where Lana and I were studiously ignoring each other.

He didn't say anything as he drove us around to the next building. He pulled up next to the door, but there were no parking spots close. My stomach sank. Given the number of cars in the parking lot, I guessed he hadn't been able to get a second room.

He turned the Jeep off and climbed out immediately. I followed him, stretching my back as I stood on the sidewalk. I was feeling huge already, even though I was only about halfway through this pregnancy. I was a little chilly, but I wasn't about to cover up Clark's Smallville High T-shirt at the moment.

"Back bothering you?" Clark asked as he grabbed my laptop bag out of the front floorboard.

I nodded.

"Did you bring your heating pad with you?"

I sighed. "No. I didn't even think about it."

"Want me to find a CostMart or something and get you one?"

I shook my head. "I think a hot shower will help." <And then you can have some time alone with your girlfriend,> I added to myself.

"Let me know if you change your mind," he said as he headed to the back of the Jeep.

I grabbed my pillow and blanket from behind my seat and tried not to look at Lana who was stretching on the other side. Clark was pulling suitcases out of the back and I pulled up the handle on mine, grabbed my other bag and headed towards the door.

"Hey, you'll need this." He held a keycard towards me. "Room 109."

I nodded and used the key to open the outside door, leaving the two of them alone for the first time — that I knew of — in a long time.

Had he been able to get two rooms and just wasn't telling me? And he'd spend the night with her?

I walked down the hall and noted we were right next to the ice machine. That would be convenient when refilling the cooler in the morning. I stuck the card in the door and walked into my home for the night. It was about what I'd expected. Two double beds, a TV sitting on the dresser and precious little else.

I stashed my toiletries bag in the bathroom and hoisted my suitcase onto the end of the dresser. I dug through and found a pair of Clark's sweats and one of his John Deere T-shirts. I hadn't planned on wearing his clothes to sleep in — I had pajamas that I could wear — but something about wearing them in front of Lana was very appealing.

Before they could make it into the room, I was locked in the bathroom with the shower running.

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Clark

"Can I get the key to my room?" Lana asked as Lois walked through the door.

I sighed. I should have made arrangements earlier. "They only had one room left. My parents made the reservations and I guess they only made one."

She glared at me. "You mean, I have to spend the night in a room with you and your *wife*?"

I couldn't look at her. "Please don't make this any more difficult than it already is, Lana."

"Pardon me for not being excited about this."

"I'm not either and I doubt Lois is."

"I don't care how Lois feels about this."

I sighed. "Do you need anything else out?"

"No."

I stacked my suitcase, both of our laptop bags, and the cooler on the sidewalk. "I'm going to park. I'll be right back."

"Do I at least get my own key?"

"They wouldn't give me three. If I give you one, I can't get in the door. I'll be right back." I quickly started the Jeep and maneuvered it into the closest spot, halfway down the building. I jogged back to where Lana was waiting. "Here." I handed Lana the keycard before I slung both laptop bags over my shoulder and picked up the suitcase and cooler.

She didn't say anything as she opened the door and headed down the hall.

She stopped before the room and opened that door as well.

It didn't surprise me to hear the shower running. I was sure that Lois' back was bothering her more than she'd let on and a shower would probably help quite a bit.

Lana glared at the bathroom door. "I have to go to the bathroom. Couldn't she have at least waited until we'd all had a chance to go?"

"There's a bathroom in the lobby if you can't wait." I found myself hoping that she would go.

She glared at me and headed out the door.

I flopped backwards onto one of the beds. I stared at the ceiling for a long minute, before deciding that, with Lana gone and Lois in the shower, I could do a quick change thing and be done with it. In seconds, I was in a pair of shorts and a muscle shirt which had become my sleep attire of choice since Lois had become my roommate the previous fall.

A minute later, the shower stopped and before long, Lois came out wearing a pair of my sweats and my favorite John Deere T-shirt — I'd wondered what had happened to it.

She glanced around. "Where's Lana?"

"She couldn't wait to go to the bathroom so she headed to the lobby," I told her.

"So we didn't get two rooms then, I take it."

"They were full."

"Ah." She stuck a wad of clothes into a bag and shoved it into her suitcase. "So how is this going to work?"

I shrugged. "About like usual I guess. We climb in bed, go to sleep and then wake up, only Lana's here too."

She sighed. "Well, which bed do you want?"

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me."

She finally sat on the side of the bed closest to the bathroom. That wasn't surprising. She was up at least once a night, I knew, to go to the bathroom. "If you don't mind, I think I'd rather at least pretend to be asleep by the time she gets back." With that, she curled up under the covers and closed her eyes.

Deciding that was probably the best thing all around, I did the same, foregoing brushing my teeth — they were as invulnerable as the rest of me and I didn't need to worry about minty fresh breath for anyone special.

It was ten minutes before Lana opened the door. I heard her stop and guessed she was staring at us. I'd done something I rarely did on purpose. I was facing Lois' back, nearly spooned

with her but not quite. Close enough that Lana probably wouldn't know the difference.

She wasn't quiet as she got ready for bed but Lois and I ignored her and kept up the pretense of sleep.

Once she finally climbed into bed, my heart broke anew as I heard her nearly silent tears hit her pillow.

~~~~~  
Lois

My heart had been pounding as Clark scooted over next to me in bed, close enough that I could feel his shirt brush against me when either of us shifted slightly. In and of itself, that wasn't terribly unusual, but usually it was because our bed was so small and our backs would brush up against each other from time to time.

Lana had stomped around the room, making as much noise as she possibly could while she got ready for bed.

I pretended to be asleep and figured Clark was as well. I could hear her crying after she crawled into her bed, but I didn't really give it a second thought. Well, not really. I felt badly for her. I did. She should have been engaged to Clark and, if I was still pregnant but hadn't gotten caught in Latislan, it was quite possible that I'd either be engaged or married to Joe. Or at least considering marriage to a man who found me attractive and would want to at least spend time with me and talk to me on a pretty regular basis. Who would make love to me, eventually.

Except for the whole music thing a couple nights earlier, I wasn't sure what the last real conversation was I'd had with Clark. One that didn't include only the weather or assignments in the four classes we had together or looking over the fall schedule which had come out the week before and discussing classes and internships. We had *not* discussed what I was going to do about school except register for classes. The baby hadn't entered into the discussion at all. I had no idea what I was going to do for childcare, much less where we going to live in about eight weeks. That was something we were going to have to figure out and soon.

Maybe if we had to play happy in front of his parents, he'd at least stay in the same room with me for a while and even have a discussion about some of this, with input from his folks. I'd talked to his mom several times since that first conversation and I liked her a lot, though I was afraid that she was going to be entirely too intuitive for my own safety and the safety of my baby.

When my eyes opened in the morning in Richmond, Indiana, I could tell Clark was already out of bed. The water was running in the bathroom and I could still see a lump under Lana's bed, so it wasn't her.

I shoved the covers back and sat up, realizing that I hadn't been up in the middle of the night and my bladder was now screaming at me. Fortunately, Clark chose that moment to exit the bathroom.

"I'm going to go get us all some coffee," he said quietly.

I paused. That would leave me here alone with Cruella. Not a good plan. Finally, I shook my head. "We can get some when we leave. I'd rather get on the road pretty quick so we can get off the road faster this evening." Lana started stirring and I headed into the bathroom.

When I was done, I brushed my teeth and repacked my toiletries bag. I had heard the door to the room open and close again. Lana brushed past me into the bathroom with hardly a glance and I noticed that my suitcase was gone, as was Clark's. I sighed. It wasn't worth chasing him down so I could change clothes and the ones I was in were very comfortable. We were going to be driving for another eleven hours and comfort was important. I was just glad I hadn't spent the night before throwing up like I had so many nights recently. I'd been glad that Clark hadn't been there for most of those nights, too.

I picked up my purse and grabbed one of the keycards off the dresser. I really didn't want to stay alone with Lana. I glanced around and noted that all three laptop bags were gone as well. About the only things left were Lana's suitcase and the cooler.

I headed out the door. Clark was putting the suitcases in the Jeep by the time I got outside. He'd apparently left them on the side walk and pulled it into a recently vacated spot near the door.

"Lana's up?" he asked as he glanced at me.

"Yep. She was in the bathroom when I left."

"Ah."

I handed him my bag and stuck my purse in the passenger seat. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms. It was kinda chilly out this early in the morning.

He looked at me again and had the good sense to look chagrined. "You didn't have any other clothes out, did you?"

I shook my head. "No, but it's okay. This is comfortable," I told him, playing with the hem of the shirt. I gasped suddenly.

"What?" He slammed the hatch shut. "Are you okay?"

My hands had immediately gone to my stomach. "Yeah," I whispered. "I think I just felt the baby move. I mean, really move."

His eyes widened. "Really?"

I nodded, biting my bottom lip. I felt it again and smiled at him.

"Again?"

I took a deep breath. I wasn't sure I really wanted to do this, but it was the right thing to do. He'd been hurt when he'd missed the first ultrasound and the first time I'd heard the heartbeat.

"Would you like to...?" My voice trailed off.

"You don't mind?"

I shook my head and his much larger hands joined my smaller ones on my belly and we waited.

Suddenly, we felt it. Our eyes locked and for a minute, I could actually believe that he was the father of this baby and we were truly in this together. One of his patented Kent grins crossed his face.

"Was that it?"

I nodded. "Pretty cool, huh?"

The baby moved again and we both smiled. Clark's eyes moved to something behind me and the smile disappeared. He removed his hands and turned back to the Jeep. "Got everything?"

I didn't need to ask or look to know what he'd seen and Lana moving into my line of sight confirmed it. "I do," I finally said. "Just the cooler, I think."

Clark nodded. "I already filled it with new ice."

I turned back to the hotel. "Then I'll get it while you load the other suitcase and I'll double check the room and we can go."

Clark started to say something but I was back inside before he could. He was probably going to tell me not to try to carry the cooler, but I didn't care. It wouldn't be *that* heavy. I quickly double checked the room and bathroom then grabbed the cooler and headed back outside.

Minutes later, we were driving around to the front desk to check out. "I'll take care of it," I held out my hand. "Who has the other key?"

Lana handed it over without looking at me and I quickly escaped inside. If Clark had checked us out, I would have been left alone in the car with Lana and I had absolutely no desire to spend any more time with her — especially alone — than absolutely necessary.

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Part 45

Clark

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We headed out of Richmond pretty early. The sun wasn't up yet — not all the way. I pulled into McDonald's and went through

the drive-through to get breakfast.

I glanced over at Lois. “Bacon, egg and cheese biscuit?” I’d learned those were her favorites.

“Two. And a really big coffee. And a cinnamon roll.”

I pushed the button and the window went down as we got closer to the squawk box. “Lana?” Lana never got the same thing twice.

“Coffee, Egg McMuffin, hash brown.”

That was about the longest conversation I’d had with Lana since we left Met U the day before, except the whole ‘I have to share a room with you and your *wife*’ thing. I ordered for them and ordered myself a couple of different croissant sandwich things and a bacon, egg and cheese McGriddle thing with pancakes in place of biscuits. I hadn’t tried them, but they sounded good.

We pulled up to the window and I paid for it, taking the coffees from the very bored looking teenager. I carefully handed one to Lana and put the other two in the cup holders. I took all of the creamer and sweeteners that she handed me and gave it all to Lois. Lana took her coffee black.

Lois didn’t even ask what I wanted in mine, but started doctoring both of ours. She got mine right. That shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did for some reason. Lana had never gotten it right.

A few minutes later, we were back on I-70 heading towards Indianapolis, then Illinois, Missouri and home. I turned on one of the playlists I’d made a couple days before.

Once she was done eating, Lana took out her laptop and I could hear her typing away on something. Lois, on the other hand, despite the huge coffee, put her pillow against the window and pulled her blanket up over her. She was asleep in minutes.

I pushed the speed limit a bit. Not too much, but hopefully enough that this trip would be over sooner rather than later. I turned the music up, too, hoping to deter Lana from any conversation. I didn’t think she’d be starting one anytime soon, but just in case.

I guessed that I could thank my lucky stars or something that the two of them had both decided that being quiet was the way to go. If they had decided, for whatever reason, to cat fight, this trip would have ended very poorly. As it was, it wasn’t going *well* but at least they hadn’t torn each other’s hair out.

I sighed. I’d never seen Lana like she was with Lois. I’d known her, literally, all my life and she wasn’t mean and vindictive. I could understand it since... what happened in Latislan. Everything we’d talked about for the last few years was on hold — indefinitely as far as she knew. I’d told her that Lois and I had to stay married, but not for how long or anything else. I’d told her too much when I told her the baby wasn’t mine and that the marriage wasn’t really real. I could only hope that she wouldn’t ever decide to air that dirty laundry in public and if she did, I was close enough to make it very clear, very loudly, that she’d misinterpreted what I’d said or something because nothing could be further from the truth.

~~~~~

Lois

I guessed the nap was about three hours long. I wasn’t sure how I’d managed to not wake up in all that time given the coffee I’d consumed, but I was grateful. We were closing in on halfway through the Richmond to Smallville leg of our trip.

“Sleep okay?” Clark asked.

I nodded and stretched as I yawned. “Where are we?”

“Illinois.”

“What’s that leave? Two more states?”

“Yeah. We’ll drive all the way across Missouri until we’re almost to Oklahoma then head north then west again into Kansas. Once we’re in Kansas, it’s about an hour and a half or so to Smallville.”

“Ah. Do we go through St. Louis?”

“We can or we can go around it. It’s Saturday so I don’t think the downtown traffic will be too bad. It’s not baseball season so there’s no Cardinals game. If there was or it was rush hour on a weekday we’d want to go around for sure. Have you ever been there?”

I shook my head as I held the blanket around me a little tighter. “Mom used to talk about how she and Dad went up in the Arch once when they were there, but I’ve never been.”

“Then we’ll have to go through downtown. We’ll still be on the highway, but you’ll be able to at least see the Arch and Busch Stadium and maybe a couple other things.”

“Sounds good, but I’m going to need a bathroom soon.”

He smiled. “I figured you might. About ten minutes?”

I nodded and rested my head against the pillow, closing my eyes. I’d noticed Lana was asleep but she woke up about not long after I had. I pretended to still be asleep.

“Where are we, Clark?” she murmured sleepily.

“Near Greenville, Illinois getting ready to stop. Lois has to go to the bathroom and she needs to stretch and walk around a bit anyway.”

It seemed like we were slowing down a bit and then we came to a stop and I could hear the blinker.

I heard Lana mutter something, but I couldn’t quite make out what it was. Probably something derogatory about me. It irritated me, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to be mad about it. Not after the way her life had turned upside down because of me.

Clark came to a quick stop and turned the engine off. I didn’t open my eyes until I heard the back door open and Clark tell Lana to get out.

I looked over my shoulder to see Clark seething and holding the door open. I couldn’t see Lana’s face but I was certain she was mad. Once she was out, Clark slammed the door shut, grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the car. As much as I wanted to stay and at least watch whatever fight it was they were about to have, the urge to empty my bladder would not wait any longer. I opened the door and realized Clark had pulled into the large parking lot and stopped on the edge. I sighed and started walking.

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Clark

“Get out.” I yanked the back door open and waited for her to climb out.

Lana glared at me as she got out of the Jeep and I slammed the door behind her. I was careful not to hurt her, but I still grabbed her arm and led her away.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked as she finally wrenched her arm away from me.

“What?” She crossed her arms and stared at me.

“That comment.”

“What?”

“Calling my wife a whore. That was completely uncalled for.”

“It’s true,” she hissed back at me.

“No. It’s not.”

“Really? Then who’s the father of her baby?” She looked like she was almost gloating.

“I am.” I didn’t want to hurt her anymore than I already had, but I had to. Navance flashed through my head reminding me why.

><I will decide if I want to keep her for myself or share her with my comrades. It all depends on how satisfied she keeps me between now and then.><

The thought of Lois in the hands of that bastard scared me badly enough but... what he’d do if he got his hands on the baby, especially if Lois had a girl...

><And if the child is a girl, as soon as she is old enough, she

will follow in the footsteps of her mother. Until then, she will be a servant in my house... There are many men who like very young, innocent women... I'm sure you do, as well.><

The thought turned my stomach again and I had to do what I had to do.

"You told me it wasn't your baby," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"I lied," I lied. "I didn't want to hurt you any more than I had to. I knew it was going to break your heart that I'd married Lois and was going to stay married to her even after we got home. I didn't want you to think I'd cheated on you, too."

The tears were streaming down her cheeks. "You made love to her?"

I shrugged. "How else would she get pregnant with my baby?" I was being a bastard. I knew I was, but I didn't have a choice. I should have let Lana believe it from the beginning and I had to make her believe it now.

"At the cabin?" she whispered.

"You want details?" I asked, eyebrows raised, stomach churning. "You want to hear that we woke up naked in each other's arms and when I saw her lying there I was overwhelmed with the desire to kiss her? And when I did, she didn't stop me? And I kissed her and she kissed me and we made love? Is that what you want to hear?"

The tears had picked up speed as I spoke. Technically, I hadn't lied. I'd asked her questions and asked if that was what she wanted to hear, but I never actually said we'd been together. Legally, the baby was mine. I was Lois' husband so under both Latislani and New Troy law, I was the father of record. Period.

"Is that true?"

I didn't answer her. "Or do you want to hear that the other two nights I spent in her bed, we weren't completely dressed?" That was also technically true. I didn't have my shirt on either night. My heart shattered again at the look on her face. I hated what I was doing to her, but her life wasn't in danger if I left her.

"So why...?" Her voice, and my heart, broke.

"Because. I didn't want to hurt you any more than absolutely necessary. I love you. I always have, for as long as I can remember, but I have a baby coming with Lois and we got married and we have to make this work because of that baby. How I feel or felt about you doesn't matter anymore. But at the same time, none of this is her fault. She never would have come on to me. And she didn't." That was the truth. I hadn't come on to Lois either, but the implication was there. And on top of it, I was angry and it was bleeding through. "I'm the one who made arrangements for us to get married. If you have a problem with it, you take it out on *me*. You leave her alone. You leave the baby alone. And you and Linda stay the hell away from her." I meant it. I meant every word. And I was sure she knew that.

"You're a bastard," she whispered.

I sighed and my head hung as the anger bled away. "I know. I'm sorry you got hurt; that you're still getting hurt, really I am, but she's my wife and she's having my baby. If you have a problem with her, take it up with me, but I'll protect the two of them with my life." I already was. "Leave her alone."

She turned and headed towards the gas station, arms wrapped around herself. I sighed and pulled the Jeep up to the pump and filled it with gas.

Lois was waiting outside when I moved the Jeep to the building.

"I'll be right back," I told her. I needed to go to the bathroom, too. I just hoped they didn't get into it while I was gone.

~~~~~  
Lois

I sighed, but didn't get back in yet. We had something like seven hours left and I didn't want to spend any more of it sitting down than I had to. I stretched my back and twisted from side to

side.

"You okay?" Clark asked quietly as he stood next to me.

"Back hurts."

"Gonna make it another seven hours?"

"Do I have a choice?" I asked back.

"Not really, I guess. Unless you want to stay in Greenville for the next week or so."

"I'll pass, thanks." I wrapped my arms around me as best I could. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Yeah." He looked around then spoke quietly. "I told her that I lied."

"About what?" I asked just as quietly.

"That the baby really is mine. That we slept together at the cabin." He didn't look at me.

"Ah." I didn't look at him. "We did sleep together at the cabin." He'd lied to her. He'd done what was necessary to protect me and the baby even if it meant breaking her heart all over again. And that just added to the guilt I was already feeling from time to time. My eyes filled with tears, but I tried not to let him see.

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. That I got you pregnant at the cabin."

I sighed and willed the tears back in. "I don't suppose you have any way to just fly us all there in a few minutes or something, do you?"

He didn't say anything.

"Relax," I told him. "Even if there was an airport handy, it wouldn't be worth the hassle."

"Yeah." He looked around again, but more nervously than he had the last time. "Listen, I was hoping to make it all the way to Springfield, Missouri from here before we stop again. That's about four hours. It's only about two and a half hours from there to Smallville. Can you make it that long?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"Do you want a drink then? Or to stop and get something to eat or do you just want to have sandwiches?"

"Sandwiches are fine and if I want to make it all the way to Springfield, I better not drink a whole lot. My bladder's only about the size of a walnut."

Lana chose that moment to come out of the convenience store. I tried not to look too closely at her, but I could tell her cheeks were blotchy and her eyes were red. She went straight to the Jeep and climbed in the back seat. Almost immediately, she put her pillow against the window and covered herself completely with her blanket.

I sighed. "Let's go. The sooner we get going..."

"...the sooner we'll get there."

A few minutes later, we were back on the road, the only noise in the Jeep coming from Clark's playlists and what I was sure were Lana's sniffles.

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Part 46

Clark

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Thank God we were almost home.

We'd crossed the Missouri-Kansas border nearly an hour earlier and I could smell the difference.

Literally.

Kansas smelled different than Metropolis.

That wasn't really much of a shock. Big city smells compared to farm country. It didn't take a brilliant investigative reporter to figure out that they'd smell different.

Since we'd left Greenville, Illinois the car had been eerily quiet, except for the music that was playing off the iPod Lois had given me. I'd hurt Lana terribly in Greenville and I knew it. We'd pulled off I-44 in Springfield, Missouri and stopped at a gas station in front of a big CostMart. The second the Jeep stopped,

Lana had taken off for the McDonald's next door. She didn't come out until I pulled up next to the door to the restaurant to wait for her.

I thought about pushing the speed limit a bit more but I knew how legendary the speed traps in Crawford County were and it wasn't worth shaving five minutes off the time.

Lois looked out the window with interest as we finally drove through Smallville. A few minutes later, I pulled up in front of Lana's house on Tank Avenue. None of us spoke as I opened the back hatch and pulled her suitcase out. I set it on the front porch as she slammed the Jeep door behind her.

"We'll be here about ten on Saturday unless you hear otherwise."

She shrugged. "Whatever."

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Lana. Really. I am."

"You're a bastard, Clark." With that, she opened the door, obviously dismissing me.

I had no desire to run into either of her parents, so I turned and left.

I pointed a few things out to Lois as we drove through town. Where we held the Corn Festival. Smallville Middle and High School across the street from Lana's house. South Smallville Elementary. My stomach felt a bit weird as I pointed out Shuster's Field, but it always did around there — I'd never figured out why.

"Clark!" Lois said suddenly.

"What?"

She looked down at herself. "I can't meet your parents like this!"

"What?"

She gave an exasperated sigh. "Your old T-shirt and sweats."

I smiled slightly. "Where exactly do you plan on changing?"

"The middle of a corn field, behind a cow, I don't care," she informed me.

I chuckled. Something I hadn't done in a long time. "My parents won't care, trust me." I sobered. "They'll be too happy to meet you and hear all about the baby and everything." I turned. "Besides, we're here."

She didn't say anything as I pulled up next to the house.

I turned to look at her. She looked nervous and scared. Not surprising. I took a deep breath and then put my hand on her shoulder. "It's going to be okay."

She wiped at the tear that started down her cheek. "If you say so."

I sighed and got out, walking around. I opened her door. "Come here."

She only hesitated for a second, but then was standing next to me, unsure what to do. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close to me. She sighed and put her arms around me, resting her cheek on my chest. I noticed again how my chin fit right on the top of her head.

"It's going to be okay," I told her again.

"No," she whispered. "It's not. Not until the maniac is off my back and somehow I doubt that's going to end after five years. Something will happen. He'll change the law again or something."

"Or maybe somebody else he pissed off will shoot him tomorrow."

"Wouldn't that be nice? Then you could tell Lana everything and, if we could get the divorce or annulment or whatever in time, you two could still get married this summer."

I hesitated. "I think that even if we were able to get annulled and it was finalized tomorrow, Lana and I would have a lot of stuff to work through before we could get married."

The door behind me opened. "Clark?" It was Mom.

"Here goes nothing," Lois whispered.

"It'll be okay," I whispered back.

We both took a deep breath and turned towards the house.

I forced a smile onto my face. "Hi, Mom."

~~~~~

Lois

A small, blonde woman pushed the screen door open. "I thought I heard a car pull up."

Clark took my hand and we walked up the stairs onto the porch. He let go and grabbed her around the waist, picking her up off her feet. "Hey, Mom," he repeated quietly.

"Put me down," she laughed.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't 'ma'am' me, young man," she said, smacking him lightly as he set her on the porch. She turned to me. "You must be Lois."

"That's me," I said uncomfortably. "Hi, Mrs. Kent."

She rolled her eyes. "I thought we got over this nonsense. It's Martha." She glanced at Clark. "Or Mom if you want." He didn't react and the next thing I knew I was enveloped in a big hug. She let go a minute later and looked me over again. "You sure are pretty." She turned to Clark again. "It's okay if I tell her that, isn't it?"

We glanced at each other uncomfortably. "I don't know. Ask her."

She hugged me again. "Well, Lois, you sure are pretty."

"Thanks, Martha." I hugged her back this time — slightly more enthusiastically.

"Where's Dad?"

"Upstairs on the phone. Wayne Irig called right before you got here. He's talking to him about crops or something." She left one arm around me. "Clark, why don't you empty the car?"

"Yes, Mom."

Gentle pressure moved me in the direction of the door. "You kids must be starved. How's your evening sickness?"

"Better, thank you. I haven't thrown up in four days." I groaned inwardly. I couldn't believe I'd just said that to my mother-in-law.

"That's great!" she said with a big smile. "Dinner's almost ready."

"You waited for us?" I asked as I looked around the homey living room. "You didn't have to do that."

"Nonsense," she said, leading the way to the kitchen.

I heard Clark setting things on the porch.

"Have a seat." Martha gestured towards the table. "Is there anything I can get for you now?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you." I stretched my back. It was stiff after spending over twenty hours on the road. I heard Clark moving in the house and up the stairs I'd seen in the living room. There were voices upstairs and then two sets of footsteps coming down, out the door and then back up.

"I'm so glad to hear you're feeling better," Martha said, startling me slightly.

"You and me both," I said honestly.

She sat down at the table and I sat across from her.

"Tell me about yourself. If you don't mind, of course."

I shook my head. "Not a whole lot to tell. My mom and little sister were killed in a car accident about eight years ago. I lived with my dad until I moved on campus last fall." I stared at my hands. "Clark and I drove up to Bremerton in early November and got stuck in a snow storm. We survived but were there for a week. Life went on as normal until we got stuck in Europe and I found out I was pregnant." I shrugged. "We got married and here we are, I guess."

I heard the footsteps head back out the door.

"How was your trip?"

I hesitated. "Could have been worse," I finally said honestly.

"But it could have been better?" she asked gently.

I nodded. "Yeah, but I didn't really expect it to go very

smoothly.”

“Want to tell me what happened?”

I sighed. Did I want to? It wasn't like I had anyone I could talk to besides Clark and he wasn't exactly the best option in this situation. Finally I just shrugged. “Twenty-some hours in the car with my husband's ex-girlfriend and sharing a hotel room with her when we couldn't get a second one. Pretty self-explanatory, isn't it?” I wasn't quite sure why I'd said ‘my husband's ex-girlfriend’ instead of ‘Lana’. Martha knew who she was in relation to Clark. Was I staking some claim? A ‘he's not just your son, he's my husband’ kind of thing?

“Has she been giving you a hard time?”

“Not really. Mostly we avoid each other and ignore each other as much as possible.”

“Sounds like that might not be a bad plan.”

The timer went off and she stood up.

“Can I help you at all?” I kind of hoped she said no. Not because I didn't want to help but because I had always been useless in the kitchen.

~~~~~  
Clark

I set the suitcases and laptop bags down in my room and sighed. This week wasn't going to be easy. I didn't think my parents would expect us to be ‘normal’ newlyweds or anything like that, but more than anything, I wanted to tell them everything. They would understand and be careful and help us protect Lois and the baby.

But I couldn't. I had to pull off the official story. The way Lois and I had been around each other for the last couple months... It wasn't going to work here. I wasn't going to be able to run to work or the library or anywhere else to avoid her. That's what I'd been doing. I'd denied it to myself, saying that I was giving her space, trying to not make her uncomfortable. The reality was I'd been staying away so that I wouldn't have to spend time with her. Not because I didn't like her or whatever, but because our circumstances were so different and I felt like it was a betrayal of Lana.

“Thought I heard you come in,” came a voice behind me.

I turned and made myself smile. “Hi, Dad.”

I was enveloped in a bear hug before I knew what was happening.

“Missed you, son,” he said gruffly.

“I've missed you, too, Dad.”

He looked at the pile. “Is that everything?”

I shook my head. “Not quite. Blankets and pillows and a couple other small bags.”

“Let's go.”

We didn't say anything as we headed downstairs and out the front door. We picked up everything except the cooler and went back to my room. Our arms were full, but much lighter than the first trip — not that the weight bothered me, of course. We set it all down and went back outside.

I started to pick up the cooler and head for the kitchen, but Dad was leaning against the rail, a sure sign he wanted to talk to me.

I don't know why that surprised me.

“Have you told her yet?” he asked quietly.

I stood next to him, leaning my forearms on the rail. “No.”

“Why not?”

I sighed. “You pounded the whole ‘dissect me like a frog’ thing in deep. I know nothing can hurt me anymore, but if the wrong person found out, you and Mom and Lois and the baby would all be at risk. Telling *anyone* scares me. The only people who've ever known anything were you and Mom and Chris — and he knew very little and *he* certainly didn't tell anyone. I'd been planning on telling Lana for years but I never did and *that* scared the hell out of me.” I paused. “Now I have to tell Lois —

and I understand why, really I do — but I haven't known her very long and I still don't know her as well as I should because it's only been... eight or nine months since I met her. It scares me to tell her. I think she'll probably be okay with it or whatever, but I also think she'll be mad at me for not telling her sooner and I figured a few miles of empty farmland as a buffer between her and anyone who might hear her yelling was a good plan.”

Dad chuckled. “That might not be a bad plan after all.” He paused. “When are you going to tell her?”

“Tomorrow or Monday, I guess. I don't want to tonight. She's exhausted from the trip and all.”

“How long have you been married now?”

I wished I didn't have to search my memory quite as much as I did. I should know that. “January 3rd.”

“How long is that?” he asked again.

I did the math. “Two and a half months or so.”

“That's the reason why you should have told her sooner. You've been married too long to have *not* told her.”

“I know.”

“What if it affects the baby?”

“It doesn't seem to have so far,” I told him. “Development is a couple days ahead of where they'd expect it to be, but that's it and that's not too abnormal at all. The ultrasound looked fine.” I knew that, ultimately, my Kryptonian physiology wouldn't affect the baby at all, but there was no way that Dad could know that.

“What about the effect on Lois?”

I sighed. “She's been sick, but she's getting better — a lot better the last few days, she said. That's not unusual either, I guess. Just that it didn't hit her until later.” I couldn't tell him that I had no idea why that was. It certainly wasn't because the baby was half-Kryptonian.

I had a flash to the night at the cabin, kissing Lana who morphed into Lois, but I shook it off.

“How're you doing, Clark? Really? I know this isn't the life you'd planned — not even close — but how are you really doing?”

I stared at the barn. “It's hard,” I finally said. “The apartment's a hole; it's being shut down for renovations in May for a reason, but I don't have a clue where we're going to go and there's very little available that our scholarships will cover so we're probably going to have to pay for it out of pocket. School's fine. I've got four classes with Lois, two of those are with Lana, too. I've got another class with Lana that Lois isn't in. I'm doing fine in all my classes. I got a job at the Daily Planet a few weeks ago — in the mailroom. It's not glamorous but it's a paycheck. I don't think it's going to pay for an apartment and childcare and all that.” I sighed. “To be honest, things aren't great with Lois. A lot of that's my fault — I know that. I've been avoiding her a lot because even though I made the decision to marry her for the sake of the baby and I still think it was the right thing to do, I resent her and the baby at the same time because it's *not* the life I was planning on.”

“Clark...”

I hurried on. “I know. It's not right. It was my decision. She didn't pressure me or anything like that.” That much was the truth. “*I* was the one who suggested we get married. *I* was the one who made the arrangements. *I* was the one who bought the rings.” I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I know I need to make more of an effort. I need to get to know her better and she needs to get to know me if this is going to work.” That was true, too; even though it was only going to last about five years, we were going to have to get along or we were going to be absolutely miserable.

“You finally got what you always wanted,” Dad said after a few minutes. “A family. Not the way you planned but...”

“Yeah.”

We heard Mom calling from inside and I picked up the cooler

as we went in.

Part 47

Lois

~~~~~  
Well, the evening hadn't been *horrid*.

Martha and Jonathan seemed like very nice people and I could see how Clark turned out to be — mostly — a good guy.

But now... Now it was time for bed. They'd just gone to their room after saying good night and Clark had shown me his room.

With the twin bed in it.

I sighed. How were we supposed to manage that?

Clark came in just then. "Dad said they put the air mattress in here for us." He looked around and found it sitting with the stack of stuff they'd brought in earlier. "Said there was no way that we'd want to sleep on my old bed."

I shrugged. "Probably not."

"He also said they're planning on going to church in the morning, but for us to sleep as late as we wanted."

"That," I said with a yawn, "I will take them up on."

"Yeah." He shut the door behind him.

That made me slightly uncomfortable. Not that I wasn't safe with him or anything like that, but I'd never been in a guy's room, with the door shut and his parents right across the hall before. Even if he was my husband and we lived in the same apartment — after sharing the same dorm room.

"They didn't figure we'd want to go anyway. Mom meant what she said about hanging out here all week if you want. You probably don't really want to go exploring Smallville just yet."

I shrugged. "Maybe some other time."

He nodded and set to work on the air mattress. While the pump was running, he moved close enough for me to hear him over the noise. "Listen, if you want to take my bed, that's fine. It'll probably be a lot more comfortable than this thing. I mean, it's not bad and great for camping or whatever, but it's not a real bed."

What he didn't say was that the two of us could spend the night in separate beds for once. That we wouldn't have to sleep together. I could only hope that we'd get two hotel rooms on the way back to Metropolis and then we could do the same thing.

Except that sleeping on his bed was a bad idea. It wouldn't be good for one of his parents to look in sometime tomorrow and realize that it had been slept in.

"Why don't you take the bathroom first," he said. "And I'll finish getting this set up."

I nodded and he pointed me in the right direction. I decided against a shower — I was exhausted and I could take one in the morning while his parents were gone. It amazed me how tiring twenty-some hours sitting in the car could be. I brushed my teeth and changed clothes before heading back to my home away from home for the next week.

~~~~~  
Clark

I sighed as I turned the pump off. I picked up the sheet Mom had left and put it on the mattress.

I heard Lois leave the bathroom and pushed the mattress against the wall, flipping the other sheet over it. I tossed our pillows on it before digging out something to sleep in.

Lois walked in wearing some of her own pajamas. I wasn't sure why that relieved me.

I didn't say anything as I left and went to the bathroom to get ready for bed. When I made it back, Lois was nowhere to be seen. I finally realized that she'd taken her pillow and blanket and was sound asleep on the floor on the other side of my bed.

What was she thinking? I'd told her she could have my bed so that she'd be more comfortable, so why was she on the floor? I thought she'd jump at the chance to sleep in a real bed and alone,

too.

Did I want to move her? I should. She'd wake up stiff and sore in the morning if she slept there all night. I pulled the covers down and then carefully picked her up. After setting her on the bed, I covered her up.

I flopped — carefully and using a bit of floating power so I didn't pop it — down onto the air mattress and after staring at the stars — through the ceiling — for a long time, I finally went to sleep.

I woke up when my parents were getting ready for church. Lois was still sound asleep and I was careful not to disturb her.

I grabbed my laptop bag and ran a hand through my hair as I yawned my way down the stairs. "Morning," I mumbled as I walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, honey," Mom said, giving me a big hug. "How was the air mattress?"

"It was fine. Lois fell asleep on my bed and I didn't have the heart to move her." That was close enough to the truth.

Mom frowned slightly. "Well, Dad and I were talking about getting a new bed sometime soon. We can move our old one in there once we do. That'll be more comfortable for you two."

I left my arm around her shoulders and she left hers around my waist as I poured a cup of coffee with my other hand. "Whatever works for you guys. I don't know when we'll make it back out here with the baby and all."

She rolled her eyes. "Once you tell her everything, you'll be able to come whenever you want, even if it's just for a few hours or an overnight."

I sighed. "That's on my 'to do' list for the day, I promise."

"I know it is." She glanced at the clock. "We've got to get going." She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "We should be home about noon. Granny's going with us, but she's eating lunch up here and looking forward to meeting Lois."

I grinned. I'd missed Granny. "We'll see you then," I said. "Do you want me to fix something or..."

Mom shook her head. "Brisket's in the slow cooker."

I sniffed the air. "Smells great already. How am I going to wait till noon?"

Mom gave me a mock glare as she headed for the door. "If you don't, I'm going to tan your hide."

"Good luck with that." I grinned at her before I took a long sip of my coffee.

Mom had left biscuits on the counter and gravy in the fridge. I checked on Lois' heartbeat and, assured she was still asleep, warmed it up with my vision then poured it over the biscuits. I opened my laptop and scrolled through my paper on Mark Twain. I was almost done with it when Lois wandered down the stairs.

"Good morning," I said.

"Must you be so chipper?" she grouched.

"It's nearly 12:30 in Metropolis," I pointed out.

"So?" She poured herself a cup of coffee and doctored it.

"Mom said they'll be home about noon," I told her, changing the subject. "Granny Kent's coming over for lunch. She's looking forward to meeting you."

She groaned and sat in the chair across from me. "How many family members am I going to be on display for?"

"You're not going to be on display. And Granny's the only one coming as far as I know. Since she lives in the small house across the yard, she eats here pretty often."

"She lives across the yard?"

He nodded. "She lived in this house for a long time, until my folks got married, I think. Then she moved across the yard to the house where my Grandpa Kent's parents had lived once she married him."

"I see." She took another sip. "What about... Nana and Pop Pop? Grandma Davis? I think, I think you've mentioned them before."

I shrugged. “I don’t know what the plans are. I’m sure they’d all love to meet you, but I also don’t think any of them want you to feel uncomfortable either.”

“Well, I think we’re a bit late for that.” She pointed to my computer. “Twain paper?”

I nodded. “Almost done.”

“Wish I could say the same about the English paper.”

I hesitated. Maybe that was the answer. I didn’t know how to *tell* her about myself, but maybe I could let her read my paper. That would at least get part of it out of the way. I’d written two versions of it — the one I was going to turn in and the one that told the real story. There was no way I could turn in the version that had me arriving on earth in a space ship. That was the version I was going to give to my parents, in part, as a way to say ‘thank you’ for everything they’d done; to tell them I understood what they’d done and why they’d done it and... even though they wouldn’t realize it, part of the reason why I’d married Lois, why I was claiming to be the father of her baby, why I’d broken Lana’s heart.

I realized Lois was still speaking. “I’m sorry. What?”

“I asked what the plan was for today.”

“Ah. Well, lunch probably around 12:30 or so after they get back. Hang out with my folks and Granny. I can show you around the farm if you want. Do some schoolwork, whatever.” I took a deep breath and finally just blurted it out. “And later, I need to talk to you about something.”

“What?” she asked as she stood up and walked to the counter to get a biscuit.

I sighed. “Something that, if we were more conventional, I should have, and would have, told you a long time ago. But I didn’t tell you, in part, because I was scared to and... for a lot of reasons that I hope you’ll understand once I tell you about it.”

“Are you still seeing Lana?” she asked, without looking at me.

It didn’t register for a second. “What?” I asked, incredulous. “No. And after yesterday, she probably won’t talk to me for a very long time.”

“Sorry.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I said, fiddling with my coffee cup. “I know you said it was okay for us to keep seeing each other but when we got married I promised you my fidelity and I meant it. Besides the whole ‘if he finds out it’s not real’ thing, I wouldn’t break my wedding vows.”

She nodded.

“It has nothing to do with Lana. It’s something Lana doesn’t know.” I paused, wondering how much to reveal. “I would have told her after we got home from Europe but...” I heard tires crunching in the yard. “They’re back.”

~~~~~  
Lois

Granny Kent was a lot of fun.

That was my first impression of her as she climbed down out of the truck when they got home from church.

She was a slight woman, probably five foot tall in her bare feet, and she was one of the ladies I’d once heard called ‘the little blue haired Jesus ladies’ except her hair was snowy white. She was wearing a nice white blouse — which was all I could see at first since she was on the other side of the truck, but as she came around the bed, I could see that my very first impression of a stereotypical ‘blue haired Jesus lady’, wasn’t accurate.

With the fairly plain white blouse came a pair of rainbow capris, bright red, yellow and blue knee high socks and a pair of black patent leather Sunday shoes.

Somehow, she pulled it off. I hoped I’d be able to do that someday — wear whatever I wanted and look great doing it. If I remembered what Clark had told me once, she was in her early-seventies, but she looked great.

I’d smiled shyly at her when we were introduced, but immediately she hugged me for all she was worth. When she pulled back, she was chatting for all she was worth about being so glad to meet the young lady Clark had married and how she was looking forward to having a great-grandchild. She promised to go through the photo albums with me sometime during the week and tell me all kinds of stories about Clark as a kid.

She’d insisted on sitting next to me during dinner, telling Clark he could sit by me whenever he wanted.

Once lunch was over, she’d asked me to walk her home and I obliged. She told me that a nap in the afternoon was part of her routine these days. I confided in her that it was often part of mine.

When we’d reached her porch, she’d turned and studied me to the point that I was a bit uncomfortable under the scrutiny. Then she’d said something that confused me. She said that Clark was a very special man — what grandma didn’t think that? — and that, while Lana was nice enough, he needed a very special woman and she’d never thought Lana was right for him. Apparently, I’d measured up to whatever standard it was she had.

When I made it back to the main house, I discovered that Clark had gone to help his dad do some work and Martha asked what I wanted to do. After a few questions, she admitted that she did have some work to get done and I told her to do it. I needed to work on my English paper.

I managed to get a couple pages written from my perspective on the death of my mom and sister, but that was about it.

I felt quite anti-social as I holed up in Clark’s room working — or trying to work — but Granny, as I’d been practically ordered to call her, was still at her house; Martha was somewhere else working on whatever kind of art she did; and Clark and his dad were off on the farm somewhere, so it wasn’t like there was anyone else to do anything with.

Finally, I gave up on the paper and logged into the Wifi network using the password Clark had written down for me. I checked my email and then surfed the web a bit, reading a couple new chapters of NCIS fan fiction that authors I trusted — trusted to write decently and actually finish their stories — had posted new chapters on.

I heard stomping outside on the porch and then voices downstairs. It sounded like Clark and Jonathan were back from wherever they’d been. A few minutes later, I heard a female voice join them.

I sighed and leaned my head back against the wall and stretched my legs out in front of me on the bed. I shouldn’t have been surprised the Clark had moved me off the floor and onto either his bed or the air mattress, but I still was.

“Hey.”

I glanced up, startled, to see Clark leaning against the door jamb. “Hi.”

“Get anything done?”

I sighed. “A couple pages on the English paper, but that’s about it.”

“Still blocked?”

“Yeah.” I played with the hem of my shirt. “It’s a pretty painful time in my life, but I think if I can get through it and get it on paper, it’ll be a good one. Better than like, my first date with Joe or the official version of how we got together or something.”

He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Well, dinner’s ready. Leftovers from lunch, if you’re hungry.”

I stood up and headed towards the door. “Sounds good to me.”

“And after that...” He sighed. “We need to go find a quiet place to have that talk.”

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I didn't eat much dinner; I was just too nervous about the rest of the night. I was granted a reprieve, however, when Granny insisted that we play 'Scenelt'. A lively game of men versus women ensued. When Dad and I won the first round, Granny demanded a rematch and got it. I certainly wasn't going to protest, not when it delayed telling all to Lois. Mom and Lois did well, but Granny impressed me with her movie knowledge and they trounced us the second game. The tie breaker was postponed until the next night when Lois yawned.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief when Granny suggested Lois go on up to bed. She nodded and headed for the stairs with another big yawn. Granny said her good-byes and gave me a big hug, whispering that I'd 'found a keeper'.

I wanted to avoid my parents but I knew there was no way I was going to be able to.

I went into the living room and flopped back into my seat.

"I like her," Dad told me.

"I'm glad," I said honestly.

"Well, I already knew I liked her," Mom informed us as she picked up the cups and took them to the kitchen.

"Are you going to tell her tonight?" Dad asked quietly.

I shrugged. "I was planning on it and I told her earlier that there was something I wanted to talk to her about after dinner, but..." I waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the game. "We got sidetracked and I bet she's ready for bed by now."

Just then the shower turned on.

"You're avoiding her." Mom sat next to me and rested her head on my shoulder. "I understand why it's so hard for you. No one understands that better than I do," she reminded me. "But you have to tell her. She's having your baby and she deserves to know."

"I know." She was right; no one knew better than her how hard this was for me, how much was riding on it in so many ways. I sighed. "If she's wide awake after she's done in the shower, I'll tell her tonight. Otherwise, I'll tell her tomorrow."

Mom moved away from me and looked me straight in the eye. "Clark Jerome Kent, don't you dare keep putting this off so that you can get to Saturday and be like 'oops, sorry Mom, Dad, but the opportunity just never came up'. If you haven't told her yourself by the time I get up Tuesday morning, I'll tell her myself and that won't be good for you, young man."

"I believe you." I did and I knew better than to try to weasel out of something when she used that tone of voice.

The water upstairs stopped and we chatted for a few minutes about assorted other things until Lois came down the stairs. She was wearing another of my T-shirts and sweat pants and her hair was still wet from the shower. She paused halfway down for just a minute before she continued down.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I figured you'd all be in bed and I could get a glass of milk."

"I'll get you one," I said, desperate to escape.

She waved me off. "I'm perfectly capable of getting my own glass of milk."

"Go talk to her." Mom gave me one of her looks — the ones I knew should be obeyed regardless of how I felt about it. She stood and Dad did the same. "Good night, Lois," she called. "We'll see you in the morning."

"Good night," Lois hollered back from the kitchen.

I sighed and headed towards the other room.

Here went nothing.

~~~~~

Lois

I'd really hoped that they'd all be gone by the time I was done in the shower. In bed, Idaho, wherever — just anywhere but the living room.

Especially Clark.

The whole 'we need to talk' thing had been weighing on my mind all day, even when I tried not to let it. It was probably a big part of the reason why I hadn't been able to get more work done on my life story, narrative, whatever we were calling it English assignment.

I heard Clark head towards the kitchen as I poured myself a glass of milk, but then he went up the stairs instead. I groaned as footsteps came back down.

"Want to go for a walk?" he asked from behind me.

I shrugged without turning around. "I don't have any shoes," I told him. I'd put socks on when I got dressed, but I wasn't about to walk around a farm in my socks.

"Brought 'em for you, just in case you did. If not, then they're down here for tomorrow."

"Fine." I did want to get a look at the farm — if for no other reason than then I'd know where to go to avoid everyone. I sat at the table and, a minute later, I stood up. "Ready."

Clark grabbed a red folder off the table and we headed for the door. He handed me a light jacket first. "You'll probably want this. It's pretty cool out."

"What about you?" I asked, slipping it on. It had to be Clark's given how big it was on me.

He hesitated before saying, "I'll be fine."

We walked out the door and started towards the barn.

"Will we be able to see anything?" I asked looking at the night, marveling at how many stars I could see.

"The moon's pretty full, so I think you'll be able to see plenty."

We walked past his grandmother's small house and a minute later, reached the barn. He opened the door for me.

"Not a whole lot to see in here right now," he said. "Tractor, some other farm equipment. The horses and cows are all outside right now."

"You have horses?" I asked, almost excited.

"Dad got a couple fairly recently."

"What's up there?" I asked, pointing to a ladder.

"Up there is the hayloft," he said as we kept walking. He grabbed a blanket off a table before we exited the other door a minute later.

He didn't elaborate or offer to show the hayloft to me or explain what the blanket was for, so I just followed him. I figured we were probably going somewhere for this talk of his and we'd want a blanket to sit on.

A few minutes later, we were walking along a small road or path between two fences. We'd passed the pond and on one side of the path there was a field of some crop I didn't recognize and it wasn't really very tall yet, anyway. On the other side was a line of trees.

We walked along for a while. He wasn't saying anything, but stared at the ground in front of him.

I stuck my hands in the pockets of the jacket and wrapped it a little tighter around me. It really was a bit chilly and the wet hair wasn't helping.

We continued walking in silence and some time later, we reached the line of trees in front of us. He turned off the more well-defined path and took my hand.

"You'll want to watch your step here," he told me, walking directly in front of me, using my hand to direct me. "It's a bit more overgrown than it used to be."

I followed him until we reached a small clearing.

"Do you mind if we sit for a bit?" he asked, not looking at me.

"That's fine." I'd expected it.

He let go of my hand to spread the blanket out and I took a seat on one side. He sat on the other, about as far away from me as he could.

I wasn't sure when the last time he'd looked at me on this

little journey of ours.

He still didn't look at me when he spoke again. "We need to talk."

~~~~~  
Clark

The knot in my stomach had been getting bigger and bigger as we walked. I still wasn't sure how I was going to tell her this. If I was going to be able to actually hand her the folder I'd brought with me. If I was going to, somehow, let her know I was a strange visitor from another planet.

"Okay," she said quietly, not looking at me any more than I was looking at her.

I fiddled with the corner of the folder still in my hands. I took a deep breath and plunged in. "First, I want to apologize."

Or maybe I was just a coward and would avoid it as long as I could.

We sat in silence for a long moment.

"For what?" she finally asked.

"You're my friend. You've been my friend since you asked me what the hell I was doing in your room and I haven't really been acting like it the last couple of months."

"No," she said slowly. "You haven't, but I don't know that I really have either."

I shook my head. "I'm sure there's plenty of blame to go around — things that both of us have done or not done or whatever — but mostly it's been me. It's hard for you to be a friend or talk or whatever when I'm not there." I sighed. "And I haven't exactly been home much or a font of conversational wizardry when I am."

"Font of conversational wizardry?" I could hear the smothered laughter in her voice.

"It sounded good at the time," I said, shrugging.

"If you say so." I could still hear the underlying amusement.

"Anyway, I'm sorry. I promised you a lot of things when I married you and I haven't done a very good job at any of them."

I could see her shrug out of the corner of my eye. "It's not like either of us really meant it."

"Regardless, I'm going to try to do better to at least be your friend."

"Well, thanks, I guess." She seemed like she wanted to say something. "And I'm sorry for getting us into this mess. If I hadn't suggested we follow Mindy, the woman who would run the mafia, we wouldn't be here."

"True. Have you heard anything from Daniel or Jill about her?" She'd snooped around her dad's house a bit when no one else was around but hadn't found anything.

She shook her head. "No. I told Daniel what we saw when you did. That's the last time I talked to him."

"We'll keep looking," I promised her. "I know you're still worried about your dad."

"I am," she said quietly and I could imagine tears in her eyes.

I sighed. I could let the conversation get sidetracked but that would only prolong the inevitable.

Maybe it was like ripping a Band-aid off. "Here." I shoved the folder her direction.

"What's this?"

"My English paper. I want you to read it."

~~~~~  
Lois

I took it from him.

"You want me to read it? I'd rather read it on the computer so I can make edits to it for you."

He shook his head. "No, that's not why I want you to read it, though if you want to edit it for me later, I'd appreciate it."

"Then why?" I asked.

"I told you there was something I needed to tell you that I'd never told anyone before. It's not all in there, but it's a starting

point. I don't know how to just say it so..."

"You could always... just say it," I told him.

"I can't," he whispered. "I've never told anyone this. Mom and Dad know, of course, and Chris knew some and I've wondered if Granny suspected, but to just tell someone..."

"Then why are you telling me?" I didn't get it.

"Because it's the right thing to do," he answered.

"Is that the only reason?" I played with the corner of the folder like he had.

He sighed. "No."

When he didn't elaborate, I finally asked, "Then why else?"

"Because my parents don't know the truth about us. Because they think you're having my baby and if you were, it could affect the baby, but you're not so it won't, but they don't know that. Because they're going to stop sending the checks they've been sending if I don't tell you and because if I don't tell you by the time Mom gets up on Tuesday, she's going to tell you and she's going to tan my hide when she's done."

Nice to know he trusted me. I'd saved his life in that snowstorm and he had the nerve to not trust me? I knew I'd screwed up the whole Latislan thing, but surely I'd proven that I was trustworthy at some point.

At least he was being honest with me. That was a step forward. Wasn't it?

~~~~~  
Clark

That had to hurt her, but it was the truth.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I know that's not what you want to hear about why I'm spilling my deepest, darkest secret to you, but it's the truth."

"And you said Lana doesn't know this, whatever 'this' is?" she asked still fingering the folder.

I shook my head. "No."

"You never told her whatever it is that would make your parents practically disown you or whatever if you haven't told me by tomorrow night?"

"No. I would have told her after I asked her to marry me, but since I never did..."

"Ah." She was silent for a minute. "So it wouldn't have affected her decision?"

"I don't know. I guess it's possible that she would have said yes when I proposed in Paris and then changed her mind after I told her, but I don't think so."

"Because she loves you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Are you afraid that I'll want to leave once I read whatever this is? Is that part of the fear of this?"

"In a way," I said after I thought about it for a minute. "If you do leave, then I can't protect you and the baby from Navance, but even though you are my friend, if you decided you didn't want to spend your life — or the next five years or so of it — with me, it probably wouldn't have the same effect as it would if Lana had decided not to marry me."

"I guess I can understand that."

"So..." I looked around. "Do you have enough light to read?"

She nodded. "I think so. The moon is pretty bright."

"Then would you mind? Please. I don't know how much longer I can deal with the knot in my stomach."

She opened the folder and read the title aloud.

"He Didn't Have to Be: The Story of a Foundling, by Clark Jerome Davis Kent."

Part 49

Lois

~~~~~  
I flipped the page and read the title again before reading Clark's paper.

“He Didn’t Have To Be: The Story of a Foundling, by Clark Jerome Davis Kent,” I said.

\*\*\*

May 1985

~~~~~  
Martha
~~~~~

We were in the beat-up truck on our way home when we saw something flash across the sky. Curious, we waited to see if anything else was going to happen and when nothing did, we climbed the gate into Shuster’s Field.

“What do you think it was?” I asked in excited, but hushed, tones.

He shook his head. “Beats me.”

We hurried to the furrow whatever it was had dug into the earth.

There we found something we hadn’t expected.

A tiny capsule lay there, and when I reached out to touch it, one side fell off. He reached towards the other side and the same thing happened, causing the top to lift with a hiss.

*<A capsule? What kind of capsule could they have found? Space junk? space... ship?>*

I gasped then whispered, “It’s a baby.”

*<A baby?!> I tried to wrap my mind around that. Clark?*

*<Note to self: Ask Clark if he’s an alien.>*

He looked around furtively. “Well, we can’t leave it here.”

“This is not an ‘it,’” I said sternly.

*I smiled to myself. That sounded like Martha.*

“Well, can you tell if that’s a boy or a girl through that plastic?”

“Well, no, but until we know for sure, we’re going with ‘he.’”

“Fine. We can’t leave him here.”

“You’re right. We’ll take him with us.”

“And do what with him?” he asked. “We can’t leave him here, but which of us would take him home? And who would let either of us keep him?”

I sighed, tears welling up in my eyes. “I know. We’re not married. They’d come and take him away and we’d never see him again. If anyone knew how we really found him, the government would lock him up and...” I choked up.

“...dissect him like a frog,” he finished grimly.

*<How... morbid! But how... safety conscious or something of Jonathan to want to protect Clark like that.>*

“So what’re we going to do?”

“Marry me.”

“What?” I stared at him.

“You’ve been my best girl since we were five. We’ve talked about it; we just hadn’t made it official yet. So let’s do it. Oklahoma doesn’t have a waiting period. We could run down there and get married this evening. By the time we get back, there won’t be any reason for anyone to take him away from us. Unless his birth parents show up, and somehow I don’t see that happening.”

*That sounded so much like Clark and Lana, even though I knew it wasn’t.*

I bit my bottom lip and thought for a minute before I nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

He hurried off and backed the truck into the field. Together, we managed to load the tiny craft into the bed and then covered it with a tarp, securing it as we went.

“Let’s drop this off at the farm before we go. We’ll go in the back way so no one will see us.”

I nodded and climbed in beside him, still holding the tiny infant. “Let’s go.”

Several hours later, we stood in front of a judge in a small town just across the Oklahoma-Kansas border. We’d had to urge him away from his favorite prime time comedy, but managed to

convince him that a dear friend had died that day and wanted to leave her baby with us, but since we weren’t yet married, we were afraid that the Kansas Division of Child Services would take him away. We’d planned on marrying, we said, just not this quickly. And that was the truth.

Reluctantly he’d agreed and we exchanged vows. It had happened too quickly to have rings to exchange as well, but he promised as soon as we got home, he’d break out the engagement ring he’d kept hidden for the last six months and we’d go to town to get wedding bands tomorrow.

“By the power vested in me by the state of Oklahoma, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You are now Mr. and Mrs. Christopher and Martha Davis.”

*Christopher Davis?! What about Jonathan?*

\*\*\*

I held the baby while he sucked hungrily on another bottle of formula. When we’d stopped at the house to hide the ship, I’d fixed a bottle from the supplies my now sister-in-law left at the house for their bi-weekly visits. I’d guessed he was about three months old and had fixed him a six ounce bottle. He’d finished it in no time flat and it had taken another eight ounces to fill him up. Space travel must have left him hungry.

*Space travel? They’d seen a light and saw a capsule, but space travel? Was it a space ship? Was he... an alien? Was it even Clark they were talking about?*

Chris sat beside me on the couch and wrapped one arm around me pulling me and the baby close to him.

“What should we name him?” he asked softly.

“I don’t know. What do you think?” I turned slightly and kissed his jaw.

He swallowed hard. “None of that until that little guy’s in bed and then there’s going to be some time for me and my bride.” He pulled us a little closer.

*I winced. How hard must that have been for Clark to write?*

“You better believe there is.” I knew my eyes twinkled at him. “So what do you want to name him?”

“How about after your family?”

“Like what?”

“Clark.”

*It was Clark in that... capsule or whatever!*

“My maiden name,” I said slowly then grinned. “My maiden name. It’s not my name anymore.”

“Nope. You’re a Davis now.”

“I like it.” I gently stroked the tiny cheek still working vigorously on the bottle. “Clark Davis.”

“What about a middle name?”

“Jerome,” I said without hesitation.

“After my dad?” Tears filled his eyes.

“Yeah,” I answered quietly. “He would have loved to see his new grandson.”

“That he would have. He never quite forgave Jenny for having girls. Of course, he was wrapped completely around their little fingers from about two minutes after they were born.”

“He loved them, but you have four sisters. He wanted another little boy in the family.”

“We’ll have to get Doc Johnson to help get a birth certificate and stuff. What’s our official story going to be?”

“An old friend of mine from college dropped him off on your doorstep. I saw her earlier today but had no idea what she was planning on doing. There were a couple of strangers in town today so no one should question it. She left a note, asking us to protect her identity and take care of her baby. We went to Oklahoma and got married. Everyone knows we’ve always planned to so... But, for some reason, she didn’t explain in the note, she didn’t have a birth certificate or anything for him.” I’d thought about it a lot on the way to Oklahoma — even working out the wording of the note in my head. I’d have to write it soon,

disguising my handwriting as I did, of course.

“That works.” He watched as I gently extracted the now empty bottle from the mouth of his now sleeping son. I lifted him to my shoulder and gently patted his back until he burped.

“Will you get that laundry basket? I put an old, flat pillow in the bottom of it and it’ll work for a bassinet until we can get some real furniture.”

He nodded and moved to get the basket off of *our* bed.

A few minutes later, little Clark was sound asleep, one fist in his mouth, still wearing only a diaper we’d absconded from Chris’s sister’s stash. “We need to get him some clothes,” he whispered as I set the basket in the living room, near the door to the room we would now share. He glanced at the clock. “It’s eleven o’clock. Do you need to call home?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to deal with my parents right now.” I rested a hand lightly on his chest. “Right now, I want to get to know my new husband better.” I smiled shyly at him.

*I shuddered a bit on Clark’s behalf. I knew in a vague way that my parents had done those kinds of things, but I had no intention of writing about them.*

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“I’ve been ready since the first time you kissed me when I was sixteen.” I moved closer to him and kissed him lightly on the lips. “Make me your wife in every sense, Chris,” I whispered.

\*\*\*

We lay in our newly shared bed, resting quietly in the afterglow of something magical when the loud clanging of a bell halfway across town shook us from our quiet reflection. I fingered the engagement ring he’d slid onto my finger just before we’d made love for the first time.

*I winced again on Clark’s behalf.*

He jumped from the bed and pulled on his jeans. “I gotta go, honey.”

“I know.”

Chris was a part of the volunteer fire brigade and when the bell rang — no matter the time of day or night — they had to go. He leaned over and gave me a long, lingering kiss. “Take care of that boy of mine while I’m gone.” He winked at me and moved to the phone. He picked it up to hear Rob Miller and Darren Johnson already on the party line. He confirmed the location then kissed me — his new bride — again. “It’s out at the Irig place. It’ll probably be light before I get back.”

*I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach as he kissed Martha.*

“Okay.”

He kissed me again. “I love you, Martha Davis.”

“I love you, too.”

\*\*\*

There was a knock on the door as I fried an egg. Clark had woken up not long after Chris left and taken another big bottle. We’d slept for a little over four hours after that. The sunlight streaming in the window had kept me from sleeping much longer. I rarely slept late, but after the unusual exertions of the day before — finding a baby and hiding a spaceship and a trip to Oklahoma and becoming man and wife — I could have slept for a couple more hours without much trouble, but Clark decided it was time to play for a bit after his seven am bottle. I wrote that note and decided it was time to eat while I waited for Chris to come back.

Clark was lying on the floor on a quilt Chris’ grandmother had made for us, knowing we’d marry someday but that she wouldn’t likely be around to see it.

I smiled at him as he studied his fingers intently and then moved to the door.

I opened it to find a very somber Wayne Irig standing there with his hat in his hand.

My hand went immediately to my stomach and I stumbled backwards. I’d seen that look too many times.

*Oh, God. That’s what I’d been afraid of. My heart broke for Martha — even though I knew she’d end up happy with Jonathan eventually.*

“No,” I whispered.

“I’m so sorry, Martha. He told us that you two had run off and got married yesterday and that he’d tell us the rest of the story later.” He twisted the hat he held in his hands. “He saved Josh.” His voice broke. “He saved my son. He made it to the back bedroom and threw a sheet down to us. He managed to wrap Josh in another sheet and lower him far enough out the window that he could drop him onto the sheet he’d tossed to us. Josh is going to be fine, but the ceiling collapsed before...” He couldn’t go on.

*Tears flowed down my cheeks as I read. Chris had been a hero, in more ways than one.*

I had backed away from Wayne as he spoke until I collapsed into the chair in the living room. A small cry from the baby on the floor gave me something else to focus my attention on. “Oh, Clark,” I cried. “Your daddy...” I clutched the baby to me and rocked back and forth.

“Joe took the liberty of calling on your folks to tell them and Darren was heading over to Jenny’s house — Chris said his mom was over there last night. I’d imagine they’ll be here soon.” He looked at the ground. “I gotta get back to my Maggie and Josh, but if you need anything, Martha, please call us. We owe Chris so much and if there’s anything...”

I nodded, unable to find the words.

As Wayne turned to leave, I stopped him. “Wayne, would you have Doc Johnson stop by if you see him? I need to have him look at Clark here.”

Wayne nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll go find him before I head home.”

“Thank you.”

\*\*\*

My parents arrived not long after Wayne left and found me still sitting in the chair rocking baby Clark. I refused to explain until Chris’s family arrived. When they did a few minutes later, I managed, between tears and refusals to let go of the baby, to tell them the story we’d concocted about a friend of mine from college in Oklahoma. The marriage itself wasn’t a surprise to anyone, only the suddenness of it.

Over the next few days, the house was packed up — I knew I couldn’t stay there by myself, not with a baby to care for. And Chris’ mom and sister, Deborah, and her husband still lived in the bigger house across the farmyard so the farm would be taken care of. I’d agonized over what to do with the spaceship we’d found Clark in, but finally decided that Wayne owed us. I’d covered it completely with tarps and called Wayne over. He’d built a big crate around it and hid it on his farm, never asking for more information than I was willing to give him.

*I wondered what had happened to it and if Clark would actually let me see it sometime.*

I moved back into the room on my parents’ farm that I’d abandoned for only a few days. I spent most of my time with Clark, rarely venturing out except to shop with my mother for necessities for him and church on Sundays. The active social life Chris and I had enjoyed disappeared and my world revolved around the tiny baby that had literally fallen from the sky.

\*\*\*

September 1989

“Clark Jerome Davis! Get back in here!” I hollered out the door.

The dark haired four-year-old trudged silently in from the barn.

*I found myself smiling a bit. I’d bet Clark was a cute four-year-old. Maybe Martha would show me some pictures.*

“What do you think you’re doing, young man?”  
 He hung his head. “Sorry, Mama.”  
 “You’re a mess. I don’t have time to give you another bath before I leave, which means that Nana is going to do it.”  
 “Aw, Mama, you give better baths.” He frowned.  
*I smiled at that, too. Daddy had always given better baths at our house. Mom never let us play as much as Daddy did.*  
 “Well, I gave you one earlier. You know better than to go play in the barn after you’ve had a bath.”  
 He scuffed a well-worn shoe against the wood of the porch.  
 “Sorry, Mama.”

I smiled. “It’s okay, Clark. Come here.” I pulled him close to my leg as he wrapped his arms around it and rested his head on my hip. “But it means that Nana is going to have to give you another bath and you need to be good for her.”  
 “She doesn’t let me play battleships,” he pouted.  
 “I know, but that’s because she doesn’t have the energy to keep up with a four-year-old at bath time anymore.”  
 Clark sighed. “Where’re you goin’, Mama? Why can’t you stay with me? You can be my best girl.”

I squatted down until I was at eye level with him. “I’ll always be your best girl, son, but tonight, that nice Mr. Smith from the next county asked your Mama to go to a movie with him.”

“Can I go? Please, Mama.” His large brown eyes pleaded with me. “I’ll be good. I promise.”

I smiled at him. “Not tonight. Maybe another time.”  
 He glared at me and stomped off to his room.  
 My mother sat in her rocking chair next to the open window in the living room. I knew she’d heard every word.

“I’m sorry you’re going to have to give him another bath, but he can’t go to church in the morning looking like that,” I told her.

“I know, dear. Me and my arthritis might even let him play battleships for a while, if he’s good between now and then.”  
 Mom smiled at me. “So, tell me about Mr. Smith.”

“His first name is Andrew and he seems like a nice man.”  
 “Is he picking you up?”

I shook my head. “I’m meeting him at Maisie’s. Maisie’s picking me up here in a little while and we’re going to the movies with her and Joe.”

“Is he going to bring you home?”  
 I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You didn’t tell him about Clark yet, did you?” my mother asked gently.

*I paused for a minute. That would be hard. How would you tell someone that your son was an... alien?*

I sighed. “No. I didn’t. Most everyone from around here knows about him, but Andrew isn’t from here. He’s from far enough away that he doesn’t know our story.” I didn’t wilt under my mother’s disapproving stare. “I will tell him. There’s no point in a second date if he’s not willing to even consider raising another man’s son.”

We turned as we heard a car coming up the road.  
 “That’s Maisie. I’ll be home later. Thanks, Mom.” I kissed her forehead. “Clark!” I called. “I’m leaving. Come here.”

Clark came running down the stairs. “Don’t go, Mama.” He buried his head in my leg. “I promise; I won’t play in the barn anymore.”

*My heart broke for the little boy Clark had been.*  
 I knelt down on the floor. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Please don’t go. I’ll be a good boy.” His bottom lip quivered.

I tipped his chin up with her finger. “You are a good boy. You’re my best boy. And I’ll be home tonight. You’ll be asleep, but I’ll be home *long* before you wake up, okay?”

Clark nodded.  
 “You be good for Nana, okay?”  
 Clark nodded again then wrapped his arms around my neck.

“I love you, Mama.”  
 “I love you, too.” I returned the hug and gave him a big kiss before straightening up and heading for the door.

~~~~~  
 Clark
 I watched as Mama climbed into the truck with Miss Maisie. I’d heard what she said to Nana. Why was she going out with this Mr. Smith if she didn’t think he’d want to... what was it she’d said? Raise another man’s son. Why wouldn’t Mr. Smith want to help take care of me? I was a good boy, even if I did forget and play in the barn sometimes when I wasn’t supposed to.

I wanted to giggle. That sounded like Clark.
 Pete had a daddy. They ran the grocery store in town. So did Lana — her daddy was the mayor and Rachel’s daddy was the sheriff. Josh’s daddy was a farmer like Pop Pop was. And Pop Pop was Mama’s daddy, but I didn’t have a daddy. Well, Mama said my daddy died a very long time ago when I was too little to remember it but that he’d loved me very much.

I frowned. Lana. I should have known she’d be mentioned in here somewhere, but — given what he’d said in the car — I wasn’t expecting it until the wedding bit, whenever that was.

I was a good boy and my Nana let me play battleships for a few minutes in the bathtub. I was sound asleep when a noise woke me up.

Mama’s laughter wafted up from the porch and through my open window. A man’s voice joined hers. That must be the nice Mr. Smith. I wanted to meet him.

I climbed out of bed and walked quietly down the stairs. I reached the open screen door and pushed on it.

“Mama, can I sit with you for a little while?” I asked rubbing my eyes.

“Clark,” she exclaimed. “What are you doing up? You’re supposed to be in bed, young man.”

I shuffled to her side. “I’m sorry, Mama. I heard you laughing and wanted to come sit with you is all.”

She smiled and held out her arm. I walked readily into her embrace. “Andrew, this is my son, Clark. Clark, this is Mr. Smith.”

I held out a small hand. “It’s my pleasure to meet you, Mr. Smith.” Just like I’d been taught.

“It’s nice to meet you, Clark.”
 Martha smoothed my hair back out of my face. “Why don’t you run on upstairs and I’ll tuck you in when I come up?”

“Okay.” I moved back inside and climbed back in bed. Voices came through the window but I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying.

A few minutes later, Mama was sitting on the side of my bed as the sound of gravel indicated that Mr. Smith was leaving.

“Did you have fun, Mama?” I asked with a yawn.

“I had a nice time.” She pushed that one lock of hair back off my forehead.

I wondered what she wasn’t telling him.
 “Are you going to see him again?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He lives awfully far away from your Nana’s house so I don’t know that things would work with him.”

“What kind of work? Like on a farm?”
I smiled at the way a four-year-old’s mind worked.

“Yes, he works on a farm, but it’s a long ways from here.”
 “Oh.”

“Get some sleep, little man.”
 “Good night, Mama.”

“Good night, Clark.” She pulled the blanket up around me and pressed a kiss to my forehead before leaving.

~~~~~  
 Martha  
 After church the day after my date with Andrew Smith, Clark was lying in his bed playing with his toy cars. He was really

supposed to be napping but as long as he was quiet I didn't mind.

I closed the door and went downstairs to sit on the couch. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

"How was your evening, dear?"

"You don't waste any time, do you, Mom?"

"No. Life's too short to waste time."

"Yeah," I said softly, thinking of the time Chris and I had wasted. We should have gotten married the minute I got home from college in December instead of waiting another six months after that. "That it is."

"So?"

"The evening was very nice until we were chatting on the porch and Clark came out."

"He was up?"

I nodded. "Yeah. He heard us laughing and came down."

"Had you told him about Clark yet?"

"No."

"How'd he take it?"

I sighed. "Not well. He made some... derogatory remarks about Clark and his father. I told him that it was none of his business at this point and if he stuck around long enough and I thought it might be going somewhere, he'd get the whole story but not until then. I only told him that I'd been married to a wonderful man who died saving a little boy's life. He made another rude comment and I told him he'd better leave before he found himself walking funny for the next week."

*That sounded like Martha. Poor Mr. Smith probably didn't know what hit him.*

"I'm so sorry, dear."

I shrugged. "If someone isn't willing to accept my son, he's not worth my time." We sat for another minute before I continued. "You know, in some ways it was more like a job interview than a date. He may not have realized that but it was — an interview for the job as Clark's dad. If he isn't willing and able to that job, there's no way he's going to end up being my husband."

"There's someone out there for you, dear. I know there is."

"Maybe. But maybe Chris was it. I'd rather have Clark any day of the week than someone who doesn't understand that it's possible to love someone else's child as though he were your own. Clark wasn't Chris' son either — and he's not mine, biologically — but that doesn't matter to me and it didn't matter to Chris."

"Mama?"

My eyes grew suddenly wide. "Clark? You're supposed to be lying down."

*My eyes grew wide, too. Clark overheard that?*

"I know but I need some water. What do you mean I'm not Chris's son? I thought Chris was my daddy and you're my Mama." His lower lip quivered and the big brown eyes filled with tears.

"Come sit with me." I patted the couch next to me. When he was curled up next to me, I continued. "Clark, sometimes when a mom and dad have a baby, they can't take care of him well enough and so they give him to someone else who can take care of him. One day, when you were very little, your mom and dad realized that they couldn't take care of you and so they gave you to me and Chris because they knew how much we would love you and how well we could take care of you."

*My eyes filled with tears. I didn't know if that was why Clark's parents had shipped him off — or if there was some other reason for it — but the way Martha explained it...*

"But Chris went away." His voice still trembled.

"You know your friend Josh?"

He nodded.

"Well, one night — the same night you came to live with us — Chris had to go help fight a fire at Josh's house. Josh was just

a tiny baby, like you were at the time. Chris went into the house even though it was on fire and he saved baby Josh."

"Why didn't he get out?"

I shook my head. "There wasn't time. He saved Josh, but he couldn't save himself. He loved you and he loved me very much, but he had to leave us."

"What about my other mom and dad?"

"They loved you very much, but for some reason, they couldn't take care of you and they wanted to make sure that you were taken care of so they sent you to us."

"Will you always take care of me, Mama? Or are you going to send me away too?"

I hugged him a little tighter. "I'm always going to take care of you. I'm not ever going to send you away."

"Not even if you can't find someone who wants to live with us and be my daddy? You won't send me away so you can find a grown up man?"

I turned his head until he looked me in the eye. "Clark, if a grown up man doesn't want to be your daddy, then he's not man enough to live with us. Ever. I wouldn't ever marry someone who doesn't love you as much as I do and if I never find someone like that, I have you and that's more important. I love you more than I love the idea of being married again."

*That sounded like Martha, too. Could I be that kind of mom? Would I be when Clark left after the baby's fifth birthday?*

"You were married to my daddy?"

"Yes, I was, sweetheart."

"And you loved him?"

"Very much."

*I wouldn't be able to say that, though. Would I? Would I love Clark and he'd leave us anyway? Would he love us by then? And not leave?*

"Do you think there's another man out there who would love both of us?"

"I don't know, sweetie. But until we find one, it's you and me okay?"

He nodded. "And Nana and Pop Pop."

I laughed. "And Nana and Pop Pop."

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Part 50

June 1990

Clark

~~~~~

I met the man I call my Dad when I was five-years-old. *He had to mean Jonathan. Right? Surely there wasn't someone else I hadn't heard of, was there?*

"You have a date tonight, Mama?" I asked.

"I do." She hunted through her jewelry box looking for her other earring.

"Is he going to be mean like that Mr. Smith was last year?"

"I hope not."

"Is he going to be nice like Mr. Johnson?"

Mama laughed. "Mr. Johnson is nice, Clark." I knew Mr. Johnson was nearing eighty, but said he loved me like his own grandson and even let me call him Pop sometimes.

I suppressed a giggle at that.

"Is he going to be nice like my daddy was?" I asked quietly.

"I don't know. He seems like a nice man, but I don't know if he's going to be as nice as your daddy until I've talked to him a while."

"Does he know about me?" I didn't look at her as I spoke.

"Yes, he knows about you." Finding the earring at last, she slid it into her ear and fastened it.

"What's his name?"

"His name is Mr. Kent. He lives over on the farm by Josh. He's been in the Navy and just came home to help his mama take care of their farm since his brother is moving to Arkansas."

It was Jonathan. It had to be. Unless this guy was Jonathan's brother or something.

"That's nice of him."

"That's very nice of him." She found her watch and put it on.

"And he doesn't live far away like Mr. Smith did."

"No," Mama said slowly. "He doesn't."

"So if he does turn out to be nice like my daddy, we wouldn't have to be far from Nana and Pop Pop."

"No, we wouldn't, but Clark?"

"Yes, Mama?"

"Even if things go well with him tonight, and I decide to see him again, that doesn't mean we're going to get married. It might be a long time before we decide to get married, even if he does turn out to be a nice man." She looked me in the eyes. "And I don't want you saying anything to him about it, okay?"

"Okay."

I hid at the top of the stairs when I heard the knock on the door. This Mr. Kent better treat Mama right or I would have something to say about it. I wasn't sure what that meant but Pop Pop had said it once so I thought it.

I giggled again at the idea of Clark standing up to Jonathan when he was little.

Mama opened the door and I heard them saying something I couldn't quite make out, but I guessed they were saying hello.

"Clark?" Mama called.

"Yes, Mama?" I called back.

"Can you come here please?"

I hesitated, afraid I was going to be in trouble for sitting there, and then made my way slowly down the stairs.

"Come here, son." Mama smiled at me and held out her arm. I practically ran to her, almost hiding behind her leg. "Mr. Kent wanted to meet you before we left."

I looked up. "Hi, Mr. Kent."

The larger man knelt down so that we were eye to eye. "You know, Clark, I don't think I'd like it too much if some strange man came to my house and took my mama out to dinner and a movie without knowing something about him first."

My eyes filled with tears. I could see why 'He Didn't Have To Be' was one of Clark's favorite songs.

"Yes, sir." I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I'd found it was always best to agree with grown-ups.

"So, what if you came with us? I wouldn't want you to stay up worrying about your mama."

I looked up with wide eyes at Mama. "Can I, Mama? Can I come?"

A single tear streaked down Mama's face. "Of course you can. If Mr. Kent wants you to come, then that would be wonderful. You know I always love spending time with you."

My small hand reached up and brushed away the tear. "Then why are you crying?"

A tear streaked down my face as well. I would cry, too, I was sure, if someday Joe, or someone else asked me out and wanted to take my son or daughter with us.

"No reason," she smiled. "So what do you say? Are you going to come with us?"

A wide grin split my face and I let go of her leg to jump up and down. "Yes!" I quickly tamped down my excitement. "I'm in my pajamas. I can't go to town in my pajamas."

"Well, we better get you changed. Come on." Martha pushed me towards the stairs. She turned to the other man before she followed. "We'll be right back." I knew she was almost crying again. "Thank you," she said quietly. I wasn't sure what she was thanking him for.

He smiled at Mama. "I'll be waiting."

I sat by the window in the old pickup truck. I knew it had

been washed that afternoon. Mama sat between me and Mr. Kent. I liked Mr. Kent. I bet Mr. Kent was trying to impress Mama with the clean truck. A clean truck probably would impress her — clean little boys sure did.

I was quite sure that clean little boys and trucks both impressed Martha.

We went to Maisie's Diner for dinner. I got to have a cheeseburger and fries *and* a milkshake. Mama always made me get water on the rare occasions we went out to eat. I'd dutifully ordered water just as usual, but Mr. Kent had been the one to suggest a milkshake.

After dinner, a drive by the movie theater showed the only choices were a girly princess movie or something Mama and Mr. Kent had indicated was for 'grown ups'.

Instead, Mr. Kent suggested we go for a drive and watch the stars for a while. Before long, the truck was parked on the little road near Shuster's Field. The three of us climbed in the back of the truck and Mr. Kent spread a blanket out for us to sit on.

I talked for a while about my friends and the frog I'd found the day before and how my Mama was much nicer about frogs than most other mamas. Nana was, too. Grandma Davis would never, ever let a frog in the house and neither would aunts Jenny or Deborah. Aunt Dorrie might but she lived a long ways away.

I wasn't so sure about the frog thing. Maybe I was having a girl...

There was a slightly weird feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I decided it was because I'd never been on a real date before. Before long, I dozed off, my head resting on Mr. Kent's shoulder as they continued to talk quietly. Well, I guess they did. I was asleep. I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep when I suddenly jerked awake.

"Mama, I think I'm gonna be sick." The words barely made it out of my mouth, when my dinner followed — all over the nice Mr. Kent.

Poor Clark. That was about how I'd felt the first time I went on a real date, too.

Mama helped me to the side of the truck where the rest of my dinner found its way onto the ground. I could hear Mr. Kent moving around behind me. When I thought I was done, I sat back in Mama's arms.

"Here," said Mr. Kent, holding out a Thermos of water. "Take a sip and swish it around then spit it out."

I nodded and did as I was told. Mama held me close to her and pushed my hair back out of my face. "Are you okay, Clark?"

"I dunno. My tummy still hurts."

She looked at Mr. Kent. "I'm so sorry, Jonathan. He's never sick."

He smiled back at her. "It's okay. It's just one of those things, but I think we better get this little guy home."

Mama nodded. "That's probably best." She helped me climb down and into the cab, keeping me close to her the whole time.

Mr. Kent changed shirts, I noticed. He must have kept another one in the truck just in case a five-year-old threw up on him or something.

I knew Mama had loved Chris, but I'd never thrown up on him. If Mr. Kent still wanted to be part of our lives after I threw up all over him, maybe he was a good guy after all.

September 1990

I was lying in bed a few months later, when I heard Mama and Mr. Kent talking on the porch and I wanted to go sit with them. I remembered the night I'd gone out there when she was talking to Mr. Smith and that hadn't turned out so well. Maybe going down there wasn't such a good idea after all.

But this was Mr. Kent. He liked me, even though I'd thrown up all over him. He'd even taken me fishing a couple of times. I loved to fish but Pop Pop couldn't fish much anymore because of

his roomba something that made his knees hurt. And Grandpa Jerome had died before I came to live with Mama and my Daddy Chris. That's why my middle name was Jerome. Mama was the only one who ever used it though and then only when I was in trouble.

I hated getting middle named.

Would she middle name me if I went down to sit with them a bit tonight? I hadn't seen Mr. Kent in nearly a week because he'd been busy on his farm.

Finally, I decided it was worth the risk.

I went downstairs and pushed the screen door open. "Mama, can I sit with you for a little while?"

Mama smiled at me. "If it's okay with Mr. Kent."

I looked at him hopefully and he smiled at me, too. "Of course. Come on, Clark. Come sit over here."

I climbed between them and rested my head on Mama as she wrapped her arm around me.

"You know," Mr. Kent said seriously. "There's something I've been wanting to ask your mama and I think it's only right that I ask her with you here too, because it affects you."

I had no idea what he was talking about. It sounded like grown-up decisions and I didn't get to help with grown-up decisions. Getting to help with this one made me feel very grown-up indeed.

There were tears in my eyes. I was sure I knew what was about to happen.

He cleared his throat and then stood up and wandered around the porch for a minute looking kinda nervous. I knew he'd been really nice when I'd thrown up on him, but I didn't know if I could be as nice as he was if he threw up all over Mama. And he looked a little green around the gills, as Nana might say.

After a minute, he came back and bent down in front of us, putting one knee on the ground. He pulled a box out of his pocket and opened it.

It was a pretty ring. It wasn't like the one Mama wore on her right hand. She said she wore it on the right because she was a widow. A widow was a lady whose husband had died, she'd told me. This was like the one Nana wore with the ring that was like the one Mama had. She wore them on her left hand because Pop Pop was alive.

She gasped. "Jonathan!"

"Martha Clark Davis, will you marry me?"

Marry him? He wanted to marry Mama? "Does that mean you'll be my Daddy?" I asked, not noticing I'd interrupted them.

He looked at me very seriously. "I'd like to be your Daddy. I'd like to be your Mama's husband. I love both of you very much and I want to help take care of you."

I stood up and looked at him carefully then knelt down next to him. "Mama, will you marry Mr. Kent?"

I smiled through my tears. That was so sweet.

She wiped the tears from her face as she nodded. "Of course I will." She reached out and touched Mr. Kent's face. "I love you too, Jonathan."

He took the ring out of the box and looked at it closely. "I know this isn't an engagement ring, and if you want me to get you one I will — gladly. But I was thinking. Chris was a big part of your life for a very long time and he is always going to be a part of your heart and part of Clark's, too. Would it be okay with you if you still wore Chris's engagement ring with my wedding band?"

I didn't understand Mama's tears as she took the ring off her right hand. Mr. Kent stuck the other ring back in the box and took the one my Daddy Chris had given her.

He put the ring on her left hand and she kissed him. That was yucky and I couldn't help but make a disgusting noise.

Jonathan laughed and stood up and swung me around. "We're gonna be a family, son."

It was the first time he'd called me son. I thought he almost had a few times before, but he'd stopped himself.

He was right. Mama and I were a great family. And we had Nana and Pop Pop but Mama's brother, Jerry, was talking about wanting to move here and help with the farm and it would be a tight fit for all of us. He was married with three little girls of his own and I would have to share my room with a girl. No, thank you.

Was that why Mama was going to marry Mr. Kent? He was still holding me and Mama had come to stand next to him and his arm was around her. "Mama?" I asked.

"Yes?" Her eyes were still bright with tears, but her smile was bright, too.

"Are you marrying Mr. Kent because Uncle Jerry is moving here and there's not enough room?"

"No! Clark, I love Mr. Kent and I'd marry him whether Uncle Jerry was moving in or not."

"Good." That was settled.

~~~~~  
Martha

Jonathan had asked me to marry him. He was a dear, wonderful man, but I knew before we could actually get married, I needed to tell him about Clark. The whole truth about Clark.

*How could she do that? That would a hard thing to do, telling someone that your son was found in a spaceship. I was going to have a hard enough time telling whoever it was that finally decided he was willing to take on me and my baby the whole truth; I couldn't imagine that.*

The next day, I called Wayne Irig up and asked him to deliver the crate that he'd been keeping for me since Chris died to the Kent farm. A couple days after that, he did.

Then Jonathan called. "Martha, do you know anything about this crate Wayne just dropped off?"

I sighed. I hadn't known when Wayne would get around to it. "Yes, I do," I said softly. "Instead of going to dinner in town tonight, can we stay at your house and I'll tell you all about it?"

"Of course. Can you tell me what it's about?"

"Clark." That was all I would say. "Please don't ask anymore right now."

"Okay," he replied simply. "I'll pick you up around six?"

"No, that's okay. I'll drive over." I thought he'd understand, but on the off chance that things went terribly wrong, I would have a way home.

"I'll see you then."

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I was nervous when I got there. Jonathan asked if I wanted to eat first. He wasn't the world's greatest cook, but he made a mean barbeque sauce and knew his way around a grill.

*I was nervous for Martha, even though I knew the eventual outcome. Had Jonathan been accepting right away? Or had it taken time?*

His mom had moved into the little house on the other side of the farmyard a few weeks earlier. I thought she knew Jonathan was going to propose to me and didn't want me to feel like she was part of the package. She was, of course, but that wouldn't have stopped me from marrying him. She made the world's best potato salad and had brought some over soon after I arrived then retreated to her own house.

I only picked at my dinner and Jonathan picked up on it immediately.

He finally set his fork down. "What is it, Martha? Are you having second thoughts about marrying me?"

Tears filled my eyes. "No. I want to marry you very badly. But I have something to show you, something to tell you and after that, you may not want to marry me."

"What is it?"

I wiped my mouth on my napkin even though I hadn't eaten a

bite in over ten minutes. “Where did Wayne put that crate?”

“In the barn, like you asked him to.”

“Well, let’s go.”

We walked to the barn and I had him pry the top off, but told him to leave the tarps in place. They were more worn than I remembered, but it had been five years.

“I haven’t told you the whole truth about some things,” I finally said, sitting on one of the milking stools. “I’m sorry if that hurts you, but I had to be sure before I told anyone else about this. Chris was the only one who knew. Even Wayne only knows that he’s been keeping a crate for me.”

Jonathan pulled up another stool and sat down near me.

“Well, I can’t say that I’m happy that you’ve kept something from me, but you must have had your reasons.”

“I did,” I said softly, still refusing to look at him.

“And I can’t imagine what it might be that you’re about to tell me that would make me not want to marry you.”

“Before I tell you the rest of the story, how much do you know about me and Chris and Clark?”

He shrugged. “I remember you and Chris being inseparable since kindergarten. I wasn’t surprised to hear you’d gotten married. Other than that, I know you weren’t married very long but that you had Clark.”

“Clark isn’t my biological son,” I said quietly. “He wasn’t Chris’ either.”

Jonathan nodded slowly. “I’d heard that he was the son of an old friend of yours or something.”

I chuckled wryly. “Try or something.”

He looked at me, puzzled, but didn’t say anything.

“One night, we found Clark, abandoned. We weren’t married yet and knew that no one would let us keep him if we weren’t so we went to Oklahoma and got married that night. We told everyone an old friend from college had contacted me and her dying wish was for us to raise her son. We drove back up here and fed him and put him to bed and then…” Even though I knew I’d been married to Chris and Jonathan knew I’d been married to Chris, it was still a little weird to talk about. I took a deep breath. “We made love for the first time — the only time — and then he was called to the Irig’s. He saved Josh, but the ceiling collapsed on him.”

“Oh, Martha. I had no idea that you were only married that long.”

I wiped the tears away. “It’s okay. We had a wonderful few hours together and if I could have Chris back but Josh would die instead… Well, I wouldn’t do that. Wayne came by the next morning and told me what happened and told me to call him if I needed anything. I called him a few days later and had him build a crate around something wrapped in tarps and asked him to store it for me indefinitely without asking any questions about it. And he did. He has. When I called him the other day, it was the first time we’ve talked about it in five years.”

“Well, I haven’t heard anything so far that’s going to make me not want to marry you.”

“I’m getting there. I haven’t told you how we found Clark. We were driving near Shuster’s Field and we saw a light in the sky. We pulled over and investigated. There was something in the field and in it was Clark.”

“What was it?”

I pointed to the crate, but didn’t say anything.

“Can I look now?”

“Brace yourself.”

He looked oddly at me, but nodded then moved to the side of the crate. He pulled the tarps off then gasped. “What’s this?”

*I could imagine what he was feeling. I was feeling many of the same things, I was sure. I wondered if I’d ever get to see it or if this… revelation was the last of what he was willing to share with me and this was only because he was forced to? Or was this*

*all some sort of sick joke of some kind?*

“A spaceship of some kind,” I whispered. “Clark was in it.”

“Is he…” Jonathan hesitated. “Is he an alien?”

I shrugged. “We didn’t know. All we knew was a little baby had literally dropped in our laps and we weren’t about to tell anyone. Chris was afraid someone would take him from us and dissect him like a frog. We didn’t know if he was from another planet or an experiment from the Soviet Union or even from our own government. We went to Oklahoma and got married. We were planning on it and Chris had bought the engagement ring six months earlier but hadn’t actually asked yet.”

“So when do we get to the part where I don’t want to marry you?”

I smiled through my tears. “Well, if I haven’t scared you off yet…”

He sat back down and took my hand. “You haven’t.”

“We wondered — if he was an alien — if he would be different from us when he grew up. Or — if he was an experiment — if he’d been genetically enhanced. I’m sure you’ve noticed things about him. He sees a little better than most kids. He’s faster than the first graders even though he’s only going into kindergarten. He’s stronger than other little boys and he hears a lot better too. Except for the time he threw up all over you, he’s never been sick — not even an ear infection. I don’t know what that means for him growing up, but I have a feeling that he could be challenging. Not because he’s not a good boy, he is, but because of his heritage — whatever that is.”

*Experiment? Genetically enhanced? Alien? Of the three, only the last had occurred to me.*

Jonathan nodded slowly. “I can see how that might be, but I still don’t see why I wouldn’t want to marry you.”

“It’s one thing to ask you to raise another man’s son. It’s another to ask you to raise a little boy who could very well be an alien.”

“You and Chris didn’t turn away a little boy who needed you, why would I?”

*Was that it? Was that why Clark did what he did?*

I squeezed his hand a little tighter. “I didn’t think you would, but you never know.” I stared at our joined hands. “Do you understand why I couldn’t tell you until I was sure?”

He smiled at me and tugged on my hand until I moved to sit on his lap. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me gently. “I do.”

“Remember those words, Mr. Kent. I hope you’re going to need them.”

“I am,” he said softly and kissed me again.

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October 1990

Clark

~~~~~

Two weeks later, Pop Pop walked Mama down the aisle. Mama and Mr. Kent had decided they didn’t want to wait and that two weeks was more time to plan than Mama had had for her wedding to Daddy Chris. I stood there next to Mr. Kent in my best Sunday suit and tried not to tug at the neck. My shoes were too tight and I couldn’t breathe right but it was hard not to squirm even though Nana had just reminded me not to a few minutes earlier.

Preacher Rob, Maisie’s husband who’d been there the night Daddy Chris had saved Josh, said some stuff I didn’t really understand. Something about deers and loving. I loved deer. It was good and Mr. Kent knew how to make it right — just like Pop Pop did. Then he said something about holding peas but I didn’t have any so I stuck my hands in my pockets. Then Mama and Mr. Kent said some stuff to each other about loving cherries. I think I was hungry. Everything had to do with food and Nana had made cherry pie for later.

I tried hard not to laugh at Clark's interpretation of wedding vows, but sobered as I remembered my own. And Clark's. Had he thought about holding peas or loving cherries when he married me? Instead of thinking about holding peace and cherishing?

Then Mr. Kent put the ring on Mama's finger and Mama put one on his. Then Preacher Rob said Mr. Kent could kiss Mama so he did. It was yucky, but they were both smiling when they were done. I figured I'd have a lot of that to look forward to in the future. Them kissing that was.

Mama was moving into Mr. Kent's — I mean Daddy's — house that night. She'd already taken all of our things over there. Well, he'd helped and I had my own room over there, but they told me I had to stay with Nana and Pop Pop one more night. Lana said something about them wanting to be alone to fight over who got which side of the bed since they'd sleep in the same bed now and they wouldn't want to fight over it in front of me. I didn't see what the big deal was, but I didn't understand grown-ups. I'd tried kissing Lana and didn't see why they wanted to do that all the time. She'd pushed me down and told me to not ever do that again.

That's what he'd been talking about in the car. I could only wish that Lana had never changed her mind.

We had dinner in the church rec room and I got to eat cherry pie and cake. Two pieces of each. And a piece of pecan pie that Rachel's mama brought. And my new Granny Kent had made her famous potato salad so I had some of that too. My tummy didn't feel good after that, but I didn't throw up on Mr. Kent — Daddy — this time. Grandma Davis was there, of course, and happy for Mama and Daddy, but she didn't cook much anymore or I would have had to eat some of her fruitcake. I didn't like it but Mama would want me to eat some, to be polite.

He could eat all that at age five? It was possible he might even be able to eat my cooking some day if that was the case.

Daddy and Mama danced then asked if I'd like to dance with them. I said I would but I didn't think I wanted to dance with any other little girls. I'd tried dancing with Lana while they were dancing by themselves, but she pushed me down again. Daddy laughed and said that someday I would. I told him he was wrong.

He picked me up in one arm and wrapped the other around Mama. The three of us just kind rocked a bit, but I guessed that was dancing.

There with Mama and Daddy, we'd gone from something's missing to a family.

Looking back, all I can say about all the things he did for me...

I can only hope that I'm at least half the dad that he didn't have to be.

There was something I couldn't quite put my finger on that was bothering me, but I couldn't quite place it so instead I closed the folder and spoke to Clark.

Part 51
Lois

~~~~~  
I wasn't quite sure what to make of what I'd just read.

But first I had to get one question out of the way. "Um, you do know this isn't a fiction assignment, right?"

"Yeah," he said quietly. "But even so, the version I turn in will be partly fiction."

"Why is that?" I asked, still trying to process twenty-five pages of Clark's origins.

"Because if I turn in a paper that says I was found in a space ship, then Dr. Pearson will think it really is fiction and it's not. And possibly turn me over to government agencies or something if he did manage to believe it."

So that meant that he *had* been found in a spaceship.

I was glad I was already sitting down.

"What does all that mean?" I finally asked.

He sighed and sat back down — he'd started pacing as soon as I read the title off the front page. "It means that in 1985, my mom and Chris — her first husband — found a baby in a space ship. They got married that night and took me home. He died saving Josh from a fire early the next morning. It was a little over five years later that Mom and Dad got married."

"I get that," I told him. "It's the whole spaceship thing..."

"Pretty hard to swallow, huh?"

I nodded.

"You should have seen me the first time Dad tried to explain it to me."

"How old were you?" I asked quietly.

"Six. The day after my birthday." He picked a blade of grass and started shredding it. "I was fast and strong — well, enough that I wasn't quite on the same level as other kids my age. Mom and Dad took me to see the high school production of Peter Pan and I decided that I wanted to fly. I put on a green shirt and my best pair of blue jeans because I didn't have any green pants. I climbed up the ladder into the hayloft and went over to the door and jumped." He shook his head at the memory. "I landed on a pile of old parts for the tractor that Mom was going to use for some piece of artwork or other. Dad had seen me and came running. I probably should have been hurt a lot worse than I was, but my shirt was torn and I had a ragged scratch down the center of my torso. It didn't bleed too badly, but they were afraid it might get infected. Mom treated it at home and kept an eye on it. Three days later, it was a scar."

I gaped at him. "Three days? When I was seven, I was outside the cabin one night when I wasn't supposed to be. I wanted to... do something to the squirrel that kept getting into the birdfeeder — throw a rock at him or something. I wasn't planning on telling my parents I'd been out there, but I fell and scraped my shoulder near my collar bone. It took two weeks before I could move my arm right and another two before it wasn't red anymore. I was grounded for a week and couldn't swim at Lucy's pool party for her birthday."

He sighed. "It's part of being me. I'm..." He paused, like he was having problems saying it out loud. "...an alien."

"What is part of being you?"

"I don't get hurt. Well, not since I was about fourteen. I haven't gotten hurt at all since then. Before that, I healed quickly and never got hurt as badly as I should have."

Something dawned on me. "So you made me carry you through the snow for nothing?!"

He shook his head. "No. I don't know what happened. The last time I felt sick was when I was five and on my parents' first date. Then in Bremerton. I have no idea what it was that made me sick."

I didn't say anything for a long time.

"So..." he asked.

"So..." I replied. "I don't know what to say, what to ask. I know I want to be a journalist someday, but I'm caught off guard and this is so outside the realm of anything I could even begin to imagine. So just tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Whatever you want. Whatever you think I need to know. You can honestly tell your parents that you told me the truth, but I can't imagine that your mom won't want to talk at least some specifics with me about whatever else it is that makes you... you."

~~~~~  
Clark

Where to start?

I sighed. "Okay. Well, I'm invulnerable to everything I've found since I was fourteen or so."

"You said that."

“Yeah. I don’t know where else to start. I’ve never told anyone about all this. Mom and Dad went through it with me. Chris only knew they found me in a spaceship.”

“Start at the beginning?”

I picked another blade of grass and fiddled with it. “I’ll tell you what I can do, how’s that?”

She shrugged.

“Okay, invulnerable we’ve covered.” I took a deep breath. “I can start fires with my eyes.”

“That’s what you meant!” she said as though a light bulb had gone off in her head.

“What?”

“On the way to the cabin. I said something about how you were going to have to make the fire and you said you couldn’t start fires with your eyes at the moment. I just thought you were delirious.”

“I was or I never would have said it. I’m way too careful about saying or doing things that I shouldn’t when other people are around.”

“Ah. So, that’s how I’ve lived with you for like nine months and never noticed anything.” He nodded. “Sorry for the interruption. Go on.”

“Invulnerable. Start fires with my eyes.”

Lois sneezed.

“Are you cold?” I asked her.

She shook her head then sneezed again.

I hesitated then asked, “Do you trust me?”

She shrugged. “I guess.”

I winced. I wasn’t sure why she didn’t trust me. Because I was an alien or because I’d been a louse lately. I stood up and moved behind her. “Hold still.”

I carefully dried her hair and ran a diffused beam of heat vision over her back.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“A very light version of the heat stuff.”

She touched her hair. “It’s dry.” Her voice was full of awe or something.

I sat back down. “Yeah. I can concentrate it or diffuse it and turn the power up and down — for lack of better terms, I guess.”

“What else?”

I hesitated. What else could I do? “I can see things far away or things that are really small — like using a telescope or a microscope. I can see through things.”

“Like what?”

“Just about anything.” What example could I give her?

“When we first met, I looked out of the bathroom to make sure there was no one in the common area and when there wasn’t I looked in our room to see if my roommate was there yet. When both were clear, I went to my room to get dressed then you showed up. Or like at the cabin. The second time the power was out. I could hear you moving around downstairs so I looked through the walls and floor or whatever and saw you with a flashlight.”

“But you couldn’t find your shirt?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I didn’t look very hard and it didn’t seem all that important. And I can hear really well.”

“How well?”

“I can hear stuff from a long ways away.” I paused. “Dad’s snoring up a storm tonight and Granny’s watching Letterman.”

“Wow.”

“I can hear the baby’s heartbeat,” I whispered.

“What?” she whispered back.

“I can hear the baby’s heartbeat when I want to. I have to turn it off and on, but I can. I listen to it sometimes at night when I go to sleep. It reminds me of why we’re doing this. To protect you and the baby.” I paused in case she wanted to say something. When she didn’t I went on. “I can breathe in toxic fumes if I need

to. Mom started a fire one time and there was fire extinguisher smoke everywhere. I inhaled it and was fine. I can also freeze things with my breath or exhale with like hurricane force winds or something like that.” I hesitated again. “And I can fly.”

“What?!” she exclaimed.

“I can fly. I can float and fly.”

“You can fly?” She looked at me skeptically.

I levitated a few feet off the ground.

“Wow.” It was little more than an exhale. She stared straight ahead for a long time, but I’d told her everything and didn’t know what else to say. “Could you have flown us out of Latislan?”

After a minute, I nodded.

“Why didn’t you?” There was no accusation in her voice and that made me breathe a sigh of relief.

“I would have. If there was no other way, I would have. I wouldn’t have let him hurt you at the airport, for instance. But I’ve always looked for another way out and by the time I realized the long-term danger, flying you out wouldn’t have mattered. Navance would have come after you anyway.”

She nodded. “Probably.” She yawned.

“Are you ready to go back?” I asked her.

“I think so.” She stood up and stretched her back.

“Bothering you again?”

“Still,” she admitted.

“Do you trust me?” I asked her again.

She bit her lip and then nodded.

I trained my eyes on her lower back and heated it gently. “Better?”

She stretched a bit more then nodded. “Thanks.”

I folded the blanket and tucked the folder inside it. “Do you want to walk?” I asked her before I could talk myself out of it.

“How else would we get back?”

“I could fly us.” She didn’t say anything. “I mean, if you want me to.”

She shrugged. “It’ll be faster?”

“A lot.”

“Then okay. I’m pretty tired again all of the sudden.” She didn’t really look at me. “How do we do this?”

“Well, I’ve only ever flown my folks. Them I usually just wrap an arm around their waists and go, but with the baby and all, I think I should probably hold you a little closer. I can sort of extend my invulnerability if I want to and the closer you are, the easier it is.”

She bit her bottom lip before nodding. “Whatever you think is best.”

I wasn’t sure what I thought was best as I handed her the blanket to hold. I could carry her in my arms or have her stand right in front of me and hold her that way. That was probably best. I moved behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. “Ready?”

~~~~~

Lois

Was I ready for this?

For finding out Clark could *fly*?

To go *flying* with him?

“Sure,” I managed to squeak.

He held me a little tighter and we slowly lifted into the air. I held my breath until he whispered in my ear, “Don’t forget to breathe.” I let the breath out. “We’re not going far or fast or high.”

The moon was bright enough that I could see the ground moving quickly below us. I wasn’t sure how long it hadn’t taken us to walk where we did, but we were standing on the porch in front of the farmhouse in just a couple of minutes.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“It is pretty cool,” he agreed. “It’s the thing I love the most, being able to fly.”

"I can imagine." I couldn't, not really, but it did seem pretty cool.

"Sometime, after the baby's born, I'll take you on a real flight."

I nodded and opened the door to the farmhouse.

"Take my bed again, if you want," he said quietly. "It's probably better for you than the air mattress."

"The air mattress can't be all that comfortable," I said to him. "You take your bed."

He shrugged. "I'll be fine. I don't really notice that stuff too much — it's not like I get a stiff back or anything. If it gets really bad, I can sleep on the couch or something. Or if I get too uncomfortable in the middle of the night, sometimes I wake up floating."

"Oh." That was a lot to take in. "Do you float at home?"

He shrugged again. "I've never caught myself. And you've never caught me. I can't sleep and float at the same time on purpose. When I sleep float, it's completely involuntary."

By then I was up the stairs and walking into Clark's room.

"Seriously," he said. "Take the bed. If my parents say anything, we'll tell them the air mattress wasn't working for you." He hesitated. "Why'd you sleep on the floor last night?"

I shrugged as he shut the door behind us. "I guess I thought that would be better than your parents realizing we hadn't slept together and I thought we'd both welcome the opportunity to not have to share a bed and I didn't think it was right to kick you off the air mattress or your bed or whatever. It *is* your house after all."

"Well, you have a legitimate reason for sleeping on my bed instead of the air mattress with your back bothering you and all," Clark told me.

"I guess." With that I kicked my shoes off and crawled under the covers of his bed.

I wanted to stay awake, at least for a while, absorbing what he'd told me, trying to figure it all out, but I couldn't. The minute my head hit the pillow, I was sound asleep.

The sound of the truck starting the next morning woke me. I padded into the bathroom and, after I finished in there, dressed in my favorite Daily Planet sweatshirt — grateful that it was big enough that I could still wear it — and another pair of Clark's sweat pants. I had to roll them at the ankles, but they were comfortable enough to make that worthwhile.

I wondered who was in the kitchen when I heard noises as I walked down the stairs.

"Good morning." I heard Martha as I wandered into the kitchen.

"Good morning," I said as I poured myself a cup of coffee. I took a long sip. "I'm not a very good conversationalist until I've had some coffee."

She laughed. "I can relate."

I hesitated before saying, "At least now I know why Clark doesn't need coffee to be annoyingly chipper in the morning."

"You talked last night?" she asked sitting at the table.

I sat across from her. "We went for a walk and he told me."

"What did he tell you exactly?"

"That you and Chris found him in a spaceship and what happened that night and how you met Jonathan. All the things he can do." I blushed a bit though for the life of me I wasn't sure why. "He flew us back here."

"That's pretty cool, isn't it?" she asked with a conspiratorial grin.

I nodded. "It only took a couple minutes, but yeah."

She reached out and grasped my hand lightly. "It's a lot to take in, isn't it?"

I nodded again.

"He's been scared to tell you, but it's something you needed to know. It's possible that it could affect the baby or you."

"I don't think it has," I told her. "Everything seems normal. My OB says that the baby's a few days farther along than average, but that it's not very unusual for a few days' variation."

Martha sipped on her coffee thoughtfully. "I wonder if that's why you didn't get sick until later. That it's a Kryptonian thing."

"A what?" I asked, puzzled.

"A Kryptonian thing." Her brow furrowed. "He didn't tell you about Krypton?"

I shook my head. "No. What's Krypton?"

"That's the planet he's from. There was a message with his ship that he was able to activate when he got older. It said that the planet was dying and that his parents had tried desperately to make a ship big enough for him to get off of the planet in and if he got the message then they must have succeeded."

"Ah. He said he was... an alien, but that was about it."

"He doesn't much seem like one, does he?"

"No. He seems pretty normal. I mean, he is a normal guy as far as I've ever seen."

"Telling Jonathan about him was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life, even harder than losing Chris," she told me.

"When I lost Chris, I knew there was a good reason for it. He'd saved Josh's life. And I had Clark to take care of. He was probably two and a half months old when we found him, so I picked February 28 for his birthday. He still needed so much time and attention that I didn't have much time to miss Chris."

She paused before going on. "I dated a few times over the next several years, but nothing serious. I rarely went out with a man more than once because I knew that whoever I went out with, whoever I dated seriously would have to like Clark and Clark would have to like him. He even volunteered to move away once so that I wouldn't have to worry about finding a man who would want to be a dad to him — I could just find someone without having to worry about him.

"The first time I went out with Jonathan, he asked Clark to go with us. I cried when he did. I knew that I'd found someone who was willing to be a father to another man's child. It wasn't long before he asked me to marry him. Chris had been my best friend since we were old enough to remember. We'd dated in high school. I moved off to college and instead of getting married as soon as I finished, we waited." She brushed a tear off her cheek. "I don't regret that he died saving Josh, but I do wish that we'd had six months together first instead of only a few hours. After I accepted Jonathan's proposal, I had to tell him about Clark. He knew that Clark was adopted, but I couldn't let him think that raising Clark would be just like raising any other child. I was so afraid that he'd decide he couldn't do it. That it would be too much."

"Clark was worried about that, too," I said quietly. "More about telling Lana than me, I think. Not that he doesn't care what I think or whatever, but from everything the two of them ever said, it was more like you and Chris — inseparable since childhood. He cares about me and what I think and all that, but he doesn't care about me the same way he did Lana." I had taken my hand back and both were wrapped around my coffee mug.

"That can't be easy for you."

I shrugged. "I knew when we got married that he was only doing it out of a sense of obligation to me and the baby. And I know there are worse reasons to get married than a baby and we're friends. That's better than enemies, I guess. And I think we both hope that things are different someday." *That* was the understatement of the year. The decade. The millennium. But not for the reasons Martha would think. "But for right now..." I sighed. "We both love the baby and that's enough for the moment."

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I took the rope from Dad and stretched it across the mattress and box springs, threaded it through the hole and tossed it back. A few minutes later, it was tied off and we were back in the cab.

“You guys didn’t have to do this,” I told him again.

He rolled his eyes. “I know you and Lois aren’t exactly conventional newlyweds, but there’s no point in the two of you sleeping in separate beds when your mom and I have been talking about this for a couple months anyway. We were really just waiting for you to be home so you can do all the heavy lifting.” His eyes twinkled at that.

I groaned. “Fine.”

He finally broached the topic we’d been avoiding during the whole trip to Parsons. “How’d Lois take it?”

I shrugged. “She didn’t really say a whole lot. She just asked me to tell her whatever I thought she should know. I didn’t really know what to tell her so I told her about all the things I can do and she started yawning. I dried her hair for her and warmed up her back muscles where they were bothering her and then I flew her home.”

“Where were you?”

“We went west along the tree line then to that clearing.”

“Nice place for a talk. Your mom and I have had a talk or two out there.”

I groaned again. Knowing my parents, they’d probably done a bit more than talk at least once or twice.

“What’d she say about the flying?”

“Wow’ was about the extent of her conversational skills at that point.” I wanted to grin at that, but I wasn’t quite sure why I couldn’t make myself.

Dad chuckled. “That was about the extent of your mom’s and mine the first time we flew with you.”

“Still, you didn’t need to go get a new bed just for us.”

“We didn’t. When we got married, we used the double bed that was already mine. A few years ago, we decided it was past time to get something new and we went all out with a king. We’ve realized that, while the double was too small, the king is too big, so we got a queen. We’ll put the king in your room. I have a feeling that — for now at least — you two will appreciate it more than we do.”

I looked doubtful. “Is it going to fit in my room?”

“It should. You may have to rearrange some stuff and you won’t have as much open floor space, but it should fit. It’s not like you’re going to be using the room very often.”

“True.” I sighed. It looked like I wasn’t going to have an excuse for not sharing a bed with Lois anymore. At least this one was about eight times bigger than the one in the apartment and neither one of us would feel we had to hug the edge of the bed to avoid each other. The night at the hotel, putting on the front for Lana, had been hard enough.

“Do you love her?” Dad asked quietly.

I rested my head against the window. “She’s my friend and she’s having my baby.” That was getting easier to say. Saying it to Navance had been easy. Saying it to everyone else had been hard. Saying to Lana a couple days earlier... ‘Hard’ didn’t begin to describe it.

“But do you love her?”

“Am I in love with her? Am I like you and Mom or Chris and Mom were when you got married? No, I’m not, but we both thought — we both *think* — that it’s best for the baby if we’re married.” That was the God’s honest truth.

“What about Lana?”

I stared at the fields we were driving past. “I broke her heart.” I cringed at the next part, but I knew it would be around Smallville before long, and my parents needed to hear it from me. “When I told her we’d gotten married, I told her it wasn’t my baby but I couldn’t explain any more than that, but that I had to

stay married to Lois and if she told anyone I’d deny it. That we’d gotten married to get Lois out of Europe since she didn’t have her passport with her and we’d thought we’d be able to get the marriage annulled when we got back but we couldn’t. I didn’t explain *why* that was, but...” I ran a hand through my hair — the one with that golden band on it again. “I probably shouldn’t have told her that, but I did, hoping that she wouldn’t think I’d cheated on her on top of everything else.”

“Probably not the smartest thing you’ve ever done.”

“You’re the master of the understatement, Dad.” I fiddled with my wedding band. “Then when we were in Illinois on the way home, she muttered something under her breath about Lois, something horrible that absolutely wasn’t true. I kind of lost it a little bit and we had it out in a parking lot while Lois went to the bathroom. I told her why I’d said what I did...” Or the official version anyway. “...and that if she had a problem with the whole thing to take it out on me, not Lois and not the baby. She and Lois already got into it once on campus. Well,” I amended, “she said some stuff to Lois a couple months ago that wasn’t entirely true. I know she’s only lashing out at Lois because I hurt her but I never told her to back off until the other day and I should have told her that a lot sooner.”

“Lana can be a bit spiteful.”

I snorted. “There’s your understatement thing again. But she’s only that way when she’s hurt or threatened. She and Lois have never gotten along, in part because Lois *is* a really pretty girl and she felt threatened by that, by the time Lois and I spent together when Lana was already in bed or whatever. We’d watch TV or something or talk about homework, things like that — nothing even remotely... romantic-y or relationship-y, but it still threatened her.”

“Seems like there might have been a reason for that,” he commented.

“It wasn’t intentional. Neither one of us really remember what happened, just that it did.”

“What exactly did happen?”

“I don’t know. Not really.” I sighed. “Lois said I was burning up in the car and once we made it to the cabin, she managed to get all my clothes off because they were soaked. All of her clothes were soaked and the power was out and she got under the blankets next to me in front of the fire. I remember waking up with her next to me and I think I remember kissing her or her kissing me or something — I’m not really sure and...” I was sure I was turning bright red. “Well, you know. Neither one of us really remembers it at all.” At least that meant he wouldn’t want details that I couldn’t give — not *details* but anything beyond ‘we kissed and had sex’. “And then I insinuated to Lana that that wasn’t the only time while we were there that Lois and I...” I let out a long, slow breath. “I know I shouldn’t have and I didn’t actually *tell* her that it had happened more than the one time, but some of what I said could have been construed that way. We *didn’t* have sex any of the other nights. We did — technically — sleep together, but it was *just* sleeping and I implied it was more.” I sighed. “That I hadn’t just been with Lois in some hypothermic induced stupor but that it had happened another time or two when we were rational.”

He ‘harumphed’ and thought for a minute. He kept one hand on the wheel and the other elbow out the window. I was glad he let that thread of conversation die. “So how do you see this marriage playing out? Is it going to work or are you two going to get a couple years in and decide that you made a mistake and trying to make it work for the sake of the baby just isn’t worth it?”

I propped a foot up on the dash. “Jor-El said Kryptonians mate for life, but I’m not sure this is exactly what he had in mind. I *want* it to work as long as possible.”

“Does that mean ‘till death do us part’?”

"I hope so." Navance's death anyway. And soon would be good. I sighed.

"Then things are going to have to change between you two at some point." He turned off US-169 onto Twentieth Road.

I thought about that for a minute. We didn't have much time before we got home. "I know that I need to do a better job at a lot of things, but which one exactly are you talking about?"

He sighed. "Well, for starters, I know you told your mom that you two aren't having sex because of how Lois has been feeling and that's good that you take how she's been feeling into account and aren't pressuring her."

"I wouldn't want to make her do something or guilt her into doing something or whatever when she's been so sick and tired." I should have known this was where he was going with this. I should have kept my mouth shut.

"Good. But at some point, she's not going to be pregnant or she's not going to be tired and sick all the time. And I'm guessing those aren't the only reasons you're not making love to your wife."

I didn't respond.

"She's not Lana," Dad said quietly.

"No, she's not." I didn't look at him.

"And, if you want this to work, at some point you're going to have to get over that."

"I know, Dad. I'm just not sure how. I'm sure time will take care of some of that, but..."

"Court her. Take her flying and show her things only you can. Spend time with her and get to know her. You've known Lana your whole life. You two were inseparable as kids and even more so after you started dating. You know just about everything about her and she knew just about everything about you, except for the whole Kryptonian thing. That's something that you and Lois have that you and Lana never did. Build on that."

He had a point, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to go through with all that. Not like he wanted me to. But he didn't know the whole story, I reminded myself. He didn't know how much I still loved Lana, why Lois and I were married, that the baby wasn't really mine.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back on the window behind me.

<<I fell and scraped my shoulder near my collar bone.>>

The dream I had of Lois or Lana or whoever it was from the cabin came back to me and I remembered that scar on the mystery amalgam woman. Nestled in the hollow between her collar bone and where her shoulder and neck met. Why was I superimposing her statement onto the dream woman and what exactly did that mean?

~~~~~  
Lois

"Did you say Clark's birthday is February 28?" I asked.

Martha nodded. "Yes. Why?"

I stared into my coffee cup. "I never asked him when it was and he never told me. I didn't even know..."

"Sounds like you two still have a lot of getting to know each other to do," she said quietly.

"Yeah." I looked around and changed the subject. "Where'd they go anyway?"

"To Parsons to get a new mattress for me and Jonathan. We'll put the one we have now in Clark's room for the two of you. It really is a good mattress, but a king size is just too big for us. We like being a bit closer together while we sleep."

Maybe I shouldn't have changed the subject. "You didn't have to do that. Really."

"We've been meaning to anyway and since Clark's here, he can do all the heavy lifting and we won't have to worry about Jonathan's back or anything."

"Ah." I guessed that made sense. Clark had said something

the night before about being extra strong. I thought. I couldn't remember a whole lot of it. It was all kind of a blur.

We heard the crunch of tires on the road. A minute later, Clark and Jonathan walked in.

Clark pointed up the stairs with his thumb. "I'm going to go clear out my room. I'll be right back."

There was a whooshing sound as he disappeared. A second later there was his twin mattress leaning against the wall, followed a second later by the box and frame. A second after that, Clark stood there, brushing his hands off. "All moved."

I just gaped at him.

"Show off," Martha muttered with a roll of her eyes.

He just grinned at her. "Is the other one ready to move out of your room?"

She sighed. "No. Why don't you come help me with that?"

Jonathan sat down across the table from me after they left.

"My back's not what it used to be. Getting better though."

"Clark told me you had surgery on it."

He nodded. "In fact, after sitting in the truck so much, I need to stretch it. Why don't you and I take a walk?"

I hesitated. "Okay."

A few minutes later, he'd called up to his wife and son that what we were doing and we were heading out the door. We wandered the same direction Clark and I had the night before.

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" he asked without looking at me. I nodded.

"He said it doesn't seem to be affecting the baby."

It wouldn't, but I couldn't tell him that. "No. The baby seems perfectly normal."

"I hadn't noticed anything odd about Clark when Martha first told me. I'd proposed to her a couple days earlier and she'd said yes. It was the happiest moment of my life." His hands were in his pockets as we walked down the narrow road. "But the next few days... We hardly spoke and she was acting weird and then Wayne dropped this crate off. She came over that night and told me how she and Chris found Clark in a space ship. Even though I was staring right at the ship, I had a very hard time believing it."

I paused for a long minute as I tried to assimilate it all. "I guess I'm still just trying to process it all." To tell the truth, I wasn't sure it bothered me or affected me or whatever as much it might have if it had been Joe, for instance. If Joe and I had gotten serious and he'd told me he was a strange visitor from another planet... I thought I would have been hurt that he hadn't trusted me for so long, but he'd still be *Joe*, my best friend. Or he was. I wasn't sure he was still my best friend or not. I hadn't really talked to him since I'd... broken up with him or whatever it was technically called after he got back from Europe.

"Well, now that you know, you two can come visit more often if you want to. You won't have to take commercial flights or drive if you don't want to."

I shook my head and gave a half chuckle. "That's why he didn't say anything."

"What?"

"When we were in... Illinois, I think, I said something about how I wished we could fly the rest of the way and he didn't say anything."

Jonathan chuckled. "He told me a little bit about the trip. I bet he wishes you two had flown."

"Probably. It wasn't easy for him or Lana," I said quietly.

"That's awfully generous of you."

"What?"

"To notice what it was like for your husband's ex-girlfriend."

I shrugged. "None of this is her fault." That much was true.

"I'm not sure why she decided to come with us."

He hesitated. "Probably to see how solid you and Clark are."

I just shrugged again.

"Knowing Lana, she probably wanted to see how committed

the two of you are to making it work and if she saw any cracks...”

He didn't finish the thought, but I knew what he meant. “It wouldn't surprise me. She never liked me and I never liked her. I know Clark loves her but I never...” I stopped when I realized what I said.

“That's got to be hard on you,” he said after a long moment. “Knowing your husband still loves someone else but wants to try to make things work with you.”

I shrugged and tried to keep the tears in. “It's hard. I was getting ready to try again with my sometimes-boyfriend when all this happened. We've been friends since we were little and have dated casually off and on for couple years but on the way to Europe he asked if we could try again to have a serious relationship and I wanted to.” I took a deep breath. “Then Clark and I got stuck in Europe and found out I was pregnant and... We both remembered just enough to realize this is his baby, but both of us thought we'd been hallucinating about that night or something.”

I swiped at my eyes again. “I know Clark and Lana would probably be engaged right now if it wasn't for all this — if she could accept the stuff he told me last night anyway. I know he's promised me that he's never alone with her, that he doesn't see her outside of class or random accidental meetings around campus, but I know that he still loves her. And while Joe's been one of my best friends for as long as I can remember, it's not the same as Clark and Lana.”

I didn't know when I'd stopped walking, but I had and a minute later, Jonathan was holding me and letting me cry.

Part 53

Clark

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Dad called up the stairs that he and Lois were going for a walk. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, but if anyone could understand how she felt having the whole ‘Clark is an alien’ thing dropped on her, it was Dad.

I helped Mom strip the sheets off the bed and then threw them in the washer.

“Lois seems to be taking it pretty well,” Mom said when I got back.

“She didn't say much last night,” I told her as I tried to decide what the best way to move the bed into my room.

“This morning either.”

There was something else she wasn't saying. Years of knowing her had taught me she'd get to it eventually.

“I don't think she's all that upset about you,” Mom continued. “At least not about all those aspects of you.” She didn't even look at me as she hoisted one corner of the bed in the air until I finally took it from her and started moving it out the door. “I think she's probably a bit more upset about the fact that you're still in love with your ex-girlfriend than she is that you're an alien.” She hurried on, not giving me a chance to protest, even though we both knew the protest would be half-hearted and weak. “I don't think she loves you quite like that either, but that's not the point. From everything you've said, you've been gone a lot lately. And, to a certain extent, I can understand why. You've had a lot to work through. But I don't know that you've stopped to think about Lois. I mean *really* think about her.”

She took a breath and kept going. “She found herself in a foreign country, basically alone without a passport and only one friend who knew anything about it. Then, in that other country, with doctors she doesn't know and no family around, she finds out that she's having a baby. And part of having a baby is hormones and being emotional and all that goes along with that. She realizes that, in order to be pregnant, she must have had sex at some point, but I know she wasn't sleeping with Joe and only

vaguely remembers what happened at the cabin with you, so that had to catch her *completely* off-guard.”

She'd kept talking in the same tone of voice, the same volume, as I maneuvered the mattress down the hall onto the stairs where it would be out of the way until we were ready for it. I couldn't really move it nearly as fast as I had my old bed — it was just too large and unwieldy in halls that were too small.

“My guess,” she continued, “is that once you found out she was pregnant, you realized what happened wasn't a dream or hallucination or whatever after all. One of you finally said something to the other one and enough of it came back to both of you that you were sure that you are the father of the baby. You made it back to the States and she went to see Joe. She wasn't all that serious about him to start with, even though they were going to try again, but ending things with Joe wasn't going to be nearly as difficult for her as it was for you with Lana and she knew that. Pregnancy hormones can do weird things to a woman and she probably imagined all sorts of things happened when you went to break up with Lana. She probably wondered if you kissed her, if she kissed you, if you were tempted to make love with Lana, if you actually *did* make love with Lana.”

I was in my room when she said that. “I didn't!” I hollered at her.

“Oh, I didn't think you would cheat on your wife, but that doesn't mean that those thoughts didn't go through Lois' head.” She was folding up the dust ruffle as I came back in the room. I wasn't sure why she was folding it because we were going to put it back on in just a minute. “And you've been gone a lot since then. I'm sure you've told her that you don't go see Lana when you're studying or if you get off early from work, but it would surprise me if she didn't at least think it sometimes. And when you aren't home, what's she doing? Does she hang out with her friends? Would you be concerned about her spending time with Joe the same way she might be if you spent time with Lana? Would it matter to you if she was still in love with Joe like you're still in love with Lana? Except that she was never in love with Joe like you were — like you probably still are — with Lana. What does she do while you're working or studying away from the apartment?”

I moved both of the boxes into my room as she talked and then returned for the metal frame and tried to avoid the guilt trip that was coming on.

The well-deserved guilt trip.

“Her body's changing. She's got to be scared about being a mom and her mom isn't around to help her adjust. She's estranged from her dad, for the most part, and she doesn't have anyone else to turn to with any practical experience, but she's about to do this whether she's ready to or not. I would imagine that she's concerned about what life's going to be like. She doesn't know where she's going to live in a few weeks much less what's going to happen to her education and career aspirations now that she's going to have a baby at nineteen, right after her freshman year of college. She probably wonders how much of the workload you're going to take on. If you're going to be home any more than you are now or if she's going to essentially be as alone as she would be if you *weren't* married.”

The metal frame was set up and I stared at the room trying to figure out the best way to arrange it. The desk was going to have to move. I sighed as I lifted it carefully out of the way.

“I think all of that concerns her a lot more than the fact that you can start fires with your eyes or fly.”

By then I'd set the boxes back in place and we flipped the dust ruffle over it.

Mom had stopped talking, apparently done with what she had to say. And she'd had plenty to say — plenty I hadn't really thought about before while I was wallowing. But she didn't understand the whole situation either.

I brought the mattress in and heard the buzzer go off on the washing machine. I zipped down the stairs and brought the sheets up. I dried them as we stretched them over the mattress — it was much faster than waiting for the dryer.

“Have I mentioned how handy you are to have around?”

Mom asked with a smile as she put the pillowcase on and held it up for me to dry, turning it to let me get the other side. We did the same with the other pillow as I put the comforter on.

“Once or twice.” I grinned at her.

“Wait here and don’t peek.” She left the room and returned a moment later. A minute later, she returned pushing a bassinet. “This was yours when I moved back in with Nana and Pop Pop. I don’t know if you need it in Metropolis, but I thought we could leave it in here if you don’t and you can use it when you come visit.” She pushed it into the corner. She wrapped an arm around my waist and rested her head against me. I put my arm around her shoulder and wondered what it was she was going to say next.

As I expected, her voice was soft. “It was Chris’. Grandma Davis gave it to me when I moved out of Chris’ house. I know he only knew you for about twelve hours, but he loved you so much.” A tear streaked down her cheek. She didn’t talk about him like this very often. “We’d always talked about having children together, but we didn’t expect to find the first one in a space ship in Shuster’s Field. I told Lois this earlier today and I’m going to tell you, too. I don’t regret for one minute that Chris went that night. He was needed and I wouldn’t trade Josh for Chris for the world. He didn’t want to go, but he had to and he knew it. I don’t regret Chris’ death, but I do wish we’d gotten married when I got back from college. We would have had six months together. Don’t waste time with Lois now. It’s going to be a long time before it’s just the two of you again, especially if you have more children someday.”

I wasn’t sure what to say about that, but was relieved when I heard the door open. “They’re back,” I said turning and giving her a big hug. “Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too.”

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Lois

We’d been in Smallville for five days and Clark had asked if I’d mind giving him some time alone with his parents so I’d decided to turn in early. The bed was huge and very comfortable. Martha and Jonathan hadn’t gone for cheap sheets and they were much better than the ones at the apartment. We’d slept on it three times and we may as well have been in separate zip codes, which was fine with me.

Martha had brought me a body pillow and I hugged it to me. I hadn’t seen much of Clark all day and that was fine with me, too. I wondered what his parents thought about that. He hadn’t even touched me intentionally since the hug when we first arrived. Well, and when he’d flown — *flown* — me back to the house the next night. It was nice to not have to pretend we were sappy and in love and all that, but going to the other extreme wasn’t what I’d expected either.

I wasn’t in love with him and he wasn’t in love with me. I didn’t care about that, but I *did* care about losing my friend. I’d spent time working on my English paper, losing myself in past pain instead of present confusion. It was nearly done. I wasn’t sure what Clark had spent his time doing. I knew he’d finished his paper but he and his dad had disappeared doing farm stuff the last couple of days. I’d had some nice talks with Martha, but she had things to do, too, so I’d ended up spending quite a bit of the last couple days on my own. It didn’t really bother me. The pervading sense of aloneness was becoming more familiar as the months went on.

I’d always been pretty self-sufficient in the sense that I didn’t need to be surrounded by other people all the time. I’d never been

a loner but I’d never had any problem spending time by myself. I read books, I wrote. I worked on my great American novel from time to time. I wrote short stories for the fun of it. I was even contemplating writing an NCIS story. I’d read a couple that were nice, but I wasn’t happy with the outcome and thought if they could do it, surely I could, too.

Since the night they’d moved the new bed into Clark’s room, he’d managed to stay up until after I was asleep and was up long before me. I knew he slept in there with me, but only because his side of the bed was rumpled and there was an indentation on his pillow.

As I stared out the window, hugging the pillow to me, I felt it again.

The baby moved.

Tears filled my eyes as I remembered the first time I’d felt it — when Clark was with me. It had been very nice, sharing that with Clark; sharing something about this baby with him besides my evening sickness or whatever it was. Of course, then Cruella had come along and ruined it.

I rested my hand on my stomach and waited. A minute later, I felt it again.

Tears streaked down my cheeks. It wasn’t like I wanted to share all this with Clark, necessarily, but this wasn’t how I’d pictured having my first baby. When I’d thought about having a baby, I figured I’d be out of college for a while, married for a few years to a guy I loved and who loved me. We probably would have had a lot of fun trying to get pregnant and then spent the next nine months getting a nursery ready and reveling in the changes. I would have been scared that he wouldn’t find me attractive when I was the size of a house, but he would reassure me that there was nothing sexier than knowing I was having his baby.

This wasn’t what I would have pictured and certainly not what I would have chosen.

I hadn’t wanted a baby. I didn’t even remember having sex. But now that this was happening... I wouldn’t stop it. I *wanted* this baby *now*. I could begin to imagine what my mom had gone through her senior year of high school when she was pregnant with a baby that wasn’t my dad’s, but I wasn’t going to give this baby up for adoption.

I’d been thinking again about meeting my half-brother’s family and I wanted to, but that meant talking to my dad and I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that. I knew he didn’t know the reason for the distance between us the last few months; that he didn’t understand. Mindy had the wool completely over his eyes.

Maybe I’d just email him.

I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, but they went across the hall. I closed my eyes, willing myself to sleep before Clark came up.

Part 54

Clark

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I nudged the door open with my knee, glad that Lois hadn’t shut it all the way behind her.

She’d rushed upstairs as soon as we pulled up to the apartment building, muttering about needing to go to the bathroom.

I should have offered to leave her in Smallville and drive the Jeep back, then fly her home so she wouldn’t have to spend two days in the car, but I hadn’t thought about that. The only good thing was the email I’d gotten from Lana that said she’d be driving herself back.

Mom had cried when she read my paper and I could tell Dad had tears in his eyes by the time he was done.

Of course, I’d barely talked to Lois the whole week.

It had been really nice to not have to pretend it was real.

While Mom and Dad didn't know the whole story, they knew enough to know that we weren't a normal married couple and that we weren't in love. They didn't expect us to be holding hands or kissing or curled up on the couch together when we watched TV.

I'd spent a lot of time with my dad working around the farm, doing things that he would have a hard time doing getting ready for the year. I mended fences and helped fix the tractor and chopped the old oak tree that had finally fallen into firewood and put it all in the woodshed to dry for next winter.

After spending a week in Smallville — or rather on the farm because neither of us actually ventured into town after we dropped Lana off — we'd spent the two quietest days of my life driving back to Metropolis. We'd stayed at the same hotel in Indiana as we had with Lana but that time we each took a bed to ourselves rather than being forced to share with my ex-girlfriend in the room.

I set the bags down next to the bed in the apartment and sighed. I'd managed to forget just how small and run down this place was. I headed back down to the Jeep to get everything else and when I got back I found Lois unpacking her clothes.

I would have volunteered to do it for her, but she was almost done and it didn't seem like we were speaking though I wasn't sure exactly why.

I sighed and started to unpack my bags. We moved around each other without really speaking — just the occasional muttered 'excuse me' or 'sorry'. When I was done, I got out my laptop and started work on another assignment while Lois took a shower and got ready for bed. I noticed that she was wearing her own pajamas. Only one night while we were gone she had worn her own — the rest of the time she'd worn some of my clothes that she'd absconded with a couple months earlier when her clothes didn't fit but she didn't have any maternity ones yet.

I heard her mumble 'good night' as she crawled under the covers. I'd hoped that — aside from the road trip with Lana — we'd be able to be friends again and work on getting back to where we were before we got stuck in Latislan, before we got married, over Break, but instead something had happened that made things worse.

I didn't *think* it was telling her the truth about myself but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what it was.

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April 2003

Lois

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"Come on in," I said, leaving the door open behind me.

He didn't say anything as he took it in. "I don't remember this place being quite this small."

I shrugged. "You were young and in love, Daddy." I couldn't flop on the bed anymore but I did climb far enough on it to sit sort of cross-legged. My stomach was in the way.

He looked at the love seat and decided that sitting on one of the kitchen chairs was a better option. It was a smart choice. He looked around some more. "I remember it being a lot nicer, too."

I sighed. "It's closing the week after finals for a reason."

He looked back at me in shock. "What?"

"They're renovating it starting in June. We'll have to move in a few weeks."

"Where are you moving to?"

I shrugged. "We haven't found a place yet." We hadn't looked. I'd called around some, but I didn't know what we were going to be able to afford or anything like that. I didn't even know how much Clark was making.

He started to say something but the phone interrupted him. I sighed and rolled until I could reach it.

"Hello?"

"Lois, it's Jill."

I hadn't heard from anyone in the State Department in a

couple months. This could not be good. I closed my eyes to brace myself. "Hi, Jill."

She sighed. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this but... Navance is going to be in Metropolis in a couple weeks."

I felt the color leave my face. "What? Why?"

"He's going to be in the States anyway and wants to see his nephew while he's there."

"Okay." My insides were starting to shake. I sighed. "Thanks for the heads up."

"Get out of town while he's there if you can."

"I'll talk to Clark," I promised.

"I gotta run, but I'll let you know if I hear anything."

"Thanks, Jill."

She hung up and I set the phone back in the cradle.

"Who was that?"

"Jill from the State Department." I took a deep breath to try to pull myself together. "She had some news for us."

"Ah"

I didn't elaborate and he didn't ask any more questions.

He'd looked like he had something else on his mind, but instead he stood. "Listen, Princess, why don't you and Clark come over for dinner on Saturday. There's something I want to talk to you about."

"What's that?"

He shook his head. "We'll talk then."

"I'll see if Clark's working or not. I'm not sure what his schedule is this weekend." I actually knew that he wasn't scheduled for Saturday night, but he'd been picking up extra shifts since we got back from Kansas. I didn't know if it was a money thing or a 'so I have a legitimate excuse to be out of the house' thing, but it didn't really matter.

Something had happened in Smallville and I didn't understand what it was. I didn't care about the whole 'alien' business. He was — generally speaking — a nice guy and it didn't matter to me where he came from. I still couldn't quite put my finger on what it was that had happened between us — was it me? Was it him? Was it some combination of the two? There was something eating at my insides that I couldn't quite place.

Daddy was saying something and I mentally shook myself. "We'll try to be there. Promise."

He held out a hand and helped me up, pulling me into a big hug. "I love you, Princess."

"I know. I love you, too."

"Are you and Clark doing okay?"

"Still getting to know each other and all that," I said honestly.

He kissed my forehead. "Take care of my grandbaby."

"I will." He held me for another minute, then left.

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Clark

I whistled as Lois punched some numbers into the keypad. "Nice," I said as we drove up the tree lined drive, catching glimpses of a very large house as we did. We'd planned to have dinner there at least one other time, but it had been canceled so this was my first visit.

She shrugged. "Usually. When *she's* not around."

She drove up the long drive and pulled in front of what was practically a small castle on the top of a small hill. I could see horses in the distance and a barn nearby. The house was surprisingly modern with a brick and rock exterior and even a turret or two. I counted at least six chimneys and I couldn't even venture a guess as to how many bedrooms it had.

Lois pulled to a stop at the front door and we got out of the Jeep.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked quietly.

She shrugged again. "I guess."

We headed inside and Lois told me a little bit about it.

"Mom and Daddy built this while she was pregnant with me.

Their plan was to have a lot of kids and maybe be foster parents someday and they wanted plenty of room. Besides that, they were young. They had more money than they had any clue what to do with. They actually paid cash for all of it.” She took a deep breath. “I think Daddy’s planning on me filling it with kids now.” She didn’t stop long enough for me to respond to that.

She opened the door and I noted hallways along either side that led to what would have to be the ‘wings’ of the house. We went up a few steps to a foyer with a library on one side and a formal dining room on the other.

“Dad! We’re here!”

“Lois!”

A woman with short blond hair came into the dining room through another door.

“Vicki!” I watched as they hugged for long minutes.

The other woman turned to me and held out a hand, which I shook, while leaving the other arm around Lois. “You must be Clark. I can’t believe Lois hasn’t brought you by yet, but...” She glanced at Lois disapprovingly. “...she hasn’t been home much either.”

“Sorry, Vicki.” Lois sounded contrite. “Clark’s been working a lot and I’ve either been sick or...”

Vicki spoke softly. “I know what happened in August. I know why you didn’t stay home.”

Lois nodded, biting her bottom lip. “I figured you probably did.”

A beeping sound came from another room and Vicki gave Lois another hug. “I’ve got to go check on that. We’ll talk later, okay?”

Lois nodded.

“Nice to meet you,” I said politely.

“You, too.” She gave me a mock glare. “We’ll talk later, too.”

I smiled. I had a feeling I was going to like her.

Lois led the way past two sets of curved staircases — one on each side — and into a big living area. Open through the second story, it was bigger than any living area I’d ever seen with lots of big windows on the back wall. The view was spectacular. Pastures with horses and beyond that trees which I was sure blended into New Troy National Forest.

She tossed her purse onto one of the chairs and went through one of the sets of doors onto a big porch. She leaned up against the railing and stared over the property.

Sensing she wasn’t quite ready to talk about whatever it was that was bothering her — and I really had no clue what it was, except that we were here with her dad and Mindy — I asked about something else.

“Tell me more about this place.” I turned my back to the rail and leaned against it.

She sighed. “Total square footage is something like 23,000. Twelve bedrooms, sixteen bathrooms, not including the basement. All of the bedrooms have their own bathrooms, plus three half baths on the main floor and one upstairs. Over the garage in the west wing are basically two, two bedroom apartments, complete with their own kitchens, with a door between them. There’s a total of like six staircases: the two main curved ones you saw already, one on either side leading to each wing, another one leading upstairs near the kitchen. There’s one there leading to the basement, too, and another leading downstairs from near the east wing. There’s two more wrought iron circular staircase in a couple other places.”

She sighed again. “Sometime when I’m not as big as this place, I’ll give you a tour.” She pointed to another, much smaller, house not too far from the barn. “That’s where Vicki and her family live. Her husband, Ollie, takes care of the outside stuff and she’s the housekeeper and cooks sometimes, like tonight, does laundry, stuff like that. Their sons help out sometimes, too, when they’re able to. Ollie manages the guys that help him take care of

the grounds and the horses, too.”

She turned and looked at the house with me. She pointed to the left. “That’s where the garages and those two apartments are.” She pointed to the right. “In the east wing... On the main floor is a billiard room, a large... ball room or entertaining room, I guess you’d call it where Daddy hosts fancy fundraisers for different causes, a wet bar, one of those half baths, and two offices. On the second floor of that wing are three bedroom suites. In the main part of the house on the second floor are four more bedrooms suites, an office area and a computer area. I think there’s... nineteen total fireplaces, but not that many chimneys because a lot of them share.” She pointed to the two doors to our right. “Through there is the Master Suite. It’s got a sitting room and a huge bathroom, closet area. Mom and Dad never lived in there though. They lived on the second floor with me and Lucy.” She shrugged. “Daddy stayed upstairs near me after Mom and Lucy died. I think that’s where he and Mindy are still living.”

“It’s nice,” I finally said.

She snorted. “You are the *master* of the understatement. It’s way beyond nice and you and I both know it. Mom and Dad didn’t think that we should be raised as stereotypical rich kids, though. He spent most of his life in a trailer park and Mom started working when she was fifteen. They both worked their way through school. We always had to help clean up and do chores and all those kinds of things. Daddy didn’t buy me my first car. I paid for half of it and he matched whatever I had saved up from doing extra work for Vicki or Ollie or whatever. And he got me the Jeep for graduation, but I also had to trade in my Honda, which was worth about... a third or so of what he paid for the Jeep.” She looked around. “If it hadn’t all been paid for, we wouldn’t have been able to keep it all. Compared to what a mortgage payment or whatever would be, upkeep is fairly inexpensive. It was built with as many cost saving features as they had — all the energy efficient stuff that was available at the time and Dad’s added more since then as practical. Don’t get me wrong, it still costs money, but not nearly as much as if Dad was still making payments.”

I nodded. “That makes sense.”

“And he rented out stalls and stuff in the barn to other people to bring in some extra money so that helped, too. Ollie gives riding lessons from time to time too and he did that for a while. Usually when he does, he uses our horses and that’s the end of it. For a while, he split his lesson fees 50/50 with Dad since he was using our horses and equipment and stuff but Dad was having a hard time paying the bills.”

“Princess!” Sam came out of the same doors Lois and I had.

Lois gave him a hug. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, Clark.” He held out a hand and I shook it.

“Hi, Sam.” I smiled awkwardly at him, not sure why we were here and why I had a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach about it.

He put his arm around Lois. “Vicki said dinner’s ready and Mindy’s looking forward to seeing you again and to meeting Clark.”

Lois’ smile looked forced and her tone was off. “Can’t wait, Daddy.”

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Part 55

Lois

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I trailed behind Daddy and Clark as they headed inside. As they headed into the kitchen, Mindy came around the corner and stopped me.

“Punkie, I’m so glad you could come *visit* us,” she said in the saccharine voice that grated on every nerve I ever had.

“Hi, Mindy,” I said warily, wondering if she knew Clark and I had stowed away on that plane.

“Listen, Punkie, you don’t want to hurt your Daddy, I know that, but you’re a grown-up girl and pregnant and married and everything.”

“I’d never hurt my dad,” I told her, wondering where she was going.

“Well, grown-up girls who know what’s good for them and their babies, don’t move back in with Daddy, when the going gets a little tough.”

My blood ran cold. It sure sounded like she knew. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you’re still using your Daddy’s money sometimes and I know he didn’t have the heart to tell you to stop. And I know your apartment building on campus is about to close, so I wouldn’t want you to hurt my Hunkie by giving him some sob story about how you don’t have anywhere else to go and you want to move back in here. You’re a big girl, Punkie, and you have a big, strong husband to take care of you. You shouldn’t guilt trip my Hunkie into letting you live here.” Her voice changed suddenly. It was much deeper and much more menacing. “You will regret it if you do.”

She turned to walk off and Dad walked through the door way as she did. “Hi, Snookums. Is dinner ready yet?”

Dad gave me an odd look as she put her arm around his waist and he belatedly put his arm around her shoulder. “You coming, Princess?”

I nodded. “Coming.”

We sat in the breakfast nook, though Daddy and I had never really used it for that. Breakfast was usually at the bar in the kitchen. Dinner, when we had real sit down dinners, was eaten here.

This table sat six. The table in the big dining room sat twenty and we only used it for dinner parties of some kind. And really, ‘dinner party’ was a fancy term for a bunch of friends over for dinner and games. Our home didn’t really compare to most of the ones in the area. It was as big as most, though not as big as some, but the interior was comfy and not the sterile formality that invaded most of the others.

This dinner, however, was different than most of the ones I’d been a part of here.

Daddy and Clark tried to carry on a conversation, but it revolved mostly around sports. Mindy said a few brainless things here and there. When dinner was over, Daddy pushed his plate back and took a deep breath.

“Princess, there’s something I wanted to talk to you and Clark about.”

This was it. I could see the gleam in Mindy’s eye. He wanted to marry her. Clark and I hadn’t done anything to try to stop her, but we hadn’t said more than a few words to each other at a time in weeks so how could we have?

“I saw your apartment the other day, and if I’d known what they were like, I never would have suggested you live there. I remember living there with your mom and…” He shook his head. “They weren’t luxury apartments by any stretch of the imagination, but they were comfortable and clean. Have you two found a place to live yet, that you can afford?”

Clark and I glanced at each other. “Not yet, Daddy,” I told him.

“What about childcare? Are you going to be able to work schedules around each other so one of you can stay with the baby? Are you going to be able to go to school, Lois?”

I sighed. “We haven’t really figured it all out yet.” I looked at Clark out of the corner of my eye. He was staring at the placemat.

He nodded. “I know how important a degree is and especially how important it is to you, Pumpkin, so here’s the deal. I want you two to move in here. I’ll pay for certain expenses. To decorate one of the rooms as a nursery and some clothes and things like that. I’ll hire a nanny to take care of the baby while

you’re both in school or at work, but that’s it. When one of you is home, the baby is your responsibility. That will also cover two date nights a month and a weekend away every few months. You two will need to be comfortable with whoever is hired, of course, so you’ll be involved in every step of the hiring process. Once the baby’s here though, you’re responsible for the rest of the expenses. Diapers, formula, clothes… all those things you two will have to pay for. And you’ll both have to work part-time. I know it may not seem fair, Clark, but you’re already working and that’s commendable, but Lois doesn’t need to get a job just yet. Lois, you won’t have to get a job right after the baby’s born, but we’ll talk about later how long your ‘maternity leave’ is.” He used finger quotes.

My chest was constricting. What he was offering was a dream come true in many ways.

The only problem — especially after the conversation right before dinner — was sitting across the table from me, her eyes narrowing and mouth setting in a finer line with every one of Dad’s sentences.

Clark cleared his throat and looked nervously at me when Mindy spoke.

“Snookie,” she said, running her hand on my dad’s arm. “Can I talk to you for a few minutes before they answer?”

He glanced at us then nodded. “Why don’t you two talk it over and we’ll be right back.”

“She’ll never let us stay,” I whispered as soon as they were out of earshot. “She already told me that.”

“Would you want to? If it wasn’t for her?”

“It’s better than anything we could afford. Plus daycare is taken care of,” I pointed out. “I didn’t have any idea what we were going to do about that.”

Clark tilted his head to one side. “Want to know what they’re saying?”

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Clark

Lois’ eyes were wide. “What?”

“I can hear them.”

“You can?” She looked shocked for a minute. “Oh, right. The hearing thing.”

I nodded. “So? Do you want to know?”

She nodded back.

I tuned in my hearing and lowered my glasses to watch.

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“Hunkie, are you sure that’s a good idea? They’re grown-ups now. They’re having a baby. Surely, Clark can take care of his own family.”

Sam shook his head. “No, Mindy. She’s my daughter and they need help getting through school. I’m not going to stand by when I can help her finish school and take care of my grandbaby. Otherwise it’s going to take her years to get through and she’ll lose her scholarship and she’s very proud of that.”

“But, Snookie…”

“I know what that apartment looked like and I know what they’re likely to be able to afford on the kind of money they’ll make as college students trying to work opposite schedules so they don’t have to pay a babysitter. It’ll be hell on both of them and their marriage.”

Mindy ran a finger down the middle of his chest, stopping in the middle of his stomach. There was a pathetic pout on her face. “Hunkie, I can’t just stand here and watch you help them become dependent on you. Watch them take advantage of you.”

Sam shook his head again. “If they want to move in, they will. Nothing you can say is going to change my mind.”

“Even if I said I couldn’t be a part of them taking advantage of you, trying to get you to pay for everything they should.”

“Are you giving me an ultimatum?” Sam asked with narrowed eyes.

"I wouldn't put it quite that way, Snookums."

"Mindy, I will not choose between you and my daughter."

"Snookums..." She took a step closer to him and pouted again. "I think you may have to. Lois has said she won't live here with me; that she doesn't like me at all. She'll do everything she can to make my life miserable."

Sam frowned. "Has she threatened you?"

Mindy nodded. "She has, Hunkie."

Sam sighed and was silent for a long minute, looking at her.

"Mindy, I think maybe it would be best if you moved out, regardless of what happens with Lois."

"What, Hunkie?"

"I've been slowly coming to the realization that this isn't working for me anymore. I think it's best if you moved out."

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I kept half an ear on the conversation between them, but didn't feel I should eavesdrop any further.

"So what do you think?" I asked her.

"Do you think he means it about her moving out?"

I nodded. "It looked and sounded like it." I concentrated for a minute more. "He's not giving in."

She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I think he may have heard what she said earlier."

He nodded. "He did. So did I. I started to go interrupt but I don't think he wanted me to. I think he wanted to hear exactly what happened."

"I think I'm glad he did."

He nodded again in agreement. "So what do you think? Do you want to move in here? Take your dad up on his offer?"

"Can we even afford an apartment?" she asked me quietly.

"Much less everything a baby needs and daycare and everything else? Am I going to be able to stay in school any other way?" She fiddled with a fork she hadn't used during dinner. "I don't even know how much you make. I don't know what options we have. I even thought about hacking into your bank account so I knew what kind of apartment complexes to be calling, but I couldn't bring myself to do that and I..." She paused for a second. "Then I just felt guilty because I'm not working, but even though I'm not sleeping as much, I have so little energy most of the time and I don't know how I'd manage a job. I've done a little bit of writing online that I've gotten paid a few bucks here and there for, but not much at all. But somehow, I get the feeling that the only way we'd be able to afford something is if only one of us worked and only one of us was in school and we didn't use daycare at all."

