

Backwards III: House of Lane

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Lois is starting to settle into Metropolis when she and Clark decide to do something a little crazy -- right before someone out of Clark's past tries to ruin everything.

Author's Notes:

I am still, months later, squeeing over the fact that KathyB -- yes, that Kathy -- was my beta for this! I don't know how many abrupt stops she brought me to before I ended up changing directions. She helped cure Clark of his turdiness and for that she has my [and Lois', I'm sure] eternal gratitude!

I don't own the characters -- I just wanted to play in the sandbox :). Some of the lines you may recognize from elsewhere -- like, say, the show. Imagine that :).

Part 1

Lois rolled over and realized that something was wrong. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something was definitely wrong.

She rolled, reaching for the warm body she knew should be next to her, but all she found were cold sheets.

She pushed herself into a sitting position, leaning against the headboard and yawning. A figure out on the balcony caught her eye.

There he was.

She slipped out of bed and padded across the large, open room until she reached the French door. She opened it and went to stand behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her cheek on his back.

"I missed you," she murmured. "I woke up and you weren't there."

"Sorry. I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep."

"Bad dream?"

He nodded. "Not as bad as I would have expected normally, but yeah."

"I'm glad."

They stood there for another long moment. "Why don't you go get some more sleep?" he finally asked. "I won't be too much longer, I don't think."

"Do you want to talk some more?"

He shook his head. "I wrote up the Superman story a little while ago. No one else had anyone out there because it's so far out of town -- probably a two and a half hour drive -- so Perry should be able to use it tomorrow afternoon and have the exclusive. I couldn't say *I'd* been there, but I had some Superman quotes and some quotes from emergency personnel via Superman -- I was careful about how it was worded and I asked the head highway patrolman there what he wanted to have make the newspaper if I 'happened' to run into a reporter who wanted to talk about it so I'm in the clear there but..."

"We can do some follow-ups by phone in the morning," Lois told him practically. "Or did you already send it in?"

"No, not yet. That was my thought, too -- that we could make some calls tomorrow." He took a deep breath and blew it out

slowly before pushing back from the railing. He turned to put his arms around her. "Thank you for being here tonight."

She leaned up enough to kiss him softly. "I wouldn't be anywhere else."

She turned, taking her hand in his and leading him back to bed.

Lois could feel him relaxing as she spooned behind him, one arm around his stomach holding him to her.

Her mind was wide awake and wandered back over the last week -- week! -- since she'd first met the man she was now holding in her arms.

He'd shown up at Kent Farms, her family's bed and breakfast, and would have taken her breath away at the first instant if she hadn't been annoyed that he was interrupting her baking for the Corn Festival.

They'd spent two days -- apart and then together -- hunting down the Irigs and the military men who were tearing up the Irig property. In the process, she'd found herself falling in love with the man behind the cape. She'd figured out his secret identity pretty quickly after they found the spaceship that had brought him to New Troy as a baby, though she admitted that he'd helped by pushing his hair off his face as she asked him if he thought Superman might work at the Daily Planet.

They'd been kidnapped and fought off Colonel Trask, eventually killing him when she and Trask had tumbled over a cliff near Parsons Lake. Clark and one of Trask's men had pulled her up. Clark's parents had come for the Corn Festival and to make sure he was okay after his exposures to the rock she'd dubbed Kryptonite.

Sunday, five days after she'd met him, she'd found herself on the plane his - apparently very wealthy -- grandfather had chartered to take the three Lanes back to Metropolis.

Within hours, she had a job as Clark's partner at the Daily Planet and they headed to the Metropolis Grand on their first assignment. They spent two nights in the honeymoon suite trying to figure out what Apocalypse Consulting was up to.

And they did. They were able to use Superman's navy connections as well as the connections to Jimmy's dad at the FBI, who'd already been investigating Congressman Harrington.

They'd come back from her third official day on the job and second day in the newsroom to find that Nathan Lane, Clark's wonderfully quirky and decidedly blunt grandfather, was having a fundraiser for one of his charities. They'd walked down the stairs and to the west wing of the house together, danced one dance, and then Clark had disappeared.

It wasn't until she'd returned to her room several hours later that she found him. He'd spent hours at a horrific crash on one of the turnpikes as it neared the state border. He'd decided earlier in the evening that the authorities could handle the original crash but then...

A big rig had run over three cars, crushing them, apparently without the driver ever touching his brakes. Lois hadn't seen any of the pictures yet, but she knew Clark wouldn't be this disturbed over something trivial. He'd even started to blame himself for not going when he'd heard about the first accident but she'd nipped that in the bud and knew he actually did agree with her -- he did *need* some time off from being Superman and if it hadn't been for the semi-truck, there would have been no real need for Superman at all.

She sighed. He'd asked if he could stay with her, to help keep the dreams away like he'd done for her a couple of times since Trask had dropped over that cliff.

It had been a very interesting first week together, and part of her hoped that not all of her life in Metropolis would be as exciting, but the rest of her craved the excitement of the big city. She'd felt truly alive as they'd walked through downtown Metropolis earlier in the day -- even if meeting Clark's Assistant

District Attorney ex-girlfriend had put a bit of a damper on it.

She tightened her hold on him but startled slightly as it hit her. It was the eighth night that she'd known him -- they'd met late the Tuesday before and now it was sometime early morning the following Wednesday. In those eight nights, they'd slept in the same bed, for one reason or another, for half of them.

She felt safe with him. Even before she'd known he was Superman, she'd felt safe with him.

And she was falling in love with him. She wasn't ready to say the three little words yet -- and neither was he -- but both were clearly headed in that direction.

When they'd gone to bed initially, he'd been wearing a shirt but it had been discarded at some point and she snuggled closer to his warmth.

She softly kissed his back and willed herself to sleep.

Part 2

Clark took a big bite of his scrambled eggs, raising his fork in greeting as his grandpa walked into the kitchen.

"Morning, Clarkie," he said, heading to the refrigerator to pull out a gallon of milk.

"Morning, Gramps."

"Missed you last night. Everyone was asking where you took off to."

"Sorry about that. Something came up very unexpectedly."

"Was it bad?" Nate asked quietly.

Clark pushed his eggs around on his plate. "How long have you known?"

He snorted. "That my grandson moonlights in tights?"

Clark nodded.

"Since you first showed up on the space transport?"

Clark looked up, surprised. "Really? That long?"

Nate nodded. "I figured it out a long time ago -- that there was something different about your adoption. Sam had to ask for some money about the time they found you -- a lot of it -- to do something he never explained. I'd imagine it had something to do with your birth certificate."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"It's your life, Clarkie. Your secret. I know you have very good reasons for not telling people and I figured when you were ready for me to know, you'd tell me and if you never did, I understood that, too."

Clark slowly chewed a bite of his bacon. "When did you first realize that I might be really different?"

"I heard about the UFO hunters up at the cabin and I never really believed that one of Ellen's college friends had met them at the cabin and given them her baby. I never thought they'd done something... illegal like steal a baby or something, but I knew there was something very unusual about your adoption from the beginning."

"I thought they told everyone they were looking for pieces of a satellite," Clark said, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Oh, they did, but no one really believed it. No one knew your folks had been there that weekend -- they hadn't gone into town at all -- so no one sent anyone to the cabin to check on anything. But everyone there knew they were looking for a UFO or some other space material."

Clark leaned back in his seat. "Wow. I never would have guessed that you knew that much that long ago."

Nate poured cereal into a bowl. "Well, I never really thought you were an alien," he admitted. "But once I read your first article about Krypton and everything, it all made sense."

"Well, I didn't know about all that till I was like fifteen."

"And that's why you didn't help out at the summer camps anymore, right? You were getting your powers?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah. Things were just too weird for me to trust myself in that kind of situation."

Gramps started to say something but was interrupted by the phone ringing. He answered and waved to Clark before walking into the other room.

Clark could hear the clicking of heels on the tile in the entryway. He smiled as Lois walked into the kitchen. She looked crisply professional and ready for her first official day in the office.

"Good morning," she said brightly.

"Morning. You look very nice," he told her as she slid onto the bar stool next to him. He leaned over for a quick kiss. "Very nice for your first official day as my assistant."

She smacked him on the shoulder. "Don't let it go to your head, Lane."

"Can I get you something for breakfast?"

Lois shook her head. "Just some coffee. I don't normally eat much first thing in the morning. I'll grab something when we get to work."

Clark, almost literally, inhaled the rest of his food before wiping his mouth on his napkin. "Ready to go?" He looked up at her to see her mouth hanging open. "What?"

"You... you *inhaled* your food," she gaped.

He shrugged. "But I'd never inhale your chocolate chip cookies. Those are meant to be savored." He winked at her. "Ready?"

"Sure."

He picked up his suit coat and shrugged it on before heading towards the garage. They climbed into his Jeep and headed towards Metropolis.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Lois asked, taking a sip of her coffee.

He shrugged. "We'll do some more follow-up on the Harrington stuff and the accident last night. I've got a call in to a source about some of the Bureau 39 guys still on the move with some sort of new UFO sighting or something but I don't expect anything to come of it. Probably some of Trask's men still on the loose. Sarah said she had a story for us so, if we have a chance to talk to her, we might come up with something. I've heard rumblings about some stuff with city council. The dock workers are talking about a strike." He shrugged. "We'll see what the day brings."

"Sounds good."

"You know," Clark said thoughtfully, taking her hand in his. "We haven't been out on a real date yet."

"What do you call the Corn Festival dance?"

"True," he admitted. "But I meant a date where I pick you up at the door and take you out to a nice dinner and maybe dancing or a movie or something."

"Then no, we haven't."

"So whaddya say? How about tonight?" He grinned at her. "Will you go out with me?"

She laughed. "Sure. Where're we going?"

"I was thinking Callard's for dinner and then we can decide what we want to do after that. We could go for a walk by the waterfront or..."

"A flight through the sky?"

He chuckled. "I don't see why not."

"Then you've got yourself a date, Mr. Lane."

"Seven sound good to you?"

"Sure. Need directions?"

Clark laughed out loud at that, to the point that Lois couldn't help but join him. When he finally caught his breath, he pulled her hand towards him and kissed the back of it. "Dad always said to marry a girl who could make me laugh. Guess we've got that covered."

"You were the one who came up with having Jimmy get Perry an Elvis costume," she reminded him. "It wasn't my idea to do that and we laughed hysterically."

"I need to remember to give him money for that -- I didn't think he'd really do it." Clark let go of her hand to turn into the parking garage. "Here we are."

Lois picked up a bagel at the stand near the entrance. They headed to the newsroom and she started to get her desk more organized to her liking. Jimmy had left a post-it note on her computer letting her know that he'd be by later to help her set up her email and show her everything else on the network. Clark logged in and checked his email.

He looked up when he heard his name.

"Clark Lane. Where have you been hiding?"

A grin split his face. "Star!" He stood and gave the woman a big hug. "How are you? I haven't seen you in ages."

"I could say the same for you, honey." She set her purse down on his desk. "Now. What's this I keep getting about you getting married last week?"

Part 3

Lois looked up from the society page's picture of her and Clark dancing the night before when a black woman started talking to Clark. Probably about her parents' age, the woman looked pretty much like anyone else -- except for the sheet of tin foil on her head. Lois blinked when she saw that.

He smiled widely, giving the lady a big hug as they talked.

"What's this I keep getting about you getting married last week?" she said fairly loudly.

Clark groaned and turned her around to face Lois. "Star, this is Lois Kent. She just started at the Daily Planet and we spent Sunday, Monday and Tuesday undercover as honeymooners. She's also my new girlfriend. Does that explain it?"

Lois stood and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

Star shook her hand warily. "Same."

Clark's phone rang and he excused himself to answer it.

Star moved closer to Lois. "Seriously. You two get married last week?"

Lois shook her head. "No. We just met late last Tuesday night."

The other woman frowned. "I started getting the 'Clark got married' vibe on Wednesday night. It woke me up." Her brow furrowed in thought. "You didn't run off to Vegas or somethin'?"

Lois shook her head. "We, um, actually fell asleep together that night, but that's it. Nothing more than that. I was hurt, we were talking..." She shrugged. "No wedding."

Well, not officially anyway. The standing joke in Smallville for years had been that if a couple sleeps together in a bed -- even if only for purposes of actually *sleeping* - they were legally married.

But that was just... rural legend. Kind of like a couple being legally married if they registered at a hotel as husband and wife. She and Clark had done that, too, but it didn't mean anything.

"What?" Star asked her quietly.

Lois realized she was biting her bottom lip and that her brow was furrowed in thought. She shrugged. "Nothing, really."

"Nothing really' means 'slightly something', so tell me." Star looked as insistent as Lois had ever seen anyone.

Lois sighed and told Star about the sleeping together in Lowell County thing.

Star was completely serious when she spoke. "Honey, I don't know you from Eve, but I saw that picture of you two in today's society column and no one's ever made Clark as happy as he is now. If I were you, I'd find out if that was really true or not and if so, sign whatever paperwork you have to, to make it legal and do it today."

"Why?"

Star shook her head. "Someone from Clark's past is going to come back and make life hard for you two, but you especially, I think."

"Oh, please," Lois said with a roll of her eyes. "What kind of trouble could possibly be prevented if Clark and I actually *had* been married since last week? And couldn't we just fly off to Vegas or something?" she asked skeptically. "If whoever it is starts making trouble."

Star shook her head again and gripped Lois' hand. She leaned close and whispered, "Trust me on this one, honey. I don't get feelings like this very often. The last one I had this strong was when Ellen and Sam found Clark in a spaceship and I told them to get out of Dodge. Go back to Lowell County, sign whatever you have to that makes it legal that you two have been married for over a week already."

Lois' eyes had been slowly widening as Star spoke. She nodded slowly. "I'll talk to Clark."

"Don't just talk to him, make him do it."

"What're you two talking about?" Clark put one arm around Star's shoulder. "Why are you so serious?"

Star smiled brightly at him, letting go of Lois' hand. "Oh, it's nothing, Clarkie. Just talking about how good you two looked in the paper this morning." She patted Clark on the chest. "Don't let this one go, Clarkie. She's the girl for you."

Clark chuckled. "I'm thinking along those lines anyway, so I'm glad you approve."

"Good." Star patted him again. "Well, now, I've got an appointment to make sure that my thoughts aren't leaking out again." She pressed her tin foil cap down a bit more solidly on her head. "There's aliens around you know." She winked at Lois before picking up her purse and sauntering off.

Clark chuckled as he sat on the edge of Lois' desk. "Star's something else."

"She sure is, *Clarkie*." Clark groaned as Lois nodded towards his desk. "Who was that? Anything interesting?"

"Highway patrol. Got a couple quotes for the article."

"Good!" She took a deep breath. She wasn't quite sure she bought into whatever it was Star was, but there was something she wanted to ask him anyway. "Um, listen, instead of our date tonight..." She looked around before staring at her hands. "Um, could we go to Smallville instead?"

"Sure." She looked up to see the concern in his voice mirrored on his face. "Any particular reason?"

She shrugged. "I miss my folks. Lucy's working so we don't have to worry about her."

She could see him relax a bit. "Sure. We'll go tonight." He reached out and brushed a strand of hair back off her face. "Then we'll go flying after dinner," he whispered. "For a bit, at least."

"Sounds perfect." Her phone chose that moment to ring.

Clark winked at her. "Your first call." He picked up the phone. "Lois Kent's desk." He smiled as the person on the other end of the line spoke. "Hi, *Mom*. Lois and I were just talking about coming out for dinner tonight if that's okay with you."

Lois bit her lip and avoided looking at Clark by staring at the one date on the calendar that had something penciled in -- the White Orchid Ball later in the month. Perry had mentioned earlier she'd be expected to attend. She'd written it down more out of a desire to have *something* on her calendar than anything else.

What if there was something to what Star told her? She'd been right when she told Sam and Ellen to get away from the cabin the night they found Clark and if this feeling was really right like that one had been...

Her brow furrowed. It was the standing joke about sleeping together. Everyone in Lowell County had said it at one point or another. Was it one of those things that was rooted in reality? Southeast Kansas was conservative to the bone and had been for a century and a half. It sure *seemed* like the kind of thing that might have been reality in the late 1800s or so -- in an effort to stop brothels or something. But even if it was reality a hundred years earlier, wouldn't it have been repealed?

But there had been that article in college...

The advisor of the paper had thought it would be interesting to look at some of the laws still on the books in various parts of the country. Lois had done some research and found some interesting ones.

In St. Louis, for instance, you can't sit on the curb and drink beer from a bucket. She'd found the probable history for that one -- German and Czech immigrants would often send someone, even children, to the tavern to buy a bucket of beer. It was likely that this law would keep them from sitting down and drinking it, becoming drunk and a hazard all around.

In Florida, unmarried women cannot parachute on Sundays. She'd never figured that one out.

In Kansas, you can't use a mule to hunt ducks, shoot a rabbit from a boat, and in Wichita, motorists are supposed to get out of their vehicle at the intersection of Douglas and Broadway and fire three shotgun rounds into the air.

In California, you can't shoot any kind of game from a moving vehicle -- except whales; those were fine to shoot. Of course, this was also the state that said no vehicle without a driver could go more than sixty miles an hour and a city -- Blythe -- that told you that you weren't allowed to wear cowboy boots unless you already owned two cows.

With all of those, and all of the other crazy laws still on the books, was it *possible* that sleeping in the same bed in Lowell County made you legally married?

How would she find out? Was it worth looking into? Would she even *want* to be married to Clark?

Memories of kissing him flooded her mind. He was a good, kind, honest man. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a man -- and he could fly.

Maybe it was worth looking into after all.

Part 4

Clark kept one eye on Lois the rest of the day.

Once Star left, she'd been oddly quiet. She hadn't even talked to her mom when he'd finished.

She'd eventually asked if he thought they could leave for Smallville by five or so. He didn't see why not -- it was a pretty quiet news day. Most of what they were doing was phone calls and follow-ups not chasing down leads outside the office.

They'd have to take off from work rather than heading home to change, but Lois said that was fine with her. She had clothes to change into at home if she wanted to. Clark had a change of clothes in his locker so that wasn't an issue either.

They took off from the roof of the Daily Planet building, with Lois still not saying much. When they landed in the farmyard, no one else was there.

Lois started talking the second her feet hit the ground. "I'm going to go change and I'll meet you back here in a minute." She hadn't finished before she headed towards her room. Clark had changed before they left but took the opportunity to spin out of the Suit.

It was less than five minutes before Lois was in the living room where Clark was waiting for her.

"Come on." She grabbed his hand and dragged him into the yard, heading towards the storm shelter. "I have something to tell you."

A few minutes later, his ship was there in front of them.

"I didn't tell you the whole truth," she said quietly.

They were leaning against one wall as they gazed at the ship. Their shoulders brushed against each other but that was the only physical contact between them.

"About what?" he asked, in equally quiet tones.

"What your father said to me when we were here last time."

He tried to stop annoyance from welling up inside him. Why wouldn't she have told him what his father said? And why had his

father said it to her anyway -- and not him at the same time?

"In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing."

He barely heard her speak, her voice was so low, and he hadn't really been listening anyway -- caught up in his own thoughts.

"What?"

"In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing'," she said again. "That's what he said to me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, puzzled. "And why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged. "It seemed...personal, somehow. Like he was talking to *me* and I guess I just wasn't ready to deal with the implications."

"What implications?"

"You have some Kryptonian birth wife. It seems like you're from the House of El. Krypto Chick must be from the House of Ra. That's the conclusion I came to anyway."

He nodded slowly, taking it in. "I guess that makes sense."

"And what he said to us the other day seemed to indicate that he thought that Krypto Chick *might* make it to Earth with you. I guess it means that if she didn't, I have his blessing to be with you, in your life, I guess."

He nodded again. "Okay. So why are you telling me all this now? Why are we here before five?"

"Because of what Star said to me today." She started pacing nervously.

He grimaced. "Lois, I've told you that Star's record is spotty at best."

Her fingers twisted nervously together. "She knows you're an alien," she blurted out.

"What?" He felt sucker punched.

Lois nodded. "She hasn't had a feeling this strong since your parents found you in that ship is what she told me."

"What feeling?" he asked, skeptically.

"That someone from your past is going to come between us."

"Like who? Mayson? Not happening. No one else was serious enough for it to matter." He grasped her hands as she walked by him again and turned her to face him. "Promise."

He kissed her softly, intending for that to be the end of it, but she practically threw herself at him with abandon. She kissed him, passionately, urgently.

For long moments, he lost himself in her, in her kiss, before he pulled back. It shocked him to see tears on her face.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he asked softly, brushing them away with his fingers.

"My gut is saying she's right, Clark. Something's going to happen to come between us and that's going to be the end of it. *Something's* going to happen."

He searched her eyes for a long moment. He wasn't sure what it was that was freaking her out, but something told him that her concern was genuine. This wasn't some ploy -- though to what end she would be... plying was beyond him.

He pulled her close to him, holding her as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I don't want to lose you just after I found you," she finally whispered.

"You're not going to."

"How can you *know* that?"

"Marry me."

The words were out before he had a chance to even think about them.

She moved back, looking deep in his eyes. "Do you mean that?"

"I do," he said sincerely.

She pulled away from him, starting to pace again.

"What?" he finally asked.

"I have to tell you something else and I really don't know

how this is going to play out and I didn't mean to cry and all that." She took a deep, steady breath. "It occurred to me that the whole sleeping together rural legend might be reality. There's some really strange laws out there that are still valid -- like in New Orleans, you can't chase a fish in a city park or in Alaska you can shoot a bear but you can't wake one up to take a picture and you can't push a live moose out of an airplane, but I guess that means you could push a dead one out. And I didn't really think you'd ask me -- sort of -- to marry you but..."

He took both of his arms in his hands, forcing her gently to stop and look at him. "Lois, honey. You're babbling again. What are you saying?"

She stopped to look at him, tears still filling her big, brown eyes. "I'm saying I wonder if there might be some kernel of truth to the sleeping together thing and if, somehow, we're already married."

Clark's jaw dropped and his eyes blinked rapidly. "What?"

Part 5

Lois watched a myriad of emotions play across Clark's face. "What?" he asked again. "You think we could already be married?"

"I don't know. But Star has that feeling and I don't know why it's important that we've been married since last week instead of flying off to Vegas or something but it is."

She searched his face again, unsure of what emotions and thoughts were playing out in his head. She backed away from him. "But, um, I mean I know lots of people who've slept together in Smallville who married other people without any problems so I guess maybe it's not legal or at least not without us going in and signing something, which I don't see us doing so I don't think you have to worry about causing problems if we don't work out in the long run. I mean, really. Star's spotty at best. She's probably not any more right about this than she was about aliens stealing her thoughts or whatever when she left. Like tin foil could keep aliens out of your head if they really wanted to steal your brain or alter your genetics or something."

