

# Double Jeopardy

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: In a world where nothing is what it seems, can our favorite couple find their way home?

I started writing this story two years ago, but the idea developed long ago. It took a while to pull it altogether. I would like to thank everyone who helped with this monster. You know who you are (better than I do <bg>)! Thanks to everyone who read when I posted to the boards and double thanks for the feedback.

I want to give credit to the writer(s) of the movie of the same name. I saw it years ago and felt it could be a jumping point for an L&C story. I was right!

Most of the characters belong to DC Comics- no infringement was intended.

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Loud applause arose around the bullpen as the young woman smiled widely.

"Very nice, Lane," Perry White told her as he held up that day's copy of the Daily Planet. Lois Lane had certainly become a valuable asset to his newsroom in the four short years she'd been on staff. She'd even earned her first Kerth already, even though she'd only been a beat reporter for eighteen months or so. And if things kept going the way they were, she'd take home another of the coveted awards this year.

"Thanks, Perry," Lois said as she tucked her hair behind her ear. "What I really need is a raise."

"Yeah, yeah. I guess you have been chasing that for a while, huh?"

Lois tapped the paper Perry had laid on the desk. "And I think that should be worth something."

"Me, too." Perry turned and bellowed for everybody else to get back to work before striding back to his office.

A few more congratulatory remarks were made before Lois settled to tackle her next front page headline. As a beat reporter you were only as good as your next story and she was beginning to be known as the best. Her phone rang and she grabbed it on the second ring.

"Lois Lane?"

"Lois, darling, I've been waiting all day to hear your voice."

"Lex," she said with a grin. "It's nice to hear you, too."

"And will it be equally nice to see me?"

"Of course. When?"

"How's tonight?"

"Unless something major comes up," Lois told him.

"Seven?"

"Sounds good." She looked up when Jimmy Olsen motioned for her. "Lex, I have to go."

"The news doesn't stop for our private lives."

"No, afraid not," she replied. "Tonight."

"I will be chomping at the bit until then."

Lois barely dropped the phone back in the cradle before she was off and running. Jimmy informed her on the way to the elevator that something huge was breaking at EPRAD.

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Jimmy ran to keep up with Lois as she weaved her way through the crowd outside the space center. A throng of reporters was already there to witness the latest in the on-going saga of the

space program. Most recently there had been an attempt to build a station that would hover just outside the atmosphere of Earth. It was the belief of many scientists that such a reality could mean unlimited possibilities for mankind. With the absence of gravity, research in fields only dreamed of before could become a reality. However, the most recent in a long line of accidents and miscalculations had set back the timeline on the project again.

"All right, people," a man in a white lab coat called as he stepped up to the microphone. "If you'll quiet down, we'll inform of you of the latest news." He waited until he could finally be heard above the hum of voices. "This morning we were given the official okay to release the news that the Space Station Luthor will go up as planned." Cheers and clapping rose from the crowd.

"I thought the accident set things back?" Lois shouted to be heard.

"Several benefactors stepped forward and their help has allowed us to continue."

"You mean Lex Luthor?" came another shout.

"Mr. Luthor has always been a major contributor," was the answer. "Certain other... hindrances have also been taken care of and we're confident now that the launch can proceed without further delay."

"You mean people had to be hushed," was Lois' sarcastic remark. She knew there had been a lot of people paid to keep quiet about the accidents at EPRAD, even if she'd never been able to prove it. And she'd tried for weeks, but so far every lead had come to a dead end.

"We won't dignify that with a response, Ms. Lane." Professor Daitch knew Lois well. When she'd been investigating the 'incident', as it had been officially dubbed, the poor man had been hounded relentlessly by numerous news organizations. He hadn't fared very well against Mad Dog either.

"Now," another official continued, "we will release an official press announcement. Selected publications and news stations will also be invited to the launch."

"That's all for now," said the first man. Another began passing out the briefs.

"Can you believe this?" Jimmy asked as he read over the paper in his hand. "There's nothing in here about any of the incidents."

"Nothing the government does surprises me," Lois replied as she made her way toward the building.

"Where we going?"

"To get some answers."

Jimmy shrugged and followed. There was no way they were getting anywhere close to that building, but he'd learned a long time ago that you just didn't argue with Lois Lane.

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Jimmy had been right- they'd been unable to get into EPRAD. And when they'd failed to be able to corner any of the scientists, they decided to call it a day and head back to the Planet to do research. But even that hadn't gone so well.

"I hate to do this, Lois, but I've got a date," Jimmy said as he looked at his watch.

"No problem. We're not getting anywhere." Lois, too, glanced at her watch. "Oh, dang!" She shot to her feet, suddenly remembering she'd made plans tonight as well. If she hurried, she'd just make it.

Thank goodness she only lived a few blocks from the Planet. She opted to leave her little hatchback in the parking garage and take the bus, hopping off a block over from her apartment. One day soon she was seriously going to have consider trading in that heap of metal for something more stylish. Cutting through the alley in the middle of her block, she went up the back stairs. Five locks later, she was tossing her things on the chair in the corner of her living room.

"Hi, Charlie," she told her fish as she dropped a few flakes in

the odd-shaped bowl. Another glance at her watch told her she only had ten minutes for a shower if she wanted to put on any make-up at all.

Not sure what they were doing to tonight, Lois opted for a cocktail dress, blue with short sleeves. While this wasn't her first date with Lex, she certainly didn't want to give him the impression that she wanted to warp their relationship into overdrive either.

Relationship? Did she have a relationship with Lex? They'd gone on nearly two dozen dates over the last couple of months. And while they'd spent so much time together, she felt that she really didn't know him at all. It wasn't like they hadn't talked; they had. It was part of her nature to ask questions and she'd asked dozens, all of which he'd answered as honestly as he could. Yet there still seemed to be so much about him she didn't know.

Did one ever know someone like Lex Luthor? He was a billionaire! A powerful businessman.

And yet he'd asked her out and continued to do so. She was very impressed with him, too. He was an intelligent man, able to carry on a conversation about nearly any subject in the world. He loved the opera, the theater, and jazz. He had his own private cook, a Mr. Belvedere, and a personal assistant. Lois found it flattering that such a worldly man was interested in her.

Too starry-eyed to question it at the moment, Lois had just finished dressing when Lex's driver called for her. Oh, well, she'd think about his motives later.

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A week later, Space Station Luthor launched without a hitch. Lois' research ran dry and she gave up the chase on that story. Perry assigned her to another story that she felt was a waste of her time. It involved a government agency and their belief that aliens might exist.

"This is such bull," Lois muttered as she picked the lock on a warehouse in Suicide Slum.

"You have to admit, Lois," Jimmy said as he followed her inside, looking around to make sure they weren't being followed. "If someone wanted to hide something, what better place to do it than in the middle of this neighborhood?"

Lois chuckled along with her \*partner\* for the day as her eyes searched her surroundings. Honestly, she had no idea why Perry insisted she needed a partner. She worked alone!

Focusing on her surroundings, she peered at the rows and rows of file cabinets and shelves of... junk! "Look for anything..."

"Weird?"

"Yeah," she said through another snort of laughter. She chose a file cabinet while Jimmy went straight for the odd-looking pieces of metal lying around. There were tons of files with names of places — cities, she guessed. "Smallville?" she whispered. "Where the hell is that?" Pulling the file out, she opened it to read what could be so important about a place with such a name. It was in Kansas. "Of course it is," she mumbled as she read on. "Target landed at... Hey, Jimmy, come here."

He hurried over to see what she wanted. "Yeah?"

"Are these numbers coordinates?" she asked as she pointed out what she thought was a location.

"Looks like it." He pulled an object up to show her. "Look at this." It looked like a globe, but it was made out of some kind of metal she'd never seen before. And it was cool to the touch, extremely cool. "Isn't that weird?" he asked when her eyes widened on first touch.

"Yeah. What is it?"

"No idea. I found it in that." He turned and pointed to what looked like, for all intents and purposes, a small spaceship. It appeared to be made of the same sleek metal as the globe, with a large symbol on the nose. The symbol was a makeshift triangle with a stylized 's' in the middle.

"Oh, how rich," Lois said with a bark of unbelief. "Where do you think they get this stuff?" Jimmy shrugged and went back to his search and she continued to read the file she held. Apparently a 'target' landed in Smallville in 1966. Someone listed only as CO believed this target to be the transport vessel of an unknown threat. The file went on to say that because the target vessel was so small it was deduced that there was no way it could have contained a very large specimen, possibly even an infant. Further, it was the belief of an agency known as B39, that the 'threat' might have presented itself in the form of a being that closely resembled humans. It was theorized that an infant might have been sent to be raised among the population to later be programmed to call in an invasion force.

"Hey, Jimmy, can you believe they've tracked people in a place called Smallville because they think an alien landed there when he was a child?" And they definitely believed it was a male.

"Did they target a specific person?" he asked as he found a small box that was heavier than it looked. Inside was a glowing rock. "Check this out!"

Lois stepped over to where he was, her face taking on the eerie, green glow of the clump inside the box. "What is that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he replied as he snapped more pictures. He'd already taken dozens. There was no way he'd get out of this place without getting the goods before he left.

A loud clack echoed through the large building causing them both to look toward the entrance.

"We need to get out of here," Jimmy deduced as he shoved the round globe he'd found into his pocket. When Lois arched a brow at him, he shrugged. "Who knows when you might need a little leverage?" He closed the box on the odd rock, and then he and Lois headed toward the back to see if they could find another way out.

Twenty minutes later they were on their way to S.T.A.R. Labs. One of the scientists there had become a very good confidant to Lois during an investigation last year and had since proven to be a trusted friend. They wanted him to analyze the strange globe.

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"Are we doing the right thing?"

Her wide blue eyes begged for him to tell her this was the only choice they had. "It's the right thing," he assured her and leaned to kiss her lips softly. "You'd never be happy unless you did this."

"I know," she said and glanced down to where her hands gripped his sides. "No regrets?"

"Lana, we've had a good life together. But the fates have other plans for us now."

"I know," she repeated the same words. It was all she knew to say. "One day the world will know how great you are."

"And you," he said as he smiled at her. "Go save the world."

For the first time since they'd met to say good-bye, she smiled back at him. "I'll always love you, Clark."

"I love you, too," he replied, kissing her one last time. He stuffed his hands into his pockets as she pulled away and climbed aboard the train. She was bound for Asia and for greatness herself. Lana Lang was a brilliant researcher and she'd isolated a strain of bacteria believed to be responsible for a raging virus threatening to kill half the population in southern China. With the isolation of the deadly substance, Lana was needed to help put together an inoculation to fight the disease. She'd already helped mix a vaccine to protect those not yet infected.

She had been Clark Kent's high school sweetheart. They'd continued a long-distance relationship during college. When he'd graduated from Mid-West, he'd gone to be with her while she finished medical school in California, taking odd jobs where he could. Being in a large city had helped him with his... uniqueness. But in the end, it still hadn't been enough. His own

ambitions and aspirations were calling to him so loudly he couldn't ignore them. Once again, they'd maintained a relationship across the miles as he traveled a bit to hopefully appease his desires. Then it was Lana who was needed. In the end, they'd decided that it was better for them both to move on. They'd known for some time that the fire that had once danced between them had faded into the pleasant glow of friendship.

And they were okay with that.

Lana waved at Clark as the train pulled away from the station. He smiled and waved back. Sure, he loved her and always would, but as a close friend. When she was gone, he turned and headed back toward town. He was off to South America tomorrow to cover a story about arms smuggling. With any luck, and this story, he'd have a desk at the Daily Planet before the end of the year.

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Lex Luthor stood on his balcony looking out over his city.

And it *was* his city.

"Sir, the doctor says things are going better than planned."

"Excellent." Lex turned and smiled at Nigel. "And dinner? Does Andre have it in hand?"

"It might be his best yet," the older man told him with an emotionless English accent.

"Is my lovely date on the way?"

"Coming up as we speak."

"Even better." Lex loosened the belt on his smoking jacket with an evil leer. Tonight was going to be a very good night.

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The first thing Lois was aware of when she woke up the following morning was that she had the worst headache of her life. She rolled over onto her back, threw an arm over her eyes, and groaned. How much champagne had she drunk? Beside her the bed moved and she froze. She wasn't alone!

Refusing to open her eyes for fear of what, or who, she might see, she became aware of another very disturbing situation. She was naked!

"Good morning, dear," came a masculine voice as it drew closer to her. A bit of relief washed over her when she recognized the voice. It belonged to Lex.

She shifted her arm enough to confirm the voice was indeed Lex's. He was grinning widely at her and kissed her shoulder, her bare shoulder.

"Did you sleep well?" Another kiss on her shoulder.

Panic like she'd never known washed through her as her mind searched to recall the events of the night before.

She was blank. Totally blank.

Lex kissed her neck. "You were incredible last night." His voice was husky and even through her haze she couldn't mistake the reactions of his body now.

Suddenly it was all too much. She sat bolt upright, her eyes searching the room frantically. They were definitely in his room. She'd seen it once, when he'd given her a complete tour of his home.

"Lois, what's wrong?" Lex asked as he sat up next to her.

"Lex," she managed as her eyes met his. He stared at her with concern and... was that annoyance? Or...?

She looked away, again trying to figure out what was wrong with this picture. "I, I..." she stammered as she threw her legs over the edge of the bed, careful to hold the covers tightly around her naked body. "I don't remember what happened last night," she managed quietly after a moment.

When she turned, Lex was standing beside the bed. She jerked her head away quickly because he was obviously not very ashamed of his state of undress. "Well, you were a bit... How do I say?" He'd pulled on his pants and he looked over at her and smiled. "You had a few drinks."

"And you took advantage of that?" Anger replaced the

confusion and she shot to her feet.

Lex had the grace to look scandalized. "I assure you, I did not take advantage of you. You were very willing."

"How could you tell if I was drunk?" Her voice had risen to just below a shout.

"You were far from drunk," he insisted. Now he was the one who seemed to be getting upset. She was accusing him of unspeakable things and he didn't appreciate it. "Surely after all this time you know me better than that?"

Was he right? They'd been seeing each other for nearly four months now. He wouldn't have taken advantage of her.

Would he?

"I'll let you get dressed and call for breakfast." He threw on his robe and left her alone.

"What's wrong with you, Lane?" she asked herself as she slipped into her... clean clothes. Cleaned, pressed clothes.

What did Lex do? Call for Nigel or Mrs. Cox to take her things out once they were in bed? Her eyes widened at that thought.

Surely not.

As she dressed she searched her mind again for what happened the night before. Dinner- she remembered dinner. They'd danced, they'd laughed, she'd sung for Lex. She remembered a kiss- a kiss she had initiated. There had been more kisses.

And he'd opened a bottle of champagne. They'd toasted to the future. She'd had a glass and a second one. After that...

Nothing!

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then another. And as she did, she began to calm. By the time she made it out to the dining room, Lex had breakfast set out.

"Lex, I'm really sorry I accused you of anything."

"It's okay, my dear." He held her chair as she sat down. "Let's have breakfast and make plans to visit the country soon. You told me last night you'd like to go horseback riding."

As he sat down, she recalled telling him that. Maybe the night was coming back after all. She took a drink of her juice, deciding that there were probably worse things than being Lex Luthor's lover.

Over the rim of his own glass, Lex smiled- just enough to be noticeable- as he watched Lois drink her orange juice. Soon. Very soon, he thought as he watched her swallow.

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Perry had watched his best reporter for over a month now. There was no doubt about it- there was definitely something wrong with Lois. He'd first noticed when she had come in the newsroom one morning with glassy eyes and the calmest demeanor he could ever remember from the feisty little woman. Since then, her fire had almost completely burnt out. She'd lost her edge, unable to produce a front-page article in five long weeks. And within the past week, she'd been unable to produce anything. The clincher was when she came to work this morning and handed in her resignation.

"Dr. Lane's on line two, Chief," Jimmy said as he stuck his head in the door.

Snatching up the receiver, Perry didn't waste time. "There's something wrong with Lois, Dr. Lane." He'd tried to talk to her, but she'd kept telling him she was fine; things were fine. Then he'd moved on to bullying her as her boss, but that had caused her to back away more. Now this! Somebody had to tell him something pretty darn quick.

"Mr. White, I assure you Lois is fine. She's getting married next week."

"What?!" That was the first Perry had heard of that.

"She and Lex will wed next week in a private ceremony in New York. This is what she wants, Perry."

A glance at the young woman packing her things told him

that there was no way this could be what she wanted. Perry knew Lois better than anyone, especially her father. Hell, the man on the phone hadn't seen her in three years until last week. Lois loved her job, or she had. The fire, the spunk- there was no way Lois was in her right state of mind. She was too docile!

She certainly wasn't acting like a woman in love, either. And why had the infamous doctor surfaced after so long? Not to mention his new and sudden interest in his daughter. He'd been in the newsroom three times since making his reappearance.

"Mr. White, are you still there?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Listen, I'll get back to you." He hung up the phone without waiting for a reply. Perry walked over to the glass and tapped to get Jimmy's attention. The young man hurried into the room.

"Watcha' need, Chief?"

"I need you to go get that hotshot new kid from research and you two get back here. I have a huge assignment for you." He never took his eyes off Lois as she finished her packing. Without a second glance, she picked up her box of things and turned to leave. If no one else thought her behavior odd, Perry certainly did. And he would prove it. There was something going on with Lois and Luthor and when he was finished digging for the truth, everyone would know it, too.

"So help me, Luthor, if you've done something to her," the editor mumbled as he watched the elevator doors close on the young woman he'd come to see as the daughter he'd never had.

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Clark couldn't help but whistle as he walked down the sidewalk toward the Daily Planet. All of that traveling, all of that chasing story after story, lead after lead, had finally paid off. He'd hopped the globe in search of the largest stories so that he'd be able to prove he deserved a desk on the newsroom floor of the greatest newspaper in the world.

Of course, he'd also hopped the globe for other reasons, too. Reasons that had kept him from being able to settle for very long in any one place. But he'd figured out just a few short weeks ago how to handle those reasons as well.

He stopped in front of a news rack and grinned widely at the man on the front page of the Planet. Dressed in blue with a red flowing cape, Superman had become a fixture in the skies above the city, and even a few places around the world. The creation of an alter ego gave him an opportunity to use the abilities he'd developed to help those in need without losing himself in the process.

Another grin appeared as he completed his journey into the lobby and took the stairs up to the newsroom floor. Most papers he'd worked in around the country and the world stuck the newsroom on the bottom floor, sometimes as high as the fifth. Not the Daily Planet, though. As far as he knew, no other paper in the world placed their newsroom on the top floor. And as he stepped out into the hustle and flow he'd come to crave, he couldn't help but take a deep breath. There was nothing quite like the smell of ink in the morning.

Clark quickly found the editor's office and knocked softly. A gruff voice called for him to enter. Inside was the man he'd looked up to since college. "Mr. White?"

"Yeah. You Kent?" the man asked without lifting his head from the print he was editing.

"Yes, sir," he replied, causing the other man to raise his head. "It's an honor to meet you." Clark crossed the room and held out his hand.

Perry rose and shook the offered limb. "An honor, huh? You kissin' up already?"

It took a moment before Clark realized the man was toying with him. He had the grace to blush, but still said, "Would it help?"

"Well, it might," Perry replied as he sat down again. He

leaned back and studied the young man carefully.

"I brought samples," Clark told him as he lifted his briefcase.

The editor waved him off. "Now what kind of editor would I be if I hadn't seen your work by now?" Again Clark blushed. "Come on, Kent. You're an international sensation in the reporting world. I wish I'd taken a chance on you the first time you applied."

"I have to admit, that rejection is why I've worked so hard the last few years," Clark said as he shifted in his seat.

"Does that mean you'll slack off if I give you the job?"

"Not a chance," Clark assured him. "I intend to set the city on fire."

"That's what I like to hear." Perry leaned forward and picked up a file. "This is the offer I'm making."

Clark reached out to take the file and opened it slowly to read the contents. "Wow! This is very generous."

"Yeah, well, I expect you to produce front-page material within the first week."

"Does that mean I have the job?"

Perry rose and walked around in front of his desk, glancing out at the empty chair on the floor. The suits downstairs had forced him to fill it. He'd held it, as long as he could. But even he had to admit that it was time. Focusing on the young man in front of him, he smiled, the first one since Kent had entered his office. "Welcome to the Daily Planet." He thrust his hand out again and received a strong, enthusiastic shake.

"Thank you, sir. You won't be disappointed," Clark said as he stood so that his eyes were level with Perry's.

"No, I'm sure I won't."

And he wouldn't. Perry had wanted to hire Kent for a while now- had almost hired him before Lois quit.

That thought made him sigh heavily. He didn't like to think about her. It was just too damn disheartening.

He gave Kent another once-over with his usual critical eye. He'd do, Perry decided. The man was young, hungry and the best journalist since...

Well, no doubt there would be another reporting sensation at the Planet before long.

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Clark looked up for the third time in five minutes. The young man three desks down kept staring at him and it was beginning to unsettle him. When he'd felt he'd had enough, he pushed to his feet and closed the distance between them.

"Excuse me?" Clark said softly. When he'd first stood, the other man had lowered his head like he was busy on his computer. Clark knew better though. The poor guy's heart was thundering against his chest.

"Yeah?" he asked without stopping his typing.

"Did I do something wrong?" The man's fingers stopped and he slowly turned to look at Clark. "You keep staring at me. I've looked several times, but I couldn't find a single crumb."

The man stared at him for a moment before he laughed softly. "No crumbs." He glanced back at Clark's desk. "The woman that used to sit at your desk was a good friend. It's just strange seeing another person sitting there."

His expression softened and he smiled sadly. "I understand. Should I move?"

The other guy stared at the now-occupied desk for a long while before he smiled. "No. I just needed to say good-bye." He stood and stuck out his hand. "Jimmy Olsen."

Clark shook the proffered hand, a bit more at ease with the scrutiny he'd been getting all morning. "Clark Kent."

"Anybody who's anybody knows of your work."

A blush tainted Clark's cheeks from the praise. He'd had to get used to that lately. Being good at what you do seemed to earn quite a bit of recognition. "Thank you." He looked back at his workstation. "I just hope I can live up to the legacy of the woman

that once sat at that desk.” Clark, too, had heard of Lois Lane. She had been an inspiration and another reason he had wanted to work at the Daily Planet.

“Yeah, well, she was one of a kind.” Jimmy missed Lois so much that it hurt. She’d been gone for nearly six months and it still didn’t get any better. “But enough of that,” he managed after a second. “How ‘bout we grab a beer after work?”

“Not tonight, Jimmy. We have a meeting,” Perry told the young man as he walked up behind Clark.

“Oh, damn! And I have some research I need to get together for you.” He clapped Clark’s shoulder. “Let’s pick a day next week, Clark.” And he was gone.

Clark watched as Jimmy hurried toward the back of the newsroom before focusing on Perry. The man was standing there looking a bit anxious about something. “Is there anything wrong, Mr. White?”

Perry scratched his head a second, then motioned for Clark to follow him into his office. Once inside he grabbed a file off of his desk. “This is a bit of research on an organization that is elusive in most circles. I just got these notes from a friend of mine down in Interpol. I was asking about something else entirely and he sent me this. See what you can find out for me?”

“You got it.” Clark reached to grasp the file, but Perry didn’t let go. His eyes met the older man’s and he waited for him to continue.

“This is hush-hush, you hear? Come only to me with this and don’t mention you’re working on it to anyone.”

“Not a problem.”

“Good.” Perry finally released the file and waved the young man from the room.

Clark looked back in time to see Perry rub the back of his neck. Was it his imagination or was the man looking a bit ragged today? Of course, the shadows he’d seen in the man’s eyes the day before when he was hired kind of spooked him. He’d never seen a person look quite so haggard.

He sat down at his desk and opened the file in front of him. “Wow!” he said to himself as he read the contents. Perry sure thrust the big guns at him. Glancing at the editor again, he couldn’t help but wonder what the man wanted with research on the Delconto Organization. Being able to travel the way he’d done over the last few years, and his ability to blend in, had allowed him to see and hear things most people couldn’t. Of course, his hearing and eyesight was a bit better than most, too.

The Delconto Organization was projected as the largest international trade business in the world. It was also rumored to be the largest crime syndicate. According to the file, Interpol, FBI, CIA, ATF, and DEA all believed the group to be trading much more than commercial and consumer goods. No one knew for sure exactly who ran the group, but every law agency in the world would love to have absolute confirmation and proof to bring down that empire. Juan Delconto had started the business back in the fifties, but since then it had changed hands. Of course, law enforcement believed the exchange was for purposes of detection. And Juan Delconto had passed away in the eighties. So...

Where did he start with such a large undertaking? The CEO of the company, the legal arm, was listed as Leslie Luckaby. Luckaby was a young Australian businessman who had inherited the company from his grandfather, Frank Luckaby.

That was as good a place as any to get started, Clark mused as he called up the research engine on his computer. It should be easy enough to document the legal aspects of the organization. Once that was done, he’d branch out from there to see where the not-so-legal aspects seemed to lead. It was his experience that crime syndicates often set up legal businesses to cover for the illegal activities going on behind the scenes. A man, or several, was often chosen to be the front man, and most of the time, the

fall guy when things began to unravel. Whoever controlled the Delconto Organization was very meticulous because apparently it had been operating since the fifties without coming apart. That meant they were extremely careful or that a lot of money exchanged hands to make sure they were always a step ahead of the law. The latter was probably more correct and if so, an investigation of any kind could throw up flags, giving the group time to cover their tracks again.

A few minutes later he took his jacket off and rolled up his sleeves. The heaps of information he’d found already told him it was going to be a long day.

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Lex stared down at the woman lying on the bed. Her brown eyes were full of pain, the sweat beading on her face. She screamed out as another contraction wracked her body. “You can have something as soon as you’re done,” he assured her. “Are you certain there will be no affects on the baby?” he asked the doctor standing beside him.

“None. I’ve run all of the tests myself.”

“That’s what I pay you for.” Lex crossed his arms and watched as the woman struggled in her agony. He was enjoying this- watching her, knowing she was in pain. There was pleasure in knowing another suffered. It made him feel powerful, even more so than usual.

“Why don’t you help her?” asked the nurse at the woman’s side.

“Help her what? I can’t have the damn kid for her,” was his sarcastic reply.

Another yell and the midwife announced that was enough. Slowly the baby eased into the world. A few wipes, a clean nose and mouth, then a soft cry filled the room. The woman let out a long, deep breath.

“What?” the mother asked. She hadn’t known the child’s sex; it had been denied her.

“It’s... it’s...” The older woman looked up at Luthor with wide, horrified eyes.

“What?” he demanded angrily.

“Sir, it’s a girl.” And she turned around to hold the baby up so he could see for himself.

“That’s impossible!” He glared down at the child as if she were an offending object. His eyes shot back to the doctor. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” the man insisted nervously. “The tests revealed a male.” The tests \*had\* revealed a male... along with a female. But Luthor didn’t need to know that bit of information.

Just then the woman screamed out in pain again. The midwife passed off the baby girl to a nurse and focused her attention back on the laboring mother. “There’s another baby!”

“Yes,” Lex breathed, an evil smile crossing his face. “Hurry up,” he ordered. “Bring my son into this world!” He watched, complete satisfaction in his expression, as another baby was born. “There he is,” he announced as he saw for himself that this baby was indeed a boy.

“I’ll be damned,” uttered the doctor as he moved over to examine the other baby. He glanced at Lex out of the corner of his eye to make sure his act had the desired effect. “This is quite a surprise.” He hoped his duplicity didn’t show.

“You didn’t know?” Luthor asked as he moved a bit closer.

“Not a clue,” he lied as the examination continued for several minutes before the child was pronounced completely healthy.

“Excellent!” Lex turned to leave, but a soft voice stopped him.

“May I see them?”

Walking back over, Lex glared down at the woman. “You’ve impressed me today. And that’s not easy to do,” he said to the woman. He looked up at the nurse. “Give her some painkillers.” With the briefest of touches, he smoothed her hair back off her

head. “When you wake, you can feed my son.”

“I’d like to see them now.” She grasped his jacket. “Please, Lex.”

He stared at her for a moment before he nodded. “Just a second. He needs his rest.”

The nurse brought the baby boy over so that the child’s mother could see him. “He’s gorgeous,” she said.

“Of course. He’s my son,” Lex boasted, then waved to have the child taken away.

“And the girl?” Another nod and the child was brought over.

“Look at her. She’s amazing,” the mother crooned.

She missed the expression on Lex’s face. “Now, time to rest.”

“Thank you,” the woman told him.

“It’s the least I could do for the mother of my son,” he said and managed a smile. “Now, go to sleep, Lois.” And he snapped his fingers so that the waiting nurse would bring the drugs forward to render his wife helpless. It was how he preferred her to be, but with the pregnancy it had been almost impossible. She’d been kept calm, only with just enough juice that wouldn’t harm his unborn son. Once she was out, he turned and strode from the room.

“I hear congratulations are in order, sir,” Nigel told Lex as he followed him into his office. He’d been waiting just outside the birthing room.

“Yes, Nigel. He’s quite the little man.” A fair amount of pride oozed from his voice as he lit a cigar. “But we have a problem. The bitch had the audacity to spit out a female brat!”

“Well, that’s... most...”

“Unfortunate,” Lex finished for him.

“How awful,” Nigel added.

“Yes, quite.” Lex drew from his stogy before he turned and looked out of the window.

“I would be more than happy to take her,” came another voice as he entered the room.

Lex turned back to see the doctor in the doorway.

“The research potential,” he put in. “These children are the first of their kind,” he pointed out.

“Yes, yes.” Luthor sat down and studied his desk for a while before he looked up at the other men in the room. “I think I should keep her for now. She could possibly come in handy later.”

The doctor was disappointed, but he knew better than to argue with Lex Luthor. One tended to become unhealthy very quickly if he did.

“Nigel, I will need a competent caregiver.”

“By nightfall,” he told his employer and disappeared, much the way he usually did when Lex said he needed something.

“Are we online?” Lex asked the doctor.

“Everything is going as planned. The tests have all documented his strength and speed. I’ve got initial results on his vulnerability as well.”

“And have you found anything that can keep him docile?”

“Unfortunately, no. But I’m sure there’s something.”

“I want it found!” Lex snapped, his face clearly expressing his position.

The doctor had to swallow hard. Luthor expected perfection, as he always did. “It will be done,” he assured him finally.

“Good.” He turned his chair around so that he could stare out at his city, effectively dismissing the doctor. In a matter of months, he’d not only have Metropolis in the palms of his hands, he’d have the world.

Outside in the corridor, the doctor stopped and leaned against the wall to take a deep breath, his evil grin wider than Luthor’s. Few men had ever actually gotten the upper hand on Lex Luthor. He had done it. Not once, but several times. Although there was the risk of Luthor finding out, he was clearly proud of his accomplishment. With any luck, by the time Luthor could sort out

this mess, he would be drinking mixed drinks on white sands of some deserted beach halfway around the world and Lex Luthor would be a memory.

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Clark had spent every spare moment over the last two weeks trying to find out what he could about the Delconto Organization. The more he learned, the more confused he became.

Frank Luckaby was the CEO until his death four years earlier. On paper, every aspect of his empire was completely legal. There was not so much as a single report from any agency that believed Frank had been anything other than what he was supposed to be. All research told Clark the man was squeaky clean. When he passed away, his grandson inherited the infamous organization.

Clark learned that Leslie was the grandchild of Frank and Erin Luckaby. He was the son of Alexander Luckaby, the only child of the elder Luckaby. There was tons of information on Leslie since he’d taken power, although very little before that. Born in Australia in 1971, he was secreted away to boarding school at the age of ten. There he was apparently groomed to take his place at the helm of the family empire. He’d been a star athlete in college, graduated with honors, and was a notorious playboy. More recent information mostly consisted of his various business ties and associations. Leslie appeared just as legit as his grandfather had. Where things got interesting was when Clark tried to find information about Leslie’s father, Alexander.

Alexander Luckaby was born in 1954 in France, making him only eighteen years old when his own son was born. He’d married just months before Leslie was born in the Bahamas. Ariana Carlin was nearly five years older than Leslie and just as rich and powerful. Apparently Alexander was not very interested in following in his father’s footsteps because he moved from the family home in 1975 to their estate in France, where he began setting up an investment company. There was nothing else about Alexander after 1984. He went on a trip with his father to Ecuador and never returned. There was no death certificate or any other information about him after that. It was as if he just disappeared off the face of the earth.

“Weird,” Clark said to himself. Maybe it was time to take a trip out to Australia. He could nose around a bit, super style. Of course whatever he saw or heard couldn’t be proven very easily, but he’d at least be able to understand what direction he should go in from here.

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Perry threw the paper across the room, effectively scattering it all over the floor. He actually felt ill.

“Ah, Chief, do you need us to come back?”

He looked up to see Jimmy and Clark standing in the doorway, no doubt taken aback by his outburst. When he tossed the paper, he’d done it vocally. Not usually one to use overly colorful words, today warranted much more than that. “Just give me a minute,” he finally managed as he dropped his head over on his propped up hands. He’d never felt quite as old as he did today.

Jimmy had picked the paper up and closed the door. “This is what she wanted, Perry,” he told the older man in a defeated tone.

“How the hell does she know what she wants, Jimmy?” Perry shouted without lifting his head. “She’s so doped up she doesn’t even know who she is!”

Clark stuffed his hands in his pockets when Jimmy gave him a pained expression. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but he was sure he’d find out, eventually. When Jimmy laid the paper on Perry’s desk, he couldn’t help but notice the picture of Lois Lane, on the front page of the Metropolis Star. Apparently she’d had a baby.

“You know we don’t know that for sure,” Jimmy said as he sat on the edge of Perry’s desk.

“I know that!” the man said as he lifted his eyes, more conviction behind his green orbs than he’d ever had. “I know

her,” he repeated again as he stood to his feet. “She didn’t do this. None of it. And I don’t want to ever hear you say different again.” He pointed a warning finger at the man.

Jimmy had the grace to look thoroughly chastised. “Sorry, Chief.”

“Yeah, well, you know how I feel, boy,” he said in a slightly softer tone. Perry rifled through several papers before looking back up at the two men. “I need you two to cover that big shindig Luthor’s holding tonight to celebrate the return of the occupants of the Space Station.”

“Ah, Perry, maybe we should trust Clark and…” He looked at his editor with a serious expression. “… bring him all the way into the investigation?”

Perry glanced over at Clark. The man had been at the Planet less than two months, but he’d already proven himself to be completely competent and more than trustworthy. And he was the best investigative reporter he’d seen since Lois. They could use his help. “Yeah,” he said as he met Jimmy’s gaze again. “Maybe it’s time.”

Jimmy nodded and the editor walked around his desk to lean against the front. “Clark, as you know Lois Lane was a reporter for the Planet up until just over ten months ago. One of the fiercest, driven women I’d ever had the pleasure and privilege to have work for me, this girl was also easily the most frustrating, too. Pigheaded…”

“Stubborn,” Jimmy added with a slight smile.

“Single-minded and absolutely brilliant,” Perry continued. “There wasn’t a story this girl couldn’t crack.”

“I’ve read her work,” Clark spoke up when there was a lull in Perry’s tale.

“Reading it and seeing her actually work are two totally different things,” Jimmy said, a look of awe on his face.

“Yeah,” Perry agreed as he smiled back at the younger man. “Well, things were on the fast track for Lois. She’d won a Kerth, was a shoe-in for another- which she subsequently won, by the way.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Then she starts to lose her drive and waltzed in here one day, handed in her resignation, and walked out. She was married the next week and now…” He lifted the paper on his desk. “She’s had a baby.”

Clark’s eyes shifted to the paper again before focusing on his boss. “And you think things weren’t quite right about her marriage and pregnancy?”

“I \*know\* things weren’t right!” Perry bellowed, causing Clark to raise his brows in surprise.

“Perry believes her \*husband\* did something to her,” Jimmy put in, a note of disgust in his tone.

“I’m telling you, Jimmy, she was fried the day she came in here telling me she’d found her life’s partner.” The man gestured with his fingers, remembering clearly what Lois said to him that day. “You forget I’ve got a boy that was an addict. I know what it looks like.”

“So you two started an investigation to prove things weren’t right with Ms. Lane?”

Both of the other men laughed at the name Clark referred to Lois as. “Son,” Perry began, “I do love to hear her still referred to by her maiden name.” He placed the paper he held back on the desk. “Me and Jimmy and Jack have been working on this relentlessly, but…” He held up his hands in defeat before letting them fall to his sides again. “We can’t so much as find a fly in that man’s penthouse.”

“Penthouse?”

Jimmy looked at Clark like he had two heads. “You don’t know who she married?”

“Ah, sorry. I was more interested in her abilities as a reporter.”

Perry laughed out loud as he reached forward to clap Clark’s shoulder. “Damn, I really like you, boy.”

“Told you he was one of kind, Chief.”

“So you did.” Just then a knock sounded on the door. Perry motioned for the other man to enter. “Clark, you do know Jack?”

“Yes. He’s done some research for me a time or two.” He smiled at Jack.

“CK’s a great guy.” Jack plopped down in the chair beside the man he’d just mentioned. “You won’t believe what I’ve found, Chief.” He glanced up at Clark, exchanging a look with his boss at the same time.

“He’s good, son. We were just letting him in on things. Jimmy thinks he could help us.”

“Well, I sure wish someone would,” Jack said.

“You found something?” Jimmy urged.

“Lois didn’t give birth to just a baby boy. She gave birth to twins- a boy and a girl.”

Perry and Jimmy stared down at the boy with stunned expressions. “What?” the editor managed after a moment.

“My source tells me the girl was born first and Luthor was furious. He looked like he was about to unleash hell in the room, then bam!” Jack slapped his hands together. “The boy was born.”

“But there’s no mention of a girl in the announcement,” Jimmy said, still stunned by this revelation.

“Yeah, well, there’s a baby girl in that penthouse.”

All of the men were quiet for a long moment before Clark spoke. “I hate to interrupt here, but you never mentioned who her husband is.”

“Damn. And you call yourself an award-winning journalist,” came Jack’s smart remark.

“You have to overlook Jack,” Perry spoke up. “He says exactly what’s on his mind.” He pushed the other man’s chair with his foot.

“I like honest,” Clark admitted.

“He’s certainly that,” Jimmy added. “Lois married Lex Luthor.”

“The billionaire savior of the city?” At their ‘I can’t believe you said that’ looks, he had the grace to look ashamed. “Sorry, I was just repeating all those press releases. Personally, I suspect a man in his position didn’t get that way by totally legal means.”

When Perry looked at Jimmy with a smile, the younger man gave him an ‘I told you so’ expression.

“Isn’t he at least twenty years older than Ms. Lane?” Clark asked another question that was on his mind.

Jack snickered. “At least. I believed Perry on that reason alone. Why would a knockout like Lane marry an old codger like Luthor? I mean, damn!”

Jimmy shuddered along with Jack. “So, you in?” he asked Clark.

“What exactly am I agreeing to?”

“We want the dirt on Luthor. We want to prove he’s done something to Lois. And we want to get her away from him.”

Perry said that as if it should be obvious.

“What about Lois’ family?” Clark wanted to know. Surely if there was something amiss with Lois, her family would be first to help them with their campaign.

“Her mother died when she was sixteen. Her sister’s a junkie and we think her father’s on Luthor’s payroll,” Jack let him know.

“Dr. Sam Lane?” Clark asked in surprise.

“You know him?” Perry wanted to know.

“I know of him. Sam is one of the most respected orthopaedic doctors in the country. He’s developed a line of prosthetics for athletes that are being heralded as the most advanced of the kind.”

Jimmy went around Perry’s desk and opened a bottom drawer. He retrieved a file and thrust it toward Clark when he made it back to the front of the desk.

Clark was thumbing through the contents when Perry spoke.

“Lane Center for Sports Therapy received a generous influx of funding the day before Lois announced she was leaving the Planet.”

“We’ve been unable to trace the money or contact Sam since,” Jimmy finished. “He was at the wedding- there were pictures.”

“But I haven’t even been able to see him at his practice,” Jack told him. “And believe me. I can see things most people can’t.”

Clark glanced at Jack. Did he have super vision, too?

“He used to be a petty thief,” Jimmy explained as he slapped the back of the younger man’s head.

“My talents help your butt out, don’t they?” Jack and Jimmy exchanged a few friendly punches before Perry cleared his throat.

“Things aren’t right and I just want to prove it.”

Clark finally lifted his eyes from the file to his boss. “Has anyone tried to acquire some kind of legal papers to get Lois out of there?”

“Perry’s tried everything,” Jimmy told him. “But being as how he only had a hunch to go on that she was drugged…” The man stopped speaking and shrugged.

“How about seeing Ms. Lane?”

“Ha!” Perry barked. “I’ve been run out of Lex Towers so many times… I think the only reason he hasn’t had me arrested for trespassing is because of the bad press it would cause him. And with all the hype surrounding the Space Station, the last thing he needs is the editor of the largest newspaper in the world making waves for him.”

“Why haven’t you just done that anyway?” was Clark’s next question.

“Well, a man in my position can’t make accusations about such a powerful man and expect to keep his job.”

“Yeah, I guess that would be committing professional suicide.”

“Not to mention the fact that we feel Luthor is the devil,” Jack spoke up. “The devil is feared for a reason. People tick him off and they disappear.”

Clark didn’t doubt that. If the man was evil enough to drug a woman to get her to marry him, he was capable of anything.

“And I can accomplish much more from here,” Perry added.

Clark nodded in agreement. He hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting Lois Lane, but he felt he knew her a bit through her work. Out of respect for a fellow reporter, he’d help all he could. “I’ll help all I can.”

“No trails,” Perry said with pointed finger. “Strictly hush-hush. When we bring that bastard down, we want it to be a total surprise.”

“Got it.” Clark rose and motioned toward the door. “I think Jimmy and I have an appointment tonight.”

Perry and his newest reporter shared a look that put the older man completely at ease. He’d chosen well. Kent would help them get to the bottom of this situation once and for all.

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Clark and Jimmy stood near the entrance to the balcony on the south side of the conference room at EPRAD. Six of the thirteen occupants of the Space Station Luthor had returned earlier that day. They’d made their public appearance, giving a brief narrative of their time in space. Now everyone was taking advantage of the party Luthor had arranged to celebrate their success. Initial research performed aboard the station offered promising results.

“There he is.” Jimmy nudged Clark as Lex Luthor entered the room. “I would love to wipe that arrogant smile off his face.”

“Let’s do it legally, Jimbo.” Clark clapped his shoulder to help calm the younger man. Since he’d been invited into the investigation earlier, he’d given a lot of thought to the man they were dealing with. He’d also combed through a few stories he’d come across in his time at the Planet, and now that he looked

deeper, he felt that a mysterious ‘Boss’ referred to by several petty law breakers could be Luthor.

Clark had to give it to Luthor- if he really was the ‘Boss’- what better disguise than to hide in plain sight?

With that thought, he had to roll his eyes. He, of all people, knew how effective such a disguise was.

And none of that was doing him a bit of good right now.

“Should we divide and conquer?” Jimmy asked him after a moment.

“Yeah.” He went one way and Jimmy the other. He listened carefully to any conversation that might help them, but most revolved around the space exploration. He was careful to tuck enough information away so they’d have enough for an article for the morning edition.

“Clark?”

He turned and was surprised to see a familiar face from his past. “Lana!”

“It is you,” she said with a smile and immediately stepped up to give him a fierce hug. “How are you?”

“I’m great. And you?” He glanced down at her. “You look amazing.”

“So do you.” She fingered the bow tie of his tux.

She’d always loved him in a tux, he recalled as he smiled at her praise. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you.”

“How’s the job?”

“Fantastic. I worked freelance for a couple months before being hired on at the Planet.”

“I know. I’ve read your stuff. As good as I always knew your writing would be.”

Again he smiled, and used it as a cover to locate Luthor. He was still chatting with various people in the crowd. “How did things go in China?”

“They went well. We stopped the spread of the bacteria and even isolated the source.”

“I knew you could do it.” He reached out and squeezed her elbow. As much as he’d missed his friend, he really wanted to be anywhere but here with her now. He needed to be listening in on Luthor’s conversations and watching his moves. “And now?” he managed after another quick peek at the elusive billionaire.

“I was asked to join the research team on the space station.”

His brows rose in surprise. Only the top scientists and doctors in the world were invited aboard. “Wow! And to think I once dated a famous doctor.”

“Hush,” she said, blushing from his praise. She noticed his eyes travel around the room for the third time. “Are you working?”

Meeting her gaze, he gave her an apologetic expression. “Sorry. Does it show that badly?”

“It does. You’re usually more focused when we talk.”

“Let me make it up to you by taking you to dinner tomorrow night.”

“Why not join me for dinner at my parents’ house instead? Mother and Daddy are both off to who knows where and I’d really like to stay in.”

“Name the time.”

“Seven.” She looked down at her watch. “Speaking of time, I have a debriefing in ten minutes.” She leaned forward and placed a kiss on Clark’s cheek. “Don’t be late.”

“I won’t. It was good seeing you, Lana.” She grinned at him widely before hurrying across the room. He sighed once she was gone, then searched for Luthor again. He’d moved off to one side to speak to a couple of men, so Clark tuned his hearing in so that he could find out what was going on. The noise of the crowd was too loud for him to make out what they were saying, but Luthor looked angry with whatever the taller man had told him. After a brief exchange, they all left through the back door leading toward

the parking area.

As discreetly as possible, Clark slipped out so that he could follow. Peering from behind a generator at the side of the building, Clark could see Luthor, the gray gentleman that had been inside, a darker haired man, also from inside, and two other men that had been waiting on them outside. He recognized the other men as Bill Church, Sr., another of Metropolis' wealthy philanthropists, and his son Bill, Jr. He tuned in his hearing to listen.

"Luthor, I don't know what game you're playing, but I don't like it."

"Game? This is no game! I have perfected the research."

"I cannot stake my reputation without proof."

Bill Sr. was the CEO of Cost Mart, a national wholesale chain. He was also on the board of directors of Church Pharmaceutical. Their specialty was the manufacture of many different kinds of medicines. Some of the experiments conducted there had even led to breakthroughs in several fields. Clark had recently learned that a few could make common ailments such as earache and sore throat non-existent. Of course, that was the legal and moral side of the company. Word on the street was that Church's lab conducted experiments in mind control. Those experiments, along with others he was rumored to have conducted, were not so honorable.

"I have proof. I've had my top scientist working on this for years." He dug through his jacket and pulled out a card. "Come by tomorrow at noon. You can see for yourself."

Bill took the card sceptically. "If what you say is true, then we can start the research. But must I remind you that my lab has done this several times? Each one has ended the same way."

"Believe me, Church, I'm well aware of those experiments. But your little creatures were created in petri dishes. Mine were conceived, carried like a normal pregnancy, and delivered just like the next crumb catcher. Can you say that?"

"You know we can't, Lex," the older Church said.

"And can you say you've created twins in your \*lab\*?"

Luthor busied himself for a moment lighting a cigar. "Believe me, Bill, these things are incredible. Eat, poop, and God help me, scream just like any other brat."

"Still, they'll have to survive the six-month threshold," the younger Church added.

Luthor drew from his cigar, then blew the smoke right in the other men's faces. "I know this will be ongoing for years, but surely an advance won't be too much to ask when you see the results." Luthor slung an arm around Bill, Sr.'s shoulder as he led him toward a waiting car. "If their own mother can't tell, it's fool-proof. Besides, this could make us rich beyond our wildest imaginations, even richer than we are now. Add the mind control and you could create the perfect army. The government would pay billions."

Bill stopped at his car and smiled. "Hell, we could create the perfect wives."

"Amen to that," Luthor said with a chuckle. "Now... can I count on you?"

"Yes," he answered as he grasped Luthor's hand in a firm shake. "If they are anything like you say, I'm in."

"Fantastic!" Church and his son, along with one of the other men climbed into the limo and drove away. Luthor watched until the car disappeared, then his smile faded. "Nigel, those \*men\* you hired to do that job in Suicide Slum were at the Tower earlier. They want more money." Lex drew from his cigar again. "Give it to them."

"Yes sir," the man answered with an evil grin.

They made their way back inside and Clark let go of the breath he'd been holding. He couldn't believe what he'd heard. Luthor had insinuated that a woman had conceived and delivered twins that he'd somehow \*created\*. What did he mean? Were the

babies some kind of experiment? He'd all but said so. What did that mean?

And could the woman be Lois? Were his own children some kind of sick experiment? If so, what kind?

Deciding that he'd 'sit in' on Church's observation the following day before he told Perry or the others, he went back inside to follow Luthor's movements the rest of the night. If this man slipped, Clark was going to be there to witness it.

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The following day Clark landed on the roof of Lex Towers just before noon. He searched for and quickly disabled the lone camera trained on the roof door. He found a secluded spot behind two large air conditioning units and watched with super eyes as Bill Church, Sr. arrived a few minutes later. He tracked Church's movements through the building and up to Luthor's office. They exchanged greetings before a woman entered the room pushing a portable baby crib, much like the ones at the hospital. Inside were two sleeping infants.

"Remarkable," said Bill Church Sr. as he looked into the crib at the babies.

"Quite," agreed Luthor. "I had hoped to show you the remarkable advancements in mind control with the mother, but... she was under the weather."

"I think this is enough proof."

Luthor gestured to Nigel and the woman left pushing the babies. "Does that mean you want a piece of the pie?" Luthor asked when they were alone.

"Twenty percent now, twenty in six months and the rest at the five-year mark."

"Five years?" Luthor yelled.

Bill took a step back at the man's outburst. "Lex, you know we need that long to ensure the viability of the tissue. These things die faster than they're created."

Lex strode across the room, clearly angry at the offer put before him.

"And what are you up to anyway?"

"Excuse me?" he wanted to know when he faced Bill again.

"You've introduced that thing as your son."

"Well, I can't very well advertise his creation, now can I?"

"I guess not." Bill turned and started toward the door. "Final offer. Take it or leave it."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't you the one that asked for a buy in?"

"But you're the one that needs to insure your little venture remains secret until you're ready to announce your success to the world."

Luthor's brows rose at the other man's audacity.

Bill smiled and waved his hand at Luthor. "Looks like we're going to be quite rich."

"Looks that way, Bill." Luthor said through clenched teeth as he watched the door close behind him. "I can't wait until that imbecile gets that smirk wiped from his face."

"Should I deliver a message?" Nigel asked, his hands clasped behind his back. He was completely relaxed and it showed.

"Not yet. Unfortunately Bill's right. I can't have him divulging my secrets." Lex stepped behind his desk and started searching through a pile of papers.

"When is the meeting with the lawyers in Sydney?"

"Not until the bastard is a year old." Lex dropped to his chair, a heavy sigh escaping as he did. "This should have been easy, Nigel. Marry, have a son, inherit an empire."

"Isn't that what you've done?"

"Not until the transfer is complete," he reminded him.

"And I'm sure you didn't count on every mole in the ground scurrying to the pile for their share of the pie either."

"Yes, well, the funny thing about rodents is that they are easily exterminated."

“Yes, they certainly are.”

Luthor laughed softly as he pulled a cigar from the box on his desk.

Clark let his vision sweep from Lex’ office further up. Inside a room on the top floor, a woman sat cradling one of the babies who had been returned to her. Though she reminded him nothing of the pictures he’d seen, there was no doubt the woman was Lois Lane. The babies were her twins. She continued to rock and hum softly to the child she held. His heart broke for her. She looked so lost, so defeated. Yet there was something about the way she cared for the baby in her arms.

“What did he do to you?” he whispered as he continued to watch another second. He finally decided it was time to let the others know what he’d heard.

A final glance and he was gone.  
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Perry just stared at a spot across the room and Jimmy paced back and forth behind the chairs as they took in the things Clark had just told them. Jack was off doing whatever it was Jack did to produce results. Most of the time they didn’t ask, and he didn’t say.

“That’s a sick bastard,” Jimmy said again for the third time.

“What empire is the man inheriting?” Perry wanted to know. “Lex Luthor has already inherited his empire. He was the only son of Lionel Luthor. He took control of all of his father’s assets when Lionel was murdered ten years ago. It was worth billions and he’s increased his wealth tenfold since then. He’s not having money problems either. We’ve checked all of that. No corporate take-overs imminent.”

“And what’s all that six-month, five-year crap? Viability of the tissue?” Jimmy was stumped. What was Luthor doing? More precisely, what had he done?

“Church. It has something to do with Church...” Perry was more or less talking to himself as he searched through the files he had on his desk. When Clark had gotten back to the Planet earlier, he was working on the investigation.

“What does Church’s lab do?”

“On the top floor, they head some of the most advanced medical research of our time. In the basement, anything that isn’t legal or ethical,” Jimmy informed him. “You name it, he’s probably done it.”

“We should start there. He mentioned his lab had already created whatever it is Lex thinks he’s created.”

“That’s all well and good, CK, but the things done in that part of the lab aren’t exactly advertised.” Jimmy sank to the chair next to Clark.

“Start with funding,” Perry spoke up. “Look into who funds Church’s lab or his enterprises. From there, look into the funding of Lex Labs.”

Clark picked up on Perry’s line of thought. “How about the physicians on the board?”

“The ones at Lex Labs should be easy enough to identify,” the editor said. “Jimmy, go back over that list of contributions Luthor’s made in the last ten years. See if there are any connections between him and Church.”

“On it, Chief.”

“Good. Now, that piece you two turned in from last night was great stuff. And unfortunately, I need you both to get me some printable copy for tomorrow.”

“We understand,” Clark said as he stood to follow Jimmy out. This investigation was important to Perry, but they couldn’t work on it all the time. They had other work that needed to be done as well.

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Clark watched as Lana laid her head back and laughed. He’d joined her for dinner and was glad he had. She’d cooked, something she didn’t often do but when she did, it was

remarkable. Her mother was a famous chef, even had a cooking show on television. Marge Lang was in Los Angeles at the moment to film a special for upcoming episodes of her program. She’d also taught her daughter how to cook. It was one of the many things he missed about Lana.

When she’d calmed, she looked at Clark, her expression growing in intensity. “Have you... been dating?”

“Not since moving to the city.” He leaned up and set his coffee cup on the table. They’d settled in the den on the sofa so they’d be more comfortable. “I was involved for a brief time with a woman in Brazil.”

“Why brief?”

“It was never serious. A couple of friends having a good time together.”

“Like us?” she wanted to know as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah,” he agreed as he lifted his hand to tuck the hair on the opposite side of her head. “Like us.” His voice was soft, his eyes boring into hers. When she leaned forward, he met her halfway. Their kiss was immediately passionate and out of control.

When they spoke again, it was lying on Lana’s bed in her room. Both were sweating and panting from their exertion. There had been a brief pause in their explorations for Clark to zip out for protection before they’d given in to their most primal needs.

“Why is it always like this with us?” Lana asked him.

“I have no idea,” Clark said with a chuckle. He rolled over and kissed her shoulder before pulling her closer. “We have ten condoms left.” He waggled his brows at her.

“You’re insatiable.” She rolled over and kissed him firmly. “Were we destined from the beginning to never be anything more than lovers?”

“I like to think of it as friends with benefits.” He nuzzled her neck, causing her to giggle. He loved to hear her giggle.

“You’re impossible.” She dropped her head back to give him better access.

“How about we do the next one on the ceiling?” he asked as he floated them from the bed.

“You know I don’t like to fly,” she protested.

“But there’s so many ways than actually leaving the ground,” he whispered huskily as he nuzzled her neck. They dropped back onto the bed as Lana’s soft laughter filled the air and they surrendered themselves once again to their desires.

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Clark closed the door of his apartment before seven the next morning. He’d said good-bye to Lana in the cab outside EPRAD. She was leaving in a week to spend the next two years of her life in space. There were tests and training she’d have to go through first, though. He’d miss her, but knew there was no future with Lana.

She’d known about his super side since they were kids and had always kept his confidence. She was his biggest supporter when he confessed that he needed to use his abilities to help others. Until they’d made their decision to part before she left for China, they’d always talked on the phone, even when they were split up. But when they’d decided it was finally the end, they’d also decided not to stay in contact. Maybe a Christmas card or birthday note, like any other friends would do.

He didn’t regret last night, though. It seemed they’d always had sort of an understanding about their physical relationship. They’d shared themselves the first time on prom night and though they’d never had an extremely active sex life, they had, on occasion, been unable to control themselves. Clark had never seen himself as a man who’d engage in such a relationship, though it was impossible for him to deny that he might never have the kind of life he craved. He was just too different from other men and he’d be hard pressed to find a woman to share a life with him. Lana was one in a million. She would have stayed

with him, if either of them had been willing to give up their hopes and dreams for the other. Fortunately, they both loved and respected the other enough not to ask for that choice.

Clark also knew now that what he felt for Lana had never been more than deep friendship. She was beautiful and intelligent and he was incredibly attracted to her. Yet he'd never really felt that extra... something he should have felt when he looked at her. His heart didn't skip a beat when he thought about her. And he had never been able to picture them later in life, with kids, growing older together. When they'd talked right before she left for China, she'd admitted the same things to him. She loved him, respected him, cherished him as a friend, and wasn't the least bit ashamed to sleep with him. He just wasn't her soul mate.

Did anyone have a soul mate? His mother swore that he'd know when he met his. She'd said he'd fall in love at first sight. Life might work against him- she might even deny it- but he'd know her. Whether or not fate brought them together was another story.

Flipping through his mail, Clark couldn't help but smile. He loved his mother beyond words. She was an incredible person. Although he wasn't sure he believed her. She was a softy and a romantic at heart.

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Before the small team could make it very far in their research into Luthor and his affairs, things seemed to go crazy. One catastrophe after another beckoned the Man of Steel and with each rescue came an equally explosive story for the Planet. They stole time away from their real jobs and lives when they could to investigate Luthor, but time was at a premium. When they finally managed to catch their breath, it had been six and a half months since the birth of Lois' twins.

"This list is so long I might never get finished," Jack said as he chose another name and entered it into the search engine on his computer.

"Lex Labs received the second allotment Church mentioned," Clark said as he continued to read over the papers he held. "I just don't understand why he needs it, though. I can't find a single subsidiary of Lex Enterprises that isn't operating in the green."

"Look in places you wouldn't expect. Try his personal accounts," Jimmy told him.

"Those have more money than his business accounts." Clark leaned back and sighed heavily. Over the last few weeks this investigation had become an obsession for him as well as Perry. Since he'd seen Lois that day as she rocked her baby, something inside him yearned to help her. He hadn't needed super eyes to know all was not well with that woman.

"I don't think it's a matter of needing the money," Jimmy said. "You mentioned they said something about a buy in and insurance. I believe Church found out what Luthor's done, whatever that is, and wanted a piece of the pie. Luthor gave it to him to keep his mouth shut."

"No doubt," Clark replied as he looked again at the disbursement of money into Luthor's accounts. He'd really hid it well. A casual observer wouldn't have been able to spot it.

"Hey, I think I've finally found a crumb trail," Jack announced. "A biologist left S.T.A.R. Labs three years ago to work at Lex Labs."

"That happens all the time," Jimmy said, dismissing the information.

"Yeah, but does the physician pick up an entirely new field of study? And continue the research of a known quack?"

"What?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"Says here he picked up Dr. Carl Mambo's research in 1995, but abandoned it again in 1996 for more human experiments."

"Carl Mambo? Isn't he the doctor that did research on cloning?" Clark asked.

"Yep. He's successfully cloned frogs, chimps, and livestock.

However, he is currently a resident of the Gutheridge Center for the Mentally Insane." Jimmy whirled his finger in a circle beside his head. "A real nut job."

"Didn't Lois interview him once?" Jack asked.

"Oh, yeah. He was ticked with her article." The man laughed as he remembered that piece. "So who decided that kind of insane research should be continued?"

"Dr. Paul Lang."

"What?" Clark stood and strode over to look at the screen over Jack's shoulder.

"Lang. Says he was a professor at MU, worked for the Mayo Clinic on genetics projects, and most recently he's been playing around with fertility studies."

Clark straightened and stared down at the computer. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Paul Lang was Lana's father. At one time he'd felt sure the man was going to be his father-in-law. How did he not know the man worked for Lex Labs? Sure, he'd known he was doing infertility research at one time, but he had no idea the man was even the least bit interested in cloning.

Jack noticed Clark's loss of concentration. "CK, is everything okay?"

"Paul is my ex-girlfriend's father."

"Really? Did you know he was into any of this?"

"No idea. Let me look at that." Clark scrolled through the information for a moment before he walked back over and sat down again. Paul Lang had worked for S.T.A.R. Labs when he and Lana were together, but according to the computer, he'd also been working with Mambo before the man was declared insane.

"Fertility, cloning... You guys don't think Luthor's scientists have figured out how to clone humans, do you?"

"That's ridiculous, Jack," Jimmy said as he chuckled aloud.

"Think about it. Clark said Luthor referred to the babies as creatures. Church wants to document the viability of the tissue. Of course, it's highly likely that Luthor's trying to pass his twins off as clones. It wouldn't be the first time a wacko double crossed other wackos." He looked at the two men for a second. "Didn't he say that they could create the perfect army?"

All three men stared at one another for several long minutes, laughed nervously, then suddenly they all sat up and began tapping furiously on their computers.

"How the hell do we prove something like that?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"Damn good question, Jimbo," Clark remarked as he scanned a web page he'd called up. This thing got crazier by the second.

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Lois stared down at the spilled juice on the table. There was white powder near the bottom of the glass. She turned it up and watched the thick substance pour out slowly. As she heard footsteps coming toward her room, she quickly picked up a napkin and mopped up as much of the gritty material as she could. Just before the door opened, she carefully stuffed the paper into her pocket. Glancing up at the camera above the table, she was sure she hadn't been seen. Not exactly certain why she'd done so, suddenly it seemed vital for her to know what was in her morning beverage.

She smiled up at the woman who helped her with the twins. Didn't she say her name was Sara?

And why couldn't she remember after all of this time? The girl had been helping her for over six months now.

No matter. The girl was nice and often argued with Lex for her. Anybody who did that was okay in her book.

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Jack pulled the collar up on his jacket and waited patiently. It was a quarter to three. Not long now.

Two minutes later, the door opened on the bottom floor of Lex Towers and out strolled the two women with the baby

carriage. They crossed the street and entered the park through the west entrance. He waited until the bodyguard took up his post on the bench near the fountain before he approached and sat down on the bench directly behind the one the women sat on.

"Afternoon ladies," he said with a smile, though he didn't turn around to look at them.

"Hey," Sara said as her face turned bright red. "Mrs. Luther, say hello to the nice man."

Lois gazed across the park, apparently looking for Jack over there.

"Behind us," Sara whispered.

Again, the woman just stared unseeingly ahead.

"How old is the baby?" And why was there only one? Always one. What about the little girl? Had they done something to her? Why didn't they bring her out?

"Seven and a half months old now," Sara informed him. Just then the baby began to cry. Sara stood and peered down into the carriage trying to discover the source of the child's discomfort.

"Could you... discard this trash for me?"

Jack was surprised to hear Lois speak. She hadn't done that since he'd begun coming to the park nearly five months ago. He leaned forward as if he was checking his phone for a call so he could glance at the bench. She dropped a ball of paper on the ground, still staring ahead. Neither Sara nor the bodyguard had seen what she'd done.

"We need to get back to the penthouse, Mrs. Luthor," Sara turned and told her. "This little one is running a fever." She helped Lois stand and Jack watched them leave. When the guard followed them through the gate, he reached down and picked up the paper. It was a napkin. He opened it carefully, noticing that there was a thick grit on the inside. He folded it back in, got up, and hurried out of the park. His patience had paid off. Perry had asked him some time ago to see if he could manage to check on Lois now and then. He'd done that in various ways. Sara, whom Jack had learned was the nanny, brought Lois to the park every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Whenever he was able, he was there as well. And it appeared Lois wasn't as fried as Perry thought she was. If his guess was right, that lady had just given him the mother lode.

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"I'll be damned!" Perry said as he read over the report Jimmy had just given him. They had taken the napkin Lois had left for Jack to Bernie Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs for him to analyze. Being as the man had worked with Lois on more than one investigation, they all felt he could be trusted. Bernie was also told not to disclose anything about anything to anyone. It had taken him nearly a week to get the results. "I was right all along."

"What was it?" Jack wanted to know.

"It's a mind-altering drug, capable of rendering total and complete psychosis."

"Holy hell," Jimmy declared. "We have to get her out of there."

"How?" Clark wanted to know. "We can't waltz in there and declare that Luthor has been giving her drugs."

"Clark's right. We have to have proof." Perry scratched his head as he continued to read the report. "If Lois got this to you, she's not totally gone."

"How did she know to give it to you?" Jimmy asked Jack.

"No idea. That was the first time she's ever indicated that she's aware of the world let alone anything else."

"Could we... prick her skin? Get a little blood and have it tested?" Jimmy threw out. Anything was better than doing nothing.

"How? When big brother's watching every move she makes?" Jack had actually thought of the same thing, but he hadn't been able to come up with anything that wouldn't raise suspicions.

"Let me think on it a day or two. In the meantime, I have a friend at the Forty Second who owes me a few favors."

"I thought we decided some time ago the cops were on the take, Chief?" Jimmy asked his boss. They'd gone to a couple of detectives before only to have things happen that were unmistakable warnings.

"Yeah, yeah. I should have contacted Bill from the get go. But right now I need you all to hustle down to City Hall to cover the inauguration of our new mayor."

All three nodded and left. Progress was slow, but at least they were making some. With any luck, Lois might actually be back where she belonged before she turned gray.

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Lead after lead failed to pan out and none of the men could figure out that it was actually Lois who had been receiving the drugs. Bill Henderson, Perry's friend in the police department, had told him that without absolute proof that Lois had consumed the substance, there wasn't much they could do. The detective had also issued a grave warning to his old friend. Bill suspected Luthor of several illegal activities, but had been unable to prove any of it. He also pointed out that Luthor was powerful enough to cause them all to disappear. One didn't take on an opponent like Lex Luthor unless one had serious ammunition.

On top of that, the news world refused to rest. There was barely time for any of them to eat, let alone work on their secret investigation. Clark tried a bit when he could, but between the Planet and Superman, there wasn't much time left in the day. They had to settle for the fact that Lois seemed to be fine. Jack continued to go to the park when he could, although Lois had stopped coming. He'd asked Sara about her a time or two and was told she was fine.

What Sara was unaware of was that Lois was more than well. Since the discovery of a foreign substance in her juice, she'd stopped drinking it. She'd moved the table in her room so that the camera missed her pouring the offending liquid into the plant in the corner of the room each day. Her mind was once again as clear as a bell and she'd almost laughed aloud when Asabi grumbled about the dying plant in the corner. Thank goodness it was replaced with another one.

With the clarity of mind came an unimaginable realization, followed closely by numbing depression. However, it was in the wee hours of the morning, as she sat and stared out at the night sky, that she came to the conclusion that if she was going to get out of the mess she was in, she'd have to drag herself out of her funk. She had to get out, for herself and for her children.

That also caused her a fair amount of pain. She was mother to two children that were made during a night she couldn't remember at all. Hell, she couldn't remember much of anything, other than the fact that she'd married the devil. She'd been shocked to discover nearly two years had passed since she'd given up her position on the newsroom floor of the Daily Planet and walked out of her life and into that of... whatever she was in now.

But her babies were blameless. They didn't ask to be brought into the world. They were also part of her and it was her responsibility to protect them. She fully intended to do that.

Lois watched and she listened, a task made easier because everyone thought she had lost touch with reality. She'd taken to roaming the halls and was allowed to do so because Lex felt she was harmless. Of course, she had to stay within the main living areas of the penthouse.

She discovered that the only place there was a camera was in her room. When she went to any other room, there was usually someone there. That was, until Lex declared her 'gone'. After that, she was nearly ignored. That was when she started hearing things.

Lois huddled as far in the corner as she could get. She was

hidden behind the floor-length drapes that covered the wall of windows in the expansive ballroom. She'd listened as Lex grunted and growled through his encounter with Mrs. Cox. He'd declared that the best yet. Wanting to vomit, she thanked God he was having sex with everyone else but her these days. Apparently he found it beneath him to bed a wife without a coherent thought.

"Inform the doctor we will begin the final stage of Lois' treatment next week," she heard Lex tell his assistant.

"Very good."

Loud clicks resounded around the room as the woman walked away. Lex called out to her just before she exited the room. "Ask Lang if he's still interested in taking the girl?"

"Has she become a problem?"

"You know me well enough to know I don't trouble myself with such trivial things." Cox laughed. "I want a few tests run and since I need the boy, the girl will have to do."

"Do the tests involve operation super cell?"

"Yes. Most fortunate we have an extra puppet to play with, huh?"

"Most fortunate, but what about... your wife?" The woman practically spat the last words.

"My wife hasn't a clue she's even alive. And when we start the shock treatments, she'll do whatever I want her to do."

"Honestly, Lex, I will never understand why you felt you had to marry that woman and claim her bastard as your son."

A few hurried strides and a loud pop, as if skin had contacted skin, nearly caused Lois to shriek. She had to bite her lip to control herself.

"Don't you ever question my motives again!" Lex yelled. "I might show you favor by allowing you to please me, but you are nothing more than an employee. One that can be replaced. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Cox managed after a second. "I'll make the call right now." This time Mrs. Cox's steps were closer to a run.

Lois was glad Lex left right behind Mrs. Cox, so she could slip from the room. She was standing outside another room a while later when she overheard Cox tell Lex that Lang would pick the girl up a week from Friday. Lex was furious to have to wait that long, but finally stopped cursing long enough to make another call about one of his utility companies. Even as Lois slowly walked back toward her room, her mind was already jumping ahead to how she'd save her daughter.

And she knew that was who Luthor was talking about.

During her pregnancy there had been times of lucidness that she remembered, even if she wished she couldn't. Those were times when Lex made sure to let her know that he wanted a boy and only a boy.

It took her all afternoon and half the night, but she finally formed a plan.

The next day was Wednesday and she went with Sara to the park. She nearly wanted to cry when she saw Jack sitting on the bench near the fountain. When she'd dropped that napkin, she really hadn't known who he was. But she did now. She recalled that he'd begun working at the Planet right before she left. If he was here, Perry had sent him. That was a good thing.

She waited, until Sara took the baby closer to the fountain for a better look. "Pretty day," she said and looked up.

"Very," Jack said and that was all.

A few minutes later she was on her way back toward the Tower.

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"What do you think it means?" Jimmy asked Perry as he read the note Lois had dropped.

"I have no idea. All I know is if she wants you to leave a baby doll in that bathroom, you'll damn well leave it there," Perry told him.

"Are you sure you haven't been seen?" Jimmy asked Jack

again.

"Who would think it's the same person?" Jack grinned as he leaned back in his chair. "A young professional, a work-out freak taking a break, a bum in dirty clothes, even an old lady. Come on, Jimbo, give me more credit. I only go as myself enough to let her know I'm still coming."

"Sorry, bro," Jimmy said as he clapped the other man's shoulder.

"Does anybody know where to buy a doll?" Perry wanted to know.

"We'll get Clark to do it," Jimmy said as the other man arrived late to the meeting.

"Huh?"

"Lois left another note." Perry held it out to him.

"A doll?" He looked up at everyone.

"Who knows?" Perry stood and rounded the table. They'd decided to meet in the conference room tonight. "Go get us a doll, Kent. Jack, you rustle me and Jimmy up a disguise. We're all going to the park Friday."

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Lois wasn't a very patient person by nature. However, the life of her daughter depended on her today. She'd waited. She'd waited two days. Now she waited for just the right time. Jack wasn't on the bench today, but she was certain he was here. Too much was riding on it.

"This little one needs a change," Sara said as she peered down into the carriage.

"May I?" Lois asked. She did that now and then, so it wasn't a surprise to Sara. In fact, she'd gotten the baby ready to go to the park. Caring for the twins was really all Lois did. That and staring out the window.

"Sure. The restroom is over there. Be quick or you know who will come looking for you." Sara motioned to their guard sitting patiently on the bench across from the fountain. He was reading a paper today, trying to look interested.

"I will be quick." Lois stood and began walking toward the building on the other side of the fountain. Her heart began to slam against her chest. This was it. She was more nervous now than she'd been earlier in the penthouse. She'd kept waiting for someone to come after them, having found her deception. Yet she knew all too well her little girl wasn't often looked in on while she was alone. Lex left that task to her and Sara and didn't often trouble himself to make sure the girl was even alive. The baby girl had also been sleeping, which meant that bought them a bit of time as well.

"I'm just gonna have a smoke," Sara told her as she waited near the bench.

"I won't be long," Lois assured her again.

"I'll be here."

The guard didn't even glance up as she entered the ladies room. It was empty, no doubt made possible by her friend. She quickly shut herself up in the handicap stall and sighed heavily when she noticed the car seat sitting on the toilet. Inside was a doll almost the same size as her twins.

"That boy's good," she said softly as she extracted the doll and replaced it with her own daughter. "Mommy loves you, Sweetie." She ordered her tears not to come. There would be time for those later. Right now this was what she needed to do. If she took this child back to that penthouse, she would definitely never see her again. At least this way Perry would make sure she was safe. More than anything Lois wanted her safe. If that meant she had to part with her for who knew how long, so be it. She would be in very good hands. A final kiss and Lois tucked the doll into the carriage carefully, then hurried from the stall before she lost her nerve.

Outside, she walked back over to Sara, careful not to get too close. "I'm tired," she declared and kept walking.

“Okay,” Sara said, stepped on her cigarette butt, then followed.

A woman was about to enter the ladies room when a man stopped her. “Sorry, Miss. Overflowed. We have to clean up the mess.” He waited until she was gone before he motioned for the lady across the walk. The young woman hurried over and into the restroom.

“Holy hell!” came the exclamation from inside.

“What is it?” he called in.

“You’ll have to see it to believe it. Is the coast clear?”

“Yep.” The man pushed the broom he held across the pavement as the young woman exited carrying the car seat. “Is that...?”

“Yeah.”

“Get to... Hell, I don’t know where to go.” Jimmy looked toward the entrance at Perry, who nodded and left the park.

“Go to Clark’s place. He’s the newest of the crowd. No one would think to look there.” He pushed the broom further down the walk as the woman carried her baby toward the opposite exit of the park. No one even looked twice.

Twenty minutes later, Jack was bouncing the crying baby trying to quiet the little bundle down. When the door opened and Perry and Jimmy entered, he let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Oh, thank God!” He immediately shoved the baby into Perry’s arms when he stepped down into the living room. “I have no idea what to do with a baby.”

“Ah, come on, Mommy. You’re a natural,” Jimmy kidded because Jack was still wearing part of his disguise. He’d been the young woman at the park.

“Look at you,” Perry crooned to the baby, who was still crying a bit. “You look just like your mother.” He looked up at Jimmy. “He’s soaked. Call Clark and tell him to bring diapers and some Similac. Tell him to grab a couple of bottles, a pacifier, wipes, and...” He looked at the tag in the child’s clothes. “Size twelve-month clothes. And tell him to be quick about it.”

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Clark made it to his place thirty minutes later. When Jimmy phoned him, he was surprised to learn about his shopping trip. But by the time he made it to his place, he’d deduced what Lois had done. Why was the question, but as he stepped through the door of his place to find three frantic men and one screaming baby, he learned he’d been right.