Part of me felt a little guilty for not talking to her about all of this, but I had been looking at apartments that we could afford on what I was making and I'd had no desire to even show them to her. Some were worse than what we had, some were better but undesirable for many other reasons. And she'd shut me out in Smallville for some reason I still didn't understand.

Of course, I hadn't told her about the email I'd gotten — or at least not all of the details of it. That was part of — a big part of — the reason I'd continued to shut myself off from her.

Basically, we weren't talking to each other about much of anything.

I sighed. "It would be harder for Navance to get at either one of you here," I finally said.

She nodded. "It would probably be safest for us here. Are you okay with it?"

To be honest the idea relieved me a bit. I still hadn't figured out what we were going to do and this would take a lot of pressure off until we got out of college and by then this would almost be over. I nodded back. "I think it's probably the best plan."

Sam came back in just then.

"Everything okay, Daddy?" Lois asked innocently.

He nodded. "Fine. What did you two decide?"

Lois glanced at me. "After the semester's over, if that's okay with you."

"That's fine." He grinned suddenly. "It's been way too long since we've had a baby around here."

Lois gave a small smile. "It won't be too much longer."

He motioned to us. "Come on, I'll show you what I was thinking for you guys."

We both stood and followed him. We went through the kitchen and between the two curved staircases, then through the library, down a few steps and then up a full staircase. I thought I might need a map to figure out how to get around this place. We got to the top of the stairs and took a right. On the right was a nice set of double doors. We went in those.

The door was sort of set at an angle, but on the opposite wall was a couple of windows with a very nice fireplace in between them. To the right was a good-sized walk-in closet; to the left was the bed and on the other side of it, doors to the bathroom. In the right corner by the window was a large chair and there was another chair and a love seat in front of the fireplace. A large, flat TV hung over it.

I turned my attention back to Sam, who was speaking. "I was thinking that you two could have this room and we could put a door in to the next one." He led us out onto the veranda and into the next room.

Not quite as big, it was currently just another bedroom.

"We could turn this into the nursery," he said, standing just inside the door. "Put a door over there into your room." He pointed to his left and then to his right. "And put a door over there into the next room and the nanny could live there so if you are gone overnight or whatever, she'd be close by."

Lois was nodding. "Sounds good to me."

Sam turned my direction. "Clark?"

I looked around. "Honestly, sir, I'm overwhelmed by your generosity. Whatever you think is best will work just fine, I'm sure."

He nodded. "And we can set aside one of the apartments in the other wing for your parents to use whenever they come to visit. There's two apartments over there with a door in between them. If your parents would accept it, I'll gladly make arrangements for them and any of your grandparents or other family who might want to come to be flown out here once Lois goes into labor."

"I'm sure they'd appreciate that. I'll let them know."

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Lois

I looked around the room. I really hoped Mindy was moving out but Daddy hadn't told us yet that she was.

It was certainly big enough for a baby's room and the one next to it was about the same size as the one I'd used growing up. The closet in there was a bit bigger than my old room which would be nice if I was going to have to share it. And that bathroom had a double sink instead of the single sink I'd grown up with and that Clark and I were sharing at the apartment.

Daddy kept talking about how we could redecorate the bedrooms if we wanted to. All I wanted was to make sure we got the absolutely biggest bed possible. I missed the bed from Smallville. We still kept as much distance between us as we could, but that was nearly impossible in the double bed the apartment boasted.

Two, three more weeks and we'd be here.

Then Daddy startled me. "You can stay in Lois' old room till we get the little bit of construction and redecorating done."

He and Clark had moved farther into what was going to become the nursery and were gesturing at walls and trying to decide where the doors would go best given the fireplaces between the nursery and the nanny's room and the built in shelving on both sides and where it would go best into the room

that was becoming mine and Clark's.

I left the room and wandered back onto the veranda and through the door to my new home. It had been a while since I'd been in there and I wanted to reacquaint myself with the room. The bathroom was much as I remembered it and I was so glad that it had a big Jacuzzi tub. There was a kind of weird closet off the water closet. There was a linen closet in there and then another closet. Maybe I could have the main closet and that one could be Clark's.

I knew it wouldn't work that way — it wasn't big enough, but a girl could dream.

I left the bathroom and sat on the bed.

Before I realized what I was doing, I was asleep.

Part 56

Clark

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Sam and I let Lois sleep while he showed me around.

The place was beyond impressive, but Sam and Lois were as down to Earth as anyone I'd ever met. He introduced me to Ollie and we talked about the construction to the rooms. We chatted with Vicki who said she'd get with Lois on the decorating and for me to let her know if there was anything in particular that I wanted or didn't want. We wandered through the barn and I met a couple of the horses. We got in the Wrangler and he showed me some of the property. We'd made it back to the house and he was showing me the apartments when Lois' cell phone rang. She'd asked me to grab it as we walked out the door of the apartment on campus and I'd forgotten I had it in my pocket.

I looked at the caller ID but it only said 'unknown caller'. I frowned and answered it. "Hello?"

"Clark?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"This is Daniel."

I groaned. "Hi, Daniel. What's up?"

"First, I wanted to see if you knew that Navance was going to be in town the week after your finals."

I ran a hand through my hair and blew out a breath. "No. I didn't know that."

"He made a comment in a news conference today that he was looking forward to seeing some 'old friends' he'd last seen around the first of the year."

I closed my eyes. "Great. I have no desire to see him and I'm sure Lois doesn't either. No, I *know* Lois doesn't either." I held a finger up to Sam who nodded as I walked away. "Why is he still so fixated on her, Daniel?"

I heard the sigh on the other end of the line. "I don't know. It could be that once he started the process, he couldn't really stop. It could be that Lois made him too mad and now he's trying to get some sort of revenge or something. It could be... to throw us off something else."

"Could be."

"Get her out of town," Daniel advised. "Don't be anywhere near campus while he visits his nephew."

"We're moving in with Sam soon," I told him. "That'll help with security at home at least. It has a gated drive and you'd need GPS to figure out your way around this place."

"That's good. How much does Sam know?"

"That we're the couple from Latislan. No more than the official news reports except our names."

"So not about any of the other?" he asked warily.

"No." Sam didn't know about Mindy and the guns or that I wasn't the father of Lois' baby or that Navance was still threatening us.

"Are you going to tell him any of it?"

"Should I?"

"If you're living there, he probably needs to know that there

could be a security issue."

I sighed. "Probably. I'll tell him before we move in."

"Be careful," he said quietly. "Take care of her."

"I will," I said, with less conviction than I should have had.

"Tell her I said 'hello'."

"Will do."

The line went dead.

"Everything okay?" Sam asked when I returned to where he was looking out the window. My parents would love the view.

I sighed. "Navance is going to be in town in a few weeks.

Daniel thinks we probably shouldn't be here while he is."

Sam frowned. "Why is that? I thought it was over when you two got married and left."

I hesitated then spoke. "Sort of. The marriage has to last at least five years after the birth of the baby for his paternity claim to be invalidated."

"I don't remember that."

"He changed the law after we left." I stared out over the fields, not looking at Sam.

"Is that why you stayed married to Lois?" he asked, moving a step closer, looking slightly menacing.

"It was one of many factors," I said honestly.

"Is he threatening her? The baby? You?"

"He's sent a few letters."

"Threatening letters?" he pressured.

"Lois is going to kill me," I muttered. I was going to have to tell him more of the truth — but not that the baby wasn't mine; that we were just biding our time until we could file for divorce.

"Daniel and Jill and whoever else they told at the State Department, and probably some people at the FBI, are the only ones who know about the letters. His nephew goes to Met U and he's run into us or just Lois accidentally on purpose a few times, just to let us know he's watching."

"Why is that?"

"Because if Navance has any proof that the marriage is... one of convenience or just to keep him away from the baby, then my paternity claims are invalid under Latislani law."

Sam looked thoughtful. "Would U.S. courts actually do that though? Would they let Navance take the baby of two married American parents?"

"Jill and Daniel said no, but would you want either Lois or the baby to live through that nightmare? Court dates and paparazzi, publicity. Always being branded as 'that kid'. How many people still remember Elian Gonzalez?"

He nodded. "Good point. Wouldn't want that." He thought for a moment longer. "I'll talk to Ollie and we'll get started on security arrangements and all of that. One of the guys Ellen and I went to college with — a guy named Allie — has a security firm that arranges security for VIPs all the time. I'll get a hold of him and go from there."

Lois' phone rang again. This time the ID was from the house. "I think it's Lois." I pushed the button. "Hello?" I nodded confirmation at Sam. "We're over in the apartments. We'll meet you... In the kitchen," I repeated after her. "Be there in a minute."

I followed Sam out of the apartment, shutting the door behind me.

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Lois

I fumed the whole way back to campus.

I could *not* believe that he'd told my dad.

If I let myself calm down, I'd understand why, but I didn't want to let myself calm down.

"Why the hell did you tell him?" I seethed once the door was shut.

"Because he heard me talking to Daniel," he said.

"Why were you answering my phone?"

"It was an unknown number. Your doctor's office is an unknown number. You had a test done the other day. I didn't *think* they'd call on a Saturday but you never know."

"I already got the results and everything's fine," I informed him.

"Well, thanks for letting me know," he said sarcastically.

"If you were home, I might," I muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I forgot he could hear that stuff. "Just that you haven't been home long enough to talk to since we got back from Smallville."

"I've been working and studying," he pointed out. "I thought working was a good thing. You're in no shape to at the moment and we needed a place to live after school gets out."

"And were you actually planning on telling me how much you make so I could help you look? Even if it was just an online search or two? Or is that just one more of those things that is different about us?"

He shrugged. "I've looked. There's nothing that we'd want to live in on what I make and I knew that."

"And you didn't bother to tell me?"

"So you could feel guilty? You've said several times you do."

"Yeah, I do. So?"

He changed the subject. "Listen, Daniel called. Said Navance was coming and we should get out of town while he's here because he said he wanted to see us."

I could feel the color leave my face. "What?"

"He said at a press conference that he wanted to see his good friends he hasn't seen since New Year's."

My hands went to my stomach and I sat on the bed. "He wants to get to me. To the baby."

He nodded as he sat in one of the chairs. "Probably. Or to at least freak you out."

I didn't say anything for a long minute. "I knew he was coming but..."

"You did?"

I nodded. "Jill called the other day while Daddy was here. I didn't see you again until today and today I was stressing about the whole Mindy thing."

"Yeah."

"At least Daddy told us that she's moving out."

"Means that we have a place to live. Would you have moved in if she hadn't?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

He sighed. "Where do you want to go after the semester ends?"

I looked at him quizzically. "The house, I guess. Where else would we go?"

"Your dad suggested the cabin," he said without looking at me.

"Which would you prefer?" I asked.

"Security's easier at the house. With the driveway and alarm system and all."

"House it is then." I managed to stand up and headed to the bathroom.

May 2003

Clark

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The next couple of weeks flew by and before I knew it we were packing to move to the house. I was *not* going to miss this place.

Construction on our new room wasn't quite done, not with the additional security measures being put in place in that wing. The rest of the house, too, but especially there.

We'd talked to Vicki several times and a super king size bed had been ordered. I'd seen her sly wink when she realized what we wanted. I was sure that she had no idea what the real reason

was.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

Acting 'normal' in public for a few minutes here and there was one thing.

Acting 'normal' in Smallville while never leaving the farm was something else — there they knew we weren't truly 'normal'.

Acting 'normal' there... That was a whole different matter.

I sighed. We were going to need to talk about that. How we were going to pull that off.

Should we just tell a very select few the truth? About everything but the true paternity?

I shook my head to myself. No. Too many people knew too much already.

"We need to talk."

Lois' voice shook me out of my reverie.

"About what?" I asked her.

"How we're going to pull this off," she said.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"And?"

"We could tell your dad more of the truth," I suggested. "And maybe Vicki and Ollie."

"No." She shook her head vehemently. "I can't risk them letting something slip."

"That was my thought, too."

"So what do we do?" she asked quietly, as she sat on the bed.

I floated in mid-air. It was more comfortable than a chair or the love seat. Lois started a bit. I hadn't done much... 'special' stuff in front of her and it still seemed to catch her off guard when I did.

I sighed. "Well, in front of them act like we do on campus, I guess. The quick kisses and stuff." I rolled onto my back, threaded my fingers together behind my head and stared at the ceiling.

"What else?"

I shrugged as best I could. "When else will we see people?"

"Watching a movie together or something."

"Whenever possible, one of us holds the baby?" I suggested.

"And when that's not possible?"

"Sit together, I guess. Pretend. Stay in our room as much as possible being 'newlyweds'." I moved enough to make finger quotes.

"I guess."

I sighed. "There's something else that occurred to me though."

"What's that?"

I was sure I was turning eighteen shades of red. The package Mom had sent didn't help. "Sleepwear."

"What about it?"

She hadn't worn any of my clothes since we got back from Smallville. I wasn't sure why but I'd found all of my clothes back in my drawers once the next round of laundry was done.

"You... We..." I sighed and didn't look at her. "We don't exactly dress like newlyweds at bedtime."

"I am *not* sleeping naked," she practically yelled at me.

"That's *not* what I was suggesting," I shot back. "I was just thinking that maybe I should sleep without my shirt in case someone comes to get us for something or if I have to go to the kitchen to get a drink or something at night." I shrugged. "That's my preference anyway. I hate sleeping with a shirt on."

She nodded. "That works."

"And, um..." I floated over to the dresser and got something out of one of the drawers. "Mom sent you this."

I tossed the box to her.

"For after the baby's born," she read. She pulled out a nightgown. "I am *not* wearing this, Clark."

I sighed. "I didn't figure you'd want to, but at least I can tell

Mom I gave it to you.”

The nightgown wasn’t all that revealing — I didn’t think so anyway. It was dark green with cream lace and spaghetti straps. It was long enough that it would probably go to her knees and there was a robe that went with it. It didn’t look like it was too low cut, but what did I know?

“I was just thinking that you might want to wear something a little more... something than sweats and T-shirts after the baby’s born. Not all the time, but every once in a while, in case you run into someone while you’re out and about or... well, for the same reasons as me.”

She fingered the satin. “You’re probably right.”

“Nothing too... you know,” I said, embarrassed.

“Don’t worry,” she said, the same shade of red I probably was. “I have no intention of wearing anything you might see Lana in someday.”

Lana.

I hadn’t let myself think about her like that in a long time, but a sudden vision of her in front of a fireplace came to me. She wasn’t wearing anything then as I looked down at her. I closed my eyes and tried to will the image away. When I opened them again, instead of Lana in front of the fire, it was Lois lying there with me.

Would I ever not be conflicted about this?

She was saying something else.

“I’ll go get a few things, maybe even a maternity gown or two since I have a couple months left.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a good idea, I guess.”

“At least we have a place to go,” she said quietly.

“Yeah.” I looked around. “There’s not much left. I can do it fast if you want and then we can load the truck and head over in the morning.”

She rolled awkwardly and then slid under the covers. “Good night.”

“Good night,” I said, but knew it would be a while before I slept.

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Part 57

Lois

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Most of what we’d brought from the dingy, little apartment on campus was either put in storage or given to charity. Most of what we kept was put in the closet of what was going to be our new room. We kept enough clothes and such for a week in my old room. Daddy thought that was how much longer it was going to take.

The new bed and sheets and all of those things had already arrived and once the doors were put in the rooms would be painted and new carpet put in, we’d move in. Of course, one thing on our agenda the week after Navance left was to go baby shopping. Clark and Vicki and I were going to hit some of the baby stores and get a crib and all that stuff.

That was going to be a fun day.

I’d get to waddle around and pretend to be in love with my husband who was *not* the father of my baby. And in the end we’d have some great baby stuff and I’d have swollen ankles and a sore back.

I soaked in the big tub that I’d practically swum in when I was little. When I was almost a prune, I climbed out and wrapped myself in the big bath sheet to dry off. I put on my favorite pair of Capri pants and a nice shirt.

Daddy had asked if I wanted to have anyone over, but I couldn’t deal with it. I missed my friends — I missed Joe still — but I couldn’t deal with the pretense in front of people who knew me that well. Dad and Vicki and Ollie and their kids were bad enough.

I waddled back into my bedroom and spent a minute looking

at the pictures on my dresser. Mom and Dad. Me and Mom. Me and Lucy. Mom and Lucy. Me and Mom and Lucy. All four of us together.

I had hoped that it would help me pull myself together, but instead I found tears filling my eyes and I gasped as the baby kicked up into my lungs. I picked up one picture and stared at it. It was Mom holding me the day I was born, Dad sitting next to her on the bed. They looked so happy.

I wondered if Clark and I would be able to pull off that look the day this baby was born.

I sighed and put the picture back.

They were downstairs waiting for me by now, I was sure.

Happy birthday to me.

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Clark

The new room was done.

And it was going to be our first night in it.

I breathed a sigh of relief. We wouldn’t be living right next door to Sam anymore. Okay not *right* next door, but close enough. We’d have our own climate control and security for those three rooms was tighter than the rest of the house. Every entrance to the second story east wing had a security keypad on both the inside and outside of every door and they were to be kept shut at all times. The upper floor already had its own climate control — there were several different zones throughout the house and that was just one of them.

Sam had contracted with his friend to update security all around the property, including guard dogs and patrols as necessary until the nightmare was over.

Lois and I both had panic buttons we could push if we ever felt the need. They were to be kept on our persons at all times. The nanny would have one, too. The baby would have a bodyguard just about any time he or she left the house. Lois had several panic buttons she could wear — a pendant or a hair doohickey or a watch or even a pair of earrings. I had a couple — a watch was the main one. We each also had one that we could keep in a pocket or purse and another on our key rings — they looked like mini-flashlights.

Every time I thought he might be going a bit overboard, Navance’s words came back to me and a cold chill would pervade my entire body, right down to my bones.

Lois’ birthday ‘party’ had been earlier that night and one of Sam’s ‘gifts’ had been that our room was done early.

Even though I knew when her birthday was, I was being petty and since she hadn’t gotten me anything for *my* birthday — I pushed the thought that I’d never told her when it was to the back of my mind; she’d never asked — I didn’t get her anything either. When I’d gotten puzzled looks from the rest of those gathered in the *actual* dining room that had been festooned with balloons for the occasion, I’d stammered and said I’d left it upstairs and would give it to her later. I’d crossed my fingers under the table but I still felt a bit guilty about it.

Ollie had given me a knowing wink at that.

It made sense they would think that Lois and I would have our own... celebration later, an... initiation of sorts for our new room.

I used my speed to put all of our clothes away and to organize the closet. There were two built in dressers in there.

Lois came in as I finished my clothes and the clothes of hers that I was comfortable with. She mumbled a ‘thank you’ and took over the rest of her things.

I stretched out in one of the chairs and propped my feet on the ottoman, clicking through the channels until the TIVO asked if I wanted to change the channel to record the season finale of NCIS.

I hit pause, knowing Lois would want to watch it in a bit.

I headed to the veranda and sat down, staring over the barn

towards the New Troy National Forest.

I glanced inside to make sure Lois was busy before I took the picture out of my pocket and stared at it.

Me and Lana at the fair the summer before.

I'd put it away when we moved out of the dorms, but I'd unpacked my summer clothes and had come across it, along with several others of the two of us.

I missed her.

So much it hurt sometimes.

I closed my eyes and could still see the words written on my computer screen.

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Clark — I don't need a ride back to Metropolis. I'm driving my car and Tim's coming with me. Now I understand why you two weren't 'completely dressed' after the first time and why you wanted to have your cake and eat it, too. With *her* being the 'cake' and *me* being the 'too'. I can understand why you'd want to 'make love' to me even though you can do whatever you want with your *wife*. Why wouldn't you want to enjoy it all while you can? You thought you could get me into bed and because it would be good, you'd get to have both of us. I'm not foolish enough to believe you wouldn't have had sex with her, too. That's probably all the two of you did in Europe after the 'wedding'. Well, Tim's always been half in love with me and waiting for the day we broke up. When he heard you'd gotten married, he emailed me and we decided that we were going to go out this week. We've chatted online for months and this week we did and it was everything you and I always thought it would be, but you already knew that didn't you?

I'm still not sure I believe that *she's* really having *your* baby, but you know what? I really don't care. Sleep with *her* all you want. I sure as hell plan on sleeping with whoever I feel like from now on. I guess I just don't see the benefit of waiting until marriage anymore. I know you said you wanted me to wait for you but you never said how long I was going to have to wait.

If I wasn't worth waiting for, don't flatter yourself into thinking that you should be.

Call me if you decide to divorce her because what we've shared for years is worth trying to recover.

Lana

<<~><<~><

I could hear the sarcasm in the last line. I knew that was the reason I'd been so distant from Lois since Smallville. She'd been closed off, too, but at least I knew where she was most of the time. The best she could do for me sometimes was guess.

I didn't know how many times I'd committed to do better; to be her friend, to help support her and the baby, to be a better husband even if we weren't a 'real' couple behind closed doors. I was still failing miserably.

Part of me wished we could afford a place of our own without worrying about security. The latest letter had come just a few days before and, once forwarded to the State Department, we'd received a call from the FBI wanting to help with security. Sam had told them that there was no need to burden taxpayers or stretch the FBI's already thin resources when he was capable of paying for the best security, but that he would appreciate it if they would work with the men he was hiring whenever necessary. The FBI man had breathed a sigh of relief at the decreased demand on his people and promised cooperation when the situation called for it.

Lois had left our new room a while earlier. I stared at the picture of me and Lana for another minute then went back inside.

On the bed was a gift-wrapped box.

I picked it up and turned it over in my hands, not noticing as the door opened.

"It's a late birthday present," Lois said. "I'm sorry I missed it."

I shrugged. "It's okay." I glanced up at her, but that was it.

Apparently, she'd decided that this was the night to do the whole 'we're married' pajama thing. In that second, I noted that she was wearing a black satin gown that fell to nearly the floor and that she had a matching robe wrapped around her. She was reaching for her bathrobe and she put that on as well. She was probably as uncomfortable with it as I was, but it was necessary.

Was it possible that she was expecting some reaction? After all I'd told her that it was possible that we'd... I made myself think it. Make love someday.

I decided that I needed to move another direction with my thoughts or I'd be back to thinking about Lana and Tim.

"You didn't have to do this," I told her as I turned the present over in my hands again.

She shrugged as she sat on the love seat. "I didn't think to ask when your birthday was. Your mom told me, but I didn't have a chance to get it until recently."

"Well, thanks."

I moved to the chair before I opened the wrapper and then the box. I stared at it. "Is this a first edition?" I reverently picked up the copy of 'To Kill A Mockingbird'.

"It was my mom's. She loved that book and I know it's your favorite, but I noticed you didn't actually have a copy of it, so..." She shrugged again.

I looked in the box again. "Two copies?"

"One to read," she said as though that it explained it all.

"What?"

"The one is a first edition and you probably won't want to read it to preserve the quality. It was actually my Grandma Lane's. She got it when it first came out and gave it to Mom when she and Daddy got married. He doesn't really care for it so when I asked him if I could give it to you, he said he'd be delighted that someone in the family would enjoy it again."

"I'll have to thank him."

She grabbed the TIVO remote. "Do you mind if I watch NCIS?"

I shook my head. "No. Go for it. I'm kind of looking forward to it myself." She'd gotten me hooked. But she was better at figuring out whodunit before it was revealed on the show than I was.

We watched as Tony and Jeanne faced down the drug crazed sister of a man who'd died while body packing heroin. With Abby's help, Director Shepard realized her long dead father had been in her home. And Gibbs and McGee tried to find out who at Homeland Security was after the Director.

"Wow," Lois breathed as the shot ended on Tony in the car with Jeanne and her father, the arms dealer known as 'The Frog'. "I did not see that coming."

"Me either," I said as I stood up. I set the books on the built in bookcase on the wall by the closet. "Thanks again."

"No problem," Lois called after me as I headed towards the bathroom to get ready for bed.

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Lois

I breathed a sigh of relief as Clark closed the bathroom door behind him.

He hadn't seemed to notice the nightgown I was wearing.

I wasn't sure which reaction would have made me happier — noticing and having some sort of revulsion on his face or noticing and having... not revulsion on his face. Given how huge I was, I certainly wasn't feeling attractive. I had to admit that I always felt better when I dressed nice and the nightgown actually *did* make me feel pretty good.

I thought not noticing was probably the best option.

I hung my bathrobe up in the closet and tossed the matching black robe over the chair in the corner. I was so glad that we were going to be sleeping in the super king size bed.

Separate zip codes while we slept was a good thing.

How close together we were at the apartment, or even in my old room, just served to remind me that he was my husband in name only.

It wasn't like I wanted him to... drop the towel, but wouldn't it have been better to be married to someone who actually liked me? He'd said several times that the biggest problem Lana had with me was that I was pretty. I certainly didn't feel very pretty, but some reassurance — even if it wasn't completely sincere — would have been nice.

As I curled up with the body pillow Martha had sent home with me, I tried not to wonder what it would be like if Joe had married me instead. He'd never made any secret that he thought I was attractive and that he wanted to do a lot more than make out someday.

I sighed and willed myself to sleep as I heard the shower start in the bathroom.

I didn't know how much later it was when I woke up, but when I did, it took me a minute to realize what it was that woke me.

There was a hand resting on my stomach, caressing it for lack of a better term, and there was something warm on my neck.

I wanted to turn my head, but instead I found my head falling to the other side to allow Clark greater access.

It took a minute — given the extremely pleasant sensations — for me to come completely to my senses.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, even as I ran a hand lightly up his arm.

"Do you want me to stop?" he whispered back as he kissed his way down my neck and across my shoulder.

I couldn't bring myself to admit that I wanted this — badly.

I settled for tugging on his arm until he was holding himself above me.

Careful not to rest his full weight on my stomach, he lowered himself until he could kiss me and I ran my hands up his arms, over his shoulders and my fingers tangled in his hair as we shared the most intimate kiss I'd ever been a part of.

An unfamiliar sound came out of the back of my throat, as he worked his way down my jaw and to the other side of my neck. I ran my fingernails down his back, wondering if he could even feel it.

"That feels so good," he murmured into my skin.

"You can feel that?" I asked, breathlessly.

He didn't say anything as he shifted to lie next to me and he ran his hand over my abdomen again before he lightly grasped the back of my thigh and turned me towards him.

I pushed him over onto his back and — being mindful of my stomach — began running my hand over his chest as I kissed *my* way down *his* neck, nibbling on his ear before moving towards his shoulder.

"That feels so good, baby," he practically groaned.

I slowed my hands for a minute. He'd never called me 'baby' but he'd called Lana that all the time.

"What?" I finally whispered, my lips still mere millimeters from his skin.

"I said that feels so good, Lana."

I stilled completely and the arm he wrapped around me pulled me closer. "What's the matter, baby?"

I pushed against him with all the strength I could muster. "Get the hell out of my bed."

Part 58
Clark

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"Get the hell out of my bed," she hissed at me.

"What?"

She pushed against me again, this time so hard that I actually

had the wind knocked out of me.

She was a bit ungainly as she rolled over and stood up, but that was to be expected.

"What?" I asked again.

"Get out." She grabbed the robe off the chair in the corner and pulled it on.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, given that Navance is in town and all."

"What the *hell* were you doing?" She flipped on the light and with her arms crossed in front of her she looked as menacing as anyone I'd ever seen.

I gestured towards her. "I *thought* I was kissing my wife."

"No, you weren't."

"Excuse me?" I asked as I stood up on my side of the large, dark wood, four poster, bed.

"You weren't kissing your *wife*. You were kissing your *girlfriend*," she shouted at me.

I looked her up and down with a raised brow. "I don't have a girlfriend, but if you mean Lana, you sure don't look like her."

"Of course, I don't, but you called me Lana."

I closed my eyes and tried to think. "I did not."

"You did."

"I did not."

"You really think I'd stop whatever that was if you *didn't* call me Lana?" She looked incredulous.

I shrugged.

"Get out," she repeated.

"No." Regardless of what my rationale for starting what she'd stopped, at no point did I think I was with Lana.

Did I?

I couldn't allow myself to delve into that too deeply at the moment.

"You've barely talked to me for months and suddenly, because it's my birthday and I figured I should probably go with the whole quasi-sexy nightgown thing we talked about before we moved on the first night in our new room, you think that I'm suddenly ready for you to jump me? Or was this just supposed to be some sort of 'thank you' for a first edition of your favorite book?"

I sighed. "No. Neither of those."

"So what was it?"

I shrugged. "You looked good?" I couldn't help the question mark in my voice.

"You sound so convincing," she said sardonically. "And since when can't you keep your hands off me?"

"I thought it would be a good thing if I couldn't keep my hands off you," I shot back.

"You've said about fourteen words to me since we left Smallville and you think that, without resolving whatever it is that's bothering you, that's making you avoid me, you can suddenly have sex with me?"

"You haven't said anything to me either," I pointed out.

"You haven't been home."

She had a point, but that wasn't the point. "I told you something I've never told anyone else, and you've never even mentioned it. Do I repulse you that much? Does the fact that I'm an alien really revolt you?" I didn't really think that was the problem, but it made as much sense as anything else because I had no clue what else it could be.

Except for the whole her husband is still in love with his ex-girlfriend thing. But I didn't want to think about that.

She gaped at me. "I *literally* could not care less about whether you were born in Kansas or Katmandu or on Krypton. And you never actually mentioned Krypton, by the way; your mom did. I even understand why you didn't get us out of Latislan when you could have. Of course, if you had, you wouldn't be here now. You'd be planning your wedding to Lana. I'd either be

engaged to or married to Joe because he loves me enough to volunteer to raise this baby with no strings attached.”

“I didn’t attach any strings,” I pointed out, my hands on my hips.

She didn’t say anything to me for a long minute. “Can you tell me this: the day after what big occasion are we filing for divorce?”

“The day after the baby’s fifth birthday or Navance dies, whichever comes first.” I didn’t see her point.

“Joe wouldn’t know the answer to that, because there wouldn’t *be* an answer to that question.”

“What’s your point? I married you because I needed to protect you and the baby. Just like Chris did. Just like *my* dad did.”

Tears started flowing down her cheeks. “Did Chris plan to leave your mom the night they got married?”

“No, of course not.”

“At what point is your dad planning on leaving your mom?”

“He’s not.”

“The title of your paper was ‘He Didn’t Have To Be’ and you talked about the kind of dad Chris was in those few hours and the kind of dad your dad was, never flinching when he found out about your origins. Marrying your mom, loving you no matter what.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So at what point does being the kind of dad your dad’s always been mean that you leave your child on the day after his fifth birthday?”

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Lois

That’s what had been bugging me.

I couldn’t have defined it to myself until that very instant.

“What?” he asked, puzzled.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. Since I’d managed to get myself off the bed, we’d been yelling at each other. “You said you want to be the kind of dad that Chris was and Jonathan still is, right?”

“Of course. They both took me in when they didn’t have to. They protected me and kept me safe from any prying government eyes. I couldn’t let him get his hands on you or the baby, just like neither one of my dads could let the government get to me.”

“And that’s commendable,” I told him. “But at what point did either one of them put an expiration date on being your father?”

“They didn’t. And I didn’t. I’ll be a father to the baby as long as you’ll let me.”

I swiped at my cheeks, hating that I couldn’t control the tears. “Okay, then. At what point did they put an expiration date on their marriages to your mom?”

“They didn’t, but those were completely different circumstances,” he pointed out.

“How would you feel if Jonathan had married your mom when you were five and the day after your tenth birthday, he’d moved out? He still saw you on weekends and came to a few football games and then married his high school sweetheart and started a new family with her. And if that didn’t hurt enough, because kids always blame themselves anyway and you missed him and it wasn’t the same as it had been the first few years, then when you’re getting ready to marry Lana, you ask him why it didn’t work out between him and your mom so that you’d know what to avoid with her, he tells you it was because after you turned ten, the government wouldn’t come after you anymore so the marriage was moot? How would that feel?”

He sighed and sat in one of the chairs. “I don’t know,” he finally said.

“But you’re willing to do that to this baby, who will, for all intents and purposes, believe that you’re his or her biological father?”

“We’ll explain it.”

I sat in one of the other chairs. “I’m not telling a five-year-old that his dad is moving out because a bully dictator wanted to kidnap him and take him away for the rest of his life but because some arbitrary deadline set by a psychopath has passed, it’s now safe for you to move on with your life as planned before he came along.” I pulled a blanket over me even though I really wasn’t cold; I simply wasn’t comfortable wearing this in front of him.

“Okay, so maybe not right away, but eventually...”

“The damage will be done by then, Clark. All a five-year-old will see is that her Daddy who she loves more than anything has left her and her mom and by the time she’s old enough to understand why you did what you did and appreciate you for it, she’ll have already spent ten or fifteen years blaming herself or me or you for breaking up her family.”

He stared at the fireplace. “I guess I never thought of it that way,” he finally said.

“Well, that’s how this baby will see it,” I told him. “You did a good thing doing what was necessary to save me, but...” My voice trailed off.

He didn’t say anything else and neither did I for a long time.

Finally, though, I spoke again.

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Clark

“So what exactly was it that happened over there?”

I was still immersed in thoughts of what hell I was going to put the baby through when I left and whether or not I should talk to Joe and the State Department and try to pull a switcheroo without Navance finding out about it and knowing the whole time that it was a very bad plan.

“What?” I finally asked her.

“What exactly was that and don’t patronize me by saying that I was irresistible or some other nonsense like that.”

I shrugged. “It’s your birthday, I didn’t get you a present, you gave me a late present so...” Those thoughts had gone through my head as part of the rationalization process, but those weren’t the real reasons. I couldn’t let Lois know that though.

“So you thought that *you* could get laid since you didn’t get me a present?” she asked with a raised brow.

I didn’t look at her. “I hoped it might be a bit more than just that.” That was the truth. I thought.

She pulled the blanket around her a little tighter. “I meant it when I said the whole alien thing doesn’t bother me at all, but what does bother me is that you’re wanting to be a dad like your dad was, but you already know the day you’re leaving. I get why that is, but it still bothers me. But what bothers me even more is that you’d decide that you’d get some sort of physical release with me while you’re still in love with someone else and actually *say her name* while we’re doing whatever it was that we were doing.” She stood up and headed for the veranda. Before she went out the door, she turned to look at me. “If you ever try that with me again, it damn well better be because you want to make love to *me* not because you want to imagine what your wedding night would have been like with Lana.”

And she left.

My head flopped back onto the chair. I ignored the whole ‘kind of dad my dad was’ thing because I wasn’t sure what to do with it. Instead I moved on to the other conflict of the night. I hadn’t gone to bed planning on kissing Lois, much less anything else.

But then she’d been wearing a very nice, very flattering nightgown, lying on my side of the bed. I didn’t know if it was a maternity thing or what, but I was sure it was much more low cut than she’d probably hoped for.

And she was lying there and in the back of my head all I could see was Lana and Tim in Chemistry, when they’d been partners and they’d always seemed to get along so well. I’d even

been a bit jealous until Lana assured me I had no reason to be.

I'd pushed the thought of the two of them to the back of my mind and thought of other rationalizations for what I suddenly wanted to do.

It was Lois' birthday.

And I hadn't gotten her anything.

And she had given me a very nice, if late, birthday present.

And I *had* told everyone that her present was upstairs — then I wouldn't have to feel guilty about lying.

And we *were* spending the first night in our new room.

In our new bed.

Surely we should give it some sort of initiation or something.

Everyone else thought we were going to.

I sighed as I glanced through the door to see Lois huddled under a blanket on the veranda. I could hear her tears without half trying.

Had I really called her Lana? I thought back over the few minutes that we'd kissed and started touching each other and I couldn't really remember what either one of us had said, but I couldn't imagine Lois stopping what she seemed to be enjoying very much if I hadn't.

I sighed and stood up, heading out the door. I lowered myself into a chair near Lois.

"Lana's having sex," I said without preamble after I sat there for a few minutes.

"So?"

"The email she sent me in Smallville said that she and an old friend of ours had gotten together."

"I repeat. So?" She didn't look at me.

"She said that she hadn't believed me when I said we weren't having sex, that I wasn't planning on making love with you while we were married, but I never told her how long or why. And when she and I had that fight in Illinois, I insinuated that not only had we had sex the first night, but that we had at least two other times, too. She decided that if I didn't think she was worth waiting for, then I wasn't worth waiting for either."

"Your point?" She sounded cold, almost heartless.

"She actually thought that I would sleep with both of you regularly. That I was having sex with you as much as I wanted and that I wanted to have sex with her, too. She said that she doesn't care anymore."

She sighed. "I really don't care what your ex-girlfriend thinks about our sex life, but none of that gives you *any* justification for using me as a stand-in for her."

"I wasn't." Was I? "I don't think I was. I don't remember saying her name at all. I wasn't thinking it." Not technically anyway.

"You want to get back at her, find another way. Don't use me."

Use her? Was I using her?

She stood up and headed towards the door. "You want to get back at Lana, insinuate to her all you want, but don't touch me. You want to scratch an itch and that's it? Take a cold shower or fly to the North Atlantic and swim laps with the whales or whatever the Kryptonian version of a cold shower is. You want to make love to me someday? To *me* because your feelings have changed, that's a possibility, but don't ever try to use me as a substitute for your ex-girlfriend again. If you think you can keep your hands to yourself, you can come back in. If not, find another place to sleep."

She went inside and I heard her climb back in bed.

Had I been using her to replace Lana?

I sighed. It was possible.

Was that the only thing I was doing?

I didn't think so.

Did I just want to satisfy some urge?

Maybe.

Did I want to make love to Lois because my feelings for her had changed?

A big part of me was sad that the immediate answer was 'no, definitely not'.

I knew keeping my hands to myself wouldn't be a problem, so, after staring at the stars for a long while, I went and climbed back into the new bed.

Suddenly, I was even more glad that we could pretend we weren't sleeping in the same bed in this thing.

I had no desire to accidentally touch her in the middle of the night and, if the extra pillow separating the two sides of the bed was any indication, I was sure she had no desire to be that close to me either.

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Part 59

June 2003

Lois

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I was sick of Braxton-Hicks and I still had a month to go.

I was as big as a house. None of my maternity clothes fit. I'd had to go to the store to buy a few things in a bigger maternity size — actually two sizes bigger than my original maternity clothes.

I flipped through a magazine waiting for Terri to call my name. Clark was in the chair next to me, but I wasn't speaking to him.

He'd been late again but at least this time he'd explained why. I knew it was a good reason, but I was still annoyed — not only because of what had happened on my birthday but because he was late, no matter why it was.

I was glad the little girl was safe. That Clark had been able to keep her from getting run over by the car.

And I even understood why he felt the need to stay and reassure the little girl's mom that she was really okay.

But that didn't mean I was happy he was late.

"Lois," Terri called as she opened the door.

I pushed up and out of the chair, tossing the magazine on the table next to me. I grabbed my purse and didn't look at Clark as he followed me.

This was going to be one of those incredibly uncomfortable appointments where Dr. McConnell checked to see if I was progressing towards giving birth.

We followed Terri down the hall and she handed me a cup as I made a stop in the bathroom. When I was done, I headed to the room where I heard Terri and Clark chatting about the St. Louis Cardinals. They'd discovered that they shared the same favorite baseball team — Clark from growing up in southeast Kansas and Terri from growing up in southwest Missouri about three hours away. We'd driven no more than fifteen miles from her house on our way to and from Smallville.

"Okay, Lois," Terri said when I walked in. "On the scale."

"Have I ever mentioned how much I hate this part?" I grumbled.

"Every time," she replied cheerfully as she slid the weights along the slide. "All done." She took my blood pressure. "That looks good." She typed it into the computer. "Go ahead and lie back and we'll check the heartbeat."

I rested my head on the pillow and lowered the band of my shorts until my abdomen was exposed. The cold goop took my breath away — as always — and I felt a slight thrill as the heartbeat came out of the small speaker. I didn't let myself think about Clark hearing it whenever he wanted. If there was some way I could have prevented him, I would have. I could have... forbidden him, but that would have meant talking to him.

The more I thought about it, the more upset I was that he'd decided he could have sex with me while still in love with another woman. And part of me felt sorry for him because Lana

wasn't waiting for him anymore, but most of me was still just pissed. And even if we'd gone through with it, I would have been if I'd later realized he was still in love with Lana. If we were to eventually end up as — married — friends with benefits? That I might be okay with — maybe — but not as a surrogate for someone I hated who would love nothing more than to see my marriage break up no matter what it might do to me or my baby.

And so I still wasn't talking to him. Even though we spent a lot of time alone together. In our room. Because there we didn't have to pretend to be nice to each other, much less in love. Sometimes, he'd take off for parts unknown, flying off of the balcony, but usually we just ignored each other. Instead of being the wonderful retreat it was designed to be, our bedroom had become another battleground filled with stony silences. The bathroom — with its very large tub and shower — was the only place I could truly find peace. The baby's room — as wonderful as it was — was still filled with fear and not just the serenity it should have. I was constantly reminded of how I'd gotten into this situation and how much danger both the baby and I were constantly in.

Once the nanny's room had been finished, Clark had sometimes gone in there to watch TV or just be away from me. A beeping sound accompanied the opening of any of the doors to the floor, so he had plenty of time to do his 'whooshing' thing and get into our room and put on a good front for whoever might be visiting us.

I regretted that wasn't going to be possible once we actually hired a nanny who moved in.

I turned my attention back to the heartbeat.

Terri frowned as another Braxton-Hicks contraction hit me. "You okay?"

I nodded, but didn't speak until it passed. "Braxton-Hicks, I guess. I don't like them."

She handed me a few Kleenex to wipe my stomach off. "How long have you been having them?"

I shrugged as I struggled to sit up, avoiding looking at Clark in the chair. "Off and on for a couple months, but they've gotten worse in the last couple days."

She nodded and pulled a sheet out of a drawer. "Okay, everything off from the waist down and Dr. McConnell will be in here in a few minutes."

Clark shifted uncomfortably. "Actually, I need to go to the bathroom." He followed Terri out of the room. "I'll be back in a minute."

I was glad he was gone while I did this. I was going to make him turn around or something, but this was better.

By the time he came back in a few minutes later, I was completely covered up. He sat in the chair and picked up the magazine he'd brought with him.

"Just so you know," I said quietly. "I know you need to be there for the birth and all that, but if you even think about sneaking a peek, you'll find yourself six feet under, invulnerable or not."

"Don't worry," he said, never taking his eyes off his magazine.

There was a knock on the door. "Hello," Dr. McConnell said as she opened the door. "How're you feeling today?"

I shrugged. "I'm okay. Tired, sore, my back hurts. Braxton-Hicks."

She smiled. "All part of being pregnant, I'm afraid." She helped me lay back down and reached under the sheet, one hand on my stomach as another one hit. She frowned.

"What?" I asked when she didn't say anything.

"I don't think those are Braxton-Hicks, Lois."

"What?" I wasn't sure what she was saying.

"How far apart are they?"

I glanced at Clark. "I think the last one was about five or six

minutes ago when Terri was in here," he said.

She nodded. "That's what I thought. You, my friend, are headed to the hospital."

My eyes went wide. "What? It's too early."

"Possibly," she conceded. "You're about thirty days from your due date. I'm not going to try to stop labor, though. We'll contact the neonatal specialists and let them know, but it's very possible that this baby will be just fine." She helped me sit up. "You're already three centimeters dilated. Do you have your bags packed and all that?"

I nodded. "Vicki laughed at me when I put everything in the Jeep today. I told her I couldn't explain it, but I needed to be ready."

"You don't know how many times I've heard that." She made a couple of notations on the chart and on the computer. "I'll call over there and tell them that you can skip triage and go straight to a room. Do you know if you want an epidural?"

I nodded. I hadn't admitted to anyone just how bad some of the Braxton-Hicks or contractions or whatever had been. "I met with the anesthesiologist last week and filled out the paperwork."

"Okay, I'll have them get a page in to whoever's doing epidurals today and we'll get you one here pretty quick. Why don't you go ahead and get dressed. Are you up to walking over or do you want a wheelchair?"

"I can walk," I told her, trying to squelch the rising panic.

"Okay." She smiled at me. "I'll see you in a little while then. I'll come check on you in a bit and you'll have a baby before too long." She left the room.

Clark shuffled slightly. "Why don't I start making phone calls while you get dressed?"

"Fine."

"Do you want to call your dad and Vicki and everyone or do you want me to?"

I started to tell him I would, but another contraction hit and all I could do was breathe through it. "Go ahead," I said when the pain subsided.

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Clark

I sighed as I dialed another number on the cell phone Sam had given me as part of the whole 'protection for Lois' thing.

"Hello?" came the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Hey, Mom," I said.

"Clark! What's up?"

"Lois is in labor," I told her.

"What?!" I could hear her voice grow a bit more distant. "Jonathan! Lois is in labor!"

I could hear Dad heading towards another phone.

"Isn't it too early, Clark?" she asked me, concern evident in her voice.

"The doctor doesn't think so. She thinks it'll be okay."

"Clark?" Dad broke in. "Call us with updates, okay?"

"I meant to tell you this before but... I can't believe I forgot. Sam's making arrangements for tickets for whoever wants to come — you two, Granny, Nana and Pop Pop, Grandma Davis — whoever else. You just need to call him and let him know who all's coming and how soon you can be at the airport. He's got a travel agent to make the actual reservations and stuff, but he said there's probably a lot more options out of Kansas City, even though the drive is a bit longer, than there will be in Tulsa or Wichita. Call the house and whoever answers can put you through to him or the agent."

"Are you sure he doesn't mind?" Mom asked, sounding a bit nervous. "It's so much and last minute fares aren't cheap."

"Believe me, Mom, Sam can afford it."

"Still, it seems like..."

"He wants to, Mom. I promise." I looked up to see Lois slowly walking out of the office. "I gotta go. We just left Lois'

doctor's appointment and we're walking over to the hospital. She just came out."

"We'll see you soon then," Mom said. "Love you. Give our love to Lois."

"Okay. Love you, too." I flipped the phone shut. "Mom and Dad give their love. Your dad's flying them out."

She nodded. "I knew he was planning on it." She slowly headed towards the elevators. "She said I didn't need to check out like usual." She stopped and punched the down button. It took a minute for the elevator to arrive, but once it did, she walked in and jabbed at the button for the bottom floor.

She sunk into the corner of the elevator, her hand resting on her stomach. Her eyes closed and her face showed strain.

"Another one?" I asked quietly.

She nodded as she bit her bottom lip.

"Anything I can do?" I asked, my hands shoved deep in my pockets.

She shook her head and she let out a sigh of relief as the contraction passed. I let out a sigh myself. I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't ready to be a dad to a baby that wasn't mine. I wasn't ready to be a dad, period. I hadn't even slept in the same room with Lois the last few nights. If I had, I probably would have known that she couldn't have slept well. Not if she'd been having these contractions for a couple days already.

I didn't think she realized I'd been sleeping in the nanny's room, but when it was finally done a few days earlier, I couldn't take the frostiness of ours. I'd been in there for a couple weeks when it was time to watch some TV or when we were avoiding the other family members, but after Lois snapped at me two nights earlier... I'd decided sleeping in there was a good plan for now. Looking back, it was probably early labor that had made her short-tempered, but my sarcastic comment about her nightgown when she'd gone downstairs to get a drink hadn't helped, I was sure.

It was the same gown that she'd worn the night a month earlier when we'd gotten into our biggest fight yet.

And we didn't even get to make up.

Of course, 'making up' was what had started it.

The more I thought about it, the more I wasn't sure what to make of what she'd said and done that night. We'd both been awake and perfectly coherent — well, she had been once I woke her up a bit. I knew she hadn't been sleeping deeply or a marching band could have come through and she never would have noticed, so a few kisses to her neck from me woke her easily.

But she'd been *responsive*.

She never indicated that the idea of having sex was repulsive or bothered her or whatever, only that she didn't want me to use her as a substitute for Lana.

The car arrived at the bottom floor and she pushed off against the sides of the elevator and headed out into the wide hall that led from the Women's Center to the Ellen Lane Memorial Medical Building. It housed the Emergency Room — where Lois had spent an uncomfortable night not long after we got back from Europe — as well as Labor and Delivery, the Post Natal Ward, the Women's Surgical Unit and the Pediatric Unit — complete with PICU and NICU. It was connected by hallways and skywalks to the other buildings that were a part of Met U's Medical Complex and School.

Part of me wanted to put an arm around her, support her as we walked slowly down the hall, but a glance from her as I moved closer stopped that thought in its tracks. She'd kept her distance from me for the last month and I didn't blame her. I had been working full-time since school was out, but when we were home together, she'd found time to watch girly movies with Vicki or go shopping or anything else where it wouldn't be unusual for me to not be with her. We'd managed to avoid watching movies

or TV together with the rest of the family and once we retired to our room for the night, we didn't say anything to each other.

If I really had called her 'Lana' that night, I couldn't blame her.

She stopped and grasped the rail along the wall.

"They're coming closer together," I said with a frown.

She glared at me and her face relaxed as the contraction let up. "Thanks for that newsflash, Mr. Newsmen."

"Who?"

She rolled her eyes as she continued down the hall, taking a right at the next opportunity. "From Sesame Street. He was the news anchor. That was his name."

She stopped next to a window next to a door and spoke briefly to the woman on the other side. A buzzer sounded, then there was a click and Lois opened the door. She walked through and set her purse on the counter. I stood next to her as she handed over her insurance and ID cards and answered a few more questions, filled out a few papers.

"You can have family and friends in the room with you while you're in labor," the woman said, "but when it comes time for delivery, you can only have one person. I need you to fill out this form with the name on it and then that person will have to sign a waiver that says that if he — or she — passes out or anything, you and the baby are our top priority."

Lois took it from her and I could see her hesitate for only a second before she wrote down my name and handed me the form. I signed it and handed over my ID. The lady made a copy of it and then picked up the phone and called the nurses' station. A minute later, a smiling red headed nurse walked around the corner.

Lois was in the middle of another contraction and when it was over, she led us down the hall to Labor and Delivery Room Eight.

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Lois

If I *ever* got my hands on whoever it was that drugged me...

I would kill him.

Literally kill him dead.

This *hurt*.

Clark had looked for a minute like he was willing to hold my hand or something and if I thought for one minute that I might be able to make him feel even a smidgen of the pain I was feeling I might have taken him up on it. But since he was invulnerable... There was no point.

Leslie, the nurse who led us to the room, handed me a gown and a cup — again? I'd just gone at the office, I informed her; she said to try — and sent me to the bathroom to change.

It took two more contractions, but I was finally ready to come back out into the room. Leslie — and Clark, because he thought she expected it I thought — helped me up onto the bed. She wrapped the monitors around me — one to monitor contractions and one to monitor the baby's heart rate.

She started an IV and I could feel myself relax as she gave me a dose of Stadol — a narcotic — to take the edge off the pain. I could still feel the contractions, but I just didn't care anymore.

I glared at Clark as Leslie told me that she was going to check to see what kind of progress I was making. He held my hand — because it was expected again — but stayed near my head, studiously looking anywhere but at Leslie. She'd just told me that I was dilated to five centimeters when another doctor and a nurse walked in.

They helped me sit up on the side of the bed. Clark moved a chair in front of me and I rested my head on his chest as he supported me for the ten minutes or so that it took to get the epidural in. A few minutes after that, I breathed a huge sigh of relief as I noticed a contraction on the monitor but didn't feel anything but a tightening in my stomach. Tears of relief actually

streaked down my face. I'd managed to remain fairly stoic but it had hurt far more than I would ever let Clark see.

There was a knock on the door that led to the public hallway and a second later, Daddy and Vicki came in.

"Hey, Princess," Daddy said with a smile.

"Hi, Daddy," I whispered, resting on my left side, a warm blanket pulled over me. He came over and brushed the hair off my face and kissed my forehead.

"You're doing great," he whispered.

"That's the epidural," I told him, another tear escaping. I felt something unfamiliar and told him so. He asked what it felt like and when I told him, he pushed the call button on the remote.

"Can I help you?" came a voice out of it.

"Lois' water just broke," Daddy said.

"I'll send Leslie in."

A minute later, Leslie and another nurse came in and switched out the now wet bedding on the bottom half of the bed for dry, being careful to keep me appropriately covered. Still doing so, Leslie checked again to see if the water breaking had sped up the progress of my labor.

She smiled up at me. "It's almost time. I'm going to call Dr. McConnell. By the time she gets over here, you'll be ready to push." She looked at Daddy and Vicki. "You two will have to wait outside."

They both gave me a hug and a kiss before they left.

Clark shifted uncomfortably and moved back to my side. "I guess this is it."

"I guess so," I said, shifting slightly. I closed my eyes.

Something felt weird again and this time it was just Clark and I in the room. "Something feels weird, Clark," I whispered, tears filling my eyes again. "And not good weird."

He pressed the call button repeatedly and I could only wait for someone to come in and tell us what was going on.

Part 60

Clark

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Was there something wrong? Or did Lois just not know what was happening because she'd never given birth before?

I punched the button a few more times.

"Yes?" came the disembodied voice.

"Something feels weird," Lois said, a tear streaking down her cheek. "Really weird."

Just then the door opened and Dr. McConnell walked in accompanied by about six nurses. The flurry of activity began.

I could only describe it as something resembling a NASCAR pit crew.

The bottom of the bed dropped away and Lois' feet were propped up. She managed to glare at me anyway as one of the nurses showed me how to help hold one of her legs. Lights came out of the ceiling. A baby warmer was turned on.

And other things I couldn't even begin to catalogue.

Dr. McConnell looked up from her seat at the foot of the bed. "Okay, Lois," she smiled. "It's time. Use the muscles we talked about and push, okay?"

Lois nodded and I helped prop her up as she pushed. There was a ten count and then she relaxed for a minute.

She repeated the process for another fifteen minutes before Dr. McConnell announced that one more big push should do it.

Lois closed her eyes and concentrated as she pushed again.

On the previous threat of dismemberment, I didn't look to see what had happened.

Before I knew it, she was pushing again.

Dr. McConnell looked at Lois and smiled, standing slightly to lay the baby on Lois' stomach. "It's a boy," she told us quietly.

She knew.

Lois had told her at some point.

I could tell by the way she looked at Lois. She couldn't tell anyone, of course. It was illegal for her to. But now Lois had someone she could confide in about everything and I didn't. I wanted to resent her for that but I just couldn't. Not when she was holding the baby who was essentially my son.

The nurse and I had helped lower her back to the bed while Dr. McConnell did... other stuff. The baby was taken by one of the nurses to do whatever it was they do with new babies. I remembered the camera and took a bunch of pictures.

"Want me to go tell your Dad?" I finally asked her.

She laid there with her eyes closed and nodded slightly. "Thanks."

I quietly slid out the door. Sam and Vicki looked at me expectantly. "It's a boy," I told them with a grin.

"How's Lois?" Vicki asked.

"She seems to be okay. Tired."

"Well, yeah," Sam said. "How long has she been in labor anyway?"

I shrugged. "She said she's been having Braxton-Hicks for a couple days, but apparently they were more than just those. When we got to the office for her check-up, she was already dilated to a three and Dr. McConnell sent us over." It started to hit me a bit more and I leaned against the wall. "It went pretty fast for a first delivery I guess."

"Definitely. From a three to a baby in a couple hours is fast, especially for a first baby," Sam told me.

"Oh, here." I held out the camera. "There's a few pictures on there."

They quickly scrolled through the pictures and made appropriate noises.

"He's beautiful, Clark," Vicki told me as she handed the camera back.

"Thanks," I said with a forced grin. I couldn't... take credit for how he did or didn't look. "Have you talked to my folks yet?"

Sam nodded. "Your mom and dad and his mom are on their way to Kansas City right now. The flights out of Tulsa and Wichita all had layovers." He looked at his watch. "Their flight leaves in about an hour. It's just under a three hour flight, so... Ollie's going to pick them up at the airport and bring them straight here."

"Thank you so much," I told him sincerely. "They're so glad to be able to come."

"It's my pleasure, really." He clapped me on the shoulder.

"Now, I bet your wife is wondering where you are."

I hesitated but quickly recovered. "I bet she is."

Just then the door opened slightly. "I thought I heard you out here, Sam." Dr. McConnell came out of the room. "Lois said you guys can come on in."

"Hi, Kristi." Sam put his arm around her as we headed into the room. "How's that grandson of mine?"

"He looks great, even for being a month early."

"Great."

I hung back and let Sam and Vicki greet Lois and her son.

My son.

For all intents and purposes, my son.

~~~~~

Lois

All I wanted to do was go to sleep.

I hadn't slept well in several days — at least now I knew why I'd been restless — and I'd just given birth, much faster than I ever would have thought possible.

And I still couldn't really feel my legs.

Karen — the nurse who'd helped support the side Clark wasn't on — had handed my son to me. I wanted to hold him, to cuddle him close, to try to nurse him, but my arms were weak and I was just so wiped out that I didn't think I could do much. She'd promised that we'd help him nurse soon.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Clark left.

“Are you okay, Lois?” Dr. McConnell asked, and I knew she wasn’t talking about the delivery.

I shrugged slightly. “Am tired,” I answered.

“That’s not what I mean,” she responded so only I could hear.

“I know. I can’t talk about it,” I said quietly. “But I’m okay.” Or as okay as I could be.

I thought.

Karen moved to help me try to nurse my son and I winced a bit as he managed to latch on. A few minutes later, we were done with our first lesson.

“He’ll get the hang of it, but he just had a bottle because his blood sugar was a little low. The nurses upstairs will help you all you need.”

“Thanks,” I said as she finished swaddling him and placed him back in my arms.

The nurses finished reassembling the end of the bed and covered me up with another warm blanket.

“Are you ready?” Dr. McConnell asked me.

I sighed and nodded.

She headed to the door and a minute later, Vicki led the small group in. Dad had his arm around Dr. McConnell and Clark brought up the rear.

“Can I?” Vicki whispered, holding her arms out, with tears in her eyes.

I nodded. “Of course, but you’ll have to pick him up. My arms aren’t working quite right.”

“You’re tired,” she said matter-of-factly. “That’s not surprising. You just had a baby.” She carefully took him from me. “He’s beautiful, Lois.”

“He looks like a California Raisin,” I whispered.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Clark glance up at that. He looked slightly shocked, but then a smirk crossed his face.

Vicki smiled. “Lots of babies are a bit wrinkled and red at first. For a month early though... he looks great.”

“Okay,” Jenny said. “We’re ready to move these two upstairs. Who’s coming with us?” She took the baby from Vicki and put him in one of the clear hospital bassinets.

“We all are,” Daddy said.

Jenny and Daddy helped me slide over to a different bed. I still had very little use of my legs — I could move them, but they felt very heavy. The rails were put up on the sides and someone else came in to steer me. Jenny covered me up with another blanket from the warmer and I cuddled down under it, nearly dozing as we moved through the halls, even though I was half sitting up.

I could hear Daddy, Clark and Vicki chatting as we walked through the halls to the elevator.

Ten minutes later, the baby had been taken to the nursery and I was in the private room I’d requested. Dad and Vicki were told they needed to be elsewhere while the nurse checked me in and I suggested that Clark go grab a bite to eat. He took the suggestion and ran. Literally.

It wasn’t too much longer before the nurse was done poking at me and I finally settled into an exhausted nap.

I didn’t know how long I’d been dozing, when the door opening woke me up.

“Hey, Princess,” Daddy said quietly. I smiled at him as he came to sit next to me, wrapping an arm around me. He kissed the side of my head. “I’m so proud of you. You did great.”

I leaned my head against him. “I didn’t have much choice. He was coming whether I was ready or not.”

He chuckled lightly. “Your mom said the exact same thing about you.” I could hear the tears in his voice, even though I couldn’t see his face. “She’d have been so happy today.”

“She’d be a grandma. She wouldn’t like that — not this young.”

“She’d have been happy,” he said again. “And so proud of you.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. “Do you think she ever would have told us if she’d lived?” I finally asked quietly.

He sighed deeply. “I hope so.”

“I still want to meet them,” I told him. “I know I said I wanted to a long time ago, but I just wasn’t ready this spring.”

“Too much else going on.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to make the call?”

I nodded. “I don’t know when I’ll actually be up for it — I’m sure it’s going to be a very emotional meeting — but I would like to set it up pretty soon. Before school starts for sure.”

“I’ll take care of it.” We sat there for a few more minutes before he spoke again. “So does that little guy have a name yet?”

“Yeah, but we wanted to wait until Clark’s parents are here.” Well, Clark had asked if we could.

He looked at his watch. “Their flight lands in a couple hours and Ollie’s bringing them straight here.”

“I think you’ll like them, Daddy.”

“I talked to Martha for a few minutes earlier and she seemed very nice.”

“She’s great. So is Jonathan. And Granny Kent reminds me a lot of Gram, actually.”

Before he could respond, the door opened again. Clark and Vicki came in, both carrying trays of food.

“I brought you some,” Clark said, handing me a Styrofoam box. “I didn’t think they’d bring dinner around for a while and if you didn’t have time to actually order it, you never know what you’re going to get.” He shrugged. “At least that’s what Vicki told me.”

“Well, thanks.” I opened the box and found a cheeseburger and fries with ketchup packets and a piece of chocolate cake with chocolate frosting.

I started with that.

Daddy had moved to the couch by the window, laughing as I pulled the cellophane off of the plate. “I should have known. You and your chocolate, Princess.”

I took a bite and closed my eyes as the fork slid out. “This is much better than I would have expected from a hospital,” I told them after I finished the bite. I switched to the cheeseburger and fries — they’d get cold if I didn’t hurry. Sure, Clark probably could have warmed them up with his eye thingy, but not with other people around and that would mean talking more than absolutely necessary.

I tried desperately to keep the tears from my eyes. This was *not* how I pictured the day my first child was born.

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Clark

I stood nervously outside the back entrance to the building. Ollie would be here with my parents and Granny any minute.

I had to make myself act more excited than I was.

It was cool — I admitted that to myself — to see a baby being born. I’d long understood the general process and had assisted at a birth or two on the farm, but...

The whole time I’d been helping Lois, two thoughts kept running through my head.

First — that I couldn’t let Navance get his hands on Lois or this baby.

Second — that I wished I was with Lana who was giving birth to *our* child.

I had tried to push the thoughts out of my head — both of them.

I guessed it was fortunate that the labor and delivery went so quickly because we didn’t have to sit in the room together for hours and hours trying to pretend that we were happy and in love and that she wanted me to be there holding her hand and feeding

her ice chips and all that kind of stuff.

I pushed off from the wall where I'd been leaning as the car pulled around the corner. A bare minute later, three of my family members were piling out.

Mom was giving me a big hug and Dad was smacking my shoulder. Granny hung back slightly and as soon as Mom let go, I gave her a big hug.

Ollie had left to go park the car. He and Vicki were practically family and he had every reason to want to be a part of this.

Mom and Granny were inundating me with questions, all of which I refused to answer until we got upstairs, telling them that Lois wanted to be a part of all of this. Ollie jogged up a minute later and we headed inside. A short elevator ride later, I showed my wrist band to the volunteer manning the door and we were buzzed into the post partum ward.

I led the way down the hall and around the corner. Sam and Vicki were standing outside the room.

"She's nursing," Sam told us. "Or they're trying to anyway, so they kicked us out for a few more minutes." He held out a hand towards my parents. "I'm Sam Lane."

I quickly introduced everyone and sort of stood there while everyone chatted. The door opened a minute later. "You guys can come back in," the nurse told us.

Lois was propped up on the bed, holding the baby and giving him a bottle. "Hi," she said a bit shyly.

"How's the nursing going?" Mom asked her first.

"He's figuring it out, but his blood sugar's still a bit low so we have to make sure he's getting enough," she told us. "There's not much in here so it'll only take a minute."

Mom glanced at me. "Aren't you two going to tell us if we have a grandson or a granddaughter?"

I grinned at her. "Oh, eventually."

She grumbled. "They would have to put a pink and blue striped hat on so we can't tell."

Lois smiled and pulled the bottle out of his mouth, carefully maneuvering him onto her shoulder. He burped quickly and spit up a bit at the same time.

"Do you mind?" I asked, moving to her side and reaching for him.

"Go ahead." She handed him over carefully before reaching for a cloth to wipe her shoulder off.

I held him carefully and turned to the assembled masses. "Mom, Dad, everybody... I'd like you to meet Christopher Jonathan Kent."

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Part 61

Lois

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I'd been so glad to see everyone leave so I could get some sleep.

I was more tired than I would have imagined.

Sure, I hadn't slept well the last couple of nights and I'd given birth earlier in the day, but it had been a quick and easy delivery. Maybe it was the endorphin low or something.

There was a knock on the door and it was pushed open before I could respond.

"Hey," came a quiet voice.

"Hi, Dr. McConnell," I said back.

"Lo-is," she said with a warning tone and a smile.

"Sorry. Hi, Kristi."

She pulled a chair up and sat next to me. "How are you?" I shrugged. "I'm tired."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. I know things aren't going well with you and Clark, are they?"

I played with the corner of the blanket. "Not really." I sighed. She already knew nearly everything; I might as well tell her

everything else. "He offered to stay tonight, but I told him to go home and get some rest. Something about how he's going to be up enough soon and that he doesn't get to see his Mom and Dad and Granny all that often."

"Do you want to talk about it?" She handed me a box of generic hospital Kleenex.

I reflected that even they were about ninety times better than the ones at that other hospital half a world away. "He loves somebody else," I told her. "And it's not like I want him to love me or anything like that, but..."

"...if he slips up it puts you and the baby in danger."

I nodded. "Yeah. And we have to make it look good in public. If Navance suspects that it's not a 'real' marriage, he can still come after Christopher under Latislani law. Actual DNA doesn't matter. The courts wouldn't send him..."

"But the PR nightmare..."

"Exactly. Anyway, we moved in with Dad a while ago and he found out the whole story except that Clark's not the father. He thinks Clark's the father and Navance is still after us. We moved in and Daddy upgraded security and redid a set of three bedrooms for us, the baby and a nanny, but they weren't done we moved in so we stayed in my old room. Then on my birthday it was done and we stayed in there for the first time. We'd agreed that I probably need to wear... nightgowns and stuff that..." My voice trailed off.

"Gotcha."

"Anyway, I figured I should probably wear one that night since everyone thought they knew what was going to happen with us when we got to our new room on my birthday. I went to bed and woke up with him kissing me. It was the first time he'd ever *really* kissed me and I thought... It was going somewhere and then he called me Lana."

"And Lana's his ex-girlfriend?"

"Something like that. He actually had the gall to tell me that since Lana's having sex we should be, too. They'd been waiting until they got married, probably sometime this summer, but... When he first told her we were married, he said it was only temporary and she offered to wait for him. When he first told her about the baby, he said he wasn't the father, but he'd deny ever saying that. A couple months later, he told her he'd lied, but I know he's hoping to get back together with her once he doesn't have to be married to me anymore."

"I'm so sorry, Lois."

I smiled weakly at her. "Me, too. You know, if we'd met when he and Lana weren't together, I think maybe there could have been something between us. But instead, we're *married*, he hates me, and I'm not all that crazy about him these days but we have to pretend everything's normal and we're happy and in love and so we end up spending most of our time alone together in our room, but it's only because there we can ignore each other and no one will know any different. They think we're consummating like bunnies, I'm sure."

The door opened again. This time it was a nurse pushing the bassinet. "Someone's looking for his mom," she said with a smile.

I could see that he'd managed to get one tiny fist out of the blankets and into his mouth.

"I've gotta get going," Dr. McConnell said. "I'll check on you tomorrow. Let me know if there's anything — *anything* — I can do."

"I will."

"Get some rest."

"I'll try," I told her with a smile as the nurse handed me my son.

~~~~~

Clark

It was unusual for me to drive when my parents were with

me, but these were unusual circumstances. They didn't know where they were going and, really, I needed something to focus on.

We hadn't left the hospital until near dark. Officially, visiting hours ended at eight, though I could have spent the night. Lois had smiled at me and suggested that I take my parents and Granny back to the house and spend some time with them.

I was sure that no one else had noticed the icy undertone to her suggestion.

"Clark, are you sure there's enough room for all of us?" Mom asked.

I chuckled. "Yeah, there's enough room."

We drove, talking about all kinds of things as we drove to Pittsdale. It was about a forty minute drive from campus and I was growing slightly nervous about the impression that the Lane Estate was going to make on my family. Dad had made a comment about Sam paying for last minute tickets and having at least two people working for him and multiple cars and all of that, besides having a cabin on top of everything else.

I turned for the last time before getting to the drive. The houses couldn't be seen from the road, but wrought iron fences lined the streets with the occasional gated drive. I sighed slightly as I pulled into the drive that marked the dead end of the street. I lowered the window and punched in my access code.

Dad whistled. "Impressive."

"Just wait," I mumbled.

We drove along the winding drive and I heard the gasps as the house came into view.

"That was my reaction, too," I told them.

"I guess there really is room for all of us," Mom said, still in awe.

"If you guys want the nickel tour tonight, I'll give it to you. Otherwise, I can show you where you're staying. I'm sure Ollie already took your stuff in when he got back." Ollie and Vicki had brought one car back and Sam had driven the one he and Vicki had taken to the hospital. We were in the Jeep. The main garage door was open and I pulled into the porte cochere and then into the middle garage space on my left. "You guys will be right upstairs from where we are now. Do you want to stop there first or take a tour or what?"

"Tour," Mom said. "Definitely."

I grinned. "Let's go."

We headed in the house and I showed the around the first floor: Conservatory, Kitchen and breakfast area, the big living room, between the staircases and through the library to the east wing. I told them what I knew about why Sam and Ellen had built such a big house and what Sam did with it these days. We headed through the Billiard Room and into the Entertaining/Ball Room or whatever it was called. I pointed out Sam's offices and then we headed out onto the covered porch before going back into the Billiard Room and then up the stairs to the suite of rooms where Lois, the baby, the nanny and I would be living for the next undetermined period of time.

I could see the glances my mom and dad shared as I punched a code into the solid door that led to the east wing.

"Why the security?" Granny asked.

I sighed. "It's a long story. Can I tell you in a bit?"

Mom and Dad shared another look.

We walked down the outer hall. "That's our room," I said, pointing to the double doors, but walking past. "This is the nursery." I figured Mom and Granny at least would be more interested in that so we headed there first.

As I suspected, they gushed over the animal decor. Lois and Vicki had picked it out. I'd just been along for the ride, but I did like it.

"That door," I told them, pointing, "goes to the room for the nanny Sam is going to hire so Lois and I can both go to school

and do internships and work and stuff, but if one of us is home, the baby's all our responsibility." I shrugged as Mom looked like she was going to say something. "That's the way it should be, so basically, she'll be a really convenient daycare for us and not a nanny in the stereotypical rich kid sense. That's the door to our room." I pointed to the opposite side as I headed out the door onto the enclosed balcony. We enjoyed the view for a minute, though we couldn't see much as the sun was setting on the other side of the house. We went through another door. "And this is our room."

I belatedly noticed that the bed was still unmade and there were a few clothes lying around. Of course, I hadn't slept in here the night before, so I couldn't *really* be blamed for the unmade bed. I wondered if Mom would notice that only one side had really been slept on. Probably. Maybe she'd figure that Lois hadn't really slept. I contemplated shifting into high speed to fix it, but since Granny was there I decided it best not to.

We didn't linger, but headed back out the main door pretty quickly — after Mom and Granny admired the bathroom and walk-in-closet. I used my code to open the main door to the wing again and then locked it behind me — it wouldn't do to get out of the habit even though Lois wasn't home.

Mom and Dad shared another look as I did.

We walked through the rest of the second story. Sam was already in his room for the night most likely — given the closed door to his suite. I pointed out the room that had been Lucy's, as well as Lois' old bedroom that we'd shared when we first moved in. We walked past a half-bath, the elevator and two staircases as we headed into the west wing.

"This is an apartment," I told them as we walked through the main door. One of the bedrooms had a door to the hall, but I skipped that one for now. "There's another one just like it connected by a door in the living room. Unless you'd rather have the other one, Sam said you can use this one whenever you're here." I nodded in the direction of the windows. "I thought you'd like this view better than the other one." I pointed to the kitchen. "I don't think there's any food up here right now, but you're welcome to anything downstairs or to raid the pantry down there and bring it up here — if you want milk or creamer or whatever. I'm not sure what the meal plans are for the next couple days since all of us will be at the hospital quite a bit, but you can either make something up here or eat with whoever's downstairs or whatever."

Dad sank down into one of the overstuffed sofas in the living room. "This is too much," he said quietly.

"Sam's very generous," I told them.

"And I'd imagine it's safer here than anywhere else." Mom sat next to Dad.

Granny sat in one of the big chairs and I took the other one.

"I think it's time you told us what's going on, kiddo," Granny said.

I sighed. I should have told them this a long time ago. "Do you remember the couple who got stuck in Latislan and the ruling general tried to claim their baby?"

Mom nodded, but the other two shook their heads.

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asked.

"Everyone said that he was crazy."

"He is. He'd be certifiable if he didn't control everything." I took a deep breath and launched into the story, leaving out only that I wasn't the father. "Anyway, now that the baby's here and he was in town recently, Sam wanted better security around Lois and Christopher. The whole wing where we live is locked down. Not everyone has access, and everyone who does has their own code to get in and out. We both carry or wear panic buttons at all times. So will the nanny. Christopher will have a bodyguard or two with him every time he's off the property or, really, out of the immediate house area. Lois put her foot down on a bodyguard

when she's at school or working or whatever unless the threat increases — like when he's in town."

Mom and Granny were ashen-faced by the time I was done. Dad looked grim.

But then Granny yawned.

"I think Ollie put you in the front bedroom, Granny." I'd glanced through the wall earlier and noticed her suitcases in there.

She nodded. "I think I'm going to turn in. Congratulations again, kiddo. He's gorgeous."

"Thanks, Granny," I said, giving her a big hug before she headed towards the bedroom I'd indicated.

"I think you need to tell us a bit more, Clark," Dad said once she was gone.

I sighed and closed my eyes, my head falling back. "If I'd known what would have happened, I would have flown her out of there before they even knew we were stowaways. I knew then that she could be trusted — after she practically carried me to the cabin." I ran both hands through my hair. "And if the physical danger had been too much, I would have gotten her out of there; we would have just... disappeared. But the long-term danger is more real than either of us would have guessed at the time. I still don't know why he fixated on her and the baby. And there's no way I'd ever let anything happen to either one of them, but I can't tell Sam that and I can't be with both of them at all times either."

I didn't tell them that after five years, I'd be free to try to fix things with Lana.

It was Dad's turn to stifle a yawn.

"Your room is over past the kitchen," I told them. They both gave me big hugs. Mom held me longer than I would have expected under normal circumstances.

"Be careful," she finally whispered.

"I'll see you guys in the morning," I told her as I gave her another small squeeze. "Sam said you guys can use one of the cars if you want to while you're here. Or you can take the Jeep and I'll take the truck when I go to the hospital. There's a couple of portable GPS units in the garage. Any of us can show you how they work. They're pretty easy and it's nearly impossible to get lost."

A minute later, I was headed back towards my room, having said good night. Knowing my parents, they'd be up for a while discussing the latest revelation about their daughter-in-law and grandson. Part of me contemplated putting on some dark clothes and heading over to the hospital to hover for a while, but Sam had at least one, maybe two, bodyguards at the hospital and the post-natal unit and nursery were locked down anyway so there was no real danger.

I sped through my before bed routine and a few seconds later, I was lying on my side of the big bed, staring at the stars through the roof.

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Part 62

Lois

~~~~~  
Christopher was tucked safely into his car seat in the back of the Jeep. Clark was driving and I was in the back next to my son. Neither one of us said much of anything on the way home. The whole family had been in and out for two days and now it was late evening and Clark and I were on our way home.

I was just grateful that we were by ourselves and we were heading home.

The nearly forty-minute drive passed in virtual silence. Christopher was asleep and Clark and I weren't speaking.

Before long, we were welcomed home by the Kents and my family. We spent about an hour or so chatting in the living room before Christopher decided he was hungry again and I excused myself, heading up to the nursery.

The nursing was going fairly well. He had a weight check in two days to make sure he was gaining back the weight he'd lost at the hospital — something the pediatrician had assured me was completely normal.

I sat gingerly in the glider in the nursery and carefully maneuvered both of us until he was nursing successfully. Before long, I burped him and switched sides.

I had no intention of going back downstairs.

It was late enough I could go to bed. I had no idea if — or when — Clark would be in. I knew he'd been sleeping in what would become the nanny's room when one got hired. I didn't think he knew I knew, though.

I wanted to cry, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Even if he wasn't around to see it.

When Christopher was finally done eating and swaddled back up, asleep, I put him in his crib and went to take a shower.

As soon as that was done, I put on the most comfortable pajamas I had and went to bed.

~~~~~  
Clark

I was being a heel.

I knew I was being a heel.

I didn't care that I was being a heel.

That made me even more of a heel.

By the time I said goodnight to my folks and everyone else, Lois was sound asleep.

I took a quick shower and pulled on a pair of boxers and sleep shorts. I hesitated when it came time to get into bed. Did I really want to sleep in here? But she'd be up in the middle of the night to feed her son and she'd know if I wasn't in here.

Would she care? Did I care if she cared?

As though on cue, Christopher started to cry.

Lois didn't stir.

I sighed and headed into the nursery. I picked him up, cradling him gently against my shoulder.

He was so small, so fragile.

And rooting.

I couldn't help him with that.

I sighed again. I was going to have to wake Lois up. I walked back into our room and sat on the edge of the bed. "Lois," I whispered, shaking her lightly with my free hand. "He's hungry."

"Wha...?" she asked as she sat up slightly.

"He's hungry," I whispered again.

She sat all the way up and rubbed her eyes before gingerly swinging her feet over the side of the bed. "Just let me go to the bathroom and then I'll feed him."

She winced as she stood up and walked carefully towards the bathroom. One of the nurses had mentioned before we left the hospital that if she had any problems going to the bathroom to call. Apparently, she'd had to have a catheter help her as late as that morning.

I looked down at the baby as I heard small noises through the closed door.

It wasn't the first time I'd held him, but it was the first where I hadn't passed him off almost immediately.

After I'd announced his name, Mom had taken him from me pretty quickly. That was the first time I'd held him.

I'd held him once or twice here and there at the hospital, mostly when passing him from someone back to Lois when time to feed him and such.

Of course, Mom and Dad and Granny and Sam and everyone else thought I was at the hospital a lot more than I was and that I had some quality time with 'my' son then.

He was a cutie. I'd give whoever it was that had been with Lois credit for helping make an adorable baby.

At the moment though, he was hungry. And not being quiet about it.

It wasn't the full fledged screaming I'd have expected from a baby, but what I now recognized as his newborn squeak.

Lois opened the door and didn't say anything to me but held out her arms for Christopher. She spoke softly to him as she headed into the nursery.

"Good night," I heard her call as she shut the door behind her.

"Good night," I called back and headed for my side of the bed.

I didn't know how long I'd been asleep when something woke me up.

"Come on, little man," I heard Lois saying as I turned my hearing on slightly. "You have to be tired." She sounded close to tears. "Can you go to sleep for," a slight pause, "Mom?"

I sighed. I should probably go help her, though I wasn't sure what I could do. I'd babysat some in Jr. High and High School, but never for little babies. About a year old was the youngest I'd taken care of. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and heard her start to sing a song I didn't recognize. I could hear the nearly silent tears.

I managed to not trip over anything as I headed for the other room. I opened the door carefully, glad they'd situated the glider where I wouldn't accidentally see something I wasn't supposed to but it wouldn't have mattered; she wasn't sitting down anyway.

"Can I help?" I asked quietly.

All I got was a glare as she finished the verse to the song. "What do you think you can do that I can't?" she asked in the same quiet voice.

I shrugged, dragging a weary hand over my face. "I don't know. I can try if you'd like me to."

She bounced gently up and down. "He's not hungry. He's not dirty. He's swaddled. I don't know what else it could be." Another tear streaked down her face.

"Do you want me to go get my mom and see if she has any ideas?" I offered.

She shook her head vehemently. "No. I have to do this myself."

"That's part of the reason why they're here," I reminded her with a yawn, running my hand through my unruly hair.

"No." She walked over to the twin bed on the other side of the room and laid him gently in the middle of it. She carefully unwrapped him and checked his diaper. "Never mind. He's dirty after all. Go back to bed."

"Are you sure?" I still wasn't sure what I could do to help, but I felt obligated to offer at least. I involuntarily yawned again.

"No sense in both of us being exhausted. And you have to work tomorrow," she reminded me.

Tony Rader, the mailroom boss, had offered to let me have the whole week off, but I'd declined saying we needed the money.

That was the truth. Now that Christopher was here, we'd have to buy everything for him. We were already paying for our own gas since we moved in. Well, I was. And I'd filled up the Jeep a couple of times when we'd been out together, but Lois hadn't gone very many places since we'd moved in and I always took the truck. Since the warmer weather didn't bother me, I even parked near our side of the house so that I wouldn't have to walk all the way across to the garage if I didn't want to.

"If you're sure," I said.

She nodded as she reached for the wet wipes and a diaper. "Go."

She was probably as glad to get rid of me as I was to leave. "Let me know if you need me to pick up anything while I'm out," I told her.

"Diapers, wipes and the petroleum jelly tubes."

I winced. Right. The circumcision. "Okay. Do you need me to go now or...?"

She shook her head. "No, there's enough to last until you get

home."

"Okay." I yawned once more as I half stumbled back to bed in the dark, trying not to listen to the other room for the rest of the night.

~~~~~  
Lois

If it wasn't for the spawn of Satan who wanted to take my child, I'd be better off as a single parent. I'd decided that the very first night we were home.

Yes, Clark had to work the next day, but a little more support and a little less off handed 'can I help so he'll go to sleep so I can sleep even though I'm Kryptonian and don't really need sleep' offer to help would have been nice.

And I really didn't need Martha knowing what a failure I was going to be as a mother.

It would be bad enough having to ask her for help if Clark and I were in love and married and then suddenly — joy of joys — found out we were expecting a baby. Instead, I knew he'd told them most of the truth and they knew we weren't happily married. I knew they were being nice to me, but I still suspected they would have rather had Lana for a daughter-in-law this summer than me under these circumstances.

Christopher was crying again — or was it still? — as I tried desperately to get his bottom clean. This newborn meconium stuff was sticking to him and trying to get it off wasn't making either of us happy.

It was another hour before I finally managed to doze off on the twin bed, with Christopher resting on my chest, *finally* quiet and asleep. I glanced at the clock as my eyes finally closed — four a. m.

And in just another hour or so I'd get to get up and do it all over again.

I was — pleasantly? — surprised that it was nearly ninety minutes later before he woke me up again, this time squirming on my chest, getting one fist in his mouth before I carefully laid him on the bed, changing his diaper again and breathing a huge sigh of relief when I realized he was only wet.

I settled into the glider and winced a bit as he started nursing. It was slightly painful and more than a little weird but a very wonderful kind of weird.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the chair. I could imagine my mom sitting there with me, in the middle of the night, staying with me for a few days or a week after a baby was born — maybe even a bit longer if needed. Getting up with me to keep me company or letting me nurse and then taking care of whatever needed taken care of — diapers, putting him back to sleep and letting me get more rest.

A tear or two streaked out of my eyes.

I missed her so much sometimes.

I wondered if Martha would take on that role if I were Lana. Probably. And if Clark and I were a 'real' couple, I'd probably let her for me, too. I'd probably welcome it.

Of course, I'd have my husband to help, too.

I sighed as I burped my son.

This time, I wrapped him up tighter in his blanket and carefully laid him in the bassinet. I wondered if, since he was still so used to being warm and snug inside me... would he sleep better in a cozier spot?

I breathed another sigh of relief when he didn't immediately wake up as I snuggled him down with his back to the side of the bassinet. I waited a minute before I lay back down on the bed.

I was asleep in minutes.

~~~~~  
Clark

I glanced through the wall after I listened and didn't hear anything but breathing coming from the nursery. Lois was asleep on the bed and Christopher was in the bassinet rather than the

crib. The bassinet had been moved right next to the twin bed — so Lois could reach him easier, I guessed. I decided to speed through my morning routine and a few minutes later, I keyed my code into the door and made sure it locked behind me as I headed to work. At least I was doing that to keep them safe.

I drove to the Daily Planet and spent my eight hours sorting and delivering mail. I actually talked to Norcross for a minute. So it was in the elevator and he dropped a couple file folders and I helped him pick everything up, but I talked to him.

I stopped at CostMart on the way home and grabbed a package of very small diapers, some wet wipes, petroleum jelly, a package of pacifiers with a holder — I hoped I got the right ones — and a couple of boxes of snack cakes. I grabbed a Double Fudge Crunch Bar at the checkout for Lois and wondered momentarily how her day had gone.

I sighed as I took the cash out of my wallet. I wasn't paying for anything as far as life went at the moment. No housing costs, no food bills except extras that I wanted, no utility bills. I was paying for gas, for auto insurance — which was cheaper now that Lois and I were married, at least for the truck; I had no idea what Lois had been paying for the Jeep — and that was about it. Everything else was going to rebuilding my savings account, the one I'd depleted when I'd bought Lana's ring. Lois had replenished most of it the day we'd had our first big fight when she'd written me a check, but I had a feeling I'd be doing some real groveling once this mess was over if I ever hoped to convince Lana that I really did want to be with her. Flowers and other assorted nice gifts would go a long way with her.

So why was I resenting spending thirty bucks on diapers and wipes?

Would Lana and I still wait for our wedding night when we got back together? She wasn't waiting for me and she didn't believe that I was waiting for her. Once I told her the whole story, would she believe that I hadn't had sex with Lois? What did it say about our relationship if she didn't? I could only hope that either she'd believe me or Lois would vouch for me — though I couldn't really see Lana taking Lois' word for anything, especially not the status of our sexual relationship — or lack thereof.

I shook my head as I took the change and picked up the bags and headed back to the truck. I was being a cad. I knew it and I didn't really care. What did that say about me?

I refused to delve into that question. I was sure I wouldn't like the answer

It wasn't long before I pulled into the drive and parked near the door closest to our room. I checked the area with my hearing. No one was up there, but I went up there anyway.

I put the stuff for the baby away in the nursery and headed for the shower. A few minutes later, I pulled on shorts and my favorite John Deere T-shirt. I sniffed at it when I noticed something a bit odd as I tugged it on.

It smelled a bit like Lois.

I hadn't worn it since she gave it back to me.

I pulled out a shirt Lana had given me for my birthday the year before. It was one I hadn't given Lois access to before she bought new clothes.

It had only an ear of corn on the front. I didn't think my parents knew where it came from, but I knew.

I knew that Lana had given it to me to commemorate being elected Corn Queen our senior year of high school. I hadn't even wanted to be Corn King, but she'd told me that I was *her* Corn King and had given me the shirt to remind me that she always thought of me as her prince.

Her knight in shining armor.

I pulled off the John Deere shirt and tossed it in the hamper before I put the other one on.

I just did *not* want to wear anything that smelled like Lois.

My wife.

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Part 63  
August 2003  
Lois

I cuddled Christopher in my arms as we moved back and forth in the glider. He fit snugly against my shoulder, all curled up in a little ball. I patted his back gently as he dozed off again.

I loved this time of day. It was dark enough outside that the room was dim, but light enough that I wasn't going to trip over anything.

And it was just the two of us.

I loved how my son fit next to me and I could smell the scent of his baby shampoo. Being here with him — usually after a day of being ignored by... the man who wasn't Christopher's father — was relaxing. Rejuvenating.

Part of me was glad that there was a twin bed in the nursery and that I'd been sleeping in it since Christopher had come home. The only bad part was that it wasn't near as comfortable as the bed in the other room — the one I normally shared with Clark. It wasn't *bad*, it just wasn't *mine*.

At least in the nursery I didn't have to worry about being anywhere near Clark in the middle of the night. The pillow that had found its way between us more nights than not wasn't always enough of a barrier.

It wasn't like I woke up with him all over me or anything, but even the slightest leg contact was a bit disconcerting given the overall state of our marriage. It was an... intimacy I didn't care for at this point. Even sharing a bed was too intimate for me at this point.

Maybe Clark would take the couch when I moved back into our room, when Christopher was sleeping through the night. Or maybe I'd just pretend he wasn't and sleep in here until Christopher turned five and Clark took off.

I sighed.

I hated how bitter I was becoming but I didn't know how to stop it. I hated the tears that fell over my 'failed' relationship with Clark. I missed my friend Clark. I missed the relationship I should have had with my husband, whoever he happened to be. I missed *me*.

I hated that my son was going to grow up essentially without a father. I loved him more than I ever thought possible to love another human being. But Clark... Stopping at the store for diapers on his way home from work was the extent of his involvement. He was no more a father at this point than the scumbag who'd drugged and raped me and that made me angry. I wasn't even sure that Clark had held him aside from passing him from one person to another at the hospital.

Part of me wanted to confront him, to point out just how badly this was going to screw up the little boy everyone thought was his son. How... cat's in the cradle it was or something. But that would have meant talking to Clark and talking to Clark was something to be avoided at all costs.

He, of course, chose that moment to interrupt my quiet time with my son by poking his head in the door.

"Your dad wanted me to remind you about the interviews tomorrow," he said looking at the floor rather than me.

"I remember. The first one's at nine, right?"

He nodded. "That's what he said. He wants us both to be there to make sure we're comfortable with whoever it is."

"You mean *I'm* comfortable," I muttered. I didn't particularly care if Clark was comfortable with whoever it was. No matter what the paperwork or the name said, Christopher wasn't any more his son than the man in the moon's.

"What?"

"Nothing," I sighed. "I'll be there." I had a pretty good idea

already who I wanted — Peggy’s sister, Jessica, had applied for the job. She was great with kids and we’d always gotten along well so unless either someone else *really* impressed me or she totally screwed it up, the job was probably hers.

That would mean, of course, that I’d have to be even more careful to hide the true nature of my relationship with Clark. Otherwise it would somehow get back to Joe and Peggy and Debbie and Les and the rest of the world at large.

I hadn’t even noticed when Clark left the room.

Maybe Daddy would put a non-disclosure clause in the contract.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought that sounded like a really good idea.

~~~~~

Clark

I wasn’t sure what my role was. I knew what it was *supposed* to be, but mostly I thought I’d leave the decision up to Lois and Sam — unless I had a really bad feeling about one of the nanny prospects we were interviewing.

The interviews were taking place in one of Sam’s offices on the floor below ours. Vicki was taking care of Christopher. The prospective nannies wouldn’t meet him until the second round of interviews later in the week.

I sat next to Lois, arm stretched out along the small couch behind her but stayed mostly silent as she and Sam talked to about ten different women. It was clear from the moment she walked in that Lois preferred Jessica. I remembered meeting her sister a couple of times during our first semester at Met U. Peggy was a nice girl and I was sure that Lois would be more comfortable with someone she already knew.

“There is a non-disclosure clause in the contract, of course,” Sam was saying. “Given your relationship with friends of Lois’, will that be a problem?”

Jessica shook her head. “No, sir. I would like clarification on what I can and cannot discuss more specifically, but no. Anything deemed off limits is just that, off limits.”

“What kind of clarification?” Sam asked.

“Well, my schedule to a certain extent at least wouldn’t be off limits — if I had plans with Peggy, for instance, when I’m not working. Complete security details for the house — to the extent I would know them — would be privileged. But what about milestones — when he rolls over or starts walking? Would those be off-limits? Would my sister or anyone else be allowed to visit me here when I’m not working or would I need to meet them elsewhere? Obviously, specific security threats or concerns would be and there must be some or you wouldn’t be going to the lengths that you are to protect that little guy. And a media blackout, of course. Though I don’t know why the media would be interested in your son, but in this day and age, who knows?”

Sam nodded. “If you are offered the position and accept it, we’ll have that discussion in more detail.”

Those kinds of things hadn’t occurred to me. I vaguely remembered Sam mentioning something in the other interviews but I hadn’t been paying that much attention.

Sam stood. “Jessica, thank you for coming in. We’ll be making phone calls in the next day or two regarding second interviews.”

“What will that consist of?” she asked.

“Spending some time with Christopher, more specifics regarding hours and salary, things of that nature.”

She nodded. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

Lois stood and walked her to the door, giving her a hug before she left. When she returned, she sat in the chair on the other side of the room — as far away from me as she could be and still be in the conversation.

“So what do you think, Princess?”

“Jessica,” she said without hesitation.

He nodded. “Well, let’s go through them one by one and go from there. The first one this morning was...” He picked up the file folder. “Nicole.”

Lois shook her head. “I didn’t like her.”

Sam looked at me. “Clark?”

“I didn’t like her either,” I told him honestly. The way she’d looked at me out of the corner of her eye made me distinctly uncomfortable. Lois and I might not have the world’s greatest marriage — which I acknowledged was the understatement of the century — but she didn’t know that and she had no business whatsoever looking at a married man like that. If they did hire her and she were to discover what my relationship with Lois was really like... I didn’t think the outcome would be good. And if she was apparently willing to at the very least ogle me not knowing anything about how dysfunctional we were, what else would she be willing to do? Violate that non-disclosure clause? I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

They’d gone on to other candidates that I was pretty ambivalent about. The only two I’d had strong feelings about were Nicole and Jessica.

“What do you think of Jessica, Clark?” Sam asked me.

“I liked her best out of everyone we saw today,” I told him.

“Then is there anyone else we want to call back for a second interview?” he asked us.

Lois shrugged. “Not for me.”

“Me either.” I stretched my legs out in front of me.

“Well, then, do you want to call her to set up another appointment, Princess, or do you want me to?”

“I will.” Lois dug her cell phone out of her pocket as she left the room.

“Are you okay, Clark? With leaving Christopher with someone else?” Sam said suddenly as Lois was out of earshot.

I looked up at him, surprised. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t seem very involved.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know anything about hiring a nanny. The first one was the only one that really made me uncomfortable.”

“The way she was looking at you?”

I’d hoped they hadn’t noticed. “Yeah.”

He nodded. “It would have made me uncomfortable, too.”

“She asked if she could come back tonight,” Lois announced, walking back in the room. “She’ll be back in about an hour.”

Sam and I both nodded. Part of me was dreading this step. Keeping up pretenses in front of Sam and Vicki and Ollie was one thing. Keeping them up in front of someone who would live two doors down might be quite another.

I sighed.

They said that when life handed you lemons you were supposed to use them to make lemonade. My life was full of lemons at the moment. The only problem was I couldn’t find the sugar.

Instead I was left with a bunch of bitter juice that burned every cut it touched and my heart was still essentially one big open wound.

For now, there was nothing I could do but tough it out. Like everything else in life, this too would pass.

Wouldn’t it?

~~~~~

Lois

“Here you go, Jess.” I opened the door to the nanny’s room — now Jessica’s.

“Thanks, Mrs. Kent.”

I rolled my eyes. “How long have we known each other? I’m your *little* sister’s friend.”

She shrugged. “Seems wrong when I’m working for you.”

“Well, you’re not working now so Lois it is.”

She smiled. “Thanks for the job, Lois. Really.”

“You’re well-qualified, we know you’re trustworthy and

Christopher really seemed to like you. One of the security guys will help you get set up with passwords and all of that kind of stuff later this afternoon. Until then, you'll have to have one of us let you in and out of the wing. Or just push the call button on the keypads and they'll let you out. Your safe word for the day is 'lemonade' — they'll ask you for it before they'll unlock the doors."

She set her suitcase down on the floor as she looked around. "I'm so sorry about all of this, Lois. No one deserves to have a madman come after them, but you especially..."

Once the final decision had been made — at some point during her second interview we'd all kind of nodded at each other — we'd told her most of the story, stressing the importance that Christopher was not to be out of her sight at any time. When he was napping, she was to be in her room with the door open between the rooms or in his room with him. For now, while he was little and all he did was eat and sleep, they were to stay in the wing at virtually all times. She could take him out on the veranda but that was the extent of it for the time being. As he got older, those guidelines would be revised. We knew it might get to be a bit stifling until he was more mobile but she agreed that it was the best option for now and we'd try not to make her shifts too long at a stretch.

I just shrugged. "It is what it is," I said quietly. "We're safe here, me and Christopher, but especially my son. He's the most important thing. I don't think he'd actually come after me as much as Christopher or me and Christopher together but..." I pointed to the dresser. "There's several panic buttons over there. They're not activated at the moment but you'll have to have one with you any time you're out of this wing. When you talk to the security guys later, they'll walk you through how everything works and the hidden panic buttons around the house and how the panels work and all of that. That's probably the biggest stuff for you to know. The baby stuff you're probably fine with."

I'd already showed her where everything was for Christopher when she'd accepted the position the week before. I had ten days before school started and not long after that I'd have to start looking for a job, but until then Jessica and I would be spending a lot of time together as she learned Christopher's routines and where we kept everything and anything else she needed to know.

Jessica sat down in one of the chairs and I took a spot on the couch.

"How are you, really, Lois?" she asked softly.

I didn't say anything for long minutes. "It's tough," I finally told her. "Still adjusting to being a wife and a mother. Christopher's not sleeping through the night so I've been sleeping in the nursery to be closer to him so that he doesn't have to wail to wake me up and then Clark wakes up, too, and there's no point in that. And I miss sleeping in my own bed and..."

"Clark?" she interjected with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes again. "It's just a big adjustment anyway, without all the extra stuff."

"Yes, it is," Jessica agreed.

Christopher chose that moment to wake up and we both went to get him.

~~~~~  
Clark

"That's him."

"Who?"

I overheard the girls behind me talking even though I wasn't supposed to. I set my tray down on the table. School had started the week before and we'd made it our new habit to eat together in the cafeteria the two days a week that we were on campus for our lunch break.

"Lana's ex," the other girl whispered back.

"He really screwed her over, didn't he?"

The first girl snickered. "No. They were *waiting* until they

got married this summer. Then he got his roommate pregnant. That Lane chick."

"The one related to all the Lane stuff around here?"

"That's her. They got stuck at her dad's cabin upstate during the snowstorm last year and spent most of it naked together."

I hated being the subject of their gossip but there really wasn't much I could do about it, even though they had their facts wrong.

I didn't look up when a hand ran across my head and a tray was set down next to me. It was Lois' way of making us look closer than we really were. She'd ruffle my hair, sit next to me and whisper something inane.

I ran the hand with that stupid band on it through my hair to straighten it. She sat down but didn't say anything to me. I didn't really look at her but reached one hand out to massage her neck lightly for a minute.

"That's her?" came the whisper behind us.

"Yeah. That's Lois Lane — Lois Kent now. Lana said she seduced him while he was practically hypothermic at her dad's cabin, but then he decided that he could have his cake and eat it, too. He told Lana she saved his life but Lana doesn't really believe that anymore — not after finding out that she got pregnant. Clark didn't even break up with her before they got married. Then he told her that it wasn't real, wasn't his baby and wanted her to wait for him."

My fork stopped halfway to my mouth at that. Lana was telling people he wasn't my son? After I'd told her I lied about that?

The other girl snorted. "Yeah, right. He's hot, but not that hot. And it's not like she knew if he was any good — worth waiting for."

"She even offered to see him on the side, but he wouldn't do it. Said he wanted to but couldn't risk getting caught — probably because her daddy would cut him out of the will or something."

I tried to tune it out but they continued talking about me and Lana and Lois while we ate silently. I finished my gluey chicken enchiladas and turned to Lois. I pasted what I hoped was a smoldering, seductive smile on my face.

"Hey, Baby," I said loudly enough for the girls to hear. "I gotta go but I'll see you at home later tonight."

She looked at me in shock but before she could say anything, I kissed her. I'd never kissed her like that before — except maybe the night of her birthday before I supposedly called her Lana. She had a slightly dazed look on her face when I moved back and I kissed her lightly again. She responded, her lips clinging to mine for a brief second.

"Bye, Baby. Love you." I hated calling her that. That was my name for Lana, not Lois, but I wasn't sure what else to use. I left without looking at her, sure that the only reason she didn't slap me was because we were in public. I hoped that she managed to control her shock at the 'love you' thing. I didn't think I'd ever said anything like that to her — at least not since who knew which government was listening in on our conversations in Europe.

I threw my trash away in the can nearby, walking behind the girls who'd been gossiping about us. I could see them glancing at each other out of the corners of their eyes and trying not to giggle. I passed them then stopped and came back. I leaned between them and said softly, "He *is* my son and if I ever hear you talking about my wife like that again, you'll regret it."

I straightened up and left, not bothering to listen to what they said after I did.

I was left with a sick feeling in my stomach as I betrayed Lana yet again, but I had no choice. I had to protect Christopher. Even though he wasn't really my son, I had to protect him.

I sighed and headed for class. I'd done what I could. I just hoped it was enough.

Part 64
September 2003
Lois

I straightened my skirt as I stared at the globe over the Daily Planet entrance.

This was it.

This was my shot.

I glanced at my watch.

I was going to be late.

I brushed my hand over my stomach, trying to get wrinkles out of my blouse.

It wasn't like this interview was with Perry White.

I probably wouldn't even see the newsroom floor if I got this job.

It was *clerical services*, for crying out loud.

I'd make photocopies, maybe do some research, typing, data input. Maybe phone solicitations for subscriptions on a good day.

I headed inside and pressed the up button. Once it arrived, I entered the elevator. My finger hovered over the button for the news floor, but I'd have enough time to soak it in later — if I got the job.

The door opened on the third floor. I didn't open my eyes as I stood there.

"Hey." The voice sounded surprised.

"Hi," I said, still not opening my eyes.

"What're you doing here?"

"Why do you care?"

There was no answer.

The door opened again — this time on the newsroom floor, I knew having counted the floor dings as we went — and Clark got off, pushing his mail cart in front of him.

I could hear a woman's voice saying hello to him and he said hello back. Cat, I thought he said as the doors shut.

A minute later, I hurried off the elevator and towards the clerical services office.

Half an hour later, I breathed a huge sigh of relief as I waited for the elevator to arrive again.

This time, I punched the button for the news floor. This time, I was going to soak it all in for a minute before I headed to personnel to finish paperwork as a new hire.

I stood watching the bustle and breathing deeply as I did.

"Can I help you?" came a voice behind me.

I turned with a smile. "I'm just looking."

That grin should be illegal. "I'm sorry, miss. Employees or those with business with Planet personnel only."

"Well, I'm Planet personnel as of about five minutes ago."

He smiled at me again. "Really? Where?"

I grimaced. "Clerical services."

He winced. "I'm sorry."

"It's a start. I'll be here someday." I looked around again.

"I'm Billy Norcross, by the way."

"Lois," I told him, taking his offered hand. I noted he held it just a second longer than strictly necessary, but I didn't care.

Over his shoulder, I saw Clark talking to a blonde girl who was walking with him as he put mail on different desks.

"It's very nice to meet you."

"*Norcross! Judd!*" The bellow startled me. Perry White stood at his office door and looked rather upset.

Billy chuckled. "You'll get used to it. Good luck, Lois. Let me know if I can help you at all."

"Thanks." I looked around for a minute longer before heading back to the elevator. I ignored the fact that my husband was chatting with another woman a few feet away and he hadn't even noticed I was there.

I went back to the first floor and filled out the rest of the

paperwork, got my ID badge and set up my email.

I went home, grateful that we'd found a great nanny in Jessica. The only annoying thing was that she kept calling me 'Mrs. Kent' no matter how many times I told her not to.

The bad part was that Clark couldn't stay in there anymore and since Christopher was sleeping most of the night already, there was no reason for me to sleep in the nursery.

And *that* meant we'd be sleeping in the same bed again.

I'd dreamt about the kiss in the cafeteria a number of times since it had happened. He'd never offered any explanation of any kind and I'd never asked. I hadn't been able to bring myself to and it hadn't happened again since then.

And now I'd be sleeping with him again.

I took a shower and was asleep long before my husband got home.

~~~~~

Clark

I noticed the Daily Planet badge on the dresser.

I should have known she'd want to work there, in whatever capacity.

At least I wouldn't be buying all the diapers anymore.

I winced at the cynical thought. I hated what I was becoming but I wasn't sure how to stop it.

I noticed a note taped to the bathroom mirror as soon as I walked in there.

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We need to get our schedules on paper so Jessica knows when we need her. I start Monday. My school and work schedules are on the calendar. You'll need to put yours on and either give it to her or leave it and I will. It also means that you'll need to babysit Christopher more now that I'm gone more. She's only supposed to work up to 40 hours a week or so though, so keep that in mind. As soon as I can, I'll try to get my schedule set up as close to yours as I can so that I can have him when you're not working. Maybe you can schedule your study times while I'm gone so that you'll only have to babysit as little as possible.

My check-up with Dr. McConnell is tomorrow. Dad asked if we wanted to go to the cabin one night this weekend. I told him I didn't want to leave Christopher that long yet. He said that we need a date night this weekend then. Put what night you want to go on the calendar and you can go to the ballgame or something. The Cardinals are in town this weekend, after all. Dad has season tickets and I'm sure he'd give us — you — the ones for one day this weekend.

Thanks.

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I sighed. Date night. Great. At least I'd get to go see the Cardinals. I hadn't seen a game — live — in a couple years and I was sure that Sam had good seats. It didn't sound like Lois was going to go with me, but it wasn't like I would — or could — go with someone else, like Jimmy from work.

I took a shower and headed back into the room with a towel around my waist. I grabbed some clothes from the dresser in the closet and turned to see Lois sleeping in the bed. How had I not noticed she was there before?

Of course. Christopher was sleeping through the night so no reason for her to sleep in the nursery anymore and Jessica was in the other room. Where else would she be?

I'd gotten used to sprawling across the whole thing in the seven or so weeks since Christopher was born. Looked like those days were at an end.

I looked at the calendar and quickly wrote in my school schedule and thought through my work schedule for the next week before I wrote it down. I penciled in the Cardinals game on Friday — Woody Williams was supposed to be pitching that night — and then looked over the rest of it. Sam had said we could have a few hours each week to study if we felt we needed it. I

penciled in study times and it looked like I'd only have Christopher by myself for about three hours total this week and most of that was in half hour chunks.

Maybe I'd be lucky and he'd sleep through most of it.

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Lois

I'd gotten a call from Rehalia, my boss in clerical services, and she wanted to know if I could work Friday afternoon. Someone had a death in the family and so they were going to be shorthanded.

I'd jumped at the chance. Clark was going to be home; he could take care of Christopher and I wouldn't have to deal with him ignoring me before our 'date night'. He was going to the Cardinals game. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Maybe sit at Barnes and Noble and read a book or something.

"Excuse me," I said as I bumped into someone fairly solid. "No, excuse me."

I looked up. "Sorry, Mr. Norcross," I said, chagrined.

He smiled at me. The only person with a better smile was Clark — when he was my friend. "No problem, Lois. And please, it's Billy."

He remembered my name. "Right. Billy it is. I wasn't watching where I was going," I told him, smiling back at him.

"I wasn't either." He punched the button for the elevator. "Going up?"

I nodded. "It's my first day. I guess someone had a death in family so I'm filling in."

"Angela's grandpa practically raised her while her dad was in the military. Her mom died when she was very young and I don't think she ever knew her grandma. He had a heart attack yesterday, I think."

"Wow." I could relate to some of her pain. "I'm glad I can help fill in then."

He stepped off into the newsroom. "I'll see you around," he told me with another smile before rolling his eyes as the woman I guessed was Serena Judd yelled at him to hurry up. Apparently, he knew what was good for him because he jogged down the stairs.

I got off a couple floors later and got settled in at one of the desks. Rehalia said my official orientation and everything wouldn't be until the next week, but I could do a few things that were pretty self explanatory.

I made copies and did a bit of 'running' — taking things down to the newsroom floor where Billy introduced me to his reporting partner, Serena Judd. I saw the way he looked at her — the same way Clark had looked at Lana — and I wondered if anyone would ever look at me quite like that. Joe hadn't, though if we'd been able to let our relationship develop he might have. My husband wasn't about to and I knew if I let myself dwell on that thought... Well, I knew it wasn't a good plan.

"And this is Jimmy Olsen. Gofer and computer guru extraordinaire," Billy told me, clapping the young man on the shoulder.

His floppy brown hair hung over twinkling eyes. I could tell I was going to like him.

"Jimmy, this is Lois..." He looked at me. "I don't think I ever got your last name."

"Lois Kent," I said, extending my hand to Jimmy.

"Are you related to CK?"

"Who?" I asked, puzzled.

"Clark Kent."

Oh. Right. "You could say that," I finally said. We weren't related; we were married.

"CK is the bomb," he said with a big grin.

I tried not to grimace. "I'll tell him you said that."

His face fell slightly. "No, don't do that."

I smiled. "Your secret's safe, but now I have to get back

upstairs." We said our good-byes and I headed back to my temporary desk.

Now if I could just make it through 'date night.'

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Clark

"Thanks, Jessica," I told her with a smile. "Where's Lois?"

"No problem, Mr. Kent. That's what I'm here for. And Mrs. Kent got called into work because someone wasn't going to be in this afternoon."

Right. Probably Angela. "Okay. Well, I know you were supposed to have the afternoon off so..." I was a bit nervous about her leaving. At least Vicki was around somewhere if I really needed her.

"I'm going to an afternoon movie with Peggy, but I'll be back in time for you guys to go out tonight," she said as she headed towards her room. "See you then, Mr. Kent."

"Have fun." No matter how many times I told her to call me Clark, though, she insisted that while she was working, I was her employer and therefore, Mr. Kent. When we were eating or whatever when she was off-duty, she was a very different person than in the few minutes I saw her when she was on-duty. Much more open and fun. Almost like Lana.

I tried to shake thoughts of my ex-girlfriend from my head, but I couldn't.

I'd gotten an email from her a few days earlier to let me know that she and Tim were having a baby together.

I sat on the bed and gazed at Christopher — currently sleeping contentedly in his bassinet. Would Tim be a father to the baby Lana was having? Would I be able to be a step-father to him or her if Lana took me back once all this was over? There was no doubt in my mind that I could do that.

So what was my problem?

Was it because I loved Lana and not Lois? I was willing to be a real father to her child if we ever managed to get back together; why wasn't I doing the same to the child who was legally, even if not biologically, my son? No adoption necessary.

He started to squirm and smack on the fist he managed to get into his mouth. I sighed and looked in the fridge we'd had in the dorm room and later the apartment. Lois had been pumping for when she wasn't around. I pulled out a bottle and wondered if the lasers from my eyes would break down breast milk like a microwave did. I shrugged. One bottle here and there shouldn't make a difference, should it? I heated it carefully, testing it on my skin. I could feel sensation — enough to know if something was too hot or too cold but it never hurt. I picked Christopher up carefully before sitting in the glider and propping my feet up.

His cry had developed a bit more and it wasn't quite the squeak it had been when we first brought him home.

He was watching me as I held the bottle for him.

I just watched him until he was nearly done.

"Hey, little man," I finally said as I looked in his dark eyes. "I guess I'm your Daddy. I haven't been around much and I'm sorry about that. There's a lot you don't know about me and your mom. I'm not your biological father, but I couldn't let anyone hurt you, especially not that mad man. If he ever got his hands on you, he'd raise you to be just like him and destroy your mom in the process. I know it probably doesn't seem like it, but she's been a good friend to me. I haven't been acting much like one to her and it hurts so much sometimes to realize that in protecting the two of you, I destroyed the one person I've always promised to protect. It's not your mom's fault and it's certainly not your fault and I'm sorry that I've missed the first few weeks of your life."

It was true, I realized. He was legally my son and I'd missed over a month and a half of his life. "This is the first time I've spent any real time with you at all. It's not like we're going to have any deep, meaningful conversations, but you're going to grow up thinking I'm your father and I know how much an

absent or nearly absent father can hurt a kid — especially a boy. Pete’s dad was like that. His parents were still married, but his dad was always too busy. It was very ‘Cat’s in the Cradle’. I don’t want that. I want to be a part of your life. Once Navance is gone, I don’t know what’ll happen, but I hope your mom will let me still be a part of your life. One day, after you know the whole story, I hope you’ll understand why I did what I did and why your mom and I didn’t stay together. I hope to make the transition as easy for you as I can.”

He hadn’t been very happy when I tried to take the bottle out while he was working on it, so I’d let him finish it before trying to burp him. I patted his back as he snuggled into my shoulder and I was overcome with what I thought was remorse.

I was pretty sure it was.

No. I knew it was. I was just finally able to admit it to myself. I’d already missed nearly two months.

I’d have to make sure I didn’t miss any more.

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Part 65

Lois

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I drove home happy about my first day at work. I thought I would at least sort of enjoy it most of the time even though it wasn’t reporting. I’d made a couple of new friends — even if one of them did think ‘CK is the bomb’.

I wondered how Clark had fared with Christopher. We’d both planned on being home, which meant that his care would have fallen to me. I didn’t mind. He was my son and I loved him very much, but I did wonder at what point Clark was going to step up — privately; he was fine around others, though caring for Christopher was still mostly my responsibility, which was understandable as a nursing mother — and be a father or if he was just going to ignore my son as much as possible until he managed to escape.

I pulled up near our side of the house and went inside. The door between our room and the nursery was open and I saw Clark sitting there, in the glider, with Christopher snuggled against his shoulder.

Maybe he was stepping up.

I shrugged mentally and went to the closet to get out an appropriate outfit before heading to the bathroom to take a shower and get ready.

When I came back out, Clark was dressed in faded blue jeans and an Albert Pujols jersey.

“Jessica’s running late. Your dad said to drop Christopher off with him downstairs before we leave.”

I pulled a baseball cap on, tugging my ponytail through it. “Sounds good. Did he give you the tickets?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.” He went back into the nursery and picked Christopher up. “You ready?”

“Let’s go.”

We headed downstairs to the kitchen where Daddy was eating a plate of lasagna and reading the paper.

“There’s my grandson!” he said taking Christopher from Clark. “I know we live in the same house but I haven’t seen this big guy in a couple days.” He nodded towards the counter. “The tickets are over there. Ollie and the boys are coming over and we’re watching the game on the big screen downstairs.” He grinned. “You two will be almost life size.”

I glanced at Clark. “What?”

“You remember, Princess. You can see the seats whenever the camera is on a left-handed batter.”

Right. “Oh, yeah. I’d forgotten that.”

“You two will be easy to spot — what with Clark’s Cardinals jersey and your Metropolitan one.”

I glanced down at my Roger Cedeno jersey. “I guess so.” I sighed inwardly. I was going to have to go to the game.

“Are you two going out for dinner?” Dad asked.

We glanced at each other. “We hadn’t really talked about it,” I said honestly. “We may just eat at the game.”

“Well, have a good time. You might try the new J. Buck’s there on Roosevelt, though it’s probably really crowded right before a game with the Cardinals,” he told us.

“Probably,” Clark said. “I wanted to try it sometime though. Dad and I went to the one in St. Louis once and it was pretty good.”

I glanced at the clock. “Either way, we should probably get going.”

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Clark

We said good-bye to Sam and Christopher before heading out the door.

“Do you want to take the truck or the Jeep?” I asked as we neared the vehicles.

She shrugged. “The Jeep’s fine.” She climbed in the driver’s seat and started it before I’d even managed to get into the passenger side. We were going down the drive when she spoke again. “I’d planned on parking at the Planet and you could catch the subway to the game and I could hit Barnes and Noble or Fox and Hound Books or Mama’s Little Bakery or something and you could call me when the game was over and we’d meet back there, but since Daddy and everyone’s going to be watching the game, I guess I probably better go.”

“Probably.” At least I knew what she’d originally planned. She hadn’t been looking forward to the ‘date’ thing anymore than I had been. Well, I’d been looking forward to the game and I was sure she’d been looking forward to some quiet time to do whatever she wanted, but neither one of us had really planned on spending the evening together.

“You can’t be seen at the game without me,” she said staring straight ahead. “Not if you’re going to be on camera all the time. A night out with Jimmy or something would probably be fine, but not on a date night.”

I just nodded and wondered just how long this night was going to be.

An hour later, we were sitting in the best seats I’d ever had at a baseball game. I had a big thing of nachos in front of me as final preparations were being made to the field.

“I just knew you were going to be here tonight,” came a voice behind me. I didn’t recognize the nasal tone and I didn’t recognize the wild haired woman with a tin-foil hat behind us either.

“Star!” Lois said, setting her hot dog tray down and turning to give the other woman a hug. “What’re you doing here?”

“Oh, your dad gave us season tickets for Christmas last year.” She leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially. “He really wanted me to do readings for him between innings, but that’s not how it works.”

Lois laughed again. I wondered how long it had been since she’d really laughed. I tried not to think too much about what that meant.

“I have missed you *so much*, Star,” she said, hugging the other woman again.

“And I’ve missed you, too, honey. But now you have to introduce me to this fine young man with you.”

I could tell she tried not to change her expression, to keep the smile plastered on her face, but I didn’t think anyone else would have noticed how strained it suddenly became. “Star, this is my husband, Clark. Clark, this is Star. She was my mom’s roommate their freshman year in college. Daddy’s been buying her and her husband, Dr. Andre Novak, tickets for years. Where is Andre anyway?”

Star ignored her question and held a hand out to me. I set my nachos aside. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Novak.”

Lois snickered and Star rolled her eyes. “Oh, no, honey. I’m Star.” She shuddered. “Mrs. Novak is my mother-in-law and I don’t like her. She’s not a nice person. Andre is working tonight — he’s a psychotherapist,” she told me. “Michelle Sitkowitz is going to be here soon.”

“That’s great,” Lois said enthusiastically. “I haven’t seen her in ages either.”

“Well, she asks about you all the time. Your dad said you two had a son recently,” Star said with a smile.

Lois nodded. “We did. Christopher is about two months old.” She sighed. “I don’t have my purse with me though, so I don’t have any pictures.”

“I do,” I told her, pulling my wallet out of my pocket and handing the picture sleeves over.

“Oh, Lois, he’s a doll.” She looked up and studied me for a minute. “He looks just like you.” I shifted a big uncomfortably as she continued to stare. “You’re not from around here are you?”

I glanced at Lois. “I’m from a small town in Kansas.”

“Really?” Her brow furrowed. “Were you born overseas or something?”

I shook my head. “No, Kansas born and bred.” Or something like that.

She smacked the side of her head. “I’ve got to get this thing looked at. It’s been a bit off kilter. I keep seeing you as a blond. Or with a blonde.” She frowned. “A pregnant blonde. Or something and that’s not right.”

I took the pictures back and stuck them in my wallet, glad that the picture of Lana was well hidden. Not even Lois could find it, but I could see it whenever I wanted by glancing through the leather. And Lois didn’t know Lana was pregnant.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” came the voice over the loud-speaker. “Please rise and remove your caps for the national anthem. Today’s national anthem is being performed by...” I tuned the rest of it out as I stood up and took my hat off.

We sat in relative silence, each cheering where appropriate — at least Lois was. I cheered at spots that most of those around us found to be completely inappropriate given the rivalry involved.

I was careful to grin at Lois occasionally when a left-handed batter was up and my arm found its way around the back of her seat, though the only contact with her shoulders was incidental at best.

She smiled up at me and we had what seemed to be good-natured discussions about the merits of one player over another. No one watching or listening would hear the icy undertones unless they knew both of us really well.

Before long we reached the seventh inning stretch. Star and Michelle were both gone when Lois finally spoke to me again, in a more... normal tone of voice. At least more normal for the discussions we’d been having lately. “Daddy said that Christopher would be asleep when we got home and even if he wasn’t we didn’t have to worry about him. He winked at me and said we shouldn’t have to. He’s expecting us to go straight to our room, stay there and... do stuff.”

“Ah,” I shrugged. “We’ll both get a good night’s sleep.”

“It also means I need to wear something... appropriate for the night after my check up, but don’t get any ideas about it. I mean it. I don’t care if you’re invulnerable, you’ll regret it if you even think about touching me.”

“Don’t worry,” I muttered. I’d go out on the balcony or something and make sure she was sound asleep before I went to bed. Touching her was the last thing on my agenda for the night.

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Lois

I’d heard the mumbled statement and I mumbled back that I had to go to the bathroom. I smiled brightly as I passed Star and Michelle on the way up the stairs, trying desperately not to let the tears fall while anyone I knew was within sight.

I made it to a bathroom stall before I started crying. I knew he didn’t want me, but the stupid hormones were making it hard to keep that in perspective. I didn’t want Clark or Daddy to know that Dr. McConnell — Kristi — had put me on antidepressants the day before. The combination of my true relationship with Clark, the stress of always being under security measures — including ones I was sure Daddy hadn’t told me about — because of Navance, and the fluctuations in hormones after the birth of Christopher were overwhelming me and sending me into a tailspin. She recognized the signs as we spoke and I had started Wellbutrin the day before. She said it would take a couple weeks for it to really start to kick in.

I took as long as I could but finally headed back down to our seats. It was the top of the eighth by the time I made it back to my seat.

“You okay, Lois?” Star asked from behind me.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I said brightly. “I got bumped and hit my knee on the wall, that’s all. Hit it just wrong.”

Clark put his arm around the back of my seat once I was in it. “Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

I glared at him. “No, thanks.”

Another inning and we could go. The Cardinals were losing badly and it seemed unlikely that the game would go into the bottom of the ninth. We could head back to the Jeep and go home and drop the charade.

That was exactly what we did. We got home and went straight upstairs. We’d exchanged exactly ten words since we left our seats. Clark went straight outside and onto the balcony. I went to the closet and then to the bathroom. I soaked in the big tub until the water was cold and then got dressed.

The night gown Martha had bought for me was beautiful and I did feel good in it. I needed to go to Victoria’s Secret or something and get a few more. It wasn’t like my husband would be buying me any.

I shuddered at the thought.

I made a few mental notes for the next day. I’d mentioned to Clark that I was working on Saturday; he was, too. Jessica had gladly agreed to work a few more hours this week — she got overtime, after all — and Daddy had said that was okay with him, too; he was the one writing the checks after all.

I got out clothes for the next day. We were riding together since our schedules were the same. Part of me hoped he got called in early, but since we were going in at eight, I doubted that would happen.

I took the robe off and threw it over the chair in the corner by my side of the bed, curling up with my body pillow and nearly silent tears streaking down my cheeks as I laid there.

Star had been known to be wrong occasionally — okay, often sometimes. She was pretty streaky as far as accuracy went, but she was right about Clark not being from around here. And the blonde she saw could only be one person. And that meant that Clark was probably still thinking about her all the time and that he couldn’t wait to be free of me and back with her.

The pregnant thing I didn’t get though.

I was sure Clark thought I was already asleep when he came in and lay down next to me. He flopped down awfully hard for someone who could float and I thought I heard him sigh as he pulled the covers over himself.

Part 66

Clark

~~~~~  
I sat on the balcony and stared at the field in front of me.

The night hadn’t been *horrid*. The Cardinals lost, but I had a great seat while they did.

A seat next to Lois.

Who I was, theoretically, supposed to be making love to right

now.

That was why Sam had told her not to worry about Christopher when we got back. She'd had her check-up and that would be the first thing on the mind of a lot of couples who'd just had a baby.

But I wouldn't be with her like that any time soon. Never was more likely and her threats to me despite my invulnerability had nothing to do with that. There was only one woman I wanted to be with and she was pregnant with another guy's baby.

I sighed.

I missed her more than I would have ever thought possible.

Still. After nine months, I still dreamed about her most nights. Dreams that I — as a married man — had no business having about a woman who wasn't my wife. Dreams that my parents would be so disappointed about — if they knew I was having them about anyone but Lois. It wasn't like they were... *those* kinds of dreams, not usually, but dreams about me and Lana, living together, buying our first house, finding out we were pregnant, having our first baby, going on a date — a perfectly innocuous date except that I knew what was going to happen when we got home and I knew that she'd dressed up for me.

I pulled my wallet out of my jeans and stared at it — through the leather and to the picture of Lana. It was her senior picture. She was in blue jeans and her faded leather jacket. The picture had actually been taken near our pond. She was leaning up against a tree, her blonde hair blowing in the breeze.

I'd been standing next to the photographer and I knew that the smile was for me. I was the only one she smiled like that for.

I wondered if she smiled for Tim like that.

I hated, hated, *hated* that someone else had been with her and I thought it was a good thing that I hadn't seen Tim since then because I'd want to deck him.

And I couldn't do that for so many reasons. I was married — it shouldn't matter to me who was with Lana, except that she was my friend, but no more than that. And I could literally send him into orbit if I half tried.

I'd heard rumors on campus that she'd had a couple other boyfriends the second half of Spring semester. And, if the rumors were right, Tim wasn't the only guy she'd been with.

She had obviously moved on with her life and if anyone from the outside looked at my life, it would seem I had moved on first. I was married, with a baby, living in an amazing house — even if it did belong to my father-in-law — a decent starter job, good grades, all of those things that someone my age, in my position would be jealous of.

The only thing I didn't have was Lana.

Not just Lana my girlfriend or Lana the woman I planned on spending my life with, but Lana my *best* friend. The one person I'd always told everything to, except the Kryptonian stuff, of course. If I got into a fight with my parents, she was the one I'd turned to. If I did poorly on a test or when my essay came in third behind one with serious grammatical and spelling errors, she was the one I'd called.

And I didn't have that anymore.

With anyone, really. Not just that it wasn't Lana anymore, but I didn't have anyone I could really confide in. Lois had told her doctor everything; maybe I could push her to let me tell my parents or something.

I sighed. It was unlikely and I knew it.

I heard Lois get into bed and figured it wouldn't be too much longer before she was asleep. She had to work the next day and, unless one of us got a call changing our schedule, we'd be riding together.

I sighed again and decided I was ready to go to sleep even if Lois wasn't. I thought that the best plan for these 'married pajama night' things, I'd either be asleep before her or wait until she was asleep to go to bed.

If I was married to Lana, it certainly wouldn't be that way.

I slid under the covers and whispered to myself, "I miss you."

Lois moved slightly and I stilled instantly, waiting for her to let me have it if she heard, but there was no other noises coming from her side of the bed.

I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief, reminding myself that I needed to be a lot more careful than I had been.

\*\*\*

October 2003

Lois

~~~~~

"He just ate so he should be good for a while."

I rolled my eyes as Clark held Christopher close to him.

I sat on the bed and waited for him to continue.

"He really likes the puppy lately. He hasn't gone to sleep without it the last few nights, so if he won't sleep, that could be why."

I raised a brow at him, but he wasn't looking at me.

"The vacuum scared him last night — I mean, I don't know why you'd be vacuuming but I'd spilled popcorn everywhere last night and was cleaning it up and it scared him so you might not want to vacuum around him."

I had been slightly amused when he first started telling me these things, but I was starting to get annoyed.

"He's liked the pacifier a lot more lately, too, and kind of looks for it when he can't find it. He doesn't like being burped in the middle of his bottle, but I guess that's not a problem for you."

"No, it's not," I said, carefully modulating my tone but wondering how far he was going with this.

"If he's crying and he's not hungry or wet or dirty, then he's probably tired but without the puppy, he probably won't sleep.

And after about ten, he should sleep most of the night." He grabbed a burp cloth to wipe off his shirt as Christopher spit up a bit. "But he has spit up quite a bit today so you might want to give him a bath."

"You do know who I am right?" I finally asked him, my annoyance finally coming through in my tone I was sure.

He looked up at me. "What?"

"I'm his *mother*, Clark. I know this stuff. Don't think I haven't noticed that you've stepped up a lot recently — I have — but I'm not some random thirteen-year-old babysitter. I know my son doesn't like the vacuum cleaner — I knew that long before you did. I know he likes his pacifier more lately. I know what his hungry cry sounds like. I know how much he likes his bouncy seat on vibrate with the ocean sounds. Now give him to me and leave. Go do whatever it is you're going to do and quit treating me like the hired help," I snapped.

He glared at me before carefully handing my son over. "Excuse me for trying to make sure that you knew what you needed to know," he muttered.

I ignored him. "Just go."

"Well, I'd make sure you have my phone number, you know in case you needed anything, but I wouldn't want to insult you or anything," he added sarcastically.

"I have your phone number," I pointed out. And if I did need anything, he would be the last one I'd call, but I didn't tell him that. I was looking forward to an evening with just me and Christopher and Daddy. If Clark was out of the house, we wouldn't spend most of the time alone in our room annoying — or more likely, ignoring — each other.

"Well, then, I'm off." He didn't say goodbye or anything else to me, but stopped to give Christopher a soft kiss on his head. "See you later, little man."

I managed to keep the tears at bay until after the door to our wing closed behind Clark. Then they began trickling down my cheeks. I swiped at them with one hand before settling my son into his bouncy seat. I sat next to him and watched as he stared at

his hands, fascinated by what he saw.

I was glad Clark had found a good friend in Jimmy, I really was, but I hated my relationship with him. He'd stepped up as Christopher's father over the last few weeks but in doing so had — probably unintentionally — left me feeling marginalized and unneeded. If I wasn't nursing, Christopher wouldn't need me at all.

I thought I did a good job hiding how I was feeling from Clark. Mostly we ignored each other and I didn't think he had any idea how often I wondered if anyone would actually miss me if I got stuck in another snowstorm but didn't make it to the cabin or somewhere else safe or was in a car accident or caught in a bank holdup gone bad.

Christopher would grow up with Lana as his mom and probably never even realize I existed. Clark would, obviously, get full custody. If he kept in contact with Daddy, Christopher might see a few pictures of me from time to time, but that was about it. Would Martha and Jonathan make sure Clark told him about me? Lana, I was sure, would prefer that my name never be mentioned. Daddy would save a ton of money on security. The security guys could go back to their lives.

Would Daddy let Clark and Lana live here if something happened to me? So he could still be near his grandson? Would Clark and Lana sleep in here? In the bed I'd shared with Clark and after... making love, laugh at how stupid Clark's first wife had been? How pathetic? How completely unnecessary I'd been except as an incubator for Christopher?

The tears flowed faster and I knew I had to get myself under control. Those kinds of thoughts were sure to send me into a downward spiral I'd have a hard time getting out of. I knew that, but I had a hard time reining them in.

There was a beeping sound as someone let themselves into our wing.

"Lois?" It was Daddy.

I swiped at my cheeks again. "In here," I called.

"Hey, Princess. What's wrong?" He was at my side in an instant, one arm pulling me towards him as he sat on the floor by me.

I shook my head. "I just had a little bit of a fight with Clark, that's all."

"This is more than just a little bit of a fight," he said softly.

I shook my head. "It really wasn't a big deal. I'm just tired and it's magnifying everything." I resolved to call Kristi when I had the chance and see about upping my medication. It was helping some, but not enough. She'd told me that was a possibility and to call her if I needed to.

"Promise me?"

"I promise."

"Then why don't we take this little guy down to the theater and watch something fun on the big screen? Movie of your choice."

I smiled slightly. "Okay."

We sat there for another long minute before he kissed the top of my head. "I love you, Princess."

"I love you, too."

"You'd tell me if something was really wrong, wouldn't you?"

I hesitated before shrugging. "I wouldn't want to bother you anymore than you already are."

"It's why I'm here, Lois. Why Clark's here. If something's really wrong, you have to talk to us."

The tears threatened to start again. The hard, cold truth was that it wasn't why Clark was here. Daddy would miss me if something happened, but the truth was that Clark would probably be relieved that he could get on with his life with his son and Lana and kids of their own.

I sighed. "I promise that if something is really, really wrong,

I'll talk to someone, okay?"

He was quiet for a long moment before nodding against my head. "Okay." He carefully extricated Christopher from his seat. "Come on. We'll go watch Christmas Vacation or something."

"It's October," I reminded him.

"I know, but face it. It's your favorite."

I laughed lightly. "Yeah, it is."

~~~~~  
Clark

"Okay, 'Out of Time' was a lot better than that 'Uptown Girls' movie Lauren dragged me to last week but that guy was a jerk," Jimmy said as we walked out of the theater.

I nodded my agreement. "I wish the new Matrix movie was out already and we'd been able to see that instead."

"It's a date, man. Think Lois'll let you go to the midnight showing that Thursday night?"

I shrugged. "Don't see why not." It wasn't like I'd ask her. Tell her maybe. Leave her a note when I left, but ask permission? Not so much.

I was still irritated with her from earlier. She'd been annoyed with me for months because I hadn't been a dad to Christopher and now that I was being one, she was still annoyed with me. I couldn't win with her.

I sighed. "Wanna go shoot some hoops or something?" I asked Jimmy.

"Lois doesn't want you home?"

I shrugged. "Guys' night out."

He grinned. "Let's go."

We stopped by the Planet to change clothes before heading to the park.

Two hours later, I made it home. I grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and headed for the main staircases in the front of the house. The pile of mail on the little table caught my eye. The only reason anyone left any mail there was if it was for me or Lois.

I flipped through them as I headed up the stairs. Car insurance bill. Junk mail. Junk mail. Insurance claim for one of Christopher's doctor appointments.

One for me.

That was odd. I didn't recognize the return address but shrugged mentally and opened it anyway. I stopped midstair as I read the beginning of the letter.

He was getting more creative with his mailings. This one was addressed to me and sent from — I checked again — Chicago.

I headed back downstairs and to the basement. Having skimmed through the letter and finding nothing really new in it, I handed it over to the night security guard in the security office down there.

This letter threatened mainly me and Christopher, leaving Lois out of it this time.

I headed into our room and straight to the bathroom to take a shower and get ready for bed. When I headed back into the room, I noticed Lois was nowhere to be seen. I'd expected her to be in bed and wasn't sure how I hadn't noticed that the covers weren't even messed up when I walked through the first time.

I looked around and found her sitting on the veranda just staring into space with a blanket wrapped around her.

I sighed. I should probably tell her about the letter. I headed out there.

"What do you want?" she asked without preamble.

I leaned against the railing, facing the house. "I got a letter."

"Why do I care?"

"Because it threatened my son."

I could see her eyes fill with tears but she still didn't look at me. "Did you take it downstairs?"

"Yeah."

"Then there's nothing else to do." She pulled her blanket a

little more tightly around her. “Good night,” she said, clearly feeling done with the conversation.

I headed inside and pulled the covers back before flopping on the bed.

It was a long time before I finally fell asleep, but Lois still hadn’t come in. I wondered what that was about but fell asleep before coming to any conclusions.

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Part 67

Lois

~~~~~  
“What time do you get off today?” I asked Clark.

“I’m supposed to get off at five, but I may need to stay till eight.”

“I guess we better take separate cars then,” I told him, breathing a nearly inaudible sigh of relief.

He was amazing with Christopher. Even I admitted that. I wasn’t sure what had happened the day of our first ‘date’ — and I used that term loosely even in my head — but his relationship with my son had done a one-eighty. He had foregone any time set aside for studying without him, choosing instead to take care of him at every opportunity. It was to the point at times that the only thing I was needed for was to nurse him. He got up with him in the middle of the night and I could hear him talking quietly, telling him bedtime stories or something of that nature and only coming to get me if and when it became apparent that he really wanted to eat.

I was grateful. I was so tired. I’d been up so often with him the first few weeks, and combined with the stress of the rest of my life, sleep wasn’t something that came easily — or well. The medication Kristi had put me on was helping; life was easier to deal with than it had been in the few weeks — months — before that appointment.

I’d never been... suicidal or anything like that, but I had wondered if things would be better for my son — for Clark — for everyone — if something happened to me. A car accident or something of that nature. Then Navance wouldn’t be after me — and Christopher would probably be safe. Clark could go back to Lana and the three of them, and Lana’s baby, could have the perfect life.

Lana was pregnant.

Martha had told me the night before while Clark was out with Jimmy. Apparently, Clark had known for a while. That would certainly explain his even more extreme moodiness during the last few weeks.

I tried not to think about it as I drove towards the Daily Planet, Clark right behind me in his truck.

I’d heard of relationships that were one way in public and another in private and that was how we were. I was sure that most of those relationships were abusive in nature, but Clark and I weren’t like that. We simply ignored each other if we weren’t in front of others and we spent as much time alone together as possible because we couldn’t afford a rift that could be exploited by Navance.

He sent letters every few weeks. His nephew had stopped me a couple of times already during the fall semester. He’d sent a gift after Christopher was born. That was turned over to the State Department and I hadn’t seen it again. I’d talked to Daniel and Jill on a fairly regular basis and the gun leads had gone nowhere. They hadn’t been able to tell us much, but the little we had been told said that there was no connection to be found to Mindy or Navance or anything else. Any shipments of guns had been either stopped or rerouted or something once Clark and I were discovered on the plane. They were keeping eyes and ears open, but Daniel didn’t hold out much hope at the moment.

And the night before when Clark had told me about the letter, he said that Navance had threatened *his* son. Not my son or our

son, but *his* son. I wasn’t sure what to make of that except to further reinforce that I was unnecessary to his son’s life. I was... expendable. I didn’t let myself dwell on that, though. I knew it was dangerous to my mental health to do so.

I spent my morning making photocopies and typing up notes for... some bigwig upstairs. I didn’t know who and didn’t really care. Clark made his rounds of the floor, dropping a few letters here and there. Most of the clerical staff didn’t get much mail.

“This came for you,” he said quietly, startling me out of my work.

I glanced up at him, leaning against the wall of my cubicle. I reached for the letter and blanched when I realized who it was from. He’d made it to my place of employment. One letter for each of us in two days. That was new.

“Why me?” I whispered, tears springing to my eyes.

“He fixated on you,” Clark said with a shrug.

“No, he fixated on my son,” I reminded him, swiping at my eyes. I couldn’t do this — not here, not now. Clark sighed and rested his hand on my shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“I won’t let him get to Christopher.”

I didn’t say anything. It was the first time he’d said anything of that nature and not included me in the statement. He’d protect my son, but would he do whatever it took to protect me?

But, I conceded to myself, my previous statement hadn’t said anything about me, just Christopher and he was probably responding solely to that comment and not in general.

Right?

“I have work to do,” I told him. “I’ll send it to Jerry over at the FBI. Maybe I can get a restraining order against him or something — or against his nephew and then they’ll have to leave me alone.”

“Lois.” I heard Rehalia calling for me.

“I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.” I stood and headed to the office in the corner of the room.

“Is everything okay?” she asked in her accented English.

I nodded. “I got a letter delivered here that upset me. I’ll be fine.”

“Good. Now, Billy Norcross needs some help with some stuff and he requested you.”

I smiled. He was a nice guy and word around the office said that he and Serena had finally had their first date a couple weeks before. “Okay, I’m on my way.”

I headed down to the newsroom floor and found Billy. I spent the next hour working with him and Serena on a project. I could see the glances between them and the few whispers they shared from time to time.

Finally, Billy pushed back from his desk. “Lunch time.”

“Lunch time?” Jimmy had been passing by but instead screeched to a stop. “Really?”

The three of us laughed. “Come on, Jim. Why don’t you two come with us and we’ll go to Callard’s for lunch?”

I ran up the stairs and grabbed my purse before heading back down to the lobby to meet the other three.

I came to a halt when I noticed Clark standing with them.

~~~~~  
Clark

They’d said they were waiting on someone else, but I had no idea it was Lois and I could tell she had no idea I was going with them either.

“Hey,” she said smiling brightly. “Are you coming with us?”

“Looks that way,” I said, a grin on my face. I’d been heading out to grab a quick bite when Jimmy stopped me and asked if I wanted to join them. I hadn’t hesitated before agreeing.

Lois and I had agreed, in one of the very few conversations we’d had that didn’t revolve around Christopher, that work was work and our relationship had nothing to do with work — it should be completely professional, but we hadn’t discussed

situations like this.

She moved ahead of me, chatting easily with Billy and Serena as I walked next to Jimmy a few steps behind. It wasn't long before we were seated around a table on the patio of the restaurant.

"So," Jimmy said after the waiter left, "Lois, you said you and Clark are related?"

I was talking about the World Series game the night before with Billy, but I heard that. She had told Jimmy we were related? Why hadn't he asked me?

"Actually, I said 'you could say that,'" Lois told him.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Okay, so spill it. Brother-in-law?"

She shook her head and took a sip of her water, before holding up her left hand. "Husband."

All conversation ceased and the awkward silence extended longer than any of us could have expected.

Serena turned around to pick her purse off her chair. "Well, Clark, trade me seats. You should be sitting by your wife."

Lois put her hand on Serena's arm. "It's okay. Really. We decided to downplay our relationship at work and keep it strictly professional. We see each other all the time at home and I'd like to chat a bit more with you, if that's okay with you, honey?" I could see the threat in her eyes if I dared to disagree, even as she smiled at me.

I smiled back. "That's right."

I turned back to Billy and the conversations resumed on other topics.

As we ate, Serena brought up a piece Perry had assigned to them. "It's the Coates Orphanage piece. I'm not quite sure what angle to take. They're pushing for more open adoptions and I don't know if that's a good thing or not. I can see the benefit of an open adoption but... Would the adoptive parents be more comfortable with closed adoptions? Are they comfortable with this woman — or man — who isn't able to take care of a baby for whatever reason still being a large part of the child's life? Are all parents who are giving the child up for adoption fit to be a part of the child's life? Are open adoptions going to be the only option in the future? I just don't know enough about all of it and I don't know anyone who was adopted to ask on a personal level, without the pressure of potentially spilling their true, innermost thoughts to a reporter."

"I was adopted," I said quietly, startling all of them. "But I'm not sure that my situation would help you any."

"Why is that?" Billy asked.

I glanced at Lois and launched into the official story. "So, my parents knew who my birth parents were but there was no family left or anything. There was no birth parents to keep in contact with, no grandparents to get medical history from or anything like that."

"My brother was adopted," Jimmy said suddenly. "An open adoption would have saved his life."

"Would you tell me about it?" Serena asked softly.

Jimmy leaned back in his chair and fiddled with his napkin. "My parents couldn't have kids so they adopted a baby boy. All they knew was the... vital statistics, I guess you'd say, of the mom. She was in high school, white, fairly well-off, but for whatever reason, didn't want to — or wasn't able to — keep him so she gave him up for adoption."

I could tell he was fighting to keep tears out of his eyes.

"When he was seven, my mom got pregnant with me. It was a complete shock. They'd been to all kinds of doctors who listed the odds of the two of them having a baby together as next to none. It was a combination of both of them — not one problem, but several that together were seemingly insurmountable. My grandma — my dad's mom — even accused my mom of having an affair, but Mom hadn't, of course, and Dad knew that. My brother and I... We were absolutely inseparable. He took care of

me and let me tag along with him even though he was so much older than me. When I was seven, he was diagnosed with leukemia and died waiting for a bone marrow transplant."

I looked at Lois and could see her face growing whiter with each sentence.

"A couple years ago, my mom got a phone call from this guy who was my brother's birth mother's husband. They'd dated in high school, she'd moved away, gotten pregnant when a guy basically forced himself on her and couldn't bear to tell this other guy. She gave my brother up for adoption and eventually they got married and had a couple kids of their own. Two girls. This guy said that my brother's birth mom and one of his half-sisters were in a car accident I guess about nine years ago now. It turns out that the mom or the other half-sister would have been matches for my brother, but we were never able to find them and he didn't know about my brother until after his wife died and didn't look until a few years later when it was too late. He and my parents talked a few times and he said that, someday, he'd like to get to know our family. He hadn't known about my brother but he would have married his mom and I have to say I'm kind of glad he didn't know because then he wouldn't have been my brother, even if he would probably still be alive."

I didn't think Lois could get any more pale and tears were streaming down her cheeks. Serena and Billy both looked appropriately sad, but Lois' reaction was more than would be expected.

Jimmy looked at her and reached over to squeeze her hand. "Hey, it's okay. It's been a long time now and I don't have any hard feelings or anything like that. I know they would have done something if they'd known, but they didn't and that's just the way things are."

Lois swiped at her cheeks. "Jimmy, there's something I have to ask you."

I knew what was coming.

"Sure," he said. "Anything."

She took a deep breath and didn't look at him as she spoke. "Was your brother's name Dave?"

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Part 68

Lois

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Jimmy stared at me. "How did you know that?"

"Was his mom's husband Dr. Sam Lane?" I asked, my heart in my throat.

"Yes," he answered warily.

Tears kept flowing and I knew I wouldn't be able to stop them. "He was my half-brother," I whispered.

"What?" Jimmy's face blanched.

"My dad is Sam Lane. My mom had a baby her senior year of high school. She gave him up for adoption and never told my dad. She left him a letter when she died nine years ago. He found the family a couple years ago and found out that her son had died needing a bone marrow transplant about a year after the accident."

"You could have saved his life?"

I nodded, swiping at my face again. "That's what Daddy told me."

I glanced at Clark who wasn't really looking at either one of us.

"Can I get anyone anything else?" the waiter asked, picking up a couple plates as he did.

I shook my head and everyone else did, too. I dug through my purse and tossed some cash on the table and fled to the bathroom.

I closed the stall door behind me and leaned against it.

I liked Jimmy.

A lot. He was a great guy, but I'd never in my wildest dreams

imagined that he could be my half-brother's brother.

"Lois?" It was Serena.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

I opened the door and came back out. "Shocked, I guess. That was the last thing I expected to learn at lunch today."

"I can imagine," she said sympathetically. "The guys have already headed back to work; Clark can't come in here, after all. Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "Not yet and I do have to get back to work anyway." I splashed some water on my face and held a paper towel to my eyes for a minute.

"I'm sure Rehalia would understand if you wanted to go home early today."

"No, it's okay." We headed out of the bathroom and towards the Daily Planet. "The whole thing is a big reason why I couldn't give my son up for adoption. I don't know if any of this might help you, but I'd be willing to talk to you if it's okay with Jimmy and his family. I wouldn't want to make things harder for them."

"Your son?" she asked puzzled.

I tried to think quickly. "Well, our son. I didn't know I was pregnant until I was about ten weeks or so. Clark and I got married a couple days after we found out. I considered adoption, but briefly and since Clark was adopted... Well, neither one of us thought it was the right thing for us, for Christopher."

"Shotgun wedding?"

"Something like that." There'd been plenty of guns out all right. "I knew at the time that Clark was adopted but that was about it. I didn't know about the rest of his story." And *that* was the understatement of the decade.

"You two weren't a couple?"

"Not really," I said honestly. "He had a girlfriend. I had an on-again, off-again boyfriend and Clark and I got stuck at a cabin during that huge snow storm last year and we were both practically unconscious after walking half a mile or more through the blinding snow..." I let her imagine the rest. None of that was a lie.

"But you knew he was the father?"

I hesitated. "Joe and I... we didn't..."

"Ah," she said, understanding dawning.

"Anyway, he wanted to do right by me and the baby so... Here we are."

"But no one at work knows that you're married?"

I shook my head. "Not that I know of. We decided that we'd leave our relationship at the door. For the most part, it's no big deal. We don't see each other often at work. And it's not like we'd be all over each other if we were. That's just not how we are. We both wear rings. That should be enough. I don't feel the need to 'stake a claim' or anything."

"I don't think there's any doubt he's committed to you," she told me, resting a gentle hand on my forearm. "He was very concerned about you, but I told him to go ahead."

It wasn't a question, but I still felt the need to answer as we headed into the building. "Yes, he is. He's very committed to me and Christopher."

Or something like that.

He might have convinced Serena but I knew better. I knew his commitment had limits — to public displays of affection, to a time limit of five years and five years only.

I sighed as we entered the Daily Planet building and went back to work.

~~~~~  
Clark

Jimmy was quiet on the way back to the Planet and we went our separate ways when we got to the building.

When I got to the mailroom, I found out that they didn't need me and they sent me home.

I used my senses to find Christopher. He and Jessica were in the big living room while Vicki was working on dinner. I parked in my usual spot near our wing and headed in the front door.

"Hey, big guy!" I said, picking him up off the floor.

"You're home early," Jessica said with a smile as I cuddled my son.

I'd made myself start calling him that and it seemed to be sinking in. "They didn't need me anymore. You're off duty, Jess."

"Thanks. My sister called earlier wanting to know if I could go out tonight."

"Well, now you can," I said, shifting Christopher a bit so I could see him better. "Have a good night."

"You, too," she said as she left.

I wondered if I should tell Vicki or Sam what I'd learned about Jimmy. I decided it was probably Lois' place to do so and that she'd probably rather do it herself.

I headed into the kitchen. "What's for dinner?" I asked Vicki. "Spaghetti," she told me. "Nothing fancy."

"Hey, you make a great spaghetti sauce. It's almost as good as my mom's and that's not something I say lightly."

She laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment. Your mom's a great cook."

"That she is."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did she teach you?"

I nodded. "Yep."

"Then you're on KP tomorrow night."

I laughed. "Okay. What sounds good?"

"Up to you," she said. "Oh, Sam said you and Lois are heading up to the cabin next weekend."

I started slightly. "I'm not sure," I finally said.

"He said something about going to Bremerton's Fall Fest again this year. Let me know and I'll pack up some stuff for you. There's not much up there."

"Thanks, Vicki." I sniffed. "I think this little man needs a diaper change."

She smiled. "I think you're right."

I headed to the living room where there was a drawer of diaper supplies and I sat on the floor with Christopher. I'd just finished snapping his clothes back up when my phone buzzed at me. I looked to see a text message from Lois saying she wouldn't be home until later, probably late. Serena was taking her to a movie.

I typed back with my thumbs that it was fine with me. There was plenty of milk in the fridge and I knew Lois borrowed her boss' office a couple times a day on days like this to pump so that wasn't an issue either.

Christopher was a lot of fun to watch as he was starting to discover the world around him. Sam and I talked football as he played and before long, it was his bedtime. I decided that I was tired enough to head to bed myself. Saturday nights invariably found Lois wearing some kind of nightgown so being asleep before she got home would be a good idea.

I stared at the stars through the ceiling.

The letter Lois had received had shaken me more than I'd let on, especially after getting one of my own the night before. I knew she'd noticed that I'd only mentioned Christopher when I said I wouldn't let Navance get to him. I'd noticed too, but not until after it was out of my mouth and it certainly wasn't how I meant it.