She would have continued but she found her lips occupied. She moaned slightly and melted against him, his arms holding her up.

They pulled away in unison a minute later.

Clark was grinning.

"What?" she asked, half irritated.

"I think I found a surefire way to get you to stop babbling." He kissed her softly. "I meant it earlier when I said 'marry me.' I'm just caught off guard about the whole sleeping together maybe being real. That's it. I mean, how off-guard would you be if some... IRS agent showed up one day and said that we filed our taxes wrong because we'd registered as a married couple last weekend? Just trying to wrap my brain around it that's all." He kissed her one more time. "So how do we find out if we're already legally married?"

"You mean it?" She searched his chocolate eyes for any sign of hesitation and didn't see any.

"Of course I mean it. How else am I going to get to eat your cookies for the rest of my life? And surely my father-in-law will, someday, tell me how to make his barbecue for my wife."

She laughed. "I wouldn't count on that. Even *I* don't know what he does -- I don't think Mom does either."

"So what do we do?" he asked again.

She moved away from him and spoke as they worked to put his ship back in the secret compartment. "We go to town. My uncle is the county clerk. We go to his office and ask him. He's the one who gives out marriage licenses and stuff. And if he has no clue or says it's not really a law, then we fly to Vegas and hope it really doesn't matter." She headed out of the shelter. "Then we have dinner with my folks, fly back to your apartment and..." She

couldn't look at him -- not with the implications of what she was saying. "...bunk together for the rest of our lives."

The metal door slammed shut and then Clark was behind her, with his arms around her waist. "I like the sound of that," he murmured. He tightened his grip. "I'm just going to fly us real quick okay?"

She nodded and wrapped her arms over his.

Mere seconds later, they landed near the court house.

She took his hand and led him into the basement. Near the far side, she went into a door marked 'county clerk.' "Uncle Joe?" she called.

"Lois?" The voice coming from a back room sounded surprised.

"Yeah, it's me."

Her uncle, tall and slender with thinning blond hair, came out of the office. "What can I do for my favorite niece?" he asked.

"This is Clark Lane. Clark, my uncle Joe Kent." The two men shook hands. "We have a question for you but..."

"But what, sugar?"

Lois bit her lip. "Are you bound by any confidentiality laws or anything?"

He nodded slowly. "I can't just call up your mom and say 'Hey, Lois and some guy just got a marriage license' if that's what you mean, but once the paperwork is filed, it's public information. Parts of all information collected are available to anyone who requests it. Not like... Social Security Numbers, but a lot of the other information is. Is that what you mean?"

She nodded. "I need to ask you something and keep it under wraps for now."

"I can do that." He grinned. "You'd be surprised at the number of things I know." He winked at her. "What's up?"

She took a deep breath. "Is there any truth to the sleeping together in Lowell County means you're married thing? There's lots of weird laws all over the country and we were wondering if that might be one of them."

Joe nodded slowly. "It is. I don't remember the last time someone used that particular regulation though."

"We want to." Clark said it and Lois breathed a sigh of relief that he was still on board.

He looked at them both for a long moment as Lois nodded.

"You sure, Punky?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "I am."

"You don't want a traditional wedding and all that?"

Lois shrugged. "Maybe we'll have one someday but not now. Right now, we just want to do this. Please."

He nodded. "Let me find the form. Most people think it's a joke and it's not automatic anyway," he called from the other room. "You have to fill out a form to make it legal. Originally, you only had to have two witnesses that said you slept together claim it and sign the form and it was legal but it was changed in... the thirties, I guess it was, so that the couple had to sign the form. If anyone challenges it, you'll need two witnesses who know you slept together to validate it, but that challenge has to be made within thirty days so..."

He emerged from the office with a dusty file folder. He pulled a sheet of paper out and ran it through the copy machine. "I don't think this form's been used since I've been the clerk and it's been almost twenty-five years now."

A minute later, they were sitting at his desk, filling out the marriage license form. Once they'd filled in their personal information, Joe took it from them to fill out his portion.

Clark stood suddenly. "Where's the restroom?"

Lois looked up at him, confused. "Everything okay?"

He nodded. "Just point me the right direction." Joe did and Clark disappeared.

Her uncle turned back to the form. "Okay... Other. See form 92-B4," he muttered as he wrote a note on there. He handed her

the newly copied sheet of paper. "Fill that one out, too, hon." He pulled it away as she tried to take it from him. "Are you *sure*?"

She nodded. "I'm sure, Uncle Joe," she said softly and took the form from him, filling in the relevant information about where and when they'd slept together and listed several possible references of people who knew.

Clark chose that moment to walk back in. He pulled something out of his pocket. "I thought you'd want this for today."

Tears sprang to her eyes as she eyed the pendant she'd worn to the fundraiser the night before -- the one every woman in his family had worn on their wedding day for generations.

"Thank you," she whispered, sweeping her hair off her neck so he could fasten it for her. His hands came to rest on her shoulders and he pressed a kiss against the crown of her head.

"Okay, kids," Joe said, interrupting the moment. "Let's make this official."

Part 6

Clark gave Lois' shoulders a gentle squeeze and returned to his seat next to her.

This wasn't exactly how he'd seen an evening in Smallville playing out, but a small smile crept across his face at the thought of what the rest of the night would probably bring.

Joe asked them a couple of questions about the validity of the information on the forms. He looked over what Lois had filled out while he'd flown back to Metropolis as fast as he could to get the pendant for her. It seemed... right. He also had rings in his pocket, but he'd give those to her later. The necklace could have been in his pocket and forgotten but rings would be harder to explain to her uncle.

Everything looked right on the form -- Martha and Jonathan both knew they'd slept together the week before -- the first time anyway. There were more people who had known about the time after that but they were using the first night as their wedding date.

"Wait," he asked suddenly. "Not to split hairs or anything, but was it before or after midnight when we fell asleep?"

"Before," Lois told him, glaring his direction.

He didn't think she was any more certain than he was, but without either of them knowing for sure, she was going with the earlier date.

They both signed the forms and Joe notarized them. He smiled. "That's it. You're legally married. I'll get the paperwork filed and have a certificate mailed to you."

"Can you give it to my folks?" Lois asked. "They'll make sure we get it."

Joe nodded. "Of course."

They all stood and Joe gave Lois a big hug before shaking Clark's hand. "Congratulations."

Clark took Lois' hand as they headed back outside.

"Let's get back to the farm before anybody sees us," Lois said.

They ducked into the alley and he wrapped his arms around her, taking off quickly and landing on the farm mere seconds later.

She turned to look at him shyly from under lowered lashes. He took both of her hands in both of his.

"Hello, wife," he said softly, leaning down to kiss her gently.

"Hello, husband," she said back, before kissing him again.

"I have something else for you," he told her, reaching into his pocket. "I just hope they fit."

"What?"

He pulled out the rings. "They were Grams'. If you want something new, we'll go shopping and I'll get you the kind of ring you've always dreamed of, but Gramps gave these to me a long time ago in case my bride liked them."

She gasped as he held them out. "Clark, they're gorgeous.

And they look like..."

He smiled. "I know. It's a Trillion cut and it looks kind of like my 'S'. This was her second set -- the ones he got her for their thirtieth anniversary." He took her left hand in his, sliding the rings on. "With this ring, I thee wed," he said softly.

"I wish I had one for you," she told him, fingering the rings into place.

"It doesn't matter to me. I know where I belong and that's all that really counts."

She moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "But once we get you one, then Sarah will know where you belong, too." She leaned up and kissed him soundly. "She doesn't need to be checking out your butt if she knows you're married."

Tires crunching in the drive brought their attention back to the present.

Lois sighed. "Are we telling my parents?"

"Don't you think?" he asked back, his arms tightening around her. "You're wearing my ring, they'll be getting the certificate soon enough... Why'd you have him give it to them?"

"So you can fly out and get it. That'll be faster than the mail."

He nodded. "Makes sense."

He let go of her and headed towards the house, hand in hand. He wondered how she was going to handle it. Was she just going to tell them or...

His thoughts were interrupted by greetings from his new in-laws.

To his surprise, Lois didn't mention anything to her parents about their trip to see her uncle.

"What's for dinner?" she asked as they walked into the kitchen.

"Stromboli," Martha told her, nodding towards the rising bread dough.

Lois groaned. "It's not put together yet?"

Clark glanced between the three of them as Martha and Jonathan laughed. "What?"

Martha shook her head slightly. "Lois loves Stromboli but hates making it."

"It takes so long," she whined. "We won't eat for like an hour and a half."

"Do you have some other big plans tonight?" her mom asked with a smirk.

Lois glanced at him from under lowered eyelashes and he could hear her heart rate first skip a beat and then pick up significantly.

Yes, they definitely had other big plans for later.

Maybe he could speed the process up. "I could bake them," he said suddenly.

"What?" All three Kents spoke in unison.

He shrugged. "I could bake it with my eyes."

"Your eyes?" Lois asked skeptically, taking a cookie out of the jar.

"You remember. My eye gizmo thingies or whatever you called them."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your vision gizmos include a baking bread setting?"

He shrugged. "Close enough." He really wanted to cross the kitchen, take her in his arms and kiss her senseless, then show her some of his other powers. His mind had been way too occupied with ways to use them when they were together for the last week.

Lois sighed. "Well, let's get them ready so Clark can superbake them."

She reached for a rolling pin and the flour, setting both on the table. She sprinkled some of the flour around before taking about a third of the bread dough and plopping it in the middle with a puff of flour.

Martha chuckled as she extracted about half of the rest of the dough from the bowl. "Jonathan, you want to start cutting the

ham or shredding the cheese?"

Jonathan pulled the meat slicer out from under the counter and dug around the fridge for the ham. He expertly situated it and began shaving off thin slices.

"I guess that leaves me with the cheese," Clark said.

Martha pointed him towards the grater and he easily found the block of Colby Jack.

He began grating and a few seconds later was down to just the end of the two pound chunk. He looked up to see everyone staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "Show off," she muttered.

He glanced at her parents who had gone back to what they were doing. He leaned over and whispered. "Tell you what, I'll show off for you later all you want."

Lois blushed and kept her attention on the bread dough she was rolling out. "I'll hold you to that," she whispered under her breath.

"Good," he whispered back and wondered how long before they could get away.

Part 7

Lois was sure he could hear her heart racing at the thought of him showing off with his powers later.

When they were alone, she was sure.

Their first night together as a married couple.

Alone.

In Clark's apartment.

Their apartment?

With that fertility statue still sitting on the bed, she was sure.

The bed.

With that thought, she was sure her blush deepened as she rolled out the dough.

"Clark, would you mind taking the ham slices and cutting them into one inch squares for us?" her mom asked.

Lois was grateful that he moved away from her. The warm bulk of his body as he whispered in her ear made her almost want to haul him off to her room and forget that her parents would be standing in the kitchen wondering what was going on.

She took a deep, calming breath before her gaze flickered towards Clark as he stacked the ham slices and cut them into squares. The soft material of his T-shirt clung to his back and arms. What she really wanted to do was just stop and admire the play of the muscles visible under the fabric.

No. What she really wanted to do was...

She shook her head slightly and went back to rolling out the dough. By the time Clark was done cutting ham, it was ready. They worked together to spread the pieces of meat around the two foot square bread dough. Lois was sure she felt a spark each time their fingers touched.

How was she going to survive until they could get back to Metropolis?

She'd never felt like this before. She'd only ever been with one man before -- though they'd dated for a long time and had been together on a fairly regular basis after that first time. And it had always been... nice but she'd never understood the women on television or movies -- or even some of her friends -- who couldn't wait to drag some guy off to bed.

But now...

Her mother was talking.

Lois looked up. "What, Mom?" She tried to ignore Clark's shoulder brushing against hers.

"Are you about done?" Martha had a slight smirk on her face.

Lois looked to see her mom's Stromboli finished and she was starting to roll out the third and final piece of bread dough. Lois quickly turned back to hers, finishing spreading the cheese over the top of the ham then sprinkling some dill, basil and oregano

over the top. She deftly rolled it, pinching the ends and sides together.

"I thought Clark was the only one with superspeed," her dad commented, earning a glare from Lois.

"I think they're anxious to get back home," Martha whispered to him. "Though why they decided to stay and have dinner with us if they flew off to get married is beyond me."

Lois' eyes flew up and she looked at Clark, whose eyes were just as wide as hers.

"What?" she managed to squeak out.

"You think we didn't notice the rings Lois is wearing?" Martha asked.

"When did you notice them?" Lois asked back, fiddling with the still unfamiliar adornments.

"About thirty seconds after we pulled in," Jonathan told her with a chuckle. "Well, as soon as you got close anyway. She mentioned it to me before we got out of the truck."

Martha smiled. "You brushed your hair back and they caught the sunlight." She reached for Lois' hand to get a better look. "They're beautiful," she told Clark with a smile. "He has good taste." That was directed at Lois as Martha pulled her into a hug.

Clark laughed. "They were my grandma's. Gramps gave them to me a long time ago."

Lois looked over at him. "Do you want to tell them or do you want me to?"

Clark shrugged. "Up to you." His arm went around her shoulders and pulled her to him. "I will if you don't want to."

She sighed nervously. Her parents had seemed happy for them so far but... She took a deep breath and started to speak. "Well, in Florida if you tie your elephant to a parking meter you have to pay for it just like you would a car. And in South Dakota a horse can't go into the Fountain Inn unless they're wearing pants. In Nebraska, you can't go whale fishing, but there's no whales in Nebraska, I don't think. Or Utah either."

Clark pulled her slightly closer to him and she rested her head on his shoulder. "Do you really remember all of those from that article?"

"No. I looked some more up today," she said with a shake of her head. "I was trying to find one in particular and found out that in Wyoming you have to have a permit to take a picture of a rabbit between January and April and you can't ski drunk. Idiots aren't allowed to vote in New Mexico, which seems pretty logical to me."

Clark squeezed her again.

"Anyway, we wondered if there might be some grain of truth to the sleeping in Lowell County thing so we went to see Uncle Joe," she said quietly.

"I take it there was?" Martha asked.

Lois nodded and explained what Joe had told them about how it worked.

"So you two are legally married because you slept in the same bed together last week?" Jonathan asked skeptically. "Not that we don't like you, Clark, we do..."

"We think you're *super*," Martha interjected with a grin and everyone else groaned.

"...but this seems a bit sudden."

Lois reached out with both of her hands and covered his. "We know it's sudden, Daddy, but it's honestly what we both want."

Jonathan stared at her face for a long moment before nodding. "Then we're happy for you." He stood and pulled her into a big hug. She rested her head on his chest. She'd always felt so safe in her daddy's arms. It was one of several reasons she'd come home after everything with Lex. "We love you, little girl."

Tears filled her eyes at the term of endearment. He hadn't called her that in a long time. "I love you, too, Daddy. And I'm so glad that you're happy for us. We're happy about this. I promise."

"I'm so glad, Princess." His arms tightened around her. "My

little girl's wedding day," he whispered. "Not exactly how I pictured it, but we are happy for you."

"Thank you. I'm sorry you didn't get to walk me down the aisle and everything."

"You're happy. That's the most important thing."

"We talked a bit about having a real wedding soon," she told him, not moving from the safety of his embrace.

"Then it would be my honor to give you away. But if you don't, I'm just happy that you're happy."

Tears filled Lois' eyes. She should have known they'd understand.

They were the world's best parents after all.

Part 8

Clark could see the tears welling up in Jonathan's eyes as he stood and pulled Lois into a bear hug. Before he knew what was happening, Martha was standing behind him, her arms around his shoulders.

"I couldn't ask for anyone better for my little girl," she whispered. "But you better treat her right or you'll answer to me."

He nodded. "Don't worry. I'll do my best to take care of her for the rest of my life."

"Welcome to the family," she said softly. "We're happy to have you."

He could see Lois looking at him from her father's arms. She smiled at him, tears in her eyes as she talked quietly to her dad.

"No ring for you?" Martha asked.

He shook his head. "Not yet. We'll get one before too long."

Martha nodded thoughtfully before squeezing his shoulders. "Give those the equivalent of 300 degrees for about an hour, would ya?"

Clark chuckled. "Sure. I need a metal box though -- otherwise the outside will brown and the inside'll be a mess."

Martha picked up the bread box. Obviously homemade -- only because it was so unconventional -- it was made of metal and would suit his purpose nicely.

"Perfect." He put the first Stromboli in and heated the box with his eyes. A minute later, he pulled it out and set it on a cookies sheet on the table. He repeated the process and, by then, the third was ready to bake.

By the time he finished that one, Martha had returned, pulling Lois to the side to whisper something to her and hand her something Clark couldn't see. Lois nodded and slipped whatever it was into the pocket of her jeans.

Her well-worn, oft-washed jeans that clung to her curves like a second skin.

Why exactly were they eating dinner in Kansas anyway?

And why did he feel like he was a teenager again? About to get caught making out with girlfriend on the couch in her parents' basement?

Lois was his *wife*. And her parents knew that now. So why did he feel like all he could do was whisper a few innuendos in her ear while they weren't looking or share longing glances across the kitchen? Should he be able to hold her hand or even kiss her whenever he wanted? And as he watched her brow furrowed in concentration and her bottom lip stuck between her teeth, he wanted to.

He glanced over to see Martha and Jonathan busy setting the table and he moved quickly towards Lois, resting his hands on either of her hips.

"Hi," he said quietly before leaning down to kiss her softly. "I've wanted to do that for a while now."

She rested her hands on his arms before stretching to kiss him again. "I'm glad you did."

He looked over at her parents again. They were studying the table carefully but the grins they were both trying to hide told him that they hadn't missed a thing. He slid his arms around her

and pulled her closer to him. He whispered in her ear, "Would your parents be offended if we skipped dessert?"

"I don't care," she whispered back. "But I can't eat as fast as you and I have a feeling I'm going to need my strength for later, so we have to have dinner and you can't inhale your food."

He grinned down at her. "Deal."

They both moved back and he held her hand as they walked the few steps to the table.

"So no guests tonight?" he asked as they began serving the Stromboli and the corn on the cob Martha had whipped up at some point.

Martha shook her head. "Not tonight. The Morrises will be here tomorrow though, Lois. I'm sure they'll be disappointed you're not here."

Lois snorted. "You mean, Donny won't be able to stalk me in my own home while his parents go do whatever they want because I'm 'keeping an eye on him'?"

Martha and Jonathan both laughed at that. "True," Jonathan said, "but they really do like you."

"Well, now Donny can have a crush on Lucy," Lois told them, taking a big bite of her Stromboli.

"You know," Clark said thoughtfully. "I still haven't actually met the elusive Lucy."

"Well, you're not going to tonight," Lois informed him.

"We're not staying until she gets home -- she can't know we flew the S-express out here."

"S-express?" the three of them asked in unison.

She rolled her eyes. "You got a better name for Superman Airlines?"

"Good point." Clark helped himself to another ear of corn. "You know, though, Christmas is coming up soon. We always spend it at Gramps' cabin in northern New Troy. I know my parents don't know about everything yet -- and neither does Gramps -- but I bet he'd love to have all of you join us. He's mentioned it in the past -- in the generic 'Clark's wife's family' sense, anyway."

"That's very generous, Clark, but I don't know..." Martha's voice trailed off as she looked at Jonathan.

"If you show me how to do the chores around here, I'd be happy to fly back for a bit each day to do them," Clark insisted. He knew instinctively that it would be hard for Lois to be away from her family at Christmas -- he'd seen some of the pictures around the house that indicated as much -- but he also didn't want to miss Christmas with his family. But then something else occurred to him. "Unless you have visitors around then, of course," he finished.

Martha shook her head. "No, we close from December 23rd through January 2nd every year so that's not an issue."

"And don't worry about airfare either," he told them. "The S-express will take care of it. Superman, uh, owes me a favor," he added with a wink. "That way Lucy will have no idea what's really going on."

Martha and Jonathan exchanged another look. "We'll let you know," Jonathan promised. "I bet we could get Josh Irig to look after the place if we needed to."

Clark nodded, realizing he was probably pushing too hard without it being an official invitation from his grandpa.

They chatted amiably about a variety of topics for the rest of the meal. The... tension -- was that the right word? -- between himself and Lois was nearly palatable to him. Every time her fingers brushed against his while passing something or her knee bumped his under the table or...

She patted his leg telling her parents how proud of him she was when it came to helping stop the tsunami.

Unresolved sexual tension.

Wasn't that what they called it when the leads on a television show kept avoiding a relationship with each other for one reason

or another?

Whatever it was, surely it would be time to leave soon and... resolve it. Right?

He took a deep, calming breath and tried to get his mind off what was surely coming when they flew home.

He couldn't have imagined this outcome from a day that started so horribly at the continued clean-up of the crash in western New Troy. He was so glad Star had come to see them that morning and pushed them this direction.

And before long he'd get to fly off with his *wife* to see exactly what life married to Lois *Lane* would be like.

Part 9

Flying in Clark's arms the day before or even on the way to Smallville had been incredible, but flying with him on the way back to Metropolis, knowing that he was her husband and that before long she'd very likely have very personal knowledge of the body under the Suit -- something many women around the world would only ever be able to dream of -- was beyond amazing.

"What?" Clark asked, amusement tingeing his voice.

"What what?" she asked back.

"Why're you looking at me like that?" He stopped suddenly, standing upright in midair.

She was still cradled in his arms and she reached out with one hand to caress the side of his face. "Just thinking that you're my husband," she whispered, leaning over to kiss him.

It was supposed to be a light, gentle kiss, but much like the kiss earlier in the storm shelter, it quickly turned into something more.

A long minute later, she pulled back as there was a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Oops." Clark looked chagrined. "Guess I lost altitude there." He kissed her again, swiftly this time. "Let's get home before we do anymore of that."

"Your apartment?" she asked softly. "Not that I don't like your grandpa but I don't really want to have to explain this again tonight or in the morning."

He grinned at her. "You mean *our* apartment?"

She smiled back. "I like the sound of that."

Lois snuggled back in his arms as he flew towards Metropolis, landing minutes later in an alley near his building.

"Why here?" Lois asked as he set her on her feet.

"You'll see." He took her hand and they walked up the stairs to his door.

Clark opened both of them before turning and sweeping her back into his arms. "I want to carry my bride over the threshold for real," he told her.

The husky tone in his voice sent shivers down her spine and, when combined with the tender look on his face, brought tears to her eyes.

She was still in his arms when he reached the bottom of the step and turned, blowing the doors shut.

"Alone at last," she murmured as he set her on her feet.

"I like the sound of that."

She closed her eyes as his face neared hers. First a slight brush of his lips against hers and then...

He was gone.

Her eyes opened and she saw him standing near the stereo, fiddling with the controls.

'And in other news, the crash of two light rail trains near Washington, D. C. has left emergency crews scrambling to find enough lights to work safely into the night. Dozens are injured but there is no official word on the death toll. Officials fear that toll will climb overnight with temperatures in the area hovering around the freezing mark. Up next, your local sports.'