“Get that milk ready,” Perry told him immediately.

Hurrying over to the table, Clark was glad he’d had the foresight to pick up a case of ready-to-feed bottles of formula, along with a package of sterile nipples. He dug in the bag for a moment, then turned in time to receive the baby Perry was handing off.

“Give me a little break, Kent. He’s pretty upset.”

Clark put the bottle down on the table so he could better shift the baby in his arms. “Oh, hi there, big guy,” he said softly. “You’re soaked.” He held the baby with one arm while he pulled the diapers from the bag. He tossed the pack to Jack. “Open those and hand me one.” He’d taken out the wipes and threw them at Jimmy. “I need that, too. There’s powder in the bag.” He walked over to the sofa and placed the baby on the cushion so he could take off his wet clothes. He’d soiled through the diaper as well as his onesie. “Come on, now, I’ll have you all dried up in a second,” he told him as he worked with all the skill of a father with several children. A few minutes later, he was lifting \*her\* to his chest to rub a hand over her bare back. “It’s the girl,” he told everyone else.”

“Yeah, well, we figured that from the note,” Jack said as he continued to watch the other man. “Pretty sure that’s the only way she could get her out of the penthouse. She’d never been to the park.”

“Who? The baby girl?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“Yeah,” Jack answered grimly. Something wasn’t right about that baby and it was beginning to rub him the wrong way.

Clark continued to rub the baby’s back, effectively calming her. “Isn’t that better?”

“I’ll be damned,” Perry said as the baby stopped crying.

“Where did you learn all of that, CK?” Jimmy asked him.

“I worked in an orphanage in China and in the children’s wing of a hospice in South America. I was also the Davies’ babysitter for three years.”

“You were a babysitter?” Jack snorted at that as he flopped down in the chair across from the couch. “Sorry, CK, but we’ll have to ask you to turn in your man card.”

“Their son wouldn’t stay with anybody else and he was a package deal. He had two baby sisters.” Clark stood and walked back over to dig a package of onesies out of the bag. By now the baby seemed very content in Clark’s arms. “So, how did we get Lois’ daughter?”

“She left her in the restroom,” Jack told him. He leaned up and grabbed a piece of paper off the coffee table. “Along with this note.”

Clark took it and read aloud. “Protect her. Her life depends on her disappearing for now. I call her Perry. Yes, Perry.” He looked up at the others. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Perry moved over to sit on the sofa. “If Lois felt she was in danger, she’s in danger.”

“But what do we do with her?” Jimmy asked as he went to the fridge for a drink. “Lex will scour the city.”

“We have to get her out of the city. Take her somewhere safe, where he would never think to look,” Jack put in.

Clark had gone back to the sofa to redress the baby and as he did so, the perfect place came to mind. “I know a place.”

“You do?” Perry asked him.

“I’ll take her to my parents. No one would think to look for her there.”

“That might work,” Perry said with nod.

“Do you think your folks will take her?” Jimmy asked as he pulled a chair from the table closer to the group.

“You have to know my mom, Jim,” Clark said as he turned the baby to sit on his lap. “She believes it’s her life’s mission to help save the world, in any way she can. If that means taking in a baby whose mom thinks she’s in danger, then she’ll take that baby in.”

“We don’t know for how long,” Perry pointed out.

Clark glanced down at the baby. “Mom won’t care. Isn’t that right, Perry?”

“Guess Lois lost her mind after all,” Jack joked of the baby’s name.

“Wise guy,” Perry told him. “How soon can you get a flight out?”

“I can be out and back in two days,” Clark lied.

Unfortunately, he had to cover for himself. Being as he’d have a passenger, he’d have to fly at night. And he’d take the time to help his mother settle the baby in.

“We’ll have to come up with a cover story,” Jimmy spoke up. “An aging couple can’t suddenly have a baby appear from nowhere. And if anybody comes asking questions...”

“Leave that to me,” Perry spoke up. “I know guys who know guys.”

“Are those the same guys Lois used to know?” Jimmy asked. She’d said that to him several times. The way she seemed to get things done, he believed her, too.

“Both of you drank some of that smart sauce tonight,” Perry said with a pointed finger, causing the other men to laugh. “So, we have a plan?” Perry said as he stood up. “Will you be all right alone with the baby, Clark?”

He glanced at the child who suddenly found his watch fascinating. "Yeah, we'll be okay."

"Better man than me," Jack said as he rose. "She is a cute kid though. Could almost pass for yours, CK, with that dark hair and dark eyes."

Jimmy clapped him on the shoulder on his way by. "Call if you need anything."

"We'll be okay. Won't we, Sunshine?" Clark lifted the baby and turned her so he could look at her. Jack was right; she was adorable.

And her mother must have all of her senses, as Perry had said. She certainly loved this little person. Only a mother who loved her child so completely could leave her for others to take care of to save her life without knowing what the future held. That was a definite sign that Lois hadn't completely lost her mind.

If Lois trusted them to keep her daughter safe, they weren't about to let her down. He didn't know her at all, but this act made him respect her beyond words.

\*\*\*

Sara hovered just inside the door to Lex's office, nervous about going in. Something was wrong with Lois. She'd refused to allow her to come with her into the library with her and the babies. When they'd returned from the park, Lois had gone straight to the bedroom, lifted the baby girl from the cradle, and took her and Xavier to the library. She'd all but locked the door to keep her out. It was past the twins' bedtime and Lois still refused to allow her in. And she refused to come out.

Lex finally looked up from what he was reading to see Sara. "I hadn't realized I'd asked you to come see me tonight," he said with a smile. He stood and walked toward the young girl, his expression becoming predatory in nature.

"You didn't." Sara wouldn't look at him.

"No matter. I don't mind a bit of pleasure if you don't." He was about to reach for her when she stepped back. "What?" he demanded. "Am I not good enough for you now?"

"It's not that, Mr. Luthor. It's..."

"Spit it out, girl!"

"Mrs. Luthor," the woman said so softly Lex had to strain to hear her.

"What about her?"

"She's shut herself up in the library with the babies and won't let me in."

Lex stared at her for a moment before he strode from the room. He wasn't sure what the hell that bitch was up to, but he'd find out. Didn't she know he paid good money to make sure that boy was cared for like he was truly a Luthor?

Lois' head snapped up when Lex flung the door to the library open.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Reading," she lied and knew immediately he didn't buy it. She hadn't read anything in months.

Lex tucked his hands behind his back and walked toward her slowly. She had the carriage sitting next to her and moved a bit as he approached. Was it his imagination or was she trying to shield the carriage from him? "Why do you keep the babies from Sara?"

"We were okay." Her heart began to pound loudly. In seconds he would learn of her deception.

He stopped in front of her and leaned over to get a good look at the babies. Xavier looked up at him and smiled. But the girl just laid there. "What's wrong with her? It's not time to sleep." He'd insisted on very strict schedules for them both. He wasn't about to let some snot nosed brat put a crimp in his style. When his hand touched her, his eyes snapped to Lois. The baby doll was jerked from beneath the covers as the anger boiled deep within the man fuming as he hovered over the frightened woman. "What the hell is this?! Where is the girl?"

"Somewhere you'll never find her."

Lex stared at Lois for a moment before he smiled. "Welcome back, Ms. Lane."

She thrust herself to her feet to stand off against the man she'd come to loathe. "I've been back for a while!"

"What did you do with the girl?" he asked, his voice calm and cold.

"I gave her to the bum on the corner!"

Lex drew back and slapped Lois so hard she felt as if her jaw was broken. "Get her back! Now!"

"Go to hell!" Lois spat as she looked up at him from her position slumped over the chair she'd fallen on. He drew back again and she stood up, squaring her shoulders as she did. "Go ahead. Do it. Then explain why your wife looks like she's been beaten to a pulp when we arrive in Australia." That made him drop his arm, clenching his jaw tightly enough so that she could hear his teeth grind. "I told you I've been back a while." Long enough to hear that Lex had married her because he'd had to. His dear father had owned an empire and had left him the throne-providing he met certain stipulations. One of which was the need to have a wife. He couldn't claim his inheritance without her. "I'm sure Daddy left instructions should your wife be mistreated."

He stepped close enough that she could feel his breath when he spoke. "You've bought yourself a reprieve... For now. But as soon as the transfer of power is complete, you will no longer be needed." She stood just a bit taller, practically daring him to do something. "Now, tell me where she is," he said, a controlled, clipped order.

"Over my dead body." Now that she'd stood up to him once, she began to feel herself come alive again. Her daughter was gone, safe by now, and there was no way in hell she'd ever tell him where she was.

Not that she knew anyway.

Lex glared at her for several minutes before he turned and walked toward the door. On his way by Sara, he backhanded her hard enough to knock her to the floor. He never stopped and didn't see that she hit her head on the way to the floor.

"Sara!" Lois yelled and ran toward her. It only took a minute to realize the hit on the head had been a fatal blow.

In his office Lex paced back and forth as he waited for Nigel. He'd snapped out an order for one of the maids to get him when he'd been on his way back. It was only a few moments before the English gentleman walked into the room.

"How may I assist you this evening, my good man?"

"That bitch has done something with the girl." He continued to pace, unable to stand still. It wasn't often he wasn't in control and when he wasn't, it caused him great distress.

"The baby girl?"

"Yes, the baby girl, Nigel!" he yelled. Stopping in front of the bookshelves, he shoved a frustrated hand through his hair. "We have to find her."

"I'll put our best men on it, sir."

"Do that. And if they don't find her by dawn, they better not go home!" He snatched up an object on the shelf and turned to throw it against the wall, shattering a picture hanging there.

Damn that woman!

And damn the man that forced him to be in a position to have her here.

But Lex would win. Good men had tried to bring him down without success. He'd be damned if Lois Lane would do it.

Mrs. Cox stepped into the room as Lex threw another object at the wall. "Mr. Luthor, Sara is dead."

He stopped and whirled to face the tall, dark woman. "Good. The bitch should have done her job."

"Sir, she had a family. A family that might ask questions."

Pure rage washed through Lex and he turned toward his desk.

He reached down, heaving as he lifted the furniture, yelling as he flipped it over. "Get Nigel. He will know what to do," he finally managed around when he'd calmed enough to speak.

"Yes, sir." The woman turned and left without another word. She was still upset with Lex over how he'd treated her in the ballroom.

Lex stumbled over to the double doors and out onto his balcony. Taking several deep breaths, his mind began to calm. This was his city. He was in control.

And no one was going to take that away from him.

\*\*\*

Clark landed in the backyard and hurried in through the door of the farmhouse. "Mom!" he called. The light was on in the den so she was still up.

"Clark? I didn't know you were coming out..." She stopped when she saw her son standing on the other side of the table... holding a baby.

"I need you to hold her for a second while I zip back to Metropolis and handle a couple of things." He carefully placed the sleeping baby in his mother's arms, then disappeared in a flash. He flew back to his apartment to gather up the baby items he'd purchased earlier. He even grabbed the soiled clothes. He deposited the trash in a bin two blocks over, double checking to make sure he hadn't left behind any evidence that a baby was ever in his home. One last look and he gathered up the bag containing the baby things, along with the car seat, and flew back to Kansas.

Martha was sitting at the table gazing at the angelic face of the sleeping child when he made it back. "Why did you have a baby?" she asked him immediately.

He set the bag and seat on the table, then took out the dirty clothes so he could carry them into the laundry room adjoining the kitchen. When he was done, he sat down to look at his mother. "It's a long story."

"I have time," she assured him.

"Well..." He started slowly and twenty minutes later, his brows rose as his eyes pleaded with his mother. "So?"

Martha smoothed a hand over the baby girl's head. "You poor dear. And Lois," she said as she looked at her son. "It's been so long. Do you think you and the others will be able to help her?"

"We have to believe we can. Perry won't stop until he does. Lois is like a daughter to him." Clark pointed at the baby. "Will you keep her?"

"Oh, Clark, of course we will. I'll explain everything to your father in the morning." Jonathan had already gone to bed.

"Thanks, Mom. I knew I could count on you guys." He reached over to touch the baby. He'd spent the afternoon with the baby and had grown quite attached. He'd miss her when he left. "You do realize it might be a while before we can reunite her with her mother."

"I think we'll manage." Martha grinned as she continued to gaze at the small baby. "I just wish she could have gotten her brother to you, too."

"Yeah." He rose to put away the things he'd brought. "Perry said he'd take care of the paperwork to explain her appearance here."

"We'll need something. And she'll need things."

"I'm gonna stay for a couple of days to help you get her settled. I'll make sure you have everything you need."

"You can bring your old crib in from the storage shed. And I think there's a few other baby items there as well."

Clark nodded. "How about tonight? Where should she sleep?"

"Your cradle is in the attic. You can get that." She rose and went upstairs.

When Clark found her, she was in his room. The baby was lying on the bed, still sleeping, and his mother had cleared a

space for the cradle. He set it where she indicated.

"I'll make up the bed."

Clark's head snapped around to her as she headed for the door. "What? She's sleeping in here?"

"For tonight. Your father's asleep. We can set the crib up in our room tomorrow."

He glanced at the baby when she left the room. He hadn't counted on the baby spending the night with him. As she sighed in her sleep, he smiled. It didn't matter where she slept. Perry needed someone to take care of her, and he was ready for the task.

When Martha had the cradle made up and the baby tucked in, she looked up at her son. "What's her name?"

"Perry."

"Perry?" He nodded. "Unusual for a girl." Another soft touch before the woman headed for the door. "Five comes early."

"Night, Mom." Clark watched the baby sleep for a moment before he stepped over beside the bed to take his shirt off. As he settled on the bed, he couldn't stop trying to figure out what direction to go in with the investigation. But there was so much running through his head.

Why did Lois feel Perry was in danger? Was Luthor planning to harm her? Did Lois know what it was? How long had she been lucid? Since she'd given Jack the napkin with the drugs in it?

He glanced over at the sleeping baby again. Doing what he was doing- it was a lot considering he didn't even know Lois.

Yet Perry knew her. He loved her and wanted to protect her. In the short time Clark had been at the Planet, he'd come to see his editor as a wise man. He was compassionate and loyal, even if he rarely let that side of himself show. Clark not only respected that, he'd come to view Perry as a friend. And something inside him told him that Perry was right- Lois was in trouble with Luthor. He'd help Perry prove it. He'd help Lois no matter what he had to do.

\*\*\*

It was all Clark could do to concentrate today. He'd covered an accident this morning and needed to finish the story on it, but his mind kept going back to the baby he left in Kansas. She was adorable. Cute dimples filled her chubby cheeks and her bright eyes constantly searched her surroundings. In the two days he'd stayed to help his folks get her set up, she'd begun to recognize his voice. She'd turn her head toward him when he spoke and smile. God, he loved her smile. And when she cried, his heart felt like breaking. She'd wrap her tiny hand around one of his fingers and he'd melt. He'd taken the time to show her the farm, talking to her softly. She liked the animals- cooing and squealing loudly when she saw one. He'd cradled her tenderly to rock her to sleep, cleaned baby food from her face at mealtime, and learned how to change dirty diapers at super speed. It didn't matter how she'd gotten to them. All that mattered now was that she was taken care of. He liked Perry- liked her smile, liked her big beautiful eyes, her round, full cheeks. When she laughed, he felt warm all over. Clark had fallen completely in love with a seven-month-old baby girl.

"Kent, you done with that piece on the accident?" Perry yelled out into the bullpen.

"Just a minute," he answered as he shook the cobwebs from his head. He'd just have to force himself to concentrate.

"Perry wants us to stay late tonight," Jimmy told him as he dropped a couple of photos on Clark's desk. "Says he wants to discuss which direction to go in."

"Not a problem." He finished up his article as Jimmy went back to his desk. With any luck, somebody would have better ideas than he did. He was lost. Luthor had covered his tracks well. If something didn't give soon, they might never be able to bring down the 'Boss'.

\*\*\*

Nigel walked up beside Lex just outside the balcony doors. They had to stand close to the building under the awning because it was raining.

"Have they found her?"

"Not so much as a trace. It's as if she disappeared from the face of the planet."

"And the bodyguard?"

"Floating down the river as we speak."

Lex lit the cigar he'd been holding, taking several long draws before he spoke again. "I spoke to Lang. He disobeyed a direct order."

"Again?"

"This one might bite us." He blew out another puff of smoke. "He didn't put the implants in place."

"It might be for the best, sir. If they'd been activated and the baby died, her true biology would have been discovered much more quickly."

"Better to be agonizingly slow with the eventuality," he practically spat at his right hand man. "If I know White, he'll have her examined to see if I've poisoned her or molested her or..." He stopped and threw the cigar on the cement, stomping it out. "He has her."

"We've traced his steps, retraced, and even plundered through his trash. We've even combed through everyone connected with White. Not one trace of a baby."

"What about the Kent fellow?"

"He's only been working for White a short time. A man like Perry White would never put that kind of trust in a man so easily or quickly."

"Yes, you're right. We can't get a single mole in that place. They all fear the man. How about bugging devices?"

"He sweeps the Planet daily. They'd be found and those \*can\* be traced."

"Damn that man," Luthor said in disgust. "He's been a thorn in my side for years." He stuffed his hands into his pockets and gazed out across the city. "What now, Nigel? What do we do now?"

"I say cut your losses. Forget the brat. Claim your empire and fade into the background."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you have much worse trouble than Perry White."

Lex faced Nigel with raised brows. "Delconto has put you on his hit list."

"What?!" True fear washed over Lex. If he'd been placed on Juan Delconto's hit list... "We have to act fast," he said with desperation in his voice. "When did you find out?"

"Today. A friend of a friend who owed me a favor wanted to warn me. Otherwise, we would not have known until it was too late."

"How much time do we have?"

"Days. Hopefully." Nigel's voice was just as unemotional as it always was.

"Then we need to get busy." Lex turned and went inside.

Nigel followed and carefully closed the doors.

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Jimmy tapped his pencil as he scanned through another article. They were back to searching for crumbs again. Clark was doing much the same thing while they waited for Jack and Perry. The younger man entered the conference room first.

"I'm pretty sure I know the reason there was no official investigation into the disappearance of Lois' baby," Jack said as he dropped to a chair.

"Because she doesn't legally exist," Perry remarked as he stepped in and closed the door.

"What?" Clark asked as he lifted his eyes from his computer screen.

"According to sources in Vital Records, the only child born to

Lex and Lois Luthor was a baby boy. Xavier Franklin Luthor is listed as a single birth." He tossed one of the papers he held across the table.

Jack shook his head in disbelief. "How do you do it? I hardly ever see you leave that office."

"Now, son, I wouldn't be a man in my position if I didn't know things."

Jack chuckled as he leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the table. "At least we know the only one we have to worry about looking for her is Lex himself."

"And being as his arm seems to reach across the country, that might be worse than having the cops looking for her," Jimmy added gravely.

"Yeah, well, I hope this will throw him off the trail for a while." Perry handed Clark some more papers. "Birth certificate, social security number application, immunization... Of course, we should get her to the doctor for a thorough exam because if my hunch is right, the poor thing hasn't had a single shot yet."

Clark had been reading the papers and after the first section on the top page, he hadn't heard much else of what Perry had said. His eyes shot up to his boss and he thrust himself to his feet. "What the hell is this?"

Perry's expression was a bit apologetic. "Now, calm down, son."

"Calm down? Perry, this is..." He glanced down again before his eyes went back up to the older man's. "We can't..."

"Think about it, Clark."

Jimmy snatched the papers and read a second. "Well, it's certainly one way to keep questions at bay."

"Jimmy, there'll be tons of questions," Clark argued.

"Read on. The last paper says you were engaged to the mother, but she perished in a car accident before you two left Brazil. And it's true. The death part. Maria died a month before you came back to the states."

"Yeah, I know." Clark knew the woman named on this paper. She had indeed been pregnant and she had died in a car accident. But her baby was living with her father in Chile now.

"I covered my tracks well. Favors were traded to make sure Luis and his daughter cannot be found. They are happily enjoying their new home as we speak." Perry grinned widely.

"Wait, wait, wait," Jack said as he dropped his feet back to the floor and sat up in his chair. "You've fixed it so that Clark is that baby's father?" he asked his boss.

"Yes," Perry answered as he sat down. "You said yourself the baby looks like him. Another positive in our corner to keep the questions at bay. I even got her a passport and according to flight records, she and Kent flew QueenAir into the states."

"And don't tell me," Jack said. "Oliver himself provided you with the manifest."

"As a matter of fact," the older man said.

Jack could only laugh and shake his head. Perry knew everybody and they all owed him a favor. Except for the ones that knew anything about Lex Luthor that could help them.

Clark slowly sat back down, flipping through the papers in his hands. With a little ink and a few repaid debts, he'd become the legal father of a baby girl named Perry Ella Kent.

"Don't worry, son. When all of this is over, I have the proof to get you out of this, too."

The younger man looked up at his editor. "Perry, it's not the fact that I'm essentially this child's father. It's just..." He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. "What happens if this turns into months or worse, years? What about that little girl then?"

"We have to think about now, Clark. Right now we have to do this. And the only way I knew to protect her is like this. If Luthor starts looking, it'll be as if she was always there and he just didn't know it. Besides, you're new man on the totem pole. Luthor won't look at you too hard."

“But...” Clark just stared at the papers. How in hell did he do this? It wasn't that he was exactly averse to being Perry's father. On the contrary. He'd found himself thinking more than once over the last two days about her really being his. But that was insane and so was this. This would never work. This would never keep her safe. And right now that was the most important thing. If Lex \*did\* look deeper...

“Clark, this will work,” Perry told him softly. “It has to.”

Clark looked up at his boss. He'd seen that look so many times in Perry's eyes. It was the love he had for Lois. She must be something incredibly special for Perry to be banking so much on helping her. As the large, soulful eyes of baby Perry flashed through his mind, he decided that \*she\* was definitely something special. This might be insane, but...

“I hope so.” He flipped the papers again, then carefully placed them into an empty manila folder lying on the table. “I'll get these out to Mom.” He couldn't believe he was doing this. There was no going back now.

“Hey, genius,” Jack spoke up. “Have you thought about what you're gonna say if folks ask why little Perry's out in Kansas instead of here with her daddy?”

Perry arched a brow at the boy's bravado. “We'll cross that bridge if and when it comes. Hopefully this will all be over soon.”

“Hey, what about her name?” Everyone turned to look at Jimmy. “Won't it be obvious who she is by her name?”

“I have a feeling nobody knows what she called that little girl,” Jack spoke up. “They never brought her to the park. Never even talked about her. My source says the baby was rarely out of Lois' bedroom. It seems Lex didn't want anybody to know she was alive.”

Clark couldn't help but feel a little ashamed of himself. He'd been worried about being labeled that little girl's father while she'd never even had a life at all.

There was a long silence while each man was lost in his own thoughts. Perry clapped his hands together to signal it was time to get to work. “Let's get the goods on this bastard and put him behind bars where he belongs.”

\*\*\*

Lex looked out over the city that he claimed as his own. No one could touch him from this position. No one could topple him from his perch atop the throne he'd built.

No one but himself.

“Sir?”

Lex turned to face the English gentleman he'd hired many years ago to handle his affairs. Nigel had come highly recommended and so far he'd proven himself to be worth every dime he paid the man. “Yes, Nigel? What is it?”

“The girl's body was found this morning.”

Lex heaved a heavy breath and slumped into the chair at his desk. “Then it's time.”

“Yes, sir.”

An evil grin spread across the billionaire's lips. “Ironic isn't it, Nigel? The one place I fought to get away from will become my shelter from the storm.”

“It's just temporary, sir.”

“Yes, indeed. Now...” Lex sat up with a renewed confidence. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does everyone know their jobs?”

“To the letter. Eleven o'clock marks the time.”

“Eleven.” Lex lit a cigar and twirled his chair to face the window. “She's beautiful; she's seductive; she's mine. Soon the world will know the power of a great leader.” With a wave of his hand, he dismissed Nigel. He smoked his cigar with all the arrogance of a man without a care in the world.

\*\*\*

Clark and Jimmy had gone down to Suicide Slum at daybreak when a body of a young woman was found. A young white girl being found in the Slums was cause for concern. She might be a runaway or a missing person. And if she was, they would make sure her family got her body for proper burial.

It turned out she was just a junkie who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The guys decided to head on to the Planet and get the article written up so they might get a little extra time to work on the Luthor investigation.

It was an hour later before Jack made it in. He was on his way to give Jimmy some research he'd done for the other man when the picture lying on Clark's desk caught his eye. He stopped and lifted the image to be sure he was seeing what he thought he was.

“Sara!”

“What?” Clark looked up from his screen.

“This is Sara, Lois' nanny.” He thrust the picture back into Clark's line of vision.

“Are you sure?” Jimmy wanted to know. He'd heard the other guy's exclamation and came to listen in.

“I saw her three times a week for months. I am positive.”

Jimmy and Clark exchanged a glance before they both headed for the elevator. They needed to talk to Bill Henderson and see if he could get the autopsy pushed forward as quickly as possible. And to see if this girl had a life outside her employer.

Jack was left holding the picture and sighing sadly. He'd really liked that girl. She had no idea she'd been in bed with the devil.

\*\*\*

Lex grinned as he lit a cigar. He might as well have one last stogy. A glance at his watch informed him it was nearly eleven o'clock. Just about show time.

“Tell my wife I'd like to see her,” he barked his order without turning toward the servant he knew was behind him.

“Yes, sir,” came the answer.

When Lex had found himself in need of a woman for certain... scientific purposes, he'd thought of Lois. He'd been entertaining her at the time, so it was natural she would be his choice.

He laughed aloud. Who was he kidding? He'd set out to gain the young reporter's trust and had eventually attained and conquered the formidable Lois Lane. From the time she'd gone to work as an intern at the Planet, she'd caused him nothing but utter distress. At every turn she was waiting with pen in hand to document his shortcomings. And on more than one occasion, she had. Too bad she didn't even know it.

He'd thought it would be fun to tame that beauty. But she was much too brash for his tastes. He preferred women who submitted the moment he spoke and she'd never do so without the help of some form of persuasion. Lex had never been one to need an outside influence to get a woman into his bed. He wasn't about to start with Lois. He had enjoyed watching her suffer though. Soon he would also put her in her proper place. He blew a large smoke ring into the air and squinted so that he could more clearly see the street below.

Inside her room, the servant informed Lois that Luthor would like a word with her. What could he possibly want?

Lois cringed to know he wanted her at all, in any way. She sure as hell didn't want him.

Lex was peering over the balcony wall when Lois stepped outside. She made her way to him and crossed her arms over her chest.

“You beckoned?” she said sarcastically.

Lex turned with an evil smile. “Ah, Lois. You always did know how to talk to a man.” He took a slow sip from the brandy bottle on the wall between his propped up arms, then promptly slapped her to the floor. “I hope you enjoyed your time as my

wife.”

Lois wiped the blood from her mouth as she glared at him. “I would have rather died than be made into your wife.”

“We can accommodate you.” He lifted the bottle for a hearty gulp. “How’s my boy this morning?”

Lois had enough of his threats. “Leave Zay out of this. This is between me and you.”

“Zay? You’re calling him Zay?” He laughed aloud for a moment.

“I refuse to call him \*Xavier\*. That’s the name \*you\* gave him,” she spat in return.

He eyed her closely for a moment, and she held her breath, expecting another resounding slap. Instead, the customary spark of evil flashed in his eyes. “Don’t you see that he’s part of this. Hell, he \*is\* this!”

“This what?” she wanted to know. She knew Lex had married her and conceived a child with her to claim a fortune. But why her? He couldn’t stand her and hadn’t failed to remind her of that fact over the last few days he’d known she was lucid. And what was all the crap about tests and viability of tissue and Dr. Lang-whoever he was?

Lex seethed in anger and grabbed Lois around the neck. “This!” His grip tightened as he flung curses and obscenities at her. He’d wanted to do this months ago. If it weren’t for the demands of a deranged, old fool...

The world began to swirl around her. Grasping desperately at Lex’s fingers around her neck, Lois’ world faded to black.

\*\*\*

“Mrs. Luthor, wake up.”

Lois came to her senses as Nigel shook her. “Wh... what happened?” The first thing she was aware of was that she was still outside on the balcony.

“You went crazy. Don’t you remember?”

“What?” Lois was looking around, trying desperately to figure out what was going on. Just then the doors flew open and a group of police burst in.

“Don’t move, Mrs. Luthor,” one of the officers told her as he trained his gun on her.

“What?” At first Lois had thought they were there to take care of her, but they were pointing their guns at her. Her dim senses picked up Nigel’s voice.

“I heard her say she’d kill him. He asked her to calm down. Then she just... ran at him, pushing him over the edge.”

Lois’ mind was a blur. What had Nigel just said? Her breathing was becoming fast and labored. She turned horrified eyes to the balcony wall where officers were looking over the side.

“Poor bastard. Horrible way to go.”

Lois gasped for air. They couldn’t mean what she thought they meant.

“Mrs. Luthor, you’re under arrest for the murder of your husband. You have the right to remain silent...”

His words faded as she was pulled to a standing position and cuffed. Lois had grown numb. She wanted out of this life but not this way. She had never wanted Lex dead. Okay, yeah, so given half the chance she would probably have choked the life out of him. But...

When they were almost to the door, she remembered something very important. “My son! Wait! My son is asleep in his room.” She fought against her restraints.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Luthor. Mr. St. John has agreed to contact your father to come for him.”

“No, not Sam. Call Perry. Call Perry White.” Lois’ words drifted off as she tried to comprehend what was happening to her. She was led out of the penthouse and into the elevators, desperately trying to recall what happened. The last thing she remembered was Lex choking her, then everything was black.

She closed her eyes and silently prayed that Perry would get her son. That was all that mattered.

\*\*\*

Clark was on his way to his desk from the copy room when a staffer turned up the volume on one of the monitors. There must be a breaking story coming in. He’d just gotten back from an accident across town, so he hadn’t heard anything else.

“As we speak authorities are escorting Lois Luthor from the penthouse she shared with her husband at Lex Towers. Witnesses say she had been suffering from a deep depression and finally broke. Before anyone could stop her, she pushed her husband over the balcony wall. Lex Luthor was pronounced dead at the scene.”

Clark’s eyes snapped across the room where an equally stunned Jimmy Olsen stood with his mouth hanging open.

The door to Perry’s office banged open and he was practically running toward the elevator. “Get Mayson Drake on the phone and have her meet me at the Hall of Justice. We need an injunction so that we can get that baby out of there!” When he stopped to wait on his ride down, he searched out Jack in the crowd. “Jack, I need you to find Lucy Lane and get her cleaned up. And I need it done yesterday! Clark, high-tail it to Lex Towers and see what you can see. Make sure they don’t take that baby out before we can go get him.”

The other men began to scramble as soon as the doors closed Perry off from view. It seemed all hell had broken loose and they’d had nothing to do with it.

\*\*\*

Thank God Lois was taken to the Forty Second, Perry thought as he entered the building a few minutes later. He’d had to beat his way through the throng of reporters outside just to get in. Inside was just as chaotic with policemen and other officials scurrying around. Bill Henderson met Perry halfway across the room.

“What the Sam Hill is going on, Bill?” the editor demanded.

“Somehow I knew this one would get you out of that newsroom,” Bill remarked. He motioned for Perry to follow him and went into his office and closed the door.

“It was messy as hell, Perry.”

“I don’t give a rat’s cheese about Luthor. Good riddance! Lois didn’t do this!” His voice was just below a shout and he stood, hands on his hips nearly shaking with controlled anger and tension. When he’d run out the newsroom, he hadn’t grabbed his jacket and his tie sat slightly askew around his neck. He could have cared less.

“Well, Perry, everyone there says she did.”

“They all work for Luthor! They’d say anything for a paycheck.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think they’d protect their payday now?” Bill challenged the other man right back with fire and passion of his own. He was one of very few men that actually dared stand toe to toe with Perry White. “With Luthor dead, his wife would have inherited the warehouse.”

“We both know a man like Luthor is not about to die without stipulating where all of his money goes. There were more prenups than Elvis had hairstyles.”

“That may be so, but even I can’t do anything about this one, Perry. She needs a damn good lawyer. With any luck, she can get time in an institution on a plea of temporary insanity.”

Perry stared dumbfounded at his longtime friend. “That’s it?” he asked in a calmer voice.

“Perry, I’m really sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Bill. Not after all we’ve been through.” He shoved a frustrated hand through his hair. “Just say you’ll turn a few stones before you pass judgment.”

“I can turn all the stones you want me to, but this one might be out of my hands.” And he had the grace to look apologetic.

“Look, I can get you two minutes.”

“With Lois?”

“Yes.” He motioned for Perry to follow him and they made their way down the hall toward the back of the station where the holding cells were. Stopping outside a door, Bill ordered the guard to take a smoke break. “Two minutes,” he reminded his friend.

Perry stepped inside the room to find Lois pacing back and forth. She stopped when the door opened and looked up at Perry. She reminded him of a caged and terrified animal. She was not the picture of someone who had killed her husband or even one who had wanted to. Her eyes were red and swollen, brimming with tears as she stared at him.

“I didn’t do it, Perry,” she said in a strangled tone.

If there was one thing he knew, it was that Lois Lane was no murderer. “Ah, I know, honey. And I’m gonna prove it.” He hadn’t known how much he’d missed this woman until just now. It was more intense than he thought possible. “You don’t know how much I’ve missed you.” Perry managed to whisper, his own emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

“Just get my baby out of there. Don’t let his goons take him off to do God knows what with him,” she pleaded.

“I’m headed to the Hall of Justice when I leave here so I can get an injunction.”

She nodded and took a few more steps across the room.

“How’s...?”

Perry waved her off. He wasn’t sure if they were being monitored or not. And he wasn’t sure how far Luthor’s reach truly was. But knew it was possible for even a man like him to be able to reach places from beyond the grave. “Working out well.”

Another nod and she was pacing again.

He wanted so badly to reach out to her, but he didn’t know this woman anymore. The change in her posture told him such an advance might not be as readily accepted as it would have at one time.

A tap on the door, then it opened. “You have to go. The DA is on the way,” Bill said when he stuck his head in the door.

“Nothing,” Perry said as he looked at Lois. “Say nothing until your lawyer gets here. Mayson Drake. I need her at the Hall of Justice for a bit, then I’ll send her right on over.”

“Thanks, Perry.” She managed before more tears came. She quickly turned and faced the wall.

Perry’s heart broke to have to leave her there. Reluctantly he tore his eyes from her back and left. So help him if Luthor wasn’t already dead, he’d kill him.

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Mayson Drake was a tall blonde woman with as much attitude as she had intelligence. She didn’t play games, jumping for the jugular the instant she was handed a new case. She was one of the best lawyers on the east coast, probably in the country. Once on the fast track to the District Attorney’s office, she chose instead to continue private practice so that she was able to hand pick her clients. She’d been Perry White’s lawyer for years. She’d also become Perry’s friend. That was why she knew what he needed now.

By the time Perry arrived at the Hall of Justice, Mayson was waiting for Judge Burke to announce he was ready to hear her emergency order for temporary custody of a minor child.

“Mayson?” Perry called as he stepped inside the building.

She turned from where she was talking with a man and motioned him over. “We have a hearing with Burke,” she informed him immediately.

“Then you know what I need?”

“Come on, Perry, I’ve known you for entirely too long.”

He smiled at her and together they walked toward the room where they would try to convince a judge to allow them the right to take custody of Lois Lane’s baby boy.

Minutes later they were sitting down across the desk as a middle-aged Asian woman moved her chair closer to the furniture so she could read over the file Mayson extended to her.

“I represent Perry White, editor of the Daily Planet. He asks that you grant him an emergency order of custody of Lois Luthor’s son.”

The woman looked up at them. “On what grounds?”

“Mr. White is Ms. Luthor’s power of attorney and under the circumstances, he feels it is his responsibility to care for the minor child until such time other arrangements can be made.”

The judge read for a moment. “I am not versed on Mr. Luthor’s final arrangements.”

“Begging your pardon,” Mayson told her. “His arrangements are separate and apart from hers. His death reinforces the power of attorney and Mr. White is within his rights to act on her behalf. She would want her son cared for and protected.”

“Does she have family members that could take the child?”

“The only family she has suitable to care for the child is a sister and she’s out of the city at the moment. Mr. White could take this child immediately.”

“And future arrangements? Mrs. Luthor’s future is dire and I can’t see Mr. White in a position to care for the child indefinitely.”

This time Mayson had to look to Perry. She didn’t know anything about what he planned beyond today. “There’s a young man that works for me,” Perry blurted out. “He has a baby daughter about the age of Ms. Luthor’s son. Granted, his folks are caring for the child while he gets settled- he just came to work at the Planet a few months ago. He’s a good man and a great father.” Perry didn’t know about the last part, but he did know Clark was one of the best men he’d ever met. He wasn’t exactly sure why he thought that, but just knew that he was. And these babies really needed to be together. Of course, that was something else he couldn’t talk about.

The judge sat back and stared at the aging man for several moments before leaning forward again. “This might not be the wisest thing I’ve ever done, but...” She picked up a pen and scribbled on the top document. “I’m granting the emergency order. I want to see you back here in a month with proposal in hand for the child’s future care. If that young man is what you say he is, and if Ms. Lane will agree to her son’s placement with him, I’ll grant him temporary custody.”

It sounded like hot air escaping a balloon when Perry sighed heavily. “Thank you, Your Honor.” This was one burden off his mind. At least Lois’ little boy would be in good hands.

“Thank you,” Mayson repeated for him as she stood and shook the judge’s hand. The papers were tucked into an envelope and they hurried from the building. Perry was about to break speed records getting to Lex Towers.

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Clark had clawed his way through the crowd outside Lex Towers trying to find out anything he could about the accident that claimed Luthor’s life.

And he was pretty sure accident was a better way to describe it instead of murder. Granted, he didn’t know Lois at all, but would she have killed her husband? Had things gotten so desperate for her that she was led to a situation like that? Did she think that was her only way out? Would she do that knowing she still had two children who depended on her?

What about Perry now? She was in Kansas with his parents. He stopped and thought about that for a minute. Hell, Perry had really just become his daughter. A man like Luthor had probably even made provisions for his death and that meant Lois was in serious trouble. She wouldn’t so easily get out of this situation.

“Clark!”

He turned from where he was trying to get a soda from the machine in the lobby to see Perry and a young woman pushing

their way in.

“Grab one of those officers and come with me.” He never slowed on his way toward the elevators. When Clark caught up, Perry nodded to Mayson. “Clark Kent, Mayson Drake. She’ll be Lois’ attorney.”

“Good to meet you,” the woman told him with a nod. She was on the other side of Perry, making it impossible for them to shake.

Clark returned her smile. “And you.” He stepped into the elevator with the others, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I take it you got the injunction?” he finally managed.

Perry waved the envelope at him. “Nobody’s left with him?”

“Nope. I’ve had a guy watching the parking garage as well.” He’d wanted to use his x-ray vision to make sure the baby was still inside, but with so many people coming and going it had been nearly impossible. But there had been no one leaving with a baby.

“I have papers to pick up the Luthor baby,” Perry told the officer. “I need you to make sure they hand him over without trouble.”

“May I?” The young man took the envelope and carefully extracted the paperwork. When he was satisfied, he tucked them back inside. “No problem, Mr. White.”

Clark looked up as the numbers ticked off the floors. He was glad when they made it to the top. Ms. Drake kept glancing at him and it was beginning to make him a bit uncomfortable. Granted, she was a beautiful woman and under other circumstances he might not have minded the attention. But...

The doors dinged and they all rushed toward the inner sanctum of the penthouse. Another officer stepped into their path. “No one’s allowed in,” he told them.

“We just came for the baby.” Perry shook the paper in his hand.

A detective stepped forward and read over the order. “Take him to find the baby, then escort them downstairs.”

The group was led into a room, then another. Room after room was empty.

“Where is he?” Perry wanted to know.

“I have no idea,” the officer replied. “We’ll ask one of Luthor’s people.” He left the room as the impatient editor cooled his heels in the hallway outside the master suite. They’d even checked in there. They’d found the baby’s crib, but it was empty.

A few minutes later the officer returned with a short, portly Hispanic woman. “Thea says that Master Luthor is not here,” he repeated what the woman had told him in broken English.

“Where is he?”

“Me not know,” she informed him. “Mr. Asabi took him right before Mr. Luthor fall.”

“That son of a...”

“Calm down, Perry,” Mayson spoke up. “We have the order, so we’ll put out an APB. We’ll find him.” She was already dialing numbers on her phone and when there was an answer on the other end, she began barking orders.

“No wonder I didn’t see anyone leave with him,” Clark said, mentally kicking himself for not trying to look earlier.

“It’s not your fault,” Perry told him as he went into the room that had been Lois and the babies’ room. He rooted around until he found a bag and stuffed it full of things. “We need to get back to the Planet,” he declared when he’d packed a bag.

“Yeah.” Clark followed him out into the hall. “I’m gonna look around a bit.” He motioned toward another elevator on the opposite end.

“Do that, but be careful. I can’t have you in jail, too.”

He nodded at Perry, then hurried away. For the next few minutes he took a look around Lex Towers super style. What he found wasn’t really a surprise. The place had more secret tunnels and passageways than the White House was rumored to have.

The thing that did confuse him was that below the parking garage there seemed to be even more, only he couldn’t really see it. It must have been lined with lead. Going down to get a better look was a bit tricky. He’d had to do it quickly to avoid detection. There were still a few guards scattered around.

“Loyal even after death,” he whispered as he pushed against a metal door. On the other side was what looked to be an apartment. Very nice, very tastefully decorated. Beyond that was another small apartment. Then another and another. There seemed to be endless rooms and corridors- a small city of bunkers. If he was reading the markings on the metal correctly, this had once been a fallout shelter. Why had Luthor built his empire on top of a bunker? It seemed the man had been like an onion, layers upon layers of mystery and intrigue, all so nasty it stung to think about it.

When he failed to find anything that could help them in their search for Perry’s brother, he headed back to the Planet. There would be a lot to do and the older Perry was probably fit to be tied.

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Perry stomped through his newsroom a week later, slamming the door to his office. Jimmy watched him through the window as the older man threw an object off his desk at the wall. He eased from his seat and carefully opened the door to the chief’s office.

“Perry?”

Perry was sitting at his desk with his head in his hands. He lifted his eyes to meet Jimmy’s. “They denied her bail.”

Jimmy shut the door and took the seat in front of Perry’s desk. “Chief, she couldn’t have done what they say she did.”

“I know. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell those nitwits all morning.” Perry leaned back in his chair. “Hell, they’ve already convicted her. Say she resented Luthor for making her give up her career. His reps are saying she chose to stay home with her son; that it wasn’t Lex that asked her to quit.”

“We’ll get her out of this, Perry.”

“We have to Jimmy. I promised that girl a long time ago I’d always take care of her. I can’t let her down.”

“We won’t.” Jimmy didn’t know that for sure, but he’d shake down every bum and businessman in the city if he had to in order to help his mentor with this.

“Where are we on finding the baby?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Perry’s voice rose in intensity. “Where could they have taken him?”

“Me, Jack, and Clark have picked through every single property he owns. We’ve contacted dozens of his constituents and even under threat of arrest, no one is turning over on him. If nothing else, they were terrified of Lex Luthor, even in death.”

With a swipe of his hand, Perry cleared his desk. He thrust himself to his feet and turned toward the window. “Leave me alone, Jimmy,” he said in a calmer, emotionless tone.

The younger man didn’t say a word, just got up and left, closing the door behind him. He hadn’t see Perry like this in... well, ever! The man sure loved that girl.

“He’s coming apart at the seams,” Jack noted as he stepped up to Jimmy’s side while they looked through the window at the man on the other side.

“Yeah.” He watched a moment before focusing on Jack. “Got anything?”

“Nada!”

“Damn!” Jimmy shook his head in disbelief and despair before heading back over to his desk. This might actually be the case that finally led the best editor in the world to retirement.

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Clark bounced Perry on his knee while he made faces at her. It was amazing how a tiny person could change your entire outlook on life. He hadn’t flown back to see her much after

leaving her with his folks, but in the last two weeks he felt she needed to know that someone loved her and cared about her, even if it wasn't her mother. Truth was he was the one who needed the reassurance.

He'd also realized this little girl needed someone to protect her and care for her because she was blameless in whatever it was that had happened between her mother and father. Clark had been mildly upset with Perry for legally attaching him to the baby without asking him first, but now he knew it was something that he was glad Perry had done. His legal status as her father would ensure she always had a home. He might not have wanted something like this at this stage in his life, though there was no way he'd just turn her out. With Lois in jail, she had no one.

Jack had tried to find Lucy. Perry had initially intended to clean her up so he could use her to get custody of Lois' son. Though now they really didn't need her. There had been another tense moment when Clark learned Perry had spoken for him again during his meeting with Judge Burke. But looking at Perry, he couldn't stay upset. He was already caring for Perry, he might as well add her brother to the mix. Besides, twins shouldn't be apart.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" Jonathan asked Clark. He'd just finished telling his parents about the situation with Lois and her son. In two weeks' time, he would go with Perry and make it official. He'd become Xavier's legal guardian. He'd toyed briefly with the idea of legalizing Perry as well, but Perry reminded him that until they knew more about Luthor and his death, they should leave things the way they were. Maybe, he'd said, in a few weeks they'd be able to get Lois to sign an affidavit so that little Perry would become her legal daughter as well.

Clark looked at the baby grinning widely at him. "Yeah, Dad. It's what I want to do. They should be together."

"That's a lot of work, son."

The young man looked up at his mother. "It's a lot to ask you both. I know that, but please. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"Oh, honey, we don't mind this kind of work," Martha told him as she smoothed a hand over Perry's head. "To have babies in this house again..." She sighed and sat down. "But, son, you don't even know this woman. And you're essentially taking the responsibility for her children. Clark, we've read the things in the paper. It's not looking good for her. Are you prepared to raise these babies? If she's convicted, it would be years before she got out."

"What about then?" his dad wanted to know. "She'd want them. Could you give them back then?"

He pulled Perry up to his chest and patted her back. "I'd deal with that when the time came. All I know is that right now, this little girl needs someone to take care of her. I can't explain it, but I *have* to do this."

His parents exchanged a look before they both smiled. "It seems our son has finally found something he likes more than flying." His mom patted his knee.

The baby leaned back to look at Clark and blew through her lips happily. "Yeah," he answered with a chuckle. "I guess I have." He played with the baby for a moment before he looked back up at his parents. "I'll start flying out to help more. Maybe I can spend my nights off here to give you guys a break. I could even bring her out to Metropolis some."

"Clark, that little beauty is home and we'll love her like our own," his dad assured him as he stood up. "Help out as much as you can." He turned and headed outside. There were chores that needed doing and he couldn't get to them from inside the house.

"Are the checks enough, Mom?"

"It's too much, Clark. You don't have enough left for yourself."

"Perry's helping. And Jimmy and Jack. They're really great guys." He smiled as he thought about the men he worked with. They really were special people. They were sacrificing a lot to help out Lois. She, too, must be something special. Clark found himself looking forward to meeting her. He'd been made an official part of her legal team- an investigator. He'd join Mayson and her legal assistant in two days when they went for their first briefing with Lois to set up her defense strategy.

In the meantime, a beautiful, dark haired baby girl wanted to play.

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Clark met Mayson outside the Hall of Justice. Lois was still being held in county lock-up and would remain there until after the trial.

"Mr. Kent," the young lawyer said as she stepped up beside him at the entrance. This time she extended her hand.

"Ms. Drake." Clark shook her hand and smiled despite how uneasy he'd felt around this woman the last time they were together. He was looking at her face this time and her smile was very beautiful.

"My assistant couldn't make it. I might need you to take a few notes for me," she told him.

"I'll do whatever I can," he told her as they started walking.

"It's hard to believe men like you exist these days." She continued toward the door and he fell in step beside her.

"I'm just doing what I can."

"What you can is helping with the investigation or maybe testifying in court. Agreeing to take custody of a woman's baby, a woman you don't even know... Well, that's something else entirely."

Clark reached out to pull the door open. "I have a boy scout complex." When she quirked a brow at him, he grinned. "At least that's what I'm told."

"Complex is probably the only way to explain this." She smiled again and stepped up to the desk. Less than five minutes later, they were waiting in a conference cell reserved for lawyers and their clients.

A few moments later, Lois was led into the cell and sat down across the table from them without lifting her head. Even with her head down she looked as defeated as a person could.

"Lois, I'm Mayson Drake and this is Clark Kent."

Slowly her eyes raised and Clark nearly gasped when he saw the shadows in her dark orbs. What had this woman been through?

"Is it safe to talk?" she wanted to know.

Clark glanced around to make sure they were not being bugged. But Mayson was the one to answer.

"Yes. It's illegal for the police to listen in on our conversations. I'm going to be your lawyer."

"All I want to know is that my babies are okay." When she said that, a bit of fire flashed in her eyes.

"Babies?" Mayson asked. "As in more than one?"

"Yes. Babies!" Lois whispered fiercely. "I have twins- a girl and a boy."

Mayson looked to Clark for answers. "Her daughter was never documented. Luthor didn't want the girl." He didn't miss the look from Lois. "Lois felt her life was in danger and got her out. She's safe."

"Is she?" Lois asked as tears filled her eyes, pleading with Clark or Mayson to tell her something.

Clark's gaze went to her and his heart leapt. She was... tearing him apart. Those large eyes looked so much like Perry's. "She is," he assured her as he reached into his front shirt pocket and pulled out a picture. "It was taken yesterday."

Lois took the photo and held it like it was a fragile piece of glass.

"We'll discuss this later," Mayson told Clark. He merely

nodded, much more intent on watching Lois. “Mrs. Luthor...”

“Lane. My name is Lois Lane.” Her eyes lifted and Clark swore she transformed before his eyes. “That’s the first thing I want. I want that to become legal.” Her eyes shifted to Clark. “Where’s Zay?”

“Your son?” he asked.

“Yes. I call him Zay because I can’t stand that name.” She focused on Mayson again. “Can I change that? His name?”

“Should you be worrying about that right now?”

“Let’s get something straight, Ms. Drake. The only thing I worry about is my children. Make me Lois Lane again. Change my son’s name to Collin Jerome Lane, then work on my defense strategy.”

Clark’s brows shot toward his hair. Jerome? Why Jerome? His middle name was Jerome.

Mayson seemed to understand Lois better than Clark thought she did. The woman smiled and opened her briefcase to take out several papers. She made a few notes on her notebook, then looked back up at Lois. “I’ll have the papers back here this afternoon for your signature. With Luthor dead, you have all rights concerning your son. But if the girl was never documented...” She stopped when Clark touched her arm.

“Trust me on that one, Ms. Drake. We’ll discuss it later. Just know that she’s okay.” He waited until she nodded before he moved his hand.

Lois glanced between them, then looked at the photo again. She didn’t know this Clark Kent but if Perry did, then he must be okay. Besides, he had the kindest eyes she’d ever seen.

“Speaking of your son...” Mayson pulled out another paper. “Perry asked me to get you to consider signing a petition to grant custody to someone who can be trusted to care for him until this is over.”

“You never told me where he was,” she said to Clark.

He shifted uncomfortably. He hated to have to tell this woman they hadn’t found her son.

Her eyes dropped away. “They have him, don’t they?”

They being Luthor’s people, Clark knew without asking. “We’ll find him.”

“You’ll try.” She wiped a stray tear and sighed heavily.

“And when they do, we need to be sure he’s cared for.”

Mayson pushed the document across the table in front of Lois.

The woman read a moment before her eyes snapped up to Clark. “You want my baby?”

“I will take care of him until you can,” he replied as his eyes tried to explain what he simply couldn’t. There was this strange pull from Lois and it was upsetting his equilibrium.

“Who are you?”

“I work at the Planet.”

“A reporter?” He nodded. “With Perry?” Another nod. She looked down at the release form. “If I sign this, it’ll be filed before anyone can use it to say I’ve given away my son?”

“When you sign it, you’re transferring custody straight to Clark.” Mayson wasn’t as polite as Clark. She used his first name, obviously comfortable doing so. “It will be filed as soon as I leave here. We have a hearing with Judge Burke the week after next. She’s agreed to grant the petition if Clark is deemed suitable.”

“Are you?” she asked him directly.

“I have a good job, plenty of food, a clean, safe home. Don’t smoke, no drugs, and last time I checked, I wasn’t on any wanted lists.” He wasn’t sure why he’d said that, but it had come to his mind and he’d decided to do what Jack did- say it. When Lois began to laugh, he knew he’d made the right decision.

“Cross dresser? Gay? Married?” she asked between fits of laughter.

He chuckled softly. “Ah, jeans are about as racy as I get. Not gay and not married. Although I’ve been called a mama’s boy a

time or two.”

When Lois finally calmed, she looked at him intensely. “Are you a good reporter?”

“I’m okay. Haven’t won that first Kerth...”

“And you think you will?” she challenged.

“I know I will,” he shot right back. She was sizing him up and he wouldn’t disappoint her. There was something about Lois he couldn’t explain- she was... seriously affecting him.

Mayson had watched the exchange, a little disappointed at first. Then she remembered where this woman was.

And promptly wanted to kick herself. Thinking those terrible thoughts... But never mind that. She had a job to do. She reached into her briefcase and pulled out several papers. “This is Clark’s profile I’ve been putting together for the judge. Background check, financial history, job history... He’s an accomplished journalist, Ms. Lane. He’s won a couple of foreign awards. He has decent savings and money in his checking account. Only two credit cards with no balance, no other debt, no medical bills- in fact, no medical history.” She glanced at him, but he shrugged.

“I’ve never been sick.”

“What?”

“Really good genes,” he said and again, Lois smiled.

“Anyway,” Mayson went on. Her personal interest in Clark Kent would have to wait. “He graduated Mid-West with honors and athletic nods. He was even offered a contract to play professional football. His parents own their own farm in Kansas. He’s a good candidate to take custody.”

Lois continued to stare at Clark and was impressed that his gaze didn’t waver. This was a special man; she could see it in his eyes. But why would a man who didn’t know her want to do something like this? “What’s in it for you?” she asked him.

“I’ll know he’s safe and protected and you’ll have peace of mind.”

“You don’t know me,” she told him.

“No, but Perry does. And he says you’re worth it,” he said softly.

Whether it was the tone of his voice or the look in his eyes, she couldn’t say. But this was the right man to help her. “If Perry trusts him, so do I,” she said and finally looked back at Mayson. “I didn’t kill Lex.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened on that balcony?”

“Well, that could be a problem...” She tucked her hair behind her ear, sighed heavily, and slowly began to speak.

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Mayson and Clark left the Hall of Justice over an hour after they’d gone in.

“It doesn’t look good, does it?” Clark asked Mayson as they made their way down the steps and onto the sidewalk.

“Honestly?” she asked as they stopped at the crosswalk.

When he gave her a ‘tell me’ look, she sighed. “Lois has no one to corroborate anything she’s said. And we can’t use the report about the drugs because there’s no proof that she ever actually consumed any. She quit taking it when she first found them so there’s probably nothing in her system. Our only witness to anything is Jack. And he can only say that Lois gave him the napkin with the drugs in it and that Lois appeared drugged. It’s a drop in the bucket.”

Clark scratched the back of his head. It looked as if Luthor had sealed Lois’ fate, even from the grave.

“Tell me about the girl,” Mayson spoke up.

“Not here,” Clark said as he glanced around. “You should come to the Planet so Perry can help with the explanation.”

She smiled. “I should have known Perry would have something to do with it. I swear that man has his hands in more things...”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed with a chuckle. “Listen, I have to go. Work doesn’t stop.”

“No, unfortunately not.” Mayson suddenly seemed a bit nervous. “I’ll call Perry about sitting down for a rap session to discuss which direction we’ll go in.”

“I’ll be there.”

“And if I need you to run down anything...”

“Just call me. I’m on the directory.”

She gave a slight nod, then dug around in her bag to pull out a card. “I’ll write my cell down, in case I’m needed on the spur of the moment.” She penned her number, then extended it to him.

He took it, another smile across his lips.

“Maybe... we could have a drink sometime?”

Clark stared at her for a moment. He knew he’d read the vibes coming off this woman correctly. She was interested in him on more personal level. This was the last thing he needed right now. A relationship with the lawyer trying to help Lois could spell trouble. And they’d all have their hands full for a while. He didn’t- they didn’t- have time for this. Yet the look in her eyes, her smile- Mayson was a pretty lady and he found himself attracted to her as well. Even if thoughts of Lois Lane kept nagging at him.

“Ah, maybe we could,” he finally answered. He held up the card. “I’ll call you.”

“Do that.” She smiled again and turned to leave.

He waited until she was in her car across the street before he left. A second later a familiar sonic bomb echoed through the air.

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The actual investigation on Luthor had to be put on hold until after a defense strategy could be worked out. It was three days later when Mayson made it the Planet to sit down with Perry and Clark. The editor quickly set them up in the conference room and ordered Jack to brew them a fresh pot of coffee.

“Jack and Jimmy here...” Perry waved his hand at the two men. “... will be joining us. They’ve got a stake in all of this, too.”

“That’s fine. Lois pretty much gave me complete discretion with her case.” Mayson took off her jacket and sat down. “Where’s Clark?”

“Covering an accident on the Stafford Turnpike. He’ll be here in a few minutes.” Perry sat and rifled through a few files before he leaned back in his chair. “Any news on the boy?”

“I was hoping you’d heard something,” Mayson answered. The police investigation was pretty much stalled. No police agency in the country wanted to touch the case until Perry started making threats about articles on cover-ups and police corruption. For the near month that the man had attained emergency custody, a nationwide dragnet had been cast to search for Collin Lane, as he was now known. Mayson had the change pushed through in less than twenty-four hours- a record in any jurisdiction. Even though Perry was being viewed as an idiot for taking on LexCorp, the fact that Collin was missing was now international news. The guys that knew guys that Perry knew were as varied as they were different. Luthor’s people couldn’t take that child anywhere in the world without being found eventually. Yet so far, they were doing a pretty fair job keeping him hidden.

“We’ve printed just under a million posters and nothing,” the old man said in a defeated tone.

“We’ve searched every building, house, henhouse, doghouse, and outhouse from here to Florida,” Jack spoke up. “You wouldn’t believe the number of outhouses!” He snorted comically at his own joke as he prepared coffee for the others.

Mayson grinned as she glanced up at the young man. No doubt Perry actually had them search every one of those places.

“Shoot us straight, Mayson,” Jimmy said as he sat down across the table. He’d met the lawyer before. “Lois is in trouble, isn’t she?”

“Barring a miracle, yes.” She watched as the life seemed to drain from Perry’s face. He’d thought she could change the other

woman’s fate. Truth was she wasn’t sure anyone could help Lois now.

A knock resounded on the door a second before Clark stuck his head through. “Sorry I’m late,” he said as he entered and closed them off again. “Mayson,” he said courteously. She flashed him a brief smile in answer. “Looking any better?” he asked her. He took a seat and grabbed a cup to pour himself some of the coffee in the pot on the table.

“No,” came her grave answer. “The best we can hope is an insanity plea with time in a hospital, not guilty on grounds of temporary insanity.”

“And Lois is actually gonna let you use that?” Jimmy asked her.

“She doesn’t have a choice. Unless you guys turn up something before the trial, we’ll have to go with it.” She shifted so she could look at Perry. “Lois told me something I didn’t know.” When Perry met her gaze, she went on. “She said she has a daughter.”

Perry glanced at Clark, then back to Mayson. “What I’m about to say can’t leave this room,” he warned her. “And being as you’re Lois’ lawyer and we’re discussing her case, I’ll consider anything I say just as confidential as her legal strategy.” He waited until she clasped her hands together across her lap, then leaned forward. “Legally, Lois doesn’t have a daughter.”

“I know. I checked.”

He glanced at Clark again, silently asking him if it was okay to tell her everything. When he gave a nod, he scooted closer, as if someone might hear him. “The baby girl was born first, effectively thrust aside by Luthor. He didn’t want her, so I imagine that’s why there was nothing about her birth on the certificate.”

“So, how did you find out?” She shook her head. “Scratch that. Just go on.” She knew Perry way too well. He had a way of finding out things that should be classified by the government.

“No doubt he used the girl to help control Lois. Otherwise, he’d have probably just gotten rid of her.” He scratched the back of his head. “Anyway, Jack here started going to the park a while back so that he could make sure Lois was okay.”

“That’s how he got the napkin with the drugs?”

“Yeah. She stopped going to the park for a while. Then one day she was back. Another note asked Jack to take a baby doll and leave it in the restroom close to where they always sat.”

“And you exchanged the doll for the baby?” Mayson deduced.

“We thought it was the boy until we read the note she left with her.”

“What did the note say?” She looked around at the others who were all listening patiently.

“It said the baby was in trouble. Protect her and that Lois called her Perry.”

The woman couldn’t help but smile. Obviously Lois thought a lot of the man in front of her. “Okay, so where is she now?”

“At my folks place in Kansas,” Clark spoke up. He sat up closer to Mayson as well. “But it’s important that her real identity stays secret. For whatever reason Lois wanted this and we’ll keep her as long as we need to.”

“Your parents just took her in?”

He made a funny face. “Well... legally, they took in their granddaughter.”

Mayson’s eyes widened at that implication, then her head snapped around to Perry. “What did you do?”

“I called in a few favors. It’s all on the up and up,” he assured her.

“I’m sure it is.” He was about to say something else, but she held up a hand to stop him. “I don’t want to know.” Facing Clark again, she asked, “And you just let him do this? Without really knowing Lois?”

"I've met her. I saw enough to know I've done the right thing." His voice was quite adamant. If Mayson wanted to argue about this, he'd give her a good one. "It doesn't matter why I did it. It's done. She's... mine and until Lois is out of this, she's got a safe, loving home."

The woman couldn't believe this man. Taking in a child that wasn't his, then agreeing to take another. All without even knowing the woman he was doing it for. Was he for real? Was it genuine? Or did he have a motive? What did he want for his part in this? As she looked at him she realized the answer. He wanted to help- plain and simple.

"All right then," Mayson said after a few minutes. "Let's get to work."

Clark exchanged a look with Perry before they settled in to see if they could find a way to get Lois out of the hole Luthor had cast her in.

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Clark jogged down the hall toward the courtroom where Judge Burke would hear the review of Perry's emergency injunction. Mayson and Perry turned toward him and motioned for him to hurry up. They were sitting down a moment later. Judge Burke read through the file before lifting her eyes to the three people across from her.

"I have reviewed the recommendation from Mr. White for his choice of custodian of the minor child..." She read again. "Collin Jerome Lane. I wasn't sure why Ms. Lane changed his name, but that's her prerogative. Ms. Drake has prepared a very thorough background of the candidate in question, Mr. Clark Kent. The social worker that made the home visit had a glowing review of you, young man," she said directly to Clark.

He gave her a slight smile and a nod.

"This is a highly unusual case. Even though I've been pressured by various organizations and individuals... And that's no admission of anything," she said to Mayson. "I stand by the decision I made to grant the emergency injunction. I have watched your plight to find the boy, Mr. White, and I want it put on record that I will do anything I can to assist in that search."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Perry told her.

"Whoever has taken Collin Lane is committing a crime because as of this moment..." She signed a piece of paper. "He is the legal child of Clark Kent."

Clark let out a deep breath. It felt almost like he'd gained custody of his own child.

"I've spoken to Ms. Lane and she assured me this is what she wants. I wish you luck, Mr. Kent. And I see no reason to review this case until Ms. Lane asks for a review." With a bang of the gavel, Clark's fate as single father to another child he didn't know was sealed.

Mayson stood and lifted the strap of her case over her shoulder. "I received a call this morning from a friend. He's also a former DEA agent. He's a private investigator now, very good at what he does. He's seen all the media attention surrounding Collin's abduction and wants to help."

Clark and Perry exchanged a glance. "We could use all the help we can get," Perry said.

"I'll tell him to get in touch with you at the Planet."

"Good." Perry looked at his watch. "I have a meeting with a source." He clapped Clark's shoulder. "I can't tell you how much what you're doing means to me, son."

"I have pretty good idea," Clark answered. And he did. He could see Perry's emotions on his face, in his mannerisms. It nearly killed him to have to watch the man crumbling, but lately that's what had been happening.

When Perry was gone, Mayson motioned toward the door. They started out, walking side by side. "I know things have been crazy, but I was wondering if you'd like to have that drink."

Clark looked up at her. "How about Friday? I'm flying out

tonight to see Perry. I'll be gone until then."

"Oh, okay. Friday, at Mulligan's in the Bay?"

"That sounds great." He reached out to touch her arm.

"Thanks for pushing things through so quickly."

"I just hope we can find the little fellow."

"Me, too. I have a meeting next week with the National Center for Missing Children. The director feels sure we can get this on the international watch list."

"Good. Let me know if you need anything."

"I will." He smiled and turned to leave.

Mayson watched him walk away. Kent had to be the most special man alive. And he was damn good-looking to boot. What more could she ask for?

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Lois paced her tiny cell the way she always did. They'd put her alone because of who she was married to. Too many people disliked Luthor and several had already tried picking a fight with his widow. Though several had also thanked her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Luthor."

She whirled around when she heard that voice. "Nigel. What are you doing here?"

"Let's just say I'm protecting my interests."

"Your interests died on the pavement below the Tower."

He did something he rarely did- he smiled. "Ah, but working for Lex Luthor was an invaluable experience. He taught me well."

"You mean you learned how to stab people in the back like he did on a regular basis."

"Call it what you will." He shrugged as best he could with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Just cut to the chase, Nigel." She crossed her arms over her chest, daring him to do anything other than what she'd told him to do.

"We have your son."

Her arms slowly dropped and she stepped over to the bars.

"Where is he?"

"Safe, for now."

"Don't you dare do anything to my baby," she whispered.

"Relax. He's important to a lot of people. And right now, so are you."

"What?"

"It seems Mr. Luthor had incredible legal ties before his death."

"Well, now he doesn't," she snapped and turned to pace back toward her bunk.

"Those ties forced him to place an undisclosed amount of money in an offshore account..."

Lois turned back to look at him, a smile starting to stretch out across her face. "Seems my dear husband needs me even in death. Or should I say his Mr. Belvedere does?"

"I only want what's owed me," Nigel continued. He reached into his pocket and extracted a few papers. "Sign these and your darling son will remain healthy and happy."

"I need more insurance than your word."

"Then how about this? Don't sign them and he's dead by dawn."

Her horrified eyes searched his to see if he was telling the truth. "If he's so important, you can't afford to kill him," she ventured. What did she have to lose at this point?

Nigel studied her for a moment before he pulled a small, metal device from another pocket. He clicked the keys on the front, then held it up so she could see the screen.

"Collin," she breathed as she watched the little boy playing on the monitor. He was laughing at someone she couldn't see.

"Yes, little \*Collin\* is quite content with his new nanny."

As Lois continued to watch, the woman came into view. "Lucy?"

“Strange what kinds of incentives get a junkie to clean up her act.” He turned the machine off and put it back in his pocket. “She calls him Collin, too.” He shook the papers. “Sign them and she continues to care for him.”

“You have to give me your word as an agent.” Nigel had once been a spy and tended to be loyal to no end.

“You have my word.”

She quickly penned her name to the papers and shoved them toward him. “That’s not all, is it?”

“Perry White.” Nigel stuffed the papers back into his jacket.

“He’s getting under too many people’s skin. We need him to stop his investigation.”

“I can’t make Perry...”

“You can if you want him to live.”

An involuntary gasp escaped before she could stop it.

“The people I’m employed by now have the power to strip him of his good name and discredit him in the world of journalism. Is that what you want?”

She looked away from him.

“Make him stop.”

“What’s in it for me besides his life?”

“Ten years on an insanity conviction. If he continues, recommendation for the death penalty.”

“Lex has already taken my life,” she spat at him.

Nigel stepped back and held out his hand. For the first time Lois saw another man that had been lurking in the shadows. He turned over the paper in his hand and started flipping through the pictures he held. “Look at them. The DA, the judge who’ll hear your case, even prospective jurors have already been appropriated. Your conviction is already paid for. But you’re right. Death would be too easy. Life in prison without the possibility of parole... well, that would be a fate worse than death. And to have to spend all of that time in solitary confinement, unable to have visitors except the guard that delivers your meals... It would be most unfortunate.”

“Wasn’t that the whole reason for this? Somebody uglier and more evil than Lex set this all up and you helped him.”

The man behind Nigel took the pictures and handed him some more papers. “The agreement’s drawn up. Think about it, Mrs. Luthor. Ten years and you’re able to see your precious children again or look at your own cold image for the rest of your life.”

“Perry wouldn’t want me to sign it.”

His fierce gaze held hers as he pulled out his phone and dialed a number. “Yes,” he said when there was an answer on the other end. “Break his arm.” He pulled the small monitor out of his pocket again and passed it to the man behind him who turned it on and held it up so Lois could see. She watched as a man approached her son sitting on the floor. He lifted him up, then flipped him upside down by his leg.

“No!” she yelled. “I’ll do it. Just don’t hurt him.”

“Put him down,” Nigel said into the phone and the crying, frightened baby was shoved toward his frantic aunt.

Lois’ cold stare never wavered as she signed the forms and tossed them back. “I want him back when this is over.”

“I assure you, Mrs. Luthor, you can have him back when this is over.” He waited for the man to gather up the all of the papers, then disappeared as mysteriously as he’d appeared.

For the first time in a long time Lois didn’t feel like pacing. She dropped to her bunk, completely defeated. That bastard had won. He’d won it all.

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Clark laughed fully, his eyes dancing with joy. He felt good tonight- the first time in a long time.

“You have a gorgeous smile,” Mayson admitted. His smile faltered a bit as he looked at her, the intensity of it causing her to blush. “Wow. I can’t believe I said that out loud.”

“Don’t be.” He reached out to squeeze her upper arm. They were sitting at the bar sharing that drink they’d set a date for. “I happen to think you have a great smile, too.”

She blushed even more, then leaned up on the bar. “So, how are you adapting to single parenthood?”

“It’s... different. Exhausting, exhilarating, and scary.” He grinned, more to himself than to her. He’d spent the last two days with Perry and he’d had a blast. She was pulling up, laughing a lot, and babbling. “She took her first step yesterday.”

“That’s great,” Mayson said with enthusiasm she wasn’t sure she felt. While she was happy for him, it was something she couldn’t understand. She had this... thing about kids.

“Doing... that,” Clark tried to explain. “It’s made me feel more... alive than I’ve felt in a long time.”

“And all of that fathering the child of a woman you barely know.”

“Strange, huh?” He took a sip from his beer. “I have no idea why I agreed to do any of this, but I’m glad I’ve done it now. I’ll just be glad when we can bring her brother home with her.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?” she asked, her expression as disbelieving as she felt. Men just didn’t do things Clark had done.

“Yeah. Want another drink? Or would you rather take a walk?”

“Let’s walk.” Mayson emptied her glass and followed Clark out into the cool night air.

They strolled along the riverfront for a while talking about their respective jobs, things they’d done in college, and places they’d been. Mayson had also traveled a bit. She’d decided to become a lawyer to right the many injustices in the world. Her father had been a policeman, her mother a homemaker. She’d been an honors student, in a sorority, and was offered a position in the DA’s office. She was smart, funny, and driven. Her job was important to her and she worked hard. Clark found himself incredibly attracted. It had been a long time since he’d met a woman he wanted to spend time with. It was the wrong time, and she was the wrong woman, yet he couldn’t stop his attraction to her.

He had to force himself to keep from thinking about Lois Lane, something he’d done a lot of since he’d met her. She was... incredible. Even after everything she’d been through there was a fire in her eyes not many women possessed. Clark wished he’d met her a few years ago. He was sure he’d have fallen...

Fallen for her?! That’s why it was important to get her out of his head. Lois was... She had a lot on her plate. The last thing she needed was for some strange man to become infatuated with her. And how would that do him any good? She was in jail- would probably be there for a \*long\* time. Lois might have moved him, but he couldn’t let her get under his skin.

That was why he should just stop thinking and concentrate on the woman at his side. Never mind how he felt about Lois Lane, a woman he didn’t even know.

A woman whose children he was legally responsible for.

The whole situation was so incredible it was almost laughable.

But not tonight. He wouldn’t think about all of that tonight.

He and Mayson continued to talk and walk. She lived in the theater district, just down the block from the Imperial.

“Great place to live,” he commented as they continued toward her building.

“Yeah. I might not seem the type, but I love the pace. This section of the city rarely sleeps.”

“Must make getting your rest hard.”

“Top floor,” she said as she pointed up. “And a very modern building. The super put in soundproofing.”

Clark laughed softly as they stopped just outside the gate that led to the front doors. “I sure hope you didn’t drive tonight.”

They both laughed because he was only just now mentioning it. “No. I take a cab when I go for drinks. And I love Mulligan’s.”  
 “It’s a great place.”

“Maybe we could go again.”

The hesitation in her voice was endearing and he found himself drawing closer to her. He lifted his hand and touched her cheek. “I was thinking about dinner at Callard’s.”

“Dinner’s good,” she said and swallowed the lump in her throat.

His eyes flashed to her lips just before he leaned in to kiss her softly. It was a light touch, leaving him wanting more. But he drew away. “Tuesday night?”

“At seven?”

“I’ll meet you there.” Another brush of his fingers across her cheek and he walked away. He couldn’t help but smile when he heard her sigh. He felt like doing it himself. Mayson was a great woman and he’d enjoyed himself tonight. It had been entirely too long since he’d spent time with a woman. He’d been so busy he’d barely had time to think. He deserved time for himself. And Mayson was an easy person to be around. Sure he’d see her again.

And maybe he’d kiss her again.

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Clark was typing furiously when Perry stepped up beside him.

“Get all of the files you have on the Luthor investigation and bring them to my office.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, just strode over to Jimmy’s desk and repeated his request. Ten minutes later, Clark joined both men, along with Jack behind the closed door of the editor’s office.

Perry looked up at the three men. They were all holding large stacks of files. “Is that all?” They confirmed that it was. He pointed toward a trunk on the floor beside his desk. “Put it in there.” When they had, he dropped a stack of his own in and slammed the top down. The lock clicked and he stood up again. “It’s over.”

“What’s over?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“The case.” Perry sat back down, fully expecting his action to dismiss the men.

“Wait a damn minute,” Jack spoke up. “I’ve put my blood, sweat, and tears into this thing for her, for you!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Perry asked as his head snapped up so he could look at the man. “It’s what she wants. I’ve been arguing with her since dawn. She wants it closed. Said if I didn’t she’d have Mayson strip Clark of his custody of Collin.”

“She can’t do that,” Clark argued. “She must not have read them through. The only way she can influence custody again is to be out of jail.”

“Yeah, but the bastard who’s making her do this can take custody permanently.”

Realization dawned on them all.

“She’d being threatened,” Jimmy deduced. “More reason we should continue this investigation.”

“If we do, they’ll break Collin’s little legs. Is that what you want?” All three men stared at him in shock. “I tried to talk some sense into her, but it’s too late. She signed a deal with the prosecutor. The judge is going to sign the order in an hour sentencing her to ten years in the state prison.”

“I don’t believe this,” Jack said and walked out, slamming the door.