I wouldn't let Navance get to her either. That's why I was married to her. And because I was married to her I did my best to do something I hadn't done enough of lately. I did my best to keep my thoughts from straying to Lana as I drifted off to sleep.

~~~~~  
Lois

I sat in the breakfast nook, staring into my cup of coffee.

"Hey, Princess," Daddy said as he walked in. "You're up

early. Did you have a good time last night?"

I nodded. "It was fun. It was nice to go out with a friend."
"I bet."

"I met someone yesterday," I blurted. "Well, I didn't meet someone, but I found out something about someone I already know."

"What's that?"

"Have Clark or I ever mentioned Jimmy to you?"

He thought for a minute. "Maybe. He works at the Planet?"

"Yeah."

"What about him?"

I took a deep breath. "He's Dave's brother."

Daddy just stared at me. "What?" he finally asked.

"We were at lunch yesterday — me and Clark and him and Billy Norcross and Serena Judd — and he started talking about his brother who had been a part of a closed adoption and how an open adoption would have saved his life. By the time he was done, I'd put two and two together."

"How do you feel about that?" he asked quietly.

"I like Jimmy a lot, but I don't know how he feels about me now. I ran off crying and I didn't see him again. He asked if I could have saved his brother's life and I told him that I thought I could have. The waiter interrupted us and I left before we could talk anymore."

"Wow." He covered my hand with his. "I'm glad you met him, though. I hope that he's okay with it. I hope you can be friends."

"Me, too. He's a good guy."

"Who is?" Clark asked, walking into the room with Christopher in his arms and a blanket thrown over one shoulder. "And someone's looking for you."

"Jimmy," I said, taking my son from him, using the blanket to shield myself from both of them as I nursed Christopher. "Did he say anything to you yesterday?"

Clark shook his head as he fixed a cup of coffee. "No. He was quiet the whole way back to work and I didn't see him again after that."

Dad stood up as the buzzer at the front gate went off. "Yes?" he said pressing the button on the wall.

"Is this the Kent residence?"

Clark and I looked at each other.

"Who's asking?" Dad asked.

"Jimmy Olsen."

Dad looked at me and I nodded. "Come on up."

Dad glanced at himself. "I think I need to go change before I meet him. I'd rather not be wearing my pajamas."

"He won't care, Dad."

"Still... Would you mind letting him in Clark?"

"Sure, no problem."

Dad headed upstairs and I took a sip of my coffee.

"You okay?" Clark asked me quietly.

I shrugged. "We'll see."

He glanced towards the front door. "He's pulling up." He stood and headed towards the front door.

I closed my eyes. I hadn't gotten home until late. It had been a good night. I'd gone to a late dinner and a movie with Serena and I'd lost myself in it. Once I'd gotten home, I sat and watched Christopher sleeping for a long time. I wasn't even sure how long. I was so glad I hadn't given him up for adoption. Regardless of the outside threats, I wouldn't have and I was glad of that.

I had finally gone back into my room and went to climb into bed only to find Clark sprawled across the whole thing. I still wasn't quite sure how he managed that since the bed was about half the size of Delaware. The blanket only covered him to the waist and, even though he was on his stomach, his physique was impressive. For a minute, I wished I was allowed to find out for

myself just how impressive... Even the next morning, I had to shake my head slightly to clear the sight of him out of my mind.

I wasn't sure why it had such an effect on me — the emotional day maybe? I'd seen him walking around shirtless more times than I could count since we'd moved in with my dad and it had never affected me like that.

"Lois is in here," I heard Clark say as footsteps approached the kitchen area.

Well, here went nothing.

~~~~~

Clark

"Hey, Jim," I said, a bit subdued.

"Nice place," he said wryly.

"It's Lois' dad's. He lets us live here while we're in college."

"Ah."

I could see the wheels turning in his head. That this was where his brother would have lived if Ellen hadn't given him up for adoption. "You should have Lois tell you the whole story sometime."

"Is she here?" he asked, showing his hands in his pockets.

"She's drinking her cup of coffee." I paused. "Her dad's here, too. He went upstairs to change because he didn't want to meet you in his pajamas."

"I don't know about this," he said suddenly. "I didn't sleep at all last night and I even hacked into the Planet's computer to get the address and came straight here as soon as I thought it was late enough, but..."

"They're nice people," I told him honestly.

"They could have saved my brother." His voice cracked as he spoke.

I nodded slowly. "If they had known, Lois would have donated her bone marrow in a second. It's not my place to tell you the whole story, but I do know that they wish they had known a lot sooner and not just because it would have saved your brother; because they really wish they had been able to know him. They've been talking about calling your folks since Lois found out she was pregnant, but I think part of the reason why is just that. That she could have helped your brother if they had known and she wonders if you and your parents resent her and Sam for that."

"I didn't," he said honestly. "Until yesterday. I don't know why it makes a difference knowing who it is, but it does." He took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's go. I want to see her and meet her dad."

"Come on in," I said opening the door behind me. We walked between the two staircases and Jimmy's eyes were wide as saucers. "Lois is in here."

A noise on the stairs stopped me and I looked up to see Sam standing there. His face was ashen and, while he looked more presentable, he didn't look good. He came down the stairs, never taking his eyes off Jimmy.

"Uh, Sam, this is Jimmy Olsen. Jimmy, this is Dr. Sam Lane."

"Hello, Jimmy," Sam said holding out his hand.

Jimmy didn't take it. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why didn't you look for him sooner?" The tears were coming, I could tell.

"I wish I had," Sam whispered. "I didn't even know about your brother until after Ellen and Lucy died. It hurt that she hadn't told me all those years and I just couldn't bring myself to look for him for a long time. All I knew was that it was a closed adoption, where he'd been born and what his birthday was. She wasn't even sure he was a boy. She'd overheard a nurse talking and thought that was what she'd heard, but she wasn't sure. She couldn't even remember the name of the agency for sure."

"My parents put the information out everywhere they could.

They went to the adoption agency and pleaded with them to open the records. The agency refused but said they'd contact his biological mother. Then all they said was that she was deceased; no information about other children or anything. They went to the courts to try to get the records unsealed so that they could contact her family themselves, but the courts refused. How'd you finally find us?"

"I hired the best private detective I know. I don't know how he found the information."

I watched as emotions played across Jimmy's face. "I want to hate you," he finally said, in a voice filled with tears.

Sam sighed heavily, tears in his own eyes. "I know. I hate me. I wish I had found Dave sooner. In time to help him."

I couldn't read the face Jimmy made then, but I couldn't stop what happened next.

Jimmy pulled back and punched Sam square in the jaw.

Sam staggered back and fell when he hit the stairs behind him.

"I deserved that," he said quietly.

"Damn right you did," Jimmy said before turning to walk out the front door.

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Part 69

Lois

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They didn't come straight into the kitchen. I heard Daddy's voice but I wasn't exactly in a position to go out there. Christopher decided he was done and I headed towards the foyer area as I lifted him to my shoulder to burp him.

I got there just in time to see Jimmy deck my dad.

"I deserved that," Dad told him.

"Damn right you did," Jimmy told him before he turned to leave.

All I could do was stare.

"Go with him, Clark," Dad said as he took Clark's offered hand and stood up.

"Are you sure?" Clark asked, a concerned look on his face.

Dad nodded. "He needs a friend."

I headed to the kitchen, knowing Dad was right behind me, and got a package of peas out of the freezer. "Here. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What was that all about?"

Dad sighed as he sat at the bar. "He's mad that I didn't look for them right after I found out. They tried to find your mom and any other relatives but couldn't. The courts wouldn't open the records and all the agency would say was that she was deceased. If I'd looked for him when I first found out, there's a good chance that Dave would still be here today."

"I thought you stopped beating yourself up for that a long time ago," I told him. We'd been over this repeatedly when we first found out the whole story.

"I did. *Jimmy*, on the other hand, had at least one punch he needed to get out. He said he was okay with whoever it was, in theory, but to actually talk to someone and know... It was too much for him. And I understand that. He needs to blame me and, to be honest, sometimes, I still do, too."

"I'm sorry, sir." The voice surprised us.

Jimmy and Clark had come into the kitchen from behind both of us.

"Nothing to apologize for," Dad told him.

"No, there is. Violence isn't the answer."

Dad got a funny half-smile on his face. "No, it's not, but it sure does feel good to deck someone every once in a while."

"Who have you ever punched?" I asked him, incredulous.

He turned serious again. "Dave's biological father. The letter Ellen left didn't tell me who he was, but she did say that the

agency had a record of him. He denied paternity, but she knew that's who it was — there hadn't been anyone else. When Steve, my P. I. friend, found Dave, he found his... sperm donor as well. The man was never a father in any sense of the word. It turns out, I knew him distantly. He was the friend of a friend of a friend who'd been here once or twice after Ellen died for fundraisers and stuff like that."

Clark and Jimmy took seats around the bar with us.

"The next time I saw him, I asked him if he ever knew Ellen Wright. He got this look on his face and said that the last time he saw her, she was knocked up and he was denying it was his kid and..." He stopped and looked at me. "He said some rather unflattering things about your mom and I punched him." He shrugged. "I shouldn't have and he tried to have me charged with assault but the DA — a friend of his, I might add — laughed at him. Apparently, he was quite the love 'em and leave 'em guy even that recently. He has several biological children he never sees and doesn't support."

"What a scum," I said, certain the disdain was obvious to everyone.

"The only good thing is that he gave me my brother then," Jimmy said. "He may have been a Neanderthal, but without him..."

"No Dave," Dad finished for him.

"Right."

"I wish I could have known him," Dad told Jimmy. "I love Lois more than life and I loved Lucy the same way, but I always wanted a son, too." He looked at me and shrugged. "It's a guy thing, I guess. I wouldn't have traded either one of you for anything, but I would have liked a son to add to the bunch."

"Why didn't you have any more kids?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Lucy's pregnancy almost killed Mom," I told him.

"It wasn't quite that bad, Pumpkin," Dad said. "But it was pretty bad and we decided that we'd be happy with the two God gave us."

"If she'd told you then, would you have tried to get my brother back?"

Dad shook his head. "No. He was your brother and, if anything had happened to your mom and dad after we'd found him again, he would have always had a home with us — you, too, as his brother — but his home was with your family. That was one of the things that prompted me to go ahead and look for him. The idea that what if something had happened to his family and he was adrift in foster homes or something like that. I couldn't bear the thought of that when we have so much. It didn't occur to me until later that he was over eighteen by then."

"Can you tell me about him, Jimmy?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not now. Not yet. I need to get used to this first." He stood up and looked around anxiously. "I don't suppose you have a punching bag somewhere? I'd really rather not hit you again, but I need to burn some energy."

"What time do you have to go to work?" Clark asked.

"I'm off today."

"I don't have to go in for a while. Would shooting some hoops help?"

He nodded.

"I'll be right back." Clark had started towards the stairs when I stopped him.

"Will you see if Jessica can take Christopher then? I have to be at work in an hour."

Dad shooed Clark off. "I got him."

Clark nodded and headed for the other part of the house.

"I don't want you to think I don't like you anymore, Lois," Jimmy said suddenly.

"It's a lot to take in," I told him. "I wouldn't blame you if you didn't like me very much right now."

"I knew that Dave had a half-sister and I thought that it

would be kind of cool if I knew her and maybe she could be sort of my sister, too, but... I don't know that you want that and that's okay."

I smiled at him. "I would like that, Jimmy. Whenever you're ready."

~~~~~  
Clark

I changed into shorts and a tank top. It was cool outside, but we'd be playing basketball so I could say that the exercise kept me warm.

I headed back downstairs and Jimmy and I went out back to the court.

We played for nearly an hour before he finally called a halt to the game. We hadn't kept score, but I was pretty sure I was winning.

We sat on the bench with a water bottle each.

"You realize this makes us practically brothers, right?" Jimmy said after a swig.

I chuckled. "That's one way to look at it, I guess."

"Lois and I have both lost a sibling," he said quietly.

"Technically, she's lost two, except she never knew Dave."

"She's told me several times she wishes she had. She wishes she would have been able to help him."

Jimmy sighed. "I'll be able to put that behind me — I promise — it's just going to take some time. I like her and I'm sure I can like Sam, it's just not going to happen over a game of basketball."

I chuckled. "I can imagine it'll take a bit more than that."

"What about you?" he asked quietly.

"What about me?" I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"Your adoption story. Do you ever wonder about your parents?"

I sighed. I couldn't tell him everything, but I had to tell him something — more than the bare bones official story.

"It was different," I told him. "My parents saved me, really, by giving me to my mom and her first husband. My parents weren't going to be able to take care of me — and they died shortly after they gave me to Mom and Chris." The planet exploded, I added mentally. "Neither of them had any family who could take me, and there was no way to contact anyone or anything like that. Mom and Chris — and later, Mom and Dad — were the best parents I could have asked for, hands down."

"Have you ever wanted to know more about them?"

"Nearly every day, but my parents have told me everything they knew and there's no one else to talk to."

I would give just about anything to know why *I*, out of everyone on Krypton, had been allowed to live. Why *I* had been put in a ship and sent out into the vast expanse of outer space to land on Earth. Why couldn't they have built a ship big enough for all of us? Or at least for the brother I'd never known?

I'd lost a sibling I'd never known, too. He was in the holograms — probably fifteen years old or so. More than old enough to know what was happening. He worked hard on my ship, just like Jor-El and Lara had. He looked about like I had when I was his age. Enough that we were twins separated by the years. Down to the mole above my lip — he'd had one, too.

I wondered all of those things. I wondered if I might get more information from the globe at some point, but I'd stared at it so often. I'd touched it, pressed every spot, every combination of spots. I'd even yelled at it, thrown it against a steel door, thrown it to outer space.

I'd gone after it, of course.

I'd cajoled, begged, pleaded, bargained.

But nothing.

Nothing else.

Jimmy startled me out of my reverie. "Ready?"

I nodded and took another drink of my water. "Let's go."

~~~~~

Lois

It was well after dark before Clark and I were both in our room again.

It was Saturday, so I was wearing a satin nightgown.

Normally, Clark was either asleep before I got to our room or didn't come in until after I was asleep.

I was watching mindless television, stretched out on the couch, secure in the knowledge that he wouldn't be there and so had dispensed with the uncomfortable robe. Well, it wasn't uncomfortable, but the way it hung, it bunched up on my arms and was just flat-out annoying.

So I was sitting there on the couch, in a gown that came to about my knees if I was standing up. It was held up by only spaghetti straps and showed more cleavage than I was comfortable with.

When he walked in, though, I decided I didn't care.

I was his wife and it wasn't like I was actually trying to seduce him or anything like that, but I wasn't going to move when I was supremely comfortable.

He sat in one of the chairs and didn't look at me.

"There's something I never told you," he suddenly said.

"Is it something I care about?"

"Maybe."

I lifted the remote and turned the TV off. "Then what is it?"

"I had a brother."

I sat up a bit straighter. "What?"

"My parents left me some messages with my ship and part of what I found out about myself was that I have — I had — a brother. He was probably fifteen or so and looked a lot like me. I have no idea why they couldn't save both of us. Or themselves. Or anything else. All I know is that I had a brother and that I was the only one from Krypton who made it off the planet alive."

"I'm sorry," I told him honestly. "How long have you known?"

"Since I was about sixteen or so, I guess."

"Why didn't you say something the first time I told you about Dave?"

He shrugged. "It's not something I think about very often. It didn't occur to me. And, of course, you didn't know about the whole 'alien from another planet' thing at the time either."

That made sense. There would have really been no way for him to tell me about it all then. "I'm sorry," I said again. "Really, I am."

"It was a long time ago, I guess. I don't even know how long ago. For all I know, the planet exploded thousands or more years ago and I lived in some sort of suspended animation until I got here nineteen years ago." He sighed and sat back, really looking at me for the first time since he'd walked in the door. I could see the shock flit across his face, but he recovered well and averted his eyes. "Anyway, I told Jimmy about my adoption — at least the official story — today and I thought about him. Van-El was his name, I think."

He knew his brother's name? Did he know his own? "What was your name?"

He didn't say anything for a long minute. "Kal-El. My Kryptonian name was Kal-El."

"Wow."

"El was the family name, I guess. Like Kent or Lane or something."

"So your name is Kal. Your birth name?"

"I guess so. It doesn't seem like my name — you know? It doesn't mean anything to me. I didn't know Van-El or Jor-El, my father, or Lara, my mother. They're just names and pictures."

"You have pictures of them?" I was surprised. Not that he'd ever shown them to me, but I would have thought Martha would have mentioned it or something.

“Something like that. There’s things, I just... know,” he finally said. “I can’t explain how I know them; I just do. Like osmosis or something.”

I just stared at the fireplace. There was no fire in it, but we’d be building them soon enough. He’d lost a brother, too.

I sighed. “I think I’m going to go to bed,” I finally said. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“I can imagine,” he said quietly. “Jimmy wants to be your friend. Eventually. He just needs some time.”

“I’m glad.” I headed to the bed and crawled in. I stared at the wall in front of me and it was a long time before Clark decided it was time for him to go to bed as well.

There was a swooshing sound as he changed his clothes and then I felt his side of the bed depress. “Good night,” he finally said.

He hadn’t said good night to me in eons. I wasn’t sure the last time he had, but if I had to guess, probably weeks before Christopher was born.

“Good night, Clark,” I said back. “I really am sorry about Van-El.”

“Thanks.”

I puzzled over the developments of the evening but was asleep before I could come to any conclusions.

Part 70

December 2003

Clark

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I unloaded the back of the Jeep and took the suitcases upstairs. Lois, Christopher and I had spent a couple of days at the cabin. It had been nice in a way. Lois and Christopher had stayed in her room and I’d stayed in Lucy’s room. We wouldn’t be able to do that when we went up for Christmas. My parents and Granny Kent were coming, too. Mom and Dad would be in Lucy’s room, I’d imagine. Granny would have one of the other two rooms. I’d found out over the weekend that Ollie, Vicki and the boys went to her parents’ home in Virginia for Christmas every year so they wouldn’t be there.

I wasn’t looking forward to Christmas this year.

That was unusual. I always looked forward to Christmas.

Except this year.

I’d gotten a phone call from Mom a few days earlier. Lana had been in a car accident and lost her baby. My heart broke for her. Instead of celebrating our first Christmas as a married couple, she was recovering from the loss of her unborn child and I was married to someone else with a baby of my own.

This time the year before, I’d been looking forward to ring shopping and asking her to be my wife, but so much had changed since then.

I thought about the snow globe I bought in Paris the day we got there — the day before my life went to hell in a hand basket. It was still hidden among the things I’d moved from the dorm room. What was I supposed to do with it?

I could give it to her. I couldn’t do anything else with it — wouldn’t be able to bring myself to do anything else with it — except donate it to charity or something. Maybe I could give it to her anonymously. Drop it off at her house with no note or anything. She’d know who it was from because we’d looked at it together and she’d commented on it — how much she liked it. I’d told her maybe Santa would get it for her if she was good. She’d moved closer to me and whispered that she planned on being very good, right before she kissed me.

I shook my head slightly as I set the bags down in our room.

“What are we doing for Christmas presents, Clark?”

Lois’ voice startled me.

“What?”

“Everyone’s going to expect us to give each other something

deep and meaningful on our first Christmas together. What is it that we’re going to do exactly?”

I sighed. “Whatever you think is best.”

She gave me an exasperated look as she put Christopher — freshly changed — on the blanket on the floor. “What do you want? Do you want me to get you something or would you rather buy something yourself and I’ll wrap it up and give it to you?”

“Whichever you want to do.” I didn’t care. I should, but I didn’t. Not just then.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Go get something you want, something that I could give you that you’d really like and that would show how well I know you and I’ll do the same.”

The idea had merit. Didn’t it? I sighed. “We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“If Navance finds out we bought our own gifts...”

She sighed. “Fine, tell me what you want and I’ll get it for you.”

“How about a new leather jacket?” I put my finger through the new hole in the one I’d taken off a few minutes earlier. “This one’s toast.”

“Fine. Leather jacket it is.”

“What about you?”

She shrugged. “Get me some jewelry or something — a mother’s necklace or something like that and call it good.”

I nodded. That was a good idea.

She pulled her shirt over her head as she walked into the bathroom. I didn’t think she realized I was watching, but it shocked me a bit to see her back marred only by a bra strap.

~~~~~

Lois

I sighed. At least the Christmas thing was taken care of.

I could strip in front of him and he wouldn’t notice.

I edited the thought. He’d notice, but he wouldn’t care. He wouldn’t... do anything about it.

We were coming up on our first anniversary and my husband was still a vir... vir... I couldn’t even bring myself to think it really — a very patient man. Or something like that.

That wouldn’t be the case if he hadn’t called me by his ex-girlfriend’s name the only time we’d ever *really* kissed. Sure we ‘kissed’ all the time in front of others, but those were the only kisses we’d shared that were only for us. Well, for Clark and Lana.

And I’d loved every second of it.

He’d made my toes curl in a way Joe never had.

Maybe it was because there were rings on our fingers and so it was ‘okay’, legal even. Maybe it was because I was pregnant at the time and more sensitive to those kinds of things. Maybe it was because he was hot. Maybe it was because he knew how to kiss. Maybe it was because I had a baby and wanted to know what sex was like.

Or maybe it was because I was in love with my husband.

I sat straight up in the tub as that thought filled my head.

Was I in love with Clark?

No. I wasn’t.

But I was well on my way.

The realization startled me.

I wasn’t quite sure how that was possible, given the extremely strained relationship that existed behind closed doors.

But I suddenly knew that every time I saw him with Christopher, I fell a little more in love with him.

I leaned back again in the tub, letting the water and bubbles cover me.

He was great with Christopher. Once he got over the snit he’d been in the first couple months, they’d been inseparable when Clark was home. Unless Christopher was nursing, of course.

Tears began to leak out of the corners of my eyes. I was falling in love with my husband and he couldn’t stand to look at

me.

Why couldn't something in my life be easy?

Things were going well with Jimmy, I thought. That was nice. After a couple of days, he and I had gone out together in our first official 'practically siblings' outing. We'd done something together about once a week and he'd joined us for Thanksgiving since his parents were both out of town that weekend.

He and Dad had spent some quality time together and had been laughing and joking by the end of the weekend and Jimmy had a standing invitation to our house and his own code to the front gate — and even our wing — so he could let himself in whenever he wanted. He and Clark did something together once a week or more, too. Usually they played basketball or some other 'guy thing'. That was about the only other time Clark let Christopher out of his sight. Jimmy was probably joining us at Christmas, as well — along with Clark's family. His dad was stationed overseas and his mom had been able to visit for Thanksgiving and it looked like she'd be able to for Christmas as well.

So there was one part of my life that was going better than expected.

And Christopher was doing well. He was a wonderful baby. I thought Clark helped with that; he doted on — I hesitated then continued the thought — his son.

I wondered again what it was going to be like in four and a half years when Clark left. Lana's baby would be three or so. My son would have a step-brother or sister. Unless something changed drastically, there was no way I'd keep Christopher from the only father he'd ever know.

Having realized that I was falling in love with Clark, would I be able to move on? I knew Joe was dating Debbie — seriously this time — so even if I wanted to go try again with him, and he was willing to take on a step-son, it didn't look like that was a possibility.

Deep inside, I realized that it was unlikely that I would move on. Clark would always be a part of my life — as long as he was part of Christopher's. I'd see him on days when he had visitation or two weeks during the summer or whatever.

Would he want to live with Clark?

The thought surprised me. I'd always assumed I'd have custody and I didn't think Clark would push to have it any other way, but what if he decided he wanted to live with his dad?

The tears came again. Of course. He'd probably want to live with his dad.

My life couldn't turn out any other way.

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Clark

"Pretty cool, isn't it, Jim?" I asked with a grin.

He looked at the cabin as we got out of the car, his eyes wide. "Yeah."

My parents and Granny had come the day before and driven up with Sam. Lois and Christopher had come up earlier in the morning and I was driving up with Jimmy after work.

"When you said cabin..." His voice trailed off.

"Yeah, that's what I thought the first time Lois said something about it. The reality is very different."

"When was the first time you came up here? Honeymoon?"

I hesitated. "Um, no. We got stuck in that huge snowstorm last year and ended up here. We — literally — barely survived."

"Your anniversary is coming up, isn't it?" he asked as he hoisted a bag out of the back.

"Early January." Great. Maybe we could avoid gifts for that and just tell everyone we exchanged them in private. Wasn't one year paper? I could get her a copy of the Daily Planet or something.

I sighed. I hated who I was becoming. I was being snippy with her, even in my own head.

Of course, we rarely spoke in private, so I wasn't usually snippy with her in person. In public — outside work — we were the perfect loving couple. We held hands, I put my arm around her as we walked on campus, we smiled at each other, we hugged, we kissed hello and goodbye — on the corner of the mouth most of the time.

In private...

It reminded me of the movie 'Dave'. The president and his wife waved to the assembled masses as they walked into the White House and then split and went their separate ways. We didn't *really* go separate ways, but we would take our own laptops and surf the 'net or do homework or Lois would write or whatever. She'd done the National Novel Writing Month thing in November, writing 50,000 words of an NCIS story during the month. I wasn't sure how she'd managed that. Part of me wondered if she'd let me read it or if she was planning on posting it online. I'd kept an eye on the main NCIS-fic websites and hadn't seen anything yet I thought might be hers.

That had kept her busy. I watched sports or read a book or whatever. We were in the same room, but I couldn't remember the last real conversation we'd had that didn't revolve around Christopher or schedules or things of that nature.

No — the last real conversation we'd had was when I told her about my brother.

I grabbed another bag out of the trunk and shut it, leading Jimmy inside. We waved hello to everyone — introductions would come when our hands were empty — and headed up the stairs. Granny had the room closest to the stairs so Jimmy took the one on the end.

We set his things down in there and went back down stairs, interrupting a rousing game of Imaginiff to give hugs to my family and introduce them to Jimmy.

Dinner was ready not too much later and Christopher joined us at the table. Mom took over the job of feeding him his baby cereal, something I knew Lois was only too glad to hand off. He never ate well for her. I thought he preferred to nurse when Lois was around.

And really, who could blame him?

I stopped, fork halfway to my mouth. Where had that thought come from? I recovered quickly and dinner was over before I knew it.

Jimmy and I were on wood duty and we went outside, getting enough to make sure all the rooms were stocked.

Dad had told me their room was fine and so was Sam's. That left Granny and Jimmy and Lois' room. I still couldn't bring myself to call it 'our room'. We'd been several times since we'd gotten married and the only time we'd actually shared a room was when her dad had been there, too. I'd offered to sleep on the floor, but we'd agreed that it probably wasn't the best idea.

When had I started thinking a king size bed was small?

Usually it was Lois, but nearly every night, one of us somehow maneuvered a pillow into the middle of the bed, marking a no-man's land that neither of us crossed.

Would it always be like this? Would I ever know what a *real* marriage was like? Would Lana even be willing to take me back when she knew the whole story? And if she wouldn't, would Lois and I stay together for Christopher's sake? Would she want to?

Would I want to if life continued like this for the next four and a half years?

We weren't friends anymore even. Our relationship last Christmas was a *lot* closer than it was this Christmas, even though we'd been married for nearly a year.

I sighed as I headed into our room — I made myself say it. Lois was in the bathroom, but as I looked around I realized something was off.

"Where's Christopher?" I called.

"Upstairs with your parents," she called back.

“Why?”

“Your mom wanted to give us some time alone while we’re here.”

“Ah ”

I heard her heading towards the bedroom.

“If that’s okay with you, of course.”

I glanced over at her and did a double take.

She was leaning casually against the door frame wearing a short, red satin nightgown, the matching robe slung over her shoulder.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was out to seduce me.

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Part 71

Lois

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I was slightly gratified to see his eyes widen when I walked out of the bathroom.

I would admit — under extreme duress — to putting a bit of an extra swing in my hips as I headed for the bed.

“Are you building a fire?” I asked as I tossed the robe on the nightstand.

“Do you want one?”

“Are you planning on keeping me warm?” I asked before I could think about it, but remaining careful not to put much of any kind of inflection in my voice.

A minute later, I was climbing under the covers and Clark was building a fire.

That answered that question.

I snuggled down under the warm blanket, almost resenting the fire.

Why was I falling love Clark?

I’d been asking myself that since I’d come to the realization that I was.

This time last year, sure. Then I could see how I could have been falling in love with him. *I hadn’t* been, I told myself adamantly. I hadn’t been falling in love with him at the cabin last year.

Had I?

I relived it in my mind.

No, I hadn’t been. I hadn’t been in love with anyone. Not Clark and not Joe.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

So why on Earth was I falling in love Clark?

I hadn’t been able to make myself really face that question.

Was it because he was a good father?

Was it because he was hot?

It certainly wasn’t because we’d gotten close enough that falling in love was the next natural step.

I stifled another sigh.

I’d known he was... worth looking at since I met him.

And he was growing into a great dad. He loved Christopher so much — and I didn’t think it had anything to do with the fact that we’d named him after Clark’s first father. Second father, I corrected myself.

I’d been a bit riskier with my selection of a nightgown for the evening, but we never knew when we’d see someone in the middle of the night — especially if Christopher was in someone else’s care. *Most* of the time he slept through the night, but sometimes he woke up and wanted to nurse. If Martha or Jonathan had to come get me in the middle of the night, flannel pajamas wouldn’t cut it.

I probably could have found something... appropriately Christmas-y and still a bit more... modest or whatever, but I hadn’t had much time to do so and, for a minute or two when I bought it, I wondered what Clark would do if I showed up in one of the much more risqué ones some night.

Probably the same thing he’d done when he saw me in this

nightgown. Slightly raised brow and back to whatever he was doing.

I wondered what he’d do if I kissed him and told him I wanted to make love to me.

Would it really be making love though?

I was rapidly coming to the conclusion that I didn’t really *love* him — not yet — but I was attracted to him — what red-blooded female wouldn’t be? — and that I was attracted to his abilities as a father.

Whatever label I wanted to put on it, I wondered what would happen if I just... attacked him one night.

I pushed the thought out of my mind.

I knew what would happen.

Nothing.

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Clark

What was going on in that head of hers?

I’d never been able to figure her out and this was no exception.

“Are you building a fire?” she asked, as she headed towards the bed in that short, red thing.

“Do you want one?” I asked her, wondering what she was up to.

“Are you planning on keeping me warm?” she asked without looking at me. Her tone seemed carefully neutral to me.

We both knew the answer to that and I started building a fire. Since it was just the two of us, I used my eyes to start the fire, lighting it in different places until it was roaring. I moved back a bit and stared at the dancing flames for a long time, until I heard Lois’ even breathing behind me indicating that she’d managed to fall asleep.

Motherhood — and the resultant changes in her body — agreed with Lois. She’d been pretty before and she still was.

The intellectual part of my mind had even noticed that she still had great legs.

Not that I’d ever spent a lot of time looking at her legs. Not that I currently spent much time looking at her legs.

And they were better than Lana’s legs.

I wasn’t sure what had brought that thought on, anymore than I knew what had brought on the thought about Christopher nursing at dinner.

Was I attracted to Lois?

Sure.

Was she my wife?

Yes.

Was Lana waiting for me to be free again?

No.

Did that mean I was going to do anything about it with Lois? Absolutely not.

My parents had never really made a secret of their... intimate life. Not that they were ever inappropriate or anything like that, but I always knew whatever was age appropriate for me to know. They’d both had the birds and the bees talks with me and, while they didn’t say that I should wait for marriage — something Lana and I had already decided when the marriage-specific conversations were had — they’d always reinforced that sex wasn’t something to be taken lightly. They’d always added the ‘especially not for you’ caveat to that as well. My differences added another level of... caution for me.

From the time I was old enough to talk about the possibility of making love with someone, they’d told me that it was my decision, but that it wouldn’t be fair or right for me to be with a girl like that without having told her about myself first. Among *many* other reasons, no birth control was 100% effective and there was always a *chance* that I could get a girl pregnant and she deserved to know the possibilities that went with that.

Personally, I’d always had my doubts that I’d be able to

father children. Even though I looked like a human male, I wasn't. I wasn't human and the odds that I'd be able to have a baby with a human female just seemed to be very low.

Regardless, I'd never planned on making love with anyone but Lana and we'd long planned on waiting until our wedding night and I was going to tell her about myself long before we got married so it wouldn't be an issue.

My parents had understood about the cabin. The official story about the cabin. Why I'd been with Lois — made Christopher together — without telling her about myself.

I hadn't been with her, of course, except in the weird dream state and that didn't count, but they didn't know that. And they knew that Lois hadn't been feeling well enough to... do those kinds of things for the first few months of our marriage. By the time Lois started feeling better, I'd told her.

And it wasn't like I was going to get her more pregnant if we'd been having sex before I had.

I closed my eyes and the sight of Lois standing there came unbidden.

I sighed and decided it was time to go to bed. To go to my own side of the bed and stay there.

Just like I always had.

Just like I always would.

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Lois

"Merry Christmas, little man," I whispered as I changed Christopher's diaper Christmas morning. "It's your first Christmas. You won't remember any of it, but I hope you know how much I love you. How much Clark loves you."

I tucked his toes into a Christmas sleeper — green velvet-y type material with reindeer on the toes and a candy cane on the tushie.

I snapped it up and took him out to the living room. Clark was the only other one in there at the moment.

"Merry Christmas," he said, handing my sole cup of coffee for the day. I'd be happy when I was done nursing and could have more. But nursing was so good for both me and Christopher that I wasn't willing to give it up just yet.

"Merry Christmas," I said, handing him Christopher.

"Hey, big guy," he said, nuzzling Christopher's neck. "Merry first Christmas."

"I thought I smelled coffee," Martha said, yawning as she came down the stairs, tying her robe as she did.

Clark shifted Christopher to one side so he could make his mom a cup of coffee.

Dad had always told me to find a guy who treated his mother well. I had.

Too bad he didn't treat me the same way.

I pushed the thought away as soon as I had it.

He wasn't a *bad* person and he wasn't *bad* to me. He'd made my cup of coffee, too. We just didn't have the relationship that I would have expected if I'd married a guy like Clark under more normal circumstances.

I pushed those thoughts out of my head.

It was Christmas and negative thoughts had no place on such a day.

We spent the rest of the day with the family. It was a good day overall. We'd watched movies and played games and for the day, I'd managed to forget that Clark and I were only playing married.

We'd sat in the big chair together, his arm around me and me half on his lap with the back of my head on his shoulder, a blanket covering both of us. Christopher had made the rounds of all his grandparents — and his uncle. Jimmy had announced that earlier in the day; officially related or not, he was Christopher's uncle.

While we were sitting together in the chair, Clark would

whisper to me from time to time — most of the time it was nothing of any great import. A few times it was the time and weather report. I'd actually laughed the first time he did that.

His parents had shared a look when I had. I thought they thought things were going much better than they really were.

Given my newly discovered... feelings for Clark, I'd reveled in the closeness, however artificial, of the day. It was easy to pretend that things were more than they were and I had a built in excuse to do so. It killed me that he didn't feel the same way.

Not in love.

I knew that 'in love' wasn't accurate, but friends, maybe on the cusp of something more or something.

I sighed. I knew the post-partum depression was still affecting me. The Wellbutrin was helping — a lot. I could see a huge difference in the way I saw the world around me when I didn't take it for a few days for whatever reason. It wasn't that life itself was any easier or anything like that; it was just easier to deal with.

I was so glad that Navance hadn't ruined the day with some sort of door-to-door delivery for me or my son. Nothing had arrived before we left and I was almost certain that Daddy or someone would intercept any mail that came and forward it to the FBI.

There was a car parked at the end of the drive with a couple of security guards in it, just in case.

Jimmy knew there was security around, but he didn't know why. I couldn't explain why, but I wanted to keep it that way for the time being. I trusted him; that wasn't even a question, but I just wasn't ready for anyone else to know. The more people who knew, the more likely it was that our names would get out. We'd managed to keep them out of the media when the whole mess started and I hoped we'd be able to keep them out.

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Clark

Had it actually felt almost *right* sitting with Lois on Christmas?

I asked myself that over and over and couldn't come to a conclusive answer.

We often sat near each other when we were around others. Sometimes she'd lay on the couch and prop her feet on my leg or I'd stretch my legs part way down the couch or something, but there was something different about Christmas Day.

I made an excuse to go out to the Jeep. Lana's snow globe was out there and I took it out and stared at it while sitting on the edge of the front seat. I still hadn't decided what to do with it.

Giving it to her seemed like a betrayal to Lois. Lois was my wife and I shouldn't be giving ex-girlfriends meaningful gifts.

At the same time, I couldn't give it to anyone else. I'd thought about giving it to Granny. She loved snow globes but rarely indulged in collecting anything — more junk for us to clean out when she joined Gramps in the sky, she said often. I knew she would have liked it anyway. I couldn't bring myself to give it to anyone else, not even Granny.

So should I give it to her? Should I save it for when I needed to grovel once my marriage to Lois was dissolved?

"Clark?"

The voice surprised me. "Hey, Mom." It was too late to try to hide the snow globe; I knew she'd already seen it and if not, would catch me trying to hide it.

"What's that?" she asked, walking into the garage and leaning against the side of the Jeep.

"A snow globe," I told her avoiding the true intent of the question.

"Clark," she said quietly, in the same tone I knew not to argue with.

I sighed. "I bought it in Paris. For Lana. She loved it."

"Then why is it here?"

I shrugged. “I found it and thought maybe I’d give it to Granny.”

“You didn’t.”

“I couldn’t make myself. It’s Lana’s.”

“You miss her.”

It was a statement, but I nodded anyway. “I do miss her. A lot sometimes. And as I was putting Christopher down, all I could think about was that she just lost a baby and how unfair life is.”

“She’s hurting over that,” Mom told me. “So is Tim. He was looking forward to being a dad.”

“I’m sure he was. He’s a good guy. He’ll make a great dad someday.”

There was a long silence before she spoke again.

“You have to let her go, Clark.”

I didn’t say anything.

“It’s going to destroy your marriage if you don’t.” She sighed. “You two put on a pretty good front, but you forget, I think, that I powdered your tushie. I know you better than anyone else. I knew things weren’t great between the two of you when you came to Smallville, but I wrote it off to everything still being new and your secret and Lois’ pregnancy and all that. But now... your one-year-anniversary is coming up. I know you married Lois because of Christopher, to try to make a family for your son, to protect both of them, and that’s commendable. And I know you were still in love with Lana in March, too, but it’s been too long. I also know there’s no real timeline for these things, but if you’re committed to making your marriage work — even if it’s still only for Christopher’s sake — you’re going to have to let go of Lana and move on.” She stood up and looked at me. “There’s a beautiful young woman in there who happens to be the mother of your son and your *wife*. Maybe it’s time you started acting like it.”

On that note, she turned and left.

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Part 72

Lois

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“Mom knows something’s up,” Clark said without preamble when he came back inside.

“What?” I asked, using the remote to turn off a movie I’d seen several times anyway.

He sighed and sat in one of the chairs. “She saw me in the garage and said that we’re putting on a good front but that she knows better.”

“Ah.” I stood up and headed for the bathroom. I really didn’t want to have this conversation right now. “I guess we’ll just have to do better around them next time we see them, but they’re leaving tomorrow so I wouldn’t worry about it too much.” I shut the door behind me and leaned against it. I sighed and headed for the shower. As much as I liked Clark’s parents, maybe I was glad we didn’t see them more often.

I turned on the shower and put those thoughts out of my mind.

Or tried to.

Was I going to be able to do this for the next four plus years? Pretend to be in love with my husband in public and deal with the iciness that pervaded our private life? Would I be able to deal with the dichotomy in our relationship, the isolation, that long? Even if there was more danger to myself and Christopher without Clark?

I sighed again.

I wasn’t going to be able to answer those questions in one shower and I put it out of my mind.

At least for the moment.

Or tried to anyway.

January 2004

“Happy Anniversary, Pumpkin.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” I said into the phone.

“Are you and Clark enjoying a couple days to yourself?”

I was glad he couldn’t see me. “Thanks for taking Christopher for a couple days for us.”

“No problem. It’s always nice to have a day or two without kids. And I love having my grandson around. You know that.”

“It is nice. Thanks.” I glanced up and saw Clark bringing some wood in. “Daddy, Clark just got back from getting some more wood. I’ll talk to you later.”

I could hear the chuckle in his voice. “Bye, Princess.”

“Bye, Daddy.”

“What?” Clark asked as I rolled my eyes.

“He thinks we’re going at it like bunnies.”

“So?” He shrugged. “You should have known they would.”

“Knowing he’ll think that and hearing it in his voice is different.”

“Ah.” He headed into my room — it was my room again since it was just the two of us — to drop the wood off.

I stood up and moved towards the window, staring over the winter wonderland below me.

“What’s wrong?” Clark asked as he came back out.

I shrugged.

“I know you better than that,” he said, sitting in one of the chairs behind me.

“Do you?” I asked him, without really thinking about it.

“Do I what?”

“Know me better than that.”

“You’re standing there staring out the window. It doesn’t take Star to figure out something’s wrong.”

“Ah.” So it wasn’t that he knew *me*; it was because he could read body language.

“So?”

“So what?”

“What’s wrong?”

I sighed deeply. “Nothing I really want to talk about.”

“Okay.”

I didn’t say anything for a long time. I wasn’t sure what Clark was doing, but I could hear him moving around behind me. “I’m going to call Daddy’s lawyer,” I blurted out.

I could hear Clark still behind me. “Why?”

“To see if we can still get an annulment and if not, see what I need to do to let you out of this.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“He’s not going to be able to get his hands on Christopher and you don’t want to be here anymore than I do.” That was technically true. He didn’t want to be here *more* than I did, but I did want to be here. I wanted to make this work, to fall in love with my husband and for him to fall in love with me, but that wasn’t in the cards. “You can go plead your case to Lana and if I can help, I will. I’ll take all the blame; tell her that I pressured you into staying with me. You can help raise her baby and have babies of your own with her. I won’t even try to keep Christopher from you if you still want to be a part of his life.”

Clark didn’t say anything for a long time. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you do that? Why would you put Christopher in that kind of danger; give Navance a claim that’s legal in Latislan, even if it’s not valid here?”

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“What?”

“This. Us. I can’t do it.” I’d come to that realization since Christmas, and now that the tears had started... I couldn’t stop them. “You’re still in love with Lana — and I can deal with that. I won’t lie and say it doesn’t hurt just a bit that my husband loves another woman but I knew what I was getting into when we agreed to stay married. But the rest of it... When we lived in the

dorms together, we had fun. Last year, we were friends but now... I'm not sure that even 'acquaintance' defines our relationship — unless we're in public outside of work and then we're all lovey dovey. I can't deal with the total dichotomy, with the loss of one of my best friends. I realize that it's unlikely we'll ever be friends like that again and I do regret that. And, you know, it's not like I expect you to fall in love with me or anything like that, but the total disconnect... I didn't expect that and I can't deal with it any longer. I miss you. We live together. We sleep together and, somehow, I still miss you."

There was silence from the room behind me and, if I turned my head slightly, I could see Clark's reflection in the window. He was sitting in the chair we shared on Christmas, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his knees.

"I'm sorry," he finally said.

"No. There's no apologies or anything like that necessary. It is what it is and it's time to move on. Your secret is safe with me — I won't tell anyone." It occurred to me that it might worry him — more than anything else.

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Clark

It was a scathing indictment of my commitment to my marriage.

That what she was the most concerned about when it came to a potential split — my secret.

My mom had been right the week before when she told me that not letting Lana go was going to destroy my marriage. I told myself that she didn't know what was going on; she didn't understand the situation.

Since then I'd been trying to avoid the conviction of conscience that kept coming. No matter what the reasons, I had promised to love, honor, cherish in sickness and health, for better or worse and all that good stuff. I'd promised — twice — my fidelity.

Fidelity.

Faithful.

Regardless of the circumstances, my thought life hadn't been faithful. It wasn't like I imagined myself... making love to Lana, but I kept her picture well-hidden in my wallet; I thought of her often — daily certainly, hourly sometimes. I wasn't sure I could control my dreams, but I sure needed to get better control of my thoughts.

And when I was thinking of Lana, I wasn't thinking of Lois. I wasn't taking care of my wife. The woman I'd vowed to take care of.

How many times over the last year had I chastised myself? How many times had I promised myself I'd do better? How many times had I failed not only myself, but my wife and my son?

I couldn't let Lois go through with this.

Sure, Sam had security and all that, but the psychological effects... If we stayed married, it was over after five years — Navance had no more legal claim. But if we didn't... There was no expiration date on what he could try. And knowing Navance, he'd keep trying just to piss Lois and the rest of the Americans off because he could.

"No," I finally said quietly, staring at the carpet in front of me.

"No what?" she asked.

"I'm not going to give you a divorce or an annulment or whatever."

"You say that like you have a choice in the matter. You don't. I'm sure there's to be a way to do it without your signature. I'll find it." She hadn't moved from the window.

"You would put Christopher at risk?" I asked her.

She gave a half-shrug with the arm that wasn't leaning against the wall. "He's already at risk. Daddy wouldn't let anyone get to him."

"For the rest of his life? He won't give up and there's no statute of limitations if we don't stay married."

"It's not enough, Clark." She sighed. "I appreciate what you've done — really I do — and I'm sorry I destroyed your plans, but I can't live this... whatever it is anymore. I miss my friends; I miss my life; I miss *me*. I know it's not your fault, but the idea that I can't go out for lunch with Joe without you because it might be proof that our marriage is a sham or this fake thing we're putting on in front of our families and all that... When behind closed doors we barely speak... I can't do it. You know less about me, and I know less about you, than we did when I opened that door and you were standing there in a towel. At least then we knew we didn't know each other or anything about each other, but now... We're supposed to know each other better than anyone else and we don't know what we don't know. Or something."

"I miss you, too," I told her, startling both of us. "I miss the sassy, take no prisoners Lois I used to know. I wonder what happened to her."

"She got pregnant and married," she replied, with a trace of bitterness.

"I don't buy that. Being married shouldn't change who you are that completely. Neither should becoming a parent."

"No, it shouldn't."

"Then what happened?"

"A mad man came after me. And if it was just me, I'd probably take him head on, but it's not. I have my son to think about."

"And you're willing to put him at risk until he's eighteen?"

She suddenly turned to face me. "I can't do this anymore, Clark. What part of that don't you get? *I can't do it.*" Her voice rose as she spoke. "I don't care that you're not in love with me. Really, I don't. Would it have been better if Joe had ended up on that plane with me? Probably. You and Lana could be playing house or whatever and at least I'd be with someone who has always been there for me and who wasn't in love with someone else. Someone who would carry on a conversation with me that didn't revolve around work or my son. Someone who wasn't repulsed by playing the greatest love story ever told in public. Someone who would be interested in me as a woman even if he wasn't completely in love with me. Someone who at least still *liked* me after we got married."

I could feel something inside me welling up. It wasn't anger; it wasn't anything I could really define. In a split-second, I was in front of her, my hands on her arms, my lips on hers.

Before she could react, I let her lips go. "Is that what you want?"

Her eyes flashed fire as she managed to wrench her hands away from me but I grabbed them again as she tried to slap me. "Have I not made myself perfectly clear? *If* your feelings for me change at some point; *if* you decide you want to make this arrangement more conventional; *if* you decide you want to *make love* to me someday — then that's a possibility — but don't you dare think you can scratch an itch or use me as a substitute for the Corn Queen." Her eyes went from fire to ice in a second. "Let me go."

"No."

"Let me go. Somehow I doubt even you're completely invulnerable and I can make you wish you were."

I let go of her arms and she immediately started rubbing them with her hands. "Did I hurt you?" I finally asked quietly.

"No."

"I won't do it," I told her again. "I won't give you a divorce or an annulment or whatever."

"You don't have a choice," she told me bitterly.

"I won't do it. I'll find a way."

She sighed and turned to stare back out the window. I leaned

against the other side. I didn't know how long we stood there before she spoke again.

"Did you know I'm on anti-depressants?"

What?

"What?" I asked.

She nodded. "Kristi put me on them when I went in for my check-up. It's not uncommon for women after having a baby, especially if she's nursing. Hormones are all out of whack and everything else."

"You're... depressed?" I couldn't believe I'd managed to miss that. But it wasn't really surprising; not given everything else.

"It's not like that. It's a hormonal imbalance. It's more than just a feeling of being sad or whatever."

"Right." I thought I knew that.

"It's a feeling of helplessness. A feeling of not being able to control anything. A feeling of... A lack of desire to do anything and not caring enough to do anything about it. After Christopher was born... Everything was just so overwhelming anyway. Being a mom. Essentially being a single mom at that point. I felt like it anyway. You've stepped up — big time — when it comes to being a dad, but you hadn't at that point. Navance. Married to someone who didn't love me; who barely spoke to me while we had to pretend everything was fine in public. All of that combined to overwhelm me. Completely. I was never... suicidal or anything like that — not even close. But there were times when I wondered if things wouldn't be better for you and Christopher and Daddy and everyone else if I was in a car accident or something. That you and Christopher would go off and live with Lana and her baby and have babies of your own together and he'd never even know that I existed."

My head was swirling. She'd been thinking all of those things? And I didn't have a clue? I knew we weren't really talking to each other, but why hadn't I noticed that she was that upset? Upset, depressed, hormonal or whatever enough to be on medication? To think that the world would be a better place without her? How could I not have known things were that wrong?

She swiped at her eyes. "I hadn't planned on telling you all of that, but I can't live like this anymore. The medication helps. A lot. I feel more like myself and I can deal with life and it's not as overwhelming. It doesn't take the problems away or anything like that, but it makes them more manageable. But I still can't live like this anymore. And I know some sort of car accident or whatever really wouldn't have helped any of you — not really. I realize that, while you might be better off without being attached to me, Christopher needs his mom and Daddy needs me more than he needs the money he'd save on security."

"I wouldn't be better off if you were in a car accident," I told her honestly. "I wouldn't have you in my life anymore and I'd miss you and the little boy everyone thinks is my son wouldn't have his mom and I'd have to explain to him — for the rest of his life — why he doesn't have either of his biological parents and try to convince him that I love him regardless of what his DNA says."

She ran her fingers over her cheeks and a second later, I had her in my arms. I held her close to me as she cried against my chest. I rested my chin on her head and tightened my hold on her slightly. "I'm so sorry, Lois. I'm so sorry I had no idea."

I kissed the top of her head as her arms went around my waist, clinging to me as the tears continued to fall. One hand found its way to her temple and gently stroked her hair.

"I do love you, Lois," I whispered. "Maybe not like I should love my wife, but I do love you and I would never want anything to happen to you and not just for Christopher's sake. I can't imagine my life without you in it, in some role. And if something ever did happen to you, Christopher would always know how

very much you loved him. I'd tell him about you, about how strong you are, how brave, how much you've done to protect him. I'd never let him forget you."

I didn't know how long we stood there, but it felt like something finally shifted in our relationship.

Like we were finally friends again.

And maybe something more than that.

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Part 73

Lois

~~~~~

If I could stay here for the rest of my life, that would be okay. In Clark's arms. Safe.

Loved.

He'd said he loved me. Even if it wasn't quite like I'd always dreamed my husband would love me.

At least he didn't hate me. Despise me. Loathe me. Detest me.

I could live with that.

For now, at least.

And he wouldn't have let Christopher forget me if something did ever happen to me.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"For what?" I asked. "None of this is your fault."

"It's my fault for not paying more attention, for not knowing that so much was wrong. For not being there for you. For not being your friend, if nothing else. I don't know how many times I've promised myself that I was going to do better but..."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I wouldn't have married you under those circumstances if I'd been given the choice, if there had been any other way, but I did. I promised to love and honor and respect and protect you, in sickness and health and all that other stuff. I pledged to you my life and my fidelity. I haven't done a very good job keeping those promises. I mean, I haven't cheated on you or anything like that — not since I kissed Lana, I mean. And I know I shouldn't have done that." I could feel his voice rumbling deep in his chest. "But the love, honor and respect stuff..."

"It's okay," I told him honestly. "Neither one of us expected this to last more than a couple weeks. I don't think either of us really meant what we said. I mean, I knew I wouldn't cheat on you, for instance, but I also figured it'd only be two weeks — how much time would I have to cheat on you? I mean not that I would, but you know what I mean." I sighed. "You didn't mean it long-term anymore than I did." I closed my eyes and reveled in being held close to him. This was what I'd dreamed of my whole life — being held like Daddy had held me, like he'd always held Mom. I still didn't need a man for anything, but this was nice. Very nice.

"That doesn't matter," he said quietly. "I still promised all those things to you and I haven't done a very good job."

"Neither have I."

"I haven't made it easy for you." He held me a little tighter. "I haven't been around and when I have been, I've been sullen and angry and... distant and everything else but what you've needed me to be." His hand started to stroke my hair again. "I can't promise you that we'll end up with some fairy tale, story book marriage, but I can promise I'll do my best to be your friend again. I know I've said that before but... I promise I'll do my very best to do better."

"Thank you," I said, holding him a little tighter.

"Is there anything I can do for you right now?" he asked a minute later. "Something I can do while we're here."

Two things sprang immediately to mind.

I wasn't sure I'd actually be able to ask him for either one.

"What is it?"

“What is what?” I asked back.

“There’s something you want to ask me.”

“How do you know?”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Your heart rate sped up.”

“You listen to my heart?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted.

I rested my head more fully on his chest. “I’m not sure how I feel about that.” I took a deep breath and asked for one of the things I wanted. “Would you take me flying?”

“What?”

“You know, like you did on the farm after you told me about yourself.”

“Ah.”

He didn’t sound all that enthused by the idea, probably because it was something he still wanted to share really only with Lana. I quickly backtracked. “You don’t have to.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s that I’ve never really flown with anyone but my parents and we probably don’t want to go while it’s daylight.”

“I know. I was thinking after dark, maybe.”

He hesitated slightly before I felt him nod. “Sure. We’ll go flying tonight.”

“Thank you.” The other request would wait until later.

“What do you want to do?”

I shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

“Poker rematch?”

I smiled. “I kicked your tuckus, Kent. Are you sure?”

He laughed. I’d forgotten how much I loved his laugh. “You make a good point. What do you want to play? Scrabble?” he asked hopefully.

I groaned. “No. Friends SceneIt?”

“Sure.”

I didn’t want him to let me go. I wanted to stay here, in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” he told me again. “I really am. And I do want to make it up to you.”

I finally moved back to look at him. “I know and you will. I don’t know how yet, but I imagine it’ll take lots of flying time and breakfast making.”

He smiled, one of his old smiles, the ones he used to give me sometimes before we got married. “That’ll help make up for me being a cad the past year or so?”

“It’s a start,” I said with a shrug, still not wanting to let him go.

He pressed his lips against my forehead.

“Things’ll be better,” he told me. “You’ll see.”

~~~~~  
Clark

Thoughts were flying through my head. I’d been so relieved — more than I would have ever anticipated — when she reiterated a bit earlier that she’d never been suicidal. It was bad enough to think that she’d truly believed that the world would be a better place without Lois Lane — Lois Kent — but...

I noticed again how well she fit in my arms. Her head was just the right height to put my chin on.

I’d asked if there was anything I could do to help and I really expected her to say something about... making love or something like that. But she hadn’t and I breathed a silent sigh of relief. Even if we did need to work to make things better between us, I just didn’t see that happening.

And then she asked me to take her flying.

I’d hesitated before I agreed. The flight I’d taken her on in Smallville was the furthest I’d flown anyone that wasn’t my parents — the only time I’d flown anyone but my parents. But I’d agreed.

And so, after dark, I was going to take her flying.

She pulled away from me and rested her hands on my chest.

“I didn’t mean to get your shirt all wet.”

I looked down. Sure enough, there was a big wet spot on the front of my shirt. I smiled at her. “It’s okay. Really. If a wet spot on my shirt is the price I have to pay for holding a beautiful woman in my arms for a little while... well, I’m willing to pay that.”

She ducked her head and blushed as I said that.

“Hey, look at me.” I tucked a finger under her chin and lifted her face. “You are beautiful, you know that right?”

She shrugged. “I’m not bad, I guess.”

I kissed her forehead again. “You are.” I meant it. She was. She was attractive and, even if I didn’t want to fly her off to bed immediately, I could acknowledge that.

She swiped at her cheeks. “I’m sure I look fabulous right now.”

I chuckled lightly. “You’ve looked better,” I conceded. Her eyes were red and blotchy and I was sure she was going to have a headache before long. “Do you want some ibuprofen to help ward off the headache?”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“You get the game; I’ll get some medicine for you.” I squeezed her lightly before letting go. “Are you hungry?” I called as I headed towards the kitchen.

“Not really,” she called back. She opened the big cabinet that held all the movies and games. “Friends SceneIt must be at home,” she said with a sigh.

“Pick something else, then. Your choice.” I poured a glass of milk and shook three pills into my hand.

She sighed again. “Nothing’s jumping out at me.”

“A movie then?” I asked as I walked towards her.

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

I looked at the selection. Something like ‘50 First Dates’ or ‘Meet the Parents’ might be fun, but was a romantic comedy the way to go? I grinned suddenly. “Lethal Weapon marathon?”

She groaned. “Sounds good to me.” She took the cup and medicine from me, knocking them back.

I dug the four DVDs out and headed towards the TV as she shut the cabinet. “You want a fire?”

She hesitated. “I’m sorry for what I said last week,” she said a moment later.

“What?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“The keeping me warm thing. It was uncalled for.”

I shrugged. “All you did was ask a question.”

“Still...”

“So do you want a fire?”

She laughed. “Unless you’re planning on keeping me warm, then yes, I do.”

I rolled my eyes, sticking the DVD in the player before zipping off to build the fire. I hesitated as I turned back to the room. Lois was curled up on the couch, pulling a blanket over herself. I headed to the big chair we shared on Christmas. “Come ‘ere.” I held my hand out to her as I passed the couch. She looked puzzled but took it and I tugged until she stood up, grabbing the blanket. I led her to the chair and sat down, scooting all the way back and pulling the ottoman a bit closer with my foot. “Have a seat.”

She gave me an odd look, and I couldn’t really blame her. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d — voluntarily — sat close together or something. Only when there were others around. After a second, she shrugged lightly and we situated ourselves in the chair. She pulled the blanket with her and we snuggled underneath it. I picked the remote up off the table and turned the TV on before pushing play on the DVD remote.

Given the overall state of our relationship, I was surprised at how well we seemed to anticipate each other’s moves or needs. When her arm started falling asleep from being pressed to tightly against me or when my leg started to go numb. That was

something I'd never noticed. I was invulnerable, but my leg could go numb?

When we first sat down, I kept my arms on the arms of the chair but before the first movie was over, I had one arm wrapped around her and one hand resting on her knee. I wasn't quite sure how that had happened, but somehow it felt right.

Didn't it?

~~~~~  
Lois

My leg was burning through my pajama pants.

Where Clark's hand was on my knee.

We were sitting in the chair, almost like you might expect a couple to be on their anniversary, but that mystery couple would probably have less clothes on.

"One down," he said as the credits started to roll. "Ready for number two?"

I nodded. "I need to go to the bathroom first, but yeah. Go ahead and put it in." I managed to stand up, Clark's hand steadying my waist. I raised my arms above my head and stretched and yawned before heading towards my — our? — room. When I came back out, Clark was back in the chair and looked like he was waiting on me. "Do you want a snack?" I asked, heading for the kitchen.

"What're you having?"

I shrugged. "Popcorn?" I started to dig the popcorn maker out of the cabinet.

"Don't mess with that. Just pour some in a big bowl and bring it here."

I glanced at him, puzzled. "Okay." I poured some kernels into a bowl and headed over to him.

"Have a seat," he said, holding an arm out to me.

I did.

He took about a third of the popcorn kernels out of the bowl and set them on the table. I watched as he stared intently at the bowl. Suddenly, the kernels started popping and a minute later, the bowl was full.

"Wow," I whispered.

"Pretty cool, huh?" he asked with a grin.

I nodded. "What're those for?" I asked, pointing to the ones on the table.

"Scoot up a bit."

I complied and he picked up one of them.

"Ready?"

I nodded.

He threw the kernel into the air where it popped mid-flight and then he caught it in his mouth.

I rolled my eyes. "Show-off," I muttered.

He laughed. "That's one way to put it." He tugged me back towards him. "One of the ways I learned to control this heat vision doohickey was by popping individual popcorn kernels. I tried to focus it enough to pop the kernel but not burn the wood around it." He shook his head slightly as he pulled the blanket up around us. "I nearly burned the farm down a time or two. Once — when I was twelve, I think — I thought I was good enough, but instead I set the carpet in the living room on fire. Mom was... not happy."

I giggled. "I bet." I was quiet for a minute, thinking. "Do you think your kids will have the same powers?"

He sighed. "I don't know that I can even have kids. I mean, I'm not human. I look human, my body seems to work like a human's — with a few extras — but I don't know that I can actually get a human pregnant, much less that she'd be able to carry the baby to term and all of that, without it taking an incredible toll on her."

"Are you and Lana planning on having kids?" I asked, not looking at him.

He nodded. "We had been," he said slowly. "But I hadn't told

her all of this yet. It's possible that we would have decided that it wasn't worth the risk or something."

I hadn't thought about all that. "Well, regardless, you have Christopher now. He'll always be your son and I'm sure Lana's baby will end up loving you as much as he does his dad, too. I know they're not your biological children but..." My voice trailed off.

There was a long silence.

"What?" I finally asked.

"Mom didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Lana was in a car accident in early December. She's okay, but the baby... The baby didn't survive."

I gasped. "What? That's horrible!"

He nodded behind me, his arm tightening slightly around me. "Mom said she's devastated, obviously, and so is Tim."

"Wow," I whispered.

"Mom told me about a month ago. The accident wasn't bad, and Lana was fine, but I guess the placenta separated from the wall of the uterus or something like that, Mom said. She actually delivered the baby — a girl — but she was too little to survive for very long. Mom said Lana actually got to hold her for a few minutes before..." He sighed. "I figured Mom had told you, too."

"No. She hadn't." I sighed. "I'm sorry. You would have had two kids once this is all over but..." I shook my head, trying to imagine what it would have been like to hold Christopher for a few minutes, knowing that he wouldn't live very long and I just couldn't. "I can't imagine what she must be going through," I told him. "Or you. She would have been your step-daughter in a few years." Another thought occurred to me. "Did you go see her?" I asked quietly before I could stop myself.

"No," he said in equally quiet tones. "I thought about it. Part of me wanted to, but I think I was probably the last person she wanted to see and I knew I shouldn't go anyway."

When had I turned towards him so that he was practically cradling me, my head against his chest, one of his hands brushing my hair gently off my temple?

"I'm still sorry I got you in this mess," I finally told him.

"I'm sorry your life isn't what you expected it to be."

"You're safe. Christopher is safe. Those are the most important things."

"Lana is hurting, though. She wouldn't be if it wasn't for me. And even then, I think that deep down she probably wishes you were there for her."

He sighed. "She has Tim and her folks. You were right when you said I'd betrayed your trust when I told her Christopher wasn't mine. Regardless of what my plans, your plans, Lana's plans were this time last year, I married *you* and you two are my priority, no matter what."

I thought maybe I was finally starting to believe that.

I thought maybe *he* was finally starting to believe that.

And that was a relief.

Part 74

Clark

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"Ready?" I asked her.

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and tried not to shiver. I ran my heat vision over her lightly.

"Better?"

She nodded. "It's chilly out here."

I moved to stand behind her and pulled her close to me. "Is that better?"

"Yeah. Warmer."

We were both dressed in dark clothes and I was getting ready to take her flying for the first time — the first real flight anyway. The one to the farmhouse didn't really count.

“How do you want to do this?” I asked.

“What way is best?”

“Well, with my parents, I usually put an arm around their waists.”

She shrugged and pressed herself a bit closer to me — to keep warm I guessed.

“I could scoop you up and fly that way,” I said. “Or we could go like this.”

“This is probably warmer,” she said. “I don’t know how much I’ll be able to see, but it seems like I’d be able to see more like this.”

“You’d probably have more of a... flying sensation, too, I’d think,” I told her.

“This works then.” She moved back slightly more. “Just don’t drop me.”

I chuckled and tightened my hold on her. “Don’t worry. Even if I did, I’m fast enough to catch you.”

“That makes me feel so much better.” Classic Lois sarcasm oozed out of every word and I grinned.

I lifted off slowly and I heard her gasp as we started soaring over the snow-covered trees. I leaned closer to her ear and smiled as I spoke. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

As I leveled off so we were parallel to the ground, she somehow managed to move her legs between mine so her feet were resting on my heels. I wrapped my ankles a little tighter around her so she wouldn’t feel like her feet were falling.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked her.

She shrugged again. “Wherever.”

I hesitated. “Would you like to go to Smallville? Say hi to my folks?”

“If you want to,” she said after a slight pause.

A few minutes later, we were hovering over high over the farm. I listened carefully. “Granny’s asleep already and...” I listened for another minute. “My parents are alone and seem to be behaving themselves.”

“Behaving themselves?” she asked.

“They were very glad when I moved out and let’s just leave it at that.”

She sighed. “I think my parents would still be like that,” she said wistfully.

“As much as I hated them being like that in front of my friends, I always wished that...” I stopped. That Lana and I would be that way when we’d been married that long. I couldn’t say that here. Now.

“Right.”

We landed lightly in front of the porch and I knocked on the door before opening it slightly. “Mom? Dad?”

“Come on in, Clark,” Dad called from the kitchen.

“Lois!” Mom exclaimed as Lois followed me in. “This is a surprise.” She hugged Lois. “To see both of you. Happy anniversary, by the way.”

Subtle, Mom.

“We were at the cabin for a couple days and Lois asked me to take her flying,” I told them as I gave Mom a hug. “We ended up here.”

“Well, we’re always happy to have you,” Dad told me. “Lois, please be sure to thank your Dad again for having us last week.”

Lois smiled at him as Dad put his arm around her shoulders. “I’m glad you could all come,” she told him. “It was much better than last Christmas.”

I squelched the thoughts that immediately came to mind. I’d spent last Christmas with my family and Lana and her family. It had been a very good Christmas, but I knew Lois had spent Christmas with her dad and Mindy and I knew she hadn’t enjoyed it very much at all.

But I couldn’t think those thoughts. This Christmas *had* been

a good one. My first Christmas as a dad. My parents had been there. Granny. My father-in-law, who I really did like a lot. Jimmy, practically my brother-in-law, who was probably my best friend, was there.

And Lois.

My wife had been there.

But on Christmas, all I could think about was that she wasn’t the wife I’d planned on having.

I knew that it wasn’t fair, wasn’t right, to keeping thinking those things.

And things were a bit better now.

We’d spent the day watching movies and it really had been a good day once we got past the ‘divorce’ discussion — except for the depressing discussion about Lana and the baby, of course. I felt closer to her than I had in a long time. Sitting together in the chair had been a good move. Something about the proximity — unforced proximity — had felt nice. Like she was my best friend.

Comfortable.

Mom was saying something to me.

“What?” I asked her.

She smiled at me. “Are you three coming out for Spring Break this year?”

I looked at Lois. “I don’t know. Do you want to?”

She shrugged. “Maybe? See what happens with work and everything?”

Dad yawned. “I don’t know about you young kids, but it’s time to get these old bones to bed.”

I grinned. “You’re not old, Dad.”

“Well, I’m still ready for bed. I have to get up with the chickens and you two are kidless for the night.”

Mom winked at me. “And since you’re kidless for the night, I’m sure you don’t want to hang out with your parents.”

Subtle, Mom. Wondering if I’d taken her advice to heart on Christmas night. I’d certainly spent enough time thinking about what she’d said and — even if I wasn’t planning on... being with Lois like she intended her talk to encourage, I had thought a lot about what my continued fixation on Lana could be costing me, us, and I thought it probably made me more open to some of the changes that had already taken place between me and Lois.

Lois pushed back from the table and stood up. “We’ll get out of your hair and get back to you on Spring Break.”

Hugs were exchanged all around and a few minutes later, Lois and I were outside.

~~~~~

Lois

I really should have worn a coat, I thought as I rubbed my arms. Even though I was wearing a turtleneck, I was cold.

Of course, I hadn’t been cold when Clark was holding me.

I felt warmth beginning to spread from the top of my head to the tip of my toes.

“Thanks,” I told him.

He moved behind me and wrapped his arms around me again.

That was much warmer.

“You’re still cold.”

It was a statement, not a question, but I nodded anyway.

He moved back and took his sweatshirt off. He bunched it up and then held the neck open for me.

“Won’t you be cold?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “I don’t get cold. Or hot.”

“Are you sure?”

He held it slightly closer to me and I ducked my head until he pulled it over me and I stretched my arms into the sleeves.

The inside was warm and toasty.

“Did you heat up your jacket on that plane?” I asked suddenly, trying not to notice how good he looked in the black T-shirt or how well it showed off the muscle tone in his arms and chest.

“Yeah,” he said a bit sheepishly. “I wasn’t going to be cold and I figured if you could be a bit warmer...”

“Thanks.”

He moved behind me again, wrapping me in his arms. I was infinitely warmer than I had been a few minutes earlier.

“Where to now?” he asked softly, his mouth close to my ear.

“Where do you like to go?”

I could feel him hesitate. “Lots of places,” he finally said.

“Like icebergs and Mt. Everest and the Great Wall?” I asked, the light bulb finally going on in my head.

“Um... Can I plead the fifth?”

“You’re a strange visitor from another planet. No, you can’t take the fifth.” I surprised myself with the statement and by the fact that my voice was light and teasing.

I’d surprised him, too, I could tell. I was about to apologize to him, when I realized he was shaking.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re too much sometimes,” he told me between chuckles. “I think only you would have been able to accept this about me, go through what we’ve been through since then, and then throw it in my face like that.”

I wanted to ask him what he’d thought Lana would say, but I couldn’t bring myself to ruin the moment.

“Well, you’re not exactly a little green man or the gross things from ‘Independence Day’, but I’m still going to get cold if my own personal transportation service doesn’t get moving.”

He chuckled again. “Do you want a whirlwind tour of the world or head back to the cabin?”

I thought for a second. “I think I’m in the mood to see Will Smith and Bill Paxton kill some of your cousins.”

He groaned. “Okay. Cabin it is.”

I didn’t look at my watch before we left, but it couldn’t have been more than ten minutes before we made it back to the cabin. I wondered if I’d ever be able to fly with him when I could actually see the ground beneath us. Probably not — not as long as xenophobes existed.

He put ‘Independence Day’ in the DVD player and we sat in the big chair again, blanket pulled over us.

I was still wearing his sweatshirt and wondered if I could get away with absconding with it. The inside was still soft, even.

I was still chilled, though, and Clark held me a bit closer as I shivered. Or I thought he did.

Will Smith and... whoever the stripper chick with a kid was were running towards each other when suddenly everything went black.

~~~~~

Clark

“What...?” I started.

“Power’s out again,” Lois said, not moving.

“I got that,” I told her.

She rested her head more fully against me and sighed. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing we’ve already got a fire going.”

“Do you really want to sleep out here?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “No, not really, but I don’t want to be cold either.”

“I can build a fire in your room.” I heard it as soon as I said it and I felt her stiffen slightly.

I shouldn’t have said it like that. We’d had such a good day. I hadn’t given any further thought to sleeping arrangements.

Whether I’d sleep in Lucy’s room like I’d originally planned or... Sleep with Lois. With my wife. On our anniversary.

“I’m sorry,” I told her a minute later.

“For what?” she said moving to get out of the chair.

I didn’t let her go.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t have *thought* that. If this is going to work, we’re going — *I’m* going — to have to do better than that,” I said softly.

She sighed and relaxed slightly in my arms.

I looked over the top of my glasses and lit a couple of the candles around the room so Lois would be able to see. “Why don’t we go to *our* room, light the fire, take a shower and get some sleep?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Let me help you — I can see a lot better than you can.”

She stood up carefully and I picked her up carefully, cradling her in my arms as I walked towards the stairs. I knew I’d caught her off-guard, but it really was easier to make sure that she didn’t trip or anything. I set her down next to the bathroom door. “Let me start the fire before you try to move and then we’ll be able to see and get a shower.”

The fireplace was open on both sides so it would allow for a shower by firelight. A few minutes later, I heard Lois start the water in the big tub. It seemed she decided a long soak was what she needed.

There wasn’t much for me to do while I waited for her to be done, so I flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

I’d been doing a lot of thinking while we’d watched movies. Mom was right. Whether or not Lana and I would end up back together or not wasn’t the point at the moment. The point was that I had to let her go — at least for now.

I picked my wallet up off the side table and walked to the fireplace. I carefully extracted the picture of Lana I’d hidden and stared at it for a long moment.

She was still beautiful. She was still Lana.

But she wasn’t my wife.

Keeping the picture of another woman in my wallet — even where no one else could see it; *especially* where no one else could see it — was a betrayal of my wife.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before I tossed the picture into the fire.

I watched as the flames licked around it, slowly devouring the love of my life. I watched until it had shriveled up and even I wouldn’t be able to tell what it had been.

I went back to the bed and flopped down again. I let my mind just float until I heard Lois come out of the bathroom. I couldn’t suppress the slight snort when I saw what she was wearing.

Nearly the exact opposite of what she’d worn the night my parents had taken Christopher for us.

Her warmest flannel pajamas.

“What?” she asked looking at me.

I shook my head slightly. “Nothing. You ready for bed?”

“Are you going to take a shower?” she asked as she put her clothes from earlier in her suitcase.

“I think so,” I said, shaking my head again slightly before heading towards my own suitcase and then the bathroom. I came back out a little bit later to find Lois curled up under the covers on her side of the bed.

I sighed and sat in front of the fire.

“Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you...” Her voice trailed off.

“What?” I finally asked.

“Would you help keep me warm tonight?” she asked in a rush.

I stifled a sigh. As good as things had been, even though I’d destroyed Lana’s picture, I wasn’t sure I wanted to curl up with her for sleeping purposes.

But it was going to get cold if the power didn’t come back on.

“Sure,” I said, standing up and heading towards my side of the bed.

I slid under the covers and scooted closer to the middle of the bed. She rolled towards me until we were facing each other.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

"I wouldn't want you to freeze or anything," I told her honestly.

"That's good."

I tried to lighten the mood. "I can't nurse Christopher, after all. Gotta keep you around for that if nothing else." I kept my voice light and teasing.

She rolled her eyes. "Glad to know the only reason you want to keep me around is as a baby buffet."

I reached out with one hand and brushed her hair off her face. "That's not the only reason to keep you around," I told her. "I'd miss you a lot if something ever happened to you. And not just because you're Christopher's mom. I know it's been a rough year, but you're my friend and I'd miss you."

"I'm glad nothing can happen to you," she said quietly. "I'm glad that Christopher will always have you, even if something were to happen to me someday."

I hesitated. "I don't know that nothing can happen to me. Remember our first night here?" I reminded her.

"You mean the night we supposedly made Christopher together?" she asked with a smirk.

The vision of her in front of the fire flashed before me for a split-second. "That's the night," I said, brushing the mental picture aside. "I would have died if it wasn't for you and I have no idea how or why I ended up that vulnerable. There's no way to know if it'll ever happen again."

She suddenly yawned.

"Come here," I said, reaching for her again. "I'll keep you warm tonight."

"Thank you," she murmured as she settled her head on my chest.

We laid there for a long time. I played with the hair at her temple thinking about our day together.

"Clark?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure."

She hesitated. "That kiss... the one in the cafeteria. What was that about?"

One of her arms was resting on my stomach and my hand rested on it. I tightened my hold on her arm as I remembered the conversation I'd overheard.

"You don't have to tell me," she said and I could feel her pulling away from me — not physically, but mentally and emotionally.

"It's not that," I said, forcing myself to relax.

"Then what?"

"There were some girls at the table behind us. Even before you got there, they were gossiping about us and Lana. It got worse after you got there. I guess I just wanted to give them something else to talk about — maybe to mention to her if they were her friends or whatever. They seemed to know an awful lot that I can't imagine Lana blabbing to just anyone so... And then before I left, I stopped at their table and told them that Christopher was my son and..." My voice trailed off.

"And what?"

I hesitated. "If I ever heard them talking about my wife like that again, they'd regret it."

She leaned up on one elbow to look at me. "You really said that? In August?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I meant it, too."

She settled back in next to me. "Thank you."

"It's what I'm here for." My hand went back to her temple and brushed against her hair until she finally went to sleep.

As I held her I thought about that kiss. I hadn't allowed myself to evaluate it too much. The kiss on her birthday had belonged in one category in my mind. Desire had never been a problem with me and Lana. We'd *wanted* to do a lot more than

kiss but we never had. It had been... not easy for me to keep tight control of those emotions but it was always in the back of my mind that I hadn't told her about myself and I had very clear boundaries on what was okay and what wasn't until I did.

On Lois' birthday... I didn't remember calling her Lana but I never remembered being that close to wanting to lose control with Lana either. What, if anything, did it mean that I'd wanted to be with her that night in a way I never had with Lana? Was it because Lois knew about me by then and so it was 'okay' in my head? Was it because she was my wife and we were supposed to do those kinds of things together?

Was there any way possible that it was because it was Lois I was with instead of Lana? I still didn't allow myself to delve too deeply into that question.

But the kiss in the cafeteria had caught me off-guard. I'd avoided thinking about it too much either. The other one *could* be written off as being in bed with a beautiful woman wearing a sexy nightgown on her birthday and that was the category I'd stuck it in in my head — the understandable, explainable category. When I'd kissed her in the cafeteria...

Part of me had been disappointed that we were in public. That there wouldn't really be a 'later' at home. That she hadn't been in for her check-up yet.

I hadn't known what to make of that at the time, and lying with her asleep in my arms on our anniversary, I still didn't know what to make of it. That one went stayed in the inexplicable category for now.

I pressed a kiss against her forehead and noted again how well we fit together.

Better than Lana and I ever had. Better, I thought, than Lana and I ever would — or easier at least.

I wasn't sure what that meant, but, given everything else, I was sure I shouldn't be thinking about my ex-girlfriend while holding my wife in my arms in our bed on our anniversary.

I put thoughts of Lana out of my mind and drifted off to sleep.

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Part 75

Lois

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Sleeping in Clark's arms was everything I'd remembered it to be.

I'd fallen asleep with my head on his chest, one arm wrapped around me, but by the time I woke up, I'd rolled over and he was behind me. One arm was looped over my waist, holding me close to him. My back was certainly warm enough.

I tugged the blankets a little closer around me and felt him tug me slightly farther back against him.

I remembered the last time we'd woke up like this in this bed. He'd thought he was on his honeymoon with Lana.

I sighed.

"What're you thinking about?" came a soft voice in my ear.

"Nothing," I said quietly.

"The last time we woke up here like this?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I felt so guilty about that, you know — I still do in some ways. The first night we were here was completely justifiable, but regardless of the reasons for the other two..." He sighed. "I shouldn't have been sleeping with you at all."

I shrugged. "None of them were your fault," I told him. "The second time you were still sick and the third I wouldn't let you leave."

"But that second time..." His voice trailed off.

"What?" I finally asked.

"Right before you woke me up the second time, I dreamed I was here on my honeymoon."

O-kay. Would Daddy have let him and Lana... I didn't even

finish the thought.

“With you,” he finished so quietly I could barely hear him.

“What?” Part of me wanted to roll over and stare at him, but I didn’t want to move. It was so comfortable and so safe.

“I dreamed that we were here, in this room, on our honeymoon.”

“You asked if I thought your parents would let me stay in your room now that we were married.”

“I did?”

I nodded. “I thought you were dreaming about Lana.”

We were silent for a minute.

“What do you want to do today?” he finally asked.

“Stay right here.”

“What?”

Had I really said that out loud? I thought quickly. “I mean it’s warm and we’ve finally got it to that point where it’s just right — not too hot, not too cold — and moving from here would mean freezing. So I’ll stay right here and you can go build the fire back up and...” That was a nice save, though I managed to stop myself before I said something about making out or making love or something else I’d really regret later.

“And what?”

I winced as I shifted slightly. “I need you to go get batteries for my pump. It’s been a while since I either pumped or nursed so...”

“Ah, right.” He sounded a bit uncomfortable, and I couldn’t blame him. I’d run into Kristi a couple weeks earlier and she’d confided that Kevin — the husband of an OB — was supremely uncomfortable with the whole pumping thing, too. “So batteries and... that. And then what?”

I shrugged. “Games? Snowball fight? Nap? There’s still no power so movies are out.”

“Yep. And we don’t have to be back in Metropolis until almost bedtime for Christopher so... We have all day to kill.”

“I’d say lounge around and do nothing, but I think that’s pretty much the only choice we have unless we decide to head back to civilization early.”

I didn’t want to do that. I didn’t want to break what seemed to be a magical spell here. Once we’d got past the ‘let’s get a divorce thing’, our anniversary had been good. We’d had fun. We’d been close. I could almost believe that we were... dating. On the cusp of a real relationship. In that early phase where all you wanted to do was be close together, little touches at every opportunity.

But without the kissing that would go with it.

What would it be like to kiss Clark? To *really* kiss him?

I’d kissed him before — lots of times — but only the ‘we’re on display and you never know who might be watching’ kisses.

And the night he’d thought I was Lana.

And the cafeteria that day.

I sighed as I closed my eyes and imagined a *real* kiss with him. Where he kissed *me*. In my mind, he was cradling my face in his hand, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone and, as he leaned in whispering my name, just before his lips brushed against mine...

The TV came on.

I squeezed my eyes shut even more tightly and willed the tears back inside.

“Guess the power’s back on,” he said, rolling away from me and out of bed.

“Guess so,” I whispered.

March 2004

Clark

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I pressed carefully into the base of the car seat, while buckling the seat belt of the rental car. Since we were going to be

using it for a week, it only made sense to bring the base, too.

“All set,” I said, turning to take Christopher, in his car seat, from Lois clicking it into the base.

“How far to Smallville?” Lois asked.

“About two, two and a half hours to the farm,” I told her, moving to the driver’s door. “We won’t go through Smallville.”

She sighed. “Well, let’s get this show on the road.”

I pulled out of the spot and we were soon on our way.

Flying in an airplane with Christopher hadn’t been as bad as I’d been afraid of — not after the horror stories I’d heard about flying with babies. Of course, I would have preferred flying under my own power still, but it could have been much worse.

Things were much better between me and Lois since our anniversary. Not great, but better.

We were friends again — more like before we went to Bremerton, before our relationship got a little weird because of Lana’s increased jealousy of our friendship because we’d actually slept in the same bed together.

Well, and naked in front of the fire.

But I’d been sick and would have died otherwise.

Regardless, we were friends again and that was good. We were at least spending more time with the rest of the family — I thought they thought once we got the first year, honeymoon phase out of the way we were more sociable or something — and were more comfortable with the pretense there. Alone we were... better, too. We talked and shared stories about growing up. Lois told me about her mom and her sister. I told her about Smallville.

I’d never really told her much about Krypton, though. I wasn’t sure why, but I couldn’t bring myself to share too much of that with her. All she knew was that they had left me some information. That I’d somehow absorbed some of it. And maybe seen a picture or something — a letter. I’d never told her about the holograms or asked if she’d like to see the ship and the globe sometime.

I’d told her what it was like learning to use my different powers. The dangers of them — like when I’d looked through my parents’ wall or I hadn’t figured out how to turn my hearing off and on — and the benefits — like when I caught my great-grandma Kent’s plate when Mom and Dad knocked it off the counter dancing in the kitchen one night.

I was holding back part of myself.

Sure Lois knew about me and what I could do, but it still hurt a bit that Lana wouldn’t be the only one to share that distinction, too. It had been well over a year since I’d had a real conversation with her — the love of my life. No, I had to stop thinking about her like that.

I sighed.

Lois was asleep against the window. Christopher hadn’t been sleeping well — he was getting a tooth or two — and she’d been up much of the night before with him.

I still missed Lana. So much some times.

I knew she wasn’t the same... innocent girl I’d fallen in love with over the course of my lifetime.

She had changed — and so had I. I was a dad, a... husband, of sorts.

If we could manage to work things out once this was over, I wouldn’t be the only one she’d ever have been with. She’d always have the memory of other guys that I’d have to... compete with or be compared to or whatever.

Though I was still saving that part of myself for only her — I wasn’t sure how I’d be able to prove it to her, not without a sworn statement from Lois or something — it wasn’t something that would only belong to us.

Krypton though...

Lois knew a little bit, but not much. I’d eventually tell Lana everything if we managed to work things out.

But what if we didn’t work things out?

Was I destined to be alone for the rest of my life?

If Lois and I divorced and then Lana and I couldn't work things out, I'd be alone. Not completely alone, of course. I'd have my parents and Christopher. But what about when Lois met someone else? When Christopher had a step-dad? What about then?

Should I just commit myself to this marriage for the rest of my life? Was this what I wanted with the rest of my life?

Not really, I admitted to myself. Part of me — a big part — still held out hope that Lana and I could work things out some day. Another part of me knew that possibility was getting smaller every day I didn't go to her and tell her the whole truth and ask her to wait for me.

I sighed again as I pulled onto the driveway. I hadn't thought about her that much since our anniversary — I hadn't let myself. It was probably just being on our way home, to Smallville, that kept her in the forefront of my mind on this trip.

The crunching gravel woke Lois and a minute later we pulled up in front of the house.

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Lois

Clark had flown some things out earlier in the morning — like the playpen and a bunch of diapers and stuff like that so we wouldn't have to deal with them on the airplane.

I'd set up the playpen in Clark's room earlier and carefully set a sleeping Christopher in it at bedtime.

We'd spent the rest of the afternoon with Martha and Jonathan and Granny Kent. I'd missed her — she was so much fun and Christopher loved her.

Things were going better with me and Clark, and it was showing. After Christmas, Martha had watched us carefully and she still was, but now, she was smiling a bit more when she was done. Apparently, we were doing something right.

I still felt like I was holding part of me back though.

I knew I was.

I couldn't let myself get too invested in the relationship.

We were having fun most of the time. It was like the first semester in the dorms, without the bunk beds. But I couldn't let my heart get involved. That would be way too easy and truly falling in love with my husband would only result in heartbreak for me in the long run. I *had* to keep that from happening.

I headed back down the stairs to find Martha and Jonathan getting ready to head up.

"Why don't you two take a walk or something?" Jonathan suggested. "We'll get Christopher if he wakes up."

Martha winked at Clark. "You could always show her the hayloft," she said as she turned to walk up the steps.

Clark groaned. "Good night, Mom. Good night, Dad."

They were laughing as they disappeared up the stairs.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Clark asked.

I shrugged. "Sure." I grabbed the same coat I'd used the year before and put it on as we headed out the door. "Where are we going? The hayloft?" I asked with a twinkle in my eye, playfully bumping his hip with mine.

He moved ahead of me and down the stairs, heading away from the barn. "No," he finally said shortly.

I paused for a second at the top of the stairs, before sighing and following him. He'd made it about thirty feet when he stopped, shoulders slumped, hands shoved in his pockets.

"I'm sorry," he said as I neared him.

"For what?" I said, not understanding what it was that I'd said or done.

"For snapping at you." He turned and faced me, but continued staring at the ground. "The hayloft... That was where Lana and I always went."

"Oh."

He gestured towards the barn. "I mean, if you really want to

see it..." His voice trailed off.

I shook my head. Not if that was where he and Lana had made out and daydreamed and all that kind of stuff. "No. Walk is fine."

We headed down the same path we had the year before, to the same clearing. We spread out the blanket and laid back on it, close but not touching.

I enjoyed this — I really did — but I had to build a wall around my heart, to protect it from the all-too-easy proposition of falling completely head-over-heels in love with my husband.

"Do you know which one was Krypton's star?" I asked. Had I asked him that before? I couldn't remember.

"Not a clue," he said, folding his arms behind his head.

"What do you want to do while we're here?"

I shrugged. "I don't care."

"Do you want to see Smallville?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Is Lana home for break?" I'd seen her a couple of times on campus and, even though I still felt badly for what she'd gone through over the holidays, there was no love lost there.

He shrugged. "I'd guess so, but I don't know."

"Then I think I'd rather not."

"Mom said the whole family is supposed to come over tomorrow afternoon for lunch and games and dinner."

"Ah." Time to meet the whole family. "Who all are we talking about here?"

"Well, we never had a wedding or reception or anything like that so pretty much the whole family remotely within driving distance will be here — I think even my Aunt Opal and her kids from the St. Louis area are coming and my Uncle Joe and his family from Kansas City. This is sort of the 'Clark and Lois got married' party or something. Didn't Mom tell you?"

I shook my head. "She said there was a big pot luck barbecue but that's it."

"Ah, well, who's going to be here... Nana and PopPop, Grandma Davis — except she's Grandma Lewis now. Grandpa Davis died before I was born, got here, whatever and she remarried a few years ago. We all still call her Grandma Davis when she's not around though. I'm not sure why, but we do."

"Who's we?"

"My cousins. My aunts and uncles will be here along with all the cousins that live close by."

I groaned. "How many people are we talking about here?"

He winced. "If everyone comes who's supposed to, seventy or eighty, maybe more. Don't expect to see Christopher the whole time."

"What? Why not?"

"He and Jerry — my cousin's newborn — will get passed from female relative to female relative — along with all other children not quite old enough to get away on their own. They all love babies. Well, all kids really."

"So what'll be expected of me then? If Christopher won't need me?"

"Well, there'll probably be a game of basketball or football or something during the afternoon. If the weather's nice, that is. It might rain tomorrow. Inside there will be a game tournament or two going on. I'm sure you'll hear plenty of embarrassing Clark as a kid stories, except that none of them know the really embarrassing stuff like when I accidentally looked through walls I shouldn't have because none of them know about the whole alien-baby-in-a-spaceship thing. I still think Granny might suspect something but..."

"Well, I won't mention it then. But I will manage to get all of the photo albums out and hear all the stories about little Clarkie Davis and slightly older Clarkie Kent."

He groaned. "Remind me to fly you somewhere far, far away and drop you off for a few hours tomorrow."

I laughed. “No such luck, mister.”

Part 76

Clark

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Lois and I were sitting on the couch as we heard tires beginning to crunch up the drive. I groaned when something occurred to me.

“Um, there may be a slight problem,” I told her wincing slightly.

She sighed. “Figures. What?”

“It didn’t even occur to me until just now, but a couple of my cousins are pretty good friends with Lana.”

“Great.”

“I don’t think they’ll say or do anything nasty, but...”

A tear streaked down her cheek and I wrapped my arm around her, pulling her towards me. I kissed her hair. “It’ll be okay, I promise,” I whispered.

“Yeah. Right.”

Mom came in from the kitchen. “Nana and Pop Pop just pulled in with Jerry, Ana Mae and Kara.”

I looked through the wall. “That’s Mom’s folks and her brother, sister-in-law and their daughter who still lives at home,” I told Lois. “And everyone knows there’s no way you’ll remember everyone — just so you know there’s no pressure to. Ken and Kelly and their kids are pulling in, too. Ken’s dad is Brandon, my dad’s brother. Danielle and Tom are right behind them.”

“I met Danielle right?” Lois asked. “In Bremerton?”

“Right. She’s Chris’ oldest sister Jenny’s oldest daughter. They have a three-year-old named Amy.”

I could hear the first car doors opening and closing, but kept my eyes on the road to the farm. “Most of the people who are going to be here are actually Chris’ family. They weren’t married very long, but Mom will always be family to them. Me too, even though they know I’m not Chris’ biological son. And, of course, they all knew Dad, too, and were happy to absorb him and his family into the Davis clan as well. I think there’s forty some people in the area descended from Grandma and Grandpa Davis.”

She leaned further against me and sighed.

“There’s Debbie and Mark with Nancy, Brad and Donny. That’s Chris’ youngest older sister, and one of their daughters, son-in-law, and grandson.” Another car turned in. “There’s Jenny and James — Danielle’s parents — with their middle daughter Lindsey and her husband, Darryl, and their little boy.”

The door opened and the first of the family traipsed in. The big porch on the back of the house would serve as the buffet. We had a big picnic table under one of the trees and I knew that there would be plastic kids’ picnic tables in the back of one or more trucks. There would also be tables and folding chairs and more food than any of us knew what to do with.

It was a good thing I didn’t think I’d have to worry about cholesterol or anything like that because half of everything was fried.

I stood up and took Lois’ hand, introducing her to the family that traipsed in, hugging both of us.

An hour later, Lois and I were sitting at one of the long tables set up in the yard. For the moment, we were being left pretty well alone, though I knew that would change.

“I should have asked you last night,” she started. “I need you to at least give me a quick rundown on the family.”

I nodded, swallowing a bite of fried chicken. “Okay — Dad’s family is easiest. Granny and his brother, Brandon. Brandon’s married to Lisa. They have two boys — Ken and Keith — and they’re both married and each have two kids.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Mom has two brothers and a sister. Joe and Lindsey live

near Kansas City and have three kids — Justin, Laura and John. They’re all married and...” I thought for a minute. “...seven grandkids total. My Aunt Opal lives in St. Louis with her husband, Mike. They have two kids, Andrew and Alison. They’re both married with two kids each. Her brother, Jerry, is the one who moved here right before she married Dad. He and Ana Mae have three girls — Kara still lives at home and Diane and Vanessa are married and they each have one kid.”

She sighed. “I’m never going to remember all this.”

I laughed. “You don’t have to. Just do your best and smile a lot.”

She nodded. “Okay, Chris’ family.”

“Well, there’s Grandma Davis-Lewis and her husband, Grandpa Lewis. Chris had three sisters. Jenny and James have three girls. You’ve met Danielle, and her sisters are Linda and Mary. They’re all married and have five kids all together. Debbie and Mark have two boys — Mark Jr. and Matt — and two girls — Cathy and Nancy. All of them are married with six grandkids total. Last, but not least, is Dorrie and Lance. They have two boys — Lawrence and Jerome. They’re married and have three kids between them.”

She sat back. “Whew. How do you remember all that?”

I smiled at her and leaned closer to whisper. “Eidetic memory.”

She looked straight at me. “What?”

My brow furrowed. “I never told you that?”

She shook her head. “No. At least I know how you get such good grades though.”

Danielle chose that moment to put a plate down in front of us. “Lois, I never had a chance to thank you,” she said without preamble as she pulled out a chair.

Lois glanced at me. “For what?”

“I know how bad that storm was and you saved my cousin’s life. We were so worried when no one heard from you guys...” Tears filled her eyes. “We were afraid you were stuck in the car somewhere and we’d never see either of you again. Thank you.”

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Lois

I’d practically forgotten about that.

Well, not really, but I certainly hadn’t expected anyone to mention it.

I reached over and grasped Clark’s hand lightly. “I’m glad I was able to get us somewhere safe.”

Danielle looked uneasy for a minute. “Um, without getting too... indelicate... That’s where Christopher came from?”

Clark and I glanced at each other. I nodded. “Yeah,” I said quietly. I glanced around and realized we were still basically alone. “I hate that everyone thinks Clark cheated on his girlfriend, but we were both in such a bad spot that night. If the car had stopped even... a hundred feet further away from the cabin, I don’t know that we would have made it that far.” Tears filled my eyes as I remembered the long walk and subsequent cabin adventure that night. “Neither one of us really knows what happened, just that it did.”

More family started pouring out of the porch, spilling into the yard and heading to the tables. Clark and I had been given the first spots in line since the whole thing was in our honor. The line started on the other side of the house, snaked into the living room and through the kitchen and out the back door. Big fifty gallon drums were filled with ice and drinks. From there family members had several big tables to choose from with the plastic picnic tables set up for the kids and several blankets strewn about the yard as well.

Martha had gotten Christopher up as everyone started arriving and he’d started fussing. Clark was right. It was unlikely I’d see him again until he wanted to nurse.

I smiled as I watched them. She was being the proud

grandma and showing him off to everyone as she circulated through the line.

“Um, Clark,” I started. “You said it was supposed to rain later. Where on Earth will everyone go if it does?”

He laughed. “Some of the local family will probably head home if it’s too bad. Otherwise, we’ll end up with groups of people in our house, Granny’s house, and the barn.”

I looked at all the young children in the area. “And what about naptimes? There’s no way...”

Danielle and Clark both laughed. “Only the littlest ones will take naps,” she said. “The others will be too excited and then fall asleep as soon as they hit Twentieth Road on the way home. Some of the older kids will end up camping out in the barn and hoping they ‘accidentally’ oversleep and miss church in the morning.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “They have to know that my parents would never let that happen. And that their parents wouldn’t either.”

Danielle shrugged. “You and I both know that, but how many times did any of the rest of us do that?”

“You’ve got a point.”

They continued chatting as I took in the scene. The yard was rapidly filling up with people and a couple more cars pulled down the drive. This was what I’d always thought a big family dinner in the country would be like. Parents with small kids got to go to the front of the line because everyone knew the cranky factor would rev up if they had to wait. The older kids and those without little ones chatted with family members they hadn’t seen in a while, catching up on all the news as they waited in line. The exceptions, of course, were Clark’s grandparents; they were in line right after us.

I saw some of the teenage cousins talking. My eyes narrowed as I watched a few of them. If I didn’t know better, I’d think two of them were flirting. How... Arkansas. They were *cousins*.

No, not necessarily, I realized. Sure, everyone in the yard was related to Clark in some way — either by adoption or marriage or both — but it seemed likely that many of them weren’t actually related to each other.

Before long, the last of the stragglers finished filling their plates. Before anyone could really start heading for seconds, Jonathan stood up and whistled loudly.

The chatter immediately stopped and everyone turned to face him.

“Everybody, welcome back to the Kent family farm. It’s been a long time since we’ve had everyone together for a big ole shindig like this but here we are. I’m sure everyone knows the real reason for this gathering is to officially welcome two of the newest members of our family.” He turned towards us. “All of you know that about fifteen months ago, our very own Clark got married and last summer, his wife, Lois, gave birth to our first grandchild.”

He cleared his throat. “I know I’ve said it before to the whole Davis family, but I’m grateful that you accepted me as a part of your family and never once suggested that I was trying to take Chris’ spot in Martha and Clark’s hearts or that I wanted them to forget about him. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. I’m honored that my first grandson is named after Clark’s first real dad, Christopher. I know he’s already made the rounds a bit today and I’m sure you’ll all get a chance to meet him before the day’s out.”

He looked around then turned towards us. “I’m not quite sure where the little guy is right now, but Clark, why don’t you two stand up. I’m sure you’ll all get a chance to say hello later, but...” He winked at me. “Ladies and gentlemen of Clark Kent’s extended family, I’d like to officially introduce for the first time at a family gathering, Clark and Lois Kent.”

There was applause and cat calls from around the yard as

Clark put his arm around me.

“Kiss her, Cuz!” came a call from across the yard.

The chorus immediately started up from all sectors. “Kiss her!”

I looked up at Clark who was turning bright red. He looked back at me and shrugged. “Guess we’ve got no choice.” He grinned, but only I could tell that it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Hold on.”

With that he dipped me to one side and kissed me.

The dip meant that most of the family couldn’t really see that our lips were really only lightly pressed together.

Cheers and whistles filled the yard as he pulled me back up. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. I put my arms around him and rested my forehead on his chest, refusing to look at the assembled masses.

I could feel Clark’s voice rumbling in his chest as he spoke. “Actually, we were honored to name our son after both of my dads. Christopher Jonathan.”

There was a loud whistle from somewhere.

“Kiss her again!”

I rolled my eyes, as Clark kissed my head.

“You can do better than that!”

Everyone laughed as Clark hollered, “As you were.”

Laughter filled the yard and the chatter resumed its previous levels.

~~~~~  
Clark

I should have known something like that would happen.

I thought we’d pulled it off pretty well. Things were so much better between us, but affection like kissing was reserved for in public only.

I noticed the bodyguards who had come with us unobtrusively mingling with the family. If pressed, they would say they were good friends of Lois’ family who happened to be driving through southeast Kansas and stopped by for a few days. It was close enough to the truth. They had an RV parked in the yard. It was a place for them to sleep and was filled with assorted pieces of surveillance equipment. The company Sam hired had a couple of them and they were driven places on an as needed basis. Apparently, they’d also contacted the FBI offices in Kansas City, Tulsa and Wichita to let them know we’d be in the area — none of the towns between them and Smallville were big enough to have their own offices.

We spent the rest of the afternoon chatting with many of the members of my extended family. When dusk fell, my cousin, Keith — Dad’s nephew — who had brought his video projector set it up and between him and a couple others a sound system had been put in place.

The first feature was kid-friendly ‘Cars’. Lois had been adopted by Danielle’s daughter, Amy, so they watched it together. When it ended, the families with small kids left, many of them stopping by to give us hugs as they did. When the commotion had calmed down, they started ‘Cheaper by the Dozen’.

I settled down with my back to a tree and Lois sat in front of me a blanket pulled over her.

“Cold?” I asked her quietly.

She nodded. “A little bit.”

“Shift the blanket a bit.”

She did and I managed to shoot a bit of heat vision at her legs. I wrapped my arms around her and we stayed there for most of the movie. I made a couple trips to get popcorn and refresh our drinks, but otherwise we were together.

When it was over, Keith stood up and made an announcement. “Okay, enough with the girlie stuff. Now it’s time for some shoot ‘em on the big...” He gestured towards the barn. “Um, well, it’s not a screen, but you know...”

The guys, including me, cheered and the women all groaned.

“Final feature of the night,” he proclaimed loudly, “‘Independence Day.’”

“That’s Laurel’s favorite movie,” I told a laughing Lois.

“Figures,” she whispered. “Besides, I think watching your cousins get blown up on the big... barn could be a lot of fun.”

I groaned and pulled her closer to me as the movie started.

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Part 77

April 2004

Lois

~~~~~

I put my second earring in. “Are you sure you’re up for a rematch?” I called to Clark.

Clark leaned against the bathroom door, fully dressed and ready to go.

“Oh, yeah. You’re going down this time.” I could see him grinning in the mirror.

I rolled my eyes at him as I grabbed my baseball hat and pulled the ponytail through it. “The Cardinals suck this year, too.”

He shook his head. “No, this is their year. I can *feel* it.”

I turned and leaned against the counter. “I do have a surprise for you though.”

“What’s that?”

I smiled at him. “Reservations at J. Buck’s.”

He gasped. “You’re kidding!”

I shook my head. “Nope. Joe Buck’s even going to be there tonight.”

“I *know*.”

“That’s why we’re leaving early,” I told him pushing away from the counter. “Reservations are in an hour and by the time we get down there and fight the crowds and all that...”

“We could always fly,” he told me. “We wouldn’t want to be late.”

I headed out the door to our room. “Christopher’s downstairs with Dad,” I reminded him, punching the code in keypad next to the door. We went to the kitchen and I smothered my son with kisses before handing him giggling to Clark who did the same thing.

“Have fun, you two,” Dad told us trading two tickets for his grandson.

“We will,” Clark said, resting his arm on my shoulder as we walked out. “Cardinals are going to win this time.”

“Good luck with that,” Daddy and I said at the same time as I bumped Clark’s hip with mine.

I decided that, since we were on a date, I’d let Clark drive.

I thought back to our first official date and was sure that this would be much better, even if it still wasn’t a ‘real’ date.

Dinner at J. Buck’s was great. I had a pulled barbeque chicken sandwich with fries and Clark had some kind of fajita steak special. We finished about an hour before game time and headed towards the ball park.

This time things were different. I could feel it. We were more comfortable holding hands and laughing than we had been; his thumb would often rub the back of my shoulder as his arm rested on the seat behind me instead of practically falling off the back in an effort to avoid touching me.

Some things hadn’t changed, though. We cheered at opposite times, just like we had the year before.

Star and Andre weren’t there — a couple of people I didn’t know were in their seats.

“Are we doing anything after the game?” Clark asked between innings.

I shrugged. “Do you want to? Daddy or Jess will get Christopher down for the night.”

“We could.” He leaned closer to me and whispered. “Would you like to go flying?”

I turned to look at him. “Seriously?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Why not? We can head out to New Troy National Forest and leave from there.”

“Can we go all those places that you went when you were avoiding me?” I asked, biting my bottom lip.

I saw guilt flit across his face. “Well, probably not all of them, but some.” He whispered in my ear. “I doubt you’d want to hang out on an iceberg while I melt it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Probably not.”

Suddenly, I couldn’t wait for the game to be over.

~~~~~

Clark

I pulled into a parking spot near the trail head. I checked the parking lot to make sure we were alone before I zipped around the car to open Lois’ door for her before she could do it herself. She rolled her eyes at me as I did.

I clicked the lock button on the key fob before we started up the trail. As soon as we rounded the first corner, I moved behind her and wrapped my arms around her. “Ready?” I asked.

She nodded.

It was the first time we’d been flying since we went to see my parents on our anniversary. “Where to first?”

“I’ve always wanted to see Mt. Everest, but would I actually survive if we did?”

I lifted us quickly off the ground and into the air. “Probably, but it’s the wrong time of year for us to do that. I mean, you’d be fine, but this is climbing season. There’s all kinds of people at base camp and all that and we wouldn’t want to risk being seen. We can go another time if you want.”

“That’s right. Early May is the best time to summit, isn’t it?”

“According to that Surviving Everest special we watched it is.”

“This is incredible,” she whispered as we flew over the Pacific Ocean.

“Isn’t it?” I slowed down so we could watch the sunset.

“How about the Great Wall? We could check it for cracks.”

She laughed. “I don’t know about checking it for cracks, but the Great Wall sounds good.”

I sped us up again and in a few minutes we were standing on a deserted section of the Wall.

“This is amazing,” Lois said, looking around in awe.

I proceeded to tell her what I knew about the history of the Wall. After a few minutes of walking, I realized that even here, in the middle of nowhere where the *only* people who might *possibly* see us were people we’d never, ever see again, and we were holding hands. Just gently clasped — no intertwined fingers or anything like that — but still nestled comfortably together.

We walked — and floated; the part of the Wall we were on wasn’t well maintained — along for nearly an hour chatting about anything and nothing, really. Finally, I glanced at my watch. “We should probably head back,” I told her, reluctantly.

She nodded. “Probably.”

“I’ll take you somewhere else another time,” I promised.

“Okay.”

I wrapped my arms around her and we took off.

It wasn’t long before we landed where we took off. She shivered slightly and I wrapped an arm around her to help keep her a bit warmer as we walked back to the Jeep.

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled up in front of the house and we headed upstairs. Lois headed to the closet to get something to wear and then to the bathroom to change. It was a ‘nightgown’ night, I knew. Date nights always were.

By the time she was done changing, I was already in bed — head on the pillow, eyes closed, covers pulled most of the way up — just as I always was on those nights.

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May 2004

Lois

I could hear Christopher making noise in the other room, but I just didn't want to move. It was way too comfortable under the covers.

My eyes opened wide as I realized why.

Clark was lying right behind me, one arm wrapped around my stomach holding me close to him.

He *never* did that.

Well, not *never*, but never on nights when I was wearing a nightgown.

We'd found ourselves waking up closer together more often — once every other week or so. I refused to think about what that might mean except that we didn't hate each other anymore. A few times, I'd even found myself behind him, his back against me, my arm around him, holding him, my hand resting on his stomach or his arm.

I sighed and forced myself to stop thinking about what it was like to feel his warm skin...

Just then, Christopher finally let out a loud scream. It wasn't like he was really crying or anything like that — just getting impatient.

"Sounds like someone needs his mom," Clark mumbled, rolling away and freeing me to get up without bothering him.

I glanced at the clock. "Clark!" I said sharply. "We've got to get going or we're going to be late for finals."

He groaned. "I'm up, I'm up."

I headed into the other room and hoped that Christopher would nurse quickly this morning. He cooperated and I apologized to Jessica for not having him completely dressed and his diaper changed before handing him off. I rushed through the rest of my morning routine and we were only about five minutes late getting out the door.

It was a day where we had very similar schedules so we were riding together. I drove, knowing I could shave more minutes off our drive time than Clark could and he knew it, too.

After our last morning of finals, we headed for the Daily Planet. Clark was still working in the mail room and I was still in Clerical Services, but it wasn't all bad. Billy and Serena asked for my help fairly often so I wasn't stuck making photocopies and cold calling potential customers. I got to my cubicle and had emails from both Rehalia and Serena telling me to report to the newsroom when I got in.

I headed downstairs and found the Billy in the conference room working on a project. Jimmy was in there with them and we quickly got to work. About fifteen minutes later, Serena walked in.

Her eyes were soft as Billy looked up at her. "Hey," he said quietly, standing up to give her a kiss.

My eyes caught a sparkle. I grinned at them. "What's that?" I asked, mischievously nodding at her hand.

Billy grinned as he pulled her close to him and she rested her head on his shoulder. "She said she'd marry me."

I squealed and stood up to give her a big hug. Jimmy smacked Billy on the back.

"When's the big day?" I asked.

"We're not sure yet," she told me. "We're thinking probably around the holidays. The news is usually fairly slow so we don't have to worry about missing something big. And besides," she whispered conspiratorially, "then going to Hawaii will be extra nice."

I laughed. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

We spent another hour working on the story before I had to head back upstairs. At six, Clark stopped by. He'd finished early but I still had another hour.

"Want me to go grab something to eat on the way home?" he asked.

"That'd be great," I told him smiling. "How about...

Chinese?" I asked hopefully. He'd brought the most wonderful Chinese — from China! — a few weeks earlier when we'd gone for a horseback ride instead of a more traditional date.

He laughed. "Chinese it is."

Clark

I pulled my wallet out of my pocket to see if I had any money on me or if I needed to stop at the ATM. I wasn't paying enough attention to where I was going and was caught off-guard when someone ran into me.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly looking up. "I wasn't watching..." I stared for a long minute before I spoke again. "Lana. I'm sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going."

She shrugged. "I'm okay."

"I'm glad," I said softly, my heart skipping a beat as she sighed.

She pointed to my wallet. "Is that him?"

I glanced down. A picture of Christopher was visible. I nodded. "Yeah, that's him."

"I heard you named him after your dads."

"Christopher Jonathan," I confirmed, pulling the picture sleeves out and handing them over. Suddenly, I was glad I'd removed the picture of her months earlier, even though there was no way she would have been able to see it.

"Kara said the shindig was a lot of fun over Spring Break."

I hesitated. "It was. It's been a long time since my whole family's been together. Keith put movies up on the side of the barn."

"I heard." She stared at the picture for a long time. "He looks just like you."

She wasn't the first person to say that, but it wasn't possible so I went with the old standby. "He's a doll," I confirmed.

Before I could stop her, she flipped the sleeve over.

There was a picture of me and my parents and then one of Lois and Christopher. It was... appropriate for me to carry a picture of my wife and our son in my wallet, but I didn't know what Lana would think about it.

No, I knew what she would think.

Exactly what she was supposed to think.

That I loved my wife and my son.

And that was the truth. I did love my son — more than anything — but I loved Lois, too. I wasn't *in* love with her, but I did love her.

"Are you happy?" she asked suddenly.

I hesitated. Was I?

Finally, I nodded. "Yeah, I'm happy."

That was the truth, not the whole truth, but the truth, nonetheless.

Lois and I were friends and we had decent jobs and school was going well. We lived in a great house with few expenses. Would I have been *happier* if my life was very different?

Probably, but that wasn't the question. I had a good life, for the moment at least. It had been a month since we'd received any threats. Christopher was tons of fun as he explored his world.

And Lois and I were friends again.

I'd already thought that once, but it bore repeating. When we'd been distant, I hadn't been happy at all. Once we were able to really talk, things were much better.

I heard the little hitch in her breathing as I answered her question. I knew it wasn't what she wanted to hear but it was what I had to tell her and not just because it was the truth.

"CK!" I turned to see Jimmy coming out of the Daily Planet's front entrance.

"Hey, Jimmy," I said as he pulled to a stop next to me. I gestured to Lana. "This is an old friend of mine from high school. Jimmy, Lana. Lana, Jimmy. Jimmy works with us at the Planet

and is kind of Lois' brother." I put a slight emphasis on the us.

She held out her hand and gave a small smile. "Nice to meet you." She turned back to me and handed the pictures over. "Here. He's beautiful, Clark. Really. I'm glad you're happy." She spun on her heel and practically ran the other way.

I watched as she left, sighing as she turned the corner. "What's up, Jim?" I asked, turning back to my friend.

He held out an envelope. "This came for you. It fell on the floor in the newsroom, but I thought you might want it before you left for the day."

I took it from him and turned it over in my hands. There was no return address and the postmark was too smudged even for me to read.

I opened it carefully, pulling out the single sheet of paper.

I could feel myself going pale as I read.

"What is it?" Jimmy asked.

"It's him." My voice sounded strangled, even to me.

"Who?"

I hesitated. "Nothing, Jimmy. Nothing I can talk about anyway. When I can, I'll let you know. I promise." I looked him in the eye. "I need you to do something for me. I need you to call Sam and tell him I said 'Rosebud'. Just like that. 'Clark said Rosebud', okay?"

His eyes were wide as he nodded and I turned and ran back inside, zipping up the stairs as fast as I could.

Navance was back and it was the worst threat yet.

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Part 78

Lois

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Clark's face looked grim as he came through the door. I was sure no one but me had noticed the 'whooshing' sound that directly preceded his entrance.

Instead of talking to me, he headed straight for my boss' office in the corner. A minute later, he was at my side.

"We have to go now."

I looked up at him, fear beginning to fill my stomach. "What is it?" I asked, turning back to my desk and shutting down my computer with a few keystrokes before grabbing my purse.

"Not here," he said quietly. "I told Rehalia we had a family emergency."

"Is Christopher okay?" Tears filled my eyes.

"As far as I know."

That wasn't good. He should have said 'yes'. We hurried to the stairs and ran down them.

"You're scaring me, Clark."

"I know. Just a minute, okay?"

We reached the main floor and burst through the doors. Clark's cell phone rang.

"Do you have him?" he asked without any preamble. He waited a second. "Good. We're on our way."

We jogged towards the exit to the parking garage. Jimmy was next to us before we got there.

"What's going on, Clark?" he asked as he trotted along with us. "What's 'Rosebud'?"

I stopped in my tracks. "No," I whispered. "Daddy has him?" I asked, remembering the brief phone conversation.

"He's fine," Clark reassured me.

"For now," I whispered.

"What's going on?" Jimmy demanded.

Clark turned to him as tears coursed down my cheeks. "I don't have time to explain. Come over when you get off okay?" He put his arm around my waist and hustled me towards the door.

Jimmy stopped and watched as we ran to the car.

As soon as we were safely inside, I turned to him. "What happened and why aren't we flying?"

Clark pulled smoothly out of the parking space and

concentrated as we left the parking garage. "A letter came."

"What did it say?"

He sighed. "I'd rather wait and tell you and your dad and everyone all at once." He reached over and grasped my hand. "Your dad has Christopher and he's fine. No one's going to get near him. The house is locked down. The FBI has been called. He's going to be fine. If something had happened, if I wasn't sure he was safe, we'd be flying; I promise."

The forty-five minute trip took just under thirty. I thought Clark was using his special vision and hearing to figure out where the police cars were. He slowed down a couple of times — too quickly for it to be explained by anything else.

There was a guard with a mean-looking German shepherd standing in front of the gate.

"Password?" he asked.

"Constitution," Clark replied.

Each of us had silent alarms we could trigger if we were in danger. We also each had a series of code words that would put different plans into action and different passwords that went along with them.

The gate opened and Clark sped up the drive, screeching to a halt in front of the main entrance. I ran to the door, but it was locked. I growled in frustration as I remembered that I'd have to punch my code in if the house was locked down. "Where is he?" I demanded as soon as I saw my dad.

He was pale and grim — just like Clark. "He's in his crib. The house and the wing are both locked down and security is being raised all over the grounds."

I headed for the stairs. I needed to see my son.

"Lois, wait," Clark called. "He's fine." I turned to look at him and he nodded slightly. He'd peeked. "Jessica has him. Everything's locked down."

"Then tell me what's going on."

Clark sighed and carefully pulled the letter out of his pocket, holding it by the corners. "Jimmy chased me down before I left. It fell on the floor in the newsroom so I didn't get it earlier." He set it on one of the tables so we could all see it. "He said he's sending a team to get his son. He said they were coming in a week, but I don't trust him. As soon as I read it, I told Jimmy to call your dad while I went to get you."

"Why?" I whispered. "Isn't enough to make vague threats or innuendos? Why does he have to *actually* threaten my son?"

Clark put his arms around me and pulled me to him. I crumpled against him, my fists balled in his shirt. "Why?" I whispered again.

"He's crazy," Clark told me, holding me tighter.

A minute later, I took a deep breath and pulled back. "I want to see my son."

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Clark

It had been two days. The stress was starting to get to all of us.

They'd contemplated moving us to the cabin, but it was actually harder to protect. The house could be locked down and there were lines of sight all around it — around all the buildings, actually. Ollie, Vicki and their family had moved into the apartments for the time being.

Lois hadn't left our wing. Christopher hadn't left her side the whole time. I'd had to pry him away from her so they could both get some sleep and then she'd only agree if I set the playpen up in our room where she could see and hear him in the middle of the night.

I had been the one to go down and get us all something to eat and to confer with Sam and security and the FBI. They were studying the threat. The early assessment was that it was an empty threat, but none of us were willing to let it go just yet.

It had stayed out of the news. Jimmy had been appropriately

appalled when he'd heard the whole story — he was staying in one of the spare bedrooms for a few days — and had promised that he wouldn't be the one to break the story, even if it would get him in good with Perry White.

For now, Perry White only knew me as the 'hey, kid' guy who brought his mail on occasion and Lois as the clerical girl who helped Norcross and Judd sometimes. For the moment, we'd prefer to keep it that way.

Lois sat in one of the chairs and stared out the window. "What'd they say?" she asked as I came back in.

I sighed and pulled on her hand until she stood up. I sat in her spot and pulled her down onto my lap. I wrapped my arms around her and held her to me. "So far there's no evidence of a credible threat."

She relaxed nearly imperceptibly. "That's good, right?"

I nodded. "They haven't found any connection to anyone coming to the States from Latislan or any of the known groups of thugs that might kidnap kids like he threatened to. Or any ties to any terror groups or anyone else possibly capable of doing something to the two of you."

"That's good."

"You need to get some sleep," I told her softly, brushing the hair off her face.

"I don't think I can," she said honestly.

"Would a bath help?"

She shook her head. "I already took one."

"Trust me?" I asked.

She hesitated before nodding. "Okay. Some warm milk remedy from Great-Grandma Davis?"

I laughed lightly. "No." I managed to stand up with her in my arms. I carried her to the bed and gently set her down. "Lay on your stomach."

She rolled over and rested her head flat on the mattress.

"This is where you trust me," I said quietly. I pushed her shirt up until it was bunched under her armpits. "I'm not going to do anything untoward, okay?"

She nodded slightly. "I trust you."

I used little darts of heat vision and started to massage her shoulders and back. Before long, her deep, even breathing told me that she was asleep and I pulled her shirt back down. I leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Sleep tight," I whispered, crawling under the covers next to her. I didn't want to be too far from her and Christopher — who was right next to her side of the bed — even in the middle of the night.

As soon as I pulled the covers up, she rolled onto her side, snuggling back into me. I wrapped my arm around her and held her as tight as I dared. "I won't let anything happen to either of you," I promised her.

I closed my eyes, and listening to the sound of both of their heartbeats, I fell asleep.

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June 2004

Lois

I sank into one of the chairs to stare out the large picture window in the cabin's living room.

"How're you doing?" Jimmy asked, sitting in the chair next to me.

"Ready for this to be over," I said honestly. "I wish he'd drop off the face of the Earth or piss off some guy who would have no moral compunction about shooting him."

"Yeah, Clark's not going to just shoot him."

"No, he's not." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner."

Jimmy didn't say anything for a long minute. "I won't say it doesn't hurt a bit that you didn't tell me, but I understand why. I just figured the security was because of Sam or something —

some enemy of his. I never would have guessed this..."

"I'm glad you understand. It wasn't intentionally to hurt you or anything like that. We figured the fewer people that know, the better. Especially people at work — even though we knew you wouldn't tell anyone or whatever."

"It caught me so off-guard, but I'm glad I could help."

One side of my mouth tweaked a bit into a tiny half smile. "I'm sure Clark telling you to call Daddy and tell him 'rosebud' wasn't what you expected."

He shook his head. "No, we were standing there talking to some friend of his from Smallville and then she took off and the next thing I know I'm in a James Bond movie or something."

"James Bond might be pushing it a bit," I told him with a small chuckle before the rest of what he said sunk in. "Friend from Smallville?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Some blonde girl was looking at the pictures in Clark's wallet. She took off just a minute after I got there."

Lana.

It had to be Lana.

And Clark hadn't told me about it.

In his defense, though, a minute later, our world had gone to hell in a hand basket so it was possible he'd forgotten all about it. Maybe.

I sighed. "I'm just glad that it seems to be almost over."

It had been two weeks. Two long weeks. Christopher hadn't left our wing of the house until we'd headed to the cabin. Clark and I had stayed home for a couple of days but went back to work after that. I was glad the semester was over and we didn't have to worry about school on top of everything else. Security was deployed unobtrusively around the Planet — and without the Planet's knowledge. It was risky and had caused a big fight with the different security gurus but one thing we *did not* want was the press getting a hold of our names. Fortunately, a few members of security were able to get temp jobs — through the cooperation of a temp agency — and so it wasn't just us without anyone else. With Clark nearby, I wasn't too concerned about my safety. I wasn't concerned at all about his and I knew he'd keep me safe if it came down to it; the threat wasn't against me anyway.

My mind had only been half on my job. The rest of it had been at the house in Pittsdale. With my son.

I sighed. There was absolutely no indication that Navance was actually going to try anything — other than the letter, of course. The FBI, Daddy's security and private investigators and anyone else who had been looking couldn't find anything linking him to anyone. I knew Daddy didn't know they'd looked into Mindy again and still hadn't found anything. No one could even find where she'd gone.

The lack of anything was frustrating. It wasn't like we could say we'd found the culprit and close the case. All we could say was that there wasn't anything to find.

Yet.

Security would remain tight for another week or so and then slowly deescalate until things were back to normal — whatever that was when a maniac threatened your family.

Several hours later, I was in bed, nearing sleep when Clark came in.

"There's something I didn't mention to you," he said, sliding under the covers.

I rolled to face him. "What's that?"

He looked hesitant. "Right before all this started... When I was on my way to get dinner... I ran into Lana. Literally. I was checking to see if I had any money on me and I bumped into her. She saw the picture of Christopher in my wallet and asked to see it. She looked at it and we talked for like a minute and a half and then Jimmy came up with the letter."

"He told me you were talking to a blonde you described as an old friend from Smallville," I told him. "I wondered if it was

her.”

“When did he tell you?” he asked.

“This afternoon.” I flopped onto my back. “After we got here.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad you haven’t been wondering about it for two weeks or anything like that. I really was going to tell you but with everything that happened...”

“I figured it was something like that,” I told him honestly. “And you did tell me.”

He reached out and turned my head so he could see my face. “I told her I was happy.”

My eyes left his. “Are you? Or did you just tell her that?”

“I am happy,” he said quietly. “I have a good life for just finishing my sophomore year of college. We’re friends again. Christopher is great. We live in a great house and have virtually no expenses. Do I wish things were different? Sure. Do I wish that he wasn’t after you two? Of course. But I *am* happy.”

He wished things were different. He wished he were married to Lana was what he meant by that. I believed him when he said that he was happy, but I would bet money that he thought he’d be *happier* with Lana.

“I’m glad,” I finally whispered and I was.

I was glad he was happy.

I was sorry he’d sacrificed five years of his life to protect us.

I was sorry he was going to be a part-time dad to Christopher once this was over.

I was sorry Lana might decide not to take him back after everything that happened.

I was sorry he hadn’t been able to tell his parents the whole story and that they were going to be hurt when they realized that Christopher wasn’t really their grandson — though I doubted genetics would actually matter given their history with Clark.

But I was glad he was happy.

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Part 79

Clark

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I blew up another one of the balloons and tied it off. “Where do you want this one?” I asked Lois.

She shrugged. “Wherever you want. I think we’ve got about enough.”

I taped it to the back of one of the chairs. “How’s that?”

She looked around. “Looks good.”

It wasn’t officially a ‘party’, but rather dinner with birthday cake. My parents and Granny Kent were on their way in from the airport with Ollie. Vicki was making barbeque chicken cups and loaded mashed potatoes in the kitchen. The boys were finishing up their chores and Jimmy would be here any minute, with Billy and Serena in tow.

As though on cue, the front door opened. “Hello?” called Jimmy.

“We’re in the dining room,” Lois yelled back.

A few seconds later, the three of them traipsed into the dining room.

“Nice place,” Billy said wryly. “What’re you guys slumming it with us for?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Just because my dad has money and lets us live here while we’re in college doesn’t mean we don’t have to work.”

“That’s right, Princess. No spoiled rich girls allowed around here,” Sam said as he walked in the room carrying Christopher. He set him carefully on the floor and we watched him take a few tottering steps before he plopped down.

I could almost see him shrug it off as he decided crawling was faster anyway and he headed towards his toys on the other side of the room.

We all laughed and Lois introduced her dad to Billy and

Serena. A minute later, my parents and Granny pulled up with Ollie and the rest of his family joined us. A couple of the security guys were there too — as ‘friends of the family’ again. It wasn’t that we thought security needed beefed up, but these guys were with us — or at least Christopher, whoever he was with — most of the time so it was only fitting they were at his birthday dinner.

I’d managed to pull my parents to the side to let them know that not everyone knew the whole story about Christopher and the security and all that.

A lively time followed.

Christopher smashed his cake up good and it was soon all over him and his high chair and the table and he even managed to get some in Lois’ hair. By the time he’d been wiped down and ‘opened’ a few presents, it was nearly his bedtime.

Hugs and kisses were given to him by all and the rest of us broke out the board games as Jessica took him upstairs for a bath and bedtime.

We played a variety of games before everyone said their good-byes and headed for home. I gave Mom and Granny hugs and kisses before they headed upstairs to the apartment.

Dad and I headed out to the deck while Lois headed upstairs.

We leaned on the rail as I waited for him to start.

“Everything’s okay?” Dad finally asked.

I nodded. “Think so. We can’t find any connection from Navance to anyone who might do anything here. It was a couple of pretty scary days, though.”

“I’m sure it was.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you guys sooner,” I finally said. I hadn’t told them until about three days after the crisis started.

Dad shrugged. “There was nothing we could have done except worry and you had other, more important, things on your mind.” He sighed. “That wasn’t what I was talking about though.”

I waited for him to go on but he didn’t. “Then what were you talking about?” I finally asked.

“You and Lois.”

“We’re doing good,” I told him honestly. “Things are a lot better between us.”

“That’s good. But are things just better or *better*?”

I sighed. “Things could be better still. But they’re getting better all the time.”

“We’ve noticed. You two seem a lot more... comfortable with each other. You were trying hard before but, to those of us who knew you really well, it was pretty obvious that something wasn’t right.”

I stared out at the dark pasture for a long time before I spoke again. “On our anniversary, she told me she wanted a divorce,” I finally said. “Said she couldn’t do it anymore; it was too hard and not even for Christopher’s sake...”

Unless they’d done more research, they didn’t know about the stipulations Navance put into place after we left Latislan. We hadn’t told them. We’d let them believe the official story and they, of course, had no idea that he wasn’t my son. They didn’t know that he could be at even more risk if Lois had gone through with it.

“What happened to change her mind?”

How much to tell him? “I refused. I told her I wanted this to work, and not *just* for Christopher’s sake. She... told me some of what she’d been dealing with while we were both kind of living our own lives — things I should have seen and I would have if I wasn’t still *so* absorbed in what might have been. I asked her what I could do to make things better for her, right then and that was when she asked me to...” I looked to make sure no one was around. “...take her flying and we went to see you guys. Basically, we — and by that I mean me, really — made a commitment to making things better between us and it’s been working.”

“But you’re still not her lover, are you?”

I shouldn’t have been surprised at his bluntness, but I was. Caught off guard, I wasn’t sure what to say, so the first thing that came to mind came out my mouth. “What makes you say that?”

“When a man and a woman are that intimate with each other, it shows in everything they do. They look at each other differently. They touch each other differently. You two still put on a pretty good show — and I’m still not entirely sure why you feel the need to do that, but I get the feeling you won’t tell me anyway except that you want to convince everyone that your marriage is all it should be — but it’s not the same as if you were in the spot you are now in your relationship and lovers as well.”

Maybe he had a point. I didn’t really remember enough about my parents from before and after the wedding to know if they looked at each other differently. I *did* know they waited until they were married to have sex, but the engagement was only a couple weeks long and the whole courtship — when they were generally accompanied by a five-year-old — was only a few months.

“Take your friends from work. They’re not — not yet. They’re in love. They’re engaged, but they haven’t crossed that final threshold yet. Obviously, I don’t know if they’re waiting for their wedding or what, but you can see it when you watch them. They want to, they want each other, but they haven’t. Not yet. It’s just not there with you and Lois.”

I sighed. “You’re right,” I finally said.

He chuckled. “Oh, I know I’m right. It was your mom who put me onto all this and you know how often she’s wrong.”

“Never.”

“Less than that, I think.”

I smiled at that.

“What’s the problem?” he asked. “She’s a beautiful young lady. She’s the mother of your son. She’s your *wife*. The only thing she’s not is Lana.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Are you still in love with her?”

“I saw her the day the whole thing happened with Christopher.” I sighed. “I still miss her.”

“Miss her or *miss* her?”

I shrugged. “I’m committed to Lois, to my son, to my marriage. I’m not going to cheat on her.”

“Oh, I know you’re not going to do that,” Dad said flippantly. “If you ever did, your mom and Lois would have to draw straws to see who got to skin you alive, even if you and Lois aren’t at that point yet. Besides, your mom and I raised you better than that.”

I wondered what he’d say if he knew I’d kissed Lana after I was married to Lois; if he knew I’d told her I desperately wanted to make love to her.

I knew what he’d say. They’d both be very disappointed in me.

Dad caught me off guard when he spoke again. “An affair doesn’t have to be physical, you know. And physical affairs don’t just mean sex. Any kind of physical interaction with another woman in a way that should be reserved only for a spouse. Kissing. Other touches. Even hugs can be. It’s going to be different for most people. Some people are... touchers and they don’t think twice about touching someone of either gender and never even realize they’re doing it. For others, though, there’s an... intent there that makes it inappropriate. So two people in the same hug or same interaction could see things differently.”

He sighed. “And there’s emotional affairs where a person shuts their spouse out emotionally and has those needs met by someone else. That can happen with no physical contact at all, and there can also be a... mental affair, for lack of a better term. When a person, in his or her mind, would rather be with another person. I’m not saying this is what’s going on with you — or that it ever would — but to use you as an example... If you’re

married to Lois but spend all your time wishing you were with Lana — thinking about Lana — your mind isn’t where it should be: with your wife.”

I wanted to tell him that it didn’t matter if my mind was with Lois or not. Hers wasn’t with me. I wasn’t sure who it was with — if anyone — but our marriage wasn’t typical in so many ways. And I couldn’t tell him that it probably didn’t really matter if my mind was on Lana regularly as long as I didn’t let it get back to the point it had been the first year of our marriage. And it wouldn’t because I’d done my best — most of the time — to keep my mind off Lana.

“So what’s holding you back?” he finished. “Is your mind still somewhere it shouldn’t be?”

I didn’t really want to answer him and breathed a sigh of relief when the door opened behind us.

We turned to see Lois holding Christopher. “Someone’s looking for his daddy,” she said. “He’s so over Mom at the moment.”

I smiled as he reached for me. He didn’t say many words yet — though he babbled all the time; he got that from Lois — but ‘mama’ and ‘dada’ were in his repertoire. I held out my arms to him. “Hey, big guy. How come you’re not asleep?” He immediately rested his head on my shoulder as I held him to me.

“I think he’s on a sugar high. He still smells like cake even though he’s had a bath.” Lois cinched the belt of her robe a bit tighter. The nightgown and robe both fell nearly to the ground, but I knew she was uncomfortable in them in front of me, much less my dad.

Lois yawned. “If you’ve got him, I’m going to bed.”

I nodded. “I got him. We’ll go for a walk or find a rocking chair or something and I bet he’s asleep before you know it.”

She turned to walk inside. “I won’t know it, Mary. I’ll be asleep.”

“Mary?” I called after her, my eyes on my son.

“Yeah. Mary. Mary Poppins.”

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Lois

I could hear Clark laughing behind me and a second later, Jonathan joined him. I wondered what they’d been talking about, but I wasn’t about to ask. Somehow, I figured it had to do with our relationship.

Way deep down inside somewhere, it bothered me a bit that Christopher preferred Clark over me sometimes. I knew that was just how it was — all kids favored one parent over the other from time to time and now it was Clark’s turn. Christopher and I had been practically inseparable when I was home for months, but that was because I was his main source of nutrition.

I shook myself.

That was a dangerous path and I knew it. I knew that if I let myself, I’d slip into a depression over the perceived rejection by my son — and the still real rejection on certain levels by my husband — even though I was on medication that helped most of the time. There was still a very real need for me to be on the look-out for what I’d taken to calling ‘triggers’ and avoid them.

The rejection — or perceived rejection — was one of those.

I made my way back through the house and wondered if Martha was planning on trying to corner me into having the counterpart to whatever conversation it was Clark and Jonathan were having.

I hoped not. I didn’t really want to deal with that. Martha was wonderful but still too perceptive for my own good. She knew, I was sure, that things were better between us but I was also sure that she knew that things weren’t... where they should be for a happily married couple. I had no desire to try to deflect those questions.

I punched my code into the keypad next to the door and went back to our room. I slid back under the covers and ‘accidentally’

left one of the extra pillows in the middle of the bed — a sure sign that I didn't want Clark anywhere near me in the middle of the night. He did it from time to time too, I was sure, though I'd never actually seen him. It wasn't *always* me that moved the pillow there. I curled up with the body pillow and sighed.

I reached down and tugged the covers over me.

One year down.

Four to go.

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Part 80

Clark

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 "Hey, little man," I said quietly as I picked him up out of his crib. "What do you say we let your mom sleep?"

Christopher had been weaning himself and now, two days after his birthday, only nursed right before bed and sometimes first thing in the morning.

I knew she hadn't slept well the night before, so I figured she'd enjoy sleeping in.

We made it downstairs a few minutes later and I fixed him a bottle of milk before starting on pancakes — his new favorite.

As the first cakes were coming off the griddle, Dad wandered into the kitchen.

"I thought I smelled something good," he said, inhaling deeply.

"Pancakes coming right up," I told him.

"What on our agenda for today?" he asked sitting on one of the bar stools.

I shrugged. "Lois has to work in a few hours, but the C-man and I are hanging out here all day. What about Mom and Granny?"

He rolled his eyes. "They were saying something about an antique shop and an outlet mall."

I winced on his behalf. "They should ask Vicki. She knows some great places. How's your back doing?" I asked suddenly.

He shrugged. "Good as new. Why?"

"Would you like to go for a hike in the New Troy National Forest? The property backs up to it and there's a great trail we can hit not too far from the barn. It goes to this amazing lake. It's a bit of a walk but it's not a hard one." I grinned at him. "We could even take a fishing pole or two."

"Really?" His eyes lit up.

I laughed. "I honestly have no idea if there's any fish or if you're even allowed to fish there if there are. I just wanted to see that face." I set a plate of pancakes in front of him as he mumbled something about sending me back to Krypton and I laughed again.

"Well, if it's not a difficult hike, I should be okay," Dad continued louder.

I shook my head. "It's not. More of a walk really. We could take a lunch and I've got a backpack thing for Christopher."

"Sounds good to me."

"What sounds good to you?" Mom asked walking in, standing behind him and wrapping her arms around him and resting her head on his back.

So that's what Dad had been talking about the night before.

Dad filled her in on our newly-made plans for the day.

She rested her chin on his shoulder. "Fine with me as long as I get some pancakes."

I set a plate in front of the seat next to Dad.

"Where's Lois?" she asked, climbing onto the stool.

"She didn't sleep well so me and Christopher decided to let her sleep."

"You didn't have to do that," came a yawn filled voice.

I looked over to see Lois walking into the room.

"Where's coffee?" she asked running her hands through her hair.

I laughed and fixed her a cup just the way she liked it. "Here. You should have slept longer."

She shook her head. "I got called in early. I have to leave in like an hour."

I looked her up and down, one eyebrow cocked. Her hair was a mess and she was wearing an old T-shirt and a pair of shorts that had seen better days. "You better get a move on, Captain Hairdo."

She glared at me as she took a long sip of coffee.

I flipped a couple more pancakes over. "Breakfast?"

She nodded and went to sit by my mom after stopping to give Christopher a kiss.

We chatted for a while as we ate breakfast before Lois headed upstairs to take a shower and get ready for work. I made some sandwiches and packed a bag with diapers and wipes and a blanket before I went upstairs to get Christopher changed and ready to go. I needed to get dressed, too, and find the carrier for him.

I walked into our room and stopped in my tracks.

Lois was walking from the bathroom to the closet, with only a short towel wrapped around her. Her eyes were wide and her arms automatically wrapped around her stomach to make sure the towel stayed put.

It was a second before I averted my eyes, just like it had taken a second when she'd been wearing that red nightgown at Christmas. She looked good, really good. I knew that — I'd seen her in shorts and swimsuits but something about a towel caught me off-guard. "Sorry," I muttered, finally looking away.

She kept was in the closet and out of my line of sight by the time she spoke. "I didn't expect you two back so soon."

I headed towards Christopher's room. "We both need to get ready to go for a walk to that lake with my dad."

"Have fun," she called.

"We will," I promised.

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 Lois

I pulled into the Daily Planet parking garage and headed for the elevator. I hoped Billy and Serena would have something for me to do instead of being stuck in my cubicle all day.

They did and before I knew it, lunch had rolled around.

"You coming?" Jimmy asked.

"Where are we going today?" I grabbed my purse and headed towards the elevator with him.

"How about that new deli on 8th?"

"Sounds good to me." We headed out the front door of the Planet and around the corner. "Shoot." I stopped in my tracks and checked my wallet. "I need to stop at the bank."

"I got it," he answered, pulling out his wallet to check his cash status. "No," he sighed. "I don't. Bank, then deli."

The line for the ATM was several people deep, but there was next to no one inside so we went in.

"Everybody down!"

We all turned in unison to see men in masks, guns drawn.

I shared a look with Jimmy, but decided this probably wasn't the time to play hero.

I'd managed to slip my wedding band off as they started taking wallets and jewelry from the bank employees and had slid it into my shirt, hoping it would catch in my bra and not clatter to the floor if they made me stand up.

I thought about activating the emergency signal on my watch, but decided that the situation didn't call for it. Not yet anyway. We weren't in any immediate danger and if I sounded the signal, it could become a hostage situation and none of us wanted that, I was sure. Besides, the signal was mainly for Navance related emergencies.

Clark would hear it — even from NTNF, I was sure — and would come flying. And that could be dangerous on several

levels.

We all did as we were told and five minutes later, they were gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I sat up, digging into my blouse for my ring and slipping it back on my finger. It amazed me how naked I felt without it, even for those few minutes.

Jimmy and I spent an hour talking to the police and then Eduardo — one of the city reporters who had shown up to cover the story for the Planet. Jimmy was sure Perry would be ecstatic to have firsthand accounts of the robbery.

As much as I wanted to get the attention of the venerable Perry White, I wasn't sure I wanted my name in the news. I sighed and realized I needed to ask Eduardo to try to keep my name out of the story. Any digging into me would bring Christopher to the forefront and I couldn't let that happen.

"Mr. Friez?"

He didn't move, but continued scribbling in his notepad.

"Eduardo?"

He looked up. "Yes? Lois, right?" He looked at his paper to confirm that.

I nodded. "Listen, I don't mind telling my story, but is there any way to keep my name out of it?"

His brow furrowed. "I suppose it's possible, though your name will be a matter of public record in the police report and stuff."

"I know, but there's a lot of reasons why I'd like to keep my name out of the media right now."

He shrugged. "Okay. I'll make you an unnamed female.

How's that?"

"Thank you."

Jimmy put an arm around me as I started to decompress.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

I rested my head on his shoulder. "Yeah. Just wondering why these things happen to me."

"Because no one else could handle them. The criminal world will shake in its boots when Lois Kent makes it to the big time."

I smiled, just a bit. "Something like that anyway."

"Ready to go get that bite to eat?"

I nodded.

"Eduardo!" he called. "Would you let Perry and Rehalia know that we're grabbing a bite to eat but we'll be back before long?"

Eduardo nodded and waved us off.

"We could have called, you know," I told him.

"Yeah, but then we'd be guilty into getting back sooner than we'd like. We still have about fifty minutes of our hour long lunch break. We were on a story," he finished glibly.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. That's it."

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Clark

"This is beautiful," Dad said, looking over the lake.

"Isn't it? Lois and I have been up here a couple times on dates. We've ridden twice and walked once, I think." I spread the blanket out on the grass and then carefully removed the harness holding Christopher in place. He'd jabbered the whole way. I'd thought he'd doze off but he hadn't. I was sure he would on the way back.

I set him in the middle of the blanket, knowing he'd be off it like a shot. Sure enough, Dad was chasing him around within a few seconds.

I laughed as I unloaded the sandwiches and drinks. "You have to watch him like a hawk."

A few minutes later, I was stretched out on the blanket feeding Christopher bits of deli meat and cheese, eating my sandwich in between bites. We looked over at the trail as we heard voices heading our direction.

I let out a breath as I recognized the first person to come into

view.

"You know them?" Dad asked quietly.

"That's Joe," I responded in like tones. "Lois' ex-boyfriend. I haven't seen him, except from a distance, since right after we got married."

"Clark?" Joe stopped short, the young woman behind him almost running into him when he did.

"Hey, Joe," I said, sitting up. "How've you been?"

"Good." He turned and took the hand of the young woman.

"This is my girlfriend, Debbie. Debbie, this is Clark Kent..."

"Lois' husband?" she asked in shock.

I stood up, brushing my hands on my jeans. "That's right. It's nice to meet you." I held out my hand and she shook it.

"Same here. Joe's told me some about you. I went to high school with Lois."

"Another Lincoln High survivor, huh?"

She smiled at me. "Yep. How is she?"

"She's good," I told her. "She's working today." I turned.

"I'm sorry. This is my dad, Jonathan Kent. Dad, this is Joe and Debbie."

Dad had one hand firmly on Christopher's ankle as he tried to get to my water bottle. I shook my head as I scooped my son up. Dad stood and shook hands with both of them.

"Who's this little guy?" Debbie asked.

"This is Christopher," I told her.

"Lois' son," Joe said quietly. "He looks just like you."

"He talks just like Lois," I said, deflecting the comment. "A mile a minute."

As though to prove me right, he started jabbering, smacking me in the face with flailing arms as he did.

Debbie laughed. "May I?" she asked holding out her arms.

Christopher dove for her.

"I guess so," I laughed.

She talked quietly to him, walking towards the lake. Dad kept an eye on them, I noticed. Joe moved closer to me.

"How is Lois? Really?"

"She's good. Really."

"And you're taking care of her?" He crossed his arms in front of him.

"I'm doing my best," I told him honestly. "I don't want to hurt her any more than you do."

"I haven't seen her in a long time. Just walking around campus a time or two but that's it."

"She's a great mom," I said, watching Debbie walk with Christopher. "She loves him so much."

"I'm sure she is. I heard you guys are living with Sam."

I nodded. "He said we could live with him while we're in college. He even hired a nanny for us so we can go to school and work."

"Jess, right?"

"Yeah."

"I know her sister."

"That's right. Lois told me that her little sister was a friend of hers from high school."

"Take care of her, Clark," Joe said quietly. "I'll still beat the stuffing out of you if you don't."

"I know."

"Uh, Clark," Debbie called, heading back our way.

"Yeah?"

"I think someone is in dire need of a diaper change and that's all you."

I reached for him and he came willingly. My sensitive nose had already confirmed her statement. "Come on, big guy. Let's clean you up." I looked back at them. "Would you two like to join us?"

Joe shook his head as Debbie took his hand. "No, but thanks."

“Well, then.” I smiled at both of them. “It was nice to meet you, Debbie. Good to see you again, Joe.”

“Likewise, Kent.”

Debbie smiled at my dad. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Kent.”

Dad waved at them as they walked off. “They seem nice enough,” he said when they were out of earshot.

“I think Lois hurt Joe pretty badly when we got married,” I told him, setting Christopher on the blanket and pulling out his cow keys to try to keep him occupied while I changed his diaper. “They’d been on-again, off-again since they were sixteen and were about to try again — seriously — when we were in Europe. She was afraid that he was going to be mad, because the two of them had never...” I sighed. “She’d always refused to have sex with him while they weren’t a serious couple and then to find out she was pregnant... She was afraid he’d be mad and hate her.”

“Did he?”

I shook my head as I snapped Christopher’s outfit back into place. “No. He understood then offered to marry her because he didn’t think I’d take responsibility or at least that I wouldn’t marry her. She hadn’t told him yet that I already had. I was telling Lana at the time and I ran into him downstairs when I left. He told me I’d better take care of her or else I’d have to answer to him.”

“Why didn’t the two of you tell them together?” Dad asked.

I looked up at him.

“What?” he asked, defensively.

I shrugged. “I don’t think it occurred to either of us. I talked to Lana and she talked to Joe at the same time.” Telling them together might have been a smarter idea, but it was way too late for that.

We spent another hour at the lake before deciding it was time to head back.

Christopher slept the whole way back.

Part 81

September 2004

Lois

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“Serena, we can’t accept these.” I handed them back.

“We have four,” she told me. “We only need two. We thought about inviting you and Jimmy, but his dad’s getting in town that weekend and only for a couple of days so... Not that we didn’t want to invite Clark, but the story was about you and Jimmy and we only had two extras.”

“Right.” I stared at the tickets in her hand. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Definitely. We want you there.”

I took them and grinned. “Kerth Awards, here we come!”

She laughed.

I frowned.

“What?”

“I don’t think Clark has a tux and I’m going to need a dress.” My eyes were wide, I was sure. “I’m going to have to go shopping.” I grabbed my purse. “I’ll see you later. Thanks again!” I could hear her laughter behind me as I ran off.

“Where’s the fire?” Clark asked, falling in step beside me as I neared the elevator.

“We’re going to the Kerth Awards.” I was sure my eyes were sparkling. This was a dream come true. Almost. The dream had me winning one, but this was a good start.

“We are?” he asked, incredulous.

I nodded. “Serena and Billy got two tickets each for the adoption story. Since they only need two, they gave us the other two. They were going to ask me and Jimmy since it’s our story, but Jimmy can’t go so they asked us.”

“I don’t have a tux.”

“I know. And I don’t have a dress.” I snapped my fingers.

“Daddy said he wanted us to go to the Adoption Option fundraiser next month and that he’d get me a dress and you a tux for that so maybe he’ll get them early. He’s getting Christopher a tux, too.”

Clark raised an eyebrow at me as we left the elevator. “We’re taking a one-year-old to a fancy shindig in a tux?”

I laughed. “It’s downstairs. He’ll be there for about an hour, hour and a half and then Jessica will put him to bed while we mingle. Jimmy’s coming and I think both of his parents are going to be there.”

“What is Adoption Option anyway? I mean, I’ve heard him mention it, but we haven’t really talked about what it is.”

“It’s his new organization. It’s part of the Sam and Ellen Lane Foundation. They’re going to work with women in the middle of unplanned pregnancies who don’t want abortions and aren’t sure they can raise the baby themselves, but still want to know their child. They’re going to promote open and semi-open adoptions. They’ll facilitate meetings between pregnant moms and prospective adoptive parents.” I pulled out of the parking garage and into traffic.

“After the whole thing with Jimmy and everything, he decided to promote open adoptions more actively and started setting this up. He talked to me about it and wanted to make sure that all of us — Dave’s family — were okay with it before he did. He was originally going to find a group to support through the Foundation, but he couldn’t find one like he wanted. One thing he wants to specialize in is adoptions of kids who they know are going to have special needs — Downs Syndrome babies, for instance — or for moms who know their kids are at higher risk for certain things because they run in families. Like David Eckstein.”

“Right,” Clark answered. “He’s the Cardinals shortstop. Something like half his family has needed kidney transplants at some point and his sisters’ kids probably will eventually, too. His dad turned down one of David’s kidneys in case one of his sisters’ kids or even his own kids needed it someday. He’s very active in the organ donation and autism awareness communities, I think.”

“Exactly. So take one of his sisters as a for instance. She gets pregnant but doesn’t want to have an abortion. Maybe she’s in college or high school or whatever and, if it weren’t for the potential health problems, she’d consider adoption in a heartbeat. But she knows that her baby could have kidney problems — severe ones, requiring a transplant at some point. She doesn’t want to give her baby up for adoption to a family who may not understand the gravity of the situation, but she also doesn’t want whoever adopts the baby to not have resources if something does happen eventually — access to family medical records, things like that.”

“Enter Adoption Option,” Clark said with a grin.

“Exactly. With Dave, none of us could have known that the leukemia was a possibility. There’s no history of it in Mom’s family. I have no idea about Bobo the Sperm Guy’s family. But if it had been an open adoption anyway, he’d still be here.”

I pulled up in front of Street’s Formal Wear. “Let’s go.”

My phone rang and I talked to Daddy for a minute. He okayed the early purchase of the formal wear and we headed in.

“Can I help you?” the young blonde woman asked.

I looked around. “We need a dress and a tux. It’s on Sam Lane’s account.”

She smiled. “Dr. Lane is a good customer.” She held out her hand. “I’m Mayson.”

“Lois,” I said shaking it. “Daddy said you guys are the best.”

She laughed. “He’s told us all about you. He said you’d be in with your son.” She looked around. “Is he with you?”

I shook my head. “This is a spur of the moment trip. This is my husband, Clark.” They shook hands. “We have a formal event

to go to next week that we hadn't planned on attending so..." I shrugged. "Here we are."

We spent the next forty-five minutes laughing and trying on different clothes. I never did see Clark in his tux, though he saw me in my dress as Mayson took measurements.

She seemed nice enough and before long, we were on our way.

~~~~~

Clark

I was whining. I knew I was whining. "I can't get this thing straight."

Lois rolled her eyes at me. "I told you to give me a minute and I'd help you fix it."

"I'm too impatient for that."

"Since when?"

"I'm nervous."

"You're not the one up for an award," she reminded me.

"So?"

"So what do you have to be nervous about?"

"Perry White's going to be there. Franklin Stern. All sorts of other famous media types."

She sighed as she finished applying her lipstick. "You'll be fine. Just don't step on my toes if we dance." She turned towards me. "Hold still."

I sighed and raised my chin as she fixed my tie.

"There. All done."

I looked at my reflection in the mirror. "How'd you do that?" And in like two seconds.

She smiled at me. "I'm good. Now, go kiss your son goodbye while I go to the bathroom and then we'll go."

I laughed and went to find Christopher.

He was in the kitchen with Sam. "I can't even imagine what he's going to look like in one of these," I told my father-in-law as I carefully stayed out of the reach of peanut butter fingers.

"He'll look adorable," Sam said, wiping his fingers with a wet wipe before tackling Christopher's.

I laughed. "I'm sure he will." I kissed the top of Christopher's head. "Be good for Grandpa, bud."

"He always is," Lois said, walking into the room.

Sam smiled at her. "Sweetheart, you look beautiful." He was right. She looked great.

"Thanks, Daddy." She accepted his kiss on the cheek before kissing Christopher's head, just as I had. "Sorry, little man. Too much peanut butter on you to get much closer."

He just laughed and waved his sticky fingers.

I glanced at my watch. "We better get moving. Thanks, Sam."