Clark flipped the switch turning the system off. He stood there for a long moment before lifting his head to look at her.

He was torn. She could see it in his eyes.

"Go," she whispered. "They need you."

"But I need you. It's our wedding night and I don't want..."

A single tear streaked down her cheek. "I know. But you have to go."

"Are you sure?" he whispered back.

She nodded. "I'll be waiting when you get back."

He crossed the room in a split second, kissing her hard for a long moment before letting her go. "I love you," he said quietly.

And then he was gone, a guest of wind and the door to the balcony slamming shut behind him the only evidence that he'd been there.

Lois sighed and flopped onto the couch.

Not exactly how she'd envisioned spending her evening.

The phone rang but she didn't answer, instead letting the machine pick up.

'Hi, you've reached Clark Lane. You know what to do.'

'Lois, honey, are you there?'

Lois reached over and grabbed the phone. The machine clicked off as she did so. "Hi, Mom."

"How are you, sweetie?" Her voice was soft.

"It's on the news already?" Lois asked with a sigh, reaching for the remote.

"He just showed up in D.C."

"I'm never turning the radio on again," she muttered sourly. "I think he was going to ask me to dance, but the radio was on when he flipped the stereo system on and the announcement was on the bottom of the hour news."

"I'm so sorry. Not what you two needed on what is essentially your wedding night."

"He didn't want to go. He *wanted* to stay here with me but he could do so much there. I told him to go. I didn't want him to always associate being with me for the first time with missing the train wreck and hearing tomorrow what the death toll overnight was and that always be in the back of his mind when he thinks about tonight. I mean, technically, we've been married since last week but..."

She found the American News Channel and hit mute, watching as Clark flew around the wreckage.

"I know you have, sweetheart, and that makes a lot of sense," Martha told her. "But there's always going to be *something*. If you're not careful..."

"We already talked about that, Mom. He deserves a life as much as the next guy and he'll have one if we have to fly off to a deserted island from time to time where there's no chance of him hearing anything."

Martha chuckled. "Sounds like a good plan. Is there anything I can do? Anything Daddy can do?" she asked more seriously.

Lois sighed. "No. But thanks for calling."

"We love you, sweetie."

"I love both of you, too. So much."

"Call if you want to talk some more."

"I will." They hung up and Lois turned up the sound.

"Superman is working like a man on a mission, Trina," the blonde correspondent said into the microphone. "I've seen him work a few times before but never like this."

"Why do you think that is?" the brunette on the other side of the split screen asked.

"Well, it's not that he never works hard -- I certainly don't mean to suggest anything like that -- but there seems to be an extra urgency to him tonight. Perhaps it's simply the urgency of the situation -- with night having fallen and temperatures plunging, but whatever the reason, Superman is certainly saving many lives this night."

Lois clicked the television off. That was something. She was certain he couldn't wait to get back to be with her.

She looked down and frowned. Old blue jeans and a button

down flannel shirt.

Was this what he'd envisioned when he pictured his wedding night? What would he have imagined his bride wearing the first time they made love?

Not this, she was sure.

She doubted he'd really care what she was wearing but that wasn't the point.

Lois looked at the clock. She had enough time to go to the mall if she wanted to, but she really had no desire to leave the house.

She finally decided to take a long shower and see if she could figure out what to wear -- besides her birthday suit -- for what was essentially her wedding night.

After drying off, she decided to go with something comfortable. A few minutes of news watching told her that Clark was still busy with the accident. She had no idea when Clark would be home or what kind of shape he'd be in -- if he was in the space he had been after returning from the accident the night before... Well, she wasn't sure she wanted those memories tainting their first night together, but she also knew Clark might want to just forget for a while and focus on her -- on them. She'd take her cues from him.

Lois climbed into his bed, hugging one of the pillows to her and pulled the covers tightly around her.

Definitely not how she'd figured she'd spend the night -- at least not once they'd decided to make it official -- but at least she had something to look forward to when she awoke.

She spent the first official night of their marriage falling asleep alone.

She really hoped it wasn't a sign of what would come in the future.

She put the thoughts out of her mind and eventually fell into a restless sleep.

Part 10

Clark landed as quietly as he could. He didn't think there was any way that Lois was still awake.

He walked into his bedroom to find that the bed had definitely been used at some point, but it was empty. He could hear Lois' heartbeat nearby -- in the living room -- and he glanced through the wall to see that she was asleep curled up on the couch.

Not wanting to disturb her for the moment, he floated several inches off the ground and into the bathroom. He thought about taking a fast shower, but instead decided to let the warmth of the water flow over him.

He reached for his shampoo and frowned slightly. They weren't in the same place he normally left them.

Lois must have taken a shower while waiting for him, he decided.

She was making herself at home. He smiled at that thought. He knew it would take time to mesh their routines and to hammer out who got more closet space and things like that, but he enjoyed the thought of making it all work with *Lois*.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally stepped out of the shower and towed off, before pulling on a pair of boxers.

He padded into the kitchen, filling a cup with water as quietly as he could. He dunked the tea bag in it a time or two before heating the water with his eyes.

"You're home." The voice behind him was heavy with sleep.

He turned to lean against the counter, taking a long sip as he did. "I got here a few minutes ago."

Lois pushed herself into a sitting position, taking the blanket still wrapped tightly around her with her. "Was it bad?" she asked softly.

He shook his head. "Not really. It would have been a lot worse if I hadn't gone, but it wasn't too bad."

"That's good."

She yawned and stretched, the blanket falling away from her. Lincoln High.

One of his high school T-shirts. He wasn't sure when he'd gotten that particular one -- maybe at homecoming the year before because his ones that were actually from high school were smaller and more faded -- and at Gramps' house.

She stood and he realized she was wearing his sleep shorts -- though they barely peeked out from under the hem of the shirt as it fell to mid-thigh.

She walked towards him. "You really okay?" she asked softly, her hands coming to rest on his waist.

He set his tea down and pulled her closer to him. "Better now that I'm with you, Mrs. Lane."

She wrinkled her nose. "Mrs. Lane? Really?"

"Lois Lane. It just rolls off your tongue with the alliteration."

"So does Clark Kent," she pointed out, gleefully as it came to her.

"You want me to change my name?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"Do you want me to change mine?" she asked back.

Clark shrugged. "I always figured my wife would, but I guess it's not mandatory or anything."

"What about Lois Kent-Lane?" She wrinkled her nose. "That just sounds... wrong."

He laughed. "It's up to you, sweetheart. I love Lois Kent. I'd love Lois Lane, but it's not the name I love. It's the woman."

"I'll think about it," she promised.

"It's not important."

She slid her hands around his waist until they linked in the back. "I have something for you," she told him, reaching up to kiss him lightly.

"You?" he whispered huskily.

She ducked her head slightly. "Well, something else."

She moved out of his arms and walked into his bedroom -- their bedroom -- and over to his dresser, picking something up off of it.

"My mom gave this to me earlier," she told him, turning and leaning against the dresser. "It was my great-grandfather's." She looked at it for a long moment. "Did you know my mom's maiden name is Clark? She said it seemed fitting and I have to agree -- if it's okay with you, of course."

"What is it?" he asked, moving to stand in front of her.

"His wedding band. He and Nana were married over fifty years."

"Your mom doesn't mind?"

Lois shook her head, reaching her left hand towards him. He reached out and took it in his own. "With this ring, I thee wed," she said softly, sliding the ring onto his finger.

"We never took vows." He reached out with his newly adorned hand and brushed her hair away from her face, taking a step closer to her. "I, Clark, take you Lois, to have and to hold from this day forward. To love, honor and cherish in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer until death parts us." He punctuated the end with a gentle kiss.

Lois rested her hand on his chest and looked into his eyes, repeating the time honored words back to him.

Clark bent his head to meet hers, their lips touching in a gentle caress. He moved away slightly before coming back to her. He pulled her body tight against his, kissing her deeply. After a long moment of the most wonderful kiss of his life, he moved back, bending to scoop her into his arms.

She squealed slightly and wrapped her arms more tightly around his neck. "Clark! What're you doing?"

He kissed her again. "I'm carrying my bride to our bed." He floated them until she was lying on her back next to him. He propped himself up on one elbow, reaching out to brush her hair

away from her face. "I'm sorry we're not back in the Honeymoon Suite," he told her softly.

She shook her head. "I'm not. We're together. That's the important thing."

"I'll take you someday, I promise."

She smiled up at him, reaching out to brush his hair off his forehead. "Someday I'll hold you to that." Her hand slipped around the back of his neck, tugging him towards her.

He gladly complied, kissing her again.

This time when the kisses intensified, neither of them did anything to stop it, instead melting into each other in a joining of bodies, souls and spirits.

Later, Clark readily curled his body around hers, on arm holding her tightly against him. He pressed a kiss against the back of her head. "That was..."

Lois sighed in his arms. "Incredible."

"The only thing I'd like more is to be able to do that with you for the rest of my life."

She rested her arm over the top of his, linking her fingers with his own. "You better believe we're going to do that for the rest of our lives."

He chuckled lightly as she yawned. "Sounds like a plan. But right now I think we both need to get some rest."

She nodded and in moments they had both drifted off.

Part 11

Lois woke up to find the other side of the bed empty and cold.

She pushed herself up onto her elbows, clutching the sheet to her bare chest. "Clark?" she called.

Had he been called off to an emergency of some kind? She'd fallen asleep alone and woken up alone their first night together -- that couldn't be a good sign. At least he'd been there for a while in between.

There was a thump on the balcony and the door opened to reveal a smiling Superman standing there.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said as he moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

She sat against the headboard, sheet still held firmly in place. "Good morning."

"I brought you something." He held out a bag, pulling it away as she reached for it. "But I need something from you first."

"What's that?" she asked.

He leaned over and kissed her softly. "Just that." He gave the white bag to her. "Fresh from France."

"You went to France?" she exclaimed around a bite of croissant.

He stood and headed towards the bathroom peeling the top of the Suit off as he did. "There was a plane coming down with no landing gear. I heard it on the neighbor's radio and you were still sound asleep. I knew it shouldn't take too long and then I could get you breakfast at the same time." By the time he finished talking, he was in the bathroom and the shower had been turned on.

Lois finished the croissant before getting out of bed, keeping the sheet wrapped around her as she walked towards the bathroom. "Well, breakfast was delicious," she told him, eyeing him through the semi-opaque curtain. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he called.

She bit her bottom lip, watching him for another moment before making a decision. A second later, she slipped into the shower behind him.

He turned, a surprised smile on his face as he put his arms around her. "This is nice," he said, the same surprised tone in his voice as he leaned down to kiss her.

"Well, it is unofficially the morning after our wedding," she reminded him, her arms wrapping around his back as she kissed

him back. "And I thought we could save time this way." She kissed him again.

"Do we have to go to work?" Clark whined holding her closer to him. "Wanna play hooky?"

"I can't, Clark." Lois moved around him and into the warm spray. "It's like my fourth day on the job."

He wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissing the base of her neck before moving back to give her some room. "I know, but a guy can dream. We'll have to make sure we get done early and then I have a surprise for you for the weekend." He leaned against the back wall of the shower, his eyes traveling appreciatively over his *wife's* body.

She raised an eyebrow over her shoulder. "That's not till Saturday." She took another second to admire the view before turning back to her shower.

He shook his head. "Perry mentioned it yesterday. This week we're working Sunday through Thursday, so tomorrow..." He rested his hands on her hips and kissed the back of her shoulder. "We're taking off on a three day honeymoon. We don't have to be back until Monday."

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Nope. Just that clothing is optional."

"And no radios?"

He shook his head. "Maybe a CD player but there's no radio signal around for it to pick up where we're going."

"Good."

"Why?" He nuzzled her neck with his lips.

"Because it was a radio that told you you needed to leave last night and a radio that told you you needed to leave this morning." She turned to face him. "I get that you won't always be here when I go to sleep or when I wake up, but I don't like the precedent that it sets and I know you needed to go last night and I'm guessing you did this morning, too, but I'd rather spend a few days somewhere where you'll never know if something's happening and just let emergency services handle it."

She brushed some water off his cheek. "You have to let yourself have a life and for this weekend at least, I hope that means focusing on your wife and new marriage and letting the world deal with its own problems for a few days -- no guilt trips allowed. Promise?"

He nodded. "I promise. And I think that three days alone with you sounds like a little bit of heaven on earth."

"No guilt trips if two more trains collide because some idiot fell asleep at the switch?"

He shook his head. "No guilt trips."

"Then I would be happy to go away with you this weekend." She kissed him gently before turning back into the shower.

"What're we telling people when they start asking?"

"Asking what?" She sighed. He didn't have a loofah or body wash -- only plain old soap. They were going to have to go get her things at some point. She looked at him, suddenly feeling a bit shy. "Would you mind helping wash my back?" she asked, holding out the soap.

"My pleasure." He took the soap from her, filling his hands with lather before gently massaging her shoulders and back as he continued. "Well, you're wearing rings, I'm wearing a wedding band and somehow I don't think I'm going to be able to keep a goofy smile off my face every time I think about you." He leaned closer to whisper huskily. "About last night."

She smiled and blushed at the same time. "It was this morning."

"Potato, pah-tah-to."

"They're going to want to know everything, aren't they?" She leaned her head back against him as his arms went around her again. "Details. Where we flew off to. There's a waiting period in New Troy, isn't there? So we couldn't have gotten married here so we must have gone somewhere else..."

"Perry's going to ask. *Cat is definitely* going to ask."
She sighed. "Perry we tell in private -- or you tell him. He likes you better."

He chuckled behind her as she turned the water off. "I think that's questionable."

"And Cat, we ignore?" she went on, ignoring his interruption as she reached for a towel.

He got a hold of it first and held it just out of reach, kissing her instead. "We're leaving work early tonight," he murmured against her lips.

"Definitely." She got a hold of the towel and headed into the bedroom with it wrapped around her.

"Or we tell everyone who asks a version of the truth," he said, reaching for a towel. "That it was love at first sight but that we didn't want to make it public until we'd had a chance to tell our families and get the rings and stuff."

"I guess that works." She looked around and then let out a frustrated growl.

"What?" Clark asked, cinching the towel around his waist.

"I have no clothes. No makeup. No... anything. It's all at your grandpa's house." She sighed and used a second towel to dry her hair.

"Put some of my clothes on and I'll take you over there. We won't even be late for work. Promise."

"That's as good a plan as any I've got at the moment."

Ten minutes later they were flying through the air. Lois had found a pair of sweatpants that didn't swallow her whole and another T-shirt, but as much as she liked wearing Clark's clothes -- and she'd decided she was going to do so fairly often -- she was looking forward to getting her own things.

They landed on the back porch after Clark made sure only family was around.

They walked in to find his parents and grandpa standing there, annoyed looks on all of their faces.

"Where have you two been?"

Part 12

Clark looked at Lois who was looking at him. "What?" he said, spinning into his business suit.

Gramps just gaped.

"Show off," Lois muttered.

"Where were you two last night?" his mom asked, her arms crossed in front of her. "We know you were in DC for a while, Clark, but we had no idea where either of you were before that and there was no answer at the apartment when we called."

Lois winced. "That was my fault. Actually, a lot of it was my fault. I asked Clark to take me to Smallville last night and then we went back to his apartment. He left for DC immediately and then my mom called and then I turned the ringer off and the volume on the machine all the way down just in case -- because I just wanted to sleep at that point." They all moved into the kitchen as she spoke.

"We were just a bit worried, that's all." Sam put his arm around Ellen. "As far as we knew you were coming back here and then we didn't hear anything. And after everything last week with that rock and your powers and everything..."

Clark looked chagrined. "I'm sorry. We really didn't mean to worry you. We just got busy and hadn't planned on going back to my place last night. We'd planned on coming here but..." He shrugged. "It honestly didn't even occur to me that you guys might be expecting us and be worried."

"I bet those rings have something to do with it," Gramps said, whispering but loud enough to be heard as he elbowed Sam in the side.

Lois blushed and Clark looked at the counter.

"Care to explain?" Ellen asked softly.

Clark reached out to squeeze Lois' hand. "Why don't you go

change and I'll explain everything and then we can head to work?"

"You sure?" she asked, looking up at him.

He nodded and she squeezed his hand back before heading towards the stairs.

Clark slid onto one of the bar stools. He launched into the story about Lowell County and sleeping together and Star's visit the day before.

"Honey, you know I love Star, but do you really think she has any clue what she's talking about?" Ellen asked him skeptically.

He looked directly at his mother. "She told Lois the last time she had a feeling this strong was when you found me in a spaceship."

His mom's eyes grew wide and his dad's jaw literally dropped. "She knows?" Ellen whispered.

Clark nodded. "Apparently." He told how they'd gone to see Lois' uncle and eventually ended up back at his place -- just in time for him to leave for Washington. "And we're going out of town this weekend," he finished. "To that beach where I've taken you two a few times."

Sam chuckled and smacked him on the back. "No radios for you to hear. Sounds like a perfect plan to me."

"I know it's really too late, but are you *sure*?" Ellen asked, taking both of Clark's hands in her own. "I do like Lois a lot, but it's so fast."

Clark stood and gave his mom a big hug. "I'm sure."

"Then we're happy for you," she told him, giving him a squeeze. She moved back and took his hand, fingering the wedding band. "Where'd you get this?"

"It was Martha's Grandpa Clark's. Clark is her maiden name. We all thought it was fitting. Especially since I gave her Grams' rings that Gramps' gave me a long time ago."

Gramps nodded. "She's the perfect person to wear them, too. Jenny would have loved her."

Lois chose that moment to walk back into the kitchen looking smart in a black business suit, pulling a pilot case behind her.

"Welcome to the family, Lois." Gramps gave her a big hug which she returned enthusiastically.

"Thank you." She made the rounds, giving both of his parents big hugs before sitting next to Clark.

Clark stood. "Actually, we need to get going. I need to take the Jeep to town so..." He gave his mom a kiss on the cheek and went to get Lois' suitcase.

"I may be in town for lunch. I'll give you a call," Ellen said, giving Lois another hug. "If you're not busy, I'd love to go for a girls' lunch out, since Clark will have you all to yourself this weekend."

"Sure. If we're not in the middle of something, I'd like that," Lois said shyly.

Clark rested his hand on Lois' back as they walked towards the garage.

"They took that well," she commented as Clark put her bag in the back.

"I thought they would. Mom wouldn't have let you wear that pendant if it wasn't tacit approval of our relationship."

"I kind of wondered about that, but I didn't know for sure."

He expertly navigated out of the port cochere before taking her hand. He kissed her fingers near the rings he'd placed there the night before. "Believe me, Mom never even considered loaning it to Mayson, for instance."

"Good to know."

He linked his fingers with hers as they drove.

After arriving at the Planet, Clark's hand rested on the small of her back as they waited for the elevator, his thumb gently rubbing against the material of her suit coat. He glanced around the parking garage.

They were alone.

He slipped his arm further around her, pulling her to him and kissing her soundly. "I know you don't want everyone to think you got the job because you're sleeping with me, but..." He kissed her again. "I could spend all day doing that."

Lois leaned up, like she was going to kiss him, when a 'ding' announced the arrival of the elevator. She moved away and into the back of the already occupied car with a sigh.

Clark moved to stand next to her, not even trying to fight the smile as her hand slipped unobtrusively into his.

Why hadn't they both called in sick again?

Food poisoning from dinner the night before or something?

Those in the elevator with them got off at various floors until, finally, everyone but the two of them exited the floor before the news floor.

Lois launched herself at him as the doors slid shut, kissing him ferociously.

He kissed her back the same way, both of them pulling back just seconds before the door slid open to the news room.

"I've wanted to do that all morning," she muttered under her breath. "But I figured I'd better wait until we didn't have time for anything else because, well, we didn't have time for anything else, but the shower is one thing and the elevator is another thing entirely."

She set her briefcase down on her desk and smiled demurely at him.

Clark shook his head. She was trying to kill him.

It was going to be a very *very* long day.

Part 13

Lois let the warmth of the setting sun wash over her.

They'd been on the little island for three whole days, doing little but swimming, talking and making love.

She had a *great* tan and hadn't burned at all. She hadn't thought she'd burn over the normally uncovered areas of her body. It was the normally... covered areas of her body she'd been worried about, but liberal applications of sunscreen had done their job and a sunburn hadn't ruined their weekend.

Clark had flown back to Metropolis with their few things and to do a, hopefully quick, patrol so he wouldn't have to after they got back. She was lying on a towel in a swimsuit that barely deserved the name. A T-shirt and shorts were on the sand nearby for the return trip.

She had ended up going to lunch with Ellen Thursday afternoon. It had been... weird though. They'd gone to a little café, eaten sandwiches while chatting then gone across the street to an exclusive bedding store to get a new comforter set for one of the rooms at Nate's house and to do a little 'dream shopping'.

She thought Ellen was just trying to be nice -- asking her opinion of this bedding set or that and what did she think of that particular bedroom setup where the bedding was staged; did she like it better or the other one? She didn't understand why her opinion mattered, though she had seen some things she liked, but it had been nice to spend an hour or so getting to know her new mother-in-law.

The day had been an easy one. Cat had been nowhere in sight. Neither had Sarah.

Perry had noticed the rings almost immediately, congratulating them and assigning them only follow-ups and an exceptionally uninteresting press conference on the rebeautification of Centennial Park which allowed them to leave by six. Lois had managed to leave about half an hour before Clark hitting a couple of stores to get a new swimsuit and a couple other things. Clark's last patrol before leaving gave her a while longer to finish shopping and to pack a few things before they were ready to leave.

But it was nearly time to leave their island paradise.

She still had a gnawing feeling of dread in the pit of her

stomach -- that another shoe was going to drop at some point. She wasn't entirely certain what the first shoe had been but something else was still lurking out there.

Her eyes were closed but she knew the instant Clark returned because he was hovering between her and the sun.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"No," she told him with a shake of her head. "Can't we just live here?"

Clark chuckled. "I'll make the hut better and store some non-perishables here so we can fly off at a moment's notice, even if it's just for a few hours or an overnight or something like that. Make us a better bed, rig a shower. This is the first time anyone's stayed more than a few hours."

"But not the last, I hope."

He hovered over her, his cape brushing the sand on either side. "Definitely not the last." He floated down a bit and kissed her softly. "We'll come back soon, but right now we need to get home."

"And I need to take that Suit off you," she said with a yawn.

Clark laughed again. "Probably not tonight. You're tired."

"I don't think I'm *that* tired."

"We'll see. I bet you're asleep by the time we get to the apartment." He moved away from her, allowing her to stand up and pull clothes on over her suit.

He scooped her into his arms and she snuggled down into them.

"I think you might be right," she admitted with a yawn.