“She can’t do this. All of that work. We’re close Perry, I know we are,” Jimmy begged him.

“Just... let it go, Jimmy,” he said between clenched teeth. He was so furious with that girl. He’d known she was stubborn, but he hadn’t realized just how much until today.

Jimmy threw up his arms and went to find Jack. Maybe they’d skip out on the rest of the day and get wasted. They certainly deserved it after all they’d done.

“What about Perry and Collin?” Clark wanted to know.

“That won’t change. They’re still yours.”

“You mean she doesn’t want us to stop looking for him?”

“I don’t want us to stop. I’ll quit investigating Luthor, but if we find that baby, all bets are off.”

“How can we find him without investigating Luthor?” When Perry didn’t answer, Clark turned in anger. He was so upset he jerked the door completely off the hinges. He quickly stood it against the wall, then strode toward the stairwell. How could he be mad at a woman he didn’t know?

He flew straight to the county lock-up only to be told Lois had already been transferred to the prison. Clark couldn’t believe how quickly the wheels of justice could move when enough money changed hands. Frustrated beyond belief, he flew aimlessly for a while, trying to sort out why it was suddenly so important to help a woman who didn’t appear to want it. When nothing came to mind and he began to feel so wound up he couldn’t see, he turned toward Kansas. He needed to hold the little girl who could ground him more effectively with just a smile than even the biggest story could.

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“Clark, do you want to go?”

He looked up at Mayson and tried to smile, but it was forced. “Maybe we should. I’m not very good company tonight.”

“She made her choice,” Mayson pointed out.

“I know. Sometimes it’s hard to accept what others feel is the right thing.”

“Not much we can do about it.”

He laid his fork down and wiped his mouth. “Isn’t there?”

She smiled at him. “You got me. I’m a lot like Perry. I don’t give up.” She leaned forward on the table. “I’m not sure what game Nigel’s playing, but I intend to find out. He ordered Perry not to investigate. Not me.”

“Nigel was the one who threatened her?”

“Yeah. We have him on tape going in. The officer who turned his head is being brought up on charges for taking bribes. And he’s talking.”

This time Clark’s smile wasn’t forced. “I like your style.”

“Enough to go to a game with me Thursday night?”

“Absolutely.” Clark held her gaze, allowing himself to soak up the vibes coming from the woman who made him tingle when he was near her. It was strange to feel that way about a woman other than Lana. He’d dated other women, even kissed a few. Some were incredibly attractive and he was drawn to them. But this- how he’d felt with Lana and now- it felt heady and exciting. It almost felt like he was doing something wrong. Was it supposed to feel that way?

Who cared?

“Let’s get out of here,” he told her and stood up. He dropped enough money down to pay for dinner and for a nice tip, then held Mayson’s coat for her. They walked to her place again, talking much the same way they’d done the week before. But this time Mayson reached out to hold his arm. He smiled over at her, silently encouraging the contact. He liked the attention of a beautiful woman and she didn’t seem to mind giving it.

Halfway to her place, he heard a cry for help. He stopped and looked at her with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry, Mayson. I need to go.”

“What?” She was completely surprised by his abrupt announcement.

He kissed her cheek and turned to leave.

“Clark?”

“I’m really sorry,” he called over his shoulder as he hurried away. The call sounded urgent.

It was later, when he was settling in bed that he thought about his quick exit. As much as he liked Mayson, he needed to be Superman. More now than ever. Superman gave him focus.

Superman also caused him to end more relationships before they really started. He couldn't very well tell every woman he liked about his super side. Lana had known him since they were kids, so it was never an issue with her. She understood his need to help and encouraged him to do so. He could run out on her just before they had sex and she wouldn't rip him apart the next day because of it. But others, including Mayson, didn't know that. And he couldn't tell them.

That was why he often distanced himself when a woman showed interest in him. It helped that he didn't find many women attractive enough to act on it. Sure, he'd dated just for the company and he'd probably do so again. But his attraction to Mayson was a bit stronger than most. And he was sure he'd confused the hell out of her tonight.

She didn't deserve that. He should just bow out gracefully.

Only he didn't want to. He wanted to see her again.

And for the first time in his life, he decided this time he'd do what he wanted to do. Everything else could be dealt with. He'd call her tomorrow and apologize. Hopefully she'd still want to go to that game.

If she did, he wouldn't run out on her.

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Clark apologized to Mayson and she accepted. They made it to the game together, then dinner again. A movie the week after that. They enjoyed each other's company and spent time together as often as they could. Superman had even left them alone, for the most part.

Work was relentless, but Clark handled it like a pro. His writing was first rate. What he didn't enjoy was watching Perry slowly go to pieces. The editor often came to work without shaving or even combing his hair. He didn't speak as much as he once did, and he rarely came out of his office. And he absolutely refused to talk about Lois Lane. The one thing he did without fail was his weekly plea on the early news show for the safe return of Collin Lane. He also joined Clark every other week to meet their rep with the National Center for Missing Children.

Jack and Jimmy began to shine as well. Jimmy's photography was beginning to draw attention. His work was featured regularly nationwide. Jack was often asked by various law enforcement agencies to handle delicate research for them. Clark also learned that Jack had a brother. Denny had just turned sixteen and started an internship at the Planet. He was the newest runner, which basically meant he was a glorified errand boy.

But what really brought out the best in Clark was fatherhood. It might have been forced upon him, but he had never done anything quite as satisfying. Perry was growing in leaps and bounds. She would turn one in less than a week and it was hard to tell who was more excited- Clark or his mother. The older Kents cherished their new role as grandparents. Perry was the light of their eyes and they lavished love on her as if she was their own. Of course, by now she was.

Inside the walls of the Metropolis Women's Prison, Lois Lane rarely moved from her bunk. She stared at the wall, unseeing and emotionless. She rose each morning to go to breakfast, worked her morning shift, went to lunch, worked her evening shift, went to dinner, then sat until time to sleep. But most of the time she simply lay awake staring the ceiling. Thoughts of one day seeing her children again filled her mind. Other than that, it was hard to tell she was even alive. Lex Luthor had robbed her of everything.

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Perry looked up when Clark pecked on his door.

"Chief?" he said tentatively as he stepped into the room.

"Yeah?"

"My folks are coming in this weekend for Perry's birthday. I

was wondering if you'd join us for the party."

The old man stared at him for so long he was sure he'd say no. Finally he smiled, the first one Clark had seen in weeks. "I think that would be fun. I'd love to see that little beauty."

Clark returned his smile, letting go of the breath he'd been holding. "Good. Friday night at seven."

"Your place?"

"Yeah. And bring your appetite." He was about to leave, but turned back again. "Bring Alice, too."

A shadow passed over Perry's face. "She might not be able to make it." He leaned back and sighed heavily. "She and I have been... taking a break."

"What?" Clark went back and sat down in one of the chairs.

"Guess I haven't exactly been myself." He made a sour expression. "Can't say I blame her. I've let this thing with Lois eat me up."

"Maybe it's time to accept that she really doesn't want help," Clark ventured. Lois had refused to see anyone, even Mayson. She'd refused letters as well. She had sent one to Perry, telling him that she'd accepted her fate and that it was time for all of them to move on. She'd expressed her gratitude to them for making sure Perry was cared for. And her final request was that if they ever did find Collin, to kiss him and tell both her children how much their mother loved them.

"I think maybe it is," Perry said after a moment. He stood and walked around to lean on the front of his desk. "What can I bring along to this shindig?"

"Just yourself, and Alice if you can get her to come." Clark had only met Mrs. White once, but he'd liked her immediately. She reminded him of his own mother. "Maybe you could ask her to come as a date. Take her for a walk after or maybe for coffee. Romance her again."

"I think you might have something there, son. I think I will ask her."

Clark stood up with a wide smile on his face. It was so good to see the shadows behind Perry's eyes lift, if only for a second.

"Speaking of romance," Perry said as he walked with Clark to the door. "How's it going with Mayson?"

The younger man knew better than to ask how Perry knew he was seeing Mayson. It wasn't a secret, but they hadn't advertised it either. Perry just seemed to know everything. "We're getting to know one another slowly."

"Good idea. Just don't take too long. Life's short and things tend to get away from you."

A reference to the many changes Perry had seen over the last few years. "I know, Chief."

The editor clapped his top reporter's shoulder as Clark stepped through the door. "Now go get me something for the evening edition, would you?"

"No problem." Clark went back to work with a little more optimism than he'd had that morning. Maybe there was hope Perry would come around after all.

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"This looks great, Mom," Clark remarked of the spread she put out for Perry's birthday party. The counter was covered in food- burgers and dogs Jonathan had grilled on the balcony. It was cold out, but they'd opted for the traditional summer fare anyway. Streamers and balloons were everywhere and the cake was tucked next to the stove, still covered.

"Make sure we have enough ice," she told him. "And make sure there's enough beer and soda."

"Mom, we have enough for an army," Clark assured her as he checked the supply for the third time. He couldn't ever remember his mother being so wound up about something. They'd briefly discussed having the party on the farm because of the risk to Perry, but in the end decided that they really wanted to share this special day with their friends. After all, they wouldn't have Perry

without the others.

A few minutes later Jack and Jimmy arrived together, along with Denny.

“Man, CK, your mom knows how to put out the pig,” Jack remarked. “I haven’t seen this much food since Thanksgiving at the shelter.”

Clark and Jimmy laughed at the other man. Jack and Denny had been homeless for a while right after their parents died. They’d often gone without enough to eat and it still amazed them when there was more than enough to go around.

“Hey, Clark,” Denny asked softly. The boy was painfully shy. “Can we really eat as much as we want?”

“Yes, you can, young man,” Jonathan answered for his son. He stuck out his hand to greet the boy. “I’m Clark’s dad, Jonathan.”

“Denny,” the boy replied as he shook hands with him. “Think it would be okay to get a drink?”

“Absolutely,” Jonathan motioned for the boy to follow him into the kitchen.

“Don’t be a nuisance,” Jack warned him.

“He’s at home,” the older Kent informed him. That made Denny smile brightly.

“So where’s the birthday girl?” Jimmy wanted to know. He hadn’t seen the baby since the day they took her from the park. Clark had tons of pictures, but it wasn’t the same.

“Good question.” Clark went in search of his little girl. She was sitting in the clothes basket at the end of his bed, all of his clean socks lying on the floor. She looked up at him and grinned, those bottom teeth shining brightly. “Hey you.” He bent to lift her out and carried her to the living room.

“Wow! What a knock-out,” Jimmy exclaimed. He grabbed her little hand and shook it. She pulled away and fell over on Clark’s shoulder. “Aww, she’s adorable, CK.”

“I still say she could pass for your real kid,” Jack told them as he peered at her over Clark’s shoulder. “Maybe you’ve fed her too long.”

“What?” Clark said with a snort of laughter. Jack said some of the craziest things.

“Mom always said that if you feed a kid too long she’ll start to look like you.” He flopped down on the sofa and propped his feet on the coffee table.

“Jack, you are so full of…”

“Watch your mouth!” Martha scolded before Jimmy uttered the dirty word.

“Yes, ma’am.” He went over and held out his hand. “I’m Jimmy Olsen. We’ve talked on the phone.”

“I know who you are, honey.” And she ignored his hand to hug him instead, pleasantly surprising him.

“Hey, CK, I love your mom,” he said without releasing her.

She laughed as she leaned back to look at him. “You sure are a handsome fellow.”

“Oh, yeah, CK,” Jimmy said as he turned and threw his arm over her shoulder. “I love her.”

Clark laughed as he rubbed Perry’s back. After a few minutes she decided she wasn’t shy anymore. When she wriggled to get down, Clark bent and set her on her feet. She’d learned to waddle quite well lately and was off in search of something new to discover.

“I swear, Clark, you were born to be a daddy,” Jack remarked as he watched the other man.

“You’ll be a great one someday, too.”

“Whatever,” Jack nearly laughed out and sat up to get a better look at the little girl who felt he was interesting. “Jimmy’s right,” he whispered to the baby. “You’re a gorgeous baby.” Her hair was curly and unruly and she had the biggest, dark eyes. Dimples covered her cheeks and plump, red lips looked puckered all the time. She and Jack played the staring game for several moments

before she decided he was okay and smiled at him. “Oh wow! She smiled at me!”

Clark laughed at his enthusiasm as he went to answer another knock at the door. Mayson grinned at him from the other side. “Hey you,” he told her and held out his hand.

She took it and stepped inside. “I was worried about what to wear.”

He glanced at her, an appreciative glow in his eyes. She was wearing jeans and a form-fitting sweater under her brown leather jacket. “I like this,” he told her softly. She shrugged out of her coat and he hung it up, then pointed to the table near the closet where the gifts were. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

“Why didn’t you tell us that?” Jack wanted to know. He was still playing the ‘stare and smile’ game with Perry.

Clark continued to hold Mayson’s hand as they stepped down into the living room. “Mayson, this is Perry,” he said as he bent and ruffled the baby’s hair with his free hand.

Mayson pulled her hand from Clark’s and bent to get a better look. “You’re just too cute,” she told the baby.

Perry looked up at her, trying to decide if she was okay, too. When she couldn’t make up her mind, she went back to her game with Jack.

“A little shy, huh?” Mayson asked as she stood up.

“Yeah. Mom says she’s getting better though.” He tilted his head toward the kitchen and the woman followed him. “Mom, this is Mayson. Mayson Drake, Martha Kent.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Kent,” Mayson said as she extended her hand.

“Where we’re from, we hug,” Martha explained and promptly did so. The younger woman was as surprised as Jimmy had been.

“Well,” Mayson said as she looked at Martha. “I think I like that,” she managed so softly she could barely be heard.

Clark glanced from her to his mother, a smile on his face. He placed an arm around Mayson’s shoulder and pulled her close to his side. Jonathan walked over with Denny.

“I like this kid,” Jonathan remarked as he approached the others.

“Dad, this is…”

“Mayson,” he finished for his son. “You’re as pretty as Clark said you were.” He, too, leaned forward for a hug.

“Thank you, Mr. Kent.”

“Jonathan and this is Martha.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“How about something to drink?” Jonathan asked her.

“I’ll get her something,” Denny offered and ran back over to the cooler. He’d been denied his childhood so long, it was hard to believe he was as old as he was.

“What do you have?” Mayson wanted to know.

“Soda, water, tea, and beer,” Martha answered as she set out the plates.

“A beer would be good.”

Denny was about to reach into the cooler, but stopped. “Jack, am I allowed to get that?”

“Ah, well, maybe I should,” Jack told him as he got up to go into the kitchen. “Might as well get one for myself,” he mumbled as he reached into the ice.

There was another knock, then the door opened. “Let’s get this party started,” came Perry’s booming voice.

Clark smiled widely as he looked around. Alice was with him. “I’m glad you both made it.” He met them and hugged Alice closely.

“Strangest thing,” Alice started. “I got a call today from a man that said he had seen me around and wanted to know if I’d like go on a date with him. Said he’d show me a real good time. Good food, a few laughs, and nightcap with a few friends. Said he’d even take me for a walk.” She cut her eyes toward Perry. “I

haven't walked in the city in a long time."

"Sounds like fun," Clark told her as he shot Perry a glance.

The older man's eyes had fallen on the baby while his wife was introduced to everyone.

"Hey, there, sweetie," Perry crooned to the curious baby as he bent to lift her up. The child stared at him warily. "I'm your Papa Perry. We have the same name." She glanced toward Clark, then stared back at the older Perry. "And you look so much like your mother." A lone tear rolled down the man's cheek just before he leaned forward to kiss her face. When she began to squirm, he placed her back on her feet. "Okay, I get it."

She ran toward Clark, seeking safety in his arms. "Hey, it's okay. Papa Perry is a great guy," he told her as he held her.

"Eat!" she said loudly.

Everyone laughed aloud.

"I second that," agreed Jack on his way to the kitchen.

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Clark walked along with Mayson after the party. Perry had fallen asleep a short time ago, exhausted from the night's events. She'd screamed when Clark put her hand in her cake, after she'd stared at it for three full minutes. She'd torn open her gifts with gusto, laughing with each new discovery. She and Jack had played their game again. Denny gave her a piggyback ride. And she'd finally allowed Perry to hold her. It had been a great party with lots of laughter, something they'd all desperately needed.

Jonathan had found a new buddy in Denny and they'd made plans to go out to Hobbs Bay the next day to go fishing. Denny had never been fishing. Martha and Alice were going shopping. Both couples were 'double dating' tomorrow night. Perry had left just before he and Mayson did for that walk with Alice.

Superman had even managed to leave them alone tonight.

The only thing that unsettled Clark was Mayson. She seemed to have had a good time like everyone else, but Clark had spent a lot of time with her alone and he'd begun reading her moods. There was something... not quite right with her tonight.

"Mayson, does it bother you that I have Perry?" he asked.

He'd noticed the way she looked at the little girl. As much as he enjoyed his time with Mayson, if she had a problem with Perry, then he had a problem with her.

The woman sighed and glanced up at her building. They'd managed to get all the way to her place on small talk. "Why don't you come up and I'll tell you what's on my mind?"

He, too, glanced at the building. He'd never gone up to her apartment at the end of the night. In fact, tonight was the first time she'd been to his place. They'd been taking things slowly, simply enjoying the building attraction. "Okay."

They stepped into her place a few minutes later. The living room was large and open. The kitchen was off to the side, part of the larger room. A door on the far wall was probably the opening to the bedroom. Clark ventured across the space and looked out of the tall, wide window. There was a huge balcony that stretched out in front.

"Nice," he said of the large outside area. There was a patio table and chairs, a grill, and a fireplace.

"Do you want something to drink?" Mayson kicked off her shoes on her way to the bar near the window.

"I think I'm good." He turned and went over to take a seat on the end of her loveseat.

She sighed before sitting opposite him. "You having Perry doesn't bother me."

"It just seems like it does. I saw the way you looked at her."

Mayson tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, deciding she could tell him the truth. "Clark, I lost a daughter three years ago."

His brows rose in surprise. "What?"

"She was three months old. Her digestive tract was enlarged and it became infected. The infection spread to her bloodstream." Mayson stared at a spot on the floor. "She went to sleep one night

and didn't wake up again."

Clark closed his open mouth. He was stunned. As wonderful as Mayson was, maternal in any way was not part of her personality. "I, ah, I'm sorry," he said softly.

"If I look at Perry like..." She half smiled and looked around like she was lost. "... I'm studying her, it's because I'm trying to picture what my baby would have looked like if she'd lived to see her first birthday."

Clark stood and went over to kneel in front of her, taking one of her hands in his. "I'm glad you told me."

"If I look at you like I can't believe you're real, it's because I'm wondering how one man can be so much different than the next one."

"Did he leave you?"

"No. We fell apart when the depression consumed us both. I simply meant that in my line of work, I see all kinds." She leaned closer, their noses nearly touching. "You're just too good to be true."

Clark pressed his lips to hers in a brief touch. "I'm real," he assured her.

"I know." She was about to kiss him again when her television automatically turned on. He glanced over at it, a questioning look on his face. "Timer. I don't like coming home to a quiet apartment. And I'm usually not in this early."

"This early?" He glanced at his watch. "It's nearly midnight."

"What can I say? I'm a workaholic."

He grinned, then kissed her again before he stood up. "I'm going to say goodnight." He pulled her to her feet and toward the door. "Do you want to join me and Perry tomorrow for an outing at the zoo?"

"I would love to." She held his face with both hands so she could kiss him soundly.

"Wow," he said when she drew back. "Maybe you should tell me things about yourself more often." He clasped his hands behind her back, holding her close. "Do you mind me asking what your daughter's name was?"

"Her name was Grace."

"Very pretty." Just then her phone rang. He laughed softly before placing a quick kiss on her lips. "Tomorrow."

She nodded and watched him leave before grabbing her phone. "Hello?"

Clark shoved his hands into his pockets as he headed down the hall. He and Mayson had just turned a corner in their relationship. If he wasn't careful, they would be pretty serious before long.

Would that be so bad? She was a great person. Beautiful, intelligent, sexy, and best of all, she was attracted to him. There could probably be worse things than taking their relationship to the next level.

Before he could dwell on it any longer, Superman was beckoned. He sighed and took the stairs down and out the back. He had a full day planned tomorrow. Maybe the rescue wouldn't take too long.

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Lois had nearly died the day her babies turned a year old. She'd received a card in the mail and for the first time, she'd opened it. Inside was a picture of a happy little girl. Her precious Perry was happy enough to smile. It was more than she could ask for. The older Perry had made sure she was in very good hands.

After crying herself to sleep, something changed for her. It seemed her mind cleared and acceptance took the place of the desolation. Resigning herself to her life now, Lois slowly became cold and bitter. Her raw edge was back, even rougher than it had ever been. She'd bite heads off for telling her good morning. And she managed to get herself into several fights. Solitary confinement wasn't the most pleasant experience, though every time she came away just a bit stronger than before. Deciding it

was time to do more than just sit and stare, she began to go to the library. The online version of the Planet became her lifeline to the world.

And she found herself drawn to the articles Clark Kent wrote. He was good, she admitted after reading his tenth straight front page story. He wrote emotion into his work that she'd never been able to capture. Her writing had a bite to it, whereas Clark's had feeling.

Later, when the professional admiration wore off, Lois found herself strangely attracted to Clark on a more personal level—something completely irrational considering where she was. The day she'd met him she'd been surprised by how she'd been affected by him. His dark eyes seemed to look straight into her very soul. And as much as she argued with herself that she should think about other things, time after time, her mind came right back to that man. It was crazy. She was in prison—would be for a decade of his life, and he was seeing her one time attorney, Mayson Drake—if the picture she'd seen on the society page was anything to go by. The couple had been captured dancing at some big party given by the mayor. After staring at the image of Clark and his blonde bombshell for nearly an hour, she decided that it was best to push insane notions from her head once and for all. It just wasn't so easy to do.

With thoughts of Clark came thoughts of her son. She'd agreed to give him custody. Why? She'd signed her son over to a perfect stranger. Why had he agreed to be guardian to a stranger's baby? Was he naturally trusting? Did he do things like that all the time? Why had Perry chosen that particular man? All questions she could have answered if she'd agree to have visitors. But she wouldn't do that. She didn't want to see reminders of what she'd so carelessly tossed away. She also felt the people who had once been part of her life should just move on.

Reading the Planet was also where she'd learned of an incredible phenomenon known as Superman. As the reclusive wife of Lex Luthor, she'd been denied access to television or live radio or any other form of news. So finding out about something so out-of-the-world as Superman was quite a shock. A man could actually fly. The media, and the man himself, claimed that he was from another planet called Krypton. Lois had laughed so hard when she'd read that she was almost sent to the infirmary for medication because the guards thought she was losing her mind. Then she read more articles, saw pictures taken by Jimmy. She'd seen pictures of Perry shaking hands with Superman. There seemed to be tons of evidence that this was no joke. This man, this person actually existed. But was he really from another planet? Clark had written the official announcement to the world. Did he believe this was real? Did he believe Superman was from this place called Krypton?

When Lois wasn't reading or doing her assigned work detail, she spent countless hours working out. She'd decided that when she left this place, she'd leave stronger in mind and body.

But what was she going to do when she left? She'd given up her career and was unsure if she even wanted to go back to reporting. Calling herself good in her chosen profession was a joke. A decent reporter would have never been so easily taken in by another person. It didn't matter that it was a man who'd fooled her. She was embarrassed by the way Lex was able to take advantage of her. And she couldn't even claim she'd been blinded by love because she hadn't loved Lex at all. In the beginning, there had been a bit of attraction, but never anything stronger. It had been exciting to think she'd turned the head of one of the most eligible bachelors in the world. Now it was plain the only reason Lex had entertained her at all was because he needed somebody for whatever insane reason he'd used her for.

What exactly had he used her for? By his rantings she was sure one reason was to have his son. She'd overheard Lex and Nigel say something about inheriting an empire. What did that

mean? Lex had already inherited his empire. His father was dead and had left everything to his only son. She'd also heard things about research and some doctor that Lex mentioned often. She'd seen the doctor and now that her mind was clear, she could remember him. She could also remember a lot of things, even if she wished she couldn't.

After deciding it was time to do something other than staring into space and feeling sorry for herself, time began to pass more quickly. Six months, six long months had come and gone as she remained a guest of the state. Six months of her children's lives that she'd lost. Six months—a mere few minutes in the unimaginable stretch that would rob her of her very essence.

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The door slammed back against the wall of the darkened apartment as the couple stumbled inside. Clark lifted Mayson up and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he backed her against the wall. His lips left hers and seared a trail down her neck. He drew back to look at her, smiling as he did, then slipped his hands under her shirt to push it over her head. He couldn't help but appreciate her full bosom. She was larger than Lana and his fingers ached to touch her. Grasping her under the tops of her hips, he turned to carry her toward the bedroom.

"Lock... the door," she gasped between kisses to his neck and face.

He gazed around her head so he could click the lock before striding through the room. Mayson reached out blindly to open the bedroom door. Clark sat down on the bed holding her on his lap. His hands searched out new places while his lips plundered hers. He paused only long enough to look at her again before finally surrendering to the unbelievable sexual tension that had been brewing between them for the last few months.

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Mayson returned from the bathroom to find Clark sitting up against the headboard laughing softly as he looked at the boxes in his hands. "What's so funny?" she asked as she climbed back on the bed and snuggled up beside him.

"Six different brands?" he asked her with a quirked brow.

"Well, I wasn't sure which one you'd like."

He chuckled as he tossed the items back on the nightstand. "I like the one that gets us down to business the quickest."

"Funny." She stretched slowly, relieving the tension in her muscles.

"At least I have proof now that you're obsessive." He reached out to smooth his hand over the leg she'd thrown over his.

"I'm not obsessive. I just like being prepared."

"Prepared is buying the box of condoms with twelve in it. Six different boxes of twelve is obsessive."

"So sue me." She leaned over to kiss him beneath his ear.

"Nah. I might want to try one of the other brands." He grunted when she nudged him in the side, laughing softly at her expression. Just then the television clicked on. "That could get annoying."

"Sorry." She reached over him to grab the remote to turn off the set, but stopped when she noticed the news was covering something about Superman.

"Superman was in Suicide Slum today and for a change, he wasn't responding to a shooting or some other gang related incident," the newscaster was saying. "He was in attendance at the brand new City of Joy—Metropolis' answer to the growing orphan population."

As they watched, Superman cut the wide ribbon stretched across the gates. An entire block in a less than reputable section of the city had been transformed into a children's village.

"Can you believe that guy?"

"What?" Clark asked when Mayson spoke.

"He's the biggest criminal in the world, yet he expects the law to just treat him like he's some kind of savior."

Clark's brows rose nearly to his hair in surprise. She'd never said anything against Superman before. Well, she'd never said anything at all about him. But he was stunned she felt this way. "Ah, you don't like Superman?"

"Like him? I'd love to lock him up." Mayson pressed the button and the television screen went black.

Wow! She didn't just dislike Superman, she wanted him out of the skies. He shifted sideways so that he could look at her. And for the first time, he really looked. What else didn't he know about Mayson? He found out just a few months ago that she'd had a baby. He hadn't asked her anything else about her baby, and Mayson hadn't told him anything. Had she been married or just involved with someone? She wanted to arrest Superman, thought he was...

"Why do you think he's a criminal?"

"Clark, he's a vigilante!" She stared at him in disbelief. How could Clark not see Superman for what he really was?

"A vigilante?" He shifted again. "Because he helps stop crimes?"

Mayson shifted and sat up. "Because he takes it upon himself to interfere in police matters."

"Interfere? So the three hundred and sixty-two drug dealers, rapists, murderers, thieves, child molesters, and various other criminals he's helped get off the streets should have been left to do as they pleased?"

It was Mayson's turn to quirk a brow at him. "Are you some kind of Superman groupie?"

"I write a lot of articles," he was quick to tell her. He had to calm down or he'd tell her a bit more than he wanted to.

"Sounds like you keep track of what he does." She threw her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up.

"I don't keep track." Clark pushed a hand through his hair, trying to relax a bit. He glanced at the nightstand, wandering if he should put his glasses back on. If she felt this way...

"I just think he should leave the law enforcement to the professionals." She was picking her clothes up, carefully folding the garments. When she'd gotten up earlier, she'd put on Clark's button up shirt.

"Every official I've ever talked to tells me they appreciate his help."

"I would, too, if someone was doing my job for me." When she'd run out of things to do, she faced him, leaning against the dresser. "He's a loose cannon."

"Loose cannon?"

"Yeah. One day he'll go too far."

Clark wanted to squirm under her scrutiny. He really didn't like the distaste he saw in her expression. "What do you think he'll do? Decide to be judge and jury and hurt someone?"

"Well, if he's inclined enough to help the way he does, he obviously has feelings. It's my experience that men tend to be pushed too far when they're angered."

"And you think he'll get mad enough one day to... snap someone in half?" Clark let out a snort of laughter. That was absurd. He'd been angry before, but he'd never thought of hurting anyone.

"Technically, he could." She ventured back over and sat down on the edge of the bed closest to him.

"Don't you think if he wanted to hurt someone he'd have done it already? He saves people's lives, Mayson." He shifted and dropped his feet to the floor.

"What happens when he responds one day to an accident and causes more damage than he offers help?"

Don't you think I've asked myself that a thousand times? he asked her mentally. That was why he'd taken dozens of classes. He was a certified paramedic. He'd been trained to handle explosives, earned his certificate to handle firearms, and even logged over twenty hours training with the fire department. The

guys of the Sixth Street Station had taken dozens of pictures- it wasn't every day one trained Superman how to fight fires. He was registered to handle bio hazardous material, knew how to evacuate an entire city, and he'd even taken the training for hostage negotiations. And at that moment, he'd love nothing more than to tell Mayson that he had also graduated from the police academy. The city of Metropolis didn't think he was a liability- they'd given him a badge.

All of that were things he'd thought over very carefully before he'd decided to make his public debut. And within the first month, he had the permission of nearly every agency in the country to do what he did. But Clark couldn't very well tell Mayson that, not as Clark. If he went to her later as Superman, she'd know who he was. At the moment, he didn't think he wanted her to know. He'd entertained the idea of telling her several times before they'd become intimate. However, he was male. And being male, he had needs and desires. Those had swelled to uncontrollable lately. When she'd blatantly told him after dinner that she wanted him for desert, he'd been unable to find a single reason why she shouldn't have him.

She sighed and smoothed a hand across his back. "I guess I'm still learning things about you."

"What?" Her abrupt change of subject threw him.

"I didn't know you liked Superman so much."

Yeah, well, you don't know I \*am\* Superman, he thought to himself. I kinda' need to like myself. But he chose instead, "He's a remarkable individual."

"I admit, the things he can do are incredible. I just don't like his reasons."

"Wanting to help is a bad thing?"

"No, not bad."

"Look deeper, Mayson." He couldn't stop himself. If she wanted to pass judgment on somebody, she needed to at least know them a bit better. "You call him a criminal. I happen to know he's done nothing illegal."

"Writing a few articles about him..."

"Articles that I had to do a ton of research to be able to write."

She held up her hands in mock surrender. "Sorry I brought it up."

Clark had to remind himself to take a deep breath to calm himself. "No," he managed. "I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time about it."

She smiled at him. "Why don't we talk about something else?" Kissing his neck, she said with a smile, "Or not?"

He forced a smile, easing into her touch. How could he possibly do anything more with her now after the things she'd revealed tonight? He almost shouted when his phone rang. "Sorry," he told her as he reached for his jeans. He dug the item out of his pocket and flipped it open gratefully. "Hello?"

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Typing the same word for the fifth time, he finally pushed away from his desk in frustration. Clark had been trying to concentrate on the article he was writing, but it was proving an almost impossible task. His mind kept going back to his conversation with Mayson two nights ago. They'd eaten dinner at a cafe not far from her place, and had planned to see what performance was the hottest theatrical release that week. However, Mayson had wanted to do something a bit different. Hell, Clark had been wanting to do the same thing for weeks. The only reason they hadn't engaged in a sexual relationship before now was because he was struggling with telling her about his secret identity. In light of what he'd learned, he was glad he hadn't told her.

He and Mayson had been on countless dates, spent hours talking. Yet she'd never mentioned her distaste for the Man of Steel until the other night. Granted, he hadn't asked her about it

either. If he was honest, he'd been a little afraid to. He was scared she'd feel exactly the way she did. She hadn't said she disliked Superman because he was alien, which would have really stung his ego. But thinking of him as a criminal was just as bad, if not worse. How did he handle this? Clark really liked Mayson. She was everything he could ask for, except for that one thing. How did he continue to date her knowing that she didn't like a huge part of who he was? Of course, she didn't know \*he\* was the criminal she wanted off the streets either. Would it make a difference if she knew? Would she... use that information against him? Surely not.

He sighed in frustration because he just didn't know. If he told her and she turned on him, that would be a bad thing. If he didn't tell her and kept seeing her, that would be just as bad. Every time he was with her, he'd feel conflicted. Part of him was ashamed of himself for having already slept with her without telling her who he really was. Another part of him felt angry. Well, angry was not exactly the right emotion. He was torn. He liked her and while he didn't exactly regret what they'd done, he wasn't sure he could do it again. Clark had learned a long time ago that in order to be happy, he had to be true to himself. It had taken him a long time to come to terms with his abilities. He was at a place he needed to be now and if he continued to see Mayson with this standing between them, he was afraid it would cause himself a bit of self-doubt. He couldn't go there again.

Before he could come to any solid decisions, a call for help sent him toward the stairwell. He'd just have to deal with this later.

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The man's hands shook as he tried to mix the ingredients in the beaker. He felt so old. How had he gotten himself into this mess?

"Do you have that formula ready?"

He looked up at the other doctor in the room with him. "Just give me a minute."

"Dammit, Sam, we should have been done with this by now."

"Don't you think I know that, Paul?" He pushed the glass container away from him, effectively sloshing the contents all over the counter. He had to get out of this. He had to tell someone.

Tell them what, Sam? he asked himself. Tell them you made a deal with the devil and now everyone you've ever cared about has suffered because of it?

Paul Lang stepped over to Sam's side. "You don't understand the seriousness of this situation, old man."

"I understand all too well," Sam thundered back, facing off with the other man. Paul was an imbecile. He shouldn't have a license to practice medicine. Hell, he probably didn't. Why Lex Luthor had sought him out to do research for him was beyond him.

He didn't understand, Paul thought. He couldn't. If this drug was not ready when Bill got there... He stared off with Sam for a minute before he turned and stomped back to his workstation. He'd gone too far this time. He'd made one too many deals. Keeping up with all of the duplicity was getting confusing. One slipup and he was dead. But if he could just manage a few more days, he'd be on a plane to a new life where no one knew who he was. And hopefully where his past would never be able to find him again. Thank God Luthor was dead. If that man had learned what he'd done, Nigel would have cut him into a million pieces and fed him to the fishes. Of course, if Bill found out what he was doing...

Unable to stand another second, Sam strode across the room and into the small office. He slammed the door and rooted around in the desk for the bottle of liquor he kept there. He'd drown his troubled thoughts so he'd at least have a few blissful moments of respite. As he dropped down in the chair, images of happier times

floated through his mind. "What have I done?" he asked himself again- the same question he asked hundreds of times a day.

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In an office building in downtown Sydney, a team of lawyers greeted a man and his assistant as they entered the room.

"It's good to see you again, Alexander," one of the lawyers said to the balding man across from him.

"I can't say the same of you," he replied in a clipped tone that left little doubt he wanted to get right down to business.

"Yes, well..." The man sat down and pulled out a file. "We are ready to proceed if you can produce the proof your father required."

Alexander glanced at his assistant, who opened a briefcase and pulled out a stack of papers. "Marriage license, birth certificate, everything the old bastard wanted me to do."

"We were hoping to meet your wife," one of the others spoke up.

"She is a bit under the weather. Having our son took a lot out of her."

"He's over a year old."

"And she was extremely fragile." He pulled out another piece of paper. "I assure you she's being cared for."

The paper from Mrs. Luckaby's doctor was read over carefully. "I do hope she is well soon."

"Yes. Are we ready to sign all of the papers?"

"More than ready." A few very important papers were spread across the table and Alexander quickly penned his name to them all. "You will have the money in your account by day's end."

"Very good." Alexander stood as his assistant gathered up all the documents they needed and stuffed them into the briefcase.

"We are sorry about all of this," the man who was clearly the one in charge said.

"I'm sure." Alexander strode out of the room without another word. He and the older man with him stepped into the elevator and he released the breath he was holding. "I hope that old man turns over in his grave. All of his careful instructions, his idiotic demands, and for what? His \*son\* gets his damn money with a dead wife and a cloned son. Doesn't it make you all tingly inside?"

"It would warm my heart," the other man said in a deadpan tone. "If I had one."

Alexander grinned at him. "Yes, it probably would." They stepped out of the elevator and hurried to the waiting limo. "How is my first born?" he asked after pouring himself a glass of champagne.

"Blissfully unaware."

After drinking nearly half of the bubbly, he held the glass out to inspect it. "Wouldn't \*Daddy\* have a stroke if he knew that wimp didn't carry Luckaby blood either?"

"Good thing he's dead, or he would die if he knew his money had just been passed to a Luthor."

"Mother was a wild one, wasn't she?" He grinned evilly as he polished off the rest of his drink. "Ah, Nigel, I do regret not being able to play with Superman a bit before all of this unfortunate mess. He would have been wonderful entertainment."

"I do like the fact that he's not crimping our style though."

"Oh, a definite plus of being dead." Alexander, or Lex, pulled out a cigar and lit it with a deep drag. "So, tell me, have you found the good doctor yet?"

"No. And Dr. Lane has disappeared as well."

"No doubt Church had something to do with that."

"I'm sure."

"And Delconto? Did he buy my little swan dive into the streets of Metropolis?"

"Hook, line, and sinker."

Lex grinned even wider. He loved being able to fool people so easily. Granted, by killing himself off he'd cut one arm of his

power and control. He'd planned to gain more power and wealth than any man alive by selling his research to the government. His son was thriving, growing as normally as any other child. Governments, agencies, and nearly anyone in between would pay any price for what he'd achieved. To be able to create people at will... Add the mind control drugs and the possibilities were limitless.

No matter. Lex, or Alexander Luckaby, had fulfilled his dead father's demands by having another son. The old man had left explicit instructions in his will that Alexander leave another heir before the rest of the Luckaby empire would be his. Not only that, he'd had to do so within a marriage. Hence, his marriage to Lois Lane. Lex had chosen her specifically, for not only his need for a wife, but his need to control her. That nosy bitch had involved herself in one too many of his affairs. It hadn't set well with him, so he made an example out of her, although she had no idea.

"How is my dear wife?" Framing her for his murder had been a stroke of genius, not to mention the satisfaction he got from knowing her imprisonment caused the mighty Perry White the worst heartache imaginable.

"Wasting away in an institution full of unfortunate souls like herself."

"And that insufferable brat?"

"Enjoying island life with his aunt. Should we continue to look for the baby girl?"

"Good riddance. If White wants her, or whoever he pawned her off on, then let them have her."

"Tell me, sir, if you can't follow through with your original plan, why do you keep the boy?"

"Just because Lex Luthor can't sell to the highest bidder, doesn't mean Alexander Luckaby can't. And knowing his mother's frantic is a bonus."

"I'm sure, but won't there be too many whistles going off if Alexander suddenly reappears?"

"Patience, my dear Nigel. Patience. That's why I'm keeping that brat. I'll enjoy a quiet existence somewhere... Asian, maybe. Then when that kid's made it to his fifth birthday, Bill Church will fall all over himself to get the files on his creation."

Nigel eyed him carefully before speaking again. "And by the time he figures out he's been duped..."

"I'll be off to some other luxury hideaway to bask in the irony of it all." He drew from his cigar, blowing out with a smile. "But before I can do any of that, I need that damn doctor. I want to be sure we have all of his research."

"And his total loyalty."

"Luthor style." They laughed at their sick joke as the limo continued to carry them through the streets of Sydney.

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Mayson watched as Clark picked over his food. They'd had dinner at his place tonight because Clark had said he wasn't in the mood to go out. They'd ordered take-out and he'd opened a bottle of wine. Talk had revolved around his latest case for the first part of the meal, but now they were hardly speaking. They hadn't seen each other in nearly a week. Every time she called, he made an excuse not to see her. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was trying to...

"Clark, do you regret starting an intimate relationship?"

His head snapped up and he looked at her. How did he answer that? "No," he finally said. He didn't regret it. He'd wanted to make love with Mayson and it had been a wonderful experience. Not exactly what he needed it to be, but it had still been very nice. He lowered his eyes back to his plate.

"Is something wrong with Perry?"

"No." This time he smiled when he looked at her. He loved that little girl. Talking about her always brought a smile to his face. "Perry's great. In fact, I think I'm going to bring her out

next week. I miss her."

"You're going to keep her all week?"

"Yeah." He stood and picked up his plate to carry it to the sink. There was no sense to keep playing with his food. He wasn't hungry.

"Clark, we have reservations at LaBlanc next week." They'd made plans weeks ago for him to join Mayson at some convention in France. It had something to do with one of her clients and she'd attended the last three years. She'd asked him along hoping to finally consummate their relationship while they were alone.

He sighed and turned to look at her with regretful eyes. "I'm sorry, Mayson, I forgot about that. I've already told Mom I could take Perry. She and Dad are planning to take a vacation- sort of a second honeymoon."

Mayson just stared at him in disbelief. They'd talked about this trip several times. He'd been looking forward to going, or so she thought. Surely, he would have known about a trip his parents were planning. He talked to them every single day. "I can't believe you're going to do this to me." She stood and jerked the plate off the table before stomping over and nearly slamming it into the sink.

"Mayson," he pleaded. He hated to see her upset. But he didn't want to go to France with her either. He wasn't even sure why he'd agreed in the first place. She'd just been so convincing. And he'd been... struggling with his attraction and desire. Now, though... He sighed again. He'd done that a lot tonight.

She was halfway across the room before she whirled back around to face him, fire in her eyes. "Why don't you tell me what's really going on with you? You've avoided my calls, and when we have talked, you've barely said two words. When I saw you at the Planet earlier in the week, you'd looked as if you hadn't wanted to see me at all. And don't get me started on the reception I got earlier." She'd leaned in to kiss him and he'd turned his head at the last second so she'd kiss his cheek.

Clark looked away from her. He'd thought about her attitude toward Superman nearly nonstop for the last week. He'd finally decided that he really liked Mayson. She was a great person and fun to be around. He wasn't ready to give that up. But when he'd seen her, something ugly within him reared its head. How could he keep seeing her if she didn't like him?

Then again, how could he blame her if he wasn't completely honest with her either? No matter what decision he made, it probably wouldn't be the right one.

"I... have been having trouble at work," he lied. He just couldn't do this. Not tonight. He was tired of being alone and seeing Mayson was what he wanted.

For now.

"That's no excuse for how you've been treating me," she told him.

"No, it's not." He forced himself to approach. He reached out to rub her upper arms briskly. "I'm sorry." This was more difficult than he thought.

"Yeah, well..." And before she could say anything else, he kissed her.

This will help, he thought as he worked his mouth over hers. She was still the same woman he'd come to like. She couldn't help how she felt. And if it wasn't for his incessant need to be two people, she wouldn't feel that way to start with. For the first time in a long time, he cursed his other side. When Mayson groaned, he began to chant: shut up and enjoy yourself.

She drew away from him. "Do you want to...?" He nodded. "I have protection in my bag."

He couldn't help but smile. Mayson was obsessive about almost everything, including their need for protection. "Did you bring all six boxes?"

"No," she replied with a chuckle. "Just a big one."

Clark smoothed his hands up her back, his right hand gripping her neck so he could pull her back in for another kiss. It's not right, his conscience yelled at him. This doesn't feel right. But he kicked those thoughts to the back of his mind as he walked Mayson backward toward his bedroom. When Mayson's hands began to roam, rational thought fled in a rush. He was ready, willing, and able and he was going to take advantage of the fact that she was, too. They'd talk about everything else later. Much later.

Mayson was the one who tore her mouth from his a moment later. "Clark, don't you hear your phone ringing?"

"Huh?" He'd almost made it to the point of no return and it took him a second to clear the cobwebs from his head.

"Phone."

Just then his machine kicked on. "Yo, CK, get your butt to the Planet. We think we've found Collin."

Clark's eyes cleared in a split second as he jerked up the receiver on the nightstand. "What?" he wanted to know, skipping all pretense with the young man on the other end.

"Yeah, man, this investigator waltzed in a little while ago and tells Perry he thinks he knows where Collin is. Has some pictures he took yesterday."

"I'll be there in ten." More like two, but he couldn't tell him that. And he couldn't get there that quick without causing suspicion. He dropped the phone back down and looked up at Mayson with an apologetic expression. "Sorry. I have to go."

"I'll come with you." He nodded and they hurried into the other room. But before they made it to the door, her phone rang. "Sorry," she said as she answered. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I'll be there."

"Your turn to be sorry," he deduced as he slipped his jacket on.

"Call me later?"

"Yeah." He smiled at her, then kissed her quickly before they left. She went toward her office and he headed into the alley to fly to the Planet.

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Clark ran through the door of the stairwell and straight to Perry's office. It was after nine and the newsroom was nearly empty. Perry, Jack, Jimmy and a man Clark had never seen were all in the editor's office.

"Clark, this is Dan Scardino. He's a private investigator. The Center contacted him to help with the search and I believe he's found our boy." Perry held out the photos he'd been looking at.

The image showed a little boy on a beach. The child looked a lot like Perry. "Are you sure this is him?" Clark wanted to know as he looked up at Dan.

"Pretty sure."

"Where is this?"

"An island town in Spain. I followed a hunch and well..."

The man grinned, a crooked expression Clark was sure he was proud of. More precisely, he was proud of himself for doing something no one else had been able to do.

"What made you look there?"

"Get this, CK, he's at his grandfather's place," Jack spoke up.

"What?" His eyes snapped over to the other man.

"The house on that island belongs to Sam Lane," Jimmy explained. "He bought it because of the frequent trips to see family." When Clark's brows rose, he went on. "Ellen Lane was actually born Ella Delconto."

"Whoa!" Clark held up his hand to stop him. "She was born who?"

"Delconto, as in Juan Delconto, as in..."

"The Delconto Organization?" he asked, stunned beyond belief.

"That's the one," Jack said with a wide grin. He sat on the edge of Perry's desk and crossed his arms. He'd been the one to

find out that little gem earlier today, by accident. "I was cleaning out some old files on Perry's computer, only it wasn't Perry's computer." He pointed to the machine he was talking about. There was another computer on the small table behind Perry's desk. "It was Lois' computer. Perry wanted some information she had on there about a stock trading scam she was covering right before she quit. Anyway..." He quickly moved on because he knew talking about Lois was a very sore spot with the boss. "I came across some personal files. One was some information about her mother- mostly estate type stuff. That's when I found that Ellen's estate had never been settled because Ellen Dyson had never filed her legal name change in New Troy."

"Damn," Clark mumbled as he dropped to the chair behind him. What did it all mean?

"So, do you want me to fly back over and get him?" Dan wanted to know. "With an international custody order I can bring him back as a representative for the Center."

"I think I'll go out myself," Clark said as he stood back up.

"I'll book you a flight," Perry said as he picked up the phone.

"Don't bother. I have a friend that owes me a favor," Clark said as he started toward the door. "Told me if I ever needed anything... I'll get him to fly me over."

"Don't forget to take your papers. And when you get there, I'll have contacted the Center's rep." By Center, they meant the Center for Missing Children. Over six months later, they were still pouring resources into their search for Collin Lane.

"Got it." He stopped and stepped back over to Dan. "Thank you," he told him and extended his hand.

"You're welcome," Dan answered and shook the offered limb.

"Good luck, CK," called Jimmy.

Clark had to wave because he was halfway to the stairwell. Suddenly he couldn't get out of the building fast enough. He spun into his suit on the way up and zipped by his place to leave the photos he was still holding. He'd imprinted the image of the little boy in his mind and wouldn't quickly forget what he looked like. In less time than it would have taken to book a flight, Clark was hovering over the house in the background of the photographs. The address had been written on back of one, so he was able to find it easily enough. A quick scan allowed him to see that there was no one there. It was quite early in the morning in Spain, so a baby should be sleeping. Only the bed in the small bungalow was empty.

He landed just outside the back entrance, the one near the ocean, and checked the door. It was unlocked. He went in to find that whoever had been there had left in a hurry. A hurried effort to pack had been made, but many things had been left. The small clothes on the floor and bed were proof that a baby had indeed been in this house. If the color was any judge, the child was also a boy. He was so frustrated he wanted to yell. They'd been so close.

He searched through the house for anything that might tell him where they'd taken the boy. When he found nothing, he picked up a small football. Tiny teeth prints marred the end, testament that Collin was teething. Perry was, too. She was cutting hers on her doll's hand. He couldn't help but smile.

Then he felt like crying. It was as if his baby boy was missing. He couldn't stop the snort of incredulity. Collin \*was\* his son- legally anyway. Would they ever find him?

A final glance, then he tucked the football into a bag he found in the bottom of the closet. He picked up all the baby items he could find- not sure why he felt he should take them- before he left. He'd return tomorrow morning as Clark so he and the rep could call the local police. There would be an official investigation.

And there was going to be an unofficial investigation, too. He didn't care what Perry said or what Lois wanted. He was going to

resurrect his research.

He was also going to find that little boy.

\*\*\*

Perry held his head in his hands, something he did a lot of these days. Clark had just returned from his trip to Spain. Collin had been gone by the time he got there. That meant someone, somewhere had warned them. But who? They wouldn't find out unless he reopened the investigation, but that wasn't going to happen.

"How will she know we're back at it?" Jack wanted to know.

"I'll know," Perry said as he looked up at the young men across from him.

"Perry, surely you see the importance of us finding out..."

"I know, Jimmy! How well I know." Perry stood and walked around behind his chair, more frustrated than he'd ever been in his life. "Lois is terrified they'll kill Collin." She'd finally agreed to talk to him on the phone today, and she'd pleaded with him to just stay out of it. She'd even asked him to stop looking for Collin. That was where he drew the line. He told her that the only way he'd back down was over his dead body. She'd held the phone in silence for a while, then told him as sternly as she could to drop it. Her attitude had actually made him mad. Didn't that girl know he was only trying to help her? Didn't she know that if they could find out what was going on, they could stop whoever was still controlling Lex's interests?

"How will they know we've done a little research on the computers?" Clark wanted to know.

"How did they know Dan was in Spain and that they needed to get him out of there?"

Clark sighed and looked away. Perry had a point.

"All the more reason to look into this dang thing," Jack spoke up. "Somebody's jumping the fence and we need to know who."

Perry turned and looked out of the window, watching the hustle and bustle of daily life in the city. At one time he'd loved this place. Lately, he was contemplating retiring to his lake home. He was too damn old for this kind of stress. "Just let it go," he said, a note of finality in his voice.

Jack threw up his hands in disbelief just before he left the room. He was disgusted with his boss. There was something to be found, if they could just look.

Jimmy shook his head sadly and followed the other man out.

"Maybe I could try to talk to her," Clark suggested.

"Give her time, Clark. She talked to me today when she's adamantly refused until now. Something's changing. She'll break before long."

"Do we have time to wait?" When Perry didn't answer, Clark sighed and left him standing at the window. Would Perry ever recover from any of this?

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"Where the hell is he?" Lex demanded of Nigel.

"I have no idea, sir. Asabi has disappeared and he won't answer the private lines."

"So help me I'll separate his body and spirit myself!" He was livid. Nigel had told him just minutes ago that Collin, Lucy, and Asabi had disappeared from Spain. "Have you looked everywhere?"

"Everywhere. I have even had a fellow look in the lion's den."

Lex swiped his hand across the desk in front him, sending everything on it flying. "Find that kid!"

"We will, sir."

"You better." Nigel turned to leave. "And, Nigel..." When he turned, Lex pointed at him. "When you do, kill the girl and take her sister a picture."

"My pleasure." He smiled before closing the door behind him.

Lex kicked the phone lying on the floor across the room. He

was losing control. And he hated to lose control.

He also hated being Alexander Luckaby. He'd hated Frank and had hated being his son. The day his mother told him his biological father was really Lionel Luthor was the day he was set free. And as soon as his mother was buried, he'd been only too happy to make sure the arrogant son of bitch who'd made his life a living hell paid for all of his sins. If it hadn't been for the fifty-three billion reasons now tucked away in various accounts around the world, he would have never bowed to that man's vanity-driven ego.

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Clark rolled over and nearly fell onto the floor. He'd laid down on the sofa at Mayson's place to wait on her to finish a conference call involved with work and had fallen asleep. A glance at his watch told him she'd been on the call for nearly an hour. He sat up and rubbed his hand through his hair several times trying to rid himself of the sleepy haze that surrounded him. In the other room, Mayson seemed to be in a heated debate. It might very well be a while before she was done. Maybe that was a blessing in disguise, he thought as he rose to head into the kitchen to get himself a glass of water. He had to shake his head as he opened the cabinet. Every glass was perfectly situated on the shelf. Mayson wasn't just obsessive- she was obsessive compulsive.

Taking his water, he ventured into her living room, glancing at the photograph she kept on the table between her chairs. Baby Grace had been a beautiful child. And the lone image was the only visible proof Mayson had ever been someone's mother. She'd only recently put it out- told him that seeing Perry and opening up to him had given her the strength to do so.

The view from her window was spectacular. You could see all the way to the bay. They'd had dinner at Mulligan's earlier. Mayson had told him she was sorry he hadn't found Collin, yet something about her posture said otherwise. Then they'd argued about the trip to France again. Perry was coming in and he was going to spend the week with her. Mayson was less than thrilled that she'd have to make the trip overseas alone, but she finally let it drop. He'd walked her home and had intended to kiss her goodnight and leave, but he felt unusually lonely tonight. Her lips had practically begged him to kiss her. One had led to two, then a stray hand cranked up the excitement, and before he could stop himself, he was laying her across her bed. Now he was glad she'd received the call that had interrupted them. He'd been strangely detached, as if he was on the outside looking in, even in the little they'd done. He'd been relieved when she apologized and went to answer the phone.

As he took another drink from his glass, he realized he was preparing himself to say goodbye to Mayson. She was a great person, and he cared for her very much. She could be a good friend, but that was all. She wasn't who he wanted to make a future with, and he just couldn't keep acting like she was. He realized earlier, even though he'd known before then, that her aversion to Superman was just a bit much for him to deal with comfortably in the context of a serious relationship. If she felt like that, there was no way he could tell her he was the Man of Steel. And if they were going to continue to see one another, he had to tell her.

And he couldn't... wouldn't do that. Not now.

Turning back to take his glass to the kitchen, his eye caught the shimmer of something sticking out of Mayson's bag where she'd dropped it on the coffee table. A closer look told him it was a metallic envelope. He was going to keep walking, but what was written on the card made him stop. 'Baby Doll'. Knowing he shouldn't, but unable to stop himself, he reached down and pulled the envelope from the bag. He set his glass down and against his better judgment, he took the card out.

"What the hell?" It was an anniversary card.

A what?! It was signed, 'Still loving you, Dan'.  
 "Do you always make it a habit to read other people's private things?"

Clark looked up at Mayson, a thousand questions running through his mind at once. "Do you make it habit of forgetting to tell your boyfriend about your husband?"

She stomped over and snatched the card from his hand. "We're separated."

"So you \*are\* still married?"

"Legally, yes." She stuffed the card back into her bag.

"Damn!" Clark snatched up the glass on the table, not caring that the water flew out over his hand and arm, and went to the kitchen to drop it in the sink.

"Clark, let me explain."

"You just did," he said as he turned to look for his jacket.

"We've been separated for years..."

"It doesn't matter. You're married and whether or not you respect the vows you took, I do." He couldn't believe he'd felt guilty for starting a relationship with her when he was being less than honest. She was doing the same thing!

"Don't do this," she pleaded as she followed him to the door.

"Do what? Get upset because you forgot to mention your husband?" He jerked on his jacket.

"Like you have room to talk."

He stopped with his hand on the door, then turned to look at her. "What?"

"You forgot to mention that you moonlight in tights." She crossed her arms over her chest, begging him to deny it.

For his part, Clark didn't even blink. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't. After I told you how I felt about Superman, I got to thinking about your reaction and what you said. After you ignored me, I knew there was more going on with you. I did a little research of my own."

"And you've found nothing that suggests I am who you say I am."

"You're right. You have covered your tracks well. But, Clark, I'm one of the best lawyers in the world because I'm not blind. A background check revealed way too many inconsistencies."

"You've done a background check on me?" He couldn't believe her. She was beyond obsessive. Mayson glanced away from him. "Do you do that with everyone you date?"

"No!" But her expression said something different.

Clark put his hands on his hips and sighed as he stared up at the ceiling. What did he do now? Someone knew his secret, had checked him out. And now she was mad at him.

"Why don't we call it even?" she asked as she stepped closer to him. "You've betrayed me as much as I've betrayed you."

His brows rose nearly to his hair. "Are you serious?" When she just stared at him, he threw his hands up and paced around her.

"The fact that you're here is proof enough to me that I'm right," she said as she turned to watch him walk away from her.

He whirled back around to face her. "I'm here because if you decide to spout your theory aloud, my family will suffer for it." He was still unable to admit to her that she was right, although she probably took that statement as admission on his part.

"Clark, I don't give trust easily. And I would never betray it either. I... I love you. I'd never hurt you."

He just stared at her for several moments before he leaned over to pull the envelope back out of her bag. "No, I guess you wouldn't," he told her sadly, then thrust the card into her hands before he left. He might have decided to end his relationship with Mayson tonight, but knowing she was married and didn't tell him hurt like hell. If she could hide something like that, what else was she hiding?

Never mind he'd been hiding something from her.

But he wasn't married. He wasn't still in touch with a spouse. And... He stopped just before he stepped into the stairwell. Dan? As in...

He went back to her apartment, causing her to gasp when he stepped back in suddenly. "Dan? Scardino?"

"Yes," she answered softly.

"The private investigator you contacted to come help Perry?" She glanced away from him. "Just how close are you and your husband?" Wow, he thought. Mayson was nothing he thought she was. If she still had some kind of relationship with Dan, why had she started anything with him? She'd actually told him she loved him.

"We're friends, Clark. Close friends. We grew up together, were high school sweethearts, stayed together through college. Marriage seemed to be the most natural thing. We just couldn't get past the emotional devastation of losing Grace."

"And if you find a way through that?"

Mayson's eyes finally met his. "I love Dan, but I'm in love with you. You're the only man I've ever cared about besides him."

Clark was the one to glance away this time. She looked so sincere. And after everything... "Mayson, I do care for you."

"But you're not in love with me?"

He sighed, refusing to look away. "No. I respect you and I was obviously very attracted."

She looked down at the floor, nearly dying inside.

He took a step closer. "I'm sorry."

When she looked up, she smiled. "I'm not. I've had a great time and I'm glad I know you. All of you." Closing the distance between them, she reached up and cupped the side of his face. "I didn't leave a trace when I was checking things out, and I made the background check look like it was part of your file for Collin." Her thumb smoothed the soft skin under his eye. "I hope, in time, we can be friends."

Clark smiled and reached out to squeeze her upper arm. "Me, too." Leaning forward, he kissed her briefly. "Take care of yourself."

"You, too." She'd pulled her hand away and folded her arms again. "No one will know I know," she said as he stepped into the doorway. When he faced her, she added, "But I think I like that you're not admitting it."

He didn't say a word, just walked away. In a strange way, he kind of liked that she knew.

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The man looked down into the wide eyes of the little boy before him. "Amazing," he said. "Absolutely amazing." He straightened up and smiled at the man beside the boy. "I have to hand it to ole Lex. He didn't quit digging until he uncovered the largest treasures. Too bad his greed cost him his life."

"His arrogance cost him his life," the other man corrected him. "So, can I trust that you will honor your previous deal with my former employer?"

"If he continues to grow as healthy as he is now, I'll even throw in a ten percent bonus."

The tall, foreign-looking man smiled. "Very good." He snapped his fingers and a woman stepped forward to pick up the boy. "I will be in touch every six months."

"I'll look forward to your next visit." Bill Church waited until the man was gone with the boy before he called his son into the room. "How far along are the doctors in achieving the results we're after?"

"Very close," answered the younger Church. "However, we need a test subject."

"Use Lane's other daughter. I hear she likes juicing up anyway."

"Oh, how ironic." Bill Jr. laughed softly. Both Lane women in the same lifetime!

Bill Sr. sat down at his desk, totally agreeing with his son. He'd been glad when Lex married the oldest Lane girl so he could keep her out of everyone's affairs. She had been a reporter and a good one, interfering more than once in his many endeavors. Lex had been all too happy to get her under control and Bill was more than willing to let him. And he could care less that she now sat in a cell for killing Luthor. Hell, if he'd been able to do it without getting caught, he would have killed the bastard years ago. Lois had done the world a favor- or at least his world.

Irony- what a wonderful thing! Lex had purposely chosen Lois for his test subject only to have her turn on him. Bill would use her sister, and neither woman would know that one of the men responsible for so much of their heartache was none other than their own dear daddy. Yes, irony was the spice of his life.

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Nearly three months after his break-up with Mayson, he was convinced her knowing was a good thing. She'd often call him after a particularly difficult rescue and ask him how he was. 'Just wanted to check on you,' she'd say. She never asked him again if he really was Superman and she never referred to it either. Much like his mother, she always spoke of him as two separate people. Yet there was that little underlying current. He'd gained a true friend. It was nice having someone around that knew, even if he didn't share that part of himself with her the way he did with Lana. He might never be in that place with Mayson, but he liked the place they'd chosen.

And Superman had kept him busy. It seemed everybody in the world needed him lately. Even when he wasn't in the suit. One major story after another kept him at the Planet later nearly every night. What time he did have, he'd fly out to see Perry. Since keeping her the week his parents went on vacation, he'd ached to have her with him all the time. The little girl filled a void he hadn't been aware was slowly eating up his spirit. He'd had to hire a sitter and Superman was grounded, but it had been the best week of his life. It was the most exhilarating as well. She'd grown so much since that first day. It was truly amazing watching all of the changes.

How was it a baby had the power to make you rethink your perspective on life? Sure, he'd often thought about marrying some day and starting a family. But he'd never actually thought he would. He was different than other men and he wasn't even sure if he could have children. He and Lana had talked about it more than once, had even wanted to find out for sure if it was possible. Of course, their plans changed. After breaking up with Lana, he came to the conclusion that a wife and children might not be in his future. His time with Mayson was great, but he'd never felt it would be anything serious. He'd never dreamed becoming an accidental father might actually be the best thing that ever happened to him. Perry was a breath of air he had come to need just to function. He was seriously entertaining the idea of bringing her out to live with him on a full-time basis.

Of course, that idea didn't come without risk. Whoever was still running LexCorp might still be looking for her, although he wasn't sure why. While he wanted her with him, there was no way he'd place her in danger unnecessarily. Before he made a decision like that, he'd have to be sure it would be safe for her to be in the city.

That was why he was thinking of doing a little reading-reading that Perry wouldn't approve of. He could always go over Perry's head... straight to the source.

He'd thought a lot about Lois lately. Perry still tried to send her letters and get her to allow him to see her. Clark hated the days his editor went to the prison; he came to the newsroom angry and upset. More than once Clark thought the older man was going to cause himself to have a stroke. Alice had even spoken with him about Perry's stress levels. Yet every week he

made that trek to Glendale, just outside Metropolis. And every week he came back about to blow a gasket.

Jack and Jimmy had given up on Lois. They were angry and had a right to be. They'd done nothing but try to help her and she adamantly refused. They'd stopped writing her a long time ago. And it only took her refusing to see them three times before they stopped going to Glendale. Jimmy had said he felt like his best friend didn't trust him anymore and it hurt.

Though Lois was a relative stranger, Clark was beginning to feel like he knew her. He'd heard so much about her through Jimmy and Perry- Jack didn't know her that well either. He'd read everything she'd ever written, which told him a lot about the kind of person she'd been. Since the day Jack said he'd been stripping her computer and run across personal files, he'd found himself wanting to read some of those files himself.

Would she talk to him? She'd spoken with him once, allowed him to take custody of her son. He hadn't been back to visit her with Mayson or with any of the others. He just didn't feel like he had the place. Did having her daughter give him a place? She'd accepted that card on the twins' birthday. Would she accept another one? Should he try?

He sighed heavily. He just didn't know what to do anymore. Feeling like he could help and not be able to was driving him insane. There was no guarantee he could find out anything more than the little they'd discovered already. Yet he felt like he had to try or he'd go crazy.

Pushing to his feet, Clark went up to his loft in search of some paper and a pen. The open box of blank cards he kept for various occasions caught his eye. Maybe he should try using one of those. She'd accepted a card. He hated to use Perry that way, but if it would ultimately help her mother, the ends would certainly justify the means.

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Lois had transformed into someone even she didn't know. The pity had slowly been replaced with seething anger, followed by an overwhelming desire for revenge. Only the person she wanted to get revenge on was already dead. It just wasn't fair. That maniacal bastard had stripped her of absolutely everything, including the right to have the final say. Yeah, she might one day step foot outside this prison and Lex would still be dead, but she'd never get back all he'd taken from her. Years of her life-gone. Years of her children's lives- gone. Hell, they wouldn't even know her when she got out. Somebody else was raising them. Those people were their family now. They'd be all those kids knew. What right would she have to take that away from them? Away from the family who was taking care of them?

Thank God Lucy was caring for Collin. At least he might have a few morals when he grew up. She snorted humorlessly at that. Morals, my ass, she thought as she entered her cell after her morning work detail. Lucy was the very definition of free spirit. A wild child from birth, Lucy was defiant right down to her core. She'd put her folks through hell. Became the girlfriend of a gang leader at fourteen, the hard drugs were only a year behind. In and out of rehab until she was eighteen, the younger Lane disappeared for nearly three years. When she resurfaced, she was as strung out as any junkie Lois had ever seen. And that junkie was caring for her son. Was that better than a nanny hired by LexCorp? Nigel had said Lucy was clean, but Lois had been around long enough to know that once a junkie, always a junkie.

She dropped heavily on her bunk, noticing that there was an envelope on the small table attached to the wall. Those ignorant guards just couldn't take a hint. She'd told them more than once that she wanted all mail returned to sender. And if the mail didn't have a return address, then just trash it.

Snatching the envelope off the table, she realized it was from the same person who'd sent the pictures of Perry that now hung on the wall. She glanced up at the happy baby in the image, then

decided to take a quick peek.

‘Lois, I know I don’t have the right to ask you for anything- I don’t even know you. I just felt it was time for... something. Time to \*do\* something. He’s gone, dead and buried. Won’t you let us help you?’

She looked at the new picture that was in the card. Perry- her precious Perry. Her hair was longer, curly. She had a mouth full of teeth and her little ears had been pierced. She was wearing a denim dress that looked a lot like overalls. She was adorable.

The card was signed ‘Clark’. As in Clark Kent? Did Clark Kent have her baby girl? Why? Why had Perry chosen a stranger to care for her girl?

What did it matter now? Someone had her and she didn’t. That was all she knew. Perry was being cared for and that was enough.

It had to be.

Lois wiped the tear that spilled from her eye- the first in months. She’d resolved long ago that crying wouldn’t help her now. Nothing would.

And nobody will, she thought as she ripped the card in half. She’d almost torn the picture as well, but she just couldn’t. That little girl hadn’t asked for any of this. Hell, she hadn’t asked to be born. With shaking hands, Lois searched out her tape and put her newest treasure on the wall. Oh, what she wouldn’t give to have one of her boy to go with the others. Why couldn’t Clark find him? Then he’d have both her children.

When she turned back around, she pushed Clark Kent and thoughts of her daughter from her mind. She had to push them out or she’d go crazy. Thinking about things she couldn’t change was useless and it wasn’t about to get her out of here any time soon.

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Lex, or Alexander Luckaby as he was known these days, was livid. Those idiots he’d hired couldn’t find their way out of a room with only one window, let alone a small boy. Nigel had searched everywhere for \*Collin\* without success. Just when they thought they were getting close, they’d hit another dead end. He needed to find that brat.

He needed to figure a way out of this mess he’d gotten himself in to. So far since his ‘death’ he’d stayed reclusive, hiding himself away from the many prying eyes of the world. But he was tired of that kind of life. He liked people and being with them. More precisely, he liked controlling them. He’d been unable to do much of that in his forced seclusion. What he needed was to get back to the world.

What he needed was to get that boy back. He was the key to a future where he was king of the world. If only he could track down Asabi. So help him that tall pile of bones was going to pay for stabbing him in the back.

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How could you love someone so much and feel like you were beginning to hate the person that gave her to you? Clark asked himself that every time he looked at the little girl growing and thriving in his care. He hadn’t brought her out to live with him for fear of losing her to the same evils that had taken her mother away from her. He had stepped up his care though. He spent both of his days off in Kansas and every other month, Perry spent a week with him in Metropolis, despite his fears. It was how he felt about Perry’s mother that had begun to gnaw at him.

Lois hadn’t answered that first card. It hadn’t come back, but she hadn’t answered either. He’d waited... and waited. Finally he’d sent another, with much the same message. Six cards and six months later, he, too, was beginning to feel the same way Perry, Jimmy, and Jack did. Perry had even stopped his weekly visits to Glendale, choosing instead to go just once a month. The twins’ second birthday was on fast approach and Clark had never felt so frustrated about anything in his life. He wanted desperately to

help Lois- almost felt a \*need\* to help her. But until she felt like she was ready to help herself, there wasn’t much he could do.

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‘No!’ shouted the little boy as he stared up at the man smiling at him.

‘Absolutely amazing,’ Bill Church Sr. said as he looked into the face of his future. A future with untold potential.

‘He’s just a boy,’ said the woman holding the child.

‘A very, very special boy,’ was the remark from Bill Jr.

‘Are we still on track?’ asked Asabi as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

‘You’ll have the funds within the hour,’ was Senior’s answer.

‘Very good.’ He motioned for the woman to take the boy out of the room. ‘We shall see you in six months.’ He turned to leave.

‘Keep coming here,’ Bill told him. ‘It’s safer. We’ve had several inquiries into our practices lately.’

‘As you wish.’ The man bowed and walked out.

When they were gone, Bill Jr. looked at his dad. ‘I’m telling you, Dad, that’s her.’

‘Then I want her back here by dark. We’re already nearly a year behind in the studies. The other subjects are too easily manipulated.’

‘You know who would make a good test subject? Superman.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, boy,’ Bill told his son as he sat down at the table in the small room. They’d met with Asabi to inspect the boy at a new location this time. It had been risky bringing others to their hideaway, but they hadn’t had much choice. They’d been visited by one too many government agencies in recent weeks. It wouldn’t do for one of Lex’s minions to be seen coming or going from one of their properties in the city.

‘It would just be an incredible experiment,’ the younger Bill said as he poured himself a drink from the bottle on the table.

‘All of that power reduced to a blubbing idiot...’ He laughed softly at the thought of Superman acting like a child. ‘And if we could control his mind...’

‘How do you propose we get control of him? Not to mention the fact that the good doctors have just barely been able to perfect the formula for humans...’

‘I know, I know.’ He took a long sip from his glass.

‘Why are you still here?’ He looked up at his son with a stern expression. ‘I told you to get Lucy Lane back here.’

‘I’m going,’ he whined like a child, putting his glass back on the table.

Bill Sr. rubbed his temples as his son left the room. That boy was more trouble than he was worth.

Outside the door a man tucked himself against the wall as Bill Jr. walked past him. What now? What was he supposed to do? He’d been working in Church’s lab for nearly a year now and before that in Luthor’s lab, creating drugs that could literally strip a man of his mind. He’d watched and monitored some of the strongest men he’d ever seen as they’d been transformed into babies again. Now they wanted to test those drugs on his daughter. Well, not if he could help it. Sam Lane hurried in the direction of his meager room. He’d grab a few things, then he’d do what he should have done from the beginning- he’d help his family.

Sam went back to the lab, thanking the powers that be that Paul was not there. He grabbed a sample of the mind-altering drugs they’d been concocting, then slipped out of Church’s compound. He hotwired a truck and drove away without a second look from anyone. He wasn’t exactly a prisoner, but Bill had made it clear that it was easier for him to stay within the walls of his prison.

And that was what it was. He’d sealed his fate with his eyes wide open- knowing exactly what he was doing. The lure of all of that money Luthor had offered him was too great to pass up. Take

a little money not to interfere with Luthor's marriage to his daughter. It seemed simple enough. However, when he began to notice the changes in Lois, he said something to Lex. That had been a huge mistake. He was escorted from the room that very day, never to be returned home. Fear for his girls' lives kept him in that lab working day and night. People had already died. He'd watched Nigel gun down several young men and women who had failed to comply with one request or another, so Sam never doubted Lex would do exactly what he said he'd do. When Lois had become pregnant, then after the birth, there were more lives to fear for.

But the hour of his greatest shame was the one where he went with Paul Lang willingly from one tyrant to another. Of course, Lex was dead. His daughter was in prison and unless he wanted to go for countless crimes, he'd keep his mouth shut and work next to a man that was almost as much a maniac as Lex. He later found out Paul was working for Bill Church. More precisely, he was selling Lex out. Or was he just straddling the fences? It was impossible to tell where Paul's loyalties laid. He'd given up trying. All he knew was that Lang was evil, had done some despicable things and threatened to do unimaginable evils unless Sam helped him. And he had, until today.

He'd allowed his daughter to be locked away, although he wasn't sure how he could help. But she probably thought he'd helped put her there. He'd allowed his grandson to be taken who knew where and until tonight by one of Lex's nameless puppets. He hadn't known exactly why the child had been carted away, but after overhearing the conversation in Church's office, he knew now. Asabi saw the boy as a pay check. And what was with all the mumbo jumbo about the boy being 'amazing' and 'special'?

It had been all he could do to keep quiet in his hiding place as he gazed at the woman holding his grandson. He'd loathed that child at one time because Luthor was his father. He realized now, the boy was also part of Lois. But what made him nearly shout out was the woman. Her hair was shorter, her face fuller. She looked peaceful and healthy. She looked like his little girl again. That was the reason he would not allow her to be \*his\* test subject. She- Lucy Lane, his youngest daughter- was the reason he was risking his neck now. To hell with his life- it was over. His business had probably fallen apart by now. His associates no doubt believed him dead. He'd save Lucy. He'd save his grandson.

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Lucy stood looking out the window of the house she had lived in for the past six weeks. Asabi had moved them so many times in the last year it was hard to keep count. If it wasn't for the little boy sleeping in the other room, she'd have been gone long ago. It didn't matter what they did to her. She'd ruined her own life with the endless stream of booze and drugs. If the law caught up with her, she'd be in the state prison with Lois. But that baby boy needed someone to protect him. He was the reason she got up each morning and he was the reason she stayed.

She turned to look at the dark-haired child lying on the bed. Fear had kept her from wavering where he was concerned. They'd threatened to break his legs, his arms, his fingers. She'd believed them when they said they could find him anywhere. Just look at all the places they'd been. It took a lot of money and endless resources to keep them on the move. What they said must be true.

Movement off to the side caught her eye, scaring her at first. The bush beside the steps moved and she took a half step backwards. When a man jumped over the rail and landed on the porch, she almost screamed.