"My pleasure." He grimaced as Christopher managed to get his hands on Sam's sleeve. "Get out of here."

I held an elbow out to Lois. "Shall we?"

She rolled her eyes, even as she slipped a hand inside the crook of my arm. "Let's go."

We pulled up in front of the Press Club where the annual event was held. Someone held open both of our doors and then parked the Jeep. Valet parking. Nice.

We headed inside where we were greeted warmly by Billy and Serena. After we found our seats, I turned to Lois.

"Would you like to dance?" I asked hesitantly.

She looked surprised. We'd never actually danced together before — at least not since the Tush Push and I didn't think line dancing really counted. "Sure," she finally said.

I took her hand and led her to the dance floor before pulling her into my arms, one hand resting lightly on her waist and her hand in my other one.

"You're a good dancer," she said quietly.

"You're not bad yourself. Nice to know you can do more than Two-Step."

She groaned. "That reminds me. We have the weekend of the

Corn Festival off. Do you want to go? It'd be a pretty quick trip but..."

I smiled. "I did promise you a Tush Push if you ever made it to the Corn Festival, didn't I?"

She nodded. If I didn't know better, I'd say she also managed to shift slightly closer to me.

"Sounds good to me then," I told her. "I bet Christopher will enjoy it, too." She gave me a quizzical look. "Well, as much as a fifteen-month-old can. He'll enjoy seeing his Grams and Gramps."

"And I'm sure they'll enjoy seeing him," she said with a smile.

"I haven't told you this yet, but you look beautiful tonight."

She looked down and blushed. "Thank you. You look pretty nice yourself."

"Thanks."

We danced for a while longer before I found myself dancing with Serena and Lois with Billy.

"How're the wedding plans coming?" I asked her.

She sighed. "Stressful. My mother wants to release doves."

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Exactly. What about you two? Was your wedding stressful?"

I hesitated. "We eloped on the spur-of-the-moment," I said honestly. "We were out of the country and found out Lois was pregnant and..." I shrugged. "The whole thing took about twenty minutes of planning." That much was true. The wedding planning part was easy. The breaking Lois out of the hospital and getting us out of the country planning took a couple of days.

"Maybe that's the way to go," she sighed. "Not the pregnant foreign country thing, but just run off to Vegas or something. Do you ever wish you'd had a big wedding or even a small one?"

I shrugged. "It never bothered me. Not really. This spring when we went home, my whole family got together and had a big 'meet Clark's wife and son' barbeque. That was fun, but... I didn't really miss the big wedding thing." I smothered a sigh as Lana came unbidden to mind. I would have missed a real wedding with her. I knew that. But I didn't with Lois.

"What about Lois?"

"We've never talked about it. You'd have to ask her, I guess."

I was grateful that the announcement was made to return to our seats.

~~~~~

Lois

I closed my eyes and rested my head on the back of the seat as Clark drove us home. "I can't wait to win an award of my own," I sighed.

"It'll happen," he promised.

"Oh, I know. Eventually, I'll have a Pulitzer, too."

He chuckled. "I don't doubt it. I bet I'll beat you to it, though."

I snorted. "Unlikely."

"How about we win one together then?" he asked, squeezing my hand lightly.

"Like Lana'll let you anywhere near me after the divorce," I said, without thinking.

There was a long pause. "Well, then, I guess we'll have to win it for the overthrow of Navance."

I didn't say anything for a long minute. "Did Serena ask you about our wedding?" I finally said.

"Yeah. I guess she asked you, too?"

I nodded. "Wanted to know if we would have preferred a real wedding."

"Would you?" he asked.

"I would have preferred a wedding where a dictator wasn't the driving force behind it."

"Good point," he replied.

I sighed and changed the subject. "My feet hurt."

"Mine don't." I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"I don't think I like you anymore."

"Sure you do."

"Only if you promise to take me flying again sometime soon."

"Deal."

We hadn't been flying again since we'd been to the Great Wall. It was late enough in the year that maybe we could go to Everest before long.

"When's the Adoption Option soiree again?" he asked me.

"The weekend after the Corn Festival."

"Busy couple of weeks."

I nodded. "So if I'm going to venture out into Smallville society... has it been long enough for them to have forgotten about the whole 'seduced Lana's boyfriend and forced him to marry her when she got pregnant' thing?"

I shrugged. "Most people will have moved on. If we run into Lana's parents or something... That might be a different story."

"Can we avoid them then?"

"I'm planning on trying."

"That's good."

We didn't speak for a while and I relived every moment that I'd spent dancing in Clark's arms.

It was everything I'd thought it would be and then some. If only he'd wanted to be there as badly as I had.

Lana's name had come up — in my head and in conversation — more than once. I hated that. Things had been going so well and even though we still were very unconventional, I hated that she was ruining my night.

I sighed. She wasn't even here. She could only ruin my night if I let her. And I wasn't going to let her.

It had been a great night and I'd seen several of my idols up close. That had been really nice. I'd wanted to ask for autographs, but I thought that might be a faux pas. Maybe some other time. I promised myself that if I was ever in their spot and someone wanted my autograph, I'd do my best to make time for them.

We pulled up in front of the house and I even waited long enough for Clark to open my door for me. I rested my head against his shoulder, his arm around me as we headed upstairs.

He punched his code in the keypad as I yawned.

For a few minutes, I wondered what it would be like if I was able to take that tux off of him. He looked beyond good.

He looked... super.

I sighed.

"Tired?" he asked quietly.

I nodded. "And my feet still hurt."

He chuckled lightly. "Why don't you go do whatever it is you need to do to get ready for bed and I'll give you a foot rub?"

The back rub he'd given me while we were in lockdown had done the trick. It had been fabulous. I was sure a foot rub would be, too.

"It's only fair," I told him through another yawn.

"What?"

"Your feet never hurt so it's only fair you give me a foot rub."

He chuckled again and I moved in front of him, my head still resting on his chest, my arms at my side. He wrapped his arms around me and rested his chin on my head. It seemed a bit of a stretch for him. Normally, I fit perfectly underneath it, but the heels must have been throwing everything off.

I sighed and pulled away, heading for the bathroom. "I'll be right out," I told him.

"I'll be waiting." I heard a 'whoosh' and knew he was done.

It was the night after a fancy shindig and a Saturday to boot. I managed to get out of the dress and heels and all the other contraptions of torture I was sure had been invented by men and slipped into the floor length black, satin gown. I grabbed the robe and tossed it over the chair as I headed for the bed.

He'd already turned down the covers and I flopped down on my stomach, bending one knee to hold my foot up in the air.

"Work your magic," I told him.

He laughed and a second later, his hands were wrapped around my foot. "Just relax."

I did and the next thing I knew, it was morning.

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Part 82

October 2004

Clark

I snapped the backpack in place around my waist. "All set, big guy?"

"He looks pretty secure to me," Lois said. "Good thing he can't pull your hair out," she muttered under her breath as he tried to do just that.

I laughed. "Ready?"

She put her sunglasses on. "Let's go paint the town red."

I groaned. "We're not going to paint the town red."

"John Deere Green?" she asked, giving me wide innocent eyes over the top of her glasses.

"Much better," I said, taking her hand. "Where to first?"

She shrugged. "You tell me, Tour Guide Barbie."

"I am *not* Tour Guide Barbie."

"Tour Guide Ken?"

I sighed. "Not even close."

We headed towards the town square where the Corn Festival was in full swing.

"Clark!"

I turned to see Rachel Harris running at me. "Rachel!" I let go of Lois' hand just in time to catch her and swing her around.

Christopher giggled.

"Oops, sorry," she said. "Didn't see the little guy."

I laughed. "He enjoyed it. This is Christopher."

"I figured," she told me with a grin.

I turned to Lois. "And this is my wife, Lois." That was easier to say than I expected. Especially to someone who I grew up with and knew me and Lana as inseparable.

Rachel smiled at her and Lois smiled back. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too," Lois said.

"Sheriff's Deputy, huh?" I asked Rachel with a grin.

She shrugged. "I'm not old enough to be Sheriff and Dad's not ready to retire yet anyway." She winked at Lois. "I might give him a run for his money for the nomination in four years, though."

I laughed. "Yeah, right. Your dad's got it sewn up until he retires."

"Probably."

A squawk came over her radio. "Rach?"

She turned her head. "Yeah?"

"Pete's over by the strongman bell ringing thing looking for you."

"Thanks." She turned back to us. "Duty calls."

I raised an eyebrow. "Mom told me about you and Pete."

She groaned. "Fine. Come on. I know he was hoping you'd be here."

We headed across the open green space. We waved to Mom and Dad over by the grill area. I'd grabbed Lois' hand again as we walked.

We chatted with Rachel and we both pointed out a few things to Lois.

"And there's the pitching booth," Rachel told Lois.

I groaned. "No. Not this year."

"What?" Rachel asked me with her biggest, most innocent eyes.

"Yeah, what?" Lois asked.

“Every year, Josh, Pete and Clark have a pitching contest. They each get fifteen pitches; each strike gets a ticket. Whoever does best gets all the tickets and gets to pick a prize for his girlfriend.” She whispered conspiratorially. “Clark’s never won.”

I groaned as Lois laughed. I’d have to try harder this year, if for no other reason than to prove that I could. It was something that I couldn’t use my... powers or gifts or whatever to do. It had to do with precision, not power.

“Twelve noon,” Rachel told me. “Same as always.”

I sighed. “I’ll be there.”

Lois bumped me with her hip. “Gonna do any better this year?”

“I have to,” I told her. “My son’ll be watching.”

~~~~~  
Lois

Rachel and I laughed at that. “He’s one, Clark. He’ll never remember,” Rachel pointed out.

“That’s not the point,” Clark grouched.

Rachel patted his arm. “I’m sure that Pete and Josh’ll let you win since you have a wife and son to impress now.”

I giggled and Clark rolled his eyes. “No, they won’t. If anything, they’ll try harder to embarrass me in front of my wife.”

“I don’t think you’ll need their help,” I said under my breath — but loud enough to be heard.

“Hey!” Clark looked wounded.

Rachel and I dissolved into giggles.

“There’s Pete,” Clark said, relief evident in his voice.

They exchanged the best guy hug thing they could with Christopher on Clark’s back. “Pete, this is my wife, Lois.”

I held out my hand but found myself wrapped in a big bear hug, feet well off the ground. I laughed.

“Put her down, Pete,” Clark said, mild amusement in his voice.

Pete obliged, setting me back down on the ground, but left an arm wrapped around my shoulders. “How do you get anything done, man? Your wife is *hot!*”

Rachel groaned. Clark glared and I was sure I seventeen shades of red.

Pete grinned. “At least you’ll have a good excuse for losing this year. You won’t be able to concentrate.”

“We’ll see,” Clark told him. “Now, would you mind getting your hands off my wife?”

I thought about bristling a bit at that, but Clark’s grin and Rachel’s exasperation told me that it probably wasn’t Clark being all possessive or anything, but rather some sort of old joke.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Pete answered with a grin of his own. “I kinda like her.”

Clark rolled his eyes and looked at Rachel. “Guess it’s you and me then.”

Rachel shrugged. “You two are pretty interchangeable. Let’s go, Clark.”

The two of them started to walk off, Clark putting an arm around Rachel’s shoulders as he did.

I felt more than a twinge of jealousy. In some ways, it seemed that was more real than when Clark did the same with me. I mentally shook it off.

“You realize your taking my son with you,” I hollered after them. “That means you get the two a.m. wake up calls!” I grinned up at Pete. “They get all the stinky diapers, too.”

Clark and Rachel stopped in their tracks. Rachel looked up at Clark. “I don’t do dirty diapers.”

Clark sighed. “Guess we better trade back then. I avoid them whenever possible.”

They turned and walked back to us. I looked back at Pete and shrugged. “I dunno. What do you think?”

He moved closer to me and spoke in a stage whisper. “I think Clark’ll beat me up if I don’t get my hands off you here pretty

quick.”

I whispered back. “And if he doesn’t, I bet Rachel will.”

He laughed. “Probably.” He let go of me and moved to grab Rachel by the waist. “I guess I’ll keep my favorite Sheriff’s Deputy.”

Clark laughed with them and put his arm around me. “Good plan, Pete. She does have a gun after all.”

Pete shrugged. “So does just about everyone else around here.”

“Not on them,” Clark pointed out.

“Good point,” Pete said, his arms around Rachel as he pulled her to him.

“Let me go.” Rachel smacked his arm. “I’m on duty till noon. I made sure I was on break for the Great Baseball Strike Contest.”

“What did you two do without me the last couple years?” Clark asked him.

Pete and Rachel shared a look.

“What?” Clark stared at both of them. “Give, you two.”

“Um, the first year, it was just me and Josh,” Pete said.

Clark shrugged. “So?”

They shared another one of those looks.

Pete sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Last year Tim joined us and almost won something for Lana. He lost to Josh by a strike on the last pitch of the game.”

I could feel Clark tense up slightly, but was sure no one else noticed. I wasn’t sure if it was the mere mention of Lana or that someone else had been playing for her or the reminder, though unspoken, that she had been pregnant with someone else’s child last year.

“I don’t think she’s here this year,” Rachel said suddenly. “At least that’s what Kara told me the other day. That she has some big project she’s working on for school.”

I breathed an internal sigh of relief.

Clark took a deep breath. “Okay, Lois, we have two hours until the showdown. What do you want to do until then?”

I shrugged. “Paint the town John Deere Green, remember, Ken?”

Rachel and Pete shared a puzzled look while Clark groaned.

“Why don’t we go find my mom?” he suggested. “I know she wants to show off her grandson.”

“He looks just like you, Clark,” Pete said. “He’s a doll, really, but it’s probably better that you leave him somewhere else during the contest. Would hate to for him to see his dad lose.”

“Hey, I just might have a good year this year,” Clark protested.

Pete laughed. “Man, you haven’t had a good year since we were nine and even then you lost.”

“He’s got a point, Clark,” Rachel told him, trying to suppress her own giggles.

“Well, then maybe he’s due,” I surprised all of us by saying.

“Yeah, maybe I’m due,” Clark echoed defensively.

“Clark! Lois!” We all turned to see Martha heading towards us. “We’ve been wondering where you were. Are you planning on throwing the pitching contest again this year?”

All three of the Smallville natives gasped.

“What?!” Pete and Rachel exclaimed.

“You’ve *thrown* the pitching contest?” Pete asked him.

“No! I’ve never done that!”

“Cla-rk.” Martha’s voice held a warning tone.

Clark sighed. “Fine. When we were nine, I did. I missed a couple on purpose because I knew you liked Denise and wanted to win something for her instead of your mom that year. But that was the last time! I swear!”

Martha, Rachel and I dissolved into giggles at Clark’s outrage and Pete’s shock.

Clark grabbed my hand. “Come on. Let’s get out of here

before they tell other stories about me.”

I waved at the three of them. “I still haven’t seen all the cute, naked baby pictures of you, you know.”

“And you won’t, if I have anything to say about it,” he told me.

“Well, I’ll have to go over your head then.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” he asked.

“I’ll talk to your mom.”

“I’ll hide ‘em all.” Clark grinned. “And you can’t stop me.”

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Clark

I had to do better this year.

I stood next to the pitching booth. The entire town was watching. Well, not really, but a few more people than I was comfortable with. Mainly Lois and Christopher.

I couldn’t explain it but I didn’t want to... fail in front of my son. Or Lois, but something about my son... I knew it was silly. He wouldn’t remember it — though I was sure Pete and Josh would remind him regularly when he was older — but that wasn’t the point.

“Okay, Clark, you’re up first, man,” Josh reminded me, clapping me on the shoulder. “But ya gotta get rid of that contraption first.”

I unsnapped the carrier and carefully took it off, swinging it around in front of me with Christopher giggling the whole time. The instructions said not to take it off and on with the baby in it, but that was hard to do by yourself and I’d gotten pretty adept at it. It wasn’t like I feared dropping him, but I couldn’t let myself do anything special in front of anyone else so I’d practiced a few times in private to make sure I could. I was bored one afternoon and it had seemed like the thing to do... Now I was glad I had because if Lois had needed to help me, I never would have heard the end of it. I was sure I’d get enough ribbing as it was for wearing a baby backpack — just not where any women could hear it.

I handed my ticket to Pop Pop who was running the booth. I thought again how good he looked for his age as he handed me the first of three baseballs. I took my spot and glared at Josh and Pete who looked like they were planning something. I tossed the ball up and down a couple of times and then...

Strike.

I grinned. I’d never gotten a first strike before.

Pete rolled his eyes. “Lucky toss.”

I glared at him again.

Another strike.

Could I possibly go three for three on my first turn?

I took a deep breath, wound up and threw.

Pete and Josh laughed loudly as I hit the plywood around the opening that marked the strike zone.

Pete got one of his first three in the strike zone, as did Josh and I went into round two with a one strike lead.

Round two, I had one strike and they each got two.

Round three saw me and Pete get two strikes and Josh one.

Round four was the opposite — Josh had two strikes and Pete and I one each.

We headed into round five — the final round — six strikes each. As always, we’d rotated who went first each round, with the order determined by who won the last contest. I’d lost the last time so I’d gone first in the first and fourth rounds. Now, in the fifth round, I was last.

Josh managed to get one strike.

Pete laughed it off and proceeded to get two.

Great. I had to be perfect if I was going to win this thing. I’d never had a perfect round in my life.

“Even Lois kissing you for luck won’t help you now,” Pete said, tossing me a baseball.

I glanced at her and winked. “She gave me a really great

good luck kiss earlier when none of you yahoos was around. Why do you think I’m doing so well?”

She rolled her eyes while Pete and Josh let out what could only be described as a guffaw.

I took a deep breath and wound up.

Strike one.

I tossed the second ball up and down, trying to calm myself. We’d never had a tie before. Could I at least pull that off? I threw the ball towards the target.

Strike two.

At the very least, I was tied at the end of regulation. Would Pete and I go ‘extra innings’?

I took a deep breath and threw.

Strike three.

I stared at the plywood. “I won?” I asked turning to face my friends.

Pete groaned and Josh grinned. “Looks like that kiss worked.”

I looked at Lois. “I won!”

She squealed and threw her arms around my neck. “You won!”

I swung her around and before I could set her down, she framed my face with her hands and kissed me square on the mouth.

I found myself starting to kiss her back when she pulled away and smacked me on the chest. It surprised me when I felt a bit cheated out of a better kiss.

“Where’s my prize?” she practically demanded, a big smile on her face.

We all laughed. I took Christopher from Mom and pointed to Pop Pop. “You’ve got twenty-four tickets. Choose wisely.”

She looked at the prizes very seriously, muttering as she went. Should she get something for Christopher or for Mom since I never managed to win her anything?

Finally, she pointed to a stuffed yellow duck that quacked when you squeezed its bill.

“That’s nine tickets,” Pop Pop told her as he handed it over. “You have fifteen left.”

She turned and handed the duck to Christopher who promptly tried to eat it.

She looked over the rest of the prizes again before pointing to a small black and white bear. “That one.” She hugged it to her chest as she turned to look at me. She gave me her most innocent eyes and a big smile. “If you hide those pictures, I’m going to name him Clarkie Bear.”

I groaned. “And if I don’t hide them?”

She shrugged and picked at his ear as she walked away. “I’ll probably still name him Clarkie Bear.”

I sighed as I grabbed the backpack from Mom, kissing her on the cheek as she congratulated me, and took off after Lois.

I was going to hide those pictures.

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Part 83

Lois

~~~~~

Clarkie Bear.

Would I really name him that?

Yes.

I’d seen the looks on the faces of everyone when I’d announced the bear’s new name. They were priceless — as was the crestfallen look on Clark’s face.

Clarkie Bear it was.

And I’d kissed him.

For real.

Sort of.

And I thought he’d started to kiss me back.

It was probably part of the whole thing. He was more

comfortable with that kind of thing — we'd been married almost two years; it was about time — and we *were* in front of his friends and he probably felt that he had to make it look good. There were people around who would probably report back to Lana if they saw chinks.

And I'd liked it.

I'd liked it a lot.

I wanted to be able to kiss him whenever I wanted and mean it. I did kiss him pretty much whenever I wanted — in public but it wasn't the same. I wanted to be able to kiss him and...

I shook my head quickly to stop the thought in its tracks.

"What else do you want to do?" Clark asked.

I shrugged. "You tell me."

I noticed Christopher had nodded off against Clark's back again.

Suddenly, my eyes lit up. "Are there caramel apples around anywhere?"

He laughed. "Yep. Josh's mom makes the best caramel apples."

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

He laughed again and took my hand. "Come on."

"Do you need help with that?" I asked Clark the next weekend as he tried to straighten his tie.

"No." His jaw was set. "I'm going to do it myself."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself. Let me know when you change your mind." I headed back into our room and stepped into my heels.

Jessica was getting Christopher dressed in his room. I headed towards the door when I heard Clark.

"I give. I need help."

I laughed. "Come here."

A second later, he was in front of me and I concentrated on his tie. Not on how amazing he looked or how good he smelled. I leaned back. "There. Perfect."

"Thanks."

I moved away from him, but lost my balance and found myself held against his chest.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice a bit husky.

I looked into his eyes as I nodded. "Yeah. Just lost my balance, that's all."

"Here he is," came a voice behind us.

The moment was over and we turned to see Jessica and Christopher coming into the room.

"Look at you," I said, slightly in awe. "You look awesome, little man." I held out my arms and he came willingly. "You are going to be a hit tonight."

He twisted in my arms as soon as he saw Clark. "Dada! Dada!"

Clark took him. "You are a handsome man, aren't you?"

There was a telltale beeping sound as someone accessed our wing. "Lois? Clark?"

"In our room, Daddy," I called.

The door opened a second later and Daddy walked in. I was glad that I was at least a semi-neat freak and that Clark could clean in seconds as we often had someone in here — if only for a few minutes here and there.

"You four look great," he said, reaching for Christopher who immediately reached back. He loved his grandpa. "You ready to head downstairs?"

I shrugged. "It's not like I need my purse or anything."

"Then let's go," Daddy said with a smile. "There's a few people here already and the rest will soon be fashionably late. Jimmy and his family were just getting here as I came up."

We headed down the stairs and into the Billiard Room. The pool table had been removed and the two rooms were both going to be in use. It wouldn't be a large crowd, but it was an important

kick-off to the Adoption Option foundation anyway.

The first people we saw were Billy and Serena. Daddy had invited them since it was their story that had started to shed light on the problem and they were covering the event for the Daily Planet. We exchanged greetings and Serena oo'd and ah'd over Christopher who was toddling around the room.

Jimmy and his parents came to join us. He looked rather dashing in his tux — not as good as Billy and certainly not as good as Clark — but good. I suddenly wished Lucy had lived to meet him. I wasn't sure where the thought had come from and I shoved it aside.

And then I froze.

I'd met Jimmy's mom a few times but I'd never even seen his dad.

He caught my eye and then Clark's and shook his head slightly.

"Hey, guys." Jimmy gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek before shaking Clark's hand. "You've all met my mom and this is my dad. Jack Olsen."

Jack. 'Security' in Latislan Jack.

Of course. Who else would Jimmy's dad be?

There were hellos and handshakes all around and more people started to fill both rooms.

Jack managed to pull us both aside. "Thank you for not saying anything," he told us quietly.

"Don't they know what you do?" Clark asked.

He shook his head. "National security means I can't tell them where I am or what I'm doing. They know that much."

I sighed. "Are you still in Latislan?"

He nodded. "Daniel and I were at a function where Navance was the other day and he mentioned you three again."

Clark wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close to him. My head rested on his shoulder.

"Did you ever find out anything about the..." I hesitated. "What was on the plane?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't tell you if we did, but, no, we haven't, and no connection to anyone else either."

I sighed. "Figures."

"I wondered when we met if you were related to Dave," he said abruptly. "I wish you could have known him."

"Me, too," I said honestly.

"I'm glad to hear your family has sort of adopted Jimmy, too. I'm not home nearly as much as I'd like and I've only heard good things about your dad." He hesitated. "I'm glad to see the three of you doing so well together. Your son is wonderful." He looked at me as he said that.

I wondered at that until I remembered that he knew the whole truth. "Thank you," I said quietly.

"You know, Clark, he really does look a lot like you," he commented thoughtfully. "Are you sure..." His voice trailed off.

Neither of us said anything and a minute later, Jimmy walked up with Christopher holding his finger.

~~~~~

Clark

Was there *any* possible way that Christopher was my son? I'd always smiled and made a comment that neither confirmed nor denied that I was partially responsible for the adorable little man.

Theoretically speaking, could my dream from that night have been a reality or something?

I shook myself. No, of course not. How could I have been with Lois like that and not remembered it? Couldn't have happened.

Could it?

I turned to Lois. "Would you like to dance?" I asked as the music started.

She nodded. "If Jimmy doesn't mind keeping an eye on

Christopher.”

He shook his head. “Nah. He’s a babe magnet and you never know. I could meet some heiress at this thing.”

We all laughed and I took Lois’ hand, leading her to the dance floor.

With her heels on, she wasn’t the right height to put my chin on her head, but she was the right height to rest our heads together as we danced — the side of my chin to her temple.

And we danced well together. We hadn’t entered the line dancing contest in Smallville this year — though Danielle had urged us to. I’d danced with Mom and Nana and Granny. Grandma Davis’ arthritis was acting up so she hadn’t danced at all. Granny Kent and I had done the Tush Push with Lois and Dad. She’d also managed to finagle a dance out of Pop Pop. I couldn’t remember the last time Pop Pop had danced with anyone but Mom and Nana. He just didn’t.

Before long, Lois and I had traded partners. We danced with Serena and Billy and Lois danced with Jimmy, Ollie and her dad, while I danced with Jimmy’s mom, Jessica and Vicki.

The dance floor was fairly quiet as the finger foods made their way around the crowd. I popped a fancy hors’ d’oeuvres in my mouth — no pigs in blankets here — and heard Christopher’s laugh behind me. I turned to see Lois holding him and twirling him around the dance floor.

I smiled as he laughed and twirled with her. She slowed down near me, but showed no sign of stopping. I moved with her. “You know, I might get jealous,” I said before I could stop myself. “My wife dancing with a younger, more handsome man.”

Her laugh sounded a bit forced, though I was sure no one else would notice. No one else would have heard me, so why would I have made such a... husbandly comment?

“You can be replaced,” she pointed out as Christopher reached for me.

“Well, then,” I said with a smile. “How about a dance with both of us?”

She smiled back. “I’d like that.”

I was reminded of my parents’ wedding as we moved slowly around the dance floor. I sensed many of the eyes in the room on us as we did and I was sure a picture or two had been taken as well.

It wasn’t too much later, that Sam took a spot on the smallish platform that housed a string quartet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention please?”

~~~~~

Lois

Everyone in the room stilled and I saw those in the other room make their way towards us.

“I’d like to thank all of you for coming this evening. The new Adoption Option Foundation is something that has become near and dear to my heart. As some of you know, Ellen was my high school sweetheart. We broke up when she moved away our senior year and she soon found herself pregnant by someone who denied the child. Rather than telling me about it as we attempted a long-distance reconciliation, she was afraid it would drive me away. She put the baby up for adoption and never actually saw him. We got married after our freshman year in college and we went on to have two beautiful daughters.”

He motioned towards me. “My oldest daughter, Lois Kent, and her husband, Clark, are here tonight with their son, Christopher. He’s the adorable little guy in the tux. Ellen and our youngest daughter, Lucy, were killed in a car accident nearly ten years ago.” He took a deep breath to steady himself. “One of the things our lawyer gave to me was a letter telling me about her son. I felt many things — hurt, betrayed, among others — and it was several years before I finally started looking for him. It occurred to me that something could have happened to his adoptive parents and he might need somewhere to go. When I

realized he’d be eighteen, I thought he might have a brother or sister who might need somewhere... And I wanted to know the young man who was part Ellen.”

He paused for a minute. “What I found out absolutely broke my heart. David John Olsen had died waiting for a bone marrow donor eighteen months after Ellen and Lucy’s accident. His parents graciously allowed me access to his medical records and both Ellen and Lois would both have been matches for him. His parents had tried everything to get the adoption records unsealed but they couldn’t. All they were able to find out was that his natural mother was deceased.

“Last year, my daughter and son-in-law met a young man while working at the Daily Planet. As they shared stories one day, they realized that they had more in common than they could have ever guessed. Jimmy was the biological son of Dave’s adoptive parents. It has been a joy and a privilege to welcome the brother of Ellen’s son into our extended family, even if he did deck me the first time we met.”

There was scattered laughter and Jimmy looked abashed.

“When I heard the story from Jimmy’s perspective, the idea of Adoption Option was created. It will serve as an adoption agency that promotes open adoptions, specializing in those where one or both of the natural parents have known family medical issues, such as those that exist in David Eckstein’s family.” He pointed towards a couple. “I would like to thank his parents for being with us tonight before they head back to St. Louis to see their son play in the World Series.”

Clark couldn’t help it; I knew he couldn’t. He let out a loud whistle at the mention of his beloved Cardinals in the Series.

Laughter broke out around the room.

Sam smiled at him. “Have I mentioned that my son-in-law is a Cardinals fan? Though the Eckstein family has never faced adoption, they appreciate that someone in a family like theirs, with genetic kidney disease, could and they support the idea of an agency that specializes in cases such as that. We will also be maintaining a registry of mothers from closed adoptions — past and future — who are willing to have their names disclosed to their children or the adoptive families if a medical need arises.

“We will be starting an extensive promotional campaign throughout New Troy and the surrounding area. Eventually, we’d like to go nationwide — at least with the registry aspect of the Foundation and hopefully with the adoption program in general.”

He moved on to the fund raising aspect of the event as Jessica took Christopher from Clark. It was past bedtime and he was starting to get more than a bit grumpy. We mingled and danced for another hour before the crowd started to dwindle and we headed back to our room.

I collapsed onto the bed, my feet still resting on the floor. “Do I get another foot rub tonight?” I asked.

Clark chuckled. “Maybe.” He tugged at his tie and I was sure he was unaware of how I watched him as he pulled it out of his collar before undoing his top button.

The phone rang, interrupting my contemplation of how delicious my husband looked and how there was nothing I could do about it. I grabbed the cordless phone next to me.

“Hello?”

“Lois, is Clark nearby?” It was Martha and something didn’t sound right.

“Is everything okay?” I asked sitting up and motioning to Clark.

His eyes were wide as he sat next to me.

“Please?” she asked.

I handed him the phone.

“Mom?”

I couldn’t hear what Martha said, but the color left Clark’s face and I was afraid he was going to break the phone if he didn’t loosen his grip.

“What?” I whispered.
“He’s gone,” Clark said hoarsely. “He’s gone.”

Part 84
Clark

I didn’t really process what else Mom said after it started to sink in that he was gone.

One of the few constants in my life was gone.

Lois was biting her bottom lip and she looked a bit scared as she sat next to me. I couldn’t make my voice work, but I found myself needing contact with her. I put an arm around her and pulled her closer to me.

Next Saturday. It was going to take that long to get the family to Smallville and arrangements made. It would give us time to make security arrangements, too, though that wasn’t my main concern. I’d be there even if security couldn’t be arranged for Lois and Christopher. In fact, it might be better to leave Christopher in Metropolis.

I barely heard Mom say she’d talk to me soon and I didn’t realize I’d said good-bye until the phone started buzzing in my ear.

“Who is it?” Lois whispered hoarsely.

“Pop Pop,” I whispered back. “Massive heart attack an hour ago. He was gone before he hit the ground — literally — Mom said. He was getting ready for bed and collapsed in the bathroom.”

“Oh, Clark.” She buried her head in my shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t know how long we sat there, but it was a long time. I remembered her complaining about needing to use the bathroom as we’d walked up the stairs and apparently, the call of nature was too strong. She headed to the bathroom and came back to sit by me again. I vaguely realized that she was wearing a satin robe and one part of my brain realized that it was Saturday and I should have expected it.

I couldn’t move. Pop Pop was the first dad I’d known. I didn’t remember Jor-El or Chris, but Pop Pop had been there from the beginning. He taught me what it meant to be a man before Mom married Dad — at least, as much as a five-year-old could understand.

He was the first one to take me fishing. He was the one who showed me the best way to husk corn. When I was four, he helped me decorate my first scarecrow for the Scarecrow Contest at the Corn Festival.

What was I going to do without him?

What was Mom going to do without him?

What was Nana going to do without him?

Lois was saying something to me, but I had no idea what it was.

I felt her move my arms to take my jacket off and then she worked on my cuff links before taking off my shoes and socks. She tugged on my arm until I was standing and she unbuttoned my shirt as I stared unseeing through the wall towards the stars. I could feel her fingers brush against my skin as she helped me take my shirt off. I fumbled with my belt but couldn’t make my fingers work right and she somehow managed that, too. Of course I was wearing a cummerbund so that’s why I couldn’t get the belt off — there wasn’t one. She helped me take my pants off and urged me back towards the bed.

I couldn’t let go of her as I lay down and I found myself burying my head in her chest as the tears finally came. I sobbed against her, soaking her nightgown — one part of my brain noted that she’d removed the robe at some point — and her skin.

She brushed my hair back from my temples and I could feel her tears on my face. She’d liked Pop Pop, too, I knew, though she wouldn’t feel his loss as keenly as I would.

I didn’t know how long she held me, but eventually, I fell asleep in her arms.

~~~~~  
Lois

I woke up to find myself pressed against Clark’s back, one arm wrapped around him.

I could tell my eyes were swollen and I had that ‘morning after crying’ headache coming on.

Why had I been crying again?

Pop Pop.

Martha had called and Pop Pop was gone.

Clark had been practically catatonic in his shock. It had been nearly an hour after he hung up the phone that I’d finally gotten him into bed. We’d sat there for probably fifteen or twenty minutes before my bladder just could not wait any longer. I’d changed into the nightgown I’d left in the bathroom closet. That took another fifteen minutes and he hadn’t moved while I was gone. We’d sat there for another ten minutes before I started to encourage him to get ready for bed.

He still hadn’t moved and I realized I was going to have to help him if he was going to get some sleep. Getting his jacket, cuff links, shoes and socks off had been easy. Even getting him to stand up hadn’t been hard.

What had been hard was taking his shirt off.

He wasn’t wearing an undershirt — but he didn’t sweat so that wasn’t an issue — and every button had uncovered more bronzed skin.

I would have loved to be able to hold him and kiss him and make him forget the horrible sadness that had brought him to this place, but I couldn’t. I wasn’t allowed to do those things.

He’d tried to help with his cummerbund and pants but he was all thumbs. I was reminded of the cabin and was glad I wasn’t going to have to take his boxers off, too.

He’d put his arm around me as I walked him towards his side of the bed. He’d held me to him as we lay down and I found myself cradling his head against my chest as the tears finally flowed. I didn’t know how long I’d held him. I did know I longed to tell him that I was falling in love with him, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it, even though I knew it was unlikely that he’d remember any of it in the light of day.

And now that it was day, I was glad I hadn’t.

I snuggled closer to his back and held him a little tighter, letting out a small sigh.

“It really happened, didn’t it?” he asked quietly, and I could feel his voice rumbling deep in his chest.

I nodded against him. “Yeah.”

“How?”

“Heart attack while he was getting ready for bed.”

“Right.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “When’s the service?”

“You didn’t say,” I told him.

It seemed like he was thinking. “Saturday, I think.”

“We’ll be there,” I promised.

“I know.” He sighed. “Do you think we should leave Christopher here? I’m not sure...”

I knew what he meant. “Maybe Jessica will go with us and she can take care of him when we need her to — so he’s not at the service maybe, but I think your Mom and Nana would both like to have him there.”

He nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

I rolled away from him as he rolled towards me and then pulled me back to him. I settled in next to him as his hand rubbed up and down my arm.

“Thank you,” he finally said.

“For what?”

“I was in shock. I wouldn’t have been able to get myself ready for bed for a long time.”

I gave a one-armed shrug. "I'm your wife. It's my job to take care of you when you need it."

"Still..."

I moved my head to look at him as he turned towards me — to kiss my forehead, I thought later.

Instead, our lips connected.

~~~~~

Clark

Her lips were soft and supple and pliant under mine.

How had I never noticed what it was like to kiss Lois?

Lois.

Pop Pop.

I stilled my lips and my fingers that had tangled themselves in her hair. I rested my forehead against hers.

"Sorry," she mumbled, even though I knew she wasn't the one who initiated the kiss.

I could feel her tense and knew she was ready to move away from me. I gently kissed her forehead and released her.

She rolled away and headed for the bathroom.

I flopped back onto my back and stared at the ceiling, letting out a long breath.

The phone rang as Lois came back out of the bathroom in a pair of sweats and my John Deere T-shirt. When had she stolen it back?

I picked up the handset with a sigh. "Hello?"

"Hi, son."

"Hey, Dad. How's Mom? And Nana?"

He sighed. "I don't think either one of them slept at all. She stayed here last night and they were in the living room the whole night, I think."

"We'll be there as soon as we can make arrangements." I was even getting more comfortable with the whole metal tube thing. "I think Jessica may come with us to help with Christopher."

"That sounds good." He sighed again. "I know you were close to Pop Pop, Clark. He was your first real dad in most ways."

"I was just thinking that," I said softly. Lois was puttering around in the sitting area, getting out her school work. We were both going to have to get ahead if we were going to make the trip. "I miss him already and I've lived away from home for over two years now."

"We're all going to miss him. Your mom said she wasn't sure anything she said got through to you last night."

"It didn't. Lois had to help me out of my tux and everything. I was in shock."

"She had to help you, huh?" I could hear much needed amusement in Dad's voice, but chose to ignore it. "Tux? What was the occasion?"

"The Adoption Option fundraiser."

"Oh, right. How'd it go?"

"It went well. I'll email you some pictures of Christopher in his tux. I don't know how much money they raised but I'm sure they did very well. David Eckstein's parents were there and everything."

"Nice."

He filled me in on some of the details I'd either missed or the decisions hadn't been made yet when I'd talked to Mom and we hung up. "I'm going to go find your dad and let him know what's going on," I told Lois.

She nodded. "Let me know what I can do and when we're leaving. I emailed my professors to give them a head's up and that I'd know details later. Would you like me to email yours for you?"

I shook my head. "I'll do it in a bit. Thanks, though." I sighed again before heading to the closet to pull a shirt and shorts on before I headed out to find Sam.

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Lois

I sighed. He'd kissed me. Really kissed me, but I chalked it up grief. He didn't know what he was doing and I was sure it was accidental.

He had kissed me and I'd kissed him and neither of us pulled back immediately. I could still feel his hand tangled in my hair, his lips on mine.

I pulled my attention back to my laptop and my assignment. I pounded away on it until I heard Christopher stirring. It was Jessica's day off since Clark and I were going to be home all day. I heard her moving around in her room as I got him up. I knocked on her door and she opened it a minute later.

"Hey," she said, looking decidedly ruffled.

I sighed. "Change of plans for the week. We have to go to Smallville and I was hoping you could go with us."

"When?"

"Not sure yet," I told her. "Clark's grandpa died last night. The service is Saturday so probably... Thursday or Friday to Sunday."

She thought for a minute. "I had plans for Friday and Saturday nights, but it's no big deal to cancel."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks. I don't think we'll want to take him to the service, but I know Clark's mom and grandma and everyone will want him there."

She nodded. "I understand. And even if he does go to the service, I can go and take him if the need arises."

"Thank you."

"How's Clark?" she asked, moving to sit on the twin bed in Christopher's room.

I found a diaper and some clothes. "Better than last night. He was in shock last night. He's talking to Daddy right now. We're both going to have to get some serious schoolwork done this week. We both have big assignments due week after next and won't be able to work on them next weekend."

"I'm not going anywhere today. Want me to take him for a while so you can get some work done?"

I looked up at her. "Would you mind? It's not necessary but it would be a big help."

She smiled. "Not a problem. I love the little guy and it's supposed to be nice today so maybe we can go outside for a bit. We haven't been able to all week."

I finished tugging his pants up. "Okay, big guy. Let's go get some breakfast and then you get to hang out with Jess for a while."

"Ess?" he said, looking her direction.

I smiled. "Yep. Jess. Want to eat?"

"Ee! Ee!" He bounced and clapped his hands.

I laughed. He loved to eat. I set him on the floor and held out my hand. "We'll see you in a bit. Thanks again."

"No problem," she said as she headed back to her room and Christopher and I headed towards the kitchen.

He held a finger as we went through the hallways and then sat to go down the stairs on his bottom, holding my finger again as we made our way through the downstairs.

Daddy and Clark were both eating bowls of cereal when we finally made it.

They raised their spoons in salute as they both had their mouths full.

I just shook my head. "Jessica said she'll watch Christopher today so we can get some schoolwork done and that she can come with us to Smallville."

Dad looked up. "Smallville? When are you going to Smallville?"

I looked at Clark, puzzled.

"He was on the phone," Clark said with a shrug.

I sighed. "Clark's grandpa died last night, Daddy."

Dad stopped, spoon halfway to his mouth, and turned to

Clark. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Your mom's dad, right?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah. Service is Saturday. I was thinking we could go Wednesday or Thursday and come back Sunday." He looked at me for confirmation.

I winced. "I have a midterm on Wednesday I can't miss, but we could go after that."

He nodded. "That works if it's okay with your dad that Jessica goes."

"Of course," Daddy said. "Call Vinnie and he'll get the tickets and everything taken care of for you."

"Thanks, Daddy," I said, lifting Christopher into his high chair. "We appreciate it."

"It's the least I can do," Daddy said. "I'll notify the security guys, too."

"Thanks," Clark said.

We talked for a few more minutes and then headed our separate ways for the day.

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Part 85  
Clark

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Sam had come with us. He'd gotten all of us tickets and rented a Jeep Grand Cherokee for the trip from Kansas City to Smallville.

I wasn't sure what we were doing for sleeping arrangements.

Nana had been staying in my room for the last several nights. I wouldn't kick her out for anything. I didn't blame her for not being able to face the house, the room, the bed, she'd shared with Pop Pop for so many years.

I certainly didn't want to stay at Nana and Pop Pop's house either though.

"Clark, I should have asked this before," Sam said, interrupting my thoughts.

"What's that?" I asked, turning my attention back to the road.

"I've got reservations at the Smallville Inn for me and a second room for Jessica, but I didn't know if you were planning on her staying with you at your folk's place or what."

"I was just thinking about that. Nana's been staying in my room. I think I may call my cousin and see if we can stay with her."

"Which cousin?" Lois asked.

"Danielle. They've got room for us and a crib for Christopher. She's expecting another baby in a couple months and she mentioned a couple weeks ago that they've already got it set up. Lois and I'll be on an air mattress but I don't want Nana to feel obligated to go home before she's ready."

"Want me to call her while you drive?" Lois asked.

"Thanks." I dug my phone out of my pocket and handed it to her. "She's on there."

I heard them talking and Lois confirmed that the three of us were welcome at Danielle's house.

Our first stop was at the — empty — farmhouse to pick up another vehicle. I drove Mom's car and led them to the Smallville Inn. We loaded Christopher into the car while Sam checked himself and Jessica in.

"We're heading over to Danielle's," I told Sam when he came back out. "My dad's meeting us there to let us in since they're both working."

We confirmed a time to meet later and we drove off.

Something occurred to me. "Ah, potential problem."

Lois sighed. "Of course. What?"

"Danielle lives not too far from Lana. I didn't even think about it. Different street and they just moved there over the summer."

She sighed. "What're the odds of Lana coming back for this?"

She had a point. "She's friends with my cousin, Kara, and she

and Nana and Pop Pop always got along well. I'm sure her parents will be at the service. I don't know that she'd come back, though."

"Well, I guess we'll deal with it if it happens."

"Nothing else we *can* do," I pointed out.

I pulled up in front of Danielle's house. Dad was already there and I met him inside.

But I felt funny.

"What is it?" Dad asked.

"I don't feel so good."

I moved closer to the couch and the sick feeling turned to pain.

"It hurts," I whispered.

"What?" Dad asked, alarmed.

Everything went black.

~~~~~

Lois

"Lois!"

I heard a crash and then Jonathan yelling for me. I left Christopher sleeping in his car seat and ran towards the house.

"Clark!" He was on the floor, glasses askew and as pale as I'd ever seen him. I looked at Jonathan; his eyes were as wide as mine. "What happened?"

"He said he didn't feel well and then he was in pain and passed out."

"Bremerton," I whispered.

"What?"

"That's what happened in Bremerton." We started working together to move him.

"But why? He was sick near Shuster's Field when he was five, in Bremerton and now here."

We'd managed to move him towards the couch.

"How did he get better in Bremerton?"

I wracked my brain. "I don't know. We moved him to the dance floor and he came around." I ran my hand through my hair. "I was talking to Danielle about that." I pointed at 'When Irish Eyes Are Killing' — hanging on the wall above the couch. "I couldn't explain it but something about it gave me the creeps. Danielle told me she found the green rock around here somewhere a field." His breathing seemed to be worsening.

"Shuster's by any chance?" Jonathan asked, turning white.

I shrugged. "I don't know that she said."

He grabbed for the artwork and took it off the wall and out of the room.

The lines on Clark's face eased and his breathing seemed easier.

"What was that?" I asked Jonathan when he came back in, phone in hand.

"Martha, I need you at Danielle's now," Jonathan said into the phone, holding a finger up. "I know, sweetheart, but I need you here. Clark's sick again. I think I know why but I need you here. Do you have that fake emerald thing with you? Good. Bring it. No, Christopher's fine."

"Christopher!" I headed towards the door to get him as Jonathan hung up.

"No!" Jonathan barked at me. "If whatever it is, is affecting Clark, it'll affect him too. You can't bring him in here."

I hesitated. It wouldn't affect Christopher but I couldn't tell him that.

Clark groaned and his eye opened just a bit.

I sat on the couch next to him, brushing his hair off of his face. "Hey. Hold still. You passed out."

"What?" Martha walked in the door. "He passed out?"

"I think I know why," Jonathan said grimly.

Clark groaned again and tried to sit up. I pushed him down with one hand. "Stay put."

"Yes, ma'am." He closed his eyes again. "Why, Dad?"

“Shuster’s Field. That’s where you got sick the first time.”  
“I still get a bit of a tickle in my stomach whenever I drive by. I think it’s just because I know that’s where I crashed.”  
“I want to try something,” Jonathan said. “Tell me if you start feeling worse.”

Clark nodded and Jonathan left the room. I could see Clark’s face tensing up long before he admitted that he was feeling something, but he finally did. Jonathan left the room again and Clark immediately felt some relief.

“What’s going on, Jonathan?” Martha asked when he came back.

“Something you told me about when you and Chris found the ship. You said there were a few green rocks around, right?”

Martha nodded. “Yeah. We figured they were meteorites that had come with the ship or something.”

“Think about it. Clark got sick — and still does — near Shuster’s Field. Danielle found part of that sculpture thing in a field near here. He got sick near it in Bremerton and again here. I think that’s one of the green rocks.”

“Why would it make Clark sick?” I asked. “If it came from Krypton or something, why would it hurt him?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Martha pointed out. “I noticed it the other day and have this green glass piece that’s the same size and shape as that piece in the other room. Danielle wanted it to make a matching piece. I’ll see if I can get it traded out and we’ll take that other one home and figure it all out later.”

Clark managed to sit up and lean back on the couch. “I’m feeling better,” he said. “Really.”

“That’s great,” I said sarcastically. “Now we just have to be on the lookout for a green rock that can hurt you or even kill you or something. Who knows where another piece of it might be?”

“I’ve run into it twice in almost twenty years,” Clark said, his eyes closed. “Hopefully, there’s not much of it.”

“Twice?” I asked. “This is the third time.”

“We don’t know for sure about when I was a kid and the last two times it was the same piece.”

“And you have to keep it away from Christopher, too,” Jonathan reminded me.

“Christopher?” Clark asked.

“Your son. If you’re affected, he may well be, too.”

“Right,” Clark said softly. “Christopher.”

~~~~~

Clark

The vision of Lois in front of the fireplace at the cabin came back to me.

I hadn’t mentioned it to her. I hadn’t told her — or asked her — about the remote possibility about us... together... that night...

If Christopher could be my son.

If it was even remotely possible, Christopher couldn’t get anywhere near that stuff.

“I’m feeling better,” I said again. “Really.”

Mom came back in, carrying Christopher. “That was a lot easier than I thought.”

“What’d you do with it?” Jonathan asked.

“It’s in the trunk of Nana’s car,” she said. “This little guy woke up and started crying as I walked by so I brought him in with me. I figured it’s safe if that rock’s not here.” She sat on the other side of me. “How’re you feeling?” she asked quietly as Christopher crawled into my lap.

“Better,” I said, soaking in sunlight streaming in the picture window. “Not great but better.”

I could hear sighs of relief from around the room.

Another car pulled in the driveway.

“The artwork thing,” Lois said suddenly. “Hang it back up.”

Mom immediately headed outside to stall whoever it was while Dad went into the back to get the sculpture or whatever it

was. He stepped on the couch next to me and slipped it over the nail.

“Thanks,” I said to him as he stepped back down.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said as Mom and Danielle walked in carrying Amy.

They made me sit there while they emptied the car. Danielle set up an air mattress in the nursery for us and Dad lowered the mattress in the crib — it was fine for the coming newborn, but way too high for a toddler.

An hour after Danielle arrived, we headed out to the farm for dinner with the family. Sam and Jessica were meeting us there. Fortunately, even our farm was in the most updated GPS doohickey in his rental.

It was a somber evening and I made sure I stayed well away from the trunk of Nana’s car. Mom had been driving it most of the day and Nana had ridden around with Uncle Jerry. Jessica left in the Cherokee with Christopher and Amy. Sam was going to catch a ride with us back to Danielle’s then he and Jessica would go back to the Inn. Someone told a funny story about Pop Pop and within minutes, the living room and kitchen were full of laughter over one story or another.

Jerry looked at Ana Mae. “I think Pop liked you better than me. He told me once that if we broke up, he was keeping you and letting me go.”

“He ‘bout threatened me,” Dad said suddenly.

The room went quiet.

“I don’t think I ever told you this, Martha, but after our first date, I ran into him at the feed store.” Dad looked at his hands. “He told me that if I was going to hurt you or Clark, I’d best run right back to the Navy or he’d make sure I met Chris again personally.”

“I’m so glad he didn’t scare you off,” Mom said, resting her head on his shoulder.

“I thought that was my job,” I said suddenly. “I threw up all over you on your first date.”

There was a chorus of gasps and ‘whats’ from the family. Apparently, most of them hadn’t heard the story.

Dad told them and by the time he was done, everyone in the room was practically rolling on the floor again. He had a flair for the comedic that I noticed once again. It didn’t come out often, but when it did, he was the funniest guy around.

It was nearly midnight before we made it back to Danielle’s house. We spoke quietly to Jessica who said both kids were angels and had been asleep since not long after they got back.

I chatted with Tom for a bit after Sam and Jessica left and while Lois got ready for bed. She was already under the covers when I made my way quietly into the nursery.

Christopher was actually snoring softly as I crawled carefully onto the air mattress.

“How’re you feeling?” Lois asked quietly.

“I’m not dying of hypothermia this time,” I told her.

I could see her smile in the near total darkness. “That’s good. I’m not saving your rear end again.”

“Sure you would.”

She sighed. “Probably.” She propped herself up on her elbow. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“At least now we know what I should avoid. That was one thing that kind of freaked me out — I had no idea what caused that in Bremerton. For all I knew, it was something that would happen to me at random times with no way to predict it. Now that we think we know what it is, I can stay away from it.”

She surprised me when she reached out and rested her hand on my cheek. “Please do. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

I expected her to say something about how much Christopher would miss me or something like that, but instead, she rolled over.

I felt the need to scoot behind her and hold her in my arms as I had every night since Mom had called with the news about Pop Pop.

~~~~~  
Lois

The graveside service was nearly over when one of the security guys — I could never remember which was Scott and which was Steve; I'd finally started calling them both Sceve, which they thought was hilarious — got a look on his face. I nudged Clark and we looked around.

On the other side of the cemetery was a news crew from a Wichita station. Another van pulled up behind it from one of the other affiliates of a major network.

"Why are they here?" Clark whispered to me.

I shrugged. Jonathan noticed them too and moved slightly to obstruct Martha's view a bit better. Both Sceves made their way unobtrusively through the crowd towards us. Clark was holding Christopher and had his other arm around me. It tightened slightly.

Both crews had cameras out and I desperately wished Clark could hear things from that far away, but he couldn't. He looked fine, but all of his special abilities were still gone.

The minute the service ended, the Sceves rushed all three of us off without letting us say anything to anyone.

"What's going on?" I asked them.

"Your names got out," the brunette Sceve said as we half ran off.

"What?" Clark hissed.

I looked back and saw Lana watching us, an impassive look on her face. I should have known she was there, but that wasn't the gloating look of someone who had just ratted us out.

A minute later, we were in the dark sedan with the tinted windows.

"Where are we going?" Clark asked.

"The farmhouse for now. We can control access there."

The drive went quickly and Clark clutched Christopher to him as we realized that there was no car seat for him. There was another news vehicle across the street from the road leading to the farmhouse. The car pulled around to the other side so we'd be out of view of the cameras as we were hustled into the house.

The red haired Sceve took the car back out to the drive to stand guard and only allow those who should have access onto the road.

Brunette Sceve turned on the television in the living room and tuned to ANC.

"And now to Lindy Sweeny, from our Wichita affiliate currently in Smallville, Kansas. Lindy?"

"The car behind me is blocking the road to a farm near Smallville. The farm belongs to Jonathan and Martha Kent, parents of Clark Kent. According to an anonymous tip received at the main ANC headquarters this morning, Clark Kent and his wife, Lois, are the American couple detained by General Navance in Latislan nearly two years ago. It has been confirmed that they were married in Latislan in early January 2003. As our viewers may remember, General Navance claimed an American's baby — now believed to be Lois Kent's baby. Under Latislani law, he can claim any baby he wants, essentially, unless the mother is married. They were married at the U. S. Embassy in Latislan on January 3, 2003. The anonymous source says that Clark Kent is *not* the father of Lois Kent's baby but that he married her simply to keep Navance away from her and her child."

The picture shifted to the cemetery where I could see members of Clark's family still milling about. A 'moments ago' graphic appeared in the top corner of the screen as the three of us were rushed to the waiting car before it cut back to a live shot of Clark's family getting into their cars. There were shouted questions at a couple of them, but none of them knew anything.

As ANC cut back to presidential election coverage, I realized they were all headed towards the farmhouse and I could only imagine the eruption that was about to take place.

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Part 86

Clark

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Who had let the cat out of the bag?

"Everyone's on their way here, right?" Scott asked me.

I nodded. "Pot luck dinner again."

"Okay. Steve's got the road blocked and is contacting the Sheriff's office. He's going to get them to block off Twentieth between Anderson and Brown and hope there's some local ordinance to get the news van that's already there out. The only cars that will be allowed in are those who know you guys and are on their way here. Your road is the only one on this stretch of Twentieth so the rest of the traffic can be rerouted."

"Thanks," I said as I sank onto the couch. Lois had taken Christopher to change his diaper.

The phone rang and, like an idiot, I picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Is this the Kent residence?" came an unfamiliar voice.

"Yes."

"Can you confirm that Lois Kent's child is also the child of General Navance?"

I managed to squeak out a "No comment" as I hung up. I turned the ringers off and set the answering machine to pick up on the first ring.

"Clark?" a voice called out as the door flung open.

"In here, Mom."

Mom, Dad and Nana traipsed in.

I looked at Nana. "I'm so sorry."

She gave me a big hug. "You owe me the whole story, young man."

"I know, Nana," I said quietly. "And I'm so sorry that this happened today."

Nana turned to Dad. "Can we go to the other house and talk? Let everyone else come over here for now."

Dad nodded. "Mom knows about most of this," he said with a sigh. "She won't mind if we use her living room."

Mom went to get Lois and we headed towards Granny's house across the yard. Scott stayed between Lois and Christopher and everyone else as they followed us.

Cars were pulling into the farmyard and parking along the gravel roads and in the grass. I avoided looking at any of them. The day was bad enough without adding unwelcome press coverage.

We made it to Granny's living room.

Lois held Christopher close to her as I told Nana the whole story.

She was more sympathetic than I would have expected under the circumstances. She'd, literally, just buried the love of her life and she was worried about us and Christopher.

"Well, it'll blow over pretty soon," she said pragmatically. "The election is in nine days and it's overwhelming all other news. You'll be a flash in the pan."

"Thank goodness," Lois mumbled.

Sam walked in just then. "Is everyone okay?"

We all nodded.

"The Sceves got us out pretty quickly," Lois said. "And made sure that news truck didn't see us."

I never had understood why Lois couldn't keep the two main bodyguards straight, but they thought it was funny that she'd taken to calling both of them Sceve.

She turned to Nana. "I'm so sorry I've dragged your whole family into this."

Nana was being very understanding, but somehow I doubted

the rest of the family would.

“We’re going to head out early,” I told Nana. “If we leave, the news crews should, too.”

“Nonsense. I want my whole family here — including my great-grandson. They won’t get on private property anyway. And if they decide to come after me at home, when I go home tonight, well, I know how to use a shotgun. But I promise you, it’ll blow over by tomorrow. Some October surprise will come out and everyone will forget all about the three of you.”

“I hope so,” Martha said quietly.

If I had my abilities, I’d be able to just get us out of here, but I didn’t have them. And we still hadn’t dealt with that green rock — whatever it was.

I sighed as I headed back towards the main house. It was sure to be jam packed with curious relatives and I was sure they’d had the news on by now.

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Lois

I stayed behind as Clark and Daddy and Jonathan headed back to the farmhouse. I didn’t want to be there, to see the looks. To know that they knew that it wasn’t just that Clark had gotten me pregnant that had forced us to marry. Not that Clark had gotten me pregnant, but that part of the truth wasn’t coming out.

Martha sat by me on Granny’s couch. “What is it?”

“I can’t believe this is happening. Today of all days.”

Nana stood. “I’m going over there. I want to make sure that no member of my family gets upset on *my* behalf.”

In a minute, it was just me and Martha — and Christopher who was toddling around.

“How are you?” she asked quietly.

“I should be asking you that,” I told her. “I’m so sorry about all this.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t do it. You aren’t responsible for the crazies in the world.”

“Nana’s being a lot more understanding than I would be, I think,” I said honestly. “She just lost her husband of what? Nearly fifty years?”

She nodded. “She’s a strong woman, but somehow I don’t know that she’ll be with us long. I think she’s already anxious to see Pop again.”

“I’ve read that,” I said, glad not to have been the one who brought it up.

“Love isn’t who you can live with; it’s who you can’t live without,” Martha said quietly. “I don’t know how many times both of them said that to all of us. That defines Mom and Pop’s relationship.”

I sighed. “I shouldn’t let Clark deal with all this alone. None of it is his fault.”

“How’s he feeling? Really?”

“Better, I think. He seems... fine, but not super or whatever.” I stood and picked Christopher up. “Come on, big man. Time to face the music. Maybe with you there, they’ll go easy on your mom.”

“If they’re not, they’ll have to answer to me.”

I didn’t think anyone wanted to mess with Martha. I was sure glad she was on my side.

There was quiet chatter in the farmhouse that stopped when we walked in.

“As you were,” Martha snapped as the silence seemed to stretch into eternity. Slowly the volume returned, but remained subdued.

It was two hours before most of the crowd had left.

Not one of them had said anything to me.

Not even Danielle.

“How are you?” Jonathan asked, sitting next to me.

I shrugged. “Wish none of this had ever happened,” I said, the tears finally threatening to overflow.

He put an arm around me and pulled me to his side. “Me, too. For your sake. For Christopher’s sake. For Clark’s sake.”

“Mostly for Clark’s sake,” I said. “He wouldn’t be in this mess...” I let my voice trail off. That was almost too much.

“Maybe — in a sense — it’s for the best. What would the two of you have done if he hadn’t forced you to get married? Would Clark still be with Lana? Would he be a part-time dad at best? Would you have even realized that Christopher was his baby? And if so, how hard would it have been for you to tell your roommate, your friend who was engaged to someone else, that you were having his baby? Would you have considered not telling him? And, given the situation, I can see how tempting that would have been.”

I shrugged against him. “I don’t know what I would have done.” I told him honestly. I wouldn’t have told Clark I was having his baby because I wouldn’t have thought I was. The thought that the dream of Clark and I together in front of that fire wasn’t a dream but a fuzzy reality had occurred to me but I had no idea how — or even if — to broach the subject with Clark. I didn’t know what — if anything — he remembered.

Nana came in just then and said her good-byes; that it was time for her to go home.

She gave me an extra long hug and told me she loved me before she left, thanking me for coming but being gracious enough not to mention the fact that I’d ruined an already difficult day.

Jessica, who wasn’t known to anyone, was going back to Danielle’s house to get our things and bring them back so we could stay at the more easily protected farmhouse.

~~~~~  
Clark

I set the bags down on our bed. There was comfort in being back in Metropolis. Hopefully, my family in Smallville would be left alone since we weren’t there anymore.

Fortunately, the Pittsdale police weren’t going to allow vehicles parked on the street and Sam’s neighbors weren’t going to allow news crews to use their property either.

They were still replaying the video of Lois, Christopher and I being hustled from the graveside service, but it was getting less time, less often already. Nana was right. One of the candidates had said something to a Joe on the street and his comment had taken over the news cycle.

My family had disappointed me. I freely admitted that. Except for my parents and Nana, they’d essentially snubbed Lois once the story came out.

I had to admit, though, if I’d found out something similar about one of my cousins the day we buried my grandpa, I might not be any better.

No, I probably wouldn’t be any better.

I sighed. I thought Lois maybe blamed me for that or something. She’d been quiet since the family had left the night before and the pillow that used to mark the no-man’s land in the middle of the bed was back in place when I made it to my old room the night before.

Since our anniversary, the pillow had virtually disappeared. Well, not disappeared, but there had been no physical barriers between us at night most of the time. That wasn’t to say that I held her or her me every night — or even most nights — but it was a sign of how far our relationship had come.

And how quickly it had fallen apart, or seemed to be falling apart.

She’d been up before me and as we packed and headed towards the airport, the only thing she’d said to me while we were alone was to ask me how I was feeling. And I was still better, just not... great.

The trip home had been quiet. The FBI had worked with Steve and Scott and we’d been kept in a private room until time

to board the plane. We'd waited to be the last off and had been escorted privately to where Ollie and Vicki were waiting for us.

I took Christopher's suitcase to his room and sorted out the dirty clothes into his hamper. I did the same with my suitcase and put away the clothes neither of us had worn. I left Lois' suitcase in the closet for her to deal with. She wouldn't have wanted me messing with her clothes a week earlier when things were pretty good with us; she definitely wouldn't want me to now.

I tried to turn my hearing on to see where she and Christopher were and to my surprise, it kicked in. They were in the kitchen and I headed to join them.

We spent the rest of the evening talking around each other and near each other but I doubted if anyone would notice that we hadn't actually spoken *to* each other.

The room was nearly silent when I made it back, putting Christopher to bed before I sank on the couch. I was feeling the loss of my grandfather pretty keenly. I missed him. If this had come out two weeks earlier when we'd been in Smallville for the Corn Festival, I'd have been able to call him up and talk to him about it.

'Love isn't who you can live with, Clarkie, love is who you can't live without,' he'd have said. 'You can't live without that wife and son of yours so you best do whatever you have to to keep them safe.' Only Pop Pop had ever gotten away with calling me Clarkie — except Lana when she was trying to wheedle me into telling her something or into doing something for her and Granny — Granny could get away with it; Nana had never tried.

I refused to dwell on the thought of life without Christopher, but eventually, Lois would have a much reduced role in my life. Whether Lana would be willing to take on a divorced guy with a son or not was still up for grabs.

What did it mean that I'd been able to live without Lana? The first year had been hard — very hard — and I probably wouldn't describe it as 'living'. Existing, maybe but not living. But now... Now I was living without her. I decided that either Nana and Pop Pop had been wrong all these years or... I refused to delve into what it meant that I had a good life without Lana in it for the moment.

I'd seen her for just a minute at the cemetery. We'd been rushed passed her to the car. She looked like she was going to cry, but then a bit puzzled — just like everyone else — by what was going on. I'd been too focused on getting out of there with Lois and Christopher to wonder why she'd come home or if she was coming to the house afterwards — she hadn't and I was glad.

I changed into a pair of sleep shorts and clicked on the TV finding a new episode of the Mt. Everest series on Discovery. I still hadn't take Lois there. We hadn't flown anywhere since we went to the Great Wall.

The water in the shower turned off and I was glad to see she was in a favorite pair of flannel pajamas when she came out of the bathroom.

"You're feeling better?" she asked.

I nodded. "I wondered if you'd picked up on that."

"I did."

I heard her get into bed, but didn't turn. Instead, I turned the volume down a bit.

"Leave it up," she told me. "I'll watch from here."

She was fascinated with Everest, I knew. That's why she wanted to go.

One of these days, I'd have to take her.

Maybe.

If we got past this whatever it was sometime soon.

Part 87

Lois

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Clark had flipped to something else when the Everest show

was over. I slid further down into bed and 'accidentally' moved one of the pillows to the middle of the bed. I didn't know when he'd done it the night before, but I'd woken up in Smallville to find the pillow back.

My heart had broken. Again.

Things had been so much better between us and this had to happen.

It wasn't the pillow itself, but what it represented. The distance between us. There hadn't been anything between us like that since we'd had it out on our anniversary. Or not often anyway. The night in Smallville I guessed Clark had moved it. This first night at home — I did. I couldn't handle official rejection by Clark again so I had to do it first. I willed the tears back into the depths of my eyes as I dozed off.

He was gone when I woke up the next morning.

The phone rang and I picked it up, wondering if it was his lawyer or something. Now that the news was out, why would he stay, right?

"Hello?"

"Lois?"

"Yeah?" I asked hesitantly. I doubted the media or anyone had this number — except, I groaned internally, the Daily Planet. Would anyone there have made the connection? Surely Billy and Serena would have.

"This is Serena." Yep. She had.

"Hi," I said quietly.

"I saw this story on the news yesterday," she said hesitantly.

"I'm sure you did," I replied softly.

"Perry assigned it to some new guy named Ralph. He couldn't write his way out of a paper sack if you gave him step-by-step instructions Christopher could follow."

I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

"Billy and I thought about offering to write it, thinking we could do a good job, but the more we thought about it, the more we thought we'd just see what Perry did with it. If he gave it a lot of attention, we'd volunteer, but he didn't. It'll probably be on page Z83 at this rate. If it even makes it into the paper at all given how well Ralph writes. There's too much going on in the presidential race for Perry to take much time on it and there's no way Ralph'll realize that you two actually work for the Planet unless someone tells him. The research that would go into finding out the ingredients for boiling water would challenge him."

I smiled. "Thanks, Serena."

"Ruining your lives isn't newsworthy."

"Jimmy knows," I told her. "Would you two like to come over for dinner one night soon and we'll tell you the whole story? Off the record?"

"I'd like that."

We spoke for a few more minutes and then I had to get ready for school.

By the time I made it to work, I was on edge. Clark and I had hardly spoken all day — the drive to campus had been nearly silent as had the drive to work. I was sure he hated me — his family seemed to. I'd gotten an email from Danielle earlier saying she was sorry she'd had to run out but Amy had spiked a fever and she'd had to get her home. She said if I ever needed anything, to let her know.

I wondered if she had any experience with assassinations.

It was nice to know she didn't hate me, at least.

I was sure we'd walk into the Planet and everyone would realize that we'd been on the news, but if they did, no one said anything. I made it through the day and breathed a sigh of relief when I clocked out. Clark was leaning against the Jeep when I got there and the ride home was just as quiet as the rest of our trips had been that day.

We were nearly home when Clark finally spoke.

"I'm sorry for the way my family was the other night."

I shrugged. “Not your fault. And it’s not like I really know any of them or anything. I’m sure that they would have rushed to my defense or whatever if I was someone they’d known a long time or they’d known well — like Lana.” I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“Maybe. I think a big part of it was the timing and the shock of it. They’ll get over it.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t really notice Saturday night. Every time I saw you, you were talking to one of my parents or Granny or Nana or getting food surrounded by a crowd of people.”

“There’s a difference between being surrounded by a crowd and being a part of it,” I told him quietly.

“I know.”

We drove in silence for a few more minutes. “Any thoughts on who did it?” he asked me.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I hesitated. “I thought it might be Lana but I saw her Saturday after the news crews showed up and she didn’t look like she was gloating or anything like that.”

“I don’t think she would. I don’t think she ever put two and two together.”

I pulled up in front of the house and we headed inside.

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November 2004

Clark

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I slipped and landed on my rear end as Jimmy leapt, the ball cleanly swishing through the net as he laughed at me.

“Block that, Kent.”

“I could have, you know,” I told him as I stood back up.

“Not while you’re sitting on your butt.”

I laughed with him. “True.”

A few minutes later, we headed back towards the house. Saturday was the day that Jimmy and I did something together. Lois had insisted, nearly a year earlier, that we try to get together for a ‘guys’ night out’ once a week or so. We didn’t every week — if one of us was working or during the whole month of October when everything had been so crazy — but we tried to. Sometimes we went to a movie, others we played basketball or went to a ball game or any number of other things, but it was a few hours a week set aside just to hang out without any girls or kids around.

And as much as I loved spending time with my son, it was a welcome break every week.

What I really needed to do was make sure Lois had more time to go out with Serena or someone else. She made sure I had this time every week, but I wasn’t sure when their last ‘girls’ night out’ had been. Lois and Jimmy tried to do something, but they usually ended up staying in and watching a movie downstairs. I wasn’t really sure why that was, but it was rarely just the two of them out doing ‘sibling’ stuff.

I frowned. When *was* the last time Lois had gone out with someone besides me? We went out to dinner or a movie or both or something once a month or so; Jimmy and I did something nearly every week; but when was the last time Lois and Vicki or someone had just gone out for *fun*?

“What’s up?” Jimmy held out a bottle of water as I leaned against the kitchen counter.

I shook my head and took a big swig. “Nothing.”

“How are you? Really?” he asked quietly.

I shrugged. “I miss Pop Pop. It seems like nearly every day I see or hear something and think about how he’d love it and I should mention it next time I talk to him.”

“Right. Seems like the paparazzi are leaving you alone. Perry barely gave the story the time of day.”

“Thank God. The last thing we need is cameras everywhere.” Nana had been right. The story had blown over pretty quickly.

Lois had been inordinately excited to get to vote in her first federal election. She’d missed the last one while stuck at the cabin and it was my first time voting in New Troy. Before Pop Pop’s untimely death, we’d spent a number of evenings bantering good-naturedly over the different issues and candidates. Overall, we agreed on most things, but my more conservative Kansas upbringing showed through at times. At others, she surprised me with how conservative *she* was. Sometimes, though, one of us would take the other side just to play devil’s advocate.

And I’d discovered that debating with Lois could be a lot of fun. We’d even made a few bets — who’d win the Senate seat in New Troy, who’d win the presidential election, how the county would vote on Proposition B.

But things had gotten weird and we’d never even settled those bets. Technically, I owed her a backrub, chocolate cake and dinner from the country of her choosing. She owed me dinner at J. Buck’s, a St. Louis versus Metropolis baseball game where she cheered for the Cardinals, and a Saturday morning where I got to sleep in as late as I wanted. Normally, I got up with Christopher on Saturdays, but I hadn’t been recently. So technically, I guessed I’d already collected on that one.

I didn’t think she’d been sleeping well since we got back from Smallville, but she’d been up with Christopher almost every morning, even the mornings that were usually mine now that he wasn’t nursing anymore.

“And your family?” Jimmy interrupted my thoughts.

I shrugged again. “I haven’t really talked to anyone but my folks. They didn’t take the whole ‘Lois and Clark were the couple from Latislan’ thing very well. They pretty well ignored Lois the rest of the day.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.”

He took another big swig and finished off his bottle of water. “All right, man. I’m outta here. I’ve got a date in a couple hours. See you tomorrow for dinner?”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me. You’re always welcome around here — you know that.”

“Free meal it is. See ya.”

I shook my head slightly as he headed out. Sometimes I almost envied his still carefree life.

“Daddy!”

I turned to see Christopher running towards me and a second later his arms were around my neck as he told me he loved me and I stunk.

Sometimes I did envy Jimmy, but moments like this I wouldn’t trade for anything.

~~~~~

Lois

“Ewww!” Christopher was giving Clark a big hug.

“You think I stink?”

“Uh huh.”

Clark and I both knew that he probably didn’t — he didn’t sweat like human males did because the heat and workouts didn’t affect him like they did the rest of the world.

Christopher gave him a big slobbery kiss and then scrambled down to go find his toys.

“What’re you doing tonight?” Clark asked suddenly.

I shrugged. “Nothing really. Why?”

“You should call Serena or someone and go out.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Four weeks before the wedding and you think Serena has time to go out?”

He shrugged. “Someone else then. When was the last time you went out with someone besides me or Jimmy? Or even Jimmy? You guys usually stay here.”

“So?”

“So you need to get out more. I was thinking about it earlier. Jimmy and I do something almost every week, but I couldn’t

remember the last time you went out with a friend.”

“That’s because I don’t have any,” I said quietly before I could stop myself.

“What?” He looked surprised.

“I don’t really have any friends and you know it. You know why. I couldn’t hang out with Joe, even if I had talked to him anytime in the last two years and I don’t have any other girl friends. It’s just the way my life is right now.” I didn’t look at him as I said it. I couldn’t or the tears would spill out.

“Seriously?”

I glanced at him from under my lashes. His brow was furrowed as though he was thinking hard.

“You don’t have any other friends? Anyone you could go to a movie with or something?”

“No,” I said softly.

He took a long drink of his water. “Why not? I know you’ve met some nice girls at school and stuff.”

I sighed. “Because I can’t risk it.”

“Risk what?”

“My son,” I snapped. “Remember him? The one Mr. Insane-o wants to take away from me?”

“And that means you can’t go out?”

I turned and walked into the living room and picked up a Ziploc bag. I held it out towards him. “I haven’t taken that downstairs yet.”

“What is it?” he asked taking it from me.

“Another letter. Someone told him I was having lunch with Billy and Serena. That means I’m cheating on you. I went shopping — *grocery* shopping — with Jimmy and that means I’m cheating on you. I *smiled* at the teller at the bank, which means I’m obviously having an affair with him.” There were pictures in the other bags I handed him, including a picture he’d gotten from somewhere of me and Jimmy dancing at the Adoption Option fundraiser. “He’s having me stalked, at least sometimes or his nephew happens to be a lot of the same places I am pretty regularly or something. Do you really think I can risk going out with anyone but you?”

He read the letter and looked at the pictures. “Can’t we get a restraining order?”

“Against who?”

He sighed. “Good point.” He reached a hand out and set it on my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I swiped at the tears that were falling down my cheeks.

For a minute I thought he might hold me but then Christopher fell, hitting his head on the coffee table. Clark hurried to his side. He was fine, if crying, and by the time Clark turned around, I was long gone.

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Part 88  
December 2004  
Clark

~~~~~  
It had been nearly six weeks since Pop Pop died. Six long weeks.

I still missed Pop Pop. We’d all breathed a huge sigh of relief as the mini-firestorm over our identities blew over quickly and we were able to get on with our lives.

The letter and pictures had freaked me out more than I’d let on to Lois when she’d shown them to me. The only saving grace was that there hadn’t been any pictures of Christopher. He was rarely off the grounds of the house so the only way he could have gotten one was if one was out there from the fundraiser or a screen grab from the funeral but even then they hadn’t gotten a clear look at him.

I’d kept my eyes and ears open whenever I was out with Lois but I hadn’t noticed anything funny at all. No one following us or

taking pictures or anything. We’d turned them all over to the FBI but they’d agreed — without knowing who it was it would be hard to get a restraining order.

Thanksgiving had been good. Mom, Dad, Granny and Jimmy joined us at the cabin again for the holiday and this year the four of us were going to head to Smallville on Christmas Eve. The semester was almost over — which was a relief. We were going to be interviewing for spring internships before Christmas and I was sure Lois was as nervous as I was about that.

Since we both worked at the Planet, an interview was practically guaranteed but an internship wasn’t and competition was fierce.

But I really had no idea how Lois was feeling about it. Since Pop Pop died and our names came out, the distance between us had grown by leaps and bounds. It was almost like *deja vu* to the year before, except that Christopher was walking and talking.

“What’re we doing for Christmas this year?” Lois asked without preamble as she tossed her bag on the bed.

I looked up at her. “We’re going to Smallville.”

She rolled her eyes. “Gifts. What’re we doing for gifts?”

“For each other?”

She looked like she wanted to say something sarcastic but bit her tongue. “Yeah.”

I shrugged. Last year had gone fine. Lois had bought me a great leather jacket that I loved and I’d gotten her a mother’s necklace like she’d suggested. They had some options that had a spot for the parent’s birthstones, too, but I hadn’t even thought about one of those.

“What do you want?” I finally asked.

She shrugged. “No idea.”

I’d had a couple of ideas earlier in the year, but I wasn’t sure what I wanted to get her. I hadn’t really thought about it much since Pop Pop died. I hadn’t thought about gifts for anyone really. I needed to get on that.

She sighed. “Well, think about it and let me know.”

I nodded. “NCIS is paused for you.”

“Thanks.”

I knew she’d done the NaNo thing again this year and that she finished with a couple days left. I’d never seen the one from the year before and somehow I doubted I’d see this year’s project either. Maybe I’d do it next year; write my own great American novel.

“What about Christopher?” she asked.

“What about him?”

“Have you gotten him anything for Christmas yet?”

I shook my head. “No, not yet. You?”

She sighed. “Some clothes and I was thinking about one of the little red tricycles.”

“That’d be good. What about a red wagon to go with it?”

“That works. You get that and I’ll get the trike.”

Well, that was settled apparently. She headed into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

So Christopher was taken care of as far as Christmas gifts went. When we’d talked about it on the way the Corn Festival, we’d talked about going together on gifts for Ollie and Vicki and their family, Sam, Jessica, Jimmy and a few others, but now that we were barely speaking again, who knew?

And, of course, right after Christmas was our second anniversary and we’d be back at the cabin for that. Sam had mentioned it to me a couple days earlier. I’d thought this year would be better — more like the end of last year — but I guessed not. They were going to be tense and awkward like most of that first year had been. Like the first day of our anniversary trip last year.

Lois came back out and took the TIVO remote when I handed it to her.

I stayed on the couch while she curled up in a chair and

turned NCIS on.

~~~~~  
Lois

I frowned as I stared at the screen. I was caught up on my schoolwork, but the wording on this particular sentence was eluding me.

I'd finished my fifty thousand words before Thanksgiving. It helped that my relationship with my husband was in the tank. I'd gotten lots of writing done after Christopher went to bed. The story I'd written the year before had been well received. I'd lucked out when I signed up for the main NCIS fic boards and the name 'Thom E Gemcity' had been available. Of course, I'd signed up the night the show had revealed Timothy McGee's secret double life as the very popular mystery novelist with that as his nom de plume and I'd snatched that name up.

That was when I'd first heard about the whole Nanowrimo thing. It was too late to start that year, but I'd finished last year. This year, I'd finished my word count, but the story wasn't finished.

I frowned again as I tried to figure out how to get Tony — the perpetual womanizer — to tell Abby — one of his best friends — that he'd fallen in love with her while they were undercover. Or rather that he'd realized he'd loved her for a long time but while they were hiding out in the honeymoon suite and had kissed to maintain their cover, he'd realized that he felt things for her that were beyond anything he'd ever felt for another girl — even Jeanne, his serious girlfriend he'd used as part of another undercover operation.

Getting them undercover together had been a bit convoluted, because — face it — as a forensic scientist, Abby didn't do much field work. But I'd done it. I'd set up in what I felt was a moderately plausible manner and now was the moment of truth.

I smacked my laptop shut. It wasn't coming to me. The unrequited love thing was easy to write. The final scene where the couple realizes they're in love... Not so much given the current state of my love life.

"I thought you were done," Clark said, walking in.

"I finished my word count, not the story."

"Ah." He hesitated. "Did you ever post last year's anywhere?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Earlier this year."

I thought he looked slightly hurt when I told him that, but, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why. I wasn't about to tell him I had the free bound copy very well hidden. My first book.

I was going to write an original work one year and see if I could actually get it published, but not this year.

"So what're you stuck at?" he asked sitting in the chair across from me.

I shrugged. "Just the final, getting together stuff."

"Where Tony and Abby declare their undying love?"

"Something like that."

"Did you manage to get Ziva and McGee together?"

"Nope. Can't see the Mossad assassin and the computer geek together. She did manage to whack a dictator from a small Southeastern European country, though."

There was a small smile on his face. "Good for her."

I sighed and stared out the window, grateful for the blazing fire as snow drifted down slowly outside. I'd finish it another day.

"When's your interview with Perry White?" he asked suddenly.

"Thursday. You?"

"Same." He hesitated slightly. "Would you like to go to lunch for luck?"

I shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

~~~~~  
Clark

Well, that was something. A lunch date was better than nothing and 'nothing' was where we'd been since we got back from Smallville.

Mom had mentioned something in passing at Thanksgiving and I'd tried to write it off as my continued grief over Pop Pop. I didn't think she'd bought it.

Christopher started crying suddenly. Lois and I exchanged glances. He hadn't woken up crying in a long time.

"I got it," I told her as she started to get up.

I walked into his room and he was standing in his crib, crying his eyes out.

"Hey, bud," I said softly as I picked him up. "What's the matter?"

He popped his pacifier back in his mouth and rested his head on my shoulder, snuggling down into my arms, but still sniffing as we settled into the glider.

"What's wrong, little man?"

"anpa," he said between sniffles.

"Grandpa?" Grandpa was Sam. Gramps was my dad.

"anpa," he repeated.

"Grandpa's sleeping, bud. We'll see him tomorrow."

"Mama," he said.

I stood up and headed towards our room. "Someone's looking for his mom," I said as I handed him off.

"Hey, Christopher," Lois said softly as he settled into her arms. "What's wrong?"

"anpa," he said again.

She looked at me, puzzled.

I shrugged. "That's all he said except asking for you."

"You want to see Grandpa?" Lois asked him.

"anpa."

She shrugged. "Let's go." She turned to me. "Can you do your whole hearing thing and see where he is?"

"Sure." I listened for Sam's heartbeat and found it in the kitchen, but...

I was sure my face drained of color. I zipped to the door leading out of our wing. "Call 911!" I called as I waited impatiently for the keypad to keep up with me.

"What's wrong?"

"Call 911!" I said again before speeding through the now-open door.

I thought I saw her grabbing her cell phone as she started following me.

"Use the keypad," I hollered. When Sam had the system put in, he'd made sure that there was a way to call all kinds of emergency personnel from all the security keypads. All she'd have to do is punch in the medical emergency code and the security system would send a signal to wherever it sent a signal to and medical help would be on its way — likely with the fire department and police in tow — and the gates would be opened so they wouldn't have to be buzzed in. It also sent a signal to Ollie and Vicki's house. There was a one-touch option, too, but then they called the house and wanted to verify an emergency and that took time. Sam had wanted something faster; a more immediate option. The emergency signals we wore wouldn't work either because that would be a very different kind of response team.

All that flew through my head as I flew through the house and I was in the kitchen in a split-second. "Sam? Come on, Sam." I tried desperately to remember what I'd learned in the CPR course Sam had sent all of us through after Pop Pop.

Was he breathing?

Yes.

Did he have a pulse?

Yes, but it seemed erratic. Where had he put the Automatic External Defibrillator? I knew he kept one for 'just in case' something happened during a fancy shindig. It would be in the

wet bar, I thought. I rushed through the house, grabbed it and rushed back.

I followed the directions and hooked it up to him after I ripped his shirt open. I breathed a sigh of relief as it said he didn't need to be shocked.

I didn't realize how quickly I had done all of that until Lois rushed into the room, carrying Christopher. I'd done all of that in the time it had taken her to get from our room to the kitchen.

She stopped in her tracks at the sight of her dad on the tile floor.

"Daddy," she whispered. "No."

Part 89

Lois

I stared out the window, sipping the coffee in my hand.

It was finally light enough to see something outside, which was good because I couldn't stand to look at outdated, inane magazines anymore. One of the Newsweeks was actually about the New Hampshire primary — the general election had been a month earlier, for crying out loud.

The doctors had been and gone several times and had admitted him to the Coronary Care Unit. They'd confirmed the heart attack. Clark had told me that he'd — literally — heard Dad fall so we knew exactly when it happened and care had been prompt.

We'd been here for several hours already and I was sure we'd be here for many more before I'd manage to tear myself away.

Last I'd heard they were talking about doing an angioplasty, but they wanted to wait another hour or two before making a final determination.

"Mrs. Kent?"

I turned to see Dr. Woods walking in the room. He was one of the top heart specialists in the country and a friend of Dad's. He'd come in on his weekend off just for Dad.

I paled at the look on his face. "It's surgery, isn't it?"

He nodded. "An angioplasty which is technically a procedure, not surgery. Your dad agreed that it's the best course of action after he looked over his charts. It should only take about an hour or so, but we need to get started," he said gently.

"Can I see him?" Tears were flowing down my cheeks.

"Of course." He turned to Clark. "One at a time."

Clark nodded. "I'll be right here."

I saw him pull his phone out to start making calls.

I wouldn't have nearly enough time with Daddy before they'd make me leave so they could get him ready.

He looked so frail lying there on the hospital bed with all kinds of wires running to him. "Daddy," I whispered hoarsely, taking his offered hand and brushing his hair off his face.

"I'm going to be just fine, Princess. Tom's the best at this and you know it."

I nodded, trying desperately to keep my tears back. "I know. He said he's going to take good care of you."

"He will." He took a wavering breath. "I need you to do something for me, too, though."

I nodded.

"I need you to take care of that grandson of mine for me. He was about all I could think about there for a few minutes."

"He woke up," I told him. "It's how we found you so fast." I couldn't tell him about *how* Clark had found him but I could tell him the why. "He was crying and kept asking for you. We finally went to look for you and that's when Clark found you in the kitchen."

"I guess I owe him a lot then. When would someone have come to the kitchen otherwise? Probably not until about an hour ago," he said glancing at the clock to confirm the time.

I nodded. "Probably."

The nurse came in, followed by other medical personnel.

"You'll need to leave now, Mrs. Kent," she said gently.

I nodded, kissing Daddy's forehead gently before breathing a silent prayer and heading back out to the waiting room.

"How is he?" Vicki asked.

I shrugged and crumpled into her arms. "He looks so... fragile," I managed through the tears. "He's my Daddy; he's not supposed to be fragile."

"I know, sweetheart," she said, rocking with me. "I know."

~~~~~  
Clark

I didn't know what I could do with her. I watched Sam as best I could through walls and all that, but it wasn't like I could keep Lois up to speed on what was happening. As far as I could tell, everything seemed to be going fine.

When I could tell they were done, I stood and stretched. "I bet they're done here pretty quick." I looked Lois straight in the eye.

She nodded slightly, from where she was leaning against Vicki. "I bet you're right."

Five minutes later, Dr. Woods came in and told us everything had gone well and that we'd be able to see him soon.

Lois slumped in relief, her eyes closed. She had to be tired, I realized. She'd been up early the morning before and hadn't slept at all since we'd been at the hospital.

"Hey," I said suddenly. "After you see him, why don't you go home and get some rest?"

She shook her head. She started to say something, but Jimmy chose that moment to rush into the room. He gave her a big hug and just held her for a long minute — something I probably should have been doing for a good chunk of the day.

"How is he?" he asked as he finally let her go.

"They just did an angioplasty. We can go see him soon," she told him.

"Is he going to be okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah, they think so."

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. "Billy and Serena send their love. They may stop by later."

"She's going to go home and see her son and get some rest," I told him.

Lois glared at me. "No, I'm not. I'll go home later, but I'm not leaving Daddy. Why don't you go check on Christopher if you don't think Jessica can handle it?" she snapped.

Everyone winced and the tension was practically palpable.

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm sure Christopher is fine, but I don't really want to bring him down here. He's with Jessica." The tears flowed again. "Daddy said that Christopher saved his life."

"What?" The exclamation came from everyone else in the room.

I told them about Christopher waking up and wanting his Grandpa. Lois pointed out that it would have been hours before anyone found him otherwise. I hadn't thought about that.

Before long, Lois was taken back to see Sam and I stared out the window for a long time.

I turned suddenly. "I'm going to go see Christopher. Will you let Lois know that I'll be back in a bit?"

Everyone nodded and I left.

It was a long drive back to the house and I used the time to make some phone calls. I talked to Mom for a long time and she said she'd fly out to be with Lois. I told her that wasn't necessary.

I talked to my boss in the mailroom and Rehalia. They rearranged our schedules so we had a couple days off and said to call if there was anything else we needed. I pulled up in front of the house.

"Hey, bud," I said, picking Christopher up from amongst his toys in his play room. Sam had taken the two offices on the floor

below our rooms and turned one into a play room/living area for us and the other into an office/study area for me and Lois.

“anpa,” he said.

“Grandpa’s gonna be just fine, little man. Thanks to you.” He gave me a big hug. Jessica went to go get lunch for all of us while I played with him.

“How’s Lois doing?” she asked when she got back.

I sighed. “She’s okay. A bit freaked out but that’s an understatement, I think.”

“I’d imagine so. I can’t imagine having my dad like that.”

I nodded. “Thanks for taking care of Christopher this morning. I know you were supposed to have the day off.”

“No problem. I think Christopher and I are going to go to the movies with my sister and her little boy later, if that’s okay. That was the only thing I had planned for today anyway.”

“Sure, just tell Steve and Scott ahead of time and they’ll go with you,” I reminded her unnecessarily. She was as aware of the security arrangements as the rest of us.

We ate peanut butter sandwiches and then I put Christopher down for his nap. I did a few other things before I went back to talk to Jessica again.

“I’m heading back over the hospital,” I told Jessica. “Holler if you need anything.”

“I will. Let me know if there’s any changes or anything I can do.”

“Taking care of Christopher is enough for now. Lois really doesn’t want him at the hospital and I can’t say that I do either.”

“No problem.”

~~~~~

Lois

It had been a long day and it was going to get longer. I wasn’t leaving.

I couldn’t sit with him most of the time, but I wasn’t leaving. I wouldn’t leave him alone.

Jimmy, Ollie and Vicki had tried to get me to go with Clark when he went home to check on Christopher. Serena had tried to get me to go get dinner with her somewhere besides the hospital, but I’d refused. She’d finally sent Billy to go get me something to eat from one of the nearby restaurants.

Ten minutes after he got back, Clark showed up with my favorite chocolate cake — that he had to have made at the house. He made *the* best chocolate cake. Even Vicki said so.

“Thank you,” I said quietly when we were sort of half alone for a minute.

“Christopher was asking for you,” he said. “And for your dad. And no problem — I figured you could go for chocolate cake right about now.”

I sighed. “I don’t think I want to bring him up here. Daddy’ll be home in a few days, but I don’t know that a seventeen month old and hospitals mix.”

“Probably not,” he agreed. “Maybe we can get them on the phone tomorrow or something.”

He put an arm around me and pulled me to him for a second. “You need to go home and get some sleep.”

I shook my head. “Not till visiting hours are over.” It wasn’t like they’d let us just go sit with him, but I could go in for a few minutes every hour until visiting hours were over. Everyone else was drifting off.

Billy and Serena stayed for about an hour. Jimmy stayed a bit later. Ollie and Vicki headed home about seven. Visiting hours ended at 8:30.

“You don’t have to stay,” I told Clark when Ollie and Vicki had left. “You could still catch them or even fly home if you wanted to.”

He shook his head. “No. I’ll stay with you.”

“You don’t have to,” I reiterated.

“You shouldn’t be alone,” he said with a sigh.

I almost rolled my eyes but managed not to. Having Clark here — unfortunately — wasn’t much better than being by myself, and even worse in some ways. With him here, it was hard not to think about what it would have been like if this had happened before Pop Pop.

He would have sat with me. Held my hand. Put his arm around me. Often. Not just the twelve seconds earlier. It made me want to cry.

I should have done that while I happened to be sitting near him or something and then he would have had to do something because we’d be ‘in public’. Now, if I decided it was a good time to break down and cry, he’d just ignore me or sigh or something.

I sighed.

I’d wait till he was asleep to break down.

~~~~~

Clark

Lois let me drive home, but I thought that was only because she’d practically fallen over in the elevator. She was so tired, but I doubted sleep would come easy to her.

It was a long drive home. Again.

She headed straight for our room when we got there.

I went to talk to Jessica and check on Christopher, who was already down for the night.

“He’s doing as well as can be expected,” I told her.

She let out a breath. “Good. I’m so glad to hear that.”

“You’re not the only one,” I told her with a smile. “Was Christopher good for you?”

She sighed. “He was antsy all day. I’m not really sure what his deal was, except I think he picked up on the tension. He enjoyed ‘The Incredibles’ though. He liked the colors and everything.”

I stilled for a moment. Superheroes. Superpowers. Secret identities. Primary colors. Capes.

I headed back into our room. Lois was in the bathroom and the water in the tub was running. That wasn’t surprising. I knocked on the door.

“Lois?” I called.

“What?”

I winced. She sounded irritated. “You okay?”

I heard her sigh. “I’m fine. Just trying to relax a bit so I’ll be able to sleep.”

“Okay. Christopher’s sleeping and Jess said she’d get up with him.”

“Thanks.”

The conversation was clearly over. I sighed. I wished she’d talk to me — that the distance between us hadn’t grown again.

I decided not to go straight to bed.

I was sure that she’d planned on tonight being a nightgown night — Saturdays almost always were. Most of those nights, I tried to either be asleep or wait until she was asleep. There was no point in either of us being uncomfortable if we didn’t have to be.

I could hear her tears start as she turned the shower on and I wished again there was something I could do to help her deal with it all.

I was flipping through the channels when she came out of the bathroom, tossing her robe over the chair on her side of the bed. I was right. Nightgown night.

“How are you?” I asked quietly.

She shrugged. “Fine.”

She lay on her side and pulled the covers way up around her, covering her nearly bare back.

She jumped slightly when I spoke again.

“Are you really okay, Lois?”

She nodded without looking at me. “Yeah. I’m just tired and want to go to sleep.”

I sighed and reached over to flip the light off.

I scooted under the covers and stared at the stars through the ceiling. I knew it would be a while before Lois would actually sleep and if she decided she wanted to talk, I wanted to be awake.

My mind wandered back to the whole ‘Incredibles’ thing. I’d seen the previews and all that, even if I hadn’t seen the movie yet. The basic premise was that there were superheroes with secret identities.

Could I do something like that someday?

I helped when I could without threatening my identity or anything like that. It wasn’t much. I stopped a mugging a few weeks earlier, but that was mostly just because I’d shown up, not because I’d done anything special.

It was definitely something to keep in the back of my mind and talk to Mom about sometime. I didn’t think I’d do anything before I graduated from college. And there was the whole Lana thing to deal with, too.

About three thousand things had to happen before I was ready to even consider that, but I was on about twenty seven of that list.

I sighed as Lois’ breathing slowed.

I rolled over and tried to sleep.

\*\*\*

Part 90

Lois

I sank wearily into the chair, my purse landing on the floor beside me.

Daddy was alive.

That was the most important thing. And he was going to be okay. He’d be in the hospital for a few days, but he was alive and shouldn’t have any long term effects from the heart attack.

My head flopped back and I closed my eyes, silent tears snaking their way down my cheeks.

I could hear Clark in the nursery talking to Jessica.

I swiped at my cheeks. I didn’t want him seeing me like this. I hurried to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. In minutes, I was in the large tub, the water and bubbles rising around me. I could hear Clark moving around in our room and it wasn’t long before he knocked on the door.

“Lois?”

“What?” I said more irritably than I meant to.

“You okay?”

I sighed. I really didn’t want to talk to him about this. “I’m fine. Just trying to relax a bit so I’ll be able to sleep.”

“Okay. Christopher’s sleeping and Jess said she’d get up with him if he needs anything.”

“Thanks.” That was a relief. He didn’t wake up every night — maybe once or twice a week — but I really didn’t want to have to deal with it tonight. I loved my son very much, but tonight... Tonight, I wouldn’t be able to give him what he needed.

I laid there until the water grew cold, but I wasn’t ready to go back into our room and crawl into the bed I knew Clark was already in. Maybe if I knew that he’d hold me and let me cry and help me forget for a while but... Instead, I knew that, even after nearly two years of marriage, I’d curl up as far on my side as I could and he’d be way over on his side and most likely a pillow or something would end up between us marking ‘no man’s land’ so we wouldn’t accidentally end up closer together and I wasn’t sure I was ready to deal with that tonight.

Instead I took a hot shower, allowing the water to stream over me, relaxing the rest of the knots out of my muscles. Tears flowed, no matter how hard I tried to stop them.

Part of me was glad Mom wasn’t here to see this. I couldn’t imagine what seeing Daddy lying there on the hospital bed would have done to her. She was a strong woman, my mom, but she’d loved Daddy so much...

My thoughts wandered somewhere I hadn’t wanted them to.

If something happened to me... If I was in a car accident or needed major surgery or something... What would Clark feel? Anything? Would he even be in the same ballpark as my mom would have been? That my dad had been when Mom and Lucy died?

I doubted it.

Upset? Maybe.

Distraught? Not a chance.

Inconsolable? I almost snorted at the thought.

I sighed and finally turned the water off. I was nearly dry before I realized that I hadn’t brought any clothes in with me. Why didn’t our bathroom have closet access again? Most of the other bedroom suites did — or at least you didn’t have to walk all the way across the room to get to it.

I went to the little walk-in closet off the water closet and sighed. The only nightgown left in there was the floor length black satin one.

None of the pajamas I wore could be considered... risqué in the slightest, but some were definitely... sexier, for lack of a better term. At the beginning of each week, I set out clothes for school, for work, for play and for sleep. Every week, I picked one or two nightgowns or other pajama outfits that came within shouting distance of the line between comfy and sexy. They never crossed that line, or even came close really, but I was still more than a little uncomfortable with it — even after all this time.

The decision we’d made about sleeping attire when we’d moved in had been a smart one. One or both of us had run into virtually every member of the household at one point or another while wearing something... more appropriate for a married couple.

I tried to put... those nights as far apart as possible. Sometimes Wednesdays and almost always Saturdays and then I set out new clothes on Sunday afternoon or evening. And this was Saturday night. I didn’t feel like walking through the room, into the closet, wearing only a towel, and digging through my dresser for a pair of shorts and a T-shirt to wear. I couldn’t take the avoidance from Clark either. Not tonight.

To be honest, the floor length satin gown made me feel good. It wasn’t immodest by any stretch and, though it did leave most of my back bare, no one saw that, unless Clark happened to roll over in the middle of the night and it covered plenty in the front, but could still be considered flattering if not outright sexy. It did sting a bit when there wasn’t even the slightest spark of anything in my husband’s eyes when he did see me, but I’d also noticed that on nights he thought were ‘married pajama’ nights, he was asleep before me or waited until I was in bed to come into our room. I wasn’t sure what to think of that. Probably just didn’t want to be any more uncomfortable than I did.

I slipped it over my head and found myself wishing that Clark would do something tonight to make me forget for a while. A night flight or a game night or something where it was out of my mind. A night flight was out. He’d only taken me twice and never had made good on his promise to take me to see Mt. Everest.

I took the matching robe with me but didn’t put it on. I was just going to go straight to bed so there was no point, but I would toss it over the chair near my side of the bed in case I did need to get up in the middle of the night. I sighed as I headed towards the door and the bed where my husband apparently waited.

I didn’t bother looking at him as I walked towards the bed, tossing the robe over the chair as I did.

“How are you?” he asked quietly as he clicked the television off.

I shrugged as I crawled in bed. “I’m okay.”

I didn’t look at him as I stretched out under the covers. There was no point in looking at him. No point in torturing myself with

the knowledge that he felt nothing for me. Friendship at most and sometimes I doubted that.

Oh, he'd been there for me today while we waited anxiously for news about my dad. But he hadn't held me for more than a minute or two tops. He hadn't held my hand. He hadn't done any of the things I figured a husband would normally do for his wife.

I sighed as I pulled the covers up around me and snuggled down into them, positioning the body pillow just so as I did. I really shouldn't have expected more from him. And I didn't really. Most of the time, when we had been alone or nearly so, I stared out the window.

His voice startled me.

"Are you really okay, Lois?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm just tired and want to go to sleep."

I heard him sigh and then the light turned off.

I closed my eyes and willed myself to sleep.

~~~~~

Clark

I sighed again as I pushed thoughts of superheroes out of my head.

She wasn't okay, no matter what she said, but what was I supposed to do to make it better?

She hadn't wanted me anywhere near her all day, why would our bed be any different?

And to be honest, while I would hold her tonight if she needed me to, I wasn't sure I really *wanted* to.

The nightgown — and glimpse of her back — only served as a reminder that I wasn't married to Lana. After nearly two years and everything Lois and I had been through, she was still the one who filled my dreams more often than I would ever admit to anyone, even though I'd done my best to try to avoid thinking about her right before bed — it hadn't helped.

But Lois...

She *was* a beautiful woman and she *was* my wife, but that still didn't mean I felt right thinking about her like that; like a woman.

My heart still belonged to Lana.

Just like it always had.

Didn't it?

I still didn't plan on betraying her. Sure, I'd told Lois that there was a remote possibility that we'd... be together sometime during our five and a half year marriage, but I didn't really believe it would happen and I still couldn't bring myself to call it 'making love', even to myself, choosing instead to use other euphemisms.

I rolled onto my side, my back to Lois as always these days, closed my eyes and sighed. Seeing Sam like that had shaken me, too, but Lois was much closer to her dad than I was and I knew it was just tearing her up.

Before long I finally drifted to sleep.

I didn't know how much later it was that a noise woke me up. It took me a minute to realize what it was, but it was Lois. She was crying and I could tell she was trying to be quiet, but I still heard her.

I rolled towards her, reaching out one hand and putting it on her arm.

She started as I touched her. "Sorry," I heard her whisper. "I didn't mean to wake you up." She shifted and sat up, reaching for the robe on the chair nearby. "I'll get up. I'm not sleeping anyway."

"Stay. You didn't bother me. Really," I heard myself saying. "Besides, I bet you could use a friend tonight."

She didn't move for a long minute, but finally moved to lie back down, still facing away from me.

I scooted across the bed until I was lying right behind her. I hesitated slightly before wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her back just a bit until she was next to me.

I suddenly realized that I'd missed this. It wasn't something we'd done every night but often enough.

Was it that I'd missed being this close Lois? Or that I'd just missed being close to *someone*?

I didn't let myself think about that.

I just held her for a long time. There were no more sobs, but I knew the tears still flowed. When they seemed to slow down, I spoke again. "What can I do? To make this easier."

She shrugged against me.

"There must be something. Anything."

She rolled over until she was on her back looking up at me. I moved my arm away from her as she did. "Anything?"

"Anything."

There were tears in her eyes, but she didn't look right at my face as she spoke again. "Make me forget. Just for a little while."

I nodded. "Okay. What do you want to do? Play some games or something? Go see Everest? Except I don't know that we'd want to leave the house."

She shook her head, still refusing to look at me.

"What do you want to do then?"

Before I knew it, she was kissing me.

And even more surprising, I was kissing her back.

And enjoying it.

I pulled back after a minute. "What was that?" I whispered.

She still didn't look at me. "I was kissing my husband and hoping, that just for a few minutes, he would help me forget that Daddy is lying in the hospital after a heart attack."

"Lois..." I started.

She put her fingers on my mouth. "I know you don't love me, Clark. I'm okay with that, but tonight... I don't even care if you pretend I'm Lana as long as you don't actually use her name. I just want you to..." She sighed. "I want more than just sex, but I don't know that 'making love' is really the right term either. Just kiss me and be with me tonight. Just this once." Tears flowed down her cheeks again. "Please," she whispered.

"Lois..." I started again, but my lips were suddenly otherwise occupied as she kissed me again.

I found my arm wrapping around her, pulling her closer to me.

One part of my mind protested that she wasn't Lana.

Another part reminded me that she was my wife — a beautiful, completely willing woman who was kissing me and making rational thought nearly impossible. It was *okay*, legal even, for us to do this. Heck, it was probably... unbiblical for us not to be or something like that.

Okay, so our marriage wasn't conventional in any sense, but that didn't mean that...

Rational thought became much more difficult as she shifted closer to me, her soft body pressing against me and I felt my hand caressing the bare skin of her back. It was so soft...

The part of me that kept saying Lois was my wife and beautiful and lying in bed kissing me and willing and warm and soft and all of those things took the other — much smaller, less insistent — part of me that kept proclaiming that she wasn't Lana and shoved it into a little box and locked it up tight.

Her hands were on my chest and she pushed against me until I rolled onto my back. Her lips left mine to trail down my chin and neck. My head fell back, my eyes closed. One of her hands ran down my chest and over to my side, her finger hooking into the waistband of my shorts near my hip as she kissed the scar on my chest.

At least I thought that was what she was doing.

Something in me snapped and with what could only be described as a growl, I pulled her to me and flipped over on top of her. I kissed her again, more deeply and I could hear the noises she was making in the back of her throat. Suddenly overcome with the desire to inspire more of those noises from her, I kissed

my way down her neck, one hand running down her side and along the leg that was hooked around mine. The satin of her gown was soft to my touch, but suddenly it wasn't enough. I *needed* to feel her skin against mine.

My hand slipped further down her leg until it reached the hem of the fabric that was bunched up around her thigh. I hesitated slightly as I slipped my fingers underneath and slid them up the outside of her leg, over her hip where I felt the elastic of her underwear and my heart rate increased. I could hear her heartbeat accelerating as my lips moved to her chin and down her neck until I reached the scar from where she'd tripped when she went to throw a rock at a squirrel. I kissed along it gently and heard her moan as my thumb stopped just under her breast.

I sat up, kneeling with one knee on either side of her upper thighs as my other hand slipped under the other side of her gown, along her other thigh, over her other hip and the other side of her waist, until the satin was bunched around her ribs. I put my hands on the mattress, one on either side of her shoulders and leaned down to kiss her softly.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded before she kissed me again. "Make me forget," she whispered.

I wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her to me until we were both sitting up. My hands slid up her sides again as we kissed and this time they didn't stop until the gown was over her head and thrown to the side. I kissed her again as I pushed her gently onto her back and followed her onto the bed.

I rolled onto my side and ran my fingers over her stomach, pulling back from her slightly. Her eyes were closed and she was biting her lip as my eyes trailed over the rest of her body.

My breath caught in my throat as I got a good look at her.

She seemed nervous and I could imagine why. She'd nursed Christopher for over a year and there were stretch marks all over her abdomen, but I barely noticed any of that. All I noticed was the whole package, but I was sure she was cataloging what she perceived as her flaws.

"You're beautiful," I whispered as I kiss her again lightly before I moved on to her chin, her neck, her earlobe, that scar, the mole on the swell of her breast and other... more interesting places and she kissed and nibbled whatever was closest to her — my face, my neck, my shoulder, my arm.

The last remaining rational thoughts fled at the feel of her skin under my lips, her lips on my skin, her body warm against mine. I didn't know how long it lasted, but for a long time, the only thing in my universe was the brunette whirlwind who was my wife.

Part 91

Lois

~~~~~

I knew I'd fallen asleep almost immediately after Clark and I...

I wanted to say 'made love for the first time', but I didn't think that's what it was for him. I had poured everything I felt for him into it, knowing that — just this once — I could and not truly be held accountable for my actions. I could blame it on emotions or that it was the first time I remembered being with a man — even though I already had a son — and I wanted to pretend I was with the love of my life, some nameless, faceless man who became Clark, if only for that moment in time. I'd started as the aggressor, but it wasn't very long before Clark had taken the initiative. I wasn't sure what to make of that and I wasn't going to dwell on it because I was sure the conclusion I'd come to was that his mind had been fully on another woman.

And technically, I hadn't fallen asleep after the *first* time because there had been more than one time. After the first time, we'd laid in each other's arms. Clark had started the conversation

by saying 'wow'. I'd agreed and he'd surprised me by saying the only thing he'd like more would be more.

I guessed he just wanted another chance to imagine what being with Lana was like. The second time, though, he'd used some of his special abilities and we'd wound up on the ceiling as we... I sighed. Made love. That's what it had been for me, even if it wasn't for him. He'd continued to hold me in his arms as he floated us back to the bed and while resting on his chest, his arms around me, legs intertwined, I'd fallen asleep while hoping that he'd actually been with me and not imagining Lana.

At least, he hadn't called out her name in the throes of passion.

I mentally rolled my eyes at the dime store novel line. It was something that might find its way into next year's NaNoWriMo project.

I thanked my lucky stars for that. Even after he'd told me I was beautiful — something I *really* hadn't expected — I was sure that he was pretending I was someone else and I hated that. I knew I'd told him that I didn't care if he imagined Lana instead of me, but the thought that he might have absolutely broke my heart.

It was still early and Clark was still asleep and I was still in his arms, our legs twined together. I kept my eyes closed and my breathing even, staying as still as I possibly could. This was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. In the arms of the man I loved. If only he'd love me too...

I struggled valiantly to keep the tears from coming and managed somehow to keep them in. I didn't want to wake Clark up by crying all over his chest.

I stayed still in his arms and the dream I had while we nearly died from hypothermia came back to me.

Clark.

Me.

The fireplace.

Kissing him.

Kissing me.

The ragged scar that ran right down his breastbone that I'd kissed and nibbled my way down.

I frowned. The scar was so faint I knew I'd never noticed it when he was walking around without his shirt on. It had to be the one from when he'd tried to be Peter Pan. He'd never explained how he had a scar even though he was invulnerable.

And what about the tattoo on the outside of his hip? I knew I'd never seen that before.

So why did I suddenly remember them from my dream from the cabin?

Was it possible that the dream wasn't a dream but a memory?

The thought had occurred to me before, but the dream — or vision or memory or whatever it was — was more vivid than ever.

Could it be?

Could Clark *actually* be Christopher's father?

Could we have actually... made love that night?

Or was I just overlaying the more recent experience on top of my dream?

"Hey," Clark whispered. "Are you okay?"

I pulled myself out of my thoughts and nodded against him.

"Just thinking about Daddy, hoping he's okay."

He kissed my forehead and stroked the hair near my temple. "He's going to be fine."

I wondered if I could get away with kissing him again.

He lifted my face towards him with his fingers tangled in my hair, his thumb running along my cheekbone.

"I know," I whispered, wondering what the look in his eyes was. Desire?

No, it couldn't be that, could it?

He kissed me gently. "I know you do."

I wasn't sure who moved first, but we moved towards each other, kissing again.

And again.

And again.

My hands roamed across the hard planes of his chest, across his six-pack abs.

His fingers trailed up and down my back, sending shivers down my spine.

His lips left mine and trailed down the side of my neck. I couldn't stop the sounds in the back of my throat.

"I love that sound," he whispered.

My mind started going a million miles a minute.

Was it possible that Clark was actually here with *me* and not pretending that I was the blonde?

I wanted to think about it more or ask him or something, but I simply wasn't capable of rational thought.

I'd think about it later.

Right then all I wanted to do was kiss Clark, touch Clark, make love with Clark.

I didn't know how long it was before I was resting on his chest again and the thought that I was missing something niggled at the back of my mind, but I was too exhausted to consider it much further and sleep claimed me once again.

When I woke up to find the sun streaming in the windows, my husband was nowhere to be seen.

~~~~~  
Clark

I sat on an iceberg in the middle of the north Atlantic somewhere, staring into the water.

What had I done?

I'd made love to my wife.

Three times.

As much as I wanted to claim otherwise, there was no other way to describe it.

I didn't love her like that — not usually — but in that moment — in those moments — there was no one else in my world.

She'd said she didn't care if I pretended she was Lana as long as I didn't actually use her name, but there was no thought of Lana at all from the time she kissed me until the time I woke up later.

I didn't know what had possessed me to kiss her again when we'd woken up again, but I had and it had been amazing.

Super.

I wasn't sure where that superlative had come from but it seemed to fit.

She'd been on my side of the bed and I'd been on hers. Her dark hair was spread over my pillow and I was glad that she was on her stomach because the sheet was dangerously low on her back, much lower than the now-discarded gown had been.

If she'd been on her back or on her side facing me... I wasn't sure what would have happened.

I'd had to get out of there before she moved.

Quietly, I'd pulled on some clothes and snuck out of the house, taking off for parts unknown and had ended up here.

I had promised Lana I wouldn't make love to Lois while we were married, but I had.

Had I cheated on Lana?

I was *married* to Lois. Being with her wasn't *wrong*, was it?

Visions of the night at the cabin were coming back to haunt me. That vivid dream of making love to Lana was all I had of her. I hadn't let myself think about it much since I married Lois because it felt like cheating on her to think about another woman that way.

It had come flooding back to me as I held Lois after she fell asleep.

But this time, Lana was nowhere to be seen. It was Lois with

me on the floor, under the blankets, in front of the fireplace.

Only Lois.

Making love.

I'd thought it before, but I was more confused than ever.

Was it possible it wasn't a dream after all? Could we have really been together that night?

Could Christopher really be my son?

Another thought came screaming into my head.

We hadn't used protection. I was pretty sure that Lois wasn't on any form of birth control — there hadn't been any need. We didn't have... any other kinds of protection anywhere. We'd never bought any for the same reason.

Well, we had from time to time, as part of the cover, but they always ended up in a dumpster somewhere.

I blew out a slow breath.

I knew that her cycles had been irregular at best since Christopher was born, but hadn't been paying enough attention to have any idea about whether or not it was possible for her to get pregnant again. Or if it was even possible for me to get a human woman pregnant.

I guessed there was nothing to do but wait and see.

My mind floated back to the cabin. Could Lois and I... My brow furrowed. The scar I'd noticed last night. From when she'd tried to throw a rock at a squirrel. Nestled deep in the hollow between her collar bone and her neck, I'd kissed it repeatedly last night.

And the small mole on the swell of her breast. I knew I'd seen it before when she was wearing a tank top or swim suit, but I knew I'd never thought about kissing it before. Or thought how sexy it was.

And now I remembered doing the same that night. But was it really a memory or a melding of a dream and the night before? I guessed I'd have to ask Lois. Maybe. It was probably going to be awkward at best to be around each other.

It had been... amazing. Incredible.

Super.

It had been perfect. Better than perfect.

Jor-El had said that Kryptonians mate for life. Was this what he was talking about? Would this preclude me from another relationship after the divorce? From ever being with Lana — or anyone else — someday? How did he define 'mate'? Make lo... Do things for purposes of procreation with? Or bind their lives together with some sort of formal ritual — like a wedding?

Or was it a nature v. nurture thing?

Did Kryptonians mate for life — though some sort of formal ritual — because that was how they were raised? How society on Krypton worked? Was there no divorce? Was there no abuse or infidelity or anything like that where it would be acceptable for that kind of formal bond to be broken?

Maybe those kinds of things just didn't exist in Kryptonian society?

Maybe there was no provision for divorce and they were just stuck?

But here on Earth — in Kansas at least — divorce was still frowned on, but certainly not unheard of, or even all that uncommon.

I realized I was getting nowhere with all this. It didn't matter what Kryptonian culture was like. What mattered, at this point, I guessed, was if there was something... innate that caused Kryptonians to bond for life. Was there some sort of bond formed when the physical relationship was consummated? Had I sealed my... fate, for lack of a better term, by being with Lois like that? If Lana and I hadn't been waiting to get married, would things have been different? Would Lois and I still have ended up in the situation, but it would have been easier to... resist when she kissed me?

Another thought kept niggling at the back of my mind.

A line of thought I didn't want to pursue.

What if there was some sort of soul mate type bond that Kryptonians experienced and it... prevented them from having a physical relationship with anyone but that person? Was it possible that something in my Kryptonian heritage felt that Lois was my soul mate and not Lana and that was why Lana and I had never...

But I'd *wanted* to with Lana. Desire hadn't been a problem — not even after I was married. It wasn't like I hadn't had physical desire for her. I'd had that in spades.

But while it hadn't always been easy controlling the urges with Lana, I had been completely defenseless against Lois' advances. Was it because we were married and I knew that it was... expected of us? Was it something to do with my Kryptonian physiology that was attracted to her?

Was Lois my soul mate instead of Lana?

Or had she... become my soul mate because we'd consummated our relationship?

Repeatedly.

And I'd instigated the last two times.

I was going to have to ask her about birth control and if she could be pregnant. And if she thought there was any possibility that Christopher was my son. *If* he was my son, she'd gotten pregnant on a Saturday and started getting hungry — really hungry — on Tuesday. Wasn't that awfully fast for a pregnancy to start affecting a woman? Was that a Kryptonian thing too? Maybe?

I decided to just watch her and see what her appetite was like during the next week. It wouldn't mean anything if she wasn't starving by mid-week but if she was...

I sighed as I glanced at my watch. Lois was going to want to go to the hospital and I should probably take her. I lifted up into the air and headed back towards Metropolis as fast as I could, slowing enough not to rattle windows but still fast enough to not be seen when I reached the house.

Part 92

Lois

~~~~~

I was dressed and ready to go, but I couldn't bring myself to leave Christopher just yet. Not knowing that it might be possible that he was Clark's son.

Clark was nowhere to be found. Jessica hadn't seen him. Vicki and Ollie hadn't seen him.

If he wasn't back soon, I was going without him.

I heard the beeping sound that indicated someone was entering our part of the house.

Clark didn't look at me as he walked in the main door to our room. He turned into a blur and a second later was dressed in a long sleeve collared shirt and a pair of blue jeans, complete with boots laced up.

"Ready to go to the hospital?" he asked, still without looking at me.

I stood up and grabbed my purse. "Let's go."

I stared out the window the whole way. How was I going to deal with being with him in public? Or would it matter?

Somehow I doubted he'd be any closer to me than absolutely necessary.

Maybe it would have been better if we'd never made love.

I wouldn't have spent the time since I woke up staring out the window reliving it. I would have headed to the hospital.

We spent the day with Daddy when we could and virtually alone in the waiting room the rest of the time. I thought Clark wished that someone, anyone, would come by or that his boss would call him and tell him there was some sort of mailroom emergency and he just *had* to come in or something.

I didn't think we'd said more than a dozen words to each other all day.

The Jeep hadn't quite stopped when I was out of it. I headed upstairs and found Jessica putting Christopher to bed.

"How's your dad?" she asked as I walked in the room.

"Better," I said, taking my son from her as he reached for me. "I've got him. Thank you so much for your help the last couple of days."

"My pleasure," she said, running a hand over the back of Christopher's head. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"I will. Thanks."

I settled into the glider and rocked with him, his head resting on my shoulder. I heard Clark come in a few minutes later.

I rocked with Christopher until he was asleep, hoping that Clark would be as well. I carefully laid him in his crib and quietly raised the side.

I headed back into our room, noticing only that Clark wasn't in bed as I headed towards the bathroom.

"Could you be pregnant?" he asked, startling me.

I stopped in my tracks, but didn't turn around. "I don't know," I told him. "I guess I'll let you know in a couple weeks."

"Is that how long it takes to know?"

I turned and crossed my arms in front of me, glaring at him.

He was sitting in one of the chairs, turned to face the window, staring out over the darkness. His elbows were resting on his knees and his head was bowed.

"Yeah, that's how long it takes," I said defiantly. "Of course, last time I got pregnant, I didn't know until I was like ten weeks along, but I bet we can figure it out before then. Hell, you might be able to right now if I'd let you do your buzz buzz vision thing on my uterus. For all I know, your little guys are faster and a fertilized egg would already be *flying* down the fallopian tube."

He didn't say anything.

"Don't worry. When the divorce happens, I still won't ask you for anything."

He stood up and turned to look at me then. "You think I won't be part of my baby's life? You *really* think I could just leave Christopher now? Much less a baby *I know* is mine? That I know is my biological child?"

I shrugged. "Like Lana's gonna want to play step mommy to a child that's mine but not yours or to a child that constantly reminds her that you cheated on her with your wife. You'll have your own kids with her. I'd never stop you from seeing them or anything like that, but I won't let them be constantly put in a situation where all they hear is about how your 'real family' comes first or some such nonsense."

"I wouldn't let her do that," he told me.

I shrugged. "Whatever. It doesn't matter. The odds of me being pregnant are probably astronomically small anyway." I turned again to head to the bathroom.

"Could Christopher be my son?"

The question was quiet but it stopped me in my tracks. "What?"

"You heard me. Could Christopher be my son?"

I turned to look at him, visions of us in front of the fireplace at the cabin dancing in my head. "Why would you think that?"

He sighed and sat back down. "That night, I dreamed that Lana and I... that she was there with me in front of the fireplace."

My eyes filled with tears. So he'd had the same... dream or whatever as I had. But if it wasn't a dream, if it was real, he'd dreamed of Lana.

He kept talking. "But it was weird. The longer it's been, the more it's you there with me. Even the next day, it was me and someone who kept morphing between you and Lana, but the longer we've been married, the more you're there and she's not."

"So?"

He leaned back and ran his hands through his hair. "So, this morning, I was remembering things that I hadn't before and I

don't know if I'm just superimposing last night on the memory or... if it really happened."

"Like what?" I asked cautiously.

"The scar from the rock throwing incident. The mole..." He made a vague motion in my direction, but I knew what he was talking about. "You, her, whoever, kissing the scar on my chest. Things like that."

He stood and started pacing. "And I don't know if I'm going crazy or what. He *looks* like me. He has the same mole on his lip that I do. I get comments *all the time* about how much he looks like me." He looked distraught. "Is it *possible* that he's my son?"

I sighed. "I don't know," I said quietly. "I had the same dream, but it was always you. It was never Joe or anything like that."

"And?" I could barely hear him.

I shrugged. "It's possible, I guess. We were both so out of it. Neither of us really *remembers* anything. We just have some kind of weird, fuzzy dream sequence." I hesitated slightly before adding, "Just like we've always told everyone."

"What about..." He shifted uncomfortably. "...the next day? Were there any... signs that something might have happened?"

"I don't know. I wasn't... looking for signs that I'd had sex the night before. I was sore all over and so tired... I don't really remember."

"So he could be my son?"

"Does it really matter?" I asked, unable to keep the trace of bitterness out of my voice.

"Of course it matters," he snapped.

"Why?" I snapped back. "I thought you already loved him like he was your own. What difference would it make if he was? Besides the whole half-alien thing?"

Pain flitted across his face, but surely he knew I wouldn't think that was a *bad* thing or something. If Clark ever did have a biological child, the child, technically, would be half-alien. It was a statement of fact, not an insult or anything of the kind.

"I do love him. More than anything."

More than anything. More than... me. I'd known that — it wasn't news — but it still hurt.

"But what difference does it make?" I snapped back. "Once Navance dies or the five years is up, you'll go back to Lana. Christopher being your biological child doesn't change the way you feel about her or about me or anything else. And I'm not going to stay — or let you stay — just because of DNA."

"Maybe it doesn't make a difference," he said quietly.

"I told you before I wouldn't ever keep you from him and that was when I didn't think there was any chance he was your son. I wouldn't keep him from you."

"I know." He sighed. "So when will we know if you're pregnant again?"

"Couple weeks, I guess." Tears filled my eyes. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I shouldn't have kissed you last night. I shouldn't have asked you to... make love or whatever to me."

"Why not?" he asked me. "You needed a friend; you needed to forget for a while."

"You really think Lana's gonna be all happy that you and I were together like that? Three times in one night?" I asked him incredulously. "You really think she'll believe you if you tell her that's all it was? Some kind of one night stand with your *wife*? *Especially* if I am pregnant? You don't think she'll think we were going at it like bunnies all the time?"

He shrugged.

"It's not like it's going to happen again, is it? But she'll never believe that."

His next question surprised me. "Why wouldn't it happen again?"

"Why would it?" I asked him with a raised brow.

He shrugged. "You seemed to enjoy yourself."

I glared at him. "I told you before — you have some kind of itch that needs scratching, go find an iceberg to melt. You decide you want to make some kind of long term, *real* commitment to me — and I want to do the same — *then* maybe it'll happen again."

~~~~~  
Clark

I didn't know what else to do.

So I crossed the room in a couple of giant steps.

And then I kissed her.

Hard.

But only for a second as her arms wound around my neck and she pulled me closer to her. My arms pulled her as close to me as I could, picking her up by the waist as the kiss softened just enough not to bruise her lips. Her legs wrapped around me and a second later, she was under me on our bed.

Clothes disappeared more quickly than I would have thought humanly possible, but it had to be because I wasn't using any of my powers.

The need to be together — to be the 'one flesh' mentioned at weddings — consumed me and Lois both.

It wasn't long before we were lying next to each other and even I was breathing heavily.

"Where did that come from?" she asked me, her head resting against my arm, her feet crossed at the ankle and propped up against the headboard.

"I don't know," I told her honestly, with a grin that I was sure looked like every stereotypical guy's first time grin ever seen on TV — even though it wasn't my first time. I thought about saying something like 'but I hope it happens again' but I decided it probably wasn't the smartest thing to do.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Don't play Mr. Innocent. You attacked me. That's where it came from." I couldn't read her tone of voice.

I attacked her?

Well, maybe, but she hadn't been saying no.

Had she?

I relived it quickly in my mind. No, she hadn't. She'd been right there with me every step of the way — as every piece of clothing came off, every kiss, every touch — it was both of us, together.

I hadn't used my powers, but it was the most incredible experience of my life. Even more than the night before had been.

"We forgot," I said quietly.

"Forgot what?" she asked, a trace of bitterness creeping into her voice. She rolled away from me and grabbed the closest article of clothing — my shirt — to pull on. "That you're not supposed to cheat on Lana with your wife?" She tugged it over her head and pulled it down as she stood up. It fell to her mid-thighs, leaving most of her legs exposed.

I never would have thought that a woman — any woman? Or just Lois? — wearing only my shirt could look so sexy.

I sighed and sat up, finding my boxers as I did. "That's not what I was talking about," I told her.

"Then what?" she asked glaring at me.

"We didn't use any protection of any kind." I ran a hand through my hair. "Again. At least... I didn't. I have no idea what you could have used, but somehow I don't think that was on your agenda for this evening."

"It wasn't," she said acidly. "I'm going to go take a shower." She headed to the bathroom.

"Lois..."

She didn't stop, but shut the door behind her and I heard the lock click.

I collapsed back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling — not bothering to look through it to see the stars.

Last night could be written off to the relief that Sam was

okay; the stress of having Lois' dad in the hospital after a heart attack, that kind of thing. But after all day to think about it or whatever... I didn't think the same could apply to what had just happened.

<But why should it matter?> one part of me asked. <She's your *wife*. You're *supposed* to make love to her — even if it is fast and furious sometimes. What do you think Mom and Dad have been hounding you about for two years now?>

<That's not the point,> my inner teenager — the part of me that had been in love with Lana for as long as I could remember — snapped back. <Do you really think she'll be able to accept this?>

I stifled a scream.

Why was this so hard? Why was it *my* life that ended up like this?

I *wanted* to be married to the woman I loved. To make love to her regularly — something I had discovered over the last twenty-four hours could be pretty amazing. To be free from evil dictators. To know my son was *my* son.

To have a *normal* life.

Or as normal as alien living as a human being could have.

I stifled another scream and was out the door to the veranda in a flash, taking off for parts unknown.

Part 93

Lois

~~~~~

He was gone when I came out of the bathroom.

That didn't really surprise me. He was probably off melting icebergs or something.

I walked to the closet and pulled out the warmest, least revealing flannel pajamas I could find, dressing in them before I went to bed. I pulled two of the throw pillows off the couch and put them in the middle of the bed — along with the pillow that had been there more often than not since Pop Pop's funeral. I wanted to make sure that there was no doubt that he was supposed to stay on his side of the bed overnight.

I doubted he'd be all over me or anything even if they weren't there, but I wasn't taking any chances. If I could have locked him out and made him sleep on the couch, I would.

I sat up at that. I took his pillow and an extra blanket and set it on the couch. I couldn't lock him out, but I could send him to the couch.

Was it fair?

I was the one who had initiated the first time and without the first time, none of the other times would have happened, so was it fair for me to send him to the couch rather than taking it myself?

Probably not, but I didn't really care.

He was the one who left; he could sleep on the couch.

And there was no reason to believe that he would actually take the couch when he got back.

I sighed and willed myself to sleep as I huddled under my blankets.

I woke up to find Clark's side of the bed unslept in and the blanket and pillow sitting neatly on the couch. Was it the same side of the couch I'd left it on? I couldn't remember.

There was a note stuck to the mirror in the bathroom. He'd gone to school early and was going to have to work late.

Part of me was relieved.

Part of me wanted to have it out with him and at least try to get back to the friendship we'd had before our names had been revealed — maybe with another baby thrown in.

I sighed.

It was Monday. If Clark really was Christopher's father, then it seemed likely that I'd be starving by Tuesday.

Tomorrow I'd know if I was pregnant with Clark's baby.

That spot inside that was completely and totally in love with

him wanted to jump up and down for joy that I could be having Clark's baby.

Part of me wanted to break down and cry at the thought of having another baby with a man who didn't love me — even if I was married to him this time.

I took a deep, calming breath. It would be another day before I'd suspect anything — at the earliest.

Maybe I wouldn't be pregnant.

That was possible.

What were the odds I'd get pregnant both of the first two times I had sex?

With my luck, probably pretty good.

I hurried through my morning routine, kissed Christopher good-bye and headed for school where I knew Clark would be. We managed to maintain appearances, walking together from class to class and a quick kiss good-bye when we had separate classes. It was a good thing, too, because I saw Navance's nephew as we headed our different ways.

I left my English class and headed towards the parking lot.

I ran a hand through my hair and wasn't watching where I was going as I rounded the corner. I screeched to a halt to avoid someone heading the other direction. "I'm sor..."

Lana.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

She shrugged. "Whatever." She started to walk away.

"Lana?"

She stopped and looked at me, her arms crossed in front of her. "What?"

"I heard what happened last year. I can't tell you how sorry I am. How bad we both felt for you and Tim." I wasn't sure why I'd brought Clark up, but it was true. We'd both felt horrible.

"I'm sure you did," she said as she turned to walk away.

"I know you don't believe me," I told her, "but it's true. I can't imagine..."

"You're right. You can't. Your son was born healthy and survived and thrived." She, unsurprisingly, looked angry and hurt and a myriad of any other emotions. She looked like she was going to say something else, but she didn't. She turned and walked away.

I wanted to call after her, to say something, anything, but I didn't know what to say.

I sighed and headed to work.

~~~~~

Clark

I saw Lois and Lana from a distance. I didn't listen in, though I could have. I didn't know what they were talking about, but I couldn't imagine a pleasant conversation for either one of them.

I wondered if Lois would mention it to me.

That would mean talking to me and I didn't know if she was.

The pillow and blanket on the couch had been a pretty obvious sign that we were fighting. Of course, being gone after we'd — I sighed as I thought it — made love again hadn't endeared me to her, I was sure. She'd been asleep long before I returned, I was sure.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow we'd have a pretty good idea if she was pregnant again. Of course, that was assuming that Christopher was my son and her extreme hunger at the cabin was due to a half-Kryptonian pregnancy rather than leftover from nearly dying.

I got in the truck and headed towards the Daily Planet. Lois' Jeep was only a couple cars ahead of me when we left, but I was sure she'd beat me by ten minutes or more given the way she always drove.

We'd pulled it off this morning — the happy couple thing, even though we said very little to each other. Being in close proximity was enough most of the time. I noted that she had

carried her purse in her hand and a book in the other so we wouldn't be able to hold hands between classes.

I'd been caught off-guard when we did the half-kiss-on-the-cheek thing as we went our separate ways.

If I hadn't known better, I'd think there was a bit of a spark there.

I sighed as I pulled into the parking garage. Sure enough, Lois was nowhere to be seen, though the Jeep was several spots further in. A glance at the time tag they gave when you pulled in to the garage said I'd been right — ten minutes earlier. I still didn't really understand why they checked all the cars in and made us put the receipt in the windows but I thought it had something to do with a bomb threat made against the Planet by 'the Boss' several years earlier. No matter what they'd done, no one had gotten any farther than that in the investigation, but security had gotten a bit tighter afterwards.

I shrugged and headed in to deliver the mail. Maybe I'd catch dinner with Jimmy in a bit.

December 2004

I found my pillow and blanket on the couch again that night and the night after that and the night after that.

I had no idea if Lois had been eating a lot or what. I hadn't seen her much at all since Monday morning. It was now Thursday and we'd made plans to have lunch before our interviews with Perry White.

Of course, I had hardly talked to her at all since then.

"Are we going together today?"

I glanced up to see her coming out of the bathroom, fixing her second earring in her ear. She was dressed more professionally than usual, because of the interview, I was sure.

"What time do you get off?"

"Seven."

I shrugged. "That's fine. I get off at six-thirty, but... Are we still having lunch today?"

It was her turn to shrug. "If you want to." She headed into Christopher's room and gave him hugs and kisses before passing him off to me.

He giggled as I blew on his stomach and we headed down towards the kitchen. I was flying him through the library and into the dining room before zooming into the kitchen.

"You look nice, Princess," Sam said, as he poured himself some cereal. He'd come home the day before and wouldn't be going back to work for a while. He was supposed to be taking it easy.

"Thanks, Daddy. We both have our internship interviews today."

He nodded. "Good luck, both of you."

"Thanks, Sam," I told him as I put Christopher in his high chair. "Jessica's running a few minutes late — I think she hit her alarm on accident this morning."

He waved us off. "I got 'im."

I pulled a bottle out of the cabinet, filling it with milk before pouring some Cheerios on his tray. "Thanks."

"No problem. Aren't you two eating? And don't worry, I'll let Jessica or Vicki or someone get him out of his high chair."

Lois grabbed a Pop Tart package out of the pantry and the Thermos full of coffee she'd prepared. "I'm good."

If that was all she was eating, then maybe she wasn't pregnant after all.

After saying our good-byes, we headed for school.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised when she pulled through the Chick-fil-A drive through and ordered a bacon, egg and cheese bagel and a chicken biscuit for herself and an order of Chick-n-minis for me.

The large water for herself caught me off-guard, until I realized that if she thought she was pregnant, she was probably

cutting back on her caffeine.

I didn't say anything but continued to wonder as we headed for campus.

~~~~~

Lois

I was surprised Clark didn't comment on my appetite.

I was pregnant.

I knew I was.

I didn't know how soon I'd be able to take a pregnancy test, but I'd eaten everything in sight for three days.

The morning flew by and it wasn't long before we met back at the Jeep to head to lunch before heading to work.

We ended up at Callard's, which was nice.

Clark even treated.

Usually we split the bill or took turns.

And it was my turn.

But he treated anyway.

I tried to keep the order down, but I was still hungry when it was all gone. I'd have to grab something out of vending machines after my interview.

I glanced at my watch.

"Clark, we've got to hurry," I said, standing up and grabbing my purse as he put his debit card back in his wallet. "I'm going to be late."

I had ten minutes to get there. The drive was only about five minutes, but by the time we parked and everything...

"I'll drive and let you off at the door," he told me, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

We hurried to the parking lot and eight minutes later, I was sitting outside Perry White's office waiting for him to finish with whoever he was talking to.

Serena sat down beside me. "Nervous?"

I nodded.

"Don't be. You're good enough for this internship. Believe that and you'll be fine."

"Thanks." I wiped my hands on my skirt. "You about ready for the wedding?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm ready for the *honeymoon*."

Given my recent experience, I wasn't sure I blamed her.

"If you ever know anyone looking for a wedding planner, tell them to steer clear of Beverly Lipman," she told me with a sigh. "She's still trying to insist on doves."

I winced on her behalf. "Sorry."

"At this point, I'd fly off to Vegas. Billy would agree in a second."

The door on the other side of me opened. "We'll let you know," Perry told the young man as he shook his hand.

I didn't think I was supposed to see him roll his eyes as he turned. "Lois Kent?"

I stood up. "Yes, sir."

"Good luck," Serena said in a stage whisper as she stood and headed for her desk.

"Judd!" Perry said sternly. "Just because you're getting married in a couple weeks doesn't mean you get to slack off!"

Serena rolled her eyes. "Of course not, Perry. It's in your inbox."

"Right," he mumbled gruffly. "Well, get me something new then."

"On it. Billy's on his way back with something on the city council."

"See to it I get a story." He sighed and turned back to me.

"Come on in. I've seen you around, haven't I?"

"Yes, sir," I said, sitting in the seat indicated. "I work in clerical services right now."

"Why are you in clerical services?"

I shrugged. "I needed a job and I'd rather work in clerical services at the Daily Planet than be an entry level reporter just

about anywhere else.”

He chuckled. “I started in the mail room myself.”

I smiled. “That’s where my husband’s at right now. He’s got an appointment later this afternoon.”

“Clark Kent?”

I nodded.

His brow furrowed. “Clark and Lois Kent... Those names are familiar...”

I tried not to let the panic show on my face. “Well, sir, we’ve worked here for a while now. I work with Billy and Serena pretty regularly and Jimmy Olsen and I are practically related. You’ve probably heard of my father, too. Dr. Sam Lane.”

Anything to distract him from the possibility of remembering the Latislan story.

His eyebrow went up. “Sam Lane is your father?”

I nodded again. “Yes, sir.”

“I remember the Adoption Option fundraiser not too long ago. Jimmy’s told me a lot about him and his sort-of-adopted sister, but I didn’t make the connection.”

We chatted for a while longer and he walked me to the door. “We’ll be in touch, Mrs. Kent,” he said with a smile — much different than the one he’d given the guy before me.

“You know where to find me,” I told him, smiling back.

He chuckled as he turned to the young lady sitting in the chair near his office. “Linda King?”

I almost stopped in my tracks, but I managed to keep going, not stopping until I was standing by Billy’s desk. I heard the door shut behind me before I turned to look.

“How many internships are there again?” I asked him, sitting in the chair by his desk.

Billy smiled. “Six, but don’t worry. I’m sure you and Clark are shoo-ins.”

“I’m not *too* worried about that,” I told him. “I gave him an article Clark and I wrote on some football players who don’t have to take their own finals. I made sure he knew we’d worked on it together, but I think we’ll be fine. It’s the other four spots I worry about.” I inclined my head towards the office. “The girl in there? She was Lana’s roommate our first semester in college. She and I go way back to preschool and it’s not pretty.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered. “Are there any donuts left?”

Billy laughed as Serena joined us. “I’ll grab you one.”

“Two,” I called after him.

I could hear his chuckle and noticed Clark get off the elevator. He was greeted first by Cat Grant — Cat’s Corner. She was barely dressed as usual. My eyes narrowed slightly as they chatted amiably.

“He only has eyes for you, you know,” Serena said quietly.

I sighed. “I know.”

I thought I knew.

For now at least.

Billy set two donuts on the desk in front of me. Clark headed our way and I could see that he noticed them.

Before he reached us, I heard the door behind me open.

“We’ll be in touch,” I heard and I closed my eyes, praying that by ‘being in touch’ it was to reject Linda. “Clark Kent?”

“That’s me,” Clark said, walking past us.

“Good luck,” the three of us called after him as he shook hands with the Editor-in-Chief.

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Part 94

Clark

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I shook Perry White’s hand again as I headed out the door.

“We’ll be in touch,” he said with a smile.

I felt good about the interview. I’d given him a sidebar to the

story Lois had brought. We’d done the research together and worked on both stories together, but the main article was more her and the sidebar was more me. They complemented each other nicely though and he said he’d let us know if he wanted to use them.

Lois was in the conference room with Billy, Serena and Jimmy. I poked my head in.

“How’d it go?” Jimmy asked first.

I shrugged. “Fine, I think.”

“He usually makes the calls before Christmas,” Serena said, helpfully.

Lois groaned. “That long?”

Everyone else laughed. “It’s only a couple weeks,” Billy pointed out.

“Still...”

The other door opened. “Hey, I’m not running a social club here, you know,” Mr. White said.

“Lois is helping us, Perry,” Serena said, pointing to the stack of papers on the table.

“And I don’t have to be back downstairs for ten more minutes,” I interjected.

He glared at all of us before coming all the way in the room. “Come on in, Kent, and have a seat.”

I glanced at Lois before doing as I was instructed. I sat on the other side of Jimmy from her.

“I glanced over those articles you two handed in,” he said, taking the seat at the head of the table. “What’s your gut feeling? Is this as far as it goes or is there more to it?”

“There’s more to it, Mr. White,” Lois said without hesitation. “I’d bet on it.”

He nodded. “That was my feeling, too. I’m running both of those pieces — after you polish them up a bit, email me a copy this afternoon — and Billy, Serena, I want you two to follow-up on it. They’re going to be run on an inside page, they probably won’t garner too much attention, but you’ll work with these two on the follow-up. Your internships start early this year and for now, you’re assigned to the two of them.” He looked at Billy and Serena. “Get with Tony and Rehalia and work out schedules, would you?”

“On it, Chief,” they said in unison.

“Thank you, Mr. White,” I said earnestly.

He rolled his eyes. “It’s Chief or Perry, son.”

“Yes, Chief,” I said with a grin.

“Who else are you going to offer internships to, Perry?” Serena asked.

I was sure Lois had mentioned her — adversarial — relationship with Linda King to Serena.

“Ah, you know I can’t tell you that,” Perry told her. “But there’s only two spots per school and you know that, too. Met U’s spots were taken by these two, so two from New Troy State and University of New Troy will finish us off. And I haven’t completely made up my mind about who’s coming from those schools, but no one else brought me news I can use. And you know the only thing I value as much as experience and...”

“...that’s initiative,” Billy, Serena and Jimmy finished for him.

He chuckled. “You guys didn’t put them up to those articles, did you?”

They shook their heads.

“It was all them, Chief,” Billy added.

“Good. Now get to work.” He stood and headed back to his office.

We *had* asked them if taking something in with us would be appropriate or presumptuous and they’d assured us that Perry would love it if we brought him something even half-decent.

“You know what that means?” Lois looked at me with a grin — the first I’d seen on her face since after the last time we’d...

“No Linda King?” I said, pushing the thought from my head.

“No Linda King,” she confirmed.

I reached behind Jimmy and over to her chair, squeezing her shoulder lightly. “Good job, Lois.”

“You, too,” she replied with another small smile.

“You heard the man,” Jimmy said with a roll of his eyes. “We better get to work and we better find out if you’re here with us for the rest of the day or not, Clark.”

He had a point and I picked up the phone to call my boss.

In some ways, it felt like the first day of the rest of our lives.

~~~~~  
Lois

I stared at the stick on the counter.

I knew it was really too early, but if I was pregnant with a half-Kryptonian, who knew how fast it would show up?

If this one came out negative, it could still be positive in a few days.

I glanced at my watch.

Time’s up.

I headed towards the counter, my heart in my throat.

Two lines.

There were two lines.

I closed my eyes as it started to sink in.

“I’m pregnant,” I whispered.

How was I going to tell Clark?

I was pretty sure he suspected already — just as I had — but how was I going to confirm it?

Things had been a bit better since we’d been offered the internships three days earlier, but he was still sleeping on the couch.

I sighed. If I was going to have his baby, I should probably let him back in the bed.

But that didn’t mean I was going to let him anywhere near me.

I stuck the stick in the baggie I’d brought up from the kitchen just in case, before hiding it in one of the drawers on my side of the vanity.

I headed out into our room, lit only by the moon outside the window.

“What’re you doing up?” Clark asked sleepily from the couch. “Everything okay?”

It was the middle of the night after all...

“Fine,” I told him quietly. I sighed. “You can move back to the bed, if you want,” I told him. I sat down, intentionally moving a pillow to the middle of the bed as I slipped under the covers.

He stood up and I tried not to stare at his bronzed chest. “Thanks.”

I rolled so I was facing away from him, but I felt the bed depress and the covers shift as he settled in.

“Good night,” he said after a long minute.

“I’m pregnant,” I replied, before I could stop myself.

There was a long silence. “I wondered,” he finally told me.

“I just took a test and it came back positive. As hungry as I’ve been this week...”

“I noticed.”

“If it’s anything like last time, it’ll slack off soon and then I’ll get to puke my guts out regularly.”

There was another long pause. “I hope you don’t get sick this time,” he said softly. “You were miserable and I wouldn’t want you to have to go through that again.”

I shrugged, knowing he couldn’t see me. “We’ll have to wait and see, I guess.”

“I guess so. Are we telling people yet?”

“Your mom and dad will be *thrilled*,” I told him with a roll of my eyes.

“Yeah, they will be.” He seemed to be thinking for a minute.

“Can we wait and tell everyone at Christmas? They’d think that

was a cool Christmas present.”

“Sure.” Another thought occurred to me. “Hey, Serena asked if I wanted to go to a lecture with her tomorrow night. Would you mind to keep Christopher?”

“Of course not. What’s the lecture?”

“The Weaker Sex: Fact or Fiction. She’s speaking to a women’s group.”

“Have fun.”

“I will,” I told him. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

I closed my eyes, but it was a long while before sleep actually came.

~~~~~  
Clark

Lois’ even breathing told me she was asleep and I rolled onto my back. I laced my fingers behind my head and stared through the ceiling at the stars.

Pregnant.

My wife was pregnant.

I was going to be a father again and, this time, I knew from the start that I was the father of her baby.

After the week Lois had had, I was even more sure that Christopher was my biological son.

And that meant that I *had* had sex with Lois at the cabin.

I’d lost my virginity — or given it or whatever — to Lois over two years earlier.

Of course, she’d been a virgin, too, at that point.

Maybe it was better we didn’t really remember it. I couldn’t imagine that it had been as good as earlier this week had been and I still didn’t remember enough of it to make a real comparison.

She’d let me back in bed. I wasn’t quite sure what that meant, though it was quite clear that she didn’t want me anywhere near her. I thought about trying to hear the baby’s heartbeat, but I figured it was too early for that, even with a half-Kryptonian baby.

I sighed and finally allowed sleep to claim me.

Lois and Christopher were already downstairs by the time I was ready for school the next morning.

“Morning,” I said to the room in general.

“Morning,” Sam and Lois replied. Christopher was too busy smashing pancakes into his mouth to make any response as I kissed him on the head.

“Pancakes?” I asked. Usually only I made that kind of breakfast.

Lois shrugged. “I was hungry and they were frozen.”

“Ah,” I said. “Want some eggs or bacon?” I asked her, opening the fridge to pull them out.

She looked at the clock. “Sure. I’ve got time.”

Sam looked at her. “Are you okay, Pumpkin? You’ve been eating an awful lot this week. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

She looked at me and I looked at her.

“What?” Sam asked.

I shrugged. “Up to you,” I said quietly as I passed her.

She sighed. “I’m pregnant, Daddy. Even though I didn’t know I was pregnant until much later, this is how it was with Christopher, too. That week at the cabin, I ate nearly everything in sight.”

Sam frowned. “That’s awfully fast to have your appetite affected.”

She shrugged. “Maybe, but that’s the way it was last time, too. I don’t remember how long it lasted, but not too long. I just hope I don’t get sick this time.”

“I hope you don’t either,” I said, standing next to her, one hand resting on her neck and massaging it lightly.

“That feels nice,” she said, her head falling forward to give me better access.

I continued for a minute, then turned back to the eggs and bacon I had going on the stove.

“We’re not telling everyone else until Christmas, though,” she continued. “Clark thought his parents would think that’s a cool Christmas present.”

He nodded as I dished food up for me and Lois. I gave Christopher a bit of my scrambled eggs.

“They won’t hear from me,” Sam promised. “But I doubt I’ll be able to go to Smallville like we planned. I’ve been meaning to mention that to you.”