"Oh. Mom said that they and Gramps' have a wedding present for us and want us to stay out there next weekend. I know you probably don't know this but Mom and Dad don't usually stay out there all the time. They have their own home but we tend to all spend weekends out there."

She nodded against his Spandex-clad shoulder. "Works for me."

She didn't remember much of the flight back to Metropolis or Clark tucking her into bed, but she was well-rested when the alarm went off the next morning.

And she was very glad to feel Clark's solid presence in the bed behind her.

"Good morning," he whispered in her ear.

"Did you set the alarm extra early so we'd have time to..."

Her words were cut off by a kiss.

"Would I do that?" he asked when he moved back.

"I know you would."

"Sue me."

"I wouldn't get anything."

Clark grinned at her as she rolled to look at him. "We do need to do that kind of stuff soon though -- get you put on my bank accounts and all those things. At least you didn't get too settled in where we'd have to worry about you breaking your lease or closing an account you just opened."

She wiggled a bit, rolling to face him. "Must we talk about the mundane when you set the alarm deliberately early?" She kissed him and they both forgot about things like checking accounts.

An hour and a half later, they exited the elevator, hand in hand. The other elevator arrived a few seconds after they did.

"Clark. Lois."

They turned to see Sarah walking out of it with her arms full of files. "Here's that research you asked for," she told them.

Clark reached to take some of the files from her. "That was fast. I just sent the email late last night."

"I got in early," Sarah said with a smile. "And I work fast."

"What's it about?" Lois asked, taking a sip of her coffee as she set her bag on her desk.

"I caught a whisper of something about the space station last night, when I, uh, went out to get food." He glanced at Sarah and

then gave Lois a pointed look.

She rolled her eyes. Like she'd contradict him about Superman cover stories in front of someone who had a big crush on him already. "Well, thank you for the quick work, Sarah. We'll let you know if we need you to help with anything else." She wasn't trying to be rude, but she didn't see any need for the other woman to hang around.

"Mr. Lane, I, uh, know you're working with Ms. Kent here, but I had an idea and I didn't get a chance to talk to you about it last week and wondered if you might have a few minutes."

Clark turned, leaning against his desk. "Shoot."

Sarah glanced at Lois and then back at Clark. "Well, um, what if you did a series of *good* stories? I mean, so much of the news is bad, what if you wrote some stories about... unsung heroes. The confirmed bachelor who took in his sister's kids when she died or the lady who still lives in the home she grew up in but it's in gang territory now and she's fighting back. Things like that."

Clark nodded slowly. "That's a great idea. Can you get me, oh, a dozen or so potential stories -- just brief synopses and we'll go from there?"

Sarah nodded. "I will. Thanks."

Perry exited his office. "Jimmy! Turn that up. They're about to officially christen the space station."

Lois sighed as she sat in her chair and turned it so she could see the television nearest her.

The honeymoon was definitely over.

Part 14

Clark slumped against Lois' desk.

"That was impressive," she said softly. "Stopping the space station from plummeting to Earth? I wasn't sure you'd be able to do it."

Clark rotated his shoulder several times before stretching his back. "*I wasn't sure I'd be able to do it. That was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"So now what?"

"Now, we go to STAR Labs."

Lois grabbed her briefcase and her coat off the rack by her desk. "Who's at STAR Labs?"

"Dr. Bernie Klein." Clark helped her on with her coat. "I've known him since I was little. He and Dad went to college together. He's a cutting edge scientist. If anyone can help figure out why the space station tried to turn itself into a huge meteor, it's BK."

He took her hand as they walked towards the elevator.

Jimmy bounded up to them as they waited for the car to arrive. "CJ! My man! I heard the big news. Congratulations!"

"CJ?" Lois asked with a raised brow.

Jimmy shrugged. "I tried calling him CL but it didn't really work very well."

"I still don't know how he figured out my middle name is Jerome. At least not legally," he said with a pointed look in the younger man's direction.

"I have my sources," Jimmy replied mysteriously. "But seriously, I heard the news through the office grapevine over the weekend. Congratulations to both of you. Lois *Lane*," he tried with a bit of a far-off look on his face. "Has a nice ring to it."

"Well, I'm staying Lois Kent professionally, so..." The elevator chose that moment to arrive. "But thank you, Jimmy."

"Maybe Clark should change his name," Jimmy told them as the door started to shut. "C*K works much better!" he finished with a shout as the doors closed in front of him.

Clark leaned back against the wall.

Lois rested a hand on his arm, a concerned look on her face. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Just beat, that's all." He pressed a kiss against

her forehead. "I'll be fine. I'm just not used to something taking that much out of me. At least it wasn't last weekend though. I didn't have my powers then." The doors opened to the parking garage.

"I'm glad you have your powers back," she told him, kissing him lightly. "Or we wouldn't have had much of a honeymoon."

He wrapped his arm around her. "If all we'd done was stay at the apartment, it would have been wonderful."

"Not Gramps' house?" she asked with a grin.

"Too many people." He held the passenger door to the Jeep for her, grinning and kissing her as she climbed in. "At the apartment, it would have been just the two of us."

"True."

An hour later, they left STAR Labs with the information that the space station would have reversed course if Superman hadn't been able to stop it. Dr. Klein had even been able to isolate where the signal to the space station had come from -- with a six foot range.

They drove to the address in the suburbs, stopping in front of a house for sale.

"Looks vacant," Lois observed, walking up the porch steps.

Clark glanced in the living room by peering over his glasses. "It is," he confirmed.

Lois jiggled the door handle. "Locked."

"Let's look around." Clark led the way to the back yard. "I like this fence," he said suddenly, a hand resting on the top of the gate to let Lois in.

Lois looked around the yard. "It's nice." She hesitated. "Is this the kind of place you see us someday?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't know. I guess part of me's always figured I'd end up living Gramps' house someday but in that vague general 'someday' sense. I've never really thought too much about the in between. I mean, the apartment's fine, but not once we have kids or if we just decide we want more room."

"Kids?" Lois asked, looking at the large satellite dish dominating one side of the yard.

"Yeah." He looked over at her. "We haven't really talked about kids, have we?"

She shook her head. "No, but I always thought I'd have a couple kids. Maybe three or so, but not as far apart as me and Lucy. Mom and Dad never planned that either, you know. They had some secondary infertility issues which is why Lucy and I are so far apart. Anyway, I was glad I wasn't an only child my whole life, but I don't want to have kids eight years apart. What about you?"

Clark shrugged. "Ever since I was old enough to really understand those things, I wondered if I could even have kids. I mean..." He looked around and moved closer to her. "I'm not *from* Earth. Who knows if I can have kids? And now that I'm..." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "...Superman, *should* I have kids? I mean, I've already had to run out on you a time or two. What about when my son has his first basketball game or my daughter's first dance recital and I'm in China because of an earthquake?"

Lois wrapped her arms around his waist, reaching up to give him a soft kiss. "We'll figure it out." She looked around the yard, leaving one arm around his waist. "And this is nice. I never really saw myself raising them on the farm, but I'm glad that they'll have it to go visit with Granny and Grumps." She'd moved away from him, looking for anything unusual.

"Grumps?" Clark called from the other side of the yard where he was inspecting a tree.

Lois shrugged. "One of my cousin's kids calls my Uncle Joe 'Gramps' and Dad 'Grumps'. I'm not quite sure how it got started or why it stuck, but it has so far."

"I didn't think your dad had a bad mood setting."

"He doesn't very often. That, of course, makes it funnier to all

of us but the little kids who don't get it. Dad's about the most easy going guy you'll ever meet unless someone threatens a member of his family somehow." Lois bent down to pick something up. She held it up to Clark. "Look. A down payment."

Clark took it from her, zooming in on it. "It's not money," he said, surprise in his voice. "It's a microtransmitter. The satellite is a decoy."

"Can I help you?"

They both looked up and Clark slipped the transmitter in his pocket.

Lois started walking towards the gate, eyeing the man watching them. "Oh, we were just driving by and thought this house looked so cute. We thought we'd take a look."

The man held out his hand. "Dave Miller."

Lois shook it. "Hi, Dave. I'm Lois Lane and this is my husband, Clark."

The two men shook hands, each trying to one up each other in the strength department, eyes locked. After what seemed like an eternity, they both backed off.

"Can I show you the inside?" Dave asked, leading the way to the front of the house.

"Oh, I don't think we have time now, do we, darling?" Lois hung off Clark's arm, her voice practically dripping honey.

"No, we've got to get back to the office." Clark smiled at the agent. "Do you have a card?"

Dave shook his head. "I'm actually all out at the moment."

Clark handed his card over. "Well, here's mine. Give us a call in a couple days and we'll see if we can find the time."

They climbed back into the Jeep and drove off. "That was weird."

"What was?"

He started to say something but was interrupted by his ringing cell phone. "This is Clark," he said into the phone. "Hi, Perry. What's up?" His face went white. "We're on our way."

"What is it?" Lois asked, a concerned look on her face.

"A bomb at the natural history museum." He pulled to the curb, giving her a quick kiss. "I'll see you there."

Lois nodded, getting out and heading towards the driver's side of the vehicle as Clark ran off.

Clark was speeding towards downtown Metropolis and the museum when a voice reverberated through his head.

/The test have only begun, Superman. Whether you are the one to pass them remains to be seen. Somehow, I doubt it./

Part 15

Lois tried not to speed too much towards downtown Metropolis, but then realized that she had no idea where she was going.

She sighed and headed towards the Daily Planet. She knew where that was.

She was getting out of the Jeep when there was a loud 'boom' well above her. She ran towards the street to find Superman and Jimmy standing there looking into the air.

"He was also in a movie called 'Destination Tokyo'," Jimmy told the hero.

Superman smiled slightly. "Thanks."

"Superman!" Lois called. "What happened?"

He turned to her. "Ms. Kent, I believe."

Lois nodded, remembering that she and Superman had never officially met. "Yes. I believe you know my husband, Clark."

She could tell he was trying not to roll his eyes. "Yes. I think it's time for your first exclusive, though." He looked at Jimmy. "Is there anything else I can help you with, photo wise, Mr. Olsen?"

Jimmy's grin grew bigger. "Call me Jimmy, Superman. And I'm good -- I've got everything I need."

"Well, thank you, Jimmy." Superman turned, walking down the sidewalk. "Ms. Kent?"

Lois fell into step beside him, tape recorder in hand.

"Superman, I heard the bomb was at the museum. How did you end up here?"

They ducked into an alley near the Planet building where Superman turned back into Clark as he told her what had happened. Lois hadn't actually turned the tape on, knowing she could get the information she needed anytime from Clark -- and then there was no chance either of them would slip up and reveal something that could be heard by someone else later.

"That's just weird," Lois said, contemplatively as they walked back into the newsroom. "Why would someone set up a mini-cd player for Superman to reassemble in order to give him clues that led him to the Daily Planet's manhole cover? And the manhole cover had a very real bomb underneath it. How many people could have been hurt?"

"Here's that research," Sarah interrupted, handing Clark a file folder. "Thirty-five feel good stories."

"Thanks. I'll look at it later." He headed towards his desk, effectively ending the conversation with the researcher. "That's something else I need to talk to you about," he told Lois.

Lois set her bag down on her desk, as Clark pointed towards the conference room. She nodded, following him. He shut the door after she'd entered.

"What?"

He looked around carefully. "First, I wanted to do this." He gave her a gentle kiss.

"You can do that anytime," Lois sighed.

"Second..." He hesitated. "I wanted to ask you about something my father said in the storm shelter."

Lois picked up one of the donuts sitting on the table. She pulled off a piece and took a bite. She made a face and set it back down. Stale. "Anything," she told him.

"What did it *sound* like?"

"What did what sound like?"

"When he talked to you in your head?"

Lois shrugged. "Just like when he was talking to both of us, only in my head. Like when you imagine hearing me say something or something like that. Just his voice in my head. Why? Did he talk to you again?"

"I heard something in my head, but it definitely wasn't my father. Male, but not my father."

"What?"

He told her the words that had reverberated in his head since he'd taken off towards the museum.

"That's weird, too. Someone telling you something about tests -- in your head -- and then the whole bomb riddle thing? Weird." She chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. "Are Kryptonians telepathic?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. I think my father may have mentioned it in one of the messages I heard years ago, but I don't really remember. Why?"

"Why not? I heard your father in my head. You heard something in your head. What if there was another Kryptonian around who, for whatever reason, is just now deciding to contact Superman? And a male, so it's not like it's your birth Kryptonian chick wife. Maybe he's been living in the bush in Australia for the last two years and just heard about you or something."

"The real estate agent!" Clark turned suddenly grabbed a notepad, sketching quickly before poking his head out the door. "Jimmy!" he hollered. "I started to tell you about it earlier but..."

Jimmy interrupted whatever it was Clark was going to say. "What's up?"

"I need you to find out everything you can about a man named Dave Miller. I think he may be an agent for Century Twenty-two but I'm wondering if that's actually true." He tore the page off the notepad. "Here's a sketch of what he looks like."

"I'll see what I can find." Jimmy left the room and headed

towards his desk.

"What's that all about?"

"I couldn't out shake his hand." Clark turned to look out the window.

"What?"

"I always have to be careful not to hurt someone when I shake hands, but him... He was the one who practically turned it into an arm wrestling match, but I couldn't out shake him."

Lois' brow furrowed as she thought. "Do you think he might be Kryptonian? Who else could match your strength?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't recognize the voice in my head, but we only spoke with him for a minute so I don't know that I would have."

Lois sighed. "Well, I'm going to go work on the bomb thing."

He nodded. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"I will."

Lois bit her bottom lip as she walked back to her desk. Could there really be another Kryptonian around? Was there more than one? Was that why Clark didn't recognize the voice?

She typed furiously for a while before she heard a sonic boom in the distance and realized that Clark was off on another rescue.

"Ms. Kent?"

Lois looked up from her keyboard to see Sarah standing there. Didn't she ever bug anyone else?

"Yes, Sarah?"

"Um, I have a question for you."

Lois leaned back in her chair. "Shoot."

Sarah looked around. "Not here. In the conference room?"

Lois watched her for a long moment. "Okay."

The two headed into the conference room. Lois shut the door behind them.

"What can I do for you?"

Sarah took a deep breath. "I need to ask you a question."

"You already said that."

"What exactly is the nature of your relationship with Mr. Lane?"

Lois raised an eyebrow at the other woman. "Why is the exact nature of my relationship with Mr. Lane any of your business?"

Sarah hesitated. "Because it is," she finally said vaguely.

"Why? My relationship with Clark isn't anyone's business but our own. And if you really want to know you could probably ask the grapevine. I've heard the news of our marriage has already reached the circulation phone pool and that there's a betting pool on when we're going to announce I'm pregnant. I don't think that even the new girl is that far out of the loop, so why are you asking?"

The door opened suddenly. "Lois, you've got a call on line three," Jimmy said, looking from one woman to the other.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." Lois smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I was just telling Sarah that Clark and I did actually get married and that, no, it wasn't a shotgun wedding. I was also going to tell her how much I appreciate her asking for clarification before acting on any feelings she might possibly have." She nodded towards the other woman. "Excuse me?"

Sarah's face was unreadable as she nodded.

Lois went back to her desk, closing her eyes and taking a couple deep breaths before reaching for her phone. "Lois Kent." She pulled out a notepad and pen, putting the other woman out of her mind and focusing on work.

Part 16

"You about ready to go?" Clark leaned back in his chair to look at Lois, still typing feverishly away.

"Almost." Her bottom lip was stuck between her teeth, her

brow furrowed in concentration.

A small smile played across his lips as he watched her working and his mind wandered towards his -- their -- apartment later that night. He'd promised her in Smallville that he'd show off for her later, but he hadn't -- not really -- and his mind was filled with the possibilities of what the evening could hold.

His daydream was interrupted by the shrill ring of his phone. He sighed and picked it up. "Lane."

"Meet me at the house in an hour."

There was a click and that was it. He looked at the phone, bewildered.

"What was that?"

"A guy. Said to meet him at the house in an hour." His brow furrowed much as hers had been.

Lois bit on the end of her pencil thoughtfully. "Miller?" she asked after a moment of contemplation.

Clark shrugged. "Could be. It's the only house I can think of except Gramps' and I don't get why that would be it."

Lois lowered her voice. "Maybe Superman should check it out really quick, just to be on the safe side."

He nodded, pushing back from his desk and moved towards hers. "I'll be back in a few minutes." He glanced around the newsroom to make sure no one was paying special attention to them. He leaned over and kissed her softly. "Love you."

She smiled back up at him. "Love you, too."

Clark headed for the stairs only to find himself pressed up against the wall by a certain auburn haired gossip columnist.

"Cla-ark, you've been holding out on me," she practically purred.

"Excuse me?" He felt more than a bit trapped.

"Those little things on Lois' finger..." She grabbed his tie and tugged him closer to her. "What's that all about?"

He held up his left hand. "They go with this one."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you still undercover or did Clark 'I'm as straight laced and unexciting as they come' Lane elope? My first guess would be undercover but the assignment's over so that leaves eloped."

"Something like that."

"Do tell."

Clark sighed. He wasn't going to get away from Cat without telling her a version of the truth. "Love at first sight. Didn't tell anyone until after we'd told our families."

Cat let go with an exaggerated sigh. She walked off, the normal swing in her hips. "Lucky girl," she called over her shoulder.

Clark rolled his eyes. He was the lucky one -- to get away from Cat without a scratch. He headed towards the stairs, taking to the sky as soon as he could.

He hovered over the house in Pittsdale for a few minutes, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, before heading back to Metropolis and hovering again -- this time over his apartment. After finding nothing unusual there, he headed back to the Planet. Even if he drove, he'd be there well before the hour was up and hopefully get a jump on whoever it was. He thought about flying but he didn't know the neighborhood and wasn't sure if there was a good place for him to land and change -- and he needed to be there as Clark, not Superman. Besides, it would give him a bit of time with Lois. Talking out some ideas would be good.

He was still straightening his tie as he exited the stairwell. He looked around, but didn't see Lois anywhere.

"Jimmy." Clark stopped the younger man with a hand on his arm. "Do you know where Lois went?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Dunno, but she left a note on your desk, I think."

"Get anything on Dave Miller yet?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Sorry, man. He doesn't work for Century Twenty-two but that's all I got."

"Thanks, Jim."

Clark looked on his desk for a note, but didn't see anything anywhere. Finally, he sighed and headed to the parking garage. He climbed into the Jeep and drove as quickly as he dared towards the house where they'd met Dave Miller earlier that morning.

His uneasiness grew the closer he got, prompting him to push the speed limit more than he normally did. Why hadn't he just flown?

He parked along the street in front of the house, his heart leaping from his chest as he heard a cry from inside.

Lois.

He sprinted, barely containing himself to human speed, towards the door before bursting through.

The first thing he saw was Lois, lying crumpled against the wall.

"Lois!" He started towards her to find his way blocked by Dave Miller. He'd never wanted to hurt someone so badly in his life as he did in that moment. "What did you do to my wife?" he hissed.

"She was in my way," the other man replied with a shrug, his eyes never leaving Clark's. "But you have a bigger problem, *Superman*."

"What?" Clark tried to act puzzled but could feel the blood draining from his face.

"You heard me." Miller gestured to one side.

Clark turned to see two screens against the far wall. One showed his balcony. The other, Perry and Alice, tied up on their back deck.

They were supposed to be on some kind of marriage retreat starting earlier that afternoon, but obviously Miller had gotten to them before they left.

"You have a choice to make. Bomb A." He made a grand gesture towards the screen showing Clark's apartment. "Save all of Metropolis. Bomb B." He pointed towards the other screen. "Save your friends."

"He can't make that choice," Lois grunted, shifting slightly.

"Everyone makes choices every day," Miller told them flippantly. "Low fat or regular? Calvin Klein or Versace? Live or die? You have to choose. The bombs are electronically linked. Disarm or otherwise neutralize one and the other goes off."

"Why?" Clark asked him, one eye on the timer sitting on top of one of the screens.

"We have to know."

He turned towards the door to the kitchen to see Sarah standing there.

"Have to know what?" he asked. "And what do you have to do with this, Sarah?"

"Tick tock," Miller said, interrupting whatever Sarah was about to say. "You have to choose."

"He'd have to split himself in two." Lois winced as she moved further upright.

"Too bad that's not one of his superpowers, isn't it?" Miller said condescendingly.

Something occurred to Clark and, quick as a wink, he swept Lois into his arms and took off out of the house. He wasn't going to leave her there.

Seconds later, he dropped her off in a mall parking lot, whooshing away before either could say anything.

He stopped next at his apartment to get a better look at the bomb before flying through STAR Labs, wincing as papers went flying. He left a note for Dr. Klein having taken the device that split the laser into two. He'd seen it when they were there earlier, talking about the transmitter, and Lois' comment about splitting himself into two had reminded him of it. He couldn't split *himself* into two, but he could split his heat vision into two.

He hovered high over Metropolis directing one beam at his

apartment and the other at Perry and Alice's suburban home.

Seconds later, both bombs were worthless.

He took the time to release the Whites before heading back to the parking lot where Lois had slumped onto a bench.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't feel so good."

He scooped her into his arms and flew off towards the hospital.

Part 17

Lois lay in the bed, staring at the window but not really seeing what was outside. The doctors didn't think there was anything seriously wrong with her but they wanted to keep her for observation.

She didn't want to stay.

Clark wanted her to.

Worry wart.

He'd stayed with her as long as he felt he could, but he was restless the whole time and she finally told him to go and see if he could figure out what was going on -- who Dave and Sarah really were.

She'd even promised to stay put.

She hadn't promised for how long.

It had been another two hours and night was falling.

She had to get out of there.

She contemplated calling her nurse and telling her that she was leaving AMA -- against medical advice -- but decided that just leaving was probably a better plan. Nurses and doctors would try to convince her to stay, maybe draw attention to her, call security, and she didn't want any of those things.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, stopping to rub her neck.

She'd fought men before -- including Jason Trask just a couple of weeks earlier -- but she'd never been flung quite like that. Almost like he was shooing a fly away.

Why hadn't she waited for Clark? Because she wanted to get there early and scope out the situation before he got there. Because she didn't want to be completely dependent on him and Superman to get stories. Because she needed to prove to herself that she was a competent investigator on her own. Besides, she'd left him a note.

Of course, the end result was that she was doubting herself even more.

She sighed, pushing the thoughts from her mind as she found her clothes and dressed quickly, already more than a bit sore from hitting the wall. She found a piece of paper and left a note sitting on her pillow that she was leaving so that they wouldn't be worried about her wandering around the hospital in a concussion induced stupor or something.

Her room, thankfully, was at the end of the hall and it was the work of only a few seconds for her to slip out of her door and into the stairwell. Minutes later, she was hailing a cab, glad that she had her purse with her.

"Where to, miss?"