"Daddy?" she whispered. She moved to the door and opened it slowly.

"Grab a bag and let's get out of here before Asabi gets back," Sam said by the time he stepped inside. He was stuffing clothes

into a bag before she could move.

"What are you doing here?"

"Getting you out." He stopped and looked at her. "What are you waiting for?"

"They'll find us."

"We'll hide in plain sight. If they try anything, they'll go down."

"Plain sight?"

"When we leave here, we're going straight to Metropolis."

Lucy stared at him like he had lost his mind. "We can't do that."

"You can't stay here."

"I have to." She waved at the boy.

"He's coming, too," Sam said and continued to gather a few things for them.

"Daddy..." she pleaded and reached out to grasp his arm.

"Lucy," he said, his eyes filling with tears. "If you stay, they are going to turn you into a lab rat." He stared at her, trying to explain in his expression what he couldn't voice. "Please, honey. Let's just leave. We'll go to Perry White. He'll know what to do."

She glanced back at Collin, then nodded. Quickly she helped her dad gather a bag for the baby and for herself before she carefully lifted the boy from the bed. She followed Sam out and down the street to a waiting van. He closed them up in back and sped away.

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For the third time in the past month Perry was contemplating retirement. The situation with Lois had dampened his fire for news. He was at the point where he could almost care less. It would be so much easier to just get up every morning and head down to the dock to drown a few worms in his search for Old Nelly. Old Nelly was rumored to be the largest bass in Lake Murray. She was the reason he'd bought a house in Cutler's Cove six years ago. His ringing phone was a welcome distraction.

"Perry White."

"Meet me on Carver Road, at the motel across from Jones' Diner. Room six on the side. Come as quick as you can get here and Perry... bring the posse. We're going to need a police escort out of here."

There was a click, telling him the caller had hung up. He'd thought that was the strangest call in the world, then his mind registered what his ears had heard. "I'll be an Elvis impersonator!" he shouted and jumped to his feet. "Kent!"

Clark looked up to see his editor running out of his office. "Get your butt in gear. Jimmy, call Henderson and tell him to get a team of his trusted men down to Carver Road Motel. Jack, we need the rep from the Center here ASAP!"

"Chief?" Clark asked him, his heart beginning to pound. The Center meant there might be word about Collin.

"I just got a call from Sam Lane. Let's go get our boy!" Of course, he hadn't said he had the boy, but Perry knew enough to know this was it. This was what they'd been waiting for. "Get Mayson on the phone," he told Clark as they stepped into the elevator.

"Wait up. We're coming, too," Jack shouted as he and Jimmy ran to the car with them. Both were on their cell phones. By the time they reached the parking level, all of them were talking. They hurried in the direction of Perry's car and two minutes later, Clark was driving them out onto the street.

"Carver Road?" he asked, unsure which direction to go.

"Take I-36 toward Glendale. It's exit 16."

"Henderson says to tell you he'll pick you up at exit 3 for an escort. He's blocking the northbound lane," Jimmy said as he leaned up over the seat. "What did he say?"

"Just to get there and bring the boys in blue."

"And you're sure it was Sam Lane?" Jack wanted to know.

"Yeah, Jack, I'm sure. It took me a second to recognize his

voice, but it was him.” Perry held tight to the door as Clark veaved in and out of traffic.

“You do know this would be quicker if you’d just fly us out?” All three men glared at Jack when he spoke to Clark. “What? It would, but I guess considering we might have half the police force with us in two minutes...” He pointed up ahead at the dozen or so cars on the interstate overpass.

“I thought we agreed we wouldn’t let him know we knew,” Jimmy whispered fiercely.

“I just think it’s crazy not to tell him we know. I mean, come on. Clark’s our friend and it would be so much easier for him not to have to make up those lame excuses.”

Clark whipped the car to the side of the road halfway up the ramp to the interstate, then shifted so he could see the other men in the car. “What?”

Perry reached over and grasped his shoulder. “We know you’re Superman, son. We’ve known for a while now. We...” He cut his eyes at Jack. “... agreed we wouldn’t say anything because we felt you had a good reason for keeping it from us.”

“Tell ‘em, CK,” Jack said. “You would have told us eventually. We’re family, right? Family sticks together and you were going to let us in on it sooner or later.”

Clark looked at his wide expectant eyes and wanted to hug the younger man. Jack didn’t give trust easily. To have him feel so strongly toward him was amazing. He’d thought about telling them more than one time, especially lately. “How?” was what he finally wanted to know.

“I swear Jack’s got Mad Dog blood,” Jimmy told him. “He figured it out.”

“And you felt you should discuss it with them instead of me?” Clark wanted to know.

“Come on, CK, I talk about everything with Jimmy and hell, the Chief already knew. He knows everything.”

Not being able to do anything else, Clark smiled. “I would have told you,” he let Jack know as he carefully pulled back onto the road.

Jack clapped Clark’s shoulder over the seat, grinning from ear to ear. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with us.”

“Yeah, CK,” Jimmy added. “But personally, I’m glad you know I know. It makes knowing a lot easier.”

“I’m glad you know, too, Jimmy.” And he was. He liked having others who knew. Others he could talk to. “So, Sam said he has Collin?” Clark asked of Perry, closing the discussion on his alter ego for now.

“No. But he’s got him.”

“I wonder how,” Jimmy said. “The man’s been MIA for a while now. Do you think he’s had him this whole time?”

“Oh, for his sake he better not have,” Perry told them. “I’ll kill that man myself.”

As they reached the waiting police cars Clark blinked his lights, allowing the escort to take the lead. Several more marked and unmarked cars fell in behind. The thirty-mile drive barely took fifteen minutes. Police cars swarmed the motel, surrounding it completely. A SWAT van that had been the second vehicle to arrive emptied the fully-dressed team onto the courtyard. Within seconds, every door had been kicked open to make sure the building was secure. They were about to go through number six when it opened.

“Don’t shoot,” Sam Lane said as he stepped into the doorway with his hands held up. “My daughter and grandson are coming out.”

Lucy, clutching Collin, slowly exited the room and was immediately swept toward the police van by two officers.

“Collin!” Clark breathed and was on his way toward them until Perry held him back.

“Let them do their jobs, son.”

The five or so minutes he waited were pure torture. Finally

the van doors opened and Henderson stepped out holding Collin.

“Let’s go, Kent,” he shouted and the man was off.

Clark was ushered into the opposite door of the cruiser Henderson had shoved the baby into. A female officer was holding Collin when Clark closed the door. The car sped away, following another vehicle and with one behind.

“Hi there, little guy,” Clark told the boy as he looked at him. The poor fellow looked scared to death. His wide eyes searched back and forth, trying to keep up with everything that was happening. “I sure am glad to see you.” He reached out tentatively to touch his hand. The stress and commotion was just too much. The boy primped up and started to cry.

“Maybe you should take him,” the officer suggested. She looked more terrified than the child.

Collin screamed loudly, but didn’t fight as Clark pulled him over onto his lap. “I know you don’t know what’s going on, but I promise you’re safe now,” he spoke softly as he put the boy against his chest. “I know, I know,” he soothed as the baby kept crying. He fought for a minute, then gave up and let Clark hold him. “Shhh,” he told him, smoothing his hand over his back. “Shhh.”

By the time they made it back into the city, Collin had calmed to a whimper. His soft hiccups vibrated through Clark’s chest as he continued to struggle with what was going on. The police car pulled up to the back entrance of the station and Clark was guided inside. The representative from the Center for Missing Children was there and so was Mayson Drake.

“Clark!” She and the rep, along with a couple of other people, were waiting inside the conference room. “Poor thing must be scared to death.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed as he held the boy while he sat up to look around him. His eyes met Mayson’s and filled with tears again.

“Oh, honey, don’t cry.”

“Stop!” he yelled and slapped at her.

Clark grasped his hand gently and tucked it by his side. “Calm down, little man. It’s going to be okay.” The boy’s eyes met his and they stared at one another. Collin must have decided the man was okay because he looked around at everyone else.

“Congratulations, Mr. Kent,” the rep spoke up. “We just need to go over a few things and we’ll close this case. Something we’re more than ready to do.”

Clark returned the smile from the other man as he glanced at the child he held. He talked with the rep and the other men he learned were also from the Center. One was liaison to the child protective services agency on Clark’s behalf. The details of official transfer of custody were all completed, the men congratulated Clark and left him and the boy alone with Mayson.

“All of the paperwork is done,” Mayson told him. “As soon as Bill gets here, you can take him home.”

Home, Clark thought as looked at the boy. He had what he’d been praying for this last year and suddenly he was scared senseless. He had no idea what kind of trauma this child had been through, how difficult he’d behave, or even how he’d suddenly ended up in a motel outside the city. Who’d had him? Why? Who would be looking for him now?

A large hand smoothed down the unruly black hair on the baby’s head as he looked at him. Collin was just as gorgeous as his sister. He had the same chubby cheeks and wide, brown eyes. He couldn’t wait to see them together. Would they remember one another? Would they get along?

Were his parents ready for another toddler? Was he?

Before he could think about any of that, Henderson, Perry, and the others came in.

“Oh, wow, look at you,” Jimmy said as he got his first look at the baby. Collin glared at him, pulling away slightly.

“Kid, we are so damn glad to see you,” Jack thought he

should know.

“Language, Jack,” Perry reprimanded the younger man. He rubbed Collin’s arm and smiled brightly. “Your mama’s gonna see me now whether she wants to or not.”

“Does this mean we’re back in business?” Jack wanted to know.

“All bets are off,” Perry answered without looking away from the boy. Jack pumped his fist, more than ready to get back to the investigation.

“Okay, so we’ve questioned Sam a bit,” Henderson spoke up, cutting into their reunion. “He was on Luthor’s payroll until the high dive.” Henderson wasn’t exactly sad the man was gone. “He was recruited by Paul Lang to help create a mind-altering drug. That’s where he’s been until three days ago. He overheard a negotiation between Bill Church and Asabi. Asabi, along with Lucy Lane, have had the child. Lucy was found in the gutter right after Lois was locked up. She was cleaned up and taken to Spain to care for the baby. She was also drugged to keep her nice and calm.”

“Sam overheard this exchange and what? Finally decided it was time for him to be a man?” Perry wanted to know.

“He claims threats were made, that he stayed and did the work to keep his girls and the boy alive,” Bill went on. “But when Church ordered his son to bring Lucy back to be the test subject for this new drug, Lane leapt into action. He said he felt Lois, Lucy, and Collin were safer in the spotlight.”

“How did he find them?” Clark asked.

“I have no idea and he hasn’t said. I guess he knew who to ask and where to look.”

“Why clean Lucy up if you’re just gonna pump her full of pills again?” Jack spoke up.

“The drugs she was given were a lot different than the street stuff she was taking. But she’s a mess. Her mind is almost like mush. She’ll have to undergo some serious rehab before she’ll be lucid enough to testify against Luthor.”

“Testify against Luthor?” Jimmy asked him.

“Oh yeah. Nigel took her to Spain and kept her there. That’s international kidnapping. And if my hunch is right, Luthor ordered that kidnapping long before he went for his little flight. Anyway, Sam Lane has a long night ahead of him answering questions about his last few months. Kent, take that boy home and hold him tight.”

“Don’t worry, Bill. I intend to.” Clark smiled at Collin who was still staring wide-eyed at everyone.

“We’re hoping Sam can help us locate Nigel and Asabi and anybody else who might pose a threat. But if you feel you need protection, don’t hesitate to ask for it. I’ll make some calls and have a little muscle sent out to Kansas if I need to. You do intend to take him to the farm?”

“In a day or two,” Clark confirmed. He didn’t know for sure, but he believed Henderson knew little Perry was Lois’ child, too. Of course, he’d learned today that many people knew all kinds of things.

“You’ll have to bring the baby into the hospital tomorrow for an exam. I would have ordered it tonight, but Lucy assures me that since he’s been with her he hasn’t been harmed.”

Clark’s eyes shifted from Bill to Collin. He hadn’t thought about anything being wrong with the baby. He guessed it made sense to have him checked out though. Maybe he’d even give him a once over Superman style in a little while to make sure.

“It’s a mad house out there,” Bill said as he opened the door.

“We knew this wouldn’t stay quiet long,” Perry spoke up. “Ready?” he asked Clark.

“Yeah.”

The rep from the Center had gone out the front door to give a statement to the mass of press that had gathered in such a short time. Sometimes it was amazing how quickly the news world

found out things. Clark followed Perry out the back where he’d parked. He tucked Collin’s head against his chest and got into the backseat of the car.

“I’ll call you,” Mayson said as she held the door and looked in on him.

“Thank you,” he said as he gave her a half smile.

“Just take care of him.” She closed the door and watched the car pull away.

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“Hey, CK, when we get to your place, if you’ll make me and Jack a list, we’ll scoot out and get Collin a few things he might need,” Jimmy said as he looked over the seat from his position beside Perry in front.

“That would be good, Jimmy.”

“Bill gave us this bag,” Jack indicated the black duffel beside him. “It has a few clothes and diapers.”

“That’s good.” Clark rubbed the boy’s bottom. “I believe he needs a change.” Collin was still staring at everyone as if he was scared to death. Poor guy didn’t know what was going on. If Clark could make this easier for him, he certainly would. The boy had been through so many changes since his birth.

Wide, questioning eyes looked at Clark. His small hand went up to touch his cheek. “Cup,” he said clearly.

“Are you thirsty, big guy?”

“Ah, do you think he can drink from a straw?” Jimmy passed back a large Styrofoam cup from the front.

Clark held it out, offering it to the baby. Collin looked at it a second before he leaned over and grasped the straw with his lips. He definitely knew how to drink from a straw because he sucked hard, gulping down whatever was in the cup. He paused long enough to take a breath, then sucked again. The whole time he never took his eyes off Clark’s. Finally he drew away and looked over at Jack.

“He sure looks a lot like his sister,” the younger man said as he smiled at him.

“Stop!” Collin shouted at him and tried to hit him.

“Hey, hey, I’m your friend,” Jack informed him as he held up his hands. Collin leaned over and smacked the closest hand. Jack laughed softly. “You know how to give five!” He waited for him to do it once more and wasn’t disappointed. The boy slapped his hand against the bigger one again, then sat back to glare at Jack. Jack glared right back.

Collin glanced at Clark before looking at Jack again. Finally he offered up a little smile.

“Oh wow! He has dimples just like Perry,” Jack said excitedly.

Clark’s hand smoothed over the side of Collin’s face. He’d placed the cup in the holder so he could better hold the boy. It was good to see the child have an expression that displayed something other than uncertainly and fear.

“Ah, man, CK, the bottom feeders are at your place,” Jimmy spoke up as they neared Clark’s building.

“Like Perry said, we knew this was going to happen. We’ve made his abduction international news.”

“I’ll pull up and get out to come around and help you fight this crowd,” Perry said as he parked on the curb. He rushed around, along with Jack. “Hey, back off,” he shouted to the reporters clamoring for a word from them.

“How did you find the boy?” came a question.

Clark took a deep breath, tucked Collin’s head against his chest- much to the little guy’s protests- then stepped out when Perry opened the door.

“Mr. Kent, are you glad to have the boy home?”

“Yes,” Clark answered as he moved slowly through the throng.

“Why did Mrs. Luthor grant you custody?” came the next question.

“Lane,” Jimmy corrected. “Her name is Lois Lane.”

“What’s your association with Ms. Lane?”

“Where’s he been?”

“Who had him?”

“Will LexCorp push to regain custody?”

The questions came one after another as they worked their way toward Clark’s apartment. They finally made it to the door and closed themselves safely inside.

“Wow! Do we act like that?” Jack asked as he stepped down into the living room.

“Lois did when she was at her prime,” Jimmy said with a chuckle. “You should have seen her.” He dropped to the sofa and propped up his feet.

Clark took Collin to the bedroom and laid him on the bed to change him. The boy didn’t protest, just stared at him intently. While Clark changed him, he gave him a quick once over with his super vision, relieved that nothing seemed to be amiss. No scars, no healing bones, and no evidence of any other kind of abuse. It appeared Lucy was telling the truth and that Collin had been taken good care of. When he was done, Clark picked the boy back up. The child’s eyes searched his new surroundings carefully. How many new places had the child seen in his short life? They went back out to the other room and Collin’s eyes spotted the toy box beside the couch. He struggled to get down, so Clark set him on his feet and he immediately went to search out something to play with. Clark was relieved to see him at ease enough to play. He supposed the boy had learned to adapt.

“That poor kid’s probably been through the ringer,” Perry deduced as they all watched him.

Collin rooted around in the toys for a moment before finding a ball. “Ball!” he yelled and turned to show it to Clark.

“That’s right, son, that’s a ball,” Clark said and knelt to look at the item with him.

“Ah, man, now you have twice the responsibilities, CK,” Jack said. “Why did you agree to all of this? And for a woman you don’t even know?”

“I don’t know, Jack,” Clark said as he watched Collin go back to the box. “They needed somebody to take care of them.”

“Well, like I tell all my other buddies, they don’t make ‘em any better than you.” He stood up and went in search of something to drink.

“Son,” Perry spoke up. “Are you sure you’re okay with all of this?”

“What choice do I have, Perry?” Clark told him. “They can’t take care of themselves.”

“Ball!” Collin had found another ball, and he promptly threw it at Clark.

The man chuckled and reached blindly for the toy. “How about I fix us all something to eat?”

“I need to get home to Alice,” Perry said. “Jimmy, think you can swing back by and put the paper to bed tonight?”

“You want me to do it?” His wide eyes told him he was stunned.

“Sure. I need to smooch with my wife tonight.” Perry started toward the door. “You have plenty of time though. Run to the store for Clark and have dinner.”

“I won’t let you down, Chief,” Jimmy said with a wide grin.

Clark stood and clapped Perry’s back. “Give Alice a smooch for me, too.”

“Hey, hey,” Perry pointed his finger at him. “See ya, big guy,” he said with a wave at Collin.

“Bye, bye,” was his answer from the curious child. He even threw up a small hand.

“Well, I’ll be Elvis’ manager.”

Clark laughed softly before heading toward the kitchen. “Let me call my folks and I’ll get that list ready.”

“Take your time.” Jimmy clicked on the TV to search for

something to make noise.

Collin turned and ran toward the set. He stopped just inches from it and stared. “Jump! Jump!” And he did exactly that.

The younger men laughed. “Maybe he wants to hear some music,” Jack offered.

Jimmy clicked it over to the video channel and Collin started to dance. “Oh, wow!”

“Check it, CK. He likes music like his sister!”

Clark laughed and turned away as his mom answered the phone. “Mom?”

“Hi, son. Is everything okay?”

“Mom, we found Collin.” There was a long pause on the other end, then his dad joined the conversation.

“You got him?” the man wanted to know.

“We have him. Just a little while ago.”

“Is he okay? Was he hurt? They hadn’t done anything to him, had they?” His mother fired questions at him so quickly he couldn’t answer.

“Mom, calm down. He’s great. Scared, but in great shape. He was with Lois’ sister. We still don’t know what they held him for.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s home and that’s all that matters,” his mother told him.

“When are you gonna bring him out, son?” his father wanted to know.

“Tomorrow maybe. Or the next day. I want to get him acclimated a bit.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll be ready for him,” he was assured. “Give him a hug from his Papa.”

Clark couldn’t help but smile. His folks had insisted these kids were their grandchildren a long time ago. Nana and Papa was what Perry called them. Hell, she called him Dadda. It had just seemed the most natural thing for her to do and the first time she’d said it, Clark was blown away. It felt right. And being as how he took care of her like a father should, he thought it was justified. Apparently everyone else did, too. They’d never referred to him as anything other than daddy around Perry.

He said his good-byes to his parents and located his notepad. He jotted down a few items for Jack and Jimmy to pick up for Collin. He would have to go buy more clothes later, but the guys could pick up enough to get him through the night.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Jimmy told the other man as he took the list and started toward the door. When they opened it, Mayson was about to knock. “Hey, come on in. We were on the way to grab some things for CK.”

“Clark?” Mayson called after she closed the door. Collin turned from the TV and looked up at her. “Hey there, Collin.”

He ran to the kitchen, hiding behind Clark’s leg. “Stop!” he shouted at Mayson.

Clark chuckled softly. “I think that’s his favorite word,” Clark said as he tried to walk over to the counter with the items he’d fished out of the fridge. He was thrilled Collin felt comfortable enough to seek shelter with him. The boy clutched his leg tightly so it made moving difficult.

“I made a few calls and had a patrol stop out front and issue a few warnings.”

“Thanks. I’ll give an official statement in a day or two.”

Clark pulled out the cutting board and grabbed a knife. He glanced down at the boy still clinging to his leg. “Hey, little man, how would you like a snack?” He opened a banana and held part of it down for him. Collin eyed it carefully before taking it. He eased away from Clark enough so he could look around the kitchen island at Mayson. “Looks like he’s checking you out.”

Mayson smiled over at the boy. “That’s okay.” She watched Clark as he worked to get dinner prepared.

“Do you want to join us for dinner? Spaghetti and salad. I figured he’d eat that.”

Collin went back around and held up his hand to Clark. “More!”

“You want the rest?” He gave the boy the banana and went back to chopping veggies. He glanced up at Mayson, then did something he’d never done in front of her- he used his powers. His hands became a blur and when he was done, so was the salad.

She looked up at him and grinned. “Nice, Mr. Kent.”

He laughed aloud and turned to lower his glasses so he could heat the water in the pot for the pasta. The gas stove would cook it quickly, but he often helped it out by getting it to boiling. “So, are you staying to eat with us?”

“Yeah, I guess I am hungry. And being as how your check for my services never reached the bank...”

He turned to look at her with a quirked brow. “A lawyer who works for food. I could handle that kind of fee.”

They laughed together as he continued to work. Collin had drifted back into the living room to dance in front of the TV.

“I’ve asked Dan to come on board as an investigator for Lois.” Clark looked up at her. “I’ve also filed for Post-Conviction Relief- a PCR. She might not want the help, but the more I’ve thought about it, the more I’m convinced things are not what they seem.”

“This PCR, what will it do?”

“I’m using it for sentence reduction. She agreed to plead guilty and made that deal without proper legal representation. If I can get a judge from another jurisdiction to hear the relief request, I think we can get her bounced out of there in half the time she agreed to.”

“Tell me how a judge agreed to give someone ten years for a murder conviction anyway? Doesn’t that carry a thirty-year minimum sentence in New Troy?”

“Yes, but the agreement was for murder in the third degree.”

“Wouldn’t Luthor turn over in his grave to know his cronies dealt her down so far?”

Mayson laughed at that. She jumped in surprise when a small hand smacked her leg.

“Stop!”

“Just tell me what I did and I’ll be glad to,” she told the boy with a smile.

He glared at her, a confused expression on his face.

Clark pulled one of Perry’s cups from the cabinet and poured the little guy some milk. “How about this, son?”

Collin looked back at him where he’d knelt at the end of the counter. After a moment, he walked over and took the cup. “Ta-ta,” he mumbled around the spout.

“You’re welcome,” Clark answered. Ta-Ta was the same thing Perry said to say thank you. Collin pulled the cup away from his lips and offered Clark a wide smile before running back in the other room. “Wow,” Clark breathed, blown away by the child’s bright grin.

“Looks like another kid has you wrapped,” Mayson commented.

Clark stood and walked back around to the stove. “Yeah, well, it’s easy to do when you have chubby cheeks and dimples.”

“Maybe I should have gained a few pounds,” Mayson mumbled as she watched Collin.

“Careful,” he cautioned. “I have super ears.”

“Yeah, I know.” They looked at one another, then smiled again. They often bantered like that when they were together, although this was the first time he’d made references to his super side. Clark had gained a true friend in Mayson. He was very glad he’d met her.

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Clark sat on the window seat and watched Collin sleep. The boy had been terrified to close his eyes. He’d cried for nearly an hour. They’d walked, rocked, sang, listened to music, and even took a second bath. Finally Clark floated off the floor and flew

Collin around the apartment. To his amazement, it had calmed the child almost immediately.

What must that child think? The first few months of his life he’d been cared for by a nanny and a mother so out of her mind she probably didn’t know who the baby was. Then the nanny was ripped from him and he was swept away by God only knew who. Nigel had kidnapped Lucy to care for him. Obviously he’d done that just so Lois would agree to sign part of her life away. But why? Luthor was dead, and Nigel was the star witness. Lois had already been in an impossible position. Why have her agree to only ten years?

How had Collin gone from being with Nigel to being with Asabi? He guessed Asabi had taken Collin for financial reasons. Who was paying him to keep that child? Why would they? Did having Luthor’s son give someone power over his estate?

A reporter outside his apartment had asked if LexCorp would try to regain custody. He’d asked Mayson about it. She’d assured him that a corporation could not attain custody of a child. When Lucy was able to testify who her kidnapper had been, LexCorp would be further discredited. Clark was just thankful Luthor didn’t have any living family members who might step forward with a claim on the boy. While he might not have asked to be an instant daddy to twins, he couldn’t imagine handing them over to anyone else other than their mother.

Looking at Collin, Clark couldn’t help but see Lois in his features. His small stature and curious eyes could both be attributed to his mother. He also had her lips. From what Jimmy said, Collin had her fire as well. There was a definite resemblance between mother and son. Of course, Perry looked like Lois as well. They were both gorgeous children and he was glad he’d gotten a chance to know them. The sacrifices he’d made and would make were nothing compared to the rewards. And if he listened to Jack, they could even pass for his children. He’d said at dinner tonight that it was uncanny how much Collin looked like him, even more so than Perry.

He laughed softly as he rose and walked over to ease into the bed beside his son. If Collin was an early riser, he’d need a bit of rest to keep up with him. He’d also need his strength, both mentally and physically, for the physical exam Henderson insisted on.

Maybe tomorrow would be the day Lois finally talked with Perry, too.

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Lois was angrier than she’d ever been in her life. Hadn’t she told Perry she didn’t want to see anybody? Hadn’t she told Mayson she didn’t need her help anymore? No meant no!

The guard made her go to the attorney visiting area even though she protested quite loudly. She’d been told that if she didn’t go, it would mean a week in solitary. That wasn’t a place she wanted to go. She couldn’t read the on-line version of the Planet. And unless she finished up in laundry, she’d miss her chance today to read it.

The door opened and Lois stepped in. Perry had been pacing behind Mayson where she sat at the table. He stopped and looked over at the woman he’d once felt was his daughter. This one was no one he knew. She was lean, leaner than before, toned to perfection- maybe even too much. Her hair was mid-length, feathered in layers- quite different than any style she’d ever worn. But what kept Perry from recognizing her was the haunted expression on her face. She was void of emotion, a cold glare casting shadows behind her eyes. The scowl matched her defensive posture.

Deciding to remain as defiant as she possibly could, Lois didn’t even blink when she saw Perry in the room. “I thought I told both of you I didn’t want to see you.”

“We found Collin,” Perry told her right away.

The arms Lois had clasped across her chest fell slowly to her

sides as the expression on her face was transformed in an instant. “What?”

“He’s with Clark as we speak.”

Her eyes filled with tears no matter what she insisted her body do, so she whirled toward the door, unable and unwilling to show how affected she was.

“All of the paperwork has been done,” Mayson spoke up.

“They won’t take him away again?” she whispered, interrupting whatever the lawyer was trying to say.

“Not if we can help it,” Perry said, moving toward her. He couldn’t stand to see her like this.

“That’s just it,” Lois almost shouted when she faced them again. “You can’t stop them. No one can. If Lex wanted that child for whatever sick reason, those orders will be carried out even now. His cronies were paid well to remain loyal. And death didn’t void the contract.”

“Lois,” Mayson tried. “We have things under control. An international warrant has been issued for Nigel’s and Asabi’s arrest.”

“Lucy?” she asked. Her sister had been caring for Collin. What did they do to her?

“She’s going to be in the hospital for a long time, Lois. They’d been giving her some kind of experimental drug.”

Lois looked at the other woman. “Probably the same stuff they were giving me.”

Perry nodded. “Yeah, yeah. S.T.A.R. Labs is comparing the two. If we could have made a connection with you...” He shoved a rough hand across his thin hair.

“I made my choices, Perry,” Lois told him as she pulled out a chair and sat down. They were here and wouldn’t leave until she’d listened to them.

“No, Lois, Luthor made them for you. He took away your right to say no when he shoved those pills down your throat.” Perry sat across from her, pleading with her to understand. She knew he was right, but if he knew Lois, she felt ashamed of herself and probably embarrassed by the situation she’d gotten herself into.

“And look where it got me!”

“Excuse me for being so blunt, but you signed the damned papers.” Perry had passed frustrated a long time ago. If this girl wanted to do battle, he’d accommodate her.

“What choice did I have?” she asked him as she thrust herself back to her feet, glaring at Perry. “They would have broken my boy’s legs.”

“And now they won’t be able to.” Perry rose and faced off with her. “So why don’t you get off your ass and quit feeling sorry for yourself so we can push Luthor’s arrogance down his cold, dead throat?!”

Lois stood there, her chest moving up and down in an effort to control her anger. She hadn’t been able to let it out, not like she’d wanted to.

Mayson stood and reached out to grab Perry’s arm. “Why don’t we all just sit down and talk this over rationally?”

Perry and Lois squared off for several more minutes before they slowly sat back down.

“Now, Collin is safe. Child protective services has released him to Clark and they’re getting to know one another. As far as keeping him safe, I think we have that covered. LexCorp is in the limelight and if I have anything to do with it, we’ll keep them there. Trying anything to harm Collin would be a grave mistake.” She opened her briefcase and pulled out a few papers. “Being as you don’t want to help yourself, I felt someone had to. I’ve filed a PCR- post conviction relief. Most of the time this kind of relief gets a conviction overturned, negating the need for a new trial. But in your case, you agreed to a plea bargain.”

“So a PCR would only be used to reduce my sentence,” Lois finished for her.

“I see you’re versed in law.”

“Yeah, well, I have a little extra time these days,” she answered sarcastically.

Mayson gave her a lopsided smile. Lately she’d come to truly feel sorry for this lady. She wished there was more she could do to help her. Unfortunately, she was doing all she could do. “LexCorp is not filing the paperwork. It might take a while for the PCR to come through.”

“I’ve got time,” she said with the same flippant tone again.

“In the meantime, we’re taking up the investigation again,” Perry told her.

“I swear, Perry, if you get my babies hurt...”

“Nobody is going to hurt either of those kids.”

She looked down at the table, suddenly feeling ten years older.

“Let’s go over what will happen with this relief appeal...”

Lois stared at a spot on the table while Mayson talked about the PCR, locating another judge, and shaving five years off her sentence. That meant she’d still be here for five \*long\* years. That was over four years from now. How in hell could she do that time without losing her mind? She already felt she’d go crazy. Getting up day after day, doing the same things over and over, and never being able to see her babies...

“Would you like to see them?”

Perry’s question made her head snap up, her eyes searching his. “How could I, Perry? How could I bring them here then get up over and over when all I’d want to do is see them again? It’s been a \*long\* year, but I’ve managed to be able to open my eyes every day without seeing them around every corner. To have them visit...” She turned her head, sniffing a little as she did so. “I just can’t do that to them.”

“Do that to them? Don’t you think they’d want to see their mother?” Perry asked her.

“I know they would.” She stood and paced over to look out the small window. “It’s been a year. They probably don’t even know who I am now. Why bring them here? To this horrid place to see their mother locked up like an animal? It’s bad enough I’ll have to tell them some day that I killed their father.”

“Stop that now!” Perry got up and went to her. “You didn’t kill Luthor. He killed himself.”

“Something happened on that roof and I can’t tell you what. All I do know is Lex is dead and I’m in jail for his murder.” She wiped her face, squared her shoulders, and faced Perry. “I won’t see the kids here. I just can’t. Obviously I can’t stop Mayson from doing whatever she’s doing, and I can’t stop you from investigating Lex now. So, you do what you have to do, and I’ll do what I have to do.” She started toward the door.

“When all of this is over, I’ll expect you to finally admit that sometimes there’s another way to do things than just your way.”

Her sad eyes met Perry’s again. “Yeah, well, right now, nobody’s way is doing a bit of good, is it?”

He could only watch as she knocked on the door and left. He sighed heavily before facing Mayson. “Do whatever you have to do. The checks will keep coming and if you need anything else, call me. We’ll all do what we can on our end.”

“We’ll find it Perry,” Mayson said as she stood up. “We’ll find whatever Luthor was hiding from the world.”

He certainly hoped so. There was too much riding on it.

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Clark had listened from outside the curtain as long as he could. He’d taken Collin to the hospital as Henderson had wanted him to do and the boy was taken into an exam room. The doctor had thought it best Clark wait outside, to help keep the boy calm. However, it hadn’t worked very well. The toddler began screaming from the time Clark passed him off to the nurse, and he hadn’t stopped yet. Nearly ten minutes later, Clark had enough. He pushed the curtain aside and stepped up to the bed.

“Collin, son, listen to me.” His eyes snapped up to the woman holding the child’s arms. “Let me.” She glared at him, but released her hold on the child. Clark lifted the boy up and smoothed his hand over his bare back. “Is this really necessary?” he asked the doctor. “You’ve taken x-rays and found nothing. Ears, eyes, chest are all clear. What do you need blood for?”

“We need to make sure there are no drugs in his system? period Please, Mr. Kent, Inspector Henderson said it has to be documented.”

And he knew Bill was right. It was better to be safe than sorry. If there were drugs in Collin’s system, it could have severe effects on him later. Or the deadly stuff could have already had consequences. He just hated to hear him cry. He’d calmed a bit, obviously convinced Clark was his shelter from the storm because he’d wrapped his small arms around the man’s large neck. Clark squeezed his eyes closed a moment before nodding his consent. He pried Collin from his neck, who immediately began screaming loudly again. “Son, listen.” He held one of the flailing arms, carefully tucking him against his side. “I’ll hold his arm,” he said to the nurse. She nodded and waited for Clark to get Collin situated for her to draw the blood. The boy struggled and screamed louder, but Clark managed, very painfully, to hold him until the procedure was finished. As soon as it was over, he pulled the child back to his chest. This time instead of seeking shelter, Collin pushed against him.

“Stop! Stop!” he shouted, then slapped Clark’s face.

“I know, son, I know.” He allowed the boy to fight until he’d drained himself. He finally stopped struggling and whimpered, hiccups the tale-tell sign that he’d been upset. Clark carefully lifted his hand and wiped the wet face staring up at him with sad, questioning eyes. “I know you don’t understand, but this had to be done.” He shifted him to the bed and began to redress him. Collin didn’t fight, just laid there, sniffing and watching him carefully. When Clark had him redressed, he picked him up and faced the doctor. “Are we finished?”

“Yes. Collin seems healthy and well nourished.”

“Good.” He smoothed a hand over unruly hair. “Thank you.”

“I’ll send my report to Henderson.”

Clark nodded and he and Collin left the hospital. The child did a fair job ignoring him on the way downtown. They stopped for a Happy Meal and the boy refused to eat. Clark tried to reason with him, but it was no use. They made their way to the Planet and up to Perry’s office.

“Hey, CK. Collin, my main man,” Jack said and held up his hand for a high five. The boy stared at him for a moment before slapping his hand in return. “That’s my boy!”

“Looks like it’s just me he’s mad at,” Clark commented as he tried again to get the boy’s attention.

“Why’s he mad?”

“I took him to the hospital to be checked over and held him while they took blood.”

“Ouch! Hey, come here.” Jack held out his hands to grasp Collin under his arms. “Let’s me and you go find some donuts.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Clark said as he relinquished the angry boy over to the younger man. Collin wasn’t exactly happy to go, but he didn’t fight either. After watching them walk away, Clark continued to Perry’s office.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be taking care of that boy,” Perry insisted as he looked up from sorting files on his desk.

“Jack’s got him.” He indicated with a quick wave of his hand. “He’s a little upset because of the exam today.”

“I can understand that.” He lifted a file and read a moment. “I have all of your notes in a box. You can hit the ground running when you get back. Of course, it’s still a time permitting thing. There’s something there, but we can’t pull you and Jimmy off the daily beat to work on it exclusively. It’ll be all Jack does, unless

he’s needed for something else.”

“I take it you saw Lois today.”

“Yeah.” Perry looked at him sadly. “This has really broke that girl. I’ve never seen someone so... angry.”

“She has good reason to be angry,” Clark defended her.

“Oh yeah, I agree. The bitterness is what really tore my heart out. She’s let this taint all that’s good in her. Said she didn’t even want to see the kids.”

“What?”

“I asked if she’d like to see her babies and you’d have thought I’d sentenced her to ten more years.”

Clark glanced out at Collin. How could she not want to see them?

How could she in that house of hell? If Lois was anything like he suspected her to be, she didn’t want to expose those children to that kind of environment. And she probably felt that if she saw them once, she’d die having to leave them behind again.

“I guess I can understand a little of how she feels,” Perry interrupted his thoughts. “I know I’d die having to look at my babies through a glass wall. Not to mention watching them leave with someone else again.”

“Then having to think of nothing but that,” Clark finished. “She’s probably managed to get her mind to a place she’s able to breathe.”

“Yeah, she said as much.” Perry walked around the desk and squeezed the other man’s shoulder. “I believe I’ve found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow with you, boy.”

Clark chuckled and dropped his eyes to the floor.

“Hey, guys,” Jack said as he and Collin came into the room. “This fellow likes chocolate donuts.”

“He \*is\* his mother’s son,” Jimmy spoke up as he walked up behind them.

Collin just looked between them, chocolate covering his lips. He held his donut out, his lips puckered as he chewed. He took another bite, staring at everyone like he thought they’d lost their minds.

They all shared a brief laugh as they watched him.

“What do you say, big guy? You ready to cut me a break?”

Clark reached out tentatively, almost relieved when the boy leaned over, giving permission for the man to take him. “Guess that chocolate’s helped with your anger.”

“Maybe we should send a few hundred pounds to the prison,” Jack commented and picked up a few files from Perry’s desk.

“Later, CJ,” he told the boy. He waved over his shoulder as he went off to work his magic. If there was something to be found, that boy would find it.

Clark and Collin took their leave, allowing Perry and Jimmy to get back to work. Outside on the sidewalk, Clark rooted around in the backpack he’d brought along with some of Collin’s things in it to search out a wipe. As he cleaned the toddler’s hands, he glanced up at him. “What do you think we should do today?” The boy was more interested in the people rushing by around them. And the noises and cars and shouts... it was as if it all excited the little guy. “How about the park? Would you like to go play?” He lifted him from the top of the news rack he’d sat him on to clean him up and they headed toward Centennial Park.

The boy’s head jerked back and forth as he looked at all of the new surroundings. “Haven’t you ever been to the park?” Clark asked him. By the time he stood the little fellow on his feet beside the jungle gym, he’d deduced that Collin had probably never been a lot of places. He’d make it a point to go speak with Lucy Lane as soon as she was able.

Collin stood staring up at the slide and the other kids running around. He glanced back at Clark, who was kneeling behind him waiting patiently. A little girl’s shriek made him jump and his expression indicated he might cry. But after a moment it passed and he took a step. A glance at Clark who smiled, then a step.

Before long, the curious child was climbing the large platform up onto the jungle gym. With an expression that must have been part of his genetic make-up, he flopped down and pushed like he'd seen the other kids do. Clark caught him at the bottom of slide and was rewarded with a wide grin.

"Look at that!" He quickly placed him on his feet because impatience had set in. Collin was off at a run. By the third slide, he laughed aloud. "Oh wow!" Clark lifted him up above his head, smiling at the sound the child made. He was rewarded with another laugh. "I like that!"

Down again, the boy was headed toward the swing. He jumped up and down, glancing back at Clark to come help him. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" he shouted over and over.

"Okay, okay. I get the hint," Clark said as he went over and lifted the boy into a child swing. "This is a swing," he explained as he set the seat in motion. A sharp intake of breath told him the child was scared. He immediately reached out to stop the swing.

"No!" the boy said and pushed his hand off the seat. "Go!"

"You're a brave one, huh?" He set him moving again, realizing Collin had been surprised by the motion of the toy. After several moments, surprise had been replaced with pure excitement. And his laughter started again.

"Go!" The boy jumped up and down in his seat, laughing and shouting happily. "Jump! Jump!"

Clark laughed with him. The string of jumbled words was impossible to understand, but Collin was sure enjoying his playtime. Soon enough he was bored with the swing. He ran toward the merry-go-round and showed no fear as Clark spun it hard. From there he was climbing the rock wall. He took a turn on the seesaw with Clark, then he was off to climb the monkey bars. When he tired of that, he spotted the pond off in the distance. His quick moving feet made short work of the distance between him and the water. Clark caught him right before he jumped in.

"Whoa!" He grabbed Collin by his arm and lifted him around. "It's a little too cool to get in the water. Besides, you really don't want to swim in that dirty water." He set him back on his feet. "No," he told him firmly and pointed at the pond.

Collin glanced at the water, then back at Clark. His eyes drifted off as he saw a goose. "Duck!" he yelled and pointed.

"No, son, that's a goose."

"Doose!" He was after the poor bird before Clark could stop him. He even managed to pull a feather from its tail causing the animal to turn and peck at him. The boy's shriek pierced the air and he held his little hand against his chest.

"Did he get you?" Clark knelt and reached out to grasp his hand so that he could inspect the damage. Fortunately there was only a red mark. "It didn't break the skin. I think you'll live." He pulled the hand up and kissed the bruised skin.

"Boo boo," Collin said as he inspected his hand.

"No, no boo boo. It's red, but it'll be okay."

"Tis it." He shoved his hand back toward Clark's face.

Clark kissed it again, then smiled. "Is that better?"

"Yep." He smiled back then set off in search of something else to do.

Amazing, Clark thought as he chased after the little boy. He was discovering everything for the first time and Clark was enjoying discovering it with him. It was also amazing how caring for a child could completely transform your perspective. He might not have asked to care for two children he didn't even know, but he was completely rewarded by doing it. As he watched Collin, he decided that the dark haired little boy was going to change his life completely- that boy and his sister.

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The items on the desk flew across the room as the man swiped his hand over the surface. If he read one more article...

"Can you believe the audacity of those people?" he asked

Nigel as he came into the room.

"Yes, sir. Quite." The older man couldn't understand why Lex was so angry. That brat was out of their hair. Good riddance, he thought as he remembered the days of listening to the awful screaming. Not to mention the smells and that revolting food they constantly spit all over the place.

"That's \*my\* son!"

"Maybe I should remind you that he's no one's son." Nigel felt he should point out that the child was not even human. He was an it, a thing Lex had commissioned Paul Lang to create.

Lex heaved to catch his breath as he stared at Nigel. "Who do you think you are? No one speaks to me that way!"

"My apologies, sir. I just don't think we should lose perspective here. The objective would be lost."

"What objective, Nigel? Without the boy we have nothing."

"I beg to differ. You have billions of dollars and a new life." He shrugged. "Of course, you could always just create another one."

"You know, Nigel, sometimes you just..." He stopped his rant and stared at the other man. "... have a pretty good idea." An evil smile had spread across his face and he turned to dig through a drawer on his desk. "Is there any word on our dear doctor?"

"Not yet. It seems he was working for Church."

Lex's head snapped up. "What?"

"Lane told police that he and Lang had been working for Church. They were trying to perfect the drugs you had Lang start developing."

"Do you know if they succeeded?"

"They made it to the testing stage. If it's any consolation, Church is fit to be tied. Lang's disappeared on him, too."

Lex pulled out a file and quickly flipped through it. "Let me look over a few things and you make some calls for me. By next week we'll be on our way to the city. With any luck, we'll also have little Xavier back where he belongs."

"She changed his name," Nigel pointed out.

"His name is Xavier!" He leaned over and scribbled several numbers. "Call these people and see how they feel about LexCorp."

"Right away, sir." Nigel took the paper and headed out of the room.

Lex sat down and smiled as he thought about reclaiming his position at the top of the world.

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Clark landed outside his parents' house just before midnight. Collin had fallen asleep a little quicker tonight, thanks to the trip to the park that afternoon. The boy had run until his little legs could barely move any longer. They'd grabbed take-out and watched a cartoon while they ate. After his bath, Collin danced in front of the television for a while. The toddler kept rubbing his eyes, clearly very tired. But just as the night before, he fought the pull to sleep. When he was finally out, Clark changed into his suit and tucked the boy under his cape before flying out to Kansas. He would have kept him longer, but he just couldn't wait to see the twins together.

Martha was waiting in the kitchen when he went in. "Oh, look at him," she said when Clark pulled the edge of the cape away. She reached to take the boy.

"I'll go get his things real quick."

Martha barely knew he was gone before he was back. He spun back into his regular clothes and stepped closer to his mother. She was staring down at the sleeping baby, a wide smile on her face.

"Did Dad get his bed ready?"

"Yes. It's in the room with Perry." She smoothed her hand over his angelic face. "His hair is so long."

"We can get it cut when he gets settled in. Do you want me to carry him up to bed?"

“I can do it.” They walked together up to the room that was once Clark’s. Another crib had been added to the room, arranged alongside the other so the two babies could see one another when they woke. It would give them a chance to study one another. Martha gently placed the baby boy in his bed and tucked the cover around him. “Sound sleeper,” she commented.

“Hardly,” Clark answered as he set the bags he had near the closet. “Last night was awful. He cried and fought until he was worn out. He didn’t cry tonight, but he wouldn’t be still until he simply passed out from exhaustion.”

“Oh, this poor baby,” his mother crooned as she looked down at Collin. “He must be so confused and terrified.”

“I’ll stay with you guys at night as long as you need me to,” Clark told her as he walked up her and put arm around her. “I hate placing all of this on you guys.”

“Are you kidding? Jonathan and I are having the time of our lives. Clark, we’ve always wanted a house full of kids.”

“Surely not at retirement age, Mom.” He guided her toward the door. The last thing he wanted to do was wake up Collin.

“So we’ll have a house full of grandkids.”

Clark rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. “Mom, you know they’re not your grandkids.”

“Not by blood,” Martha said as she pulled away and placed a hand on her bedroom door. “Love’s thicker anyway.”

Before Clark could say anything else, his mom closed herself off in her room. He just shook his head and went back into his old room to make himself a place to sleep on the floor. He wanted to be close in case Collin woke up during the night and was scared.

Thank goodness he could float, Clark thought as he spread out the blanket he’d taken from the closet. The last few days had caught up with him because he was more than ready to lie down. For the first time in a long time, he even managed to let his mind rest as he placed his head on his pillow. Tomorrow was a new day.

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Collin’s wide eyes moved back and forth frantically as his bottom lip poked out in a pout. He was just about to start screaming when his eyes fell on another pair of brown orbs staring right back at him.

“Baby,” said the little girl clutching the top of her crib and looking at her visitor. Perry wasn’t as shy as her brother. “Hi, baby!” She waved her little hand at him and smiled.

The boy had no idea what to do. He just sat there, staring at her.

“Dadda!” The little girl yelled out and looked down at the man lying on the floor. “Dadda! Baby! See baby!”

Clark slowly rolled over and looked up at Perry. “Hi there, sunshine,” he managed as he struggled to his feet. “How’s my big girl?” He reached in and picked her up, kissing her cheek.

“Baby! See!” Perry leaned toward the other crib, smiling and babbling.

“Yes, sweetie. That’s Collin.” He pulled her up and settled her on his arm. “Hey, big guy.” The boy stared up at him, his lip quivering on the verge of crying. “It’s okay. This is Perry. She’s your sister.”

“Baby,” Perry said again and tried to climb into the crib with Collin.

“Here.” Clark eased her down in front of the boy. She sat for a moment before crawling over on her knees, her hand going up to touch the other baby.

“Hi, baby!”

Collin scooted backwards away from her. “Stop!” He swatted at her, smacking her in the face.

Perry’s smile faded and she primped up. “No!” she yelled at him. “No hit!”

“That’s right, Perry,” Clark said as he leaned over to grasp Collin’s arm. When the boy looked up at him, he shook his finger

at him. “No hitting! That’s not very nice.” Immediately the boy began to cry, large tears welling in his eyes. “I know you don’t understand, little man,” Clark said as he picked him up, soothing a hand over his back where he lay against his chest.

Perry stood up and watched her daddy hold the new baby. “Baby cry.”

“Yes, Perry. The baby’s crying. He’s scared.” Clark leaned over and scooped up the other child and sat down on the floor. He situated them so they could look at one another. Collin’s head was lying over on Clark’s shoulder, but after a few minutes he leaned up to look at Perry.

“Baby,” the boy said of Perry.

“That’s right, son. Perry.”

Collin leaned over to touch the girl, the same way she’d done him. “Baby,” he repeated.

She laughed, her teeth shining brightly. “Baby.”

“Collin,” Clark told her again.

Perry looked up at him, then back at her brother. “Baby.”

Clark chuckled softly. “I guess baby will do.” He kissed her head and eased them both to the blanket so he could get up and get the things he needed to change them.

Perry sat wide-eyed as Clark changed Collin. When he pulled her down, the boy stood up and looked around the room. He watched Clark for a second, then turned to walk away, curious about his new surroundings.

“Wait up, big guy,” Clark said as he finished changing Perry at super speed. He held her as he went to grasp Collin’s arm right before the child started down the stairs. There was a gate at the bottom, but they’d never put one at the top. Clark would take care of that later in the day. He allowed the little guy to walk down the stairs as he held his hand. When they stepped into the kitchen, Jonathan looked up from his coffee.

“Hey there!”

“Hi, Papa!” was Perry’s happy response. She struggled for Clark to put her down, then hurried over for her morning hug.

“How’s my sunshine this morning?”

“I happy!” she said.

“Good.” He kissed the top of her head and allowed her to go greet Martha. He looked up at Collin, who still held tight to Clark’s hand. “Hey, Collin. Papa’s glad to see you finally.”

The boy stared at him, but for the first time meeting someone new, he didn’t tell him to stop. He glanced up at Clark, pulled his hand away, then walked over to stand next to Jonathan.

“Do you want a hug, too?” the older man asked him. He didn’t wait for an answer, just lifted him up to sit on the table. “You are one handsome fellow. And so big.” He was taller and more solid than Perry. The boy just sat there staring at him.

“That’s amazing,” Clark said as he watched the exchange. “He usually yells ‘stop’ when he meets a new person.” He sat and took the coffee his mom offered him. She’d put Perry in her highchair and went back to get the toddlers’ breakfast.

Collin reached up to touch Jonathan’s face, offered him a smile, then looked toward Clark. “Cup!”

“We can do that,” Martha said, handing him a full sippy cup.

The boy took it and sucked happily, still eying the man who’d called himself Papa. After a moment, he clutched the cup against his chest so he could speak again. “Eat!”

The adults laughed softly and Jonathan settled him in his lap to feed him. “Is this okay?” he asked the boy. “We’ll have to get another highchair.”

“Are you guys sure it’s okay that he’s here? I can tell Perry...”

“Tell Perry what?” Martha wanted to know as she set food in front of the little girl. “Sorry, we have to turn him away because my folks can’t handle two. Don’t be ridiculous, Clark. He needs us.”

Clark looked over at the baby. He was leaning forward to get

another bite; Jonathan couldn't feed him fast enough. "Yeah," he agreed. "I think I need them both," he said softly. He looked up when his mom placed a hand on his shoulder.

"What's going on, son?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just feel... so many things since Perry came into my life. And yesterday, watching Collin discover new things- I felt..." He sighed, unable to describe how he felt. "I just wish their mother would at least see them. You know she told Perry she couldn't. Said if she saw them and had to let them leave, she didn't think she could make it through the rest of her time."

"Clark, that poor girl is probably so mixed up," Martha observed. "I know I'd be if someone stripped me of my dignity, my identity, and my freedom."

"I guess so." Clark glanced over at Perry, then to Collin. "This is just such a weird situation. But I'm grateful to Lois for bringing these guys into my life."

"So are we, boy. So are we," Jonathan agreed as Collin reached out to grasp his hand so he could bring the spoon to his mouth. The man chuckled. "I guess I'm not fast enough."

"More!" Collin said as he looked up at Jonathan.

"Okay. We have plenty." The man leaned over and touched his nose to the boy's, causing him to stare like he'd been burned. "What? Did I do something wrong?"

Collin reached up to touch his nose. "Nose."

"That's right." He touched Collin's nose. "Nose."

Collin struggled around and touched his nose against Jonathan's. "Lub u," he said with a wide grin.

The old man's eyes widened in stunned disbelief. "I love you," he managed as he smiled back.

"How 'bout that?" Clark said as he watched the exchange. "Lucy must have done that with him. I plan on talking to her in a few days."

"That poor girl." Martha poured more coffee before she sat down to her own breakfast.

"I think I'll take this big guy out to help me on the tractor today," Jonathan announced after they'd finished their breakfast.

"You two be careful," Martha warned him.

"We will." Jonathan had risen and was headed for the door. He stopped and turned back toward the table. "Tell 'em bye-bye, Collin."

"Bye-bye," the boy said and waved his hand.

"Bye." Clark was still smiling when they went out. "I guess I shouldn't have been so worried about him."

"No. He's going to be just fine."

"I wonder why he's taken up with Dad so quickly." Clark handed Perry's cup to her.

"Are you jealous?" his mom wanted to know.

"Mom, no. I'm thrilled he's so trusting. I was worried about him that first night. I kept thinking 'what have I done?' But seeing him with Dad is great."

She reached over and grasped his hand. "He'll be more than okay."

Clark smiled at her. "I know. Look how I turned out."

Perry began to chant something no one could understand, but she seemed happy enough.

"Oh really?" Clark asked her as he stood and scooped her out of the chair. "How about me and you see what we can get into today?" She grasped his face and planted a solid, sloppy kiss on his lips. "Ah, sunshine, that's the best thing in the world."

The little girl's laughter rang out around the room as Clark tickled her. They drifted outside to enjoy the beautiful day.

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Three days later Clark was back in the city, knee deep in a story about mistreatment of patients at an assisted living center. He was also eager to get back to his research of Luthor and LexCorp. He'd stayed with his folks to get Collin settled and

make sure he had all he needed before he came home. To his amazement, the toddler seemed to be completely at ease on the farm. And by the time dinner was cleaned up that first night, the twins appeared to be friends. The day he left, they watched from the porch, holding hands. He couldn't be more thrilled.

He'd come back to find notes on this story waiting on him. Perry said it was top priority because his ninety-year-old mother-in-law lived at this particular center.

"Hey, CK, how does Collin like the farm?" Jack wanted to know as he pulled over a chair next to Clark and sat down.

"He loves it. And he's crazy about my dad."

"What does he think about Perry?"

"They seem to be the best of friends. He'll take her hand and lead her around the yard. It's so cute." Clark grinned as he thought about them together. "She's always trying to kiss him."

"I'm glad they like each other so much."

"Me, too."

"But I'll tell you again. You're one of a kind." He clapped the other man's shoulder. "Now, how about I talked to the medical examiner and he told me a few interesting things? Do you remember the girl found in Suicide Slum I said was Sara?" Clark nodded. "She was the daughter of Judge Carl Beckham. He's the circuit court judge from Rolland County. Well, he and his wife have filed a lawsuit against Luthor's estate. They contend that because she was working for Luthor when she died, he was responsible for her safety."

"What was the cause of death?"

"Head trauma."

Clark leaned back in his chair. "Really?"

"Yep. It gets better. Luthor's body was so badly traumatized, the assistant examiner signed off without an autopsy."

"What?" He sat up straighter, placing his forearms on the desk.

"But..." Jack grinned widely. "The head ME had already ordered tissue and blood samples be taken. I called Mayson and she's getting a court order for the samples to be turned over to Bernie at S.T.A.R. Labs for analysis."

"What's she hoping to find?"

"Anything to help Lois." Jack stood up, shoving his chair in the general direction it had come from. "I'm off to see what other mysteries I can uncover."

"Okay. I'll see you later."

"Later."

As interesting as that information had been, he needed to make some headway on his story. He made a couple of calls and left to talk to the director of the center. Luthor and his secrets would just have to wait.

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Jonathan made a wide turn with the tractor and dropped the blades for the final cut. He'd been mowing all afternoon and he was more than ready to be done. He and his grandkids had plans tonight and he was anxious to get home. As he pulled alongside the edge of the field next to the road he noticed the black SUV sitting in the driveway of the Irigs' place. He'd seen the truck several times today and wondered if the people inside were lost. Glancing over he noticed that the windows were dark, too dark to see inside. Even the front glass was black. Just as he reached the back side of the field, it hit him what they were doing there.

He reached down and picked up his phone. At this angle, they couldn't tell what he was doing. He was glad Martha and the kids had gone into to town today to spend time with Maisey and her grandkids. That was probably why the truck was still there.

"Hello?" Martha answered his call.

"Don't come home," he said casually. "Stay with Maisey. I'll have Clark pick you up."

"What's wrong?" she wanted to know.

"There's a strange vehicle here. They've been watching the

house all afternoon. I just figured out who they could be.”

“They want Collin,” Martha deduced.

“Sit tight.”

“Be careful, Jonathan.”

“I will. I’ll drive over to Wayne’s barn. They didn’t show up until after I’d been plowing a bit. They might not know who I am.”

“Okay. We’ll be here.”

“Okay.” He ended the call, then dialed his son.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” Jonathan hardly ever called him from his cell.

“There’s an SUV watching the farm.”

“Be there in three.”

By the time Jonathan pulled up in Wayne Irig’s barn, Superman landed beside the mysterious truck. They were taken by surprise and before they could pull away, both men were bound and cursing loudly for the interference. Ten minutes later, Sheriff Rachael Harris found the men lying on top of the hood of their truck. Jonathan walked across the road as she pushed one of the men into the back of her police cruiser.

“What’s going on, Jonathan? I got a call from Superman saying these men were trespassing.” Rachael smiled at the older man. “I wish he’d stuck around. I’d love to meet him.”

“I wonder why he was all the way out here,” Jonathan speculated.

“Me, too.”

“Those two have been watching the place all afternoon. Reminded me of thieves casing a target.”

Rachael glanced at the angry men in back of her car. “Yeah, well, we’ll find out what’s going on. I’ll see how many charges we can stick ‘em with so they’ll want to rethink watching anybody again.”

“We appreciate it, Rachael.”

“No problem, Jonathan. That’s what neighbors are for. I’ll send a truck out for their vehicle in a bit.”

Jonathan nodded and watched her pull away. Clark was waiting on the back porch when he made it to the house. “They’re off to county lock-up.”

“Good. I’ll call Rachael tomorrow and see what’s going on. And I’ll call Henderson to see about getting you an agent out here to keep an eye on things.”

“I normally wouldn’t want something like that, but I might not be able to stop anybody from taking Collin by myself.”

“Should I take them back to the city with me?”

“No.” Jonathan reached over to squeeze Clark’s shoulder.

“The alarm system is working and Betsy is dead on.” Betsy was Jonathan’s shotgun.

“Just call if you need anything.”

“I will, and I did.” He smiled at his son. “I’ll let Martha know she and the kids can come home. Want to stay for supper?”

“I wish I could, but I’m close to cracking a case Perry has me on. I’ll check on you tomorrow if I’m able to get away.”

“We know you will.”

“Give the kids a hug for me.” Clark floated up off the porch.

“I will.” Jonathan watched as Clark disappeared in a flash.

He hated to have to have a guard on the place, although he felt it was best to have someone help keep Collin safe. Worst case scenario, they’d take the kids to the city and stay with Clark. None of them could do this alone and he’d be darned if anyone was going to take his grandson away.

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Clark had just finished his piece on the assisted living community when the elevator dinged and Henderson came down the ramp. He stood and waited for the man to reach him.

“Let’s go to the conference room, Clark,” Bill said immediately.

“Should I grab Perry?”

“Yeah.” Bill headed to the other room while Clark pecked on Perry’s window and motioned for him to follow him. They went in with the inspector to see what kind of news he had for them. Clark had contacted him the day before about the visitors to his parents’ farm. “The two goons are known associates of the Delconto Organization.”

“Delconto?” Clark asked in surprise. He hadn’t expected that.

“Apparently the group put a hit out on Luthor right before he died. We’re told the order came straight from the top.”

“Luckaby?”

Bill looked at Clark and shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint you, Kent, but Luckaby’s a puppet. He truly is oblivious to everything that’s going on. He does what he’s told to do, draws a fat pay check, and sips fruity drinks on the beach during his down time. If brains were dynamite, I don’t think the kid would have enough to blow his nose.”

Perry let out a snort of laughter. He had a staff member like that. Ralph was still around for the comic relief offered. “If Luckaby’s just a puppet, who in hell is the head of that monster shop?”

“We have no idea. Honestly, before we learned of the hit on Luthor, we thought maybe he was.”

“We suspect he was the syndicate head known as the ‘Boss,’” Clark told him.

“Yeah, we’ve thought that for some time. We just never could get anybody to flip on him.”

“Never could? Does that mean somebody’s talking now?”

Perry asked him.

“A small time drug pusher says he was running coke in the District on order from Nigel himself.”

“I’ll be an Elvis record collector.”

Clark chuckled at Perry’s latest Elvis analogy. He could sure come up with some good ones. “That’s not nearly enough to do anything serious, is it?”

“Unfortunately, no. We need to find out who all the players are. The what, why, how, and anything else that can stick. We need to bury Luthor so deep in his own muck, that Lois will look like an angel for pushing him off that balcony.”

Perry made a face at that. “You believe she pushed him?”

“Well...” Bill pulled out a chair and sat down. “I’m not really sure if I believe it or not. At first I thought maybe she was just ripped from whatever Luthor was force-feeding her. I know she said she’d stopped ingesting his tonic, but I thought he’d managed to get something else in her another way. Her blood tests when she was locked up came back clean. She insisted that Luthor choked her until she passed out.”

“Didn’t I read a report that supported that claim?” Clark asked, pulling another chair out.

“The county physician said it was a distinct possibility that she was choked. Small vessels around her eyes were broken, which suggests that she was deprived of oxygen.”

“It still wasn’t enough to counter the eye-witness testimony of St. John,” Perry spoke up.

“No. St. John was one of Her Majesty’s top agents, and since he’s been in the US he’s clean as a whistle, so...”

“His testimony would have held clout.” Perry leaned back in the chair he’d taken so he could study the other man.

“I hate to say it, but yeah.”

“Okay, so let’s get back to why Delconto had men at the farm,” Clark said. He’d been thinking about that for a moment and it was suddenly a very scary thought. That organization was a heck of a lot more dangerous than anything Luthor could have created.

“We asked if they were there for the kid. They assure us they have no interest in the boy. They were waiting on Luthor’s group to make their move.”

“So the bad guys were going to snatch the other bad guys?”

Perry wanted to know.

"Yep. If Luthor couldn't be taken down, they were going to rip into his estate to see what they could use."

"And you believe them?" Clark asked.

"Yes and no. I do believe they wouldn't harm Collin. The thing about that group is that if you're the target, \*you\* are the target. They have never made it a practice to... break your son's legs because you couldn't live up to your end of a bargain. They'd... wipe out the kid's inheritance, but wouldn't touch him."

"Strange group," Perry said.

"And as dead as they come," Bill put in. "I've called in a few favors and two guys should be all set up on the farm with your folks and the kids, Clark."

"Good."

"But we've got to kick this investigation into high gear. I'll only be able to keep them there for three or four months, tops."

The men looked up when Jack knocked on the glass. "Clark, you've got a call from Bernie Klein on line two," he said as he stuck his head inside.

"Take it in here," Perry told him.

Clark went over to the phone in the corner. "Clark Kent."

"Mr. Kent, this is Bernie Klein. I was asked by Ms. Drake to compare a few samples."

"I'm not sure I understand," Clark replied with a quirked brow. Mayson hadn't said anything about work Bernie was doing for her or that it had anything to do with him.

"One of the samples was blood taken from your custodial son."

"Collin? Mayson wanted you to analyze Collin's blood?"

"Yes," Bernie answered. "She wanted to make sure there were no drugs in his system. You know, like the ones I identified from that sample Jack brought me."

Clark had wondered if they'd been feeding Collin drugs, but he just seemed to be as normal as the next kid. Now his heart sank. If Bernie was involved... "Collin?"

"No, no. His blood was clean. No drugs of any kind."

Clark let go a huge sigh of relief.

"There's just something else, something I hadn't expected."

"What? Is there something wrong with him?"

"No, he's healthy and growing normally. But, Mr. Kent, I think you and Ms. Drake should come hear this in person."

A million things ran through his mind. What could possibly be wrong? Why did Bernie feel it warranted a personal visit?

"Mr. Kent, can you come today?"

"Ah, yes, Dr. Klein. I'll contact Mayson and we'll be there as soon as we can."

"Good. I'll see you then."

Staring at the handset once he'd replaced it, Clark couldn't begin to imagine what else could be wrong? Well, Bernie did say Collin was healthy. So what could he have found?

"CK? What's wrong?" Jack asked him.

"Dr. Klein did a little analysis for Mayson and he's found something."

"What?" Perry wanted to know.

"He didn't say. He wants to see me and Mayson in person. Are we done here, Bill?"

"Yeah. Perry and I can talk a bit of strategy without you."

He nodded and left the room, stopping at his desk long enough to call Mayson. By the time he reached S.T.A.R. Labs, he was nervous. What if there really was something wrong with Collin? He'd flown to the lab in his suit and landed in an alley a block over to change. When he reached the front entrance, Mayson was waiting.

"You're getting as quick as I am," he told her as he reached her side.

"I was in the area when you called me." She didn't break

stride on their way toward the building. "Bernie didn't say what this was about?"

"Just that he found something he hadn't expected." Clark held the door for her. They were given passes and beeped right in when they gave their names to the lady at the desk.

Bernie looked up when they entered his lab. "Oh, I'm glad you two could make it so quickly." He motioned them closer as he picked up a paper lying in front of him. "I've studied Collin's sample over and over. No drugs, as I said on the phone. In fact, his immune system is one of the healthiest I've ever seen. His DNA is quite remarkable. The..."

"Dr. Klein," Clark interrupted him. He'd worked with Bernie on a couple of cases and knew the man's tendency to go off on tangents.

"Yes, yes. Well, I compared his DNA to Ms. Lane's, just like you wanted me to do, Ms. Drake."

Clark glanced at her, but didn't say anything.

"He's definitely Lois Lane's son." He walked over to an x-ray reader and poked two slides from a nearby table onto the board. He clicked the light on and pointed to short lines. "This is Collin's profile. You can see here..." He indicated an area with his finger. "...this part of the profile is a perfect match to his mother." He pointed toward an almost identical area on the other film.

"Excuse me for asking, but why would you check to make sure he was really Lois' son?" Clark didn't understand that reasoning.

"Ms. Drake wanted to be absolutely certain we had the right child."

"I don't trust Luthor's cronies," she told him.

He indicated understanding with a nod of his head.

"We also wanted to make sure neither profile had been compromised by any of the drugs."

Clark could understand that. "So what did you find that you didn't expect?"

Bernie scratched his head, an unreadable expression on his face. "Are you sure that file you sent me was on Lex Luthor?" he asked Mayson.

"I'm positive. Lex was accidentally stabbed during a fencing exhibition. I know the physician who treated him at Mercy. He took the blood samples personally."

"Then we have a couple of serious situations." Bernie put another slide up on the light board. "This is Luthor's profile."

Clark looked at it a moment before he stepped closer. "They don't match," he finally said softly.

"No, Mr. Kent, they don't. This is the sample that should be shared between father and child." He pointed to an area with his finger. "As you can clearly see..." He pulled the film of Collin's profile down and overlapped it on top of Luthor's. "They don't match."

"I'll be damned," Mayson said aloud.

Bernie turned and smiled. "I'm not done." He walked over to the table and opened another file. "According to the only samples taken by Rich Laughlin, the known Luthor sample does not match those of the man who's buried under that tombstone in the Gardens."

Both Clark and Mayson gasped aloud. "What?" they said in unison.

"The sample Rich took from Luthor's body does not match the one taken at the hospital when Luthor was injured. Either one of the samples is the wrong one or..."

"Luthor's not dead," Clark said as he looked at Mayson.

"That son of a..."

"But we have to find him. We can't prove a thing without him."

Mayson nodded at Clark. "Unfortunately. The prosecutor would argue that the samples were mixed up. Blah, blah. But this

is great work, Bernie.”

“Can I get a copy of the report?” Clark asked the doctor.

“Oh sure. I have one for each of you.” He dug out a file and handed it over.

“Thanks again, Bernie,” Mayson said just before they headed out the door. “Poor Lois,” she said as she handed over her badge at the front desk.

“Yeah. She might actually be thrilled to know she didn’t have that monster’s children.”

“I just wonder whose children she did have,” Mayson said as they made their way toward her car. “Let me give you a lift back to the Planet.”

“Sure.” He climbed in and read over the file as they made their way across town. “I wonder who the mysterious father is. And how did she get pregnant and think it was Luthor’s?” He shivered involuntarily at that thought.

“Makes you wonder what all that maniac did to her.”

“Hey, Bernie’s report says that the longer she’s off the drugs, the more she’ll remember while under their influence. If that’s true, she might be able to tell you herself one day.”

“If she will, Clark, you forget that she’s a tough nut to crack. She’d closed in on herself and acts like she doesn’t want to help herself at all.”

Clark held up the file. “Maybe this will change her mind.”

“Let’s hope so. I’ll see if we can get in to see her tomorrow. Do you want to go with me?”

“Yes. Maybe she’ll open up if I bribe her a bit.” He wagged his brows and grinned.

“You’re so full of it.” Mayson smacked his leg as she maneuvered her car into the garage below the Planet.

“Perry’s gonna have a stroke when he finds this out.” Clark climbed from the car after they’d parked and waited for Mayson to come around. They made their way upstairs and promptly stunned the other men with their news.

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Stepping down off the plane onto the tarmac, Lex took a deep breath. “There’s nothing like the smell of Metropolis,” he commented as he looked around. It was so good to be back.

“Welcome to Metropolis, Mr. Harris,” a man told him as he reached out to take the bags an airport crew member had set on the concrete.

“Yes.” Lex, or David Harris as he was known as now, climbed into the back of the waiting limo. He’d come to reclaim everything that was rightfully his. To hell with everything else.

The car was in motion and out on to the main road before David tore his eyes from the passing scenery to look at the tall, dark-haired man across from him. Nigel had nearly died when he’d had to die his gray hair black. Shaving his goatee had been battle as well. But these were all things that couldn’t be helped. David had to wear a blonde wig, of all things. And grow a mustache. How hideous!

No matter. If it got him what he wanted, he’d wear a paper sack over his head.

“Any news on the doctor?”

Nigel looked up at him. “We should be hearing something any time now,” he replied with an evil leer.

“And the boy?”

“Guarded twenty-four hours a day by two of Henderson’s men. We have to be careful how we tread, too. Delconto had men in Kansas.”

“What?”

“Apparently he still wants a piece of the pie.”

“Is he planning to take the boy?”

“I’m told he just wants his money.”

David took a cigar out and lit it. “Send him a peace offering from Harris International. See if he’d be interested in forming an alliance against LexCorp.”

Nigel smiled evilly. “How... twisted.”

“Well, it’s mine. I should have it. I formed that company and I can tear it apart.” He drew from his cigar again. “What do you say we have a bit of fun?”

“I’ll set something up at once.” Nigel pulled out his phone and dialed.

David took another satisfying draw from his stogy. Yes, fun was what he needed. He’d been shut away much too long.

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Jack and Jimmy were both set up in the conference room sifting through the mounds of files they had on the Luthor investigation. Clark was off to make copies of something or other while Perry had gone home early to take his wife to dinner. The team had been working nonstop for the last few days to find anything they could, but so far had been unsuccessful.

“Hey, CK, are you having the birthday party for the twins at your place?” Jack asked when the other man entered the room again. Collin and Perry’s second birthday was only a week away.

“Yep. My folks will be here Friday night. Believe or not, they’re driving out. Thought it would be a \*good\* trip for the kids.” Clark chuckled as he sat down.

“What about the guards Henderson sent out?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“Poor guys have to follow them all the way to the city.” He shook his head. “I really hate they need protection at all.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Jack spoke up.

“Guess so.” Clark went back to perusing some paperwork, but was interrupted just minutes later when Bill Henderson came in. “Hey, Bill, what brings you here this time of night?”

“Clark,” he indicated with a nod of his head. “Guys,” he said to the other two. “We found Marge Lang dead tonight. Her sister called from Cincinnati. Said she hadn’t heard from Marge in three days and insisted we go check it out. She’s been dead for at least a day.”

“How?” Clark asked in stunned disbelief.

“Overdose. We won’t know for a week or two exactly what.”

“And Paul?”

“MIA. Seems he’s been missing for a while. Marge told her sister he was working on a top secret project that was going to make them a fortune.”

“No clue what it was?” Jimmy asked him.

“No. We did find something interesting. Apparently Paul had a private lab on his property. We’re seeking a search warrant now.”

“Why the warrant? Isn’t it a crime scene?” Jack threw in.

“If the lab had been within the same building we wouldn’t have to get a warrant.” Bill turned toward the door. “You know, you need to consider a career with the force, Jack. You’d make one heck of a detective.”

“Yeah, well, if I can’t make a go of this journalism stuff, I’ll think about it.” Jack gave him a grin, one that told him there was no way he’d ever consider joining the police force, and Bill smiled back, knowing there was no way a former thief would ever see the legal side of a badge.

“I’ll let you know if that warrant comes through.” Bill waved and he was gone.

“This just gets more interesting by the day,” Jimmy put in.

“I totally agree,” Clark said as he leaned back in the chair he was sitting in. Lana would be devastated. She adored her mother. Lana was also on a space station and not due to get back for another year.

“You okay, CK?” Jack wanted to know.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” He sat back up and shifted through a few papers. What were they missing? They’d been combing through countless information and weren’t a bit closer to proving Luthor was still alive. It was as if the man had disappeared off the face of the planet.

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Lois was angry again. This Drake woman just didn't give up. The guard had come and demanded she go meet with her lawyer... again. It looked like she'd have to blow her stack to get the woman off her back. She'd signed her life sentence. This prison was where she'd be for the next decade, minus a year.

When she stepped inside the interview room, Mayson was not alone. Clark was with her. Had she given permission for him to come here?

"Hi," he said and stood up.

"What do you want?" Lois asked them both and stood near the door.

"Some information has come to our attention that we think you should know," Mayson told her. "Please come sit down."

"Just spit it out." She intentionally kept her eyes on Drake. Clark's expression was just too raw for her taste. And he was still standing, staring at her.

"We have reason to believe Lex is still alive," Mayson told her. If Lois wanted blunt, that was what she'd get.

That made Lois blink. She relaxed her defensive stance just a bit and slowly moved toward the table. "What?"

"I asked Bernard Klein to run some blood tests for me and the man who fell from Lex Towers was not Lex Luthor."

Lois grasped the back of the chair and looked away. That... that... bastard! "He set me up."

"It looks that way." Mayson pulled out the report of the test results and pushed them across the table.

With a shaking hand, Lois picked up the sheet and read it carefully. Finally she sat down, noticing that Clark did, too. "Of course, you'll have to prove this beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Yeah. I'm waiting for the court order now to exhume the body. If our examiner can prove it's not Luthor..."