Lois nodded. “We’ll figure something out.” She looked at the clock again. “Now we’ve got to hurry.” She started eating more quickly and a few minutes later we were headed towards the door.

~~~~~

Lois

Daddy gave me a big hug before we left. “Congratulations, Princess,” he whispered.

“Thanks, Daddy.”

A minute later, I was in the Jeep and Clark was in his truck behind me. We had different work schedules so we took different vehicles. We were spending two hours working with Billy and Serena then I had a four hour shift while Clark had a seven hour one.

We were finding that the football test thing went a bit higher but not all the way to the top. TAs were being pressured into either taking or allowing another student to take the finals for the players. The coaches and at least some of the professors seemed to be aware of what was going on and the Athletic Director was a maybe. We didn’t think it went any higher than that.

Our articles ran in the next Sunday paper. They were buried in the middle of the Sports section and had been edited down some, but they were there.

“I think I’m going to frame these,” I said to no one in particular. Both of our names were on both articles.

“I need to go get a few more copies,” Clark said, coming into the kitchen. “My folks’ll want to see it.”

I grabbed another handful of popcorn out of the bowl, munching on it before I replied. “They’ll be proud of you.”

“They’re proud of both of us,” he corrected. “I told them it was coming.” There was a long, though not entirely uncomfortable silence. “How’re you feeling?”

I shrugged. “Fine. Still hungry.” I grabbed another handful of popcorn.

“I see that,” he said, a touch of amusement in his voice.

I glared at him.

We needed to talk. I knew that. Things were a bit better since the interviews with Perry, but we needed to figure some things out about our relationship.

Clark had been attentive when we were in front of others who knew I was pregnant and pretty normal in front of other people, but we still weren’t really speaking much in private. It wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been before our last anniversary — or even between Pop Pop’s funeral and Daddy’s heart attack — but it still wasn’t *good*.

I sighed and folded the paper carefully. I couldn’t deal with another pregnancy like the last one. Physically, I wouldn’t have much choice, but relationally...

That was a different story.

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Part 95

Clark

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“Lana,” I said, surprised to see her. “How are you?” She shrugged. “Fine. How’s the *wife*?” she asked sarcastically.

I hesitated slightly before saying, “Fine.”

I had to tell her. But could I tell her how much I still missed her sometimes? How I still dreamed about her more than I should?

Should I?

That those dreams had stopped completely after I made love to my wife a few weeks earlier? That I’d found myself dreaming of Lois from time to time?

She interrupted my thoughts as she spoke, but she didn’t look at me. “Are you going to Smallville for Christmas?”

I shrugged. “We’re not sure yet. We were supposed to but Sam had a heart attack a couple weeks ago. He was supposed to go with us but now... I think my parents may come here instead.”

“Is he okay?”

I knew she didn’t really care, but was just asking to be polite. “He’s going to be fine, but isn’t going to be able to travel for a while.”

“Ah.”

I had to tell her. I knew Mom wouldn’t blab the news all over Smallville until we told her it was okay to tell people, but I also knew that I couldn’t let Lana hear through the grapevine and the grapevine on campus would probably start before too long.

“Well, I’ll see you around.” She turned to walk away.

“Lana, wait.”

She turned back, expectant. I couldn’t look her in the face, but stared at the ground instead, my thumbs hooked through the straps of my backpack. I didn’t speak for a long time, too long apparently.

“What is it, Clark?” she asked, getting irritated. “I have to meet someone.”

“Are you happy, Lana?”

That wasn’t what I meant to say, but it was eerily reminiscent of the last real conversation we’d had.

“I’m fine.”

“I mean it. Are you happy?”

She moved closer to me, her voice lowered. “No, I’m not happy. The man I still love is married to another woman, and I haven’t talked to him in months. I have no idea if he still loves me or not and whether or not there’s still a chance that we’ll be together again someday, even though he told me once that his marriage was temporary, a sham. We *should* have been married for a year and a half now, and instead, he’s been married almost two years, has a baby with this other woman that he swears isn’t his, but everybody thinks it is. I was supposed to have another man’s baby when I sought comfort in the arms of a friend after he ran out on me, but no. I lost my baby and the one man who always said he’d always be there for me, who had always been there for me, was nowhere to be found.”

“I’m sorry about that. My heart broke for you when I heard.” That was the truth.

“You should have been there to help me through it,” she hissed. “No, it shouldn’t have happened in the first place because you should have been the only one to be with me like that. Ever. And I should have been the only one you’d ever be with. Even though you told me that you weren’t going to have sex with her.” She moved a bit closer still. “Do you still love me, Clark?”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t answer that. “I miss you,” I said finally.

“That’s not the same thing.”

“I can’t talk to you about that, Lana. I’m married. What I felt for you or still feel for you doesn’t — can’t — matter right now.”

“Have you ever made love to her?” she asked quietly.

I still didn’t look at her.

“You have, haven’t you?” she said after a minute and I could hear the tears in her voice. “Was it a one-time thing because you were both drunk or something or did you decide I wasn’t worth waiting for after all? Was it payback because I didn’t wait for you?”

I still didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say; how much I could — or should — tell her without betraying Lois. I'd already betrayed her too much as it was.

"Okay — you can't — or won't — say. I get that, but don't expect me to take you back with open arms and no discussion of your *marriage* whenever it is you're finally free of her. And don't expect me to play step-mommy to a son that isn't even yours."

"I told you I lied about that." I didn't look at her as I spoke.

"The more I thought about it, the more I didn't believe what you said in Illinois. And, God help me, I still want to have your children, but I won't do that." The tears were flowing freely.

"She's pregnant," I blurted out.

"What?" she whispered, her hands clutching her stomach as though I'd punched her there. "She's pregnant?"

I nodded.

"Was this a planned thing? Did you mean to get her pregnant? Or did she get pregnant on purpose to try to keep you with an actual child of your own?"

"It wasn't like that..." My voice trailed off. "It just sort of happened."

"I don't want to know." Her voice was flat.

"I'm not going to tell you any more than that," I told her honestly.

"I have to go," she said abruptly. "Tell Lois congratulations for me. She finally got what she always wanted."

"What're you talking about?"

She didn't say anything but turned to walk away and this time I didn't stop her.

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Lois

I was glad the overwhelming hunger had passed but the nausea hadn't started yet.

I was glad that Christopher was sleeping, Daddy was at a check-up and I'd told Jessica to take the rest of the afternoon off.

I was glad Vicki was nowhere to be seen.

I grabbed the Rocky Road ice cream out of the freezer then shoved it back in, pulling the chocolate out instead. I contemplated eating right out of the carton, but decided instead that I wanted a sundae. I scooped some into a dish, sliced some bananas onto it, slathered it in chocolate sauce, whipped cream and nuts before sticking a couple of cherries on top. I stuck the carton back in the freezer before grabbing a spoon and the baby monitor and heading to a chair near the big picture window in the living room.

I stared over the snow covered landscape. On nice days, I could see horses out in one of the pastures, but today was too cold for that.

So why was I eating ice cream?

Because I'd seen Clark and Lana together.

At least they weren't making out like the last time I'd seen them.

Would he tell me about it this time?

The door opened behind me, but I didn't turn around as I heard Clark walking through the entry.

"Hey," he said quietly as he sat in one of the other chairs.

I raised my spoon in salute.

"What's wrong?"

"I wanted ice cream."

"Still starving, huh?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Was this what it was like last time?" he asked quietly.

I shrugged again. "I don't really remember. I know I was the second week or so — at the cabin — but I don't really remember after that. I didn't know I was pregnant for another couple months," I reminded him. "Why would I have kept track of my eating habits?"

I saw him nod out of the corner of my eye. "Are you happy

about this?" he asked as he sat back and propped his foot up on the small table in front of him.

"I'm not *unhappy* about it," I said honestly. I'd be a lot happier if my husband loved me, I thought glumly. "You?"

"I've always wanted to be a dad," he said. "And I think of Christopher as my son in every way that matters, but..." He shrugged. "I never want him to think that I don't love him or I love this baby more or anything like that, but I think it'll be really cool to see a baby growing *knowing* that he or she is my son or daughter."

"You only have to be Christopher's dad for three and a half more years," I told him trying desperately to control the bitterness I was afraid would seep through. Unless, of course, Christopher started floating around the house and then we *knew* Clark was his dad. "And I'm sorry I've managed to complicate your life even more by not thinking about birth control that night." I thought about taking another bite of ice cream, but decided to just bite the bullet instead. "I'm sure Lana's going to be ecstatic to have a *real* step-kid running around." I took a big bite, purposefully giving myself a brain freeze so I could use that to write off my tears.

He didn't say anything for a long time. "I saw her today," he finally said. "Ran into her after one of my classes."

"That's nice," I said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "How is she?"

He shrugged. "We didn't talk long. She said congratulations though."

He'd told her?! We hadn't told his parents yet! The only reason we'd told my dad was because he'd commented on how much I was eating.

"So when are you going to Smallville?"

"Why am I going to Smallville?"

"Wouldn't want your parents to hear about their new grandbaby from Laura Lang, now would we?"

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Clark

I groaned.

"Guess you didn't think about that before you told her, did you?" Her voice was soft, with a hint of accusation.

"No, I didn't," I replied honestly. "I just knew I didn't want her to hear about it through the grapevine."

She made a shooing motion with her spoon. "You better hurry then. You know how the Smallville grapevine works. There's no way the secret will keep until Christmas like originally planned."

"You're right." She was. How could I have messed this up?

"You better get going. No matter how fast you can fly, good gossip moves faster. And the love of Lana Lang's life getting his wife pregnant a year to the day after she lost her baby is pretty good gossip." She took another bite of her ice cream but still didn't look at me.

I didn't understand women.

That's all there was to it.

Or maybe she was having some kind of hormonal mood swing or something.

Something was definitely bothering her, but I hadn't a clue what it was. I'd told her I'd seen Lana. I didn't try to hide that from her like I had before. We were having a baby...

Was that it?

Did she just really not want to have my baby?

Didn't want to be pregnant again? This time with my child? When she didn't love me?

When she found out she was pregnant the first time, she'd said something about one day wanting to have a baby where it had been done 'right'. Met a guy, fell in love, married him, then had a lot of fun making a baby together.

And now, she was pregnant again. She'd met the guy, married

him but... I had to admit that making this baby had been pretty incredible — at least for me and I thought for her — but I knew that wasn't what she'd had in mind when she said it.

And then what she said sunk in. "I didn't realize that was today," I said quietly.

"Well, it was."

I was silent for a minute before I sighed and stood up. "I'm going to go talk to my folks. I'll try to nail them down on the plans for Christmas, too. Is there any chance your dad will still want to go there or should we just plan on it here?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't think he can. You could always go home for Christmas without me and Dad."

"I could," I said slowly. "But I know my parents would want to see Christopher."

"So take him with you. Dad and I will spend a quiet Christmas here."

"You don't want to be with Christopher on Christmas?" I asked her, astounded.

"Of course I do," she shot back. "But I know your parents have the farm to deal with and may not be able to come — not without you flying them back and forth and raising all kinds of suspicions when they're only here for twelve hours or something — and so I was floating that as an *option*. We could do Christmas here on Christmas Eve with Christopher and you could fly him there for a few days Christmas Eve night."

"I'll keep that in mind if my parents can't come for some reason, but if Christopher and I are going, why can't you go with us then?"

"I don't want to leave Daddy alone and I'm not sure I'm up for the trip." She put another spoonful in her mouth.

"I'll talk to them and see what they say."

"And there's a legitimate reason for us to spend Christmas apart this year, with Dad and all, so it would give us a few days where we wouldn't have to pretend we're living the greatest love story since Ricky and Lucy. And we could always just say that we exchanged gifts in private and not have to worry about getting each other something everyone else will think is deep and meaningful or whatever like we did last year."

She had a point and being free of the pressures to pretend everything was normal for a few days might be nice. Things were much better this year than they had been the year before, but not nearly as good as they had been as recently as a couple of months earlier.

I sighed. We *did* have a legitimate reason this time. And Christopher and I already had tickets to Smallville that Sam had bought months ago.

"Would you be okay with me being there without you?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" she snapped.

Why was she snapping at me? "Because it's very possible I'll run into Lana while I'm there," I told her honestly.

"As long as you don't get her pregnant, too, I don't really care."

Part 96

Lois

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I didn't.

I didn't care if he saw Lana or even if he went for a literal roll in the hay with her as long as he didn't get her pregnant and put my son's life in danger.

I didn't.

"I've never had sex with her, Lois. And I don't plan on starting anytime soon."

"That's good to know," I muttered as I took a bite of chocolate soup.

"I promise you that."

"Uh huh."

"Do you not believe me?" he asked me sitting back down.

"Let's just say that, in my admittedly very limited experience, you certainly didn't seem inexperienced a few weeks ago." It was true. It had exceeded every expectation I'd ever had about what the first time I'd remember would be like. And then some.

"I understood the theory, even if I had no practical knowledge until then. And," he continued, "in *my* admittedly very limited experience, you didn't exactly seem all that inexperienced either."

"Well, I do have a son. I've obviously had sex before." I couldn't tell him why I'd done the things I'd done — because I loved him and if that was the only opportunity to be with him like that, then I was going to make the most of it. No matter how hard I'd tried to protect my heart from falling head over heels in love with him, I had.

I loved him.

"You know what I mean. You don't even remember it and it's not like you had lots of experience before that."

"By choice," I reminded him.

"I know that, but still."

"Regardless, you certainly didn't seem like a virgin that night." Something else that had come flooding to me after our night together. I'd taken that from him, too.

Unless, of course, Christopher actually was his son.

He shrugged. "Well, as far as I knew, I was." I could see him grinning as I set my bowl on a table. "I guess I'm just naturally good."

I didn't respond.

"Maybe it's part of being Kryptonian," he continued. "Maybe we're just born with an innate sense of how to... do that."

"Are you born with that tattoo, too?" I asked, surprising both of us.

"The one on my hip?"

"No, the one on your face, Einstein. What do you think?"

Clark laughed suddenly.

I glared at him. "What?"

"Do you know when the last time you called me 'Einstein' was?"

I shrugged. "Not a clue."

"It's been a while."

"Guess you haven't been stirring up my emotions then." He had, but I was suppressing them so deep...

"Guess not," he replied quietly.

"So the tattoo..." I prompted.

"I have no idea. My parents said I had it when they found me, but the weird thing is that it hasn't gotten... distorted or anything as I grew up."

"Maybe it's not a tattoo then. Maybe it's some sort of birthmark that grows with you."

"Well, it's the same symbol that's on my ship and that my parents wore on their clothes in the holograms."

"What holograms?" He'd never mentioned any holograms.

"There was this... globe that was in my ship and it shows holograms sometimes with messages from my birth parents."

"Ah." I didn't ask for any more information and it didn't seem he was going to offer any.

He — or maybe Martha — had mentioned more than once that there had been messages left with his ship, but he'd told me it was some sort of osmosis or something — he just knew things somehow. He'd never told me there were holograms or whatever. I wondered if he'd show them to Lana someday — he sure didn't seem to be in a hurry to show me.

My thoughts circled back to the tattoo. "Maybe it *is* a tattoo then but their technology made it so it grows with you. Part of some sort of naming ritual or something."

"Maybe." He shrugged. "I really have no idea."

"You better get going if you're going to get to your parents'

house before Laura gets a hold of them.”

“I’ll be back later,” he told me as he stood up to leave.

“Fine.”

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Clark

I was going to have to put on one of the best performances of my life.

If I acted anything less than ecstatic that Lois was pregnant, my parents would pick up on it. And I was happy about having a baby, but the circumstances... They left something to be desired.

That struck me as odd. It was odd. My wife was having my baby. How could those be bad circumstances?

I landed swiftly and silently in the farmyard and headed for the house. I listened as I did so, but the absence of any extra cars made me feel pretty sure that they were home alone.

I knocked on the door and opened it as I did. “Mom? Dad?”

“In here, honey,” Mom called.

I headed for the kitchen where her voice had come from to find myself engulfed in a big hug.

“This is a surprise,” she said with a big smile. “What’re you doing here?”

“Well, I’ve got some big news,” I started, but was interrupted by the phone.

“Oh, hang on.” She picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

I listened in and cringed when I heard Laura Lang on the line. I frantically tried to wave her off.

“Laura? Laura? Laura!” Mom gave an exasperated sigh as she couldn’t get a word in edgewise and rolled her eyes in my general direction. “I’m right in the middle of something. I’ll have to call you back later.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as she hung up over the protests on the other end of the line.

She sat down and gave me one of those looks. “Do we need to wait for your father and does this have anything to do with Lana?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I’d rather tell the two of you together, but I don’t *have* to and Lana’s sort of involved, but only kind of and not really.”

Stomping on the porch told us that Dad was on his way in. A minute later, the door opened.

“Clark! What’re you doing here?” He slapped me on the shoulder as he headed for the counter to get a cup of coffee.

“He’s getting ready to tell us. He has big news that sort of involves Lana, but not really, and he wants to tell us together.” Mom smiled sweetly but I remembered the last couple times I’d given them big news and didn’t blame her for being a bit apprehensive.

I sighed. “This wasn’t how I wanted to tell you. We’d planned on telling you at Christmas, but I ran into Lana today and I didn’t want her to hear through the grapevine and I didn’t even think about it getting back to you guys before we had a chance to tell you.”

“And that’s why you didn’t want me to talk to Laura?” Mom asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah. I’m sure she was about to give you an earful.” I bit my lip momentarily. “The date didn’t even register with me until Lois said something later.”

They looked at each other quizzically. “What’s the importance of today?” It was Dad this time.

I took a deep breath. “Last year today, was Lana’s accident. The day Lana lost her baby.”

There was a small ‘oh’ out of both of them.

“What does that have to do with the news you have to share?” Mom wanted to know.

I took another deep breath, almost glad that the memory of Lana’s loss could be used as an explanation for tempering my joy. Not that I would willingly wish that kind of pain on anyone,

much less Lana and Tim. “Lois is pregnant. We’re going to have a baby.”

Their jaws dropped before they started talking at once.

“Clark!” That was Dad.

“That’s great!” Mom.

“Are you excited?” Dad.

“Jonathan!” Mom spoke louder. “I think we should probably go one at a time.”

I laughed, trying to make it not sound forced. “Yes, we’re excited. We hadn’t planned on having another baby anytime soon, not with school and everything but... And I really hadn’t planned on telling Lana today, but when I ran into her...” I sighed. “She said something about the baby she and Tim lost and I thought it would be cruel to let her hear through the grapevine so I told her. The date didn’t even register with me. When I told Lois that I’d told her, she reminded me that Laura would probably be on the phone with you as soon as she hung up with Lana, so here I am.”

“How far along is she?” Mom asked.

“Um...” I shifted in my seat, trying not to look uncomfortable. I *shouldn’t* know the exact date of conception because it was the only time we’d been together like that. “I’m not sure. She’s due in early August though. Or she thinks she will be. We haven’t been to the doctor yet.”

“But you’re sure she’s pregnant,” Dad said.

I saw the glance between the two of them. They’d been hounding me for nearly two years about why Lois and I were married, but we weren’t lovers. If Lois was pregnant, that little hurdle was obviously a thing of the past.

Or something.

If Lois’ last pregnancy was any indication, we wouldn’t be expected to do those sorts of things for a long while. She’d likely be sick before too long and — while I wouldn’t wish that on her — at least that could be our reasoning, our rationale, for not continuing to be lovers for a while.

Or something.

I was also sure they’d expect me to take a lot better care of her this time around. And they were right to. I stifled a sigh.

They were still looking at me expectantly.

I nodded. “The test came back positive. And she’s got this *huge* appetite like she did last time. It’s starting to taper off a bit already and since she didn’t realize she was pregnant until later last time, she doesn’t remember exactly what the first few months were like.”

“Have you tried to...” Mom hooked her finger in her glasses. “...look yourself?”

I shook my head. “No. I have no idea what kind of effect that might have on the baby and I can’t hear the heartbeat yet. I could hear it not long after we got back from Europe last time, but I hadn’t tried before then either.”

“Okay, well, you won’t be able to tell us at Christmas, so you’ll have to get us something different for our present,” Mom said, with a grin. “When are you guys getting in Christmas Eve?”

I sighed. “That’s something else I need to talk to you about. Sam can’t travel until after the New Year.”

Dad frowned. “That does put a crimp in Christmas, doesn’t it?”

“Can you guys come to Metropolis again this year?” I asked.

Mom shook her head. “I don’t think so. I don’t know that we could find someone to watch the farm for us on such short notice. A lot of Smallville folks are going out of town this year, including the Irgis.”

“Well, Lois had a suggestion. I’m not crazy about it but...”

Technically that wasn’t true. Actually, I was looking forward to a few days where I didn’t have to pretend Lois was the love of my life and I was sure she was looking forward to the break, too, but I couldn’t tell them that.

“What’s that?”

“Christopher and I come here late Christmas Eve night as planned and stay for a few days. Lois will stay with her Dad in Metropolis. We’ve already got tickets lined up — we just won’t use all of them.”

“We still won’t get to see Lois though.”

“She’s not sure she’s going to be up to travelling anyway.”

“Well, if that’s the way it has to be...” Martha’s voice trailed off.

“We didn’t see another way that didn’t involve me flying you guys there for a few hours and the questions that would go with that. At least not without leaving Sam alone on Christmas and Lois really doesn’t want to do that.”

Jonathan frowned. “You flying us wouldn’t be a good plan.”

I glanced at the clock. “I better get going, but we wanted to let you know before you heard from somewhere else.”

“Why didn’t Lois come with you?”

“No one else was home with Christopher and he was asleep.”

Mom gave me a mock glare. “You better bring her out to see us soon.”

My brow furrowed. “Do you think it’s safe for me to fly her out while she’s pregnant?”

They shared another one of those looks. “Well, you might have to hold her a little closer than normal to make sure she stays in your aura,” Mom said, trying to hold back her laughter.

I rolled my eyes. Of course, I’d be holding her closer than I had before, wouldn’t I? At least they’d think that things were that much better or something.

We spoke for another minute and then I headed outside.

Dad followed, leaning up against the porch railing.

“I’m happy for you, son, and not just because you’re going to be a dad again.”

“You mean because I finally made love to my wife? I’m finally getting it right?” I asked, the bitterness seeping through.

“Something like that.” He stared over the field. “It was after Sam’s heart attack, wasn’t it?”

He startled me with that.

“I’ll take your silence as a ‘yes’.”

“What makes you say that?” I finally asked.

He shrugged. “You weren’t her lover at Thanksgiving. Things were rocky between you two and now she’s pregnant. My guess is that you turned to each other in grief and relief and all the other emotions that were running high that night.”

I sighed. “You’re right. That’s pretty much how it happened.”

“So are things better between you two now or was it some variation on a one night stand?”

“Does it matter? If it’s anything like last time she’s going to be really sick in a couple more weeks.”

“Yes, it matters,” Dad said forcefully. He started to say something else, but thought better of it.

We stared at the sky for a long few minutes.

“I better go,” I said. “I need to get back before I’m missed by anyone but Lois. She knows I’m here.”

He nodded and gave me a big hug. “Congratulations, son.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I headed down the stairs and rocketed into the sky.

Part 97

Lois

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I took my ice cream bowl and headed back to the kitchen. Part of me was looking forward to spending a nice Christmas with Daddy. It had been a couple years since it had been just the two of us. I would miss spending it with Christopher, but we’d have a Christmas together, even if wasn’t on Christmas Day. I’d get to see him open presents and all that. It wasn’t quite the same, but it would be close enough.

Until Pop Pop died, I’d looked forward to spending

Christmas with Clark, too.

Now I wasn’t sure how I felt about not spending Christmas with him.

Why couldn’t my life be easy?

Simple?

Meet a great guy — maybe even a guy like Clark — fall in love, get married, have a couple kids.

Instead I was married to a great guy, just like Clark, and completely in love with him, no matter how hard I tried to kid myself that I wasn’t; no matter how hard I tried to pretend I wasn’t, to protect my heart.

I debated another bowl of ice cream, but decided against it.

“Mom and Dad said congratulations,” Clark said without preamble as he walked back into the kitchen. “Mom said she’ll call you later, unless you call her first.”

I nodded. “I’ll call her in a bit.”

“They want you to come for Christmas, but understand if you want to stay here with your dad.”

I nodded again. “I want to come but...”

“Right.”

Was it horrible that I wanted to have Clark hold me? To be close to him? To kiss him again? To make love with him again?

To have him want those things with me?

Tears filled my eyes and I turned to head for the stairs.

“What is it?” Clark called after me.

“What is what?” I called back, not stopping.

“What’s wrong?”

I stopped, one hand on the banister. “What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“Because something is,” he said, right behind me this time. His hand rested on my shoulder.

“Nothing I want to talk about,” I told him honestly.

He sighed. “I thought we were past that.”

“We were,” I reminded him. “We’re not anymore.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that since Pop Pop died, things changed again and I don’t want to talk about it.” I started up the stairs.

“Lois, wait.”

I didn’t stop until I ran into a solid shape in front of me.

“That’s not fair,” I told him.

“Please talk to me,” he said softly.

“Fine. You want to talk?” I looked up at him, tears in my eyes.

He nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

“This isn’t how I saw having a family. Is that what you want to hear? The other night was good, that’s not what I mean, but I never thought I’d have two kids, married to a man who likes me but doesn’t love me and I’m still only twenty with my second baby on the way.” And I never thought I’d be completely in love with my husband when he didn’t love me back. But I didn’t say that. “And I’m quite certain this isn’t how you planned on having a family, and I’m certainly not who you planned on being the mother of two of your children.”

I brushed past him and headed towards our room.

I heard him sigh behind me, but he didn’t follow.

I lay on the bed and tried not to relive our night — nights — together. Instead, I cried myself to sleep. Quietly. And hoped he wouldn’t hear.

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Clark

I sighed as she headed towards our part of the house.

She was right.

This wasn’t how either of us had always imagined having a family.

How had life gotten so far out of hand?

“Is something wrong with Lois?” Sam asked as he headed towards me.

I shrugged. “She’s been emotional since she got pregnant again. Hormones, I guess. Worried about being pregnant while interning and all of that.” I didn’t know that those things were on her mind, but it wouldn’t surprise me if they were.

Sam nodded. “Well, whatever I can do…”

We headed down the stairs. “Is it all right with you if Christopher and I head to Smallville for Christmas as planned?”

“Of course,” he said, puzzled. “But what about Lois?”

“She’s planning on staying here with you. She doesn’t want you to be alone on Christmas.”

“Hmmm.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that noise.

We went into the kitchen, me sitting at the counter staring at my hands.

“I take it this wasn’t something you two planned?” Sam said as he pulled a pan of baked spaghetti out of the freezer and stuck it in the oven.

“No, it wasn’t. It caught us completely off-guard.” *That* was the understatement of the year. “We had put off any decisions about more kids or whatever until at least after college.” That was true enough, but we’d never talked about more kids together. Ever.

“Well, I’ll do what I can to make things easier for her, but I’d imagine that’s going to fall mostly to you,” he said, setting the oven timer.

“Probably. You didn’t see her when she was bad last time. It wasn’t pretty.”

“Well, hopefully, we can at least keep her out of the ER this time.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly, “that would be good.”

Would I treat her differently this time around? How? I’d brought her what foods she could eat and all that last time. She wouldn’t have wanted me holding her hair while she puked or anything like that and I couldn’t imagine that she’d want me to this time either.

If her back bothered her like it did last time… That I might be able to help with. If she’d let me close enough to touch her.

I heard Christopher start to stir. I checked on Lois. She was sleeping soundly. “I’m going to go check on Christopher,” I said suddenly, heading upstairs. “Hey, big man,” I said softly as I walked into his room. He squealed happily and held his arms up towards me. I picked him up and he immediately snuggled into my arms, his head on my shoulder.

“Mama?” he asked.

“Mama’s sleepin’,” I told him, checking his diaper.

“Mama s’leepin’?”

“Yep.” I changed him quickly. “Wanna go find Grandpa?”

“Anpa!” The little guy bounced up and down in my arms as we headed downstairs.

Sam was in the living room flipping through the channels. “I know I’m supposed to take it easy, but this is going to drive me crazy.”

I set Christopher down on the floor and he immediately toddled over to the drawer where his toys were kept. He pulled out a couple of dump trucks and smaller cars to put in them and… well, dump.

“Lois is sleeping,” I told Sam. “I hate to wake her up. I don’t think she’s been sleeping well.” In fact, I was pretty sure she wasn’t sleeping well. I didn’t tell him about the tear stained cheeks I’d noticed when I checked on her.

He nodded. “Well dinner won’t be ready for another hour. Are you taking Christopher with you to the wedding this weekend?”

Billy and Serena’s wedding was finally upon us — and them. They were more than ready, I knew that much.

“I don’t think so,” I told him. “It’s a pretty fancy shindig and I’m not sure a one-year-old and fancy shindigs mix — unless

they’re held directly below his room,” I finished with a grin.

Sam laughed. “He does look pretty cute in that tux, doesn’t he? But you’re right. He and I can hang out here Saturday night.”

“Sounds good to me.”

~~~~~

Lois

Black was appropriate for a fancy wedding, wasn’t it?

I sure hoped so, because that’s what I had that fit. I was already noticing that some of my regular clothes didn’t fit as well as they had a few weeks earlier.

“Lo-is,” Clark called.

“What?” I called back as I put on the necklace Clark had bought for me for Christmas the year before.

“I can’t get this tie straight.”

I sighed. He never could. “Just a minute.” I smoothed the dress over my not-quite-flat stomach and sighed again. It would have to do.

I padded out into our room and slipped into the heels I had waiting for me there before moving in front of an impatient Clark.

Two seconds later, his tie was straight.

“There,” I said. “All set.”

“Thanks,” he said looking in the mirror. “I can never remember. Am I supposed to button this thing?” He buttoned and then unbuttoned his coat.

“Only if you want to,” I told him, picking up the purse I’d left lying on the bed. “Double breasted is buttoned when you’re standing up and not when you’re sitting down. Single breasted usually isn’t, but if you’re more comfortable that way…”

He left it unbuttoned. “Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

His hand on the small of my back as we walked through the house sent a tingle through me. Was he aware of me like I was aware of him since we’d been together? Somehow, I doubted it.

“You look great, by the way,” he said as we headed down the stairs.

“Thanks,” I said, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice.

“What?”

“What what?” I asked, unsure what he meant.

“You sound surprised.”

I shrugged. “You don’t usually say stuff like that, that’s all.”

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “You’re a beautiful woman, Lois. You always are, no matter what you’re wearing. I know I’ve told you that before.”

I didn’t really look directly at him as he spoke and I shrugged again. “Well, yeah, you’ve said that before, but not often and I’m never sure if you really mean it or not or if it’s just something you say because you think you should and it just caught me a bit off-guard, that’s all.”

He gave me an odd look but didn’t say anything else as we headed towards the playroom where Christopher was playing with Daddy.

We said our good-byes and a few minutes later we were in the Jeep heading towards the country club where the wedding was being held. The valet took the keys from Clark and a minute later, my hand was slipped through the crook of his elbow.

Once inside, we mingled quietly with those we knew from the Planet or elsewhere. I noted that I wasn’t the only one wearing black. Before long, we took our seats and the wedding began.

We watched as Perry performed the ceremony — we’d been as shocked as anyone when we realized that he was officiating; it turned out that the minister they’d finally hired got a job as a comedian on a cruise ship or something — and though it probably wasn’t quite as conventional as Serena’s mom would have liked — not many conventional weddings are sprinkled with Elvis tales after all — it was beautiful and before we knew it,

they were kissing.

We waited until it was our turn to head through the receiving line, both of us giving Serena big, if careful so as not to mess up her dress or veil, hugs. I gave Billy a big hug and he and Clark did some guy handshake, shoulder slap, half hug thing.

Clark offered me his arm again as we headed towards another part of the club for the reception. We were seated with Jimmy and his date — a girl named Angela — and Perry and his wife, Alice, and Rehalia and her husband.

It wasn't too long before dinner was served and then we all watched as Serena and Billy shared their first dance.

"What song was your first dance to?" Rehalia asked me.

I glanced at Clark. "I don't remember, do you?"

He laughed. "Our *first* dance was 'Boot Scootin' Boogie' during the line dancing contest in Bremerton. We took first place." Everyone laughed. Even me. "But our first dance after we got married..." He thought for a minute. What was the first song we'd danced to? "I'm not sure what it was. I guess our first real dance after we got married was at the Kerths last year, wasn't it? I don't know what song it was, though."

I thought then nodded. "That sounds right."

"No dancing at the reception, huh?" Perry asked, his eyes twinkling.

Jimmy was studiously looking anywhere else to avoid being dragged into the conversation.

"No reception," I said suddenly. "We... eloped." Or something like that. "Very spur of the moment."

The band leader announced that it was now time for anyone who wanted to join the happy couple on the dance floor.

"I think that's our cue," Clark said with a grin, moving back from the table. "Would you like to dance?"

I nodded. "Of course."

And when I was in Clark's arms, I could pretend it was real. Maybe that it was our wedding and before long we'd head out to the limo or upstairs to the Honeymoon Suite or... I sighed as I moved into his arms, wishing I'd get the chance to take his tux off again, but very differently than I had the last time.

I sighed one more time, trying to ignore Clark's cheek against my temple, his breath playing with my hair.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing," I said. "Not really. Just wondering where — or when or even if — I'll get to have a real wedding."

"Why wouldn't you get to have a real wedding?"

"You really think I'll find someone who wants a divorcee with two kids?" I tried not to sound bitter. Tears sprang to my eyes. Dancing slowly with him like this only served to remind me what might have been if my life had been just a bit different.

"Don't ruin tonight," he said quietly. "Just enjoy right now and don't worry about the future."

"You asked," I reminded him.

"I did, but only because I could tell something was bothering you. Don't let it. Not tonight."

I nodded. "Fine. Not tonight."

We danced for a while longer before trading partners. By the time I made it back to Clark, I'd danced with Jimmy, Perry, Billy, Rehalia's husband — whose name I never did catch — as well as a couple other guys from work.

Clark was laughing as he and Billy traded dance partners so we were together again.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself," he said quietly, pulling me into his arms.

"I am," I responded as another song started. I recognized it. Garth Brooks. 'Unanswered Prayers'.

I tried not to dwell on the lyrics and how I wished that someday Clark would think something like that — how glad he was that his prayers hadn't been answered, that he was so grateful that his prayers to marry Lana hadn't been answered, that he and

I were still together and in love and...

Tears threatened again and I willed them back into the depths of my eyes.

I needed to live in the here and now.

Here.

In the arms of my husband.

Dancing the night away.

Pregnant with his baby.

Happy.

In love.

For now it had to be enough.

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Part 98

Clark

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I enjoyed dancing with Lois. Really. I did.

Why did she have to spoil a nice night by wondering if she'd ever get remarried?

Maybe because she assumed that I'd marry Lana the day after the divorce was final?

We hadn't really talked about what would happen after the five years was up — at least, not outside of random comments like those. I thought it was probably better that way — and I thought she probably felt the same.

I stifled a sigh of my own as 'Unanswered Prayers' started playing. I tried to ignore the lyrics. I fully acknowledged that the dream of me and Lana together was getting farther and farther away. And not just because of some arbitrary deadline set by a dictator.

The conversation I had with her a week earlier was still fairly fresh in my mind. She wasn't the person I used to know anymore — and I didn't think I was the same person either.

No, I knew I wasn't the same person I had been growing up — the same person I had been when I'd married Lois.

I was a father.

I was a husband — a better one on some days than I was on others.

I knew what it was like to make love to a beautiful woman.

All of those things combined to make me a different person than I had been two years ago as I tried to plan the perfect proposal for Lana.

So, I was different and Lana was different. Could we be different together? Could we work that way?

It wasn't like we'd been together and grown and changed to the point where we were different, but still together. Where the early foundation of our relationship was enough when we didn't have as much in common anymore.

Would what we'd had be enough for her to be willing to try again? To see if we could get back what we'd had — or something even better?

What if we couldn't?

Would that mean I wanted to try for a life with Lois?

That one day we'd be in Smallville and I'd see Lana and thank God that I'd ended up with Lois instead?

I wasn't sure I could see that happening, but...

I sighed as the song ended and Lois moved away from me.

"I think I'm ready to go home," she said, turning and heading towards our table to get her purse.

I followed her, my hand automatically finding its way to the small of her back and the skin exposed there, gently guiding her even though she didn't need me to in the slightest.

If she noticed the contact, she gave no indication. I thought about listening to her heart rate, but she'd been dancing — even if it was slow dancing — so her heartbeat would be slightly elevated anyway and that meant there was no real way to know and so I didn't listen in.

Before long, I was driving us back to the house, the trip

passing mostly in silence. “How’re your feet feeling?” I finally asked as we pulled up the drive.

She shrugged. “Same as they always do when I’ve been wearing heels all night.”

I nodded as I pulled up towards the house. “Do you want to walk through the house or...?”

She shrugged again. “I don’t care.”

I pulled up near the entrance to our side of the house, zipping to her side of the car. There was a little bit of ice on the ground still and I wanted to make sure she didn’t slip.

“I’m a grown woman, Clark,” she said, more than a bit frustrated as she half-yanked her arm away from me.

The movement caused her to slip and only quick movement on my part saved her from falling all together. I left my arm around her for support as we headed inside.

As soon as we were indoors, she pulled away from me. “I really don’t need your help walking. I wouldn’t have slipped out there if you hadn’t been trying to *help* me.”

“I just didn’t want you to fall,” I told her pragmatically.

“I wouldn’t have.” She punched her code in the outer door before yanking it open then heading into our room. She went straight to the bathroom. “I’m taking a bath. Do you want in first?”

“No, I’m good,” I told her as I took my overcoat off and threw it over the back of the couch. I heard the water start to fill the tub and sighed. Part of me thought about taking off and going to talk to my folks, but I wasn’t sure that was a good idea.

They wouldn’t understand the struggle I was having; the struggle whether to let the idea of a future with Lana go — like they’d told me to a long time ago without knowing all the details about my future with Lois — or to hang on to the dream I’d had since childhood, really.

Who could I go to?

The answer was no one — maybe Daniel or Jack, but that was about it, and it wasn’t like either one of them were a real option.

Jimmy was out.

So was Sam.

If only my brother had lived...

I sighed again.

And if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

~~~~~  
Lois

I sunk under the bubbles and let silent tears fall. I knew I shouldn’t get the water too hot so the bath would be short. And the jets were out. My first appointment with Kristi wasn’t for a couple more weeks, but I remembered those things from the last time.

If Clark offered me a foot rub, I wouldn’t turn it down.

It wasn’t long before the water was too cold to be comfortable.

A few minutes later, I was dressed in a nightgown and headed back into the bedroom. It was the first night I’d worn a nice gown since... that night and I wondered what — if any — reaction Clark would have.

The fire was roaring and the room was comfortably warm. That was nice as it had been a touch on the chilly side when we got in.

“Thank you,” I said, noticing that he was still wearing most of his tux.

Clark was sitting on the couch, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his knees.

“I don’t like where we’ve been the last few weeks,” he said without preamble, still staring into the fireplace.

“Your point?” I said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

He sat back and sighed. “I mean it, Lois. We still have three

and a half years before Navance isn’t a threat anymore and even if you weren’t pregnant again, we’re tied together for life through Christopher — whether we knew he was my son or not. I don’t like not getting along with you. Christopher will pick up on it now, too, now that he’s older — he already has been and, besides that, you’re pregnant. That means things could get rough for you anyway, and tension between us won’t help any.”

So was it that he wanted things to be better for us? Or that he wanted things to be better so Christopher wouldn’t notice and it wouldn’t adversely affect his second baby?

I sighed. “Fine. So what makes things better? Your family getting unmad at me for ruining your grandfather’s funeral? Because that’s when we started having problems again or whatever?”

“I don’t care what my family thinks,” he said quietly. “I’m still annoyed with them for treating you the way they did. They shouldn’t have and I’m sorry for that.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said, slipping into one of the chairs and pulling a blanket over me before he could notice what I was wearing.

“Still...”

“So, what exactly is it that you want?” I asked before he could go any further.

“I want to be friends again or still or whatever. I hate being uncomfortable around you and you *are* having my baby. We should at least be friends, shouldn’t we? Can’t we?”

I made myself ask something I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer to. “Would things have been different last time if you’d known I was pregnant with your baby instead of nameless, faceless frat party guy’s?” I didn’t look at him as I asked.

He sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Is this time going to be different?” I asked quietly.

“How do you want it to be?” he asked back. “Besides me actually being here more often, of course. I’m not planning on melting icebergs or exploring the Himalayas or anything this time.”

“That’s a start then, I guess.”

“But even after we moved in here... I was home more, but we weren’t good together at all.”

“No,” I answered slowly, “we weren’t.”

“I don’t want to go back there.”

“Me, either.” That was the God’s honest truth.

We both stared at the fire for long minutes.

“So what is it you want?” I asked again. “Besides not what we were before.”

“I want to be friends,” he said finally. “I want to be your friend and I want to help take care of you when you need it — foot rubs, back rubs, not sure about holding your hair while you puke or whatever, but whatever I can do to keep you out of the ER this time, middle of the night pickles and ice cream craving, make sure you don’t slip on the ice, whatever.”

“Because I’m having your baby?” I clarified. It wasn’t that he wanted to take care of me; it was that he wanted to take care of the mother of his child. That was something at least.

Wasn’t it?

He sighed. “I’d like to think things would have been different if I’d known — if I knew — Christopher was my son, but there’s no way to know that, is there?”

I shook my head. “No, there’s not.”

“So, yeah, I guess part of it is that you’re the mother of my baby — I should take care of you — shouldn’t I?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“And you’re my friend,” he continued softly. “That makes me want to help take care of you, too.”

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Clark

I did want to help take care of her this time around.

I'd like to think it wasn't solely because I knew she was having my baby this time, but, unfortunately, I had to admit that it was a possibility.

Or at least that it was possible that it was a large part of why I wanted to take better care of her this time.

I sighed before I stood up and started doing something I'd rarely done in front of her as I headed towards the bed.

I undressed.

It wasn't like I was trying to turn her on or anything, but at the same time, I wasn't getting naked either.

I took off the suspenders and cummerbund, tossing them to the side before unbuttoning my shirt. It followed the same path as the accessories before I headed into the closet to get a pair of sleep shorts.

"But I need you to talk to me," I said as I came back into the room, having toed off my shoes and tossed my socks in the hamper while I was in the closet.

I wasn't actually watching her, huddled under the blanket in the chair closest to the fire, but I could see her watching me out of the corner of my eye — out of the corner of her eye — as I took my pants off, tossing them in the pile of things that needed to go to the dry cleaners.

I pulled my shorts on over my boxers.

"What do you want me to say?" she finally asked.

"Whatever you're thinking, whatever you're feeling. Whatever you need from me," I told her honestly.

I thought I heard words in her sigh, but even I couldn't make them out. I thought it was something about need and love but I wasn't sure what it was. I glanced over at her, but she showed no signs of repeating it.

"What can I do? Right now?" I asked, remembering our conversation on our anniversary.

She breathed something else, but I didn't hear it either. Then she shrugged.

"Come here," I said suddenly, knowing what I might be able to do to help some at the moment.

"What?"

"Just come here," I said heading towards her and holding out my hand when I got close enough.

She sighed and then took it, the blanket falling away from her as she stood up.

I should have known she'd been wearing a nightgown, but I was still caught slightly off-guard and averted my eyes almost instantly. It wasn't really all that revealing — and it wasn't the same one she'd worn a couple weeks earlier either.

I let go of her hand as she folded up the blanket and set it on the chair. My hand found its way — again — to the small of her back and this time, gentle pressure urged her towards the bed.

"Lay down," I told her. "On your stomach."

I couldn't quite read the look she threw my way, but I pulled the covers down and she complied. I went into the bathroom and got her favorite lotion, squirting some into my hand and rubbing my palms together and then warming it up slightly before I picked one foot up and massaged it gently. I knew they had to be bothering her, even if she wouldn't admit it to me.

By the time I finished with both feet and her calves, I'd heard sighs of contentment and she was soon sound asleep.

I floated as I pulled the sheet, blanket and comforter up over her, all the way up to her shoulders. I floated over to my side of the bed and slid under the covers, hesitating slightly before moving closer to the middle of the bed.

Lois rolled onto her side, her nearly bare back towards me and she seemed to instinctively slide towards me, finding easily the spot where we fit nearly perfectly together.

I vacillated in my mind for a second before wrapping an arm around her, pulling her slightly closer to me before settling in to sleep with my wife curled up in the hollow my body created.

When I woke up the next morning, she was still there — or was it again? Had we separated during the night and somehow found our way back together? — and, I realized, I'd never had such a good night's sleep.

Part 99

Lois

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I woke up in Clark's arms.

Or at least, his arm.

Holding me to him.

I could feel the warm skin of his chest against my back.

I could feel the warmth radiating from his arm through the satin of my nightgown.

I didn't remember going to sleep like this, did I?

I thought back. No. The last thing I remembered was Clark using my favorite lotion to give me a foot and calf massage.

I remembered it feeling so nice and I must have fallen asleep.

So how I'd ended up in his arms — arm — was beyond me. Not that I was going to complain, of course.

I sighed as I realized nature was calling. Carefully, I tried to move from his embrace.

"It's okay," he said quietly. "I'm awake." He rolled away from me. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good. Thanks." I rolled until I was sitting on the edge of the bed. "And thanks for the massage — it felt great and my feet don't hurt at all this morning."

"You're welcome." He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "I meant what I said last night. I want to help take care of you when you need it. And even when you don't."

"Thanks." I sat there for another minute before making myself ask. "Is it because you want to take care of *me* or because I'm having your baby? Would you feel the same way if this time we knew, for whatever reason, that this wasn't your baby either?"

He sighed. "I don't know. I can't honestly answer that. I'd like to think things would be better this time regardless, because *we're* better this time."

I sighed. I probably shouldn't push it, but I didn't think I could help myself. "Yeah, we're better, but is that only because of Christopher? Or is it because you like me better and I like you better or whatever? You don't really *want* to be here any more than you did last time, do you? So is it just because I'm having *your* baby or would things be better this time if I'd been at another party and someone spiked my drink, but this time no one was there to rescue me?" I tried to keep my voice as neutral as possible.

He flopped onto his back, but I stayed where I was; sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor in front of me.

"I..." He stopped.

I felt him roll towards me and then his hand covered one of mine that I didn't realize was gripping the sheets.

"I've always liked you," he said quietly. "Two years ago, I didn't like myself much. I didn't like the situation at all, but it was never *you*. I do want to be here with you and Christopher."

"But you'd still *rather* be with Lana, wouldn't you?"

He gave an exasperated sigh. "What is it you want me to say?" He let go of my hand and I felt him move until he was sitting and leaning against the headboard.

"I want the truth," I told him as a random vision of Gene Hackman yelling 'you can't handle the truth' at Tom Cruise flashed through my mind. What was that about?

"Why is this so important to you? Isn't it enough that things are going to be different this time?"

No. It wasn't enough. It was good, but it wasn't enough. I wanted him to want to be here with *me*, not just with Christopher, but with *me*.

“No, it’s not,” I whispered and practically fled to the bathroom.

~~~~~  
Clark

I leaned my head back against the headboard.

I didn’t understand women. I didn’t understand *Lois*.

I’d told her the night before that I wanted things to be different. I wanted to help take care of her — however she needed me to.

So why was she pushing this?

Why wasn’t it enough that I wanted to take care of her?

Why was she pushing me to say that I wanted to be here with her and Christopher?

I *did* want to be here. I loved Christopher, very much, and I wanted to be as big a part of his life as I could be for as long as I could be.

What about *Lois*? Did I want to be here with her? Or was the attitude change *just* because I knew she was having my baby this time? Would I be the same way if something *had* happened to her at some party somewhere? Would I be upset that someone had done that to her?

Of course. I’d be mad; the guy would be lucky to survive if I ever got my hands on him, but I’d feel that way about anyone who did something like that to a friend of mine — I’d have been that way if I knew who it was that tried to do that to *Lois* at the frat party, but if something happened now...

Would I be incensed, infuriated, that someone had violated my *wife*?

I sighed. I didn’t think I’d be any more upset than I would have been for *Lois* two years earlier. I’d be upset, very upset, mad, outraged, whatever, but probably not much more than if it was... *Serena* or something.

Well, probably more than if it was *Serena* but probably not quite like *Dad* would be if someone did that kind of thing to *Mom*.

But being here with her and Christopher... I wanted to be here, I wanted to take care of her...

So why wasn’t that enough for her? That I cared about her and I wanted to take care of her? Why did it matter so much that it was different because it was my baby? *Was* it different because it was my baby? I’d be more upset than I would have been two years earlier if someone had done that to her, but I’d treat her better than I had two years earlier, wouldn’t I?

The conclusion I came to was a resounding yes. We weren’t where we were two years earlier.

Was part of my motivation or whatever that she was having my baby?

Probably.

Almost certainly, but at the same time would I treat her differently, would I want to take care of her any less, would I *actually* take care of her any less, if she wasn’t having my baby?

Want to? Maybe. Actually? I didn’t think so. I wasn’t sure what I’d be able to do for her, but things like back rubs and fulfilling cravings I’d have done either way.

Right?

I thought so.

Would it have been different if *Lana* and I had been married for a couple years and found out we were having a baby?

Probably.

But *Lois* and I were about as far from a conventional couple as we could possibly get, it was only natural that it would be different if I was with *Lana* — or whoever — and more conventional. Wasn’t it?

Did she want something more conventional?

Was that what she meant when she said it wasn’t enough?

And if so what did that mean?

I sighed and went to stand next to the bathroom door. I

knocked lightly. “*Lois*?”

No answer.

“Come on,” I said. “Open the door.”

“What else is there to say?” she finally called. “Things are going to be different this time. End of story.”

I sighed again. “Please. Talk to me?”

The door opened. “Things are going to be different. That’s great. I’m happy that we’re not going to be where we were last time I was pregnant, but that doesn’t mean I’m ecstatic that I’m having a second baby when I’m only twenty and my husband is still in love with someone else.”

I started to say something, but she stopped me.

“Does that mean I want you to be in love with *me*? That’s not what I said. I’m not unhappy about this baby, not at all, but this still isn’t how I figured I’d have a family and every day that we’re married, every baby I have, makes it that much harder — eventually — to have that dream. When our marriage ends, you go back to *Lana*, beg her to take you back, get married, have babies with her, see Christopher and this baby for a month during the summer and a couple weekends a month or whatever we work out depending on where you live. If I ever want a *real* family life, I have to get back out on the dating scene, find a guy willing to accept me and my baggage with relationships because — let’s face it — I’m likely to be a bit gun shy after the first year we had, two kids, potential threat from a psycho even if it’s officially over because he may never actually leave us alone. And that’s assuming, of course, that I end up with custody, because it’s very possible that Christopher and this baby will want to live with you and the *Corn Queen* anyway. *That’s* why it’s not enough that it’s *just* going to be better than it was.”

She hadn’t stopped to take a breath then shut the door in my face before I had a chance to respond.

~~~~~

*Lois*

It was getting to me again.

I knew that.

I’d reduced the amount of medication I was taking — with *Kristi*’s blessing, but when I told her I was pregnant again, she said it might get worse again as my hormones went back into flux.

I’d been doing so well, things were better in my life and I was able to deal with it all and cope so much better than I had been right after Christopher was born. She’d been urging me to see a therapist — a *Dr. Friskin* that she’d sent patients to a number of times — but I couldn’t. The risk was too great.

I was going to have to talk to her about it, but it seemed likely that I’d need to increase it again.

I leaned heavily against the door, knowing that if he wanted to, he could look right through it and see me.

Everything I said to him was true. It was going to be harder to find someone after our marriage was over. Someone who would want to be a step-dad to two kids, who was willing to take on me and my baggage and not just from that first year; from being in love with a man who didn’t love me back but who loved his kids and was a great father.

And I didn’t *say* I wanted him to be in love with me, but I did. I wanted him to be in love with me like he’d been in love with *Lana* — like he was still in love with *Lana*.

Or at least how I guessed he was still in love with *Lana*. He didn’t talk about her much — and I was glad for that — but he’d never said anything to the contrary. I was sure he was still hoping for a future with her someday — a future with kids of their own, half siblings to Christopher and Clark’s baby that was — even as I thought it — developing inside *me*; a future that included making love and not just on nights when her dad almost died.

Maybe someday I’d find someone who loved me like that — but for the moment I wasn’t holding out much hope.

I sighed. We didn't have to go to work or anything else so the day was going to be spent hanging out at the house. Maybe Vicki would want to go Christmas shopping or something. There was only a week until the big day and surely I could find someone else I needed to shop for.

Like my husband.

I didn't have anything for him yet.

I didn't know what I was going to get him.

That was a good idea. I'd get Vicki and maybe Christopher and go shopping.

An hour later, we'd decided that leaving Christopher — and therefore the Sceves — at home was a better plan.

I needed to get them something for Christmas, too. They'd miss Christmas with their families to be in Smallville with Clark and Christopher.

"How're you feeling?" Vicki asked as we walked through Pittsdale Mall.

"Okay for now," I told her. "Last time I didn't get sick until ten weeks or so. Tired, but that's not surprising either. I could probably go for a nap this afternoon," I admitted.

She laughed. "I think I may, too." She stopped and looked around. "Where do we need to go?"

I sighed. "Not a clue."

"Well, Victoria's Secret?"

I rolled my eyes. "No. I have no idea what I'm getting any of them, but there's no need to go *there*." I thought I managed to keep the bitter note out of my voice. "One of the Sceves said that his pocket knife broke last week."

We headed to several different stores and got both of them new pocket knives and I decided to stop at one of the nearby restaurants and get gift certificates. I got spa certificates for their wives. They'd missed out on time with their families to protect mine sometimes and I appreciated that. I thought for a minute. Maybe tickets to a play or something, too, would be good. A date night for them and their wives.

That just left Clark.

"I just don't know what to get him," I whined to Vicki as we sat on the food court. "He hasn't mentioned anything that he wants or needs and I can't think of anything." I *wanted* to do something nice for him, but I had no idea what. Ski weekend with Jimmy? They already had one planned for February.

"What about a vacation?" she asked suddenly.

"What?" I took a drink of my shake.

"You could probably get a good deal on a cruise or something between Christmas and the time school starts. You two have never been on a vacation together," she pointed out.

I sighed. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. "I'll talk to Dad's travel agent and see what he can get for me. If we go then, I won't be sick yet, hopefully."

We finished our milkshakes before we headed towards the restaurants to get the gift cards and then drove by the travel agency to see if Vinnie was in and he was. I found a cruise I could afford — though the room wasn't quite as nice as it would have been if Daddy had planned a trip, but that was okay; I didn't have his kind of money yet — but I could afford one of the smaller rooms, with no balcony. I bit my lip. Clark didn't like flying much — though he'd gotten better at it; would he be okay with a cabin without a balcony?

I sighed. Was this really a good idea? A week alone with Clark? But we wouldn't be *alone*. We could do whatever we wanted and that didn't have to be together.

And there wouldn't be any Latislani spies on board either.

I sighed and Vinnie and I decided on a cruise, flights — for the day after Clark was supposed to get back from Smallville — and on a room. Daddy had travel insurance that would cover the costs if something happened and we needed to cancel for any reason.

Of course, we'd also said that we wouldn't have to do Christmas for each other this year because we weren't going to be together.

Well, I'd keep the papers hidden and if the opportunity arose, I'd give it to him and if not, then I'd deal with that later.

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Part 100

Clark

I continued to mull over the conversation Lois and I had that morning while she and Vicki were Christmas shopping.

Christmas.

We still hadn't decided for sure what was going to happen with that. I thought Sam had something up his sleeve, like forcing Lois onto a plane or something, but I had no idea what it was.

I did know that Jimmy was going to be here — or at the cabin, whichever — for Christmas. His mom was able to go to Europe to see his dad again this year so he'd be with the Lanes.

One of us had made a comment about not needing to get each other something meaningful for Christmas this year since we weren't going to be spending it together.

I should still get her something — but what? She bought just about anything she wanted. A bound copy of her NaNo story? I'd looked at the website and I thought they gave one out so that wasn't going to work.

She didn't need clothes and she'd be in maternity clothes soon enough anyway.

Jewelry? Like what? I'd get a stone added to her necklace once the baby was born but it was too early to do that and too far away to give her an 'IOU' or something — if she was due in January maybe but not in August.

Was there a book she wanted? No. Movie? She bought them.

I had enough money in savings that I could do something nice for her — maybe that would show her... something. That I cared about her and not just because she was having my baby.

A contract on a Southeastern European dictator might say that.

I sighed.

"What's up?" Sam asked, looking up from the book he was reading.

"Huh?" I asked, looking him. We — and Christopher — were in the room that used to be his office but had been transformed into a comfortable living area and play room for us.

"You've been thinking hard about something."

"Yeah."

"So... what's up?"

"I still haven't come up with anything for Lois for Christmas or our anniversary," I admitted.

"I'm not sure I'll be much help. I haven't had too much luck either."

There was something on his face that made me not quite believe him, but I wasn't sure what it was.

"I think I've got everyone else taken care of," I told him, "but Lois..." I sighed again. "I'm just not coming up with anything." I ran through the list out loud and he agreed with my assessment of all of them — though I didn't mention the NaNo thing, because I didn't think he knew about that.

"Well, you're going to the cabin for your anniversary, right?"

I shrugged. "We've mentioned it in passing, but that's it."

"I know it's not much, but make her favorite dinner or something? Whatever her idea — and I don't really need to know what it is, by the way — of a romantic evening is?"

"Yeah, I can do that." Maybe. At least take her flying or something — maybe that trip to Everest we'd talked about several times. I didn't know about 'romantic' but her favorite dinner and a night flight — that I could do.

"Well, that takes care of your anniversary then — unless you

come up with something else great in the meantime.”

“But that leaves Christmas,” I said with a sigh.

“What about something for work?” Sam said thoughtfully.

“She just got the internship.”

I nodded. “That might work — a nice briefcase or something?”

“I don’t know what your budget is, but I can point you in the right direction for something like that. Or maybe a nice pen and pencil set?”

“Something she’ll use as a reporter,” I said thoughtfully.

“She’s already got a good PDA.”

“A tape recorder?”

I nodded slightly, but... did anyone use tape recorders anymore? “Thanks, Sam. That helps.”

That was a relief. I could get them and if we didn’t do gifts, then I could return them or give them to her anyway — maybe that would help make up for being a cad on her birthday the year before.

“What about a day at the spa or a massage or something?”

Sam added thoughtfully.

I nodded. I thought she’d appreciate that. Maybe the work stuff for Christmas and a spa gift certificate for our anniversary. “That’s a great idea.”

Sam chuckled suddenly. “I doubt a year’s supply of Saltines would go over well.”

I winced. “Probably not.”

Just then, Vicki and Lois walked in the door. She only had one big bag, but it looked like there were several smaller bags inside it.

“Get it all done?” Sam asked.

She nodded. “Sure did, Daddy.”

“Good.”

She headed up the winding stairs to our section of the house. I watched as she went, glad that I had all that figured out.

~~~~~  
Lois

I wasn’t going to see him for the better part of the next two weeks and I didn’t want to let him go.

I’d used my ticket to get past security so I could wait with Clark and Christopher. He didn’t understand why his mom was kind of teary and I doubted Clark understood why it was harder than he would have expected. I still hadn’t decided if I was going to give him the cruise or not, but if I did... Well, it would be the longest I’d ever gone without my son — and then some.

The plane pulled up to the gate and they’d be boarding as soon as the turn around on it was done. We didn’t pay any attention but both played with Christopher instead.

“Lois! Clark!”

Both of our heads jerked up.

“Mom? Dad?” Clark asked, puzzled.

“Martha? Jonathan?” I asked at the same time.

“What are you guys doing here?” Hugs were given all around as Clark spoke.

“Sam arranged it. Danielle and Tom ended up staying in town and said they’d keep an eye on the farm for us,” Martha said, taking Christopher from me. “It was his idea for us to get off the plane you were getting on.”

We chatted for another minute and Clark went over to the ticket counter to tell them that we needed to get their bags off. The clerk called down to the baggage handlers and said that they’d put the bags on with the ones that were now being taken off the plane.

We headed towards baggage claim and were soon on our way back to the house.

Daddy was waiting, of course. He gave me a big hug. “Merry Christmas, Princess. I knew you’d want your whole family here.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

It now made sense why he’d said he wasn’t feeling well most of the day and why we’d eventually decided to have Christmas with him and Christopher after they got back from Smallville.

“Are you really feeling okay?” I asked, as he kept his arms around me.

“Yeah, sweetheart. I am.”

I smacked him lightly. “Don’t worry me like that.”

He laughed. “Sorry.”

We spent the rest of the night playing games in the living room. Martha and I beat all three of the men in a game of Trivial Pursuit and another of Taboo.

It was late by the time we ended up in our room.

“There’s something I meant to mention,” Clark said as we got ready for bed.

“What’s that?” I called from the bathroom, taking a deep breath as I pulled out the red nightgown I’d worn the year before.

“I did get you something for Christmas. I know we’d said we weren’t going to and if you didn’t, that’s fine, but I wanted to mention it to you before tomorrow.”

I put the red nightgown back on the shelf and pulled some warm flannel pajamas off of it — covered with reindeer, they were a much safer choice. We always spent all day Christmas day in our pajamas and I certainly wouldn’t have worn the red nightgown, but I decided that — knowing what it was like to be with Clark, really be with him — I couldn’t deal with his lack of interest on Christmas Eve.

He’d probably be relieved, too.

“Anyway, I can give it to you now or tomorrow. Your choice.”

I went back into our room and climbed into bed. “Tomorrow is fine,” I told him. I thought about telling him that I had something for him but decided not to. If he’d bought me an orange or something, then there was no way I’d give him a cruise in front of family and friends. I’d hang on to it until near the end and then make my decision. If he had gotten me fruit — or a Cheese of the Month Club membership or something equally ridiculous — I’d just say that I’d ordered his and it wasn’t here yet and deal with it later.

~~~~~  
Clark

I changed Christopher’s diaper and we headed downstairs. Lois was still asleep and I didn’t want to wake her up before absolutely necessary. She was going to need all the rest she could get to get through this pregnancy.

Christopher thought all the presents under the tree were way cool. The night before, while my parents and Lois were waiting for luggage, I’d flown back to the farm to pick up their presents — they hadn’t wanted to take them on the plane.

Mom was up and together we managed to keep Christopher away from the presents and stuff.

Dad was the next one down, followed by Jimmy and Sam.

Mom and I started breakfast and, before long, Lois joined us. She looked pretty well rested, which was good.

After breakfast, Christopher opened his stocking to find a couple little cars and things.

We passed around presents until everyone had a small pile near them. Christopher’s pile was, of course, the biggest. There was nothing in mine from Lois and, I admitted to myself that I was slightly disappointed in that.

But we had said we weren’t doing anything so maybe she simply hadn’t. Or maybe having my baby was enough of a gift?

It was a gift.

It was my connection — family. Christopher was my son — the more I remembered, the more I thought about it, the surer I was of that — but at the same time, I hadn’t known that while she was pregnant, when he was born, while he was small.

From the time I started to understand biology and genetics

and whatever, I'd doubted my ability to father children. It wasn't like I spent much time thinking about it, but when I did — or when Lana and I had talked about having a family — I didn't think it would happen for me, but I also knew it wouldn't matter to me if we ended up adopting kids. I *wanted* natural children, but I'd always known that biology didn't matter to my parents.

It was part of why I felt so horrible about the way I'd acted the first two months or so of Christopher's life. I knew he'd never remember that I hadn't been there with him much the first few weeks, but I would.

My attention was brought back to the present by a one-year-old crawling on my lap. As was tradition, we started with the youngest and worked our way up, taking turns opening presents. Christopher's first present was a Radio Flyer Retro Rocket from Sam. It took us a while to realize that it wasn't someone's cell phone vibrating when he pushed a certain button and the whole thing vibrated. He tried to climb on it while it was still in the box and we all had to laugh at that.

He was easily distracted by the bows and other presents, but kept coming back to the rocket.

Lois loved her briefcase and digital voice recorder — tape recorders were so last century, I'd told Sam once I finally started looking.

If anyone noticed that I didn't have anything from Lois, they didn't say anything about it.

It was late by the time we finished watching movies and playing games with the rest of the family and we headed to our room.

"Thank you for the gifts," she said without preamble as soon as we were alone. "I love the bag, especially."

"Will your laptop actually fit in it?" I asked her. "I couldn't find any for the bigger laptops, but your dad said that was the best brand out there."

"I think it will," she said as she punched the code in the pad by the door. "And the voice recorder will come in handy. Or it will if I ever get to actually be a reporter."

"Why wouldn't you get to be a reporter?"

We headed into our room.

She looked at me as though she couldn't believe I'd even ask the question.

"What?" I didn't get it.

"I'm *pregnant*," she said as though it should be obvious.

"So? Lots of women have babies and a career."

She gave an exasperated sigh and flopped onto her back on the bed. "I'm pregnant. If it's anything like last time, it's going to be all I can do to get through school this semester, much less work and internship. The job... I'd hate to lose it, but it's not *essential* at this point, but I *have* to do the internship if I want to graduate. And if I don't graduate, then I won't get a good job."

"Sure you will. Perry loves you already." I sat in the chair near the closet.

"Loving me doesn't matter if I don't have the degree to go with it." She sighed. "I did get you something."

I looked up at that. "You didn't need to."

She shrugged without actually moving. "I wanted to. It took me a long time to come up with the right thing and I'm still not sure..." She sighed. "It's in the drawer in the end table on the left side of the couch. Would you mind to get it?"

I stood and headed towards the living area. When I opened the drawer, I saw an envelope with my name on it.

"Don't open it yet," she said as I pulled it out.

"Okay." I moved back to the chair.

She sighed again. "It's not *just* for you; it's for us. It's more than a bit extravagant, but it's for both Christmas and our anniversary, which I know we hadn't talked about. I had no idea what to get you and Vicki suggested something like this. If you don't want it, that's fine, just tell me and I should be able to get a

refund. I won't be hurt or offended or anything like that."

Somehow I doubted that. I couldn't quite tell why but there was an undertone that said she'd be hurt if I didn't accept the gift — whatever it was.

"Go ahead."

I opened the envelope, unsure what to expect.

I slowly pulled the papers out of the envelope. Airline tickets. And cruise tickets.

"Wow." I didn't know what to say. "I don't know what to say."

"We don't have to go if you don't want to, but Vicki mentioned that we'd never really gone on a vacation together and that now was the time to go if we wanted to — between semesters, before I get sick, before we have two kids. If you don't want to, that's fine. I can get most of the money refunded pretty easily — and maybe all of it. And I got a good deal anyway — Vinnie found it for me online, not through one of his regular channels, but on one of those online cruise discount sites. But I still couldn't afford a suite or whatever with a balcony so I didn't know if you'd want to go or not because I know how you hate flying because you're cooped up and I didn't know if the same would apply to a cruise ship or not."

I didn't think she took a breath the whole time she was talking, but she seemed like she was waiting for me to say something.

"I'd love to go."

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Part 101

Lois

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"You don't have to say that," I told him. "It's really okay if you don't want to go."

"No, really, I do. A cruise'll be fun." He actually sounded convincing.

"And a cabin with no balcony or whatever doesn't bother you?"

He shrugged. "We'll find out. If I'm ever feeling claustrophobic or something, I can always go up to one of the decks or something."

"True."

"Thank you, Lois. Seriously. This is great." He flipped through the paperwork again. "When do we leave?"

"New Year's Eve. I already talked to your boss about it and told him that we might be out of town that week. Perry, too."

"Cool. What about Christopher? Is he going with us?"

I shook my head. "No, he'll stay here. I mentioned it to Jess, but didn't want to tell Daddy until I knew for sure if we were going or not."

My cell phone buzzed and I rolled my eyes as I picked it up. "We're not that far away, Daddy."

He laughed. "I know but I thought I'd call. Are you going Day After Christmas shopping tomorrow with Vicki?"

"I'm not sure yet. It'll depend at least partly on how well I sleep tonight. I know I won't be going early."

"Okay. Well, if you do end up going, I've got a couple things I'd like you to look for for me."

"Hang on." I set the phone face down on the bed. "Are you sure, Clark?"

He looked up from where he'd been reading through the information. "Yeah. I'm sure."

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, Princess?"

"Um, I just gave Clark his Christmas present."

"Do I want to know?" I could almost see the look on his face.

"It's a cruise. We leave New Year's Eve if that's okay with you. I mentioned it to Jess so she wouldn't make any other plans, but I wanted to make sure Clark wanted to go before I mentioned

it to you. You know how claustrophobic he can get on planes and I couldn't get a room with a balcony so... That's why I didn't give it to him in front of everyone else, too."

"That's fine. I'll still be home that week so between all of us we can take care of the little man."

"Thanks, Daddy."

"Good night. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas. Love you." We hung up and I looked back over at Clark. "All set."

"Good." He grinned at me. "So does that mean we're going to paint Florida red for New Year's Eve then?"

I rolled my eyes. "Were we planning on painting the town red when we were staying here?"

"Probably not," he conceded. "Did we even have plans?"

I shrugged again without really moving. "We hadn't really talked about it. I don't think I know of any big parties or anything."

"Want to go to Smallville? Just for the evening? Leave from Florida and go hang out with my parents? Watch the fireworks from the farm then go back?"

That sounded nice. "I'd like that."

"Good. We've got plans then." He stood up and zipped around, ready for bed in a second. Before I knew it, he was lying next to me, propped up on one elbow, dressed in his sleep shorts and no shirt.

I looked at him and wondered what he'd do if I kissed him.

I decided I couldn't take the risk with my fragile self-image.

"Are you going to be able sleep?"

"I think so."

"Is your back bothering you?"

How did he know? I thought I'd covered it pretty well.

"I don't think anyone else noticed."

I nodded. "Some. I don't remember it bothering me this early with Christopher."

"You may react differently with each pregnancy," he said pragmatically and I wondered suddenly if he was planning on having any other kids with me.

"Maybe."

"Would a back rub help?" he asked quietly without really looking at me.

I sighed. "It probably wouldn't hurt." But I wasn't sure I wanted to feel Clark's hands on me either.

"Hold still."

A second later, I was on my stomach, covers pulled up over my legs, Clark's warm hands on my back massaging out the tension.

~~~~~  
Clark

As she'd done many times over the last year — whenever we'd flown — Lois held my hand through most of the flight to Florida.

I couldn't explain why, but it helped. And I was getting used to flying in general. It was easier than it used to be whether she was holding my hand or not. I guessed I was just getting used to it.

"What do you want to do for dinner?" I asked Lois after we checked into the hotel for the night.

She shrugged. "Where do you want to go?"

We finally settled on the Olive Garden across the street. Even though Lois' appetite wasn't as great as it had been that first week, she could still put many men to shame. I thought Olive Garden would regret their Never Ending Pasta Bowl.

I couldn't help but smirk as she finished off her third bowl.

"What?"

"Nothing," I said wisely.

"It's your fault," she mumbled, though I could tell she wasn't being... vindictive or whatever about it. "Kryptonian genetics

and all."

I laughed. "Sorry. Nothing I can do about that."

She sighed. "I know." She poked at a noodle left in her bowl. "Thanks for not laughing at me or being repulsed when I gave this to you."

I'd been right. For some reason, it was very important to her that I accept this gift. "Why would I do either one of those?"

She shrugged. "Vacations isn't something we do; isn't something that's *necessary* to keep up appearances. I mean other than the occasional trip to Smallville or the cabin or something."

"Still, it's a great gift." I reached out and covered her hand with my own. "I like spending time with you and I've always thought cruises would be fun."

"Well, thank you anyway." She sighed. "Ready?"

I nodded and paid the bill.

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January 2005

The next day, we boarded the ship. "This can't be right," Lois said as she looked around our room. "I know I didn't pay for a room with a balcony."

There was a fruit basket on the small table. I opened the card. "Happy Anniversary to my favorite daughter and son-in-law. Your tab and excursions are taken care of — as long as you don't go 'overboard'. Love, Dad." We both groaned. "Guess your dad upgraded us?"

She sighed.

"What?"

She nodded towards the bed. "He couldn't have upgraded us to something with a bigger bed?"

I looked at it and shrugged. "We've survived on smaller."

"True, but I know you like your space to sprawl when you sleep."

"I'll manage somehow, I promise."

Was she nervous about having to sleep that close to me? Was she afraid I was going to try something? Surely she knew me better than that. Didn't she?

Should I say something to reassure her? Or would that just make things worse?

I picked up some of the information they'd left us and looked through it. "Tomorrow night is the black tie dinner thing for us. I guess, everyone rotates through the dining rooms and tomorrow is one of our formal ones."

"You can opt out of that one if you want to, when you make your reservations. They encourage you to opt out if you're going to have little kids with you. They have alternatives for the kids, though, rather than taking them with you to the dinner." She shrugged. "I thought we'd want to go."

I nodded. It was nice dancing with her when we were all dressed up — we'd never really danced when we weren't, except line dancing, of course.

We spent the rest of the day exploring our world for the next week. That night, we slept just fine and I woke up with Lois spooned in front of me, one arm holding her close to me.

We spent the day on board. Lois relaxed near one of the pools for a while, soaking in the sun. The sun always made me feel better — Jor-El had mentioned something about its rejuvenating power for me or something — so maybe it would help Lois, since she was pregnant with a half-Kryptonian baby.

Sure enough, she said she felt much better that evening. Getting ready together when the bathroom was the size of a postage stamp didn't help any.

Lois wore the same dress she'd worn to Billy and Serena's wedding. She looked great, as she always did when she dressed up.

I sighed as she straightened my tie for me — again. I could never get it right, but she always did after only a few seconds. "I wish I could figure out how to do that myself."

She smiled at me. “Well, I guess it gives you a reason to keep me around. At least for now.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to make of that. Another subtle reminder that this wasn’t permanent. I wasn’t sure why she snuck those in every once in a while. I’d made a concerted effort not to, knowing that it wasn’t something either of us enjoyed discussing.

But *why* didn’t we enjoy discussing it?

Because we were going to break up the only family Christopher — and this baby — would have known?

Because it was a reminder that there was still a psycho out there?

Because...

I wasn’t sure what other reason there could be, but maybe there was one, because I could always see something in her eyes when she did; something not quite readable.

I offered her my arm as we headed down the hall towards dinner.

~~~~~

Lois

I was in his arms and all I wanted to do was cry. I wasn’t sure what the name of the song was, but I knew where I wanted to spend the rest of my life — right here, in Clark’s arms, dancing cheek to cheek or whatever.

I sighed. I was glad that — even here away from prying eyes — he held me close to him while we danced.

“What’s wrong?” he breathed in my ear.

“Nothing,” I told him.

He backed away from me, taking my hand as he led me off the dance floor and out of the dining room. He kept hold of it until we reached a quiet spot on one of the decks.

He finally let go of my hand and leaned against the railing. “I thought we were past the not talking to each other thing.”

“It’s not that,” I told him, leaning near him on the rail. Close, but not too close. Definitely not touching.

“Then what is it?”

I shrugged. “Nothing I want to talk about and it has nothing to do with not wanting to talk to *you* about it. I don’t want to talk to anyone about it. It’s nothing you can do anything about; nothing anyone can do anything about — so what’s the point?” I had fallen hopelessly in love with him — with my husband — but there was no way I was going to tell him that. Having my heart handed back to me on a platter — chopped into little pieces — was not my idea of a good time.

“Is it Navance?”

I hesitated slightly before shaking my head. “No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I *do not* want to talk to you about this, okay?” I glared at him and turned and walked off.

And walked right into him.

“No, it’s not okay.”

I crossed my arms in front of me. “That’s too bad. You can’t make me talk to you about this and I’m not going to. I was having a very nice time dancing with you, even if I did have something on my mind and you had to go ruin it by dragging me out here.”

“Fine,” he said with a sigh. “Let’s go back in.”

I shook my head. “I’m going to bed.” I held out my hand. “Can I have my key?” I’d given it to him earlier since I certainly didn’t have any pockets and that way I wouldn’t have to take a handbag with me.

He sighed again. “Here.” He handed it to me. “I’ll be in in a while.”

I nodded. “I’ll be asleep.”

I hoped I’d be asleep. It would be very nice if I was asleep when he came in. Then I wouldn’t have to pretend to be asleep. I’d told him the truth when I said spending some time in the sun had helped to rejuvenate me, but I was still tired.

I lay in bed and stared at the stars out the clear balcony doors.

I had no idea how many times I’d wondered why my life couldn’t be simple, why I couldn’t have just found a guy and fell in love and gotten married and made babies together, all the while setting up my career as an award winning investigative journalist.

I knew I had to deal with the hand I’d been dealt — and I wouldn’t trade Christopher for anything.

I wouldn’t trade my night with Clark for anything.

Or the next night either.

And I certainly wouldn’t trade this baby for anything either.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t asleep when Clark came in, but I tried to pretend.

“You’re not asleep, are you?”

I sighed and sat up against the headboard. “What?”

“I’m sorry for pushing you.”

I saw him sitting in one of the chairs, his tie hanging from one side of his collar, jacket discarded, sleeves rolled up and forearms resting on his knees.

“Thank you,” I told him quietly.

“I understand that there might be things you don’t want to talk to me about and I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

“If there’s anything relevant to anything, I’ll tell you. And most things I want to talk to you about, but that doesn’t mean I want to share absolutely everything.” I couldn’t. I had to at least try to keep some sort of protection around my heart. It was too late — way too late — to keep from falling in love with him, but I didn’t need him telling me he didn’t feel the same way. “And I’m sure there’s stuff you don’t want to tell me about and that’s fine with me. I don’t need to know everything, just anything that’s relevant and I trust you to decide what’s relevant and what’s not.”

He didn’t say anything for a long minute. “Okay then.”

He headed to the bathroom and I slid back under the covers, rolling onto my side, back to the bathroom. A minute later, Clark emerged and crawled into bed next to me, but instead of sliding in behind me with his arm around me like we’d woken up that morning, he rolled onto his side, his back to me.

That was how we fell asleep — or at least how I did, backs to each other like we had so many times before.

I tried not to think about how long it had been since we’d deliberately done that because I knew it would only end up depressing me.

I sighed as I realized that it was after midnight.

Happy anniversary to us.

Part 102

Clark

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I didn’t know what was going on in her head, but that was nothing new.

She was right — I didn’t tell her everything and I shouldn’t expect any more from her.

I didn’t tell her that I was losing hope that I’d ever be able to work things out with Lana. I didn’t tell her that I was afraid I was going to end up alone after this was all over; that I wondered about the same things she did — if I’d find someone else if I couldn’t work things out with Lana, if I’d ever have that ‘real’ family she imagined; if I should give up on Lana and turn my attention to a life with Lois. I knew I couldn’t *make* myself fall in love with her, but I could commit myself to a long-term relationship with her and see what happened.

We woke up the next morning as the sun streamed in the balcony doors. Lois groaned and pulled the covers over her head.

“Want to sleep a little longer?” I asked quietly, getting out of bed to pull the curtains shut.

“No,” came the voice muffled by the covers. “I’m hungry.”

I laughed, but it sounded strained, even to my own ears.

“Happy anniversary,” came the voice again.

“Happy anniversary,” I told her, before digging something out of my suitcase. I sat on the bed near her. “I got you something.”

Her head slowly emerged from under the covers. “A present?”

I nodded and handed her the envelope. “It’s nothing as nice as all this but... I hope you like it.”

I’d thought about taking part of it out, but I hadn’t. That would have been small and petty after the night before.

She propped herself up on her elbows and opened the envelope. She pulled out the card first. “Oh, this is great!” It was a gift card to the spa I knew she liked. She pulled the other piece of paper out. “An IOU for my favorite dinner and a night flight from the cabin.” She turned to look at me. “Thank you. Really.”

“You’re welcome.” I reached into one of the drawers and pulled out a package. “Something else. Second anniversary is cotton so...”

She looked puzzled but eagerly ripped open the paper. She stared at it for a minute then burst out laughing. “Thank you.”

“It’s officially yours,” I told her taking the green shirt from her and holding it up. “I don’t remember the last time I wore it, but I know how much you love it so...”

She sat up and grabbed at the shirt, holding it to her protectively. “Mine.”

I laughed, more normally this time. “All yours,” I confirmed.

We’d spent some time looking at what excursions we wanted to do during the cruise, but the couple that Lois most wanted to do she couldn’t because she was pregnant and that meant I couldn’t do the ones I really wanted to either, unless we didn’t go together, but I didn’t think suggesting that would be a good idea. After all, it took both of us to get her pregnant.

“You know, Clark, you don’t have to do something that I can do. I know you’d rather go SCUBA diving or something and I can’t go,” she’d said. She’d flipped to the page on Cozumel and sighed, tears filling her eyes. “I can’t do it. I can’t believe I can’t do it.”

“What’s that?” I’d asked, looking up from the pages I was looking through.

“Swimming with the dolphins. For safety reasons, expectant mothers, guests with heart and respiratory conditions and those with back/neck injuries cannot participate.”

“I’m sorry,” I’d told her honestly. “But whatever we do, we’ll do it together. It is our anniversary after all.”

We’d finally decided on some excursions that we’d thought would be interesting if not the most exciting ones ever.

The thought that maybe we could do this again sometime — when she wasn’t pregnant — crossed my mind, but then I realized that it was unlikely we’d be able to. If the last time was any indication, she’d nurse for a year or longer when she wouldn’t want to — or be able to — leave the baby for an extended period. By then Christopher would be three and we’d be out of college and we’d have work schedules and all of that to deal with and... it just didn’t seem likely.

We spent the day exploring and the evening eating at one of the much more casual restaurants. We talked about going to one of the club type areas for dancing or something, but Lois said she wasn’t up for it.

Her hand was nestled in mine — I hadn’t even noticed when it had gotten that way. We ended up just walking around the decks — and talking about some things we needed to discuss. It was a nice night, but I still noticed when she shivered slightly.

I took my hand out of hers and wrapped an arm around her. “Is that better?”

She nodded. “Thanks. It’s a nice night, but the wind is a bit chilly.”

“You know, I never did get my sweatshirt back last year,” I

said with a hint of amusement in my voice.

“No, you never did.” She didn’t comment further. I chuckled. “Imagine that.”

We walked for a while, continuing to talk quietly.

“Is it anything you want to talk about?” I asked her quietly. “I’m not pushing, I promise. I just want to know if I can do anything to help you with whatever it is.” I squeezed her lightly. “That’s all.”

She shook her head. “No, there’s nothing you can do. It’s something I need to work through on my own.”

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

We’d come to a stop near the railing and leaned on it.

“I guess today’s as good a day as any to tell you this,” she finally said with a sigh.

Nothing could have prepared me for what she said next.

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Lois

I laughed when I opened the second present from Clark. The day at the spa and the IOU had been great, but his John Deere shirt was priceless.

We took turns getting ready and I put on my most comfortable tennis shoes. I felt so badly that Clark wasn’t going to be able to do the things he really wanted to do on this trip. He felt obligated to stay with me and do whatever tour it was that I wanted — and was able — to do.

First, we went to the Key West Lighthouse Museum. The trip up the 88 steps made me a bit nervous — though I couldn’t really define why — but the view was spectacular. We read the brochures and learned about the history of the lighthouse — how Barbara Mabrity had been fired for making anti-Union statements though the area was controlled by the Union during the Civil War. She and her children took shelter in the lighthouse in 1846 during a hurricane. The station was destroyed — she survived but six of her children didn’t.

After we finished there, we headed to Ernest Hemingway’s home and museum. Our tour was led by a guy named Joe Buggy. He was a self-described ‘edutainer’ and several members of our tour had been through his tours before.

It was easy to see why people came to see him over and over. He was great fun.

After that we headed to eat and then a local beach to soak in the sun for a while before heading back to the ship.

Dinner was pretty casual, not nearly like the formal affair the night before.

Clark looked beyond fabulous in his black, short sleeve, collarless shirt that showed off his chest and arms to near perfection — though I didn’t think he realized that.

It occurred to me that he’d filled out since last year when we’d flown to see his parents and he’d given me his sweatshirt. He’d looked good then, but he looked better after another year.

“You can go on one of the other things without me, you know,” I told him as we ate dinner. “It’s not fair that you can’t go SCUBA diving or something just because I’m pregnant.” We were both certified divers, but there was no way they’d let me go — unless I didn’t tell them I was pregnant, but that wasn’t right and I wasn’t about to do anything that would risk me or the baby.

He shrugged. “But I do want to hang out with you and, besides, I helped you get that way. It wouldn’t be fair that I get to go when you can’t when it took both of us to get you pregnant.”

“Still, it’s not every day that you have the opportunity to go swimming with dolphins.” I realized who I was talking to and lowered my voice. “Okay, *you* might have the opportunity to swim with Orcas whenever you want, but the rest of us... You should do it — if there’s an opening. Or whatever else you want to do. I can find something else to do — or even rest on board and take a nap. I would have enjoyed one this afternoon.”

He smirked.

“What?”

“You did take a short nap on the beach,” he told me as he took a sip.

“I did?”

He nodded.

“Well, a longer one would have been nice then.”

“I’m sorry it’s taking so much out of you,” he said quietly, without looking at me. “I wish we *knew* about Christopher so we could compare but...”

I sighed. “I know, but unless you know a guy with a time machine, there’s no way to find out. Or unless you want to submit to a DNA test or something and find out for sure.”

He shook his head. “No. All of the reasons why my parents didn’t think it was a good idea to run a DNA test two years ago are still valid. What if something odd shows up? It’s not a risk I’m willing to take with either Christopher or the new baby — or you either.”

“Me?”

He hesitated. “Let’s get out of here before we talk about this more. Do you want to go to one of the clubs or whatever for dancing tonight?”

I shook my head. “I’m not up for that.”

“Walk it is then.”

I didn’t think he realized that our hands found their way together as we walked.

“What did you mean?” I finally asked as we walked.

“Well, if something odd about my DNA came out, and someone came after me — there’s not much they could do to me. But you, Christopher, the baby...” He sighed. “All of you are vulnerable. If some xenophobic nutcase found out about me and that he couldn’t do anything to me, he could come after the three of you. As long as no one finds stockpiles of that green meteorite, we’re okay.”

“Kryptonite,” I said quietly.

“What?”

I shrugged. “It’s something that stuck in my head. A Kryptonian meteorite — Kryptonite.”

“Ah.”

“That might be one way to prove Christopher’s your son,” I said slowly. “Not that I’d ever willingly expose him to it, knowing it’s even a possibility, but if he ever was exposed and reacted to it... If he was exposed and didn’t react, it could be because he’s not a full-blooded Kryptonian or something.”

He shook his head. “He’ll never be exposed — neither of them will be — if I have anything to say about it.”

“I’m with you there.” I sighed. “I almost brought him in the house when you passed out at Danielle’s. If I had, we might know.”

“It’s not worth knowing. Exposing him to that stuff — on the off chance that my son... I wouldn’t wish that kind of pain on anyone — with the possible exception of Navance and his nephew. And even then I’m not sure.”

“Right.” I couldn’t imagine a pain so bad I wouldn’t wish it on Navance. There was no way I’d put my children through it willingly.

We wandered slowly around the decks and when we came out the other side of a wall, the wind caught me off-guard and I shivered involuntarily.

Clark took his hand out of mine and wrapped an arm around me. “Is that better?”

I nodded, reveling in the warmth of his body near mine. My eyes closed as I soaked in the experience. “Thanks. It’s a nice night, but the wind is a bit chilly.”

“You know, I never did get my sweatshirt back last year,” he said, and I could hear the underlying chuckle.

“No, you never did.” I didn’t tell him I wore it when I knew he wouldn’t be around.

He laughed. “Imagine that.”

We walked a little further, his arm around me. “Regardless,” he said. “I’m not about to expose you or Christopher or this baby to... Kryptonite.”

“I’m not either,” I said quietly, though my accidental exposure hadn’t occurred to me until he said something. I was sure that wouldn’t be good for me or the baby.

“So no way to know if Christopher is my son without a DNA test or a random guy walking up to us and saying ‘oh by the way, it was me who drugged you that night, but don’t worry, I didn’t actually get to finish what I started’. And he’d be lucky if he survived the encounter.”

That warmed my heart slightly. That he’d feel that strongly if he found out who it was who had tried to do that to me.

We walked along a little further, the silence between us comfortable and not awkward.

“Is it anything you want to talk about? I’m not pushing. I promise. I just want to know if I can do anything to help you with whatever it is.” He lightly squeezed my shoulders. “That’s all.”

I shook my head. “No, there’s nothing you can do. It’s something I need to work through on my own.” I needed to work through how being in love with my husband was a good thing.

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

We’d come to a stop near the railing and leaned on it.

I sighed. It was our anniversary after all.

“I guess today’s as good a day as any to tell you this,” I finally said with another sigh.

I couldn’t look at him and it took me several more minutes to work up the courage to actually say it. He waited patiently, as though knowing I needed to decide for sure if I was going to tell him.

I took a deep breath and took the plunge.

“I think I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Part 103

Clark

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She took a deep breath and didn’t look at me as she spoke.

“I think I’ve fallen in love with you.”

What? I stared out over the water in shock. Whatever I could have imagined was bothering her — that wasn’t it.

“I mean, I know you’re not in love with me and that’s fine. You have Lana to go back to when this is all over and I don’t have anyone so maybe that’s why or something. Maybe it’s a proximity thing or...” She took a deep breath. “No, that’s not it. I mean that doesn’t hurt, made it easier, but I first realized that it *could* happen over a year ago — when things were still so horrible between us. And at first I thought I was already in love with you, but then I realized that wasn’t actually the case. I was attracted to you — but we’ve both always said that the other was attractive. I don’t know if you *really* still think that or not, given what pregnancy and nursing have done to my body but you always said that was the biggest problem Lana had with me so that must mean *something*. So I was attracted to you last year and then I realized that I was attracted to your abilities as a father. From the time of that baseball game date, you and Christopher were practically inseparable unless he wanted to eat. You’re a great dad and I realized that even then, but since our last anniversary...”

She finally paused for a breath, but that was it. “Things have been so much better for the most part and I got to see you happy and relaxed and we spent time together. And the more time we spent together, the more I realized how easy it would be to let myself fall in love with you. But I didn’t want to do that. I knew what would happen. I’d let myself fall in love with you and as soon as Christopher turns five or some mob boss puts a hit out on Navance, you’d leave and fight for your relationship with Lana,

but you'd still be a big part of Christopher's life — at least for a while and probably forever, because I can't see you slowly becoming less and less a part of his life. But then I realized that he, and later this baby, would probably want to live with you anyway, so that would limit the amount of contact more I'd think, but I knew that if I let myself fall in love with you, I'd end up with a broken heart and I didn't want that. Why on Earth — or Krypton — would I consciously put myself in a position for a broken heart? But you know what?"

She still didn't give me a chance to respond. "I did anyway. I fell in love with you anyway and I know that, in the long run, there's nothing in it for me but heartache, but it happened anyway. And it's okay. I'll be fine, but I just need some time to work through it and get over it or whatever. And before you think it was all part of a diabolical plan or something, I didn't plan that night. Honest. All I could think was that I wanted to forget about Daddy in the hospital and I knew that it would take my mind off of it more than something like a game or something. Something where I could feel and not think. I mean, I'd thought about it before, but I'd never planned it or anything — even before Christopher was born I'd wondered — in passing or just idle curiosity or wondering about that night at the cabin — what it would be like, but I didn't mean to get pregnant, honestly. The whole thing was very spur of the moment and it didn't even occur to me until later that some sort of precaution might have been in order. I didn't plan on asking you to be with me that way and I certainly didn't plan on getting pregnant. I know you don't need the complication of a baby you know is yours when this is all over."

My head was spinning and I wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but that had to have been roughly the equivalent of rambling on and on for eighteen pages — front and back — while only taking two or three breaths.

But I couldn't let that go.

"A baby is *not* a complication. Never a complication," I said forcibly. "You *know* I've never been sure that I could have kids and there's no way I'd call a baby complication no matter what the circumstances."

She sighed. "Fine — something Lana will see as a complication, proof that you cheated on her with me. I know that a baby is one more... hurdle you two won't need to try to get over or around when we're over. I know you don't love me — at least not like that — and I don't mean to put you in an awkward position or anything and I certainly don't expect you to suddenly realize you're in love with me. But you've been asking about what's bothering me and that's it." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I think I need to be alone for a bit, but I want you to know that I really don't want anything to change between us or anything like that. I don't expect any more from you than I did ten minutes ago. And I think you probably need some time, too."

With that, she turned and walked off.

I leaned heavily against the railing.

My head was still spinning.

Lois was in love with me.

Most people would think that was a good thing.

My wife loved me; was *in* love with me.

My parents would be thrilled.

Looking back on it now, they'd always liked Lana, but I had the impression that they *loved* Lois. And not just because I married her and she was the mother of their grandchild — grandchildren. Because they genuinely loved her.

They had no idea what a mess my life was. Married to one woman — one pregnant woman who I already had one child with — clinging to the dream of a life with my childhood sweetheart, practically counting the days until we could call the divorce lawyer.

Did knowing Lois was in love with me change any of that?

Should it change any of that?

If I loved her, if I was truly committed to our relationship, our marriage, for life, then it would.

But I wasn't.

I ran my hands through my hair.

What did it mean for me, for Lois, for our kids?

Kids.

Was that why she'd kissed me like that the night of her dad's heart attack? Even if she hadn't planned it? Looking back on it, I could see how those feelings might have played a role in what happened. Maybe not necessarily in the initiation — other than that most people who were in love with someone wanted to make love with them at some point — but definitely in some of what happened between us that night.

I believed her when she said she didn't mean for it to happen, much less get pregnant.

I sighed. I'd seen the tears streaming down her cheeks as she walked away. She'd managed to keep them in until she left. That amazed me, given what I knew about how easily she'd cried lately.

Was that what this trip was about?

Trying to... buy me? Or buy... my love? Or something like that?

I didn't think so. I think she just thought it was something she could do to be nice — a nice gift for both of us, nothing more than that.

I believed her when she said she didn't expect me to love her back or to suddenly realize that I wanted nothing more than to spend the whole rest of my life with her or anything like that.

I could hear her depression speaking again in some of what she said; that Christopher and the baby would want to live with me — and therefore, Lana — and contact between the two of us would diminish more if they did than if they lived with her and had visitations with me or whatever. What she didn't say, what I could hear, was the assumption on her part that, not only would they want to live with me when we split, but that, over time, they'd desire less and less contact with her, causing less and less contact between the two of us.

My heart ached for her, knowing that she believed that. She was a wonderful mom and Christopher loved her so much even if he did go through phases where he preferred me. There were also times when he preferred Lois. He'd had a bit of a cold in November and he wanted nothing to do with me while he wasn't feeling well.

I'd done some research over the past year on post-partum depression. From that and what Lois had told me, it was easy to see where she would blow that kind of thing out of proportion.

Whether I was in love with her or not, she needed me to be there for her, to be a shoulder for her to cry on, to help with her cravings and nausea, with her sore back and labor and delivery and midnight feedings and all of that — from the beginning — to continue to help protect both her and Christopher from Navance.

I sighed and pushed back from the rail to search for my wife.

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Lois

I turned away from the rail and walked away from him.

I couldn't believe I'd managed to keep the tears from falling until I'd finished my spiel. I couldn't believe that I'd actually gotten up the nerve to tell him. He hadn't run screaming but, at the same time — except for his comment about a baby never being a complication — I hadn't let him get a word in edgewise.

I was glad when I made it through a door. I knew he could still see me if he wanted to but a quick glance as I turned the corner showed him still leaning on the railing.

For a minute, I wished I wasn't pregnant — and over twenty-one — so I could go drown my sorrows. I thought about heading to one of the clubs anyway, losing myself in the crowd, but

decided that I'd rather just go to bed.

And wonder if my husband would ever show up.

I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. That was the *last* thing I wanted.

I looked at the couch. It pulled out. Maybe I'd sleep there.

I got ready for bed and decided that pulling the couch out wasn't worth it. I took a pillow and one of the extra blankets and curled up. I appreciated that it would be long before I wouldn't be able to curl up anymore. The baby would soon make that impossible.

I put my hand on my stomach, covering the life that was growing there. Though I couldn't honestly say we'd created this baby out of *our* love, he or she was made out of mine. And Clark would love this baby as much as he loved Christopher. It wouldn't matter that he didn't love *me*, that he wasn't *in* love with me, this was his baby and that was all that would matter to him.

Despite the occasional tears that continued to leak out, the long day had worn me out and I knew I'd been asleep when I heard the door open. I tried to keep my breathing even, my eyes closed, my body relaxed.

"Please don't pretend to be asleep," Clark said quietly, sitting on the ground next to me.

I suddenly flashed back to our wedding night. I'd tried to sleep on the couch then, too. Of course, the only reason we'd ended up in the same bed that night was because we were afraid people were listening in to what we were saying.

Had he carried me back to the bed then? Yes, he had. I'd been asleep on the couch and he'd carried me to bed — and called me 'sweetie' — before contemplating taking the couch himself. It was only my request that had brought him to sleep in the bed.

How much had changed since then.

How much had stayed the same?

I sighed and opened my eyes to find Clark holding ibuprofen and water for me. I took them from him. "Thanks."

"You'll probably have a headache as it is."

"Probably."

"You tried to sleep on the couch on our wedding night, too."

I shrugged. "We weren't in love. We didn't want to be married. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable by assuming you'd want to sleep in the same bed and, since I was the one who'd gotten us in the mess, it wasn't fair to make you sleep on the couch."

"And tonight?" he asked softly.

"We're still not in love. We still don't *want* to be married. I still didn't want to make you uncomfortable after what I said and it's not fair to make you sleep on the couch." I still hadn't looked at him.

He brushed my hair off my face and tucked it behind my ear. "I don't want things to be awkward. I still mean what I've said the last few weeks. I want to take care of you. And I want you to know something and I want you to really listen to me."

He didn't say anything else and finally I nodded. "Okay."

"You are a *great* mom. Christopher loves you *so* much." His fingers brushed the hair at my temple. "I know he prefers me sometimes, but there's times when only Mom will do, and deep down, you know that."

I nodded.

"And, even having had a baby and nursed him for a year, you're still a beautiful woman. You always have been and I have this sneaking suspicion that you always will be. You have a great figure and Christopher didn't change that. This baby won't either."

I'd rolled onto my back, mainly so I could stare at the ceiling instead of looking at him. One hand still played gently with the hair at my temple and the other came to rest on my stomach.

"I mean it, Lois. I want you to really hear me. You're an

intelligent, beautiful woman. You're a great mom and your son loves you very much. I could hear it in what you said out there. Not in everything, but in some of it, I could hear the depression talking again and I don't want things to get that bad for you again. Not because you're having my baby, but because I care about you and this time, I'm going to keep my eyes open and not have my head in the sand when it comes to what you're going through."

He sighed. "Right here, right now — I'm with you. Only you. I'm committed to helping you through this however I can."

Not committed to me. To us. But to helping me through it.

That was something, I guessed.

I hadn't expected him to declare his undying love. To be honest, I'd expected him to avoid me at all costs for a few days.

His hand left my stomach and turned my face towards him.

"Are you really hearing me?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I finally managed to get out. "I hear you."

"Do you believe me?"

I bit my bottom lip, but didn't respond.

"Do you?" he asked quietly, but more forcefully.

I shook my head. "No, I don't believe you," I finally whispered.

"Why not?" His voice was gentle.

"Because it's not true."

Part 104

Clark

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She didn't believe me?

Of course she didn't believe me.

"I mean, I believe that you believe it, but I can't tell you that I believe it because I don't."

"Why not?" I asked her quietly. "It's all true."

She sighed. "I just don't. Most of the time I do, but not now, not lately."

"The hormones getting to you already?" I asked.

She nodded. "It's the only thing I can come up with. I talked to Kristi about it and we raised my medication again, but she said it would take a couple weeks to kick back in."

I breathed a sigh of relief that she was aware of what was going on with her.

"At least you're not avoiding me," she said after a long silence.

"Why do you think I would avoid you?"

She gave me a look of disbelief. "I just told you I think I'm in love with you and I know you're not in love with me. I thought you'd avoid me for a few days."

"The thought crossed my mind," I admitted, "but the more I thought about what you said, the more I heard the depression talking in some of it, and I wanted to make sure that you were okay."

"Thank you."

I sighed. Just because I wasn't in love with her didn't mean I didn't care about her — and not just because she was the mother of my kids.

She rolled back onto her side. "I'm going to get some sleep." She pulled the blanket up over her and closed her eyes.

I rolled my eyes and scooped her into my arms. She squealed and grabbed at me in surprise. "Not on the couch," I told her.

"Are you going to sleep on the couch?" she asked me as I set her on the bed.

I hesitated.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "If you're not sleeping on the bed, then I'm not either. So you may as well let me have the couch if you don't want to sleep in the bed with me."

I didn't answer but about two seconds later, I was sitting on the bed next to her. "Okay?"

It was her turn to hesitate. “Please don’t do anything different or whatever.”

“What?”

“I know you hate sleeping with a shirt on. You don’t have to feel like I’m going to jump you if you come to bed without your shirt on.” She didn’t look at me.

I looked down to realize I hadn’t taken my shirt off. “It wasn’t that,” I told her. “I just hadn’t taken it off yet. Honest.” I took it off and tossed it in the corner before staring at my hands for a minute. “I’m not quite sure what to say or do. I don’t want to hurt you or make anything harder for you or whatever.”

I didn’t know what to do. As far as I knew, before now at least, the only person who’d ever been in love with me was Lana and I was in love right back. How was a guy supposed to act around a friend who admitted to being in love with him?

What about when that friend was also his wife and the mother of his kids?

Maybe when this was all over, I’d write a book: *The Idiot’s Guide to Living in a Quasi-Platonic Marriage While Protecting Your Wife and Kids from an Insane Dictator*.

I’d be rich. I was sure there would be a *huge* market for something like that.

I wondered who’d play me in the movie. Maybe that guy who was in the 90210 eps Lois liked so much.

I sighed. That was not what I needed to be thinking about at the moment. I needed to be thinking about Lois and what I could do for her to help her figure out whatever it was she needed to figure out so that her heart wouldn’t end up broken at the end of all this.

“What can I do to help you work through this? Or whatever it is you need to do.”

She shrugged. “Just be you. I’ll deal with me. Don’t be weird or anything, just be... *us*. Whatever that is. It’s not like I sit around pining or anything. Do I like it when I wake up and you’re lying behind me, with your arm around me? Yeah, but I’m not sure that has anything to do with my feelings; more like I feel safe and protected or whatever and unless you come right out and say ‘Lois, I love you; I want to build a life with you and our kids’ I’m not going to get the wrong idea.” She hadn’t looked at me the whole time. “And I don’t expect you to say that. Ever. And that’s okay. Just don’t get all distant on me, because, as much as I hate to say that I need anyone, I’m going to need you to get through this pregnancy.”

“And I’m going to be there for you this time. I wish I’d done a better job last time, but I can’t go back and change that. *I can* do better this time.”

She sighed. “Thank you.”

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Lois

I’d fallen asleep. Alone.

More or less.

Clark had headed out onto the balcony and stared at the water — or something — for who knew how long.

But when I woke up, he was still sleeping — near me, but not with me. In the same bed, but as far away from me as he could get.

I shouldn’t have told him. It was going to make things all weird.

I sighed and got up to get ready for the day.

Clark was still sleeping when I was ready to go so I headed out. I was glad breakfast was a buffet and I could eat as much as I wanted and it was unlikely that anyone but Clark would notice — especially if I rotated seats; I was also glad there was no assigned seating at breakfast.

I was on about my fifth plate when Clark set his plate down across from me.

“Hungry?” he asked as he bit off a piece of bacon.

I glared at him. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. How many plates is that?”

“Four.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Fine. Five.”

“Was it like this with Christopher?” he asked quietly, taking a bite of his pancakes.

I sighed. “I don’t remember. I think I remember being hungrier than normal now and then, but I remember having some sort of excuse, too. Like Joe and I had gone for a hike or something. And yesterday was pretty normal, wasn’t it?”

He nodded. “I didn’t notice you eating a ton or whatever and we were pretty active yesterday.”

“Maybe it’s catching up with me today,” I suggested. We ate in silence for a few minutes. “Listen, I meant it when I said you could go do something else if you can get a spot on one of the excursions. You don’t have to stay with me.”

“I’m staying with you,” he said quietly. “Nothing’s changed.”

I wasn’t sure I bought the ‘nothing’s changed’ bit and I wasn’t sure I really wanted to hang out with him all day — not if he was going to be weird. So far he didn’t seem to be but...

I sighed.

“What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing,” I said as I ate another bite of French Toast. “Just thinking,” I mumbled around the food.

He stopped eating and leaned towards me. “You know, if you don’t want me to be weird, you can’t be weird either.”

I took another bite so I wouldn’t have to respond vocally, but I nodded.

“I mean it, Lois. I don’t want this to be weird any more than you do, but you have to be okay with it too.”

“I know.”

We finished breakfast and spent the day sightseeing.

Of course, it was also the second formal night of the cruise.

I pulled out the only other cocktail dress I had that still fit. Both of them were black, but this was the one that left most of my back bare.

Clark dressed in a flash as I stood in front of the mirror, trying to get my necklace on. It wasn’t cooperating and I swore under my breath.

“What?”

“I can’t get it,” I told him, setting it on back in the jewelry case. “I’ll wear something else.”

“Would you like me to help you?” he asked. A glance in the mirror showed that he wasn’t looking at me, but working on one of his cuff links.

“If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Besides, we both know you’re going to have to get my tie straight here in a few minutes. It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you,” I said, holding the two ends out for him and tilting my head forward.

He fastened the clasp, then grasped my shoulders lightly, using his thumbs to massage my neck.

I let out a light moan. “That feels so good.”

He continued for several minutes before moving on to my shoulders and upper back, right along either side of my spine. I could feel pointed blasts of heat vision helping loosen the muscles in just the right spots.

“Better?”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’ve been trying to do some of that yourself all afternoon but I didn’t think you’d been too successful.”

“No, I hadn’t.”

“You didn’t sleep well last night.”

It wasn’t a question; it was a statement as he went back to working on his tie.

“Did you?” I asked, avoiding the non-question.

He sighed. “No, not really.”

“Me either.”

I’d noticed over the last several months, and especially the last few weeks, that I slept best the nights that I either fell asleep in his arms or woke up in them.

And there was no way that was going to happen the night before and I doubted it would happen again anytime soon.

Maybe he’d give me a foot rub tonight — he usually did on nights when we were all dressed up. But we usually danced those nights and, somehow, I doubted dancing with me was real high on his list of things to do.

I could see him bending over backwards not to give me the wrong idea — the wrong impression — and ‘encouraging’ me. What I wanted was to enjoy this a bit longer — dancing with him, having him hold me at night, foot rubs, back rubs, letting me take care of him when he needed it — after Pop Pop died, after the Kryptonite — but I didn’t see that happening.

I wanted to enjoy being in love with him while he was being my friend — the quasi-platonic kisses, as we’d taken to calling them, the hand holding, the dancing close...

But I thought I’d ruined all that when I told him I was in love with him.

For a brief instant, part of me wished Lana would meet some accidental fate and that he’d decide that giving us a *real* try might be worth a shot. No, accident wouldn’t work — he’d just mourn her. Move on and get married — maybe.

But I didn’t want to be second choice. I didn’t want to ‘win’ by default. I wanted Clark to *choose* me and Christopher and the baby.

But I still had three and a half years before I had to deal with that. I just wanted to enjoy it without thinking about all of that for a bit.

I stifled a sigh as we headed towards dinner.

~~~~~  
Clark

I got the impression she was holding something back — feeling nervous about something, unsure about how to act around me.

I felt the same way.

I wasn’t sure how to act around her. She said she didn’t want anything to change; she didn’t want me to treat her any differently, but she was acting differently and it was hard not to act differently in response.

I could tell she wasn’t sleeping well as I stared out over the water off of our balcony the night before. She seemed restless, tossing and turning, or at least moving around more than usual.

I thought about suggesting we head back to the ship early so she could take a nap, but I didn’t think that would go over very well so I held my tongue.

I could see the strain in the set of her shoulders and the way she kept rolling her neck throughout the day. I could imagine that she was probably regretting telling me and I could understand why.

I wasn’t sure if I wished she hadn’t told me or not.

It was flattering in a way and it felt good to know that I was appealing to someone besides Lana, but at the same time I wouldn’t want to hurt Lois for the world and I didn’t see how this could any way but badly for her at this point. Even if...

I made myself think it.

Even if Lana and I couldn’t work things out — either she didn’t want to or we started dating again and realized that time had just changed us too much or whatever — I just wasn’t sure I saw myself falling in love with Lois.

Could we live together and parent our kids and be friends and such like we had the last year? Without the being in love part? Being platonic partners in a marriage?

Maybe.

No.

It wouldn’t be enough for me, I didn’t think, and even before Lois said what she said, I didn’t think it would have been enough for her.

No, I knew it wouldn’t be enough for either one of us.

Both of us wanted the kind of relationship we’d seen played out in my parents’ relationship, in Nana and Pop Pop and even Sam and Ellen before she’d died.

Nana and Pop Pop had always said love wasn’t who you could live with; it was who you couldn’t live without.

That was what both of us wanted.

After last night, I had the impression that — for now at least — Lois wanted that kind of relationship with me.

I’d always wanted that with Lana and even though I was coming to the realization that it might not happen with her, I wanted it with someone.

I didn’t know who that someone might be, if not Lana, but wouldn’t I know by now if it was Lois? We’d been together for two years now. Wouldn’t there be some signals, some feelings or whatever, if she was the one I wanted that with?

We made it through dinner — we were both pretty quiet and the people sitting with us left us pretty well alone.

Surprisingly, Lois only picked at her dessert. And since it was chocolate, that was a sure sign that something was very wrong.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly.

She nodded. “Just tired.”

I wasn’t sure I bought that.

She seemed ready to head back to the cabin.

“Um, listen, before we go...” I hesitated.

“What?” she asked expectantly.

“Would you like to dance?”

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Part 105

Lois

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Did I want to dance?

Of course I wanted to dance.

But did I want to dance with a post-revelation Clark? The one who’d been acting a bit odd all day? Of course, I knew I’d been acting a bit odd, too but...

“Please?” he asked quietly. “I’d like to dance with you.”

I nodded. “I’d like that.”

I’d let him dictate how close we danced, how intimately.

Was that the right word? I pondered that as we headed towards the dance floor, Clark’s hand resting lightly on the — bare — small of my back.

I loved dancing with Clark when he held me close to him and...

No.

I wasn’t going to go there.

At least he wanted to dance with me.

We walked onto the dance floor just as one song ended and another began.

It took a few seconds before I realized what song it was. The lyrics reverberated in my head.

/Wise men say/Only fools rush in/But I can’t help falling in love with you.../

He held me as close to him as he had a couple of nights earlier; his chin next to my temple as we moved slowly around the dance floor. His breath played with the loose hair near my face.

/Like a river flows/Surely to the sea/Darling so it goes/Some things are meant to be.../

“Perry loves this song,” Clark said quietly.

I smiled. Over the last few weeks, we’d come to know that our new boss was crazy about Elvis — which explained why he was ordained by the Church of Blue Suede Deliverance.

“I know.”

The chorus or verse or whatever it was repeated in my head.
/Take my hand/Take my whole life, too/For I can't help
falling in love with you.../

I couldn't help falling in love with Clark — it had happened
despite my best intentions. It was only too bad that it wasn't
happening the other way around.

The song ended and another started. He didn't move away
and I wasn't about to.

Of course.

Unchained Melody.

Which could be Clark and Lana's theme song.

I sighed.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said quietly. “Just dancing, that's all. Enjoying
the music.”

“I know you said you didn't want anything to change — is
this okay?”

I nodded. “It's nice.”

“Let me know when your feet start bothering you.”

I smirked. “It's been a song and a half, I think I'm okay.”

“And if you overdo it, I'll give you a foot and calf rub.”

“Thank you. They always help a lot.”

“That's why I'm here.”

I didn't want the night to end, but apparently the band leader
thought that it was a night for romance.

Unforgettable.

Wonderful Tonight.

You Are So Beautiful.

Have I Told You Lately That I Love You.

And on.

And on.

And on.

Any other night, I probably wouldn't have thought twice
about it, but this night...

I wasn't about to stop dancing with Clark until he was ready
to stop dancing with me or until the band decided to pack it in for
the night.

“Your feet are going to be killing you before long,” he said in
the middle of You Are So Beautiful.

They already were but I wasn't about to tell him that.

“I haven't told you that you do look beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you. You look pretty great yourself.” Was that the
kind of thing I wasn't supposed to say anymore?

“I've been thinking a lot about what you said last night and I
wanted you to know something.”

“What's that?”

I wasn't sure I'd believe some sort of declaration of undying
love at this point.

“I *do* love you, Lois. I may not be *in* love with you, but I do
love you. You're one of my best friends, my *best* friend really,
and I can't stand the idea of hurting you.”

I wanted to tell him that he should just fall in love with me,
but I knew that wasn't really the answer. He couldn't *make*
himself fall in love with me any more than I could help falling in
love with him.

The band announced that they'd play one more song and that
was it for the night.

Everything I Do.

Of course.

We danced until the last strains died out and then headed
back to our cabin.

I changed into a pair of shorts pajamas and lay down on the
bed. Clark had already changed and was leaning against the
balcony railing.

“Ready for that foot rub?” he asked, walking back in.

I nodded and rolled onto my stomach. “Thanks.”

“It's what I'm here for,” he told me again.

He found my lotion again and began to work his magic on
my feet and legs.

Before I knew it, I was nearly asleep.

~~~~~

Clark

I was glad when she'd said she wanted to dance. I enjoyed  
dancing with her.

Something felt different, though. Maybe it was just that I was  
more aware of her or that I thought she was more aware of me or  
something.

I tried to act the same as I had a couple of nights earlier; I  
held her close to me, my hand on her back, my chin at her  
temple.

It was romance night or something because every song was  
on someone's top 100 most romantic songs list somewhere.

Perry's favorite, I Can't Help Falling In Love With You — or  
whatever the official title was.

Unchained Melody.

She sighed in my arms.

“What?” I asked her quietly.

There was a pause. “Nothing,” she finally said. “Just dancing,  
that's all. Enjoying the music.”

I stifled as sigh of my own. I didn't believe her, but I didn't  
know whether I should push her or not. “I know you said you  
didn't want anything to change — is this okay?” I wanted to  
make sure that I wasn't making her uncomfortable. But  
everything just felt awkward — not dancing with her, but just  
being together.

She nodded. “It's nice.”

I told her I'd give her a foot rub if she needed one later.

More love songs.

She showed no signs of wanting to stop dancing.

So we kept on dancing.

Neither of us said much as we danced.

Finally, I warned her again about her feet bothering her and  
she didn't respond. I'd bet that they were already bothering her,  
but she didn't want to say anything.

They were playing You Are So Beautiful and I realized I  
hadn't told her how nice she looked.

“I haven't told you that you do look beautiful tonight,” I  
finally said. I hoped that was okay.

“Thank you. You look pretty great yourself.”

I smiled slightly. That was always nice to hear. There was  
something else I'd been thinking about all day. I hesitated before  
I spoke again. “I've been thinking a lot about what you said last  
night and I wanted you to know something.”

“What's that?”

“I *do* love you, Lois. I may not be *in* love with you, but I do  
love you. You're one of my best friends, my *best* friend really,  
and I can't stand the idea of hurting you.” That was the truth. The  
thought of hurting her, hurt me.

But that didn't mean I was in love with her and I couldn't  
make myself fall in love with her, but I didn't want to hurt her  
either.

It was time for the last song.

Everything I Do.

At this point, that described my relationship with Lois —  
more or less. Almost everything I did was, in some way, for Lois.  
That we were married at all was to protect her and Christopher  
and the rest of my life stemmed from that — everything else I  
did.

I kept an arm around her for support as we walked back to  
our cabin. I was sure her feet were hurting way more than she  
would ever let on.

She didn't mean for me to, but I saw her wince slightly as she  
stepped out of her shoes.

She went to the bathroom and I quick changed into a pair of shorts. I stood on the balcony while she changed, waiting to hear her lay down on the bed.

I turned and headed back inside. “Ready for that foot rub?”

She rolled over on to her stomach. “Thanks.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I reminded her, finding her favorite lotion on the vanity. I sat on the bed next to her and squirted some of the lotion into my palm. I warmed it lightly by rubbing my hands together before picking up one foot.

My mind wandered a bit as I gently massaged first her foot and then her calf. I hesitated slightly before moving on to massage the lower part of her thigh. Her deep sigh of relaxation told me it was the right move. I only worked the muscles that weren’t covered by her shorts. When I was finished, with one leg, I started on the other.

When I finally set that leg back down on the bed she was almost asleep.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“You’re welcome.” Another thought had occurred to me. With all the walking we’d been doing... “How’s your back? Sore?”

She nodded slightly, eyes still closed. “It’s okay.”

I moved until I was floating slightly above her and slid my hands under her shirt, gently working the muscles there.

I didn’t think she was fully awake because she leaned up on her arms and pulled her shirt over her head.

“Would you rub my shoulders too please?” she practically sighed.

I gulped at the sight of her completely bare back as she settled down onto the bed, arms tucked under her pillow. She shifted slightly, lifting up to move her pillow and rest her head directly on the mattress, her upper arms straight out from her shoulders and one arm hanging over the side of the bed, bent at the elbow.

I sighed and continued to work on her back muscles and then her shoulders and upper arms.

She was sound asleep by the time I finished.

And she was on top of the covers.

I sighed. She was going to get cold if I didn’t move her underneath and I didn’t think she’d be comfortable if I just put a blanket on top of her. I floated down until I was practically touching her.

I slipped an arm under her stomach, holding her tightly to my chest as I pulled the covers back and moved her pillow back with the other hand. I floated her back down and quickly pulled the covers up over her as she rolled onto her side.

I breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled the covers up over her shoulders.

Now the only question remained...

Where was I going to sleep?

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Lois

My shirt felt weird on my skin.

I started to open my eyes, then thought better of it, opting instead to snuggle farther down under the covers.

Then I realized why my shirt felt weird.

I wasn’t wearing one.

I froze.

Why wasn’t I wearing a shirt?

Was I wearing my shorts?

I breathed a sigh of relief.

I could hear Clark moving around the cabin. He was trying to be quiet, and I appreciated that, but...

“Clark?” I asked tentatively.

“Yeah?” He sounded nervous.

“Where’s my shirt?”

Something landed on my head. “There you go.”

“Do I want to know what happened to it?”

“You took it off while I was giving you a back rub.”

I opened one eye to look at him.

He was looking anywhere but at me.

Great.

“Did I, um, flash you or anything? Because I don’t really remember...” Did I? I remembered him starting to rub my foot and I thought I remembered him rubbing my back but...

He shook his head. “No, nothing like that.” He sighed. “You just leaned up a bit and pulled it over your head.”

That was good.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“It’s okay.”

He wasn’t looking my direction and I quickly — and carefully — pulled it on over my head before sitting up.

“Where did you sleep?” I asked him, noticing that his side of the bed didn’t look slept in.

“Ah, I slept on top of the bed.”

Right.

On top of the bed.

Because he wouldn’t sleep *in* the bed with me if I wasn’t wearing a shirt.

Of course not.

And I probably didn’t want him to, to be honest; not when he wasn’t in love with me because of the places me being shirtless and close to him could lead us.

I sighed and swung my legs out of the bed. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“It’s a day at sea.”

“Right. I’d thought about getting a massage but after last night, I don’t need it. Thank you.”

“You’ve said that about eighteen times,” he told me with a smirk.

I sighed.

“What?”

I stared at my hands as I spoke. “Well, normally, I’d call you Phoebe or something and smirk while making some smart aleck remark about how you should be a professional masseur but then you’d have your hands all over naked women every day and I didn’t think I’d like my husband doing that.” I sighed again. “And I don’t really mean anything by it except a smart aleck, half-flirty remark, but I’m afraid you’re going to take it all wrong or something.” I ran a hand through my flyaway hair. “I shouldn’t have told you, should I?”

He just stared at the floor in front of him for a minute. “No, I’m glad you told me. And if you want to say something like that — which is exactly what I would expect you to say — say it. You told me not to worry that you’d get the wrong idea if I asked you to dance or we woke up next to each other or whatever and I won’t get the wrong idea if you’re your usual sassy self.”

I smiled slightly. “That’s good to know. I don’t want to stop being myself. And I really don’t want you to stop being yourself.”

“Good because I don’t want to have to be someone different.”

A split second later, he was next to me, his arm around me, pulling me to him. He kissed my hair. “I do love you, you know.”

“I know. And I really don’t want us to be weird. I’ll deal with it and by the time Christopher turns five, I’ll be fine.”

“I hope so,” he said quietly. “I don’t *want* to hurt you. Not ever again.”

“You don’t think calling the lawyer will hurt a little bit anyway? If for no other reason than it’s closing a chapter in our lives? Like when you graduated from high school — you’re excited and happy but a little sad at the same time?”

He nodded against me. “Yeah, probably. And it’ll hurt that it’s going to hurt the kids and we’ll have to figure out the best way to make it as easy for them as we can.”

I nodded back.

“You were right, you know,” he said softly.

“About what?”

“That Dad and Chris never put an expiration date on being my dad *or* on their marriages to my mom. I have thought about that and I’m not sure what the solution or answer or whatever is, but you *were* right.”

My heart wanted me to tell him to fall in love with me and stay with me and the boys and commit to a life together, but my head knew that wasn’t a good idea.

We sat like that for another minute before the silence was interrupted by the rumbling of my stomach.

Clark chuckled. “Ready to go clean out the buffet?”

I nodded. “Let me get changed and then we can go.”

He squeezed me lightly before kissing my head again. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I stifled a sigh as I went to get ready.

Part 106

February 2005

Clark

~~~~~

January — once we got back from the cruise — had been a crazy month. Christopher actually had an ear infection — which puzzled me if he was my son; I’d never had one. Mom thought it might because he was only half-Kryptonian, which would be a reasonable explanation. Maybe.

He hadn’t slept well while his ear was bothering him — and who could blame him? Between that and the beginning of the semester, life had been a bit nuts. Lois was still sleeping quite a bit more than usual. We were on the down slope now — at least as far as college was concerned. We were in the spring of our junior year and the end was nearly in sight.

We were both holding our breath though. She’d just passed the ten week mark and wasn’t sick yet. With Christopher, that was about when she’d gotten sick. So far there were no real signs of it, but it would be a few more weeks before we breathed a sigh of relief that she’d missed out on that this time around.

Billy, Jimmy and I were supposed to go to a basketball game, but Jack ended up in town at the last minute. Billy and I had given our tickets to Jimmy and his parents so they could have a night out together — and I knew Jack was a basketball fan.

Billy and I ended up in the theater in the basement with the game on the big screen.

“What’re Lois and Serena doing tonight?” I asked him. “She wasn’t sure since we were taking over the screen down here.”

He shrugged. “They’re hanging out here somewhere, I think.”

“How was Hawaii?” We hadn’t had a chance to talk since they’d gotten back.

He grinned. “We didn’t see much of Hawaii.”

I laughed. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

He told me a little bit about what they had seen — mostly the beach near their hotel. “How was the cruise? Wasn’t that kind of a second — or first — honeymoon for you guys?”

I shrugged. “Kind of. It was a Christmas/anniversary present from Lois and then Sam upgraded our room and covered our excursions and room tab for our anniversary present. But Lois has been pretty tired lately so...” We’d seen plenty of the places we’d been to but I wasn’t sure how to tell Billy that.

“I noticed she’s seemed a bit run down — is something wrong or...”

We hadn’t told anyone else yet, but it wasn’t going to be long before everyone knew anyway. I sighed. “She’s pregnant again. It’s taking a lot out of her, but we haven’t told Perry and Rehalia yet, so...”

“They won’t hear it from me,” he promised.

“Congratulations. When’s the big day?”

“She’s due in late August — right as the semester starts — but Christopher was a month early so...” We were actually guessing that this baby would be early, too, but we’d have to wait and see. “Right now, we’re just hoping that she doesn’t get sick. It was really bad from about ten weeks to twenty weeks or so and she just passed the ten week mark.”

He nodded. “Let us know if there’s anything we can do.”

“We will.”

The pre-game show was almost over. “Do you guys have any big Valentine’s Day plans then?”

I shook my head. “Believe it or not, we’ve never been big Valentine’s Day people. Our first year, she was so sick. Last year, we were busy with school and work and everything and this year... Hoping she’s not going to be sick, mostly at this point.”

He took a long swig of his root beer — no alcohol in Sam’s house, unless it was one of those fundraisers; Ellen’s grandparents had all been alcoholics. “Not sure what we’re doing yet — but would you want to double date if Lois is up to it?”

I shook my head. “Thanks for the offer, but we wouldn’t want to intrude on your first Valentine’s Day together.”

He snorted. “As long as you don’t come home with us, we’ll be fine.”

I laughed with him. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll talk to Lois and get back to you, how’s that?”

“That’s fine.”

“What’s fine?” came a decidedly feminine voice.

We turned to see Lois and Serena walking in with plates of very non-basketball food.

“What’re you two doing down here?” Billy asked, pulling Serena on to his lap.

She picked up a piece of her quesadilla. “We were supposed to have the theater tonight and since you guys are in here instead, we’re joining you.” She took a big bite.

Lois sat in the chair next to me. “Yep.”

I was so glad things weren’t weird between us anymore. We’d settled back into a comfortable space — somewhere sort of like before Pop Pop’s funeral but not quite. Neither of us agonized over every word we said and neither of us read too much into what the other did say.

“I, uh, told Billy,” I told her quietly. “He said he’d keep it quiet.”

She swallowed a bite of her quesadilla. “That’s okay; I told Serena.”

We laughed together, before Lois’ laugh turned into a coughing fit.

And then she bolted.

~~~~~

Lois

Sometimes I hated being pregnant.

The baby at the end was great — labor not so much, but the baby...

But the middle — where I felt so sick I thought I’d never have a normal meal again — that part I hated.

“You okay?”

I glared at Clark. “Go back to your ball game.”

He sank to the floor next to me, taking my hand lightly. “I’m sorry you’re sick.”

I sighed. I wanted to blame him but I couldn’t. *I* was the one who instigated that night. I leaned my head on his shoulder. “I know.”

“Maybe it won’t be as bad this time.”

“I hope not.”

“Me, too, for your sake.”

I sighed again. “Go back to your game. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Yeah. There’s nothing you can do here.”

“I really would hold your hair for you if you wanted me to.”
I gave a half laugh. “Thanks, but no thanks.”
“Let me know if you change your mind.”
“I will.”

He kissed my hair and headed back to the other room.
I rested my head against the wall.
I was sick again.

This was going to be fun.
We spent the rest of the evening watching the basketball game with Billy and Serena and I managed to get some sleep that night.

The next day saw a Saturday shift at the paper.

The newsroom was fairly quiet. I’d been staring at Perry’s office off and on all morning.

He walked through the pit, stopping at my desk. “Lois, can I see you in my office when you have a minute?”

I looked up from the research I was doing. “Be right there.”

Ten minutes later, I knocked on his open door.

He looked up from his desk. “Come on in, darlin’.” He went back to editing until after I’d shut the door behind me. He had a slightly puzzled, slightly concerned look on his face. “What’s goin’ on? And don’t tell me nothin’ ‘cause I know better than that.”

I sat in one of the chairs across from him. I was sure I looked nervous, sitting on the edge of the chair and twisting my fingers together.

He sighed. “I know something’s going on, but relax. About the only thing that would upset me as much you think whatever it is you’re about to tell me will is if you plagiarize regularly or decided that the Star is a better paper.”

I smiled slightly. “No, nothing like that.” I took a deep breath. “I’m pregnant.”

He leaned back in his chair, a smile on his face. “Congratulations. When’s the big day?”

“Technically, I’m due August 24, but Christopher was a month early so really, we’re thinking any time after mid-July is fair game, but the biggest reason I’m telling you now — besides that you noticed something is off — is that it may be starting to affect my job. I’ve been planning all day to tell you.”

He frowned. “You should be past the first trimester, right?”

I shook my head. “Almost. Nearly eleven weeks, but if it’s anything like last time... I didn’t get sick — nearly all day every day for a while — until I was about ten weeks. We’ve kind of been holding our breath hoping that this one would be different, but last night...” I sighed. “I couldn’t keep anything down. I’m hoping it was a one-time thing, but... Last time, it lasted until I was nearly twenty weeks.”

He nodded and chewed thoughtfully on his pen for a long minute. “I’ve got a couple ideas percolating already that I need someone to work on that you might be able to do from home if you need to. Online stuff. You do have reliable internet access?”

I almost snorted. Daddy’d had the most reliable internet since almost before Al Gore invented it. I managed to keep my composure and nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, we’re looking for two things. First, some kind of column for the weekend health and family section. We hadn’t decided what we wanted exactly, but a column about pregnancy — from your perspective — would fit the bill nicely. We can talk more details later.”

I nodded. “That sounds good.”

“And we’ll probably have Clark write companion pieces — from the dad’s perspective.”

“Okay.”

“The other is the new blog section of the website. We’re looking for writers there, too.” He half rolled his eyes. “Franklin Stern wants to be modern and in this day and age...” He sighed. “It could be anything you want — still pregnancy related, for

now at least. Everything from what you managed to keep down that day to fetal development and so on. I’ll want you to run the first few by me before they get posted, just to make sure we’ve got the right feel, and then have Clark or Billy or Serena or Jimmy or someone edit them for you before you post. I don’t have many worries about your grammar and all that — mainly a second set of eyes to catch whatever you miss. We may have Clark do one of those, too.”

I nodded. “That sounds great.”

“And you can do online research for Billy, Serena, Clark, whatever else you can do from home. You’ll still need to keep a time card for me, but as long as you get your work done, I’m not going to be too particular about it and it won’t affect your grade for your internship or anything like that.” He thought for another minute. “Baby On Board: He Says/She Says, by Clark and Lois Kent. If you need to keep it up for a while after the baby’s born, we can probably work something out then, too.”

“Thank you so much, Perry. I appreciate it. I’ll be here as much as I can, though I can’t promise I won’t have to run to the bathroom now and then.”

He smiled at me. “You make sure you take care of that baby, okay?”

I nodded. “I will.”

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Clark

Lois told me the good news — that she’d be able to work from home when she needed to and that we were both going to be published every weekend. That was huge. And we were both going to have blogs, too.

She lay down to take a nap and Christopher woke up early from his.

There was about six inches of fairly fresh snow on the ground. Christopher had been asking to go play in it for two days.

“Wanna go play in the snow?” I asked him as I tried to get him into his snowsuit.

“P’ay?” he asked excitedly, pulling his leg back out of the snowsuit.

I nodded as I — patiently — put his leg back in the suit. “Play in the snow.”

“S’o?” He pulled the other leg out.

“Yep. Snow.”

“Mama p’ay?”

“No, bud. Mama’s sleeping.”

“Mama ‘ap?”

“Mama’s taking a nap,” I confirmed.

“‘ess p’ay?”

“No, Jess is gone.”

He frowned. “‘anpa p’ay?”

“Grandpa’s at work, bud. You and Dad are gonna play.” I managed to get both legs in at the same time and pulled the elastic suspenders over the top of his shoulders. I held his coat for him. “Arms in.”

Obediently, he held out one arm, then the other. I zipped up the coat and pulled a knit cap over his already tousled dark hair. The hood from the coat went over that and I pulled the Velcro over the bottom of his face.

“Okay, boots, bud.”

He tried to sit down semi-gracefully, but ended up plopping on his well-padded rear.

I picked up one boot. “Foot.” He held up the wrong foot. “Other foot.” He switched and I managed to get the boot on and tied. I picked the second boot up. “Other foot.” He switched again and I got that boot on. I pulled on the mitten that was strung through the sleeves of his coat. “Hand.” He held his hand out and after a bit of maneuvering, his thumb and fingers were separated. I pulled on the other mitten. “Hand.” We repeated the process with his other hand.

I held out both of my hands and he put his in them. I pulled him up. “Let Dad get his coat and gloves on and we’ll go.” I pulled on my hat, coat and gloves as he waddled towards the back door.

I opened the door and held his hand as he carefully stepped in the small pile of snow that had drifted up next to the door.

“S’o!” he yelled excitedly

I laughed. “Yep. Snow.” I shut the door behind me and grabbed both of his hands swinging him through the air as I headed down the stairs from the deck to the yard.

His giggles filled the air.

I set him down in the middle of the yard in a drift that came to about his waist. He giggled. “S’o’ma’, Daddy!”

I laughed. “Snowman it is.”

He struggled through the snow helping me roll three balls. We found tree branches that he stuck in the sides. He pushed the acorns we found in for eyes — they were more than a little lopsided, but that was okay. We put another one in for the nose and made a mouth.

He insisted on buttons as well, but those had to go all the way to the ground so we had to traipse back over to find more acorns. I did my best to break a trail for him. The snow really wasn’t that deep but he wasn’t that tall either.

He moved back and looked at the completed snowman.

“’anpa. ‘anpa s’o’ma’.”

“Grandpa snowman?”

“Uh huh.”

His nose was starting to get a little red and he was a bit sniffly.

“Time to go inside, bud.”

I scooped him under my arm and zoomed around the yard for a few minutes before heading back inside. He was still laughing as we took off his snow suit.

He sat on the counter, babbling nearly non-stop as I made a cup of hot chocolate to share with him. I only understood about a third of what he was saying, but that didn’t stop him.

We worked together to blow on the steaming liquid. He ate the mini-marshmallows straight out of the bag and we took turns taking sips.

Out of nowhere, he stopped and looked at me intently with his big brown eyes. “Wuv ‘ou, Daddy.”

I wasn’t sure why, but for some reason it caught me off-guard and my eyes welled up.

“I love you, too, little man. I love you, too.”

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Part 107

April 2005

Lois

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I looked out the window.

Sort of.

I could only see a bit of sunset orange out any of the windows at the moment. I sighed deeply.

I was so sick of being sick.

Clark had definitely been much more attentive this time around. He’d rubbed my back and brought me soup and anything else I needed and most of what I wanted — pretty much everything I’d gotten up the nerve to ask for. I hadn’t asked for a flight and, to be honest, wasn’t sure I was up for one.

Working from home was nice, too. I was able to work from bed when I needed to or the couch when I was feeling a bit better. The columns and blogs were popular — or as popular as something like could be.

Since Christopher was in the house somewhere with Jessica we hadn’t bothered locking the main door to our wing. I heard a noise out there and froze — even though I wasn’t moving much as it was.

“Mama?”

I breathed a sigh of relief and rolled over. “In here, buddy.”

I could only see the top of his head as he came into the room. I could hear his breathing and he seemed a bit out of breath.

I heard him set something on the ground and then he struggled to climb onto the nightstand and then the bed. I held out a hand to help him but he wouldn’t let me. When he was about half-way up, he stopped and climbed back down. He set something on the nightstand, but the pillow was in my way and I couldn’t see what it was.

But it crinkled.

And thunked.

A minute later, he’d struggled back up onto the bed.

He plopped back onto Clark’s pillow with a sigh.

He rolled to look at me. “Mama, si’?”

I nodded. “Mama’s sick, bud.”

“Baby?”

I nodded again. “Yeah, the baby’s making Mama sick.” We hadn’t really sat him down and told him that he was going to be a big brother, but when I’d started getting sick, he’d noticed and we’d told him that I had a baby in my tummy.

He frowned and crawled over next to me, pulling my shirt up and looking at my baby bump. “Be ‘ice, Baby.”

I smiled at him. “It’s okay. It’s not Baby’s fault.”

He kissed my stomach. “Wuv ‘ou, Baby.”

My heart melted even as I cringed. He put both hands on my stomach and pushed himself up, but I tried to ignore the pain. I tried to hide it, but he didn’t notice at all. He bounded back to the other side of the bed.

“Careful, Christopher,” I warned.

He jumped up and landed on his rear before crawling the last little bit. I heard the crinkling and thunking again as he pulled whatever it was towards him and turned around.

“’ere go, Mama.”

He handed me a very mangled package of saltines and a Sprite that I didn’t think I’d be opening any time soon.

“Oh, thank you!” I pulled him to my side and kissing his hair. “You are my favorite little man. Thank you so much.” I set them both to the side. “I’ll eat them later, okay.”

He nodded before crawling under the covers and snuggling in next to me. He turned and crawled back to the other side of the bed, grabbing the remote that was sitting on Clark’s nightstand before cuddling back in by me.

He handed me the remote. “Ja’ Ja’.”

I laughed. “Okay. We can watch Jack Jack.”

‘The Incredibles’ was already in the DVD player and, as always, we started with the Jack Jack short. He giggled and cheered as Jack Jack went through his assorted... powers. When it was over, I started the movie.

For some reason, he loved this movie.

It was the only movie he’d sit through and watch from beginning to end — and it wasn’t a short movie. I thought he liked the bright colors.

Or maybe he had some clue that his dad could have been a super.

That it was possible that he could someday be a super or something.

Clark had mentioned in passing that the idea of a secret superhero identity appealed to him, but he said it would be a while before he’d seriously think about it.

It would probably depend on whether Lana would let him once he was back with her.

Would I... ‘let him’? If he wanted to become a superhero while we were married and he asked my... permission, would I be okay with that?

I’d seen him watching the coverage of the aftermath of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean after Christmas. I could see it tearing

him apart. He wanted to go help, and I thought about encouraging him to, but I just couldn't.

If it hadn't been for Navance, I probably would have, but if someone realized what was going on — if he got caught on tape or something...

In the end, I thought he agreed that it wouldn't be a good idea for him to go either. Not now.

Maybe someday.

Violet managed to rescue her family as Clark walked in.

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Clark

"Daddy!"

Lois reached for the remote and paused the movie as

Christopher jumped at me, trusting me to catch him.

"What're you watching?" I asked, even though I knew.

"Mama, me, baby wa' Ja' Ja'."

"Jack Jack?" My brow furrowed. "Do you like Jack Jack?"

He frowned. "Daddy," he said, with a warning tone. He wiggled down and grabbed my hand as he headed back to Lois' side.

I laughed and crawled onto the bed with them to watch the end of the movie. He kept tugging on my arm until I was right next to Lois and he then wiggled between us.

He frowned and pushed on me. "'ove."

I obliged and he determinedly tugged the covers down. I tried to help him but he told me not to. He was going to do it himself. When he was satisfied, he patted the bed next to Lois. "'ome on, Daddy."

I laughed again and toed off my shoes.

He sat cross-legged and glared at me. "'amas, Daddy."

Right. Pajamas. "Okay, bud. I'll go put some pajamas on." It made sense. Lois was in pajamas — a different pair than this morning, I noticed. That meant she'd felt well enough to get up and take a shower and stuff and some point.

I headed into the closet and took my pants off, pulling a pair of pajama pants on in their place before heading back into the bedroom.

Christopher giggled as I crawled towards him on the bed, growling slightly. When I got close enough, I grabbed him and gently tossed him onto the bed.

"Daddy!" He was rolling as I tickled him.

"He's never going to go to sleep tonight if you get him all riled up," Lois said, with just a hint of a reprimand in her voice.

"I'll stay up with him if I need to," I told her as he started pulling on my shirt. I pulled it over my head and tossed it onto the chair by the closet.

He pulled me back on to the bed near Lois. I sat as close to her as I could without making her uncomfortable while still being close enough to make Christopher happy.

He snuggled back between us and pointed the to the TV. "P'ay, Mama."

"Yes, sir," she said with a mock salute with the remote. She hit play and the blue screen was replaced by the bright colors of the movie.

I knew I had to tell her what had happened.

I'd done a rescue. I managed to make it look legit, but...

The lake in the middle of the NTNF had a stranded boat in it. The weird thing was... it was like a cross between Gilligan's Island and Tommy Boy.

It was a sailboat, with no wind, stuck on a little island in the middle of the lake.

Apparently, they were doing a sailboat tour of the lake and the wind died down and the back-up motor wasn't working for some reason.

I'd borrowed a rowboat from an unoccupied cabin and headed out there.

I sighed. I was going to have to tell her — Ralph had been

one of the people I'd rescued.

"Something happened today," I said quietly. "Just now."

"What's that?" she asked, not really looking at me.

"Uh, there was a boat stuck on that little island on the lake."

Her head turned sharply my direction. "And?"

I told her what had happened — how I'd gotten out there.

"And they didn't question why you were rowing out in the middle of the lake?" she asked with a raised brow.

"Ralph was the most intelligent one of the bunch," I answered. "Ralph."

She winced. "That couldn't have been fun. He makes Gilligan look like a combination of the Albert Einstein, Fred Astair and Bob Vila."

I swallowed a laugh when Christopher glared at me. "Yeah."

"How'd they get out of there?"

"Their motor wasn't working and I told them the wind had picked up so I pushed them off and blew them to shore."

"And they didn't notice anything?"

I shook my head. "Ralph? Please. He couldn't figure out how to fasten Velcro without step by step instructions."

She groaned. "True."

"Shhhhhh," Christopher interrupted.

We shared an amused look and I snuggled back down under the covers with Christopher.

It put me close to Lois; much closer than I usually was.

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Lois

Clark was warm.

He was always warm, but that wasn't the point.

Christopher had forced us into much closer proximity than we usually were. What I really wanted from him was for him to hold me while we lay here — with Christopher or any other time.

I wanted to feel loved.

I stifled I sigh.

I knew it was at least partly my own fault. I was sure I wasn't sending off 'please love me, stay with me, have a family with me' vibes.

And Clark wasn't in love with me so it wasn't really fair of me to want to feel loved by him.

I felt *cared for*.

I knew Clark cared about me — and not *just* because I was having his baby.

We hadn't seen much of each other in the last few weeks. I'd worked from home most days — making it to school most of the time but that was about it. The first few weeks after I started getting sick weren't too bad — not until about six or seven at night — so I was able to go to school and the Planet most of the time. But once I hit about fifteen weeks pregnant...

It had been downhill from there.

Now I was just over nineteen weeks and the last couple days hadn't been quite as bad.

And I'd managed to stay out of the emergency room.

I realized that Christopher was sound asleep by the time the mole people showed up.

"See?" Clark said quietly. "Right out."

I smiled at him, reaching over to brush Christopher's hair off his face. "You know, you never have told me how you cut your hair and shave. We'll have to deal with that with them, won't we?"

He shrugged. "Christopher's been sick. I mean, I know we're going off the assumption that he's my biological son, but there's no way if any of this is hereditary or not. I never had ear infections or colds or anything like that."

"No," I said slowly. "But Christopher and this baby are only half Kryptonian. Despite the cold and ear infection, he's been very healthy. Dr. Shanks thinks he looks great for his age and he's developing well. No one's noticed anything odd about him at all."

I sighed. “I should have said this a long time ago, but I’m sorry about the half-alien thing. I didn’t mean anything by it other than it’s technically accurate.” I gently stroked Christopher’s hair. “I really didn’t mean anything bad by it or as an insult or anything like that. Anymore than I might say someone was half-Italian or something.”

“I know. It stung for a minute, but I didn’t really think you meant anything by it,” he said quietly.

“I didn’t. I don’t think of you like that; I never have. You’re Clark — my roommate, friend, guy who takes me flying sometimes; not a little green man or anything like that.”

“Thanks. I think.”

We sat there for a few minutes, without saying anything.

“You’re feeling a bit better?” he finally asked.

I nodded. “I’m sick of being sick and today wasn’t fun but it was better than last week was.”

“That’s good. I’m glad. Something else we haven’t talked about...”

“What’s that?”

“Are we finding out if we’re having a boy or girl?”

I shrugged. “As much as I like knowing everything, I kind of liked not knowing, too. Do you want to know?”

“Kind of, but it’s up to you. You’re the one who has to be pregnant and go through labor and delivery.”

“Think about it a bit more?” I asked him. “The ultrasound isn’t until next week.”

He nodded before moving to lift Christopher into his arms. He floated up off the bed and over me until he could stand up. “I’ll be right back.”

I snuggled back down under the covers, hearing the crinkling sound of the package of Saltines.

“They’re a little mashed,” Clark said as he came back in, amusement in his voice.

“Christopher brought them for me,” I told him as I dug the Sprite out from under the covers, too. “I’d open that one over the sink.” I set them both on the nightstand. “He managed to get them all the way up here.”

“How has he never managed to get lost in this place?” he asked as I hit the remote to turn the DVD off. He flipped through the TIVO recordings and selected the most recent NCIS. “You’ve probably already watched it — do you mind?”

“No, go ahead. I think I’m going to write another blog entry since I didn’t get one done today.”

He started the episode before hitting pause. “Are you really okay?”

I shrugged as I opened my laptop. “I’m a bit better today and should keep getting better if Christopher was any indication.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I looked up. “What did you mean then?”

“I mean, overall. The depression, everything.”

The whole I’m in love with him thing. That’s what he wasn’t saying.

I’d told him I’d be okay and I would — I thought. Eventually. For the last few weeks, I hadn’t really been able to think about it — other than be grateful that things were better than last time.

“I’m fine,” I told him. It wasn’t entirely accurate but it wasn’t inaccurate either.

“Is there anything you need? Anything I can do before I start this?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m okay. Make sure the Saltines and Sprite are gone before Christopher gets up in the morning.”

He laughed, zipping around to get rid of them for me.

“Thanks,” I told him.

“No problem. That’s what I’m here for. Superfast clean up.”

I smiled. “That’s good, because...” I stopped. *We* were never going to inherit this house so I could delegate all cleaning to him. *He’d* be gone long before then.

“What?”

I forced another smile. “Nothing. Just that’s why I married you, you know. Insane dictators and superfast cleaning.”

He gave me an odd look, like he didn’t believe me but turned NCIS back on.

I stifled a sigh and went back to my blog, wondering what would happen if I really wrote about my life.

Yeah, like anyone would want to read that — *The Idiot’s Guide to Living in a Quasi-Platonic Marriage When You’re In Love With Your Husband and He’s Not In Love With You While Protecting Your Son From an Insane Dictator.*

Yeah, that’d be a best seller.

I wondered who would play me in the movie.

Maybe that chick from *The New Adventures of Batman* show in the mid-90s. She was cute.

Nah.

I put it out of my mind and got to work.

Part 108

Clark

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We waited for the tech to get everything set up for the ultrasound. Lois was grumbling again about needed to go to the bathroom, but at least she’d managed to keep all the water down.

“Ready?” the tech asked.

Lois nodded, wiggling slightly to get a bit more comfortable.

“Do you want to know if you’re having a boy or a girl?”

Lois looked at me. We’d talked about it some more, but hadn’t really come to a decision.

“It’s up to you,” I said.

She looked back at the tech. “I want to know.”

I chuckled and she glared at me. It didn’t surprise me that she wanted to know this time around. Even though she hadn’t come right out and said it until just then.

I was awed when the image appeared on the screen. “There he is,” I whispered, it coming out in my voice.

“He?” she asked, amused.

“Or she. Whichever.”

Ten minutes later, the tech frowned. “I’m sorry. This little guy or gal is *not* cooperating and I can’t tell if you’re having a boy or girl.”

Lois sighed. “Fine.” She gave me an odd look.

I wondered if she’d want me to take a look at some point so that she could know.

That thought made me nervous. I wasn’t sure if my vision doohickey was actually some kind of x-ray or what but I didn’t know if it would hurt the baby.

We went to the waiting room to wait our turn to see Kristi.

“Is it different this time?” she asked quietly.

I knew immediately what she meant. Was it different this time because I knew this baby was mine?

“Maybe,” I said finally. “I mean, seeing Christopher’s ultrasound was very cool but...”

“Right.”

Should it be different?

I believed that Christopher was my son, but I hadn’t known that at the time — at the time, I’d had no idea that it was even a possibility.

“Lois?”

We looked up and headed to the exam room. Lois made her standard complaints about weighing in and after a few minutes, Kristi came in.

“How’re you feeling, Lois?” she asked as she washed her hands.

“A bit better. I haven’t thrown up in about three days.”

“That’s great.”

We chatted idly about the pregnancy and such for a few

minutes — she asked about Christopher and Sam and if the Wellbutrin was still working.

“Well,” she finally said, “this baby is measuring a few days bigger than normal, too, but again, that’s nothing to be concerned about at this point. I’ll probably keep a closer eye on you after about 32 weeks, but otherwise…” She motioned for Lois to lay back and then measured her stomach. “About half a week ahead, just as I’d expect.”

“Did she measure bigger last time?” I asked.

Kristi looked at her notes. “Maybe a smidge, but that’s it.”

So between sixteen and twenty weeks, there was a growth spurt? Maybe?

That was something to keep in mind if I ever had another baby with someone.

“Did she ever measure any bigger than a few days last time?”

I asked. “Was that why he was early or something?”

Kristi flipped through the notes from Christopher’s pregnancy. “Well, she stayed between three and five days bigger after twenty weeks, but it was kind of back and forth — three one time, five the next, three again, four — and so on. I didn’t measure her that last day because she was already in labor and I usually do the exam then measure.”

I nodded. Good to know. Another growth spurt between 34 and 36 weeks or so?

Lois glanced at me but I couldn’t read her look.

Thirty minutes later, we were headed to the Daily Planet.

“What was with the questions about how big I am?” she asked from the passenger seat of the truck.

I shrugged. “Just trying to figure out half-Kryptonian pregnancies.”

“So you know what’s normal when Lana’s pregnant?” she asked, not looking at me.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know the last time I’d brought Lana up in conversation. No, the last time I’d brought her up in conversation was when I’d seen her right after we found out Lois was pregnant again.

Did that mean we hadn’t talked about her?

No.

Lois had brought her, the divorce and my subsequent remarriage to Lana up more than once — probably once a month or more.

“You never know,” she went on. “It could be that half-Kryptonian pregnancies only affect *me* this way and will affect her differently.”

I didn’t say anything but simply nodded. That was possible, I guessed. That a half-Kryptonian pregnancy would be different for every woman, just like regular pregnancy was different for every woman.

I got my parking ticket, parked and we headed to the newsroom.

“So?” Serena asked, excited as we got situated at our desks.

“Little one wouldn’t cooperate,” Lois grumbled. “Just like his dad,” she added nearly under her breath.

What was that about?

I wouldn’t cooperate? About what?

Because I wasn’t in love with her?

“Kent!” The bellow came from Perry’s office.

“Which one?” Lois hollered back.

“You!” he bellowed.

She sighed and I held out a hand to her to help her up. She waved it off, managing to pull herself up out of the chair before heading to his office.

~~~~~  
Lois

“What’s up, Perry?” I asked, sinking into one of the big chairs.

“How’d the ultrasound go, darlin’?”

I shrugged. “Fine. No cooperation so we don’t know if we’re having a boy or a girl.”

“Sorry about that.”

“We’ll find out in a few months, I guess. She did mention keeping a closer eye on me and having me take it easy after about 32 weeks or so since Christopher was a month early.”

He nodded. “You keep me posted.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. “Now, I know you’ve been worried about getting your hours in and all that, and I wanted to you to know that you’re doing fine. I’ve talked to your journalism professors and they’re pleased with your work, as well.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought I’d been doing okay, but it was good to hear it. “Thank you, Perry.”

“Now, because of the popularity of your columns, I want you to keep writing it after the baby’s born. You can build up some internship hours over the summer — fewer a week over a longer period so you’ll still have enough when the time comes. From home when you need to.”

“Thank you. You’ve been very generous in working with me on this.”

He waved it off. “Nonsense. I know an investigative reporter in the rough when I see one. It’s an investment in the future of the Daily Planet.”

I smiled at him. “Well, thank you anyway.”

We chatted for a few more minutes about the direction the blogs and columns would go and then I headed back out into the newsroom.

I was ready to spend a day in the Planet. It had been a while.

After a fairly productive few hours, we headed home. Clark spent an hour or so with Christopher while I collapsed and took a short nap.

I was awake when he came in to get ready for bed.

“Can I ask you something?” he said suddenly, walking out of the closet in a pair of pajama pants and no shirt.

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Why do you bring up Lana all the time?”

I looked up sharply to see him staring right at me. “What?”

“The last time I brought up Lana was when I saw her and told her you were pregnant. Every other time we’ve talked about her since… I don’t even know when, you’re the one who brings her up.”

I shrugged. “So what’s your point?”

“If I don’t bring her up, why do you?”

I sighed. “Why not? Today, you asked questions about my half-Kryptonian pregnancies. What other reason would you have for wanting that information? It’s not like we’re going to have any more babies,” I pointed out. “For us to have more babies, we’d have to make love again and that’s not going to happen. You don’t want to be close enough to me to touch me most of the time — unless I’m puking or you’re being all nice about the pregnancy — so how exactly would I manage to get pregnant again in the next three years?”

He looked incredulous. “You don’t want me anywhere near you most of the time. I’ve tried to respect that; to not intrude on your space.”

“Fine. You don’t want to ‘intrude on my space,’” I repeated sarcastically — complete with a roll of my eyes. “But that fits in well with what you actually want, which is to not be that close to me any more than absolutely necessary.”

He sighed. “You still didn’t answer my question. Why do you always bring up Lana?”

“Today, you asked questions about *my* pregnancies, presumably so you’d have a better idea of what half-Kryptonian pregnancies are like and since we’re not ever going to do the things that would lead to having any more kids, you must want to know for someone else’s pregnancy. *Lana* is the most obvious choice, unless you’ve moved on to someone else without telling

me. Did Pete and Rachel break up?"

"What on *Earth* are you talking about?" He shook his head. "I've *never* cheated on you — unless you count those two kisses with Lana cheating, and you probably should, I admit that — but except for that, I've *never* cheated on you."

"You don't have to actually cheat on me to know who you want to move on with your life with," I told him quietly.

He sat in the chair. "True, but it's not true."