She bit her lip for a moment, thinking. "344 Clinton," she finally said. From there she could make some phone calls but still get some rest. And surely Clark would come back there at some point. She could also change into some of his clothes -- they would be much more comfortable than the business suit she was currently wearing.

The ride wasn't long and Lois soon found herself wishing Clark had already given her a copy of his keys. She checked first under the mat, then under the flower pot before stretching to check above the door.

No key.

She dug through her purse, finding a dusty paperclip on the bottom. A few seconds later, she was inside. She looked around

but found no sign that Clark had been there recently.

She picked up the phone to call the Planet when she realized the balcony door was open and she heard voices outside.

"How much are you willing to sacrifice personally to put me away?"

She peeked out the door.

Dave Miller was there, his back to her. Superman was on the other side of him, but he hadn't noticed Lois' presence yet. Sarah was between the two of them, looking from one to the other.

If she timed it just right, she might be able to tackle Miller while he was distracted. And hope that she was wrong about his Kryptonianess. Otherwise she'd end up right back in the hospital.

"Plenty," Clark hissed. "You threatened millions of people and two of my friends because you knew I knew them."

"That's a good attitude." Lois couldn't read the tone of his voice. Almost... gloating?

Miller touched his watch band and a green cone appeared around him.

Clark gasped and stumbled backwards almost as though he'd been struck.

"Ching!" Sarah yelled.

Ching? Who was Ching?

Lois didn't dwell on it but saw her chance, lunging towards the other man. She knocked him against the small outer wall before scrambling towards Clark who was in obvious pain.

Before she could get to him, her arms were grabbed and she was dragged away by Sarah.

She was much stronger than she looked.

Miller struggled to a sitting position. "Two guesses what this is. It rhymes with Kryptonite. Lois, no helping."

Clark was staring at her, obviously not happy that she was there, but his attention was drawn back to the other man as a gun suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"Turn it off," Lois told him, trying to sound as menacing as she could while still held prisoner.

"Okay, it's Kryptonite," Miller mocked her. "Actually, it's a Kryptonite force field. What's the matter *Superman*? Don't you still want to put me away?"

"I'll take a piece of you." Lois struggled with Sarah, determined to get away but her wrists were firmly held in place. "Let go!"

"He has to do this alone," Sarah told her.

"Do what alone?" Lois asked.

Clark struggled towards Miller and the force field but he couldn't get close enough before the pain overwhelmed him.

"That's good," Miller told him. "Run away. Or better yet, just fly away." He was obviously getting weaker himself, though Lois wasn't sure why. He turned to Sarah. "See? I told you."

"You can't hide in there forever," Clark gasped at him.

"I don't intend to," Miller shot back. He brandished the gun.

"What are you doing, Ching?"

Who was Ching?

"Simple," Miller -- Ching? -- told her. "Testing the Man of Steel. I intend to shoot myself." He looked at Clark. "Of course, you could try to stop me. But if you decide to do that, you'd have to pass through the force field. That, of course, would be lethal."

"Ching, I order you to stop now!"

Order him? Why was Sarah ordering... Ching?

"I'm beyond orders," he told her, still staring at Clark. "So, you can either let me die, the man who tried to kill Olsen and White, plus a million other people, or... you can kill yourself trying to save me."

"He's bluffing," Lois said hopefully.

"I wasn't bluffing about the bombs, was I?" he reminded her. "Five."

"Ching, don't do it!" Sarah pleaded.

"It's the only way to prove to you that I'm right. Four."

Sarah, distracted by Ching's actions, had loosened her grip on Lois' wrists.

Lois wrenched away from the other woman, diving towards the man in the force field.

"Lois! No!"

She could hear Clark yelling as she struggled with the other man. He threw her off, spun her around and she found herself staring at Clark.

With the gun pointed directly at her temple.

Part 18

Clark stared at Lois as she dove for the man in the black suit.

Miller, Ching, whoever he was quickly got the upper hand and she was turned so that he could look directly at her eyes.

And the gun pointed at her temple.

"Can you do it, Superman?" the other man gasped. He was breathing heavily after his brief fight with Lois. Was he weakening as well? "Can you make it through a Kryptonite force field in time to stop me from shooting your wife?"

"Ching. I command you to stop."

Clark glanced at Sarah again. Why was she ordering Ching? What kind of relationship did they have that she could 'command' him?

"Three."

"What's killing her going to prove?" Clark asked him. "That you have Kryptonite?"

"It'll prove that I'm right. That you're not the one."

"The one?" Clark asked, puzzled. "What 'one'?"

"Tick tock, Superman. Two."

"Whatever it is, Ching, Miller, whoever you are, it's not worth killing over." Clark prepared himself, taking a runner's starting stance as he stared at the two of them.

Ching's eyes grew calm. "Yes, it is. One." His finger tightened nearly imperceptibly on the trigger.

"No!" Clark yelled. He screamed as he pressed forward, the pain nearly too excruciating to go on.

But he had to save her.

Ching, too, but Lois...

He had to save her.

His shoulder collided with the other man as Lois twisted away. The two men landed in a crumbled heap.

Clark slumped in the corner, aware only of Lois' hands on his face mere seconds later.

"Clark," she cried. "Clark!"

He struggled to open his eyes.

"Why?" Lois asked. "Why did you do this?"

"I..." He heard Ching speaking. "What have I done? He is the one."

Clark couldn't open his eyes, couldn't move anything.

He felt a hand on his chest.

"Get your hands off my husband!"

He could hear what he guessed was Lois and Sarah fighting, before he felt the hand on his chest again.

"He's going to be all right." That was Sarah's voice. "Let's tell the others."

He heard a 'whooshing' sound he knew he should recognize before everything went blessedly black.

He came to some time later.

He was in his bed and the Suit was gone.

"Lois?" he managed to croak.

He heard footsteps and then she was there next to him.

"Hey," she said softly. "How are you?"

"I tell you what... Kryptonite is a humbling experience." He wanted to push himself up to sit against the headboard but he didn't think he had the strength just yet.

"Your parents are on their way," she told him, brushing his

hair back off his forehead. "I didn't know what else to do so I called them. Your dad said to get you comfortable and they'd be here as soon as they could."

"And getting me comfortable meant getting me naked?" he asked with as much of a grin as he could muster.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to get that Suit off of you?" she asked back with a raised brow. "That thing is *tight*."

"It's *Spandex*. It's supposed to be tight. Dad said it would cut down on wind resistance."

"But you're so heavy," she complained good-naturedly. "I bet it'd be hard to get your regular clothes off without your help, much less the Suit." She stretched out next to him on the bed, one hand resting on his chest. "Clark, Sarah and... Ching or Miller or whoever he is... First, they tried to kill you and me and then they said you were the one -- the one what?"

"I have no idea."

"But then they... *flew*!"

He wasn't sure he heard her right. "What?!"

"They *flew*," she repeated. "How could they fly?"

"I don't know. I was the one unconscious on the floor remember? But they *flew*?"

"They flew," she confirmed. "And nobody on Earth has ever had your powers."

He reached up and cupped her face in his hand. "No. And I'm the only Kryptonian around."

Lois bit her bottom lip, her expression thoughtful. "Do you think there's any possibility that... they aren't *from* Earth?" She shook her head. "No. That's crazy. It's a dumb idea." She looked at him, sure there were tears filling her eyes no matter how hard she tried to keep them at bay. "Right? Tell me I haven't been right about other Kryptonians and the Krypto-chick isn't coming back for you."

"It's not dumb," he told her, his arm wrapping around her shoulders as she shifted to rest her head on his shoulder. "The message you heard from my father seemed to indicate that there may have been others get off the planet as well. Maybe they went somewhere else and just got here."

"Maybe." She fiddled with the sheet where it met his skin, her fingers brushing against his chest. "Clark, do you know how Sarah spells her name?"

"S-a-r-a-h, I guess."

"What if it's S-a-r-a? Sa-Ra. Sa from the House of Ra or something?" She looked up at him.

His hand moved from her shoulder to her temple, brushing her hair back as he turned to kiss her lightly. "Do you really think that's likely?"

She was silent for a long minute. "She flew. The only people who can fly are Kryptonian. So Sarah must be Kryptonian. Sa-Ra. Why not? She's your birth wife coming back for you, isn't she?"

He felt something hit his skin. "Are you crying?" he asked, looking at her in surprise.

She sniffled. "No," she protested weakly.

He winced, but pushed up onto his elbow, twisting so he was facing her. "What is it, honey? You really think Sarah is a Kryptonian chick wanting to take me off to some rock as her husband?"

"Why not?"

"Even if she is the birthwife my father mentioned, that doesn't mean she gets me. That doesn't mean I'll sleep with her at night. That doesn't mean I could ever love her or make love to her. That doesn't mean she means any more to me than anyone else does. *You* are my wife. Period."

Lois smiled at him as he leaned over to kiss her gently. "Silly, isn't it?"

He didn't answer but kissed her again. He wrapped his arm more tightly around her as they kissed again and again, even with

the sheet and comforter between them.

And then...

The sound of a key in the lock brought them back to the present. The door opened and there were footsteps on the landing.

"Lois? Clark?"

Clark rested his forehead against hers with a sigh. "I think we need a new lock," he whispered.

"I think you're right," she whispered back. She rolled away from him, standing up as she did. "He's in here," she called. "He'll be right out."

She dug around in his dresser and tossed some clothes at him before heading towards the living room.

Clark sighed again and slowly got dressed.

Part 19

Lois headed into the living room. "Clark just woke up a few minutes ago," she told his parents, hoping that they wouldn't realize exactly what they could have been interrupting.

"How is he?"

"He's okay, but he's getting dressed. I got the Suit off, finally, but he's so heavy that was all I could manage. He's tired and weak but..."

"It's my dense molecular structure," came a voice behind her.

She turned to see Clark in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt leaning against the brick archway. She hurried to his side, supporting him as they walked to the couch. "Your what?" she asked.

"My body is heavier, denser than a human my size," he explained. "That's why I seem so heavy."

"Oh."

Sam pulled out his doctor bag and began to examine Clark, his thermometer exploding as he tried to take Clark's temperature.

As Sam checked him over, they told Clark's parents about everything that had happened from the time of the space station's weird attempt to turn itself into a charcoal briquette.

"And they *flew*?" Sam asked.

Lois nodded. "They whooshed off, just like Clark does. We were wondering if they might be Kryptonian or something."

"Did any others survive?"

Lois stared at her cup of coffee and Clark shifted uncomfortably.

"What?" his parents asked in unison.

"When Lois and I went to look at the ship a couple weeks ago, there was a message from Jor-El. It said something about..." Lois could feel his eyes on her, but she refused to look his way and he continued. "...other Kryptonians."

Lois stood and headed for the kitchen. "No, what he said was something about your birth wife finding you." She braced her hands against the counter and closed her eyes. "Then he said 'In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing' in my head. But now the House of Ra apparently isn't so absent which means that as far as the Krypton babe is concerned I'm persona non grata."

She could hear Clark walking towards her but she moved away before he could get to her.

"We don't *know* that, Lois," he said with an exasperated sigh.

"No, we don't *know* that, but let's look at facts." She finally looked at him. "One. The only people who can fly are Kryptonians. Two. Sarah and Ching or Miller or whoever he is, flew. Three. Therefore, they must be Kryptonian. Four. You have a birth wife from the House of Ra. Five. Sa-Ra has been checking you out all week. Then she confronted me in the conference room and asked me to explain the nature of our relationship. Knowing what I know now, it makes perfect sense. I couldn't figure out why she'd be... mad when I told her we were married, but since she's the *birth* wife and I'm just the regular wife, I guess that makes me the other woman and who wouldn't be mad at the other

woman?"

She finally allowed him to take her into his arms and she rested her forehead against his chest.

"It all makes perfect sense," she muttered.

"Lois, honey, I love *you*. I *married* you. There was no House of Ra when we got married."

"I knew Star was right." She slipped her arms around his waist. "Someone from your past is going to make all kinds of trouble for us."

There were twin 'thumps' on the balcony and Clark let go of her in an instant, heading towards the door. He looked furious to say the least.

The door opened and Sarah and Ching walked in.

"You are not welcome in my home," Clark told them, standing his ground nearly toe-to-toe with the other man.

"We must speak, Kal-El," Sarah told him.

"No. We *must* do nothing except you must leave. You're not welcome here. You tried to kill me, my wife, my friends and half of Metropolis. You think I should roll out the red carpet?"

Ching looked at the ground. "It looks like wood, not carpet."

Under other circumstances, Lois might have been amused.

Ellen had moved to her side and her hand rubbed up and down Lois' arm, trying to comfort or reassure her.

Sarah stood up as tall as she could. "I am Zara from the House of..."

"Ra," Lois finished for her. "You're Clark's birth wife, aren't you?"

Zara looked stunned. "Yes, I am." She looked at Clark. "You shared this information with an outsider?"

"Lois is my wife," he told the woman, folding his arms over his chest in the best Superman pose he could manage. "I share *everything* with her. But, in this case, she was with me when Jor-El mentioned a birth wife from the House of Ra and then he said something really interesting to her alone. That she had his blessing. So you two can just fly on back or have Scotty beam you up or whatever it is you have to do and go slingshot around the sun -- or into it might be a better option."

"What *exactly* did Jor-El say to you?" Zara asked, looking straight at Lois.

Lois thought about lying, fudging on what it was he'd said, but she couldn't bring herself to. "In the absence of the House of Ra, you have my blessing," she told the other woman with an indignant glare. "And we had no idea the House of Ra still existed when we got married. For all we knew, you were wormhole food."

Zara frowned. "When did you two get married?"

Clark told her.

"So you were married when we met?"

Lois and Clark exchanged a look.

"That's the date on the license," Lois told her defiantly. "We just kept it to ourselves until we could tell our parents and get rings and all of that."

Zara turned to Ching. "This ruins everything."

He nodded gravely. "Yes, milady. It does."

Zara gestured towards the other room. "Can we sit?"

They, including Sam and Ellen who had stayed in the background -- all worked their way back into the living room.

Clark took Lois' hand as soon as he was close enough to her, choosing to sit in the oversized chair and pull her onto his lap.

She closed her eyes as he buried his head in the base of her neck for a moment.

"I love *you*," he whispered. "And I don't give a tiny rat's tuckus if we ruined everything."

"I am afraid, Lord Kal-El, that you must care."

Clark looked over at the other woman and Lois could see the surprise on his face.

"I have the same kind of hearing you possess," Zara reminded

him. "I am a Kryptonian living under a yellow sun, remember, husband?"

"I'm *not* your husband," Clark told her forcibly.

"And it is because of that belief and your marriage to Ms. Kent that an entire planet worth of people is going to die."

Part 20

Lois was already in bed by the time Clark finished in the bathroom.

"No powers stinks," he told her with a sigh as he headed for the other side of the bed.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "You still *look* incredible though."

He chuckled lightly. "That's always nice to hear."

"I mean, I can see why Zara wants you, Lord Kal-El." She didn't look at him as she said that, choosing instead to focus on a loose thread on the comforter.

He winced at the title. "That doesn't mean she gets me," he reminded her, pulling the covers over his legs as he leaned against the headboard, his arm brushing against hers. "*You are my wife. Period. End of discussion."

"You say that now..." she muttered.

"I mean that now. I'll mean that later." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders to pull her closer to him, kissing her hair as he did. "Always."

"So you're staying here?" she asked, refusing to look at him even as her head rested against his shoulder.

"Of course I'm staying here."

"I wish you sounded more convincing."

He shifted so he was facing her more fully as she continued to look anywhere but at him. "Lois, I don't *want* to go with her. I want to stay here with you, with my family, my friends."

"I get that, but you feel obligated to go, don't you?"

Clark sighed and leaned his head back. "Maybe on some level, but I have other, more important obligations here -- like you, my folks, Gramps. But even if we weren't married... after everything they told us, I don't see how my presence would fix things. This other guy..."

"Lord Nor," Lois filled in. "Zara's little brother."

"Right. Lord Nor would still want to take over and subjugate everyone anyway. I'd just be a detail to take care of and I'm needed here so I'm not sure what I could do."

"So if I told you I didn't want you to go, that I wanted you to stay here, you would?" she asked, her fingers pulling at the thread on the comforter.

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "You're my wife, my top priority."

"She was your wife first," Lois reminded him softly.

"Zara is not now, nor will she ever be, my wife. Period."

"That's good to know."

"I mean it, Lois. *You* are the one I chose to marry and I don't particularly care about Kryptonian birth marriages," he told her forcefully.

"But you still feel somewhat obligated?" She still didn't look at him but snuggled more closely in to his side.

He stared at the window for a long moment. "It's a whole planet. Millions or billions of people. Part of me wonders if I owe it to them, to my birth family, my birth *people* to try to help somehow? I mean, I'm probably related to some of those people. Maybe get Zara to rule without me somehow that doesn't involve this Nor guy." He shrugged. "I don't know, but there has to be something, doesn't there?"

Lois' brow furrowed. "Millions? She said a thousand or more, not a hundred thousand. If there were... fifteen hundred people, or even two thousand, how many people could we be talking about? I'm not trying to minimize anything, but a couple thousand people? *Maybe* five or six thousand thirty years later? You saved more than that as Clark when you stopped the tidal wave. A lot

more. How many thousands of lives have you saved since you became Superman?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Thousands is probably a good estimate, maybe more?"

She pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs even as she leaned against him. When she spoke it was more like she was thinking out loud, almost to herself. "Even if they only counted the nobility in the 'thousand or more' and there were... fifteen thousand when you included all the slaves or whatever -- and that seems awfully generous because how big would the ship have to be to deal with that many people? But if there were fifteen thousand people total and they had high birth rates and low death rates because they probably wouldn't have taken grandpa with them -- maybe a few elder statesmen but mostly young, fertile couples -- so not much in the way of natural, old age deaths yet. And with their technology they probably have low infant mortality, and given their situation probably put a premium on children, they probably have a higher population growth than Earth, but you're still only talking about a few tens of thousands. Maybe forty thousand or so. The phrase 'an entire planet' means something different to them than it does to you."

"So do we just let forty thousand people die or be subjugated by a monster?" He ran his hand through his hair. "What's the answer?"

"I don't know. My only point there was that we're not talking about *billions* of people."

"Point taken." He turned towards her, one hand reaching out to brush the hair off her face and tuck it behind her ear. "Forty thousand on New Krypton, billions on Earth -- but most of those on Earth won't end up with a madman as their... king if I don't do something, but it's likely that hundreds or even thousands would die in the few months I might be gone who wouldn't if I stayed. Do you have any idea what the answer is?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I just know I don't want to lose you."

"You're not going to lose me."

"But you still feel an obligation to go, to do *something*."

He sat in silence for a long moment. "Kind of. What I'd really like is more information. All we have is their word and it's not like they've shown themselves to be champions of truth and justice or anything. All they've done since they got here is try to blow people up," he pointed out. "How do we know they're telling the truth?"

"Why would they lie?"

"I don't know but something keeps niggling at the back of my mind -- that something's not quite right, but I can't put my finger on it."

Lois giggled suddenly, leaning up to kiss him lightly. "No one actually says 'niggling' you know. You think it, you might type it but no one actually says it."

Clark rolled his eyes. "*That's the part to focus on."

"I mean it, no one actually *says* niggling." She looked up at him with wide-eyed innocence. "I would have thought you'd know that, my big strong reporter man."

He growled and shifted her so suddenly she squealed. "I'll show you niggling," he said, kissing her soundly.

She kissed him back, enthusiastically.

Neither one were sure how much time had passed when they lay together in a tangle of limbs. Clark pulled the sheet more tightly around them.

"That was..." She sighed happily. "Super."

Clark groaned. "Are you going to use that superlative regularly? Just to annoy me?"

Lois grinned. "Yep."

"Good to know."

They lay there for a long moment before Lois couldn't stop a

long, nearly shuddering sigh as she struggled to keep the tears from her eyes.

Clark's arms tightened around her and he pressed his lips to her forehead. "Are you going to tell me what's bothering you? And don't tell me nothing because that sigh said something is."

Lois drew random patterns on his chest with her fingertips. "I don't want you to do that with anyone else," she finally said.

"I'm not going to. We still haven't decided if I'm even going. And *if* I do, I already have a wife who I'm falling more in love with every day. Besides, we still don't even know for sure Zara and Ching are telling the truth."

They were both startled when a voice behind them spoke.

A man suddenly appeared at the side of their bed. "They're not."

Lois gasped and Clark sat up abruptly, insinuating himself as best he could between Lois and the intruder.

"Who are you?" Clark demanded. "And how did you get in? What are you doing here?"

"I am Lord Nor of the House of Ra."

Part 21

Clark desperately wished he had his powers, but to be perfectly honest, he was sort of surprised he'd had as much energy as he had a few minutes before. He was sure Lois was part of his... inspiration at that point, but given how drained he'd been just a short time earlier...

"*You are Lord Nor?" Lois sat up, the sheet clutched tightly to her chest.

Clark could see her looking him up and down with one eyebrow raised.

"Who designed your body armor? Goodyear or Michelin?" she finally asked.

Lord Nor's brow furrowed. "I do not understand." He bowed slightly from the waist, his eyes continually slightly averted from both of them. "My Lord Kal-El, I have come to warn you."

Clark closed his eyes for a moment. "Then could you, um, leave for a minute and let us get dressed?"

The brown-haired man bowed slightly again. "Yes, milord." He turned with a click of his heels and practically marched into the other room.

Lois flopped back down against the pillow. "You have got to be kidding me," she muttered.

Clark leaned over and kissed her lightly. "Sorry, sweetie," he told her with a sigh. He reached for his clothes, mixed in among the bed sheets, pulling them on as quickly as he could. Lois was doing the same.

He took her hand in his as they walked into the living room.

The man who had identified himself as Lord Nor was standing uncomfortably near the sitting area.

He turned towards them as they approached him. "Milord." He gave another half bow with another click of his heels.

Clark rolled his eyes. "Enough with the bowing crap. Get to your point."

"May we sit, Lord Kal-El?"

Clark closed his eyes and breathed a prayer for patience. "My name is Clark." He led Lois to a seat on the couch. He'd really like to knock this guy into next week -- even if Zara and Ching *were* lying and this Nor guy wasn't a despot, he'd obviously been in the apartment while he and Lois had been...

"I did not intend to invade your privacy, milord," the other man said. "However, it is of utmost importance that I speak with you immediately."

Clark's head snapped up.

"Kryptonians are telepathic. You have had no practice in shielding your thoughts from other Kryptonians. They practically... spew out." The other man refused to look at them as he spoke.

If Clark didn't know any better, he'd think the allegedly rapacious Lord Nor was blushing.

"Great," Lois muttered. "So your Krypto-babe can hear everything you think? Even while we're..." She stopped. "Never mind."

"Milord, how long have you been married to the lady?"

Clark glanced at Lois who was staring at the floor before telling the other man the date.

"That is two days before Lady Zara and Lt. Ching arrived on Earth."