"Won't I still be here for killing whoever it is?" Lois interrupted Mayson.

"Not if the exam can prove that the poor fellow died of something other than trauma from the fall."

"That would have to be one hell of an examiner. Wasn't the trauma pretty extensive?"

"Why don't you let us worry about that?" Mayson said and pulled another file from her briefcase. "We do have something else we need to tell you."

Lois cut her eyes at Clark, who had been watching her since she came in. "What?" she demanded, stabbing him with a fierce glare. "Do I have a growth or something on my head you find interesting?"

"I'm just trying to figure out how you do it," he answered, not the least bit affected by her outburst.

"Do what?"

"Sit there and not even ask. How you've been here this whole time and not once asked about them."

"Not asking keeps me sane," she shot at him.

He leaned forward, staring at her as intensely as she was him. "I get that. I really do, but at the same time the not knowing would drive me insane. You gave your son to a perfect stranger and you don't even want to know if I mistreat him. For all you know, I could have been some kind of pervert who gets his jollies from little boys. Or girls for that matter. You do know I've got her, too? I've had her from the beginning."

"I think this meeting is over," Lois said as she pushed herself to her feet and turned to leave.

"They're not Luthor's," Clark told her as he stood up again.

That made Lois freeze halfway to the door. "Bernie found out."

"Are they mine?" she asked without turning around.

"Yes."

"Why would you ask that?" Mayson spoke up.

"I remember things." She returned to her chair and stared at the top of the table. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Clark

ease back to his seat. "I was inseminated."

"What?" Mayson was the one to lean closer now.

"The night I conceived, Lex drugged me. The next morning I just thought I'd drank too much champagne and well..." She waved her hand to indicate what she couldn't say.

"And now you remember you were inseminated?" Mayson jotted something on a piece of paper.

"Yeah. The same doctor that oversaw the delivery of the twins did it. He and Lex kept talking about the whole thing being an experiment. I guess I know now that it was." She glanced away, trying to stave the tears in her eyes. "Do you know who the donor was?"

"No," Mayson answered regretfully. "All things considered, I feel pretty sure the sample wasn't a donation."

Her eyes snapped back to Mayson's. "Oh, great! Lex snatched part of some other schmuck's life away from him, too." She laughed dryly. "Won't we be a pair?"

"Lois, we might never find out who the father is," Mayson let her know.

"Yeah." Lois tucked her hair behind her ear and looked at a spot on the wall. Clark was glaring at her and it unnerved her to no end. He was right. She should ask, but she just couldn't.

"They'll be two next week," he offered.

"Yeah," was all she said.

He opened a file he'd brought with him and pulled out a picture, pushing it across the table in front of her. "They look good together."

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she continued to study the wall. She couldn't look.

"Why don't you want to help yourself?" he wanted to know. "Fight him. Don't give him the satisfaction."

"What will it get me?" she asked as her eyes snapped back to his.

"It might get you out of here. Don't you want that? Don't you want to get back to these guys?" He shook the picture at her. "Lois, they're wonderful people, being raised by a man who seems to love them more than their own mother does."

She shot to her feet, glaring at him. "I love my babies! Don't you ever assume I don't. But you're not in this place. You don't know what it does to your mind. To a mind, I might add, that was already sloshed by whatever that psycho did to me. Most days I wish I had been the one to fall off that balcony." She reached down and snatched up the picture. "Knowing I might see them again is the only thing that keeps me going."

Clark stared right back at her, almost smiling when she glanced down at the image.

"Oh, God!" she gasped as her eyes went back to the picture of her twins. "They're..." She sat back down, unable now to look away.

"They like riding on the tractor and watermelon. Watermelon is better than cake," he said with a half chuckle. "I taught them how to swim two days ago. He's a little bigger and extremely protective of Perry. She calls him Baby. They're getting matching bicycles for their birthday. Mom's teaching them their alphabet. Collin's learning to milk the cow." He smiled and held his hands up. "His hands are barely big enough, but he won't stop trying. I'm told he gets his determination from you."

She finally lifted her eyes to his. "I just can't see them in here," she said softly.

"Yeah," he agreed reluctantly.

"They look... happy... healthy."

"They are. Perry's potty trained and Collin's just about there. He's caught up quickly since we got him."

"Lucy? Did she say anything?"

"She's not lucid enough to tell us much right now. All the drugs, all the stress... she just finally broke." Clark shifted in his seat. "Your father was the one to find them."

“He was working for Lex,” Lois said as she let her eyes fall back to the picture.

“Unfortunately, he’ll have to spend a bit of time in jail, too, for some of the unethical things he’s done,” Mayson told her. “He’s agreed to help us as much as he can though.”

She nodded, then looked back up. Her eyes swept across the file Clark had open in front of him and she saw another picture. She reached for it without asking. “This is the doctor,” she said of the man in the photo.

“Paul Lang,” Clark told her. “We believe Luthor’s trying to find him because his wife was found dead.” He leaned forward, placing his arms on the table. “Do you remember anything else that happened to you?”

“Mostly I was kept... nice and calm. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. The drugs drained the life out of me. I just didn’t care. When they learned I’d conceived, I was kept locked away. The drugs changed, enough not to hurt the baby. They didn’t know I was having twins until they were born.”

“Perry didn’t have a birth certificate.”

Lois looked at Clark. “I thought not. She was never allowed out of the penthouse. The doctor always saw her there.”

“Lang?” Mayson wanted to know.

“Yes. He was the only one Lex let near them. They made reference to them living to see six months old. It was vital to them both. There was also something said about their fifth birthday.” Her eyes met Clark’s. “What’s wrong with my babies?”

Clark’s heart broke. She looked as if she was about to cry again. For some reason seeing her so distressed was awful. He couldn’t explain what he felt, but knew he’d definitely never felt quite like this before. “There’s nothing wrong with them,” he assured her.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he said with a half-smile. “Bernie’s run countless tests on Collin and Doc Brown back home says Perry is as healthy as a horse.”

“No crazy blood disorders or funky, incurable diseases?”

“No.”

Her eyes went back to the four on the paper. She missed them so much. Of course, she’d never really known them through her drug-induced haze. How would she ever catch up if she got out of this place? Some days she felt it would be best if Lex had just killed her.

“Lois, Perry told me about something Jack found on your computer.” Lois looked up at Mayson. “Your mother... she was a Delcont?”

“As in the daughter of the most notorious crime boss in the world,” Lois told her. “I found that out by accident when I was investigating a gun smuggling ring in the Congo. I asked my father about it and he refused to tell me anything. I do know we spent summers in Spain until I was ten. I was told my grandfather had died and that was that. We didn’t go to the service and mother never mentioned him again.”

“I’ve tried to find out more information about her birth and why she changed her name, but I keep hitting a brick wall,” Mayson said. “I plan on questioning Sam about it.”

“Ask the bastard if he knows who fathered my children,” Lois spat.

“We’re doing all we can to get you out of here,” Mayson wanted her to know.

“I know you want to help, and I know you’ll do all you can, but if Lex Luthor wanted me here, here is where I’ll stay.” She looked over at Clark. “I have no idea why you agreed to do what you’ve done... Why would a man take on the care of two kids that belong to a woman he doesn’t even know? I’ve asked myself over and over again if you’re for real.” She reached down to lift the photo. “All I know is you’re keeping my babies away from

whatever evils Lex had planned for them.” Looking at the image again, tears filled her eyes. “What do they call you?”

If he thought he felt bad earlier, he really felt awful now. She must be so mixed up. He glanced away, unable to stand watching the despair in her features any longer. “Lois...”

“It’s okay. I think you’ve earned that title.” She smiled at him and an understanding seemed to pass between them. Her eyes drifted over to Mayson. “Does it bother you that he’s caring for two toddlers that aren’t his?”

“Why would it bother me?”

“I think I’d be a little pissed if my boyfriend was doing what he’s doing.”

Mayson grinned and glanced at Clark. “We stopped seeing each other like that a while ago.”

Her eyes widened and she looked distressed. “Please don’t tell me you two split up because of...”

“No, no, no,” Clark assured her quickly. He looked over at Mayson. “I think we were always better suited to be friends.”

Lois studied them both for a moment, until she was satisfied their break-up didn’t have anything to do with her or her kids. “I’m gonna keep this,” she told Clark and held up the photo.

“I brought it for you,” he told her. “And when I send pictures of their birthday party, don’t send them back.”

She stood up and pushed her chair underneath the table. “See ya’, Clark Kent.” With a sad smile, she turned and left.

Mayson stuffed her files into her briefcase and rose from the table. “I can’t imagine what she feels.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed as he took up his file and followed Mayson from the room.

“What are you going to do when we get her out of here?”

Clark looked at Mayson with questioning eyes. “What?”

“Clark, I’ve seen you with those babies. How are you going to give them back to their mother?”

He stuffed his free hand into his pocket and walked in silence, his mind whirling. He’d thought a lot about what he’d do when Lois was able to come for her kids. Truth was he didn’t know how he’d handle it. While Collin hadn’t been with him as long as Perry had, he meant just as much to him. He loved those babies. Giving them up was unthinkable. “Maybe we should get her out first,” he answered evasively.

Mayson understood completely. She would feel the same way he did. And knowing Clark and his big heart, he didn’t want to have to think about parting with those little people. But he was right. They needed to get Lois out of prison first.

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Paul Lang was either incredibly naive or an idiot. He had kept meticulous records. Every detail of how he created various mind control drugs for Lex Luthor was spelled out. He’d indeed continued Carl Mambo’s research and had extended it to include some of his own, and there were details of an apparent in vitro fertilization procedure. Clark had discovered another side to the man he thought he knew.

Henderson had gotten the search warrant for Lang’s private lab and seized tons of incriminating evidence into the various illegal activities of both the doctor and the elusive Lex Luthor. Bill had taken copies of what they’d found to the Planet and turned it over to Perry and his boys. Of course, it was done with the understanding that they had no clue where it had all come from.

Jack patiently sifted through some of the information they’d found in Lang’s lab. He just couldn’t believe the sheer amount.

“You know, he was smart enough not to ever use actual names,” Jack stated.

“Yeah. The most minute detail... except for that.” Clark scribbled a few notes into his notepad, then grabbed up another piece of paper.

The silence in the conference room was interrupted by a

messenger. He delivered a book to Clark from Detective Henderson.

“What is it?” Jack asked peering across the table.

“Looks like a journal. The note from Henderson says it’s Paul Lang’s. They found it in a safe deposit box at his house.” Clark opened it slowly. It soon became clear that this was more than he could have asked for. He looked up at Jack. “This is what we needed. It says Luthor came to him in ‘86. That happened to be a good thing because Paul had accumulated several hundred thousand dollars’ worth of debt to the wrong people. He cut a deal with Luthor to keep from losing any body parts.” Clark paused and read a few more pages.

“Lang started doing various things for Luthor. Seems the mind-control drugs have been used by Luthor for years. Lang states that Luthor’s ultimate goal was to see if he could make a person think that they were someone else entirely.” Clark flipped a few more pages. Jack noticed he stopped, staring at the pages in shock.

“CK? What is it?”

“Lois was the first guinea pig for the new drugs for total mind control. It started out as a test, but Luthor became obsessed with her. He married her because he had to, although Paul didn’t know exactly why.”

“Man. Poor Lois.”

“Yeah.” Clark read a couple more pages before his wide eyes met Jack’s again. “She was also a guinea pig for another reason. Luthor \*needed\* to have a son. But get his, he was infertile.”

“What?”

“Yep. He paid Paul to get Lois pregnant.” He read on. “I know the connection to Mambo now.” He looked up at Jack. “The twins were supposed to be clones.”

“Clones?” Jack snorted. “Don’t tell me that quack actually thought he could create human clones.”

“Not only that, he convinced Luthor he had discovered a way for a woman to conceive a cloned embryo.”

“Please tell me Collin and Perry are not clones.”

“No. Remember the in vitro research from his lab?” Jack nodded. “It seems Lois was the mother.”

“And the father?”

“Luthor thought Paul was creating a clone child. Paul, however, states here that the possibility of a clone living more than five years was highly unlikely.”

“The five-year mark Lois mentioned,” Jack observed.

Clark nodded. “Paul took a sample from one of his clients and with Lois’ egg, created the twins.” Clark flipped a page. “He was ecstatic with that little surprise.”

“God, that’s awful. So who’s the father?”

“That’s the strange thing. He almost boasts about his accomplishment, yet never mentions the name of the father. He does say that it’s sweet justice to beat Luthor at his own game.”

“So Collin and Perry were fathered by Joe blow so Luthor could have a son? Explains why he wasn’t crazy about the unexpected girl.”

“He didn’t need her,” Clark pointed out.

“This is too weird.” Jack leaned back in his seat. “What do you tell those kids when they ask about their father one day? No offense, CK.”

“None taken. They \*will\* ask some day.”

“What else does it say?”

“That Lang sold all his dirty little secrets to Church.” Clark stopped on the last page. “My God! He killed Ellen Lane.”

“What?” Jack sat up straight.

“He was having an affair with her.” Clark’s eyes met Jack’s. “Lucy’s his.”

“Damn!”

“Ellen wanted to end the affair, but his jealousy got the best of him. Apparently he and Sam knew each other in college and

competed for Ellen’s attention. When she married Sam and had Lois, Lang married Marge and moved across the country. He buried himself in work and the advances in his research are what caught Luthor’s eye. Lang moved back to Metropolis to work for Lex Labs because the money was too good to pass up and he met up with Ellen again. Two years later, Lucy was born. He wanted Ellen to leave Sam and start a family with him, but Sam threatened to take Lois away from her. She stayed, Paul went crazy, and she was found dead of an apparent heart attack.” Clark read over another page. “He knew she was Delconto’s daughter.” He finally looked up at Jack. “He turned on Lex because Karen Lang was supposed to be Mrs. Luthor.”

“Karen?”

“Paul’s sister. He believes Luthor killed her. She disappeared just months before their wedding and has never been found.”

“What a whacked, twisted son of a gun. Hell, both of them.”

“You can say that again.”

“And Lois was convenient to use?” Jack threw a few papers across his desk.

“Paul liked the irony of Luthor’s choice.”

“Do you think Sam Lane knows any of that?”

Clark shook his head. “I doubt it. Paul kept making references to things happening behind Lane’s back.” He flipped the book onto the table. “I guess we’ll ask him.”

Jack leaned back so he could prop his feet up on the table. “Hell of a way to find out about your wife’s affair and the child you raised.”

“This whole thing is one hell of an affair.”

“You can say that again. I would love to get my hands on Lang and Luthor. Give me five minutes alone with them. Somebody would talk.”

“I know, Jack. I know.” Clark slowly read through the journal again. Of course, to get his hands on Luthor, he had to prove he was alive and find him. That was like finding a needle in a haystack. Sighing heavily, he decided to call it a night. They’d made it about as far as they could today. They’d start fresh again tomorrow.

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“I think we have a problem, sir,” Nigel told his boss.

“Well, spit it out,” David said as he stared across and up at the building that used to be his. He’d had to settle on living in an apartment next to Lex Towers until he took possession of his prized high rise again.

“Our source in the department tells me that White and his crew have discovered that the man who fell from the penthouse balcony is not you.”

David’s head jerked around and he stared at his assistant. “Damn! How in hell did they discover that? I thought that nitwit signed off on the autopsy.”

“Apparently there were samples taken before the case could be closed.” He stepped over and poured David a drink. “I have also been told that Marge Lang was found dead. It is believed that Paul fed her too many of the research drugs.”

“What is that fool up to?” He took a drink from the glass Nigel had given him. “Still no sign of him?”

“I believe we have finally located him.”

“Let me guess. On a little remote island off the Mexican shore?”

“Actually, I think he’s a guest of Juan Delconto.”

David spit his brandy across the room. “Holy hell! If that man learns of what Paul’s done for me...”

“I am well aware of that, sir.”

Harris slammed his glass down onto the desk, breaking it into several pieces. “We might not have a choice but to snatch that kid. We have to have him to prove my claims. And if I can get him before Delconto, I can use him as a bargaining chip.”

“I’ll send a couple of guys today.”

“Do that.” He walked over to look out of the window again. What had he gotten himself into? More precisely, how did he get himself out of this mess?

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Clark walked slowly toward his door. He’d left work a while ago to attend a rescue as Superman. He’d decided to get himself a cup of coffee and walk home. It was a gorgeous night and he liked to soak up the sights and sounds of the city whenever he could. He grabbed his mail from the box out front and was reading over a bill when he opened the front door.

“Dadda!”

He looked up to see Perry climbing the stairs toward him. “Sunshine!” He tossed the mail over onto the bookshelf and hugged the little bundle of energy in his arms. He kissed her face several times before he looked up to see his mom in the kitchen and his dad coming in from the bedroom. “Hey, I didn’t know you guys were coming in tonight.”

“I hope it’s okay,” his mom wanted to know.

“More than okay.” He kissed Perry again and set her on her feet. “Where’s Collin?”

“Staring out the window. He likes the window seat,” Jonathan told him.

Clark headed into the bedroom to find the boy kneeling on the seat and peering out the window. “Hey, big guy!”

Collin turned and grinned at him. “Hi, Dadda!”

“Oh wow! You called me Daddy,” Clark said as he picked the boy up and hugged him close. Collin loved to see Clark come for visits and showered him with love every time, but he’d yet to call him daddy. Collin leaned back in Clark’s arms enough so that he could rub his nose against his. “Lub u.”

“Oh, son, I love you, too,” Clark said and kissed his lips. He hadn’t realized just how much until lately. The twins had become a very important part of Clark’s life. They made him feel complete in a way nothing ever had- not even being Superman. He had to put the boy down because the little fellow was ready to go play.

“Dinner will be ready in two,” his mom called.

Clark stepped into the kitchen, loosening his tie as he did. “Is everything okay? You seem...”

Jonathan glanced back to make sure the kids were playing. “We decided to fly out today. There was another strange vehicle at the farm.”

“Where are the guards?”

“One’s out front. The other one will relieve him in a little while.”

“Why didn’t you call me, Dad?” Clark threw his jacket into his bedroom, along with his tie.

“We can’t keep calling you every two seconds, Clark,” his mom spoke up as she set the bread on the table.

“You call me whenever you need to,” he insisted. “I don’t want anything to happen to any of you.”

“They don’t want us,” Jonathan reminded him.

Clark looked over at the little boy digging toys from the box. “Yeah, I know. Hopefully this will all be over with soon. We’ve learned some pretty incredible things over the last few days.”

“Eat, Dadda!” Collin said as he ran across the room and held up his hands to Clark.

“Yeah, big guy,” he told him and lifted him in his arms. It was amazing how comfortable the boy had become in the short time he’d been in Kansas. He was almost as outgoing as Perry now. What would he be like in a few months’ time?

Clark looked at him. Would he be with them in a few months’ time? Would they be able to get Lois out of prison and she take them away? Would some maniac snatch him and hide him away from them again?

“Let’s eat,” Martha told them all as she reached to lift Perry up.

Pushing away his troubled thoughts, Clark settled Collin next to him in his highchair. He received a huge grin and decided that for tonight, he’d just enjoy having his family together.

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The first thing she was aware of when she came to was that she was definitely not in her cell. The walls were burnt orange and the air was warmer. This was not the prison. She looked around the room, shocked beyond belief when she noticed that through the window she could see water- lots of water. She stood up and stumbled toward the open double doors. Not more than fifty yards in front of her was the brightest white sand she’d ever seen. The surf was crashing and receding on the beach. The sun was shining, the reflection off the sand nearly blinding.

“I see you’re awake.”

She looked through the doors, down the long, wide porch to see an older gentleman sitting at a round table.

“Come join me, dear. I’m sure you’re famished.” He waved a hand at the spread of food in front of him.

Shaking her head, she managed to make it to a chair and drop heavily. She was still groggy as hell, but she was also thirsty. She drank down over half of whatever juice it was in the glass in front of her before she looked up at the man. “Who are you?”

“Oh, Lois, I’m hurt you don’t remember your grandfather.”

Staring at him wide-eyed she realized this was her mother’s father. “Juan?”

“It has been a while. What? Twenty years?” He took a sip from his coffee cup, then smiled at her. “It was never my choice. Ella made the decision to leave.” He set the cup back down. “Changing her name- now that was a bit too much. If she was ashamed of her heritage...”

“Why wouldn’t she be? You lead one of the largest crime syndicates in the world.”

He laughed softly. “Call it what you will. I call it business.” He waved his hand. “It affords me the things I want. This island, this house... Your mother used her share of the money to start a new life.” Juan folded his hands across his lap, gazing at Lois. “I would have come for you sooner...”

“You should have never come for me at all. I was in enough trouble as it was.”

“Oh, please. Lex Luthor isn’t dead.” He shook his finger as he grinned. “Granted, he threw me for a minute.”

“Yeah, he threw me for more than a minute.” She picked over the fruit before deciding on a piece of watermelon.

“I did not even realize you were his wife until the news broke that you were accused of his murder.” He lit a cigarette and blew out a puff of smoke. “A friend of his tells me you have also delivered twins.”

“Did that friend tell you they weren’t Lex’s?”

“Oh, yes.” He watched her for several moments before he shifted in his seat. “You didn’t know that until recently, did you?”

“My lawyer had some tests run and found out.”

“Yes, when they found out Lex was alive.”

Lois stared at him. “You probably know everything that’s going on, don’t you?”

“I know enough. Unfortunately, I’ve lost my contact inside S.T.A.R. Labs. But I’m sure not much more can be learned from running blood tests. At least not with Lex’s blood.”

She studied him while she ate for a moment. The longer she was awake, the better she felt. And the clearer her head became. Her instincts weren’t completely gone either. “You know who the father is,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“I know a lot of things,” he said as he puffed on his smoke again.

“Why did you take me?”

“The scientific implications, of course,” he told her as he snuffed out the cigarette. “I wish I could say it was because you’re blood, but...” He grinned and held his hands out widely.

“Money and power is greener than blood. Ella made her choices. Those choices cost her gravely. I have other kids. My son will one day take over my empire.”

“According to every major law enforcement agency in the world, the Delconto line died on a plane off the coast of California.”

“Yes. Lex should have taken lessons, shouldn’t he? If you want to die and stay dead, do it right.” He chuckled softly. “And you always, always have to be careful where your fluids are... just in case some wacko or scientist decides to start studying them.” He glanced at the food on the table. “Eat, drink. You’ll be taken care of here. My physician will give you a day or two to settle in before he begins the tests.”

“What tests?” she demanded.

“Standard physical, a few blood tests. We have to make sure there were no adverse effects from your pregnancy.”

“Why would there be?”

“Oh, no, dear. Too soon.” He stood up and a man came out of nowhere to help him. That was when Lois noticed that he could barely move his legs. He moved, with assistance, toward a wheelchair that had been provided by another man. “Until later, my dear.” He waved his hand without looking back and was wheeled away.

Lois looked around, noticing the careful eyes watching her. They weren’t easily seen, unless one was looking for them. She ate for a moment, then stood up and went back to her room. Although comfortably decorated, it was essentially bare as well. A comfortable, overstuffed bed with fine linens. A closet full of nice clothes. A bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub and anything she could possibly want for a bath. However, there was nothing she could remotely use to hurt herself or use to get away. No telephones, not even lines. No television, no radio. And as she drifted around the porch, she discovered she was locked away from the rest of the house. Walking out onto the beach, she also learned there was a gate to separate her from the main yard. She could reach the beach area, but even that was cut off from the rest of the shore by large rocks that protruded far enough out into the water to make swimming around them hazardous and possibly deadly. So while she was free to a point, she was just as much a prisoner here as she’d been in Metropolis.

And she wasn’t in Metropolis. She wasn’t even in the states. She could tell from the color of the sea water, the pristine bleached sand on the beach. Where was she? And how in hell did she get out of this?

Sighing heavily, she sank to the sand where she’d ventured out. What now? How long would she live this hell before she was finally able to do the only thing in the world she truly wanted to do?

What were they doing right now? Were they with Clark? Was he holding them? Telling them their mother loved them? Did he rock them to sleep? Did he kiss them? Rub their noses with his own the way she’d done? The way she’d done with Lucy when they were kids?

Clark Kent- what kind of person was he? She’d felt immediately comfortable with him the first time she’d met him. He had trusting eyes. If Perry thought he was a stand-up guy, that was enough for her. He had to be. Perry was the best man she knew and he didn’t make snap judgments. He knew when someone was good and when they weren’t. That was why she should have listened when he told her to get away from Lex.

Lois sighed deeply and looked out across the ocean. Where was her life headed? Would it be shipwrecked indefinitely or would she someday be swept back out to sea? Was she destined to just float along, lost in the ebbs and tides that made the world go round?

Glancing back up at the house behind her, she realized something she hadn’t before. She came from a strong line of

people. Granted, that line might be as evil as they came, but still strong, determined, and confident. She came from a line of intelligent people. Her father had once been one of the foremost medical minds in the world. She was good at her chosen profession- before all of this. What she needed to do was pull herself together and find out what the leader of the crime world wanted with her. If she could manage, surely the person and reporter she’d once been could figure out how to get herself out of this mess she’d fallen in.

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Clark hated to work while his folks and the kids were in town, but a few things needed to get done. He’d gotten up early to get it done so he could spend the day with the twins. He finished up his latest story for the Planet before calling up a program with information on the Luthor investigation. He read through some information before he pulled up an older search.

“Damn! Why didn’t I see that before?”

“See what, CK?” Jack asked as he walked up. Jack came in early most days so that he could cut out early. He’d recently started playing with a band at a little place in the jazz district.

Furiously punching the keys, another program flashed on the screen. “Leslie Luckaby...”

“Luckaby?”

“More precisely, Alexander Luckaby. Jack, what was Lex’s given name?”

“Alexander Xavier Luthor... You don’t think?”

“I do think,” Clark said as he stood up. “He named Collin Xavier Franklin. I need to take a little trip.”

“But Alexander disappeared years ago.” Jack turned and punched a few keys so that he could look at Clark’s files. “Right about the time Lex Luthor made his debut in the business world. Damn!”

“Get me some pictures,” Clark told him as he backed toward the stairs. “If you can find any.”

“Got it.” Jack hurried toward his own computer as Clark disappeared.

A few minutes later, Clark landed in a secluded area in Sydney and hurried into the building that housed the Delconto Organization. Slipping past security and dodging cameras, he made it to the top floor. When he opened the door to the CEO’s office, he almost turned around again.

“What the hell?!” The young man in the plush chair pushed the naked woman up from his lap, grabbing blindly for the robe lying across his desk.

“I’ll just...” The young woman motioned with her hand, then disappeared into the bathroom.

Leslie Luckaby stood up and put on the robe, keeping his eyes on Clark the entire time. “I don’t know who you are...”

“It doesn’t matter. I need to ask you some questions about your father.”

“Alexander?” Clark nodded. “Why do you want to know about him? He went to Ecuador with my grandfather and didn’t come home again. Probably got drunk and a local cut his goods off for messing with his wife.”

“Do you have a picture of him?”

“There’s one hanging in the lobby.” He stuffed his hands into the pockets of the robe. “Look, Mr...”

“You haven’t seen him in the past year?”

“No. I told you...”

“Thank you.” Clark turned and left a stunned man standing in the middle of his office. He made his way back down to the lobby and when he found the portrait of Alexander Luckaby, he could only shake his head in disbelief. “I’ll be damned.” He asked a few questions and within a few minutes, he was sitting down across the table from the attorney in charge of Franklin Luckaby’s estate.

“Look, Mr. Kent, we are not authorized to tell you anything.”

"I beg to differ. As an investigator for the attorney in charge of securing the future of the Luckaby line, I would say that whatever you're hiding is vital to my young client's future. If my research is correct, Master Lane is Franklin Luckaby's grandson. As his grandson he's entitled to a healthy trust." Clark didn't know that for certain, but it was a good guess. Most wealthy people set up trusts for children and grandchildren.

The attorney looked a little uneasy. Finally he took a deep breath. "Mr. Luckaby called us last week and told us the boy died. When we get the official death certificate, we'll transfer the money into Mr. Luckaby's account."

"I'm sorry, but those plans will have to be put on hold. Collin Lane is alive and he is the son of Alexander Luckaby and his wife."

The man stared at Clark for several moments before he turned to his computer. After three or four minutes, he looked back over at Clark. "Lane? As is Lois Lane?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't she Lex Luthor's wife?"

"Yes. I will call the attorney in charge of this case. I think you and she need to discuss a few things."

"Yes. I believe we do." He stood and motioned toward the phone on his desk. "Please, Mr. Kent, call the attorney and set up a video conference. I'll have my secretary bring in all the necessary numbers." He hurried into the other room while Clark phoned Mayson.

He gave Mayson a quick rundown of what was going on. She was stunned, but immediately cut the connection to make some calls. A mere fifteen minutes later, she was on the vid screen in the conference room discussing Luckaby and details of his estate. The lawyers in Sydney were shocked to say the least. They were also angry. If what Mayson was telling them was true, Alexander Luckaby was in serious trouble.

When the video conference was over, Clark stood up. "Thank you for listening."

"We will get the necessary samples for you by the end of business tomorrow. This has to be proven and documented."

"I understand."

"We will also get orders for DNA from Leslie and the banked blood of Franklin. The man made a donation every chance he got while he was alive. He was paranoid that something would happen. When Alexander was small, he banked his blood as well. We'll express it all to the lab Ms. Drake indicated."

"We'll fax the results back as soon as we have them."

"Very good." They shook hands again and Clark left.

He landed back in Metropolis and hurried up to the newsroom. Henderson was in with Perry. "What's going on?" he asked Jack, who was perched on his desk watching the windows of the editor's office.

"Not sure. Bill came in two minutes ago and shut himself in with Perry."

Right about then, Perry looked up and motioned for them to come in. "Hey, Jimmy, I think we're being paged."

The three men entered Perry's office and waited for whatever it was that needed to be said. None missed the fact that Perry looked like he was about to drop.

"Lois is gone," Bill finally spoke up.

"Gone? Where?" Jimmy asked, his heart thundering in his chest.

"She and another inmate got into a fight last night. They beat each other to death."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. Finally they were all prompted into action when Perry fell to the floor.

"He's out cold," Clark said as he assessed the man's condition. "Call an ambulance."

Bill called for help on his phone while the other man struggled to help their boss. Twenty minutes later, Perry was on

his way to Mercy Hospital.

"I'll go with him," Jimmy told the others.

Clark nodded and watched as they carted the old editor out of the newsroom. "What the hell happened, Bill?" he wanted to know.

"Apparently the leader of one of the gangs wanted Lois as her... friend. She and her gang held her down and raped her with whatever they could get their hands on. But that girl had spunk. She kicked and clawed, knocked out the two gang members, then went to whaling on the leader. They passed licks with chairs, crushed each other's faces into the bars, dragged each other across the floor... It was a bloody mess."

"Where is she?" Clark wanted to know.

"They're holding her in the morgue at the prison until her father tells us where to send her body."

Clark was halfway to the stairwell before Henderson yelled at him. "Where are you going?"

"I need to get permission from Sam for an autopsy."

Bill could only grin because Clark was gone. "Smart boy," he said to Jack. "I've already asked the doctor to give us permission."

"Did he?" Jack wanted to know.

"Yeah. But he wants Bernie Klein to do the exam."

"Another smart man," Jack said as he went to answer a phone.

"See ya', kid."

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Mayson found Clark standing on the balcony, leaning over on the wall. "Thought you might need a refill," she said as she set a full bottle of beer up beside his arms.

"Thanks." He tossed his empty bottle across his shoulder and it landed with a crash in the large can he'd put out next to the door. He chuckled softly at the reprimand he received from his mother.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah." He took a long gulp from his beer, then turned to lean on an elbow so he could look at Mayson. "I haven't said thank you for everything you've done." Mayson had rushed every known application and subpoena through as fast as she could. They were waiting on results from Bernie, but they now knew a lot more than they had a few days ago.

"You don't need to thank me. It's what I do."

"Yeah, well..." He took another drink from his beer.

"It was a great party," she told him, mainly to have something to say. They'd celebrated the twins' second birthday.

"The look on that kid's face..." Clark smiled as he remembered the surprised expression on Collin's face when he saw all of the people and balloons and decorations. The cake had been a huge hit. It had taken him nearly ten minutes to get all of the chocolate out of his hair. The bicycle was another hit. He rode a path through the apartment before he'd dropped from sheer exhaustion. Perry hadn't made it as long as he had. They were both sleeping in the loft where Clark had made them a makeshift bed they had all shared since they came to the city. He'd been sure to install a gate at the top of the stairs, though. Collin had nearly fallen down the ones at the farm.

"What are you going to do when Bernie confirms Lois' death?"

"I'm going to get you to file the necessary papers to declare Perry her daughter, then I'm going to apply to legally adopt both of them."

"What?" she asked with raised brows.

"Come on, Mayson. They're mine. You've seen that. Besides, what am I supposed to do? Give them to the state? Sam's going to be in prison for a while. Lucy's still so fried she doesn't know her name and they don't belong to Luthor. Right now, I'm all they have."

“And you’re prepared to keep them?”

He glanced toward the door. “I think I’ve been prepared to keep them for a long time now.”

“So you’ll commute, Superman style, back and forth to Kansas the rest of their lives? What happens when they’re older and start asking questions?”

“Actually, my parents looked at a place near Perry. They told me they’ve been thinking of moving to Metropolis for a while. They know I want to be a bigger part of the kids’ lives and I won’t take them from my folks.”

“The solution is for your parents to give up the family farm and move to the city with their son?”

“The solution is for my folks to choose love over bricks and mortar.” Clark slugged down the rest of his beer.

“For kids that are not even blood...” She stared at him, glanced at the apartment, then smiled. “I have \*got\* to move to Kansas.”

“Why?”

“So I can catch myself a good husband.”

Clark laughed as Mayson drank down some of her beer. “I thought you and Dan were working on things.”

“How did you know that?”

“I’m not the best reporter in the city for no reason,” Clark leaned back over on his arms across the balcony wall. “Are you? He could have come with you tonight.”

“Yeah, you would have been totally okay with that.” There was no sarcastic tone in her voice. Clark really would have been okay if she’d brought Dan along tonight. “How about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

“No. I don’t have enough time to think, let alone date.” He tilted his head to the side when his hearing kicked in.

“You need to go?”

He listened for another moment before he shook his head. “No. Emergency crews have it.” They stood in silence, staring at the side of the next building. His balcony offered a horrible view, but it was secluded and private. He glanced at the woman beside him. He’d come to cherish his friendship with Mayson. She asked questions he needed her to, even if he didn’t want her to ask them. And she’d gone above and beyond the call of duty for Lois and the investigation to help her. It would be days if not weeks before they had the results from all of the tests Bernie was running, but at least they had a solid direction to go in.

Martha yelled from inside that some of their guests were preparing to leave, so Clark sighed and stood up. “Come on. Walk me inside,” he told Mayson, throwing his arm over her shoulder as they headed toward the door. Tomorrow was a new day- more time to think about Lois and her situation.

Just like every other day.

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“We have major trouble brewing,” Nigel told David as he entered the office.

He looked up at him, a little pissed to be interrupted from his call. “Yes, let me call you back,” he told his caller. When he’d replaced the receiver, he leaned back in his chair. “Do tell.”

“A source inside the prison says that Lois was killed three days ago.”

“Good. That trash is out of my hair for good.”

“Not good. My source is better than that, sir. She’s not dead. It was meant to look that way.”

“For what reason?”

“Because Juan Delconto wanted it to.”

David’s face turned white and he sat up and leaned on the desk. “Why?”

“For the same reason he wanted Paul Lang. He’s furthering the doctor’s research.”

“And the boy?” David asked as he stood up.

“Still being guarded by Henderson’s men. And Kent’s always

around, too. Delconto will wait until there’s no trace.”

“Yes, yes.” David paced from behind the desk. “We need to get him before Juan does.”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been trying to do?” Nigel had been desperately attempting to get his hands on that kid without being seen.

“Don’t be a smartass, Nigel!” David clipped out. “He thinks Paul can help his condition,” David deduced as he paced back and forth.

“How could knowledge of the pregnancy and birth of cloned children help him?”

“How do I know?” he snapped. “But you know Paul was into more than cloning. Maybe some of that research he was doing in fertility and cell reproduction is what Juan’s after.” He walked over to the window. “We have to do something. Anything!”

“Just tell me what.”

“If I knew what, we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place!” he shouted and picked up a paper weight off his desk and threw it across the room.

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It had been two weeks since the birthday party. Bernie had performed the autopsy on the body from the prison and determined that it was not Lois Lane. Henderson had launched a full investigation of the prison and the warden, looking for evidence of how Lois had gotten out of the institution without notice. Apparently the security system had been down that night for service. There had been extra guards on duty, but of course the fight in D-block had led to a lockdown and the extra manpower had been shifted to the troubled area. Being as it was the same block that housed Lois, it should have been easy to explain what happened. However, she’d just disappeared without a trace.

Bernie had learned a few other disturbing things as well. The samples sent from Sydney were quite telling. The man born as Alexander Luckaby was indeed Lex Luthor. He was also the biological son of Lionel Luthor, not Franklin Luckaby. It was also proven that Leslie Luckaby was not the biological son of Lex either. Bernie ran a few other tests and found out that Luthor was infertile, just as Paul Lang’s journal had stated. Franklin Luckaby’s lawyers informed them that the elder Luckaby had set strict guidelines for his son to be able to inherit his share of the Luckaby fortune, including marriage and sons. Thus, the need for his marriage to Lois and the birth of her son. That man had created such a tangled web, Clark was sure they’d never get through it all.

“Clark?”

He looked up from his computer to see Mayson coming down the ramp. “Hi. What’s up?”

“Let’s talk in the conference room.” She motioned with her head and he stood up to follow her.

“What’s going on?” he asked when the door was closed.

“I just got a call from Sydney. Even though Leslie and Collin are not biologically related to Luthor, they were legally tied to him. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Lex was really Alexander, and while that presents a whole lot of complications here in the states, he filed his marriage to Lois and the birth of Collin in Australia, under the Luckaby name.” She held out a piece of paper to him. “Collin just became a very wealthy little fellow. And because he has a sister, she’s as rich as he is. Franklin did specify male offspring to carry on his name, but he made provisions for any females born.”

Clark read over the papers outlining the trust. “We don’t want this money.” There would be a deposit made to an expense account once a month until the children graduated college. They would then inherit over ten billion dollars each. Of course, there would be a check to pay for tuition, all the way through school.

Another would be available for a wedding of their dreams, and another trust for two children each.

“Consider it payback, for them losing their mother,” Mayson told him. “I’ve thought this over. I’ve asked tons of questions. The lawyers in Sydney want to wash their hands of this whole mess.”

“So give the money to the twins?”

“There’s also a healthy sum to continue the investigation to help Lois.”

“What?”

“They want to smooth this over, make themselves look good. They also want us to find out what happened to Alexander’s first wife, Arianna. Her family’s prepared to fork out another billion for positive results.”

“It’s blood money, Mayson.”

“No, it’s old, family money. Yes, Franklin and now Leslie is paid by the Delconto Organization, but it’s more of a benefits package. They never gave them enough to make them rich. They needed stooges and they got good ones.” She tapped the paper. “This would allow you to buy your parents a house here and they can keep the family farm.”

He looked up at her. “That’s playing dirty.”

“Yeah, well, I do what I have to do.”

He quirked a brow at her. “How big is your check?”

“You know me better than that. I won’t take a dime without your permission.” She glared at him, giving him back the same expression he gave her. “I could accept on behalf of the kids without your permission. Is that what you want?”

“You wouldn’t do that,” he said as he stepped around her, looking down at the papers.

“No, but Clark, think about it. They owe Lois.”

“Money won’t replace what she’s lost.”

“No, but it will sure as hell give her enough ammunition to rub it in somebody’s face one day.”

Clark finally turned back to Mayson. “I’ll talk this over with my folks and Perry, Jack, and Jimmy. If they think it’s a good idea, then we’ll take it.”

“Good.” She turned to leave. “I’ll call when I know anything else.”

“I’ll be here.” Clark’s eyes fell back down to the paper in his hands. What would he do with all of this money? Granted, the kids would end up with a ton when they were grown. Still... it was too much to contemplate. He glanced up to see Jack and Jimmy in the bullpen. No time like the present to see what everyone else thought.

Ten minutes later he was sitting across from Perry’s desk waiting to hear what he thought.

“Not everybody with money acts like Luthor,” Jimmy pointed out. “Perry and Collin will have morals and values. They’d use it wisely.”

“I’m not worried about that, Jimmy. Is it right to take it to begin with?”

“Hell, yeah,” Jack added. “Payment for all the crap!”

“Jack, I didn’t do what I’ve done for payment.”

“I know that, CK. It’s just...” He sighed in frustration, not able to explain what he felt.

“Mayson’s right,” Perry spoke up. “Luckaby money is old, family money. Franklin’s great, great grandmother was the wife of a duke. A rich duke that inherited even more money from his uncle, who had no children. When the duke died, the wife got the money. She married Gordy Luckaby, who knew how to invest all of that loot. Harold Luckaby bought into the insurance industry right before the Great Depression. His Australian money multiplied in the wake of America’s misfortune.”

“So how did Franklin end up working for Delconto?” Jimmy asked.

“Franklin’s sister was Juan’s third wife,” Perry answered.

“And you say I can root out info,” Jack said with snort.

Perry chuckled. “Yeah, well, I can find out things when I threaten to write unsavory details of people’s lives and business practices.”

“Way to go, Chief,” Jimmy said with a grin.

“The sister wasn’t Ellen Lane’s mother was she?” Jack asked.

“No. Ellen was born to his second wife, Lorna. Anyway, it’s believed that Delconto hired Luckaby to keep him quiet.”

“A case of your enemies closer,” Clark spoke up.

“Something like that.” Perry leaned his forearms on the desk and looked over at the other man. “Clark, take the money. You can use it to help Lois. When we finally get her out of all of this, she’ll need money to re-establish her life. Mayson deserves the payday and I’m sure Jack and Jimmy here wouldn’t mind helping you spend some of it. You could hire them to help find out what happened to Arianna Carlin.”

He glanced at the other men, then at the papers. “I still want to talk to my parents.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go on and do that. Then call Mayson to get things squared away.”

He nodded at Perry and stood up to leave. How much more twisted would this story get before it finally worked itself out?

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Clark rounded the corner at the end of the block from his apartment. He heard his mother scream and shot off like a rocket. He made it inside just in time to see her slam the bathroom door closed on an advancing man. “Hey!” he yelled, causing the man to turn with wide eyes. The intruder barely had time to blink before Clark had him tied up and lying on the floor at the end of his bed. He pulled out his cell and dialed Henderson’s direct line. “Bill, this is Clark. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I think there was just an attempted kidnapping at my place.” He listened a second. “Yeah, he’s okay. My mom locked them inside the bathroom.” He listened again. “Yeah, got it.” He closed his cell and knocked on the bathroom door. “Mom?”

“Clark?” She opened the door and wrapped her arms around his neck. “They tried to take Collin.”

“I know.” He released his mother and knelt to hold his arms out to the twins. They were glued to Martha’s legs, but went willingly into his arms. “I’ve got you.” He kissed each head and stood with a child in each arm. “What happened?”

“Your father went to the store and two guys came in the door. The guard chased one out, but that guy was coming in after him hard.”

“He’s tied up now.” They walked past the man lying on the bedroom floor and into the living room. Clark sat in the chair and they waited until Henderson got there. When the guy was loaded into a cruiser and on his way to county, Bill came back in to get Martha’s statement. Jonathan arrived in the middle of everything. He hurried to his wife to make sure she was okay after asking about the kids.

“I’m pretty sure they were working for whoever wants this kid.” Bill reached over and rubbed the boy’s head, who tucked his face into Clark’s neck. “I hate to say it, Kent, but you need to get these kids out of here until we can figure all of this out.”

“Where am I supposed to take them, Bill?”

“Somewhere with only one way in and one way out.”

Clark turned his head so that he could kiss Perry’s face. Bill was right. They needed to be protected, but he needed to be here to help with the case. He’d speak with his folks and they’d figure it out. Somehow, someway they’d keep this boy safe.

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“This is a damn mess,” Perry said as he sat at the conference room table. Clark had taken his folks and the twins to Perry’s lake house, for now. Dan Scardino had agreed to be their personal guard until something more permanent could be figured out. Jack had wanted to go with them, but reluctantly agreed he could be

more helpful using his computer skills.

“My question is who wants him?”

“Luthor,” Jack answered immediately.

“But hasn’t he served his usefulness? Luthor has his money.” Luckaby’s lawyers had tried to stop him from keeping it, but the account that the funds had been wired to had ceased to exist. It was as if it had never been there to begin with. The money was just gone.

“Wherever that’s at,” Jack said as he looked through some papers. “Find that money, find that bastard.”

“We know that, Jack,” Jimmy pointed out. They’d been looking for the fifty billion that had vanished into the recesses of the virtual world.

“How about smaller accounts?” Jack pushed his laptop around in front of Clark, who was sitting closest to him. “Twenty-eight billion dollars was deposited into an account under the name David Harris of Harris International ten weeks after the money was wired to Luckaby.”

“Harris International? Isn’t that the oil tycoon?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah. Reclusive playboy, takes over flailing businesses.”

Clark leaned closer. “He’s leading a bid to take over LexCorp.”

“But Harris is a loaded in his own right,” Jimmy went on.

“Twenty-eight billion is nothing to sneeze at, Jimbo.” Clark turned the laptop back toward Jack. “See if you can find out where the money came from.”

“On it.” Jack went to work, flashing through screen after screen.

“Busted!” Jimmy shouted and ran out of the room. He came back a second later carrying a photo he’d sent to the printer from his computer. “This a picture of David Harris taken at Metropolis International Airport by a friend of mine in the gossip business. Who does he look like?”

“A lot like Harris,” Jack pointed out as he turned his computer around to show them the picture on the screen. He was right; the two men did look alike. But if you looked carefully...

“Luthor!” Clark breathed.

“I’d say so.” Jimmy hurried over to pick up more photos they’d dug out. He put them up on the board to compare them side by side. “Luthor, in all of his haired glory. Luthor, as Alexander- bald as hell. And could this be Luthor, as David Harris?” The last picture showed a man with hair, although not a lot. It was dirty blonde and short. It also looked like there had been an attempt to disguise himself behind the mustache that Harris was known for.

“Only one way to find out if we’re right,” Clark announced and stood up.

“It’s nearly midnight, son,” Perry spoke up.

“Don’t worry. I’m gonna take a peek super style.” He waggled his brows and left. Flying high over the building where it was rumored Harris was staying, he carefully trained his vision on the occupants inside. David, or Luthor, was entertaining a woman. Poor girl, Clark thought as he continued his visual search. He stopped when he saw a man sitting in a chair in another room. The man was listening to classical music and drinking some kind of alcohol. He was also someone Clark knew. He was Nigel St. John with black hair. “Got ‘em!” he said with a fist pump, then zipped back to the Planet.

“Well?” Jack asked the time he walked in.

“He’s Luthor. I saw him and Nigel.”

“I’ll call Henderson,” Perry spoke up. “Of course, he’ll need more than a hunch to make a positive ID.”

“We’ll find him something,” Jack said as he went back to work on the computer.

“Sorry to run out on you,” Clark spoke up. “But I need to go check on my kids.”

“No problem, CK. We have this covered.” Jimmy waved him off and he left them to work while he went to make sure his twins were okay.

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Frustrated didn’t begin to explain how Clark and the others felt. They couldn’t find a legal reason to check into David Harris’ legal identity. They’d done a background search and couldn’t find a thing that said Harris wasn’t who he said he was. They continued to dig into Luckaby’s business, into Luthor’s business, and into everything else they could find to comb through. The men who broke into Clark’s place said that a man paid them to go snatch the boy and take him back to a warehouse. The warehouse was swept, the man was found. The man said he was contacted by phone. The money was left at the warehouse for him to pick up. The phone call was traced back to a prepaid cell. After days and days of searching, nothing.

Clark decided to accept the offer from the Luckaby estate. Refusing to hide, he used some of it to upgrade the security at the farm and pay two fulltime guards who would work around the clock to protect his son.

And he was his son. With each day that passed, Clark fell more in love with those kids. It didn’t matter how they’d come to him. It didn’t matter how insane the situation was that was keeping them with him. All he knew was that he loved those kids and they’d become vital to his existence.

Legal avenues were pursued, not-so-legal avenues- thanks to Jack- and every stone turned. The man known as David Harris practically dared them to prove he was Lex Luthor. They’d traced the money, but were unable to discover how it got into his account or where it came from. They hit wall after frustrating wall.

They were unable to find out what happened to Lois or where she was. Whoever took her, had covered their tracks too well.

The days dragged by, and then the weeks. Eventually the months slipped away. Before anyone knew it, nearly another year had passed. As spring descended on the city, so did the hope of a breakthrough in the case.

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Lifting her sunglasses to cover her eyes, the woman hefted her small backpack onto her back and hurried across the street. It had been a long trip to get here, but she’d finally made it. Glancing at the paper in her hand, she looked up at the building to make sure she had the right place. She smiled and opened the door of the little shop.

“Good morning,” came the cheerful voice of the lady behind the counter.

“Good morning. I came about the ad.” She laid the paper down and pointed to the ad she’d circled.

“Oh, yes ma’am. You want to rent the apartment?”

“Yes. Can you show it to me?”

“Sure.” The lady led her through the small building; it was a book shop. “Do you think you’ll be okay living above the business?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” she said as they continued into the back.

“That’s the entrance you’ll use when the shop is closed.” The woman pointed to the back door. “We lock the shop door.” She motioned for Lois to follow and they went up. There was a small landing at the top of the stairs. The woman stopped and unlocked the door. There was a kitchen, living area, and a bedroom with a full bath. “Nothing fancy.”

“It’s perfect.”

“I lived here until I married. The kids have each taken their turn here. Nice for a single person.”

“It’s great,” she repeated her approval. “The add says it includes utilities?”

“Oh yes. Everything’s included, even satellite television.”

She nodded, looking around again. She walked over to the window and looked out over the square. There was going to be a festival soon. Folks were scrambling to get set up.

“You’ll love it here. We sure have.”

She turned and smiled at the woman. “I’ll take it.”

The older woman smiled back. “Good. How about a cup of coffee?”

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The slim redheaded woman settled in easily enough because she didn’t have but one bag. After taking dust covers off the furniture, she walked over to look out of the window at the commotion on the square. The annual Corn Festival was in full swing. She still couldn’t believe there was a ritual devoted to corn.

But it didn’t really matter. She was only in Smallville for one reason. She showered and dressed, then headed toward the ongoing festivities in town. There was going to be a dance with a live band tonight. She was told most people around came out, so she figured that was her best shot to do what she needed to do.

Dressed like the local folks in jeans and a tee-shirt, she ordered a barbeque sandwich from a stout gentleman she was sure might be a cross dresser. Surprised by how tasty the food was, she chose a bench on the edge of the makeshift dance floor and looked around. She hated her new glasses, but they helped her hide in plain sight.

“Again, Daddy!”

She turned to the excited squeal of a little boy behind her. He was jumping up and down as his dad retrieved the balls from an attendant at a game booth. When the man turned her way, she nearly fell off the bench.

“That’s him!” she breathed as her eyes fell on the boy again. He was so tall! Beautiful black hair was tousled on top of his head. Chubby cheeks were filled with dimples.

And his smile...

Tears filled her eyes as she watched him hold the softballs for...

“Clark,” she whispered. As she watched, the man she’d just spoken of stopped and turned around. She quickly busied herself with eating, pasting a fake smile on as she watched the dancers. When he threw his first ball, she watched him out of the corner of her eye. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he’d heard her.

What was she thinking? He \*had\* probably heard her.

The little boy shouted and cheered when Clark knocked down the milk containers again. He was so adorable. His eyes danced in the multi-colored lights beginning to twinkle to life in the setting Kansas sun.

“Uncle Jack, Daddy won me a bear!”

The boy ran a few feet away and into the waiting arms of another young man. She remembered him. He’d grown up a bit since she’d seen him last.

But what nearly took her breath away was the little girl in the arms of the man beside Jack. Perry! Her precious Perry. She looked so much like her brother. They were wearing matching outfits- Collin in overalls and Perry in a dress that was made like overalls. They both had on red shirts under their denim and white tennis shoes.

They were both gorgeous.

And Jimmy... Wow! He was certainly a handsome man now.

Walking behind Jimmy and Jack she recognized Mayson Drake, who was walking arm in arm with a tall, dark-headed man. Clark greeted everyone, then they headed toward the rides. She stood and drifted around the craft booths, keeping an eye on the small group. Clark rode ride after ride, played several more games, and bought ice cream cones for the twins. He smiled widely, laughed with them, and held them like they were the most precious things in his world. He had been a very good choice, she thought as she drifted to another display.

As she rounded the corner to stay hidden from the others, she saw someone else that caused her breath to hitch. “Perry!” she said as she looked at the older man. He was laughing and holding Alice’s hand. They were walking with another woman and the man from the barbeque stand. The man and woman must have been husband and wife because his arm was around her shoulder as they walked along. They chose a large table near the bandstand and after a few minutes, Jimmy and Jack joined them. Another young man came up with a girl. They laughed and talked, then the younger boy and girl left. As she continued to watch, little Perry ran their way.

“Nana!” She crawled into the lap of the older woman she didn’t recognize. Clark and Collin sat down and before long Mayson and her companion joined them. As she continued to watch, she realized the other older couple must be Clark’s parents. Clark ordered food and fed the kids. He happily ate the fries they offered him and kept their little faces wiped.

He’d done a wonderful job with them, she thought as she continued to watch. Both children talked a mile a minute and Clark patiently answered all of their questions. His smile didn’t look forced and his laugh reached his eyes. He was happy.

Happy with her kids. Wiping the stubborn tears from her cheeks, she started back to her place. She’d needed to see they were okay. She’d need to know that Clark wanted them, loved them. Even if he’d never bargained to be anyone’s daddy when it was thrust upon him, she needed to know he was okay with it. Not only did he look okay, he looked as natural in his role as father as he seemed to be in his role as reporter.

Lois had been back in the states for a few days, learning how to blend in with her surroundings. She had a plan and part of that plan had been to make sure her kids were okay. She’d done a check on Clark Kent and learned that he was a good reporter- had won several awards. He was boasted as the hottest ticket in town. Several billboards around Metropolis displayed his picture. He seemed to be as clear-cut as he came off. No record, graduated high school and college with honors. He was an athlete, star of the football team. He lived in an unassuming part of town, although she’d learned that he had a very healthy bank account. He’d recently made an offer on a house near where Perry lived. The only thing that troubled her had been lack of information on the twins. There had been tons of pictures of Clark with Collin the day they’d gotten him. There were several follow-ups, then nothing. Kent had done a good job of keeping them out of the spotlight.

She’d talked with the lady who ran the diner the day before. The twins lived in Smallville with Clark’s folks. He visited as often as he could, and they went with him to the city at least once a month. Maisey also told Lois that the elder Kents and their grandchildren were planning to move to Metropolis so they could be closer to Clark.

She stood in the window of her apartment above the shop and watched the people coming and going at the festival. Her eyes searched until she found the table where Clark and the others sat. She was close enough that she could make them out clearly enough. Pulling a chair over so she could sit down, she left the lights out and watched her children play.

“Soon,” she promised them softly. “I’ll see you soon.”

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“Hey, CK, we had a blast in Smallville,” Jack informed him as he came over and dropped on the edge of his desk. “Thanks for asking us out.”

“No problem, Jack.” He grinned at the man.

“Although I am glad your folks are moving to the city. I have a feeling Denny would have asked to live with them, too.” He and Clark shared a laugh and talked about their weekend.

Clark looked up when the elevator dinged and Henderson entered the newsroom. “Kent, got a second?”

“Sure.” He stood and patted Jack’s shoulder. “Later.”

“Got it.” The man disappeared the way he always did.

“What’s up, Bill?” Clark asked when they were alone in the conference room.

“The occupants of the space station are coming home early. I thought maybe it would be easier for Lana to hear about her folks from you.”

“Yeah. When?”

“Tonight. We can get in right after debriefing. Meet me at EPRAD about seven. One more thing... we found Paul Lang.”

“Where?”

“On a beach off the coast of Spain. The local police found him a week ago. A friend of mine from Interpol just happened to catch the memo and called me. Scardino flew out last night and he just called a little while ago.”

“Is he talking?”

“Sorry, Kent, Lang was dead. Gunshot to the back of the head. He was executed.”

Just then the door banged open and Mayson entered. “We’ve finally caught a break!” She opened her suitcase and took out several photos. “Dan took these this morning- Spain time. He emailed them to me. This is a compound about sixty miles from where Lang’s body was found.” She looked up at the men. “You did tell Clark?” she asked Henderson.

“Yeah. What are these?”

“This compound is owed by Pedro Renaldo.”

“Pedro Renaldo?” Henderson asked.

“As in the man believed to be the son of Juan Delconto?”

Clark put in.

“That’s the one. Dan said he spoke with some of his buddies from his law enforcement days and they tell him that up until six weeks ago, there was a man at the compound in a wheelchair.” She produced another photo. “This man.”

Bill jerked the picture up. “Juan Delconto.”

“Didn’t he die several years ago?” Clark wanted to know.

“Right around the time several agencies got together and decided to launch a major investigation into his organization,” Mayson added. “That’s why every division of every agency in the world was scrambling to find out who his next of kin was.”

“Ella was his only legal heir. However, it was believed that he’d fathered nearly a dozen sons. Pedro being the oldest.” Bill looked at the photo again. “That’s him though.”

“Wait. If this compound was owned by the alleged son of Delconto, wasn’t he investigated?” Clark thought he should ask the obvious.

“Thoroughly. We believe that bribes were paid to make records disappear.”

“But look at the photos,” Mayson pointed out. “It looks like a war took place there. Dan is working with Interpol to secure warrants to go in. We should know something by tomorrow.” She took out yet more pictures. “There’s something else.”

Clark snatched up the images she laid out. “Lois!”

“No wonder we couldn’t find her. We were looking in the wrong place,” Bill spoke up.

“And for the wrong person.” Clark shuffled through the pictures, then looked back down at the more recent ones. “Why wasn’t somebody notified when she was spotted?”

“Dan says that branch of Interpol has been working for years to get something on Renaldo. I’m sure a woman being at the compound was an everyday occurrence.” She started picking up the pictures. “I’ve sent copies of all of these to your office,” she told Bill. “I have a deposition in an hour. I’ll call when I hear something.”

Bill turned after she left. “I have to go, too. This is major.”

“Yeah. I’ll tell Perry when he comes in.”

“Where is that old news hound?”

“Closing the deal on the Planet.”

“What?”

Clark grinned. “He bought the Planet from Stern.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Bill shook his head and left.

Before Clark could make it back to his desk, Jack came rushing over, grinning from ear to ear. “Who’s your daddy?” he asked Clark.

“Jonathan Kent, I hope.”

“Funny.” Jack shoved a piece of paper in front of Clark.

“Where’s Bill? We need to see if he can use this.”

“What is it?”

“DNA results from a cigar I lifted from a party at the Lexor Hotel two nights ago. I filled in for my buddy Ron as waiter. And guess who one of the guests was?”

“Who?”

“David Harris.”

Clark’s eyes snapped from Jack’s down to the paper. “They match Luthor’s?”

“Yes sir!” Jack was grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re right. Henderson needs this.” He took the paper and ran from the room. Bill was crossing the street when he made it downstairs. “Bill!”

When Clark caught up to him and explained what he had, Bill started grinning. “I’ll try to get a warrant by close of business.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

The Inspector nodded and hurried down the block to where he’d parked his car. Clark stuffed his hands in pockets and looked around. What now? He’d go tell Perry and the others to sit tight, then maybe he’d fly to Spain, offer his eyes for a super search on that compound. If Lois had been there, where was she now? Had they... killed her? Taken her somewhere else? He needed answers and he was much too impatient to sit around and wait for them to come to him.

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Superman flew to Spain and was greeted by officials there with the utmost respect. They were more than pleased to have him go out to Renaldo’s compound and take a look around. His super eyes might be better than all of theirs combined. He arrived only moments after the teams of investigators did, having just been allowed by a judge to enter the grounds. The place was huge, spanning several miles along the coastline and into the interior of the small island off the mainland. It appeared there had indeed been some kind of war. Bodies were lying everywhere; the smell of rotting corpses hung heavily in the air.

“What happened?” Superman asked the lead detective.

“We think there was a shootout among them. We haven’t deduced why yet, but most of these men have the same tattoo.” He bent to show Superman an emblem on a dead man’s arm. “It is believed that once you enter the Delconto Organization, they brand you.”

“And once in, this is the only way out,” Superman said as he waved his hand at the carnage.

“I’m afraid so.”

He continued further onto the estate, counting casualties as he went. By the time he reached the main house, he was up to seventy. More bodies were inside. It took a while to search through the main rooms because of the sheer size of the house. Another wing spanned out toward the water. When he reached the eastern section, he made a huge discovery. Down a tunnel and several steps was an entire bunker. It appeared to be a lab of some sort. It looked as if it had been abandoned in the middle of some experiment or other.

“In here,” shouted an officer.

Superman entered the other room, which was obviously a morgue, judging from the metal drawers in the wall. As they pulled out several, his thought was confirmed.

“We’ve hit the jackpot,” came the voice of another man. He pulled out a drawer with a body lying on it who looked like...

“Juan Delconto!”

Superman turned to see Dan Scardino enter the room.

“Superman, I didn’t know you were coming out for this.”

“Yeah, thought I could lend some eyes.”

Dan chuckled softly and slapped his shoulder. He was quite a character, having become friends with Clark over recent months. “Looks like the old man died before the turf war.”

An officer leaned up and looked at the others. “No obvious wounds.”

“Get him out of here and to the examiner. I want to know by daybreak tomorrow what killed him.”

“Not a problem.” The young man began preparing the body for transport as the others kept milling through the mess left behind.

Superman pointed out things not so obvious to regular eyes as he made way through the house. When he stepped into the secluded room close the beach, he stopped. “Lois,” he breathed. He could smell her. He’d only seen her twice, but she’d been in this room. “This is where they kept Lois Lane,” Superman told the detective with him.

“It was cut off from the rest of the house. Gated, even the beach was blocked by boulders.” He waved toward the surf.

“Not to mention the watchtowers,” Dan pointed out as he entered the room. “We need to find something with a little DNA on it.”

“Will this work?” Superman asked as he came out of the bathroom with a toothbrush.

“You know it will,” Dan said with a grin and opened a bag for him to drop the item in. “Where is she now? We’ve looked and can’t find her body.”

“I’ll search again. Did you find Renaldo?”

“In his car in the garage. It seems he was trying to make a getaway,” Dan told him.

Superman nodded and was about to leave, but turned back. “What can you tell me about Paul Lang?”

“Executed,” Dan informed him. “How he got to the beach is beyond me.” Dan pointed out across the water at a speck of land just barely visible. “He was found on that island. Obviously the tide washed him over there. From the looks of things, he was killed sometime during their little war.”

Superman left the room and began carefully searching the grounds and house again. Although close to a hundred bodies were discovered, none were Lois Lane. He was headed back out to where the police had set up a makeshift headquarters when Dan caught up with him. “Ten of the bodies didn’t have the Delconto tats.” He steered the Man of Steel toward the bodies that had been separated from the others. “This guy...” He indicated which one with his foot. “... is a known associate of Intergang.”

“As in Intergang in Metropolis?” Superman asked.

“As in Bill Church,” Dan said with a grin. “If my theory’s correct, Church sent a crew to eliminate the competition.”

“Why would they agree to a death sentence? From everything I’ve heard, people know it’s suicide to confront Delconto.”

“Don’t ask me, but that’s what it looks like.” He waved a hand toward one side of the compound. “The fence wire has been snapped open over there and you can clearly see where several men came through. I think it was an execution-style assignment. In and out, everybody dead and nobody knows they were here.”

“Then what went wrong?”

“Anybody’s guess.” Dan shrugged and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “All I know is that the sons of bitches took care of themselves for us. The organization will fold now. At least seven of the nine believed to be sons of Delconto have already been identified among the dead.”

“That still leaves two,” Superman said grimly.

“Yeah, but if they’re running, we’ll find them.”

“I hope so. I’ll debrief the detective before I go.”

“No problem. Thanks for the super peek.”

“I wish I’d found more to help.”

“Me, too.”

Superman walked away, leaving Dan to stare at the mess left by whatever force had swept through the place. Could the infamous Delconto Organization really have been toppled here? And where was Lois?

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Clark waited inside a room at EPRAD for Lana to arrive. He hated to be the one to tell her that her folks were gone, but knew it was best coming from him. The door opened and she stepped inside.

“Clark!”

“Hiya, stranger,” he said as he folded her into a warm hug.

She drew back to look up at him with a frown. “What?” She could tell by the way he’d hugged her something was wrong.

“That obvious?”

“I know you too well.”

He took her hands and led her over to a chair. Once they were seated, he finally raised his eyes to hers. “Lana, something’s happened.”

“Mom?”

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard. “She was found dead a few months ago.” Lana sat, stunned, her mouth hanging open, her eyes filling with tears. “The investigation points to...” He looked down where his thumbs rubbed the backs of her hands. “... your father killed her.”

She jerked away from him and stood up. “Liar!”

“I’m not, Lana,” he said softly as he pulled a file across the table. “There’s a copy of the reports in there.” He stood and she backed away from him. “That’s not all. Your father was found on a beach in Spain. He’d been... executed.”

She just stared at him, unable to utter a word.

“We believe he was working for Lex Luthor, then Bill Church, and at the end for Juan Delconto.” He jerked a finger toward the file. “There’s excerpts from a diary we found in his lab. He had an affair several years ago with a woman named Ellen Lane. He fathered a child with her.”

Lana suddenly smiled. “Clark, why are you teasing me like this?”

“I’m not teasing you, Lana. I’m very serious.” The smile slowly faded from her face and she glanced at the file. “The woman’s name is Lucy. We’ve confirmed that Paul was her biological father. And, Lana, he killed Ellen Lane. He admits it in the diary.”

She stared at Clark for a long while before she moved over and dropped to the chair. Slowly she opened the file and began reading. After a few minutes, she picked the file up and threw it across the room. “How could he?”

“I know,” Clark said soothingly as he sat back down in front of her. “The entire mess is unbelievable.” She looked up at him with huge tears in her eyes and he reached for her, holding her while she sobbed. When she finally calmed, he took her to his place and spent the night retelling everything that had happened. He held her while she cried some more, then while she slept. He couldn’t possibly imagine what was going through her mind.

Nearing dawn, Lana came out to the living room where Clark sat on the sofa tapping away on his computer. “Did you sleep out here?” she asked of the cover on the cushions.

“Yeah, what little I slept,” he said as he looked up at her.

“How do you feel?”

“Lost,” she said as she sat down beside him, leaning her head over on his arm. “You could have stayed in there with me.”

“I know.” He turned his head and kissed the top of hers.

“Clark, do you think we did the right thing when we separated?”

“What?” He shifted so he could look at her.  
 “Everything we’ve done leads us right back to each other,” she pointed out. She lifted her hand and cupped his cheek. “And I’ve missed you so much.”

He covered her hand on his face and gently pulled it away.  
 “Lana, I’m not alone now. I have... kids.”

“Oh yeah, by my sister’s sister,” she said as she stood up and headed into the kitchen for something to drink. “I want to meet her,” she said, not giving him a chance to say anything else.

“She doesn’t know yet. Lucy was drugged with some potent stuff your father was mixing up. She’s lost her mind.”

Lana took a drink from the can of soda she’d gotten from the fridge and walked back over to lean against the bookshelf. “Will she ever be right again?”

“The doctors doubt it. I’ve tried to talk with her a couple of times. She’s like a child now.”

She turned and looked at the pictures on the shelf. “Are these the kids?”

“Yeah. Collin and Perry.”

“Perry, for a girl? How odd.”

“Lois named her after Perry White. She was...”

“The star reporter for the Planet,” Lana finished as she turned back around, holding the frame in her hands. “I remember her. She interviewed Daddy once.” Looking back at the picture, she frowned a little. “You know, Clark, they kinda’ look like you.”

“Jack says that all the time,” he said with a chuckle.

Lana replaced the frame and went to sit back beside him on the sofa. “Are you happy?”

“As a dad?” She nodded. “Like nothing I’ve ever known,” he said with pride. “They complete me the way I’ve always longed to be. With them, I feel like I belong.”

“Oh, Clark,” she said and leaned into his side. She knew how much he’d struggled with his true identity. “I guess I need to get to the police station. There are probably tons of things I have to take care of. Will you come to a memorial service for my mother?”

“You know I will. What about your father? You need to say good-bye to him, too.”

“Yeah, but under the circumstances, I think that one will be private.”

“I’ll be there, too,” he told her and wrapped an arm around her.

“You’re a good friend,” she said against his body.

“So are you.” He continued to hold her, allowing her to be comforted as long as she needed. Now that her parents were gone, he was all she had in the world.

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David Harris hurried out to his car through the pouring rain. He had a meeting across town and he couldn’t be late. Nigel was off on an errand so he was alone in the back of his Lincoln. When the driver turned left instead of right at an intersection, David leaned forward.

“Where are you going, you idiot?” No answer. “Did you hear me? The meeting is at Seventy-second and Grand.” Still no answer. “Stop the damn car!” He reached for the handle and the locks clicked.

“Just sit back, Harris, we’ll be there soon,” came the unusual voice from the driver.

“Where’s Leon? You’re not Leon.” The driver said nothing else as the car was maneuvered through the afternoon traffic. Harris continued to rant during the entire forty-minute trip. The car finally pulled into the parking area of an abandoned manufacturing plant. When they stopped, they were inside the actual building. The doors clicked open and Harris immediately jumped out. The small driver got out as well.

“I’m going to...” David stopped when he saw the barrel of a gun pointed at him. “What is the meaning of this?”

The driver lifted a hand and took off the cap, shaking long, red hair free. “Sorry about the color, dear, but I thought it suited me.”

“Lois!” he breathed, his eyes wide in shock. “I was told you were dead.”

“Yeah, your men did a bang-up job.”

“Those were no men of mine!”

“Oh, I know that, too.” She eyed him for a minute. “You know, for a dead man you look pretty decent. The blonde hair sucks, and so does the mustache, but...” She shrugged, keeping her gun trained on him the whole time.

“I suppose you want payback.”

“Oh, honey, I don’t want payback. I want what’s rightfully mine.”

“You want money?”

“No,” she said with a wide grin. “I want to \*know\* you’re dead.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll fry.”

“I don’t think so,” Lois said, cocking the gun. “You see, I signed a sweet little deal to serve ten years. Two of which are nearly over. I won’t get time for leaving my nice comfortable bed in the state pen because I was taken from there against my will. And I can’t be convicted of killing you again. It’s called double jeopardy, a protection in our justice system that says a person can’t be convicted of the same crime twice. So see, my dear husband, I can finish out my time. Can you?”

“You wouldn’t dare.” He shouted out in pain and fell up against the car when Lois shot him in the leg.

“You don’t think so? You took me from my life, filled me with drugs, forced me to marry you, after you impregnated me with some strange man’s sperm!”

Lex laughed evilly. “Don’t you know, \*wife\*, that your precious babies are nothing more than an abomination?”

“Don’t you know, Boss, not to trust the cronies who work for you?” She smiled when his grin faded a bit. “Paul was smarter than you give him credit for.” When his brows rose, she nodded. “Yes, my dear, I know the doctor’s name. He and I spent a great deal of time together recently.” She walked around, more in front of Lex from his position holding himself up against the car. “He was stabbing you in the back and you were too dumb to know it. Your \*cloned\* son was conceived in a petri dish, my egg and his \*father’s\* sperm.”

“You’re lying,” he said. “I saw the results myself.”

“Results can be doctored. But what do you care? Perry White knows he’s not your child. And if I know Perry, by now the best doctors in the world also know he’s not a clone.”

“I should have killed you when I had the chance.” He moved like he was going to grab her and she shot his other leg.

“You bitch!” he yelled and fell to the ground.

“Hurts so much more than a faked fall from Lex Towers, doesn’t it?” She knelt and ground the barrel into one of his wounds, causing him to shout out in pain. “Just tell me why. Why did you pick me out of all of the women you could have chosen?”

“You were...” He gasped for breath. “... the only one smart enough to figure it all out.”

“And the irony is...” She used the gun to lift his face until their eyes met. “I did.” She stood up and dug into her pocket for a necklace, dropping it on his lap. “Juan says to send you his best.” She drew back and popped him in the head as hard as she could, rendering him unconscious. Glancing at her watch, she dropped the gun beside him on the ground. Her prints wouldn’t be on it; she’d worn gloves. She hurried across the empty building and uncovered another car. She drove out, across the yard, down a path at the back of the property. The car was parked so that she could look through binoculars and watch the police arrive to find David, AKA Lex Luthor, slumped on the ground. Satisfied they had him in custody, she drove toward the main road.

\*\*\*

Clark pushed through the crowd as Lex Luthor was wheeled into the penal wing of Metropolis General Hospital. Henderson had gotten the call that local police on the outskirts of town had found the man, shot in both legs, and had taken him into custody. While they'd been unable to secure a search warrant on the evidence Jack had discovered to force David Harris to prove he was Lex Luthor, Bill had been able to get a bench warrant for Lex Luthor's arrest. He was wanted on charges of fraud. The description that went out matched David Harris, so when he was found bleeding on the concrete in that plant, he was arrested.

"So far he's refusing to say a word," Bill told him as he reached Clark in the throng of reporters.

"No idea who shot him?"

"Nope. But I'd like to shake the guy's hand."

"Yeah," Clark agreed and followed Bill inside.

Two hours later, Lex was ranting and raving because his lawyer wasn't there. And he wasn't admitting he was Lex Luthor.

"Police have found the body of a man they believe is David Harris," Bill told Clark as he approached him in the hallway.

They'd been standing outside Luthor's room talking when the Inspector got a call at the desk. "And get this... the gun found with Lex shoots the same kind of bullet found in Harris' head."

"We couldn't get that lucky," Clark said in disbelief.

"We'll know in a few hours."

"Call me. I have to get to the Planet and write this up."

"You got it," he called because Clark was halfway to the exit. Just when he thought things couldn't get stranger, they did.

\*\*\*

Clark didn't make it home until nearly midnight that night. No sooner than he'd closed the door when there was frantic knocking on it. He pulled it back open to see an anxious Lana on the other side.

"I think I know who the father of the twins is," she said as she pushed in around him.

"What?" he asked as he shut the door and stepped down into the living room, cutting on a light as he did.

"I found this." She held up a small, black book. "It was in Daddy's safe."

She had Clark's attention because Paul Lang had basically told the world the things he'd done in his other book. He walked closer, reaching out to take the book. He flipped through several pages before his shocked eyes met Lana's.

"They look like you for a reason," she said, large tears in her eyes. She'd met the twins a few days earlier and had fallen completely in love. Clark had shown up for her mother's memorial service and the private one for her father. It had been a long, trying couple of weeks, but Clark had been her rock. "Remember the tests Daddy ran for us?"

When they'd been together and seriously talking marriage, they'd confided in Paul Lang Clark's amazing abilities. He'd run a few tests for them to determine if Clark could father children. It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

"I know he told us you couldn't, but..." Lana glanced down at the book.