"So you're asking for whenever you and Lana decide to have kids? Now that you know that a half-Kryptonian pregnancy won't kill her."

He groaned in frustration. "*Why* do you do that to yourself?"

"What are you talking about?"

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Clark

"Are you trying to torture yourself or something?" I didn't understand why she did that. "You're the one who brings up Lana and the divorce *every* time. I don't know when the last time I brought it up was." I sighed. "Is it some kind of defense mechanism or something?"

"What?"

"I don't know. You keep making sure that neither one of us forgets about the temporary nature of this marriage. Is that some way of trying to protect yourself or something?"

"I really don't want to talk about this," she insisted stubbornly. "I'll take your word for it that you never bring up Lana or the divorce because you're the one with the eidetic memory. And I don't think there's any kind of deep seated reason why they get brought up. You may not have mentioned Lana in months, but when was the last time you thought about her? The last time you thought about what life will be like with her after this is over?"

"I don't know," I told her honestly.

"Then give me a ballpark. This week? Last week? Last month?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It's been a while. I made myself stop thinking about her like that a long time ago."

That was met with a long silence. "What?" she finally asked.

"I realized that as long as I was obsessing, even in silence, about life with Lana or whatever, it was making our life here and now miserable. Or at least part of what was making our lives miserable. And I knew that I had to stop doing that, so I did. Or I tried to. Took me a while, but, for the most part, I've stopped thinking about that. Every once in a while something slips through, but..."

"Oh," she said quietly. "What about dreams? Do you dream about her?"

"Sometimes," I told her honestly. "I don't know how I can control that though. And less lately." I wasn't sure what that meant. A lot less lately. Hardly at all since Lois had gotten pregnant. Since we'd... made love.

Suddenly, I wished again that the ship would have big enough for both me and my brother and I sighed.

"But you aren't planning on this marriage lasting past Navance's death or Christopher's fifth birthday."

"No," I said, as gently as I could. "Do you want it to?"

"It doesn't matter what I want. If you don't want to stay together because you really want to be together, we're not staying together — and not just because you have no place better to go. Period. End of discussion."

"And you?"

"You know what I want *right now*," she told me, staring into the distance. "But by then... I'll be ready for it. I'll know it's coming and will prepare myself and I'll be fine. It'll hurt more if the kids decide they want to live with you because the only thing I could do about that would be to decide not to love my kids and I can't do that."

"No, you can't." But she could stop loving me?

Where did that thought come from?

Did I want her to?

The answer was... yes. I thought. If she didn't stop being *in* love with me, she was going to get hurt — badly — and I didn't want that for her.

Would Christopher — and this new baby, who would be almost three by then — want to live with me? Would I want them to?

The answer to that was a resounding 'yes', but would I want to take them from their mom?

The answer to that was a resounding 'no'.

So where did that leave me?

I sighed.

I had no idea.

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Part 109

May 2005

Lois

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It was my birthday.

Would it be any better than two years ago?

The year before hadn't been *too* bad.

Clark had offered to take me flying but it hadn't happened. He'd done well with my gift though — an assortment of NCIS memorabilia: a 100th episode hat and T-shirt, a Jenny Shepard ID tag and an autographed picture of Cote de Pablo/Ziva.

She was my favorite — because she kicked... butt. She *never* would have gotten stuck with Navance. She would have kick boxed her way out or something. Even if she was pregnant and sick.

I wondered if he'd get me something this year. He'd done good at Christmas; surely he would for my birthday, too, right?

I managed to lumber down the stairs and collapse in the living room.

"Mama!" Christopher ran over and climbed on the couch next to me. He pulled up my shirt. "Hi, baby."

I laughed as the baby shifted in my stomach, the bump moving from one side to the other. "The baby says hi to his big brother."

"Me!" he exclaimed grinning and bouncing next to me.

"Yep. You're going to be a great big brother, aren't you?"

He nodded, then turned. "G'an'pa!"

"Hi, Daddy," I said without turning.

"Happy birthday, Princess."

"Thanks, Daddy."

"Daddy say Mama s'leep," Christopher told me seriously.

"He wanted to wake you up to tell you happy birthday," Clark said, walking into the room and handing me a cup of coffee.

"Thank you. And thank you for not waking me up."

"I figured you could use the sleep."

"You figured right." I closed my eyes and blew lightly on the coffee before taking a sip.

"So what's on the agenda for the day?" Dad asked. "Vicki's making whatever you want for dinner."

"Nope," Clark said. "We're heading up to the cabin tonight and I'm making her favorite dinner."

"I thought you were going tomorrow night," Dad asked him, puzzled.

"We were, but I have to work early the next day so..." Clark frowned. "Didn't I tell you?"

"We're going to the cabin?" I asked.

Clark nodded. "You're cashing in your dinner night."

"What?"

He rolled his eyes. "Remember? I promised you your favorite dinner at the cabin as one of your anniversary presents. But it

snowed the weekend we were going to go and then you got sick.”

“Right.”

It sounded nice actually. If we didn’t have to come back until late tomorrow, I could sleep as late as I wanted and if Clark was cooking tonight, it was bound to be good and I wasn’t sick anymore so I could actually enjoy it.

“Will there be chocolate cake?” I asked him.

He laughed. “Of course.”

“When do we leave?”

He and Daddy both laughed at that.

“After lunch,” Clark told me. “Christopher wanted you to himself this morning. He said something about Jack Jack downstairs.”

I rolled my eyes. “I bet he did. What if we went to see the horses?” I asked him.

He was still cuddled next to me and seemed to think about that carefully. “Kay.” He climbed down. “Let’s go.”

I laughed. “I have to eat breakfast first.”

He sighed deeply, before settling back in next to me. “Kay.” I laughed.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Clark headed back into the kitchen.

“Are you taking orders?”

“Whatever you want, birthday girl.”

“French toast with powdered sugar, a couple eggs and bacon,” I called.

“Did your appetite increase again?” he called back.

“I’m making up for lost time.”

Daddy brow furrowed. “Did this happen with Christopher? Did you have a second ‘eat everything in sight’ phase?”

I thought for a few minutes. “I don’t think so, but at this point, I’d call it an anomaly. We’ll have to see if it sustains.”

I chatted quietly with Daddy and cuddled with Christopher until Clark told me that my breakfast was ready.

I waddled into the kitchen and managed to get up onto one of the stools at the bar. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he said with a smile. “What do you want for dinner?”

“I thought you had it all planned out.” I took a big bite of scrambled eggs.

“I do, but just in case you wanted something different.”

I thought for a minute. “Whatever you have planned is fine. There’s no aversions I can think of.”

“Okay.”

I finished my breakfast and then spent the morning with Christopher down in the barn with the horses. We took carrots and apples with us and fed the horses. There was one mare who would be giving birth soon and Christopher was excited about that. We told him he could name the new baby horse.

We had his favorite — hot dogs and macaroni — for lunch and then put him down for his nap. Jessica returned from wherever she’d gone to take over from there.

Clark and I threw a few things in a bag and headed towards the cabin.

I slept nearly the whole way.

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Clark

I was glad she was feeling better.

Even though we’d been through it before with Christopher, it was harder this time to see her sick. Maybe it was because I knew that I was at least partially the cause of it.

She’d been so miserable, but at least she’d managed to stay out of the ER this time. That was a relief.

Sam had helped me get her a great present, one I knew she would like. It hadn’t cost much of anything, but I hoped she’d appreciate the thought rather than the dollar value.

I pulled into the garage and reached over to touch her

shoulder gently. “Lois, we’re here.”

“Huh?” She sat up sleepily. “I slept the whole way, didn’t I?” she asked with a big yawn.

“Pretty close,” I told her with a grin.

“Sorry.” She yawned again.

I laughed. “It’s okay. You needed the rest.”

She opened her door and got out of the Jeep. Even though she still wasn’t even thirty weeks pregnant, the changes in her body were more than making her uncomfortable.

“So what’s on the agenda for the afternoon?” she asked as she headed up the half staircase to the cabin.

“Whatever you want,” I told her. “Movie, games, another nap — it’s your call.”

“Okay. Then what’s for dinner and when is it?” She sank on to the couch.

I laughed again. “I’d planned on Creamy, Cheesy Chicken and Pasta with garlic bread and corn on the cob and chocolate cake for dessert.”

“Yum.”

I deposited our bags in our room — our room. It was coming much easier. I hadn’t even thought about staying somewhere else this time.

“So what do you want to do?”

“Treadmill?” she asked. “Bungee jumping?”

I rolled my eyes as I sat in the big chair. “Seriously. Ready to challenge me at Scrabble again?”

“We are not playing Scrabble.”

“Poker?”

“No.”

I pulled my glasses down and looked at the game and movie cabinet. “Taboo is out. So is Pictionary. Scattergories?”

“I could go for Scattergories.”

I went and got it out of the cabinet, handing her a folder and a set of cards and finding a working pen in the box.

Thirty minutes later, I was groaning again as she added up her points — and was more than just a bit smug about it.

“Want to go for double or nothing?” she asked.

“What were we betting?”

“Well, if you lost, you were going to give me a foot rub, and if you won, you were going to get to give me a foot rub.” Her look dared me to try to argue with her.

“So if you win — or you lose — you get both feet massaged?”

She glared at me. “A foot rub includes both feet.”

“So if I lose — or you win — what do you get this time? A foot rub and…”

“Legs, both of them.”

I nodded. “Scattergories again?”

“Did you get any better in the last five minutes, Dr. Suess?”

“You never know.”

She shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

“Your birthday, you pick the game.” It didn’t really matter — either way she won and she knew it and I knew it and she knew I knew it. “Monopoly?”

I expected a snap answer — either way, but instead she just stared at the still-open cabinet for a minute.

“No,” she said quietly. “We don’t play Monopoly anymore.”

Right. “Sorry,” I said quietly. “World domination?” I asked, looking at Risk. She was good at that game.

“Can I turn Latislan into a parking lot?”

I winced. Another letter had come a week earlier and, as usual, had sent her into a fairly foul mood whenever the subject came up — worse moods than when it had been a while. “That’s a bit of overkill, don’t you think? I’d bet most of the people there want him gone — probably some worse than we do.”

“Probably,” she admitted grudgingly. “Is there an assassination option?”

I shook my head.

“Then, no. No world domination today.”

“Battleship?”

She nodded. “That we can do.”

It was a kid’s game, but we’d had fun playing it before. It was more fun when we’d played in a group of about six — winner was the last one with ships still afloat and you had to try to remember what everyone else had done — but we allowed pen and paper to help with that.

We played games for a couple more hours — during which time Lois also managed to acquire the rights to a back rub, a chilled room with a fire going even though it was May, a neck rub, feeding her chocolate cake while she reclined on the sofa, and a scalp massage complete with hair washing if we could find a comfortable way for her put her head in the sink — like at a salon and salon sinks were one thing that Sam didn’t have at the house.

I had the feeling she was looking forward to collecting.

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Lois

I was looking forward to collecting what I’d won — and I’d won fair and square, though I thought Clark might protest that a bit. I was pregnant and it was my birthday — I got to make the rules.

He was in the kitchen making dinner while I flipped through a magazine I’d brought.

Suddenly, there was a whooshing sound to our room and then another back to the kitchen.

I didn’t even look up.

“There’s something there for you,” he called a few minutes later.

I looked up to see a beautifully wrapped box. My eyebrows went up. “The trip and dinner aren’t my birthday present?”

“No, those are from our anniversary, remember?”

“Well, thanks.”

He smiled at me as he leaned on one hip against the counter. “It didn’t really cost much but some time and phone calls — and your dad made the biggest one of those for me — but I hope you like it.”

I shot him a puzzled look as I tugged on the ribbon. It wouldn’t come off.

He laughed as I kept tugging. “Just rip the paper.”

I glared at him and then did just that. It was a shirt box from Macy’s but I knew it wasn’t shirts inside.

I shook the lid off so the bottom landed in my lap.

I gasped. “Are you for real?!”

Inside were two autographed NCIS scripts. ‘Twisted Sister’ where Tim McGee’s secret identity as Thom E. Gemcity the popular novelist was revealed and ‘Cover Story’ where his as-yet-unfinished second novel was being used as a script by a killer stalker/fan. Both were autographed by the complete cast, including guest stars.

“Clark, these are awesome! Thank you!”

“I don’t remember which is which — but one is Cote de Pablo’s and the other is Sean Murray’s. They’ve got all their notes in them and everything.”

“Wow. How did you get these?” I started to carefully flip through the first one.

“One of the guys your dad knows went to school with Don Bellasario and he made the first call for me and I went from there.”

“Did you get to pick which episodes?”

“I actually talked to Mark Harmon...”

Gibbs? He’d talked to Gibbs?!

“...and he asked what your favorite episodes were or who your favorite character was. I told him Ziva was your favorite character but that you loved the Thom E. Gemcity stuff. He said

he’d ask around and see what he could find.”

“Well, he did good. These are incredible.”

“You’re Thom E. Gemcity, aren’t you?” he asked me quietly.

I looked up to see that he wasn’t really looking at me.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“I thought so. I read your last two NaNo projects. They were really good. That’s how I figured it out, actually. I’d been looking and had it narrowed down to that one and a couple other really good authors, but then I read where Ziva killed a dictator and...”

“Right.”

“There were three really good ones being posted that had Tony and Abby getting together so I wasn’t sure until then. They really are very good,” he reiterated.

“Thank you.” It meant a lot that he thought they were good — I wasn’t sure why but it did.

“Dinner’s ready,” he said, putting plates on the table with a flourish.

Before I could even try to stand up, Clark was there helping me.

“Thank you,” I told him as his hand rested on my back, giving gentle support as we headed towards the table.

We ate in relative silence — mainly because I couldn’t stop eating long enough to talk.

“Was it like this again last time?” he asked. “I mean, I know what you told your dad this morning but... He doesn’t know the whole story.”

I sighed before eating the last bite on my plate. “I don’t remember specifically having a hollow leg again last time.”

We moved to the couch. “Are you ready to talk names?” he asked, lifting my feet onto his lap and taking my socks off — my shoes had come on off in the car and I hadn’t bothered to put them back on when we got to the cabin.

I sighed happily as he started massaging one foot. “Could you do your buzz-buzz thing and find out if this is a boy or a girl?”

He winced slightly. “I’d rather not, just in case I put out some kind of microwaves or something.”

I sighed. “Fine. Girl names?”

He hesitated slightly. “Ellen or Lucy?”

Tears filled my eyes faster than I thought they ever had before. I swiped at the ones that streaked down my cheeks. “No,” I whispered. “Maybe a middle name, but I still don’t think I could do a first name.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“Are there any family names you’d like?”

He thought for a minute. “Well, my mom — my birth mom, that is — Lara maybe. Granny’s name is Jessica. My mom.” He shrugged. “My birth mom is the only one that really stands out. I mean, I love all of them, but I don’t know that I’d want to use any of them.”

“Right. What about boys?”

“Dave,” he said quietly.

I shook my head. “No. Middle name, but not first name.”

We’d talked about that last time, too, but ultimately decided that going with Clark’s dads was the smarter choice — and he’d liked the idea of naming Christopher after both of his dads and I hadn’t minded. I wasn’t sure I would have been ready to use David at that point anyway.

He nodded. “Sam?”

I thought about that for a minute. “Maybe. Your family?”

“We’ve already used two of my dads. Joel maybe? For Jor-El? Gramps was Silas.”

I couldn’t help wincing.

He laughed. “That was my thought.”

“What about William? For Pop Pop?”

He hands stilled. “No. I don’t think I could do that either.”

I nodded. It was still too fresh. “I understand. Anybody else?”

“Dad was always pretty close to his grandpa — Nathaniel.”

“Dad’s dad’s name was Nathan,” I told him, surprised.
 “Do you like that?” he asked me.
 I nodded. “I loved Grandpa, but I don’t think it would hurt like the others would.”
 “Nathaniel David?”
 “I like it,” I answered as he switched feet. I moaned slightly as he hit just the right spot on the bottom of my foot. “And for a girl?”
 “What do you think?”
 “Larellen Lucielle?” I cocked my head to one side. “I dunno. What do you think?”
 “What would we call her? I know you’ve always insisted on calling Christopher by his full name and not Chris, but you’ve never really said why that is.”
 “Chris was your dad,” I told him. “And for some reason, he always struck me as more of a ‘Christopher’ than a ‘Chris’.”
 “Would we actually call her Larellen?” He seemed a bit skeptical.
 “Do you really like that?”
 “It’s kinda cool,” he said thoughtfully. “The combination of their two names. I can’t imagine calling her that though.”
 “Me either. Lara? Laurie? Ellie?”
 “Ellie? Would you be okay with that?”
 I nodded. “I think so.”
 “That settles it then. Unless inspiration strikes, Nathaniel David or Larellen Lucielle.”

Part 110
 Clark

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 That was settled.  
 Larellen Lucielle sounded like a little girl who would dress only in pink froo-froo but calling her Ellie would help with that — and I couldn’t see any little girl of Lois’ wearing pink froo-froo voluntarily.  
 I gave Lois’ foot one last squeeze. “How’s that?”  
 She nodded. “I’m ready for my cake now.”  
 I zipped to the kitchen and back, sitting on the floor next to her. I filled the fork with just a taste of cake. “Open up.” My elbow rested on the couch, fork poised to feed her.  
 She glared at me. “Put enough on there for me to actually taste it.”  
 I laughed and put more on the fork. “Better?”  
 She glared again. “A little bit.” But she opened her mouth and waited for me to feed it to her.  
 “How exactly did I end up feeding you cake?” I asked her as she took the bite.  
 She chewed for a moment then swallowed. “You won a Trivial Pursuit game — by one question, I might add; I had all my pie pieces long before you but couldn’t land in the middle — and, in doing so, won the right to feed me cake.”  
 “I *know* that,” I told her with a roll of my eyes, while cutting off a bigger bite.  
 “Well, you didn’t know the answer to the question about Wilton Cakes and the bet for that question was cake feeding. Besides, if I don’t have to deal with the lifting of the fork and cutting of the cake and all of that, I’m free to completely relax and savor the chocolate.”  
 “You’re lazy?”  
 She glared at me. “Today, I helped make eyes, ears, fingers, toes and a nose. What exactly did you do?”  
 I raised an eyebrow as I held out another bite.  
 “No uterus, no opinion,” she informed me before cleaning the fork.  
 “Yes, Rachel,” I said with a smirk. We’d watched that episode of Friends a few weeks earlier.  
 She glared at me. “Cake. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”  
 She winced. “The attitude is good. The ma’am needs to go.”  
 “Yes, milady.”  
 It was a good thing I was invulnerable, because I thought that look rivaled the one she’d given me not long after we met. I gave her another bite.  
 “Yes, Queen Lois of Lane, ruler of Lane and Duchess of Kent?”  
 “Just feed me cake.”  
 I fed her the rest of the piece in near silence.  
 Her eyes closed and she moaned quietly as I slid the fork out of her mouth with the last bite.  
 “That was delicious, Clark. Thank you,” she said sincerely.  
 “My pleasure.” I zipped the plate and fork to the sink. “Do you want something to drink?”  
 “Milk, please.”  
 I poured her a glass. “What do you want to do now?” I asked as I handed it to her.  
 “Movie?”  
 “Which one?”  
 “‘Tommy Boy’?”  
 I pulled it out. “Got it.”  
 I put it in the DVD player and got it all set up before moving to sit on the couch with Lois. She sat up enough that I could sit behind her and she could lean against me, one hand resting on her stomach. We’d found this was the most active time of day for the baby.  
 “Wow,” I said after nearly fifteen minutes of non-stop baby movement while the movie played. “Nate’s active tonight.”  
 “Nate?” she asked. “When did we decide on ‘Nate’?”  
 “Earlier...” I started.  
 “Earlier, we decided on Nathaniel.”  
 “Not Nate?”  
 She laughed at my hurt look. “Nate’s fine for now. I didn’t realize Christopher wasn’t a ‘Chris’ until after he was born. Besides, it’s Ellie who’s being so active tonight.” As though to emphasize her point, my hand was suddenly kicked — hard.  
 “See?”  
 “Sit up,” I told her.  
 “Why?” she asked as she sat up.  
 I moved and helped her lean back on the couch. I sat back down on the floor, one hand on either side of her stomach. “Now, listen here, Nate, you should be nice to your mom and give her a bit of a break. She cheats, you know.”  
 “I *do not* cheat!” she exclaimed, offended.  
 I raised an eyebrow at her. “Did I actually have a chance of winning anything today?”  
 She glared at me. “You won the right to give me a foot rub and feed me cake and everything else.”  
 I shrugged. “If you say so.”  
 “Besides, it’s not like you’d need a foot or back rub.”  
 I just rolled my eyes. “Now, if you don’t mind, Nate and I are having a private conversation.”  
 She sighed. “*Ellie* and I are joined at the... well, my uterus to what will be her belly button at the moment so anything you have to say to her you can say to me.”  
 “Fine.” I turned back to her stomach as the baby rolled over.  
 “You should be nice to your mom. She likes to try to make you think she’s playing fair when she’s really not. She always manages to win, even when she loses.”  
 “I never lose,” she muttered.  
 “But she never really loses. She always manages to work it so that she wins no matter what. I won Trivial Pursuit and ended up feeding *her* cake, you know.”  
 “She knows,” Lois informed me. “She was there.”  
 “But you know what your mom’s done that’s made me a winner? She’s given me you and your brother.” I rubbed her

stomach. “You’ll understand someday — I hope — why that means so much to me. I’m all that remains of a dead planet — at least until your brother was born, but I didn’t know that he was my son at that point. I know you’re my son or daughter and I’d love your brother as much as I do now even if he wasn’t my biological son, but knowing that he probably is...”

I sighed.

“I never realized my need to be connected to Earth, but you and Christopher... You do that for me and so you need to take it easy on your mom because she’s the one who’s made that possible. Besides,” I whispered, “it’s her birthday.”

I looked up to see if she was smiling at that, but instead I saw tears. “Hey,” I said, moving towards her. “What is it?”

“I never knew you felt like that,” she told me.

I shrugged. “It’s not something I dwell on, but yeah. I never really realized how much I wanted my own, biological kids.” I helped her sit up slightly so I could sit back down behind her. “I mean, you know I love Christopher — I always have — but...” I sighed, gently rubbing her stomach. “I’ve never really *known* where I came from, who I am. I mean, I know what was left with the ship and all, but it’s like reading about an ancient society. You don’t really know. I love my folks, my whole family, but the idea of something — or someone — tangible here on Earth that’s connected to me...”

Her hand covered mine and they stilled, our fingers lacing together momentarily. “I’m glad I can give that to you, then.”

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Lois

I stretched and yawned, pulling one leg across my body and stretching my back before rolling over and doing the opposite.

“Afternoon, sleepyhead.”

I looked up to see Clark leaning against the door jamb.

“Afternoon?” I asked with another yawn. “Did I really sleep that long?”

He nodded. “Nate there behaved himself and let you get some sleep.”

I glared at him as I struggled to sit up and swing my legs over. If it was this bad already, what was it going to be like in another three months?

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Always.”

He made me a full breakfast, even though it was after noon.

“Delicious,” I said, wiping my mouth on my napkin. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, cleaning up my dishes. “Come on,” he said, heading towards Daddy’s room.

“What’re we doing?” I asked him, following along.

“Put this on.” He tossed me something black.

I held it up. My maternity swimsuit. “Why?”

“You’ll see.”

I changed as quickly as I could after Clark headed into the bathroom.

“Come on in when you’re done,” he called.

I walked into the bathroom to find him sitting on the edge of the tub in his suit. In the shower stall was lounge chair from the deck.

“You can’t recline all the way, or stretch your legs out all the way, but you can mostly lie back.”

“Very creative,” I told him, impressed. I sat in the chair and decided I’d rather lean a little further back than stretch my legs out a little more and he helped me adjust it.

He took the removable shower head and pointed it at the ground near my feet. “I came in here because it’s a bit bigger,” he said turning on the water. “Tell me when the water’s just right.”

A minute later, I nodded, scooting up a bit higher and flipping my hair over the top rail of the chair. The water he’d just streamed over my lower legs was hot but not too hot.

“I’ve never done this before,” he warned me as he carefully wet my hair.

“Just don’t get any soap in my eyes.”

“I’ll try not to.”

Once my hair was all wet, he moved on to the shampoo.

“The point of this isn’t clean hair,” I reminded him. “It’s a scalp massage.”

“Right.”

He began to gently massage my head, starting near my temples and working his way around my whole scalp. “That feels so nice,” I told him quietly. “My mom used to do this sometimes. She’d have us lie on the counter at home and roll a towel under our necks and give us a good scalp massage. I’ve tried to do it myself, but it’s never the same.”

His thumbs gently worked against my temples as his fingers worked the back of my head and into the hollow between the tendons at the back of my neck.

I’d worked hard since we got here to keep my thoughts from wandering down the ‘what if Clark loved me’ path, but I couldn’t stop it anymore. If he loved me, we could do this together, in the shower, more than big enough for two...

I stifled a sigh and stopped the train of thought in its tracks.

He rinsed the shampoo out carefully.

“Conditioner,” I told him.

“I know.”

I didn’t open my eyes, but I could hear the smile in his voice and see it in my mind as he worked the conditioner into my hair.

“Almost done,” he told me as he rinsed the conditioner out.

He turned off the water. “How’d I do?”

I opened my eyes and smiled at him. “You did great. If you ever get the urge to do that again, just let me know. I know that was your first time and all, but if you ever want to practice, I’ll let you practice on me.”

He laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He handed me a towel. “We do need to get going here before too long though. Vicki’s making your favorite dinner and dessert tonight.”

“Thank you for letting me sleep,” I told him as I wrapped my hair in the towel. “What’d you do?”

He shrugged. “Watched a couple movies. Worked on a story for Perry. Cleaned the whole cabin.”

“And that took you what — twelve seconds?” I asked with a smile.

“Fourteen.”

We headed out of Dad’s room and back towards ours. Clark disappeared and reappeared in a flash — dressed back in his shorts and T-shirt. “Why don’t you go get changed and I’ll clean back up in here? I’ll get the car loaded and we can head out here in about half an hour?”

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

A few hours later, we were seated around the dining room table, eating Stromboli. After dinner, we headed outside. Clark, Jimmy, Billy, Ollie and his sons soon had a game of football going. Christopher played on the deck with me, Daddy, Serena and Vicki as we watched them running around in the yard. A while later, Daddy took Christopher down to play on the swing set while Vicki, Serena and I chatted. Martha called and I talked to her for a bit. By the time it started to get dark, I was ready to go back to bed.

“You want to cash in that backrub?” Clark asked as I came out of the bathroom in a pair of bike shorts and my John Deere shirt.

“I would appreciate it, thank you.” Back rubs were a bit harder since I couldn’t lie on my stomach.

Not impossible, but harder.

I lay down on the couch, back facing the edge. Clark floated on his side next to me and began working his magic on my back. Over the last several months, he’d learned where it bothered me

the most and the best ways to help work out the knots.

“Is Nate behaving tonight?” he asked as he massaged.

“So far,” I told him. “We’ll have to see if Ellie lets me sleep though. My legs have been all twitchy lately as I try to go to sleep. Last night wasn’t too bad, but it seems like half the time I get so close to asleep and then they twitch and wake me up.”

“Ask Kristi about it,” he advised. “Or your dad.”

I sighed. “I may if it doesn’t get better soon.”

“Don’t wait too long. You need to get as much rest as you can now before baby keeps you up all night. You don’t want to go into that already sleep deprived.”

“Yeah, I know.” I wished I could just sink into the mattress, flat on my stomach, like I had so many times in the past but my stomach was just too big.

I still felt much better than I did when he’d started. Before I realized what he was doing, he’d scooped me into his arms and was carrying me to the bed. He set me gently on my side.

“There you go. Get some rest. I’ll be back in a bit.”

It was pretty early still. “Okay,” I said with a yawn.

I burrowed under the covers as the baby kicked me again.

“Behave, Nate or Ellie,” I whispered. “Be good to Mom, would ya? We’ve got three more months, you and me, and we need to work together, okay?” I sighed as I settled further in under the covers. “I love you and so does your daddy.”

Part 111

June 2005

Clark

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Three more years.

I realized that I was more grateful that in three years the threat to Christopher — and Lois — would be over in three years than I was that my marriage to Lois would be over and I’d be free to see if Lana was still free or whatever.

I had long since acknowledged to myself that the odds of us getting back together were probably about the same as the Cubs had of winning the Series without lifting their ban on goats.

But if, once Navance was no longer a threat, I didn’t at least talk to her and see where we stood, I’d probably regret it.

I watched Lois, very pregnant, reading a book to Christopher. Was this where I wanted to be?

With Christopher and this new baby? Sure. That was easy.

But Lois...

I loved her, very much, but I wasn’t *in* love with her. I knew what it was like to be in love and I wasn’t in love with her.

And she’d made it abundantly clear that, even though she was in love with me — and I didn’t think that had changed — she didn’t want to stay married just because I had nowhere else to go or because I felt obligated to her and the kids or something like that. For the moment at least, she was open to the marriage extending but only if I was in love with her.

And I wasn’t.

Would I be?

There was no way to know that.

Was it possible?

I guessed it was.

Was it probable?

That I didn’t know. I hadn’t thought it would be probable that we’d ever make love either but we had.

Repeatedly.

But only in one eighteen hour period or so.

I sighed as I watched them together. He was pointing out each of the puppies in the Poky Little Puppy book. Lois was counting them as he pointed and he was repeating the number after her.

I couldn’t *make* myself fall in love with her, could I?

I didn’t think so.

But somehow our little family would end up split. Either the kids with me or the kids with Lois or one would go with me and one with her. Either way, I knew it would tear Christopher apart. Probably the new baby too, but wouldn’t he or she be too young to really understand at that point?

I shook my head. I wasn’t going to think about it anymore. Not today. It was Christopher’s second birthday, not a day for thinking about those kinds of things, but rather a day to celebrate.

I noticed Lois rubbing her stomach absently and frowned. She’d been doing that a while earlier, too.

Christopher hopped down and ran to the cabinet to pick another book. I walked over and leaned on the back of the couch. “Are you okay?” I asked quietly.

She looked up at me. “What?”

“Are you okay?” I asked again.

“Yeah,” she said, a bit surprised. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

I shrugged. “I’ve noticed you rubbing your stomach several times today and I wanted to check on you.”

She winced and pressed on the left side of her belly. “Nate or Ellie is just giving me a hard time. Trying to come out my side two months early.”

I could see her shirt move as the baby did and the odd look on her face relaxed. “Are you sure that’s all it is?”

She nodded.

“No cramping or Braxton-Hicks or anything like that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be a worry-wart.”

I saw her shirt shift back. She gave an exasperated sigh and pushed back.

“You’d tell me if something was happening right?”

“Yes, I would. I promise. I’m only about thirty weeks. It’s another couple weeks before Kristi said she’s going to have me take it easy,” she reminded me. “But I’ve been taking it pretty easy anyway when I’m home. I just don’t have the energy to do too much.”

I frowned. “You were taking it a lot easier last time, weren’t you?”

“Maybe some. I wasn’t interning like I am now, but I’m not working either so...”

Christopher saw Sam outside and headed for the door.

“Christopher,” I said sharply.

He stopped and looked at me — biting his lip, just like Lois did sometimes. “Wha’, Daddy?”

“What do you need to do before you go outside?”

“As’,” he said contritely.

“That’s right.”

“Daddy, I go ou’si’ wi’ G’an’pa?”

“What else?”

“P’ease?”

I nodded. “Make sure he sees you before you go down the stairs.”

“Kay.” He struggled slightly to open the door and headed out onto the deck. “G’an’pa!”

Sam stopped and looked up and him as the door slammed shut behind him. Christopher walked carefully down the stairs — at least as far as we could see him.

I turned back to Lois, hopping lightly over the couch after making sure no one was around. I settled gently next to her.

“You’d tell me?”

She nodded. Sam and Christopher moved back into our line of sight out the window. “Do you think he realizes how different his life is?”

“Who? Christopher?”

“Yeah.”

Usually Scott and Steve had a pretty easy job. There was a nice surveillance room set up in the basement that kept the whole exterior of the house under their watchful eyes at all times. A minute or two after Christopher went outside, Scott was out there

as well, keeping his distance, but keeping an eye on him nonetheless. “No, I don’t think he does. He doesn’t know anything different.”

“How do we explain it to him someday?” she asked quietly.

“Hopefully, by the time he’s old enough to understand, it’ll be long behind us.”

She rubbed her stomach absently again. I didn’t think she noticed the slight strain on her face. “I’m going to call Kristi,” I told her.

“What? Why?”

I put an arm around her and pulled gently on her shoulders until she leaned against me. She stopped rubbing as the strain eased. “Humor me,” I said quietly. “I don’t think you see it, but every time you start rubbing your stomach your face tenses and it’s worrying me a bit.”

I thought she was going to protest, but she didn’t and that surprised me. Maybe she wasn’t quite as calm as she was acting? She just nodded.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and searched until I found her number. They were coming over later for Christopher’s — small — birthday party, but it wouldn’t hurt to talk to her now.

I invited her and Kevin and Karly over for lunch before the party and she said she’d take a look at Lois first thing.

A few minutes later, Ollie showed up with my parents, Granny and Nana.

We spent some time chatting with them. Kristi and her family showed up not too much later. The three of us headed upstairs to our room.

Lois lay on the bed while Kristi used a Doppler wand to check the baby’s heartbeat. I knew the heartbeat was fine — or at least it sounded fine to me — and she confirmed it.

“Everything sounds good,” she said, handing Lois a Kleenex to wipe off her stomach.

I breathed a sigh of relief until I noticed Lois rubbing her stomach again, her face tensing slightly.

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Lois

I breathed a sigh of relief when Kristi said the heartbeat sounded good.

“Right there,” Clark said, suddenly pointing at me. “See?”

“What?” she asked him.

Kristi’s hands were suddenly back on my stomach and she frowned.

“What?” I asked, looking back and forth between them.

“How often?”

Clark shrugged. “That’s the first I’ve noticed in about an hour. It was every fifteen minutes or so a couple times earlier.”

“What?” I asked again, more demanding this time.

“Are you not noticing that?”

I rolled my eyes and struggled to sit up. “Obviously not.”

Kristi sighed. “It looks like mild contractions. Nothing too serious at this point — I don’t think you need to go to the hospital or anything like that.”

I could almost feel my heart stop. “Is everything okay? I haven’t noticed anything except that he — or she — seems to be trying to come out my side today and I keep having to push back to get him to shift.”

Clark sat next to me. “I didn’t think you were really noticing them, but I could tell when you started rubbing your stomach...”

“They’re not bad,” Kristi reassured me. “I do want to do a quick pelvic exam, just to be on the safe side and then you’re going to take it easy. With your history of pre-term labor, we’re going to have to be careful with this one.”

Bed rest? Was that what she was talking about? “Bed rest?” I asked.

“Modified, most likely.” She squeezed my hand reassuringly. “I’m going to go find some gloves. Why don’t you go ahead and

take your bottoms off and I’ll be back.”

Clark stood up. “I’ll go get them for you. I know where some are downstairs.” He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead. “I’ll be right back.”

“Do you want me to leave for a minute?” Kristi asked as Clark left the room.

I shook my head. “No, just hand me that blanket, would you?”

She handed me a blanket that was hanging over the back of the couch. I draped it over my middle and lay down, wiggling out of my clothes before scooting up to rest my head on Clark’s pillow.

“How are you?” she asked quietly. “Really?”

I shrugged. “My husband isn’t in love with me, but I’m having his baby. Things are peachy.”

“I’m so sorry, Lois.”

I sighed. “It’s a lot better than last time. For the most part, Clark’s been great, but the threat is still there, constantly there. Like being on call all the time or something, I’d guess. You can never really rest because you never know when that next call — or threat — is going to come. It’s been over a year since the last — the only — real threat, but the letters still come every few weeks. I still run into his nephew every once in a while. I still get calls from the State Department when he’s going to be in the country. It’s like living with the sword of Damocles.” I swiped at my cheeks. “Three more years and we should be free of him.”

“What will that mean for you and Clark?”

“Divorce, most likely. Kids who want to live with their dad and his ‘real family’.” The bitterness crept in. Since he’d said something to me about always being the one to bring up Lana or the divorce, I didn’t think I’d brought it up again, but it was seldom far from my mind.

“You don’t think Clark sees Christopher and this baby as his real family?” she asked astounded, handing me another Kleenex.

“Did I tell you Christopher is his son?” I asked her suddenly. “What?”

I nodded. “After... we made this baby, we both realized that the dreams we’d had at the cabin were probably real and Christopher probably really is his son. We don’t know *for sure* but...”

She brushed the hair off my face as a beeping sound let us know Clark was on his way back in. “I’m glad.”

“Thank you.”

Clark walked in and a minute later was sitting by me while Kristi checked to make sure I wasn’t on my way to the hospital.

“Slightly effaced but that’s it,” she told us, snapping off the glove. She gave me her best stern look as she pulled the blanket back down. “You *are* going to take it easy. If I have to chain you to a hospital bed, I will, but I don’t want to.”

I nodded. “So what does that mean?”

“It means you lay down as much as you can — left side is preferable. I’m not going to put you on any kind of time limits or anything at this point, but...” She frowned. “I don’t guess it’s probably wise for you to move over by the elevator is it?”

“No,” Clark said. “It’s probably not. It’d probably be okay for us, but we want to be near Christopher and we wouldn’t want to move him over there.”

She nodded. “Well, I know you’re going to hate this, but your house is the size of DisneyWorld. We’ll get you... something. A wheelchair or motorized scooter or something because I don’t want you walking down to the kitchen when no one else is around to get something to eat. You can take something with wheels to the elevator and take it down. Understand?”

I sighed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Write down whenever you notice a contraction. I know you probably won’t notice all of them and that’s okay.”

“What about Christopher’s party?” I asked. “I can’t miss his

party.”

She smiled. “You can sit and direct things, but after that, you have to take it easy.”

“Got it. I’m turning into Joey for the next few weeks.”

“Joey?” they asked simultaneously.

“Good grief,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “From ‘Friends’. He’s about as lazy as they come.”

“Then, yes, you’re turning into Joey.”

“Hey,” Clark said suddenly. “I know it’s not November, but you could write your novel.”

I glared at him. “I am *not* writing ‘The True and Amazing Adventures of Wanda Detroit’. If you want to, you can, but it’s so not my thing.”

Clark had come up with that title on my birthday when I told him I was thinking about writing an original novel the next time I attempted NaNo. It was supposed to be about a singer down by the docks who died without ever finding her true love.

Yeah. Right.

Maybe I could manage to get Abby and McGee married off on some undercover assignment where she realizes she’s in love with him and he wants nothing to do with her even though she’s pregnant with his baby. But then right as the assignment ends some months later — because it’s a long undercover assignment, of course, he realizes he’s in love with her and the baby and wants to make a family with her. Or maybe that would work better with Tony and Ziva.

Or maybe not.

Kristi interrupted my thoughts. “Okay. Get dressed and Clark here is going to carry you downstairs.”

I started to protest, but one look from both of them told me it was better to listen to her.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said meekly. They talked in the hallway for a minute — about what was going to practically be a jail sentence, I was sure — while I got dressed.

“Okay,” I hollered, irritated. “Clark can come scoop me up and carry me on downstairs now.”

A second later I was in his arms as he carried me towards the elevator.

“Thank you,” he said quietly as we separated from Kristi.

“For what? I’m going to be an irritable...” My voice trailed off.

“Probably,” he conceded. “But thank you for not fighting it and for letting me call her earlier.”

“I want this baby to be healthy as much as you do,” I told him, trying not to snuggle down in his arms and rest my head on his shoulder.

But I couldn’t stop myself.

“I know,” he said as my head made contact. “But you could have protested and...”

“I probably still will,” I informed him. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t listen.”

He set me down as we neared the living room. Most of the guests had arrived — Billy and Serena, Jimmy, the Sceves, Vicki and family, Kristi and family, Clark’s family.

“Where’s my birthday boy?” I said loudly. “Let’s get this party started.”

Part 112

Clark

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She sat carefully on the couch as Christopher bounded up to her, talking a mile a minute about how everyone was there for his party.

Kristi had assured me that everything was going to be fine; that Lois just needed to take it easy. She needed to make it through another four or five weeks and then things should be fine. Even if she did deliver the baby today, everything would

probably be fine, but there would probably be a NICU stay.

That thought made me nervous. We’d never had any reason to be nervous about Christopher seeing a doctor or anything unusual at his birth because we hadn’t realized he was my son at the time.

But with this baby...

That worried me. We knew this baby was mine and there was always the chance that something would be different or something.

It was a bit of a relief that no one had noticed anything about Christopher.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked, sliding her arm around my waist.

I put my arm around her shoulder. “Christopher’s second birthday.”

“I mean with Lois.”

I sighed. “She has to take it easy for a few weeks. Modified bed rest, Kristi called it.”

Mom’s brow furrowed. “Are she and the baby okay?”

“For now. She’s been having pretty mild contractions today and Kristi wants her to rest as much as possible.”

“Would it help if I stayed for a few weeks?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Talk to Lois? Can you afford to be away from the farm that long?”

“If I’m needed here, we’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I squeezed her slightly.

We went and joined the rest of the group as Christopher opened his presents.

The rest of the day was spent just hanging out with friends and family. Lois sat or reclined most of the day and, every once in a while, I could see the strain on her face.

Everyone else had gone to bed by the time Lois was ready to head up. I scooped her into my arms and headed towards the stairs nearest our room.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked as we walked.

She shrugged. “It’s going to be a long month.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her honestly. “I know you’re going to hate this.”

She sighed. “I have to do what I have to do, right? It wouldn’t be safe for the baby to be born this early, for lots of reasons, not the least of which would be an extended NICU stay — or the lack of an extended NICU stay which would be almost as bad.”

“Right.” I set her on the bed. “I still wish you didn’t have to go through this.”

“I know. At least last time I was so sick I didn’t really care that I didn’t do much most of the time. This time, I’m just going to be frustrated and probably not very nice most of the time.”

“Mom offered to stay for a while if you want her to,” I told her.

“I don’t know what she could do.”

I shrugged. “Hang out. Play games. Teach you to knit.”

She glared at me. “Don’t go thinking I’m going to get all domestic.”

I laughed. “I wouldn’t think that for a minute. I was just thinking it was something you could do while you were resting, that’s all. Or take up scrapbooking or...”

“Coming up with ways to assassinate evil dictators without leaving a mark?”

“Or that.”

She took as deep a breath as she could and let it out slowly. “Do you think he’ll really let this go in three years?”

I stretched out on the bed next to her, reaching out to put one hand on her stomach as the baby twisted and rolled. It was the coolest thing. “I don’t know. It would be nice to think that he would but...”

“Maybe they’ll have a civil war or something.” She rolled slightly so that her forehead rested against my shoulder.

“Maybe.”

“What would you do if he changes the law again?” she asked me quietly. “What if he changes it to ten years or something? What would you do?”

“Stay,” I told her. “Unless you told me to leave — and really meant it — I’d stay. I wouldn’t let anything happen to the two of you.”

I could tell she wanted to say something else, but she didn’t.

“What?” I finally asked.

“Nothing,” she sighed. “Just wondering why nothing is ever easy in my life.”

“Most things worth having aren’t easy,” I said quietly.

“I wish it was a little easier.”

“I know.” I pressed my lips to her forehead for a long second. “I know.”

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July 2005

Lois

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“I’m going to go stark raving mad,” I told Martha.

It had been two weeks and I was going crazy. Beyond crazy.

She’d even taught me how to crochet — not knit — and I’d made a hat and scarf for the next winter. It only took three days of doing nothing else to finally start getting it right.

I spent most of the days on the couch or in the recliner Daddy had put in our room. I’d rewatched every DVD I owned — or it felt like it anyway. I’d even watched the episodes of 90210 with Brenda’s French boyfriend a couple of times until I realized that part of the reason I liked them so much was that he reminded me of Clark.

Martha had pointed out their similarities.

I’d read a few books — including all the Lord of the Rings books and was thinking about starting on Harry Potter but I couldn’t make myself.

“Two more weeks,” I said, tossing the ball of yarn onto the couch and setting the scarf I was working on for Daddy on the table.

“Only two? I thought we were shooting for three or four more,” Martha said.

“I know. But two weeks and we’re much better off than we are now. Two weeks and it would only be slightly unusual for little to no NICU time.”

She nodded. “Do you think that could happen?”

I shrugged. “Christopher was four weeks early and a tad on the small side, but not even that, really. Maybe half-Kryptonian pregnancies are shorter.” I had to remind myself that she didn’t know we’d only realized that Christopher was probably Clark’s son relatively recently.

“That’s possible,” she conceded. “But I still think we ought to try to keep that bun in the oven as long as possible.”

“Yeah.”

“So how about a game?” She stood up and headed to the bookcase.

“Sure,” I said, resigned for the moment to my fate.

I’d enjoyed spending time with Martha all though I was sure she was going to be going slightly stir crazy herself before long. I thought part of it was psychosomatic — I *knew* I couldn’t get up and go anywhere; she could.

Most days, I spent a couple hours writing a blog post or working on an article or doing online research for Billy and Serena. While I did that, Martha either spent time with Christopher or out with the horses or any number of other things.

We’d talked about a lot of things and I was sure we’d talk about a lot more before the baby decided to show up. She’d told me all about Chris and their long courtship and Jonathan and their whirlwind one. She told me what it had been like raising Clark with his powers and we talked about what it might be like

for me — and Clark — raising superkids of our own.

There were times I wanted to pour out everything to her — to tell her the whole story — but I couldn’t. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Regardless, it was nice to have her there.

Hours later, I pulled myself out of the chair and swayed slightly.

“Hey.” Clark was at my side in a second. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Head rush.” I leaned against him as he wrapped an arm around me and waited for it to pass. “Thanks,” I said straightening a bit as it passed.

“No problem. What’d you and my mom do today?”

I glared at him as I headed towards the bathroom. “Same as the last two weeks. TV, crochet, games, anything that doesn’t require movement from me.”

“Exciting.”

“Don’t rub it in. How was your day?” I called as I went into the bathroom, in desperate need of brushing my teeth.

“Good. I covered a flower show.”

I had my toothbrush in my mouth but had to head back out to our room and raise an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, it was a blast.”

“I’d rather do that,” I told him around the brush.

“I know. Tomorrow, I get to cover a dog show and Perry said it would be okay if I took Christopher with me.”

I wiped my mouth off. “He’ll love that.” I took my Tylenol PM to help me sleep — between twitchy, restless legs and not doing anything all day long, I’d actually had a hard time with falling asleep.

“I know.”

I carefully climbed into bed, sighing as I rolled onto my side facing him. It was actually a bit of a relief not to be on my tailbone.

“How’s Nate?” he asked, climbing in on his side.

“Ellie is fine as far as I can tell. She’s cooperating.”

“Good.” He moved closer and situated himself the same as he had every other night in recent weeks. “Hi, Nate or Ellie,” he said softly. “You be nice to your mom, you hear me? She’s trying hard to make sure you don’t show up too early. She loves you, you know. And so do I and so does your big brother. Now be good and let her sleep, okay?” He talked quietly for a few more minutes before moving back to his pillow. “There.”

“You really think she’s listening to you?” I asked, skeptically.

“You slept better last night, didn’t you?”

I nodded grudgingly. The night before was the first time in a while that he’d told the baby to behave and let me sleep.

It seemed to have worked.

Of course, it was also the first night I’d taken the Tylenol PM but I didn’t want to ruin his delusion.

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Clark

“Yeah, Perry?” I stuck my head in his office. I’d had an email when I got in telling me that he wanted to see me.

“Have a seat,” he said, waving me in.

Having no idea what it was about, I shut the door behind me. I sat in one of the big chairs while he finished writing his thought in the margin of whatever article he was proofing. He put his blue pencil down and looked at me.

“How’s Lois doing?” he asked.

“She’s going nuts,” I told him. “It’s been a bit better since Sam moved a bed and recliner into the bedroom on the main floor that no one uses. She can get up and walk around a bit more — make it to the kitchen and the living room and the deck so she can be in the sun a bit more sometimes. The first two weeks were bad, but the last two would have been worse if it wasn’t for that.”

“How much longer do they think?”

“Kristi came by last night and checked on her. She said that she’d probably go ahead and let her deliver if she went into labor

now. That means Lois is still supposed to take it easy, but not quite as strict.”

“It’s still a bit early though isn’t it?” he said with a frown.

I nodded. “She’ll be thirty-five weeks in a couple days. She had an ultrasound and an amniocentesis last week and the baby looked great, even for six weeks early. Especially for six weeks early. Even his or her lungs look good.” It had made us wonder if gestation for Kryptonians wasn’t a bit shorter than humans or something.

“And she still decided she didn’t want to know the gender? Isn’t that something they can test for with an amnio?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but she said we made it this far. Now it’s only a couple more weeks and it’ll give her something to look forward to finding out at the end of labor. Anyway, things look good, so it could really be just about any day now. Though, with our luck, she’ll probably go over now.”

Perry looked over my shoulder out the window. “Is that why she’s here?”

“What?” I exclaimed, shocked and turning in my seat to see Lois and my mom walking through the newsroom. I stood up and headed out to where they had stopped to talk to Serena. “What are you doing here?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm and low.

“I *had* to get out of the house, Clark. And Kristi said short trips would be okay. Your mom mentioned a couple weeks ago that she’d like to see the Planet. She drove and I reclined as much as I could. I’m almost thirty-five weeks,” she said quietly. “Everything should be fine.”

I sighed. “I know you’ve been going crazy. Are you feeling okay?”

She nodded. “I’m *fine*.”

“Okay.”

I showed Mom around the newsroom and introduced her to a variety of people. Lois stayed seated at her desk, chatting with Billy, Serena and Jimmy — and anyone else who happened by.

Twenty minutes later, we made it to Perry’s office. They started chatting about the last time Perry saw Elvis — turned out Mom was at the same concert.

I looked and saw Lois talking to Jimmy. Jimmy was animated trying to describe something with his hands. He finally pulled her chair to my desk and looked something up online.

I didn’t think she noticed when she started rubbing her stomach and the strain started to show on her face.

But then she winced.

I ran off, leaving Mom and Perry staring after me.

“Hey,” I said, squatting next to her chair. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes were wide as she looked back at me. “I think my water just broke.”

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Part 113

Lois

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I was just sitting there, arguing with Jimmy over the best place to go camping — not that I ever went camping, but because I could.

“I’ll show you,” he told me, reaching for the mouse on my computer.

“It’s not turned on, Bill,” I told him with a roll of my eyes. “I’m not really here, remember?”

“Bill?” he said, rolling me towards Clark’s desk.

“Bill Gates,” I said, holding my feet up as he moved the chair.

He started typing rapidly as he jabbered on about how close this place was to the lake.

I rubbed my stomach absent-mindedly.

There was a sudden, sharp pain followed by an odd feeling and I knew I winced noticeably.

Clark was next to me in a few seconds. “Hey, are you okay?” I shook my head. “I think my water just broke.”

“What?” he hissed.

“I think my water just broke,” I said again.

Jimmy looked at me, wide-eyed. “Seriously?”

I nodded as the first real contraction hit. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the breathing exercises from the last time.

“Lois?” I heard Martha nearby. “Clark, what’s going on?”

“Her water just broke.” His voice sounded grim.

“What?!” Martha grabbed my purse as the contraction eased.

“We’ve got to get her to the hospital,” Clark said, his hand on my elbow as I struggled to stand. “Can you drive, Mom?”

We started walking slowly toward the elevator.

“I’d be happy to, but I don’t know where I’m going.” She pushed the down button.

“I’ll drive,” Jimmy said, holding on to my other elbow. He turned. “Perry?”

Perry nodded. “You still owe me some time though.”

“Got it, Chief.”

The doors opened in front of us and a few minutes later, we were exiting at the parking garage. The Jeep was too far away and Jimmy sprinted to get it as another contraction hit.

“Too close,” I whispered.

“It’s been over five minutes,” Martha said practically. “How far is the hospital?”

“About twenty minutes,” Clark told her.

Much closer than if we’d been at home. The contraction eased as Jimmy pulled up.

Clark hurried to the passenger side and opened the back door as Jimmy opened the one on the driver’s side.

“Turn around and back in,” Clark told me, grabbing a blanket from the back and putting it on the seat.

I did and worked my way across the seat. Clark sat as close to the door as he could, turning slightly to let me lean against him. Two minutes later, we were out on the street, headed towards campus.

Clark called Kristi as soon as we were out of the parking garage. She was almost done in the office and would meet us over there. Martha called Daddy and Jonathan and travel arrangements were being made for Jonathan, Granny and Nana.

Jimmy pushed the speed limit when he could and I heard Clark say we’d made it in about eighteen minutes.

Jimmy and Clark helped me out of the Jeep and Clark kept an arm securely around my waist as we walked inside.

The next hour or so was a whirlwind of activity. Kristi was already there and helped get me checked in. I managed to fill out paperwork, change into a gown, get situated on the bed and ask for an epidural while there was a flurry of activity around me.

Clark let me rest my head against him again while the doctor put the epidural in and I breathed a sigh of relief as the medication kicked in.

“What about the baby?” I asked Kristi with tears in my eyes as she finished my first internal exam of the labor process.

“You’re about a four and you’re almost 35 weeks,” she told me. “The amnio last week showed that the baby’s lungs were more developed than expected, which does happen sometimes. It’s possible that he or she might even avoid the NICU, but there’s no way to know at this point. I want you to be ready for that. I’ll do my best to let you hold him for a minute, but we’ll have to see — and even if you do get to hold her, it might be a while before you see her again.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“But,” she smiled, “even if we do have to go the NICU route, odds are it wouldn’t be for very long and that he’ll be just fine.”

I nodded again. “I know.” We’d talked for a long time about the pros and cons of the amnio the week before. Kristi had told us two weeks earlier that she wanted to do it. We’d talked about it at

length with Martha. We'd finally decided that the tests they were running shouldn't show anything but how developed the lungs were. We decided the risk was pretty minimal and the need to know about the baby outweighed the slight risk.

I lay on my side, feeling the contractions but not the pain. Martha, Daddy and Jimmy had come in and were talking quietly. Clark sat close to me, holding my hand, brushing my hair off my face.

"How are you?" he asked quietly.

"Scared," I told him. "Not about labor or delivery but the baby, what comes after."

"It's going to be okay," he said, with more conviction than he felt, I was sure. He brushed my hair back again. "The baby is going to be fine."

"I'm sorry," I told him, tears in my eyes.

"For what? You've done a great job getting this far."

"If I hadn't come today... If I'd stayed home and taken it easy..."

"There's no way to know that," he said pragmatically. "It could have happened at home anyway and then it would have been just you and Mom since Vicki and Ollie and the boys are out of town and you would have had to try to tell her how to get here while in labor."

"You could have gotten home fast enough to drive," I reminded him.

"True, but this way we didn't have to worry about it. We got you here quickly and you've got your epidural and the baby's going to be in good hands. You and the baby both are."

I nodded. "Still..."

Kristi came in just then and shooed everyone but Clark out. She checked my progress. "You're almost completely effaced but I think this is going to go a bit slower than last time. You're up to a six so you've made some progress but you've still got some time."

"Okay."

"And listen — going to the Planet and sitting there for a bit had nothing to do with this. It probably would have happened today anyway and nothing you did today caused this, okay?" She squeezed my hand. "It's going to be okay."

I couldn't make myself agree with her, but finally squeezed her hand back.

She went to the hall and opened the door, letting Daddy, Martha and Jimmy back in. She updated them and then chatted with them for a while — she'd called Kevin and told him that she was going to hang out here for a while since I'd probably deliver before it got too late.

I sighed.

"It's going to be okay," Clark reiterated.

"I hope so," I whispered.

"It will be," he said again, this time leaning forward to kiss my forehead. "It will be."

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Clark

She was scared, more scared than she was letting on, I was sure.

I didn't blame her — I was more scared than I was letting on, too. I should have known she'd be feeling guilty about her trip to the Planet today.

It was several hours before it was finally time for Lois to push. Mom, Sam and Jimmy gave Lois big hugs and headed out to the hallway to wait.

A number of nurses came in and transformed the fairly homey room into a delivery room. One of them helped position me and Lois.

"You ready?" Kristi asked.

Lois shook her head. "No, I'm not. It's too early."

Kristi squeezed Lois' knee reassuringly. "It's going to be

fine."

Another contraction hit and Lois pushed without any prompting.

I didn't know if it was because she'd given birth once already or because the baby was small or what, but it was only a few more minutes before we were officially parents again.

"It's a boy," I told Lois as she collapsed back on to the bed.

"Another boy," she whispered.

It was only a few more seconds before he was lying on Lois' stomach and Kristi showed me where to cut the cord.

"He looks good," Kristi said quietly. "For now at least, he looks great. We'll do another evaluation in a few minutes, okay?"

Lois nodded. "Hey, little man," she whispered, holding him in her arms. "I need you to stay healthy, okay?"

He let out a newborn squawk at that.

"Can I?" I asked her quietly. She nodded and I carefully took him from her, wrapping the blanket around him a little tighter. I gazed at him in awe. I knew I'd been there when Christopher was born, but I'd been preoccupied and hadn't really held him for a long time. "Hey, Nate. I'm your dad," I whispered. "Your mom's right. You need to stay healthy."

One of the nurses reached for him and I carefully handed him over. They took him to the warmer and started doing whatever it was that they did to newborns.

"Six pounds, six ounces," one of them said a few minutes later.

"That's great for five weeks early," Kristi told us.

Lois winced. "As long as he stays healthy, I think I'm glad he came early."

Kristi laughed. "Even if he'd gone full term, you'd probably be looking at eight or eight and a half pounds which is still pretty normal."

"I think I prefer slightly smaller," Lois replied as they put the bed back together and helped resituate her.

"His blood sugar's a little low, so we're going to need to give him a bottle," one of the other nurses said. "Dad, you want to do the honors?"

I looked at Lois. "Unless you want to."

She shook her head. "Go ahead. I'm wiped."

They wrapped him up in a couple of blankets, put a hat on him and handed him to me. I settled into one of the chairs and he sucked eagerly on the bottle. Kristi went to let everyone back in.

Seconds later, Mom, Sam, and Jimmy came in and crowded around, oo-ing and ah-ing.

"So do we have to wait for your dad and grandmas to get a name this time?" Mom asked as she took a seat.

I laughed and looked over at Lois.

"Up to you," she said with a smile.

"Everybody, I'd like you to meet Nathaniel David Kent."

"Nathaniel?" Sam asked.

Lois nodded. "After your dad and Jonathan's grandfather."

I looked over at Jimmy. He was trying hard to keep the tears out of his eyes — I could tell that. "Thanks, guys," he finally managed to get out.

I knew the name would affect him, but I didn't think it would affect him that much.

I handed Nate over to Mom who took him — and the bottle — carefully. A minute later, he had finished enough of the bottle to satisfy the nurses and they took him back.

We talked to everyone for a while as they waited for Nate's temperature to get back up. It was nearly midnight by the time they were ready to take him upstairs so they waited a few more minutes so Lois' insurance wouldn't be charged for an extra day in the room. By then, it was just me and Lois — everyone else had gone home.

"Do you want me to stay tonight?" I asked as she settled into her room; Nate was in the nursery.

Lois shook her head. “No, go home and get some sleep. Christopher will want to see you in the morning. Go ahead and go. Daddy’s got one of the Sceves staying here, just in case.”

I perched on the side of her bed. “Okay. I’ll bring Christopher by in the morning.”

“Sounds good.”

I kissed her gently on the forehead. “You did great today,” I said quietly. “And Kristi’s right. Nothing you did or didn’t do today made him come early. And he’s doing great — except for the body temperature and blood sugar things. His lungs are working well. He’s going to be fine.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“And it’s not unusual either,” I reminded her. “Babies born at this age don’t always end up in the NICU. Everyone’s just going to assume he’s a healthy, if slightly early, newborn.”

“I know.”

“Get some rest,” I told her. “You’re the one who did all the hard work today.”

She smiled and I could tell that she was tired.

“I’m sure you’ve got at least an hour before someone comes in to poke at you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nope. The nurse’ll be here in a second to check me over. It’ll be an hour before I get any rest and then it’ll be about thirty minutes before they wake me up for something else. I’ll have a total of about an hour and a half worth of sleep before the sun comes up.”

I winced. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Just bring Christopher with you in the morning.”

She yawned.

“I will.” I reached out and gently cupped the side of her face in my hand, my thumb rubbing along her cheek bone. For a second, the thought that I might be sending the wrong signal went through my head, but for the moment I didn’t care. “You really did do a great job. He’s beautiful and I can’t thank you enough for taking such good care of my baby — our baby — the last 35 weeks.” I hesitated slightly before leaning over and kissing her softly — right on the lips. She kissed me back — with the same light touch. “Thank you.”

She smiled up at me. “You’re welcome. I just wish I could have kept him in a little longer — just to be safe.”

“He’s going to be fine,” I told her again, a bit more forcefully, hoping that she’d believe me — hoping that I’d believe me. I had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that there was something we were missing or something, but I wasn’t about to tell her that.

“I know. Now go home, get some rest, and bring Nate’s big brother back in the morning.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She glared at me and I laughed.

“Sorry. Yes, Queen Lois of Lane, ruler of Lane and Duchess of Kent.”

“Better.”

The nurse chose that moment to walk in. “Sorry about the delay. Let’s get you checked out so you can get some rest.”

“I’ll see you in the morning,” I said quietly, kissing her one more time on the forehead.

I squeezed her hand slightly — and she squeezed back — before I headed out the door and home.

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Part 114

Lois

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“Mommy!” Christopher came running into the room ahead of Clark. “Where baby?”

I laughed. “The baby’s name is Nate,” I told him as he crawled up on the bed next to me.

“Where Na’?” he asked as he settled in. “I mi’ you, Mommy.”

“I missed you, too, little man.”

“Where Na’?” he asked again.

Clark laughed with me as he set down the diaper bag.

“He’s in the nursery right now,” I told them.

“Everything okay?” Clark asked.

I nodded. “Dr. Shanks hasn’t been around yet. They won’t bring him in until after he’s been checked out.”

Clark sat in one of the chairs. “How’d he do overnight?”

I sighed. “I actually haven’t seen him again,” I admitted.

“They said that he wasn’t holding his temperature still so they had him under the heat lamps. He was doing better but by then it was almost time for Dr. Shanks.”

“Everyone sends their love and says they’ll be up later,” he told me.

“That’s good.” I’d managed to get a shower and wash my hair and actually felt half-human again.

“You look great,” he told me before taking a bite of his breakfast biscuit. They must have stopped somewhere on the way.

I grimaced. “I feel better, but I can’t imagine that I look good.”

“Daddy go’ ole M’Don’ds for bre’fas’,” Christopher told me.

“Did Daddy let you eat in my car?” I asked, giving Clark a look.

Christopher nodded. “I tol’ him no, bu’ he say otay.”

I laughed. “It’s okay. *This* time,” I added, a warning tone in my voice. “Daddy knows you’re not supposed to eat in Mom’s car.”

Clark just grinned.

There was a knock on the door. “Someone’s looking for his mom,” the nurse said, pushing a portable bassinet in front of her.

I read the numbers off the band on my wrist and she matched them to the ones on Nate’s wrists.

“Are you ready to try nursing?” she asked.

I glanced at Clark. He shifted uncomfortably. “Hey, bud, why don’t you hold your little brother for a minute and then we’ll go look at the other babies while Mom feeds him?”

“tay.”

Clark stood and took Nate carefully out of the bassinet.

I shifted slightly and helped Christopher position his arms to hold him. I helped support Nate in his arms.

“Hi, Baby,” Christopher said quietly.

“Nate,” I reminded him.

“Hi, Na’.”

We sat there for another minute.

“Okay, Christopher, let’s go and let Mom feed Nate, okay?” Clark said, carefully taking Nate from Christopher.

“Kay, Daddy.”

Clark handed Nate to me as Christopher climbed down off the bed.

They left and the nurse worked with us to get Nate to latch on. By the time he was done trying to breastfeed, we’d decided that he had good technique for such an early baby but wasn’t quite strong enough to get what he needed. The nurse left as Martha, Jonathan, Nana and Granny arrived. I passed Nate — and his bottle — off to Martha who showed him off to everyone else. They all used the hand sanitizer and passed him from person to person.

“How are you feeling, Lois?” Nana asked.

“Tired,” I told them honestly. “I didn’t get much sleep last night. It was nearly 1:30 by the time the nurse left and they come and check on me every three hours or less so…” I shrugged. “I’ve been up for good since about seven. And they try to be quiet in the hallways and stuff, but they’re not always successful. And I really prefer my bed at home,” I said with a sigh. “Or even the bed in the boys’ room.”

They all, especially Martha and Jonathan, gave puzzled looks

at that.

“Christopher was up every three hours or so the first few weeks he was home. I slept in there so he wouldn’t wake Clark up. Clark was working and I wasn’t so I didn’t see the point in neither of us getting any sleep. I figured I’d probably do the same this time. Regardless, I’ll sleep better once I get home.”

“When are they releasing you?” Jonathan asked.

“Probably tomorrow. If they want to keep Nate another day, they can probably keep me another day. They said that was a possibility. It depends on his temperature and blood sugar. Overall, he’s doing really well for a 35 weeker, though.” I shared a look Martha and Jonathan at that.

“He looks great,” Granny said as she took him from Jonathan. “What’s his full name again?”

“Nathaniel David Kent, after Jonathan’s and my grandpas and my half-brother.”

“Nat would have liked that,” Granny said quietly. “No one’s been named after him, as far as I know, anyway.”

“We talked about William,” I said in equally quiet tones, “but it was too soon for Clark. We’d talked about David as a middle name last time, too, but decided that we wanted to use both of Clark’s dads instead and that we’d use David if we ever had another boy.” Actually, I’d said I’d use David if I ever had another boy — I just hadn’t dreamed it would be with Clark and I knew he hadn’t either.

Speaking of that first boy... He bounded back in followed by Clark. Even with all the grandparents around, he made a beeline for me. That was unusual. Normally, he was all about the grandparents — because they let him have more candy than Clark and I did, I thought.

I thought he’d missed me the day before and that was why he was a little clingy — or it could be a new baby thing.

“Hey, Nate brought something for you,” I told Christopher. “He wanted to give you a present for being such a good big brother.”

I nodded at Clark who pulled the presents out of the duffel bag.

Christopher opened the first present. “Ja’ Ja’!” It wasn’t really Jack Jack, but it was an Incredibles blanket. We’d already decided he’d get an Incredibles toddler bed before too long — it had been ordered and was in storage because you never knew how long the bedroom sets would actually be in stock and we weren’t too worried about him out-growing the Incredibles.

Nate had made it back over to Martha by the time he finished his bottle.

“Here.” I tossed her a burp cloth. “Christopher spit up a lot when he was little and I think Nate’s going to, too.”

As though on cue, he spit up a good portion of what he’d eaten, somehow managing to miss the burp cloth completely and got it all over Martha’s shirt.

“Sorry,” I told her.

“Nonsense. Occupational hazard being a grandma. I think he needs his britches changed though. Where’s the diapers and stuff?”

Clark dug the diaper changing stuff out of the bassinet base and Martha proceeded to change him for me then swaddled him back up.

“I hol’ baby Na’?” Christopher asked.

“Sure.” He and I resituated a bit and Martha set Nate carefully in Christopher’s arms. “Are you ever allowed to pick Nate up without Mom or Dad’s help?” I asked him.

“No,” he said seriously. “Or G’ams or G’anpa or ‘icki or...”

We all laughed.

“That’s right. You can only pick up baby Nate if someone helps you.”

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Clark

I noticed for the first time how much Nate looked like Christopher had when he was little — at least as much as an eighteen-hour old could look like anybody.

I stayed at the hospital most of the day. Dad and Nana took Christopher home for naptime; Mom and Granny had gone shopping for baby clothes. I tried not to compare this time to last time, but I couldn’t help it and felt guilty all over again for how I’d treated both Lois and Christopher when he was born.

“What?” Lois asked quietly.

It was just the three of us for the moment. I sitting in the rocking chair holding Nate and I’d thought she was asleep but I guessed she woke up.

I sighed. “Regretting two years ago,” I told her.

She winced as she sat a bit further up in bed. “That was a long time ago, Clark. You’ve more than made up for it. Christopher will never remember and you’ve made so many good memories with him since then.”

“How do I tell him that someday?” I asked. “I mean, not any day soon, but when he’s having a kid of his own and asks me what it was like or he wants to know everything about Navance. How to I tell him all that?”

“You don’t unless and until the time is right,” she said. “I don’t plan on telling him about Navance until he’s about thirty. I don’t think the name means anything to him now, and if I have anything to say about it, it won’t until he’s more than old enough to understand.”

I wondered what she’d tell him about me and my role in our break up and everything else. I wondered what I’d tell him. And when. And how.

I shook my head slightly. Not today. “I know. I don’t want either of them to know about all that until absolutely necessary. And maybe not even then.”

Sam chose that moment to walk back in. “Sorry I didn’t get here earlier. Had an appointment about the patent thing and then a meeting at Adoption Option.” He made a beeline for me. “How’s my grandson?”

He held out his arms and I handed Nate over. “He’s good. And don’t worry about it — my family hasn’t been gone all that long. How’d the meetings go?”

“Good,” he said, settling in on the couch. “The patent should be going through any day now and we’re expanding Adoption Option all along the east coast. We’re hoping to have offices in every state east of the Mississippi in the next year or so.”

He was still on the cutting edge of reconstructive joint replacement and all that. He had another patent on its way — something about hips this time, I thought. If it was anything like the rest of his inventions, *my* great-grandkids wouldn’t have to worry about money.

“How’re you feeling, Princess?” he asked Lois.

“Not bad,” she answered. “Didn’t sleep well and Nate’s a spitter, but other than that...”

He was a spitter — so far. We’d noticed he did better with the breast milk — either from nursing or what Lois was able to pump — but he spit that up, too. And lots of it, it seemed like. It wasn’t worrisome yet, but definitely something to keep an eye on. Dr. Shanks had said. It looked like he’d be able to go home the next day, but we’d have to bring him back daily for weight checks for the rest of the week.

“Do you mind if I go get a bite to eat real quick?” I asked Lois suddenly.

She shook her head. “No, go on. Daddy’ll keep me company.”

“I’ll be back in a bit then,” I said, walking towards her. “Try to get some more rest, okay?”

She nodded as I kissed her forehead. “I will.”

I headed to the cafeteria two buildings over. It wasn’t great but it would do. I got something for myself and an extra piece of

chocolate cake for Lois. I got the food to go and went back to Lois' room.

She was asleep when I got there and I breathed a silent sigh of relief. She needed the rest — the next few weeks were likely going to be hard enough on her.

"She fell asleep as soon as you left," Sam said quietly, cuddling his grandson close.

"Good."

"He looks great, Clark. I didn't want to say anything yesterday but I was a bit worried about him being so early — no matter what the amnio said."

I nodded my agreement as I set my food up on the side table. "Believe me, we both worried enough, but once her water broke... She'd already started blaming herself before he was even born — that if she hadn't gone to work yesterday, even though she still took it really easy, he wouldn't have come. Kristi told her that no matter what she'd done, he probably would have come yesterday."

"Probably." He looked at Lois. "I do need to talk to you later," he said so softly I could barely hear.

I looked up, surprised. "What...?"

He shook his head. "Not here."

I looked at him for a long moment and nodded. "When we get home."

We stayed at the hospital for a few more hours — Christopher came back with his grandparents and great-grandmas for a while. I went home with the rest of them at bedtime and put Christopher down for the night. I had the oddest feeling that he might end up sleeping with me quite a bit over the next few weeks until Nate got the hang of sleeping through the night.

Sam was his new office — well, new since we'd taken over his old one — on the other side of the second floor. I headed over there as soon as Christopher was in bed, making sure to set the security system as I left. Something about what Sam had said didn't sit well with me.

"What's up?" I asked as I walked in, taking a seat across from his desk.

He handed me a piece of paper. "That's a photocopy, but that came certified mail early this afternoon."

I saw red as I read it. "To my son's new half-brother," I read aloud, seething. "Who the hell does he think he is?"

"An insane dictator," Sam said with a sigh. "It was accompanied by a gift that I sent over to the FBI."

"Thanks." I ran a hand through my hair. "I don't suppose you know anyone who specializes in assassinations, do you? While making it look like natural causes, of course."

He laughed. "You know, there were times I thought Mindy might be up to something no good, but it was never anything I could put my finger on. We could always ask..."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I was sure I knew a lot more about Mindy than he did, but that he knew — or suspected — anything, surprised me. And I didn't really know all that much.

I sighed. "At least he didn't threaten Nate," I finally said.

"No, he didn't, but whenever Nate isn't home but isn't with one of you two or Christopher for whatever reason, he'll have his own security, too. For now, at least."

"Three more years," I sighed.

"Then what?"

"According to current Latislani law — at least last I heard — his claim is invalid if Lois and I are still married when Christopher turns five. Of course, it's possible that he'll change the law again like he did last time. If he could find a way to make some sort of valid claim on Nate he probably would — like if he was in the country around the time of conception or whatever..." I let a deep breath out slowly.

"Well, you know all of you are welcome here as long as you want, but even if you guys end up moving out for some reason —

jobs across the country or whatever — I'll make sure that security is something you'll never have to worry about."

"Thank you, Sam," I said sincerely. "That means a lot to me." I choked up momentarily. "There's no way I could afford to protect my family like this. I'd do whatever it took, you know that — even if I had to set them up in an igloo at the North Pole — but all this... The security guards, the lockdown systems, everything else... There's no way." I looked back up at him. "Thank you."

"I'm not going to let anyone get to my family either. And I can afford all this, no problem. You do what you can to take care of them, and I'll do what I can." He sat up, leaned forward his forearms resting on his desk and he looked straight at me. "And what you can do is keep acting like you and my daughter are living the greatest love story since Han Solo and Princess Leia."

I was sure my eyes were wide as the proverbial flying saucer as my head snapped up to look at him.

"What?" I managed to squeak out.

"You heard me," he said, leaning back in his chair. "So do you want to tell me the whole story or should I keep pretending to be oblivious?"

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Part 115

Lois

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It was going to be a long night.

I could tell that as soon as Clark and everyone else left. Nate didn't seem to want to sleep. He was still nursing as well as could be expected, but he was still spitting a lot of it up — more than I remembered Christopher doing.

I finally sent him back to the nursery to let the nurses deal with him. I knew that the next night, I'd be on my own — more or less — and I needed to get some sleep. Clark would be a bigger help than he had been the first few weeks Christopher had been home so that would help, but most of his care would — necessarily — fall to me.

I curled up as best I could and tried to get comfortable on a bed made of foam and industrial plastic or whatever it was and a pillow that I was sure couldn't have been any flatter if it was *actually* a pancake. I thought about calling Clark and having him fly my pillow over but decided not to.

I sighed deeply and my mind drifted back to the night before. He'd kissed me — really kissed me. I closed my eyes and relived those few seconds, the feel of his lips on mine, his hand pressed against my cheek.

I knew it was only because I'd just given birth to his baby and nothing more than that. It wasn't like he'd suddenly fallen in love with me or something like that. It was a kiss of... gratefulness or thankfulness or something like that.

Had he felt what I did?

Was it because I was still hopelessly in love with him? Something I hadn't tried too hard to rectify yet — not while I was pregnant with his child.

Was it because he was the only man I'd ever been with?

Was it all my imagination?

Had the spark, the electricity, I'd felt been the product of an overactive, overtired, extra hormonal, extra fertile imagination? Or had it really been something?

If so, he hadn't said anything, hadn't given any indication that he'd felt any of it.

I hadn't had the mental energy to delve into it the night before — not after the nurse finished checking me over.

I sighed again and wished that I could just sleep in his arms, have him spooned behind me, his body warm against mine as we fit perfectly together in sleep. He hadn't held me like that since my declaration of love.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I should never have told him. For the most part, things were pretty normal — as normal as they had been before Pop Pop died anyway.

The door opened and I sighed again. So much for sleep. “Someone’s looking for his mom,” my nurse for the night said quietly. “Do you want to try to nurse him?”

I nodded, unbuttoning the top of my pajamas. “Yeah, we’ll see how he does and then probably give him back to you to top him off with a bottle if that’s okay.” I yawned, as though to emphasize my point.

“Do you need some help?” she asked as we both read the numbers off the bands. She picked Nate up and handed him to me.

“Would you mind helping me make sure he’s latching on right?” I asked as I maneuvered him.

“Sure.”

A few minutes later, he was nursing well.

“Thank you,” I told her.

“I’ll be back in a bit. Just push the button if you’re ready for me before then.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

I tried not to move because this was actually working. He looked a lot like Christopher — like Clark — I noted as I watched him.

I carefully reached for the TV remote on the multipurpose doohickey that also had the call button and volume and everything else on it. ANC was running their top of the hour news. The first story was the brutal extinguishing of the group that attempted a coup in Latislan.

I sighed. A girl could dream, right? And with the outcome of this one — apparently Navance’s men had been... cruel to the men and their families, including their wives and very young daughters — it seemed unlikely another one would be attempted any time soon.

The next story was on the arrest of the governor of New Troy for apparent crimes — including the ‘sale’ of the presently vacant Senate seat. A surge of pride swelled inside when they mentioned the story was broken by Billy Norcross and Serena Judd-Norcross of the Daily Planet. Clark and I had helped some with that story. I’d mostly done research from the... comfort of my own recliner while Clark had done more.

Nate was done on that side and I situated the burp cloth before carefully maneuvering him to burp. With the burp came a good portion of what he’d eaten. I was glad it had all stayed on the cloth though — I didn’t have any other clean pajamas. I breathed a sigh of relief when he easily latched on the other side and turned my attention back to the news.

There was nothing exciting on — some late night talking heads debating some policy or other that I didn’t really have much interest in at the moment. I flipped through the channels until I found a rerun of ‘Gilligan’s Island’. I smirked to myself as I remembered Clark’s rescue of Ralph several months earlier.

I watched as Wrong Way most decidedly did not help them get off the island. Nate finished nursing on the other side and spit up what seemed like everything he’d taken in. I paged the nurse to come get him and take him back to the nursery.

Maybe I’d actually be able to get some sleep.

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Clark

I just sort of stared at Sam.

He smirked back.

“Um...” My mouth opened and closed more than once I was sure.

“I’d laugh but I don’t think it’s very funny.”

I sighed, resigned, and leaned back in the chair. “I don’t either.”

“So?” he asked expectantly.

“I told you the truth about the cabin,” I told him. “Neither one of us really remembers what happened that night — just that it did. And what we do remember, we didn’t remember until later. And that’s where Christopher came from.”

“And Latislan?”

How much to tell him? “You know Lois. She thought she saw something that would turn into a big story someday and followed someone to the airport. I was with her when she took off and went with her, trying to talk her out of it. The next thing I knew we were in the hold of the plane on our way to Latislan.”

“What was in it?”

I sighed. “Guns. Lots of guns.”

He frowned. “That doesn’t sound like a good plan — following guns.”

“We didn’t open one of the crates until we were in the air.” I’d known but I couldn’t have told Lois that and I wasn’t about to let her go alone. “By the time we landed, she was sick and she essentially sacrificed her location so they wouldn’t find both of us. She was in the confrontation with Navance before Daniel got there. Once he claimed the baby, the only way out under Latislani law was if Lois was married.”

“The courts would never have let him take Christopher back,” Sam pointed out. “And I wouldn’t have either, legal ramifications be damned.”

“Things between you and Lois weren’t all that great at the time,” I reminded him. “At least not from where she stood. And I’d already told Navance that the baby was mine. Even if the courts wouldn’t send him to Latislan, how many people remember Elian Gonzalez? He’d always be Christopher Kent — or Lane if we’d never gotten married — kid who might or might not be the child of a dictator whose maybe bio dad wouldn’t marry his mom to protect him. You saw what it was like in Smallville — now imagine a court case that drags on for years. He and Lois would be virtual prisoners here. They’d still have to have security whenever they left only they’d have paparazzi, too. One of those celebrity kids’ websites would post every picture of them they could. We thought we could get married, get out of dodge and then decide what to do.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I was ready to propose to Lana — I sold her engagement ring to a Marine so I could pay for the wedding and the rings — and Lois and Joe had decided to give it a real try again. He offered to marry her when we got back; after he found out she was pregnant but before he knew we already were.”

“So you got married to protect her and Christopher, but you stayed married — even though you were in love with someone else... why exactly?” He looked scary. I thought I’d found the fourth person who could actually scare me — Mom, Dad, Lois and a dad who wanted to protect his little girl.

“At some point — between the time we left Latislan and the time we landed back in the States, he changed the law. His claim on Christopher is still valid in Latislan unless we stay married until Christopher turns five — long enough that we wouldn’t stay married if we didn’t mean it but short enough that his motives aren’t completely obvious.”

“But you didn’t mean it, did you?” He was growing more menacing by the minute. “And what exactly is going to happen when Christopher turns five?”

What was I supposed to say to that? I sighed and shook my head. “No, I didn’t really mean it — anymore than she did,” I pointed out. “Regardless of Christopher’s paternity, we hadn’t planned on staying married once we got home.” Maybe I could distract him from the birthday question. “Once we were in that situation, I would have done what I did even if she wasn’t having my baby.”

“Would you have stayed married to her?”

“Yes,” I told him without hesitation. “As long as she didn’t

tell me no and call the lawyer, I would have stayed married to her.” I *had* stayed married to her not knowing he was my son, but I couldn’t tell him that. So far, I hadn’t really told him much more than I had my parents — just the gun thing, I thought.

“But you’re still not in love with her? And even though you’re not in love with her, you’ve obviously had sex or she never would have gotten pregnant — right around the time of my heart attack, if I’m not mistaken.”

I nodded. “I assure you that *every* time we’ve been together, it’s been entirely mutual,” I said quietly. “I would never take advantage of her or see what I could get away with or whatever.”

He snorted. “Lois would leave you walking funny for a week if you tried.”

I smiled slightly. “Probably.”

“Have you ever cheated on her?” The question, and the underlying tone, caught me off-guard.

I hesitated.

“You have?”

I sighed and ran both hands through my hair this time. “When our tour group got back from Europe, I had to break up with Lana. I kissed her then and one other time about a week later. Lois knows about both of them and I apologized a long time ago. But that’s it. I’ve never cheated on her — besides those kisses — and I won’t. I may not be in love with her, but I do care about her — very much and not just because she’s the mother of my sons. I promised her my fidelity and she has it. I don’t want to hurt her if there’s anything in my power to stop it.” Anything but falling in love with her, I thought, but that wasn’t in my power.

<Lana’s not waiting for you,> my inner teenager replied. <You *could* at least tell her that you wanted to try at a life with her. You could be having sex with her on a regular basis in a few weeks. It was pretty amazing, after all.>

<Shut up,> the non-teenager inner voice told him. <I can’t lead her on like that, no matter how good the sex was.>

“Is she in love with you?” he asked quietly.

“You’d have to ask her that,” I answered. “I’m not sure how she feels.” Not at the moment anyway.

“Oh, she’s not going to know about this conversation,” Sam informed me, using that same tone that my mom did when I knew better than to argue with her. “At least not all of it. Not the part where I know that you’re not in love with her. And you still haven’t explained why you’re pretending to have the greatest love story since Han and Leia or what’s happening when Christopher turns five.”

I sighed and hoped I could distract him from the second half of the question. “Part of the law was that the marriage has to be a real marriage and not simply to negate his paternity claims. All he needs is ‘reasonable suspicion’ or something like that and then my claims of paternity are invalid — even if a DNA test had proven that Navance wasn’t his father by then. That’s why it’s so important that everyone believes that everything is as it seems. Having Nate had nothing to do with any of that, but I’m sure he goes a long way towards proving that we’re not just married to protect Christopher from him.”

“Is that the *only* reason you’re married to my daughter?”

“That’s how it started,” I told him as honestly as I could while trying to imply a lot more about where we were at present than I actually said. “Things have changed a lot since then. I do love Lois, even if I’m not *in* love with her right now, and I love Christopher and Nate more than anything. I’d do just about anything short of murder to protect them, though I probably wouldn’t testify against someone else if I saw them do it.”

He looked at me for a long time. It stretched into eternity and I felt like I was being evaluated for something and being found wanting, but I wasn’t entirely certain what it was.

Probably as a suitable mate for his only living child and as the father his grandchildren.

And I wasn’t measuring up; even though I was doing everything I could to protect them.

To tell the truth, if I was in his position, I probably wouldn’t think I measured up either.

He finally nodded slightly. “I appreciate you telling me as much as you have, though I get the feeling I still don’t know the whole story.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, ignoring the second half of his statement.

“I did have one other question, though.”

I nodded at him.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice that you still haven’t answered me. What are your plans when Christopher turns five?”

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Part 116

September 2005

Lois

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I sighed as I showed the home health nurse out. Nate had only gained two ounces in the last week. Nearly two months old and his total weight gain was only about seven ounces. He’d lost weight the first week — not totally normal, but not very *abnormal* either. We were keeping a close eye on him and he’d been at the doctor’s office once, if not twice, a week for the first six weeks. Then they started sending a home health nurse with a scale to the house.

She came in, we chatted for a few minutes about how he was doing, she weighed him, wrote it down and left.

Now, he was a grand total of seven pounds, two ounces.

He was still spitting up nearly everything he ate — or close enough anyway. We’d weighed him one day, fed him three ounces of breast milk — which, conveniently, weighed three ounces — he promptly spit up, as usual, and we reweighed him. He’d gained about an ounce and half, meaning he’d spit up an ounce and a half.

Everyone kept telling me, ‘oh it always looks like more than it is when babies spit up’, but I was *finally* getting people to listen to me when I said that he was losing a lot of his food. The doctor and the nurse practitioner knew I was doing everything I could and were sympathetic — as were Daddy and Martha, in particular — but in general...

I hated that I was right, though. We’d already started trying other things. I was letting him nurse as much as he wanted, then pumped, then fed that to him. We were about to try something else, I thought. Like not nursing at all for a couple days, but pumping as much as I could and giving that to him, with a bit of cereal or special formula in it for more calories and so it was a bit thicker so maybe it wouldn’t come back up. We’d talked about it two days earlier when he’d had another weight check appointment. The nurse would call in her information to Dr. Shanks’ office and then they’d call me and we’d come up with a new plan.

I sighed. I loved Nate more than anything, but this was taxing. It had gotten to the point where Clark and I had discussed going to straight formula with him. The conclusion we’d come to — and the doctor and pediatric nurse practitioner had agreed — was that he spit up less breast milk than he did formula. So not only was it good for him and me, but he seemed to keep more of it down.

I also thought they were going to start him on Baby Zantac, too, hoping that would help.

Sure enough, three hours later, I got a phone call from Ronnie, the nurse practitioner. We were going to keep the same schedule as now, but add a little bit of a special formula to the bottles and start him on the Zantac.

“Hey,” Clark said quietly, coming into our room and keeping his voice down when he realized that Nate was asleep on my

chest. “Sorry I didn’t get back to you earlier. It was one of those days.”

We had a signal of sorts. If either of us had some kind of emergency and the other didn’t answer, we’d call until they did. I’d only called once, which meant there was no rush for him to get back to me.

“I was going to call you from the car, but Mom called as soon as I got in.”

“No problem.” I filled him in on what had happened.

He sighed. “I’m so sorry. I know this is hard on you.”

I shrugged. “I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do.”

The feeding cycle repeated every three hours and it usually took between an hour and an hour and a half to feed him so I had, at most, two hours between feedings. The only breaks I got were classes when Jessica took care of them. The feeding schedule was such that she usually only had one feeding in the mornings and I was home for the next one. My professors had been very understanding so far when it came to missing classes for doctor’s appointments and so on — though I’d done my best not to schedule them during class. We were now in our senior year and I’d had most of my professors before — and the one I hadn’t, Clark had. They were sympathetic and said they’d do what was needed, within reason, to help me finish. It helped that Clark was in several classes with me — if I didn’t make it, he could take notes and use my digital recorder to help me catch what I missed.

I was still doing my internship from home. The column was now filled with the struggles of a mom — and Clark’s column of a dad struggling — with a baby branded ‘failure to thrive’; the blogs were the same.

The support we were getting from the comments was incredible. There had been quite a few of the ‘it’s not as bad as it seems’ comments, but just as many others were supportive and encouraging — stories of babies with similar problems who were now just fine, suggestions on things to try — most of which we already had — and things of that nature.

Things between Clark and I hadn’t really changed much. The strain was getting to both of us. Most conversations revolved around work or the kids, out of necessity as much as anything else. I rarely had the energy for more than the bare minimum. I didn’t know the last time I’d had more than two hours of sleep at a time.

“Listen,” Clark said, startling me out of my thoughts. “Why don’t you sleep tonight? I’ll feed him that Gentlease stuff they gave us. He spits up more of it than when he’s nursing but less than any of the other formulas. It’s not ideal, but you need to get some sleep.” He reached over from his chair and brushed my hair back. “Take a long, hot shower and go get a good night’s sleep. I’ll make sure Christopher stays in his bed and get up with Nate as needed.”

I yawned as I nodded. “I know it’s best for him when he nurses but...”

“A mom too exhausted to function isn’t going to help him or Christopher or herself.”

“I know but...”

“You have to take care of yourself, too.” He sighed. “Mom offered to come back out and stay for a while. Harvest will be finished soon and there won’t be as much to do on the farm. She thought you might could use the help.” He reached for my hand and held it loosely. “Asking for help doesn’t mean you’re a bad mom. It means that this is overwhelming and you’re doing what you need to do to take care of yourself so you can take care of Nate and Christopher, too.”

How had he known the thoughts that were running through my head when he mentioned Martha? Shouldn’t I be able to do this on my own? I *was* his mom after all...

But he was right. Being a good parent also meant knowing when to ask for help and I was going to need help. Jessica did

what she could but she had Christopher to take care of most of the time and evenings and overnights off — though she had volunteered to help out a few times.

Finally, I nodded. “Okay. *If* she can get away without it causing any kind of problems or anything, I’d love to have her come. But make sure it’s okay with your dad, too. She’s already spent six weeks living with us this year.”

He laughed. “I’m sure quick trips home can be arranged. Didn’t you know I took her home about twice a week while she was here?”

I shook my head. How had I not known? “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“If I had to guess, she felt bad that she was *able* to get out and about and do things and she didn’t want to rub it in.”

“That sounds like her.”

He chuckled lightly and squeezed my hand. “It does, doesn’t it?” He stood and carefully took Nate from me. “Go take a shower and get some sleep. I’ll take care of him.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

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Clark

I heard the water start in the tub. I was sure a long bath would help her feel better and help her relax enough to get to sleep.

I put Nate in his bassinet, being as careful as I could so he wouldn’t wake up. I breathed a sigh of relief when he stayed asleep.

I headed back into our room, pulling the door most of the way shut behind me. Christopher was in his Incredibles toddler bed and had ended up in our bed with me when Nate woke him up. It wasn’t every night or every time Nate was up, but often enough. Most nights that he didn’t end up with me, I found Lois and Nate in her old room. She said she went in there to keep from waking Christopher up. She had talked about just staying in there for a while, but never had.

I was watching an episode of one of the new shows we’d been watching — Storm Chasers, a bunch of crazy guys with cameras and scientific equipment chasing tornadoes — when Lois came out of the bathroom.

“You didn’t wait for me?” she asked.

“Sorry. I figured you’d go straight to bed and watch it tomorrow.”

She sighed as she climbed into bed. “You’re probably right. I’m going to go right to sleep.”

I could hear the covers shifting and a soft sigh as she settled in under the covers. Most of the lights were off, just a table lamp near me and the television. I turned the sound way down so it wouldn’t bother her and trained my ears on the sound of the show.

The show was nearly over and I jumped when I heard Lois say my name.

“Clark?”

I literally jumped, my heart in my throat. “You scared me,” I told her.

“I scared you?” I could hear the amusement in her voice.

“I was tuned in to the very low volume on the TV and that made you *really* loud,” I told her, twisting in the seat so I could look at her.

She was sitting up against the headboard, knees pulled up to her chest, both hands running through her hair.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I can’t sleep.” Her whole body jerked slightly. “I’m tense and stressed and my mind is going a million miles an hour.”

I clicked the power button on the remote and was beside her on the bed a second later. I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to me. “He’s going to be fine,” I reassured her, kissing the top of her head.

“I can’t help but wonder what’s going to happen before he

gets to that point though,” she told me quietly. “Is he going to end up in the hospital? Is there some other drug? Will he outgrow it? Is the Zantac not going to work because he’s half-Kryptonian? Would that valve be working if I’d stayed on bed rest a while longer and he’d stayed inside a bit longer?”

She was working herself into a bit of a frenzy and I stopped her with a finger on her lips.

“There’s no way to know,” I reminded her. “If he’d made it to a full forty weeks, he could still have this problem. Heck, it could be *because* he’s half-Kryptonian. Or my son anyway. Maybe I have some kind of family history of ineffective gastroesophageal sphincters.” The current belief was that the valve between Nate’s esophagus and stomach wasn’t functioning properly and that’s why he spit up so much.

Her head rested on my shoulder. “I know, but still...”

“Don’t blame yourself,” I reminded her. “You’ve said I can’t blame myself for being Kryptonian. He probably would have come that day whether you stayed home or not.”

We sat there for a long minute.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Sure.”

“Would you stay with me tonight — just until I go to sleep — and hold me for a while?”

She must have sensed my hesitancy, though it was only a split second. “Sure,” I said as she started to talk over me.

“It’s okay. Really. Go watch something or whatever. I’ll be fine.”

As though to emphasize her point, she slipped out of my embrace and back under the covers, situating the body pillow just so.

I stifled a sigh at the misunderstanding and slid down until I was lying behind her. I scooted closer and wrapped an arm around her waist. “How’s this?” I asked, well aware that the last time we’d slept like this was on the cruise.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I didn’t know how long we lay there, but it was a while before she drifted off to sleep. As I closed my eyes to try to get some sleep myself, I heard Nate start to make some noise. I glanced at the clock and realized that the three hours were up. The next feeding would be four hours later — unless he woke up on his own before then. The one after that was three hours again. Hopefully, Lois could sleep until then and get a good seven hours of uninterrupted sleep. I knew she needed it and something told me this might get harder before it got better.

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October 2005

She’d only called once, but I left the staff meeting to answer the call anyway. I’d warned Perry it was coming.

“What’d they say?” I asked without preamble.

I could hear the tears in her voice. “He only gained an ounce and a half. They want to go ahead and put him in the hospital and see if we can figure out what’s wrong. Is it that valve? Is the valve the problem or the symptom? All that.”

I sighed and sank into the nearest chair, my forehead resting on the palm of my hand.

We’d known this was probably coming. Last week, half the practitioners in the pediatrician’s office had wanted to admit him and the other half wanted to try one more medicine and actual cereal in his bottles first. We’d seen two of them on a regular basis, but they’d all consulted on his case over the last nearly three and a half months.

An ounce and a half meant that he was still well under eight pounds — again. Or still. We’d thought — hoped, prayed — that when he hit eight pounds, he’d be strong enough to nurse better and all those other things and it would be the tipping point, so to speak. It hadn’t worked that way and he stayed over the eight

pound mark for only one weigh-in. He’d *lost* six ounces, despite our best efforts, the next week and only gained a tiny bit of that back.

I knew Lois had gone to the doctor’s appointment prepared for a hospital stay and now it was upon us.

We’d talked it over ad nauseum. Mom had been in Metropolis for three weeks helping as much as she could, often sleeping in the boys’ room. We’d talked it over with her — and Dad — and decided that there was no other choice. We’d tried everything and he simply wasn’t gaining weight.

There was no other option at this point. They’d all been exhausted.

And now, my son, the half-alien, was going to the hospital to be poked and prodded and studied and who knew what else.

My dad’s voice from my years growing up echoed in my head. Dissect you like a frog, dissect you like a frog. The refrain was repeating over and over.

“I don’t know what else to do, Clark. We’ve tried *everything*.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “They won’t find anything different. Will they? They’ll want more blood work and urine tests... But I can’t okay this without knowing you’re okay with it.”

We’d already had blood work done and urine tests and they’d all come back normal — no sign of alien hunters or anything wrong, for that matter.

I sighed. “Okay. Let’s admit him. We have to do what we have to do.”

If worse came to worse, I’d fly us all off to the North Pole.

I ran a weary hand down my face.

For now...

Kryptonian or not...

They were admitting my three-month-old son to the hospital.

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Part 117

Lois

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They were admitting my three-month-old son to the hospital. My half-Kryptonian three-month-old son.

We’d talked for hours with Martha and Jonathan over the last couple weeks. I don’t think they’d really grasped the potential seriousness of the situation until Martha arrived in Metropolis and saw him — how little he was, even for a three-month-old preemie. His eyes were slightly sunken and his head was way out of proportion with the rest of his tiny body — much more so than most newborns.

When I looked at the pictures, he almost looked... alien.

I sighed as I rocked with him in his hospital room waiting for someone to come in and finish checking him in.

Daddy had agreed the night before that hospitalization might well be our next step, as much as we all hated the thought. Of course, he didn’t understand the true reasons for our reluctance. We’d talked about telling him, but there wasn’t really another option for Nate at this point — we’d have to hospitalize him whether Daddy knew about Clark or not — and so we’d decided not to at this point.

I looked up as the door opened. It was Clark.

“Hey,” he said quietly, putting my suitcase down. I’d left it in the car and asked him to bring it up when he got here.

“Hi,” I said in the same tone. “He’s asleep.”

“What’d they say so far?” He sat in one of the other chairs.

“Nothing yet. They’re supposed to be in to finish paperwork in a few minutes and then the hospitalist will be in before long to talk about what we’re going to do and when and what the potential options are and all of that.”

As though on cue, the door opened and a lady came in wheeling a computer in front of her. She input all sorts of information about insurance and medical history and all of that. A

few minutes after she left, Dr. Mayors came in.

We talked for over half an hour, detailing everything we'd tried, both of our medical histories, just about everything else.

He rattled off a long list of tests he wanted to do — EEG, EKG, Upper GI, ultrasounds of his kidneys — we shared a look at that; would Clark, and potentially Nate's, dense molecular structure affect that? — something with nuclear medicine, CAT scan, MRI and a number of other things I doubted I'd remember later.

"I think we can safely say that valve isn't working right," he told us. "The question now is whether that's the problem or the symptom."

"What could it be a symptom of?" Clark asked him.

"Well, there's a number of possibilities. My guess is that it's just that the valve isn't fully developed and that's the extent of the problem, *but* we want to make sure of that. It *could* be a sign of a heart problem or a neurological problem, for instance. The test I think will tell us the most is the pH Probe test, but... When was the last time you gave him Reglan?"

That was the most recent medicine. "This morning," I told him.

He nodded. "Okay. We won't be able to do the pH Probe test until Monday then. That has to be out of his system for 72 hours to do that. With that one, we'll put a little probe down his nose and it'll measure the acid in his throat."

"What if he has a good day?" I asked. "There's days he doesn't spit up hardly at all."

He shook his head. "It won't matter."

A tear streaked down my cheek. "That's something I'm afraid of. What if he has a good week while we're here? He's had them before where he's inexplicably gained four or five ounces and we can't figure out why. The next week he'd lose two ounces and the same thing — no explanation for the change that we can see."

He smiled reassuringly. "Mrs. Kent, I assure you that we're going to do our best to figure out what's wrong. Even if he does have a good week, we know that there's *something* going on with him and we're going to figure out what it is and go from there."

I nodded. "Thank you."

He sat forward and rubbed his hands together. "Okay, I'm going to go get this information into the computer and start getting those tests ordered. Tammy will be in here in a few minutes to get his crib set up. We'll put him on an incline and see if that helps some."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, a nurse came in and situated him on the bed, blankets rolled all around him to keep him in place.

"He's got reflux," she said confidently. "He acts like a reflux baby, the way he twists and arches his back. The Zantac didn't help?"

"Not really," I told her.

"Well, Dr. Mayors is getting all the tests ordered." She showed us his intake/output sheet where we'd record everything going in and coming out while we were there.

The doctor came back in and we discussed how he was going to eat for the next few days — I was going to pump as much as I could and every three hours we'd give him everything I'd pumped plus a little bit of formula to bring it up to three ounces total. He brought in a box of Human Milk Fortifier to add to the bottles.

We'd had my milk tested to make sure that it had enough calories and it had actually tested on the high side of normal so we knew that wasn't the problem, but adding extra calories to what he did keep down couldn't hurt either.

Finally, it was back to just the three of us in the room. Nate was sleeping peacefully in Clark's arms and another tear streaked down my cheek.

"He's going to be okay," Clark told me with a conviction I

wasn't sure he felt.

"I know," I said, swiping at my cheeks. "But he's so little..."

"I know."

Clark took Nate to one side of the room while I pulled a curtain shut to pump.

Daddy and Martha walked in as I finished doctoring the pumped milk. Clark gave it to him and we talked to them until someone showed up to take Nate to have some test or other done. Daddy and Clark went with him — I didn't think I could handle watching my baby get poked and prodded.

Someone brought in a cot for me to sleep on, telling us we could rearrange the room however we wanted.

"How are you holding up, dear?" Martha asked when it was just the two of us left in the room.

I shrugged. "They're talking about running just about every test known to man on my son and they mentioned the possibility of surgery even. Even without... Clark, I'd be freaked out."

She reached out and grasped my hand lightly. "It's going to be fine."

"Everyone keeps telling me that, but..." I sighed. "I just want him to be healthy."

"I know, sweetheart. I know."

~~~~~

Clark

Sam and I followed the guy through the hospital complex halls and corridors and even a skyway or two before we reached the area where they were going to be running a number of tests on Nate. I'd held him in my arms the whole way, grateful that he was sleeping.

Even with my eidetic memory, I was having a hard time keeping track of everything.

It was almost two hours before we made it back to Nate's room.

Mom was rocking in the chair and Lois was curled up on the cot, exhausted.

"She hasn't been asleep long," Mom whispered.

"She's exhausted," I whispered back.

She slept for about thirty minutes before it was time for her to feed Nate again.

I'd planned on staying as late as they'd let me, but she shooed me out about seven, an hour or so after our parents left.

"Christopher needs to see at least one of his parents today," she told me.

I sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I saw him for a few minutes at breakfast but that's it."

"Go home and give him a big hug and kiss for me."

"I will." I stood and went to her side, bending down to give her a kiss on her forehead. "Call me if you need *anything* or can't sleep or whatever."

She nodded. "Okay. I will."

Nate was asleep and I noticed her opening her laptop as I left, probably to write a blog post. I needed to do the same thing in a little while.

I made my way back to the house. Christopher ran up to me as I walked into our living room.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

I swung him up in my arms and around in a wide circle. "Hey, little man."

"Where Mommy an' Na'?" He was still in my arms, playing with the button on the top of my shirt.

Jessica motioned at me that she was heading out and I nodded, mouthing my thanks to her before turning back to my son.

"Nate's in the hospital, bud. He's sick and the doctors have to find out what's wrong with him."

"G'an'pa doctor," he said, still playing with the button.

"I know. But Nate needs a special doctor and Grandpa's not

the right kind. Mommy has to stay at the hospital with him until they know what's going to make him better."

"Ca' I see 'im?" He sounded sad, and almost a bit scared.

"Sure. We'll go see him tomorrow, okay?"

He nodded.

I tipped his face back towards me with one finger. "He's gonna be fine, but you know what? Because Mom and Dad are going to have to be at the hospital with him some, that means you get to spend lots of time with Uncle Jimmy. He's going to be here tomorrow to hang out with you."

"Unca Ji'y?"

"Yep. You love playing with Uncle Jimmy."

Christopher nodded. "Wan' Mommy," he said, resting his head on my shoulder.

"I know, bud, but she has to stay with Nate until we can make sure he's healthy."

He heaved a sigh. "I know."

I carried him upstairs and we settled on to the twin bed in his room. "Go pick a book," I told him and he scrambled off the bed and over to his bookcase. He stood in front of it with his hands on his hips and, I was sure, a very serious look on his face. He finally selected two and brought them back over.

"'Bear Wants More' and 'Bear Snores On'?" Two of his favorites. He settled in next to me and I wrapped an arm around him, starting to read. He said the tag line with me every time through both books.

"Daddy," he said halfway through the second book. "We ca' Mommy?"

I looked down at him, surprised, and wondered why I hadn't thought of it. "Sure, we can call Mommy. Do you want to finish the book first?"

He shook his head. "No. Wanna talk to Mommy."

"Okay." I dug my cell phone out of my pocket, pressing the '3' button until it dialed 'Lois' cell'.

"Hello?" she said quietly on the second ring.

"Hey. How's it going?"

She sighed. "It's a blast, but you haven't been gone that long. What's up?"

"I've got someone here who wants to talk to you," I said with a smile.

"Good. I want to talk to him." I could hear the smile in her voice.

I pushed the 'speaker' button so I could hear both sides of the conversation and help interpret when necessary. Lois usually was able to decipher Christopher's speech better than me, but over a phone...

"Hi, Mommy!" Christopher said brightly.

"Hi, buddy. How are you?"

"Miss you, Mommy." He sounded sad.

"I miss you, too."

"How Na'?"

"He misses his big brother."

"He si'?"

"Yeah. He's sick but he's going to get better and he's going to need to you teach him how to do big boy stuff, okay?"

"Kay."

"And now it's past your bedtime," she said sternly. "You tell Daddy it's bedtime."

Christopher giggled. "I s'leep wi' Daddy?"

Lois laughed. "You'd have to ask Daddy about that. I love you, Christopher."

"I wuv 'ou, Mommy."

"Let me talk to Daddy."

I took the phone off speaker. "I'll call you back in a little while, okay?"

"Okay. It's about time to feed Nate though, so give me a bit."

"You got it." We hung up.

"Daddy?" Christopher asked as I put the phone on the bed next to me.

"Yeah?"

"You wuv Mommy?"

"What?" I asked after a second of shock.

"You wuv Mommy?" he wouldn't look at me.

"Why do you ask that?"

He shrugged. "'ou don' say 'ou wuv Mommy."

"I love your Mom, bud."

I *did* love Lois, but probably not like he meant, though he probably didn't really know what he meant.

He reached over me and handed me my phone. "Shou' te' Mommy."

"I'll tell her later," I promised.

He frowned then nodded. "Kay."

"And your mom's right. It's bedtime for you."

I laid him giggling on his back as I changed his diaper, wondering when he might decide he was ready to use the big boy potty — something he adamantly refused to even try to this point.

I carried him over to his bed and laid him on it, pulling his covers over him. I kissed his forehead. "Sleep tight. Love you."

"Wuv you. Te' Mommy."

"I will."

I headed to our room and floated onto the bed, pulling my phone out of the pocket. I called Lois and talked to her for a few minutes, getting a status report — nothing had changed. I told her I'd see her in the morning and we hung up.

I folded my hands behind my head and stared at the stars through the ceiling. Even Christopher was picking up that things weren't quite right between me and Lois.

I'd managed to evade Sam's question after Nate was born. Lois had called right after he asked me again what my plans were for the day after Christopher's fifth birthday and I'd left to talk to her. Sam hadn't been happy about it, but I'd been careful not to be alone with him since.

I sighed. Right now, I couldn't focus on that. Right now, I needed to focus on Nate and what we could do to get him healthy and on Christopher and making sure he wasn't feeling neglected while Nate was in the hospital. Jimmy was going to be staying at the house for a few days and that would help, but...

No one had said anything looked unusual during any of the tests they'd done earlier — the ultrasounds and x-rays and other tests that looked at his insides all came back completely normal. That was a huge relief. There were more tests scheduled for the next day and then the pH Probe on Monday, so he'd be there until at least then.

I sighed again.

Once Nate was out of the woods then I'd think more about what Christopher had said and what on earth I was going to do about my life, my marriage, my sons.

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Part 118

November 2005

Lois

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Surgery.

They wanted my three-month-old son to have surgery.

They wanted my three-month-old, half-Kryptonian son to have surgery.

I sighed. They were sending us home for a couple days until they could get the equipment in. They hadn't done this kind of surgery on such a small baby in years and needed to order what they needed. The surgeon had only been at Met U's hospital for a few months and had done it on babies fairly often at his old hospital. Nate, now up to eight and a half pounds, would be one of the smallest babies he'd done it on though.

It was Friday and surgery was scheduled for Wednesday

morning.

Unless we called it off.

Jonathan had flown in earlier that morning and we were getting ready to have a Kent family pow-wow.

“Should we bring my dad into this?” I asked them as we settled into the living area of our room.

Clark ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know.”

“He’s not going to tell anyone,” I pointed out.

“I know, but...”

“Would it change his mind about Nate having surgery?”

Jonathan asked. “He’s looked at all the medical records — all the x-rays and CAT scans and EKGs and everything else. He hasn’t noticed anything off and neither has anyone else. Is there *any* other option at this point? Besides surgery?”

I paced. “I don’t think so. We’ve tried everything. I have no idea how he’s managed to gain as much as he has the last week, but I think it’s because I’ve done nothing but force feed him high calorie food, at least that’s how it feels. And that’s all well and good for a week or so, but is that sustainable long term? Is it *desirable* long term? Is there any way to know if that valve will fix itself? If he grows up to be invulnerable like Clark, will it automatically heal itself when the invulnerability kicks in? Can we risk waiting that long?”

Jonathan and Martha were sitting next to each other on the couch, his arm tight around her. Clark was in one of the chairs, his forearms resting on his knees. I continued pacing and as long as I was pacing I wouldn’t be expected to sit by Clark. I wasn’t sure if it was the week apart, where we’d hardly seen each other or what, but I really didn’t want to be anywhere near him at the moment.

Martha and Jonathan shared a look.

“We talked about this,” Martha said, “but decided we wouldn’t bring it up unless you did. We’re okay with telling Sam if you two think it’s the best thing to do. We’ll support you whichever way you decide.”

“Is there anything he could say that would change our minds?” Clark asked, looking up at me.

I shrugged. “We could always just tell him that we’re freaked out by the idea of someone cutting open our not-quite-four-month-old. And that’s completely true, no matter what his biology. Ask if there’s any other specialist we could consult or any other option or what waiting might accomplish — if anything. And if he comes up with *anything*, take that option instead of surgery right now?”

Clark sighed. “That sounds like a good plan. As for telling him... play it by ear? He was urging us to admit him a month ago, but only because he was afraid of what might happen if we waited. He completely understood our rationale for waiting — Kryptonian physiology aside, we were more than a bit hesitant to admit such a little baby, but we also want what’s best for him.”

There was a beeping sound that indicated someone entering our wing.

“Lois? Clark?” It was Dad.

“In here, Daddy,” I called.

He walked in the room. “Family conference?”

I nodded. “Yeah. We didn’t know where you were and you didn’t answer your phone.” I resumed my pacing.

“I got caught up on a conference call.” He sat in one of the chairs. “What’s the consensus?”

“You’re the doctor,” I reminded him. “You’ve looked at all the tests they’ve done. What do you think?”

He sighed. “Well, the pH Probe was the only test that came back abnormal. That’s good. His reading was a 21 and anything over a 15 indicates GERD — gastroesophageal reflux disease.”

“What’s the highest possible score?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m not sure,” Daddy admitted, “but I do know that 21 is pretty high.”

“Are there *any* other options at this point?” I asked him.

“Any other specialists to call in? Anything?”

He shook his head. “If there is, I don’t see it.”

“Did you see anything unusual at all on any of the tests?”

This came from Clark. “Anything that might indicate this was a symptom and not the problem or anything else even this slightest bit off?”

“No, nothing. Everything except his weight and the pH Probe, test results looked great.”

I looked at Clark and he looked at me. He shrugged slightly.

“I don’t see any other options then.”

I scrubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands, willing the tears to stay put. “Surgery it is then, I guess.”

I failed and the tears started flowing. Daddy moved next to me and wrapped me in his arms; in the same big hug he’d given me countless times over the years. “Would you do it?” I asked him. “Would you agree to surgery for me or Lucy when we were almost four-months-old? If he were your son...”

“He’s my grandson,” Dad said quietly. “And yes, at this point, I would.”

I nodded against him. “Okay. Then appointment with Dr. Forest on Tuesday, surgery on Wednesday.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” he asked. “To the appointment? They might even let me scrub in and observe if you want me to ask.”

“I don’t know,” I told him.

“Well, talk about it and decide.” He gave me one more squeeze. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“I know,” I whispered. Deep down I did know, but that didn’t make it any easier.

Fifteen minutes later, they had all left and I was standing staring out the window over the pasture, moonlight illuminating the dusting of snow.

“Are you okay?” came a quiet voice behind me.

I shrugged and a second later, Clark was behind me, his arms wrapping around me. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“I know.” I turned in his arms until my cheek was resting on his chest, my arms sliding around his waist. “I’m still scared and not just about the Kryptonian thing. I’m scared because they want to cut open my son who’s barely more than a newborn.”

“I know. It scares me, too, but we’ve tried everything else. All the doctors, your dad, everyone thinks it’s the right thing to do. We have to trust them to know what they’re talking about and what they’re doing.”

I sighed. “I know it’s not something we usually do, not since our anniversary and all that, but would you hold me tonight — at least until I’m asleep?” I hurried on, remembering his hesitation the last time I’d asked. “You don’t have to, but I sleep better when you do — or fall asleep easier at least.”

“Of course,” he said, letting go of me and scooping me up. “Mom said she’d get up with Nate tonight so we could sleep — you especially. She knows you didn’t sleep well while you were at the hospital.”

I was glad I’d changed into my pajamas and pulled the covers back as soon as everyone left. He set me gently on my side of the bed before floating over me, coming to rest behind me as I pulled the covers up. He put his arm around me, pulling me back towards him and I closed my eyes for a minute, relishing the feeling of his body along mine.

Here I felt safe — and even loved — but I couldn’t let myself get used to it. One day he’d leave and I’d be alone in my bed again. I’d move though, switch to another room — either my old one or one of the apartments if the boys stayed with me. I wouldn’t be able to stay here — where we’d made Nate. Maybe I’d move into Jess’ room and move one of the boys in here or something if they stayed.

I let out a deep sigh.

“What is it?” Clark asked. “And don’t say Nate because I know it’s more than that.”

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Clark

I did. I knew there was something else bothering her — probably the same ole, same ole, but I had to make sure.

“What do you think is bothering me?” she asked, rolling over to look me in the eyes.

I sighed. “Probably the same thing that bothers you whenever we’re close to each other.”

“You mean that my husband’s not in love with me and is planning on leaving me — with or without my kids — in a couple years? And don’t say that I brought it up this time because I didn’t.” I could hear the bitterness in her voice.

“Yeah, something like that.” I sighed and rolled onto my back, staring at — not through — the ceiling. “You know what Christopher asked me the first night Nate was in the hospital?” I ran both hands through my hair.

“What?”

“He asked me if I loved you.” I hadn’t planned on telling her all of this yet, not until Nate was out of the woods or whatever.

“What did you tell him?”

“That I did. And you know that’s the truth but even though he’s not old enough to understand the different kinds of love, he and I were talking about different kinds. He wanted me to call you right back and tell you. I told him I’d tell you later.”

“You didn’t.”

“I didn’t want to just say it without having the conversation that went with it and that wasn’t the time or place.”

“Huh.”

I wasn’t sure she bought it.

“What was I supposed to tell him?”

I could tell she wasn’t going to say what she was really thinking. “I don’t know,” she finally said.

“I thought you weren’t going to hold back the smart-aleck remarks,” I said without thinking.

“Fine. I’m thinking that maybe you should have told him that you love Mom but not enough to stick around after he turns five.”

“How would I explain that to a two-year-old? And you would have *killed* me if I had.”

“Probably,” she conceded. “But you still should have found a way to avoid the question or just reiterate that you love him and Mom loves him. That’s what we’re going to end up telling him someday anyway, right? Why start misleading him now?”

Yeah, the bitterness was really coming through.

“If I could make myself fall in love with you, I would,” I said, surprising both of us. “It kills me to think that it’s going to hurt the boys and you and me, but neither one of us want to settle for a marriage that’s basically platonic.”

“So it would be *easier* to just fall in love with me? But you can’t bring yourself to make yourself?”

“You — the general ubiquitous you — can’t make yourself fall in love with someone,” I pointed out.

“So you’ll go back to Lana in a few years and I’ll start from scratch.” I heard more than saw her shrug.

I sighed. “I don’t know about Lana.”

She rolled onto her side and propped herself up on one elbow. “Is there trouble in potential paradise?”

“Maybe. It’s been almost three years already. I’ve had two babies with you; she lost a baby with someone else. A few things she said last time I talked to her bothered me some. I don’t know that it’s some things we couldn’t work through, but who knows? Who knows if she’ll even want me back? And if she won’t be a good step-mom to the boys then it won’t happen either. Besides the whole alien thing.”

“Would she let you be Mr. Incredible?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.” I thought about asking her if

she’d be opposed but it didn’t matter.

“I won’t settle for second choice,” she said quietly. “So if you have any thoughts of seeing if she’s even interested and if she’s not, coming running back to me, you can just forget it. I won’t take Lana’s rejects because you don’t have anywhere else to go. I want to be with someone who loves me for me, not because I’m better than being alone. We’d both end up resenting each other and that wouldn’t be good for either of us or the boys. Besides being relegated to a life of celibacy, because I’m not being friends with benefits. It’s either a commitment to a life together, loving each other or it’s nothing. Got it?”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t be happy with that either. And I wouldn’t do that to you — offering you second best.”

“Well, at least we’re clear on that.”

There was a long silence.

“Just out of idle curiosity,” she finally said, “what is it that you love or loved or whatever about Lana? And what is it that I’m lacking? Not that I’m planning on going out and getting some ‘I heart Clark’ tattoo if it would make you feel differently or make some fundamental change to who I am, but I’m curious.”

“Lana...” I sighed. Did I really want to do this? Would Lois give me a choice? “I’ve known Lana since I can remember. Except for the Kryptonian thing, she knows everything about me — or did anyway. She was my best friend. She was there for me through everything — even if she didn’t really understand. She didn’t push me when I was brooding over a new power that made me different than everyone else. She just sat with me and held my hand and let me work through it, never pushing me for more than I was willing to tell her. She’s beautiful, tenacious, strong. She loves kids. She loved *me*.”

“I love you,” Lois said quietly. “I know everything she didn’t and I still love you, but that’s not enough and I understand why, but why was it enough then?”

“It wasn’t. It was everything. The physical attraction...”

“Which we’ve proven we have in spades — or we did a year ago anyway before pregnancy and childbirth destroyed what was left of my figure.”

I ignored that. She was right, but I ignored it. “Her kindness...”

Lois snorted.

“Around everyone but you,” I pointed out. “You two were like oil and water from the moment you met. Her generosity. Her.”

“So what is it about me that’s lacking? I like to think that I have at least some of each of those qualities.”

“You do.” I sighed. “You equate just about everything to one of your shows right?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“It’s like *Friends*. When Ross was dating Julie and was making a pro/con list between her and Rachel, what was on Julie’s con list?”

“She wasn’t Rachel,” Lois said quietly. “So that’s what makes me inherently unlovable? I’m not Lana?”

I gave a muffled scream. “No. That’s not it at all. You’re *not* inherently unlovable; you’re just not Lana.”

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Part 119

Lois

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Of course.

I wasn’t Lana.

That had always been my biggest fault as far as Clark loving me was concerned.

I wasn’t Lana.

I rolled off the bed.

I knew I’d asked him to hold me until I fell asleep, but I decided that I didn’t want to be anywhere near him. I headed

towards the closet and dug around in one of my drawers until I found a swimsuit.

“Lo-is,” I heard Clark call after me.

“What?”

“You wanted the truth, right?”

Yeah. I had wanted the truth, but that didn’t mean I liked it.

And that didn’t mean I had to stay in bed with the guy who would prefer I was someone else.

I threw my maternity suit to the side and found another one. It wasn’t exactly a micro-bikini or anything remotely like that, but as I tugged on first the bottoms and then the tankini top, I knew it had fit better before Nate was born.

“What are you doing?” Clark called from the other room.

“Going for a swim,” I told him, as I exited the closet and headed towards the bathroom to grab a towel.

“It’s freezing outside.”

I glared at him. “We have a lap pool in the basement, remember?”

I turned and headed towards the main door only to find Clark standing in my way.

“What?”

“Don’t go like this,” he said quietly. “Not tonight. Not with everything...”

“I want to do something where I don’t have to think,” I told him, arms crossed defiantly in front of me. “Swimming a bunch of mindless laps fits the bill. So unless you have something else in mind to take my mind off my infant son having surgery, get out of my way.”

“Is that what you want?” He wasn’t looking at me.

“For you to take my mind off of it like you took my mind off Daddy?”

Was that what I wanted? Kind of. I wanted him to want me, to love me, to want to be with me. I wanted him to make love to me, but because he loved me not because it was something to pass the time.

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“No,” I told him as I tried to brush by him. “I don’t want you to make love to me, have sex with me, consummate like bunnies with me or whatever you want to call it. I don’t want you to make me forget for a while. I want you to let me by,” I said as he blocked me again.

“I don’t believe you,” he said quietly.

I looked at his eyes. I could see in them, for a brief instance, the desire I’d seen nearly a year before. “Are you in love with me?” I didn’t give him a chance to answer. “You’re not. And I told you before that if you decided you wanted a long term commitment, a relationship with *me*, it could happen again, but not until then. You kissed me like four seconds later and all that went out the window. I know you didn’t mean that as some kind of commitment, but it’s not going to happen again. Don’t expect me to share my body when you’re not willing to share your heart.”

I shoved my way past him and out the door.

“Don’t wait up,” I called over my shoulder.

I waited impatiently for the security door to release before practically running down the stairs towards the indoor lap pool. It was too shallow to dive in, so I walked in slowly and started swimming. I didn’t know how long I swam, but it was a long time. Up and down the pool, from one end to the other, over and over again.

I finally stopped and climbed out of the pool.

“I don’t want to break your heart and I don’t want to hurt the boys, but what am I supposed to do?”

I turned to see Clark sitting in one of the chair on the end of the pool.

I pushed my wet hair back. “Leave,” I said after a long moment of silence. “Leave now before any of us get hurt any

worse than we’re already going to. If you leave, I can move on. Christopher and Nate won’t spend two and a half years thinking they live in a fifties sitcom. Daddy’ll protect me and Christopher — even if he goes with you. And I won’t keep you from Nate even if he can’t live with you right now because he’s nursing and all that.”

“I leave and his claim doesn’t go away,” he said.

“And in another two and a half years, he’ll find a way to change the law or something. Hell, I’m surprised he didn’t try to claim Nate under some old, obscure law that says since I already had one of his kids I’m his concubine or something and so any other children I bear are his, too. If you don’t want to hurt me anymore than necessary, leave now.”

I headed back up to our room, took a shower and changed back into my pajamas. I glanced at the bed where he’d been holding me not too long earlier, but he wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

A minute later he walked in the door from the veranda as I took my pillow off the bed and headed towards the door.

“Where are you going?”

“My old room,” I told him.

“Why?”

“Because I refuse to sleep on a couch after spending the last eight days on a cot that was more uncomfortable than the floor in the cabin and there is no way in hell I’m sleeping in a bed with you tonight.”

“I’ll go,” he said. “You need to be here in case Nate needs you. Or I’ll sleep on the couch — whichever.”

“Right.” The sarcasm oozed out of every word. “Wouldn’t want Mommy dearest to know that Clark Jerome Davis Kent is anything less than perfect and that even though we’re nearing our three year anniversary, he’s not any more in love with his wife than the day he married her. And even if he’s not sure he’s still in love with his ex, he knows what day he’s leaving his family.”

“What do you want from me?” he practically yelled, before lowering his voice. “You want me to lie to you and tell you I love you and I want to be with you and make love to you and then one day, years from now, tell you I’ve been lying the whole time? I leave and you and my son are both in danger. I stay until the danger’s over and I hurt all of you. What’s the answer?”

“I’ll leave,” I said quietly, pain shooting through my heart. “We’ve talked for nearly three years about you leaving, in large part because we didn’t think you were Christopher’s father. Now that we know almost for sure that you are, there’s no reason for you to leave. I’ll leave. I’ll go. We can make it normal for our kids. You live with Mom and Dad until you’re two and a half and then you live with Dad. Or in Nate’s case, until you wean. He’ll never know any different and Christopher won’t remember life with both of us for long. It’ll be his new normal and he’ll adapt. He’s a kid. They adapt easily.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Is that what I want?” I gave a short bark of laughter. “Of course that’s not what I want. That’s not what I *ever* wanted. None of this is what I wanted.”

It was only because there was only a few feet separating us that I could hear him.

“Then what do you want? What’s the answer?”

I took a couple of steps until I was right in front of him. “What do I want?” My hand rested on his chest. “*This* is what I want.”

And I kissed him.

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Clark

She was kissing me and my arms were wrapping around her, kissing her back, my hands finding their way to her shoulders and then my fingers tangled in her hair.

Her lips unexpectedly released mine and she pushed on me.

“That’s what I want,” she whispered. “But I want you to want it too. Not on some purely physical level, but because you love me, because you want me and you don’t. If you think I need to stay in here, then you need to go somewhere else.”

She pulled away from me and headed towards the bed.

“I thought you wanted me to hold you tonight because you sleep better when I hold you.”

“I changed my mind. If we’re not around someone else, there’s no reason for you to touch me ever again.”

She crawled into the bed and pulled the covers over her.

I didn’t even hear tears.

I sighed and headed out to the veranda, still clad only in my pajama pants and a pair of socks. I sat in one of the chairs and stared out over the forest in the distance, one foot propped up on the railing in front of me.

One of the doors opened behind me. “I thought I heard someone out here.” It was Mom.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I told her.

“More like you were fighting with your wife. I couldn’t hear what you were saying but that part was pretty unmistakable.”

I shrugged. “You got me. Lois and I were fighting.”

“Are you going to make up with her?”

“She’s already in bed and said she didn’t want me anywhere near her.”

“Do you *really* think she meant that?”

I sighed and ran a hand — the one with that damn band on it — through my hair. “Yeah, she meant it.”

“You know,” Mom said with a smirk, “making up is a lot more fun than fighting.”

I didn’t really remember her and Dad ever fighting, but somehow I knew she knew this from personal experience.

“Trust me. She meant it. She doesn’t want to see, hear or touch me right now. She was even planning on sleeping in her old room except that she needs to be near Nate, just in case.”

“Want to talk about it?” she asked quietly.

I shook my head. “I can’t. It’s between me and Lois and I can’t talk to anyone else about it — at least not right now. Maybe eventually, if it doesn’t resolve itself, but not anytime soon.”

She caught me off-guard with her next question. “Are you still in love with Lana?”

“I haven’t talked to her since I told her I got Lois pregnant — and that was the anniversary of when she lost her baby. I’ve seen her from a distance a few times, but I haven’t talked to her. How could I still be in love with her?”

“Are you still thinking about what might have been?”

Was I?

I wasn’t even sure I was still in love with Lana but I couldn’t tell her all of that.

“I wonder sometimes, but I don’t dwell on it. Don’t you ever wonder what life would have been like if Chris had lived? If I hadn’t landed in Shuster’s field?”

“From time to time. Not as often as I did before I re-met your dad. Maybe once or twice a year — on his birthday or our anniversary, but that’s about it. But you know what? As much as I loved Chris, I wouldn’t trade my life with Jonathan. I can’t imagine life without your dad.”

“How long did it take you?”

“It was different for me. I had five years between Chris’ *death* and the time I went on a *date* with Jonathan. You were still officially dating Lana when you married Lois.”

I didn’t respond to that.

“If you want to think about what life with Lana would be like... What if you hadn’t ended up in Latislan with Lois, would you even know that Christopher was your son? Would Lois? Would she have made it out of Latislan at all? Would she think she’d been drugged at a party or something and didn’t remember it? And if you did know, you’d be a part-time father at best. I

know you loved Lana and she loves kids, but she never liked Lois. How would she deal with a child you had with another woman while you were supposedly saving yourself for her, no matter what the circumstances were? And Nate... Nate wouldn’t exist. Is that really the life you thought it would be?”

She sighed before continuing. “And if that’s not the life you thought it would be, if you’ve put that mostly behind you, what about now? What about Lois? Have you fully committed yourself to her, to your marriage, to your life together?”

I put both feet on the ground and leaned forward, my elbows on my knees. “There’s stuff about my life I can’t tell you, Mom. I wish I could, but I can’t. I promised Lois I wouldn’t talk about certain parts of our lives, our marriage, our problems with anyone. I already said too much to Sam once and can’t bring myself to tell her that — and he said he’d prefer she not even know we’d had the conversation. And maybe we should talk to someone, maybe we need to, but we can’t. There’s too much risk with Navance and everything else. And now Nate on top of it all...” I sighed. “I promise. If I can ever talk about it, you guys will be the first ones I talk to.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yeah, I love her,” I said without hesitation.

“You know,” she said contemplatively, almost as though she forgot I was there, “I loved Chris with all my heart and I love your dad with all my heart, but they’ve always been different kinds of love. I think what I had with Chris could have turned into something like what I have with Dad, but it never had the chance. There’s all different kinds of love, even between a husband and wife. I love Dad because he’s my best friend, my confidant, my lover, my other half. It’s not all heart fluttering and floating. It’s deep, it’s abiding, it’s timeless.”

She moved to stand behind me, wrapping her arms around me and resting her chin on my head. “I love you, Clarkie.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

They were good words of advice, but she had no idea what a mess my life was.

Would Lois really leave?

Would I let her?

Now?

Later?

All of those questions had to go on the back burner. First, we had to deal with our son needing surgery.

I sighed and decided that sleeping on the veranda might not be such a bad plan.

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Part 120

Lois

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I sat in the surgical waiting room and stared at the wall in front of me.

I had my laptop with me and had blogged about all this and had promised updates from the hospital’s wifi network, but I just didn’t have it in me.

We’d been at the hospital since 4:30 — well, Nate and I had been. Clark had gotten up with Christopher and then headed over, arriving about 6:30. We’d been sitting in a pre-surgical prep area, when they came to take him away. I breathed a silent prayer as I handed him over to a nurse who promised me that she’d take good care of him. Dr. Forest had been there and reassured us that he thought he could do the Fundoplication through the laproscopic procedure rather than the ‘old-fashioned way’.

A Nissen Fundoplication.

I never would have thought I could remember that.

They were taking the top of his stomach and wrapping it around the bottom of his esophagus. Food wouldn’t go down and in; it would go down and around and in. It would also have to go around to get out — and that was much harder, which was the

point.

Dr. Forest thought he could do the surgery with cameras and such rather than actually opening him up, but he wouldn't be sure until they got in there.

They'd taken him nearly an hour ago.

The pager they'd given us buzzed. I looked up, wide-eyed. "It's too soon," I whispered and darted towards the reception desk.

My insides were churning. The surgery was supposed to take two or two and a half hours and it had been less than one.

Another family was in front of me. Daddy and Clark had gone to get something to eat a few minutes earlier, but he was at my side before it was my turn.

"What's the name?" the receptionist asked.

"Nathaniel Kent," I managed to get out.

She pulled a clipboard out with his name on it. "They just called. It took longer than expected to get his IV started and all of that, so they just started the surgery a few minutes ago and they wanted to let you know that there had been a delay."

My knees nearly gave out underneath me and only Clark's arm around my waist kept me upright. "Thank you," I told her as she turned to the person behind me.

"You need to relax some," Clark said quietly, keeping his arm around me as we headed back to the chairs we'd staked out. "I know it's hard, but you're going to make yourself sick."

"My *baby* is in there," I reminded him. "What if they find something? Or he reacts weird to one of the drugs they give him? Or..."

"Stop," he said forcefully. "He's fine."

"Can you see him?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm not sure where he is."

I glared at him. "Then until we know for sure that he's okay, I'm going to freak out a bit." I jerked away from him and went to sit near Daddy, but far enough away that he wouldn't immediately try to start a conversation.

I heard Clark tell him why they'd paged me. I watched them from under my lashes. Daddy looked fairly relaxed. He'd known Dr. Forest through professional conferences and so on and by reputation for years. He was completely confident in Dr. Forest's skills.

Clark looked slightly more stressed, but not nearly like I was.

My stomach was churning and it wasn't *just* because Nate was in surgery.

It was because of the fight we'd had the other night, the feelings the kiss had reawakened in me, everything else. Even though we hadn't been anywhere near each other most nights, at least we were in the same bed. The last few nights... Clark had slept on the couch and probably would for the foreseeable future — at least when I was home and I wouldn't be home for a few days. There hadn't even been any tears over it, just a deep, abiding sense of loss.

I'd brought my favorite blanket in with me and curled up underneath it, my head resting on the wall next to me. I wasn't quite sure how, but somehow I managed to fall asleep.

~~~~~  
Clark

I gave a small sigh of relief when Lois fell asleep. She was going to give herself an ulcer if she wasn't careful.

"What?" Sam noticed the sigh.

"She hasn't been sleeping well," I told him, nodding towards Lois. "Maybe she can get a little bit of rest and sleep through most of this."

"That would be good. I know she's scared about this, but it really is a pretty routine surgery."

"Surgery is only routine when it's not on someone you love," I said quietly.

He smiled slightly at that. "Very true, but I promise you that

it really is fairly simple — even if they do have to open him up instead of just the tiny incisions."

I sighed. "I still wish..."

"I know."

Sam turned back to his magazine and I popped open my laptop, logging in to the Daily Planet's blog site and posting an update.

Notes of encouragement could be found on both of our blogs and that was nice. People all around the city — or country even — were pulling for Nate.

Mom and Dad came back just then. They'd been with us for a while then went to get something to eat. They'd ventured all the way to the cafeteria while Sam and I had hit the small stand closer to the waiting room.

Dad and Sam were soon involved in a detailed discussion about football that I normally would have enjoyed, but not this time.

Mom sat next to me and rested her head on my shoulder.

"How are you?" she asked quietly.

"Just waiting," I said.

"That's not what I meant. You and Lois. How are you?"

I shrugged. "Same."

"Still fighting?" she asked and I could hear the disapproval in her voice.

"Not really. Just not talking."

"And you're still on the couch." It wasn't a question.

I sighed. "It's not the first time and it probably won't be the last either."

"What fixed it the last time?"

"She found out she was pregnant and told me I could come back."

"Did you actually resolve whatever the problem was?"

Had we? The problem had been that I'd kissed her and practically thrown her on the bed and made love to her without committing fully to her.

And that hadn't happened again and wasn't about to happen any time soon.

That was resolved wasn't it?

"More or less," I finally said. "We agreed... not really to disagree, but that there were strong opinions involved and we were going to put it behind us."

"And this time?"

"I don't know what the solution is this time," I told her honestly. "I think part of it is the stress and emotions over Nate, but beyond that... It's just something we have to figure out and I don't think we'll be able to while we're focusing on Nate. Give it a couple weeks..."

"I'd bet that a big part of it is stress over Nate. Don't give it a couple weeks," Mom advised. "Find some time to talk to her today and try to work out whatever it is."

"I'll see," I finally said noncommittally.

Mom sighed and picked up a magazine. I turned back to my laptop and checked my email. I had a couple from professors wishing us well. I pulled up one of them and replied with an assignment that was due the next day. Lois' laptop was open on one of the chairs and I was able to log in to her documents. I checked her assignment and it looked done so I sent it, too. She'd said she was reading over it one last time the night before.

I hovered over her 'eBooks' file. I knew that was where she kept everything she'd written and I'd seen her pounding away on another NaNo project. I thought about opening it, but logged off instead. She hadn't even told me what her story was about this year.

I poked around online and played a few games of Mahjong Titans on the computer when the pager Lois still had on her lap buzzed.

She practically jumped up. "Where is he?"

“They just paged you, honey,” Sam said. “You’ve been asleep for a couple hours.”

Lois headed for the desk with me in her wake.

“Name?” the lady said a minute later.

“Nathaniel Kent,” Lois told her.

She pulled the clipboard back out. “They’re done with the surgery itself and are just finishing up and getting him to recovery. The doctor should be out in about fifteen or twenty minutes to talk to you. We’ll page you again when it’s time to meet him.”

“Thank you,” Lois and I both said as we turned back.

Jimmy had joined our parents while we were up there.

“Surgery’s over,” Lois told them, sinking back into her seat. “They’ll page us when Dr. Forest is ready to talk to us.”

Lois pulled her blanket back over her and stared into space while the rest of us talked quietly. Her dad was closest to her and reached over to hold her hand, whispering something I couldn’t hear. She nodded, but didn’t really move much more than that.

A few minutes later the pager buzzed again. Jimmy offered to stay with our stuff while the five of us met with Dr. Forest in one of the small rooms off the waiting room. Lois ended up sitting between her dad and my mom, on purpose I thought, at least until Mom moved over and gave me a pointed look. I gave an internal sigh and took the seat she’d vacated. Lois didn’t even look at me.

The room was quiet until Dr. Forest entered a few minutes later.

He had a big grin on his face. “Everything went *great*,” he told us.

Lois’ shoulders slumped in relief.

“We were able to do the surgery laparoscopically. The smallest we can do laparoscopic surgery on is about eight pounds. Nate is eight and a half so it was kind of up in the air whether or not we could, but it worked just fine. He’ll have four small scars, but that’s it. I couldn’t have asked for it to go any better.”

“So no G-tube?” Lois asked.

He’d warned that a G-tube was a possibility for releasing gas — or maybe even feeding for a while, if the wrap was too tight for him to swallow well — for a while but he was hoping not to go that route.

“No G-tube.” He let loose a big yawn. “Sorry. We have to keep it pretty warm in there for Nate’s sake, but I promise that’s the first time I’ve yawned. Once you get out of surgery it kinda catches you sometimes.” He stood and stretched. “They’ll have him in recovery in a few minutes and will page you then so Mom and Dad can go back. It’ll probably be an hour or so until they move him back over to the Peds unit. Like I told you before, he won’t be able to burp for a month or six weeks or so. I’d stock up on Mylecon gas drops because since he can’t burp, the gas will probably be pretty bad for a while.” He squeezed Lois’ shoulder lightly. “Honestly, it couldn’t have possibly gone any better.”

We all gave voice to our thanks and stood to leave.

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Lois

I had to ask. “Dr. Forest?”

He turned from where he was saying something to my dad.

“Yes, Mrs. Kent?”

“Everything looks normal? You didn’t notice anything else looking off or anything like that? This should fix it all?” That wasn’t *really* what I wanted to know. I really wanted to know if he noticed two stomachs or three livers or something.

“Everything looks perfect,” he reassured me and I breathed a sigh of relief — I was sure the Kents did, too.

“Thank you.”

We headed back out to the waiting room where Clark filled Jimmy in on what the doctor had said.

It was only about five minutes before they paged us again and Clark and I headed towards recovery. We gave everyone hugs as

they were all heading out — it would be an hour or more before Nate made it to a room and there was no point in them waiting. We used hand sanitizer and were led to a bed where Nate slept.

He was wrapped a blanket, IV tubing coming out from underneath it.

“Would you like to hold him?” one of the nurses asked.

I nodded. I did. I wanted very much to hold my son. She helped me pick him up and I settled into the rocking chair next to the bed. Someone else pulled up a chair for Clark.

He reached out and stroked Nate’s cheek.

I looked at him and could see the emotions warring on his face. He’d been just as scared — if not more so — than me. He just dealt with it better.

“I’m sorry,” I said suddenly, surprising both of us.

“For what?” he asked, never taking his eyes off Nate.

“The other night. I should never have asked questions I knew I wouldn’t like the answers to, much less get upset when I didn’t like what you say.”

He sighed. “And I should never have answered them — at least not like I did.” He looked straight at me. “You are *not* inherently unlovable. You’re a wonderful person, a great mom, and you’ve given me two beautiful boys. You deserve better than this — better than what we have. You deserve someone who loves you with his whole heart, something like my parents have, your parents had, my grandparents had. You deserve that, not some platonic thing forced by a dictator like what we have.” He moved his hand from Nate’s cheek and reached out to brush my hair back. “You are beautiful and pregnancy didn’t destroy that.”

He sighed. “You’re my best friend. I want you to be happy. I want you to be safe.”

Tears filled my eyes and the hole in my heart grew. Happy. Safe. But not enough to decide to love me.

A nurse came over and interrupted whatever else either of us might have said.

I sighed. Nate was doing well and they were ready to take him over to the Peds unit. Any conversation with Clark would have to wait for later.

Part 121

Clark

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I hadn’t expected her to apologize and I still wasn’t sure exactly where we stood.

I hated this. Why couldn’t I just be in love with my wife?

I knew what Mom had said about it not being all fireworks and fluttering was right, but I knew there had been at least some of that when she and Dad started dating. It had grown into that deep, abiding, lasting thing.

I sighed as I got ready for bed. Christopher had been almost ready for bed when I got home. I reassured him that Nate was going to be just fine and that he and Mom would be home in a few days.

He’d fallen asleep as we rocked and I’d carefully put him in his bed.

I didn’t know what to do, what to think.

I guessed I’d just keep living life and see what happened.

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January 2006

“Clark, I can’t do this. I need your help.”

I looked up from the paper I was working on to see her practically in tears. “Of course. Let me take him.”

Normally, Lois was able to calm him down better than I was — she had that mom-sway/jiggle thing down pat — but he’d been crying for nearly two hours now.

She’d had him in the living room while I worked in our office/study room so he wouldn’t bother Christopher or Jessica as they slept.

I carefully took him from her, situating him stomach down on my arm, his head tucked in my elbow with his legs hanging on either side of my hand. “Hey, Mr. Man. You need to work this out of your system.”

Lois rotated her shoulder around and around. Holding him like this was hard on her shoulder and back, but it was the only way he could get remotely comfortable when he had a gas attack. Unfortunately, they came several times a day, often lasting for half an hour or more.

I’d gotten better at helping him, but it came more naturally to Lois. I thought Nate preferred her at this point anyway.

Overall, he was doing pretty well — he was even sleeping six hours at a stretch most nights. We kept him in a bassinet in our room for the time being, though, so he wouldn’t wake Christopher up.

“When was the last time you gave him gas drops?”

“A while ago,” she said, sinking into the chair and pulling a blanket wearily over her. “You’re welcome to try again, but it’s not working tonight.” She sighed. “I shouldn’t have had that cavitini last night.”

“What?”

“Pepperoni. I bet it’s why he’s having so much trouble tonight. Don’t let me eat pepperoni while I’m still nursing.”

She tossed the dropper to me and I caught it deftly with one hand, resituating Nate so I could give it to him.

The screaming stopped for a few minutes before starting again.

I sighed. It did make for a long evening.

“I think he burped a little bit earlier today,” Lois told me.

“Really?” I asked surprised.

She nodded.

“I never thought I’d be so excited about a burp.”

“He hasn’t burped in almost two months,” she reminded me, rolling her shoulder some more. “He has horrible gas. Burping will help a *lot* with that. It’s a big deal.”

It was hard to hear her over the screaming, but she was right.

I nodded. “I know.”

We’d avoided the question of ‘us’ since the brief conversation in the recovery room. Nate had still needed attention around the clock many days — mostly from Lois. She managed to get all of her classes done and made it to all of her finals. She’d even made it to two tests while Nate was in the hospital, but that was only because she was on campus anyway. The spring semester was starting in a couple of days and we were hopeful that he’d soon need less attention and Lois wouldn’t have any problems with classes.

Perry had been fantastic. Over half her internship had been done from home. She did a lot of work online for Billy and Serena and wrote a regular column and blogged almost daily. Very few of our classmates doing more traditional internships could say that. We had all the same classes this spring — our last semester of college. Finally. It was hard to believe that — given everything else — we’d made it this far on time. It wouldn’t have happened without Sam — even if we hadn’t had the specter of Navance over us. If Lois had gotten pregnant and we’d gotten married and tried to do it on our own without the outside threats, we never would have managed.

All of our classes were related to our major or minor and we’d had all of the professors before. They were all aware of what had happened with Nate in the fall and we’d told them that things were going better and we hoped that there would be no further problems.

“Seventeen weeks,” Lois said, lying back on the couch.

“Seventeen weeks until we graduate.”

“Excited?”

She nodded. “Very.”

Perry had practically promised us jobs when we were done.

They were ours to lose if we screwed up. We’d be low men on the totem pole, but we’d be working for the best paper in the world.

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Lois

Clark finally managed to get Nate to calm down. Sort of.

My arm and shoulder had been bothering me for well over two weeks before I realized why it hurt so much all the time — holding Nate the way he preferred when he was gassy was harder than I realized — even though he was still barely nine pounds.

He was nursing well — and had been since his surgery. I didn’t think I’d have to miss much school — if any — because of him, at least not because of this. He might be sick or something else, but hopefully the GERD and recovery from the Fundoplication were nearly over. I’d almost cried when I realized that he’d burped earlier.

Maybe I’d even be able to make it to the Daily Planet on a fairly regular basis.

I yawned and stretched my arms over my head.

“Why don’t you go on to bed? I’ll take care of him. Get some sleep.”

I nodded. “Thanks.” I headed up the stairs, Nate’s wails following behind me.

I took a shower and changed into some pajamas. I was glad that at some point I’d stopped wearing the nightgowns. It just didn’t seem necessary after Nate was born.

I crawled into bed and was asleep almost immediately.

I wasn’t sure what woke me up. Nate wasn’t crying.

Christopher wasn’t either.

Then I realized that Clark must have rolled over in his sleep because his arm was around me and he was holding me to him.

After Nate and I came home from the hospital, I’d told him he didn’t have to sleep on the couch. Unspoken was that I didn’t really want him near me, but he’d gotten that without it being explicitly stated.

This was the first time he’d been close to me. It helped that, after Nate was born, I found myself preferring to sleep facing him with the body pillow in front of me.

I sighed. Part of me wanted to enjoy being in his arms — arm — again. Part of me was too tired to enjoy it and I soon slipped back into sleep.

He was still there when I woke up again, sunlight streaming in through the windows. I tried not to wake him up as I tried to ease out of his embrace.

“Sorry,” he muttered as he rolled over.

“It’s okay. I just need to go to the bathroom.” I winced suddenly as I stretched. “Did he sleep all night?”

“I didn’t get up with him,” Clark said with a yawn.

“Me either.” I winced again. “I think I need to feed him here pretty quick.”

“I’m glad you got a whole night’s sleep,” he called as I shut the door behind me.

I exited a few minutes later and took Nate from Clark, who was still lying on the bed.

“He woke up a few minutes ago.”

I settled into the big chair and tossed a blanket over both of us as he started nursing. My eyes closed in relief as the pressure decreased.

When he finished, I held him on my shoulder, patting his back. Clark and I looked at each other and grinned as he burped, not a big burp but a burp nonetheless.

The door between our room and the boys’ opened suddenly. “Daddy, I hung’y,” Christopher said as he walked in.

Clark yawned again and climbed out of bed. “Come on, little man. Let’s go get breakfast while your mom feeds Nate.”

“Kay, Daddy.” Before he headed towards the door, he climbed up on the chair next to me. “Mornin’, Mommy.”

“Good morning,” I said, giving him a big kiss.
He patted the blanket that was back over me and Nate.
“Mornin’, Na’.”

I smiled at him. “He’s too busy eating. He’ll say morning later.”

“Bye, Mommy.” He scrambled down and Clark swung him up, flying him out the door.

When Nate was done I tried to burp him, but no such luck. We headed downstairs and spent the day hanging out with Daddy and Jimmy.

Classes started the middle of the next week and I made it to all of my classes. I even made it to the Daily Planet for a few hours a couple of different times.

I loved the smell of newsprint in the morning. Or something like that. I’d missed the hustle and bustle of the newsroom though I was grateful that I’d been able to stay home and take care of myself and Nate when I needed to.

Life continued. Nate started burping more regularly and his gassy episodes decreased significantly. That was a huge relief for all of us.

Before we knew it, it was time for Spring Break again and this year we were headed back to Smallville.

March 2006

Clark

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“I’m glad you can fly,” Lois said with a sigh. “I can’t believe I forgot Ducky for Christopher.” He was so attached to the duck I’d picked out when Clark won the pitching contest at the Corn Festival. Forgetting it was practically a cardinal sin.

“I’ll go get it when it’s dark. Since we’re not there, the wing shouldn’t be locked down and no one will notice that I opened a door while I’m supposed to be here.”

I finished setting up Nate’s portable playpen/bassinet in my old room. Christopher was going to sleep in Mom’s craft room in a sleeping bag — he thought that was way cool.

She rummaged through the diaper bag again before sighing. “I also forgot the gas drops.”

“I’ll run to the store and get some in a few minutes.” Though his gassy episodes had decreased significantly as he burped more, he did still have them from time to time.

Twenty minutes later, I’d taken Dad’s truck to Smallville. I pulled up in front of the store and headed inside. I chatted with Mrs. Bellconto — she and Mr. Bellconto had owned the store for as long as I could remember. She said that everyone in Smallville was glad to hear that we’d named Nate after my great-grandfather and that he was doing so well. She made me promise to bring him by before we left. I paid for the gas drops and the other things Mom had asked me to pick up for her.

I had it all in a bag and was heading out of the store when someone else was walking in. I stood off to the side to let whoever it was pass, but they didn’t. They just stopped.

I looked up. “Lana,” I said quietly.

“Hi,” she said in equally quiet tones.

“How are you?”

She shrugged. “I’m okay. I got the job as the new Title I teacher at Smallville EC as long as I graduate and pass my certification test, but those shouldn’t be a problem.”

EC was the Early Childhood building, wasn’t it? Yeah, it was. Preschool and Kindergarten. “That’s great,” I said honestly. “That’s the three and four year olds right?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I’ll have two classes — morning and afternoon — with about ten kids each.” She sighed. “Listen, I never told you how sorry I was about Pop Pop. I know how much he meant to you.”

“Thanks. We all still miss him a lot.”

“I bet. And I heard the baby’s doing better. I’m glad, really.”

“He’s doing much better. He’s finally gaining weight slowly but surely. He’s still really small but I think the worst is behind us.”

“That’s good. Are you going to Pete and Rachel’s wedding?”

I nodded. “We’re all planning on going. That’s part of the reason we came this year. Last year, Lois was too sick and this year... With everything with Nate, we’d planned on staying home but I didn’t want to miss their wedding.” I was surprised at how easily I mentioned Lois’ name and how little reaction Lana had when I did.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you there then.” She turned and headed towards the store.

“Lana,” I said quietly and she turned to look at me.

“Congratulations on the job. You’ll do great. I know you will.”

“Thanks.” She turned away and headed inside.

I went back to the truck and headed towards the farm. I was surprised at the lack of... whatever when I saw Lana. Something. I was happy for her. This was going to be her dream job. Small class, little kids, she’d be in her element.