"What does it matter that it was before they arrived?" Clark asked him.

"It means that, unless you invalidate your marriage to your lady under whatever terms Earth allows, your marriage to Lady Zara is void."

"I won't do that," Clark said quietly. "I won't divorce Lois."

"Then I fear our world will plunge into civil war." Nor sighed deeply before standing. He turned to face them before bowing slightly again. "My apologies for disturbing your evening, milord. There is no need for you to depart for Krypton. I deeply regret that the plight of Krypton has caused you any distress when there is no need for your involvement, outside of your official abdication. I am aware of your deep internal conflict and it is my deepest wish that you had been spared that." He turned to face Lois, bowing more deeply as he spoke. "Milady, I wish you a long and fruitful life."

Lord Nor turned to go when Clark stood suddenly. "Wait."

Nor turned. "Yes, milord?"

"Why will the world fall into civil war?"

"Lady Zara will not relinquish control so easily, I fear."

"Control to you?" Lois asked, standing next to Clark, arms crossed in front of her. "I guess it's very convenient for you that her marriage to Kal-El is void. If you're telling the truth, of course."

Nor nodded. "Yes. I am next in line to be First Lord of Krypton should Zara's marriage to Kal-El fail before he -- and she -- officially take over the throne. The line of succession goes through the House of El. If no member of the House of El can take the throne, it currently goes through the House of Ra -- as the family of Kal-El's birth marriage. However, Lady Zara cannot ascend to power on her own. She must be wed to you, milord, in order for her to take power."

"Do you have to be married then? Or is this some kind of sexist thing?" Clark asked him. "Where a guy can take power, but she can't?"

"Perhaps it is what you call 'sexist'. The ruling line goes through the male heirs, but once a ruling couple is installed, the First Lady can rule alone under certain circumstances."

"What about your birth wife?" Lois asked quietly. "Did she survive Krypton?"

Nor shook his head. "Sadly, she did not. I remember her when we were young children -- I was nearly five Earth years old when she was killed in one of the tremors. The council approved my marriage to a lady from the House of Ver nearly ten years ago. We now have three children -- two daughters and a son."

"Do you have to be married?" Clark asked again, curiosity getting the better of him. "Or just the women?"

He shook his head. "Men are not *required* to be married, but it is strongly encouraged. It is thought that family -- either solely a wife or a wife and children -- gives the First Lord much needed perspective and additional incentive to keep our people safe and to keep the peace. It is also believed that wives can often offer much needed advice and support that the First Lord can get nowhere else. In this case, Lady Zara needs you to become First Lady. Unfortunately, I have no doubt that, should you return to Krypton with us, Lord Kal, once you have ascended to the seat of First Lord, you would become expendable and find your dinner

laced with poison or some similar fate will befall you -- just as befell our father nearly a year ago. Once she has been installed as First Lady of Krypton, she no longer needs to be married. One of the circumstances under which she can rule alone is the death of the First Lord. I doubt your body would be cold before she would formalize her relationship with Lt. Ching."

Lois reached out and gripped Clark's hand as the words sunk in. He covered her hand with his other one, clasping it tightly.

"And if Clark doesn't go with you, you become the top banana?" Lois clarified, giving the other information a minute to sink in before addressing those issues.

Nor's brow furrowed. "I do not know that expression, but I will become First Lord upon Lord Kal-El's official abdication and renouncement of his birth-marriage. Technically, the council has to approve it, but it is a mere formality given the dates you have provided."

"And why are you better than Zara? Why would *you* be a better leader for your people? And you hinted that she killed your father? Why? What proof do you have?" Clark fired questions at him.

Nor shook his head sadly. "Proof? I have none, milord. I have only suspicions and what you would likely call circumstantial evidence at best. Why did she kill him? Because we had finally discovered the likely landing place of the baby Kal-El's spaceship. Until she could find her birth husband, she could not rule. Had you not been found, she would have had no chance to ascend to power. She cannot take the role of First Lady without a First Lord from the House of El and there are no others. Once Lord Kal was found, she knew the council would never approve the journey unless it was *necessary*. My father's untimely -- or most fortuitously timed -- demise made it necessary. I shall have to live with the regret the rest of my life. I warned him, more than once, of what I feared, but I was not convincing enough and he continued to trust her until his dying breath."

"So what makes you better than your big sister?" Clark asked again.

"My sister is power hungry, driven by greed and determined to subjugate anyone and everyone to her every whim. Now that she is aware of what Kryptonians can do on Earth, I would find it highly probable that your planet is high on her list of takeover plans."

"What?!" Lois and Clark nearly exploded, both at the same time.

Nor nodded somberly. "Consider this: what would the people of Earth do against superpowered invaders?"

Lois sank back into the couch, her hand still in both of Clark's. "Good point," she said softly.

"So either we believe you and Zara wants to take over Earth or we believe her and you will. Either way, Earth is in the cross hairs and there's nothing we can do to prevent it, is there?" Clark asked him.

"Milord, there is something that can be done, but I hesitate to mention it because of the potential consequences."

"What's that?" Lois asked. "Divorce me and marry Zara?"

Nor shook his head. "Fight Ching."

Clark took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "I guess I could do that," he said uncertainly.

Nor continued grimly. "A fight to the death."

Part 22

"What?!" the four of them exclaimed in unison.

Lois and Clark looked at each other as they stood in his grandfather's house. After hearing everything Nor had to say, they knew they needed to discuss the situation with their families. Clark had flown to Kansas to pick up the Kents and now Martha, along with the Lanes, were standing in Nate's kitchen. Jonathan had been in town already -- Clark would try to pick him up later.

They moved into the living room. Sam and Ellen sat on the loveseat, Gramps in one of the chairs, and Martha joined Lois and Clark on the couch.

"This Nor guy, who last night we were told was an evil despot, showed up after we left and told you you'll have to fight Ching to the death?" Sam continued skeptically.

Clark nodded. "According to him Zara's the bad guy and my birth marriage to her is void since Lois and I were technically married before Zara showed up."

"Well, Zara told us that last night, didn't she?" Ellen asked from her seat next to Sam. She was gripping his hand tightly as they struggled to come to terms with all of the new information.

Clark shook his head. "No. She said I had the *option* to void the marriage, *if* the Council -- whoever they are -- approved, and that it was likely that they wouldn't approve it since that would mean Lord Nor would take over."

"But Nor said that Zara killed their father and would likely kill Clark once the marriage and their takeover of the planet was formalized," Lois told them with a frown.

"What?!" the four of them exclaimed in unison again.

"She needs Clark to become Queen of all New Krypton or whatever it is they call her and then she can rule by herself," Lois continued. "According to Nor, she killed Daddy Dearest once they figured out where Clark landed. The Council would never fund a trip to Earth unless absolutely necessary and having no Supreme Ruler kind of fits that bill."

"Wait." Gramps shook his head. "The line of succession goes through Clark and his birth wife, Zara. So if Zara is unable to take the throne because Clark isn't there, it passes to Zara's brother, right?"

Lois and Clark both nodded.

"Why not one of Clark's family members?"

"I'm the last member of my family," Clark told them quietly. "Jor-El and Lara were both only children."

"So that's why her father was running things? Because he was her male kin and she's your birth wife?" Gramps clarified.

"I guess," Clark answered with a shrug.

"So Nor says you have to fight Ching to the death and officially abdicate, which is just a formality, and then they'll leave and you're free to live your life?" Sam let go of Ellen's hand and put his arm around her.

"Well, yeah, but the question remains, who do we believe? Nor or Zara? Zara and Ching have done nothing but put people's lives in danger since they got here. They said Nor is evil. Nor says they're evil and that they'll want to take over Earth as soon as Zara's rule is secure." Clark's arm rested on the back of the couch, his fingers gently massaging Lois' neck as he spoke.

"Nor was polite, though. He apologized for Zara and Ching's actions," Lois pointed out. "I don't know why but I'm inclined to believe him over the two nutcases."

"He *did* say that the Council would consider my marriage to Zara still valid if I divorced Lois, but that's not happening."

"What if you just go before this Council, or have them come here, and abdicated? Renounce your marriage to Zara and let them deal with it?" Martha asked.

"Ching has Kryptonite," Lois reminded them. "And if Nor's right, who's to say they have any scruples and wouldn't just take over Earth or New Krypton regardless?"

Clark's arm slid all the way around her shoulders. "*If we believe Nor, I wouldn't put it past Ching to go after all of you guys to get to me if he had to. And if he has Kryptonite, who's to say if I could protect you? Or that they wouldn't use it and kidnap me? Then take all of you to force me to go through with it?"

"Of course, this Nor guy could be using you to kill Ching," Gramps pointed out. "To eliminate one of his problems."

"That thought occurred to us, too." Clark ran his free hand through his hair. "But how do we know who's telling the truth?"

And that's assuming that one of them is. For all we know, they're both evil."

"It's possible," Sam conceded. "But until then, there's superpowered bad guys out there who, for all we know, are planning on taking over the Earth. Heck, they may be working together."

"I assure you that is not the case."

All five of them stood to face the newcomer who suddenly appeared in their midst.

"You!" Lois and Clark exclaimed in unison.

"What are you doing here?" Clark continued, putting himself closest to the intruder.

The other man bowed slightly in Clark's direction. "Milord, I have received word that Lady Zara and Lt. Ching are planning something. I do not know what at this point, but something that will threaten both you and your family. With your permission, members of the Council would like to have a word with you."

Clark crossed his arms in front of him. "Why?"

"If you are not going to come to Krypton, you must abdicate officially. I fear, as does the Council, that Lady Zara and Lt. Ching will not give up so easily and we may well need your help stopping them. With your approval, milord, the Council would like to convene a meeting with you as soon as possible."

Clark nodded cautiously. "Where would this meeting take place?"

Lord Nor hesitated. "The safest place would be the floating palace. I understand your concern for your family and they could be transported there as well. However, the Council and I also understand your probable reluctance to go to an orbiting space craft and they would gladly come here or another location of your choosing."

"Lois will be present?"

"Anyone you wish, milord. You are the next First Lord of Krypton until the abdication is official. As such, your word carries much weight."

"Can you give us an hour and then contact me?" Clark asked after a long moment of thought. "I have some things I need to take care of and then we can set up a meeting place."

Lord Nor bowed again. "As you wish, milord."

He touched the mass of computer chips on his left shoulder, seemingly entering a combination or command of some sort. A moment later, he nodded his head towards them and vanished.

"Well, that was interesting," Sam said after a moment of stunned silence.

"I think I understand why you think you trust him more," Ellen added. "He was certainly polite and his tone was much more apologetic than those other two last night."

Clark rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "What do you guys think? Meet with them somewhere neutral? I'd like you guys to be there for advice, though I'm not sure about putting all of you in danger like that." He started pacing. "And really, I'd kind of like Perry there -- I mean, he's one of the best judges of character I know. He knows snake oil from shinola. He's told me that enough times, but just show up in his office and say 'Hi, Perry. Here's some aliens. Think we could use the conference room?'"

"Probably not the best plan?" Gramps asked softly.

Clark nodded. "Not likely."

"Well, then, bring them here," he said, putting an arm around his grandson's shoulders. "We can use the formal dining room as a conference room -- I've done it before -- and meet there. If you want to call Perry and tell him it's urgent and could he please come... Well, that's your decision, but it would also mean telling him that you're Superman. He's a newsman. It's in his blood. What would he do with the information?"

"You're right. I don't think Perry would betray my confidence, but it's probably not worth the risk right now. Why

don't I take all of you to Smallville? You'll be safe there and..."

"No!" Lois interrupted him forcefully. "I'm staying right here, mister."

"And so are we." Sam had an arm around Ellen who nodded her agreement.

"Then that's settled," Martha said. "The Council of New Krypton can come here."

Part 23

Clark stood nervously in the foyer of his grandpa's home. He knew the new Kryptonians would just... arrive, with no warning or even the lights and humming sounds from Star Trek. It was a bit disconcerting. Lord Nor had promised they'd be arriving within the next few minutes and he wasn't sure what to expect once they did.

Even though his every nerve was at attention, he was still slightly shocked when a group of seven men appeared in front of him. All of them snapped to attention then bowed slightly towards him.

Clark sighed. This could be a long meeting.

"Lord Kal-El, may I present the Kryptonian Governing Council?" Lord Nor began. He pointed to each man as he introduced them. "General Dru-Zod, commander of the forces of Krypton. Trey-Xa, special advisor to the First Lord. Lord Dax-Ur, Lord Lon-Da, Lord Jen-Mai, the remaining members of the Council."

Clark nodded at them, unsure of what he should say. He took a deep breath and held a hand out towards the dining room. "Gentlemen," he said, hoping only he noticed the slight tremor in his voice.

None of them moved.

Lord Nor cleared his throat. "Milord, it is... bad manners for anyone to precede the First Lord. If you will lead on..."

Clark sighed again and headed into the dining room. This was going to take some getting used to.

He noticed that Lord Nor was right behind him, followed by Trey-Xa, the other lords in the order they had been introduced, with General Zod bringing up the rear. He wondered if it had something to do with order of importance.

His family, including Martha and Jonathan, were waiting for them. He'd gone to pick up his father-in-law while they waited knowing both Lois and Martha would want him there.

Introductions were made and then all of them stood there awkwardly.

Trey-Xa finally spoke up. "Milord, would you allow me to assist with protocol so that we may begin the meeting?"

Clark shrugged. "Sure. Why doesn't everyone just sit down?"

Trey gestured to the head of the table and the seat to the right of the head chair. "Milord? Milady?"

Clark struggled not to roll his eyes. He caught Lois rolling hers as he held out the chair for her. The rest of the... earthlings sat on the same side of the table as Lois. Lord Nor sat on his left, followed by Trey, the other lords and General Zod.

Trey leaned forward, his forearms resting on the table. The tips of his fingers touched as he collected his thoughts before speaking. "Lord Kal-El..."

"Please, call me Clark," Clark interrupted.

The other man hesitated before continuing. "Lord Nor has informed us of the happenings on your planet. Above all, we wish to protect the people of Earth from potential destruction at the hands of unscrupulous Kryptonians."

"Which Kryptonians would those be?" Lois asked. "You guys or my husband's birth wife and her cohorts?"

"Lady Zara and Lt. Ching are here without sanction by the Council. They were to have traveled with us to assess the situation and, if appropriate, approach you, mi... Clark. Their departure was not discovered for nearly twelve hours and Lt.

Ching had managed to disable the hyperlight drive on our larger ship. It was several days before new parts arrived and it was not repaired until we were well under way. They have been here for nearly two full Earth weeks while we arrived only three days ago. We believe it is our arrival that caused them to accelerate their plans for... testing you. We deeply regret any damage caused and any pain they may have caused you, milord."

"Thanks."

"Lord Nor has also told us of your marriage to your lady and of the pertinent dates. Your marriage to Lady Lois invalidates your birth marriage to Lady Zara. It will be dissolved upon your official request to the Council."

"Good to know," Lois muttered under her breath.

Trey continued talking as though he hadn't heard her. "Lord Nor has also informed us of your desire both to stay here and to make certain that the Kryptonians are left in good hands. Your concerns over which party is telling you the truth are certainly understandable. All I can do is assure you that we are telling you the truth."

Clark nodded. He'd been afraid of that.

"You don't have *any* evidence that Zara's conniving and would likely kill Clark once his usefulness was gone?" Lois had leaned back and had her arms crossed in front of her. "If you're all so sure that she's going to be an evil despot, you must have *some* evidence."

Trey hesitated before speaking again. "The Council's... awareness of Lady Zara's true nature has only come since her departure from our planet. I am afraid that her father had something of a... blind spot where she was concerned. He believed she could do no wrong. However, since her departure, a number of things have come to light. Mistreatment of several of her servants both as a child and more recently, as well. Her..." He refused to look at Clark as he continued. "...relationship with Lt. Ching."

"Call it what it is, Lord Trey," Nor interjected. "A clandestine affair of the most unseemly sort. And we do have some... circumstantial evidence. However, we cannot play the holograms on the planet without the proper equipment. We can play them on the ship if you would be willing to come with us, but not here."

"What kind of equipment?" Sam asked.

"I believe the closest translation would be 'hologram projector'. They are also capable of storing some data. We do not have any portable ones with us, I fear."

"A sphere about this big?" Clark asked holding out his hands. "Opaque?"

Lord Trey nodded. "Yes."

"Like the one my father put in my ship?"

"It is possible. There are several similar devices used for navigation and other purposes. There are also multi-purpose devices. There is no way to know without inspecting the item."

Clark stood and those to his left followed suit. "I have it with me."

The visitors remained standing at attention while Clark headed out of the room.

"You could sit down, you know," Lois told them with a smirk.

"We shall wait for the return of the First Lord," Lord Nor informed her.

"It's a bit much, isn't it?" Gramps muttered to Sam. "You know I love Clark, but First Lord? All hail Clark?"

"First Lord, Supreme Potentate, Grand Ruler of All Kal-El," Sam stage whispered back. "Not Clark."

"Right."

The faces of their guests remained impassive.

Ellen shushed them. "They are our guests. May we get you gentlemen something to drink?" she asked.

Trey shook his head. "No, thank you, milady."

Clark returned to the room holding the globe they'd found in his ship. "Here. What's this one do?"

Trey closed his eyes for a long moment. "They are sending the materials here. We should be able to see them in conjunction with that device. It is a much older version, however, there is a reasonable chance that it will be compatible."

A minute later, a large console appeared on the table. Trey took the globe from Clark and set it on the indentation.

Clark took a seat and the Kryptonians followed his lead.

Clark reached out to take Lois' hand, leaning to one side in his chair. "Okay, gentlemen. Let's see your evidence."

Part 24

Lois viciously stabbed the spatula under one of the chocolate chip cookies.

"What'd the cookies do to you?" Martha asked softly.

"That's not it and you know it," Lois retorted. She set the cookie sheet down on the counter with a sigh. "I just don't want to think about what's going on..." She waved vaguely in the direction of the back pasture. "...out there."

'Out there' Clark was learning the art of the Drei from Lord Nor and General Zod.

The council members had left nearly two hours earlier. The holograms they had watched had backed up Nor's claims. Of course, they had no way of knowing for sure that the holograms weren't faked or doctored somehow, but it certainly appeared that Ching had been skulking around a space ship of some kind.

The fight with Ching was most likely imminent. Lois didn't really understand *why* Ching would feel the need to fight Clark to the death except that he and Zara apparently had a thing going and Clark was Zara's birth husband.

Regardless, it seemed *someone* was going to want to fight Clark at some point so it seemed reasonable that Clark was going to have to figure out the Drei thing and sooner seemed better than later.

"I know, Sweetie." Martha wrapped her arm around Lois.

Lois rested her head against her mother's. "Can't they just have a spitting contest instead? I know Clark's basically invulnerable but against Kryptonians? With Kryptonian weapons? It's not who Clark is, who *Superman* is. He goes out of his way to make sure he doesn't hurt people."

"Would you prefer to fight Lady Zara?"

Lois and Martha turned to see Trey entering the kitchen.

"What exactly would that accomplish?" Martha asked him.

"We fear the only way Lady Zara and Lt. Ching will give up their aspirations is with the death or arrest of one or both of them. Since Lord Kal-El is the rightful First Lord, he is the only one capable of stopping them."

"You can't just arrest them?" Lois asked irritably.

"Given their current abilities, it would be most difficult."

Lois sighed her agreement before continuing. "So instead you're going to have Clark take out all of them for you? You're superpowered, too, now. How many men does she have with her?"

"A dozen or so, milady. However, it is likely that once Lady Zara and Lt. Ching have either been defeated or surrendered, their men will acquiesce to their new leadership -- under Lord Kal-El or Lord Nor."

"Why is that?"

"It is the Kryptonian way."

Lois started to say something else but stopped when the back door opened. Clark looked as exhausted as Lois had ever seen him. She'd watched Superman closely over the previous eighteen months or so. She'd seen him physically and emotionally spent, but usually only after spending days helping in the aftermath of an earthquake or other disaster. Or the night of his Grandpa's fundraiser when he'd felt guilty over the second half of the

accident near the New Troy state line. He'd been dancing with her and, instead of going when he first heard about the initial crash, he'd thought the authorities would be able to handle it. Instead, the secondary accident had claimed dozens of lives - lives which Clark had felt responsible for.

But this was different. They'd only been outside for a couple of hours but Clark looked more drained than she'd ever seen him. Her eyes narrowed. Was he not as fully recovered from the Kryptonite exposure as he'd claimed? Or was it just that he'd been fighting with another superpowered Kryptonian?

Clark's eyes lit up as he walked into the kitchen. "Are those your cookies?" He walked to her side and gave her a quick kiss before reaching for one.

"Hey! Those are still hot!" She smacked his arm

Clark grinned at her. "Won't bother me a bit. You know, I married you for your cookies and this is the first time you've made them for me."

"Milord?" Trey asked, a puzzled look on his face.

Clark held one out towards the older man. "Try one," he mumbled around his own mouthful before handing one to Lord Nor and General Zod.

Trey looked at it skeptically. He took a tentative bite. "It is delicious, milady," he said hesitantly.

Lois glared at him. "Don't patronize me, *Lord* Trey. If you don't like them, just say so."

He hesitated again. "It would be unseemly of me to say so."

"Well, it would surprise me if I liked Kryptonian food right off the bat." She shrugged. "You won't hurt my feelings."

"But Lord Ka... Er, Clark married you for these. It would be extremely rude of me..."

"It's an *expression*," she told him. "Clark didn't really marry me for my cookies."

Clark grinned. "Nope. Was your dad's pulled pork."

Lois sighed. "Well, Dad put that in the crock pot before you took him home. And there's garlic chicken pasta in the fridge, along with baked spaghetti and beef stroganoff and Mexican chicken."

Clark raised an eyebrow. "Are you planning on feeding an army?"

Lois shrugged. "You never know; I might have to."

"How did your training go?" Trey asked Clark.

He shrugged. "It's hard."

"He's a quick study," Nor interjected. "Ching has been training with a Drei since childhood, but Lord Kal-El has already mastered its finer points, as well as the 980 basic moves. And he won three out of four matches."

"That's good, isn't it?" Lois asked.

"I could still beat him," Nor said, a trace of disappointment in his voice. "There is a mindset crucial to all Drei masters, a point in the match when the man becomes the weapon. All else vanishes. No doubts, no fears, no heart, no mercy. Just the kill."

"You have not shown us that," General Zod told him, shaking his head.

"And I won't," Clark said forcefully, his arm tightening around Lois' shoulders. "That's not me!"

"Yes, it is, Clark," Zod said sternly. "It is part of the Kryptonian that lies within you."

"I've never believed in killing," Clark pointed out. "I've closed my mind to Kryptonian instincts like that."

The other three Kryptonians shared a look.

"Then I doubt you will survive the duel, milord," Trey said softly.