He read through the pages again, unable to believe what he saw. "No way," he breathed.

"It's true."

Both Clark's and Lana's heads snapped up when the new voice entered the conversation. Lois was standing in the doorway of his bedroom.

"Paul told me before he was shot." She was standing with her arms crossed, leaning on the jamb as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"How did you get off that island?" Clark wanted to know as he walked toward her.

"The first question I would have asked was how I got in your

house." She pushed off the wall and held out a hand to Lana. "You look exactly like your father described you... And a little like my sister."

Lana took the offered limb with a wide-eyed expression on her face. "Why? Did he tell you why he did what he did?"

"Money, of course. It's the evil that rules the world."

"And Clark?" Lana wanted to know.

"He hated Clark." She glanced at Clark as she retrieved her hand from the other woman. "More precisely, he loathed his biology." Lois walked around Lana and dropped heavily on the sofa, leaving them to stare at her. "I do have to say it was genius what he was trying to do. It just blew up in his face." She leaned back into the cushion and propped her feet up. "How 'bout something cold to drink, Kent?"

He couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped him as he went to retrieve a few beers from the fridge. Somehow he felt Lois needed something a bit stronger than cream soda. He gave one to each woman and opened his own bottle.

"Damn, that's good," Lois said after she took a long gulp. "I haven't had a beer in... well, it's been a while."

Lana was sitting on the chair watching Lois carefully and Clark decided to pull a chair over from the kitchen. He watched his guest as he drank from his bottle. She was everything Jimmy had described her to be. Yet nothing that he'd said she was.

"How are our babies?" she asked Clark, looking directly at him.

He glanced down at the book he still held. "This is true? They really are mine?"

Lois stared at him for several moments before she leaned up to dig in her pocket. She tossed him a small, black device. "Paul's flash drive, with all of his notes on it. Bernie will confirm it. He just needs a little tissue from your cheek." She pointed at him, swirling her finger in a circle.

Clark looked at the computer drive for a moment before he pushed it into his pocket. "I'll see him in the morning."

"Make it early," Lois told him. "By the time the morning edition of the Planet comes out, all hell's gonna be broke loose." She downed the rest of her beer, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Why did they kill him?"

Lois looked over at Lana with sad eyes. "Juan's son killed him when he failed to save his father's life. Juan had a rare blood disorder that slowly ate him up inside. He took me from the prison and tried to find Collin because he thought the blood flowing through Collin's veins could save his life."

Did she know? Clark asked himself. She'd said Paul hated his biology, but did Lois know what that meant?

"I doubt anything could have saved him," Lois went on. "Paul tried to tell him that in order for a transfusion to work, the donor blood had to be a match. Collin's blood didn't match Juan's. Paul showed him the research. Mine did though." She snorted a wry laugh. "Figures my blood would match the devil's." She tapped her empty bottle on the table and Clark leaned forward to replace it with his own. She shot him a half smile before turning it up. "The tests didn't work and Juan died anyway when he caught cold."

"And the shootout?" Clark asked her.

"I heard the shots all the way from the airstrip. When the plane circled back around, it looked like World War Three was taking place."

"Plane? How did you get on a plane?"

"Juan's son, Mikel, took me out. When Renaldo went crazy and shot Paul, Mikel came for me. Just as we made it through the hidden entrance on the west end of the compound, we heard the first shots. Within minutes the place sounded like a war zone."

"It looked like one, too," Clark told her and stood up to get more beer. She'd emptied the second bottle as well. He tossed

the empties, grabbed two more cold ones, and pushed a dinner plate his mother had sent home with him the day before into the microwave. Lois looked pale, like she hadn't eaten in a while. And if she kept drinking so quickly, she'd be drunk soon.

Lana rose and looked for the purse she'd dropped in her excitement earlier. "Could we talk more... about my father... when I don't feel like I'm going to pass out? I've been in conferences all day and I'm wiped."

"I'll tell you anything I can," Lois assured her.

She nodded and turned to Clark, looking for and receiving a hug.

"Call me tomorrow," he told her.

"I will." She turned, but looked back up at him.

"Congratulations, Daddy," she said with a grin.

He laughed softly as she left. When he sat back down across from Lois, he placed the hot food in front of her. "Eat. You look like you could use it."

"Did you cook it?" she asked as she took the fork he offered.

"No. Mom did."

"Oh, oh," she mumbled around the tasty morsels in her mouth. "This is delicious."

"Squash casserole, pork chops, and wild rice. Nothing special."

"Very special when you've had fruit and tacos for months." She stuffed another bite into her mouth. "And before that it was prison slop." She moaned as she continued to eat. "I think I like you, Kent."

"Yeah, well, that might be a good thing," he said softly as he took a drink from his beer.

She polished off the food before looking up at him. After she downed more beer, she wiped her mouth with a napkin he'd given her. "All things considered, I'm glad it's you."

"You don't even know me," he told her.

"No. Not with my head. But the first time I met you I knew there was something about you... And it has nothing to do with your biology."

"You keep saying that. What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Paul told me you're Superman."

Clark's eyes widened as he stared at her.

"Don't worry. No one knew that he's you. Juan just thought he'd used Superman's sperm to impregnate me. And Renaldo didn't have a clue what he was doing. He knew Paul was a doctor trying to find a cure for his father's illness." She played with the fork, staring at her plate. "You don't know me either, but you took my little girl."

"What choice did I have?"

Her eyes lifted to meet his. "Is that why you did it? You didn't have a choice?"

"She needed someone." Clark shrugged. "I could have worked something else out if I'd really wanted to."

"And you didn't... want to?"

He smiled at her as he thought of his beautiful little Perry. "Those big, brown eyes just kind of..." He squeezed his hand into a fist, trying to explain with his action what he couldn't with his mouth. Little Perry had captured his heart with a single look. With all of Perry's resources, something else could have been worked out for her. Truth was, he hadn't really wanted her anywhere else.

"And Collin? You agreed to custody."

His gaze fell back to hers. "I did that because he should have been with his sister. But..." He swallowed as he looked at her. The same thing he'd felt the first time he met her washed over him. That... wave of heat, like he was unbalanced. It was new to him where a woman was concerned. What was it about her? "The first time I met you there was just something about you," he repeated softly what she'd told him a few moments ago.

Lois stared for a moment, then smiled at him. So much was

said in that gaze. And so much more was left unsaid. "They stay with your parents..."

"At first we took Perry out there because we needed to... hide her. Mom and Dad fell in love and well, I just couldn't take them away from them." He took another drink of his beer.

"It probably helps with you being Superman, too," she concluded.

He nodded, then glanced away, unsure what to say to her.

"Does that bother you?"

"That you're Superman?"

"That I'm different and the father of your twins?"

"No. I'm just glad I know it's you. You don't know how much I worried about it being some... maniac with strange diseases or some psycho who'd come to stake claim to his rights one day. I was so glad when Paul ran tests at the compound and told me I was healthy. Of course, that was before he told me you were the unknowing donor. He did that just two days before he died." She drank from her bottle again. "I think he suspected he was going to die and wanted to clear his conscience. He confessed to killing my mother, fathering Lucy, and what he did to you. He said the only reason he didn't kill you was because he couldn't figure out how."

Clark couldn't help the smile that edged its way onto his face. "Is a bit difficult," he said.

"I can imagine." She finished her third beer before she looked over at him. "Does it bother you?"

His head snapped up so their eyes met. "What? Being Collin and Perry's father?" At her nod, he grinned full out. "I'm already their daddy. Being their father is just gravy."

"Sounds like something Jimmy would say," Lois said with a smile as she stood up. "Do you mind if I crash here tonight? I saw a space in the loft big enough to make a makeshift bed."

He rose to his feet. "You're more than welcome to crash here, but take the bed. I'll sleep out here on the couch."

"I can't run you out of your own bed."

"You can break in, use the toilet, eat my food, and drink my beer, but you can't sleep in my bed?"

She allowed the smile to turn into a soft laugh as she made her way into the bedroom. "How do you know I used the toilet?"

"I didn't. Although I'm pretty sure after three beers, that's where you're going." He watched as she entered the alcove leading to the bathroom, her laughter bouncing back to his ears. What now? Lois Lane was in his apartment and he'd never felt so utterly off balance in his life. He couldn't explain it. She'd moved him the first time he'd met her, but he'd explained it away that she was a pretty woman and he liked pretty women. But this, this... whatever it was that he felt was unlike anything he'd felt before. But what did it mean? What was going to happen tomorrow?

He was going to confirm that his twins were really \*his\* twins!

Wow! That would make his year.

He was about to take Lois' plate to the kitchen when his phone rang. "Hello?"

"Of all that's holy in Memphis, Kent, she's done it!" came Perry's excited voice over the line. "She's nailed that two-timing, double dealing bastard to the wall. Not only that, she's got the goods on Delconto and has blown his organization to hell and back. Wait till you see the morning edition! For the first time in over three years, there's gonna be a by-line with Lois Lane's name on it!"

That was what she meant by all hell breaking loose, Clark figured as he listened to Perry rave on.

"Said she'll see us tomorrow. Get some sleep, son. Mad Dog's coming home!"

Clark couldn't help but laugh as he hung up. Perry hadn't given him a chance to say a word.

“Hey?” He turned to see Lois standing next to the bed with his sweats and one of his tee shirts on. “Wake me by six, would ya?” She didn’t wait for an answer, just climbed into his bed and pulled the covers up to her neck.

He chuckled and gathered up the mess from the living room. By the time he’d rinsed the dishes, he could tell by her breathing she was fast asleep. Was she that comfortable with him? To fall asleep so easily in his place? In his bed? What did that mean?

Stop it, Kent, he told himself. Poor girl’s been through hell and all he could think about was how attracted he was to her.

His mind rushed forward to the next day. There would be so much to do. Mayson needed to be called, motions filed to keep Lois out of jail, tests run to confirm the twins’ biology...

Lifting a photo of Collin and Perry, he couldn’t help but smile. They really did look like him. He’d always written it off to wishful thinking. Wouldn’t Jack be stoked? He couldn’t wait to fly out to the farm so he could hold them. His mom and dad would tell him they’d told him so- the many times they’d said the twins were their grandchildren.

Glancing at the sleeping woman in the other room, he couldn’t help but wonder how much longer he’d be able to hold them any time he wanted to. Lois wouldn’t go back to prison-Luthor was alive. She’d want her life back- was already taking steps toward that goal.

And she’d want her kids back, too. He’d be forced to share them with her.

She *would* share. There was no way he’d give them up now. They were his, no matter what a blood test said. He’d taken care of them, loved them for nearly two years. They were as much his as they were hers now.

Would she fight him over them?

He wasn’t going to find out tonight, so he made his way quietly into the bathroom to get ready for bed. Changing into a pair of shorts and a worn tee shirt, he went out to make up the couch. He settled after cutting all the lights and stared up at the ceiling. Things could change in the beat of heart, he thought as he listened to the steady rhythm from the other room.

Why was it having that woman in his house didn’t bother him more than it did? It almost felt like she was where she was meant to be.

That’s crazy, Kent, he told himself as he rolled over on his side. Closing his eyes, feeling the lethargy overtake him, he was glad tomorrow was another day.

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The feeling that someone was watching him forced him to open his eyes. Two, large brown orbs were staring at him. Lois was sitting on the floor in front of the couch, leaning on the coffee table.

“I’ve been watching you, trying to picture you as that guy in blue tights who can do so many things,” she said softly.

“Superman is something I do,” he told her without moving.

“Yeah. Clark is who you are. You were raised Clark Kent, you’ve had a life as Clark, and...” She let her eyes roam over him a second. “You kinda’ look like a Clark.”

He chuckled softly. “What does a Clark look like?”

“You,” she said with a grin. She reached out to touch his arm, squeezing experimentally. She smoothed her hand down to his side, further to his leg. He’d slept on top of the cover so she was able to touch the skin on his thigh.

“What are you doing?”

She shrugged. “It’s just hard to imagine a man doing what you do. I mean, you feel like a man.” She pulled her hand back and settled so that she was cross-legged in front of him.

“I am a man.”

“Yeah, I know. A very beautiful man, too.” She looked into his eyes, a slight smile on her lips. “It’s just hard for me to wrap my mind around all of this super stuff.”

“You said it didn’t bother you,” Clark couldn’t help but say. If his super side did bother her, he wasn’t sure what he’d do.

“It doesn’t. But I was in prison when you made your debut as superhero.”

Clark smiled then. She wanted to see him do something super. “Why don’t you just ask?”

“Okay. Show me what you got.” Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open and he lifted up off the couch. He drifted above her for a second before he floated back down to the cushions.

“Satisfied now?” he asked her. He was still lying in virtually the same position he was in when he woke up. Only now he was grinning like he’d just stolen a cookie from the jar.

“Is that supposed to impress me?” she asked him with glint in her eye.

He laughed out loud. “I can see now you’re going to be high maintenance.”

“Yeah, but I’m worth it,” she replied with laughter in her voice.

His smile faded a bit and he held out his hand. “Want to go up with me?”

“Float?” He nodded and she automatically grasped his hand. They rose into the air, in exactly the same positions they were in from the couch and the floor. Her first instinct should have been to brace herself, but for some reason she knew she was perfectly safe in this man’s hands. She glanced around her, at the furniture below them. Her excited eyes met his. “Now this impresses me... a little.”

He laughed aloud again. “Somehow I knew it would take more than this.” He lowered them back until they were on solid ground.

“Will you show me some other stuff?”

“Sure.” He made a move to get up but she placed a hand on his chest.

“Not now. We have time.”

He relaxed back into the pillow, half lying on his back now. She had leaned back against the table and was watching him. “I know I have bad hair in the morning...”

She chuckled, but didn’t look away. “I just wanted to get to know you.”

“By looking at me?”

“You can learn a lot from just looking at someone,” she told him.

“Yeah,” he said as he rolled back to his side so he could see her better. “I guess you can.” They remained that way for a long while, simply looking at one another. When Lois’ eyes filled with tears, Clark pushed himself up on his elbow. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Over four years of hell catching up with me,” she replied and pushed herself up onto her knees, attempting to get up. Her eyes met his when he reached out to grasp her arm. He understood that she felt lost and mixed up even if he could never really understand the true depth of what she felt. Hell, she didn’t even understand it herself. More tears stung her eyes, a sob escaped her lips.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered and that was her undoing. Her body sagged and he flung his legs over the edge of the couch so he could pull her into an embrace. She clung to him where she knelt on the floor, her face buried against his chest. Clark smoothed his hand over the back of her head while she sobbed loudly, her body wracked in pain and frustration. He felt like crying himself. He couldn’t begin to imagine how she felt, but he was fairly sure this was the first time she’d allowed herself to do this.

It was nearly twenty minutes later before she’d calmed and loosened the hold she’d had on his shirt. “Your shirt’s wet,” she told him without moving.

"It'll dry," he assured her, running his hand through her hair.  
 "You could be a pervert who gets his jollies with little boys for all I know and I'm clinging to you like you're my lifeline," she mumbled as she turned her face further into his body.

He laughed softly, but held her closer.

"My knees hurt," Lois said a few moments later.

Clark floated them up so he could reach out with his other arm and pull her completely onto his lap, cradling her like a baby as he sat back down. In this position he could look at her face. His hand, on its own accord, came up and he caressed her cheek.

"Do you hold our babies like this?" she wanted to know as she looked up at him, content to stay like that.

"All the time," he told her, pulling her closer, the hand that had caressed her face, now playing in her long red locks.

"Lex didn't like the red hair. Of course, he never really liked me much anyway."

His hand stilled. "When did you see Lex?"

"When I shot him," she said, her eyes falling to a spot on his chest, her hand picking at the material of his shirt.

"You were the one who shot him?" She didn't say anything. "Maybe we should keep that to ourselves." And he couldn't believe he'd just said that. He was Superman! He couldn't condone actions like that.

Lois struggled to sit up, and with his help, sat down beside him on the couch. "I, ah, I had planned to kill him."

"What?" Clark asked as he leaned up on his forearms where they rested on his knees.

"You don't know what went through my mind, Clark." She wiped the fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. "All the pain, the confusion..." Pulling a leg under herself, she stared off across the room. "He'd drugged me daily, convinced me I'd done things, made me marry him." She leaned her head back to take a deep breath. "He used me to create what he thought was the first clone pregnancy and child. He... raped me over and over."

Clark looked away, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves. He'd never loathed a person more than he did Lex Luthor at that moment.

"I gave birth to children I really didn't know. I loved those kids, but at the same time I..." She swallowed hard. "I'm ashamed of how I felt."

"You thought they belonged to Luthor," he said softly, wanting desperately to reach out to her, but she'd pulled away emotionally. He could feel it.

"Even later, when I learned they didn't belong to him."

"Lois, everything you've felt is understandable."

"Then you know why I wanted to kill him." She stood and paced across the room. "I could have gotten away with it, too. Or at least served the rest of my time for it. I'd been convicted once..."

"Yeah, but could \*you\* have survived it? Survived knowing you took another person's life?"

She turned in front of the bookshelf and looked at him. "That's why the slimy bastard is still alive."

Clark tried to hide the grin, but had to catch a book she picked up and threw at him.

"It's not fair!" Her voice wasn't angry or bitter. She felt relieved to actually be able to feel so light after all that had happened.

"What's not?"

"That you know me so damn well and you don't even know me at all!" She stomped into the kitchen, flipping on the light as she did. It was just beginning to get daylight outside and it was a little dark in the apartment. She'd been fine in the dim light while they'd talked, but she was thirsty and hungry and couldn't see well enough to find herself something.

When she opened the fridge, Clark stood up. "What are you looking for?"

"Food and this..." She opened the can of cream soda and drank for a moment before she sighed in contentment. "I definitely like you, Kent."

"Because I drink cream soda?" He reached in to grab the eggs and butter.

"Oh yeah."

He laughed softly as he made his way over to the counter beside the stove. "Toss me the cheese and that ham in the top drawer, will ya'?"

"What ya' cooking?" she asked as she dug out the items he'd requested.

"Breakfast." He gathered the dishes he needed and grabbed a knife. "You do like omelets, don't you?"

"Really?" she wanted to know as she stepped up beside him.

He grinned at her as he worked. After a moment, his hands became a blur. When he was done, he was dropping the vegetables in the egg mixture.

"Now that was a little impressive," she told him as she leaned over on the counter.

"You should see me take out the trash," he said and wagged his brows.

She laughed at him, watching as he finished their breakfast. When she sat down and took her first bite, she moaned appreciatively. "Yeah, I definitely like you, Kent."

He laughed as he took a bite of his own breakfast. He definitely liked her.

Too much, he thought as he watched her. His arms and body still tingled where he'd held her. As he watched her eat, he realized that not only was she going to set the reporting world on fire, she'd set him on fire as well.

He was in \*big\* trouble!

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Lois was standing in the doorway leading out to Clark's balcony. She'd showered and changed into the clean clothes she'd brought with her the night before. The sun had finally come up and by now the morning edition of the paper had been delivered to most of downtown Metropolis. She was waiting for Clark to finish his turn in the bathroom so they could face the day.

The phone rang just as Clark stepped back into his bedroom. He threw the towel he was drying his hair with across his shoulder and answered the phone by his bed. "Hello?"

"I've already talked to Mayson. The writ she filed last night was signed at five thirty this morning. Ticked Judge Brenner off to no end, but Lois won't have to go back to jail while all of this is worked out."

"How did I know you wouldn't wait until morning to get something done?" he asked Perry.

The older man laughed softly. "Yeah, well, I've worked too damn hard to get that girl out of this mess."

"Yeah," Clark glanced over at the woman they were discussing. She was still standing in the doorway, seemingly lost in her thoughts.

"Have you seen the paper this morning?"

"Not yet."

"Boy, she's something else." Perry looked at the paper he was holding. "She assured me she had the goods to back this up. And she's never let me down before."

"Somehow I don't think she's going to this time either."

"All right. Hightail it down here. She'll want to see you, too."

Clark couldn't stop the smile as he replaced the receiver. Maybe he should have told Perry he'd already seen Lois. She turned and smiled at him. Damn! She had the most gorgeous smile.

He shook his head and began buttoning his shirt. "Sorry. I should have finished dressing in the bathroom," he told her as he walked over to the closet to find a tie.

"I'm not," she mumbled as she came over to peer in next to him. "You have good taste in clothes," she told him.

"Thank you." He pulled a tie from the hanger.

"Please tell me you're not wearing that."

"What's wrong with my tie?" he asked as he looked down at it.

"It's the loudest thing I've ever seen," she said and began flipping through the rest on the hanger. "On the other hand, it's probably the tamest in the bunch."

"Funny," he replied as he wrapped the material around his neck and tied it at super speed.

"I wish I'd waited for you to dry my hair," she told him with a grin.

He chuckled and reached down to grab a pair of shoes.

"Why \*do\* you have a hair dryer? The black ones," she pointed out.

"These are black," he said as he glanced up at her.

"Those," she indicated with her foot.

"What's the difference?"

"Put on the shoes, would you?"

He shook his head, but grabbed the pair she'd pointed out. He went over and dug out a pair of socks from his dresser, then sat down on the window seat next to her to put them on. "Should I change my shirt? Or is this one okay?"

"No, no. It goes good with the tan pants."

Laughing at her, he leaned over to pull his socks on. She watched him while he slipped into his shoes, then tied them.

"Why didn't you do that fast?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't."

"Your life is so weird," she observed as she pushed her hand through her hair.

"You don't know the half of it," he replied and stood up. He motioned toward the bathroom. "I need to go comb my hair." She nodded and he left in a blur, whipping her hair around her face. By the time it settled, he was back.

"Okay, how do you do that without messing it up again?"

He chuckled softly as he whirled around the room straightening up and making the bed.

"I could have done that," she said as he stopped next to her again.

"Next time," he said as he grabbed the coat that matched his pants. "You ready?"

She took a deep breath and glanced at the door. "As I'll ever be." She stood and followed him into the other room. "Do you mind if we stop by the Apollo hotel for a second?"

"The Apollo?" he asked as he opened the door.

"That's where I stayed when I first got to the city."

"You were here before last night?"

"Yeah," she answered as they walked down the steps and toward the sidewalk.

"I guess we have a bit more talking to do," he observed as they stepped up to the curb so he could whistle for a cab.

Oh, yeah, she thought as the car stopped in front of them. Wait until you find out I've seen the kids, she said to herself silently. Somehow she felt he wouldn't like that too well.

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Lois looked up at the Daily Planet almost in awe. It felt like this was the first time she'd seen it. It had been so long since she'd been here. She had butterflies in her stomach as big as birds.

"Ready?" Clark asked as he touched her back gently.

She glanced at him, shifted the bag she held on her shoulder, then nodded. She allowed Clark to guide her in and onto the elevator. They didn't say anything on the ride up to the news floor, but she had no doubt Clark could hear the blood rushing through her veins. Her heart was about to beat a hole through her chest. By the time the doors opened on the bullpen, she felt

lightheaded.

"You okay?" Clark asked her softly.

"Yeah," she assured him without looking away from the commotion. It was easy to tell a major story had broken. Runners were hurrying here and there, reporters shouting at one another, phones were ringing off the hook. She slowly stepped out to the edge of the rail overlooking the action.

"Please tell me my eyes aren't playing tricks on me?"

She turned to look into the blue eyes of Jimmy Olsen.

"Jimmy," she breathed as she stepped forward.

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tightly, sighing in relief. "Damn, girl, it's good to see you," he whispered as he hugged her.

"And you." She finally drew back so she could see him.

"Look at you." Her hands grasped the sides of his face. "You have grown up on me."

"How 'bout you?" His fingers trailed through her long hair. "I have to tell you, Lois, this red is kinda' sexy on you."

She laughed as she hugged him again. "I sure have missed you."

"Oh, God, I've missed you, too." He pulled away and glanced over at Clark. "Don't tell me you went to that guy first."

Lois glanced back at the man behind her. "What's wrong with Kent? He seems to be an all right fellow."

"I don't know, Lois. He parades around here as an award-winning journalist, but between you and me, he writes touchy-feely crap." He and Lois both shuddered, then laughed aloud. He threw his arm around her shoulder and started them down the ramp. "Come on. The old man's 'bout to have a cow. I think seeing you will calm him down."

Clark grinned and followed along behind them. On the way to the Planet he'd called Dr. Klein, who told him to drop by as soon as he could. But he also told him he'd need DNA samples from the twins, too. He planned to fly out in a little while and swab their mouths so that he could find out if they really were his biological children.

And as he watched Lois and Jimmy talk, he decided to push those thoughts away for now. There would be plenty of time to think about that later.

Jimmy pushed the door open to Perry's office and the older man and Jack looked up from where they were hunched over his desk studying some papers. Jack glanced at the Chief and grinned widely.

"Damn, lady, you don't how glad we are to see you," Jack said and walked over to her. "I'm Jack." He extended his hand.

Lois glanced at the limb, then stepped up to hug the other man. He seemed stunned momentarily, but managed to wrap his arms around her. "Thank you," she whispered. "For sitting on that park bench so many times." Leaning back, she smiled at him. "And for taking my baby out of that park and away from that monster."

For once, Jack was speechless. He blinked several times, then nodded. He stepped away from her to allow her time with Perry.

In all of his years in the profession he'd chosen, the profession he'd dreamed of having as a kid, nothing had ever been quite as satisfying as standing in front of the one person he'd longed to see in his office again. Large tears rolled down his cheeks and he sighed, a breath he'd needed to take for years.

Lois ignored the tears spilling from her eyes and crossed the distance to him. She clung to him as tightly as he clung to her, both crying softly.

Clark reached up and tugged on Jack and Jimmy's sleeves, motioning for them to leave the others alone. All three of the younger men backed out of the office quietly and closed the door. They'd allow Perry and Lois to reunite in private.

"So, how did you find her?" Jack wanted to know as they huddled around Clark's desk.

“She found me,” he told them. “She was at my place when I got home last night.” Clark sifted through his messages, glancing back at the people in Perry’s office.

Jimmy looked that way, too. “She is something else.” He stepped over to his desk and came back with the morning paper. “Check this out.”

In blazing sixty-point headline was the title: The Fall of the House of Luthor. Below the fold was another equally large headline: Juan Delconto- Modern Day Godfather.

Clark grinned as he read over the articles.

“Two more articles are inside,” Jack told him. “Hell, the first half of the paper is stuff she sent in. Perry says it’s all legit.”

“It is, Jack,” Clark said as he continued to read. How had she done this? She knew details they’d only dreamed of knowing. Of course, a lot of what they’d learned was there, but details they hadn’t suspected were clearly outlined. She’d named people, places, times- crimes that had gone unsolved. He’d looked into a couple of the events she’d mentioned himself only to hit a dead end. He glanced at the office again. She and Perry were talking.

“Is that her?”

Clark and the guys looked up to see Mayson coming down the ramp.

“The one and only,” Jimmy spoke up.

“Is all of this true?” she asked of the paper she held as she made it to their side.

“Perry says it is.”

Mayson looked toward the office. “The red hair suits her. No doubt she dyed it so she could blend in. If what she’s written here is any indication, she’s been snooping around for a while.”

Clark had just finished the articles and he nodded his agreement. “If she’d been caught...”

“That’s Lois,” Jimmy said. “She has a way of getting information you’re sure she should have died getting.”

“I wouldn’t have thought she’d manage it,” Mayson said. “The woman I met in that prison was \*not\* this woman.” She shook the paper to indicate what she meant.

“Guess she finally decided that somewhere inside Mad Dog was still alive,” Jimmy added. He looked over Mayson’s shoulder when Perry motioned for them. “I think they want us to come back.”

Perry was laughing happily when the others came back in. Lois was sitting in his chair, grinning widely. “Here’s what you need to corroborate everything in those articles,” Perry said and tossed Jimmy a flash drive. “Copy it all and bring it back to me. Henderson will need some of that.”

“Got it, Chief.”

“Mayson, we’ll need some of those pictures of the compound- pre and post war.”

“I’ll email them to Jimmy.” She stepped forward and held out her hand to Lois. “It’s good to see you on this side of the fence.”

Lois shook it with a smile. “It’s good to be on this side.” She held the hand a second longer. “Thank you, for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” Mayson told her sincerely. When she drew her hand away, she looked up at Perry. “If I help bring a smile to that man’s face...”

Lois looked up at him. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Perry rubbed her shoulder, refusing to get more than a few feet away from her. “Now, Jack, get Henderson down here. And, Clark, since you don’t need me to buy you a plane ticket, I’d appreciate you flying back to Spain and following up on what she’s got. Find out everything that’s going on there.”

Lois’ eyes moved over to Clark, who nodded his consent. “Hold on.” She leaned forward and put her arms on the desk. Looking directly at Clark, she asked, “He knows?”

Clark reached over and closed the door. “They all do,” he told her.

“Well, damn. Here I thought I knew something nobody else

did,” she said with a hint of laughter in her voice.

“You know?” Perry asked her.

“Yeah, I know. I wouldn’t be a person in my position if I didn’t know,” she repeated something he’d said to them all more than one time. Everyone laughed aloud at that.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t,” Perry said.

“Well, since you all know... Clark has to see Bernie in a little while. We think he can prove who the twins’ biological father is.”

They all stared at Lois. “Really?” Perry was the one to say. “Why does Clark...?”

“I told you they looked like you,” Jack interrupted the older man’s question, slapping Clark on the arm.

Clark chuckled at his reaction. He knew Jack would say ‘told you so’.

“Wait. I’m not following,” Jimmy spoke up.

“Clark was engaged to Paul Lang’s daughter years ago. She knew about him and they wanted Paul to test to see if they could have children together because of their differences,” Lois began the explanation.

“And he used the sample Clark gave him to test,” Mayson finished for her.

“Yeah,” Lois confirmed. “When Lex went to him to help him have another son- he helped impregnate Arianna so Leslie could be born, too- he decided to double-cross Lex. Lex believed the twins were clones. He’d ordered them created so he could have his son, but so he could sell the knowledge at the same time. He didn’t bargain on twins and certainly not on one of them being a girl. Although when I got her out of there, he was going to give her to Paul. Paul told me he would have sold her to Church. And by the time anyone knew she wasn’t really a clone, he would have disappeared.”

“Thank God you had the presence of mind to get her out of there,” Perry said as he leaned on the corner of the desk.

“Yeah,” she said as she looked away from Clark. They’d been staring at one another.

“I guess the two of you and I need to have a conference,” Mayson said as she checked her watch. “Let me know when Bernie has the results, Clark.”

“I will.”

“Lois, you are needed at a hearing this morning to have the charges against you officially cleared.”

“Okay.” She stood up and looked around. “Thank you all for everything you’ve done.”

“Are you kidding? Perry would have fired us,” Jack spoke up.

They all laughed.

“This guy’s full of...”

“Get out here,” Perry interrupted Jimmy’s remark. “Get yourself cleared so we can get back to work. You \*are\* coming back to work?”

“I think I want to,” she told him as she stepped around the desk. “But I need a little time to gather myself together first. Maybe a couple of weeks?”

“Yeah, absolutely. I think the owner would be all right with that.”

She grinned at Perry. “I still can’t believe you bought the Planet.”

“As much blood, sweat, and tears as I’ve put into this place, I figured it might as well be mine.”

Lois leaned over to hug him again. “Well, I’d be honored to work for you, Mr. White.”

He laughed softly. “Can that crap.” He stood and looked at the others. “Don’t you all have something to do?”

Jack and Jimmy said good-bye to Lois and left so they could get to work. Lois looked over at Clark. “Are you heading out, too?”

“Yeah. I need to get a swab from the twins before I see

Bernie.” She nodded. “Will I see you later?”

“Yeah. I was hoping you’d let me hang out at your place until we get the results.”

“You know where the spare key’s at,” he told her with a smile as they exited Perry’s office.

“Are you kidding? I picked the lock.” When he looked at her, she shrugged. “I wanted to see if I could still do it.”

“Look under the black flower pot, would you?” He patted her shoulder and stepped over to his desk.

“You have my desk?” she wanted to know as she ran a hand over the surface.

“I’ll be more than happy to give it back to you,” he informed her as he looked through the mail that had been dropped off already.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll take that one,” she told him, pointing to the empty desk across the aisle. “Start fresh. Create something new.”

He looked up at her, a soft smile on his lips. “I think that’s a great idea.”

She smiled back, then reached to pick up a picture he had sitting on his desk. It was one of the twins taken at their birthday party. “I’ve missed both of them,” she whispered.

“Lois, don’t do that. It won’t do you a bit of good to keep looking back.”

“I know. It’s just…” She set the frame back down and looked up at him, taking a deep breath for courage.

“I know,” he informed her.

And he did. Or at least he understood. How was that possible? How was it a man she didn’t know could make her feel so at ease?

Feel so alive?

Glancing away, she tucked her hair behind her ear. “I guess Mayson’s ready,” she said as the other woman came out of Perry’s office and headed for them.

“Yeah.” Clark reached out to squeeze her arm. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.” She looked at him another moment before she stepped around him and went with Mayson. The sooner she got her life back, the sooner she could start to live again.

But how exactly did she do that? How did she begin to rebuild herself? When she wasn’t sure who she was anymore?

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Clark landed in the back yard near the barn and smiled at his playing children. They had noticed him and were off at a full run toward him. He bent and caught them both, hugging and kissing each as he stood back up. Both were chattering away as he crossed the lawn to the blanket his mother sat on where they had been playing. It was nice out and Martha had decided to take advantage of it.

“You did?” Clark asked Perry. She told him she’d learned to ride her bike… or at least he thought that was what she’d said. She talked much more clearly than Collin, but when she was excited, it was hard to understand everything she said.

He set them on their feet and they were off again. He waited until they were on the swing set before he sat down with his mom.

“I didn’t know you were coming out today, son.”

“Yeah.” He watched the kids for several more moments before he looked at his mom.

“What?”

“Lois is back.”

“Back?”

“Out of prison, in a hearing as we speak to clear her of the charges against her. Luthor was found and is in jail.”

Martha sat for a moment before her eyes drifted over to the twins. “It’s too soon,” she said softly. “I’m not ready to give them up.”

“Mom, don’t.”

“Don’t what? I can’t help it, Clark. Those kids are my life. And you can’t tell me you’re okay with handing them back over.”

“No, I’m not.” He sighed and looked back at them. “But I might not have to.”

“What?”

This time when he looked at her, he was grinning. “Lana found another diary that her father left in his safe. In it, Paul claims the twins are mine.”

Martha’s eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

“Remember when Lana and I were talking about getting married?”

“The tests Paul ran for you,” she finished for him. She remembered what a difficult time it had been for Clark. When Paul had told them Clark would never be able to father children, Clark had been devastated. He was so sure that if he married Lana, he would ruin her life. The woman had stolen Martha’s heart when she’d declared that it didn’t matter if they ever had children. She just loved Clark. It had broken Martha’s heart when they’d split up, but she’d come to realize since then that Lana hadn’t been her son’s soul mate.

“Apparently Paul lied to us so that Lana and I would separate. He didn’t exactly appreciate my differences.”

Martha gazed over at the twins. “And he said he used your sample?”

“That’s what he claims.” Clark reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a plastic bag Bernie had given him. “Dr. Klein is going to run a DNA test to make sure. I have to swab the inside of their cheeks.”

“How soon before we know?”

“Tomorrow, hopefully.” He grinned at his mother. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Oh, honey.” She covered her mouth with her hand as tears filled her eyes. “Blood or not, they’re ours.”

“I know, Mom. But wouldn’t it be nice to know they really are mine?” He didn’t wait for her to answer, just stood and went to play with his twins. He’d get his sample, but right now he wanted to see if he could hear them laugh.

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Bernie shook his head as he pushed the long swab into the plastic tube. “I still can’t believe this,” he said as Clark closed his mouth.

“You?”

The older man looked at him. “Yeah. I guess this is a bit surreal for you.”

“Just a bit.”

“I’ll try to have this done by tomorrow morning. It usually takes forty-eight hours, but I’ll work through the night. I’m as anxious to see this situation come to a conclusion as I’m sure you are.”

“Thanks, Bernie,” Clark told him as he clapped his arm. He hadn’t told Bernie that he was Superman, or even super, just that he had been engaged to Paul’s daughter once and the man insisted on running fertility tests before he’d allow Clark to marry his daughter. Dr. Klein thought Paul was a mad scientist, like everyone else.

“I’ll call you as soon as I know.”

He thanked Bernie again and headed back to the Planet. He caught up on a few things before flying out to Spain. He’d wanted to see Lois before he left but she was apparently still with Mayson. By the time afternoon wound into evening in Metropolis, Clark was letting himself into his apartment.

“Hey. I was wondering when you might get here.”

Lois was sitting on the sofa, her bare feet propped on the coffee table. She’d raided his clothes again, sporting a pair of his shorts and another of his tee shirts. She was flipping through his photo album and nursing her second beer, if the empty bottles

were an indication of how many she'd had.

"Do you not have any clothes of your own?" he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Not many," she said as she looked back down at the book.

Damn! He shouldn't have said that. She'd been in prison for... well, since she'd left the Planet. Of course she didn't have many clothes!

He took off his jacket and tossed it over the back of the chair at the bottom of the stairs. "Sorry. That was..."

"Don't be sorry. I'm not. Your clothes are comfortable."

His eyes met hers and they smiled at one another. "Then wear whatever you want," he told her as he pulled off his tie.

"Leave that shirt on the dresser."

He stopped halfway to the kitchen, his brows rising toward his hair.

"I like the color," she told him, again looking at the photos. Her eyes flashed to his for a moment and he could see the amusement in them. He shook his head and continued his journey into the kitchen.

"You hungry?"

"Yep. I would have ordered take-out, but I was broke after I bought you more beer."

"You didn't have to do that," he told her as he stood up from his perusal of the items in his fridge.

"I drank it all."

"I could have bought more."

"How did you get so much money?" she asked as she closed the book and placed it on the cushion beside her.

"Well..." He closed the door to the fridge and walked over to sit down on the coffee table in front of her. "You know that Luthor was born Alexander Luckaby." It wasn't a question; her article proved she knew. "He filed the marriage to you and Collin's birth in Australia under his given name. The lawyers for the Franklin Luckaby estate felt that since Collin and Perry were legally the grandchildren of Franklin..."

"That they should have the money?" she asked incredulously.

"Yeah. They have huge, huge trusts waiting on them when they graduate college. More for school, their weddings, and an obscene amount for their care. Mayson called me earlier and said that since Alexander's been found, and so has the money he inherited from Collin's birth, the estate lawyers are going to amend the settlement."

"They want the money back?"

"Ah, no. They are going to increase the trusts, the monthly care payments, and they want to talk to you about an appropriate amount for you."

"For me?" He nodded. "They want to what? Give me hush money?"

"I felt the same way, but then I thought, what the hell? Somebody should pay for what he did to you." He gave her a lopsided grin. "Think of it this way. You can give Luthor something to think about while he rots in Striker's."

"What?"

"Tell him. Tell him that the money he worked so damn hard for is where it should be- in your bank account."

Slowly a grin crept across her face. "Wouldn't it just rub him raw to know that I was spending his precious money?"

"It would," he agreed with a grin of his own.

She looked at him for a moment before she patted his leg. "Well, since you're loaded, why don't you order us some seafood? I'd love a great, big lobster. Ooo, and scallops! The last time I had scallops was when I snuck one from Bobbie's bag right before..." She stopped, her grin fading.

"You ate from Bobbie's bag and got away with it?" he asked, recognizing immediately her withdrawal at the mention of the past.

"Oh, no. He knew I'd eaten one. Please don't tell me Bobbie

is your source now?"

He was glad to see her perk right back up when he changed the subject. "Fraid so. Jimmy introduced us."

"Traitor," she said and sat back.

"How about an admiral's platter from Callard's?"

"You don't really have to buy seafood," she told him, although she hoped he would.

He waved her off and reached over for the phone on the table beside the couch. He ordered an admiral's platter with plenty of garlic/cheese bread. "I'll grab a slab of chocolate cake at the Fudge Castle on the way to pick it up," he said as he put the phone back.

"Thanks." She tucked her hair behind her ear and lifted the photo album back up. "Hope you don't mind that I took this out."

"You wear my clothes and you think I'd be upset because you looked at my pictures?" He laughed wryly as he stood up and headed toward his bedroom.

She shook her head in amusement as he disappeared. Lying back on the sofa, she clicked on the television. When Clark came back in, she was flipping through the channels. She almost gasped when she looked up at him. He'd changed into a pair of jeans and a tight, white muscle shirt. And he was wearing flip flops. It should have been illegal for a man to look the way he did at that moment. He'd left his glasses off and when their eyes met, she didn't try to hide her admiration.

Damn! He's modest, she thought as a deep blush crept up his neck and face.

She grinned at him, a bit different than the ones she'd been giving him, then blinked and pointed at the TV. "I guess the world knows Lois Lane is back."

Clark had to remind himself to breathe before he could look away from her. He was male and there was absolutely no way he could have mistaken the look she'd just given him. Lois liked the way he was dressed and told him without saying a word. Of course, he liked the way she was dressed, too, but had desperately covered his appreciation. He didn't want her to feel uncomfortable around him. Somehow he felt flirting with her would definitely spook her, but obviously she wasn't a bit shy about flirting with him.

Every news channel had the same thing on. They were covering Lex Luthor's rise from the grave, Lois' overturned conviction, and the disbandment of the Delconto Organization.

"Looks like you're a household name," Clark observed as station after station talked about her cracking the case.

Clark glanced at the clock on the wall because he'd taken his watch off already. "I should head out to get the food. You want to go?"

"Nah," she said with a wave of her hand. "Too comfy."

He chuckled at her and checked his pocket to make sure he had his keys. He went back to the bedroom to grab his glasses, then jogged up the steps to the door. "Back in twenty."

"I'll be here."

The entire way to Callard's all he could think about was how good that woman looked lying on his couch. His clothes were a little big on her, but couldn't have been sexier. She had to be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She was small, too small if you asked him, even if her muscles were well toned. Her skin was tanned, a testament to her recent proximity to the beach. The red hair looked good on her, although her natural dark brown would be even more gorgeous, especially long. When he'd seen her at the prison, her hair was shorter.

No matter how good she looked in his house, right now she needed a friend. Lois might be showing a strong exterior, but inside she was a mess. The fact that she so easily broke down with him that morning proved that. And that was just the beginning. How much worse would she get? She hadn't even seen the twins yet. How would she react when she did? It

bothered him that she hadn't said much about them, though he hadn't missed the expression on her face when she was looking at the pictures earlier. She loved her kids. Yet she was lost. He just hoped he could help her find her way again. Everything else would have to wait.

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When he got back, Lois had made sweet tea and set the table. "Hope you don't mind," she said, looking up from where she stood on the other side of the table. "I haven't sat down to a meal at a real table since I went to Perry's for Christmas the year before I... left. I don't count dinners with Lex. Or eating at a prison table."

"I thought you were comfy on the couch," he said as he dug their meal out of the bag and set it on the empty end of the table.

"I was, but..." She shrugged and poured their tea. "I was full of alcohol, too."

"Tea's fine." He took out the huge lobster he'd ordered. "How 'bout a piece of tail?"

"Well, sure, if you're offering." When he dropped the lobster on the plate, and nearly fell over in shock, she bent over laughing. "Damn, you have a dirty mind!"

"Like you didn't mean it that way," he defended himself, the heat from his face burning him up.

She laughed another second, then took a breath. "No comment."

His hand slipped, nearly causing him to push the lobster in the floor. "Shut up, will you?" he finally managed when he recovered enough to stop his hands from shaking.

Lois bit her lip as she helped him serve up their food. She didn't say anything else until they were seated and she'd taken the first bite of her lobster. "Ah, wow!"

"Good?" he asked, dipping some of the shellfish in the butter that came with their meal.

"Fantastic!"

He kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. She was definitely one of a kind. Bold, brazen, and uninhibited- a lot like Jack. Having her around was going to be an adventure.

At least, he hoped she was going to be around.

"Should I crack that for you?" he asked her when she started to struggle with the shell.

"Yeah. Do your... thingy and get all the meat out." She dropped the lobster on her plate and looked at him expectantly.

He grinned before reaching for her plate. His hands became a blur and when he handed it back, a pile of lobster meat was lying to one side, the shell on the other.

"Thank you," she said and picked up the plate to push the shell onto the empty tray. "Now I have room for everything else."

Clark chuckled as he continued his meal. They ate in silence for a long while. He smiled at her audible approval of her food from time to time, pleased to see her eat so well.

"Sorry about eating like a mad woman. We only had ten minutes to swallow our garbage while I was in Glendale." She'd eaten twice as much as he had.

He wasn't quite sure what to say to that. In fact, he wasn't sure what to talk about at all with her. The twins, sure, but he wanted her to be the one to mention them. And in the next breath, she did.

"How soon before we know if your little swimmers hit their target?"

How many times had he shaken his head in disbelief where this woman was concerned? She was hilarious! "Tomorrow."

She nodded and stuffed another shrimp in her mouth. "Do you think maybe we could... see them soon?"

"I can go get them now, if you want me to."

Looking down at her plate, she suddenly felt lightheaded. There was nothing she wanted more than to see her babies, but at the same time...

"I, ah, I'd like to wait, until we know," she told him without lifting her eyes from her plate.

"Lois, I can't begin to pretend I know how you feel..."

"Good, because I'm not sure I know myself." She quickly scarfed down the rest of her meal and stood up to take her plate to the kitchen. When she turned, Clark was standing there.

"Don't bottle it up. Let it out, whenever you need to."

She stared at him, stubborn tears spilling over her lashes. "It's just so unfair," she whispered.

"I know." He reached out to grasp her arm.

Wiping her face stubbornly, she sighed heavily. "Look, I will probably take you up on that offer so much, you'll get tired of wet shirts. But tonight, I'd like to talk about something else, anything else. As much I need to break down from time to time, I need to laugh and smile, too."

"Perry was right." She quirked a brow at him. "You are a brilliant woman." His eyes danced in amusement, causing her to laugh softly.

"Have I told you I like you?"

"Yeah, a time or two."

She pushed him against his chest. "Go finish your dinner so I can wash these dishes."

"You don't have to wash the dishes."

"I want to do it."

He was about to protest again, but the look in her eyes changed his mind. She needed to do this simple thing. So much had been taken away from her and this was one way she was using to feel whole again. He nodded and went back to his meal while she started the dishwasher. A few minutes later, he dropped his plate in the pile of suds and smiled at her. He allowed her to finish while he put away the extra food. The plate he'd ordered came with enough for an entire family.

"Ready for that chocolate?" he asked when the table was clear.

"Can we eat it in the living room?"

"Sure. How about a glass of milk to go with it?" She gave him her approval with a nod of her head and finished wiping down the counters. When she made it to the couch, Clark was already eating his cake and watching baseball.

"Oh, no. A sports freak," she commented as she sat and pulled her leg under her.

"Funny," he mumbled around a mouth full of cake. "We can watch something else," he said when he'd swallowed.

"No, this is fine." She put a piece of cake in her mouth and sighed. "This is, too."

He chuckled softly, taking a drink of his milk before he sat back.

"I thought Superman ran around saving people," Lois said as she turned on the couch to face him, pulling her other leg up, too.

"He does. But Clark needs to lay around watching baseball every now and then."

She could understand that. "It must be so hard being you."

"It was before I created Superman. I was able to do all of these wonderful things to help people, yet I wasn't."

"For fear that someone would figure you out?"

"Yeah. What kind of life would I have if the world knew Clark Kent was also an alien from another planet?"

"None," she answered. She glanced at the television and a news brief came on about the very person they were just talking about. "Must be odd to see yourself like that."

"And all over every kid's toy, tee shirt, and billboard in the city," he finished as he leaned back to lay his head on the couch.

"Oh, God! I can't believe I didn't remember that!" She reached out to grab his arm, her excitement running through her and straight into him. "Clark, do you know how you got here?"

"To Earth?" She nodded. "Yeah. A spaceship. Duh!" he said in a mocking tone.

“Bite me,” she threw right back at him. He was about to shoot another smart comment at her, but her hand covered his mouth. “Do you have your ship?”

“I did,” he answered when she moved her hand. “It was stolen from the farm years ago.”

“I know where it is,” she told him, almost shaking. “Or where it was. It might still be there. We can look, of course. And you probably will. Although it’s been over four years. They could have moved it by now.” She stopped when he grinned at her. “I know. I babble.”

“Babble away. I like hearing you talk.”

“Do you want to hear about the ship or not?” She quirked her brow at him.

“Okay. Tell me.” He shifted so that his arm was propped on the back of the couch and he held his head with his hand.

“Jimmy and I were checking out this quack one time. Or I thought he was a quack. But since you’re here, and can do what you do, he might not have been a quack after all. There was a warehouse with all of this... junk in it. There was what appeared to be a spaceship there with your shield on the nose.”

Clark perked up when she mentioned his shield. He rose and walked over to the bookshelf, retrieved a piece of paper and pencil, then draw a picture at super speed. “Did it look like this?” he asked her when he was done.

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Jimmy told me about it once,” Clark replied as he went in to his bedroom. When he came back, he was holding a round, metal ball.

“That’s the globe we found.”

Clark sat down next to her and held it up. It immediately began to glow. She jumped when the hologram of Clark’s birth father appeared. Sitting mesmerized, she listened to the messages from father to son sent across time and space.

“Wow,” she whispered when it fell dark and dropped back into Clark’s palm.

“Jimbo gave this to me right after he told me about the warehouse. We went to check it out, but it was empty.”

“They had a file on Smallville.” He nodded that he knew. “I remember thinking, ‘where the hell is Smallville?’” They both laughed softly.

“Guess I should be happy that particular lead ran dry.”

“Damn right. Mad Dog would have...” She stopped and looked at him. “I’m glad it ran dry, too,” she told him seriously. “Back then I wouldn’t have thought twice about ruining your life.”

“Back then? Would you think twice now?”

“You can’t possibly think I’d tell any...” She stopped again as she took a deeper look into his eyes. “I didn’t give them away.”

“I know you didn’t. And I had no intention of mentioning, but...” He looked away and sighed. “Please don’t take them away from me,” he whispered.

Lois leaned up and rubbed his back. He’d sat down and leaned over to place his elbows on his knees. “Why would I take them away from their daddy?”

Clark’s head snapped around and his eyes met hers. “I hope we’re adult enough to work something out.”

“Clark?” She waited until she had his attention. “We’ll work something out.” When she saw the relief wash over him, she wanted to reach out and hug him. He was adorable.

Lois became aware that she was still rubbing his back. She glanced at her hand, but didn’t move it. He didn’t seem to mind either.

Clark finally managed to take a breath and looked down at the table. He’d been worried about losing the twins.

Well, not worried exactly. But to hear her say she wouldn’t take them...

He closed his eyes and suddenly became aware that she was touching him. And it felt \*so\* good. When he looked up, she was staring at the table, too. “I have a penny or two,” he said after a brief silence.

Lois blinked, patted his back, and smiled at him. “Not tonight.”

“Okay,” he relented. He felt bereft when she pulled her hand off his back. She sighed and laid her head over on the couch so she could look at him.

“Thanks for sharing that.” She indicated the globe with a pointed finger.

“Thanks for not ratting me out.” They laughed as he stood up to take the globe back to the bedroom. “Hey, I was thinking maybe you might want to go shopping. Grab a few things you might need.”

“What’s a matter, Kent? You want your clothes back?” She grinned at him as he sat back down. “I can give them to you.”

Clark reached out and placed his hands on hers to stop the progression of material up her body. She was going to give the shirt back. “Keep it on.”

Her eyes twinkled as she lowered her hands. “That modesty thing really works for you.” He promptly blushed more, causing her to giggle. “I wish I’d met you five years ago.”

“Yeah? So you could have taken a bite out of my steel butt? No, thank you.” He threw his feet up so he could prop them on the coffee table.

“You’re right. Mad Dog was a different person. I would have thought that blush was an act.”

“It’s a practiced art,” he said as he leaned back again.

She laughed aloud. “I can see that.” This time she was the one to lean her arm on the back of the cushions. “So, tell me what team you like?” She indicated with her head that she was asking about his taste in baseball teams.

And he saw it as her need to unwind. He told her which teams he liked in the college arena as well as pro. While she seemed genuinely interested, he could tell part of her mind was a million miles away. He kept talking about sports, then told her what his favorite movies were. Television shows, game shows, and music- they discussed everything in the world that wasn’t related to Luthor. She’d talk soon, he decided, and when she did, he would listen.

He would listen for days if she needed him to.

\*\*\*

The next morning started much the same way it had before. Clark felt like someone was watching him and when he opened his eyes, Lois was staring at him.

“Please tell me you don’t do that all the time,” he said, burrowing himself deeper into the cushions. He’d been out as Superman for a while and he was tired.

“What? Watch people while they sleep?”

“Yeah,” he said, closing his eyes again.

“Nah, just those who float.”

He opened his eyes again, a smile on his face. “My mom used to squeal every time she’d come in to get me up for school and I’d be three feet above the bed.”

Lois chuckled at the thought of a poor mother finding her son in the air instead of on his mattress. “I can see that.” She took a sip from the water bottle she was holding.

Clark noticed she’d changed into a pair of his sweats and appeared flushed. “How long have you been up?”

“Nearly an hour. I had a nightmare and couldn’t go back to sleep, so I went for a run.”

He rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. “I guess I was more wiped out than I thought.” He flung an arm across his forehead.

“Guess I should have let you sleep.”

“No, no. It’s okay.”

“Was it bad?”

He pulled his arm down and turned his head so he could look at her. “Huh?”

“I heard you go out. And when you came in you sighed a few times on your way in here after your shower. I figured you’d been to a rescue.”

“Yeah.” He rolled back onto his side. “A little boy was caught in the crossfire of his father’s drug deal. He was shot three times.”

“Oh, God,” she said with a gasp. “Is he... did he die?”

Clark stared at a spot over her shoulder for a moment before he nodded in the affirmative. “He was dead before I got there. His mother was so fried she didn’t know what planet she was on and his father said ‘good riddance’.”

“You’re kidding?!”

“I wish I was.” He blinked several times before his eyes finally focused on hers.

“Is he still alive?” she asked him, a hint of a smile dancing on her lips.

Her attempt to lighten his mood worked and he smiled back. “Only because of my incredible restraint.”

“I would have choked him with my bare hands,” she said and took another gulp from her bottle.

“I believe it.” He reached over his left shoulder with his right hand trying to scratch an itch. He grunted when he couldn’t quite reach it, and Lois leaned over to help him out. “Down,” he said. Leaning forward to search out his discomfort brought her closer to him. She looked directly at him, her face only inches from his.

“Is that it?” she asked him after watching him struggle with her close proximity a second.

His eyes flashed down to her lips for the briefest second before focusing on hers again. “Ah, yeah,” he managed, swallowing the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat.

Even though he said she’d found the spot, she didn’t move—just kept scratching. “How is that you can feel an itch then you can catch a bullet with this thick skin?” Her hand moved to another spot.

“Ahh,” he breathed, closing his eyes to gain a bit of control. Having her that close was threatening to send his senses into overdrive. “Aura,” he said after a beat.

“Aura?” Her lips were quirked in a knowing grin. She knew exactly what she was doing to him, and she didn’t stop.

“Uh huh,” he told her, refusing to open his eyes. “Like a force field around me.”

“That’s what protects you?”

“Yep.” He had to bite his lip to keep from grunting. What she was doing felt good, even if it was about to drive him mad to have her so close.

“And how is it a simple thing like someone scratching your back feels so good?”

“Because you’re in it.”

“Oh, baby, I’m no where close.”

That made him open his eyes to look at her. And he wished he hadn’t. The little devil knew exactly what she was doing to him. What would she do if he closed the distance and kissed her the way he wanted to? He should—just to crawl under her skin the way she did his. That little glint in her dark orbs nearly set him on fire. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she told him, grinning wider. Her hand stopped scratching and smoothed down over his side.

“Are you this bold all the time? Or do you just trust me enough to play with fire?”

This time it was Lois who swallowed the lump in her throat. Her grin faded and she pulled her hand from his side as she eased back down to the floor.

“Hey,” he said as he pushed himself up on his elbow. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t.” She took another drink of water. “I guess I should stop messing with you.”

“I wasn’t implying that you stop.” Damn! He shouldn’t have said anything. He enjoyed her flirting, even if it was sending him into a perpetual state of arousal.

“Sheez, aren’t we indecisive?” The grin was back as she quirked a brow at him.

He chuckled at her. “I like it that you feel so comfortable with me. But you have to know that it \*does\* affect me.”

“Yeah, I know,” she told him, the flirting glint back in her eyes. “As long as you know I do it because \*you\* affect me.”

All humor was gone. His expression was immediately serious, and he could feel the electricity jump between them.

“And yeah,” she said as she continued to stare at him. “I guess I do trust you.” She looked away and laughed softly. “Crazy, huh? I barely know you, but I think I’ve trusted you from the first time I saw you.” She picked at a string on the rug.

“No crazier than me feeling as equally comfortable with you,” he said softly.

Her head came up and her eyes met his again. “Really?”

“Yeah. You might drive me crazy, but I think I can live with it.” The corner of his mouth edged into a half smile. “As long as you know that I \*am\* a man.”

Her eyes swept his body approvingly. “How well I know,” she mumbled as she stood up.

“You do know I can hear you?”

“You do know I want you to?” she shot right back, brow arched in challenge.

That caused him to laugh. Yeah, he knew.

She turned up her bottle again on her way toward the bedroom.

“Where ya’ going?”

“To take a shower,” she said as she wiped her mouth without turning around. “Want to wash my back?” Her grin threatened to split her face when she heard him laugh again. She absolutely adored that man. Why was that? Why had a strange man from another planet gotten so far under her skin in such a short time?

And he hadn’t done it on purpose. He was just... there. Lois suspected what made him so attractive had nothing to do with his alien side. There was something about him so completely different than any man she’d ever met. It was as if she could feel him.

Crazy, she thought as she stripped and stepped into the shower stall. People didn’t \*feel\* other people. Yet the more she was around Clark, the more she actually thought she did. Did that have anything to do with the fact that they shared children together? Was it some weird alien thing on his part? When they’d been so close out there, it was all she’d been able to do to keep from leaning forward and kissing him. He was so beautiful. Another strange thing to think of a man, although it was the only way she could describe him. Whatever it was, Lois liked this Clark Kent.

And she loved messing with him.

It wasn’t that long ago Lois thought she’d never feel anything remotely similar to desire for a man again. Clark Kent had changed that. He’d set her on fire with his mere presence. And she knew she was playing with fire messing with him so boldly. She just couldn’t stop herself. No, she’d never been like this around any man, though she’d always been direct. In the past, if she was interested, she showed it. If she wasn’t, she was honest about that, too. Flirting and flaunting her femininity had just never been part of who she was.

Was that another testament to how much she’d changed?

Glancing toward the door, she found herself wishing he really would come wash her back. She knew he wouldn’t, but...

Reminding herself what a screwed up mess she was right now, she told herself Clark Kent couldn’t possibly be interested

in her. Well, maybe for one reason, but that was because she'd worked him into a frenzy. Even as she thought that she knew it wasn't true. Clark was different.

But as different as he was there was so much in front of her right now. No man needed the complication being involved with her would surely bring.

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Another call for Superman pulled Clark from the couch after Lois went to shower. On the way back he stopped and grabbed breakfast. He stepped into the bedroom to grab some clothes when Lois came out of the bathroom. She was wrapped in his robe, drying her hair with a towel.

And she looked just as good as she did in his shorts.

"Hey," she said as she made her way over to the dresser.

"Hey."

"Shower's all yours."

"Breakfast is on the counter."

"Thanks." She pulled the towel down and dug around in her bag.

"What's wrong?" he asked of her expression.

"I have \*got\* to get some clothes. I can't wear your sweats in public."

"Well, you \*could\*," he said with a sly smile.

She let out a snort of laughter. "Yeah, you'd like that."

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled as he rooted around in his closet for a pair of pants.

"You do know I can hear you?" she repeated what he'd told her earlier.

"You do know I want you to?" he shot right back.

She laughed softly as she went back to drying her hair.

"Think maybe I could wash my underwear?"

"That might be a good idea. Somehow I don't think mine would look quite the same on you," he said as he decided on a pair of slacks.

Lois let her eyes glide over his backside. "No, I don't believe they would."

He couldn't help but smile at the way she said that. He turned and dropped his pants on the bed, along with a shirt. "What happened to all of your things when you...?" He stopped, unable to utter those words.

"Lost my mind?" she finished for him. He made a face, still not able to voice what he meant. She stopped moving the towel and furrowed her brows. "You know, I'm not sure. I know I moved them to the penthouse. Of course, where my stuff went from the penthouse is anybody's guess. I wasn't able to take anything with me to prison. Had to buy it all right there." She stopped drying her hair again. "You don't know anything about how money appeared in my account every week, do you?"

"I'd say ask Perry," Clark said and turned away from her.

"Yeah, well, I know he was the one putting it there to begin with, but funny thing happened. It increased shortly after the first time I met you."

"That \*is\* strange," he commented as he flipped through his shirts.

"Yeah," she replied with a hint of a smile on her face.

"I'll get Jack to look into where your stuff's disappeared to," he said when he turned back around. She was drying her hair again, thank goodness.

"He seems like a good kid."

"He is. He and his brother, Denny were homeless for a while after their parents died, and he stole to feed them. But he's grown up a lot."

"Not this shirt," she told him as she picked it up from where he'd tossed it on the bed.

"Why not? I always wear that shirt with those pants." He placed his hands on his hips and stared at her.

"Because I'm gonna wear it," she replied with a smile.

"Really?"

"Yep." She walked over to his closet and pulled out a belt. "Too big," she mumbled and put it back. She rummaged through his selection for a moment before she sighed. "I need to gain a few pounds," she decided. When she looked at him, he turned away. "I suppose you think I'm just fine. Nice and thin, the way most men prefer."

"I'm not most men," Clark said as he stuck his wallet in his back pocket. He'd changed into a pair of jeans when he'd come back from his rescue earlier.

"Does that mean you think I could use a few extra pounds?"

"Yeah," he told her as he looked back at her. "You are a little small."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Does that mean you like big women?"

"What?" he asked her.

"Well?"

He shook his head, again, and searched out his flip flops. "I don't think liking a person has a thing to do with their size. I'm more attracted to a person's personality." He was standing in the doorway of the bedroom when he finished speaking.

"You're attracted to my personality?" she asked him.

"Oh yeah," he said with a grin and headed into the living room to pick up his glasses from the coffee table.

"Where ya' going?" she wanted to know as she followed him into the other room.

"To buy you some clothes."

"Yeah, right," she said with a snort.

"Would you prefer to wear my robe?" he wanted to know as he stopped at the bottom of the landing.

"Well, no..."

"Okay, then." He jogged up the steps and reached for the doorknob. "Back in twenty." He left her standing there with her mouth half open, whatever she was going to say stuck in her throat.

Buying her some clothes was a good excuse to get some air. Being near Lois sent his equilibrium into a tailspin. What he'd felt earlier when she was messing with him was hard to describe. Torture was the word that came to mind. He'd felt desire before. He'd acted on his desires, fulfilled them. Yet one look at her and he'd realized he'd never even been close. The powerful surge he felt from her actually scared him. It had taken every ounce of willpower to keep from touching her, tasting her. She'd been so close. Her full, inviting lips seemed to call to him. When she'd drawn away, he was both relieved and disappointed.

And now all he wanted was to be close to her again. He was like a drowning man who had gotten a fresh breath of air. He wanted more. \*Needed\* more. From what she said she felt something for him. Thrilled and apprehensive all at the same time, he knew he'd have to tread carefully. Lois had a long way to go to climb out of the emotional abyss she was trapped in.

There were also two other people to think about. But maybe their mutual attraction to one another was a good thing where the kids were concerned. It sure couldn't hurt.

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Lois had just finished drying her hair when the phone rang. Thinking maybe she should let the machine answer, she headed into the living room. By the third ring, her impatience ran out and she picked up the receiver beside the couch.

"Hello?"

"Ah, yes. I need to speak to Clark, please."

"He's not in. Could I take a message?"

"Tell him Bernie Klein called..."

"Dr. Klein, it's Lois." She was glad to hear his voice. He'd once been someone she liked and looked to for help from time to time.

"Lois! How are you? I read the articles. Great stuff. Welcome

home.”

“Thanks, Bernie,” she said with a smile. “You needed to speak with Clark?” she prompted. Bernie had a tendency to be a bit scatter-brained if you didn’t keep him on topic.

“Oh, yes. I have some results for him.”

“Good results?” she asked, her heart suddenly slamming against her chest. She hadn’t realized until just now how important it was for the twins to be Clark’s.

“Well, I think so. He \*has\* been raising them and they call him daddy...”

“Yes?” she asked him loudly, tears filling her eyes.

“Yes,” he said, the smile apparent in his voice. “Without question.”

“Lois? What’s wrong?”

She turned to see Clark standing behind her, concerned eyes looking at her.

“It’s Bernie,” she said and held out the phone.

He didn’t know whether her tears were a good thing or bad thing. He almost didn’t want to answer the call.

Almost.

His eyes never left Lois’ as he stepped closer and took the receiver. “Bernie? It’s Clark.”

“Clark, good. I’m glad I caught you.”

“Tell me,” he said, still eyeing Lois. She hadn’t given him the slightest indication either way.

“Congratulations, Daddy.”

He dropped the bag he held and sat down on the couch. “Really?”

“Really. And, Clark, you could have trusted me enough to tell me you were... a little different.”

“Wh... what?”

“There’s not a glaring difference. It didn’t jump out at me or anything, but your DNA is remarkable, as well as the twins’. Perry is almost an exact match. Collin’s profile closely resembles Lois’. Tell her I destroyed the sample. I’m sure the state doesn’t need it anymore. Oh, and I destroyed the others, too. Although I have a copy of the profiles on a flash drive for you. It’s locked up tight, though.”

“Dr. Klein?” Clark managed after the man’s stunning revelation.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I want you to know you have a trusted confidant.”

“I appreciate that,” Clark said with a smile.

“Again, congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Clark returned the receiver and sat staring at the top of the coffee table, allowing the information to sink in. They were his; they were really his children.

Lois moved around and sat down on the table in front of him, reaching out to take his hands. “Please tell me this is what you wanted.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything as much as I wanted this,” he said softly, turning his hands over to hold hers. He’d fantasized many times about the twins actually being his. To have that fantasy turned into reality was something he couldn’t describe. It felt... amazing.

She gave him a watery smile, but couldn’t say a word.

“Is this what you wanted?”

“Yes,” she whispered, then choked back a sob.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she said as another sob escaped.

Clark pulled her into his arms and she cried in earnest. She clung to him, burying her face against his neck, trusting him to chase away her demons again. He held the back of her head with a large hand while his other spread out across her back. This time he did cry with her, silent tears that rolled down his cheeks. At

that moment he knew how much she’d lost. He’d been robbed of precious moments, too. This was certainly never how he’d pictured having kids.

A long while later, she took a deep breath, but didn’t pull away. “You smell good,” she mumbled against his skin.

He laughed softly and turned his face so that he could sniff her neck. “So do you.”

“I smell like men’s body wash.”

He laughed again and drew back far enough to look at her. “Better?” he asked as he lifted his hand to caress her cheek.

“I really am happy with the results,” she said with a sincere expression.

“Me, too.”

“Gravy, remember?”

He shrugged with a cheeky grin. “Sue me.”

Lois laughed softly and leaned back away from him. She reached over and grabbed the bag he’d set down. He’d bought her a simple pair of gray slacks, a gorgeous burgundy blouse, and a pair of black loafers that would probably go with a ton of different outfits. There were also black, sheer socks and new underwear. Granted, not the sexiest underwear she’d ever had, but definitely a far cry from the prison rags she’d worn.

“How in hell did you know what sizes to buy?”

“I’m Superman,” he teased her as he stood up. “It’s another super power.”

She laughed out loud as she followed him into the bedroom. He continued through to the bathroom so he could shower and she took out her new clothes to get dressed. Super power or not, he’d done a heck of a job, she thought as she admired herself in the mirror on his dresser. The only thing missing was a new bra. But the one she had would do for now. Clark had even remembered to get a black belt. Maybe she’d let him go shopping for her. She hated shopping.

“Nice,” he said as he walked up behind her, looking at her reflection in the mirror.

“Thank you,” she told him with a serious expression.

“You’re welcome.” He reached out to squeeze her arm, gave her another look that left little doubt just how much he liked what he saw, then stepped over to the closet to look for a tie.

Lois took a deep breath, reminding herself there was so much to do. She didn’t have time for what her body was telling her she wanted. Although she was having an equally hard time trying to convince her mind, too.

A glance at him told her that maybe knowing Clark Kent was a good thing. Besides, thinking about him was better than the pain and bitterness any day.

\*\*\*

Much of the day was spent with Lois in conference with Mayson and Perry, after fighting through the throng of press at the Planet. She’d suddenly become the news, a very different situation for her. But a few mumbled ‘no comments’ and a strong arm from Clark helped them ease into the building easily enough. They’d probably be hounding her at Clark’s place when they found out she was staying there.

Her situation was discussed at length. Although a bit reluctant, Lois mentioned a few of her intentions for the future. Mayson also spent the afternoon on video feed with the lawyers in Sydney. She and Lois had discussed a few figures and the details of the settlement were quickly outlined. Final papers would be ready in a day or two. Apparently the foreign law firm wasn’t all that concerned about her legal status in the states. According to Australian law, her children were the legal heirs to the Luckaby fortune.

Clark flew to Spain again and by lunchtime, he had a follow-up ready for print. Lois had detailed the Delconto Organization’s rise to the criminal world. She told of Hernandez Delconto, Juan’s father, who took over an Asian opium operation during

World War One. Hernandez plowed through Asia, the Middle East, then into his home country of Spain. By the start of the next World War, he was a force to be reckoned with. His import/export business was the perfect cover for his drug operation. He later began smuggling arms to support the many militia around the world. Juan hit the ground running when he took over the organization with a laundering business. By the end of the eighties, it was widely known that Delconto was also a front for an international hit group as well as being known for its many trade endeavors. Illegal alcohol, drugs, arms, and even humans were transported around the world, sold to the highest bidder.

Lois had gotten every bit of her information first hand. Juan had confessed his many sins on his death bed. He'd also provided proof to some of the horrors he'd described. There were shipping forms, manifests, videos, pictures, account numbers, personal logs, and numerous other items of proof. Juan had named names, supplied numbers. He was taking as many as he could to hell with him.

One of the men he'd provided some very incriminating evidence on was Lex Luthor. By day's end, Henderson had turned over enough evidence to the prosecutor to put him away for a long time for crimes ranging from embezzlement to murder. There was even the mention of the state seeking the death penalty.

Martha had waited patiently until late evening to call Clark about the DNA results for the twins. He'd asked her if he could bring Lois to dinner and they'd tell them everything. She'd hung up the phone with a smile on her face. She knew, but she didn't say so.

Close to five, Clark looked up to see Jimmy and Lois in Perry's office. They were all laughing and talking, catching up the way a family does when they've been apart for a while. He hadn't told them about the results Bernie had given him, so he figured now was as good a time as any.

"Hey, Jack, can you join us for a sec?" He was halfway to the boss' office when he'd yelled out to the other man.

"Sure thing, CK." Jack crossed the room and they walked in, one after the other.

"Hey, guys. Got a minute?" Clark asked when he went in.

"Sure, son. What's on your mind?" Perry said from his relaxed position, leaning back slightly in his chair, his hands folded across his lap.

Clark looked over at Lois, his expression asking for permission to share their news from the morning phone call. She nodded with a smile and he took a deep breath. "Collin and Perry \*are\* mine."

Jack and Jimmy both shouted out loud.

Jimmy jumped to his feet and bear hugged Clark.

"Congratulations, CK!"

"See? You're gonna learn to listen to me," Jack told him as he took a turn hugging his friend.

Clark laughed at him as he stepped back from their exchange. "Thanks, guys!"

"How do you feel about this?" Perry asked Lois. Leave it to him to make sure his 'daughter' was okay.

She glanced up at Clark, a grin on her face. "I think he'll do."

Perry laughed heartily and stood up to walk around the desk. "I think it's ironic as hell, but I like it." He reached out to shake Clark's hand, pumping it vigorously. "I could say I knew what I was doing way back when."

Clark smiled as Perry released his hand. "I guess you did."

"Mayson mentioned that she'd need to talk to you about the legalities when the results were in," Perry told him.

"Yeah. She said we'd discuss it tomorrow."

Jack and Jimmy had been talking a mile a minute behind Clark. Finally Jack reached over and squeezed Lois' shoulder. "How 'bout you and Clark come hang out with me and Jimmy

tomorrow night? I play with a band on Friday nights at Lennie's."

"That sounds fun," she told him. "Clark?"

"Yeah. It does." His eyes flashed at her, before he focused on the other man.

"Great!"

"Hey, CK, can you see if Carrie down in advertising will come along?" Jimmy asked him.

"Why don't you ask her?"

"Are you kidding? I have to ask a girl out like ten times before she says yes. You look at 'em and they're ready to go."

Clark rolled his eyes at Jimmy. "They do not."

"Oh, yeah? How many times did you ask Mayson out before she went?"

"I didn't..." He stopped, his cheeks turned red, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"See?" Jimmy said again.

"See what?" Lois wanted to know.

"He didn't even have to ask her. \*She\* asked him out," Jimmy said with a grin. "Women love him."

"They do not," Clark argued. "Besides, if Carrie agreed to go if I asked her, how would that help you?"

"Bar. Drinks," Jack spoke up. "I swear for a reporter, you are the slowest guy in the world." Jack shook his head and headed out the door. "See ya' later," he threw over his shoulder. "I have work to do."

Poor Clark let his head drop toward his chest, laughter threatening to overtake him. Perry, Jimmy, and Lois were all snickering as well.

"On second thought," Jimmy started, "maybe I \*should\* ask her myself."

Clark looked at him. "Maybe you should."

Jimmy chuckled and clapped his shoulder before he headed out to finish up his work for the day.

"And you hired this guy?" Lois asked Perry, motioning toward Clark.

"Ah, he'll do," Perry told her, the same thing she'd said of him earlier.

Lois cocked her head to look up at him. "Yeah," she agreed.

"All right," Perry announced. "You two get out of here." He walked back around the desk, confident they'd do as they were told.

Clark stepped through the door and waited for Lois to come out. "How are you?" he asked her. He hadn't seen her very much during the day and wanted to make sure she was fairing well.

"I'm good. Mayson says we have a legal mess with Lex."

"I thought the judge overturned the conviction?"

"He did." They stopped next to his desk. "But I signed a marriage license with Lex Luthor. He never legally changed his name."

"So... your marriage shouldn't be legal," Clark said. He knew the law enough to know that much.

"Right, but..."

"I knew there would be a but."

"He also filed a license in Australia as Luckaby. Apparently I signed that as well. However, with the information in Paul's research, I might have legal grounds to void any marriage.

Mayson said she'd have to check into things, call the Australian consulate, yadda, yadda." She motioned with her hand.

"How long does Mayson think you'll be in limbo?"