I pulled into the drive and laughed as I saw Christopher trying to help Dad. I remembered when I’d tried the same thing with Pop Pop — with about as much success.

I headed inside with the bag of groceries, still chuckling.

“He loves it,” Mom said, as I glanced out the window to watch them.

“I know. He loved it when I was little, too, didn’t he?”

“Well, you were older when we moved in here, but yeah. He loved having you help him. He loved having a son.”

“Do you ever wish you’d been able to have his baby?” I asked quietly.

Mom stared out the window at Dad and Christopher for a long moment. “I think there’s part of me that always wanted to have Chris’ baby and later your Dad’s. But we had you. We all loved you as if you’d been our own. And I have to admit, having seen what Lois has gone through, I’m not sure I’d want to go through all that. She’d be the first to say it was all worth it though. Dad and I tried to get pregnant, you know. We never used birth control and figured I’d get pregnant pretty easily. We didn’t want to wait because there was going to be at least a six year gap between you and a baby anyway.”

She let out a deep sigh and I wrapped my arm around her. She wrapped hers around my waist and rested her head against me.

“I never knew that,” I said.

She nodded. “We didn’t tell you because we didn’t want you getting your hopes up until I was pregnant. We finally had some tests run and it turned out that it wasn’t going to happen for us. We both shed some tears over it, clung to each other and came through it stronger than ever. And we had you so it wasn’t like we were completely childless...”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“I’m not,” she said, the steel in her voice surprising me. “You were enough and another kid would have made it more difficult when you were changing so much. Don’t get me wrong — we would have loved another baby as much as we loved you, but we learned to be content with the life we were given. We were given so much. If it hadn’t been for your parents sending you to us, we wouldn’t have had you either. We decided to be thankful for what we had rather than dwell on what we didn’t.”

The back door banged open. “Daddy! I he’p G’am’s!”

I laughed. “I see that, bud. You’re a mess. Let’s go clean you up before you mess up Grams’ kitchen.” I grabbed him around the waist and carried him upside down towards the bathroom.

I could hear the laughter coming from behind me and I was grateful that Mom and Chris had found me and that Dad had been able to accept all that went with raising me without blinking an eye.

The squirming bundle was deposited in the tub and before long the tub was a mess instead of him.

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Part 122

Lois

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The squeals coming from the tub woke me up. I was exhausted and Martha had been kind enough to offer to take care of Nate for a while so I could get a nap. I wasn't sure how long I'd been asleep, but not nearly long enough.

I yawned and headed downstairs, avoiding the bathroom, knowing that Clark and Christopher were probably having a blast playing battleships or something.

Jonathan and Martha were in the kitchen, his arms around her, her head resting on his chest.

"Sorry," I mumbled as they turned towards me.

"What're you doing up already?" Martha asked, moving away from Jonathan and towards the sink where the lunch dishes still sat.

"Christopher woke me up from the bathroom," I said with a big yawn.

"I don't know how you're even functioning," Jonathan said. "Every ninety minutes?"

I nodded. "The longest he's gone between eating in the last six weeks or so is about two hours. He's up about every ninety minutes at night. At this point, I'd even be willing to put him in another room or something and just let him cry so I could get some sleep, but he has such a hard time gaining weight still — even though he's not spitting up anymore — and I hate to let him waste calories crying." I sank into one of the chairs with a sigh.

"Lois, honey, you have to get some sleep. I know you're sleeping between feedings, but you're never going to get to REM sleep that way and you'll never be really rested," Martha pointed out.

I nodded. "I know, but I don't know what else to do."

"Well, for starters, let us help while you're here," she said practically.

"Done," I said, too busy yawning again to be enthusiastic.

"Besides, if you two are going to win the Tush Push competition at the wedding, you need to be well rested."

"They have a competition? At a wedding?" I asked incredulously.

"Well, you have to pay to enter," Martha said with a laugh. "Usually it's about five bucks. The bride and groom are the judges, though," she conceded, "actual talent doesn't always have anything to do with who wins. There's often other factors involved. Last time it was two of Clark's cousins' kids that won. They weren't very good, but they tried hard and were absolutely adorable. They were four and six," she told me. "Anyway, whoever wins has the honor of presenting the happy couple with the proceeds as part of their wedding gift. They also get the second pieces of cake."

"Cake?" I asked and they both laughed.

Would Clark want to dance with me at the wedding? I'd figured we would, but what if Lana was there? I knew the four of them went way back after all. Line dancing was one thing, but slow dancing? Would he dance with me and hold me like he did the last time we danced together if Lana was around or would we just sit those out? Sit out was more likely, I realized.

"Good as new," Clark proclaimed as he and Christopher entered the kitchen. He pulled Christopher off his shoulders and set him on the floor.

"Guess wha', Mommy?" he asked crawling into my lap.

"What?"

"I he'p G'am's do 'hores."

"You did?"

He nodded and proceeded to give me a list of things that he'd

helped — or attempted to help — Jonathan do.

"He say we go fishin', too. Ca' we?"

"That's up to Gramps," I told him. "I do know that Gramps and Daddy used to go fishing all the time," I whispered. "I bet you could get them to take you."

He twisted in my lap to look at Clark, leaning against the wall. "P'eeeeeease, Daaaaaddyyyyyy."

Clark laughed. "We'll see."

Jonathan took Christopher back outside with him — promising to keep him clean this time.

Clark poured himself a glass of buttermilk but then just stared at it as he leaned against the counter.

He didn't look up when he finally spoke. "I saw Lana at the store."

Martha looked first at me and then at him.

"That's nice," I finally said, trying desperately to keep my voice neutral.

"She got a job at Smallville EC. She's going to be the new Title I teacher."

"That's great," Martha said, though I could hear the uncertainty in her voice as she glanced back at me. "Donna's retiring next year and I know they were worried about finding someone to take over the program. Lana's perfect for that."

Clark nodded. "She'll be in her element."

"What's Title I?" I asked. "Little kids?"

"Pre-K," Martha answered. "Some are a year from kindergarten and some are two years. They get placed in Title I because of some kind of qualification — it can be delayed speech or income levels or any combination of a number of things. Typically, they have pretty small classes, only eight or ten kids, so they get lots of individual attention."

"Good for her." From what I knew of her, it did sound perfect. And then she wouldn't be in Metropolis either.

Part of me felt petty for thinking it, but the rest of me didn't care.

I'd just crawled into bed that night when Clark came in.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Are you okay with the whole me seeing Lana thing?"

"Did you make out with her in the middle of the General Store?" I asked, trying to put a teasing note in my voice.

"No. Of course not," he answered with a roll of his eyes. "We talked for three or four minutes and went our separate ways. She told me about her job and seemed sincere when she said she was glad Nate was doing better."

"You talked about Nate?" I tried to keep my voice neutral that time.

"She brought him up. She said she'd heard he was doing better and she was glad. And I really think she meant it."

~~~~~

Clark

I did really think she meant it. And I certainly hadn't tried to keep it from Lois. It wasn't like I'd run into her on purpose.

"Do you really think I'd kiss her?" I asked suddenly, sinking on to the edge of the bed.

She rolled onto her back before shrugging. "No. Not really. Especially not at the grocery store anyway."

"Do you really think I'd kiss her anywhere?"

She sighed. "No, not really. Only twenty-seven months until it's all over and you can do whatever you want with her and that's all I'm saying and you brought her up so you can't say that I did." She rolled over and pulled the covers up over her.

It was my turn to sigh. "Mom's got Nate tonight?"

She nodded. "Yeah. She said I needed a good night's sleep."

"You do. You don't let me get up with him nearly often enough."

"You can't nurse him."

“No, but I can give him a bottle.”

“We’ve been over this, Clark. I can work from home and nap during the day when I need to and you can’t.”

“And we’ve been over the fact that I don’t need as much sleep as you do.”

“Well, tonight your mom’s not getting any sleep, so it’s a moot point at the moment, but if you keep talking *I’m* not going to get any sleep out of the deal.” As thought to emphasize her point, she pulled the covers slightly higher and burrowed further underneath them.

“She’s going to be at the wedding Friday,” I told her.

“I figured.”

“While half the town’s going to be there, there’s still not going to be *that* many people there and we’re both likely to run into her at some point.”

“I figured that, too. And like I told you before, I really don’t care if you talk to her or whatever as long as you don’t get her pregnant and jeopardize me and Christopher.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you *again*,” I hissed at her. “I’m not going to kiss her. I’m not going to sleep with her. I’m not going to do *anything* that might *possibly* result in her getting pregnant. And not *just* because it might put you and Christopher in danger. Because I promised not to. Because it’s wrong. Because of lots of reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with Navance.”

She didn’t respond and I figured the conversation was over. I pulled my shirt off and crawled into bed.

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I looked around the reception hall for Rachel and Pete. They’d finished taking pictures at the church and had arrived a few minutes earlier. I finally located them surrounded by a number of other friends and decided to wait a bit before approaching.

Mom and Dad had staked out a table for all of us and Lois was busy getting Nate situated in the high chair. As was tradition, everyone had brought dishes for the pot luck dinner. Mom had brought a big enough dish of baked spaghetti to cover for me and Lois as well.

We waited our turn to go through the buffet line. Lois was next to me and she filled both her plate and Christopher’s. I’d seen Lana from a distance a couple of times, but not close enough to talk to her — which was fine with me.

Twenty minutes later, it was time for the dancing to start. They wouldn’t go straight into the line dancing — not on full stomachs. Rachel and Pete shared their first dance as a married couple and then they danced with their parents. The DJ — a guy I knew from high school — said anyone who wanted to dance was welcome to.

Mom and Dad were on the dance floor a minute later.

“Do you want to dance?” I asked Lois.

She shook her head. “I need to finish feeding Nate first.” She sighed as he spit out most of the cereal. “If he’d cooperate.”

“Oh, let me try, Lois,” Nana said. “You go dance with your husband.”

Lois sighed and pushed the cereal and spoon over her way. “Sure. Let’s go.”

I could sense her reluctance, but I wasn’t sure why. Probably because Lana was around somewhere. “You okay?” I asked quietly as I took one hand in mine and rested the other hand on her waist, pulling her towards me.

She shrugged. “Could still use some more sleep, but your Mom’s been great this week.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Just wondering why you asked me to dance,” she said without really looking at me.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because we’re in front of half your hometown.”

“Including my ex-girlfriend, you mean.”

She shook her head. “No. Including your ex-girlfriend you want to get back together with someday.”

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Lois

I had to get out of here. Dance contest or not, I didn’t really want to be here. I was happy for Rachel and Pete, but I didn’t really want to be here — near Lana.

The song ended and I moved away from Clark. “I think I’m going to take Nate and Christopher home and put them to bed. I could stand to go to sleep early, too.”

“You don’t have to,” he said quietly.

“Yes, I do.” I sighed. “These are your friends and your family’s friends, but they need to get to bed. We have to get up early in the morning to catch the plane. I don’t want your Mom or anyone to miss this, but it’s not as big a deal to me.”

“What about the dance contest?” he asked.

“Ask Granny.”

“Ask Granny what?” Granny asked as we sat back down.

“Would you be Clark’s partner in the contest?” I asked with a big smile. “I need to get the boys home and to bed. We have to get up early in the morning.”

“Oh, I can do that, dear,” Granny said. “I love spending time with my great-grandsons, you know that.”

“I know, but really. I’m exhausted and these are your friends and family.” I smiled at her. “Just help Clark win and bring me home a piece of cake.”

She smiled back. “If you’re sure…”

“I’m sure.” I packed the diaper bag back up and headed over to give Rachel and Pete quick hugs before I left. I hoisted Nate’s car seat over one arm and took Christopher’s hand. “Come on, little man. We have to go home.”

“I wanna stay,” he said, pulling his hand out of mine and crossing his arms in front of him, a pout on his face.

“I know. But we have to fly in a plane tomorrow so you have to go to bed. So do Mom and Nate.”

“I don’t yike p’anes.”

Figured. Just like his dad.

I sighed and held out my hand. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“*No!*” He plopped down on the floor.

Clark had a serious look on his face as he picked Christopher up. “You’re coming with me, young man.”

They headed out the door into a hallway.

I sighed and started for the front door. I knew Clark would find me when he was done talking to Christopher.

I was waylaid several times on my way out. Everyone wanted to see Nate and they all commented on how glad they were that he was doing so well.

It took over five minutes to make it the forty or so feet to the door.

“He has something to say to you,” Clark told me as he met me there.

“I so’y fo’ not yis’ning, Mommy,” Christopher said, scuffing his shoe on the floor.

I set Nate down and squatted in front of him. “Thank you for saying you’re sorry.”

His little arms were around my neck a second later. “I huv you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too.” I held him for a long minute before pulling back. “And now it’s time to go back to the farm, okay?”

He nodded. “Okay.”

I straightened up to find Clark had picked Nate’s seat up.

“You ready?” he asked.

I nodded, holding my hand out to Christopher.

As we headed for the door, I saw something in the reflection. Lana.

Watching us.

Part 123
Clark

I didn't see why Lois had to go home.

I mean I understood that we had to get up early and the boys would travel better if they had a good night's sleep but I was surprised at how disappointed I was that she was leaving. She made good points about how she didn't really know anyone and she didn't want to take any of us away from the reception but still...

Granny offered to take them home, but Lois insisted that she wanted to — and I knew she was tired. Nate's current eating schedule had taken a huge toll on her. Granny even agreed to be my partner in the dance contest in a while. I hadn't line danced with Granny in a long time — it would be fun at least.

Of course, Christopher started to throw a fit when Lois said it was time to go.

He said something to her that I didn't catch but the look on his face said enough.

"Come on," she said to him, holding out her hand. "Let's go."

"No!" he practically yelled, plopping himself down on the ground.

He knew better.

I picked him up, throwing a sympathetic glance at Lois as I did. "You're coming with me, young man."

He kept his arms folded in front of him as we headed into the hall. I set him on his feet and squatted in front of him.

"Is that how you're supposed to talk to Mom?" I asked him.

He didn't answer, the defiant look still on his face.

"Chri-stopher." I knew he didn't miss the warning tone. "Is that how you're supposed to talk to Mom?"

He shook his head slightly but still didn't say anything.

"What are you supposed to do when Mom tells you to do something?"

"Do it," he muttered sulkily.

"What do you say when Mom tells you to do something?"

"es, Mommy."

"Do you think you need to go tell Mom something?"

He nodded. He really was a good boy most of the time, but he did have his moments. I was glad they were few and far between.

"What do you need to tell Mom?"

"I so'y fo' not yis'ning."

"That's right." I pulled him towards me. "Thank you for listening to Dad. I love you."

"I wuv you, Daddy."

"You ready to go find Mom?"

He sighed. "Wanna stay wi' you."

"I know but tomorrow we have to go on a plane, remember?"

"I don' yike p'anes."

Why didn't that surprise me? "I know. I don't either. Will you hold my hand?"

"Mommy hol' you ot'er han'."

"Mom'll hold my other hand," I confirmed. "But right now you need to go home and go to bed, okay?"

He sighed. "Kay."

I stood up and held out my hand. "Come on." He put his hand in mine and we headed towards the entrance where Lois had finished being sidetracked by nearly half of Smallville.

"He has something to say to you," I told her when we got there.

"I so'y fo' not yis'ning, Mommy," he said.

Lois set Nate down and squatted in front of Christopher.

"Thank you for saying you're sorry."

He gave her a big hug. "I wuv you, Mommy."

"I love you, too." Lois held him for a long minute. "And now it's time to go back to the farm, okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

I picked up Nate's car seat and we headed out the door. When we got to the rental car, I stuck his seat in the base and buckled Christopher in while Lois stowed everything else.

"You sure you don't want me to come with you?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Stay and have fun. You don't get to see these guys very often."

"You're sure?" I asked again.

She rolled her eyes as she sat in the car and turned it on. She pushed the button for the passenger window as she closed her door. "I'm sure. I'll see you later. Just bring me a piece of cake."

Of course she'd want a piece of cake. "Will do. I'll see you in a little while. And Mom said she'd get up with Nate tonight since it's our last night here and that way you can get one more good night's sleep."

"Tell her thanks. I'll probably be out by the time you guys get there."

"Okay." I leaned in the window. "Bye, bud. Be good for Mom," I added sternly.

"Bye, Daddy." Christopher waved as Lois pulled off.

I headed back inside, wondering how long until the dance contest.

"Clark?"

I turned, startled at the voice that stopped me before I made it inside. "Lana?"

"I wanted to talk to you for a minute."

I shifted uncomfortably. "How about inside?"

"I'd rather talk where we can't be overheard. No one else needs to hear our business."

I sighed and moved backwards slightly so that I was in full view of anyone looking out the door.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm just not sure it's a good idea for me to disappear with my ex-girlfriend right after my wife pulls out of the parking lot."

"Doesn't she trust you?"

I sighed. "Yeah. She trusts me. I don't know that she trusts you or us together, but she trusts *me*." I ran a hand through my hair. "She saw us at the library," I told her. "The week after we got married and..."

"I remember. I was there," she interrupted. "That was when you told me she was pregnant but it wasn't your baby. I've seen Christopher, Clark. He might as well be your identical twin, just a bit younger."

"I know. He *is* my son, but we didn't know that at the time."

"From the cabin?" she asked quietly.

I nodded. "Just once. I never meant to cheat on you." I shoved my hands in the pockets of my Dockers. "It was the first night when we both nearly died. Neither one of us really remembers what happened that night — just that it did."

"What about the rest of the time?"

"What I told you then was true. The second night, I wasn't feeling well still and fell asleep when I went to check on her and the fourth night she had a nightmare."

"You told me later that you weren't completely clothed those nights." She didn't look at me.

"I wasn't wearing my shirt either night," I explained. "But nothing more than sleep happened those nights. I swear. Except the one night that I still don't really remember, I never cheated on you and I hate that you think I did deliberately. That wasn't how it was and I'm so sorry that you got hurt."

"It's a bit late for that," she said quietly.

"I know."

"Why'd you marry her if you didn't think he was your son?" She swiped at her cheeks.

"Because Navance was going to make her his concubine and raise Christopher to be just like him. And if she'd had a girl..." I practically shuddered at the memory. "You don't want to know

what he said he'd do if she had a girl."

"Ah. Why didn't you just tell me? I wouldn't have liked it but... You didn't trust me that much?"

I sighed. "I trusted you, but Lois and I had agreed that we wouldn't tell *anyone* the whole truth, just that we found out she was pregnant with my baby and so we got married. Sam didn't know until the semester was over and my parents didn't know until after he was born. I told you more than I should have. She was my wife and no matter what was going on with you and me, I betrayed her trust and I shouldn't have done that. That's why I retracted it later." I stifled a scream and ran my hands through my hair. "I did it again." I looked at her earnestly. "No one else knows that we didn't know he was my son. You're the only one and I shouldn't have told you all that. I shouldn't have confirmed that we didn't know."

"I wasn't really surprised when I found out it was you two in Latislan," she said suddenly. "I remembered it being on the news and someone said something about wouldn't it be funny if it was you two since you'd disappeared together. I thought of it again after you told me you'd gotten married, but forgot all about it until after Pop Pop's funeral." She finally looked at me again. "It wasn't me. I don't know who told, but it wasn't me. I may have wondered but I didn't *know* and I wouldn't do that to you or Christopher."

"But you would to Lois?"

She shrugged. "Who can say? She never liked me and I never liked her, but it's a moot point since she's your wife and Christopher's mom." She sighed. "You're a great dad," she said quietly. "I always knew you would be."

"Thanks. You're going to be a great teacher."

She switched topics suddenly. "Do you love her? Are you in love with her? Like you were with me? Or was everything we had a figment of my imagination?"

I sighed and thought for a minute before answering. "There's lots of different kind of love, Lana. I really was in love with you — I never lied to you about that. And I do love my wife and our sons." I wasn't sure why, but it was important to me that she knew both of those things. And I avoided the 'are you *in* love with her' thing.

She nodded and swiped at her cheeks. "I never really meant it you know — when I said I could never play step-mommy to her kids. If we ever had ended up back together like you told me we would, I would have loved them because they were your sons."

"I know," I said quietly. "You don't have it in you to hate any kids."

"And you never had it in you to turn your back on a friend in trouble."

I heard the door open. "Clark?"

I turned. "Yeah, Mom?"

"There you are." She turned to see who I was talking to. "Hi, Lana."

"Hi, Mrs. Kent."

"Granny's looking for you," she told me. "They're about to start the competition."

I nodded. "I'll be right in."

"Lois and the boys get off okay? Christopher had a little bit of an attitude, it looked like."

"Yeah. She's supposed to call me when they get there. It's dark and she still doesn't drive around here very much. And he apologized to her before they left. He knows better than to talk to her like that."

"Just like you knew better than to play in the barn after bath time?" She was smirking as she said it.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Something like that."

We heard the DJ make the announcement about the contest.

"That's my cue," I said. I turned back to Lana. "I'm glad you got the job — you'll do great."

"Thanks." She wiped her cheeks again. "Go on. I'll be in in a few minutes."

I nodded. I put my arm around Mom as we walked inside.

"Are you sure that was wise?" she asked quietly as soon as we were inside.

"I made sure anyone anywhere near the door could see me. She was right, though, if we'd talked inside everyone would have been straining to hear what was said." I sighed. "We cleared the air about a couple things and that's it. I promise. And I'll tell Lois about it as soon as I can." My phone vibrated in my pocket. "I bet that's her."

"Come on, Kent!" Pete hollered. "You're holding this thing up."

"Just a second," I hollered back, pulling my phone out. I pushed the button. "Hey."

"Kent!"

"Hang on, Pete!" I called. "Sorry," I said back into the phone. "You make it home, okay?"

"Yeah, only one wrong turn," Lois said. "Who's hollering at you?"

"Pete. They're ready to start the competition but they're waiting on me."

"Go on. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay."

"Bye." She hung up before I could say anything else.

"You, too," I said to the dead air. "See you soon." I needlessly pushed the end button and stuck it back in my pocket. "What are you guys waiting on?" I asked finding Granny on the dance floor.

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel's niece and Pete's nephew won the competition. As the flower girl and ring bearer, they were definitely the cutest couple.

I shared a dance with each of my grandmas and Mom, then Rachel.

"I'm sorry Lois had to leave early," she said as we danced.

"Me, too. But we have to get up early in the morning to catch our flight back to Metropolis. The boys won't travel well at all if they don't get a good night's sleep and Nate's been keeping her up a lot lately."

"I'm so glad he's doing well. Pastor Gary prayed for him nearly every Sunday for months, especially the week before his surgery."

"Well, that's as good a reason as any for his recovery. Thank you," I said sincerely. "That means a lot."

She nodded. "That's what friends do. He's a doll — and tiny enough to be one still, too. And Christopher is cute as a button."

I laughed. "Thanks. I'd take full credit but Lois is the one who's sacrificed a lot for them."

"I heard that it was pretty rough on her. What are you guys doing after graduation? Lois doesn't strike me as the stay-at-home-mom type."

I laughed again at the thought of Lois as June Cleaver. "She loves them like crazy, but no, she's not. We both have jobs at the Daily Planet unless we screw it up in the next few weeks."

"That's great. Your dream job. Writing for the best newspaper in the world."

"Yep."

The music stopped and someone else claimed Rachel for the next dance.

I went back to a table — no one was where they were originally anymore — grabbing a glass of water on my way. Pete sat down next to me a minute later, followed by Josh and a couple other guys from high school. Before we knew it, we were reenacting football plays from high school.

Not long after that, Rachel sidled up to Pete and whispered something in his ear. A grin crossed his face.

"My bride has just informed me that if I'm bored enough to

run football plays then it's time for us to go find something more entertaining to do."

Rachel turned eight shades of red. "That is *not* what I said."

He shrugged. "Close enough and you're right." He kissed her and all of us whooped, drawing the attention of the small crowd that was left. "It's time for us to go spend some real *quality* time alone."

He stood up and grabbed her hand, whistling loudly as he did. "Ladies and gents, it's time for us to *go!* Take the birdseed home for the birds; we're not waiting long enough for some line to form." With that, he tugged on her hand, both of them laughing as he practically ran them out the front door.

The rest of us laughed, too.

Josh smacked me on the back. "Speaking of quality time, I think it's time I found my wife and had some of that quality time myself." He'd married my cousin, Kara, over Thanksgiving weekend — because of Nate's surgery and everything else, we hadn't made it. I was supposed to have been in the wedding, but he'd understood when I backed out at the last minute.

I laughed. "See ya later."

"You ready, Clark?" Mom asked.

I nodded. "Let's go."

Dad grabbed Mom around the waist as I trailed them, heading towards the door. Mom laughed as he whispered in her ear and I was glad I couldn't hear what he said, though I could make a pretty good guess. Hearing would be turned *off* for the rest of the night.

I sighed.

It seemed like I was the only one not going home to make love to my wife.

Part 124

Lois

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I flopped on the bed as Christopher *finally* went to sleep. He'd thrown one fit after another — a sure sign that he was tired. I was sure all the extra activity chasing after his grandpa was the main reason for that. They'd gone fishing with Clark a couple of times and Clark had helped get some stuff done around the farm — since he could do all of that stuff faster and easier than anyone else.

I'd moved Christopher into the spare room into his sleeping bag. Nate was sleeping for the moment, too.

I knew I should have followed the Sceves instead of them following me. I'd made one wrong turn, and they'd stopped on the deserted farm road, honked at me and waited for me to turn around.

It had sounded like they were still having a good time at the reception when I called Clark to let him know we'd made it home okay. I was kind of disappointed that I hadn't been there for the line dancing. We always had fun when we line danced. Not that we had often, but when we did, it was fun. I also knew that getting Christopher home and to sleep was the right decision. He was going to be grumpy enough on the plane ride. And I was exhausted, too.

I yawned and crawled to the top of the bed — not caring that I was on Clark's side — and wiggled under the covers.

I was asleep in minutes.

I didn't know how long it was but Nate's crying woke me up. I sighed and started to push myself up off the bed.

"I've got him," Clark said quietly.

I could see him in the moonlight coming in the window and it looked like he hadn't been back long. I sighed. He looked good. His tan Dockers fit just right across his rear as he leaned over to pick Nate up. His black collarless shirt stretching across his arms and chest accentuated his well-toned muscles.

I sighed, jealous for a moment of Rachel and Pete and what I

was sure they were doing just then.

"Do you want to go ahead and feed him since you're up?" he asked.

"Sure," I said with a yawn, pushing myself into a sitting position.

"Trying to steal my side of the bed?" I could see the smirk on his face in the darkness.

"I was tired and this was where I landed," I told him, taking Nate from him and pulling the sheet up over us. The last time I'd slept on his side of the bed was the night we'd made Nate. I stifled a sigh.

"You okay?" he asked, turning from where he was rummaging through his suitcase.

"Yeah, just tired. Who won the dance contest?"

He grinned. "Ring bearer and flower girl. I had fun with Granny, though."

"I'm glad."

"I think I would have had more fun with you though; she can't twirl quite like she used to."

"You only wanted to dance with me because of my twirling ability." I gave an exasperated sigh. "I knew it."

He laughed. "You got me." He sat on my side of the bed and didn't look at me. "I talked to Lana."

"That's nice." I kept my voice carefully neutral. I'd seen her watching us as I left with the boys and it didn't surprise me that she'd cornered Clark.

"She caught me outside and wanted to talk where no one else could hear us. I stood where anyone inside could see me. Mom did and came out a few minutes later. She said she wasn't the one who told the news people that we were the Latislan guys."

"I never really thought she was."

He sighed. "I did tell her something I didn't really mean to, though."

"That you're still in love with her?"

He was quiet for a long moment. "No, that wasn't it at all. She asked me if what we'd had was just her imagination and I told her no — that I never lied to her when I said I loved her. But she asked me about Christopher — about when I told her that you weren't actually pregnant with my baby and I told her that we hadn't known he was my son for a long time."

I sighed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I didn't really realize I'd told her until after I told her I never should have told her that in the first place — that, at the time, you were already my wife and I shouldn't have betrayed your trust."

"But you did it again." I didn't think there was any accusation in my voice.

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"You guess?"

"Most people in our family and friends circle know most of the story now anyway," he pointed out.

"She's the only one who knows that we didn't think he was your son."

"I know. And I told her that and I don't think she'll tell anyone."

"You better hope not."

I put Nate on my shoulder and patted his back until he burped then resituated him on the other side.

Would she always be the third party in our marriage?

And why did it matter?

It wasn't like Clark was really here most of the time — some of the time. Or at least not committed to staying.

"She said she wouldn't do anything to hurt me or Christopher so I can't imagine that she'd say something."

"But not me? She doesn't care if I get hurt?"

He shrugged. "You and she never got along. You probably wouldn't worry as much about something hurting her either."

"You're lucky I'm feeding your son," I said quietly.

He looked up at me. "What? Why?"

"So I can't smack you. Do you *really* think I'd ever do anything to intentionally hurt her? I *never* wanted to hurt her. My *only* concern was protecting Christopher and if I could have done that without hurting her, I would have."

He sighed. "Okay. Maybe you're right, but your lives have been very different since we got married. She felt like she lost everything when I broke up with her because we were married. You didn't."

"That's no excuse and you and I both know it."

He sighed. "I know."

I burped Nate again. "Would you mind to put him back down?"

He shook his head. "No. I got it."

I handed him over and quickly retreated to my side of the bed, curling up and willing myself to sleep.

~~~~~  
Clark

I sighed. Mom met me in the hall and took Nate. I headed downstairs and lay on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

I didn't mean to, but I fell asleep on the couch.

It was still dark out when I heard footsteps coming into the living room.

"Clark?" It was Dad.

"What time is it?"

"Zero dark thirty." I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Yeah, I figured that."

"What're you doing down here?"

I shrugged and then stretched. "I was thinking and fell asleep."

"Uh huh."

"I was." I knew I sounded defensive. "Did Nate keep you and Mom up?"

"He was up a couple times."

"Thank you for taking him. Lois is exhausted."

"We noticed."

"And she won't let me get up with him at home. I should probably just take him to another part of the house after she goes to sleep and not give her a choice in the matter." I yawned again. "Why don't you let me take care of the chores since I'm already up?"

Dad nodded. "Don't let me stop you. I'll start on breakfast."

I rushed through the chores and made it back inside just as dawn was breaking fully.

I went inside to find everyone else up. Lois looked decidedly annoyed at being up before absolutely necessary.

Two hours later we were on our way to Kansas City and four hours after that, we landed in Metropolis.

I sighed as I put the last of the kids' clothes away. As much as I loved visiting Smallville, it wasn't home anymore.

And it was good to be home.

~*~*~ May 2006 ~*~*~

"So, you two graduate next week." Perry leaned back in his chair. "Lois, darlin', it's been good to have you back in the newsroom on a regular basis."

"Perry, I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate you working with me the last year or so," Lois told him. "I never would have made it through my internship anywhere else."

He snorted. "Like I told you before, I know a good investigative reporter in the rough when I see one. I didn't become editor in chief of a major metropolitan newspaper because I can yodel, you know. You're an investment in the future of the Daily Planet. And speaking of the future of the Daily Planet, you've both officially finished your internships."

Lois and I glanced at each other.

"And now, it's my pleasure to officially offer you jobs in the

newsroom. You start the week after graduation."

Relief crossed Lois' face. She hadn't said it out loud but I knew she'd been worried that all of her time away from the newsroom — even though she'd had Perry's blessing and had worked from home — would hurt her chances of actually getting the job.

"Now, Lois, since you've had a lot less in-newsroom time, you're going to have a little more grunt work to do for a while, just to make sure you know how everything works — pay some dues, that kind of thing."

She nodded. "That's fair."

I knew that wasn't what she really wanted, but I also knew that she would take what she could get at this point.

"I'll expect the two of you to start developing your own sources and start bringing me story ideas. I imagine the two of you will work together fairly often on investigations, but it's not a permanent newsroom partnership. At least not at this point. If you two prove you can work together as well as Billy and Serena, it might, but not for a while. It took them years to get where they are."

"Thank you, Perry," I said.

"Now, the two of you are done interning and you don't start your jobs for another ten days or so, so get out of my newsroom and pass your finals, because if you don't the job offers disappear," he warned.

We laughed. "Got it," we said in unison.

We headed out of his office.

"I knew you'd be fine," I told her.

"I know, but I still worried about it."

I put an arm around her, remembering that we were in public. "So what do you want to do to celebrate?"

"We're already going to the baseball game tonight. You can buy me an extra Big Kahuna."

I laughed. "Of course." Those were her favorite baseball snacks — chocolate chip ice cream cookie sandwich.

"So what's the plan tonight, guys?" Jimmy asked walking up to us. "Angela's meeting me here at six."

Star and Andre had given us their tickets so we could go to the game with Jimmy and Angela.

I looked at Lois. "Well, we're heading home now, right? We could be back here at six couldn't we?"

She nodded. "That sounds fine to me."

"Six it is then." Jimmy grinned and smacked me on the shoulder. "Thanks, guys." He bounded off, a big smile still on his face.

"I wish I had half his energy," Lois said with a sigh.

"It's gotten better since Nate started sleeping more, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, it is a lot better."

Not long after we got back from Smallville he'd started sleeping better and that was a relief for all of us, but especially Lois.

~~~~~  
Lois

I tried to get my cap to stay on straight, but it wasn't working. I'd have to get Martha to help me with it.

"Fu'y ha', Mommy." I could see Christopher's smirk in the mirror behind me.

"Daddy has one just like it," I told him. "And he's wearing a dress."

"It's a *gown*," Clark said, walking into the room.

Christopher giggled as Clark grabbed him around the waist and hung him upside down over his shoulder.

"Do you hear that noise?" Clark asked me. "It's sounds like a giggle from a little mouse."

"I no' a mouse!"

I shrugged. "I thought I heard something, but I'm not sure

what it was. Maybe it was a squirrel.”

“I no’ a squi’el!”

“You’ve got a big lump on your shoulder. You should see about having my dad get rid of that for you. I bet they could put that on display at the hospital.”

Christopher giggled again as Clark tickled his stomach.

“You know it sounds a little like Nate,” he told me with a grin.

“I no’ Na’! I C’isto’her.”

“Christopher?” I asked him, puzzled. “Do you know a Christopher?”

Clark shrugged. “Not that I know of.”

He tossed Christopher gently on the bed.

“Oh! *That* Christopher! Yeah, I know him.”

I smiled as Clark tickled him some more and Christopher rolled around giggling on our bed.

I looked at the clock. “We’ve got to get going. You’re going with Gramps and Grams, okay, Christopher?”

He nodded. “I see you dere.”

“That’s right, but now Mom and I gotta get going.”

I sighed as I checked my cap again. It wasn’t too bad. Clark dropped Christopher off with his folks and he drove my Jeep towards campus.

Two hours later, we walked through the line and received our fake diplomas.

We made it back to our seats and chatted very quietly with those around us while the several hundred other students got their fake diplomas.

“Do you see everyone?” I asked Clark quietly as I scanned the Lane Athletic Building.

“They’re behind us somewhere. About half way up, right in the middle.”

I turned and found them after a few minutes of searching. Christopher waved excitedly when he saw me and I waved back.

We were told to stand for the final words.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor and privilege to introduce you to the *graduated* class of 2006.”

There were whoops and hollers all around us. I turned to Clark to find his arms wrapped around my waist as he picked me up. My arms wrapped around his neck and I laughed as he swung me in a very tight circle.

After what seemed like an eternity, he set me down and gave me a quick kiss — the same as always when other people were around.

I smiled as I turned towards a friend who was sitting on the other side of me and one of the other guys in our class smacked him on the back.

It was the first day of the rest of our lives.

Or at least the first day of the next two years.

Because that was all we had until the threat was gone.

I kept a smile on my face until we made it outside and found the rest of our family. I noticed they’d gotten separated from the Sceves but I was sure they’d catch up in a few minutes — they knew where we were supposed to be.

We exchanged hugs with everyone and then took pictures — a friend from one of Clark’s classes took one of all of us.

Nate was resting his head on my shoulder when I felt a chill go over me.

I couldn’t explain it but I started looking around.

Then it hit me.

“Where’s Christopher?”

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Part 125

Clark

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We met the rest of our family near a big oak tree in front of Luthor Forensic Science and Criminology Center.

We exchanged hugs all around then took a few pictures and headed towards the parking lot.

“Where’s Christopher?” Lois asked suddenly. Nate was resting his head on her shoulder.

We all looked around.

“Christopher Kent!” she called sternly.

He didn’t appear.

I looked around. “Christopher!” I yelled.

“Split up,” Sam said, his voice tight. “Call if you find him.”

We all headed different directions, calling for him.

Scott and Steve had gotten separated from us in the crowd and were just making their way back towards us. Sam was apparently filling them in as I kept calling for him.

“Christopher!”

I tried to tune in my hearing but it was too loud — even outside.

“*Christopher!*” I called again.

Even without my hearing on, I could hear everyone else trying to find him, too.

Five minutes later, I still hadn’t found him and hadn’t gotten a call from anyone else either.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at it as I answered. “Do you have him, Sam?”

“Not yet,” he answered grimly. “Scott is coordinating with campus security and Steve’s calling the police and FBI. If he isn’t found in the next few minutes, they’ll lock the area down.”

“That’ll be too late,” I said, my voice sounding strangled. I was sure. “If he’s got him...”

“We’ll find him,” Sam assured me.

“Call me if you hear anything,” I said, hanging up.

“*Christopher Kent!*”

“Clark!”

I looked around trying to see who it was. The voice was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it.

“Clark!”

I looked again.

There.

Lewis Lang.

“Have you seen my son?” I asked him.

“Lana has him. She’s looking for you.”

“What?” I shook my head. “No. Which way did she go?”

He pointed. “That way. She saw him and she and Laura went to look for you.”

By then we were attempting to walk briskly through the crowd in the direction he indicated. I dug my phone out of my pocket and punched a button.

“Sam? Lana found him. She’s looking for one of us. I’m with her dad — looks like she headed back towards the Luthor building.”

His voice came over the phone. “I’m not calling off security until we find him, but I’ll let them know that if they find him with her, that’s okay — she’s not a suspect or anything like that.”

“No, she’s not,” I said firmly. “Her dad said she saw him wandering around and that’s the end of it.” Another thought hit me. “Is Lois with you?”

“She’s right here. Do you want to talk to her?”

“We’ll be there in just a minute. Make *sure* she understands Lana had nothing to do with this, though.” That wouldn’t be pretty. “It looks like he just wandered off. We’ll be right there.” I punched the end button without waiting for his response.

“I don’t think he wandered off,” Lewis said as we hit an open space and started to jog. “Someone had him and when Lana said something, he dropped him and ran.”

I stopped in my tracks. “What?”

He grabbed my arm and hurried me on. “Somebody had him...”

We came upon the tight grouping of Sam and my parents and

Lois and Nate and...

"Where is he?" I asked.

"We haven't found them yet," Sam told me.

"Clark!" This time I recognized Lana's voice and I turned towards it.

"Christopher!" It was little more than a breath.

"Daddy!" He twisted in Lana's arms until she had to put him down and he ran towards us. "Mommy!"

Lois practically shoved Nate at me, trusting me to get a good hold on him as she ran towards Christopher.

"Christopher Jonathan Kent, where were you?" she asked as she swept him into her arms.

I could see Lewis talking to Sam as I followed them, wrapping my free arm around both of them, relieved beyond words to see him.

Tears were streaming down Lois' cheeks and I rested my forehead against her hair, my eyes closed as I breathed a prayer of thankfulness.

"Let's go." The words were quiet but insistent. Scott tugged on one of my arms. "We have to get him out of here."

"What?" Lois looked puzzled. "Why?"

We were already being rushed out — Scott on one side, Steve on the other, campus security surrounding us.

"Just go," I said quietly, one arm still protectively around her as we headed towards the dark sedan pulled as close to us as possible.

We were practically shoved into the back seat. The door was shut behind us and there were two sharp raps on the roof of the car. It pulled away from the curb immediately.

Steve twisted in the front seat. "The rest of your family and the Langs are on their way to the house."

"Why? What's going on?" Lois asked, insistently. "I thought he just wandered off."

"Lana saw someone with him," I told her gently. "When she confronted the guy, he dropped him and took off."

"What?" Her face turned ashen. She turned to Christopher. "Hey, little guy..."

"Mrs. Kent," Steve interrupted. "I know you want to know what happened, but I need you to let us talk to him first, okay? You can be there, but we can't risk tainting his memory, okay?"

She nodded and pulled him closer to her.

Between the lack of rush hour traffic and the police escort, the normally forty minute or so drive took just under twenty. Christopher was enthralled with the patrol cars complete with lights and sirens both in front and behind us.

It wasn't until we were in the house that I breathed a sigh of relief.

The house was locked down behind us and a few minutes later we were settled on the couch in the living room. Christopher asked for and received a cup of juice as he settled in between me and Lois.

Jessica was already home and gladly took Nate from me so he wouldn't interrupt the talk we were about to try having with Christopher.

"Christopher, I need you to tell me what happened," Steve said gently.

He nodded. "'Kay, Mi'ter Ste'."

"Can you tell me where you went today?"

Christopher giggled. "Mommy, Daddy sc'oo' to see Daddy in a d'ess."

We smiled despite ourselves.

"Tell me about the building."

"Big," he said. "Lo'sa pe'ple."

"Where did you go when you left?"

He thought for a minute. "Too' pi'tures by t'ee."

"Then where did you go?"

"Wit' ice c'eam man."

"Ice cream man?"

He nodded. "'Ice c'eam man ha' ice c'eam." He frowned. "Den he ba' man."

"He's a bad man?" Steve asked.

Christopher nodded. "He say I no' see Mommy, Daddy fo' lon' time. He d'op ice c'eam and not pi' i' u'."

"Then where did you go?"

"'Ice yady sa' le' me go."

"Do you know the lady's name?"

He shook his head. "She ta' me ba' to Mommy an' Daddy. She wear dress yike Daddy and Mommy."

The front door opened and people spilled inside. Sam, my parents, Lana and her family.

"Dat yady ta' me." Christopher pointed at Lana.

~~~~~  
Lois

Lana looked shocked. "I didn't..." she started, but Steve held up a hand and she stopped.

"Where did that lady take you?"

"Mommy an' Daddy."

"Do you remember what the man with the ice cream looked like?"

Christopher bit his bottom lip. "B'own hai', yike Mommy an' Daddy hai'." He shrugged.

Steve nodded. "Thanks, little man. You did great."

Christopher grinned. "T'anks, Mi'ter Ste'."

"Why don't you go see if Miss Vicki will get you a snack?" I told him, giving him one more squeeze.

He scrambled down. "'Kay."

The rest of everyone made their way into the living room as Steve picked up his cell phone. "Ms. Lang, I'd appreciate it if you don't discuss this anymore just yet."

She nodded.

He spoke quietly into his phone for a minute then came back.

"Ms. Lang, can you tell me what happened?"

She took a deep breath. "I met my parents near the athletic center and we started towards a less crowded area to take some pictures. We did and a couple of my friends were there. We talked for a few minutes and then I saw this guy carrying Christopher. I didn't think it was him at first, but then he said 'Daddy!' pretty loud and started wiggling and the guy wouldn't let him go."

She stared at her hands. "I called out to him — his name — and he turned towards me. I said something like 'that's not your kid' to the guy. I said it pretty loud, I guess, because everyone turned to look at him. He set Christopher on the ground and ran off. I stayed with Christopher. Daddy tried to follow him but I don't think he got very far."

"I didn't," the man I now knew was Lewis Lang said, "but a minute later, I heard someone calling for him and saw Clark."

"I asked him where his daddy was," Lana continued, pointedly not looking at me. "He thought for a minute and said something I thought sounded like 'Luthor' so Mom and I headed towards the Luthor building. A few minutes later, we saw you guys and then we were all rushed off."

"Could you describe the man?"

She nodded and gave a fairly generic description — medium height, medium build, dark hair, sunglasses, baseball hat, red shirt, blue jeans. She thought she'd recognize him if she saw him again and so did her parents.

"Thank you," I said suddenly, swiping at the tears on my cheeks.

"I couldn't let someone take off with him," she told me.

Clark squeezed my shoulders slightly. I hadn't really realized he still had his arm around me.

"Still, thank you," I said again.

Steve was back on his phone. "They found the ice cream," he said as he hung up. "We may get prints off of the cup but don't

hold out too much hope on that.”

I sighed and leaned against Clark a little more. His arm tightened around me even more.

“He’s okay,” he told me quietly, rubbing my arm gently. He kissed my hair. “He’s safe.”

“For now,” I whispered, pushing myself up and practically running off.

Clark was right behind me, stopping me before I got too far. “We’ll *keep* him safe,” he told me, taking me by the arms and turning me towards him.

My hands were balled into fists and they rested on his chest as he wrapped me in his arms. My tears soaked his shirt as I unclenched my fists just enough to grasp it in my hands.

I didn’t know how long he held me but it was the closest we’d been, for the longest period of time, since I didn’t know when. His hands rubbed up and down my back, soothing in their motions as sobs wracked my body.

“Why?” I whispered.

“Because he’s crazy,” Clark reminded me. “We’ll do whatever we have to to keep him safe, you know that.”

“He only has to get lucky once,” I reminded him, turning my head so my cheek was resting on his chest instead of my forehead and I slowly loosened my grip on his shirt to let my arms slide around his waist, shifting closer to him as I did. His arms tightened around me. “We have to be lucky all the time.”

“I know.”

“I don’t suppose you know anyone willing to perform assassinations?” I asked with a sigh, unwilling to move out of the circle of his arms just yet.

“Sorry, no. I did hear a rumor about another attempted coup or something though. Maybe he’ll be ousted soon.”

I sighed. “Not with our luck.”

“Lana got a good look at him. I think I might be able to draw him if she describes him for me,” he said quietly. “Do you want me to try?”

“I don’t care if you sleep with her if it catches the bastard that did this.” I hoped no one else was close enough to hear that, but I didn’t really care.

He sighed. “Don’t do that. Please.”

“Fine, but I don’t.”

I didn’t. I’d do anything to protect my son, though I’d prefer to avoid my husband sleeping with the love of his life to do it.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“What do you think?” I asked, irritated, pushing away from him. “Just go. Draw or whatever. I’m going to find my son and not let go.”

I heard him sigh as I walked off, heading towards the kitchen without going through the living room.

“Come on, bud, it’s about naptime,” I said, picking him up off the stool. “How about I lay down with you for a while?”

“Wa’ Ja’ Ja’?” he asked.

“Sure, we can watch Jack Jack,” I told him as I headed through the house.

Ten minutes later, we were curled up on my bed — the one I usually shared with Clark — watching Jack Jack.

I’d double checked all the doors before I started the movie. Christopher and I were securely locked in.

He was as safe as Daddy could make him.

I held him close and we both finally dozed off watching superheroes.

I just wished I *really* had one of my own.

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Part 126

Clark

~~~~~

“I don’t care if you sleep with her if it catches the bastard that did this.”

I winced. I could see the living room out of the corner of my eye and heads shot up when they heard that.

I let out a deep sigh. “Don’t do that. Please.” I ran my hands up and down her back, pulling her a little closer to me.

“Fine, but I don’t.”

And there were pigs flying around outside right now. There was a long silence.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“What do you think?” She pushed away from me. “Just go. Draw or whatever. I’m going to find my son and not let go.”

She turned and stalked off towards the kitchen. A minute later they were on their way upstairs to watch *Incredibles* and maybe take a nap.

I ran my hands through my hair as I watched her walk off before sighing and heading back to the living room. Nearly everyone was giving me looks of varying degrees of outrage and significance.

I turned to Steve. “Is the police sketch artist going to be here anytime soon to see if we can get a drawing of this guy?”

He shook his head. “It’s going to be a while before he can get here.”

I sighed and looked over at the Langs. “Would you mind helping me try to draw him? Or, Mom, do you think you could?”

Of course, Mom was more of an artist than I could ever be. She shrugged. “I can try.”

Half an hour later, they had a drawing all three agreed was a fairly reasonable likeness. An inspector, Henderson, I thought, showed up just as they were finishing it. Mom handed it over to him as everyone was introduced.

He frowned and turned to the Langs. “Are you sure?”

The three of them nodded.

Henderson sighed. “Well, the good news is it’s probably not related to the Latislan stuff.”

My head shot up. “What?”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve seen this guy.”

“Who is he?” Sam asked.

Henderson shrugged. “We don’t know. They call him the Toyman because the first kids he lured he used toys on. More recently he’s used ice cream like this time.”

“Why did he take Christopher then?” I asked. “It’s not like we have any money or anything like that. And he’s usually surrounded by security.”

Henderson took a seat and motioned to me to do the same. “I’d guess he was a target of opportunity. He probably showed up at graduation hoping to find the kid of some rich benefactor or something and found the grandkid of one. You may not have money, Mr. Kent, but Dr. Lane does. Ms. Lang recognizing your son and saying something thwarted his attempt — this time. There’s no way to know if he’ll try again. One of the kids he tried to abduct nearly a year ago got away and he’s never tried again. Another, six months ago, got away and he was able to kidnap him a week later. The kids have all been released, unharmed, once the ransom was paid.”

That was a bit of a relief.

But...

How was I supposed to tell Lois that there might be two madmen after our son?

“Where is Mrs. Kent?” Henderson asked.

“She took Christopher upstairs for his nap and probably a movie,” I told him.

“I need to speak with her. Can you show me where we’re going?”

I stood. “You won’t be able to get in without a code anyway. The house is on lockdown.”

“I noticed,” he said, trying to conceal a smirk. “There’s so many police officers and security guards outside, if I didn’t know better I’d think the grass was blue.” He turned. “Ms. Lang, would

you join us?"

She nodded and stood up. I led the two of them through the house and up the stairs. I noticed Lana's eyes widen slightly as I punched my code in the keypad.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Christopher never leaves the house without security," I told her. "And this wing of this floor is secured whenever he's in it."

"Oh." It was barely more than a breath.

"Wait here," I told them as we entered the hallway, shutting and securing the door behind us. I went through the double doors to our room and found the two of them asleep on our bed, Incredibles still playing on the TV. I shook her shoulder gently. "Lois. Hey. I need you to wake up."

"What?" she whispered grumpily.

"There's a cop here who wants to talk to you and me and Lana."

Her eyes opened and she looked at me. "I'm not leaving him."

I nodded. "I know. They're out in the hall. It wasn't Navance."

"What?" She carefully extracted herself from Christopher — with just a bit of help from me. A second later, he was curled up under the blanket, still sound asleep.

Quietly, I told her what Henderson had told us.

There was a soft knock on the door as I finished. "Mr. Kent? Mrs. Kent?"

I looked at her and she nodded, pushing herself up off the bed and heading towards the seating area, using the remote to turn off the TV as she did.

I headed for the door and opened it to let them in. "Christopher's asleep," I said quietly.

They both nodded as they walked in. Lana looked decidedly uncomfortable as she realized we were in our room and not a living room or something.

Lois had curled up in one of the chairs, leaving no room for me to sit with her. I ignored the other two and grabbed her hand, tugging her onto her feet and pulling her into my arms. She only resisted slightly — because we had an audience, I was sure.

I lowered my face to the side of her head, the side away from Lana and Henderson, as her arms found their way around my waist. "Please don't try to do this by yourself," I whispered. "Please let me help you."

She nodded and I held her for another long moment before the shifting on the couch reminded me of why we were there. My arms slipped to her sides, grasping her hand lightly as I moved towards the loveseat. I found my fingers intertwining with hers and my other hand covered both of them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kent, I need you to tell me anything — *anything* — you can remember. Was there anyone who looked a little funny? Someone who watched while you took pictures?"

Lois closed her eyes. "Maybe. There was a guy — he was wearing a red shirt, with a logo on it. Baseball hat, blue jeans, sunglasses. Just like Lana said earlier, but I distinctly remember seeing him leaning against a planter, just sort of staring in our general direction, but not necessarily at us."

"Did you see any distinguishing characteristics or anything like that?"

She bit her bottom lip and her brow furrowed. I ran my thumb gently over the back of her hand, trying to give her the support she needed. "Maybe."

"What is it?"

"He had a tattoo on his right bicep." She was silent for another minute, then shook her head. She opened her eyes and tears slipped out. "I don't know what it was. I remember seeing it — and it went all the way around his arm but..."

"That's okay, Mrs. Kent. That's great."

"I saw it!" Lana said, louder than she meant to I was sure.

Lois and I both looked immediately over at the bed.

Christopher stirred, but didn't wake.

"Sorry," she said more quietly. "I saw it. It was an intricate pattern. Some kind of flower with thorns, but I don't think it was roses. I remember thinking that thorns didn't go with it, you know?"

He nodded and held out the sketch pad. "Mrs. Kent, does this look like the man you saw?"

She nodded instantly. "That's him." She collapsed against the back of the loveseat and I let go of her hand with one of mine to help support her. "Now there's two crazies after him."

"Not necessarily," Henderson said. "The tattoo information is new and could be a big help. Maybe because it's May or whatever, but no one's seen him in short sleeves before."

I ran my hand up and down her shoulder as she spoke again. "Please, Inspector Henderson. It's bad enough to have one crazy guy after us when we can't really do anything about it. This guy we can."

"Mrs. Kent, I promise you, I will do everything in my power to get him. I've been working this case for a long time now, and no one wants him caught more than me."

She nodded. "Thank you."

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Lois

Clark and Inspector Henderson stepped out into the hall so Clark could let him out. I expected Lana to follow, but she didn't. She stayed on the couch, steadfastly looking anywhere but at me.

"I'm sorry," she finally said quietly.

"For what?" I asked, stifling a sigh. "You're the one who saved him."

She shook her head. "Not today. I'm sorry I was always such a bitch to you in the dorms." She wiped at a tear that wound its way down her cheek. "I've thought and said a lot of really mean things about you since you guys... got married and seeing all this, the security, the constant fear you must live under... It's not justified. You married the guy I thought I was going to spend my life with. I thought you had it all, especially when I heard you guys moved in here. You had Clark, you had his baby, you had everything I ever wanted. But the rest of this... I can't imagine functioning with all of this. I don't know how you do it. Clark told me after you got married that it wasn't real, that he never planned on being with you and all of that, but he couldn't explain. I've pieced it together over the years — from things one or the other of you have said when we ran into each other or the news or gossip around Smallville... I know Navance was threatening you and your baby and I'm guessing the only way out was to get married and stay married."

"So far so good," I said when she paused.

"I also know neither one of you thought Clark was really his dad. I got the impression that there was some end date in mind — some kind of expiration on what Navance could do or something and that he was planning on leaving and coming back to me at some point." She held up a hand. "He hasn't said anything that would give me that impression since right after you got married, so I'm not sure what the deal is now, but once I found out about Latislan for sure, I did some research and found the five year limitation and all that."

Her tears were coming fast and furious. "For a while, I held onto that, hoping that it meant what I thought it did, but when I saw him — the day he told me you were pregnant — even though he didn't give me details or anything remotely like that — I knew we were never going to happen. Not because of the baby or because he... 'cheated'..." She used air quotes. "...on me with you or anything like that, but I could see it. I've known Clark since we were babies. I see it in the way he looks at you, the way he holds you, the way he loves your sons, the way you danced together at Rachel and Pete's wedding... I don't think he even

realizes it and I don't know if you do or not, but he loves you. He loves you in a way that he never loved me. I believe him when he says he never lied about his feelings for me, but it's different. I was so scared that first semester that he'd realize what was already happening between you two. He promised me that there wasn't anything going on and I believed him then and I do now, but the two of you..."

She shook her head slightly. "The two of you were always a better match than the two of us. It's taken a lot of soul searching for me to reach the point where I can accept that. And if he ever came to me and you two were truly over and wanted to try again, I might, but I don't think he will. Not even if you died or something. What we had was great in high school, but I don't know that it would have really lasted like we thought it would. I hope it would have — that it could have grown and matured and developed, but there's no way to know. And I've discovered that, really, at heart, I'm a small town girl, but Clark will fit in well here in the city — at the Planet. Much better than I ever would though I would have followed him in heartbeat."

She swiped at her cheeks again. "Don't give up on him yet," she said as she stood. "He loves you. He'd go to the ends of the Earth to protect you and your kids. He doesn't realize it yet, though." She started towards the door and she stopped, turning back to look at me. "Take care of him," she said quietly. "At some point, something is going to happen that's going to shatter his world to pieces and he'll realize how much he *needs* you. I don't know what it's going to be — something happening to one of the kids that doesn't seem like it can be fixed, you leaving or kicking him out when the five years is up, but something is going to happen to tear his world to bits and he's going to need your help to put it back together. I just hope he realizes that before it's too late. You're the best thing that ever happened to him, even if he's too big a lunthead to see it."

And she left.

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Part 127

Clark

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It scared me a bit to realize that Lana stayed behind when Henderson and I left our room. It took all of my willpower to not listen in, but Henderson captured my attention distracting me from whatever my ex-girlfriend might be saying to my wife.

Ten minutes later, Lana made it downstairs. Henderson took her aside and showed her some pictures on his PDA. She seemed to identify something that they later told us was the tattoo pattern from the guy who tried to take Christopher. Maybe it would help, but I wasn't holding my breath.

Things quieted down, though there was additional security and there would be for a while.

I pulled out my laptop and logged into the Daily Planet archives, searching for the stories on the Toyman kidnapper.

The weird thing was that none of the kids remembered anything about where they were held or anything like that.

The names of all of the families were in the paper, though not all the names of the kids had been released. The one kid who'd gotten away and not successfully kidnapped later was mentioned but never by name. That was a relief. Even if the story got out, it looked like Christopher's name might stay out of it.

Lois wandered into the kitchen a few minutes after I realized that.

"Where is everyone?" she asked, baby monitor in her hand. "The boys are still sleeping. Scott's up there with Christopher. I think. Maybe Steve. One of them."

"Lana identified the tattoo pattern. Henderson said they could go and would be in touch if they needed anything else. He and most of the police left, but the house is still locked down. Parents and Jimmy are watching a movie. I'm researching the Toyman."

"What'd you find?" she asked, sliding on to one of the stools. "Not much," I sighed. "None of the kids remember anything about their time while they were gone."

"Perry said he wanted us to start coming up with our own stories. Catching the bastard would certainly do that."

Clark nodded. "Yes, it would. But how, exactly, do you propose we do that? The only thing I've come up with is absolutely not happening."

"What's that?"

"Christopher as bait was the only thing I could think of and there's no way in hell that's happening."

"I agree," she said. "I was thinking we find out where the kids were taken, where the payoffs were made, where the kids were released and see if we can find a pattern or something."

"It's worth a shot."

I thought for a minute and looked around to make sure no one else was around, before scribbling all the information about each kidnapping on a piece of paper.

"There."

She picked it up, staring at it for a long moment. "Nothing jumps out at me," she said with a sigh.

"Me either."

She tapped the pencil against her chin. "There's something here, but don't ask me what it is. Where's Charlie Eppes when you need him?"

I chuckled. Of course — the mathematician from 'Numb3rs'.

"CBS, Friday nights. Or in the first two 'Santa Clause' movies." She glared at me. "We did a 'Numb3rs' thing in one of my classes my senior year in high school. I forget what episode it was based on, but it was cool. And you've said the baseball stat thing was cool too."

"Yeah, it was." I leaned back. "Nothing coming to you either?" I asked as she continued to stare at the notepad.

"No." She pushed it away from her. "I'll keep thinking about it."

"What did you and Lana talk about?" I asked suddenly.

She didn't answer for a long moment. "Nothing I want to talk about, but don't worry. There's no hit out on her or anything. You didn't listen in?"

She seemed to be holding her breath until I shook my head. "I was tempted, but I didn't. Henderson was talking to me anyway."

"Would you have if he hadn't been?"

"I don't think so. Though I did keep an ear out for shouting and hair pulling."

"It was nothing like that." She sighed. "She apologized for how she acted when we lived in the dorms, said a couple other really interesting things and left. That's it."

"What kind of things?"

"I'm not telling you. It's between me and her. Maybe someday I'll tell you but not today."

We heard voices coming up the stairs.

"Guess the movie's over," she said. "Aren't you on dinner duty tonight?"

"Yeah. I better get it started."

I snapped my laptop shut and started the stir fry.

~~~~~

Lois

I went into the living room but watched Clark carefully, if surreptitiously, the rest of the day, contemplating what Lana had told me.

Did Clark really love me and just not realize it?

I thought Lana believed that, but I didn't know that it was true.

"Mommy?" The voice came through the baby monitor and I waggled it in Clark's direction so he'd know I was on my way to get Christopher and he didn't need to worry about it. He nodded and turned back to his stir fry.

I hurried through the house, punching my code in next to the door. “Hey, how was your nap?” I asked him.

“Goo’.”

I lay down on the bed next to him as he yawned and stretched.

“Wa’ Ja’ Ja’?” he asked.

“Sure.” He was a bear if he didn’t wake up on his terms. Usually that just meant not making him get right up when he woke up. He needed to wake up more slowly. He sighed. “Whe’ Daddy?”

“He’s making dinner,” I told him.

“Actually, I thought I’d check on my favorite three-year-old.” I looked up, surprised.

“Mom’s finishing dinner,” he told me as he sat down on the other side of the bed.

“Daddy, I no’ t’ree ye’. I t’o!” Christopher giggled as Clark tickled him.

“Well, you’re big enough to be three.”

He stretched out and Christopher snuggled in next to him.

We watched for a few minutes, before I broached a subject that had been on my mind off and on for over a year.

“Have you thought any more about that?” I asked quietly, nodding towards the movie.

He nodded. “Yeah. I have. But I don’t think I’d seriously consider it until the whole Navance thing is over.”

“Think about today though,” I pointed out. “You could have left and changed into a costume and flown around looking for him. And maybe caught the guy.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But there’s no way to know.”

“I just remembered you saying once, you wouldn’t do anything until after college and college is over now...” My voice trailed off.

“But the risk is still too great with everything else,” he replied. “Maybe once we’re settled in at the Planet or something, but I don’t think I’d seriously consider it until the threat is gone.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Clark pulled his cell phone off his belt a minute later when it started buzzing. He looked at it — he’d come a long way from his text messaging antipathy. He still didn’t like it, but he was willing to accept it was a part of his life.

He reached for the remote sitting on the bed and stopped Incredibles. “Dinner’s ready.”

I heard Nate starting to stir in the other room. “I’ll get Nate if you take this little guy down.”

“I no’ yiddle, Mommy,” Christopher squealed as Clark swung him onto his shoulder.

I laughed as I headed into the other room.

The rest of the evening and the next day passed without incident. The press hadn’t gotten wind about us — though there was a blurb about an attempted abduction after graduation in the Daily Planet, but it didn’t garner much attention.

I could only hope Perry would forgive us if the full story ever came out.

Same with Latislan.

There was another civil war or something beginning there again. I’d gotten my hopes up a couple times before when protests had gotten out of hand — they’d even made it into the capital building once before they were subdued — and I’d learned not to hope too much.

I never thought I’d *actually* wish someone dead, but I did.

Monday morning found both of us dressed in suits as we got ready for our first official day at work. Dress code for interns was a bit more lax than for reporters — besides we were professionals now.

“Is this straight?” Clark asked. “I usually have better luck with regular ties than bow ties, but this knot just doesn’t want to cooperate today.”

I raised an eyebrow when he turned around.

“What?”

“Who helped you pick that tie out?” I couldn’t even begin to describe it. Yellows, blues, whites, abstract patterns...

“My mom did when we went shopping the other day.” He flipped it up slightly so he could look at it. “You don’t like it?”

I shrugged. “Somehow, it suits you. I don’t think it suits anyone else, so I don’t know why they made it but...” I sighed. “You’re right. The knot looks funny.”

He tugged on it and started over. Again. I knew I’d seen him do that at least twice already while I was finishing my make-up.

“And what’s with the glasses? Are you going to wear them more regularly now?” He’d worn glasses from time to time for as long as I’d known him.

“I was thinking about it last night. If I ever do the Incredibles thing, I don’t think I’d want to wear a mask. It says there’s something to hide. There’d already be plenty of suspicion that I had some sort of other identity, but no one would expect a super to need glasses. My parents both have glasses and I’ve worn them sometimes anyway since I was learning to control all the stuff I can do with my eyes.”

“So it’s part of a long-term disguise or something?” Personally, I thought they looked great, but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

“Something like that,” he said, finishing retying his tie. “How’s that?”

I eyed it critically. “It’s straight and that’s about all I’m going to give it. You clean up pretty good, Kent.”

He smiled at me — one of those thousand watt smiles that should be illegal or would light up all of Metropolis if they could figure out how to harness the power. “You, too, Kent.”

I glanced down at my understated black suit and bright blue camisole underneath it. “Thanks,” I said, a thought running through my head again.

“What?”

I sighed. “I just wish I’d been able to at least hyphenate my last name, that’s all. I always dreamed of seeing the ‘Lois Lane’ byline, but ‘Lois Lane-Kent’ would be okay, too. Don’t get me wrong — it’s not like I hate seeing ‘Lois Kent’ or anything — I just hate what it represents. That I couldn’t even hyphenate my last name because it might mean that you weren’t Christopher’s dad. And even after this is all over, I wouldn’t go back to Lois Lane because of the boys and all, but I just wish that ‘Lane’ was part of my professional name at least, that’s all.” Tears threatened for a moment.

“Hey, come here.”

It was the first time he’d held me in his arms when someone else wasn’t around in a very long time; the first time I remembered him intentionally touching me when we weren’t in front of anyone since the day before Nate’s surgery. Of course, I’d told him not to, but that didn’t mean I didn’t miss it.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You didn’t offend me or anything like that — I completely understand. You told me the week we met that you’d hyphenate when you got married but would probably stay ‘Lois Lane’ for professional purposes. That plan went out the window a long time ago.”

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Clark

She hadn’t put her shoes on yet and she fit right under my chin. There were a lot of things I couldn’t do anything about but maybe I could do something about that. I’d have to call Jill or Dan or even Jack and then talk to Perry depending on what they said.

I’d missed being close to her like this, but I’d respected her wishes — at least consciously. There’d been a couple of times when I woke up to find myself spooned behind her, but for the most part I hadn’t touched her when we were alone together since

she'd told me in no uncertain terms that there was no reason for that. I refused to delve any deeper into why I felt like that — except that she was my friend and I enjoyed being with her, being close to her.

"Happy Birthday," I said quietly. "You've had quite a birthday weekend — graduation, starting your new job on your birthday."

"Having my son almost kidnapped and then rescued by your ex."

"But he's safe. And he's going to stay safe. Your dad's keeping security high on him."

"I know."

I heard the patter of little feet heading our way. "We've got company coming." But I didn't let her go.

"Mommy? Daddy?" came the little voice still laden with sleep. "I mo'nin' ye?"

We both laughed.

"Yes, it's morning, bud. Remember, it's Mom and Dad's first day at work." She didn't move from my arms as she spoke and I had the feeling she was enjoying it as much as I was.

So why had I let it happen?

Why hadn't I... not *forced* the issue, but forced the issue. Held her hand or hugged her or spooned with her at night — on purpose.

We'd avoided the question of 'us' since right after the surgery. Neither of us brought it up; we avoided any mention of it at all, except to mention that we couldn't wait for it all to be over. I didn't think Lois meant our marriage, except that she would be out of a marriage with a guy who didn't love her the way she needed to be loved. I thought we both just meant that we couldn't wait for the specter of Navance's paternity claims hanging over our heads to be gone.

I didn't think either of us wanted to think any deeper than that — of what was going to happen afterwards.

For Christopher to be safe.

"I hung'y," Christopher said, wiggling his way in between us. I was sure he had no clue what he was interrupting.

I finally let go of Lois and picked him up. "Well, let's go get something to eat."

"I'll get Nate," Lois said, heading towards that room. "I'll feed him downstairs. Would you mind tossing some frozen pancakes in for me?"

"Sure," I called over my shoulder.

Surely I could do better than frozen pancakes though.

I knew I didn't have long, but no one else was around. I set Christopher down in the living room with PBS Kids on and told him I'd call him when breakfast was ready.

I zipped around the kitchen and by the time Lois made it downstairs with Nate, scrambled eggs and bacon were almost done and real pancakes were being flipped.

"You didn't have to do this," she told me. "And how'd you have time?"

"I, uh, zipped around," I told her.

"Well, Jessica's on her way down, so no more zipping."

"I wouldn't have if she'd been close and you know it."

My parents had left for Smallville the day before and Sam had some kind of meeting early so it was just the four of us — and Jessica — in the house. Vicki wouldn't be up until later — I still wasn't sure exactly what she did all day, but the house was always clean so I guessed that was a big part of it.

Lois took her suit jacket off and situated the blanket and Nate so he could nurse while she ate. "I need to pack a lunch, too," she said.

I surprised myself when I said, "Nope. I'm taking you out to lunch today to celebrate graduation and your birthday and jobs and all that. The two of us."

"You are?" She looked surprised, too.

I nodded. "Yep."

She looked at me for a long minute. "Then I look forward to it."

Part 128

Lois

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"I want to stop and get something for Christopher," I told Clark as we ate lunch at Callard's — just the two of us. It was nice.

"What's that?"

"There's that toy store not too far from here. I just want to get him something — he had a pretty traumatic weekend and did great with it."

He'd woken up at one point Saturday night with a nightmare about being taken away. He hadn't had any Sunday night so we were hoping that it was just a one-time thing, but there was no way to know at this point.

"Sounds good." He glanced at his watch. "But we better get going if we're going to stop there. I have to go to that museum thing before long." He grimaced. "And I won't be able to leave once I'm there either. I mean, it's not like anything bad's going to happen or anything, but I hate the idea that I'm going to be more or less stuck, you know?"

I nodded sympathetically as he put his wallet back in his pocket. "Sorry. I'd say I wish that I got the assignment instead of you, but I don't."

We headed down the sidewalk towards Farmingdale's Toy Store.

"I think I'm going to have to leave from here," Clark said as he held the door for me.

"Okay."

We wandered around for a few minutes, looking for something that Christopher would like.

"Can I help you?"

We turned to find a sharply dressed man with dark hair and glasses. He looked slightly bookish and then he smiled.

I managed to control a gasp.

It was him.

The man who'd been watching us at graduation.

I glanced over at Clark who had started chatting with him. He didn't seem to notice anything. I reached over and grasped his hand, squeezing tightly.

He gave me an odd glance, but that was it.

I tried to give him some sort of subtle signal that we needed to leave, but he didn't take the hint — and they weren't very obvious hints, but it was the best I could do.

We were talking with the guy about a train table — which was way over the top for what I was looking for at the moment — when Clark glanced at his watch.

"I gotta go," he said, giving me a quick kiss in practically the same breath. "I'm going to be late."

I didn't even have time to say 'bye' before he was out the door.

"Actually," I said, willing myself to stay calm. "I need to be going myself — if I'm not back at work soon, my boss won't be happy. Thank you for your time though," I told him with a smile. "We'll be back."

We said our good-byes and I didn't think he suspected anything.

I called the Planet — and told Jimmy to tell Perry I had a hot tip and I'd be in as soon as I could — I wasn't about to get into this over the phone and I didn't want to actually talk to Perry about it.

Not yet.

I headed straight towards the precinct where I knew Henderson worked. I talked to the desk sergeant, insisting that I

needed to talk to him right away.

I was promptly ushered to a hard plastic chair and told he'd be with me as soon as he could.

I sighed and pulled out the piece of paper Clark had written everything about the kidnappings down on.

There had to be some kind of pattern — maybe if I put pins on a map or something — that tied the toy store guy to these.

A thought occurred to me and I started scribbling on a piece of paper I pulled out of my briefcase.

He couldn't control where he took the kids from and at least some of them were targets of opportunity so I took those two variables out and listed the rest.

"Mrs. Kent? Can I help you?"

I looked up and saw Inspector Henderson walking towards me. "I saw him," I said excitedly. "And I can prove that he's connected to all this."

"My office," he said tersely. "Let's go."

I followed him to a room that wasn't much more than a hole in the wall.

"Where did you see him and when?"

"He works at Farmingdale's Toy Store. Clark and I stopped to pick up something for Christopher and it was him — I know it was him."

"Okay, evidence."

I set the pieces of paper on the desk. "Clark wrote this out the other day and we started looking for a pattern. We couldn't find one — at least not written like this."

Clark had written the name of the child on one line, location taken on the next, drop point on a third, and recovery location on the fourth. Nothing had jumped out at either of us that way.

"I realized that he couldn't control where he took the kids from — graduations, skating rink, amusement park — so I tossed that information out when I was looking for a pattern. And some of the kids were targets of opportunity — like Christopher was on Saturday. He saw the grandkid of a rich guy and tried to take him so the *names* probably wouldn't be a pattern. I'd be willing to bet that the other two would continue this pattern if he had succeeded. Look." I pointed the second sheet of paper. "I listed them in order — drop off points for the money on this side and recovery locations of the kids on this one. Look at the first letter. It's not that he was at the carnival, he was at the *ferris* wheel. F. The second one is at the Metro Mall *arcade*. A. Then R, M, I... and so on. The money drop offs spell Farmingda... If he'd taken Christopher, it would have been somewhere with an L. The recovery locations spell toy store with an extra t at the end. I'd bet that the next place would be somewhere with an O."

He listened until I was done then stared at the sheet of paper for a long minute. "And you're sure it was the same guy?"

I nodded. "I'm *positive*."

"Okay then."

"Wait. One more thing. I can't believe I forgot this." I pulled my cell phone out. "I might have a picture of him."

"What?"

"We were looking for a toy," I explained. "I took a couple pictures so I wouldn't forget for Christopher's birthday next month." I scanned the pictures and found one with the guy in the background. "Here."

He looked at it and nodded. "Could be." He leaned back in his seat. "Completely off the record?"

I hesitated. "I want the exclusive when the time comes. I won't jeopardize the search for him, but I want the exclusive when it's over."

He looked at me for a long minute, then nodded. "Okay. As long as you cooperate, sure. For now, deep background at most. Hopefully, you'll be able to write soon."

"You got it."

"And you don't give the department a fair shake in whatever

you end up writing... You'll never get an exclusive again."

"Understood."

"There was another kidnapping yesterday. The drop off point for the money is at the Metropolitan's game tonight — the ladies room. We've already got it staked out, but so far, he's managed to avoid us all together." He picked up his phone and spoke for a few minutes. "Okay — we're off to the toy store. You can come, but you stay back."

"Can I send Clark a text message at least? Just let him know? He's at the first half of that museum thing today — with the Orani Jewels and all that."

He hesitated then nodded. "Let me see it before you send it though."

I thought for a second while he grabbed a couple things then typed furiously with my thumbs. "Here."

"Found guy from Saturday. Meet me where you last saw me ASAP," he read. "Okay — send it."

I did and trotted after him.

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Clark

This was about the most boring thing I'd ever been a part of — and I'd taken Ethics with Dr. Johnson so that was saying something.

My phone buzzed slightly and I pulled it out of the holder, earning me a few glares from those around me.

My eyes widened.

Lois had found him? The toy store?

Was *that* why she'd been acting a bit odd? Grabbing my hand, squeezing it, making a comment about Lana. I should have known something was up but I was too busy imagining myself and Christopher — and Nate someday — playing with the train table.

As soon as possible.

I glanced at my watch. It was going to be another thirty minutes or more before I could get out of here. I tapped a message back — be careful, will be there as soon as I can.

A minute later, it buzzed again, earning me more glares. She was with Henderson. That made me feel better — she wasn't going it alone at least.

I was twitchy for the next nearly forty minutes and practically ran over a couple of others on my way out the door. It took me ten minutes to get to the toy store and I was more than frustrated that I couldn't just *fly* over.

There were police cars all over the place and yellow tape in front of the store, blocking that part of the sidewalk.

I saw Lois standing near the front door and I ducked under the tape only to be stopped by a guy named Zymak. At least that was what his name tag said.

"Sir, this is a crime scene. You can't go in there."

"That's my wife," I told him, pointing to Lois. "I'm Clark Kent, Daily Planet. She's my wife and our son was the attempted kidnapping over the weekend."

"Let him through, Zymak." Henderson waved me over.

"Are you okay?" I asked Lois as soon as I was close enough.

She nodded. "I left right after you did and went straight to the department to tell Henderson."

I breathed a sigh of relief and put an arm around her. She rested her head on my shoulder.

"All of this is completely off the record for now, Kent. We believe Lois is right and this is the guy. He was on our suspect list, but pretty far down — just because a couple of kids were taken at events he was known to have attended. Four events if I remember right. We'll have to see how the evidence matches up. *But...*" He sighed.

"There's another kid missing, Clark," Lois said, looking up at me earnestly. "He could be anywhere."

"We're looking for some sort of hidden room here or at his

house or any evidence as to where he is, but we haven't come up with anything yet."

I turned on my hearing and trained one ear towards the store. There.

I could hear it.

A child's heartbeat.

I squeezed Lois' shoulders as I spoke again. "You think he's here?"

She looked up at me, understanding on her face. "It would make sense," she said. "He could keep them happy with toys or whatever and keep an eye on them."

I lowered my glasses and quickly found a young boy sitting in some kind of basement, staring at a television with a spinning medallion or something on it. There was a blonde woman sitting near him, but facing the other way, watching a closed circuit television.

I looked carefully until I was sure I could find the trap door from above.

"I think I saw something when we were here earlier. Near the train table."

"That's right!" Lois played along; I doubted she actually saw any more than I did earlier.

"Do you mind?" I asked. "We won't touch anything without your say so."

Henderson hesitated then nodded. "Get gloves."

Zymak gave us each a pair of gloves to put on. We went inside and I surreptitiously shot lasers at the four cameras. I was able to do it quickly enough that the blonde would think it was short in the system and not individual problems.

We headed to the train table and there was something — something legitimate. The table was skewed slightly and there was a bit of a copper colored plate.

In it was a loop. If they moved the table and pulled on the loop, the trap door would come up.

I looked through the floor again and saw her staring at the ceiling. I didn't think there was another way out and I didn't see any weapons — no guns or knives or anything of that nature, though there's always something that could be used as a weapon.

"Move back," Henderson said quietly as a number of officers gathered around and carefully moved the table.

We did move back but stayed in the building, watching as they lifted the door, guns drawn. I maneuvered us so I could see — obliquely — into the room. The TV was in my line of vision and I managed to zap it, the popping sound distracting the lady long enough for the police to get in there.

I held Lois close to me and did little more than breathe in her ear. "There was a subliminal message on the TV he was watching. That's why they didn't remember anything."

She nodded. "How do we find out?"

I glanced into the purse in the room and found a business card holder. "Her name is Constance Jones and she's a hypnotist. I can play off like I recognize her. Go with it."

Just then she came out of the opening in the floor.

"Henderson," Lois said. "That's Constance Jones. She's a hypnotist that works with..." She snapped her fingers. "Oh... Where did we see her, Clark?"

"With Darren Ronick. Wasn't he murdered last year?" I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach about that.

She glared at us. "I'm better than Ronick *ever* was. Those kids didn't remember a thing after watching my DVDs."

Henderson glared at us as she was led off. "She's already been read her rights, but I thought I told you two to get out of here."

Lois shook her head. "You told us to stand back. We did."

He sighed. "Fine. Now, we're going to talk about what you can write. Got it?"

Lois glanced at her watch. "Can we hurry? We don't have

much time if we're going to make the next edition."

Ten minutes later we were on our way to the Planet. I called Jimmy and refused to hold while he connected me to Perry — telling him instead to tell Perry we had a huge story and would be there momentarily.

I was sure Perry wasn't happy that we'd been ignoring phone calls and pages and text messages for the last hour.

"Stairwell," I told her as we practically ran into the lobby. "Hold on," I said as I checked to make sure that no one else was around before zooming us up to the newsroom floor. She was right — we didn't have much time.

"Kents! My office. *Now!*" Perry hollered at us the second we walked through the stairwell door. I'd bet that he'd been waiting for us.

"Can't, Perry! Hot story!" Lois yelled back.

"I decide what's hot and what's not. Now."

"We have the exclusive on the capture of the Toyman," Lois said more calmly. "Would you mind if we wrote it up first?"

The bustle of the newsroom stilled and Perry's jaw dropped. "Would you mind repeating that?"

Part 129

Lois

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"You heard me right," I said with a grin. "Clark and I have the exclusive on the arrest of the Toyman and his accomplice, as well as the recovery of the latest missing child. He was just kidnapped this last night and his name isn't being released yet."

"You're serious."

I almost said 'as a heart attack', but that didn't seem appropriate given our family histories. "As serious as you telling an Elvis story."

"They arrested the Toyman and you two were there?"

Clark nodded. "I'm going to type up the thing on the Orani Jewels while Lois gets started on the Toyman story."

"I've even got pictures," I told him as I pulled up a blank file.

He seemed to snap out of his stupor. "Okay. Jimmy — get the pictures and get them developed or whatever it is so I can see them — and well, not on some little two inch screen. Cat, start calling the parents of the other kids and get reactions. We'll work some of that in to the main article and more into a sidebar. You got a name on this guy, kids?"

I handed my cell phone to Jimmy. "Don't delete anything," I warned him as he took off. "They're not great," I told Perry, "but they're something."

"Dr. Harold Kripsley," Clark said as I paused. "His accomplice is Constance Jones, the hypnotist who used to work with Darren Ronick before he was killed a year ago. She admitted to us as she was being led off that her DVDs were why the kids didn't remember anything."

"And we can print all of this?" He looked like a kid at Christmas.

"There's a few things we can't print," I told him. "But all of that, we can."

"How'd they find out it was him and why were you there, Lois?"

I glanced at Clark who was studiously typing up the museum story. "Um, anonymous tip and... right place at the right time." Or something like that. I lowered my voice. "I can't tell you more than that... here," I said looking around at the newsroom. "But that's enough for the story and that's more than anyone else has," I reminded him.

"Billy and Serena, start digging into Constance Jones and any connection she might have to Darren Ronick's murder. Eduardo, drop the Latislani stuff — it's all rumor and conjecture anyway — and start looking into Harold Kripsley and get these guys what you can as soon as you can."

I'd already started typing as he was talking.

"Move!" he hollered as he moved towards me and Clark.

"Clark, can you call your folks and I need to call Dad and let him and Jessica know we're running late?"

Perry squatted down next to me. "What is it you aren't telling me?"

I glanced at Clark who nodded as he pulled his cell phone off his hip. "You know the attempted abduction at graduation? There was a blurb in the Sunday paper on it."

He nodded warily.

I sighed. "That was Christopher. We stopped at Farmingdale's on our lunch break to pick something up for him. While we were there I recognized the guy who was helping us as the guy who'd been staring at us on Saturday. A... friend had seen Christopher with him and scared him off. She helped with a sketch that confirmed to me what I'd seen. I was the anonymous tip, but Christopher's name is *not* getting anywhere near this." I tried to sound threatening — as threatening as I could at a near whisper.

He looked at me for a long minute then nodded. "Okay. We'll keep him out as long as his name isn't released by the police. Get it typed up and come see me — both of you."

I nodded, reaching for my desk phone as I started typing furiously again. "Hey, Dad, it's me," I said when he picked up. "I only have a second, but Clark and I broke a huge story today — they caught the Toyman. You know, the guy who's been kidnapping kids using toys to lure them?"

"They caught him?" I could hear the relief in his voice.

"They did. But we're going to be here for a while getting it typed up and all that. Can you let Jessica know we'll be late tonight?"

"Sure. We'll get it taken care of, no problem."

"Thanks, Daddy."

~~~~~  
Clark

I worked quickly and finished the — much shorter — Orani Jewels piece.

I rolled my chair over to Lois. I'd read most of the articles in a number of local papers and on local news stations' websites and was more familiar with the background than Lois was. Billy and Serena had covered most of the stories after the first two and they gladly helped us put the background information necessary in the main story. They were also working on the background of Constance Jones, of course. Perry had someone putting together a timeline to put on an inside page.

We were in a bit over our heads — and I thought Lois would be the first to admit that.

When no one but *maybe* me would hear it.

It was nearly seven by the time we were ready to leave. Lois stretched and yawned. "We're going to miss Christopher's bedtime if we don't hurry," she reminded me.

I sighed. As glad as I was that the Toyman was off the streets, I kind of hoped this wasn't indicative of what our days would be like on a regular basis. Maybe we could come in later and spend time with the boys in the morning if we were working late often.

"Perry still wants to see us," I said, holding out a hand to her.

She grabbed it and I pulled her up before we headed towards his office.

"Perry?" I asked, knocking lightly on the open door. "You wanted to see us?"

"Have a seat, kids." He looked serious and I'd admit to being a bit nervous. "Great job today, but we do have to have a few ground rules." He sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of you — pulling in this kind of story on your first day..." He shook his head. "It's unheard of. But you need to keep me in the loop."

"Perry, Henderson told us we couldn't," Lois said. "He told me specifically that nothing got told to *anyone*, even you at that point, without his approval or we lost the exclusive. He had to

approve my two text messages to Clark and he's the father of an attempted victim," she pointed out.

He sighed again. "You *have* to keep me in the loop. I have to know what to hold space for and all kinds of other things — you've been around long enough to know that. And about Christopher being an attempted victim..."

"Our son is *not* news," I said quietly. "If his name is released by the police and there's a story to be told, we'll tell it here, but we will *not* put him front and center unnecessarily. Not now, not ever. Our family is off-limits for the sole purpose of selling papers."

"As an editor, I hate that. As a father, I couldn't agree more," he told us. "All I ask is that you don't talk to anyone else if necessary. He can remain one of the unnamed other kids. However, what I was *going* to say is that I'm very glad that he's home and safe."

"Thank you," we both said quietly.

"Now, why don't you get home and give him a big hug before he goes to bed," he said gruffly. "And don't forget — if this is what you start with... I expect something bigger tomorrow."

His grin belied his words. We said our good-byes and headed out.

"I'm proud of you," I told her as she drove us home. "You did great today. You found the pattern where no one else did. You kept your cool and did what needed doing to protect not only Christopher but other kids. Two kidnappers are behind bars tonight because of you."

"Not just me," she said after a minute. "If it wasn't for Lana, I never would have known who to look for. And Daddy would have been paying him off yesterday and we would have been praying that he was okay. And that Navance wouldn't take it as some sort of lack of caring on your part because you're not his real father or whatever."

"Did you hear what Perry said to Eduardo?"

She shook her head. "Not really. He was talking but my mind was going a mile a minute."

"There's more rumors in Latislan."

"I'll believe it when he's dead," she said, sighing.

I reached over and took her hand, letting it lie loosely in mine. "I know."

Her hand shifted and her fingers laced through mine. "Thank you," she finally said quietly.

"For what?" I hadn't really done much I could think of that would lead to her thanking me — not with the emotion I heard there.

"For marrying me. For doing what you had to in order to protect me. To protect Christopher before we had any idea he was your son."

It was a good thing that she was parking in front of the house because the tears were coming.

"I don't know when the last time I thanked you was. Your life would be so different right now — good or bad or whatever — but you gave it all up to protect us." She swiped at her cheeks.

I got out of the Jeep and walked to her side, opening the door before she could and pulling her into my arms.

I don't know why exactly — but she broke down into tears, crying into my shirt — and the tie she'd made fun of that morning. I smiled slightly at the thought of her mascara ruining it.

Wouldn't that be ironic or something?

"Hey, it's okay," I said softly, rubbing a hand up and down her back.

"Thank you," she said again. "I don't know what I would have done if it wasn't for you. Pregnant. Alone. What would I have done without you?" she said again.

"I'm glad you didn't have to find out," I told her. "I'm glad I

was there. I'm glad you weren't alone."

"Even though it ruined your plans?"

"Even though it ruined my plans," I said instantly. "The thought of you there with him makes ruined plans seem irrelevant in the extreme."

We stood there for another long minute before she moved back, wiping her eyes. "Thanks," she said, turning away from me. "I needed that. We better get moving if we're going to tuck Christopher in."

With that we headed inside.

~~~~~

Lois

I chose a gray suit for my second day of work.

"I really hope Perry wasn't serious," Clark called from where he was attempting to tie his tie again.

"About what?" I asked.

"That we have to bring in something bigger than yesterday."

I laughed. "He knows we basically lucked into that. Do you know what's on your agenda today?"

I could see him shrug. "I have the second half of the Orani jewels thing this afternoon. Just promise me you won't get the second huge story of your career while I'm stuck at a museum."

I laughed. "I'll do my best."

"Tie straight?" he asked turning to me.

"It's better than yesterday's." This tie was half black — the bottom half was black with red and blue and off-yellow diamonds on the top half. Where they met was a diagonal stripe.

"Yesterday's has mascara all over it," he told me.

"Sorry."

He shrugged. "That's what dry cleaners are for."

An hour later we were in the newsroom, watching on the televisions scattered about as the Messenger suddenly caught fire.

Perry started barking orders. "Billy, you and Serena get over the EPRAD and see what you can find out."

"She's not here today, Perry," Billy said, grabbing his suit coat.

"Then take Clark. And get a hold of that Platt guy."

He sent a number of other people off to do other stuff.

"What about me, Perry?" I asked a minute later as Clark and Billy headed into the elevator.

"Work on the follow-up on the Toyman, darlin'."

I sighed and turned back to my computer. Figured. Clark would get today's big story.

His hand rested on my shoulder. "Have you even seen today's paper yet?"

I shook my head. "No, not yet."

He tossed a copy on my desk. "Take a look."

I looked it over as he walked off. It looked about like I expected — like what Perry had set up.

"'Toyman Captured; Latest Victim Recovered Safely' by Lois Lane-Kent and Clark Kent with special contributions from Billy Judd, Serena Norcross-Judd, Eduardo Friaiz and James Olsen," I read to myself.

What?

"Lois Lane-Kent?" I looked up to see Perry watching me from his doorway. He winked at me and turned with a smile.

Where had that come from? I'd have to ask Clark later if he knew anything about it.

I reveled in my first front page story for a long moment and then turned back to the follow-up.

After all, you were only as good as your next story.

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Part 130

Clark

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I felt a bit bad for Lois. She was stuck in the bullpen working on the Toyman follow up and I was with Billy heading for

EPRAD to try to get the story on the fire.

"Who's Platt?" I asked as we worked our way towards the space facility.

"He came in last week," Billy told me. "You guys weren't here. He looks like a bum, but he's a brilliant scientist — if you can read his notes. He gave us a bunch of papers that may or may not indicate this was going to happen."

We got to the facility and were told that there were no comments for the press at that point but I saw someone I recognized walking by.

"Dr. Baines," I called. I'd seen her on TV at some point.

She stopped and looked at me. She ran her eyes up and down, making me supremely uncomfortable.

"Can I help you?" she finally said, walking towards us.

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet. I'm working on this story with my colleague, Billy Norcross." I sounded so grown up, I mentally rolled my eyes.

She shook hands with Billy before turning to me and holding out her hand, palm down. It was awkward at best, but I shook it. I thought she wanted me to kiss it and that wasn't going to happen.

"Naturally, we're all still in a state of shock," she told us as we walked... somewhere. I wasn't sure where we were headed.

"I don't suppose I have to tell you what a catastrophe the explosion was. Commander Laderman... he was one of our best. Three kids, his wife, Anna..."

"Dr. Baines, what's being done to investigate the cause of the explosion?" Billy asked.

"Well, we won't know anything until we examine the burned wreckage. We're in the process of moving it to a hangar for inspection."

"Can we take a look at it?" I didn't think Billy was holding his breath that we'd be able to, even as he asked the question.

"Sorry. No press allowed." She smiled politely at him.

"No exceptions?" I asked, smiling at her and hating myself as I did it.

She gave me another of those up and down looks.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, holding my eyes with her own.

"On the subject of Dr. Samuel Platt," Billy started.

"I have his file right here. A real waste of talent. Seems that the pressure of building the space station, along with his divorce, finally got to him. He started drinking and taking drugs. It went from bad to worse. We kept him on as long as we could. But, after he set fire to one of the laboratories, we had to let him go," she told us.

Billy looked at her thoughtfully. "Dr. Platt said he submitted a report to you... something about coolant devices installed to freeze the ion particles?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Coolants? No, I don't recall any report. I could check my records."

"Could you? And give us a call?" Billy asked with a smile of his own. He handed her a card.

"No problem at all." She paused and gave me another significant look. "Let me know if I can be of further assistance."

A few minutes later we were walking through the parking lot.

"She seemed... cooperative," I said with a smirk.

"I don't trust her," Billy said, echoing my own sentiments. "Very attractive."

"Young for a woman in her position," I added.

"We're supposed to immediately assume she's telling the truth. Still, I'm glad I wasn't you."

I winced. "I can't believe how forward she was. I wear a ring for crying out loud. And I can't believe I even *contemplated* flirting with her a bit to get some information."

He laughed. "All you had to do was smile, my friend. No actual flirting required."

"Thank goodness. Lois would *kill* me." That was the truth.

“Where’s Serena anyway?”

Billy sighed, but didn’t give another response.

“What?”

“She’d be okay with me telling you...” He sighed again. “She had a miscarriage. We’ve known it was coming for a week or so, but the physical process really started yesterday.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said quietly.

He shrugged. “They said it was just one of those things — that most likely the baby wouldn’t have been viable anyway and that’s why, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Let us know if there’s anything we can do — anything at all.”

“I don’t know what that might be, but if something comes up, we’ll let you know.”

“Hey, we’re not too far from your place. Do you want to stop in for a minute?”

His phone rang at that point. “That’s her. Hang on.” They spoke for a minute before he hung up. “She wants me to stay on the story.” He shook his head with a slight grin. “Right now, she’s jealous that you were at EPRAD with me instead of her. I think it’s partly bluster but... She still wishes she was here. She said she might go into the office.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Me either, really. Something to keep her mind off of everything.”

I nodded as we headed towards the address Platt had given Billy and Serena. It was an abandoned, run down building that looked like it could either fall over or go up in flames with only the slightest provocation. He was obviously squatting.

He was nowhere to be found and, while we found the room he’d been living in but we didn’t see anything immediately useful. At least not to us.

“Now what?” I asked. I looked at my watch. “I have about an hour before I need to leave for the museum thing.”

He grimaced. “Better you than me, man.” He stopped. “Let’s go back over to EPRAD and see if we can at least get a glimpse of it while they’re moving it.”

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

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Lois

I sighed as I finished typing up the follow-up. I’d talked to Henderson and he’d given me a little more information, but not much. The follow-up was pretty easy.

“Ms. Judd? Ms. Judd?” I looked up to see man who looked suspiciously like a bum was walking down the ramp.

“Ms. Judd’s not in today,” I told him. “I work with her pretty often. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Where’s Mr. Norcross then?”

“He’s out working on the Messenger story.”

“Who are you?”

“Lois Kent,” I told him.

“Lois Lane-Kent?” he asked suspiciously.

I nodded.

“I’ve read your columns about your little boy. I’m glad he’s doing well. And the story this morning was good work,” he said warily.

“Thank you. He’s doing very well now — we’re very fortunate.”

“And your husband? Where’s he?”

“He’s with Mr. Norcross and then going to the Orani Jewels presentation this afternoon.”

He nodded. “Okay then. I gave Mr. Norcross and Ms. Judd some information last week. This is more on that. The coolants weren’t supposed to be there. That’s why it exploded.”

He shoved his package — a full brown paper shopping bag — at me.

“It’s all in there.” He looked around nervously. “I have to

go.”

“Wait,” I said. He stopped and turned. “Who are you?”

“Dr. Samuel Platt. I talked to them last week. I said the Messenger was going to explode and it did. The transport will, too, unless someone does something.” He came back to me, putting his hands on my shoulders. “My wife and daughter are going up on the transport this week, Ms. Kent. Someone has to do something.”

“We will,” I promised him. “If there is *anything* we can do, we will.”

“Please, Ms. Kent. Make sure the story gets out.”

“We will, Dr. Platt.”

He looked around nervously. “I have to go. They’re following me.” He turned and practically scampered off.

I wasn’t sure he wasn’t crazy. Of course, it also wasn’t paranoia if someone was really following you.

I headed to Perry’s office, bag in hand. “Perry, Dr. Platt was just here. He dropped all this off.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What exactly is all that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t have any idea. Something that’s supposed to prove that the Messenger was sabotage and that the transport will have the same problem.”

He sighed. “Head into the conference room and start trying to figure it out. If it’s anything like the notes he dropped off last week, it’ll take a while to get them all in order.” He looked past me. “Serena just walked in. I’ll have her work with you.”

I turned to watch her putting her things at her desk and then she noticed Perry waving her in.

“I couldn’t stay at home with all this going on,” she told us without preamble.

“How ya feelin’?” Perry asked her quietly.

She shrugged. “I’ll be okay as long as I don’t overdo it.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked her. “Should you be up and around? You don’t look so well. And you’ve looked a bit under the weather for a week now.”

She smiled weakly. “Nothing like that.” She leaned against the wall. “Billy and I found out two weeks ago that we were having a baby.”

Something about the way she said it was off — and it wasn’t good.

“Last week, I had some cramping and we went to the ER and they told us that I was having a miscarriage — it was just a matter of time. It started last night, but I can’t miss this. I don’t want to be out on the beat, but I can work from here.”

“Go into the conference room and you two start trying to figure that mess out,” Perry told us.

We headed into the conference room and I pulled a handful of paper out. I sank into a chair and sighed. “This is going to take forever.”

“It took almost two days last week and it wasn’t this much information,” she told me, taking a seat on the other side of the table.

I wasn’t sure what to say. I was barely twenty-two and had two, mostly, healthy children. I’d never lost a baby or... I wasn’t sure what I could — or should — say to her.

“I’m sorry,” I finally blurted out. “I can’t even imagine...”

She shrugged but I could tell she was struggling with tears. “It wasn’t planned. But even in this day and age...”

“Still...”

She nodded. “I wanted this baby, once I found out about it and so did Billy. I think he’s more devastated than I am.”

“If there’s anything we can do...”

She nodded again. “I’ll let you know.”

The door between Perry’s office and the conference room opened. “Lois, there’s a warehouse fire down near the wharf. I need you to head over and cover it for me. Billy’s on his way back here and can help Serena. Clark’s on his way to the Orani

Jewels presentation.”

I nodded, squeezing Serena’s shoulder slightly as I walked by. “On it, Chief.”

I grabbed the briefcase Clark had given me for Christmas — that now also housed a digital camera so I wouldn’t need to use my phone if the need for pictures arose. They’d used stock pictures for the front page of the paper but the ones I’d taken with my phone had made it online — they just weren’t good enough quality for the front page of the paper. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

The taxi dropped me off about a block from the warehouse.

It took several minutes to work my way over. So far, the fire was contained to one area but it had been dry for several weeks and the wind was picking up again. I saw the rest of the press that was already there, but decided that wasn’t where I wanted to be.

I looked around and when I was sure no one was watching, slipped under the yellow tape.

“Ma’am!”

I sighed. So much for that plan.

I turned, a bright smile on my face. “Officer Zymak, a pleasure to see you again,” I said when I recognized him.

“Mrs. Kent, you can’t be in this area.”

“I’m so sorry. I thought I saw someone over there.” I pointed vaguely in the direction of the warehouse.

“I’ll have someone check it out, but for now you’ll have to get back behind the tape. I’m sure Henderson will give you a statement later.” His eyes softened slightly. “It was a good article this morning. Thank you for helping us catch him, but really, you need to stay behind the tape unless one of us lets you by.”

I nodded and slipped back under the yellow tape. I pulled my notepad out and started scribbling notes down. “Is there anything you can tell me, Officer Zymak?”

He hesitated. “It’ll be public information soon anyway, and it’s not like you can get to press before it will be, but you didn’t hear this from me, got it?”

I nodded. “You have my word.”

“It was arson, but that’s all we know. A couple of the bums who live on the streets nearby say that someone’s been living here. They won’t even stay here because the building’s so dilapidated. We’re not sure at this point if he was the arsonist, a target of some kind or if he’s unrelated to this at all.”

“Why would someone want to burn down a building over a squatter though?”

Zymak shrugged. “He’s some kind of scientist. Used to work for EPRAD. Maybe he knew some trade secret they didn’t want to get out. I don’t know though, that’s pure speculation on my part.”

“Got it.” He didn’t mean Platt, did he? Surely that would be *too* much of a coincidence. Right?

There was a shout from the crowd.

“What the hell is that?” one man yelled.

“Is it a bird?” another hollered.

“Too small for a plane.” Zymak said shading his eyes as he looked over my head. “Dear God, I hope it’s not a missile or we’re all dead.”

Another police officer nearby held up a pair of binoculars. “Nope. It’s a guy in a pair of tights. He’s flying.”

My head jerked up and around as the black streak came to a stop above the building just as the fire jumped from the shorter office area to the roof of the main building.

It was a man.

In black.

Black spandex.

He had dark hair but that was all I could tell from this distance, but it had to be Clark — who else could it be?

I was going to kill him.

As everyone watched he took a deep breath and blew in the

direction of the warehouse, dousing the flames.

I was going to kill him dead.

\*\*\*

Part 131

I was going to kill him dead and now that the fire was out and he was talking to the fire chief, I was going to tell him that.

“Clark Jerome Davis Kent, you get your flying Kryptonian butt over here or I *will* tear you limb from invulnerable limb and you’ll only *wish* I had Kryptonite to make you pass out.” The words were spoken quietly and no one was close enough to hear.

I saw him look directly at me about the time I hit ‘flying Kryptonian’. He finished talking to the fire chief and walked my way.

He stopped directly in front of me and my eyes narrowed as I studied his face.

“You’re not Clark.” I barely breathed the words.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

I studied him carefully for a minute longer as he shifted nervously from foot to foot. “Van-El?” I whispered.

His eyes went wide and a second later, one arm was wrapped securely around my waist as we shot into the air.

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Clark

For the second day in a row, I was in the most absolutely boring presentation in the history of presentations — and I’d had Dr. Long for Philosophy.

How someone managed to make topics that *should* have been interesting so incredibly dull was completely beyond me.

This guy was droning on and on and on and...

My phone vibrated on my hip, but this time no one noticed. Everyone was too busy pulling out their own Blackberries or iPhones or whatever.

It was from Perry. Well, it was probably from Jimmy, but on behalf of Perry.

<To all reporters. Flying man on ANC a hoax? Fire at warehouse on Bessolo near wharf. Lois already there — anyone with more information contact immediately.>

I froze as I read it.

Flying man?

What the heck?

Everyone else was wiggling in their seats. I glanced at my watch. Ten minutes to go. I lowered my glasses slightly and zoomed in on a couple of the other devices. The messages were all similar.

There was a flying man on ANC and everyone wanted to know if he was real or a hoax and — either way — how.

And Lois was there.

It obviously wasn’t me. Who could it be? Someone from some other planet? A Kryptonian?

My phone buzzed again and I glanced down.

There was only one word on the screen.

Van.

Van?

If I’d been standing, I was sure my legs would have given way beneath me.

I double checked. It was from Lois and it just said Van.

Could it possibly be?

Could it really be Van-El?

My brother?

Would Lois have sent me a cryptic text if it wasn’t?

“Are there any further questions?”

No one said a word. In fact, I was fairly certain that none of us had heard anything from the last ten minutes of the presentation.

I was glad I was close to the door and I was easily the first one out. I took off at a sprint, glad the museum wasn’t too far

from the wharf.

I was there in just a few minutes — faster than anyone else. Officer Zymak was standing guard near the police tape.

“Have you seen Lois Kent?” I asked him.

He nodded. “She was here earlier, but the flying guy in black talked to her for just a second and then grabbed her around the waist and flew off with her. I hope she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” I said distracted. “Which way did they go?”

“Um, up,” he told me. “You know up, up and away or something super-ish like that.”

“Did anyone talk to him besides Lois?”

“The fire chief did for a minute, but that’s it.”

“I know probably every member of the press wants to talk to him, but this guy *flew* off with my *wife*. Is there any chance the fire chief would talk to me — off the record if necessary?”

Zymak hesitated then pulled out his walkie. A couple minutes later, we were walking towards the fire chief who was talking with Henderson.

“Kent, where’s your wife?” Henderson asked without preamble.

I shrugged. “I was hoping you could tell me.”

What I really wanted was to fly off and search for them.

The fire chief shook his head. “I was talking to him. He suddenly looked over at her, excused himself and left. And by left, I mean talked to her for a minute, grabbed her around the waist and flew off.”

“Hey!” came a voice from the crowd of reporters. “How come you’re talking the Planet’s newbie?”

We all ignored them.

“What did he say to you?” I asked.

“That he was a friend and here to help. That there was a man in one of the rooms. He was passed out but okay. The building was stable and then he was distracted by Mrs. Kent. We were able to get the man out and to the hospital.”

My phone had been vibrating nonstop. I finally pulled it out of the holder on my waist, hoping it was Lois.

“They’re all from Perry,” I told them before they asked.

“Where are you? Where is Lois? Where are you and Lois? And so on.”

It buzzed again in my hand.

This one was from Lois. Planet. Fifteen minutes.

I sighed but didn’t tell them it was from her. “I’ve got to get back the Planet. That’s where she’ll probably go anyway — once she’s done interviewing him or whatever.”

They nodded. “Have her call us if he threatens her or whatever and she needs help.”

“I will.” I couldn’t tell them that if she needed help or he threatened her, he’d have me to deal with.

After all, what could country boy Clark Kent do against a flying man?

I trotted back to the tape line and was immediately inundated with questions by the other members of the media. I ignored them and jogged another couple blocks until I found a taxi.

It took less than ten minutes to get there.

I zipped up the stairs and into the bullpen just in time to see the glass doors above the newsroom open.

Gasps went up throughout the entire newsroom as a man wearing a black Spandex shirt of some kind and pants that reminded me of the ones that male figure skaters wore flew in through the window.

Lois was in his arms.

He was cradling her against his chest.

I didn’t know who he thought he was but I was the only one who was supposed to fly with her — and a feeling of... jealousy swept over me.

Jealousy?

He set her carefully on the floor next to her desk and I noted the bright blue shield on his chest.

The crest of the House of El.

“Van-El,” I breathed.

He looked up sharply, right at me.

I was rooted to the spot.

“You owe me a full interview,” Lois told him. She glanced at me. “How will I find you?”

He floated into the air. “I’ll be around.”

There was a black streak even I couldn’t follow as he flew out the window.

“Did you find out what the ‘S’ stands for?” Cat asked.

“No,” Lois said turning back to her desk. “But I do have a story to write up.”

Perry leaned on her desk. “Lois, darlin’, before you do that...”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and innocent. “Yes?”

“Would you mind to tell us what he said?”

“Not much, really,” she said looking at me. “He’s from a defunct planet called Krypton. He’s here to help. He can fly and put out fires.”

“Did you get any pictures?”

She pulled a digital camera out of her purse and handed it to Jimmy. “Don’t delete anything.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You should trust me.”

Lois typed furiously though I was dying to drag her off to the conference room and demand that she tell me everything.

I couldn’t take it any longer and wheeled my chair towards her. “Are you okay?” I asked quietly as I sat near her.

She stopped typing and turned towards me. “Are you?” she asked back, reaching out and covering the hand that was resting on her desk.

“In shock, I think. He’s really Van-El?”

She nodded. “He is.”

“My brother?”

She reached out and cradled my face in her hand. “Your brother. Give me two minutes and I’ll go tell you everything I know.”

I nodded, trying to keep the tears at bay.

She turned back to her computer and typed for another minute before hitting send. She grabbed my hand as she stood up, leading me to the conference room.

She shut the door behind her and moved to where I was standing near the windows. She wrapped her arms around me and my forehead dropped to her shoulder.

I couldn’t stop the tears at that point. I didn’t even try.

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Lois

I held Clark for long minutes.

It reminded me of when Pop Pop died.

“Tell me everything,” he finally whispered. He straightened and just held me close as I spoke.

“I thought he was you at first and I was going to have to rip you limb from invulnerable limb. I know we’d talked about how you want to do this someday but that you’d do it without at *least telling* me about it... That made me mad. I said something about getting your Kryptonian butt over here and he heard me. When he got close enough, I knew he wasn’t you. The resemblance is uncanny though. You wear your hair different and he’s obviously older, but very similar. He could pass for you if it was someone who didn’t know you well.”

I sighed. “He didn’t tell me the whole story, but he did tell me that he looked for you when he got here. I’ll let him tell you the rest of it. Mostly he took me to a nearby rooftop and grilled me for information about you. What did I know, how did I know it, did anyone else know anything — that kind of stuff. Did I know how to get in touch with you?” I rubbed a hand over his back.

“He wants to see you, to talk to you, but he said he needs some time. He’s spent ten years thinking you were dead. Between that and his debut, he’s overwhelmed. He knows where to find you. I gave him all kinds of phone numbers and instant message IDs and emails and all that.”

“Ten years?” he said suddenly. “I’ve been here a lot longer than that.”

“He said something about it taking him longer to get here. Honestly, I didn’t really absorb a whole lot of it. I was in a state of shock, too.”

“Kents!”

We heard Perry bellowing in the newsroom.

“You were making sure I was okay after Van-El flew off with me,” I told him. “Nothing more than that.”

He nodded.

There were huge blow ups of the pictures I’d taken of Van-El. Clark stood behind me as we looked at them. He leaned close to my ear. “Did he tell you if he has another name?”

I nodded.

“Did he tell you what it is?”

I shook my head.

The entire newsroom was gathered around Perry and the pictures. “Okay — I already got a call from Stern. I guaranteed him that each and every one of my staff would chip in. Would not rest until Van-El?”

He looked at me and I nodded in confirmation.

“...was ours.” He paused and looked at everyone. “Are we clear on this?”

I *had* to put up a fight. Not only was it my second big story, but if I could keep *anyone* from finding out too much... I crossed my arms in front of me. “No. Perry, you can’t be serious. *I* was the one Van-El flew with. *I* wrote the original piece. *I* found him!”

“Actually, *he* found *you*, didn’t he?” Jimmy asked.

“Put a sock in it, Jim.” I used my best pleading voice. I might be the new kid on the block but I knew how it worked. “Chief, this isn’t fair. I should have the exclusive on the follow-up. Those are the rules.”

“The rules are off,” he told me. “This is too big.”

I felt like Christopher when he threw a fit. “But he’s *mine*; he’s *my* story.”

“Forget it, Lois. Van-El’s fair game. Every reporter for him or herself.”

The buzz around the newsroom increased.

“Settle down. Think. What could draw him out? Use your instincts. Beat the bushes. Turn the stones. *Get. Me. Van-El.*”

“I bet I know what could draw him out,” Cat purred.

“But if he *is* an alien, like he told Lois, maybe he doesn’t get the old ... you know, itch.” That came from Jimmy and caused both me and Clark to shift uncomfortably.

“One way to find out.” Cat wagged her eyebrows.

“A possible visitor from another planet arrives on Earth and all you can think of is hauling him off to your lair and trying him out?” Serena asked her, her own eyebrow raised.

Cat shrugged. “Test drive, Ms. Judd-Norcross. A couple hours behind the wheel, I’d know for sure if we’re talking import or domestic.” She sauntered off.

I could practically feel Clark cringing.

I was cringing.

Granted, I had no other experience, but he’d still seemed... domestic to me. Until we were on the ceiling, of course.

“What the hell is this? The Betty Crocker Bake-Off? Get back to work! We’ve got a newspaper to run!”

At Perry’s bellow we all scattered.

Well, Clark and I didn’t scatter too far.

“I want to go look for him,” he told me quietly, his chair pulled up near my desk. It was turned so he was straddling it, his

arms folded over the back and his chin resting on them.

“I know.” I couldn’t really get to one of his hands to hold it so I put my hand on the back of his neck, rubbing his hairline gently.

What I really wanted to do was go somewhere, take him in my arms and kiss him senseless.

Instead of that, I pulled up the Planet’s internal WIP file. Before I could get too far, it hit me.

“Platt was at that warehouse,” I said suddenly.

“What?”

I nodded. “Zymak told me there was someone in there — an out of work, slightly crazy scientist.”

He moved back and then smacked his head. “Of course. Billy and I went by there earlier looking for him, but I was so preoccupied with the ‘flying man flew off with my wife’ thing that it didn’t register. Henderson said they took someone to the hospital but not who and that he was going to be okay.”

I pushed back from my desk. “Let’s tell Perry we’re headed to the hospital and that we might have a lead on Van-El and we’ll check it out, too.”

He nodded and moved his chair back over to his desk. “Let’s go.”

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Part 132

Clark

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What I really wanted to do was go find my brother.

I didn’t care about Platt or anything else.

Okay — that wasn’t strictly true, but the fact that my brother was alive trumped everything.

“You need to go see your folks,” Lois said as we walked out of the Daily Planet building. “They’re going to be wondering what’s going on.”

“I know.” I sighed. I did need to go see them.

“Go on. I can handle this and I told Perry we were heading home once we were done. Give me a call before you head back and I’ll let you know what I’m up to.”

“Okay.” I gave her a quick kiss — the kind I barely thought about anymore — and headed for a nearby alley.

Faster than the eye could see, I headed for the sky. When I was far enough up, I stopped and searched, but there was no sign of my brother.

I headed towards Kansas as quickly as I could, finding the explanation for why my parents hadn’t called. It was Tuesday which meant Granny was at the Senior Center in Parsons. Mom and Dad were both out in the south field working.

They looked up, surprised, when I landed in front of them.

“Clark!” Mom said with a grin. “What are you doing here?”

“Have you guys seen the news at all this afternoon?”

They shook their heads. “We’ve been out here most of the day. Why? Is everything okay?” Dad asked.

“Um...” I sighed. “Can we go inside?”

They exchanged a glance. “Sure,” Mom said.

Ten minutes later, we were sitting watching the repeated ANC coverage. They were rerunning the footage of Van-El over and over. His name hadn’t made it public yet; I guessed Perry was holding on to that tidbit for the morning paper.

I hadn’t spoken since I turned it on. Dad’s jaw was twitching and Mom’s mouth was open.

“Clark, is there something you need to tell us?” he finally asked quietly.

“Where’d you get the costume?” That came from Mom.

I sighed. “It’s not me.”

“Then who is it?”

“Van-El,” I said. “My brother.”

They exchanged another glance — this one puzzled. “Who?” Mom finally said.

“My brother.” My brow furrowed as I thought. “Did I really never tell you about him?”

“Uh, no,” Dad said. “We would have remembered that.”

“When my parents — Jor-El and Lara — were working on a ship for me to escape in, there was someone else there, too. They said he was my brother, Van-El. He was about fifteen or sixteen or so and they said it was too hard to make a ship large enough for him or for both of us so they made one for me and sent me here.” We watched as he put his arm around Lois’ waist and took off.

“Lois talked to him?”

I nodded. “She thought it was me. She was ready to read me the riot act for doing something like that without talking to her about it first. I mean, we’ve talked about it in general a few times, but nothing like ‘oh, by the way, I’m becoming a super today’. She said we could almost pass for each other, especially if it was someone who didn’t know us well or from a distance. I guess they were able to build him a ship but it took longer to get here. He tried to find me when he arrived, but he’s thought I was dead for over a decade.”

“When are you going to meet him?” Dad asked.

I shrugged. “Lois said he needed some time to adjust to the idea of me being alive or something, but that she gave him every possible way to contact either one of us, so hopefully it won’t be too long. I’m thinking about going for a ‘run’ or something tonight and going to look for him. Maybe try to catch him at a rescue or something and follow him until he talks to me.”

Mom sighed. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t try to find him, but if he said he needs some time, he probably needs some time.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I mean, look for him, but don’t push — not yet. Give him time to come to you.”

I thought for a minute. She was probably right. She was Mom, of course she was right. “How long do I give him?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. See what happens.”

“I did see him,” I said quietly. “He flew Lois back into the newsroom.” My face wrinkled in disgust. “You should have heard some of the things people were saying. I mean, nothing horrible in the xenophobic sense, but wondering about his sex life and stuff like that.”

Dad raised a brow at me and I knew that was the wrong thing to say. We hadn’t had that discussion since I told them Lois was pregnant but I knew it had crossed Dad’s mind at the very least. Probably Mom’s too.

“Cat actually said to give her an hour ‘under the hood’ and she could tell if he was an ‘import or domestic.’”

Dad grimaced and Mom winced at that.

“So you’ve thought about doing something similar?” Dad asked.

I nodded. “I’ve helped out when I can but I’d like to do more. The first time I saw the Incredibles, I saw the potential there. So did Lois. I think maybe that’s why Christopher likes it so much — on some subconscious level, he knows he might be able to be one someday.”

“Might?”

I shrugged. “Obviously, neither of them are invulnerable at the moment. Who knows if they inherited my powers?”

They nodded.

“Anyway, we’ve talked about it in passing, but I’d told her a long time ago it would be at *least* after college and probably after the whole thing with Christopher is resolved before I’d seriously consider it.”

“I guess we’ll see how it plays out then.”

The sound was turned all the way down but the banner on the bottom asked if he had a secret identity — like the supers or Batman and so on.

My phone buzzed. “That’s Lois,” I said, reading the screen.

“She’s on her way home. I better go.”

“Tell her congratulations on the front page story on her first day at work. I noticed the byline,” Mom said standing up to give me a hug.

“She told me once a long time ago and again recently that she’d always planned on using Lane or Lane hyphenated for her professional name and was kind of disappointed that she wasn’t going to be able to.”

“Well, why ever not?” Mom asked. “It’s not like you’d refuse to let her hyphenate her last name or some nonsense like that.”

“No. Daniel had mentioned it after we got married — that anything like that might give Navance something further he could use to claim that Christopher wasn’t my son or something. It’s part of the reason why we chose to name him after both my dads — it’s something I would have wanted to do at some point anyway, but with everything else, it was safer for him than naming him Christopher Samuel or Christopher David or something.”

Mom rested her head on my shoulder. “You know, we knew what you guys live with, but I don’t think I understood until I stayed there last summer. The security, the lockdowns, all that...” She shuddered. “I don’t know how you live with it.”

“Sadly, it’s become normal. Christopher doesn’t know any different. Neither does Nate, but he’s too young to understand. Christopher is, too, really. He just knows he’s not supposed to ever go outside without a grown-up and Scott or Steve or both go with him everywhere he goes.”

I gave her a squeeze. “I gotta go. I love you both and unless something truly desperate happened — like saving Christopher or something — I wouldn’t do the super thing without talking to you guys first anyway.”

“That’s good to know. And you’re right,” Dad said.

“Christopher or Lois would take preference over talking to us.”

We said our good-byes and I flew back to Metropolis.

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Lois

I went to the hospital but couldn’t get any information on Platt’s condition. I did manage to confirm that he was there but that was about it.

I called Serena and told her what I’d found.

Then I headed home.

I wasn’t sure Perry would like it, but I also knew that I’d brought in two huge stories on my first two days and I also knew — better than anyone except maybe Clark — that if Van-El didn’t want to be found, he wouldn’t be.

Clark met me at the Jeep in the hospital parking garage.

“What’d they say?” I asked.

“They congratulated you on two front page stories in two days.”

“And your brother?”

He sighed and leaned his head against the head rest. “I guess I’d never told them about him. Dad said I’d never told them much about the personal stuff the globe told me, but it didn’t really tell me much either so...”

“Globe?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest. Was he actually going to tell me something?

“It was the navigation system in my ship — I think, anyway. Kind of like a universal GPS or something. Some things I just knew when I picked it up the first time when I was... oh, I guess ten or so. It changed from a picture of Earth to another planet that I just knew was Krypton. It showed a few holograms over the years that told me a little bit about why I was sent here — that the planet was going to explode or something. Most of the time it just sits there — kind of an opaque white marble or something.”

It wasn’t much but I would take what I could get.

“Anyway, we watched the coverage on ANC, didn’t really listen but they replayed the whole thing over and over —

including his... conversation with you and taking off with you.”

I cringed. “They got that on tape?”

“Yeah, they got that on tape.”

“I’d bet Dad hasn’t seen or heard about it or...” As though on cue, my phone rang. “Can you grab that?”

He pulled the phone out of my purse. “Yep. I’d bet he’s seen it,” he said handing it over.

“Hello?”

“Are you okay, Princess?”

I laughed. “I’m *fine*, Daddy.”

“They’re saying he’s an alien and he *flew* with you.”

I couldn’t tell him it wasn’t the first time an alien had flown with me. “He’s just a guy, Dad. Honest. I’ll tell you all about it when we get home. But really — I mean the flying was cool, but I was never in any danger or anything like that.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m *sure*.” I winced. “Did Christopher see it?”

“Yep. He wants to know how you got to fly with Mr. Incredible.”

I laughed again. “Just lucky, I guess. We’ll be home in about fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Okay. See you in a few. Bye.”

“Bye, Daddy.” I hung up the phone and tucked it under my leg.

“Christopher saw it?”

I nodded. “I bet I’m going to be in for a tougher grilling from him than I was from Perry.”

He chuckled. “Probably. The kid is obsessed with supers.”

“I wonder why.”

I didn’t let myself think about it, but reached over and rested my hand on his arm. “How are you doing?”

He shrugged. “I’m antsy. I want to go fly around until I find him — and I may do a little bit of that later. But Mom pointed out that he probably really does need some time and not to push him or it could backfire.”

“True.”

“It’s been a big week already. I mean, the almost kidnapping. Starting work. Our first big story on our first day. Working on the Messenger thing. The two most boring presentations ever...”

“You didn’t have Jensen for World Religions; he made Charlie Brown’s teacher look exciting.”

He laughed. “True. I had my share of boring profs though.”

“True.”

“Anyway, if all that wasn’t enough, now my brother I thought died when the planet exploded isn’t really dead and is out there flying around putting out fires and stuff. It’s just a lot to take in.”

“Did you see Eduardo’s article today?” I asked quietly.

“Rebels in Latislan?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

“Me either, but a girl can dream right?”

He nodded.

That reminded me. “Hey, do you know anything about my byline?”

He smiled. “I wondered how long it would take you to notice and mention that.”

“Well, I noticed and I’m mentioning.”

“I talked to Daniel after our conversation the other day and he said he thought it would be okay. I thought about mentioning it to you, but then everything got crazy and I talked to Perry about it — I know it wasn’t *on* your birthday, but pretty close, right?”

“Well, thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“I didn’t get to give you your real birthday present yet. I forgot all about it in the excitement. Remind me later.”

“Another autographed script?” That I hadn’t gotten a present from Clark had slipped my mind. And Daddy had told me a couple weeks ago that his went with Clark’s.

“Nope.”

“Any chance I could guess?”

“Probably not.”

“Then I give up, I guess.” I rolled my window down and punched my code in to open the gate. “But as soon as the boys are down... I want it.”

He laughed. “Okay.”

I pulled in front of the house and Christopher darted out the front door with Daddy close behind him.

“Mommy! Mommy! You f’y wi’ Mi’ter ‘c’edib’e?”

I laughed as he launched himself at me. “His name isn’t Mr. Incredible. It’s Van-El and yes, I did get to fly with him.”

“Ca’ I f’y wi’ him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know him very well. Maybe if I get to know him I could ask him, but that’ll be a long time.”

He gave a big sigh. “‘Kay. Ca’ I ge’ a... W’a’s ‘is na’?”

“Van-El.”

“A Va’-E’ doll?”

“Well, I don’t think there’s any Van-El dolls yet, bud. But if I find one, then maybe for your birthday, okay?”

He nodded. “Okay.”

I glanced at Clark. I couldn’t quite read his expression. Jealousy? Was that it? Not much, just a touch?

Because there was a hero and it wasn’t him and Christopher was excited about it?

Didn’t he know that, powers or no powers, he would always be Christopher’s hero?

And mine?

Somehow, I wasn’t sure he did.

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Part 133

Clark

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“Any luck?”

I shook my head as I pulled my shirt off. Lois was already in bed. “No. No luck.” I tossed the black turtleneck into the laundry. “I flew around, stopped at a fire, but he wasn’t there.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

I shrugged. “He knows where to find us. If he’s out and about tomorrow, maybe I can catch up with him. Perry’s going to want us hitting the streets looking for him anyway.”

She yawned and stretched. “Probably, but we also have another Toyman follow-up — his arraignment is tomorrow — and the Platt research. Was that fire arson? Van-El said he thought he smelled an accelerant of some kind but he wasn’t sure what it was — for all we know, it could have been paint thinner left behind by the last company to work out of there — but we should check it out. The transport is going up Sunday and we need to make sure there’s nothing wrong with it. Even without searching for Van-El we’ll be pretty busy.”

I headed into the closet and brought a small box out. “Here.” I tossed it to her. “Happy late birthday. You won’t be able to use it right away but...”

She gave me a puzzled look, but ripped at the paper. She opened the box as I settled in my side of the bed before reading the note inside. “Are you serious?”

“As serious as Perry telling an Elvis story.”

She squealed and launched herself at me. I laughed until I realized she’d managed to knock me over.

She was lying directly on top of me.

On our bed.

Where we’d made love.

She pushed back slightly as I reached up to brush a wayward strand of hair back.

I wanted to kiss her.

Really kiss her.

Like I had on her birthday the first year we were married.

Like I had in the cafeteria.
Like I had the night we'd made love.
Like she'd kissed me the night before Nate's surgery.
But I couldn't.
She'd kill me if I ever did that again without making a full commitment to this.
To us.
And with the emotions of the last few days still running high, I didn't think it was a good idea.
She scrambled off me. "Sorry. I didn't mean to knock you over, but this is amazing."
"I'm not sure when we'll be able to go, but Mark is going to get me some dates of episodes he thinks would be good. He said they're talking about a really cool Christmas episode this year."
"Mark? As in Mark Harmon?"
I nodded.
"We get to be extras on an episode of NCIS? And spend a whole week on the set?"
I grinned. "Yep. He'd told me last year that if we ever wanted to get on the set to let him know and he'd get us passes or something. I sent him an email a few weeks ago and asked if this might be a possibility."
"You have Gibbs' email?"
"No. I have Mark Harmon's email."
"Same thing," she muttered.
I shook my head slightly. "Now," I warned, "the part will probably be something like random person sitting at a table in the background or something like that, but I still thought you'd like it. And I already talked to your dad and he said his gift is the plane tickets and hotel room when we go."
"This is incredible. Thank you. Are the boys going with us?"
I shook my head. "Probably not. I can't imagine trying to keep track of them on a set."
"You're probably right." She slid back down under the covers and rolled to look at me. "Thank you. It's a great gift."
I reached out and moved that strand of hair again. "That doesn't like to stay put does it?"
She shook her head. "Jenn cut it too short. Once it grows out a little bit it'll be okay." She settled back onto her pillow. "Good night."
"Good night."
I knew sleep wouldn't come easy to me and it didn't.
After lying there for what seemed like hours, I headed out to the veranda and sat in one of the chairs, staring at the night sky. I knew I could do the same through the ceiling but it wasn't the same.
"Want to talk about it?"
I hadn't even heard Lois come out behind me.
"Not much to talk about. Not yet anyway. Not until I can talk to him and get some answers."
She sat in the chair next to me. "I didn't think you'd be able to sleep tonight."
"You thought right. Don't know what to do about it though."
"I don't either. I just thought you might not want to be alone."
"Thanks."
We sat in silence for a long time before we spoke at the same time.
"You should go to bed."
"What about the globe thing?"
"What?" I asked.
"Could it tell you anything? I mean, I don't know much about it, but maybe it knows something."
"I don't know how it works. I kept it in my room for a while and every once in a while it would glow and the hologram would appear. I moved it to another hiding spot with the ship when I got a bit older and would go down there once a week or so.

Sometimes it would say something and others it wouldn't. Believe me, I've tried everything to get more information out of it and I can't figure out how it works. Maybe Van knows."
"Maybe."
"But you really should go get some sleep. I don't need as much sleep as you anyway and you've had a busy few days and you need to get some rest."
She yawned and nodded. "I probably should but I don't want to leave you alone."
I smiled at her. "I'm fine, really."
"Okay then." She stood up and yawned again. Her hand rested on my shoulder for a brief moment. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."
"I will."
She went inside and I could hear the sheets rustling as she settled into bed. I didn't know how much longer I stayed out there but it was the wee hours of the morning before I finally felt I could sleep.
~~~~~  
Lois  
As expected, I was covering the Toyman's arraignment. Clark was working with Serena — who was still only feeling okay at best but who wasn't missing out on all this if at possible — on the Platt stuff that he'd dropped off.  
Billy was out chasing down any possible lead on Van-El. Mid-morning there were reports of jumpers — one right after the other. Van-El, by zipping quickly from one to the other, caught the second one. It seemed a bit odd to me, but Billy was covering it — trying to get interviews with the jumpers.  
There was a large crowd gathering near a building at Third and Ordway when I left the arraignment. "What's going on?" I asked someone walking by.  
"Bomb threat at the Carlin Building," the lady told me as she hurried past. "I'd get out of here."  
Right. I headed towards the area.  
I heard one of the officers say that the building had been evacuated. That was good.  
Van-El landed in the middle of the cleared area. He glanced at me and something I couldn't quite place crossed his face. He spoke briefly with the head of the bomb squad before walking up the stairs towards the building.  
I could hear local reporter Linda Montoya jabbering away live on whichever local network she worked for — or maybe she'd been picked up by one of the news networks by this point — with the possibility of Van-El showing up.  
Perry said he'd been fielding calls all day wanting more information and even interviews with me.  
He told all of them they could read about it in the Daily Planet.  
The explosion nearly knocked me off my feet and stopped my heart in my chest.  
He had to be okay.  
I knew Clark said he was invulnerable but he'd never walked into an explosion.  
And if something happened to Van-El now, before Clark had a chance to get to know him...  
I breathed a sigh of relief and my heart started beating again when Van-El walked out of the building. He didn't have so much as a scratch.  
"Lois!"  
I turned when I heard Clark's voice. I heard a telltale whoosh and turned back to see that Van-El was gone.  
"Lois, you're hurt." He reached for my forehead.  
"I'm fine, Clark. Just a scratch."  
"Let me see."  
"I'm *fine*," I reiterated, submitting to the gentle ministrations as he brushed my hair back.

“I think you need a stitch or two.”

“Can’t you just...” I looked around. “...zap it or something? Cauterize it?” I whispered.

“No! It would *hurt* for one thing — badly — and your dad will want to check it out later anyway so it’s not a good idea.”

I sighed. “Fine. Where’s a paramedic?”

A few minutes later, I was all stitched up and we headed towards Henderson.

“...somewhere within a two mile radius,” he was saying.

“What?” Clark asked suddenly. “It was deliberate?”

Henderson turned to see us. “Kents. You’ve been on the job three days now. I think you need to get new careers — it’s gotten way too exciting.” He sounded almost like Charlie Brown’s teacher — there was that little inflection in his voice.

“Come on, Henderson. Lois got hurt. Van-El could have been hurt. Anyone in the building before it was evacuated could have been hurt.” Clark could be persuasive.

Henderson sighed. “The explosion was radio-controlled, activated from an unknown point of origin within a two-mile radius of this site. Also, there were video cameras installed in the lobby that were *not* part of the building’s security system, or any other system that the management company knew about. We think the two are connected.”

I gasped. “You’re saying someone waited for Van-El to appear, watched him enter the building, and *then* detonated the explosives?”

Henderson nodded. “That’s our theory.”

“That’s horrible!” I exclaimed, sharing a stricken look with Clark.

“Who would want to do something like that? Kill Van-El?”

I reached out and grasped Clark’s hand lightly. I could only imagine the thoughts going through his head.

“Probably some criminal element wanting to know if they can eliminate him,” Henderson said. “If he’s ‘a friend’ who is a good guy, they’ll likely want to get rid of him as soon as possible.” Someone else hollered at him. “Talk to you Kents later. Seriously. New line of work.” He walked off.

“Someone’s trying to hurt him.”

“He can’t *be* hurt,” I said quietly. “Not without Kryptonite and no one knows about that except us and your folks. *He* might not know about that. Did the globe ever say anything?”

He shook his head. “No. Nothing.”

I sighed. “Well, let’s get back to the Planet and get this written up.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

~~~~~

Clark

Someone was trying to kill my brother — who I still hadn’t met but who had taken off as soon as I got there — and had hurt Lois in the process. She was going to be fine, but she could easily have been hurt much worse. At least two other people were in the hospital.

We made our way back to the Planet and wrote up the bomb story. Lois wrote up the Toyman story. When we finished those, we headed to the conference room to see if we could help Serena.

“I think it’s time to call in the big guns,” she said with a sigh.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Bernie Klein from STAR Labs.” She picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory. “Bernie Klein,” she said when someone answered. She was apparently on hold for a moment while the call was transferred. “Bernie?” Pause. “Yes, it’s Serena. Do you know Dr. Samuel Platt?” Pause. “Good. We have a bunch of his notes here. Can we teleconference and see if you can help us with all this?” Pause. “Great. See you in a minute.”

A minute later, a lab appeared on the Plasma screen at one end of the room. “Just a minute, Serena,” came a disembodied

voice.

“No problem, Bernie,” she called back.

I glanced at Lois. I expected this to be some bowtie wearing, gray haired, lives in a lab kind of guy — like a stereotypical lab rat but that voice didn’t sound like it belonged to that kind of guy.

Lois was frowning, but I couldn’t figure out why.

A minute after that, a full head of dark hair appeared along with a forehead. We could hear some muttering.

“There,” he finally said. “All done. I think.” His face came into full view and my jaw dropped.

Lois gasped.

He was frozen in place. “Um, you know what, Serena? I have, um, something, um, in a beaker in the next lab and it smells funny. The fumes will kill my lab rat if I don’t go get it. Have Billy bring everything over later tonight or in the morning.”

The screen went black.

“That was odd,” Serena said, a frown creasing her face. “He’s usually very personable, besides being the hottest scientist in town.” She turned and looked right at me. “Oh, my. *That’s* why you’ve always looked so familiar. I could never place it. I thought you didn’t have any family.”

“I don’t,” I whispered. “Not that I ever knew of.”

I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath, running my hands through my hair. This was a lot to absorb.

But now I knew who he was.

Van-El was Bernie Klein.

Part 134

Lois

~~~~~

I couldn’t place the disembodied voice of Dr. Bernie Klein. I frowned and thought as hard as I could but I couldn’t figure it out.

“There,” the voice said. “All done. I think.”

I gasped as I saw him for the first time. I wanted to look at Clark to see what he was thinking, but I couldn’t take my eyes from the screen.

“Um, you know what, Serena?” Dr. Klein said. “I have, um, something, um, in a beaker in the next lab and it smells funny. The fumes will kill my lab rat if I don’t go get it. Have Billy bring everything over later tonight or in the morning.”

The screen went black.

“That was odd. He’s usually very personable, besides being the hottest scientist in town.” She looked at Clark. “Oh, my. *That’s* why you’ve always looked so familiar. I could never place it. I thought you didn’t have any family.”

Clark’s voice was quiet as he shook his head. “I don’t. Not that I ever knew of.”

But he did and now we knew who Van-El was in the rest of his life.

Serena sighed. “I guess I’ll have Billy run all this over. He works pretty quickly most of the time — maybe he can get this back to us soon.”

I’d just bet he worked quickly.

“I’ll take it over,” Clark said suddenly.

Serena shook her head. “If he said Billy, he meant Billy. He can be a bit of an odd duck at times and that’s one of those things. He’ll only authorize access to STAR Labs for him today.”

As though on cue, Billy walked in. “What did Dr. Klein say?” he asked.

Serena filled him in, though not on the obvious resemblance between Clark and the scientist. She’d mention it later, I was sure.

Billy sighed. “Okay. Get all this back into the bag or something and I’ll run it over.”

“How’s the Van-El stuff coming?” Clark asked. I was sure only I could hear the apprehension in his voice.

Billy shrugged. “There’s some interesting stuff about those two jumpers. They don’t think the first guy ever intended to jump and the lady is under sedation at the hospital because...” He stopped what he was doing and looked at all of us. “Get this. She’s afraid of heights.”

“That’s odd,” Clark said.

“She’s afraid of heights, but she jumps off a thirty-story building?” I raised an eyebrow. “That’s way past odd.”

“Well, I’m still working on it, but I’m wondering if instead of trying to kill him, like Henderson told you guys, someone’s testing him — finding out how fast he is, what his weaknesses are, those kinds of things.”

I nodded slowly. “That makes sense. Scary, but makes sense.”

“Scary how?” Serena asks. “It doesn’t seem anything can hurt this guy.”

“No, but other innocent people were hurt.” I fingered the bandage on my forehead. “Some of them a lot worse than me. And what if he wasn’t fast enough to get from the first jumper to the second in time? She would have died — and so would anyone who happened to be walking on the street below.”

Billy put the last of the papers into the bag. “Definitely things to keep in mind.” He gave Serena a kiss. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

An hour later, we were on our way back to the house.

“What’re you thinking?” I asked Clark quietly.

He shrugged. “He’s obviously still not ready to meet me.”

It had to be hurting him, to know that his brother was out there but that he wasn’t ready to meet him.

“Are you going to go look for him again tonight?”

“Probably.”

The radio was on, but quietly, when Clark suddenly reached for it.

It was the bottom of the hour news. “The rebels in Latislan have gained strength. The capitol city of Skopje is not a safe place these days as rebels and protesters take to the streets in their attempts to oust General Navance from office. Sources say he may be persuaded to step down in the next few days if the violence doesn’t end. Jenny Dorsom, ANC.”

I sighed. “Violence doesn’t bother him. He’ll try to squelch the rebellion or protest or whatever it is with more violence and things will go back to the way they were.”

“Maybe. Or maybe this is the time that his luck runs out.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I told him. “And I know how long you can hold your breath, but I still wouldn’t recommend it. I’ll believe it when he’s dead.”

He reached over and squeezed my hand lightly, for just a second before releasing it, but not saying anything else.

We made it home without incident. As he had the night before, Christopher jabbered non-stop about Van-El, wanting to know if I’d seen him again.

I didn’t think Clark noticed how it was affecting him. I thought he thought he was just brooding over the fact that he hadn’t talked to Van-El yet, but I could see more in it.

“You’re his hero, you know,” I said suddenly as we got ready for bed.

“What?” Clark looked up from where he was getting his clothes ready for the next day. He’d searched for Van-El for a while, with no success.

“Christopher. You’re his hero, you always will be.”

He shrugged. “If you say so.”

I moved to stand in front of him. “Look at me. He loves you more than anything. Sure, right now, he’s fascinated by a real life super, but you’re his hero. You’re the one who tucks him in and reads him stories and takes him ‘flying’ around the house.” I rested a hand on his chest. “*You’re* the one who put his life on hold for years to protect him. He may not understand that yet, but that makes you a hero. Not the special stuff, but the regular stuff. Taking care of him. Taking care of me. You don’t need a special

suit and international news attention to be a hero. And if you do the super thing someday, he’ll be just as fascinated. I promise.”

“Maybe. But I won’t be the first super by then and so the novelty will have worn off. He’s already talking about wanting to trade his Incredibles bed in for a Van-El one.” He sighed. “I just wish he would talk to me. Answer my questions.”

I hesitated slightly before wrapping my arms around him and pulling him to me. He rested his forehead on my shoulder and I could feel his feelings of rejection wash over me. If Van-El would just talk to him, I didn’t think the Christopher thing would affect him as much.

I wasn’t sure how long we stood there, but he finally pulled back. “I’m going to go to bed.”

I nodded and followed him, wishing for once, he’d let me hold him.

~~~~~  
Clark

“Clark Kent for Dr. Bernie Klein,” I told the receptionist. I didn’t care what Lois and my mom said; I had to try to talk to him.

“I’m sorry, sir...”

“I’m with the Daily Planet. One of my colleagues dropped some information off with him last night and we were hoping for an update on it.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Dr. Klein has taken an unexpected leave of absence. If he said how long he was going to be gone, I haven’t heard yet. However...” She reached for a slip of paper. “...he did leave this for anyone from the Daily Planet who might come by. He took the information with him and will get back to you if he figures something out.”

I sighed. “Thank you.”

I headed out of the building and wound up back at the Daily Planet.

“There hasn’t been any Van-El sightings all day,” Perry was saying as I walked into the conference room. “Why is that? Did yesterday’s events scare him off?”

“Who knows, Perry,” Billy said. “It’s not like we’ve got a phone number for the guy.”

Well, they did, but they didn’t know that and he wasn’t there anyway.

Perry turned to Lois. “What about you? Did he give you any contact information?”

Lois shook her head. “Nope. Sorry, Chief. I’ve got a couple of thoughts, but...” She shrugged. “If he doesn’t want to be found, I don’t think he will be.”

Perry turned back to Billy. “Any word from Klein yet?”

Billy shook his head. “He’s left the lab. He told me he was taking it all with him and would get in touch if he had anything.”

I decided not to mention that I’d been at STAR Labs a few minutes earlier.

Perry looked at Eduardo. “Anything on Latislan?”

Eduardo shrugged. “Violence in the streets of Skopje. That’s about it at the moment. There’s rumors that Navance may step down, but I wouldn’t believe that. I’ve followed him for too long. The only way he’s going to leave office is in a body bag.”

I looked at Lois who was studiously ignoring everyone and everything except the pencil in her hand.

“Kent, since you covered the Orani Jewels, I’d like you to do a follow-up on the attempted assassination of Secretary Wallace. That was the last place Van-El was seen.”

“On it, Chief,” I said, with less enthusiasm than either of us would have liked, I was sure.

A few minutes later, the meeting broke up and I headed for my desk, making phone calls and gathering the information I needed. It wasn’t hard and before long, the story was sent to Perry.

I poked my head into his office. “In your inbox, Chief.”

"Thanks, Kent. Now what're you working on?"

"Do you have anything specific for me?"

"Not at the moment."

"I'll go look for Van-El then."

"How's the Platt stuff coming?"

"Waiting to hear back from Dr. Klein."

"Okay then. Let me know if you come up with anything."

"Will do."

I headed out and decided that I was going to go towards the building where Platt was squatting. I stopped at a diner near there and asked around for information but no one was talking.

I stood on the sidewalk, hands shoved in the pockets of my pants as I pondered my next move.

"You want information?" a dark-haired skinny guy asked me.

"Do you have any?"

"Maybe."

He wanted payment. I pulled out my wallet and started to pull forty dollars out. I put twenty back in. "You have information that pans out, I'll get you some more."

He snorted. "I don't want money."

"You don't?" I asked skeptically.

"I work for food."

Of course.

He glanced around. "Come on."

There was an explosion in the distance.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Explosion. The helicopter with Dr. Baines and Dr. Platt in it," he told me.

I stopped and looked at him. "How do you know?"

"That one's a freebie. How I get my information is of no import to you. It's nothing illegal and that's all you need to know."

"Okay." I followed him into a hole in the side of Platt's building. "Platt!" I turned an accusing look towards the other man. "You said he was in the helicopter that just exploded."

"I was," Dr. Platt told me. "I got off, but no one can know I'm alive — not yet. What did you do with all the information I gave to Mrs. Kent?"

I sighed. "Bernie Klein has it."

He nodded. "He's a good man." He shoved something else into a tattered brown suitcase. "I'm leaving. When this is all over, maybe I can see my family again." He picked up a picture of a woman and a redheaded little girl in a wheelchair. "Maybe she'll walk someday," he said quietly before putting the picture into the bag, too. "They say love isn't who you can live with but who you can't live without. I never thought I could leave them, could live without them, but the only other option was to stay and it was too dangerous. At least this way I know they're okay. If they were killed, I couldn't live with that." He buckled the suitcase.

He looked at me. "Please don't follow me."

I nodded. He left.

"Who are you?" I asked the skinny man leaning against a wall.

"They call me Bobby Bigmouth and you owe me dinner. Four courses, with drinks and desserts."

I stared at him. "Do you have an ethnic preference?"

He thought for a minute. "Chinese. This time."

"Where can I find you tonight? If you want the good stuff, it'll have to wait until then." It was almost a challenge. After dark, I could fly to China and get him real Chinese. I had a feeling this was one relationship I wanted to cultivate.

We made arrangements to meet about eight — I'd have to get Lois to cover for me at home. And maybe I'd run into Van-El.

I went back to the newsroom and filled Perry, Lois, and Serena in on what had happened. Billy was off covering the explosion. We all agreed that for the moment, we needed to keep Platt's survival quiet.

Perry headed back to his office and Serena turned to me.

"How on Earth did you get Bobby Bigmouth to help you?"

I shrugged. "He offered."

"He's the *best* snitch in town, but he's very selective. Billy and I have only gotten a handful of tips from him. Mostly he works for the cops and a couple of television reporters with a reputation for honesty."

"Maybe I have an honest face? I do owe him a big Chinese dinner later tonight."

"Make sure you take it to him and give him more than he asked for," Serena advised. "If you ever slight him, he'll know it and you'll never get anything else from him. If he asked for four courses, bring him five. And don't skimp and go some place cheap. Go to one of the best places you can find, even if it's a bit more expensive. You can usually get the Planet to reimburse you after the tip pans out."

I nodded. "I know just the place."

About seven-thirty, I ducked out for a 'run'. Promptly at eight, I met Bobby where we'd arranged. My arms were full of bamboo containers.

He took one from me and dipped his fingers in the container, pulling an egg roll out. If I didn't know better, I'd think his eyes rolled back in his head.

"This is great, Kent. Where'd you get it?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't need me," I pointed out.

He stared at me then nodded reluctantly. "Okay." He pulled a fortune cookie out and glared at me. "It's in Chinese."

I didn't know much, but I knew enough. I hoped anyway as I took the slip of paper from him. "A good horse is like a member of the family."

"That is *not* a fortune."

I shrugged. "Can you overlook the lack of a real fortune with food that good?"

He contemplated for a moment as he pulled something out of one of the other containers. He tried it then nodded. "Fine."

He turned and walked away.

I watched him for a long minute until he disappeared before heading for home.

Part 135

Lois

~~~~~

I told Perry I was chasing down a Van-El lead.

That was sort of true. I'd managed to get a home address for Dr. Bernard Klein. I wasn't about to tell anyone how I'd done it.

I climbed the steps to the apartment on Clinton Avenue, my heart pounding in my chest. I knocked on the door. There was a sound inside, but no one came to the door no matter how hard I pounded.

"I know you're in there, Dr. Klein. Please answer. And I know you can hear me," I said.

After ten minutes of pleading, there was still no answer.

I sighed and rested my head against the door. "I understand that you're overwhelmed, not only by all the attention, by the tests, and by the discovery that your brother is still alive. He needs you. He needs to talk to you to find out more about himself. And I think you need to talk to him, too. To talk to someone who understands." I hesitated. "My sons need you, too. They deserve the chance to get to know their uncle. You deserve the chance to get to know all of them." I sighed. "I know someone's trying to run you out of town, but whatever you can do — it's enough. Without you — already — Platt would be dead. And Secretary Wallace would be dead, too. You can't be everywhere and do everything, but whatever you can do... it's enough."

He wasn't going to answer, that much was clear. "Please," I said again. "At least think about it."

I turned and headed back down the stairs. I smiled at a blonde woman who was headed the opposite direction. She smiled back and I thought about asking her if she knew Dr. Klein, but something held me back.

I headed back to the Daily Planet to find Billy and Serena pouring over a much cleaned up version of Platt's report.

"What's it say?" I asked as I took a seat near Jimmy.

"The same thing Platt did. We have enough that we can write it up and hope we can convince EPRAD to take a closer look at the same thing on the transport that's going up Sunday. According to Klein, it's easily fixed."

"Well, that's good news. I wonder if they're letting any reporters on," I commented idly. "wouldn't that be something? To be on the colonists' transport. That would be a coup of a lifetime."

"Nope. No media," Billy said with a sigh. "Believe me, we tried."

All four of us sighed together.

"Where's Clark?" Serena asked.

I shrugged. "Not sure, probably trying to chase down Van-El. Or off on some other big story, I'd guess."

~~~~~  
Clark

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked my dad as we sat on the front porch. "I can't find him. I know who he is — his other identity, I mean — but he's purposefully avoiding me. I can't find where he lives. He's unlisted, unpublished. He's on leave from STAR Labs." I ran my hands through my hair. "You should see Christopher," I said quietly. "He's enthralled."

That hurt. More than I could explain, more than I could understand.

Dad chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about it. You'll always be his hero."

"My son is captivated by his uncle but that uncle — my brother — won't even talk to me."

"All the kids — all the *grown-ups* — are enthralled by Van-El right now. It'll die down. I promise."

I sighed. He didn't understand. I'd never be his *first* real hero. I couldn't explain why that was important to me, but it was.

We sat there for a long time, just staring out at the crops swaying in the fields.

"How are you? Really?" Dad finally asked.

I sighed. "It's been a big week at work. Two major stories dropped into Lois' lap and I was able to work with her on them. We've had two front page stories in our first few days. This whole Platt/Messenger/transport thing could turn into another one, though we're mainly working with Billy and Serena on it — it's not *our* story. Lois got hurt when someone exploded a bomb in the Carlin Building as soon as Van walked inside. Others could have been. What if he'd gotten there and went in before the building was evacuated? How many people could have been hurt then?"

"Are you thinking about putting on a suit?" Mom asked coming out onto the porch and sitting by Dad on the swing.

I shrugged. "The thought's crossed my mind many times, but I don't think I can right now. Not with trying to establish our careers and protecting Christopher and all of that. Maybe someday but not now."

"What if Christopher wasn't in danger anymore?" That was Dad.

"Are you planning on joining the insurgent protestors in Skopje and assassinating him?"

Dad snorted. "Can you see me doing that?"

"No, but unless you have some other way to get him out from under Navance's thumb, that's the only way it's ending any time soon."

"The news today said that his government might be overthrown soon," Mom pointed out, trying to be helpful, I was

sure.

"It's not the first time they've said that," I reminded her. "One of the reporters at work said that the only way Navance is leaving office is in a body bag and I tend to agree with him. And none of that helps with getting my brother to talk to me."

"It's only been a couple of days," Dad said.

"No, it's been twenty-two years. The globe never told me much — not enough anyway."

"Maybe it's time to ask again?" Mom's voice was quiet.

I nodded. "I'll be back."

I headed to the barn, to the storage area Dad had built behind the storm shelter. The steel door wasn't heavy, not for me. In the middle of the small room, sat my ship, still in the crate Wayne had built around it over twenty years earlier. There was a small shelf on one side. On it was a small treasure box.

I opened it carefully and pulled out the globe.

I floated in mid-air, crossing my legs, bobbing slightly up and down. I held it in both hands, in front of me, just staring at it.

"Give me something," I finally said, a pleading note in my voice.

But there was nothing.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been down there when there was a vibrating sound.

I sighed. It wasn't the globe. It was my cell phone. I pulled it out of the holder and read the text message from Lois on it. Perry was looking for me.

I carefully put the globe back in the box and locked it all back up, hiding the door behind the shelving.

I told my parents I was leaving and took off for Metropolis.

I went back into the newsroom to find Perry bellowing for me.

"Any luck on Van-El?"

I shook my head. "No. Didn't pan out."

"Okay then. Police academy graduation this afternoon and I want you on it."