Lois pushed away from the counter. "Great," she muttered. "I married a man who isn't a killer and that's going to get him killed." She dug another package of chicken out of the freezer and tossed it on the counter. "Thaw that, would ya?"

Clark turned and rested her hands on his shoulders. "What's

going on?"

She turned to face him, wrapping her arms around him before resting her head on his chest. "I'm cooking, baking, whatever. Trying to keep my mind off Ching killing you." She held him tightly as his arms wrapped more securely around her. "I'm scared, Clark," she whispered.

"I know, honey." He pressed a kiss against her hair. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

A throat cleared behind them and they turned to see Trey shifting uncomfortably. "It's time," he told them. "They are waiting."

Part 25

Trey ordered the mother ship to transport all of the Kryptonians to the location of the meeting.

Clark was surprised when they reappeared in front of the Daily Planet building, though on second thought, it probably shouldn't have surprised him. Lois had, reluctantly, agreed that being in public as the Earth wife of Superman or Lord Kal-El wasn't a good idea so she'd stayed at the house in Pittsdale. Clark held out little hope that she'd actually stay there until it was all resolved.

A quick scan of the building showed that Ching and Zara -- along with a few of their followers -- were holding a numbers of his coworkers hostage.

Clark sighed internally as the men of the Council fell in behind him in a V formation -- his cape billowing him as he strode towards the Daily Planet building. He paused before entering, instead lifting into the air. The others followed suit and they entered the newsroom through the large windows above the bullpen -- the elevator wouldn't have had quite the same effect.

He felt fury rise inside him when he saw Ching strike Eduardo, sending him flying across the conference room while still tied to his seat.

"Ching!" he yelled. "Your quarrel is with me, not the people of this planet."

Ching appeared in front of him with a whoosh, Drei in hand. "Then you I will fight."

"I don't want to fight you," Superman told him. "I want you to submit to the laws of your planet, whatever they may be."

"And have my molecules spread across the galaxies? I think not, Lord Kal-El." He twirled the Drei in his hand. "So will you fight me or abdicate your position as ruler of Krypton to Lady Zara before she annexes Earth as a new colony of Krypton?"

Superman's face was grim. "I will defend my people."

"Which people, *Superman*? The weak Earthlings or the people of your birth?" He continued to twirl the Drei lightly.

"Both."

"I'm glad to hear that." Ching struck at him with the Drei only to find himself blocked by the Drei of Lord Nor.

"There has been a meeting of the Council called," Lord Nor told him. "You are not required to attend, *Lieutenant* Ching. You are not a member of the Council and Lady Zara has no need of a body guard."

"You are not in charge, brother." Zara appeared at Ching's side.

"Neither are you," Nor reminded her. "You become First Lady *only* upon your official marriage to Lord Kal-El."

"And as the birth wife of the next First Lord, it is my prerogative under the law to have a body guard present at all times," Zara reminded him. "Would you disregard the law?"

"I will personally guarantee your safety, Lady Zara," Jen-Mai said from behind Clark.

"The body guard is one of *my* choosing and I choose Lt. Ching, Lord Jen." She spoke as one used to having those around her acquiesce to her every whim.

Lord Trey nodded. "Very well. We shall begin the meeting momentarily." He turned to Clark. "Milord, may you suggest an appropriate location?"

Clark looked around. "Mr. White," he called.

Perry looked up from where he was being held just outside the conference room full of hostages. "Yes, Superman?"

"May we use your office, sir?"

"Long as it's intact when you're done," Perry said, looking at the mess in the newsroom.

"You have my word." Clark led the rest of the group towards the editor's office, landing lightly just outside the door.

A moment later, the door was shut.

Ching stood slightly behind Zara, who was seated in an office chair near the door to the conference room. Lord Trey took the spot behind the desk and the rest of those present took places in front of chairs or the couch, waiting for a signal to be seated. Clark was a bit surprised when Trey motioned for him to sit next to the desk -- given the meeting at the house and their deference to him, he would have expected to sit behind the desk -- but Trey was the one who was actually running the meeting. It didn't really *matter* to him, he was just struggling to figure out Kryptonian protocol and when they kept changing things... He sighed. Hopefully, they wouldn't be around long enough for him to figure it out.

Clark sighed and struggled not to roll his eyes as he realized they were waiting on him. He took a seat in the chair next to Perry's desk. "Please, be seated." He managed to keep the irritation out of his voice. "Lord Trey, would you please conduct this meeting of the Ruling Council?"

"As you request, Lord Kal-El." Trey looked around for a second before using Perry's nameplate as a gavel. "This meeting of the Ruling Council will come to order. Lord Kal-El, it is our understanding that you wish to renounce your marriage to Lady Zara and abdicate your position as First Lord of Krypton and that your marriage to your lady took place before the arrival of your birth wife on this planet."

"That is correct," Clark told those assembled.

"You understand that in doing so, you relinquish all rights to the throne of Krypton for yourself and all future generations of the El family to Lord Nor and his offspring?"

"Yes, Lord Trey. I understand the ramifications."

Trey nodded. "Then it is the ruling of this Council..."

Zara stood suddenly. "Lord Trey, Lord Kal-El cannot renounce his marriage to me with pending charges."

"What charges?"

"Abandonment."

"Excuse me?" Clark asked with one brow raised. "I didn't even know you *existed*..."

"Lord Kal," Trey interrupted. "We are all aware that this is your first Council meeting. I must ask you to refrain from speaking until I ask you to, now that charges have been presented by Lady Zara."

"My apologies, Lord Trey," Clark said, once again stifling a sigh.

"Lady Zara, what proof do you have of these charges? The dates Lord Kal-El has provided us with indicated that his marriage to his lady took place prior to your arrival."

"One of my men provided us a copy of their marriage certificate. While it is true that the official date of the marriage was prior to my arrival, the papers indicate that Lord Kal-El and his... *lady* took advantage of an obscure law in the county in which she resided. The papers were not filled out, filed and made official until *after* my arrival. They knew this and have continued to mislead the Council about the true date of their decision to marry." Zara sat back down in her seat.

"Is this true, Lord Kal-El?" Trey asked.

Clark hesitated. "To an extent, Lord Trey."

"Please explain."

"While the timeline Lady Zara has given is correct, there was no intent to deceive. The official date of our marriage is the one I have provided you with."

"And the consummation?" Zara asked him.

"Lady Zara," Trey snapped. "You know well the procedures of Council meetings and you will be granted no more leniency for breaking them."

Zara simply glared at him.

Trey sighed. "She does bring up a valid point, however. *Milord*, the date of consummation?"

Clark sighed. "The same day we filled out the paperwork, perhaps early the next morning as I was called to assist at a train derailment when we arrived home."

"Then we have a quandary," Trey said, letting out a long breath.

"There is no quandary, Lord Trey. The charge of abandonment must be upheld and since Lord Kal-El has abdicated his position, as his birth wife, I am entitled to remain as First Lady."

"But even though you were here, I had no idea who you were," Clark interjected. "You were Sarah, the researcher, not Zara the Kryptonian until yesterday. How was I supposed to know?"

Zara just glared at him.

"Lord Kal-El raises a good point," Trey admitted wearily.

"And you and Ching tried to kill me, my friends, my *wife*, and half the city," Clark continued as though Trey had no spoken.

"It is of no consequence whether he knew who I was or not. Not under Kryptonian law," Zara said defiantly.

Trey closed his eyes for a long moment. "Unfortunately, she is correct. It is the ruling of the Council that..."

Part 26

"Wait!" Lord Nor interjected suddenly. If Clark didn't know better, he'd think he saw a hint of fear in Nor's eyes. But that couldn't be right, could it? "Lord Kal-El's abdication was never formalized. Lady Zara interrupted before it was made official."

Trey nodded at Nor. "Then the ruling on the charge of abandonment would require Lord Kal to pay reparations and dissolve his marriage to Lady Zara as part of the abdication agreement. Because of the contradictory dates, he will not be bound by Intentional Abandonment penalties and ruling power would still pass to Lord Nor."

"I ask that the Council first rule on the validity of his marriage date to the Earth woman," Zara said, staring at her brother.

"For what purpose?" Trey asked her.

"The purpose is irrelevant. It is a proper request."

Trey nodded. "For the purposes of the abdication, the date on the certificate will be entered as the valid date of his marriage to his lady, with the date of abandonment as the date of the consummation of his marriage." He pounded the desk with the name plate. "It is so ordered."

Clark sighed as he listened to the conversation between Zara and Trey. He didn't understand the rules or laws or whatever it was they were talking about and finally decided he needed to speak up -- to at least satisfy his own curiosity. "Lord Trey, please pardon my speaking out of turn, but I have no idea what *law* it is I'm supposed to have broken. I had no idea there were any other Kryptonians in the... *universe* until yesterday. How could I *possibly* have abandoned Lady Zara several weeks ago? And what about the threats she and Ching have posed to Lois, myself and the city? Ching held a... a... *gun* to her head and threatened to kill her."

Trey nodded. "I understand your concern, Lord Kal. First, the abandonment penalty that you will be required to pay will be...

twenty of your dollars. Given the circumstances surrounding the entire situation that seems more than fair."

Clark nodded. He still didn't quite get it, but if twenty bucks would get this whole mess resolved, he'd pay it. He wasn't happy about it on principle -- and he was sure Lois wouldn't be either -- but it was worth it at this point.

"And what exactly am I supposed to do with twenty Earth dollars?" Zara demanded. "How does that make up for abandonment?"

"Consider yourself lucky that Lord Kal does not yet fully understand Kryptonian law," Trey snapped at her. "I am quite certain that as soon as he does, you and *Lieutenant* Ching will be brought up on charges of endangerment. The only reason you have not yet is because none of us were here to witness those acts. Once this matter is resolved, I personally will discuss that matter with Lord Kal-El."

Zara glowered.

"Now," Trey continued, "on to the matter of abdication."

Zara stood again. "Lord Trey, it has been ruled that my husband, the next in line to be First Lord of Krypton, has abandoned me and been ordered to pay reparations. Under such a ruling, it is my prerogative to request that I be placed as First Lady in his stead."

Trey hesitated. "The request is denied."

Clark watched Zara and Ching carefully. Neither showed any kind of reaction to Trey's announcement. Did they have a Plan B? If so, what was that plan? The whole fight to the death thing?

"It cannot be. Lord Kal has not yet taken his position as First Lord. His is to be a preemptive abdication. As his abandoned spouse, the position of First Lady, without a ruling First Lord, is rightfully mine."

Trey pinched the bridge of his nose.

"She is right, Lord Trey," Jen-Mai said quietly.

"I am aware, Lord Jen," Trey told him. "But Lord Kal's abdication has not been made official. Under the abandonment charge, his marriage has been dissolved but the First Lordship passes through the House of El, not the House of Ra. He can still be installed as First Lord and then abdicate to the family of his birth wife once the installation is complete making Lord Nor First Lord."

"If he is going to take his office with the intent to abdicate then it is also my right to challenge him to a duel," Lady Zara said, a smug smile on her face. "A duel to the death with the one left standing to take the role of Ruler of Krypton."

Trey sighed wearily. "That is your prerogative. However, I ask that you reconsider. Given the... abilities you have both acquired on Earth, it seems unlikely that there would be a true winner and the losers would be the planet and the people of this city."

Zara ignored Trey and turned to face Clark. "I challenge your claim to the seat of First Lord, Lord Kal-El."

"I'm not going to fight a woman to the death, Trey," Clark whispered.

"You will not have to, *milord*. Lt. Ching will represent me in the duel," Zara announced.

"Then I shall represent Lord Kal," Nor said instantly, rising to his feet.

"That is not how the law works, dear brother, and you know it." Zara continued to stare at Clark. "It is your choice, *milord*. Abdicate and I will rule in your stead or fight Ching -- to the death. If you win, I will bow out graciously as the law requires. If you lose, the Council will recognize my rightful position as First Lady of Krypton."

"Do I have a choice?" Clark whispered to Trey.

Trey shook his head sadly. "Your choices are to fight Ching or abdicate, allowing Zara to take control as First Lady. I am sure you are aware of the potential consequences of that choice."

"So it's me or everyone?"

"I fear it may be both," Trey told him, refusing to look him in the eye. "If Lady Zara takes over, I fear for both of our peoples, but Ching has trained with the Drei since his youth."

"Can't we play basketball or something instead?" Clark asked with a sigh, resigned.

Trey looked puzzled. "What's basketball?"

Part 27

Lois somehow managed to convince their parents to wait in Pittsdale after Clark and the others took off. She'd reluctantly agreed that it would be best if she wasn't in the meeting with Ching and Zara. Though they knew that she was Clark's wife, Clark wasn't going to be the one meeting with them -- Superman would.

But she'd also overheard that Zara and Ching had taken over the Daily Planet building and were holding everyone hostage. She'd agreed that accompanying Clark might be a bad plan on several levels, but that didn't mean that she was going to sit idly by and wait to see what happened.

She was stopped by police cars a block away from the building. How was she going to make it all the way to the Daily Planet building? She sighed, growing concerned as Superman and Ching landed lightly in the middle of the street.

"We can take this somewhere else," she heard Clark say.

Ching shook his head, a Drei materializing in his hand. He began to twirl it. "The duel is right here, right now." He struck at Clark, knocking him off his feet.

A Drei suddenly appeared in front of Clark and he grasped it as he jumped to his feet.

Lois watched from a distance, both fearing for her husband and wondering what she could do to help. Trey, Nor, Zod and the rest of the Council were standing not too far from where she was, but she doubted the stern looking policeman would let her get close. "Lord Trey," she whispered, hopeful that he would hear her. He turned towards her.

He walked towards her, speaking in low tones that only she could hear when he was close enough. "Milady, you are not safe here."

"Neither are a lot of other people," she told him quietly. "But I need your help."

She whispered to him for a moment. He nodded and a few seconds later, they were airborne. They disappeared over the western horizon and returned several minutes later, a box under Lois' arm.

"Be careful, milady," Trey said quietly. "We have been told that one of Zara's men used his eyes to burn one of the humans to a crisp, I believe is the phrase. They will not hesitate to do the same to you. You have no legal standing under Kryptonian law at the moment so there may be no consequences to them as far as they are concerned. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Lois' face was grim. "I'm saving my people, Lord Trey, just as you and Clark are trying to protect yours." She started to walk off but stopped, turning back to the other man. "You do whatever you can to help Clark. I'll take care of Zara. Stay away from the newsroom and keep Clark away."

Zod landed next to Trey. "How are you going to take care of Lady Zara?" Zod asked. "I believe you to be both brave and strong, milady, but not foolish. I fear both for your safety and the state of Lord Kal-El's mind if something were to happen to you."

"Just stay away from the building," she told them, marching off.

She peeked around the corner, cringing as she heard metal crunching in front of the Planet building. A car alarm blared. Seeing no one, she ran quickly to a short staircase nearly hidden by a dumpster and down to the door. She pulled her lock pick set out of her pocket and a minute later, she was inside.

She was in a basement storeroom and she carefully felt her way to the staircase. It wasn't an emergency only staircase, but no one ever used it. She could only hope the Kryptonians were the same way.

Silently, she headed up to the fifth floor where Lois presumed Zara and her people were holding Perry and the rest.

She opened the door just enough to peek out. At the end of a hall near the conference room, there wouldn't be anyone on the other side.

Seeing no one she ran quickly to the side door of conference room where members of the Daily Planet staff were being held.

"Lois!" Perry hissed quietly. "What in tarnation are you doin', darlin'?"

"Rescuing you," she whispered back.

"You do know these yahoos have powers like Superman, right? One of them burned Ralph to a crisp," he told her softly as she worked on the ropes that bound him to the chair. "They threatened to do the same to anyone else who stepped out of line. I don't know what we can do against them, but they're arrogant SOB's. Didn't even leave anyone to guard us. They're too interested in Superman and the other guy duking it out." They all winced as another car alarm started sounding.

Lois nodded as she finished untying Perry and together they worked on the rest of the staff. As they untied a couple of others, they quietly started helping their fellow workers and she pulled Perry slightly aside. "Superman told me how to defeat them," she whispered in his ear. "He didn't want anyone to know because it can hurt him as well, but these are extenuating circumstances."

Perry nodded as he rubbed his wrists. "That's understandable. Where's Clark?"

"He's out on the street. He'll have the story for you later." She picked the case up and headed for the door. "Stay here but be ready with those ropes when I need you."

Perry nodded. "Lois, darlin', be careful," he called after her in a whisper.

She nodded before opening the door. There were no sentries, which she thought was odd, despite what Perry had said about their arrogance. Instead, she could see Zara floating near the big outer windows watching the battle on the street below. She was flanked by about ten men in the same black suit that Ching and Zod had worn.

"Hey! Zara!" Lois called loudly. She could practically see Perry cringe. "Can't fight your own battles, can ya?"

The other woman turned in mid-air, floating down towards Lois. "And you think you can defeat me?"

"I have something for you," Lois said boldly, waiting for Zara to get a bit closer. She held the case in front of her.

Zara landed about four feet in front of Lois, standing on Lois' desk.

Lois flipped the clasps and opened the case. "Just a little piece of home for you," she said as Zara fell to a heap on the ground.

Instantly, the ten guards were headed towards Lois who held her ground. They joined Zara, writhing in pain on the floor.

Lois yelled over her shoulder. "Bring those ropes out here and tie these guys up, would ya?"

Perry and the others were out there in seconds. Lois left the case open, far enough away that none of them could get to it, but close enough that it would continue to affect them. She headed towards the window to see what was going on down on the street.

They could hear the sounds of metal crunching all the way from the fifth floor.

"What's going on, Lois?" Perry asked her quietly as Superman landed on one of the police cars that had surrounded the area. The policemen had tried to stop the combatants, but their bullets had bounced harmlessly away. "Superman showed up with some of those other guys, had a conference in my office,

but I couldn't hear what was going on. Sarah, from research, and that guy out there fighting Superman had showed up here a couple hours ago and took us all hostage."

She pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. "Sarah is Kryptonian," she explained. "And Krypto-chick is Superman's birth wife. Apparently, not everyone died when the planet exploded but he didn't know that. She wanted him to go back with her to rule or something, but he wasn't convinced she was on the up and up." She pointed out the window to the small group standing on a nearby corner. "Those are other Kryptonians, members of the ruling Council. The one wearing body armor that looks like tire treads is Lord Nor, next in line for the throne if Zara and Kal-El -- Superman -- dissolve their marriage because Superman plans to stay here. He's her little brother. Clark and I saw the evidence that Zara and Ching are the bad guys here, not Lord Nor like they claimed."

They watched as Superman knocked Ching into an abandoned city bus.

"Can he defeat this guy?" Perry asked her.

Lois shook her head. "I don't know. They said he didn't have the killer instinct that most Drei masters have. Dreis are those things they're using to fight with."

They watched as Ching began spinning his drei in a figure eight. He stared at Superman as he approached cautiously, his cape in tatters.

The Drei and the symbol on Ching's chest both began to glow. Lois blanched. "No doubts, no fears, no heart, no mercy," she whispered as a yellow flash left Ching's Drei and hit Superman square in the chest.

Superman flew backwards, a good thirty feet before hitting the building across the street from the Planet.

Ching walked towards him, Drei pointed at Superman's chest as he stood over the fallen hero. They could hear the war yell from the newsroom.

But before Ching could strike the final blow, something shocked them all.

A crack reverberated through the cement canyons and then his head exploded.

Part 28

The small group of Kryptonians on the street were instantly on alert.

Ching had stood over Clark with nothing to stop him from killing the fallen superhero.

And then came the crack.

And the small red dot in the middle of Ching's forehead.

And the cloud of red mist where the back of his head had been

Nor rushed towards Clark as the others took to the sky.

"There!"

Nor looked to see Trey and Zod headed towards a building half a block away.

There was a light reflecting towards them and he zoomed in with his vision.

On the rooftop was a man with a rifle.

Aiming at Superman.

Another crack reverberated around them.

"NO!" Nor yelled as he threw his body in front of Clark's, pain ripping through him as the bullet hit his abdomen.

He landed heavily on Clark who felt the rest of the air get knocked out of him.

"Nor!" Clark grunted. He struggled to push the other man off of him and pulled what was left of his cape off of his shoulders, struggling to wrap it around Nor's torso in an effort to stop the bleeding.

Trey and Zor landed with another man in tow.

Zod tapped the communicator on his shoulder and Nor

disappeared from sight.

"He's been taken to the infirmary," Zod told Clark as he slumped against a light pole.

"What about Lois? She's here, isn't she? Zara -- the others at the Planet?" Clark asked, trying to catch his breath.

Zod looked around. "They have retaken the Planet building. Lady Lois had Trey take her to get something from her parents' home and told us to stay away."

"Kryptonite," Clark said, wincing at the memory. "Staying away is probably a good plan."

"Milord, this is the man who killed Lt. Ching and tried to kill you," Trey said, leading his prisoner towards Clark.

Clark looked up and his eyes widened as he took in the man standing there. "Trask," he whispered. "You're dead."

Trask glared at him, but didn't say anything.

"He had this." Trey held out a high-powered rifle. "There's also a box of ammunition that needs to be retrieved from the roof, but when I neared, I became dizzy. Perhaps we could send Lois to get it."

Clark nodded as police began to swarm around them.

"Inspector Henderson," he said with as much authority as he could muster. "You need to send men to the top of the Carlin Building. This man," he nodded at Trask then Ching, "killed this man and wounded another. He also tried to kill both Clark Lane and Lois Kent in Smallville, Kansas a few weeks ago. He went over a cliff into a lake and was presumed dead but a body, obviously, was never found. Lois, Perry and a number of other members of the Daily Planet staff were held hostage but have overtaken their captors and tied them up."

Henderson started barking orders sending men running in different directions before turning back to Clark. "How are you, Superman?"

"I'm okay. I've never fought another Kryptonian before and it took a lot more out of me than your average bad guy. I didn't know other Kryptonians even still *existed* until a few days ago."

He leaned his head back against the lamp post and closed his eyes, thankful that it all seemed to be over.

"Lord Kal-El?"

Clark looked up at General Zod. "Yes?"

"Milord, I believe it would be best if we were to transport Lady Zara and her men to the ship rather than have your people take custody. They are currently incapacitated, however, we have no way of knowing how long that will last and I fear for the lives of your officers should they regain their abilities."

Clark looked at Henderson. "What do you think, Inspector?"

Henderson nodded slowly. "Well, they should be brought up on a number of charges, including kidnapping and murder."

"I assure you, Inspector," Zod told him with a slight bow. "They will be dealt with appropriately."

Henderson regarded the other man for a long moment. He was the senior officer on the scene but what would his bosses say later? He wasn't sure how the other Kryptonians had been incapacitated and wasn't sure he had the luxury of time. And if he tossed the decision up the chain of command, it would get bogged down in red tape. He sighed. He'd deal with the consequences later. "In that case, we would appreciate it if you would take custody, ah, General Zod?"