"Two weeks or more. But she said she'd work as quickly as possible. Guess what else?" she asked with a cheeky grin.

"What?"

"By the end of the week, I'll be as rich as you."

"Really?" His lips spread into a smile of his own.

"The new settlement will need both our approvals when the final draft is done."

"Both? Why?"

“We’re in this together,” she said matter-of-factly. Clark’s smile faded a bit as he looked at her. “Speaking of our... relationship... Mayson wants to talk to both of us tomorrow.”

“Yeah. She told me. We’re supposed to meet her at ten.”

“Okay.” He glanced back at his desk. “I’m done here.”

“Okay.”

Clark looked at her a moment, wondering if she was ready to meet her twins. He hadn’t even asked her to dinner before telling his mother they’d come.

“What?” she asked. She could tell there was something on his mind.

He sighed and glanced away for a second. He was actually nervous about asking her to go with him. He wasn’t sure how he’d react if she said no.

“I’m ready,” she told him, relieving him of the need to ask. She wasn’t sure how she knew what was wrong with him, but she knew. Another of the strange things about this new relationship she’d have to analyze.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said with a wide smile. “Let’s go by the apartment so I can change into something more comfortable before we go.”

“Not fair,” she told him as she walked beside him up the ramp.

“You don’t like your clothes?”

“Oh, I love ‘em. But a pair of jeans would be even better.” She looked down at her feet. “And some new sneakers. Those things I’ve got are awful.”

“Then we’ll make a pit stop.”

They stepped into the elevator and turned as the door closed. “You can’t keep buying me clothes. Someone’s gonna start to think I’m a kept woman.”

Clark laughed when he realized she was teasing him. “I could just give it all to you and play the part of the kept man.”

“Hand it over,” she told him with an outstretched hand.

Keeping his eyes on hers, and a hint of smile on his lips, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Her eyes looked down at it when he put it in her hand. And when her brown orbs flashed, he realized his mistake. She stuffed his wallet into her bag and turned around to look at their reflections in the shiny, metal doors. He was shaking his head when they opened on the bottom floor.

On the sidewalk they hailed a cab. Clark didn’t say a word other than give the cabby directions to City Place- the closest mall.

“How ‘bout that?” Lois said after a few moments of silence. He looked over to see her holding his wallet open. “Your picture on your license is actually pretty decent.” Her head snapped up so she could look at him. “I’ll have to get a new one. Dammit! I hate going to the DMV.”

“Do what I do. Go to one out of the city, where it’s less crowded. It’s all state anyway.”

“Smart, Kent,” she said and began her perusal of the contents of his wallet again. “Look at them!” she said as she found a picture of the twins. They were covered in mud.

“Dad took that the weekend of the Corn Festival. They were helping him wash the car, but found out that playing in the mud was a lot more fun.”

Lois lifted her head and stared out the window, all pretense of a smile gone.

“What?” he prompted.

“I saw them that weekend. Saw all of you,” she said without looking around at him.

“In Smallville?”

“Yeah. I’d only been back in the states for a few days. I’d

done some searches on the net and found out about the festival. I made a few calls and learned that you were all going to be there.” She shrugged. “I wanted to see.”

Clark was the one to look the other way now. He was... upset that she’d done that. That she’d been so close, yet remained so far away.

“I wanted to see you, with them.”

“What?” he asked as he turned his head back to her.

“I wanted to watch you with them without you knowing I was doing it.” Her eyes met his. “I had to know that you really loved them.”

“Of course I love them.”

“But you didn’t know they might be yours. I wanted to know if you loved them without knowing their biology. I know,” she said of his strange expression. “It doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand why I needed to know that, but I did. And I saw. Then I had to take care of all this other stuff before I could be with them.” She reached out to grasp his arm. “Please understand.”

“Lois, I might never understand everything, but I will try to accept the things you feel you need to do,” he assured her. And he meant it. He’d do everything he could to allow her to do what she felt she needed to in order to cope with all that happened to her.

“Even if it makes you mad?”

He sighed and glanced away. How was it she knew him so well? “Yeah, even if it makes me mad,” he confessed and turned back to offer her a smile.

She studied his eyes for a moment before deciding that he meant what he said. Squeezing his arm, she relaxed and offered him a smile in return. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem.” He settled back in for the remainder of the ride while she continued to look through his wallet. “Having fun?”

“Yep. Two credit cards- smart man,” she supplied. Her eyes widened when she found another card. “Clark Jerome Kent.” His license hadn’t had his full name on it, but his social security card did. “I’ll be damned. You and Collin share a name.”

“Yeah. I’d thought that funny at the time.”

“I named him after my brother.”

“Your brother?” He didn’t know she had a brother.

“Mmm,” she mumbled as she continued to look through his personal items. “He died when he was four months old. Heart condition.” She lifted her eyes to his. “That’s why my mother started seeing Paul again. Daddy withdrew in his depression and I guess she was lonely.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me, too.” She gave him a sad smile, then thumbed through his money. “Wow! Do you always keep this much cash?”

“Not until recently.” He shrugged. “I figure I have it. Why not use it?”

“I know how much the new expense check will be every month, but how much is it now?”

“Too much.” When she gave him a stern glare, he said, “Twenty thousand. Don’t tell me the new one will be more than that?”

“Okay. I won’t tell you.” He laughed softly as she looked up at the mall stretching out in front of them. “It’s amazing the things you miss.”

“I know. When I traveled overseas, I was often in tiny villages without running water.”

“Oh, thank God, Lex paid his bills,” she said in exasperation.

Clark laughed again as he opened the door when the cab pulled to stop. “Pay the man, would you?”

Lois wasn’t a bit bothered by opening his wallet and pulling out enough money for the ride and a generous tip. When she stepped out on the sidewalk beside him, she held out the leather case. “Maybe you should hold onto this.”

“I don’t know. I kinda’ like the idea of being kept.” He

pushed his hands into his front pockets and started for the entrance of the mall.

She sighed in frustration and hurried to catch up to him. As he stopped to hold the door open, she reached out and stuffed his wallet into his back pocket, grinning widely at the hitch in his breathing. Her eyes flashed to his and with more gumption than she should, she smoothed her hand over his rear.

“Nice, Kent.” She patted once and went inside before he could fully process what she’d done.

Clark had to close his eyes when she touched him. A flash of white heat surged through him like a bolt of lightning. Did she have any idea what she was doing to him? Hell, he’d told her that her teasing affected him. A glance at the devilish grin on her face told him she knew exactly what she did to him. If he wasn’t such a gentleman, he’d give as good as he got.

Shaking his head, he gathered himself together enough to catch up with her. She was looking through a window at a pair of shoes. He prayed he’d have the strength to put up with her because she was certainly exhausting.

Exhilarating, but exhausting.

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“Ready?” Clark asked Lois as he stepped up behind her. She was looking out of the door leading to the balcony of his apartment. They’d spent an hour or so at the mall buying her a few new clothes. And he was sure his eyes were going to hurt from staring at her. The snug fitting blue jeans wrapped around her like a glove. She’d chosen a plain white blouse that allowed everyone to see exactly how female she was. Of course, the new bra she was wearing helped out a bit in that area as well.

He laughed inwardly when he thought about how badly she’d embarrassed him picking out that particular item. Lois had noticed the clerk was openly flirting with him and couldn’t resist teasing him a bit. When she’d tried on a bra, she’d stepped out of the dressing room and asked him if it made her breasts look perky. She’d even asked him to squeeze them to make sure. He’d nearly died right there when she’d declared that he didn’t have a problem doing so when they were alone. Of course, the poor clerk was barely able to check them out after that. But she hadn’t flirted with Clark anymore.

Lois turned and grabbed the jacket she’d picked out from the window seat. When she looked up at Clark, she was the one whose breath hitched. He was wearing jeans, one of those muscle shirts under a button down denim shirt, and a black leather jacket. And he wasn’t wearing his glasses.

“What?” he asked when she kept staring at him.

“Do you look decent in everything you wear?” she asked as she slipped her jacket on.

He glanced down at himself, then shrugged. He looked the way he always did, but if she liked it...

He grinned and clicked off the lights on their way toward the door. Clark led her toward the back of the building, stopping when they were in the shadows of the alley. He turned toward her, a smile playing on his lips when he heard her heart beginning to race.

“Don’t be nervous. I don’t plan on dropping you.”

“Funny, Kent.” She pasted on an expression of pure bravado, daring him to show her what he had.

“I’ll have to...” He motioned toward her and reached out to grasp her sides. His eyes held hers as he lifted them off the ground. “Hold on. We’ll have to go up pretty quickly.” She’d barely placed her hands on his shoulders when they became a flash. When he stopped, she had a death grip on his arms, but her eyes were searching her surroundings. Her face was flushed and her heart thumped slightly different than before. She was excited, he realized.

“That was awesome,” she said breathlessly. Her eyes came back to his, flashing in anticipation.

“More?” Seeing her reaction thrilled him. He couldn’t remember wanting to fly this much in a long time.

“Oh yeah,” she breathed and relaxed her hold on him.

“It’ll be easier like this,” Clark said and shifted her so he could reach down and lift her in a cradle hold. Before she could protest, they were moving. Lois’ arms had automatically circled his neck when he’d grabbed her. Her eyes darted here and there as they flew and slowly she began asking him questions about things she saw. He was glad she’d relaxed and wasn’t scared. It was May and the night was warm, but flying so high meant that the air was chilly.

“Are you cold?” he asked her.

“No.” Her arms tightened around his neck. “You’re nice and toasty.” He chuckled softly and continued his narrative of their flight.

“Hold on,” he finally told her and descended toward the ground. They landed just behind the barn. He stood there, holding her, looking into her eyes. Slowly he lowered her feet to the dirt.

She eased back, but not completely out of his grasp. Her eyes moved away from his so she could look around.

“Lois, I’m not sure what you’re expecting, but they’re little. And they don’t understand everything.”

“I know, Clark.” She pulled away from him and entered the barn. There was a cow in a stall who looked like she was about to explode. “Is she going to have a baby?”

“Yeah,” he replied as he walked up beside her. “Collin and Perry aren’t really shy, but...”

“What?” she asked him. “Just say whatever it is you’re trying to say.”

“I just don’t want you to... withdraw if they don’t exactly...” He sighed and looked over at the cow.

“Clark, I know they won’t jump into my arms and yell, ‘Mommy!’ They don’t know me and I don’t know them. I know it’s going to be hard and we’ll have to get used to each other.”

He smiled and reached out to place his hand on her back. “It won’t take them long. They’ll be crazy about you before you know it.”

She had to bite her tongue to keep from asking how long it would be before he was crazy about her. This man had tilted her world on its axis. And unlike when Lex had upset her existence, she liked this disruption. With a nod, she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Think we could go see them now?”

“Yeah.” He held up his hand for her to go out first and he fell in step beside her. When they neared the house, they noticed his father was on the back patio. He looked up from the grill and smiled.

“Hey there,” Jonathan offered.

“Hey, Dad.” Clark stepped over and kissed the side of his father’s face, an action that stunned Lois. “Dad, this is Lois.”

“Hi, Lois,” he said and stepped forward to hug her.

Hot tears stung her eyes, but she ordered them to stay put. She wasn’t going to start that already, even if she hadn’t expected this man, this strange man to hug her. “Jonathan, right?” she asked when he drew back to look at her.

“Yes, ma’am. And I’m glad to finally see you.”

She tilted her head and looked at him. “Are you?” she asked, unable to stop herself. She hadn’t meant to say that, but she really needed to know if this man was okay she’d come to make waves in their peaceful lives.

Instead of taking offense, Jonathan recognized her question for what it truly was- her need to assure herself that someone cared about her. He pulled her back into another hug and sighed. “I’m not made that way, Lois,” he told her softly. “I’d much rather have you here with those babies than anywhere else in this world.”

This time when he withdrew, a couple of tears slipped through her carefully erected defenses. “Sorry,” she mumbled and

wiped her face quickly.

“Don’t be,” the older man told her. “Now, go on in the house with Clark so I can finish our dinner.”

She nodded and turned toward the door. Clark was smiling softly and he allowed her all the time she needed to be ready to go inside. Her feet moved slowly, one step after the other. Clark held the door as she stepped inside. They walked through the small entry and entered the kitchen, causing Martha to look up from the stove, a blindingly warm smile on her face. Lois now knew where Clark got his warmth.

Were her twins like that? Had the Kents’ disposition rubbed off on them any?

“Lois!” Martha said as she started toward her, outstretched arms. The younger woman was smothered in another hug before she could protest, even if she wasn’t about to. She kind of liked these hugs. “It is so good to meet you,” Martha said when she held Lois at arm’s length.

And she meant it. Lois didn’t have to ask this time. These people were probably the most genuinely sincere she’d ever seen. “I’m glad to be here,” Lois told her and realized that she was telling the truth. She’d briefly, very briefly, toyed with the idea of just drifting away, blending into the world and leaving her children to be raised by their father. But that was before she’d seen them in Smallville. Before she’d seen for herself what a great person Clark was. She’d only watched him then, but she knew. She knew he was one of a kind.

She’d also known she wanted desperately to meet him, too. Now she was glad she had.

“Daddy!”

Lois jerked her head toward the sound of the small voice as fast moving feet carried a little whirlwind across the kitchen. Clark bent and held out his arms, but Collin stopped when he noticed they had a guest. He finished the journey to his father slowly, carefully watching her as he went.

“Hey, big guy. Where’s your sister?” Clark asked him as he gathered him in his arms and stood up, kissing his face as he did.

“Hi, Lady,” Collin told Lois with a flip of his hand to imitate a wave.

“Hi, sweetie,” Lois squeaked through her tears. He was so beautiful. She hesitantly reached out and was shocked when Collin did the same. “Oh,” she managed as her fingers stroked his small hand.

“Don’t cry,” he told her, concern written all over his face.

She laughed softly, but the tears still rolled down her cheeks. Collin watched her for a moment, then gently pulled his hand away and grasped Clark on both sides of his face.

“Did you bing me sumpin?” His head nearly touched Clark’s as he looked the man in the eyes. Being that close surely made his features seem even larger than they were.

Clark leaned forward so that they were touching. “Sorry, pal, the only thing I brought today was this pretty lady to see you.”

Collin turned his head, without pulling it away from Clark’s. “Otay,” he said and grinned at Lois.

If it hadn’t been for Martha standing beside her, she was sure she would have fallen down. His smile was amazing. It sent warm sparks down her spine. Her hand went up to cover her mouth as she slowly smiled back.

“Her not purdy, Daddy,” Collin said as he looked back at his father.

“Collin!” Clark rebuked.

He smiled, an expression that she was sure he practiced. “Her bootiful!”

Clark laughed and hugged the boy close to his chest. “I have to agree, son,” he told him, then set him on his feet. “Why don’t you go tell Perry I’m here?”

“Tay.” And he was gone.

Lois watched him run down the hall and disappear through a

door on the other end.

“You okay?” Clark asked as he reached out to smooth his hand over Lois’ shoulder.

She could only nod because she was too choked up.

“Let me take your jacket,” Martha spoke up. Lois shrugged out of it and Martha thrust it toward Clark. “I hope you brought your appetite.”

She was about to tell Martha she had when Perry came barreling into the kitchen, followed closely by her brother. Lois watched as Clark greeted her much the same way he had Collin. She wasn’t as impressed with their guest, too caught up in wrapping her father around her finger. Perry held Clark’s face the same way Collin had, but she kissed his lips, nose, and cheeks before she’d had enough. Leaning back in his arms, confident he’d hold her, she finally looked over.

“Hi,” Lois said softly.

“Hi,” she returned, but instead of reaching out to touch Lois, she wrapped her arm around Clark’s neck and leaned her head over on the side of his. “What’s your name?” she asked, sweetly.

“My name is Lois,” she answered automatically.

“My name is Perry,” the little girl returned.

“I know. Your daddy told me.” If she wanted to talk, she’d be more than happy to do so. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Collin had reached out to hold Clark’s leg and was looking up at her, apparently interested in what she had to say.

“Is he your friend?”

“He is,” Lois told her. “And he said you might like to be my friend, too.”

Perry sat up and smiled at her. “Yes!” she said enthusiastically. She wriggled to get down and Clark set her on her feet. “Come see.”

Lois glanced at Clark, who nodded. “Where are we going?” Lois asked Perry, wiping the tears from her face.

“To drink tea,” Perry informed her.

“I don’t want to,” Collin whined, but he followed anyway.

Clark sighed as he watched them disappear into the dining room that had been turned into a playroom. He smiled at his mother when she wrapped an arm around his waist.

“She’s very pretty,” his mother said. “I know where the kids get it from.”

“Gee, thanks, Mom,” Clark replied, pulling her closer to his side.

“Does that mean...?” she asked him, a hopeful expression on her face. She knew he was, but she needed to hear it.

“Yeah, Mom. They’re mine.”

“Oh, Clark!” She hugged him tightly, tears of her own making tracks down her cheeks. She pulled away suddenly and hurried toward the door. “Jonathan!” she yelled when she opened it. “He is!”

“Hot dog!” the older man shouted back.

Clark laughed softly and picked up Lois’ jacket from the chair he’d draped it over and went to hang it up. He put his in the hall closet, too, and headed toward the playroom. He propped against the frame and watched as Lois drank tea with her children. She was so intent on her task, she didn’t even notice him. Both kids were talking a mile a minute and somehow she seemed to be keeping up, even dropping in her own comments and questions. He shook his head as he continued to watch. His mother pulled on his shoulder, and when he noticed she was holding the camera, he stepped out of the way.

The first flash made Lois look up at them.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Martha said as she held up the camera.

“No.” Her eyes glowed as she smiled at each child.

“Nana wikes pithas,” Collin told her.

“I do, too,” Lois said. She was rewarded with another cheeky grin as he continued to pretend he was drinking tea.

Perry was the one to plop her cup down and declare she was full. “Want to go swing?” she asked her new friend.

“Oh, yes,” Lois replied. “I like to swing.”

Neither child waited on her, just jumped up and ran back toward the kitchen. Lois stood and walked through the door. “I guess I better hurry.”

“Looks like it,” Clark said with a grin.

“Here, son, go take pictures,” his mother told him as she held the camera out. “I have to finish the potatoes.”

Clark took the large device and went after the trio. He’d had to buy his mother a top of line camera after she’d worn out her third one. This one seemed to be faring better from the nearly constant use.

Jonathan was laughing softly as he watched Lois push each child on their swings. Clark clicked off a few pictures before his father held out his hand.

“Go join them.”

He relinquished the camera to his father and went to take over pushing duties so Lois could swing, too. Both children were laughing and yelling back and forth. Soon enough so was Lois. He was so thrilled to see her this relaxed and enjoying herself so much. He had been a bit worried about how the children would react to her, but Lois had said the magic word to Perry- friend. His little girl loved making friends. She spoke to everyone when Martha took her shopping in town; she didn’t meet a stranger, unlike when she’d first come to live on the farm. And if Perry deemed someone a friend, that was good enough for Collin. At the same time, if Perry disliked someone, her brother wouldn’t let them so much as look at her. He was very protective of his sister.

Clark looked up when his mother called them to dinner. The twins set off at a run and he walked with Lois toward the house.

“Still okay?” he asked her.

“Oh, Clark, you’ve done a fantastic job with them.”

“My parents have done a wonderful job,” he corrected her.

“I see how they look at you.”

“Does that... bother you?”

“Absolutely not.” She stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

“What bothers me is that we’re out here and I’m not seeing them smile.”

Clark chuckled softly as she pushed against his chest, then hurried up the steps. He ran after her, as ready as she was to see them smile again.

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Lois chose to sit across from the twins so she could see them both, instead of having to move her head back and forth to see them. Luckily the table was round, enabling her to see everyone fairly clearly.

“Oh, Jonathan, this steak is delicious,” she commented after about three bites.

“Thank you,” he said and reached over to pat her arm.

“And the potatoes...” She moaned appreciatively.

“Lois likes to eat,” Clark told them.

“Me, too,” supplied Collin and demonstrated by stuffing a potato into his mouth.

Lois laughed softly as she looked at him. He allowed her a glimpse of his dimples before he stuck another bite of his food with his fork. She noticed that Perry was eating, but not as enthusiastically as her brother. Martha noticed Lois was watching the girl.

“Perry is all girl. She’s... dainty.”

“I see,” Lois said and the little girl smiled at her. Both children sat on booster seats strapped into the dining chairs. It was amazing how much they’d grown. Perry’s hair was long and wavy, tied up in piggy tails. Collin sported a neat, close haircut, making him look like a little man. Glancing from them to Clark, Lois realized that they did indeed look like him.

Clark looked up from helping Collin with his steak, noticing

Lois seemed to be lost in her thoughts. “Hey?” He reached over to touch her hand and she blinked so she could focus on him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just noticing how much they really do look like you.”

Martha grinned at her husband. “We’ve always thought so, too. But of course, we figured it was just wishful thinking.”

Lois let out a snort of laughter. “I’ll bet that was odd as he... Hey, pass me the salad,” she interrupted herself from uttering the swear word at the last moment.

Martha laughed out loud. “Yeah, it was,” she agreed. Her eyes met Lois’ and they both laughed again. “Jonathan forgets himself sometimes, too.”

“Sorry,” Lois replied with a blush and ducked her head toward her plate. She dug back into her food with abandon. In mere minutes she was done. Martha and Jonathan exchanged a glance, but kept eating their own meals. “I eat fast. Consequence of starving in prison. When I first went, I still ate slowly and went to bed hungry a few nights. Of course, considering it \*was\* prison food, I guess I went to bed hungry a lot.” She stopped when the older Kents stared at her.

Clark hadn’t slowed down. He had gotten used to her babble rather quickly. “She babbles,” he pointed out around a mouth full of food.

“Sorry,” she said again. “I haven’t talked a lot in the past few years and now that I can...” She shrugged helplessly, a deep blush washing over her face. “Okay, I’m nervous as he...” She glanced at the twins who were watching her intently as they ate. “I’m petrified.”

“Why, dear?” Martha asked her.

Lois stared at her as if she had three heads. “Are you kidding?” She waved her hand around the room as if that should explain everything. When Martha gave her an understanding smile, she let out an exasperated breath. Leaning back against her chair she felt hot tears sting her eyes again.

“Lois, don’t,” Clark whispered. “They understand.”

“I know,” she breathed, wiping her cheeks.

“Daddy?” He reluctantly tore his eyes from Lois and looked over at Collin.

“What, son?”

“Is her okay?”

“Yes, big guy, she’s okay.”

His large, bright eyes went to Lois and she swore his expression was one of complete understanding. “Div her a teenex.”

The adults laughed softly as Clark stood up and retrieved the \*Kleenex\* from the buffet by the door. “Here. Take a teenex,” he told Lois as he pulled one from the box and held it out to her.

She laughed again and accepted the offer. “Thank you,” she said to Collin.

“Welcome,” he replied, then shoved more potatoes in his mouth.

Why had she waited so long to come meet these little people? Lois asked herself as they finished their dinner. Her eyes flashed to Jonathan’s when he offered her another gentle touch. She and Martha exchanged an entire conversation across the table, without ever saying a word. She talked a bit with the twins, but mostly they ate. They were good eaters, and it showed. They were healthy, with beautiful olive-colored skin and shiny hair. Martha and Jonathan took really good care of them and it showed.

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“Will you come back to see us?” Perry asked Lois when Martha announced it was bedtime. Clark explained they were on a schedule, although not too strict. But Martha liked for them to go to bed close to the same time each night. He did say they could stay up a bit later if she wanted them to. Lois insisted they

stick to their routine, saying there would be plenty of time for them to be together from now on. He'd argued briefly, but she'd told him she'd like to talk with his parents for a while.

"I will come so often you'll get tired of seeing me," Lois told the little girl.

Perry smiled brightly, the dimples in her cheeks as deep as Collin's. "Wois, do you hug your friends?"

A lump jumped into Lois' throat and she forced it down so she could answer. "Yes, Perry. I like to hug my friends." She nearly passed out when Perry launched herself at her, wrapping her small arms around her neck. It took her a second, but she finally managed to get her body to react to what her brain was telling her. Lois folded her daughter against her body as new tears filled her eyes. She cried softly as she held Perry for the first time since the girl was seven months old.

Collin looked up at Clark from where he sat on his father's lap and was about to say something, but Clark covered his mouth with a large hand. "Not now, son." He smoothed his hand over his cheek, gazing at him to keep his attention long enough for Lois to reunite with Perry. It worked for a moment. Finally the little boy turned toward the others.

"Is her otay, Daddy?"

"She is now, son," Clark told him as he watched Lois withdraw and cup Perry's cheek.

"Thank you," Lois told Perry. "I really needed that hug."

"Night, Wois." Perry kept watching her as she grasped Martha's hand so the older woman could lead her up to bed.

When they were gone, Collin slid off of Clark's lap and walked over to Lois. "I wike to hug, too."

Lois reached out to grasp his tiny face and rubbed her nose against his. She'd done that to both of them from the time they were born.

Collin looked up at her with a bright smile. "My daddy do that," he let her know.

"Does he?" Her thumbs stroked his cheeks as she gazed at him. Deciding she'd waited long enough, she pulled him to her chest to hold him like she'd done her daughter. His small arms squeezed tightly, wrapping her in a warmth she'd missed desperately.

Collin wasn't as understanding as Perry, withdrawing from the hug long before Lois wanted him to. "See ya'," he said and ran toward his grandfather. Jonathan bent to lift him in his arms and they went up to bed.

When they were gone, Lois sighed and looked over at Clark. "I miss them already."

"I know." He reached over to squeeze her arm. "We can come back day after tomorrow. Or you could stay. I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind."

"We have that meeting with Mayson tomorrow," she reminded him.

"I forgot. Sorry."

"But maybe I could come back this weekend. I mean, you could, too, but if you can't..."

"I think that's a great idea," Martha said as she re-entered the room. "I'll make up the extra room." She sat down in the chair across from the sofa where the younger couple were sitting.

"Thank you."

"Lois, you don't have to thank me. They *are* your children."

"They're yours, too," she said flatly as her eyes bored into the older woman's. Martha was unable to utter a word in reply.

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you all about."

"What do you need to talk to us about?" Jonathan asked as he sat down in the other chair beside his wife.

"You are planning to move to Metropolis?" Lois asked the older couple.

"Yes. We close on the new house in two weeks," Martha told

her.

"I've done a lot of thinking... a *lot* of thinking. I'm not gonna take the kids away from you." She stared down at her clasped hands.

"What?" Martha glanced at Clark, who was obviously hearing this for the first time, too.

"You're all they know."

"Don't you think they'll want to live with you once they get to know you?" Jonathan spoke up. As much as he didn't want to lose his twins, he didn't want to keep them from their mother either.

Lois shrugged, unable to look at them. "Truth is I'm not sure I trust myself to take care of them."

"Don't be silly," Martha told her. "You'll be wonderful when you settle in."

Clark sat up on the edge of the sofa. "Why don't we take one day at a time before we make such huge decisions?"

"I thought you'd be thrilled," she said when her eyes met his.

"Thrilled? Lois, if you think I'm thrilled because you've more or less decided that you don't want to raise your kids, then you have a lot to learn about me. No, I don't want to lose them. But I don't want you to give them up either. And you don't have to. We can raise them together."

"Clark, you don't want me and all my baggage around all the time."

Clark scooted closer to Lois and reached out to lift her chin until she looked at him. "I want you with your kids. And since I'm not going anywhere, then yeah." He smiled at her, his hand dropping to grasp hers. "I want you around."

"You'll change your mind," she told him, a deep frown on her face. She'd thought about this nearly nonstop since she'd first seen the kids tonight. They adored their grandparents. How could she take that away from them? And how in the world could any of them want her around all the time? There was so much going on in her mind. She wasn't sure she'd ever feel... normal again.

"And when I do, I'll kick your butt to the curb," he joked, hoping it would have at least a little effect on her. He let out a long slow breath when her mouth quirked toward a smile.

"Clark, why don't you take Lois to look at the house?" his mother put in. "That storage space over the garage could be turned into a nice little apartment."

Clark's face lit up. "Mom, that's a great idea!"

"Oh, I don't know," Lois spoke up.

"You don't have to," Clark said as he reached down to squeeze her knee. "I know for you."

She finally allowed the smile tugging her lips to spread out. "If someone had told me about you, I'd have called them a liar."

"He is a good boy, isn't he?" Martha asked as she stood and patted her son's shoulder. "As much as we love talking with both of you, five o'clock comes early."

"I'm so sorry," Lois said quickly and jumped to her feet.

"Don't be, honey." Martha reached over and grasped Lois' arm as she led her toward the kitchen. "We are thrilled to finally have you here."

"I'm not sure what you're expecting from me..." Lois began.

"We expect you to love your children," the other woman said. They stopped next to the table and Martha faced her. "And since you turned them over to strangers to raise because you felt they were better off than with Lex Luthor, then I'm positive you already cherish them."

Lois stared at Martha for a moment before she leaned forward and hugged her. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Oh, honey," was the soft reply. When they drew apart, Martha smiled and cupped Lois' cheek. "Make my boy take care of you."

Her eyes glanced over to where Clark was acting like he wasn't listening. "I think I can handle that."

"I have no doubt," Martha replied with a knowing grin. She went over to the counter to pack up the goody bag she was sending with them.

"You're welcome here any time," Jonathan told Lois as he gave her a warm hug.

"Thank you." She turned toward Clark, who held out her jacket for her to slip it on. She gave him an appreciative glance and he smiled at her.

When he'd put his jacket on and given his parents hugs, he steered her out the back door. "Do you mind holding this?"

"Sure," she replied and took the bag. "What choice do I have?"

"You could always fly us home," he joked as he bent to lift her into his arms.

"Yeah, I think I'll do that," she said as she wrapped her free arm around his neck.

He chuckled and lifted them into the air. "We can go up a little slower this time since no one can see us." And he could watch the wonder on her face. She liked flying.

And he liked flying with her... like this. He'd never really done that before. Never had someone to share himself like that. Lana had always known about him, accepted him. She just didn't like flying, at all. The poor girl could get air sickness in an elevator. She'd told him they had to give her a sedative so she was able to fly to the space station.

"This is the only way to travel," Lois said after a moment.

"I agree. Of all my powers, this one is the best."

"Absolutely," she said as she looked out across the passing scenery. "Did you tell your parents that I know about you?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you must have because they didn't mention it tonight." She looked around at him. "Do the twins know?"

"They know I can do some amazing things. I've never tried to hide it from them. It's who I am, so why hide it from them? I know I hide it from the world, but family's family. I don't want to hide from family."

"I'm glad I know, too. I'd hate for you to hide this from me."

"Then I guess I'm glad we didn't meet any sooner."

Lois leaned her head against his. "I don't know. Under different circumstances..."

"It's over now," he said softly.

"I know." She sighed, for all she'd lost, for what could have been, for what lay ahead.

Clark pulled her just a bit closer, a pang of regret for what she'd lost knotting in his stomach. If he could give her life back...

But that was yesterday. They couldn't change a thing. All they could do was forge ahead. He'd meant what he'd told her; he wanted her around. All the time. It was amazing how much she'd gotten under his skin in such a short time.

By the time they reached Metropolis, Lois was sound asleep. He landed in the alley and carried his load inside. He laid her down on the bed and had to pry the bag his mother sent from her hand. He figured it was reflex for her to hold it so tightly. He'd noticed she often clenched her hands, holding things with a little too much force. After setting the bag on the nightstand, he reached down to pull her shoes off.

He smiled as he remembered her trying to decide on which pair she wanted the most. He'd solved her problem by purchasing both pairs she'd picked out.

As carefully as possible, he slipped her jacket off. He grabbed the extra quilt from the window seat and spread it over her, deciding that she'd have to sleep in her clothes. He wasn't about to make her uncomfortable in any way. And taking her clothes off would not only do that, it would make him extremely uncomfortable.

Not being able to stop himself, Clark smoothed his hand over

the side of Lois' face. In her repose, one wouldn't know the demons that plagued her. He hoped that with time, a lot of patience, and few hundred hugs from two of the most gorgeous toddlers in the world, those demons wouldn't accost her as horribly as they did now.

He straightened up and grabbed the bag from the nightstand to take it to the kitchen. After putting the food away, he went to change. He settled on the couch and closed his eyes to listen to the steady thump of Lois' heart. He, too, was soon fast asleep.

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Violent thrashing sent the blanket on top of Lois flying off the bed. She moaned, she grunted.

"NO!" she yelled and sat straight up. Her eyes searched frantically for the man who had just been on top of her. When Clark reached down to grasp her arm, she swung wildly. "Get away from me!"

Her action caught him off guard and the smack across his face was hard enough to knock him to the floor. He landed on his backside with a thud. His grunt of surprise brought Lois to her feet. She squared her feet and was ready to do battle.

"No more!" she went on. "You won't do it again!"

"Lois," he tried softly. "It's me, Clark."

She stood over him breathing heavily, as formidable an opponent as he'd ever seen. She stared at him for a moment, then suddenly her face cleared. Her eyes focused in the dim light and she let out a defeated breath before dropping back down on the mattress.

Clark moved slowly toward her. "Lois?"

Her hands were shaking and she was still breathing like she'd been running. She ran a hand through her hair, then bent over to rest her arms on her knees.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he stood up. He didn't get too close, allowing her the time she needed to recover. She nodded, but didn't speak. "Want some water?" She shook her head in the negative, gulping in deep breaths now. All of a sudden she jumped up and ran to the bathroom. Clark could only stand there as he listened to her. She was sick. Deciding that a possible rebuke was better than doing nothing, he went into the bathroom and wet a cloth in cold water. Satisfied that she was finished throwing up, he bent over and placed the cloth on her face.

Lois sighed in relief and sank backward, confident Clark would be there. He didn't disappoint her, kneeling so that he could hold her against his chest and continue to wipe her face with the cloth.

"Better?" he asked after her shaking seemed to ease a bit.

"No," she mumbled into the cloth, turning her face further into Clark's hand.

"Do you need to throw up again?"

"No," she breathed.

Clark moved the cloth over her face and held her while she recovered. After a while, he shifted her so he could pick her up.

"I need to brush my teeth," she managed when she realized he was going to carry her out of the bathroom.

He set her on her feet in front of the sink, then motioned with his hand toward the door. "I'll go get you something to drink." She nodded her head as she struggled to get her brush ready. He wanted to help, but decided she might want to be alone. He left her there and went to the kitchen to pour her a glass of Sprite.

Lois brushed her teeth, washed her face, and flushed the toilet before going into the other room. Clark was stepping back into the bedroom when she came out. "Do you have some aspirin?"

"Ah, yeah." He hurried back into the kitchen and was back by the time she sat down on the side of the bed. "Here." She took the pills and the soda, gulping them down quickly.

"Thanks," she told him.

"You're welcome." He had knelt down so that he could see her face and he watched her carefully as she turned up her glass

again.

“Sorry about knocking you down.”

“Not a problem. I should have known better than to grab you while you were dreaming.”

She nodded her head, then set the glass down on the nightstand. “Why does Superman keep aspirin in his house?”

He smiled. Leave it to Lois to ask him that. “I keep them in case Mom or Dad needs them when they come. And believe it or not, from time to time I feel like I need them.”

“I guess everybody does get tired sometimes, even a super man.”

“Sometimes.” He watched as she picked at her nails, not even attempting to look at him. “I have really good hearing.”

She didn’t say anything, just stared at the floor as one nail flicked at another.

He waited, but still she sat. Finally he sighed softly and stood up. “If you need anything...” Just a nod. He tore his eyes away from her and went back into the living room. He couldn’t force her to talk to him. She would when she was ready.

Clark stretched back out on the couch and sighed again when Lois clicked the light off. A moment later, the bed squeaked, telling him she’d resettled to go back to sleep. He turned over and looked up at the ceiling, desperately wishing again that he could help her in some way. It actually hurt him physically to see her in so much pain and distress. He was positive she didn’t even know how to help herself. She was floundering, struggling to cope, to make sense of everything.

This time he was the one to jump in surprise when Lois sat down across the top of his legs. He’d been so lost in his thoughts he hadn’t heard her come in. He watched her while she sat there, wrangling with her demons even though she was wide awake.

“I can remember things... Things that happened while I was drugged.” She tucked her hair behind her ear, but didn’t look at him. “The first time he gave me drugs was the night Paul inseminated me. The first time he raped me was on our ‘wedding night.’” She made quotation marks with her fingers when she said wedding. “It was... strange. I remember thinking ‘this doesn’t feel right’. So I told him no.” She glanced toward the door, wiping her cheek as she did. “Only he made it clear that in his world, no was not a word I could use with him.” She sighed and laid back, staring up at the ceiling. “He told me later, after the twins were born, that the only reason he ever had sex with me was because he was bored.” Her head rolled so that she could look at him. “He left me alone after the kids were born. Thank God. If I’d had to worry about becoming pregnant...” She let out a snort of laughter. “I guess he controlled women because of his inadequacies as a man.”

Clark folded his pillow so that his head was higher, allowing him to see her better. It was dark in the apartment, the only light coming in through the window in the bedroom. But he was pretty sure that was the way she wanted it.

She moved her head to look at the ceiling again. “Even nearly being raped in prison didn’t scare me as much as actually being raped by Lex.” Lois lifted her head and looked at Clark with a smile. “You know what’s funny? He was worse than my first boyfriend. At least he’d been a teenager and had an excuse not knowing what he was doing.”

Clark just kept looking at her, offering support the way he felt she needed at the moment- by being there, listening.

Lois shifted so she could prop her arm on the back of the couch, leaning her head on her hand. “I don’t even know now what the attraction was. I guess I was flattered that he was interested in me. Third richest man in the world courting a struggling reporter- who wouldn’t be impressed?” Her eyes had adjusted to the dim light and she could see his eyes. “I never thought I’d be able to be alone in the same room with another man, much less sit on him.” She grinned at him.

His lips quirked, but he still didn’t speak. And he didn’t move. He didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable in any way.

Her smile faded and she dropped her eyes to stare as she picked at the couch cushion. “I don’t have that dream often, but it has the same affect every time.” Again she looked at him and smiled. “Although the reaction was a bit different when I woke up this time.” When he barely acknowledged what she’d said, her smile faded. “Why the hell don’t you say something?” she asked him, a single tear spilling from her eye. “I’m pouring my heart out here and I really need to know if I make you sick.”

“What?” he asked with furrowed brows.

“Do I?”

“Why would you think that?” She didn’t answer, just looked away from him.

Clark sat up, which brought his face within inches of hers. “What he did to you wasn’t your fault.”

“Thirteen times,” she whispered, still looking down. “And every time felt like he took a piece of my soul with him.” Clark hesitantly reached out to rub her upper arm, unable to respond to that. “How do I get that back?”

“Lois,” he said softly and waited for her to look at him. “I don’t think you’ll ever get it back, but you can put all of that into a place where you’ll be able to live again.”

She held his gaze for a long moment before she lifted her hand and placed it on his chest. She didn’t say another word, just gave him a look that begged for him to help her. He pulled gently on the arm he was still holding and she fell over on him. As his arms wrapped around her, the first tears left her eyes.

Clark tucked her head under his chin and held her close while she cried. This time was worse than the first one. His heart broke for her. He’d gotten to know Lois Lane through Perry and Jimmy, and he knew what a strong woman she’d once been. He’d seen glimpses of that strength in the last few days. As far as he knew, he was the only one who’d seen her break. It would be a struggle. It would take time, more tears, and incredible patience, but he believed that if she’d allow herself, she could heal. She could one day be that strong, independent woman she’d once been.

And the world better look out. Somehow he felt she’d be even more formidable on the other side than she had ever been. Luthor probably had no idea just what he was creating.

“I feel like... hitting something,” she sobbed a while later.

“I know.” He held her a bit tighter.

When she finally calmed enough to talk, she asked, “Can I hit you?”

He laughed softly. “You’ve done that already.”

“Yeah. But I was asleep.” The laughter rolled through his chest, against her cheek. And it was contagious. The crying stopped and the humor finally bubbled over. “I’m serious,” she mumbled after she calmed. “I’d at least like to remember it so it’ll make me feel better.”

Clark smoothed the side of her head, allowing her all the time she needed. She burrowed into his chest, apparently comfortable where she was. “I could... take you to the South Street gym.”

“To box?”

“Box, kick box, wrestle. It might help.” He was only saying it to help lighten her mood, but she wasn’t laughing. Or even smiling. He could tell by the way she’d tensed up that she was actually considering it.

“I used to take self-defense classes. I did it back then so I’d be prepared... just in case.” She pushed away from his chest and wiped her face. “Fat lot of good that did me.”

“Lois, you were drugged.”

“How will I ever be able to look at myself in the mirror again and not ask if there was more I could have done?” She shifted and dropped her feet to the floor. She’d pulled them up on the couch earlier. “I could have said no.”

“You did say no,” Clark reminded her.

"To the damn dates," she spat as she stood up.

"How could you have known what kind of monster he was?"

"If I'd opened my damn eyes, I would have seen it!" she yelled at him. "I was a better judge of character than that. I knew Claude Benoit wanted to seduce me for my story. I knew Paul Herrin was sleeping with my roommate. And I knew Lex was going to hurt my baby girl. How could I \*not\* know he was using me? Why didn't I know what he was?!" She threw up her hands and stomped into the other room. The light clicked on and Clark could hear her jerking open a drawer. He'd barely dropped his feet to the floor when she came back through. "I'm going running."

"It's three in the morning," he pointed out.

"So?" she asked as she dropped on the chair and stuffed a foot into one of her shoes. She'd changed into a pair of sweats already.

"Lois," he tried again.

"What?" She finished her task and stood up. The hair on her head whipped around her face and Clark was standing on the top of the landing, dressed in sweats and sneakers. "Where are you going?"

"With you," he said matter-of-factly.

"I don't need a babysitter." She stomped up the stairs and reached for the door.

He actually flinched at the tone of her voice. The pure rage that spilled through surprised him. So did her defiant and aggressive posture. "Fine!" It was clear how she felt, so he'd go back to bed. He didn't need this crap anyway. Lois never faltered as he bounded back down the stairs and flopped on the couch. The door slammed loudly and he let out an exasperated sigh. He'd handled that all wrong. Sure, he didn't think it was a very good idea for her to go out running at three in the morning, but he didn't have a place to object. Lois was just... Lois. She might be the mother of his kids, but that didn't give him the right to tell her not to do something. They might be moving toward becoming good friends, but he still didn't have claims on her.

And none of that meant a damn thing right now. He was mad. More precisely, he was hurt. He was only trying to show her that he was concerned for her. Even telling himself that this was just another coping mechanism didn't matter. She wasn't angry at him; she was angry with herself. Still, it didn't make a difference. Clark was stubborn and when his feelings were hurt, he didn't handle it very well.

He glanced at the door, briefly considering going to look for her. That would make her even madder. He could follow her from the air, but if she found that out...

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He'd just wait here. She wouldn't be gone long.

Ten minutes later he was almost grateful that his hearing picked up a news break on the radio in the apartment next door. There was a pileup on the freeway. One last look at the door and he zipped out of the apartment. Lois would be here when he got back. Maybe he'd try talking to her.

Maybe by then he'd be calmed down, too.

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Lois wasn't back when Clark finished with the wreck on the freeway, and it was nearly dawn. By now he was a bit apprehensive. He zipped back out, flying around the neighborhood looking for her. He went to the Planet, to Perry's, even Jimmy's. Everywhere he took a super peek, she wasn't there. Reluctantly he flew back to the apartment so he could shower. It was almost time for him to go to work. He decided that Lois was a big girl and could take care of herself. She'd done so up until now. Surely she could keep on.

He finished his shower, managed to eat a bite, then left for work. Lois knew where the apartment was; she'd come back when she was ready.

And what if she was never ready? his wayward mind asked him. What if everything was just too much for her to handle?

He made it to work, sat down, and called up his email before Perry came out of his office.

"Where's Lois?" the editor asked him.

"I don't know," he answered without looking at him.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

Clark looked up at him. "She went running early this morning and hasn't come back."

"Hasn't come back?" Perry asked as she propped his hands on his hips.

"No."

"Well, what in Sam Hill happened?"

"Look, Perry," Clark started, his frustration returning full force. "She had a nightmare last night and didn't handle the aftermath very well."

The fire seemed to drain from the old man. He relaxed and sat down on the edge of Clark's desk. "How was she doing before then?"

"I thought she was doing okay," Clark admitted as he leaned back in his chair. "We went to see the kids last night and she was happy. Even planning to go out tomorrow and spend the weekend with them." Clark pinched the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "We talked a while when she first woke up," he started when he looked back at Perry. "Then she got angry and stormed out."

"What was she angry about?"

"She's incredibly angry with herself over everything that's happened. She feels she should have known what kind of person Luthor was, should have known what he was going to do."

"She's letting the guilt eat her up," Perry deduced.

"Yeah. I tried to talk to her..." Liar, he told himself silently. If you'd tried very hard, she might not have left.

Perry stood up and reached over to squeeze Clark's shoulder. "Lois is tougher than you think. She'll be okay."

Clark gave him a nod, a wry smile on his face. Perry's expression said he didn't totally agree either, but what could they do? He went back to his office and Clark went back to work. Or at least he tried to. He was worried about Lois and until he knew what was going on with her, he doubted he'd get a whole lot done.

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At ten, Clark walked into the building that housed Mayson Drake's law practice. He was immediately admitted into her office and was surprised to see Lois sitting in front of Mayson's desk. She'd obviously showered because she was wearing different clothes. She and Mayson were laughing as if nothing was wrong.

"Hey," he told her as he sat down, not taking his questioning eyes off her. She, however, barely looked at him.

Mayson didn't miss the exchange between them, but she didn't say anything. "The lawyers in Sydney won't have the final proposal ready for you until Monday," she informed them, thinking it best to skip pretenses and get down to business. She and Lois had been talking about the relentless pursuit of the media when Clark came in.

Clark tore his eyes away from Lois so he could focus on Mayson. "That's fine."

"I also wanted to address the legal issues involved with the twins..."

"What legal issues?" Clark asked.

"Well, I assumed both of you would want to formally legalize Perry's birth."

"How \*did\* you get away with keeping her all of this time?"

Lois asked Clark, her eyes boring into his.

"Perry knew guys," Clark began.

"Who knew guys," Lois finished, very familiar with that

phrase. She turned her head back to look at Mayson. “How do we do that?”

“Dan has contacted the midwife who delivered the twins. We have a formal statement of her involvement with Luthor, including the birth of both children. That, along with the evidence Paul Lang supplied, is enough to get a legal birth certificate. And to amend Collin’s. But...”

“There’s always a but,” Lois said dryly.

“This one isn’t so bad,” Mayson told her as she swiveled her chair back and forth slightly. “I think we should wait until I get the judge to decide on the legality of your marriage before we make a move with the children.”

Lois nodded, completely agreeing with her. She didn’t want anything to connect back to that monster.

Mayson looked from Lois to Clark, who kept glancing toward the other woman. He was obviously upset about something, but she wasn’t about to ask in front of Lois. “If we’re going to wait until the other decisions are made to move on Perry’s birth, maybe we should wait to discuss the rest of the situation as well.”

“What situation?” Lois asked, interrupting Clark from doing it.

“Clark’s the biological father,” Mayson pointed out. “I would assume he’d want to be their legal father as well.”

This time Clark turned his head to look at Lois. He really hadn’t thought about the legalities involved with being the twins’ father.

“Maybe we should wait,” Lois supplied.

“I’ll do this any way you want to do it,” Mayson assured them.

When Lois didn’t say anything else, Clark spoke. “Just let us know when everything comes through.”

“I’ll do that,” Mayson told him.

“Is that all?” Lois wanted to know.

“For now.”

Lois nodded at Mayson and stood up. “Thank you, for all you’re doing.”

“Not a problem,” Mayson said again. She watched the other woman hesitate before she turned and left the room. Clark, who was still sitting, sighed heavily and stood up. “What’s going on, Clark?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he replied. “She’s having a hard time dealing with everything that’s happened.”

“That’s understandable.”

“I know.” He glanced toward the door, then pushed his hand through his hair. “I’ll call you,” he told Mayson.

“I’ll be here,” she replied and watched him leave. She’d really hoped the exchanges she’d seen between those two weren’t a figment of her imagination. She loved Clark and wanted to see him happy. Although now she wasn’t sure Lois was who could help make that possible.

By the time Clark made it out of the building, Lois was gone. Whatever was going on with her must be worse than he’d first thought. Or she was fighting the healing process. He felt it was probably the latter. But what could he do? She was going to do what she wanted to do and there was nothing he could say that was going to change that.

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Lois and Clark were supposed to join Jack and Jimmy that night to listen to Jack’s band play. When Lois didn’t return to the Planet, Clark bowed out. Jack was smart enough to know there was something going on and didn’t attempt to protest. Lois was still MIA when Clark went home, though he could see where she’d been there earlier in the day. He ordered pizza to eat while he watched the baseball game. It wasn’t what he really wanted to do, but what choice did he have?

He’d finally gotten over his wounded ego trip and was

worried about Lois. He also knew he’d probably compound the problem if he went looking for her. Halfway through his pizza, his cell phone rang.

“Hey, CK,” came Jack’s voice when he answered.

“Something’s wrong with Lois.”

“What?” he asked, leaning forward on the couch.

“She drank a lot and she’s falling over some guy she said she went to college with. They’re talking about renting a room next door at the Salem Arms.”

His first instinct was to jump up and fly to the club, but like it or not, Lois was a grown woman. “Ah, Jack, Lois is a big girl...”

“Clark, I know something happened between you two, but don’t let her do this. Jimmy’s talked till he’s blue in the face...”

“Jack...”

“Come on!” Jack’s voice gained a little momentum. “Just get off your ass and come talk to her.”

Before he could say anything else, Jack hung up. Clark closed his cell and stared across the room. Should he go? Should he take the risk that she’d hold his interruption against him? Her huge, soulful eyes flashed in his mind and he stood up. Luthor had devastated Lois and it had ruined her self-esteem. A one-night stand with a virtual stranger wouldn’t help matters any. It was worth the risk, he decided as he slipped his button up shirt over his muscle shirt. It wasn’t cool enough for a jacket, so he pocketed his keys and headed out. She could stay angry at him for a month, but he had to try to keep her from making a huge mistake.

He entered the club a few minutes later and immediately spotted Lois on the dance floor with a blonde-haired man young enough to be illegal. Before he could cross the room the song ended and she headed toward the bar. She wrapped her arms around Jimmy from behind, causing him to wince in discomfort. He’d obviously been dealing with an inebriated Lois all night and he looked about ready to burst. A deep breath for courage and he started toward them. Lois moved from Jimmy over to another man he didn’t know. She stood between his legs, wrapped her arms around his neck while he grasped her buttocks, they grinned at one another, then kissed. He had to stop and look away, fury surging through him like he’d never known before. Although he didn’t have the right to be jealous, he was. Incredibly.

Clark reached out to pat Jimmy’s shoulder when he made it close to the bar. The poor guy looked up, relief flooding from him in waves.

“CK!” He thumbed toward the couple trying to devour one another. “Please take her home.”

The pleading look on Jimmy’s face convinced him that protecting what was left of Lois’ virtue was worth any rebuke she threw his way.

“Lois?” he said and reached out to grasp her arm firmly.

She pulled away from the man she was kissing. When her eyes focused, she grinned widely. “Clark!” One swift turn and she had her arms wrapped around his neck. “Dance with me.”

“Not tonight, Lois,” Clark said sternly and pried her arms out from around him.

Her smile turned to a scowl. “Aren’t we the party pooper?”

“Come on,” he told her, reaching over to the bar to grab her bag.

“I’m not ready to go,” she told him, tugging against his hold.

“Yes, you are.”

“Hey, pal,” the man said as he stood up. “Take your hands off the lady. She’s leaving with me.”

Clark’s eyes swept across the other man before settling on his face. “Not tonight.” Again he pulled on Lois’ arm.

She jerked away from him. “Later, Clark. Greg and I have plans.” Her eyes flashed as she gazed at the other man.

“I know. He’s going home to his wife and you’re coming with me.”

“Wife?” Lois looked at him. “Greg,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Are you married?”

The man pushed his left hand into his pocket. “No,” he said loudly. “Let’s just go get that room. In a little while you won’t care if I’m married.” His brows danced seductively at her.

Clark rolled his eyes and reached out to grab her arm again.

“Let me go,” Lois told him harshly. When his expression challenged hers, she stepped closer. “Don’t make me say things you don’t want people to hear.”

Whatever it was in her eyes, it was enough to convince Clark that he was wasting his time. He released her arm, thrust her bag into her hands, and turned to leave.

“CK!” Jimmy stepped over to block him from leaving.

“Come on, man, take her with you.”

“She doesn’t want to go with me,” Clark told his friend. “Let her do this. Maybe it’ll jar some sense into her.”

“You can’t mean that?” Jimmy asked with a horrified expression.

“No,” Clark said in a low, defeated tone. “But I can’t have her shouting things I’d rather the world not know about me.”

“Oh, this is bull,” Jack announced. He’d walked up to catch the end of the exchange between them. He stepped over and grasped Lois by the arm. Despite her squealing and loud protests, he threw her over his shoulder. “Grab her bag,” he told Jimmy and headed toward the door.

“Hey, put her down,” shouted ‘Greg’.

“Back off!” Clark told him sternly and followed the other men out.

Lois was still shouting and had started pounding Jack’s back by the time they reached the end of the block. He bent back over and stood her on her feet. “Shut up!” he told her. Her mouth clamped closed and she stared at him. “You’ll thank me for this tomorrow,” he said and released her arm to Clark.

“Don’t you dare,” she told him.

“Dare what? Stop you from making a huge mistake?” When she glared at him, he glanced back at the bar. “Fine. I’ll rent the room myself. Hell, I’ll take a few pictures so you’ll have a reminder tomorrow.” For the second time in twenty-four hours, Lois hit Clark. Only this time she’d done it on purpose.

“Go to hell,” she breathed before she snatched her bag from Jimmy. She jerked her arm from Clark’s grasp and stormed across the street.

“Damn!” Jack commented. “That’s pure fire and ice right there.”

“She’s messed up, Jack,” Jimmy pointed out.

“I know,” the younger man said. “How could she not be after all she’s been through?” He shook his head, then turned to go back to the club.

“Need me to help, CK?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“Nah.” Clark clapped the other man’s shoulder before heading out after Lois. She walked with determined purpose, albeit in the opposite direction of the apartment. He wasn’t sure where she was going until she came to an intersection he recognized. Lois hurried across the street and into Lex Towers.

The elevator to the penthouse was sealed, so she made her way toward the stairwell. It took a few minutes but she finally managed to pick the lock on the door leading to the luxury apartment she once lived in. Lucky for her there was a fair amount of light coming in through the massive windows that made up the outside walls. Clark stayed in the shadows, watching her more with his super vision than anything else. Once inside the penthouse, she walked slowly, gazing around her. She stood in the doorway of the room with the cribs. When she’d had her fill, she headed toward another room. It must have been Luthor’s suite because he could tell that she’d started to shake as she looked around. After a moment, she eased further into the room. He could hear that she was crying, her sniffing a sure sign. As he

watched, she pulled a fencing sword off the hanger on the wall and began lashing at the furniture. She swung with violent force, bringing the metal in contact with the mattress over and over. She moved from the bed to the nightstand, then a chair at the foot. With each swing sobs wracked her body.

Clark had never felt so awful in his life. What must she feel to be so distraught? What could he possibly say or do to help her?

When she’d completely worn herself out, she sank to the floor. Her sobbing had subsided. She must have been all out of the energy to even do that. Slowly she stood and started toward the door. She picked up her bag where she’d dropped it when she went in, then continued through the dark apartment. She was about to go back out the way she’d come in, but stopped and hurried back into the first room. A cabinet door in the corner banged against the wall loudly and she dug around for several moments. When she emerged again, she was holding a small shoe box. She stuffed it into her bag before she got up to leave.

Her aimless ramble took her through the park. With no particular purpose or direction, she walked in circles before finally heading toward Clinton. Clark flew ahead of her, spun into his sleep shorts, and settled on the couch to make it appear he’d been there a while when she came in. She didn’t even look at him, just hurried into the bathroom.

His head turned toward the bedroom and he sighed in frustration. Not much he could do until she decided she was ready to talk. When he heard her open the fridge and pop a top on a beer, he decided that maybe he should say something.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“Have you ever been to hell?” she asked after slugging back half her brew. “Why don’t you go? You might like it.” She’d gone back into the bedroom and by the sounds she was making, she was packing.

He stood up and walked to the doorway. Sure enough, Lois was stuffing clothes into the backpack she’d had when he first found her in his apartment. She stopped her packing and walked over to pick up her bag. She dug inside for a second, then tossed some money on the bed.

“I’ll be out of here as soon as I’m done packing.” She indicated the money with her head. “For the things you bought.”

He glanced at the money, but didn’t speak. What was going on with her?

She finished her packing, then grabbed the beer from the dresser where she’d set it. After it was empty, she headed back toward the kitchen to toss the bottle. She went into the living room to look around, making sure she had all of her stuff. “I’ll see Mayson tomorrow and tell her what I want her to do about the twins.”

“And what do you want to do?”

“Just pick up the damn papers when she gets them ready.”

He’d stepped back into the other room and was standing between her and the door. “Get out of the way. You’ve already ruined my night once.”

“Really?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don’t you think \*Greg\* would have done a bit more than that?”

“By giving me what I want?”

“You want meaningless sex with a stranger?”

“I want you to get out of my way,” she said, punctuating each word.

“No,” he replied. “I don’t exactly know what’s going on with you, but...”

“You’re in my damn way is what’s going on!” she shouted at him.

“Fine!” He stepped aside. “Go! Go do whatever it is you feel like you need to do.” He held up his hand toward the door.

Lois stomped past him, stopping at the bottom of the stairs to grasp the banister. She stared down at the floor for so long Clark thought maybe she’d gone to sleep. “I’ve been there,” she said

softly, so softly he almost had to use his super hearing. “To hell.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“You might know, but you can’t possibly understand what I’m going through.”

“No, I can’t,” he told her as he took a step toward her.

“I don’t understand myself.” She looked up toward the ceiling, taking a deep breath in an effort to calm herself. “I feel like dying,” she finally admitted.

Clark did, too, he decided as he reached out with a hesitant hand. His grasp was gentle as he squeezed her shoulder. He needed her know that he was here for her, although he didn’t want to send her off on another tangent.

“I should have never come back.” She shrugged away from him and climbed the stairs. “Take care of them,” she said just before she opened the door and left.

Clark was standing in the middle of the small alley leading out to the main sidewalk when she looked up. “Sleep on it, Lois. Come back in and go to bed. If you still want to leave tomorrow, I’ll get you a plane ticket, bus ticket, or a car. Just don’t leave while you’re like this. What’s one more day?”

“Time enough for me to feel worse than I do today. This won’t go away, Clark.”

“You’re right. It won’t. You can run to the ends of the earth and it’ll still be there. You can walk away from your own kids and it will still be there. You can pick up a different guy every night of the week and it won’t take away the pain.”

“What will? Playing mother of the year? Or chasing stories to my next Kerth? Oh wait. I know. You can turn on that Kansas charm and seduce me into your bed. Maybe \*Superman\* can make me feel like a woman again.”

“Can you say that a little louder? I don’t think they heard you in Gotham City,” he said fiercely.

Lois continued their stare down for a moment before she whirled around and went back inside. Clark threw his hands up in frustration and followed her in. She’d obviously taken him to heart because she’d dropped her bags on the floor and was toeing off her shoes. She reached over and swiped up the money she’d carelessly tossed on the bed earlier, threw it onto the nightstand then jerked the covers back. She didn’t bother to turn the lights off before she crawled onto the bed, clothes and all.

“Don’t you want to take your clothes off?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she asked sarcastically.

Clark huffed his agitation and stepped into the room to turn the light off. Damn, if she wasn’t a stubborn woman! He flipped off the rest of the lights and dropped onto the couch. And he was giving up his bed for this treatment?

“Superman is a whole lot easier to deal with than this,” he mumbled to himself as he flopped backwards. Of course, being super was what got him involved with this woman to begin with. Well, not technically. Perry did that. But his super side had forever tied him to that woman. How would he handle her instability?

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Lois hadn’t slept well at all. Clark heard her get up four times before he decided he wasn’t going to sleep any either. It was nearly dawn so he rose and went to gather his clothes so he could shower. He was as quiet as he could be, even though she wasn’t sleeping. He could tell by her breathing. She had the covers pulled up to her neck tightly and she didn’t move. He glanced her way and her blink told him she was staring across the room. He finished gathering his clothes and went to shower. Lois would talk when she was ready.

If she was ever ready.

When he went back into the other room, she was sitting on the window seat with her legs drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. There was a cup of coffee on the window seal and he almost smiled. If she felt well enough to drink coffee, there

might be hope.

He pulled a button down shirt on over his muscle tee and stepped over to the mirror to comb his hair. It was Saturday—the first one he’d had off in a long time. He planned on flying out to see his babies for the day. He grabbed his shoes and went out to the living room to slip them on.

“Can I still go?”

Clark looked up to see her standing in the doorway, looking for the world like a lost child. “Of course you can go,” he said, keeping his tone light. “Do you need to take a shower?”

She nodded, wiping the tears that were spilling from her eyes, then turned to go back in the other room.

He sighed as she gathered up her clothes and went to take a shower. Over the steady spray of the shower, he could hear her sobbing. Then she started to talk angrily.

“You won’t win! You can’t win. I won’t let you.” Her breathing was labored and hard between her crying. “Dammit, I won’t let you,” she said again. The chanting continued in the same vain until the shower stopped. She was sniffing now, obviously trying to get control of her emotions before she came out. He stopped listening and went to grab some coffee for himself.

When she came into the kitchen, he was writing out a check for the light bill. “I need to drop this in the mailbox out front when we leave.” She didn’t say anything, just went over to dump the rest of her coffee in the sink and rinse out her cup. He sealed the envelope for the bill, then closed his check book. He returned it to the drawer he kept it in, turning the lock after he did.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.” She disappeared into the bedroom and when she came out, she was carrying the small backpack. “Is it okay to take this? I have some things for Collin and Perry.”

“Yeah. Just slip it on.” She did and he led them out the door. “I’ll be right back.” He ran to the front and put the bill in the drop box. She was in the back of the alley, where they’d taken off from last time, when he came back. “We’ll have to get up and go in a hurry today.” Nothing, but she did lift her arm. He reached down to pick her up and was off. It didn’t even cause her to blink today. He didn’t slow down until they were high enough not to be seen. And then it was only enough so Lois could breathe easily. He figured the sooner they got to Kansas the better. She wasn’t in a talking mood.

They made the journey in silence, but the tension was thick enough to cut with a knife. He landed beside the barn and set her down. He held up his hand for her to go ahead of him. Although she looked totally distraught, she started walking slowly toward the house. They were just about there when the back door banged open.

“Daddy!” Perry ran toward Clark as quickly as she could, her feet leaving the ground when she was within a foot of Clark. He reached down and caught her, swinging her around.

“Hi, sunshine!” They exchanged their usual nose rub and Clark gave her an appropriate dose of kisses. “How’s my big girl?”

“I’m good!” She looked over and grinned at Lois. “Hi, Lois!”

“Hi, Perry,” Lois said with a watery smile.

“Did you come to play?”

“I did.” She pulled the pack from her back and opened it. “And I brought these.” She held up a bag of donuts. “For our tea party.”

“I like donuts!”

“I thought you might.”

Perry struggled against her daddy’s grasp and he set her on her feet. “Come on,” Perry told Lois.

Clark could see Lois was still struggling, but at least she was willing to play with Perry. They went inside and he followed a

few moments later. “Hi, Mom,” he said and kissed his mom’s cheek.

“What’s wrong with Lois?” Martha whispered when Lois and Perry had entered the playroom.

He grasped his mother’s arm and pulled her out to the porch. “She’s struggling pretty badly.”

Martha looked back at the house. “That poor girl.”

“Don’t expect her to act like she did the other night. She’s in a really bad place right now.”

“We’ll just have to carve her a wide berth.”

“Oh yeah,” Clark agreed as he opened the door to go back in. “Where’s my boy?”

“On the tractor with his grandfather. I can call them.”

“I’ll go out and find them.” He grabbed a biscuit from the basket and grinned when his mother swatted his rear. As he crossed the backyard, he decided that maybe what Lois needed today was to be here with Collin and Perry. They’d sure made him feel better on more than one occasion when he was down. If that didn’t work, he didn’t know what would.

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By lunchtime, Lois was smiling and laughing as she played with the twins. They’d had tea, drove toy cars through the house, had a race on the swings, rode the tractor with Jonathan, and explored the farm. Even though she looked happy, Clark could tell that the smiles didn’t quite reach her eyes. He saw the deep shadows marring her expressions, but she plowed along as bravely as she could. She shared donuts with the twins and gave each a toy- Perry a rag doll, and Collin a football. She also had new outfits for them both.

She was certainly resourceful, he thought as she gave the kids their gifts. Mayson probably gave her an advance on her money.

Lois shared a picnic lunch with the twins on a blanket near the pond. They blew bubbles and flew a kite. Clark was happy to allow them this time to spend alone. He helped his dad make some necessary repairs. Wayne Irig’s son was going to move into the bunk house near the south side of the property and care for the cattle when his parents moved to the city. They’d discussed leasing the farm, but would make a final decision later.

By dinnertime, Lois looked a lot better than she had earlier in the day. She talked mostly with Collin and Perry, although she answered the few questions his folks asked her. As much as Clark loved visiting his twins, he was glad when it was time for bed. Lois read the bedtime story on the sofa after the kids were bathed and in their pajamas. Each one gave her a hug, then went up to bed. Lois had told Martha and Jonathan that she would stay next time and after Clark said good-bye to his parents, they left.

When they landed outside the apartment, Lois hurried inside. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and went in behind her. She was sick again, but this time he left her on her own. He kicked off his shoes and flopped down on the couch, deciding to give Superman the night off. He’d been out a few times today and things seemed quiet.

Lois showered again before she left the bathroom. She was wearing a pair of Clark’s shorts and one of his shirts when she went into the kitchen. Although Clark’s eyes glanced at her from time to time, he didn’t lift his head from where it rested on the back of the couch. He was trying to appear interested in the game.

After pouring herself a glass of milk, she went back to the bedroom. Twenty minutes later, she clicked the light out. He sighed heavily and forced himself to remain seated. This was beyond ridiculous now. She needed to talk, even if she didn’t want to.

“Would you accept an apology?” Lois said from the other room, trusting him to hear her. “Don’t answer that. Just...” She sighed. “I’m sorry.” She sniffed. “I’m just tired of hurting... all the time.”

“It’ll get better,” he said loud enough for her to hear him without shouting.

“I know. I’ve just never been very patient.”

He smiled at that. No kidding! He hadn’t known Lois but a few days and already knew that much about her.

“I want to wake up and breathe without dragging air into my lungs to do it. I want to work like I used to, not wonder if each new thing I uncover is related to that monster. I want to... look at men without wanting to choke the life out of them just for being male.” The covers ruffled and she sniffed again. “I want to love my children without hating how I got them.” She was silent for a long time before she said, “I want to call their father my friend and not want to rip his eyes out at the same time.”

Clark’s head snapped toward the bedroom.

“I don’t mean to, Clark. I don’t want to. I happen to think you’re an amazing person. And you’re the hottest son of a bitch I’ve ever met. But at the same time...” She sniffed again. “I don’t hate you or anything. And I’ve only had that thought once or twice.”

Since she’d mentioned it, Clark could completely understand how she felt. She blamed any and everybody for what happened to her, including him. It was natural to do so, and whether she realized it or not, it was also a huge part of the healing process.

“I’d rather tease you and flirt with you shamelessly,” she admitted after a long silence.

He laughed softly. He’d rather she did that, too. He’d missed her teasing, no matter how much it affected him.

“Thank you... for stopping me last night.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, although he wasn’t sure she heard him. The relief he felt knowing she hadn’t spent the night in a hotel room with... \*Greg\* made him lightheaded. If she’d gone off with that man...

“Thank you... for listening.” She burrowed into the bed and sighed. “I love our twins,” she felt he should know. “And I haven’t felt as alive as I did today in a really long time.”

“I’m glad,” he said. She was quiet again and before long her slow, steady breathing told him she was asleep. She probably needed to sleep. More correctly, she needed to rest. He briefly wondered if she’d see someone, get a prescription to help her sleep.

He shifted so he could lie down. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

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She was watching him; he could feel it. He slowly opened his eyes and she was right there.

“Hey,” she told him softly.

“Hey,” he replied without moving.

Lois just stared at him, not saying a word. He stared back for a moment, then closed his eyes again. She could sit there the rest of the night if she wanted to. He was tired. Superman had been needed a while ago and it was draining as hell keeping up with her. Not that he had.

There was movement, then she sighed. He opened his eyes when she grasped the fingers of the hand he had draped over the side of the couch. Lois was lying on a bed she’d made up on the floor. Suddenly he realized that she fought against him so hard, against herself so hard, because she was scared. She was probably closer to being terrified. For a woman who’d been independent and strong, able to care for herself, it was almost impossible for her to cope with the fact that she’d been stripped of her self-control. What she needed more than anything was to feel safe again. Until she did, she wouldn’t be able to regain her confidence.

Did she feel safe with him? She’d moved her bed next to him and held his hand- it must indicate some kind of trust in him. As he smoothed his thumb over the fingers that held his, he made up his mind that if being close to him made her feel better, she could

hold his hand all the time.

She went back to sleep, and after watching her a while, so did he. When he woke up again, she was sitting on the floor, leaned back against the couch so that if she turned her head, their faces would be inches apart. She was still holding his hand where it hung across her shoulder. The television was playing a cartoon movie and she was actually laughing now and then. He moved a little, squeezing the hand she held. She turned her head and looked at him.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” she asked him.

“Uh uh,” he told her and shifted so that he was lying more fully on his side. He’d been on his stomach when he woke up, the same position he was in when she reached up to hold his hand earlier. His new position brought his face closer to her head. The smell of her shampoo, or his, invaded his nostrils. “You smell... manly.”

That caused her to laugh. “If you’d buy some decent shampoo...”

“What’s wrong with my shampoo?”

“Nothing, for you.” She released his hand and shifted so she could see his face. To prove her point, she reached up to play with his dark hair. “How do you manage to get all of that gel out?”

He let out a grunt of laughter. The hand she’d released came up to smooth across her back. “Heat vision.”

“Really?”

“Mmm,” he said and closed his eyes. She was still playing with his hair and it felt good.

“Hey, Clark?”

“Umm?”

“I noticed that Perry talks better than Collin.”

His eyes opened again so he could look at her. His gaze was reflected right back while she waited on his answer. “We had Perry a year longer,” he told her. “Doc Nate says that he’s right on course.”

“Okay,” she said and laid her head over against his arm. “That feels good.” He was still rubbing her back. His hand stopped and he was about to draw away. “Don’t stop,” she begged. He put his large hand back and moved it around on her body again. “I went to see Lucy.”

“How is she?”

She lifted her head to look him. “In a lot of ways she’s probably better off than I am.”

“Don’t say that,” he said softly.

“Would you miss me?” The teasing glint was back in her eyes and he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Maybe when I didn’t have anybody else to talk to.”

She elbowed him in the chest, causing him to grunt. “You know what, Kent? You can just bite me.”

He pulled her arm up to his mouth and bit her before she knew what happened. She jerked her arm away, her mouth hanging open as she stared at him. “You told me to,” he said innocently.

“What if I told you to jump off a bridge? Scratch that. You wouldn’t even hit bottom.” She turned back around and leaned up against the couch with a sigh.

The hand that had been on her back went around her chest and grasped her by the arm so he could pull her back, closer to him. “Want to jump with me?” he asked next to her ear.

“It depends on where we’re jumping to,” she replied as she lifted her hand to grasp the arm across her chest. “Or what we’re jumping into.”

Her close proximity threatened to send his system into shock. But for the life of him, he couldn’t pull away. His thumb stroked her shoulder and he turned his head into the side of her face, inhaling deeply.

“Clark,” she breathed, his action causing her to close her

eyes. Her hand squeezed his arm tighter.

“Do you realize what you do to me?” he asked her softly. “Just being in the same room.”

She swallowed hard, her body feeling completely alive.

Clark shifted so that he could push her hair off the side of her face with his other hand. “Help me, Lois. Help me find the woman under all the pain.” He rubbed his face against hers. “If you affect me this much now, just think how much you’ll move me then.”

Lois felt the tears sting her eyes. How could she possibly cry anymore? She shifted so she could turn around. Clark recognized her need and wrapped his arms around her, giving her the comfort she sought. When she’d cried herself out, she drew back to look at him.

“I’m really high maintenance.”

“I like a challenge,” he said with a grin, his hand going up to cup her cheek.

She let out a humorous snort before leaning over to rub her nose against his the way their twins did.

Clark was the one to pull her back into another hug, needing the time to calm his raging nerves. She’d sent him into hyper drive and his body was behaving like a teenager.

From a damn touch! On the nose!

When he drew back, she was smiling. “Let’s go do something fun today,” she said as she pulled away and stood up.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “What do you like to do?”

“I could name a few things,” he mumbled as he sat up.

“Still hear you,” she called over her shoulder on the way into the bedroom.

“Still want you to,” he declared as he stood to gather up all of the covers. He zipped through the apartment and put the folded cover in the window seat. Lois stopped what she was doing and grinned at him.

“Not very original,” she said.

“Might not be original, but it \*did\* impress you.”

“And how would you know that?” she asked as she folded her arms across her body.

“Your eyes... they tell me way too much about you.”

“Then maybe I should start wearing shades.”

“Ah, but I can still see your eyes.” He shook his finger like that was a no-no as he stepped around her to get clean clothes out of his dresser.

“Damn! I forgot about that.” Lois snapped her fingers, still smiling widely. She had so much fun teasing Clark.

“Should I cook breakfast or do you want to go out?” Clark was pulling a shirt from the closet.

“Let’s go out. I know this great little place in Hobs Bay.”

“Lola’s Cafe?”

“How did you know?” she asked as she turned his way.

“I like to eat, too.”

She threw a shirt at him, then started toward the bathroom.

“Me first.” She stopped in the archway and looked back. “Or you could just join me.”

Clark grinned, then pulled his head out of the closet to grin at her. “What are you going to do the day I take you up on that?”

Her eyes swept the length of his body before settling back on his. The dark orbs were nearly black now, a few naughty thoughts undoubtedly dancing around in her head. “I could think of a couple of things,” she told him honestly.

The grin faded from Clark’s face as they stood there staring at one another. His body was screaming at him, the attraction for this woman undeniable.

“I have to tell you another reason you unnerve me so much is because I’m so damned attracted to you,” she told him softly.

“And that bothers you?”

“No. It...” She glanced away to break the tension between them. “Okay,” she said when she looked back at him. “It \*does\* bother me a little. Not that I don’t like being attracted to you.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I just have all of this stuff... rambling around in my head. Then when I look at you...” Her eyes went back to his. “The storm can be raging out of control, but one glance at you and...” She glanced toward the bathroom. “I’m going to shower now because I’ve said too much.”