"You got it." Not exactly front page, exciting fare, but maybe it would take my mind off Van.

It wasn't exciting, but it was more interesting than the Orani Jewels thing had been — at least until the assassination attempt on Secretary Wallace, but I hadn't been there for that part of it.

I spent my afternoon there then headed back to the Planet to write it up. Billy and Serena were putting the finishing touches on their article based on Platt's information. They'd called EPRAD looking for comments and telling them what the article was going to say, but as usual they had no comment except to say that they were looking into it and, if applicable, would have a statement for the press at the appropriate time.

We all sat around the conference room and brainstormed more ways to find out what happened to Van-El. Lois and I studiously ignored each other, afraid we'd give something away.

We wrapped up the day, no closer to an answer than we had been before.

The ride home was quiet.

When we got home, Christopher was still jabbering on and on about Van-El. We finally got him to bed about half an hour after his usual bedtime.

"So do you have big plans for tomorrow?" I asked Lois. It was Friday night and, for now at least, we were each working part of the weekends. Tomorrow was my day and Sunday was hers. Perry said he'd try to get us on the same day at least starting in the next few weeks.

She shrugged. "Hang out with the boys, I think. No plans to go anywhere or anything like that."

"No plans to try to ferret out Bernie Klein's home address?"

She hesitated before shaking her head. "No."

"You've already got it, don't you?" I asked, crossing my arms in front of me.

She sighed. “He was home, I know he was, but he wouldn’t talk to me either. I thought about picking the lock but decided that might not be the best plan.”

“Probably not.” I sighed. “Are you going to give it to me?”

She shook her head. “No. He’ll come see you when he’s ready. And I don’t think it’ll be long. I think he’s probably just overwhelmed by everything.”

I nodded. “I still think I’m going to go try to find him.”

“Okay.”

I changed into dark clothes and flew over the city of Metropolis in a search pattern of sorts.

“Can’t you just give me a couple of days?”

The voice came from behind me.

I turned to see my brother floating there in his black outfit with the blue shield.

“I understand why you want some time, but can’t you see where I’m coming from?” I asked him. “I *just* found out my *brother* is alive. The one I thought died with the rest of my family and everyone else when the planet exploded. I’ve always thought I was alone — until my sons were born — and I want to talk to you, to get to know you, to get to know our family and our planet and why *me*? Out of all the people on Krypton, why was *I* the one who was saved? And now you? Why did you think I was dead? Why wasn’t I told that you were coming too so I could have been looking for you?”

He sighed. “You weren’t told because we weren’t sure that we were going to get my ship ready in time. The smaller one, for you, was easier to build, in secret. We were working on one for me as well, but it was harder. We sent your ship off thinking we had hours left, tops. We ended up with days, almost two weeks, Earth time and we were able to finish my ship. I felt the explosion of the planet as my ship headed away from Krypton just before the suspended animation set in. Your ship was smaller, easier to propel faster with the new hyperlight drive our father had developed. My ship was bigger and had an older drive installed. It took me longer to get here than it did you — about ten years longer, something like that anyway. I’ll tell you more about it some other time, but when I got here, I did look for you but my homing device that would show me where your ship was malfunctioned and I couldn’t fix it. I trekked across the country, stopping in nearly every small town in Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri — where they all meet — because that was where your ship was supposed to have landed — but I couldn’t find you.”

He sighed. “Eventually, I ended up in Metropolis and met a guy named Louie. He got me papers and helped me get a GED. I went on to college and now I’m Dr. Bernard Klein. It wasn’t my choice of name, by the way. I wanted to go with Vance Ellis, but he convinced me otherwise.”

“Does he know?” I asked quietly, trying to absorb it all.

He shook his head. “Only my girlfriend, his daughter, Ashley.”

~~~~~  
Lois

I wasn’t asleep when Clark finally landed on the veranda.

“Any luck?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah. I found him. And I got a few answers, but mostly he just asked for a little more time.”

I pushed myself into a sitting position against the headboard. “What’d he say?”

He told me how he’d been sent off, but that Van-El hadn’t really told him why him except to say that the smaller ship was easier to make. He hadn’t told Clark why *him* out of all the babies on Krypton, he was the one put in the ship.

He climbed into bed next to me and just sat there staring in the general direction of one of the windows.

“What now?” I asked him quietly.

“Wait, I guess.” He sighed. “I think I’m beat. It’s been a long

few days and I have to work in the morning.” He sighed again and slid under the covers, rolling to face away from me.

I took a deep breath before sliding in behind him, wrapping one arm around him and pulling myself close to his back. “You’re my hero, Clark. You have been for a long time and it doesn’t take a fancy suit and powers to change the world. You changed mine and you’re changing the world through your words, through your stories that you’re writing, through raising your sons to be good men. You’re my hero and you’re Christopher’s hero and Nate’s hero — and probably your mom’s too. I don’t know how she got through the death of Chris, except by having you to focus on.” I pressed my lips firmly against his back. “Please remember that.”

There was no response except a deep sigh and a tightening of his arm against mine. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

Something told me the next few days were going to be busy ones.

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Part 136

Clark

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I’d fallen asleep with Lois’ arm around me, her body against mine. I knew she meant what she said — that I was her hero and the boys’ hero — but I still had a hard time actually *believing* it.

I *did* manage to get the best night’s sleep I’d gotten in a long time.

I wondered briefly why that was — because Lois had been that close to me or sheer exhaustion? Some combination of the two?

I sighed and turned my attention back to work. It was a Saturday and — hopefully — a pretty slow one. Wouldn’t that be nice?

Part of my job for the day was to check the reports that came in over the wire services and distribute them to whoever was most appropriate or to Perry if it was something he’d need to assign.

I sighed as another report came in. I was sure this would be as exciting as the last three had been. I printed it off without looking at it. I pulled it off the printer and finally glanced over it as I stood — I had to know where to take it after all.

Instead I read the whole thing.

Twice.

And then a third time.

“Kent!” Perry bellowed.

I was too busy reading it again to notice.

“Excuse me, Kent, but I’m running a newsroom here, not a mannequin service.” He held a hand between my eyes and the page. “You think I could get that so I can assign it to someone?”

“Oh, sorry.” I shook myself out of my stupor. “Here.” I handed it to him.

“Care to tell me what it’s about?”

“The overthrow of the Latislani government.”

“I thought it was just a few insurgents or protesters or whatever they were calling themselves.”

I shook my head. “Not anymore apparently. The resistance movement has taken over their capitol building.”

“You two have been there, haven’t you?”

I wasn’t sure when we might have mentioned it, but we must have, in passing at some point.

I sighed. “Yeah. That’s actually where we got married.”

“You got married in Latislan?” Perry’s surprise was evident. He didn’t know the whole story about how we got married. He didn’t even know half the story. Just that Lois was pregnant when we got married. Most people knew that. And those who didn’t could do math.

“Yeah. It’s a long story that I don’t really want to get into.”

“Well, I didn’t think it was one of those destination weddings.”

I shook my head. “Not even close.”

“Well, do you two want to work on this with Eduardo? He’s been working on the insurgents, so he’ll be following up on it.”

“Um...”

“General Navance is probably going to be overthrown soon, if he hasn’t been already. It’s a big story.”

“I don’t know, Perry. Normally, I’d say yes. We’d both jump on it, but I think we’re too close to this one.”

I could see the realization hit him. “My office. Now.”

I nodded and followed him to his office, shutting the door behind me.

“The American baby Navance tried to claim a few years ago...”

I sighed. He didn’t become editor of a major metropolitan newspaper because he could yodel, after all. “That was Christopher. He sends threatening letters every few months, reminding us that he’s keeping an eye on us and Christopher.”

“There’s going to be news crews outside your house before long.”

“Maybe. Our names were never officially released...” I blew a deep breath out slowly. “I mean, they came out about eighteen months ago, but it was right before the election, the same weekend as the Joe the Janitor thing and when it wasn’t officially confirmed, it blew over pretty quickly. Billy and Serena knew about it but also knew that we wanted to keep it quiet. They said if you’d made a big deal out of it, they would have offered to write it but you gave it to Ralph instead so they kept their mouths shut.”

He snapped his fingers. “*That’s* why I recognized your names when I interviewed Lois for her internship. I knew the two put together sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. She distracted me with a story about her dad or something.”

“That sounds about right. We wanted the spotlight off Christopher as much as possible — we still do. The Planet will get the exclusive, if and when there’s an exclusive to be had. But until then... We don’t want him in the limelight any more than necessary. Billy and Serena wanted to respect that — please don’t be mad at them; they knew we wouldn’t cooperate at that point.”

“That’s perfectly understandable.”

“And Sam’s got security all around Christopher and Lois so...”

“Why Lois? Why’d he pick her?”

“There was contraband on the plane we flew in on and we think it was at least partly a distraction from that but, Navance also hated her. She refused him and kneed him where it hurts. He might have killed her, I think, if someone from the State Department hadn’t shown up when they did. He certainly would have kept her as a... mistress, to be polite about it, or worse. Trying to take him out took her last ounce of energy and she collapsed. They took her to the hospital and that’s when she found out she was pregnant. There was no record of our entry into the country. He had the tests doctored to say that she was only a couple weeks along and that she’d been in country long enough for the baby to be his. Under Latislani law, that’s all he needed to do. He really didn’t even need to do that — all he had to do was claim paternity.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“The only way around it was if she was married. Then the husband was legally the biological father no matter what a DNA test would say. We snuck into the embassy and got married. We made it out of the country, but he still tried to claim Christopher. No court would send him to Latislan, but we didn’t want any kind of media furor like we’re probably going to see for the next few days and all of that, so we’ve tried to keep it as quiet as we can. After five years, the husband is the legal biological father period.”

“The five year period isn’t up yet, is it?”

I shook my head. “No, he’ll only be three next month.”

I could see the wheels turning. “Is he your biological son?” he asked quietly.

“It’s a long story, but we’re pretty sure he is,” I sighed. “But in the end, it didn’t really matter. I had to protect both of them, no matter what.”

He looked at me for a long minute then went on. “Well, hopefully, you won’t have to worry about him soon.”

I nodded. “That would be nice.”

“Listen, I’ll get this to Eduardo and make sure that any mention of you guys is out unless someone else is reporting on you. Then we’ll keep it as unsensational as possible unless and until you guys are ready for an exclusive.”

“Thanks, Perry.”

“Now, why don’t you get home and celebrate the overthrow of this weasel with your wife.”

“Sounds like a plan. Thanks.”

“Give Lois my love and hug Christopher extra tight.”

“Don’t worry, I plan on it.”

“Wait.” I could see the wheels spinning. “Contraband? What kind of contraband?”

“Guns,” I said grimly. “Lots and lots of guns. Lois’...” I hesitated, not willing to bring Sam into it. “Lois saw someone she knew in Paris — someone who wasn’t supposed to be there and who had acted suspiciously in the past. We followed her to the airport and snuck on the plane. We got stuck and flew to Latislan.”

He started to respond, but the door opened and Eduardo poked his head in. “Chief, word’s coming over the wire that Navance is dead.”

My eyes opened wide. Overthrown was one thing. Dead was another.

Perry smiled at me. “Go. Make sure Lois knows.”

I took off out of the newsroom as fast as I could without anyone getting suspicious, heading home to tell my wife the nightmare was over.

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Lois

“Christopher Jonathan Kent, get down from there.” I gave an exasperated sigh as I stared at him until he finally moved.

“So’y, Mommy,” he said when he made it down off the entertainment center. “Ca’ I wa’ Back’a’digans?”

“Can you behave?”

He nodded. “I be goo’ boy.”

I sighed. “Okay — which one do you want?”

We ran through the eighteen Backyardigans episodes we had saved on the TIVO and he finally settled on ‘Mission to Mars’ where three of the characters went on a trip to Mars and the other two acted as ground control. It was his favorite, which didn’t surprise me given the whole space travel thing.

When it was over for the third time, I put my foot down on another round. “Not now, bud. Maybe later you can watch another one.”

He gave a big sigh. “Ca’ we go ou’si’e?”

“Maybe later. Mom’s too tired to go outside right now. After naptime.” I hadn’t slept well — dreams of being chased through the streets of Skopje haunting me — and I hoped I could get a nap in while the boys did.

He sighed again. “Kay.” He pulled out his cars and started lining them up — big ones in one line, little ones in another. When they were lined neatly up, he drove them around — one by one — in a big circle around the coffee table and to the back of the line.

I turned on ANC for a few minutes to see if I was missing anything big in the world while not at work.

I didn’t pay much attention to the baseball story that they were talking about but something on the scroll caught my

attention.

‘AP Report: Latislani dictator General Navance overthrown by rebels. *ANC* Hundreds dead in two days of intense fighting. *ANC* American embassy in lock down as counter insurgents try to get in. *ANC* All American personnel believed safe.’

That was cause for relief. I knew a number of the people we’d met were still there. But overthrown? I didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t look confirmed; just that the Associated Press was reporting that he’d been overthrown. Until he was in that body bag Eduardo had mentioned, I wouldn’t feel safe.

But then the picture on the screen changed.

“And now breaking news from Annie Bartlett in Skopje, the capital of Latislan,” the male anchor said as the ‘breaking news’ logo filled the screen. “Annie?”

I stood rooted to the spot and couldn’t take my eyes off the TV. There stood Annie Bartlett in the middle of Latislan. Well, standing might be a bit of a stretch. She was huddled behind a short wall that I recognized as part of the American Embassy.

“The worst fighting yet has been going on for two days, but word has just reached the streets — and is being confirmed by our sources in the Latislani government as well as the resistance movement — that General Navance is dead. We’re getting different stories on how he died. One source said heart problems. Another said a brain bleed while a third said the brain bleed was the result of a 9mm hole in his head but wasn’t sure if the wound was self-inflicted or not.”

Someone back at the studio cut in. “But he *is* dead, Annie?”

“Yes, Todd. That has been confirmed by a number of different sources.”

I didn’t hear anymore, but sunk to the couch, oblivious to the little boy trying to get my attention.

The door to our living area banged open. “Lois!”

Clark was home. I turned to him, tears running down my face.

“You heard?” he asked.

I nodded as I stood and he walked towards me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my head in his shoulder. “It’s over,” I whispered. I felt his arms wrap around my waist as he lifted me off the ground, holding me tight to his chest.

My tears continued to fall, soaking his suit jacket, but he didn’t seem to care. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was shedding a tear or two himself. Clark never cried.

Well, not never, but not very often.

How long we stood there, I didn’t know, but it seemed like forever. The last time he’d held me for this long was when we found out Nate needed surgery.

Nate.

He was Clark’s son.

Christopher could be — probably was — but we just didn’t know for sure.

Suddenly, I pushed against him. Navance was dead. There was no reason for Clark to stick around anymore. He didn’t seem to be getting the hint. I pushed harder and hissed at him, “Let me go.”

Finally realizing what I wanted, he set me down, but kept his arms loosely around me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I told him brusquely and moved away from him. I put the toys I’d been holding in my hands in one of the toy buckets before calling out. “Jess, can you keep an eye on the boys? I need to make some phone calls.”

Jessica poked her head around the corner. “Sure, Mrs. Kent. Not a problem.” She glanced at the clock. “I’ll go ahead and get them some lunch and put them down for naps.”

“Thanks,” I said to her as I left the room. Part of me wanted to pull Christopher in my arms and never let go, but I couldn’t.

I heard Clark following me. He caught up and put a hand on my arm. “Lois, what’s wrong? This is good news.”

“Yes, it is.” I moved into the room we called our office. It was such a fancy term for a couple of desks and textbooks strewn all over the place. I needed to call Jill at the State Department. We’d been working with her since the whole thing started. Surely she could tell me if Christopher was safe now. I picked my address book and looked through it. I hadn’t called her in a while and no longer remembered the number.

“Who are you calling?”

Couldn’t he leave me alone? I wanted to get this call over with and grieve my marriage in peace. “Jill,” I finally told him. “I have to know for sure.”

Ten minutes later, she reassured me that not only was he dead, but the Latislani law — along with a number of others — had already been declared invalid by the new government. It seemed I wasn’t the only one he’d done this to and a number of leaders of the opposition had found themselves in similar situations without American citizenship to help them escape.

My voice was wooden as I told Clark what she’d told me.

Tears continued to flow as he asked again. “What’s wrong? And don’t tell me nothing because it’s something.”

I shrugged. “I hope you and Lana will be able to salvage your relationship,” I finally said.

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Part 137

Clark

~~~~~

Salvage my relationship with Lana? Lana was the absolute last person on my mind.

I moved closer to her and knelt down on the floor by the chair she was sitting in. “I wish it had happened sooner, too,” I finally said. “And Lana has nothing to do with why. I’m glad it’s over for you and for Christopher.”

She stood abruptly. “Me, too. I’m going to go find Daddy and let him know. Do you want to call your parents or should I?”

I thought for a second about calling her on all of this. Did she really still think I thought things were going to work out with Lana? But first I needed to go see my parents. “I think I’ll go see them if that’s okay with you. I’d like to tell them in person.”

She shrugged. “Fine by me.”

“Do you want to come?”

She shook her head. “No, you go.” And she turned and walked out of the room to find Sam, I thought. I watched her leave wondering what it meant for us — how exactly were we going to handle this very unexpected, very sudden change in plans?

I jogged to the wooded area not far from the barn and, once in the trees, took off as fast as I could and streaked towards Kansas, landing just as fast behind the barn. I knocked on the door as I opened it. “Mom? Dad?” I called.

“Up here, Clark,” Mom called back and I heard her footsteps heading towards the stairs. “What are you doing here?”

“Where’s Dad?”

“He had to run to town a little while ago, but should be home in a few minutes. Why? What’s up? Is Lois okay? The boys?”

“Yeah, everyone’s fine.” I turned my eyes towards the road and, looking through the wall and zooming in, I saw Dad on his way home. “He’ll be here in a minute,” I told her.

“Well, do you want to tell me now?”

Even though I knew Dad would be here shortly, I couldn’t keep it in any longer. “General Navance is dead!” I exclaimed, picking her up and swinging her around.

“What?”

“They just announced it on the AP and on ANC. He was killed by the rebels.”

“And this is good right?” I could tell she didn’t want to get her hopes up either.

“That’s great!” I exclaimed. “He’s the reason that Christopher

has always been with security, why our part of the house has always been locked down. If he's dead, he has no claim on Christopher. They announced he was overthrown earlier today but dead is better for us."

"So what does Lois think?"

"She's relieved. He can't come after her son anymore."

"Her son?"

I winced and hoped Mom didn't notice. Trust Mom to catch the slip. "Yeah. Christopher."

"Clark Jerome Davis Kent, what aren't you telling us?"

I never got away with anything — even now, married with kids of my own and I didn't get away with anything. I heard the tires of the truck crunching in the gravel. "Dad's here."

"You're not getting out of it that easy."

We went to the kitchen and I sat at the table staring at the wood grain. Mom was going to ferret the truth out. To be honest, I was surprised she hadn't caught on before this.

She set a glass of buttermilk in front of me and we waited for Dad to come in.

"Clark! What are you doing here?" He smacked me on the back.

I explained about the uprising in Latislan and he said he'd heard about the general on the top of the hour report on the radio on the way to town but the significance of the event hadn't registered.

"And now Clark's going to explain to us why he referred to Christopher as Lois' son."

"He is Lois' son," I pointed out defensively.

"And your son?" Mom asked with a raised eyebrow.

"And my son," I said, less convincingly than I would have hoped.

"Clark..." Mom's voice held the warning tone I'd known not to mess with since I was three.

I sighed and leaned back in the chair, running my hands through my hair. "We're not sure if he's my son or not," I finally said.

They were silent for a moment before Dad finally said something. "Lois never struck me as the type to sleep around." I was sure there was more he wanted to say.

"She's not. She was drugged at a Halloween party and I found her with some guy who got away before I could catch him because I was more concerned about her. We're not sure how far he got before I got there. And if he did..." I couldn't say it. "We have no idea if he used protection or not."

"But it's possible that he is your son?" Mom asked.

I nodded. "We didn't realize it until the night she got pregnant with Nate. We had no idea that we'd actually been together that night at the cabin. Neither one of us remembered it — the whole hypothermic thing — even though that's what we told everybody, we didn't know it was the truth. I thought I'd dreamed of being with Lana — she only remembered dreaming of being with me. Their faces kept getting confused in my mind when I tried to remember the dream, but... After Sam had his heart attack, Lois was in a really bad place. I mean, really bad and she'd been in some bad places before." I fingered the placemat Mom kept on the table. "We came home and she was absolutely falling apart and she kissed me and asked me to help her forget for a little while."

I couldn't look either one of them in the face. "Lois was my wife, and had been for almost two years so it wasn't like I was cheating on someone. But at the same time, afterwards, it felt like I was cheating on Lana though, even though I was married to Lois," I conceded. "I'd promised Lana that it was in name only even though we had to make it look good so that he wouldn't suspect we were only staying married to keep him away from Lois and Christopher because that if anyone realized that's what it was, he could claim Christopher under Latislani law."

I took a deep breath. "Anyway, I helped her forget about her dad for awhile and afterwards we both remembered what happened at the cabin. Before long she realized she was pregnant again. The pregnancy was similar to Christopher's. She didn't get morning sickness until about ten weeks again and it lasted until about twenty weeks, just like with Christopher. We don't *know* what that guy did to her and Christopher looks so much like me so that seems to indicate that he's my son, but..." I shrugged. "... we just don't know. We're almost positive he is, but without a DNA test..."

I had no idea how long it was before Dad finally spoke. They were holding hands — they always did when trying to come to grips with new information. "Let me get this straight. When you told them in Latislan that Christopher was your baby, you didn't think he was?"

"Right."

"So why did you say he was?"

"I just sort of blurted it out hoping that if I claimed him, they'd let her go. It didn't work that way and we had to get married for me to claim him under Latislani law since Navance claimed him too. We were going to get divorced or annulled or something as soon as we got back, but when we were at the airport in Metropolis, Jill told us that he'd changed the law so that the marriage had to last five years after the baby was born and if he suspected that the marriage was just to keep his hands off the baby, he could come after the baby anyway."

"So you stayed married," Mom said slowly.

I nodded. "Sam had already asked me to consider it. Lois had been through so much already in her life and for her to end up alone and pregnant was more than he could stand. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that it wasn't going to happen and once Jill told us he'd change the law, we didn't have a choice. Or didn't feel we did anyway."

"You've always told us that no court would send him back to Latislan," Dad pointed out.

"And I don't think they would, but the international relations and PR nightmare that would go along with it wasn't worth the risk. If he ever got his hands on Christopher and got him out of the country, we'd never see him again. As long as we stayed married, his legal claim — even under Latislani law — was invalid. And if there was a court battle, Christopher would always be branded as the kid who had no dad whose mom married some guy who left them when a foreign dictator tried to take him away. And I'd be the guy who let him try. I couldn't let him do that. You and Chris wouldn't let that happen to me, Mom, and neither did you, Dad. How could I let that happen to Christopher?"

"And what was going to happen when five years was up?" Dad asked.

"I didn't think that far ahead. Lois read me the riot act over that one after I gave her that story to read about how we became a family. If I wanted to be the kind of dad you've been to me, how could I think about leaving after five years?"

"What was your answer to that?"

I couldn't look at him. "I didn't have one and eventually she just dropped it."

"And now?" Mom asked quietly. "The threat is gone, but from the sound of it, the marriage is still basically in name only — except for that once."

I shrugged, having moved the place mat so I could trace the wood grain with a finger. "Yeah, pretty much."

"So are you leaving?"

I sighed. "I don't think she wants me to stay."

"What do you want?"

"I don't want to leave my sons," I answered honestly. "I don't think I could handle being a part-time dad. I love them too much."

"And what about Lois? Could you leave her?" I think Dad

wanted to yell at me because I'd bet money, that while he was proud of me for trying to help Lois and the baby who would become Christopher, he probably thought I went about it the wrong way.

"If she doesn't want me to stay, what does it matter? Maybe Sam will let me live in the apartment or something so I can be close to my boys."

"That doesn't answer the question," Dad pointed out. "With the boys out of the picture, could you leave Lois?"

I didn't answer him; I didn't know how to.

We were quiet for a long time.

"I guess that explains some things," Mom finally said.

I nodded.

"Like why you never even tried to fall in love with your wife," Dad said quietly.

"I can't *make* myself fall in love with her," I told them. "For the first... I don't know how long, I'd planned on me and Lois getting a divorce and begging Lana to take me back. I gave up on that dream a while ago, I guess. I'm not in love with Lana anymore and there's been way too much water under the bridge or something for it to work with us at this point. Besides her living here in Smallville and me in Metropolis. And for now, at least, I'd guess Lois and I are still working together and I don't think that would have gone over well with Lana if we were trying again."

"No," Mom said slowly. "You can't *make* yourself *fall* in love with her, but you can decide *to* love her. There's a big difference. Maybe you're just still too young to realize it."

"I *do* love her. She's my best friend, though we've had more than our share of rough patches the last three and a half years. I don't want anything bad to happen to her. I want her to find someone who loves her like she deserves to be loved — like you two, or you and Chris, Mom, or Sam and Ellen. Like Nana and Pop Pop. I want her to be *happy*."

"How does she feel about all this?" Dad asked.

I shrugged. "She told me on our second anniversary that she was in love with me, but not to worry about her — she'd be over it by the time Christopher's fifth birthday rolled around. I don't know if she still is or not, but I think she'd be willing to give us a real shot if she thought I was really committed to making it work, but..." I sighed. "I don't want to short-change her either. That was the big fight you heard, Mom, right before Nate's surgery. She said that we needed to end things then — because the option was to hurt all of us then or hurt us all worse in two more years. She even offered to be the one to leave. We'd always talked about me leaving, but that was before we realized that Christopher was probably my son. That time, she offered to go. But ending things between us would mean that Navance's claim on Christopher wouldn't expire on his fifth birthday. That's what I couldn't tell you about." I sighed. "I probably still shouldn't, but I have the feeling my marriage is over, so it probably doesn't matter. We just kind of dropped it with everything with Nate."

The grip they had on each others' hand had tightened as I spoke. I was sure their heads were spinning, too.

Mine sure was.

"The plan was always for you to split up," Dad finally said. "But you also said that it's probably not what Lois really wants. What about you? You said you don't want to leave your sons. You said she offered to leave. Would she give you custody of the boys?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. But they need her. They love her and she needs them, too."

"What about you?" Mom asked. "Do you need her?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know how.

Part 138

Lois

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I wasn't quite sure what made me bring Lana into the conversation — especially when I was pretty sure the relationship was dead as far as she was concerned but I did. Maybe I wanted to see his reaction.

Or maybe I was a glutton for punishment.

Clark moved next to me. "I wish it had happened sooner, too," he said. "And Lana has nothing to do with why. I'm glad it's over for you and for Christopher."

And if it had happened sooner, then maybe he and Lana would have worked out after all. Especially if it had happened before Nate.

I stood up suddenly. "Me, too. I'm going to go find Daddy and let him know. Do you want to call your parents or should I?"

He thought about it for a minute. "I think I'll go see them if that's okay with you. I'd like to tell them in person."

I shrugged. "Fine by me."

He hesitated. "Do you want to come?"

I shook my head. "No, you go."

I turned and left. I heard the door to the outside shut. He was gone.

I made it to the library before I sunk to the floor and let the tears flow freely.

"Lois?"

I could hear Daddy calling to me, but I just couldn't answer. "Princess?" He found me. "What's wrong?"

I couldn't answer him through the tears.

"Princess?" A second later, he was on the floor next to me, holding me in his arms and rocking with me like he had when I was little and I'd freaked out after Mom and Lucy's accident.

I didn't know how long he rocked with me, but the sobs finally slowed from a torrent to a trickle.

"What is it, Princess? Where's Clark?"

"Navance is dead," I managed to get out between hiccups. "Clark's talking to his parents, telling them."

"This is good, right?"

I nodded. "Christopher's safe. That's the most important thing."

It was. That was what really mattered.

My son was safe.

"So what is it? This is more than just relief."

I just sat there for a long time, letting him hold me, feeling safe, as the crying jag finally subsided.

"It also means my marriage is over," I finally said. "We always said as soon as Christopher turned five, it would be over, unless something happened to Navance before then."

He sighed. "I wondered. I talked to Clark about it after Nate was born, but he never told me what the plan was after five years," he said.

I shrugged. "We're over. We never really were; we never started. The only time there was really an *us* was the night after your heart attack. I wouldn't trade Nate for anything, you know that, but at the same time, I don't think it would hurt as bad if it hadn't happened. If I didn't know what it was like to be with him like that; if I didn't have that memory. Or if I'd never fallen in love with him. Or if I'd had two more years to get over being in love with him like I thought I had."

I sniffled and huddled a bit closer to him. "I think I'm going to move back in to my old room. I can't stay in there. I told Clark a long time ago he could have custody of the boys."

"Do you really want that?"

"No, but I can't stay with someone who doesn't want to be with me. And the boys need him and he loves them and they love him so much. They need to be with him more than they need to be with me. I'm sure we can work out some sort of visitation or whatever, but I can't stay here. Not right now." I swiped at my cheeks. "Will you let him stay here with them for a while? I can't

stay — even if I did have custody, I don't think I could stay here — not where I spent my life with Clark. Not right now. I want to find an apartment or something not too far away, but not here. I can't stay here."

"Your boys do need you, Lois. They love you and they need you, but if this is what you really decide to do, they can stay as long as they want, but, sweetie, are you sure you don't want to fight for him?"

"I'm not going to fight him. If he wants custody — and I'm sure he does — then he can have it. I won't put the boys through a custody battle. However he wants to set it up I'll live with."

"No, honey. Not fight him — fight *for* him, for your relationship, for your marriage."

"He doesn't want to stay, I'm not going to try to make him. I'm not going to try to keep him using sex or anything like that. If he wants to stay, if he *really* wants to make this work, then sure. But that's not what he wants. Even if the Clark and Lana thing isn't going to happen, he doesn't love me. Not like that." I sniffled. "I've known this was coming for a long time. I've thought about it. If you'll let them stay here so it disrupts the boys as little as possible, I'd appreciate it."

"Are you *sure*?" I could hear the pain in his voice — pain on my behalf.

I nodded. "I'm sure." I swiped at my face. "I think I'm going to go start moving everything."

"What are you going to tell Christopher?"

I shrugged. "I don't know yet. We'll figure something out, I guess." I'd heard Jessica taking the boys upstairs a few minutes earlier. "He's napping now, I'd guess, so no need to tell him anything for the moment."

Daddy sighed then nodded, resigned. "Okay. Do you want me to help you?"

I shook my head. "It won't be hard — just move my clothes to my old dresser."

"I'm not sure I agree with you, but let me help you."

I sighed. "Okay."

I went upstairs to the closet in my new-old room and started pulling everything out of drawers. I stuck Clarkie Bear in one of the buckets that had winter clothes in it. Daddy had gone to get the hand truck and some more tubs or something to put my clothes in. I stacked the three tubs of winter clothes on it and he 'drove' them over to my old-new room.

The tubs of maternity clothes would either stay or go in storage somewhere — they weren't going with me, that was for sure.

While he took the winter clothes, I started throwing other clothes into the tubs, not particularly caring about neatness. By the time Daddy made it back, the dresser was mostly empty.

He started on his next trip and I started on hanging clothes. I had two handfuls of hangers when I left the room. I passed Daddy in the hall and tossed the clothes on the bed. Two more trips finished everything from the closet.

My next stop was the bathroom — everything of mine went into another tub. Books and assorted other miscellaneous went into another tub. I looked around and thought I had everything out of there. Daddy was back with the hand truck and loaded those two tubs on there.

I grabbed my purse, my briefcase and my laptop bag and headed towards the room I'd grown-up in. I sighed and rested my hand on the door as I closed it behind me.

It was over.

It had never really started.

It had only really existed in my dreams.

Daddy finished taking the last load to my room. "Are you really sure about this, Princess?"

I nodded. "I'm sure."

He gave me a long hug and kissed my forehead. "I love you,

Lois."

"I know, Daddy. I love you, too."

He left a minute later and I locked the door behind him. I didn't want Clark coming in without notice or anything.

I sighed and started to unpack everything — hanging the clothes up in the closet and filling drawers long empty. It didn't take long and I sighed as I dug Clarkie Bear out of the tub he was in.

I curled up on my bed and held the black and white bear to me as the tears came again.

I'd sprayed it lightly with Clark's cologne once, so it smelled like him. It was all I had left.

Well, I had Christopher and Nate, but they were going to be living here with Clark until he found a place of his own, I was sure. Or would they just live here forever? When Clark moved on with someone else? Would he still live here? Share our room with her — whoever her was? Would Daddy let him if he remarried? Would I end up an unwelcome near-stranger in the house I grew up in?

I didn't know how long the tears lasted, but I finally dried my cheeks and pulled out my laptop. I hit a few websites buying replacements for things that would hurt too much to keep now — my briefcase that Clark had bought me, my digital recorder from him.

I wouldn't get to go on the NCIS trip now either. Unless I went by myself, of course. And I didn't think I'd want to do that.

I got on the Planet's apartment listings and found one that I liked on Carter Avenue. I called and left a message with Mr. Tracewski, the manager. I hoped he'd get back to me soon.

When that was done, I settled back down on the bed, curled up under the covers with Clarkie Bear and closed my eyes. The magnitude of the day overwhelmed me and I was soon asleep.

It was about the farthest thing from restful there could be.

The nap was plagued with dreams of kidnappings and evil dictators coming back from the dead and chasing me and Christopher and Nate.

Christopher and Nate leaving to go live with the undead psychopath because they wanted to live with him and not me.

Clark in a cage lined with that green rock, writhing in agony.

The boys in there with him.

Mindy taunting me as she walked down the aisle with Daddy.

All of Clark's family sneering as Clark — laughing — took Christopher and Nate to live in Smallville with Lana.

Me locked in an 1800s home for the criminally insane after being convicted of drug smuggling to Latislan.

A world where Clark married Lana after our freshman year and lived happily ever after.

A world where Clark and I both died on the way to the cabin.

A world where I died and Clark lived.

A world where Clark died and I lived and everyone blamed me for the loss of their hero.

Lara and Jor-El, looking a lot like Martha and Jonathan, yelling at me for ruining their son's life — they'd sent him to *Kansas* to be with *Lana*.

Martha and Jonathan taking the boys away from me.

Clark telling me the world would be a better place without me.

I sat up with a start, sweat dripping off of me.

My breathing slowly returned to normal, though I was sure my heart was still racing.

I grabbed some clothes out of the dresser and headed towards the bathroom. First, a shower to wash the sweat off and then a long bath to try to relax.

I didn't know how long I soaked and I didn't know how long Clark had been gone. And I didn't care.

I *did* care that the boys were probably without either parent at the moment. Their lives were turning upside down and they had

no clue.

I couldn't bring myself to go find them though. I wouldn't be able to deal with the questions Christopher would ask about my tear stained cheeks.

I did finally get a text from Dad asking if I was hungry. I told him no. He sent another one back saying that Clark wasn't around and did I know where he was — Christopher was asking. I told him I had no idea.

That was the truth. I knew he'd gone to Smallville but I had no idea if he was still there or if he'd flown off to the Himalayas or what.

I tried not to wonder what it meant that he wasn't back yet.

Was he out doing loop-de-loops? Melting icebergs? Rescuing seals from Great Whites on the Barrier Reef?

Talking to Lana?

That seemed to be the most likely and she was even still in Metropolis. Apparently, her advisor had advised her wrong and she had to take an intersession class to finish out her coursework.

I toweled off and got dressed, curling up in a big chair to watch a DVD or read a book or something. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do, so I ended up staring into space until night fell.

My phone buzzed with another text message. Bedtime for the boys. Did I want to tuck them in? Clark still wasn't back from wherever he went, Daddy said.

Did I *want* to tuck them in?

On what was probably one of my last nights in the house with them?

Yes.

I was glad it had been a while since I'd actually cried, but I was going to have to dig through the bathroom stuff and put it all away. I just hoped I still had some ibuprofen in there. I thought I might even have a T3 — Tylenol with Codeine — left from when Nate was born.

I headed to the other side of the house.

"Hey, bud," I said as I saw Christopher sitting on his toddler bed.

He crossed his arms and refused to look at me.

I sat on the floor next to his bed. "What's wrong?"

"You say we go ou'si'." His tone was accusatory.

"I know, but something happened and Mom had to do some other stuff today."

He laid down in a huff. "I no yike, Mommy."

My heart broke anew and tears I didn't think I still had streaked down my cheeks. "I love you, Christopher. I always have and I always will."

He turned away from me and pulled his covers over his head. Part of me knew he didn't really mean it, but the rest of me was heartbroken.

Nate was already asleep so I just brushed his hair back off his face, pressing a kiss to the tips of my fingers and then onto his head. "I love you, Nate."

I went back to Christopher's bed and sat back down by it. "Will you talk to me for a minute?"

There was no response.

"I love you, bud. More than you'll ever know."

I pulled the top of his blanket down far enough that I could kiss the top of his dark head.

Tears continued to fall as I made my way back to my room and crawled under the covers of my bed, hugging Clarkie Bear to me and cried myself to sleep.

Alone.

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Part 139

Clark

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I left the farmhouse as confused as I'd ever been.

I loved Christopher and Nate, and I loved Lois, but what did that mean now that Navance was gone?

I needed the boys, but did I need Lois the way my parents were talking about?

I couldn't imagine my life without her in it. To be honest, I couldn't really imagine life without being married to her. I thought that was, in part, because imagining life not married to her meant imagining life with custody arrangements and almost-three-year-olds asking why I didn't live with them anymore — or why Mommy didn't live with us anymore. I didn't want to think about those things — or imagine what it was like dropping the boys off or picking them up and all of the things that went along with sharing custody when a marriage dissolved.

Did that mean I wanted to stay married to Lois?

Did I want to avoid the heartache that would come with a divorce? Of course. Was that enough of a reason to stay married? That I didn't know.

I flew aimlessly in the night side of the world, out of the light where I might attract more attention.

"Something's on your mind."

The voice next to me startled me. It wasn't often that someone flew along side me. Okay, it had never happened before.

I pulled up and rotated onto my back, floating in place and staring at the stars, fingers interlaced behind my head.

"Yeah," I finally said. "Something's on my mind."

"Christopher's okay?"

My head jerked around to look at him.

He shrugged. "I can do online research as well as your wife. And, besides, it was all over the news already."

I sighed. News crews parked outside the house hadn't really occurred to me in hours.

"They've been replaying the footage from your grandfather's funeral a couple years ago when your names were first released to the press."

I sighed again. "Of course they have been. I guess that's why Sam pays for security. They won't get anywhere near him."

"Sam is your father-in-law?"

I nodded. "Lois' dad. And what do you mean about her being able to research?"

"She came to see me the other day. I didn't answer the door, but she had some interesting things to say."

I snorted. "Lois always has interesting things to say."

"So what's on your mind?" he asked quietly.

"It's been an... interesting week. My son was almost kidnapped and then rescued by my ex-girlfriend who has always hated my wife. I leave my wife alone with the kidnapper without realizing it and she singlehandedly lands a huge front page story her first day on the job. The next day, I find out that my long dead brother — who exploded with my home planet — isn't really dead. My wife gets hurt in an explosion. My brother disappears and won't talk to me — and even though I understand why, it's still driving me crazy. Then I find out that he's a young — apparently hot — usually personable, already world renowned scientist. And then he *really* disappears and no one sees him for a couple of days. Now the guy who's been after my son since before he was born is dead which means that Christopher is safe but my marriage is over and I don't know how I feel about that except that I hate that the boys are going to get hurt in the process and so is Lois but she also deserves to be with someone who truly loves her the way she deserves to be."

I covered my face with my hands and let out a muffled primal scream. "It's been a hell of a week."

"Sounds like it."

We floated along for a while.

"Why is your marriage over?" he finally asked.

"The only reason we got married was because of the threat from Navance. We'd always said we'd divorce after his fifth

birthday when Navance's claim expired. Or he died. Whichever came first. And now he's dead. That means one of us will be calling a divorce lawyer on Monday. We'll probably fight over the kids but not the way a lot of divorcing couples do. She'll probably insist that they should stay with me because they need me more and I'll probably do the same. But either way, everyone's going to get hurt. One of the messages from Jor-El said Kryptonians mate for life, but I don't know what that means or if it matters what that means. Does it mean that I've... turned her in to my soul mate or whatever by marrying her or by sleeping with her or having babies with her? Or does it just mean that there's no such thing as divorce on Krypton?"

He sighed. "That's a loaded question. With more than one answer. There is provision for dissolution of union under a few, very specific conditions — things like abandonment or failing to adequately provide or abuse, things like that. It's rare. Most people on Krypton do mate for life, but the concept of marrying for love like here is mostly foreign. However, most Kryptonians know when they meet their... what you called soul mate. That doesn't mean that they always married that person. Sometimes social strata was in the way — it was a very stratified society. Sometimes they would meet their soul mate as children but one would die. Sometimes the arranged marriage of nobles was to someone else. There was no infidelity — as far as I know anyway — because the penalties were so strict."

He rolled onto his side, propping his head up on one elbow. "There is a connection created between Kryptonians when the physical relationship is consummated. The bond is greater with soul mates than with non-soul mates but it does exist. Part of it is because Kryptonians are telepathic and... empathetic isn't quite the right word, but can sense things from those they are closest to. It's possible, consciously or unconsciously, to block those, of course, but especially those with the soul mate bond that has been consummated, it usually is very strong. Did you turn Lois into your soul mate by consummating the relationship with her? No. Did you create a connection that you can't really break? Yes. What does that mean?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what that means for you. That's something that you'll have to figure out for yourself. Is it possible that Lois is your soul mate? Maybe. Is there a way to know if your soul mate died on Krypton? No, not really."

"What about yours?" I asked suddenly.

"I don't know. I had not met her when I left the planet. I was betrothed to a member of the House of Ra — Zara. She I had met, a number of times, but I never felt that bond that our parents spoke of often. They said they... just knew when they met. I never knew."

"What about your girlfriend?"

"Ashley?" he sighed. "I love her. I know that. Is she my soul mate?" He thought for a long time as we floated. "Sometimes I think I've buried the Kryptonian part of me so deep that even if she is, I wouldn't realize it, you know?"

I nodded. "You were betrothed?" I asked suddenly. "An arranged marriage?"

"Yes." He hesitated slightly before going on. "I would have been First Lord of Krypton someday. Or you would have been. It is possible that I would have passed on the opportunity because of my desire to be a scientist and your very existence meant that there was someone else. Jor-El... He was First Lord, but the Council of Elders would not listen when he told them the core had become unstable and the planet had limited time left. Scientists were well-respected, but the First Lord was not expected to be one. The First Lady most certainly was not. That was part of the reason why you — why you were the one who was sent to Earth. You are the son of the last First Lord of Krypton. He had access to materials and equipment that others would not have. But it all had to be done in secret. He and Lara

worked on your ship non-stop."

"That must have been hard for you," I said quietly. "Knowing they — and you — were building a ship to save me, but you were going to die with the planet."

"We knew it was unlikely we would be able to get my ship finished in time. Bigger pieces of material were harder to come by and there was only one — experimental — hyperlight drive. My ship was too big for it to work properly. The slower drive meant I arrived about ten or twelve years after you did — something like that. None of that helps you with your current dilemma though."

"No, it doesn't."

We floated for a bit longer.

"What about Van-El?" I finally asked. "Is Van-El the hero coming back?"

He sighed. "I don't know. Ashley — and Lois — both told me that whatever I can do is enough, but..."

"I know. I've thought about it a lot you know. Secret identity and all that, but... I'd said it wouldn't happen until after the whole Navance thing was over."

"Well, I'd take all the help I could get if you ever decide to," he said with a sigh. "But I'm not sure Van-El is coming back."

"Well, whatever you decide, I want to get to know you," I said quietly. "I want to know my brother."

He nodded. "I'd like that, too."

We talked for a while longer before he sighed again. "I told Ashley I would be home before now."

I nodded and we headed back towards Metropolis.

It was after dark by the time we parted ways over Hobs Bay.

I landed near the barn and headed towards the house. The lack of lights in our wing meant the boys were already in bed. I'd missed their bedtime.

The wing, unsurprisingly, was still locked down. I'd imagine that it would be for a while. Until we were sure.

I headed into our room and something immediately felt off, but it took me a minute to put my finger on it.

All of Lois' things were gone. I looked through the wall into the closet. Her clothes were gone. Into the bathroom. All of her cosmetics and medications, over the counter and prescription, were gone.

So where was she?

I listened for her heartbeat and found it in her old room.

She was asleep.

She'd moved out and now she was asleep.

Did I want to wake her up?

What would I say? Why did you move out now that we're getting a divorce?

I snorted as I flopped on to the bed.

What had she told the kids — if anything?

I sighed and finally fell asleep.

Alone.

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Lois

I woke up alone.

It took me a minute to realize where I was and why, but it was only a minute and it all came flooding back to me.

Navance's death.

Moving out of our room.

Falling asleep alone.

I had to work.

I looked at the clock and realized I had a bit of time. I hugged Clarkie Bear closer and pulled the covers and my John Deere shirt more tightly around my shoulders. I stayed in the perfectly warm cocoon as long as I could, trying to keep all the thoughts of the day before and of what my life was becoming out of my head.

I finally sighed and got up, making my bed — something I'd rarely done voluntarily the last time I'd lived in here.

I got up and showered and dressed quickly, taking extra time and care with my make-up; the evidence of the day before having not completely disappeared overnight. I took some more ibuprofen hoping to ward off the oncoming headache. I hoped I could sneak out of the house without running into anyone.

Did I want to get a cup of coffee before I left or did I want to stop on my way? I looked at my watch. I didn't have time to stop — not really. And the coffee here was better anyway.

All I needed was to grab a cup of coffee.

What could happen?

Or maybe I needed to put a coffee maker in my room, I thought as I realized Clark was already in the kitchen.

"Good morning," he said quietly without looking at me.

"Morning," I said back, pouring coffee into my favorite insulated mug.

"What did you tell the boys yesterday?"

"Nothing," I replied as I doctored it just the way I liked it.

"You didn't tell them you moved out?" he asked quietly.

"I didn't tell them anything," I grabbed my briefcase. "I have to get to work. I'm looking at an apartment later this afternoon — over on Carter Avenue. Daddy said you and the boys can live here as long as you want. I'll call the lawyer tomorrow and get everything started."

"You don't have to do that."

"One of us does. I may as well."

"I mean custody."

"They'll do better with you."

"I'm not sure I believe that."

"I do and if I don't get going, I'm going to be late for work."

I didn't wait for him to say anything else, but walked off.

The drive to the Planet lasted longer than I would have liked. After making it through the news crews outside the gate, traffic was slow and I barely made it to the bull pen in time.

"Lois," Perry hollered. "My office."

Great. Here was the lecture.

"Yeah, Chief?"

"We're going to talk about the whole Latislan thing later — and how you misdirected me when you interviewed."

"I'm not sorry," I told him honestly. "I couldn't risk the attention."

He waved a hand. "I know. Right now, I need you to get down to EPRAD. After Clark left yesterday, they found the same problem on the transport as had been on Messenger. But, like Dr. Klein said, it was an easy fix. I need you down there to cover the launch."

"On it." I grabbed my things and headed towards the elevator.

"Bring me an exclusive!" he yelled after me.

"Have I ever brought you anything less?" I called back.

I could hear his chuckle until after the doors closed behind me.

Now I just had to figure out how.

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Part 140

Clark

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"Son, I hate to ask you this, but could you come in for a while?" Perry had called on my day off.

I sighed. Christopher and I were just getting into a game of Candy Land.

"What time?" I asked.

"An hour or so. I need you to do some research here in the office and then cover the transport launch."

"I thought Lois was covering that," I said, puzzled.

"She was. She called a minute ago and said she had a hot lead from a guy you worked with the other day and will miss the launch. I'd call someone else, but Serena's having a really bad day — I guess it's finally really happening — and Billy's staying

with her. Everyone else is already assigned to other things."

I sighed. "Sure. I'll be in before long."

We finished our game of Candy Land and Sam said he'd take care of the boys for me. There was no mention of what was going on with me and Lois. I wasn't sure what that meant.

I gave both the kids big hugs and kisses before I left.

I spent about an hour researching the Platts, not just Samuel but his wife, Lori, and daughter, Amy.

I glanced at my watch. I had about an hour before I had to head towards EPRAD for the launch. I checked out with Perry and went to the deli around the corner. I couldn't believe how busy it was on a Sunday until I remembered the ball game was starting before too long. Most of the crowd were wearing Metropolitan blue.

I saw someone in a Cedano jersey and sighed. He was Lois' favorite — even though he'd left the year before.

I was just getting ready to take a big bite of my sandwich when I heard my name.

"Clark?"

I turned to see Lana standing there.

"Look, normally I wouldn't ask, but there's nowhere else to sit..." Her voice trailed off.

"Go ahead." I gestured to the seat across from me.

"How are you?" she asked quietly. "I saw the news yesterday and this morning. They showed Lois leaving the house."

"The Pittsdale police are usually pretty good about keep the streets clear, but they've found some way around the ordinance and the cops haven't been able to do anything about it yet."

"How are you doing?"

I shrugged. "Glad he's dead."

"What does that mean for you guys?"

"It means he can't claim Christopher anymore."

"That's good." There was a long pause. "How's Lois?" she asked finally.

I sighed. "I'm not sure I should be talking about this with you."

"I hope I'm still your friend," she said quietly. "No matter what happened with us in the past, you could use one right about now."

"I guess it doesn't really matter now anyway," I sighed. "Lois moved out, back to her old room. We always said it was going to end as soon as the threat from Navance ended. The whole reason for keeping the secrets was because of the danger to Christopher and that danger doesn't exist anymore." I took a bite of my salad. "When we first got married, I hoped you'd wait for me. I hoped that the day after this baby turned five, I'd end up on your doorstep and we'd have some kind of movie reunion moment."

"You had to know it wouldn't work like that," she said earnestly. "Life isn't a movie."

I sighed. "I was eighteen. I was in shock, reeling from everything that happened. I hated what I was doing to you, but I didn't see any other way. You didn't see him. Even Lois didn't see him at his worst. The things he threatened to do..." I shuddered involuntarily. "He was evil personified. When he threatened to either never let her leave or make her leave and keep the baby, the only thing I could do was claim to be the dad." I pushed the lettuce around on the black Styrofoam plate. "I didn't know when I said it that it was only valid if we were married. We managed to get her out of the hospital and to the embassy where we got married and planned to annul it as soon as we got back. I knew you'd be pissed, but I'd hoped that you'd understand."

She sighed. "I don't know if I would have or not. You stood me up on what was supposed to be a romantic evening in Paris for the roommate you swore nothing was going on with. I'd even hoped that you were going to ask me to marry you that week."

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, poking at a cherry

tomato with my fork. “I was. I had to hawk your ring to pay for the wedding and bands. I sold it to an embassy Marine who got a really good deal.”

She swiped at a tear.

“I was trying to stop her, you know. I hadn’t planned on going with her. I just chased her out the door to try to get her to turn around. Before I knew what happened, we were on a plane to Latislan.” I stabbed at a cucumber. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I did,” she said suddenly. “I wanted to hurt you like you’d hurt me but I didn’t think that was possible. You were married with a baby coming. You had it all. You’d told me it wasn’t real, that you weren’t going to sleep with her...”

“I didn’t. Just the once — well, just after Sam’s heart attack. When she got pregnant with Nate.” I didn’t think she needed to know how many times it had actually happened. “That’s the only time...”

“I believe you. But at the time...” She wiped at her cheeks again. “When we were on our way to Smallville, you were taking care of her and feeling the baby move or I thought you were anyway and sleeping close to her and she was wearing your clothes and you two were just so... *married*. I slept with Tim out of spite. He knew that, mostly, I think. That I was just using him to get back at you. I always liked him, you know that, and I didn’t really want to hurt him and he wasn’t expecting a relationship or anything — though that’s kind of what we had — off and on whenever I was home. And then I slept with a couple other guys after that. I figured why not? Then when I heard Christopher had been born, we weren’t careful and I got pregnant.”

“My heart broke for you when I heard what happened.”

“I know.” There was a long pause. “I’ve grown up a lot since then. No matter what I think about you, sleeping around isn’t going to make me feel better about myself. Only I can do that. I’ve had to learn who I am without you. I’ve grown up a lot and, as awful as it was to hold her for a few minutes knowing that she wouldn’t survive, I wasn’t in any position to be anyone’s mother at that point in my life. Whether I would have been a few months later...” She shrugged. “Who knows? Lois is a great mom,” she said, surprising me. “She loves those kids so much...”

I nodded. “That she does and they love her.”

“But she moved out?”

“She moved back to her old room. We stayed there for a few days when we first moved in before all the security upgrades were done on the other part of the house, but the room where she lived growing up. I was talking to my parents, telling them everything and then to... someone else.” I wasn’t ready to tell her I had a brother — not yet. “By the time I got back, she’d moved everything and was asleep in the other room. This morning she told me she’s going to call the lawyer tomorrow and is looking for an apartment.”

“She’s going to move into an apartment with two little boys?” she asked with a raised brow.

“No. She’s planning on moving in alone and leaving the boys with me at her dad’s house — he said we can stay as long as I want.”

“She doesn’t want them?” Her skepticism came through easily.

“It’s not that. She thinks they’ll be better off with me.”

“What do you think?”

I sighed. “I think what would be best all around, would be for me to be in love with Lois and live happily ever after or something. I think that Lois is still struggling a lot more than she’s been telling me.” I ran a hand — the one with the band on it — through my hair. “The first year was horrible. Beyond horrible. I was mean and spiteful and hateful and virtually ignored her but because of the threat and because she was so sick, she ended up being a hermit and I spent as much time as I could anywhere but anywhere near her. She struggled a lot that year —

especially after Christopher was born. The second year was a lot better until after Pop Pop died and our names came out and even then things weren’t *bad*. Since we found out she was pregnant with Nate...” I sighed. “She’s spent most of her time trying to keep her head above water. Between being sick when she was pregnant and his health problems... It’s only been the last couple months that she’s been sleeping for more than an hour or hour and a half at a time. We... Us... We went on the back burner to trying to survive. I think she really believes they’ll be better off with me, but I’m not sure that’s true.”

“You think they’d be better off with both their parents?”

“Aren’t most kids?”

“And that’s not an option for Lois?”

“It’s an option for her. She told me a long time ago that she’d fallen in love with me at some point but not to worry about her, she’d be over it before the five years were up, but we’re still two years short of that.”

“And for you?” she asked. “Is it an option for you?”

~~~~~  
Lois

I gave an exasperated sigh. “I *know* I don’t have anything with me, but you didn’t give me much time and besides, Clark’s the one who knows where to get the really good stuff.” I wasn’t really speaking to him at the moment, but I wasn’t above using him to get the story.

“I don’t know, Lois.”

He sounded skeptical and, really, I couldn’t blame him. He’d never worked with me before. Even though Clark had been good to his word, how did he know I would be? I had to convince him.

I wasn’t above pleading. “Come on, Bobby. Clark got you *great* Chinese the other day. I can *promise* you he’ll get you Italian that’s just as good, but you gotta help me out.” I had no idea if I should really be promising Bobby that, but maybe I could leave Clark a voice mail. Surely he’d do it for the sake of the story, if not for my sake.

We were walking through the area known as Suicide Slum. I felt more than a bit nervous but I was also pretty sure that he wouldn’t take me anywhere too dangerous. And for a skinny guy, he looked like he knew how to take care of himself.

He sighed. “Okay. Here’s the deal. Platt’s back on the transport...”

“How? Everyone still thinks he’s crazy.”

“No. Not everyone. There’s a few people who were being pressured into saying he was crazy and that brother-in-law of yours corroborating his research went a long way with those who really did think he was crazy.”

“My brother-in-law?”

“Dr. Klein. He’s your husband’s brother, right?”

I sighed and nodded. So much for no one noticing.

“Anyway, when Dr. Klein agreed with his assessments and they found the problem yesterday, suddenly he wasn’t crazy anymore.”

“Okay, so he’s back on the transport.”

“Right, but no one knows yet. Not his wife and daughter, not anyone. Only a couple of big mucky mucks. He’s using false papers as a member of the hospitality crew on the transport.”

“If he’s not considered crazy anymore, why the secrecy?”

That didn’t make any sense.

“Because he knows something’s going to happen. Something big and even I don’t know what it is. I don’t know if it’s going to happen on the launch pad or at launch or half way to the space station or even on Prometheus itself. I can’t find out what it is and he can’t either.”

“So go and find out what it is?”

“I can’t go take care of it because I’ve got this inner ear thing. I have another set of documents that would get you on board if you’re up for it.”

“Why me?”

“My gut says you’re the one to go and my gut’s always right.”

I bit my bottom lip as I thought about it. The transport ship was only supposed to be gone for a few days — just long enough to drop off the colonists and supplies before coming back. I’d let Perry know where I was going and he could tell Clark. It could be the distance Clark and I needed to get our official separation started. The boys would be taken care of and Nate was showing signs of weaning anyway so... Especially if he was going to be living with Clark, he wouldn’t be nursing much longer anyway.

I nodded. “Let’s do it.”

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Part 141

Clark

I took a big bite of my sandwich to avoid the question. We’d been sitting there long enough that it was a bit stale, but that didn’t stop me from eating most of it while Lana watched with an amused look on her face.

“What?” I asked her.

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Are you really sure you want to talk about this?”

“Are we getting back together?” she asked quietly. “Is that what you want?”

I thought for a long moment before answering.

Was that what I wanted?

Did I still miss Lana? Did I still miss my friend?

Yes.

Did I miss Lana, my girlfriend, the person I was going to marry?

I sighed as the realization came over me.

“No. It’s not what I want. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” she said with a smile. “I wish things could have been different, that none of us would have gotten hurt like happened over the last three and a half years. That you guys wouldn’t have lived through everything you have. But now... I’ve met someone. He’s a great guy from Parsons. He’s studying to be a pediatrician and will be moving back to Kansas before long to do his residency. His name is Chad and he’s going to take over for Doc Johnson in a few years. He’s twenty-six and a great guy. I think you’d really like him.” She smiled at me.

I frowned for a minute. “Chad Andrews?”

“Yeah. You know him?”

I thought for a minute. “I think he dated my cousin Kim for a while in high school — my Aunt Dorrie’s daughter.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. He graduated from Smallville, but a few years before us.”

I smiled back. “Well, I’m glad.”

“So, I’m okay with talking about this if you are. So, do you want to stay with Lois? Is that an option for you?”

I sighed. “She’s said for a long time that if I want to stay because I want to be with her, she’d be open to it but only if I really wanted *her*. Not because you’d moved on or there was no one better — she wouldn’t settle for second choice or ‘better than being alone’ and I wouldn’t expect her to and I wouldn’t want to either. ‘Friends with benefits’, she called it, isn’t an option and, really, to this point, ‘benefits’ hasn’t been part of our relationship.”

“Why not?” she asked suddenly. “Was it that bad?”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you really want to know the answer to that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t want *details*...”

“It was good, really good,” I admitted. “But...” I winced at the memory. “...the first time I *really* kissed her was when she was still pregnant with Christopher and... I still don’t remember saying it, but she wouldn’t lie about something like that...”

“Like what?” she finally asked, when I didn’t continue.

“She said I, um... called her Lana.”

Lana winced. “Slick.”

I sighed. “Like I said, it was a long time ago, when I still hoped that we’d get back together. Anyway, she said if I ever tried something like that again without *really* meaning it... The only other times we’ve *really* kissed was after her dad’s heart attack and I kissed her after Nate was born, but that’s it. And one day in the cafeteria right after Christopher was born.”

“I heard about that one,” she said without looking at me.

“I wondered.”

“Knowing who it was, they were probably talking about us.”

“Yeah. I overheard them.”

“I didn’t really care who knew what back then.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“They said that you two looked like you needed to get a room or something after that kiss and that you warned them not to talk about your wife like that again.”

“Yeah.” The memory of that kiss flooded my mind and I was sure I turned bright red as that memory was followed by memories of making love to my wife.

Kissing her.

Touching her.

Finding myself on the ceiling with her.

“Why not?” Lana smirked.

“Why not what?”

“Why haven’t you kissed her more? It’s obvious you enjoyed it.”

I couldn’t look her in the eye.

“Come on, Clark. Where were you just then? With Lois? Making love to her? It’s okay. We’ve moved on. You were remembering what it was like to make love to your wife — and that’s not a bad thing. It’s a *good* thing.”

I sighed. She still knew me so well. “She meant it when she said I better really mean it if I ever kissed her again. After the heart attack... it wasn’t really like that. She instigated it and the understanding was that it was essentially a one-time thing.”

“Essentially?” she asked with a smirk.

“So it was more than once, but over a short time period.” I still couldn’t look at her as I said it.

“So you’re really good together, you have two kids, you’re *already* married. Why don’t you want to give a shot?”

I poked at the last tomato before glancing at my watch. “I love her — she’s my best friend; I’d miss her a lot — but do I love her like a man should love his wife? The kind of ‘who you can’t live without’ kind of love?” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Wouldn’t I know that by now? It’s been three and a half years. Wouldn’t I know by now if I was in love with her?”

Lana shrugged. “There’s lots of different kinds of love — you told me that, remember?”

I nodded, glancing at my watch again as I did. “I gotta go. I’m going to be cutting it too close as it is. I’m covering the transport launch at EPRAD.”

We stood and I gave her a big hug. “Thanks. And good luck with doctor man.”

She laughed. “Thanks.”

We headed out the door and shared another hug. She waved as I climbed in a convenient cab.

“EPRAD,” I told the driver. “And step on it.”

~~~~~

Lois

I saw Clark hugging a blonde in front of the deli near the Daily Planet. I was in the back of the dark panel van, sitting out of sight, but I could see them through the windshield as we sat at a stop light.

I got a good look as she pulled back and smiled at him. He smiled back.

Lana.
Of course.
Who else?

It further reinforced my decision to go.

Bobby would tell Perry where I'd gone once I was gone. I wasn't about to take any chances with him telling me not to go. I'd also told him I'd be incommunicado until after the launch so he wouldn't expect to hear from me and an ill-timed text message from Jimmy wanting an update wouldn't screw things up.

"So what exactly is the plan?" I asked Bobby.

"We're picking up Platt," he told me from the driver's seat of the van. "Then we get you and him into the EPRAD building. He'll have a colonists' jumper for you to put on. You need to get your hair all appropriate and all that."

I nodded and dug through my bag and found a hair band, pulling my hair into a tight ponytail at the base of my neck as we lurched forward.

Fifteen minutes later, Platt was huddling in the back of the van. He dug a tan jumpsuit out of his bag. It was wrinkled but looked clean enough.

"Put that on, Ms. Kent."

I raised an eyebrow at him. I was still in a suit skirt.

"Please, Ms. Kent," he said, exasperated.

I sighed and motioned to him to turn around. He complied before I'd finished the motion. I took my suit coat off and tugged off my nylons. "I can't wear pumps," I said. "Do you have any shoes?"

He nodded.

I pulled the jumpsuit on as far as I could before managing to wiggle out of my skirt. I tugged it up over the camisole I'd been wearing under my suit coat, zipping it up in the front.

"You'll need to take off your jewelry, too," Platt told me as he handed me a pair of utilitarian socks and soft soled boots.

I fingered my earrings. They'd been a present from Daddy for my sixteenth birthday.

"I'll make sure you get them back, Lo," Bobby called from his seat.

I sighed and took them out, sticking them in the small zippered pocket of my briefcase.

"And your wedding ring," Platt said, staring out the window.

"Are you serious?" I was dumbfounded. Surely they didn't expect people to remove wedding bands — diamonds, sure, but bands?

"Yes. Can't wear them."

I sighed, tears filling my eyes. I knew that my marriage was essentially over but removing my ring...

With one swift movement, I tugged it off and slipped it into the pocket as well.

We were rapidly approaching EPRAD.

"There's about four hours before the launch," Platt said.

"There will be a briefing that you need to attend. I know you're not a real colonist but in case of emergency or something, you need to know those things."

I nodded.

"Under here," he said, pulling me down and covering us with burlap.

After a cursory examination of the van — during which Platt and I stayed extremely still — we were waved through.

Fifteen minutes after that, I merged myself into a line of colonists. Platt had promised to meet up with me again when we boarded the ship itself. He'd show me a jump seat that I could stow away in. Meanwhile, I was supposed to be keeping my eyes open for anything suspicious.

Of course, I didn't know what normal was so I wasn't entirely certain what I was supposed to be looking for.

The briefing lasted about an hour and was full of last minute instructions and emergency evacuation procedures if something

happened on the launch pad.

My gut feeling was that if something happened on the launch pad, the man who was still my brother-in-law was our best chance of survival.

All luggage — and there wasn't much apparently — had already been stowed for the passengers. I got the impression that the two or three day trip to dock with Prometheus was going to be a pretty boring one for most of the passengers. Storage space was so limited that they were unable to bring much to do. There were screens built into every other seat back so that they could watch the movies or television shows from the central database. There were also infomercial type programs available with just about everything you'd want to know about the space station.

I sighed. I'd have even less to do, I was sure. Brood, cry, relive my night — nights — with Clark...

Suddenly, the meeting broke up and I stayed near the back center of the crowd as we left the room.

~~~~~  
Clark

"Have you heard from Lois?" Perry asked when I answered the phone.

"No," I replied. "Why?"

"My gut is telling me that girl's getting into something."

I sighed. "Probably. She didn't give you any indication what she was working on?"

"Not really. Something with that Bobby Bigmouth Billy and Serena swear by, but that's all I can tell."

"I'm sure she's fine," I told him, though my gut was starting to churn as well.

"Probably, but keep your ears open."

"Will do."

"She said she won't be able to be in contact with us for a while — no phone calls or text messages until after the launch."

I sighed. "Okay. Thanks."

The cab pulled up to the main EPRAD gate where I got out, paying him and making sure I got a receipt so I could get reimbursed.

I was cleared by security and sat for about fifteen minutes on a shuttle bus that would take me, other members of the press and others to the observation areas.

As a member of the press, I was ushered into a building where a few statements would be given as the launch time neared. About half an hour before the launch, we'd be taken to the press area to watch the launch itself.

I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

I wasn't sure what it was. Lois? Something was going on with her?

The briefings were pretty standard stuff. Yes, they'd found the problem with the coolant that Dr. Platt had brought to light and Dr. Klein had confirmed. No, they didn't anticipate any problems with the launch. Yes, everything was going smoothly. No, they wouldn't be allowing any interviews with colonists at this point.

There was an update on how things were going every hour or so. Two hours before the launch, the colonists entered the ship. We watched that on the big screen in the press briefing room.

My eyes narrowed as I thought I caught a glimpse of...

Lois?

Getting on the transport?

Surely not.

Could it be?

I slid my glasses down and tried to zoom in, but she — whoever she had been — was long gone and using my x-ray vision only showed me the wall behind the screen. I'd have to try to get a better look when we got outside.

There was about twenty minutes before the next briefing. Was there anything I could do?

I called her cell phone and — unsurprisingly — it went straight to voicemail. I hadn't really expected her to answer. With little else to do for the time being, my mind wandered to my conversation with Lana.  
Did I want to make things work with Lois?  
Maybe?  
Gee, what wonderful lukewarm sentiment.  
I mentally rolled my eyes. I was quoting Friends to myself. That was something Lois would do — should I read anything into that?

I didn't think so. It just meant that we'd been in close proximity a lot over the last few years.  
Right?  
So did I want to make it work?  
Did I want to live a life without my sons?  
No.  
Did I think they needed their mother?  
Definitely.  
Was the best thing for them Mom and Dad together?  
Probably, but only if we really wanted to be together. Contentious parents who fought non-stop or ignored each other or otherwise modeled behavior that we wouldn't want them to grow up thinking was normal probably wasn't a good plan.

I sighed. I didn't think I'd come to a solution watching a colonial transport launch.  
My thoughts were interrupted by the T minus ninety minutes statement.  
I wondered if Van-El was around — just in case something did happen — that the end of whatever this was hadn't ended with Baines death.

I sincerely hoped he was around — especially if that was Lois I'd seen getting on that ship.  
Just because she'd moved out, because we'd said our marriage would end once the threat from Navance was over, didn't mean I wanted anything bad to happen to her.  
Whatever it was she was doing, I hoped she knew what she was getting into and I hoped she knew how to get out.

The feeling in my gut was intensifying the closer we got to launch.  
But what exactly was I supposed to do about it?

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Part 142  
Lois

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Talk about boring.

But tense, nerves on edge, sitting on the edge of your seat boring.

Platt had hissed at me and motioned me into a small galley. "You're going to be sitting in this galley," he told me as he opened another door. "There's a jump seat over there. Mostly for now, you need to try to stay out of sight."

"Then how am I supposed to keep an eye out for anything suspicious?"

"Right now, that's my job."

I sighed. "Fine."

He pointed towards a door. "That's an electrical room. If you need somewhere to hide, that's the place. There's a jump seat in there, too."

I nodded. "Okay. Is there anything I should be doing to make myself look like I belong?"

"No. Just stay hidden."

With that he left.

I poked around in the cabinets to see what I could find. Nothing very interesting, unfortunately — not even bags of peanuts. Apparently, all the food was the dehydrated space food stuff. We'd probably be drinking Tang the whole time.

It shouldn't have surprised me.

You'd think that a space program that had a space station with over a hundred colonists going up would be able to come up with something better to eat.

There was an on-board announcement — ninety minutes to launch, all colonists should be situating themselves in their seats.

Ninety minutes. What was I supposed to do for ninety minutes?

I sighed and sat in the jump seat, staring into space. Not literally, of course, I couldn't do that for a few more hours, but figuratively.

Clark and Lana.

He sure didn't waste any time.

Especially after he'd essentially told me that it wasn't going to happen with the two of them and after what she'd said to me the weekend before... It seemed that once Clark really was available, she'd decided maybe he wasn't as in love with me as she'd indicated.

His world wasn't falling apart and he certainly didn't need me to put it back together.

I sighed and tried to organize my thoughts for the story I'd be writing. I'd spent a good chunk of the hour after the briefing but before we'd boarded talking to other colonists, getting their stories and why they were going to the space station. I'd seen Mrs. Platt and Amy from a distance and wondered if they knew Dr. Platt hadn't been on the helicopter when it exploded. Perry had agreed that for his safety, that needed to be kept quiet for the moment. As far as I knew, no other news organization even knew he was still alive.

Before I knew it, the T minus one hour announcement was made.

I wondered who Perry had covering the launch since I wouldn't be.

I thought Serena was home. They'd thought the miscarriage was starting earlier in the week, but it hadn't really started until the day before. My heart broke for both of them. To know the baby had stopped developing and just be waiting for the inevitable...

I shuddered involuntarily. Neither of my pregnancies had been planned, but I'd wanted both babies very much — once the initial shock of each wore off. The pregnancies hadn't been easy and neither had the first nearly year with Nate, but I wouldn't trade either of them for anything.

I sighed. It certainly seemed like a hurry up and wait type thing. There wasn't really anything for any of us to do except wait.

And wait.

And wait.

T minus thirty minutes.

I breathed a sigh of relief. We were getting there.

~~~~~

Clark

T minus thirty minutes.

They ushered us to a shuttle bus and were driven to the bleachers designated for the press. As soon as I could, I slipped my glasses down my nose and started scanning the ship for Lois.

It took a few minutes, but I finally found her — there in one of the galleys. She was sitting in the jump seat and tapping her fingers impatiently.

That didn't surprise me — Lois wasn't known for her patience with anything.

But what did she think she was doing?

Stowing away on the transport?

Someone else came into the galley. Platt. What was he doing there?

He was saying something to Lois, but I couldn't make out what it was and it was way too loud to try to listen in.

She followed him out of the galley and into another part of

the ship. No sooner had they left than someone else walked into the galley.

No, not walked.

Skulked maybe.

Snuck?

He opened another door and then shut it behind him.

Lois and Platt came back into the galley, talking animatedly, but I still couldn't make out what they were saying.

Lois sort of threw up her hands and sat back in the jump seat, buckling herself in.

She was really going through with it.

She was going to the space station.

How long was she going to be gone?

Was she coming back on the transport in a few days?

Or was she planning on staying on the space station until the next transport returned?

And what was I going to tell Christopher?

'Sorry, Mom's in space'?

I sighed. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing. Christopher and Nate would miss her — and so would I, I was sure — but starting the separation with an atmosphere between us might not be such a bad idea.

I would miss her.

What did that mean?

She was my friend and I would miss her.

That was all.

Right?

Right.

T minus ten minutes.

Ten minutes and she was going to head into space.

The feeling in the pit of my stomach was still there and I couldn't shake it.

I kept my glasses on the end of my nose and watched as Lois unstrapped herself from the jump seat.

What was she doing? Didn't she realize the ship was taking off in less than ten minutes?

What was I thinking? Of course she did, but she was Lois.

She opened the door to the electrical closet or whatever it was. There was a man in there doing something to an electrical panel.

I frowned as she said something to him. He didn't look happy about it. They argued for another minute before he slammed the panel shut and, grabbing his tool box, tried to brush by her.

I could tell she was raising her voice, creating a disturbance, but I wasn't entirely sure why. She must have been able to see something that I couldn't.

She reached out and punched a red 'in case of emergency' button. A claxon sounded all over the facility and the digital countdown in front of us stopped.

A voice came over the intercom system. "Ladies and gentleman, there has been a delay in the launch. We will provide you with more details as they become available. Please stand by."

I looked back at the ship and gasped as I realized that the man Lois had been arguing with was no longer arguing with her.

Instead, he had an arm around her neck and was brandishing a hand gun.

~~~~~

Lois

I sat in the jump seat, tapping my fingers impatiently.

I was ready to get on with this.

"Lois," Platt hissed. "Let's go."

"Where?"

He rolled his eyes and I got up to follow him.

We went into a storage area.

"Van-El?" I hissed as I saw the person hiding in there.

"Shhh," he hissed back.

He was in his black suit with the crest on it and I was glad I

hadn't accidentally called him Bernie or something.

"What's going on?"

"Something else is going to happen," he told me. "Still not sure what, but something. I've been going through the storage areas looking for explosives or things of that nature, but I haven't found anything yet."

"Well, that's good, right?"

He shrugged. "Depends. If there's nothing to find, it's fine. If there is something, then no, it's not good. The longer it takes to find the worse it could be."

I nodded. "Well, I haven't seen anything, but I haven't actually left the galley. No one I talked to earlier was acting the slightest bit suspicious."

He sighed. "Okay. Well, I'm going with the transport unless we figure out what's going on before then."

We talked for another minute and then Platt and I headed back to the galley, still discussing what the possibilities were.

"Now, strap in," he said. "I've got to get back to my station."

I threw up my hands. Realistically, I knew there wasn't much else we could do. We had to be strapped in when the launch took off. If he was careful, Van-El wouldn't have to be.

I sat in the jump seat and buckled in.

And then I heard it.

A noise coming from the electrical closet. An announcement was made that all non-essential personnel needed to depart immediately.

The noise came again.

I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the door to the closet.

I gasped.

"What are you doing?"

"Fixing an electrical problem," he said.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was wrong. Something about him was... off.

"I don't believe you."

He shrugged. "No skin off my nose."

He slammed the door to the electrical panel shut but not before I saw something that didn't belong. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but the feeling in the pit of my stomach said it wasn't good.

He grabbed his tool box and tried to brush past me.

"If you'll excuse me, miss, I'm considered non-essential personnel and I need to disembark immediately."

I went with my gut.

I reached out and slammed my hand into an emergency button.

Immediately, sirens started wailing and an announcement came over the loud speakers that the launch had been delayed and more information would be available shortly.

I wasn't really sure what the announcement said because I was fighting with the guy.

Before I knew what had happened, he had me around the neck and shoulders and had a gun to my head.

"Who are you?" I managed to croak out.

"Name's Arlo," he told me.

"Joe the Blow?"

"You've heard of me?"

I tried to nod. I closed my eyes and hoped that Van knew what was going on.

I also hoped Clark didn't. I wasn't sure why, but I didn't want him to know I'd gotten myself into this predicament. It wasn't like I thought he'd hold it against me in custody or visitation hearings with a judge or anything like that but that I couldn't take care of myself. . .

Of course, this wasn't over yet — maybe I could get out of this by myself yet.

~~~~~

Clark

My heart was in my throat as I realized the man had a gun to her head.

I was even more surprised when I realized that Van-El was standing at the other end of the galley.

I couldn't hear what was being said, but I knew it wasn't good.

It couldn't be good when Lois was being held hostage.

Security was heading towards the launch pad.

I managed to get away from the crowd and to where I couldn't be seen, zipping my way towards the launch pad myself.

I made it close enough to hear and see what was going on better but far enough away that I wouldn't be noticed.

I could hear Van trying to talk to the guy — Joey Arlo? Joe something — trying to get him to release Lois.

Why didn't he just zip around and take the weapon?

Because there were too many other people around and if the firearm discharged, that could be bad.

Really bad.

But in the meantime, he had a gun to Lois' head.

Lois.

My wife.

My heart still hadn't left my throat.

They were still talking.

Security wasn't equipped to deal with this situation and I could hear the sirens from the MPD screaming our way. I was sure the hostage negotiators were on their way, too.

Would they be in time?

Could I risk zipping in there and knocking the guy down and getting the gun away from him?

I'd be risking my identity — and my brother's.

And my parents.

And my sons.

And Lois.

But if he did something to her, it wouldn't matter.

Would it?

What if she did get hurt — or worse — before this was all over?

I couldn't even think the words of what might happen to her if Van couldn't get her out of this.

If something happened to her...

I'd have to tell our sons that their mom was gone.

I'd have to explain to Sam why I hadn't protected her.

I'd have to explain to my parents why I hadn't realized it till it was too late.

And I'd have to live without her.

Could I do that?

I suddenly knew something with amazing clarity.

I couldn't live without her.

Without my wife.

Without Lois.

Who was on the space transport with a gun to her head.

I closed my eyes and tried to take deep calming breaths. For now, there was nothing I could do but pray, something I hadn't really done much of in a long time.

And wait.

And watch.

I closed my eyes again and took another deep breath.

My eyes flew open when I heard what I'd dreaded.

A gunshot coming from the spaceship.

Where Lois was.

And then there was an explosion.

I was surprised I didn't pass out.

My heart stopped in my chest, but I couldn't see what had happened. The smoke in the galley was too thick for even me to see through.

A second later, the main door opened and a grim looking Van-El exited the ship, carrying a limp Lois in his arms.

"Noooooooooo!"

\*\*\*

Part 143

Lois

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"What do you want?" I managed to gasp. I debated struggling but with the barrel of the gun pointed directly at my temple, I decided it probably wasn't the best plan — at least not yet.

"To get out of here and you're my ticket."

"You're not going anywhere." The authoritative voice startled both of us.

Van-El was standing at the other end of the galley, arms crossed in front of him.

"Just watch me. As fast as you are, you couldn't stop a bullet from this range." He brandished the gun, waving it around near my head.

"You need to calm down and I'm sure we can come to a solution that's acceptable to all of us," Van said.

"Oh, I doubt that," Joe Arlo said. "Somehow I think acceptable to you would be me behind bars and I don't think that's going to happen."

"You have a point," Van-El conceded. "But you're not leaving here with Ms. Kent."

"So you know who she is?"

"We've met," he said without inflection.

They could go back and forth for a while, I realized.

"Um, Van-El," I choked out. "I think he planted a bomb."

Van-El seemed to be scanning the area and his look turned grim. "We don't have long."

"So you best let me leave." Joe pulled me with him towards the other side of the galley — closer to the exit.

"You will not leave with Ms. Kent."

I could tell that he was trying to decide the best way to play this. Go for the bomb and hope that he didn't escape with me in the meantime? Try to resolve the issue with me in time to stop the bomb?

I took a deep breath. Surely I remembered what I'd learned in my self-defense classes in high school.

But that had been a lifetime ago.

"Please," I said. "I have two little boys. They need me." I wasn't about to let on that their dad was about to get custody... "So does my husband." I wasn't entirely certain about that, but I wasn't going to give any indication that I was anything but a wife and mother whose family needed her.

My boys. If something happened to me, they'd have Clark. He loved them. He'd take care of them and — hopefully — make sure they didn't forget me.

"Where's your ring?" he asked, pulling me with him.

"They made me take it off."

Van-El moved towards the electrical closet.

"Not another step," Joe told him, pointing the gun in his direction.

"Didn't you see the explosion the other day? He walked out of it, completely unscathed. Do you really think that a wimpy little hand gun is going to stop him?"

He wavered for an instant and I took advantage of his second of distraction.

I brought my foot down sharply on his and then brought my elbow back into his stomach.

"The bomb!" I yelled at Van-El.

It all happened too fast for me to remember later exactly what order everything happened in.

I knew there was a gunshot and an explosion, but I wasn't entirely certain which came first.

The smoke was choking me.

And then everything went black.

~~~~~

Clark  
 “Lois!” I yelled, running towards the launch pad.  
 “Sir!”  
 I was stopped by security.  
 “You can’t go in there, sir.”  
 “That’s my wife,” I told him, consciously restraining myself from simply throwing them off me. “Lois!”  
 Van looked at me as he set her on a gurney. I breathed a sigh of relief as they attached an oxygen mask but didn’t begin CPR or any other kind of heroic efforts.  
 “Van-El!” I yelled. “Tell them to let me through!”  
 He nodded at the security guards who reluctantly let me go. I ran to the waiting ambulance. “Lois!”  
 She was breathing on her own — that was good. She was unconscious — that was not.  
 “Lois.” This time it was a whisper as I reached out and took her hand.  
 “Sir? You can’t be in this area,” someone nearby said.  
 “She’s my wife,” I told them, knowing I would refuse to leave.  
 I could hear conferring happening behind me.  
 “When she gets better, I’m telling Perry to fire you two.” Henderson’s hand rested on my back.  
 “What happened?” I asked hoarsely.  
 “Apparently, Joe the Blow was setting a bomb in an electrical room. Lois got in his way when he tried to leave. He took her hostage. Van-El tried to talk him out. The bomb went off and Van-El was able to mostly protect her. Joe is in pretty bad shape and not expected to make it,” he finished, nodding towards the other stretcher being removed from the ship.  
 “Good,” I breathed.  
 “No. Not good, though I understand why you think that. Without the Handyman, we have no way of knowing who put him up to this. It looks like the explosion was set to happen after take-off. If it had, we never would have figured out what happened because the ship would have crashed — rather spectacularly.”  
 I sighed as I brushed Lois’ hair off her face. “I understand what you’re saying but you’ll have to forgive me for not being too upset.”  
 My cell phone buzzed at that moment. Repeatedly. I didn’t let go of Lois’ hand as I pulled it out.  
 Perry.  
 Sam.  
 My parents.  
 Jimmy.  
 Billy and Serena.  
 Lana.  
 All were calling or text messaging.  
 I hoped the boys hadn’t been watching the launch.  
 Sam. I had to call Sam first.  
 As though on cue, he called again.  
 “She’s alive,” I said without any preamble.  
 “Thank God,” he breathed. “What kind of shape is she in?”  
 “She’s unconscious but breathing. Did the boys see?” I could just imagine them having the launch on and then Van-El walking out with Lois in his arms.  
 “No, but Christopher’s upset — insisting that something’s wrong with his mom.”  
 “I’ll keep you posted,” I told him, “but I gotta go. They’re taking her to the hospital and I’m going with her. Will you call the Planet and my parents?”  
 “Of course.”  
 I hung up without saying good-bye, knowing that he would understand.  
 I held her hand in mine and brought it to my lips, kissing it softly, soot and all.

“I love you,” I whispered, telling her for the first time and knowing that she wouldn’t remember it.  
 “Colonists, please return to your seats.”  
 I looked up, startled. Surely they wouldn’t be able to launch now, would they?  
 Van-El was talking to the officials, but looking straight at me. “I can give them a lift to the space station and return in a few days to bring the transport back. As long as all the life support systems are still functional, of course.”  
 The official nodded his confirmation.  
 “Samuel!”  
 I turned towards the transport ship. There was Mrs. Platt hugging Dr. Platt and he let go of her to kneel next to Amy’s chair.  
 There was a flash next to me and I turned expecting to be angry at someone taking pictures of Lois.  
 Instead I found her briefcase in my face. “There’s a picture of the reunion on the camera,” said the member of the grounds crew.  
 No. It was Bobby.  
 “You got her into this?”  
 He nodded. “I didn’t know this was going to happen, obviously, and once she found out it was possible to get on the transport, there was no way she was going to take no for an answer. All of her things are in there.”  
 “Thank you. What kind of meal do you want this time?”  
 “Ah, Lois promised me you’d get me Italian later tonight, but no rush on it. Whenever she’s doing okay.”  
 I nodded, turning back to her, climbing into the back of the ambulance as they loaded her. A second later, sirens were screaming as we headed towards the hospital.  
 “You can’t leave me,” I told her.  
 Tears were threatening to overwhelm me. I couldn’t give in.  
 “Lois, come back to me, you come back to me. You have to come back now. Do you hear me?! Lois, don’t go! Fight.”  
 She couldn’t leave me, not right after I’d finally realized how much I needed her.  
 “You are not dying on me, you are not giving up, now open your eyes. Dammit. I can’t lose you now. Christopher and Nate... they need you.” My voice cracked. “I need you.”  
 The tears slowly spilled over.  
 “I love you, Lois. I can’t lose you. Not now. Not when I finally realized I can’t live without you.”  
 ~~~~~  
 Lois
 I could hear someone calling my name.
 “Lois, come back to me, you come back to me. You have to come back now. Do you hear me?! Lois, don’t go! Fight.”
 Through the fuzz I thought it sounded like Clark.
 “You are not dying on me, you are not giving up, now open your eyes. Dammit. I can’t lose you now. Christopher and Nate... they need you.” Then something unexpected. “I need you.”
 What? The fuzz was starting to clear.
 “I love you, Lois. I can’t lose you. Not now. Not when I finally realized I can’t live without you.”
 “What?” I whispered.
 “Lois?” Clark whispered hoarsely.
 I started coughing and couldn’t hear what else was being said.
 “What happened? Van-El? Arlo?” I whispered, pulling the oxygen mask away from my face.
 The paramedic firmly put it back in place.
 “There was a gunshot and the bomb exploded,” Clark told me, gently stroking my hair away from my face. “You passed out and Van-El carried you out. Joe’s not expected to make it.”
 “Did the boys see it?”
 I shook my head. “Your Dad said no, but that Christopher is convinced something’s wrong with you.”

“He’s right,” I whispered.

I wanted desperately to ask him if I’d heard him right — that he loved me, needed me, couldn’t live without me — but I couldn’t bring myself to do that. Not in front of the paramedics, where the rejection would be public. Sort of.

“You’re going to be okay,” he told me, leaning over to kiss my forehead. “You got the story, you know. The scoop. You have to be okay to write it up. Otherwise, Perry’ll have your hide.”

“What happened to the transport?”

“Van-El’s flying it to the space station and then helping it back in a few days. Life support and everything is operational, just the navigational systems are shot.”

“Good.”

“And the Platts were all reunited,” he told me with a smile.

I smiled back. “I’m glad.” I started coughing again as we pulled into the ambulance bay.

The next two hours were a whirlwind of doctors and IVs and tests and more tests to make sure I was okay after being hit on the head and unconscious for a while.

The only time Clark left my side was when they made him.

I caught a glimpse of him talking to a blonde nurse and it came flooding back to me.

Clark.

Talking to Lana.

Hugging her.

Smiling at her.

Tears threatened to overflow and I needed to focus on something else.

“Can I get my laptop?” I asked the nurse who was in the room with me. “Or just my bag there?” I pointed to the bag Bobby must have given to Clark.

She handed it over and I quickly booted it up, calling up a blank word processing document. I sent an email to family and friends to let them know I was okay and they could read the whole story in the Daily Planet.

Dad sent me an instant message saying he was glad I was doing well and did I want him to come up? I asked him to stay with the boys.

An email from Perry came in asking how I was doing and when I thought I’d have the story to him.

I smiled to myself — of course he wanted to know when I’d get the story to him, but I also knew his primary concern was my safety. I told him he’d have it as soon as the medical personnel left me alone long enough to get it done.

I started typing furiously.

“What are you doing?” Clark asked as he walked back into the room.

“Typing,” I whispered.

“I can see that. What are you typing?”

“Story.” I was sure he’d notice I was being short with him again, but I didn’t care. I must have heard wrong when I was coming out of it

He was already back with Lana; he just didn’t have the guts to tell me.

I guessed I should be grateful for that — he wasn’t kicking me while I was down.

“Have to get it to Perry,” I went on. “Why were you there?”

“I was covering it for you since you were off covering something with Bobby.”

“You better write it up, too,” I whispered.

He looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it, instead pulling out his laptop and a minute later he was typing as well.

“Mrs. Kent?” one of the doctors said a minute later, walking in to my room.

“Just a minute,” I whispered. I bit my bottom lip as I wrote the last few lines of the article. I debated internally then turned to

Clark. “Would you read this over before I send it to Perry?”

He nodded. “Sure. I’d be happy to.”

Of course. Happy to. Happy to help me with my story before he broke my heart and took my sons with him.

I turned back to the doctor. “Yes?”

He had a mildly amused look on his face. “They told me you were in here typing furiously.”

“I’m a reporter. I had to get the story out.”

“I heard.” He sighed. “You’ll have to stay overnight for observation.”

I glared at him.

“That’s the way it is. And you’ll need to take it easy on your voice for the next few days, too.”

I sighed and nodded. “Fine,” I whispered.

“Can I stay with her?” Clark asked.

“Of cour...” He stopped mid-sentence as I shook my head vehemently.

“No. You need to go home.”

If Christopher was concerned that there was something wrong with me, Clark could go a long way towards reassuring him that I was okay.

“I want to stay,” he told me reaching for my hand.

I didn’t pull it away but I didn’t curl my fingers around it either.

“The boys need you,” I insisted.

He sighed. “Fine, but not until they get you settled.”

“Someone will be here to take you over to the unit in a few minutes,” he told me.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Anytime, but next time try to avoid the exploding space ships, huh?”

I nodded and reached for my laptop as he left.

“I made a few small edits, but otherwise it looks good.”

“Thanks.” I quickly typed up an email and sent the article to Perry. I leaned back on the bed, closed my eyes and sighed.

He reached over and took my hand again, this time enveloping it in both of his. “You scared me today,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered back. “I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”

“I know. And I realized something...”

I sighed and pulled my hand from his. “Why are you here, Clark? Navance is dead. We don’t have to play like we’re the greatest love story since Rob and Laura anymore. So why don’t you quit pretending to be the doting husband and I’ll call the lawyer in the morning? I’m sure you, Lana and the boys will all be very happy together.”

Part 144

Clark

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She pulled her hand from mine. “Why are you here, Clark? Navance is dead. We don’t have to play like we’re the greatest love story since Rob and Laura anymore. So why don’t you quit pretending to be the doting husband and I’ll call the lawyer in the morning? I’m sure you, Lana and the boys will all be very happy together.”

Lana?

“Lana?” I asked her.

“You know, the blonde who used to constantly be attached to your lips.” Her voice was hoarse, but full of more than one kind of pain, even in a whisper.

“What about her?”

“I *saw* you two, okay?”

I could see the tears forming in her eyes.

“What? When?”

“Today. I saw you two hugging outside that cafe near the

Planet.”

I sighed. “I went in to have lunch before I headed over to EPRAD. It was packed because of the baseball game. She needed somewhere to sit. I had an extra chair.”

“I see.”

“That’s all it was, I promise.” Then I sighed again. “Okay, we talked. About a lot of things — including some of the stuff I could never tell her before because of Navance. About how exactly we ended up in Latislan and married. About why she started sleeping around for a while. About what we both want out of life today. And I gave her a big hug before we went our separate ways. That’s it.”

“And what you want out of life today is Lana.” She shrugged. “She’s what you’ve always wanted.” She refused to look at me.

“No, she’s not,” I said quietly. “I knew that already, but seeing her today... We talked about that, too. She’s not what I want out of life anymore. And I’m not what she wants. And I knew that before I found out she has a boyfriend who’s moving back to Smallville before long.”

“I see,” she said again.

“She asked me some hard questions about what I want out of life — out of us — and I didn’t have any answers for her. But then I saw you in there.” Emotions were filling my voice and I reached for her hand. “I realized that if anything happened to you... Love is who you can’t live without, remember?”

She nodded, but still refused to look at me.

“I realized that if something happened to you, I’d have to explain to Christopher and Nate why I hadn’t saved you. To your dad why I hadn’t protected you. To my parents why I’d realized it too late. And I’d have to live without you. In that moment, right as the explosion happened and the smoke was too thick to see through...” I choked up, tears threatening to overflow. “I realized that I don’t know how to live without you anymore.”

“So you’re codependent,” she whispered coldly.

I shook my head. “No, it’s not like that at all and I think you know that. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. I love you, Lois. I love you like I never loved Lana.” I pulled her hand to my face and pressed my lips against it. “I want to spend the rest of my life getting to know you. I want to raise my kids with you. I want to be your partner at work and at home. I want to spend hours making love to you. And I want it to be fast and furious sometimes, too.” I smiled slightly. “I want you to call me Einstein all the time again.” I took a deep breath. “Whaddya say? Are you willing to give us a real shot?”

She still didn’t look at me, but didn’t take her hand out of mine. “I don’t know, Clark.” She opened her mouth to say something else but an orderly walked in and her mouth snapped shut again.

“Mrs. Kent? We’re going to move you to a room now.”

She nodded and shifted on the bed, pulling her hand from mine. “Let’s go,” she whispered. “Why don’t you go on home, Clark? If you hurry, you can still see the boys before they go to bed.”

I sighed. If she didn’t want to talk any more at the moment, she wasn’t going to. “Okay, but I’m going to be back first thing in the morning.”

She shrugged. “If you want to.”

I watched as they wheeled her out and then collected my things and headed out of the building. I took a cab to the Planet and headed up to the newsroom.

“Clark, son, what’re you doing here?” Perry asked as I walked in.

“I wanted to make sure you got everything okay and let you know that Lois is going to be fine,” I told him.

“The articles are great, but I expected that. And I figured it would take a little more than an explosion and smoke inhalation to keep Lois down.” He chuckled. “You know, I told her several

times that I saw allowing her to intern from home was an investment in the future of the Daily Planet, but I really didn’t expect to be completely paid back in the first week.”

I laughed with him. “She’s a story magnet, all right. Henderson said he’s going to have a word with you about our continued employment.”

“Oh, he already has.” Perry shook his head. “That girl...”

“You said it.”

“CK!” Jimmy ran up and smacked me on the back. “How’s Lois?”

I filled them both in on everything that happened at the hospital. “Anyway, I had to come back here to get a vehicle, but I need to get going to so I can see the boys before bedtime.” Both the Jeep and the truck were in the Planet’s parking garage.

“Listen here, son. You and Lois have put in about two months worth of work since you started. Lois has a few days off, obviously, but why don’t you take them with her? Celebrate the death of Navance, a very successful first week and rest up for the next one.”

I didn’t hesitate before I nodded. I’d gladly take a few days off with her. It might take that long — or longer — to convince her that I was serious when I said I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. “You got it, Chief.”

We spoke for a few more minutes before I headed down to the garage to go home.

I hurried and made it home just as Sam was putting the boys in their pajamas.

“Daddy!” Christopher ran at me. “Wh’re Mommy?”

I swung him into my arms. “Mommy had to stay at the hospital tonight but she’s going to be just fine, little man.”

“Va’-E’ safe her?”

I nodded. “Yep, he did.” This time it didn’t bother me at all that someone else had saved her.

As long as she was safe.

I talked to him for a few more minutes then read him a book before tucking him into his bed and admonishing him to stay put. I covered the already sleeping Nate with a light blanket and headed towards Lois’ old room.

It was odd to not lock the door behind me as I left our wing.

I saw the teddy bear I’d won her in the middle of the bed and I picked him up. I went on to the balcony, leaned on the railing and stared — unseeing — at the little bear.

“Days like today have a way of clarifying things, don’t they?”

I hadn’t heard Sam come out but he leaned against the rail next to me.

“Yeah, they do,” I said quietly.

“And what exactly did it clarify?”

“That I want a life with Lois. I love her. I don’t know how to live without her. I want to be the kind of husband she deserves. I want to fight and make up and pay bills and go to PTA meetings and argue over where we’re going on vacation and who gets the remote. Maybe have another baby or two with her. I want to grow old with her. To spoil grandkids with her. To love her. For her to let me.”

“Have you told her this?”

“I started to but they took her to her room for the night and she told me to come tuck the boys in.”

“Ah. Did she believe you?”

“I think she wanted to, but I don’t think she did.” I sighed. “And I can’t say that I blame her. For the last three and a half years, I haven’t shown her that’s what I want. Perry said she’s got a few days off, obviously, and told me to take them with her. I’m not quite sure how I’m going to convince her, but I’ve got to. Somehow, I’ve got to convince her that I want a life with *her* — because I want *her* not just because we have two kids together and all that.”

“Then get out of here with her. Go somewhere together. Give her that romantic evening we talked about a long time ago. And I still don’t want to know what it is.”

“Can you and Jessica and Vicki take the boys for a few days?”

“To save their family? Of course.”

“Do you mind if I take her to the cabin?”

He chuckled slightly. “I’d always figured she and Lucy would go up there with their husbands some day.”

I gave him a half-smile. “I know I haven’t been the husband you’d want for your little girl, but I hope I can be.”

He put a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve protected her and Christopher and maybe that was enough until now. But now... You can be what she needs. I know you can.”

“I just hope she’ll let me.”

~~~~~

Lois

I knew I wasn’t going to get much sleep and not just because they were going to be poking at me all night.

I wouldn’t be able to sleep because of what Clark had said.

That he loved *me*.

Not Lana.

He loved me like he’d never loved Lana.

Did I believe him?

No, first, did I want to believe him?

Yes.

Definitely.

I wanted desperately to believe him.

My phone buzzed in my bag and I pulled it out.

A text message from Clark.

‘Rest your voice. Get some sleep. I love you.’

Well, that explained why he didn’t call — resting my voice and probably afraid I wouldn’t answer. At least if he was really serious about this whole thing.

I sighed. Sleep was not going to come so I pulled my laptop out, checking my email.

I had a number of responses from friends and family. Perry, Jimmy, Martha, Vicki, Jessica, Joe.

Joe.

I hadn’t talked to Joe in ages. I hadn’t even realized that I’d sent the email to him. I opened his email first.

‘Lois, I saw you guys on the news yesterday and my heart goes out to you. I understand a lot better what you were going through then. I wish you’d been able to confide in me, talk to me as your friend if nothing else, but knowing what kind of guy he was, I’m not surprised you chose not to — protecting Christopher was your first priority and that’s the way it should have been.’

Of course he understood. I missed Joe. I missed my friend. I’d have to make a point of getting together with him and Debbie before too long. I turned back to the email.

‘Debbie and I are happy and I truly hope you and Clark are, too. I hope he’s everything you ever wanted. I was so glad to hear that Nate’s healthy, too. That had to have been hard for you. I’d love to get together sometime soon — a double date maybe? Just not a toga party. /shudder/ I saw the transport this afternoon and I’m glad to hear you’re okay. Love ya, Lolo.’

I smiled at the high school nickname. Joe was the only one who’d ever been able to get away with it.

I wrote him a short note back — basically saying thanks and I’d be in touch soon. I skimmed the rest of the emails — they all said about what I expected. Glad you’re okay. Talk to you soon. Take a couple days off and bring me a big story.

The last was from Perry, of course.

As I was about to close it out, a new email popped up.

Lana.

I hesitated before opening it, but did.

‘Lois, I debated for hours whether or not to write this email

and then whether or not to send it. [Edit: I finished this email an hour ago and finally decided to just do it.] I saw Clark today and we talked about a lot of things — cleared the air about things we couldn’t before yesterday [or two days ago, depending on when you get this]. I understand better than ever why you both did what you did. I wish it had never happened, not because I got hurt — though I wish there’d been a way around that; I don’t know what it might have been — but because of the threat you guys have lived under for years now.

‘I told you last week I didn’t know how you lived with the sword of Damocles hanging over you at all times, and I still don’t. I don’t think I could handle the stress of living like that. No, I know I couldn’t. I talked to Clark this morning about what he wants out of life now that you guys have choices again — choices that aren’t affected by a psychotic dictator half a world away. He said he didn’t really know what he wanted when I talked to him, but seeing him with you on the news coverage [they replayed the whole thing over and over... And then they played it some more]... If he hasn’t realized yet how much he loves you, how much he needs you, then he’s a bigger lunkhead than even I ever gave him credit for.

‘I know we may never really be friends — there’s too much water under the bridge for that, I think — but I’d like to think we could be in the same room together and be more than just civil to each other. Share a few Lunkhead Clark stories at the Corn Festival while he and Josh and Pete and Chad compete to see who gets the most strikes [Josh invited Chad to participate this year once he found out we started dating — since Clark wasn’t there last year — apparently, it’s not as much fun with only two...].

‘My life isn’t anything like I thought it would be when I first dragged Clark to Metropolis. In some ways, I think it’s a lot better than it would have been — because I don’t think I’d ever truly be happy in the city and because I think Chad and I are a much better match than Clark and I ever were; like you and Clark are a much better match than he and I were. I understand why I didn’t have an invitation to your wedding to Clark — and not just because no one did — but I’d be honored if you two would attend mine, when Chad finally gets around to asking. If everything goes as planned, we’re looking at a summer wedding...

‘Of course, we all know what can happen to plans. And life is what happens while you’re making plans. I love Clark. I always have and part of me always will. He’s a great guy and a great dad and has the potential to be the great husband you deserve. I know you may not believe him right away when he says he wants you, to build a life with you and the boys, but he’ll mean it. Don’t just write it off; make him prove it to you. Listen, not with your head, but with your heart, when he tells you what you mean to him. How he can’t live without you.

‘If someone had told me four years ago I’d be playing matchmaker with Clark and his wife, I’d have thought they belonged in the ‘flying alien’ crazy crowd. But you of all people know that flying aliens do exist [what’s it like flying with Van-El anyway?!?! I think that would be cool...] and here I am trying to get Clark’s head to realize what his heart has for a long time and trying to get you to listen to him.

‘I’m glad you’re okay and I hope you’re fully recovered quickly. I don’t expect to hear back from you, but I’m sure I’ll see you around at some point. Until then, take care of yourself and take care of Clark. He needs you more than he’ll ever realize I think. I’m not sure how to end this so I’ll just say good-bye and good luck. Lana.’

I closed the laptop and set it on the table. I leaned my head back onto the bed.

Imagine that.

Words of wisdom from Lana Lang.

Could she possibly be right?

Could Clark mean what he said?
I sighed and closed my eyes.
I didn't really think I'd get much sleep, but I had to try.

Part 145
Clark

I got up with the boys and got them situated for the day.
"Mommy at ho'pita?" Christopher asked as I pulled his shirt over his head.

"Yep. She'll be home later today though." I'd decided that, barring Lois overruling me, I'd bring her home for a while and then go to the cabin. "But I think Daddy's going to take her to the cabin for a couple days to get some rest so she can get better, okay?"

He nodded. "Unca Ji'y come ober?"
"Maybe."

I took him downstairs where Jessica was already working on their breakfast. I gave both boys big kisses and headed out the door, taking the Jeep towards the hospital.

I wondered what kind of reception I'd get when I got there.

I had some pretty good ideas for what I could do if I could get Lois to go to the cabin with me — how I could try to convince her that I really did love her and that I wanted to make us work.

"When do I get to leave?" I heard her asking in her hoarse voice that seemed to have progressed beyond the whisper from the night before.

"As soon as the paperwork is done, Mrs. Kent. Probably within an hour or so."

"Good," I said, leaning against the door frame and smiling. "The boys are anxious to see you — especially Christopher."

She glared at me. "I want to leave now."

The nurse looked at me and sighed. "We're working on it. I promise."

With that she turned to leave.

"Good morning," I said quietly, walking into the room and pulling a chair up next to the bed. I kissed her forehead before I sat down. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Not much. They were too busy poking at me."

"I figured." I noted a copy of the Daily Planet on the tray table. "Another front page story. Perry's very proud. He told me he didn't expect his investment in you during your internship to pay off quite so spectacularly quite so soon."

She smiled slightly. "He emailed me back earlier. Said he gave you a couple days off, too."

"I'm supposed to make sure you rest and get better," I said quietly. "But there's something else I need to do, too." I reached for her hand, holding it in both of mine. "I want to try to convince you that this is what I really want. You. Me. Us. The boys. Our family. We didn't get a chance to finish talking last night and I'm sure we don't want to have this conversation here so here's what I was thinking. I'll take you home for a little while as soon as you get out of here. Christopher especially wants to see you. And you can take a shower and get the rest of the smoke smell off or whatever. Your dad said he'd make sure the boys were taken care of for a couple days if you'd agree to go with me."

"Where?"

"The cabin." I rubbed the back of her hand with my thumb. "What do you say? Will you go with me? Give me a chance to prove to you that this is what I really want? That I'm not... settling or something like that. Let me convince you that you are my *first* choice, that I don't know how to live without you anymore."

She sighed. "And if I'm not convinced?"

"Then I'll keep trying to convince you." I smiled. "I've got some pretty good ideas though, I think."

"Like what?"

I grinned at her. "I'm not telling you that. You'll have to wait and see."

"Fine."

I pulled her hand to me and kissed it. "But now, you still need to rest your voice."

She glared at me. "How's Van-El?"

I shrugged. "I haven't talked to him since right after he carried you off the transport. I did hear a report of a rescue on the news on the way here though, so that's good."

She nodded. "I'd like to meet him officially some time soon."

"Okay."

"I got an email from Joe last night," she said, not looking at me. "He wants to double date sometime. Assuming you can convince me, of course."

I nodded. "I'd like that. I like Joe. Even if he did repeatedly threaten to beat me up if I didn't take good care of you."

"I got an email from Lana, too," she blurted out.

"Really?" I tried to keep my tone neutral.

She nodded. "She had some interesting things to say."

"I'm sure she did," I said noncommittally.

"She told me to give you a chance and make you prove to me that I'm what you really want."

"She did?"

Lois nodded.

"So will you go with me?" My heart was in my throat as I waited for her answer.

She nodded again. "I'll go."

"Thank you," I said earnestly.

"But don't for one minute think it means you get to see me naked again."

I grinned. "Can I hope I will?"

She shrugged.

I reached out and brushed her hair off her face. "I didn't sleep much last night either. I hope you don't mind I stayed in your old room. I couldn't stand to be in our room without you there — with all of your things gone. And I thought about what I could do to convince you and I will admit that the idea of being naked with you again — once you're convinced, of course — is appealing." I was sure my voice had turned exceedingly husky. "Kissing you, making love to you, seeing what other interesting places we could find besides the bed, in front of that fire place at the cabin and the ceiling... Washing your hair again — but this time in the shower together. You driving me crazy. Driving you crazy using nothing but my... special abilities..."

She didn't look at me but she was turning eight shades of red. "I'm not sure I like you thinking about me like that at the moment."

"I'm your husband. It's my privilege. Heck, it's encouraged by society. And all of our parents, I might add. Do you know how much grief I've gotten from my parents because I *didn't* think of you like that?"

"That's irrelevant," she said.

"I know." I started to say something else, but the nurse chose that moment to walk in with Lois' discharge papers.

Fifteen minutes later, I had the Jeep pulled up in front of the hospital waiting for Lois to be wheeled out.

I held the door open for her and she was quickly settled in to the passenger seat.

~~~~~

Lois

I still wasn't sure I believed him, but the thought of doing those things with Clark... I could feel my body temperature rising at the mere thought of him washing my hair again, much less the other things he mentioned.

It was what I wanted and I was going to give him a chance to prove it to me.

The trip home was fairly silent, but he did hold my hand as often as possible. I didn't instigate it but I didn't pull it away either.

I thought it was interesting that he'd spent the night in my room. I wasn't sure what to think beyond 'interesting' but...

"Listen, while you spend some time with the boys and take a shower or whatever else you want to do, I'm going to go make some arrangements for later, okay?" Clark asked as we pulled up in front of the house.

"Sure."

"Any dinner preferences?"

"Something easy on my throat."

"Of course."

"Mommy!" Christopher walked carefully down the front steps and then ran towards me.

I picked him up and held him tight, his arms wrapped around my neck. The last time I'd seen him he'd told me he didn't like me because I hadn't taken them outside to play during my complete breakdown on Saturday.

"I mi' you, Mommy," he said quietly. "I wuv you yots."

"I love you, too, little man."

"Daddy say Va'-E' safe you."

I nodded. "Van-El saved me."

"I'll be back in a little bit," Clark said.

"Daddy say he ta' you to cabi' to ge' be'er."

"See you later," I said to Clark before turning back to Christopher. "That's right. Daddy's going to take Mommy to the cabin so she can rest."

"I'm glad." I hadn't seen Daddy walk out of the house carrying Nate.

He wrapped his free arm around me as we headed back inside. "You should have seen him last night, Princess. He loves you. I don't know why it took him so long to realize it but he does."

I shrugged noncommittally. "If you say so. I'm not totally convinced yet. Right now, I think I need to try to feed Nate."

I'd done a lot of pumping over the last couple of days — when I could anyway — and had them bring me a pump at the hospital after Clark left the night before. It had been two days since he'd nursed though. I was hoping he hadn't decided he was done completely.

I breathed a sigh of relief — for more than one reason — when he latched on and started nursing immediately.

Christopher came and sat with us, bringing a book to read.

I sat with them, nursing, reading, playing for nearly an hour before Jessica said she'd make lunch for them and — if I wanted her to — put them down for naps.

I went up to my old room and took a long shower, trying to wash the smoke and chemical smells out of my hair. I tried not to think about Clark helping me.

I failed.

I wanted to believe him, more than anything, but I didn't want to find out later it was all an act either.

I chose my clothes carefully as I packed. I wanted to look nice, but not too nice. Shorts that were a touch on the too short side — but not even close to 'Daisy Dukes'. A knit top that fit just right, but not too 'just right'.

I packed two sets of clothes. Clothes for if things went well — tops that showed a bit more cleavage, shorts that were a little shorter and tighter; after all Clark had said several times that babies hadn't destroyed my figure. I also packed clothes for if things didn't go as well as I hoped they would — pajama pants, T-shirts, strictly utilitarian underwear, tankini; I figured if things went really well and we decided to use the hot tub, swimsuits would be optional — right?

I tossed the John Deere shirt he'd given me for our anniversary in there as well before zipping up the suitcase.

There was a knock on my bedroom door.

"Come in," I called.

Clark took one look at the suitcase sitting on the bed and raised an eyebrow. "We're only going for a couple days."

I glared at him. "Well, there's two sets of clothes in there."

"Why?" he asked puzzled.

"One for if you convince me you're serious and one for if you don't."

He moved closer to me and ran his hands over my upper arms. "Well, I'll admit that if I can convince you, I'm kind of hoping we don't need clothes." He sighed. "But I've also resigned myself to the fact that just because I convince you this is what I really want, that doesn't necessarily mean I'll get to see you naked again right away."

I sighed. "We'll see how things go." I moved towards the bathroom and away from him. I tossed a couple things in a toiletry bag — including the birth control pills I'd started not long after Nate was born. The last time we'd been together had been completely unexpected and I wasn't ready for another baby. I was taking precautions on the off chance that something like that happened again on a day when our emotions were completely overwhelmed.

I'd thought he'd wanted to kiss me when I knocked him over onto the bed after he gave me my birthday present but he hadn't. I wasn't sure what, if anything, to read into that except that maybe he hadn't realized yet or whatever.

"I'm ready," I said, coming back out of the bathroom.

"Let's go say good-bye to the boys and we'll head up to the cabin."

I was so glad that Christopher wasn't in his 'I don't like Mommy' state anymore — even though I knew he hadn't really meant it. We gave them both hugs and kisses and headed down to the Jeep.

"Didn't you bring a suitcase?" I asked when I saw only a small bag in the back.

He shrugged. "Power of positive thinking?"

A minute later we were on the road heading towards the cabin.

"The media gave up pretty quickly," I commented when I realized that there weren't any trucks outside the main gate.

Clark grinned. I loved that grin. "They found a way around the main ordinance that kept them away before but the Pittsdale cops found a way around that."

"Good."

"And your dad had one arrested last night for trespassing, too."

"Good for him."

The drive passed in relative silence, with Clark holding my hand most of the way.

He pulled up in front of the cabin instead of pulling around to the garage but it wasn't like it was cold out and the biggest hazard was bird droppings on the windshield.

I sighed and waited for him to open my door for me.

"I can tell you're still not feeling a hundred percent," he said scooping me up into his arms.

I gasped and grabbed a hold of his neck.

"Besides," he said, his voice suddenly husky. "I never got to carry you over the threshold when we got married."

"You didn't want to and you've had plenty of opportunities to make up for it since then," I muttered.

"I've passed up plenty of opportunities to do lots of things I regret now," he told me, pressing his lips against my hair.

I reached out and opened the door as we got close enough.

He carried me into the cabin and I gasped again as I looked around.

"Clark..."

There were candles everywhere — not lit, of course. Rose

petals of all colors covered every surface. The floor, the couch, the short staircase to the room that we shared when we stayed here, even sprinkled on the kitchen table.

“What’s all this?” I finally asked.

He wrapped his arms around me, nuzzling my neck with his nose and lips. “I want to show you how much I love you.”

“This looks wonderful,” I admitted, “but it still doesn’t mean you’re going to see me naked.”

I extracted myself from his arms and headed towards the couch to sit down.

I could hear his sigh behind me as he returned to the Jeep to get our things.

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Part 146

Clark

“What’s all this?” Lois asked as I set her on the floor just inside the door of the cabin.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her body to mine. I gently kissed the long line of her neck. I knew she knew exactly what she was doing when she got dressed. A shirt that showed just enough but not too much, shorts that were just a touch too short so I could hardly keep my eyes on the road and not on her legs as we drove up here. “I want to show you how much I love you,” I told her between kisses.

I’d gone to every florist I could find in the tri-state area and had bought as many rose petals in as many different colors as I could find. I had scattered them all around the room, up the half staircase to our room, on our bed and around our room, I’d even left some in a glass bowl near the tub in our bathroom — just in case. I thought about lighting the candles all around the room as I held her to me, but it was still too bright outside.

“This looks wonderful, but it still doesn’t mean you’re going to see me naked.” She pulled away from me and headed towards the couch.

I knew it would take more than a few rose petals and candles to prove to her I was serious, but I sighed anyway as I went back to the Jeep and grabbed our bags.

When I made it back inside, she was fiddling with one of the rose petals.

“Black?” she asked as I walked towards our room. “Really?”

“What do you think it means?” I asked back as I went up the steps.

I heard her walking behind me.

“Death,” she said as she entered the room.

“It can,” I conceded. “But not always. In this case it means the death of old habits, the death of thoughts or ideas, a rejuvenation on the horizon. Courage.”

“I see.” She leaned against the door frame. “Do you know what all of these colors mean?”

I leaned against the bedpost. “Yes. Do you want to know?” There were nearly twenty different colors all together.

“Not right now,” she said, moving further into the room and heading for the large windows on the other side. She sighed and leaned her forehead against the window. “How do I know I can believe you?”

I moved behind her, resting my hands on her shoulders. “I don’t know,” I told her honestly. “It’s true though.” I kissed her shoulder just on the skin side of her top. “What I felt for Lana doesn’t begin to compare with what I feel for you, sweetheart.”

“What does that mean?” She sighed and I wasn’t sure she was aware that she’d tipped her head slightly so more of her neck was exposed for me to kiss.

I did just that before I spoke again.

“It means I feel so many things,” I told her. “And all at once... Happy but kinda scared... Excited... calm. Lost... found. Safe in a way I’ve never known, but in danger, too. This thing

with us, whatever it is... is stronger than me. Being with you is stronger than me alone. It may have taken me a long time to realize that, but I do; I have. I love you, more than I’ve ever loved anyone. More than I’ll ever love anyone ever again.”

“I want to believe you,” she said. “Really, I do.”

“But you’re not convinced yet,” I added.

She shook her head.

“I’d tell you to tell me what to do or say to convince you, but that wouldn’t work. If I just say what I already know you want to hear, it doesn’t mean nearly as much as if I come up with it on my own.”

I moved away from her and sat in one of the chairs nearby.

I reached for her hand and tugged on it. She resisted but finally moved to sit on my lap. I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her hair.

“When I saw that explosion and heard that gunshot, it was almost like the future flashed before my eyes. Without you in it. Would I have survived if something happened to you? Probably. I’d have to because I’d have two little boys depending on me. But, honestly, Lois... I don’t know how I’d make it. The same way Mom made it without Chris, I guess. One day at a time, but you know what? I don’t want to. The thought of a life without you isn’t much of a life at all.”

~~~~~

Lois

I loved the feeling of Clark’s arms around me. The way he’d kissed my neck.

But there was more to this than physical attraction — or there needed to be anyway. Physical attraction we’d always had in spades.

“I’ve been thinking about what life without you would be like for a long time,” I finally said quietly.

“And?”

“And I think that while it would be hard for a while, I’d manage. I’d find a way and I’d move on and, hopefully, someday, find someone else.”

“Is that what you want? You’ve told me before that you want to have a life with me, with our kids,” he said quietly. “But only if I really want it, too. And I do want it.”

I sighed and pushed myself up out of his arms and off of his lap. I couldn’t think with him that close to me.

“Everyone keeps telling me that you love me,” I said after wandering around for a minute.

“Like who?”

“Daddy and Lana, mainly.”

“Lana told you that?”

I nodded. “That’s part of what we talked about last week after you and Henderson left. She said something in the email last night, too.” I smiled slightly. “She said she never imagined herself playing matchmaker between you and your wife.”

Clark chuckled lightly. “I’d imagine not.”

“She also said that she and Chad and you and I are much better matches than you and she ever were.”

“I don’t know Chad very well, but I believe it.”

“How do you know Chad?”

“He’s from Smallville but a few years older than us. He dated one of my cousins for a while.”

“Ah. She said he gets to be in the strike contest this year.”

He grinned at me. “I guess I’ll have to kick his butt, too.”

“You won *once*, Randy.”

“Randy?”

I rolled my eyes. “Randy Johnson, six foot five, lefty. Killed a pigeon. You remember him, right?”

“There’s lots of Randy’s in the world,” he pointed out. “You could have meant Randy Jackson.”

I gave him a ‘you’ve got to be kidding me’ look. “What would an American Idol judge have to do with you throwing

baseballs?”

He shrugged. “It’s been so long since you’ve called me a nickname, I’d almost forgotten what it was like. I think the last time was after we found out you were pregnant with Nate and you called me Einstein.” He looked at me tenderly. “I still miss the sassy, take no prisoners Lois I first met.”

“I do, too. Maybe she’ll start to come back now that Navance is gone and the pressure is off.”

“I hope so.” He looked around. “Listen, I wasn’t planning to eat until later, but do you want a snack or something?”

“Actually, some ice cream sounds really good,” I told him, sitting in one of the other chairs. “Do we have any?”

“If we don’t, or if we don’t have the kind you want, I can go get it. Your preference, milady?” He stood and bowed slightly from the waist as he said it.

I rolled my eyes.

“Queen Lois of Lane, Ruler of Lane and Duchess of Kent?”

“Better.” I smirked at him.

“Your preference?”

I thought for a minute. “Just chocolate, I think. With chocolate syrup.”

“No whipped cream? Or nuts? Or a banana? Or cherries on top?”

I shook my head. “Not today.”

A few minutes later he returned with a bowl full of chocolate ice cream, drizzled in chocolate sauce.

“Perfect,” I said, taking it from him. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He sat on the floor in front of the chair and rested the back of his head against the end of the arm. “I have another surprise for you later,” he told me. “And if you’re up for flying, I’ve got some place I want to take you, too.”

“Everest?” I asked around a mouthful of ice cream.

He shook his head. “Wrong time of year — again.” He leaned his head against my knee. “I promise I’ll take you sometime this year though — during the off-season.”

I took another big bite of ice cream and didn’t respond. What was I supposed to say? Okay? You bet you will? Even if I decide I don’t really believe you?

“You’ve been my rock this week,” he said suddenly. “With everything from Christopher missing to Van-El and him not ready to talk to me and Christopher so excited about him and everything else... You knew what I needed to hear, when I needed to hear it.”

“It’s my job,” I told him.

“It’s more than that. If it had been three years ago — in the space we were in then — you wouldn’t have.”

Would I?

Probably not.

“Probably not,” I conceded. “But you’ve told me what I needed to hear from the beginning — most of the time anyway. Like the day I saw Lana and Linda.”

“We were still in it together at that point,” he said quietly. “I mean, we have been since then, but starting on Spring Break and until our anniversary, we weren’t. I meant it that day when I said you were beautiful and I still do and I hope — I pray — that we’ll make love again sometime soon.”

I did too, but I wasn’t ready to tell him that.

~~~~~

Clark

I wanted to kiss her.

Badly.

But I also knew she wasn’t ready for that.

We sat in silence as she finished her ice cream.

“Thank you,” she said again as she put her now empty bowl on the end table.

“My pleasure,” I said again.

“Did you really sleep in my room last night?” Lois asked

suddenly.

I nodded. “I was torn when I got back the night before and realized you’d moved out. Part of me was hurt that you’d do that without even talking to me first and another part of me knew I should have expected it and part of me was confused by the huge sense of loss that I felt. I’d known it was coming — that one of us would leave when the threat was gone — why did it hurt so bad? Why did I feel so empty?”

She didn’t say anything.

“I talked to Van-El for a while — I’ll tell you more about it later — but he made me think about some things. And then yesterday Lana asked me the hard questions about you and me and how I felt about you. I was starting to come to the realization that I needed you, but seeing you being held hostage... And then the explosion and gunshot right on top of each other...” I stood and paced in front of the window. “I don’t know how else to tell you, to show you, that this is where I want to be, but it is.”

She sighed and stood, moving to the window to stare out over the tree covered mountains. “I don’t either.”

“I guess maybe the only thing I can do is not leave. I’d really rather you were able to believe me. I hate to think what some kind of official separation would do to the boys — Christopher in particular because Nate’s not really old enough to understand — especially if we’re going to end up together, but I guess that would be preferable to us splitting up all together and that’s not what I want.”

Lois sighed again. “I want to believe you, really, I do. You said you had a whole night planned, right?”

“I do,” I confirmed.

“Well, then I guess we go through tonight and see what happens.”

“I guess so.” I had some things up my sleeve that I thought would go a long way towards convincing her.

I stood next to her staring out the window for a long time, her next to me, close but not close enough.

I moved closer to her and wrapped my arm around her, pulling her to my side.

She sighed softly and let me, wrapping an arm around my waist and resting her head on my shoulder.

I wasn’t sure how long we stood there, but the sun was getting lower in the sky.

I turned slightly, wrapping both arms around her and holding her to me.

This was it. This was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life.

In the arms of the woman I loved.

“Tell me about a couple more of the rose colors?” she asked softly.

“What color do you want to know about?”

“The turquoise.”

She would have to pick that one. “Turquoise is fertility — not that I’m hoping to get you pregnant again or anything like that, but it seemed to fit here at the cabin — and abundance and calm and self-respect.”

“Ah. What about the gold ones?”

“The promise of a new beginning.”

“Peach?”

“Sincerity.”

“Orange?”

I was sure my voice dropped an octave or two. “Fascination. Passion. Desire.”

“I’m guessing the orange and blue ones together don’t stand for the Gators.”

I chuckled lightly. “No. Blue is fantasy. Mystery. Mysterious beginnings of new things. So together I guess they’d be passion and mystery. Fantasy and desire.”

“Oh.” She barely breathed the word as she looked up at me.

I ran my hands lightly up and down her back before deciding I didn't have anything to lose.

I brought my hands up to frame her face, my fingers tangling in her hair.

And I kissed her.

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Part 147

Lois

~~~~~  
He was kissing me.

Me.

And I was kissing him.

His thumbs stroked my cheeks and I moaned as my arms found their way around his neck.

He took my breath away as his hands left my face and wrapped around me, pulling me closer to him.

And if I wasn't careful I was going to be completely overtaken by...

I sighed and let myself lean more fully against him, trusting him to support me.

His hand slid under the edge of my shirt until his warm fingers brushed lightly across my back just above the waistband of my shorts.

His lips left mine and trailed down my jaw line to my ear then my neck and as much of my shoulder as he could get to before he was stopped by my shirt. He worked his way back up to my face kissing each of my closed eyes before kissing the tip of my nose and then my lips again.

A small moan escaped from one of us as he found his way to the other side of my neck. I thought it came from me.

"I love that sound," he whispered before kissing the same spot again.

His hands were restless on my back, first rubbing up and down outside my shirt, before slipping back underneath again. One arm held me close to him while the fingers of the other hand drew small circles that gradually increased in size until they covered the entire small of my back. He reached the back of my bra and seemed to hesitate for a second before his fingers trailed down my spine.

This was going too fast.

I was going to say something but my lips were suddenly occupied again. He was so solid, I realized as I was pressed against his chest and my fingers trailed along his back, albeit outside his shirt, but his lips... His lips were soft on mine. This kiss wasn't demanding but insistent nonetheless and I was powerless to keep from kissing him back.

Before I realized what had happened, I was stretched out on the bed with him stretched out next to me, taking his shirt off. Or I was taking it off of him. Or some combination of the two. My shirt had already been lost somewhere in the process. He kissed me again, rolling on top of me, his weight pressing me into the mattress before he moved back.

"I love you," he whispered, one hand reaching up to brush a tangle of hair back from my face before he moved in for another kiss.

It was the intermission that I needed. Just enough for a single moment of clarity that this was moving way too fast.

I stopped him with a hand on his now-bare chest. "This isn't just physical, Clark. We've done physical and it was great, but this has to be more than that."

"I know." He shifted so he was lying next to me, running his hand up and down my bare arm, moving to kiss my shoulder, trailing little tiny kisses along my collar bone and up my neck. It wasn't fair. I couldn't think when he did that. "And it's not. I love you. More than anything. I love your spunk, your fire, the way you love our sons, the way you've protected Christopher, the way you've loved me when I was too dense to realize how much you

meant to me." He continued kissing along my shoulder and neck as he spoke.

I sighed. "I do love you. I've loved you for a long time, but my head is afraid to let my heart believe you."

"I don't blame you. I haven't done much to earn your trust in matters of the heart over the years."

He kissed his way back up my neck to my jaw line and then back to my lips.

I couldn't let this continue. Not now. I had to stay coherent.

I put both hands on his chest and pushed him back. "Please, Clark. Stop."

~~~~~  
Clark

How could I have not been doing this for the last three and a half years? We'd kissed the one night and made love together, but it was the aberration in our relationship to that point.

This...

This was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

But then...

I closed my eyes. I had her in my arms again and she was telling me to stop. I flopped onto my back, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "I'm sorry," I told her. "I shouldn't have done that."

"You shouldn't have kissed your wife?" She said with a trace of bitterness.

"No."

She sat up and started looking for her shirt. When she couldn't find it, she grabbed mine and pulled it over her head, standing and moving to stare out the window. It hung loosely on her, hanging well below the shorts she'd been wearing so it was like she didn't even have them on. I was certain she had no idea how irresistibly sexy she looked.

I knew she didn't understand what I meant. I sighed and moved to stand behind her, resting my hands on her shoulders and tugging gently until her back rested against me. "I shouldn't have kissed you like that because it's not something we normally do. It's something I want to do, very much, but it's not something you've given me permission to do, except once. Twice, if you count the cabin."

"And 'I do' wasn't permission enough?"

I shook my head, even though I knew she couldn't see me reflected in the window, not with the setting sun in her eyes. "No, it wasn't," I said softly. "And you know that. You'd be the first one to say that."

"Yeah, I would." She did lean back against me, allowing me to loop my arms loosely around her.

Her stomach chose that moment to growl.

I smiled and kissed her head. "I bet you're about ready for dinner."

She nodded. "Almost dying makes you hungry and I haven't had much besides that ice cream." She sighed. "And I'm sorry for almost letting us get carried away."

I held her tighter for a minute before whispering, "That's okay; not your fault. Do I want to make love to you again? Yeah, I do, but if you're not ready, not convinced that this is forever for me, that's okay. I'll do whatever I have to do until I convince you."

We stood there for a minute longer before I released her.

"Dinner actually is almost ready. Give me about five minutes?"

She nodded.

I headed back out into the now-darkened living room, first cooling the room down slightly with my breath and then lighting dozens of candles as I went.

I pulled dinner out of the fridge and heated it with my eyes. I set the table, complete with stemware and a bottle of wine.

I served up two plates and poured some water. I zipped into Sam's room where I changed into the tuxedo I'd left there earlier.

I knew Lois would be still wearing shorts and either her shirt or mine, but I had left her dress in the bathroom with a note attached to the hanger that if she wanted to dress up she could, but that she looked fabulous in whatever she wore.

I looked around the living room again, lighting a candle I'd missed the first time and starting a fire in the fireplace.

Satisfied it was as perfect — and romantic — as I could make it, I started the playlist I set up on my iPod — the one she'd given me before our first trip to Smallville. I'd hooked it up to the built-in stereo system earlier and now soft jazz music filled the air.

I went up the stairs and knocked on the still slightly open door.

"Just a minute," she called.

I frowned slightly. I'd have to make sure she didn't overdo it. Her voice still sounded a little raspy.

It was closer to three minutes before the door opened all the way and my breath caught in my throat.

"You look gorgeous," I whispered.

She'd put on the dress and done something I couldn't figure out to her hair. She was without make-up, it looked like, but I thought she'd never looked more beautiful.

"Your tie's crooked," she told me with a smile, reaching out to fix it. "There."

"See? I need you."

I offered her my arm and escorted her across the living room, holding her chair for her as she sat down.

"Thank you." She looked at the table and around the room. "Everything looks wonderful."

"I try," I said giving her one of my best smiles. "Would you like some wine?"

"Just a little bit," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger close together. "I don't want anything to cloud this night — to cloud my judgment. If this is really going to happen with us, I want to be clear headed."

I nodded before pouring just a bit of wine into her glass.

We ate in near silence — but companionable silence, not strained.

"Do you want dessert?" I asked as she finished.

She shook her head. "Maybe later. Right now, I'm pretty full."

I stood up and held out a hand. "May I have this dance?"

She regarded me contemplatively before nodding and grasping my hand lightly. I led her to an open space near the fireplace and moved to my iPod, starting another playlist.

I turned back to her and rested one hand lightly on her waist, using the other to take her hand in mine.

But something was off.

We didn't fit right.

I frowned as it hit me. "You're too short."

~~~~~

Lois

I stopped moving and looked up at him. "Excuse me?"

"Usually my chin is at your temple when we dance," he said with a frown.

I smirked at him. "You didn't bring me any shoes to wear with the dress. I'm in socks."

He looked down to see me wiggling my toes in my bright pink fuzzy socks.

"Oops." He had the good grace to look chagrined.

"It's okay." I moved closer to him, resting my head on his shoulder, his chin on the top of my head as we moved slowly through the living room.

I smiled slightly as I recognized many of the songs from the last time we had really danced — on board the cruise ship. We'd danced a few times since then, but only a song or two here and there at the Adoption Option Fundraiser or things of that nature.

I loved this and I loved him. I'd stay like this forever if I

could.

I didn't know how long we danced, but I never wanted it to end.

"Are you ready for some dessert yet?" he asked, his voice deeper than I'd ever heard it.

My breath caught in my throat as I looked up at him, raw need and desire emanating from his eyes. I managed to nod. "That sounds good," I whispered.

He didn't let go of my hand until we were back at the table and he held my chair for me. He sure was going all out.

In a flash, there was a plate of chocolate decadence on the table.

One plate.

One fork.

Right in the middle.

He sat across from me and picked the fork up. "Here." He held a bite out for me. I hesitated then opened my mouth to allow him to feed me the cake.

~~~~~

Clark

I was sure she had no idea how she looked as I slid the fork back out of her mouth.

I swallowed hard. Maybe this part wasn't such a good idea after all.

I continued to alternate between us until the cake was gone.

"Thank you, Clark. That was delicious." She moved like she was going to stand up.

"Wait. Please."

She sat back down.

I took both her hands in mine before taking a deep breath and starting the speech I'd been practicing since I left the hospital the night before. "We've been through a lot since we first met, Lois. We were both dating other people — me more seriously than you, but still. Then we found ourselves here, in a life or death situation, and we managed to survive it. You saved my life." My voice cracked. "For that alone, I could never thank you enough. And we made a baby that night — we didn't know it but we did. I still don't *really* remember it, but what I do remember was amazing. A few weeks later, we found ourselves in another situation where there seemed like there was no way out, but we found a way. It wasn't what either of us would have chosen at the time, but the decisions we made got us out of there. I couldn't let him hurt you or the baby, so we did what we had to do."

I took a deep calming breath. "You became the first and only person I've ever told about myself. I know my mom made me do it, but I'm so glad that I did. It was nice not to have to hide who I am and what I can do from someone and I'm glad it was you. Other people would have freaked out that they were married to an alien, but you didn't. You took it in stride and read me the riot act about wanting to be like my dads instead. And you were right to.

"And then, almost three years ago, you gave birth to our son."

She opened her mouth to say something, but I stopped her with a finger to her lips. "We've talked about this before. I believe that Christopher is my son. I know I don't have any proof of that, but that's what my gut says and until and unless a DNA test someday says otherwise, I'll continue to believe it. I love him regardless, you know that — I'd go to the ends of the Earth for him — but I do believe that he's my son, *our* son."

I rubbed the back of her hands lightly with my thumbs. "And then your dad had a heart attack and you asked me to help you forget, just for a little while. I wasn't sure what you meant at first and you really caught me off-guard when you kissed me and asked me to make love to you. I wanted to say 'no', or I think I did because that wasn't something we did — something we'd said we never really planned on doing, something you told me never to do again unless I was serious about *you* — but from the

moment you first kissed me until I woke up the next morning, there was no one — nothing — in my world but you. I beat myself up over that for a long time, but you know what I realized, even then?”

I didn't wait for her to answer as I stared at the hands I held in my own. “That night, for the first time, I felt complete; like I'd found the other half of myself, but I didn't want to admit it to anyone. Not to you. Not to myself. And then we found out you were pregnant again and I was happy that you were having my baby and this time we'd know he was my baby. You gave me a connection to Earth I hadn't fully realized I needed.

“I know how much you hated being on modified bed rest but you did what you had to because you already loved Nate so much. Then he was born and he wasn't entirely healthy. You wouldn't let me blame myself, no matter how much I wanted to, because Nate's half-Kryptonian. And, in the great scheme of things, his health problems weren't all that serious, but they were happening to *our* baby and I held you in my arms as we cried together wondering if he was actually going to be okay.”

I let go of one of her hands and wiped her tears away with my fingers. “I felt sucker punched when you said you would leave. When you said that leaving then would be better than staying. I thought it was just because I was caught off-guard by it, but it was more than that. And not just because you would have given me custody of Nate who ended up needing lots of care for a long time. Because you would have been gone. I didn't realize at the time how much that would have affected *me*. And not just because I can't get my own ties straight.”

She smiled through her tears at that.

I paused for a minute, trying to keep my composure. “And then we found out that you were safe — you and Christopher were safe. I went to tell my parents and, somehow, the whole story tumbled out. Dad asked me if I could live without my boys and I told him no in an instant. Then he asked if I could live without you and I didn't have an answer for him. When I realized you moved out, I was dumbfounded. I should have expected something like that — either you gone or my things thrown on the yard or something — but I didn't. I couldn't sleep that night because you weren't there. I hadn't realized that I unconsciously listen to your heartbeat at night when I'm going to sleep. I used to listen to Christopher's, before he was born, when things were *so* tough, to remind me of why we were doing this. But yours... I'd never realized how comforting it is to hear your heart close to me. There were lots of other reasons I couldn't sleep that night, but that was one of them.”

“When I saw you in that ship with a gun to your head, my heart stopped. When I heard the explosion and the gunshot and saw Van carry you out the door... I think I forgot to breathe. Heaven forbid, if something ever happened to the boys, it would absolutely tear me apart, but if I didn't have you with me, I couldn't do it. There's no way.

“And you're an amazing reporter. Your writing makes mine better, you know that right? Who else could get a police inspector to try to get her fired the first week?” She smiled at that, too. “And besides all that — I think Pete said it best — you're *hot*.”

I took another deep breath. “But more importantly... You've held me when I needed holding — like after Pop Pop died and this week when Christopher seemed to prefer Van to me. You've been there for me when I was depressed and moody. You've said the things I needed to hear when I needed to hear them — everything from ‘I can't do this anymore’ on our first anniversary to knock some sense into me to telling me that I'm Christopher's hero and Nate's hero and Mom's hero. And your hero. I can't imagine everything I've put you through over the last three and a half years makes me a hero, but it was good to hear anyway. And I hope that I can make up for it. That I can find a way to really be your hero.”

I let go of her hand and slid onto my knee next to her, digging in my pocket for the box I'd put there earlier.

“Lois, will you marry me?”

\*\*\*

Part 148

Lois

~~~~~

Marry him?

I was already married to him.

“I'm already married to you,” I said.

“I know.” He took my left hand in his. “Where's your wedding band?” he asked, shocked. “Did you take it off when you moved out?”

He looked back up at me and I could see the pain in his eyes.

I shook my head. “I took it off yesterday. I had to,” I told him. “Dr. Platt told me I had to take it off before I could get on the transport. It's in my bag with my earrings — I just forgot all about it with everything that happened. That's all, I promise.”

He nodded. “Okay. I believe you. Where's your bag?”

“In the other room.”

Clark literally flickered in front of me and two rings were now in the box.

He took a deep breath. “So, anyway, now... I want to do this right. I'm on one knee, with a ring, proposing properly after what I hope was a romantic evening of dinner and dancing and dessert in the remote mountain cabin where we made love for the first time, even if we didn't remember it for a long time. I want to have a wedding with our family and friends and your dad walking you down the aisle — either in Metropolis or Smallville or both. Christopher and Nate involved somehow — as ring bearers or something.”

He smiled at me that grin that I loved so much — the one that could light up a room. “Standing at the front of the church trying to keep my feet on the ground when I see you for the first time in a beautiful white dress; being incredibly nervous before I walk out there. Trying to get my tie straight without your help. My hands shaking a little bit as I put the ring on your finger. Taking our wedding vows again, knowing this time it really is forever instead of just until we can get out of the country. Knowing that when we say in sickness or in health, to love and cherish and all those other things that we really mean them in a way we didn't the first time. I love you, Lois. I think I always have, even before I knew it, before I knew you. I don't love you and know I can live with you. I love you and know I can't live without you. So what do you say? Will you marry me?”

By the time he finished, tears were running down my face. I nodded. “Yes. I'll marry you. Of course.”

He took the ring out of the box and looked at it contemplatively. “You know, my mom's engagement ring is the one that Chris gave her the night they got married; the night they found me. My dad never got her one, though he offered more than once to buy her one if she wanted. If you want me to get you one, I will, gladly, but this one was one that your dad gave me yesterday. I never told you that last year — right after Nate was born — he and I had a conversation about us. He'd suspected for a long time that things weren't what they seemed. Last night, we talked again and I promised him that I was going to do my best to be the husband you deserved. He gave this to me because he thought you might want it and he didn't want to give it to me when we weren't... real. It was your mom's and I have the wedding band, too, if you want it.”

I swiped at the tears on my cheeks. “It's perfect,” I whispered. I'd always loved my mom's ring and had recognized it immediately when Clark opened the box. He slid the wedding band on and then Mom's engagement ring. I rested my hand on his cheek. “I can't live without you either, Clark. I've known that for years. I've known it since the first time we went to Smallville,

I think. I loved you before that, before I knew you. I think I fell in love with you when you were standing there, in a towel, and threw my attitude back in my face, even if I didn't realize it for a long time. I loved you when I thought you hated and resented me. I loved you when you loved me that night, helping me forget for a little while how close we came to losing my dad. I loved you when you put your life on hold to protect me and a baby you had no idea was yours. I want everything you said, too. A chance to connect our lives forever in front of family and friends and know that it's forever this time."

He kissed my fingers near where the rings were. "I love you, Lois. I'm just sorry it took me so long to realize it." He looked up at me and I could see it all there, written in his eyes. "How long do you think it'll take to plan a wedding?"

~~~~~  
Clark

I stood up as she shrugged and pulled her up with me, into my arms where my chin rested on her head.

She sighed. "I don't know. Six months? Depends on when we want to have it and where and all those kinds of things, I guess. How much notice we want to give our guests. The last wedding I was a part of, the planning took about fifteen minutes."

She turned her head to rest her cheek on my chest as I chuckled. "I remember it took a lot longer to plan how to break you out and even then the Jack, who was supposed to get you out of the hospital room, got stuck somewhere. Last I heard, they weren't sure who it was that actually helped you."

"Well, I'm glad that someone stepped in."

"Me, too. I would have gone in myself if it had taken you too much longer to get to that alley."

"I'm glad you didn't have to." She pulled back and looked at me. "You'll never believe what Lana asked me."

I was sure I looked puzzled. "Lana? I think I missed something."

"Well, I was just thinking that you would have flown me out of there and she said something in her email about flying with Van-El. She thought it would be cool." She smiled at me. "I have to say I'm glad she isn't the one you fly with."

"Me, too." I tucked her hair behind her ear. "I couldn't really define it at the time, but I was jealous when I saw him fly into the newsroom with you. *I'm* the only one who should fly with you like that."

"Well, he might fly with me like that sometimes, but you're the only one who gets to fly home with me."

"Do you know how glad I am for that?" I asked her.

"You know," she said, her fingers playing with the collar of my jacket. "The only time I've gotten to take one of these off of you... It wasn't a very good night and I didn't really enjoy it as much as I could have."

"I don't remember much about that night," I told her. "Not once Mom told me about Pop Pop. As long as I have you, I won't have to worry about getting my own tie straight."

She laughed and I rubbed her back lightly.

What I really wanted to do was kiss her.

Kiss her and never let her go.

Kiss her and make love to her.

But she'd said earlier it was too much, too soon. Was that still the case? Now that she'd agreed to be my wife again?

~~~~~  
Lois

He seemed to be struggling with something as we stood there, his arms tightening around me. I don't know how long we stood there before I finally spoke. "Clark?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"Why did you want to know how long it's going to plan a wedding?" I asked.

"Just wondering..."

"What?" I asked as he didn't continue.

He shook his head. "Just curious. Wondering how long it takes to plan a wedding."

I didn't believe him, but it didn't seem like the time to press that issue. "Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"You *can* kiss me you know." And I wanted him to, desperately.

"You were here earlier. I'm afraid if I kiss you I won't want to stop," he whispered huskily. "Earlier you weren't ready, and you were right not to be, and I didn't know if you might want to wait for our next wedding night. Or even just for a while longer or what."

That was why he was asking how long it took to plan a wedding.

I took a deep breath and asked what I was afraid to. "What would you say if I did? Or if I wasn't ready for that tonight anyway?" I couldn't look at him as I asked, but I needed to know. If I wasn't willing to sleep with him here, now, tonight, would he still want to stay?

"I love you, Lois, and part of that is that I want to make love to you again — over and over, for the rest of our lives. But more important than me wanting to make love to you is you being ready; you really accepting that this is forever for me. And if you're not ready to make love again, then we wait until you are."

"Do you really mean that?"

He pressed a kiss to my hair. "I really mean that. Though, once we get married again — officially — I might have a hard time keeping my hands off you, but if you want to wait until then..."

I shifted so I could look at him. "That was what I need to hear. I need to know it wasn't just about the physical."

"It's not," he told me brushing my hair back. "It's not just about the physical. It's about so much more than that. It's about thinking back over the last three years and realizing that I couldn't have done this with anyone else. I can't imagine my life without you — all the little things you've done over the years to make my life easier, taking care of the boys, loving them, loving me when I wasn't being very loving towards you. Being willing to let me go if that was what I really wanted," he finished softly. "But it's not. It's not what I want. What I want is you. To build a life with you. And if waiting to make love is what you need from me, then that's what you get."

I smiled at him through my tears. "Thank you," I whispered. "But you know what? We're already officially married. We have two sons together. I think we're probably okay." I smiled at him, playing with his tie. "Besides, I want the chance to take a tux off of you."

"That's another thing." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We've been together twice and we have two kids. Are we going for three for three?"

I shook my head. "After Nate was born, I started birth control pills, just in case. I knew that if you ever really kissed me again, I wouldn't be able to — wouldn't want to — stop. We're good."

"Yes, we are," he told me with a cheeky grin as he trailed finger up my spine, giving me chills. "We're good *together*."

I smacked him lightly. "Yes, we are. And it was more than twice — once here — but after Daddy... I seem to remember someone being insatiable."

"That was you," he said. My eyes closed as his fingers brushed against my hair at my temple.

I sighed happily. "Maybe, but it was you, too. And what I *meant* was we're covered as far as birth control goes."

The relief was evident on his face. "I know we haven't talked about whether we want any more kids or not, but I don't think now's the time if we do."

"I know." I smiled at him. "You made that beautiful speech

and asked me to marry you. I said yes and you still haven't kissed me. If you don't kiss me soon, I may have to take matters into my own hands and kiss you."

Another grin slowly crossed his face. "I guess I better kiss you then."

"And once you start," I whispered. "Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

"I won't," he whispered back, his hands moving to frame my face. "I love you, Lois Lane-Kent and I'm going to spend the rest of my life loving you."

"I love you, Clark Kent, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life letting you."

He grinned. "I'm so glad."

He lowered his face to mine and kissed me until I was breathless.

"Hold that thought," he whispered. He released me and disappeared. When the blur stopped, he was standing in front of me wearing a pair of silk boxers and a matching shirt that hung open. There were champagne flutes in each hand. "Didn't spill a drop," he said proudly.

I took the glasses from him and set them on the table. "I don't want anything to cloud this moment. But I do seem to be a bit overdressed and it would take me a lot longer to change than it does you." I looked up at him with a pout. "I didn't get to take your tux off." I reached out and trailed a finger down his chest, stopping at his belly button before moving closer to him and wrapping my arms around him under his shirt, feeling his warm body under my fingertips.

"Well, then I guess we'll have to save what I brought for you — hoping things would turn out well — for later." He took my face in his hands and kissed me again. "And you'll get to take my tux off another night," he whispered before kissing me again.

And again.

And again.

I didn't even notice as he floated us towards the fireplace.

This time we'd both remember what happened here, at a cabin in the woods.

This time was forever.

THE END

Neodesha/Smallville, KS:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/cgi-bin/boards/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=010202

Smallville to Kent Farm:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/cgi-bin/boards/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=010219

Kent Farm:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=010225

Kent Farm:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/cgi-bin/boards/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=1&t=010239

Smallville, KS and surrounding area:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/cgi-bin/boards/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=1&t=010250

Link to the FDK thread with pics of the Lane house [scroll down for a link to a fuzzy basement layout]:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=010265

Chapter Notes

4:

Madame Medusa is from 'The Rescuers'.

Fred Garner is the fictional President Garner from the show. He was never given a first name but the actor's first name is Fred so... In reality, Bill Clinton was the second president who was impeached.

5:

NTNF — New Troy National Forest

79:

David Eckstein article:

<http://deseretnews.com/article/1,5143,600157461,00.html>

99:

<http://www.hemingwayhome.com/HTML/guides.html>

107:

Cote de Pablo plays Ziva David [Da-veed], Israeli Mossad officer working for NCIS.

Sean Murray plays Timothy McGee, MIT/John's Hopkins graduate/Special Agent/Computer guru. He is also popular author Thom E Gemcity.

Mark Harmon plays Leroy Jethro Gibbs, the experienced agent who runs the team [which also includes Michael Weatherly playing Anthony DiNozzo].

Jenny Shepard was the director of NCIS before her death.

Don Bellasario is the creator of both JAG/NCIS and still executive producer [I think].

114:

Nate's story is based largely on my son's. For pics, see the end of the chapter 114 post on the boards:

http://www.lcficmbs.com/ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=010519

124:

Clark's tie:

<http://www.loisandclarkarchive.com/SecondSeason/LL/LuckyLeon114.jpg>

125:

Yes, I shamelessly stole a plot device from Nanfic... And probably somewhere else because I'm almost certain that hers wasn't the first time I'd seen it...

126:

Clark's tie:

<http://www.loisandclarkarchive.com/ThirdSeason/JSN/JustSayNoah130.jpg>

Notes on the story in general:

Thank you so much for sticking with me this far!! A couple people said some things at the end of posting this that I did want to address...

Some complained that the second bad guy who kidnapped Christopher came out of the blue and the first A plot needed to be resolved first. Sometimes that's not how life is. One situation doesn't resolve before the next one pops up. And really that one was over pretty quick.

Same with Van-El, that he came out of the blue and it was like starting a new story before this one was over. I can see that to an extent, but regardless of whether there's a sequel or not [there is in Unanswered Prayers and Someone Else's Dreams], the end of this story isn't the end of *their* story. Van-El is in Unanswered Prayers and Someone Else's Dreams so you can learn more about him/Krypton/etc. there if you want to.

[Did I mention that A plots are the bane of my existence? And should only exist to further the B plot?]

Others said that Navance was a non-threat.

I saw him as someone who had complete power within his own little world and wanted to get back at someone who got in his way. Did he ever really intend to do anything to them? Not a clue but as a dictator he had a lot of other things on his plate and I saw him as taking great delight in making their lives miserable with continual reminder letters — something he could do fairly easily without distracting from running his country. That's how I saw him more than as someone who would actually try to kidnap Christopher, but L/C, of course, had no way of really knowing that. I think fear is often like that [though usually not on that kind of scale — an insane dictator threatening your son]. We're afraid but maybe we don't need to be. Maybe it's a realistic fear [as in

this case], but in the end, it resolves fairly easily. I'm not sure what would have been gained by having Navance actually kidnap Christopher or start a lawsuit or whatever. I think we've all known someone like him [albeit with less power] who lived to make others miserable.

As for Mindy... We have no idea where she's been or what she's been up to in the meantime — for all we know she's been in prison which would limit her presence in Lois and Clark's [and Sam's lives].

The ending *is* incomplete and not because I want people to read UP/SED, but because it's not the end but rather the beginning of their lives together. They still have things to work through. To have wrapped them all up in a neat bow would have been too quickly IMO — some of the things they have to work through will take months or longer.

Thank you again, dear reader, for sticking with me! CarolM

As of the uploading of this story, Unanswered Prayers is being edited for the archive and should be up shortly. It has been posted on the boards, but the archive version will also be a 'director's cut' with several additional scenes not found on the boards. Someone Else's Dreams is currently stalled but I do hope to finish it before long.