Zod nodded and tapped the communicator on his shoulder and spoke a few words they didn't understand. "They have been transported directly to the brig."

"Thank you, General." Henderson turned back to Clark. "Are you okay, Superman?"

Clark nodded. "I will be."

"Inspector, tell us what you need us to do. My men are yours to command." General Zod bowed slightly to Henderson. "We will do whatever we can to help repair this area of your city."

Henderson sighed and looked at Superman. "I don't suppose

there's much point in taking photographs or collecting evidence, is there?"

Clark shook his head. "I am sorry, Henderson. Believe me, we tried to find a way around this nonsense and then I tried to get him to go elsewhere but..." Clark shrugged. "I will have the Superman Foundation make sure that any vehicles are either repaired or replaced and I believe that General Zod and his men could repair much of the rest of the damage in short order."

"Inspector!"

Henderson and the others turned to see one of his officers with a prisoner in tow. "Yeah, Zymack?"

"This man was attempting to remove these from the top of the Carlin Building." He held out a lead box enclosed in a plastic bag.

Henderson took it from him and started to open it.

"Please don't," Clark said suddenly. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to take that somewhere for safe keeping. I'll see to it you have access to it for evidentiary purposes if necessary but what's in there needs a special kind of security."

Henderson hesitated then called for one of his other men. "Let us get the prints off the outside then I'll turn it over to you. You know the rules of evidence. Contact Abby in forensics as soon as you can?"

"Yes, sir. I'll see to it that it's properly stored and that Abby has access to it before end of business today at the latest." Clark pushed himself up off the ground. "I have some other matters to attend to, Inspector. General Zod will coordinate anything you need, right General?"

General Zod snapped his heels together and bowed slightly towards Clark. "Yes, milord."

Clark took the evidence bag with the box of rifle ammunition from Henderson, summoned his remaining energy and took to the sky.

Part 29

It was several hours before they made it home. Colonel Cash, the man captured by Zymack, and Trask were both under arrest.

Lois and Clark, once Clark had landed on the roof of the Planet building and emerged in the newsroom as Clark, had written up the story as several members of the Royal Kryptonian Guard, under command of General Zod, fixed the street and buildings.

Lois went back to the apartment to pick up a change of clothes while Clark talked to Perry and stopped at the police station to see the forensic scientist before they headed back to Pittsdale for the night.

"What's for dinner?" Clark asked as he sank onto one of the bar stools. "Do we have anything?" His eyes twinkled at Lois even as his shoulders slumped.

Lois stood behind him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "I think I'm too grateful that you're okay to be annoyed at that."

Clark reached for one of the cookies still sitting on the counter. "Me, too."

"Clean up was going well?" Jonathan asked as he checked on the barbecue in the slow cooker.

"They were just about done repairing the buildings when we left," Clark told them. "Dad, you've got all that Kryptonite locked up?"

Sam nodded. "The evidence bag I'll take over to Bernie at STAR Labs. He's a good man and a cutting edge researcher. He's often expressed a purely scientific interest in Superman -- in a good sense, not a creepy, dissect you with a knife sense. Wondering if there was anything he could do to help Superman. I wonder if he might be able to use the Kryptonite to develop some kind of antidote or vaccine or something. The other case is under lock and key here for the moment."

"Thanks, Dad."

"This is ready whenever you guys are ready to eat," Jonathan announced.

Clark started to get off his bar stool as Ellen started to get plates out of one of the cabinets.

Lois stilled him with her hands on his shoulders. "I'll get yours."

"Thanks."

They spent the next hour eating and talking quietly about the events of the day. Clark volunteered to fly Martha and Jonathan home, but they insisted he needed more recuperation time before doing something like that. Lucy was staying with Granny Kent for the night and there were no guests staying at the B&B so they wouldn't be missed.

"Well, kids," Gramps started as the clean up was finished. "I'm proud of both of you, how you dealt with all of this. We, uh, hadn't planned on telling you about this tonight -- just the next time you stayed here so it's not *quite* done, but the three of us do have a wedding present for you."

"Gramps, that wasn't necessary," Clark told him.

Lois smacked him. "Hush. If someone wants to give us presents, let them," she whispered loudly.

Everyone laughed and Gramps waved Clark off. "Nonsense. My only grandson is only going to get married once. I'm going to go all out."

Clark shook his head ruefully. "Fine."

Gramps pushed back from the table. "Come on."

He led the group through the living area and to the master suite on the main floor. He rested a hand on the door. "It's all yours, kids. Whenever you're here."

Clark gaped. "Gramps, that's your room. Yours and Grams."

Gramps shook his head. "Not anymore." He pushed the double doors open. "Congratulations."

Lois and Clark both gasped. Lois recognized the bedroom set and bedding from her lunch/shopping trip with Ellen.

"This is too much," she whispered. "We can't accept this, can we, Clark?"

Ellen slipped an arm around her daughter-in-law's shoulders. "Yes, you can, dear. We wanted to do this for you -- give you a place that's for the two of you while you're here, not leftovers from Clark's teen years. A home away from home, but close enough you can come whenever you want. We all remember what it was like to be honeymooners and know that you might not want to come every weekend like Clark usually did, but when you're here..."

"You could even consider it your own personal B and B and I certainly wouldn't be offended if I didn't see you all weekend," Gramps told them with a wink.

"Thank you," Lois said, turning to give Ellen a big hug before moving on to Gramps and Sam. "Thank you so much."

Together, with her parents, they explored the large bedroom -- complete with super king bed. Lois was sure anything smaller would have been dwarfed in the room. There was a living area with comfortable new furniture in it. The bathroom and closets were bigger than the entire living room in Smallville.

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this," Lois whispered to Martha as they inspected the larger of the two walk-in closets, complete with built in shelving and drawers. "It's too much."

"Honey, you married into a family with money," Martha said, putting her arm around her daughter. "I'm just so glad that you two will never have to struggle like we did."

"But, Mom, if this is what they do for a wedding, what will they do for Christmas or birthdays? Unless Clark has some hidden bank account I don't know about, we can't afford anything near like this for them."

Martha rubbed her shoulder comfortingly. "Honey, accept the gifts graciously, in the spirit which they're given and give what

you can, what you're comfortable with. I doubt they expect anything more and I think that they'd hate to make you uncomfortable."

Lois sighed. She was sure they didn't *mean* to make her uncomfortable, but they did.

She and Martha headed back into the bedroom to find that Clark had collapsed onto the bed and the rest of the family had left.

Martha gave her a big hug. "I love you, Sweetie. And I'm so glad Clark is okay."

Lois held her for a long moment. "Me, too, Mom. Me, too."

Lois shut the main door behind her mom, turning to lean against it. "How are you?" she asked heading towards the bed. She crawled onto it and stretching out next to him.

He turned towards her, burying his head in her shoulder. "That was the hardest thing I've ever done.

She wrapped her arms around him holding him close for the first time since the battle ended. It was their first few moments alone since before the Council had arrived early that morning. A few tears streaked down her cheeks. "I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered, one hand playing with the hair at his temple.

"Me, too. When Ching was standing over me, I understood what Nor had been talking about -- the no mercy thing. I don't have that in me, Lois, and he would have killed me if it hadn't been for Trask's insane desire to be the one to do away with Superman. And Trask would have if Nor hadn't gotten in the way."

"I love you, Clark." Lois' arms tightened around him.

"I know, honey. I love you, too." He closed his eyes and relaxed into her embrace.

Part 30

They laid there together for what seemed like an eternity before Lois spoke again. "Clark, this is really too much. This bedding alone was several hundred dollars for a regular king size and this bed is bigger than that."

Clark nodded against her. "I know."

"I guess it's going to take some getting used to," she said with a sigh, resting her head on his.

"What's that?"

"Being part of a family with money. A big gift at my house for years was a candy cane." She sighed again. "I mean, not really, but there were a lot of years where Christmas was a craft, and a wedding present was a quilt Mom and I made, often out of the best parts of clothes Lucy and I had out grown, not a whole bedroom suite."

"The last thing any of them would want to do is make you or your family feel uncomfortable," Clark told her, shifting until he was sitting next to her against the headboard. "If it really does, or if you think it'll bother your parents because they can't do something big, then we can decline and I'll talk to them privately about why."

Lois shook her head. "No. Mom and I talked about it earlier. They're just happy we won't ever have to struggle like they did, but Christmas... birthdays..."

"You know that doesn't matter to my folks, or Gramps either. They love being able to do nice things for people. My mom couldn't make a quilt to save her life -- you should have seen how many tries it took to make my first cape -- but she can buy a nice one. And I'd bet serious money -- or naked chores -- that they talked the store *way* down on the price. Gramps is a great haggler, but Mom puts him to shame. It would surprise me if they got less than 15% off the ticket price and probably more like 25%."

Lois looked up at him. "Naked chores?" she asked with a raised brow.

He shrugged, a twinkle in his eye. "Well, not *here*, but at home. If I'm right, you have to do the chores naked. If I'm wrong,

I do."

"That's not fair," she told him. "You can do all the chores in like eight seconds. I'd never know you didn't have clothes on."

"Normal speed."

"Fine," she muttered. "But *I'm* not asking if they got a discount." She rolled to the side, getting up and heading for the closet. She returned a minute later with a box in her hand.

"What's that?" Clark asked, taking it from her.

"Speaking of clothes, I was watching a little bit of NASCAR the other day and one of the commentators said something about Superman so..." She shrugged. "Open it."

He eyed her warily as he opened the box. He looked at the contents and then back at her. "What's this?"

She smiled innocently. "Well, the announcer said that Superman wears Jimmie Johnson pajamas so..."

Clark laughed as he pulled out the flannel pants and socks. "No shirt?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

He pulled her to him. "I happen to have it on good authority that Superman's wife prefers he sleep in next to nothing," he murmured before kissing her soundly.

"True, but not when other people are around, like when we stay here -- just in case."

"The door has a lock," he pointed out.

"Still." She drew a random pattern on his back with one finger. "How are you? Really?"

He sighed. "I'm... okay. I'm glad that everything's over, that the appropriate Kryptonians are in custody. I'm still stunned that Trask was alive and that he probably saved my life."

"Me, too." She sighed deeply. "Nor saved your life, too you know. Have you heard if he's going to make it?"

Clark shook his head. "It's still touch and go, last I heard."

Lois brushed the hair off his forehead. "You look exhausted."

He nodded. "I am. Grateful, but exhausted. All I really want to do right now," he admitted, "is fall asleep in your arms. That's all I've wanted to do for the last couple of hours."

"You should have said something. Everyone would have understood if you wanted to go to bed and I wanted to stay with you."

"I know."

She stood and headed back to the closet. "Put your new pajamas on," she called over her shoulder.

By the time she emerged a few minutes later, Clark was leaning against the headboard. He chuckled. "Really?"

She shrugged. "Superman wears Jimmie Johnson pajamas. Superman's *wife* wears Superman pajamas."

"Well, I also happen to have it on good authority that Superman prefers his wife sleep in slightly less."

She climbed in next to him, her brow furrowing as he winced when she smacked his arm lightly. "What? That hurt?"

He nodded. "A bit."

"You've been putting on a front, haven't you? You're in a lot of pain? I'm going to call your dad." She started to get back out of bed.

He stopped her with a hand on her arm. "No, it's not that. I'm just sore and tired and I didn't want everyone to worry. I didn't want 'Clark' to be all banged up at the same time 'Superman' was earlier so I managed pretty good at work and I knew how concerned you and my parents would be..." His voice trailed off as she glared at him. "I'm *fine*, just tired and sore. I promise. I wasn't... trying to keep it from you. I just didn't want to get into all of it in front of everyone. That's it."

She sighed and moved back towards him. "Then you need to get some rest."

Clark grimaced as he lowered himself to the pillow trying to get comfortable before Lois situated herself around him. "I love you, honey. I couldn't have done this today without you. Getting

that kryptonite from your house was a stroke of genius. If Zara's men had gone out there after Ching and Nor were down... I'd have been done for." He closed his eyes briefly then sighed.

"Now that we got comfortable, we're about to have company."

"What?"

"Trey asked if he could speak with us for a minute."

Lois sighed. "Great." She nodded towards the sitting area. "In there?"

"Sure."

He leaned heavily on Lois as they walked into the attached sitting room. He'd been okay as long as he kept moving, but now that the adrenalin had worn off and he was winding down...

Trey appeared in front of them as they settled onto the couch.

He bowed slightly. "Milord, milady. I will get straight to the point. After consultations with the other members of the Council, we have a proposal to make."

"What's that?" Clark asked wearily.

"We would like for you, Lord Kal-El, to return to Krypton with us to take your position as First Lord with Lady Lois as our First Lady."

Part 31

Lois and Clark stared at Trey in stunned silence.

"Would you mind repeating that?" Clark finally asked.

"The Council would like to extend our request that you return with us to Krypton to be First Lord, with Lady Lois at your side."

There was another long silence.

"I thought I'd die under New Krypton's heavier gravity and red sun," Lois finally said.

Trey looked puzzled. "There would certainly be a period of transition where you would need medical assistance, but it is our belief that you could acclimate quickly, aided by the gradual increase in gravity on board the ship as we travel. May I ask who informed you otherwise?"

"Zara and Ching," Clark told him with a sigh.

Trey nodded. "Both of your families would, of course, be welcome to join you. We can accommodate up to an additional twenty people presently, but arrangements could be made for more than that or for those who would not be prepared to leave when we are ready, to join you at a later date."

"What exactly does being First Lord entail?" Lois asked him. "Like president?"

Trey shook his head. "The First Lord has both more and less power than your president. It is a hereditary position, for life, but he rules with the advice and, sometimes, the approval of the Council. Many decisions are made by the majority on the Council, though the First Lord can sometimes overrule it." He sighed. "It is a complex system which we would gladly explain in more detail if you are seriously considering our offer."

"What about Nor?" Lois asked quietly.

"It is still unknown whether he will survive. The doctors are cautiously optimistic. Between prompt medical attention, Kryptonian technology, and exposing him to your yellow sun as much as they feel is safe, they are hopeful, but it is too soon to know for certain."

"Isn't he the rightful First Lord, though?" Lois persisted.

"No, milady."

"I thought he was once Clark abdicated." She turned to Clark. "Did I miss understand?"

Clark shook his head. "I haven't had a chance to tell you about the Council meeting, but I haven't officially abdicated yet. You understood right, but the abdication still isn't official."

"Why not?"

Clark sighed. "Because Zara charged me with abandonment and there were reparations and duels and..."

"Abandonment?! Reparations?!" Lois sat up straight and stared at him. She turned to Trey. "You're making him pay Zara

reparations for abandonment after everything they did? When Clark didn't even know she still *existed*?!"

Clark pulled her back towards him. "Twenty bucks."

She looked at him. "What?"

"Trey ordered reparations of twenty bucks. I figured it was worth twenty bucks to make her go away."

Lois relaxed against him. "Yeah, I guess, but still. I'm offended on principle."

Clark chuckled. "I figured you would be."

"But what about Nor?" Lois asked again.

"This possibility was discussed on our journey here," Trey told them. "Offering the position of First Lord to Kal-El and First Lady to his Earth wife, if he had one and it seemed appropriate, was proposed by Lord Nor. Special provision was made and voted on by the Council while we were en route."

"So, I'd be First Lord and Lois First Lady," Clark clarified.

"And my parents and Gramps and her parents and sister could all come? And no one would die because of the gravity?"

"Precisely. We would hope that you would facilitate relations with Earth. Help us to determine what kind of relationship the two worlds will have. We believe that having you as our leader would do much to allay any fears the people of Earth might have. Our scientists are already working on a... vaccination of sorts that would prevent Kryptonians from having powers on Earth. We feel that would be a concern to the people of Earth and, as we have all seen, not all Kryptonians would use those powers for good."

"If we went, everyone would figure out Superman is really Clark Lane," Lois said quietly. "We'd *both* be in newspapers and stuff and someone would put it together pretty quickly. Like Perry."

"Good point," Clark said with a sigh. "I'm not sure I want everyone knowing, even if I were leaving to run New Krypton. Especially if some of our family stays here or if we get there and it's not working for any of us and we want to come back. Assuming any of our families would even want to go -- they all have lives here already that they may not want to leave."

"May I make a suggestion?" Trey interjected.

Lois shrugged. "Sure."

"Perhaps your departure could be explained away. We've done research and everyone believes Clark Lane to be a friend of Superman. Perhaps any relevant persons could be told that, as friends of Superman, the two of you and your families have been invited to spend time on Krypton as his guests. You could both submit some articles to your newspaper and no one would be the wiser. We would expect you to come only if you planned on staying, not as some sort of trial period, but we also understand that one cannot predict how these things will play out. If you, milord, were to decide to abdicate under established Kryptonian law, you could return to Earth with your identity still intact. Transmissions of your appearances with Lady Lois would be confined to Krypton only. Eventually, however, it would likely be inevitable that your true identities would be revealed."

Clark nodded slowly. "I guess that's a possibility."

Trey bowed slightly. "We will await your decision, milord, milady."

Clark held up a hand. "When do you need to know? Before you depart for New Krypton?"

Trey nodded. "Yes, milord." He hesitated. "Milord, I do not wish to seem impudent, but may I ask you a question?"

Clark shrugged. "Sure."

"Why do you refer to our world as *New Krypton*?"

"What else would I call it?"

"Krypton."

"But the new planet is *New Krypton*, right?" Lois asked.

"New planet, milady?"

"The one you moved to after Krypton exploded," she

responded, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

Clark stared at Lois' hand that he held within his own for a long moment before speaking. "My father left messages on the globe saying Krypton's core was unstable. The holograms showed the planet exploding as my ship left."

Trey's brow furrowed. "It did, milord?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah, it did."

Trey hesitated again.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

Trey took a deep breath. "Milord... Krypton never exploded."

Part 32

Clark stared at him, mouth ajar.

"Would you repeat that?" Lois finally said. "Krypton never exploded," Trey repeated. He finally sank into one of the other chairs. "I did not know that you had been told it had. And further, who told you we now live on *New Krypton*?"

"Zara and Ching," Clark told him quietly. "Though pretty much everything else was either a lie or a convenient truth, so why not that?" He looked at Trey, tears in his eyes. "My parents?" he whispered.

Trey shook his head. "What your father did not know..." He sighed sadly. "He was not told because we were not certain it would work. Not long after your ship was launched, there was a breakthrough. The core was restabilized but part of that restabilization led to the most massive tremor of all. Unfortunately, the lab where your parents were still working was destroyed with your parents and several of their assistants inside. We were able to ascertain the general direction in which your ship had launched, but half the universe was in that direction. We feared we would never find you. Recent technological advances enabled us to reconstruct enough of the data to determine what galaxy you were in. Probes searched for habitable planets and, a little over a year ago, we discovered this planet -- and you."

Clark's grip on Lois' hand had tightened to the point that she was becoming uncomfortable and she whispered his name.

"Sorry," he said quietly, loosening his grip. "So my parents are... dead?"

"Yes, milord," Trey answered quietly. "I wish I could tell you otherwise..."

"But if they weren't dead, they would have come after me a long time ago?" It was more a question than a statement.

"Yes, milord. Visible emotions are not common among Kryptonians, but everyone could see how much they loved you. There was a failsafe built into your ship so it could be recalled if necessary, but the controls for that were also destroyed in the last tremor. Nearly ten percent of our population was killed in the last few tremors -- including Lord Nor's birthwife, who was one of your cousins on your mother's side, Lord Kal-El. That is another reason why Nor was acceptable as First Lord, even though she was dead and of the House of Lo, she was a relative of the First Family."

Clark closed his eyes as it all sank in. "So I do have family on Krypton?" he finally asked.

"Some distant relatives." Trey waited a few seconds before going on. "None of them would think any less of you for choosing to remain here, milord. You have a family and a life in this world."

"Who would become First Lord if I abdicate and Nor doesn't pull through?"

"I am not certain. We would have to go through the genealogical charts and determine if there are any relatives who are related by blood to the House of El -- your great-great-grandfather, for instance, had one son and one daughter. For a number of reasons, each successive generation has had only one child. Fortunately, for the purposes of succession, each of them had sons. We would have to determine which of that daughter's

descendents would have the rightful claim as a descendent of the House of El."

"Would there be any... civil war type repercussions?" Clark asked.

"Unlikely. Though it is possible that there would be several descendents with... nearly equal claim due to birth order, birth dates, and so on and there may be some squabbling, but it is unlikely to lead to war." Trey stood. "I will take my leave, milord. I am certain you need time to rest and recover as well as to absorb all that I have said this evening. We will be in touch tomorrow." He bowed, the deepest bow either of them could remember seeing from any of the Kryptonians. "Milord, milady. May your rest be peaceful and your recuperation swift."

"Thank you, Lord Trey."

Lois and Clark watched as he disappeared from their sight.

"That was interesting," Lois finally whispered a minute later.

"That's the understatement of the year." Clark rested his cheek against her head. "What do you think?"

"I think we should go to bed, get some sleep and deal with it in the morning. Talk to our parents and Gramps and go from there."

Clark nodded. Lois stood and held out a hand to him, helping him up. He winced, but was able to walk to the bed under his own power.

"You're feeling better?" Lois asked as they situated the covers.

"Some. Or maybe I'm just getting more used to moving while in pain."

Lois rested her head on his shoulder as his arm wrapped around her, his fingers playing lightly with the hair at her temple.

"Would you have gone if we weren't already married?" Lois asked suddenly.

"What?"

"If we hadn't listened to Star... would you have gone?"

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know. I wouldn't have to pay Zara twenty bucks, though."

"I'm still against that on principle."

He chuckled. "I know." He turned serious. "I can't say for sure what I would have done if we weren't already married. If we were dating? Engaged? I just don't know. I still wouldn't have *wanted* to go, but I don't know if I would have or not. As it turned out now, I didn't have to. All I should have had to do was abdicate."

Lois sighed and snuggled closer to him. "I don't want to think about it anymore tonight." She yawned. "We both need some sleep."

He pressed a kiss against her forehead. "One thing's for sure though. We're not moving to Krypton unless they have the stuff for you to make me cookies sometimes."

Lois smiled. "Yes, milord."

He chuckled and held her a bit tighter.

Wrapped in each other's arms, they drifted off to sleep.

Together.

The transport ship had landed behind Gramps' house. Everyone had gathered there to say good bye to those headed towards Krypton.

Lois and Clark stood together, looking out the window. Clark's arm rested on Lois' shoulder and hers was around his waist as the transport ship lifted into the air. They watched until it was out of sight of the house in Pittsdale.

Satisfied, they turned from the window, settling into the couch designated for them, chatting amiably with those around them. Clark pressed a light kiss against her hair and she turned to smile at him as the conversation flowed around them.

They had made their decision and they were at peace with it.

Together.

THE END