Before he could say a word, she disappeared behind the bathroom door. He sighed heavily because he knew how she felt. He was so incredibly attracted to her it was starting to be painful to be close to her. Lois was unlike anyone he’d ever met. And he was pretty sure he hadn’t even scratched the surface on her true personality yet. Granted, with all that had happened to her, he might never know the person she was, but he was certain the person she was going to become would be one heck of a woman. He was glad he’d met her.

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Lois had put on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt that accentuated all of her feminine positives. Damn, Clark thought as he started toward the bathroom. He was glad he was a man.

“Hey?”

He stopped and turned back toward her. “Yeah?”

“Do you have Jimmy and Jack’s numbers stored in your cell phone?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mind if I call them? I think I need to apologize to them for how I acted the other night.”

“Lois, they understood. If they hadn’t, they wouldn’t have called me or helped me get you out of there.”

“Yeah, I know, but I would still like to apologize.”

Clark smiled and pointed toward the living room. “It’s on the table beside the couch.”

She gave him a grateful nod of her head and went to make her calls. Clark closed himself off in the bathroom and a little while later, they were stepping out onto the sidewalk.

“You know, if we had a car, we could drive up the coast. Maybe have a picnic on the beach,” Lois said as they walked along.

“Do you like the beach?”

“I love the beach. I also like the mountains. Not so crazy about the outdoors... you know, camping, hiking, stuff like that.”

Clark chuckled softly. “I can see that.” He held up his hand and waved a cab to the curb. They crawled in and Clark gave the cabbie an address at the bay. They shared breakfast over light conversation, mostly about the places Lois missed. She told him about several of the restaurants she liked eating at, where her favorite grocery store was, and where she used to rent movies. He was content to listen, sprinkling in questions here and there. When they stepped outside again, Clark hailed them another cab. Lois was the one to look at him in surprise when they pulled to a stop outside the city, in front of a car dealership.

“Clark?”

“What?” He glanced at the building. “There’s a silver Jeep I’ve been eyeing for a while. You’re right. We need a car.”

“We?” she asked him with a quirked brow.

“We,” he stressed as he gently guided her toward the sales lot at the end of the building. “I know how you feel about me, sweetie. You’re not going anywhere.”

She glared at him, but he just wagged his brows back at her, causing her to laugh softly. They stopped next to a Jeep and Lois looked at it carefully. “You have good taste in cars,” she told him.

“Yep,” he replied as he opened the driver’s door and popped the hood.

“What are you looking for?” Lois asked as she stepped up beside him.

He smiled at her as he looked around at the engine. “There \*is\* more to a car than putting gas in it and driving it.”

“I know.” She stuck her lip out in a pout. Actually, she didn’t know. She’d always done exactly what Clark said- put gas in and drove. Okay, so there probably was all kind of things you had to do to take care of one.

When Clark was satisfied, he closed the hood. Moving back to the door, he sat down behind the wheel.

“Mr. Kent,” called the salesman as he approached the vehicle. “Are you ready to buy that thing yet?”

“Yet?” Lois asked him from where she stood beside him in the open door.

“I’ve looked at it a time or two,” Clark told her.

The man stopped a few feet away from them. “I have the paperwork ready to go, Mr. Kent. You can be out of here in less than thirty minutes.”

Clark looked over at Lois. “What do you think? Do you like it?”

“What are you asking me for?”

He arched a brow at her. “Do you like it?” He stressed every word.

She sighed and pulled on his arm for him to get out. When he had, she took his place in the driver’s seat. She set the rearview mirror, flipped the visor down and looked at herself in the mirror there, then smiled at Clark. “Yeah, I like it.”

He grinned back at her before turning to the salesman. “Do the paperwork.”

“Yes, sir. Just meet me inside whenever you’re ready.” He turned and hurried toward the building. He’d been trying to convince Clark to buy the Jeep for a while now.

“Clark, this car is brand new,” Lois said as she leaned over to peer at the dash. “There’s like less than two miles on it.”

“Good.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets as she climbed out. “You look good in it.”

“Oh, honey, I look good in anything.” She patted his chest and started toward the building.

He chuckled and shook his head. So true, he thought as he watched her walk from behind.

So, so true!

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After signing all of the paperwork, making a call for insurance, and waiting until the Jeep was detailed for delivery, the couple climbed into the new vehicle and drove up the coast. They drifted in and out of a few antique shops in a small, beach town. From there they headed toward a large thrift market Clark knew about. Lois haggled with several vendors over things she wanted, which amused Clark to no end. They grabbed sandwiches from a cafe beside the road and headed down to the beach for a picnic lunch. Luckily they found a park with tables. They inspected the lighthouse at the end of the pier, then took off their shoes to walk in the edge of the water while they talked.

Although it was May, the beach was still fairly empty. Up until now, talk had revolved mostly around things they’d done as teenagers, places they’d been, and people they’d known. Lois had done a lot of the talking, but she’d asked dozens of questions when Clark talked about traveling. Afternoon was beginning to wind into early evening, but neither seemed to be in a hurry to get anywhere.

Lois shook her head again to get her long hair off her face. “I think I’m going to get a haircut. Something short, easy to take care of.”

Oh, God, Clark thought as he looked at her. Don’t do that. You’ll expose that delicate neck and...

“What?” she asked, noticing the look on his face. He blushed and looked away, a sure sign his thoughts hadn’t been exactly platonic. She grinned widely, thoroughly enjoying his discomfort. “Would you miss my long hair, Clark?” she asked in a girly

voice.

“Shut up,” he told her and edged her toward the water. She’d teased him relentlessly today.

Laughing softly, she dodged the surf. Clark was so great to hang out with. He’d had to leave her hanging a couple of times today to go be Superman, but he’d hurried back both times. It was so odd hanging out with the Man of Steel. Yet it felt as natural as breathing. Something else she refused to mull over. Lois didn’t understand why she felt so comfortable with Clark; she didn’t care. She’d decided earlier in the day that he made her feel good and she wasn’t about to analyze it.

“Hey, Clark?”

“Umm?” He was looking down at the sand, trying to find perfect shells.

“I know I’m a mess.” That caused him to lift his head toward her. “I know I should probably talk to someone- a professional. But I feel comfortable with you. And well, I thought I could talk to you. You \*did\* say you’d listen.”

Clark grasped her arm to stop them so he could look into her eyes. “You can talk to me all you want to. I can’t promise I’ll know what to say or how to respond...”

“I’d just like for you to listen. You don’t have to say anything.”

“I have super hearing,” he reminded her as he tugged on his lobe.

“And I might use it sometimes. You know, like I did last night.”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“You sure it won’t be too much for me to dump on you?”

“Tell you what... You dump on me and I’ll dump on you.” She furrowed her brows in question. “Like I did the other night after that rescue. Sometimes I need to vent.”

A smile spread across her face. “Deal,” she said and held out her hand to shake on it.

He shifted the bucket they’d brought to the beach with them after depositing their shoes in the car so he could grasp her hand. “Deal.”

“I might... get loud sometimes,” she told him without releasing his hand.

“I’ll stand on the balcony. Or the top of the building.” She laughed softly. “Whatever you feel like you need to do,” he told her.

“Okay,” she replied as she looked into his eyes. He had such great eyes. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Take your glasses off.”

He glanced around them. There were a few people, but not really a crowd.

“Come on. We’re a hundred miles from Metropolis. Nobody knows you. Well, except for that crazy man at the flea market.” There had been a man at the flea market that recognized Clark and asked Lois if she was Lois Luthor. Clark had to haul her off to keep her from tearing the man’s eyes out. She’d been fairly lucky following her expose on Lex in regards to being hounded by the media. Sure, there had been a few bottom feeders hanging around the Planet the next day, but most had left her alone. She’s wasn’t sure why that was, but she was grateful.

“Why do you want me to take off my glasses?” he asked.

“You have great eyes and I’d like to see them.”

Those great eyes glossed over and he swallowed hard. Lois really did a number on his system. He continued to hold her gaze as he pulled his frames from his face, folded them up, and stuck them in the pocket of the shirt he was wearing. “Better?”

“Much,” she told him, her own eyes glistening in the afternoon sun. She grabbed the bucket from his hand and went back to combing through the shells. Clark wanted to collect enough corkscrew shells to make the twins a necklace. “Found

one!” she yelled and bent over to retrieve her prize. “Why didn’t we go see them today?”

“Because you wanted to do something fun,” Clark reminded her as he picked up another shell.

“Oh, yeah. Will you fly me out later? I’d like to stay with them a day or two.”

“Sure,” he said as he glanced at her. “I think you need to stay with them a while alone. Well, not really alone since my folks will be there. But alone. You know, without me.”

“Clark?” He shut his mouth. “Don’t ever say you don’t babble.”

Chuckling at her, he went back to his search. They had half a bucket full when they made the trek back to the car.

“The only thing I hate about the beach,” Lois said as she rubbed her feet together to rid them of the sand.

“Grab your shoes. There’s a spigot over there.” Clark pointed toward the water supply. They washed off, put their shoes back on, and set out toward Metropolis. There was about an hour of daylight left when they turned the corner onto a street Lois recognized.

“Are we going to Perry’s?”

“Nope. I’m taking you to see the house I bought.”

“It’s on the same street as Perry?”

“Across the cul-de-sac. We’re the only two houses at the end of the block.”

“Wow!” Lois said as they pulled to a stop in the driveway. “It’s beautiful.” She tore her eyes away from the structure to look across at Perry’s house. He’d done a few renovations since she’d been here last, but it still looked the same.

“Come on. We can’t go in because I won’t get a key until we close.”

“I could pick the lock,” she suggested as they went up the steps on the end of the front porch.

“Lois,” he warned. “Just peep in the windows, would you?”

She was already glued to the first one. “Dining room?”

“Yeah. The kitchen’s off behind it. There’s a large den at the back and another room that I’d like to use as an office.”

“Living room,” Lois commented as she peered through the window on the other side of the front door. “How many bedrooms?”

“Four. And a loft on the third floor.”

“Nice,” she said as she headed back toward the steps. Around the back, through a gate, the paved drive led to a huge garage.

“How many cars do they expect you to have?” The building could hold two and stairs on the side led up to what must be the space he and his parents had mentioned that could be an apartment. “How big is that place?” she pointed.

“Right now it’s just one huge room with a bathroom. If we renovate, it could easily be transformed into a small apartment. For that matter, we could use part of the garage, too.” He shrugged as he walked toward the back of the house.

“A pool!” Lois said loudly. There was an in-ground pool to the right of the patio.

“You like it?” Clark asked with a smirk on his face.

“How can you afford this place?”

“It was headed into foreclosure. I offered the payoff to the mortgage company and they accepted. I got it for less than half what it’s worth.”

“Get out of town!”

“I’m working on it,” he joked. The new house was in a subdivision just outside the city. If one had to live outside the city, this was the place to be. Away from the hustle and bustle, it was still close enough to make the commute so short that you wouldn’t miss the convenience.

“Funny,” she told him as she walked closer to the pool area. There was a fence that closed the entire section off from the rest of the backyard. “Maybe there should be an alarm on this gate,”

she suggested, thinking of the twins' insatiable curiosity.

"And another one in the pool itself. That's the first thing I looked into before I made an offer on this place." He pointed toward an area in the back corner. "I thought maybe I'd build a play area back there. Big jungle gym with some of that spongy flooring to keep them as safe as possible."

"Small enough to put a top on it so that they won't get burned in the heat?" she asked him timidly.

He grinned at her. Even though there were quite a few shade trees in the large lot, the added protection from the sun would be a nice addition. "Yes, Mom," he groaned, a teasing glint in his eyes.

"When do you think they'll want to call me that?" Her smile had faded and she was walking toward the back of the yard.

"Before you know it," Clark said and went after her. "You'll get tired of hearing it."

"I doubt that," she told him as she leaned to sniff a rose. There was a small garden beside the garage.

"They've seen pictures of you. I'm surprised they haven't put the two together yet." It was only a matter of time though.

Epecially with Perry. She'd inherited her mother's curiosity.

"You showed them pictures?"

"Sure. We've talked about you with them, too. It really is surprising they haven't remembered it yet."

"I guess they will." She pointed toward the garage. "Can I pick the lock on this one?"

"No." He waved her toward him. "Come on. Let's go bowling."

"Bowling? Ah, no." She walked past him, looking up at the windows on the side of the house. "At least you won't have to do a lot of work to the place."

"Yeah. It was just renovated two years ago. The couple that lived here divorced. He lost his cushy CEO position and she moved back out west."

"Did they have kids?"

"Nope. Yuppies from California, came over when he got a job with LexCorp."

"What?" she asked she stopped.

He nodded. "Mayson was the one that told me about this place. Dan found out about it."

"Dan? He's been mentioned before."

"Dan Scardino. Ex-DEA turned private detective. Also Mayson's husband."

"Husband? But I thought you and she..."

"We did. She and Dan were separated at the time. Although she didn't mention she actually had a husband when we first started dating." He winced as he remembered the night he found out.

"Ouch!"

He shrugged helplessly. "We moved on. She and Dan are actually back together." He motioned with his thumb behind him. "They're buying the house next door."

"No," Lois breathed.

Clark nodded in the affirmative. "Which works well for me. You know..." He made a flying motion with his hand.

"Guess it would." She started toward the car again. "Maybe you should build a balcony outside your bedroom window."

"There's that brilliance again." He'd already thought of that. He pulled the keys out of his pocket. "Want to drive?"

"I can't. Don't have my license. Remember?"

"Sorry. I forgot."

"Will you take me to get it when Mayson gets me all worked out?"

"Sure. Then I'll let you drive me home." He winked at her and they climbed in. "Where to?"

Lois stared at the house for a moment before looking at him. "Can I live with you?"

His brows jumped up in surprise. "What?"

"Live with you and the twins... in the house," she clarified. "I'd really like to be close to them." She looked back out of the window. "And to you," she whispered.

"Ah, well..."

"That's okay," she said. "I'll just get a place near the Planet. Maybe I could keep your apartment." She pulled her seatbelt on and snapped it.

"Jack and Denny are moving into my place," he said. "Lois, I would love for you to live with us."

"No you wouldn't. You hesitated..."

"I was just surprised you asked. I know Mom mentioned renovating the garage..."

"That'll be good, but I just don't want you going to all of that trouble for me."

"Like having you live with me wouldn't be trouble?" He meant it in a teasing manner, but the flash of Lois' eyes told him it hadn't come off that way. Her head jerked around and she stared out the window.

"Can we just go now?"

"Lois, I didn't mean it that way." He reached out to touch her, but she shrugged his hand off her arm. He felt like kicking himself. They'd had a really good day and he had to go and ruin it. "Listen to me," he started. "I was teasing you. Kinda' like you do me constantly." Nothing. "If you think you'd be comfortable living with me, you're more than welcome. I'd love to have you that close to the twins. Hell, we've been living together for the past few days anyway. And I hope you weren't planning on going anywhere. I just want you to realize what a huge commitment that is."

"I don't have anywhere else to go," she said softly.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to live with us for that reason."

"I want to be with my kids and I want them to be with you." She finally turned around to look at him. "I want them to be with their grandparents..." She stopped and looked at him with wide eyes. "I can't live with you. I'd be edging out your folks."

Clark smiled at her. "Maybe that apartment above the garage would be more suited for them."

"What?"

"Mom and I talked about it yesterday. She thinks it's time I take care of the kids more. And since you're their mother and you're here..." He finished with a shrug and turned the engine of the car over.

Lois sat back and looked out the window again, a faraway expression on her face. "Your mom is... unlike anything I've ever thought a mom should be. Mine left long before she died. Her depression over losing Collin, then her strained marriage... Lucy put a smile back on her face for a while, but she was lost by then. I went through six different nannies before Lucy. Four after, before I declared myself old enough to take care of both of us." She sighed as they stopped for the sign at the end of the road. "I was only ten. Then mom died a few years later and I moved out a year after. I've been on my own ever since." Her eyes shifted to the large, warm hand that covered hers. "She told me that she'd always wanted a daughter," Lois whispered, talking about Martha. "And she doesn't even know me."

"You two are going to be good friends," he said softly, slipping his fingers through hers as he maneuvered them into traffic.

"I hope so," she said so softly he had to use his super hearing. "Hey," she said suddenly, perking back up. "Let's call Jimmy and Jack and see if they want to hang out tonight."

"Sure. What do you want to do? Dinner? Dancing?"

"Ah, no. I don't think I want to see another club for a while." That made him chuckle. "Is it too corny to stay in and play a board game or something?"

“Not if you like Trivia. Jack loves that game. We usually try to play at least once a month.”

“Call ‘em. They’ll come for you.”

“Come on, Lois, they’d come if you asked, too.” She rolled her eyes at him, so he retrieved his hand from hers and pulled out his cell phone. Jimmy answered on the second ring and informed Clark he was a lifesaver. The poor guy had been about to explode from boredom. He’d been on an early date and now he was on his own. He’d called Jack, but didn’t get an answer. He agreed to grab chips and beer and be at his place by seven.

He had to leave a message for Jack, but the other man called back before they made it into the city. He informed Clark he’d thought of calling to ask them the exact same thing. He’d grab pizza and he and Denny would be on the way. When he told Lois they had plans, her whole body seemed to relax. She’d been worried they wouldn’t come because of her. Suddenly Clark was looking forward to showing her just how much everyone cared about her.

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“Wow! That’s really good,” Lois said of Clark’s homemade salsa. He and Lois had stopped off at the store to grab what he needed to make the dip. It was sort of a standing tradition that he make salsa when they all got together.

“Don’t sound so surprised. You have eaten my cooking.”

“Omelets are one thing, but not many people can make good salsa. I should know. I’ve eaten every variety known to man in the last few months.”

Clark made a sour expression. That was the reason he’d picked up supplies to make a different dip as well, so she’d have a choice. “How ‘bout this one?” he asked and scooped some of the white mixture up on a cracker to offer it to her. Instead of taking it from him, she leaned forward and accepted it with her mouth. The expression on her face, the feel of lips on his fingers... His mouth went dry and his entire body vibrated. Did she have any idea what she was doing? One look told him that this time she didn’t. Or she wasn’t trying to fry his brain with her incessant teasing. She was merely tasting the food.

“Mmm,” she moaned. “Much better than the salsa.”

Clark couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. Had he ever been so aroused in his life? And she was just eating a cracker. He shuddered involuntarily to think what she could do if she \*tried\* to turn him on.

“Clark?”

He blinked several times but it didn’t help. Stepping around her quickly, he bolted for the bathroom. He had to take a cold shower.

“Clark, what’s wrong?” she asked him, hurrying to grab him by the arm.

Before she knew what was happening, he’d grabbed her and pinned her against the wall, holding her arms above her head, his face close enough that she could feel his breath on her skin. “You’re what’s wrong,” he whispered. And just as quickly as he’d grabbed her, he let her go.

She was left to catch her breath when he closed the bathroom door. It took a minute, but she finally realized what had happened. A giggle bubbled up and spilled out. “Poor baby,” she said, knowing he’d hear her. “Can I help it that I’m so... me?”

Inside the bathroom, Clark hung his head and laughed. That was why he was so attracted. She was quirky and a bit conceited, although she had every reason to be. She was brilliant, beautiful, and full of more fire than ten women. A second with her was better than ten minutes flying.

Damn! He was in trouble.

When he finally came out of the bathroom, he had the grace to blush when their eyes met. He’d been a little ashamed of how he’d reacted to her. Yet at the same time he’d been so excited he was breathless. He’d read about people feeling the way he felt,

but thought it merely descriptive prose. He now knew it was very possible to feel an actual rush from an attraction to a woman.

Lois was talking with Jimmy when Clark came out and she flashed him an evil grin. She loved knowing she affected him like that, even if it did scare the hell out of her. Soon enough Jack joined the group, explaining that Denny was spending the night with his friend, Kenny.

“I was hoping to finally meet him,” Lois said of Denny’s absence.

“He likes it at Kenny’s house because Kenny’s dad hangs out with them. He’s helping Kenny restore a ‘66 Mustang.”

“Sweet,” Lois commented.

“It will be when they’re done. Fire engine red, black ragtop... Lucky kid.” Jack leaned over to pull out the board to the game.

“Come on, Jack. You do good by Denny,” Jimmy said, clapping his friend’s shoulder. They had this conversation all the time so he recognized the expression on Jack’s face.

“Yeah, I know. I just wish I could give him more.” Jack was only five years older than Denny, but he worked hard to provide for his brother. “Speaking of which, CK, could you loan me some money? Denny’s got to have a laptop for school next year and after the bills, I just don’t have the extra cash.”

Clark looked up from stuffing a chip in his mouth. “Sorry, Jack. No can do.” He winced and nearly spit the food in his mouth out when Lois smacked him against the chest. “Ouch!”

“Oh please. That didn’t hurt. But what the hell do you mean you can’t give him the money?” She was glaring at him like he’d lost his mind.

“I can’t give him the money for a laptop because I gave it to Jimmy. He’s building Denny’s laptop.”

Lois had the grace to look ashamed of hitting him. Her eyes shifted to Jimmy.

“CK asked me a few weeks ago about building him one when Denny asked Martha if he could come out to the farm this summer and work to earn the extra money to buy the computer.”

“Yeah, and everybody knows Jimmy’s the best tech guy in the city,” Clark pointed out. He was smiling when he looked at Jack, but the expression on the young man’s face sobered him instantly.

“If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a million times. You’re one of a kind, CK.” Jack held up his hand for a manly shake, which Clark was happy to give. “I’ll pay you back.”

“Yeah. I want a copy of that boy’s graduation certificate.”

“Come on, man, I’m serious. I can’t let you do that.”

“No, but Denny can accept a gift. Better yet, it’s an investment. That kid’s going to college on a full ride. And I’m investing in his success now.”

“You have my permission to bust his chops if his grades slip this year.” Jack finished handing out the pieces for the game.

“Now, I have to warn you, Lois. I’m the trivia champ.”

“Oh yeah,” she said, taking up his challenge. “Move over, champ. There’s a new girl in town.”

“Are we in trouble?” Clark asked Jimmy.

“So much trouble,” Jimmy replied as he shook his head.

Two hours later, the small group was laughing, shouting at one another, and having a good time. The salsa and dip was gone, the pizza had been eaten, too many beer bottles were crowding the trash can, and the fun wasn’t over yet. Lois and Jack were neck and neck on the game, vowing it wouldn’t end until one stumped the other.

“You two do know that Clark could answer nearly all of the questions in that stack?” Jimmy asked them as they bickered back and forth.

Clark was shaking his head at Jimmy, trying not to be seen.

“What does he mean?” Lois wanted to know.

“Nothing,” Clark answered and emptied his beer.

“CK wouldn’t use his vision to cheat,” Jack pointed out.

“Oh, I know,” Jimmy said. “But he doesn’t need to read the cards.”

“Jimmy, why don’t you ask Lois the next question?” Clark bit out between clenched teeth, kicking the other man under the table.

“Ow!” Jimmy just wasn’t getting it. “I just thought as long as we’ve been playing this, Jack would have figured it out by now.”

“Figured what out?”

“Come on, Jack...”

“Jimmy...” Clark tried again. “Do you want to stop having game night? That’s what’s going to happen if you keep talking.”

Jimmy looked back over at Clark and shrugged. “Just thought they’d want to know.”

Lois had watched the exchange, then her eyes settled on Clark. “You know all of the answers, don’t you?”

“No!” Clark said quickly, too quickly.

“Bullsh... OW! That really hurt, Superman,” Jimmy said when Clark kicked him again.

“Do you know?” Jack asked him. “I mean, it’s okay if you do because you still play. And that’s really cool. You’re Superman and you’re sitting here playing Trivia with us.”

“Now that’s impressive,” Lois said softly as she chose another card from the stack. She didn’t miss the glance Clark gave her. “Okay, Jack, show me what you got.” She shot him another question and he rattled off the answer. He shot her one, and they continued that way for twenty minutes. They’d chosen to sit in the living room to play and when she came back from a potty break, she sat down on the floor between Clark’s legs. Clark and Jimmy had been eliminated some time ago, so they were merely serving as referees at this point. Both she and Jack were competitive as hell.

Clark only hesitated a second when she sat down between his legs. His hand touched her shoulder now and then, his body touching hers when he’d lean forward for whatever reason, all of which they seemed completely comfortable with. When Jack finally stumped Lois, Clark reached out to rub her shoulders with both of his hands.

“Poor baby,” he repeated what she’d said about him earlier.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said.

“Who’s the man?” Jack asked after he’d quit celebrating so excessively.

“Okay. You’re pretty decent,” Lois relented.

“Decent? Decent? I wiped the floor with you.”

“After...” She glanced at the clock. “Three hours!”

“Yeah, yeah,” he tossed back at her. They laughed and started to gather up the game to put it away.

Lois leaned back more fully into Clark, her arms hanging over his knees. She laid her head back so she could look at him upside down. “So, can you really answer all of the questions?”

“Probably,” he admitted.

“Does being Superman make you some kind of genius?”

“No. It does cause my brain to work a bit faster than normal. I can read like a million words a minute.”

“He can type that fast, too,” Jimmy put in. “I’ve replaced six keyboards on his computer already this year.”

They all laughed aloud. “I try not to get in such a hurry,” Clark informed them.

“So, CK, when are we moving houses?” Jack asked after a moment.

“Hopefully by the middle of next month. I’d really like to be in the house before Father’s Day so we can have a barbeque.”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy spoke up. “Me and Jack have already decided we’ll be more than happy to keep the pool used for you.”

“You can clean it, too,” Clark said as he leaned forward to prop his elbows on Lois’ shoulders, allowing his hands to drape in front of her.

“Why would we clean the pool when you can do it in like two

seconds?” Jack asked him.

“Yeah, Clark, why would they?” Lois wanted to know, looking back at him again.

“Keep your two cents to yourself, would you? I’ll make you keep the grass cut.”

“No problem. I’m sure I can find the number for a good crew.”

Jack and Jimmy both laughed. “As long as you don’t ask her to cook,” Jimmy threw in.

“You know what, Jimmy. I used to like you,” Lois told him, causing him to laugh again.

“So, are you coming back to work soon?” Jimmy asked her after a moment.

“I don’t know. I might get to know my twins for a while first.”

“They’re the best,” Jack let her know. “Perry can bat those big, brown eyes and I’m totally whipped.”

“I remember neither of you knew what to do with her that first day,” Clark said.

“Well, no,” Jack replied. “She was small and squirmy...”

“And poopy,” Jimmy added, causing another round of laughter. “She was great though. But Collin... that kid is a tiny Clark. His heart’s way too big.”

“This guy has a big heart?” Lois asked, a teasing glint back in her eyes.

Clark pulled a hand around and cupped her chin so that he could tilt her head back. “Watch it, Lane. I can set your pants on fire with a glance.”

“Promises, promises,” she told him, that flash behind her eyes.

He grinned at her, but didn’t comment, just released her chin. “Has she always been impossible?” he asked Jimmy.

“Oh yeah,” he exaggerated. “Poor Ralph’s ego is probably still stinging from the last cut down she delivered.”

Lois covered her face with her hands. “Oh, damn! I forgot about that.”

Jimmy reached over to pop Jack on the arm. “The entire newsroom stopped. Hell, I even think the phones stopped ringing.”

“What did she do?” Jack asked, taking a drink of his beer.

“Well, you know Ralph thinks he’s all that anyway. So, he asks Lois daily to go out with him. Drops a few innuendos, some of which are rather raunchy. This one day he swaggers over to Lois’ desk, calls her ‘beautiful’, which she hated, then proceeds to tell her how he’d make her throw rocks at all other men. She stares at him for a moment, then sweeps everything she can off her desk.” He demonstrates with a wave of his hand. “Grabs Ralph and hauls him over on top of her as she falls up on the desk and starts to tell him, very loudly, to get busy.” Jack’s eyes widened in shock. “She’s yelling and moaning like they’re already going at it, saying how good he was...” Jimmy stopped so he could laugh. “Poor guy never knew what hit him. After a few minutes, she pushes him backwards and declares she needs a cigarette.” She slapped his knee a few times in his laughter. “The bastard was so... excited, he had a wet spot.”

“Which you pointed out to everyone,” Lois let them know.

“Hey, I just thought I’d help you out a little.” They all laughed, Jack trying to picture Ralph after embarrassing himself like that.

“I can see you doing that,” Clark pointed out.

“Yeah, so don’t mess with me,” she warned him with a pointed finger.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Oh, now that would be rich,” Jack said. “Clark being mowed down by some dame.”

“Hey! I’m not some dame.”

“No, no. I know. I was trying to picture something like that.

Any woman telling Clark no..."

Lois glanced up at Clark. "What? You think women always say yes to him?"

Both of the other men replied, "Yes!"

"Not all the time," Clark said to defend himself.

"Name one time she said no," Jimmy challenged him.

"Me and Lana broke up. And so did me and Mayson."

"Oh right. Who did the breaking up?" Jack wanted to know.

"Well..." Clark stopped and smiled. "Okay. But with Lana it was mutual. We just had separate dreams."

"Uh huh. And to this day she'd jump back on you like white on rice," Jack said as he stood up to take his trash to the kitchen.

When Clark didn't say anything, Lois looked around at him. "I got that vibe, too," she told him.

"Yeah, so? Lana and I have known each other since we were kids. You tend to be comfortable with people you know so well."

"So explain us." Lois looked at him with a very serious expression.

"I'm a man, you're a woman," Clark told her with a waggle of his brows.

"Smartass," she mumbled as she settled back again.

"Man, CK, you like playing with fire," Jimmy said as he stood up, too. "Don't say I didn't warn you when you have a wet dream in the middle of the day." He shook his head like he couldn't believe Clark's audacity as he put the chair he was sitting in back under the table.

"You guys don't have to go," Lois told them.

"Unfortunately I do," Jimmy replied. "I'm opening up shop for Perry tomorrow. He and Alice are going to see Richard."

"Where is he?" Lois asked.

"Rehab... again. Maybe this time it'll stick. He nearly died from the last overdose."

"I wish he'd get straight. I went to see Lucy and it was hard seeing her like that, knowing all of the recreational drugs she abused helped put her in that state."

"I think Richard's going to make it this time," Jimmy said. At least for Perry's sake he hoped he did.

"How 'bout Jerry? Where's he?"

"On the west coast, doing pretty well. Doesn't come home nearly enough, but he's out of trouble and working."

"Good." Lois smiled as she remembered Perry's sons. Both had strayed far from the lessons they were taught growing up. But Perry had loved them and never gave up on either one.

"All right," Jack said when he came back from a trip to the bathroom. "It was fun. Don't get up," he told Clark when he noticed the other man was about to stand. He clapped his hand instead. "Lois, keep this guy straight."

"How do you do that with a joker that can fly away from you?"

"True," Jack said as he bounded up the stairs. "Come on, Jimbo. You're driving me home."

Jimmy finished putting his dishes in the sink and headed for the stairs. "Later, guys. We had a blast."

When they were gone, Lois sighed and laid her head over on Clark's leg. "Comfortable?" he asked her.

"Very," she answered and closed her eyes.

"Still want to fly out to stay with the twins?"

"Would it be too much trouble for you to take me first thing in the morning? It's already past twelve in Kansas."

Clark glanced over at the clock. "Yeah. Guess everyone's in bed." His eyes fell back on the woman lying against him. Her position was pure torture now that they were alone. Of course, it hadn't been exactly easy when the guys were there. His hand went up and he smoothed the side of her face. She'd closed her eyes, content to stay where she was.

"That feels good," she told him.

"Are you really going to cut your hair?"

"Do you want me to?"

Clark ran his hand through her long locks, trying to imagine what it would look like in her natural color. "I don't know. I kinda' like it."

"Do you like the red?"

"Ah, well, I'd rather see the natural color."

She opened her eyes to look at him. She'd turned just enough to see his face. "I thought you were partial to blondes." Both Lana and Mayson were blondes.

"I'm partial to Lois Lane," he admitted softly. His hand cupped her cheek, his body once again humming with suppressed desire.

"Would you go out with me?" she asked him as they stared at one another.

"I thought we did that today." His thumb rubbed the skin under her eye, his skin tingling from the warmth radiating off her.

"I mean a real date, like where I take out my best perfume, the one I bought after seeing 'Love Affair'- the good one, not the remake- and put a dab behind my knee, even though I have no idea why? That kind of date?"

His thumb stopped moving and he stared at her. "Are you ready for that?"

"I didn't mean tonight or even tomorrow. I just wanted to know if you'd go... when I'm ready."

"Yes, I'll go."

She shifted and stared across the room. "What if I'm not ready for... a year?"

"Then I'll have a while to let the anticipation build."

"I'm serious, Clark."

"I am, too." He reached down to pull her hair back with both hands, smoothing it out to fashion a ponytail.

"Will my living with you upset anyone?"

"What?" he asked, pausing to hold her hair up.

"Some woman won't be upset because you're shacking up with your babies' mama," she said with an exaggeration on the last part.

He chuckled and started playing with her hair again. "I'm not seeing anyone," he told her. "You should know that by now."

"Why not?" She leaned her head backwards again. "You're gorgeous, rich, single, gorgeous, successful, funny. Did I say gorgeous?" When he grinned, she laughed, resting her head back completely. She missed the expression on his face. "Why aren't you dating?"

He shrugged, unable to say anything because the position of her head reminded him just how close they were.

She looked at him when he didn't say anything. "Sheez, Clark, maybe you do need a girlfriend."

"You know what? All of that teasing is going to get you in trouble one day."

"Yeah, yeah," she said as she drew away from him and stood up. "I think I'm gonna head to bed."

"Okay," he said, swallowing his disappointment because she'd gotten up. As torturous as it was having her lying on him, he would much rather have her near him than in the other room. Spending the day with her had shown him a glimpse of how good things could be... with her around. He'd already decided to call Mayson the next day to find out if she could push the closing on his house through a bit quicker. He stood up when she stepped through the doorway into the bedroom. With a sigh, he zipped around the apartment cleaning up from their game night. Seconds later he was digging his blankets out of the window seat. He turned from spreading the last blanket on the couch to see Lois standing behind him.

"I had a good time today," she told him.

"Me, too."

"The car's great. And the house."

When she wouldn't look at him, he stepped around the coffee

table. “What?” he asked her.

Her eyes slowly met his. “Could I have a hug?”

He smiled and immediately wrapped his arms around her. “Want to talk?”

“No. I just wanted a hug.” Her arms had slipped under his open shirt. Thank God he was wearing his muscle tee, Lois thought. Of course, she wouldn’t have asked otherwise. She’d just had an overwhelming desire to feel him hold her, for him to reassure her that she was still okay. “Why do you wear these tight shirts?”

“I don’t know,” he said through a laugh. “I had to buy some shirts when I was in a little village in South America once and these were all they had. Every man there, it seemed, wore them. Probably has something to do with the heat.” He shrugged as best he could while holding her. “Guess I got used to them.”

“I know I like ‘em,” she mumbled against his chest.

He squeezed a bit tighter, then withdrew so he could look at her. “Better?”

“I think I can make it through the night now,” she assured him, offering him one last smile before she headed to bed.

Clark chuckled and went to use the bathroom before he went to bed. When he came out, Lois was sound asleep. Some of the incredible pressure she was feeling must have been released today. She was learning to find that balance she needed, to heal. A final glance and he went to settle on the couch. That lady had gotten under his skin, and he was loathe to do anything about it. He wanted her near... all the time.

He closed his eyes with a smile on his face, looking forward to another day with Lois Lane.

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As promised, first thing the next morning Clark flew Lois to Kansas. The usual rounds of kisses were dispersed, they all ate breakfast together, then Clark announced he had to get back for work. Lois walked him outside while the kids were finishing their food.

“Thanks for bringing me.”

“Any time,” he assured her. They stopped next to the barn. “Have fun.”

“I will.” She glanced out across the field. “Will you come out some?”

“Oh, yeah. I try to make it out every other day, when there are no emergencies or breaking stories.” She nodded her understanding. “You gonna be okay?” he asked, reaching out to touch her arm.

“Oh, yeah. I’m petrified, but I’ll be okay.”

“Just go with what you feel.” She smiled at him, causing his heart to do a little flip. “Hey, are you okay for money?” He reached for his wallet in his back pocket.

“I’m good. Mayson gave me an advance. Oh, I forgot about that proposal.”

“I’ll check on it today.” She nodded again. “Want a hug?” She let out a breath of relief and stepped forward when he held out his arms. This felt so right, Clark thought as he squeezed tightly. When he drew back, he noticed there were tears in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she lied.

“Lois, I can’t stay.”

“I know.” She wiped her face and smiled bravely. “I want to do this. It’s just...” Her large, soulful eyes spoke volumes. She was scared and she felt safe with him.

His hand went up to cup her cheek and he offered her warm smile. “Call me, any time.” He pulled his hand away and dug a card out of his jacket pocket. He also took out a pen so he could scribble his cell number on the back. She took the card with a grateful expression.

“Go, before I change my mind.”

“Okay.” He stepped back and became a whirlwind. When he

stopped, he was dressed as Superman and she had a brow arched at him. “Impressed yet?”

“Nah,” she told him with a grin.

He chuckled and lifted into the air. Hanging about twenty feet from the ground he gazed at her a final time, then was gone. He smiled when he heard her say wow. He missed her already, but knew she needed to do this. She needed time with the twins to help gain the confidence she needed to become their mother. She’d be okay; she was in good hands.

Lois walked slowly back toward the house, feeling more lost than she had when she was with Lex. Why was it that she felt this way about Clark Kent? From the first day she’d met him she’d felt comfortable with him. The feeling had only been confirmed when she started getting to know him. He was one of a kind and right now she missed him horribly.

Just then the back door banged open and two little tornadoes bounded down the stairs. Her frown was replaced with a smile as she looked up into two of the most beautiful faces she’d ever seen. She’d be okay without Clark for a few days, she decided. There was more than enough to keep her busy.

\*\*\*

Metropolis went crazy over the next few days, as it often did. Clark chased down a few more follow-ups to Lois’ exposes, cracked a new case, and worked overtime as Superman. He’d talked to Mayson about the new proposal from the lawyers in Sydney, which nearly blew his mind. There was more money involved than he’d ever dreamed of in his life. But Franklin Luckaby had been an extremely wealthy man and with Leslie’s share already divided out, the twins would receive the rest. It would be hard to get used to having so much money, but Clark figured there wasn’t a whole lot he could do about it now. He and Lois both had agreed to take the money.

Clark hadn’t managed to get to the farm except for the few minutes that he’d made it out to get Lois’ signature for the proposal. And that had only been the same afternoon he’d dropped her off. She’d called him three times, but each time he’d been too caught up to answer the call. When he’d tried to call back, she’d been occupied. By the time he made it back to Kansas, it was late Thursday evening.

Landing in the front yard tonight, Clark headed toward the porch. He’d just stepped off the steps onto the porch when Lois spoke.

“Where the hell have you been?”

His head whipped toward the swing where Lois was sitting. He hadn’t even heard her there. “I’m sorry. I’ve been swamped.”

“How will you ever be able to help take care of them full time?”

“Things will be different once we’re settled in the new house,” he tried to explain as he stepped in her direction.

“I’m sure. You’ll sleep a few doors down.”

The tone of her voice surprised him. She was angry, really angry. “Look, there’s nothing I can do to change the fact that I couldn’t come...”

“But there’s something you can do to change the fact that you’re here.” She stood up and stepped toward the door. “You can leave.”

“Lois,” he tried again as she pulled the screen door open.

“Don’t Lois me,” she said fiercely as she stepped over in front of him. “You have responsibilities now. You have more than just that damn Planet to answer to. And I know Superman is a large part of who you are, but even that has to be put on hold sometimes. Just because we weren’t in Metropolis with you this week, doesn’t mean we didn’t need you as much as whatever you felt was more important.”

Damn! She was gorgeous when she was upset. That passion was incredible to behold. He couldn’t wait until she completely unleashed it again.

“Stop looking at me like you want to jump me!”

He looked away, thoroughly ashamed of himself. He wasn't thinking exactly that, but...

“Go home, Clark. And don't come back until you're ready to be part of this family.”

Before he could say a word, she went inside and closed the door. He sighed heavily and hung his head in shame. She was right. He did take too much for granted where the care of his kids were concerned. This was the first week in a long time he hadn't flown out at least every other day. So why was this week any different? Yeah, Lois had needed the time with the twins, though he could have at least made a better effort to support her. He knew how fragile she was, and he knew how much she'd come to rely on him.

He looked up when the door opened and his mom stepped onto the porch.

“Mom...”

“Don't tan your mom me,” she started as she stepped up to him. “I should tan your hide.”

“I know.”

“Do you? Clark, that woman is a mess and for some reason she feels like you're her anchor in the storm. You should have come or called or something.”

“I know.” Clark looked down in shame.

“Now, you get yourself back to the city and you think about this. When you decide it's time for you to grow up and be the man she needs you to be, you call and you better grovel like you've never groveled before.”

“Yes, ma'am.” He turned around and started down the stairs. He stopped at the bottom and looked up. “I'm sorry.”

“I know,” she replied, the frustration ebbing away.

“I talked to Mayson. I'm closing on the house Monday.”

“Oh, good. I've been weeding through things, packing up some stuff...”

“I'll get a good company for the move.”

“Okay, son. Go on now.”

He nodded and walked out away from the house so he could change. He lifted into the air and floated just above the roof so he could look back. The curtain on the window of the room Lois was staying in was open and he could see Lois sitting on the bed crying. Feeling worse than he'd felt in a while, Clark slowly headed toward the east coast. Not sure how he'd handle this, he felt lost.

Clark had just changed into his sleep shorts when his cell phone rang. “Hello?”

“I'm surprised you're not too busy to take your call.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose when he recognized Lois' voice. “Believe it or not, I feel horrible.”

“Yeah, but you didn't feel horrible when you were doing it. That's the problem with people. They do things, knowing it'll hurt people, but they're not sorry until someone points out just how lunkheaded they'd been.”

“I didn't mean to hurt you. I wasn't staying away intentionally.”

“Intentional or not, it's done. The damage included.” She was silent for a long moment, then she sniffed. “Clark,” she breathed. She sounded as if she was going to say something else, but then the phone buzzed in his ear, indicating she'd hung up.

He slowly closed his cell and sighed heavily. What had he done? She needed someone she could count on. Too many people had let her down in her life. He wasn't sure why she'd decided that he was her safe harbor, but that was what he wanted to be. He wanted to help her, wanted to be the one she could turn to. Yet he had a horrible way of showing it.

As he lay down on the bed, inhaling deeply her fragrance where she'd slept on his pillow, he vowed that whatever it took, whatever he had to do, he'd become the person she needed him to

be.

And he'd become the father Jonathan Kent had been to him. He'd never had as much to lose before. Superman or not, award-winning journalist or not, he was not about to trade his new life for the world.

\*\*\*

Clark called the farm the next morning to apologize, but Lois wouldn't talk to him. He flew out for lunch, taking the time to do so, and again, she barely spoke to him. He played with the twins for a bit, then flew back to the city. That evening he was back in Kansas. He shared dinner with his family and was in charge of bedtime duties that night. He went downstairs when Collin and Perry were asleep to find Lois sitting on the porch swing.

“I've said good-bye to my folks already,” he told her, receiving nothing in return. “I, ah, I have to fly back because I have to meet a source at dawn.” She still didn't speak, just stared ahead unseeingly. “You look great with the kids. They seem to adore you already.” Still nothing. “I'm sorry, Lois. I don't know how many times I can tell you that.” When she didn't say anything, he sighed. “What do you want me to do? Do you want me to fly back and just leave you here? Are we going to do this when you come back to the city?”

“Who says I'm coming back?”

His brows rose in surprise. “If you want to see the twins, you will because they are. I'm closing on the house Monday.”

She turned her head slowly and glared at him. “Are you telling me that if I want to see my kids I have to play by your rules?”

“No. I'm just saying they're coming to Metropolis to live with me.”

“And what if I think it's time they live with me?”

“Wow! You are the most impossible woman on the face of the planet!” He'd had enough. If she wanted to be difficult, he'd help her out. “You're not taking my kids away from me.”

“Oh really?” she asked as she stood up to face off with him.

“Yes, really!” he stressed and stared her down. They played that game for a moment before she did something that Clark would have thought impossible. She raised her knee quickly and dropped him to his knees. He felt like he'd been hit with a baseball bat. Or least what he thought it would feel like. Pain shot through him like he'd never felt before. Lois had kned him in his groin and he could actually feel it.

“I said I wouldn't do this,” she said angrily. “I said I wouldn't let you get to me.”

He looked up at her with pained filled eyes, trying desperately to breathe.

“I needed one person I could count on,” she whispered, then ran down the steps toward the barn.

Finally able to drag in enough air to see clearly again, he slowly moved his hands away from his body and fell over to sit on his butt. He drew his legs up and wrapped his arms around his knees as his stomach calmed. It seemed he learned more and more about his physiology every day. He'd never exactly attempted to see if something like that could hurt him, and now that he knew, he wasn't likely to try it again.

He looked up at the large structure across the yard and sighed. He'd messed up and he couldn't change it. Until she was ready to accept that there wasn't much he could do or say to make much of a difference. Showing her that she \*could\* count on him was all that was left. He'd work extra hard to prove to her that he was completely different than any other man she'd ever known.

Glancing at the barn again he wondered if it was worth it. Was this what he wanted? Did he want some kind of... relationship with Lois Lane? Sure, he was tied to her now because of the twins, but did he want more? She was complicated, a complex person with layers on top of layers of

pain and confusion that would probably take years to peel away. Was that what he wanted? Each day would bring another set of rules to a game he wasn't sure how to play. Could he keep up? Did he even want to try?

As he stood up Lois' soft crying penetrated his hearing. That sound, that simple, heart-wrenching sound told him with a resounding yes, that he did want her. In whatever capacity she'd accept him. \*If\* she ever accepted him again, he thought as he stepped off the porch and headed toward the barn. She had climbed the ladder up to the loft and was staring out the open door at the sky.

"Can I come up?" When she didn't answer, he floated up because he was still a bit sore. His feet touched the hay and he walked over to the door. "I used to love the hayloft. Had my first camp out up here." He walked over to where she was and sat down on the other end of the hay bale. "I appreciate you showing me that I'm not as invulnerable as I thought."

"Pain is a wonderful thing, isn't it?"

"Okay, I get it. I hurt you. I'm sorry."

"Just go home, Clark. I'm still too mad to make up right now."

He sighed heavily and stood up. "Just for the record... No matter how angry I get, I'd never physically hurt you." Not receiving so much as a flinch to indicate she'd heard him, he disappeared in a flash. He flew hard and flew fast- trying desperately to make sense out of things. Was mere attraction worth all of this?

Back in the loft, Lois leaned over on her knees. She hadn't been angry in a really long time. Mad maybe, but not angry. Even when she'd been put in prison, she was more confused than angry. Of course, a million other emotions she didn't understand all warred for a place inside her mind to occupy. She gave each one a position of high esteem for brief periods, but anger was the one emotion she hadn't let come out to play. And now she knew why. People often did stupid things when they were angry. Or said stupid things. She'd certainly done that tonight.

With a huge sigh she stood up and headed inside. The Kents were in bed so she was careful to be quiet. Lifting the phone from the cradle on the table in the hall, she dialed a number she'd already memorized. The machine picked up on the third ring.

"Clark," she started softly. "I'm sorry."

It was merely a whisper, but Clark listened to it four times. That was all she'd said.

And it was enough. It gave him a glimmer of hope that things weren't as hopeless as he thought they were. He'd fly out for breakfast after meeting his source. Then maybe he'd invite her to go for a walk.

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Martha turned from the sink when Clark stepped through the back door. "Hi!"

"Hey." He looked around, then listened, unable to hear a sound. "Where are the kids?"

"They went to town with Lois for breakfast. I think she wanted to see if we trusted her enough to be alone with them."

"Do you?" The shocked expression on his mother's face told him he'd said the wrong thing. He pushed his hands in his pockets and sighed- something else he did a lot of these days.

"I'll pretend you didn't say that."

"And I'll go wash my mouth out with soap." He turned on his heel and started for the door.

"Don't you dare fly to town and check up on her," his mother warned him.

"Not about to. I'm going to see if Dad has some good, hard work for me to do."

"Yeah, like anything you do would be hard," his mother spat at him.

He waved over his head and kept walking. His dad had been

putting up new fence posts in the field behind the pecan grove. He'd finish it for him and hopefully burn off a little steam in the process.

Deciding he might actually be seen if he put up the posts using his powers, he picked up the post hole diggers at the back of the barn, hung his top shirt on a hook, and headed toward the field. His father had made a bit of progress, nearly half the posts in on this side. He tied a length of string on the last post and set to work.

Lois walked along behind the twins as they ran toward the field where their father was working a while later.

"Daddy!"

"Daddy!" Both kids were yelling and running.

Clark put the tool down and turned to greet his tornadoes. Collin reached him first and he swung him up, hugging and kissing him on his face.

"Dad-dy," Perry whined and jerked his pant leg. "My turn."

"Your turn?" he asked as he kneeled. He set Collin on his feet and pulled Perry against his chest. He kissed her face, then rubbed her nose in their usual greeting. "Hi, sunshine," he told her with a grin.

"I love you, Daddy," Perry told him, a small arm still wrapped around his shoulder.

"I love you, too, sweetie."

"What 'bout me?" Collin asked.

"I love you, too, big guy," Clark told him as he reached out to pull him to his other side.

Collin giggled and wiped his small hand across Clark's large cheek. "You dirty."

"I've been helping out Papa."

Collin looked up at the posts, then on to where he saw Jonathan coming their way on the tractor. "Papa!" he yelled.

"Hey, hey. Wait until he gets here," Clark told him, holding him around his body. "Remember what I've said about running in the path of the tractor?" The boy nodded. "Daddy would be so sad if something happened to you."

"I be careful," Collin told him, then waited patiently until Jonathan pulled alongside them and stopped.

"Well, look what I see," Jonathan said as he opened the door of his closed cab. "How about my two favorite people join me for a ride?"

Collin and Perry squealed and ran toward the tractor. They'd long ago learned how to crawl up the large machine. Clark had purposely chosen that particular model for his father because of the oversized cab. There was more than enough room inside for the two booster seats Jonathan had built and installed so that the twins could ride along with him. Both children settled and waved at their parents.

Clark waited until they'd made it to the end of the fencerow before his eyes met Lois'. "Hey," he said and turned to go back to work before she could answer.

Lois walked over and bent to lift a post, dropping it in the hole he'd just finished. She held it while he packed it down. She was the one who tied the string on to measure the next section. And without a single word between them, they worked together until they reached the corner. He stepped over to the end of the row and looked down the length to make sure it was straight.

"Not bad," he said, then pulled his watch out of his pocket where he'd put it to keep from messing it up. "No wonder I'm hungry," he said and grabbed the diggers so he could head toward the barn.

It was Lois who sighed this time before hurrying to catch up to him. "We make a pretty good team, huh?" she said softly, glancing over at him as they walked.

"Damn straight. Have you seen our kids?" He waggled his brows at her as they stepped inside the barn.

Despite herself, she chuckled under her breath. The sink on

the back wall was too inviting, and she stepped over to wash her face. It was pretty warm out today and she was sweating like a horse. “Dang that super skin of yours,” she said as she bent to splash water on her face. Clark was dirty, but he hadn’t sweated a drop.

He put the tool back and walked over to wait until she was done so he could wash off as well. “What’s wrong? Can’t take the heat?”

“Bite me, Clark,” she said as she pulled a couple of paper towels from the roll hanging beside the sink so she could wipe her face.

“Somehow I don’t think you’d enjoy that as much as I would,” he said and bent to wash his face.

“Yeah, well, catch me on a good day.” She wiped her neck, then her arms. “Sometimes there’s just no substitute for a little kinky action.”

Clark paused, hands halfway to his face- full of water- as his mind processed what she’d said. Heat shot through him as the multitude of wild scenarios flashed behind his eyes. After all that had happened between them, despite the angry words, even if they hadn’t smoothed their disagreement over, his thoughts took off faster than Superman. He finally managed to clear his mind enough to throw the water in his hands on his face. He stood up, a wide grin on his face, water dripping down on his chest.

“Do you sweet talk all the guys like that?”

Lois stopped in her wipe-down and looked over at him. “Just the ones who go on picnics with me and my twins.”

Clark kept his eyes on her as he pulled down a couple of towels. “What’s on the menu?”

“Fried chicken, potato salad, biscuits, and fresh fruit.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

She watched him as he finished his clean up. After he’d thrown the paper in the trash bin, he shrugged. “A man needs to eat.”

“He needs to breathe, too, but I don’t hold that against you,” she told him as she turned and started toward the other end of the barn.

Clark shook his head and chuckled loudly as he followed her out. Ten minutes later they were headed toward the pond on the back side of the property. They planned to have their lunch under the large oak next to the water.

With their blanket spread and the food laid out, Clark sat down to help Collin make his choices. Lois put food on a paper plate for Perry before helping herself.

“Do you have enough?” Lois asked Clark.

“For now,” he assured her, reaching into the cooler to dig them out something to drink. “Does anybody here drink... kool-aid?”

“Me!”

“Me!” came the answer from both kids.

He gave them each a bottled kid’s drink, then pulled a soda out for him and Lois. She took it with a slight nod of her head. An entire conversation passed between them as they looked at one another. He tore his eyes away from hers to concentrate on the twins. They all talked and laughed while they ate, content to let things rest for now.

“Daddy?” Perry asked when most of her meal was gone.

“Yes, sunshine?”

“Is Wois my mommy?”

Clark halted the progression of his chicken to his mouth and looked over at his little girl. She’d finally figured out who Lois was. He placed the food back on his plate so he could pull Perry over onto his lap. “Do you know what a mommy is?”

“Uh huh,” the little girl said with a nod of her head. “A mommy is a nana, dis younger.”

He laughed softly and hugged her close. “Something like that.”

“Is her?” Collin asked.

“Yes, Collin... And Perry,” he said as he tickled her ribs.

“Lois is your mommy.”

When Perry recovered, she grasped Clark on both sides of his face, her eyes staring into his from an inch away. “Can I call her mommy?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Clark said as he leaned forward to kiss her lips.

Collin finished his chicken, wiped his hands, and looked over at Lois. “I call you mommy?”

Lois blinked several times to keep from crying. “I’d like that,” she told him softly.

“Kay,” he answered, downed his drink, then jumped up to go explore a bit.

Perry climbed off Clark’s lap and walked over in front of Lois, waiting patiently for her to pick her up. When she was settled so she was facing Lois, Perry’s small hands reached up to hold her cheeks. Her small nose rubbed the larger one in front of her, causing the woman to squeeze her eyes closed tightly.

“I love you, Mommy,” Perry said, then slipped off her lap, chasing her brother.

Lois swayed, her emotions nearly overwhelming her. Clark scooted over and reached out to grasp her shoulder. “Pretty amazing, huh?” She could only nod as she looked up at the twins, large tears spilling from her eyes. “Lois,” Clark whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.” Her eyes met his for a second, then she stood up so she could go play with Collin and Perry.

This time when Clark shook his head it was for an entirely different reason. He was happy for Lois.

And glad she’d made even a little concession where he was concerned. Maybe later they’d be able to talk. He stood up and headed toward the pond where his three favorite people were skipping rocks. Or where Lois was trying to demonstrate how to do it. This is the life, he thought as he picked up a rock, kneeling beside Collin to show him how to hold it the right way. He’d never make the mistake again of letting any of them feel like he didn’t cherish them.

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Clark had ignored three phones calls and two news briefs on TV while he spent the rest of the day with his family. They all ate supper, then he and Lois shared bedtime duties. A note on the table when they came downstairs informed them that Martha and Jonathan had gone for a drive and the dishes were waiting.

“Subtle, Mom,” Clark said as he started the water.

“You could have these done in like two seconds,” Lois told him as she carried over dishes from the table.

“And deprive you of the experience? Not a chance,” Clark said with a grin as he started washing the glasses.

They washed in silence for a long while before Lois turned and leaned against the counter. “I’m gonna stay with Collin and Perry until the move.” She stopped drying the bowl she held and looked up at him. “That is if I haven’t earned a bed at the shelter.”

Clark rinsed the dish he held, albeit a little difficultly because Lois wouldn’t move, then he moved it over to the drainer, passing it from one hand to the other behind her back. The movement brought him to stand directly in front of her. His eyes went down to hers. “You mean if you don’t take them away from me.”

“I guess sorry means sorry only after you make someone feel like a total heel.” She shoved him backwards, dumped the bowl on the counter, and stomped out the front door.

“Damn, Clark, you must like the taste of your foot,” he said to himself. He finished the dishes at super speed before he went to try to smooth this latest crisis over. Lois was sitting on the top step, her arms wrapped around her body, rocking back and forth. She wasn’t crying, but she wasn’t far from it. He sat down on the

porch behind her, a leg on either side of her body. Slowly he leaned forward and surrounded her with his arms. That stopped her rocking and put his face next to hers. “Sorry means sorry and I need to learn that.” He held her tighter, somehow knowing that right now she needed this. Her body was stiff in his grasp, the tension so thick he could feel it. “I’m not letting you go,” he soothed, moving his hands over the tops of hers to slip his fingers between hers. If it was possible, she was stiffer, more defiant. “Let it go, Lois.”

“I can’t,” she breathed.

“Not all at once...”

“Not all of it ever,” she pointed out.

“No, not all, but some of it. A lot of it.” He turned his face into her neck. “Right now. Right here. Scream, laugh, cry- do whatever you feel like you need to do.”

“That’s just it. I don’t know what I feel like I need to do.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to go claw his eyes out,” she almost shouted. “I want to hit him- hard. I want to make him feel as small as he made me feel.” By now she was shaking, her body not relaxing a bit under his. “I want to kick him where it hurts.”

“Ouch,” he said softly.

She turned her head toward his, her lips almost touching his. “I’m ashamed of myself for doing that,” she told him, talking about what she’d done to Clark.

“Don’t be,” Clark said, pushing his wayward thoughts away from their extremely close proximity to one another.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked him.

“At the time it hurt like hell,” he pointed out. Unable to stop himself, he rubbed his cheek against hers.

She drew away enough to look into his eyes. “How is it you felt that anyway?”

“I have no idea. It shocked me to no end when the pain shot through me. My stomach hurt all night.”

“I’m...”

“Shhh,” Clark interrupted her. “Sorry means sorry. You’ve said it already.”

She must have believed him because she relaxed into his arms. “Will you hold me for a while?”

“All night if you need me to.” And he tightened his arms.

“Thank you... for staying today.”

“I’ll have to go to work tomorrow.”

“I know.” She sighed and melted even further into his body.

Clark was content to sit there with her, listening to her heart beat. It thumped fast at first, then gradually slowed down. When she slumped, he realized she was asleep. How must she feel? Tension so bound up inside that you lash out at others for no reason? He suspected that as bad as her outbursts had been, he hadn’t seen the worst yet. When that dam finally broke, it was going to be catastrophic. He just hoped they all had the strength to survive it.

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Work called the next day, so Clark hurried around the city chasing down leads. More of the aftermath from the stories about Luthor and Delcont managed to make it back to print for the Monday edition. It would probably be months before they could all put that behind them enough to move on.

Clark was winding down things to head home when Jack dropped on the edge of his desk. “I found out where Lois’ things are.”

He looked up at the younger man. “Yeah?”

“In the wine room of the penthouse. There was a storage room with boxes in it. Some of them contained her things. Her furniture was in another room next to it. My bet is Luthor put ‘em in there and forgot about ‘em.”

“Somehow I don’t see that man forgetting about anything,” Clark said as he stood up.

“How’s Lois doing with the twins?”

Clark stopped gathering his things and smiled as he remembered her expression when Perry and Collin whispered ‘goodnight, Mommy’. “They’ve figured out she’s their mother.”

“I’ll bet she was a little stoked.”

“Right now, Jack, I think that’s the best therapy she could have.” He clapped the younger man’s shoulder and finished shutting down his computer. “See you later.”

“You got it.”

Clark had every intention of heading back out to Kansas, but Superman was needed first. As soon as he was done, he called out to speak with Lois. She assured him that she was okay, so he decided to head home to get some sleep.

Monday dawned clear and bright, albeit busy as hell. Clark was chasing down a lead at dawn. He’d barely made it back to the office when Mayson called to tell him the bank was ready to close on his house. By noon he had the keys to his new place, had contracted a moving company to pack up his parents’ things on the farm and move them across the country, and another piece written for the front page. He ducked out of work early to head over to the house and make plans to start renovations on the garage apartment for his parents. With a clear direction and something to look forward to, Clark couldn’t wait to get his family to the city.

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“So, we’re set then?” Clark asked as he polished off the pie on his plate. He and his folks had decided that as soon as he was done with the renovations, which he estimated to be by the weekend, the moving company would gather them up and haul them eastward.

Martha looked around and sighed.

“Mom, you don’t have to do this,” Clark said as he saw the expression on her face.

“Yes, we do,” she told him. “Collin and Perry need you and Lois and we need them.” She stood up and gathered up the dirty dishes from the table. “We’ve just been here a long time, son. There are a lot of memories in this house.”

Jonathan reached over to cover her hand with his. “We’re taking those with us.” The couple exchanged a look before Martha finished her task. “Now, are you two set?” They were alone at the table because the kids had already gone to bed.

“Not much for me to do,” Lois said as she stood to carry her coffee cup over to the sink.

“Actually, I do need you to do something,” Clark announced. “Mom, Lois is going with me tonight.” He stood up as if he was ready to go.

“I am?” she asked as she turned to look at him.

“Yeah. Well, please. I need you to look at something.”

Lois was sure he’d practiced that expression. The one that looked like a hurt puppy dog. If he’d look at her like that, she was sure she wouldn’t be able to deny him very much. She knew now where Collin picked up that particular art.

“I’ll have you back bright and early for breakfast,” he went on.

“Go on, honey,” Martha told her.

Lois glanced at Martha, then looked to Jonathan, who grinned. “All right, but no funny business,” she warned Clark in a teasing tone.

“Ha, ha,” he crooned as they headed toward the door. “Thanks, guys,” he told his parents and led Lois out into the yard. Before she could take three steps, he scooped her up and took off. Her arms automatically wrapped around his neck, the gasp returning from his surprise take-off.

“You didn’t change tonight,” she pointed out.

“Not tonight,” was all he said as they headed toward Metropolis. He landed in the backyard of the new house in the shadows and set her on her feet.

“Why are we here?” she asked.

“I need you to pick out the room you want.” He grasped her hand and tugged her along behind him toward the house.

“Clark, any room would have been okay. You’re being good enough to let me stay...”

“Just come on.” They walked across the patio and up onto the back porch. He unlocked the door and flipped the lights on in the mudroom.

“You’ve had time to get the lights on?”

“Good friends,” he stated. “Jack made some calls for me. All of the utilities are on, the phone will be on tomorrow, and hopefully I’ll have most of my stuff in here by Friday.”

She stopped just inside the large den and looked back at him. “You’re gonna move in before us?”

“Well...” He stopped when he saw the expression on her face. “Maybe just my stuff,” he went on. “I can come out and stay in Kansas until we can all stay here together.” The flash in her eyes told him that was exactly the right thing to say and do. This was another of those things Lois felt she needed. And he wasn’t about to deny her.

Lois drifted through the large house, clicking on lights as she went. Upstairs she went from one room to another, then back again. “This place is great, Clark,” she finally decided as she stopped in the hall outside the two biggest rooms. One was obviously the master bedroom because it had a bathroom. Of course, the other one had a bathroom, too, although with just a shower stall in that one.

“I was thinking we could turn the third floor into storage and a playroom.”

“Good idea, but they can’t be up there alone until they’re much older.”

“Yeah, I know.” He walked over and peered into the large master bedroom. “So, which room do you want?”

“Clark, I’m not taking your room away from you.” She could tell by his posture that he was indicating the master suite.

“If you weren’t moving in here, my folks would have had this room.” He shrugged as if that should explain everything.

Lois folded her arms across her chest and sauntered over to the doorway where he stood. She peered inside, then grinned at him. “You know, we could always share.”

That glint was back in her eyes, indicating she was in a teasing mood. “We could,” Clark replied as he stepped so that he was straddling the threshold and leaned back on the frame. Of course, we’d have another decision to make then.” Her arched brow asked him to explain. “We’d have to pick out a bed.”

She felt good tonight, more than willing to play this game. “What’s wrong with yours? I happen to think it’s comfortable.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t you rather have a king-sized bed? I kinda’ like to stretch out when I work and my bed is a bit confining.”

Her smile faded, the teasing glint gone as well. She turned and stepped into the room, walking over to look out of the window. It was on the side of the house next to the empty end of the cul-de-sac. Perfect for a balcony so Clark could come and go in super guise.

“Hey, what did I say?”

“Nothing,” she lied. The room also boasted a fireplace. It was the perfect room for... “You’re right. We’d have to choose a new bed. I only work on clean surfaces.”

As she walked over to inspect the fireplace, or pretend to, dawning flashed for Clark. She was curious about his past. More precisely, his bed’s past and the women he’d had in it. Of course, the only women who’d been in that particular bed was her, his mother, and Lana slept there once. He’d purchased the bed when he’d moved to the city and nothing had ever taken place in that bed more exciting than sleep. A fact that painfully reminded him just how long it had been since he’d...

“You know, we could always just use your bed.”

Lois’ head snapped around so she could look at him. “What?”

“Jack found your things, furniture included.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked over to look out of the window. “And I have to tell you, your bed is really nice.”

“Yeah,” she said, heading toward the closet. “Nice and clean.”

He walked over and stuck his head in the door of the closet. It was large enough to be a room on its own. There were shelves and drawers as well as plenty of room to hang a wardrobe.

“My bag of rags would get lost in here,” Lois commented as she stepped over to a full length mirror that had been installed in the middle of one wall.

“I have a feeling you could find a few more things to fill the space.” Clark pulled out a drawer in a section designed for jewelry. His mother had declared the closet extravagant.

“The closet in the other room would probably be more my size,” Lois declared as she started back that way. “Damn!” she mumbled when she stepped into the other storage space. It was almost as large as the other one.

Clark chuckled at her. “Every closet in this house is huge.” He’d followed her into the other room. “So, which room do you like?”

“The one with you in it,” she said under her breath as she inspected the bathroom.

His smile widened as he sat down on the window seat. This room offered a smaller version of the storage space like the one in his apartment. As he sat there, Lois came out of the bathroom and walked over to click the light off. She’s already clicked the one off in the other room. Enough moonlight was shining through the window to see Clark clearly enough. She walked over and sat down beside him.

“You know, if you \*really\* want to share a room...” he teased, but she didn’t smile. He reached over and smoothed his hand across her back. “Is it that important?” he asked her, meaning her apparent need to know about his love life.

She obviously understood what he meant because she shrugged. “Crazy, huh? To wonder about something like that when I’m so damned messed up.” She laughed softly, a humorless sound. “I have no idea what you’ve done to me, but I can hardly think of much else. I mean, yeah, I think about the stuff that’s happened to me, think about getting through the next minute. It just all comes right back to you at the end of the day. For the past few days I’ve been thinking about us living together.” She stopped and stared across the room, silent for a long moment. “And that makes me think about your bed.” Her eyes came around to meet his. “It also makes me a little... nuts thinking about who might share that bed with you,” she whispered.

“I thought that’s what we were talking about,” Clark said, his eyes dancing in the light.

“Clark,” she whined, obviously not back to the teasing mood of earlier.

His hand reached over to grasp hers. “I thought I told you I’m not involved with anyone.”

“Not right now.”

“And the only person I see myself being involved with in the near future is you.” His thumb stroked the back of her hand. “Besides, it would be way too kinky for me to share my bed with someone else if you’re already in it.”

“Dammit, Clark!” she barked at him and pulled her hand away from his. “You’d feel funny as hell if I really wanted to do that.”

He chuckled softly, rubbing her back again. “I’d probably feel...” He grunted when she elbowed him. “Okay, okay. I’ll stop.” He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her to his side, ready to put her mind at ease a bit. He wasn’t sure why she felt

she had to know, but he was quickly getting to the point where he'd tell her anything. Hell, she already knew his biggest secret. "Lois, I have been in a very serious relationship."

"With Lana?" she asked, not looking up from a spot she found interesting on the floor.

"Yeah. She and I \*were\* intimate. Even after we decided to separate, we would... sleep together from time to time when we saw each other." He shrugged helplessly. "We knew each other and you tend to be comfortable with people you know."

"Explain us." They'd said these same exact things before.

He laughed softly as he pulled her closer and reached out with his free hand for one of hers. "I guess it's like my mom says... when you find your true best friend, your heart and soul will know long before your mind does." She hadn't said best friend, but he wasn't about to tell her that Martha had said soul mate. He was sure that might cause her a bit of unease.

Was that what Lois was? His soul mate?

"You think we're true best friends?" she asked, looking up at him.

"I hope so. You know way too much about me not to be."

"Oh please. Quite a few people know you're Superman."

"Yeah, but they don't know what color my underwear are," he said softly. He wasn't really sure Lois knew either, but she had been living with him. So...

That caused her to laugh out loud. "That might make a difference," she said when she'd calmed, reveling again at how his laugh and smile affected her. His eyes squinted nearly shut and his whole face lit up, making him even more beautiful than he normally was- if that was possible. "Did you sleep with Mayson?" She asked that question directly, no smile on her face at all. She hadn't meant to be so direct, but she'd been wondering about it for a while and well, she wanted to know.

"Yes," he answered just as directly. "A couple of times." He looked down as his thumb stroked the back of the hand he was still holding. "In her bed."

Did that mean he hadn't slept with anyone in his bed? Or just that particular bed? Or...? When she looked up and his eyes met hers, she received her answer. He hadn't slept with a woman in the bed at his apartment.

"I had a single bed until I moved to Metropolis," he went on.

"Must have made... work difficult."

"It made work nonexistent," he clarified. "Lois, I had a life, even a love life, but I've never been... promiscuous either. I think you should... feel something before you share an experience like that."

"I would hope you'd feel something," she joked, feeling like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders by his revelations.

He laughed again, rubbing his hand up and down her arm.

"That might make a difference," he repeated what she'd just said to him.

"You felt something for Mayson?"

"I did, and I still do. I wasn't... in love with her, but I did care very deeply for her. She's become a dear friend, and I love her that way now. Does that bother you? Will it bother you when she moves next door?"

"Actually, there's something about Mayson that makes you want to be her friend," Lois confessed. "I've never had a female friend before," she said softly.

"Then I hope you two become closer."

They sat in silence for a long while, Lois staring down at the floor, tons of different things whirling around in her head. "So how kinky are you?" was what popped out of her mouth.

Clark wasn't the least bit shocked by her question. He was quickly learning to expect the unexpected with Lois. Her mind jumped off on all kind of wild tangents and most of the time, she asked exactly what was on her mind. "Oh, I don't know. Sex on

the ceiling is good."

Her eyes automatically glanced up at the ceiling. "It would definitely be interesting," she commented as she stood up.

"Where you going?"

"To look at the ceiling in the other room. I want to see which one looks more comfortable."

Clark laughed, partly because her comment was funny and partly to cover the electric current that shot through his body. He got up to follow and sure enough, she was standing in the middle of the master bedroom looking up at the ceiling.

"Just pick a room already," he said as he reached out to tickle her sides.

"Don't you... do... that," she said and moved to get away from him.

"Why? I want to hear you laugh." And he backed her against the wall where he could tickle her relentlessly. Her laughter echoed throughout the empty room. "Say uncle," Clark said as he continued his assault.

"What if I turned the TABLES?" She finished in a breathless grunt because she'd grabbed him by his shirt and with one swift move, he was the one in the corner laughing.

"Mmm, a woman who can handle her half of the work," he teased, his eyes dancing with mischief.

Lois' hands stopped attacking him and she stared up into his eyes. "Lex threw me up against the wall so hard once, I bled for two hours. Still have the bump." She demonstrated by reaching back to touch a spot on her head.

Clark's smile vanished and he swallowed hard. Why did she feel like she needed to tell him that now?

"He liked making me submit with the lights on. Said he... performed better when he saw the fear in my eyes. He gave new meaning to the word kinky. Only with him it wasn't kinky. It was sick and disgusting and painful and..." She stopped and glanced down at his chest. "Oh God! You're not wearing a muscle shirt tonight." He had on a button down shirt, but he'd left his muscle tee off. Before he knew what she'd done, his shirt was wide open. "Wow! Look at that."

Absolutely not! he thought, closing his eyes and dropping his head back against the wall. Please don't touch me, he chanted mentally. She was grasping the sides of shirt, but if she touched him...

Her eyes finally left his chest and drifted back to his face.

"What's wrong, Clark?" she whispered. Her hands loosened just a bit on his shirt.

"You know what's wrong," he told her, taking a deep breath through his nose.

"Would you ever do me like that, Clark?"

That caused his head to snap up and his eyes flew open.

"What?"

"Would you toss me around like that? Would you want to see my eyes? Would you want me to stand up? Would you want me to please you no matter how much it hurt me in return?" By the time she finished her string of questions, tears were rolling down her cheeks. And even before she asked them, she knew the answers.

He lifted his hands and cupped her face, wiping her tears away with his thumbs. "You have big, expressive eyes that would definitely be worth watching. But I'd never want to see fear in them. I'd never put fear in them. Excitement maybe. Anticipation is nice. Never fear." He'd wanted to say more. He'd wanted to say he'd give anything to see desire in her eyes. This wasn't the time though. He dropped his hands to grasp her hips lightly. "I'd never want you to do anything you didn't want to do."

Her large, expressive eyes searched his for a long moment before they glanced back down at his chest. A second later her hands went up and she reached out to touch him. "You are \*so\* beautiful," she told him softly.

His fingers squeezed reflexively on her hips. “So are you,” he replied. His body felt like it was vibrating with pent up desire as her warm hands branded him. She smoothed over his pecs, stopping directly over his nipples to squeeze ever so slightly. She ventured on, moving her hands down over his stomach and back up his sides.

“You have caused me to rethink everything.”

“Like what?”

“Not all men are slimy, manipulative pigs.” He smiled.

“Attraction is definitely something I can still feel.” The smile faded. She swallowed as they continued to stare at one another. “Sex might actually be something wonderful again,” she said softly. “Instead of some dark, twisted act used to control others.”

Clark lifted his hand back to her face, then leaned his head over to touch hers. “Lady, you have no idea what you do to me,” he whispered, then pulled her into a hug. His hands smoothed over her back, his body humming from the contact between their bodies.

“I think I do,” she mumbled against his chest.

He laughed softly and splayed his hand over the side of her head. She drew away from him and moved her hands down to grasp his. “Are we gonna stay here all night?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking we might try out the pool. The bank sent out a crew to clean it this afternoon.”

“We don’t have suits.”

“Sure we do,” he said, his eyes flashing devilishly. “Our birthday suits.”

She swatted him on the chest. “You are terrible.”

Laughing again, he wrapped his arm around her and guided her toward the door. “Come on. I’ll buy you a sundae at the fudge castle.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

Clark grasped Lois and swung her up into his arms before floating them down the stairs. She protested mildly, but her giggles told him she was having a good time. Clark buttoned his shirt after depositing her on her feet in the den. They cut all the lights, then they headed toward the city. A deep understanding had been established between them tonight. Both knew about and accepted the other’s attraction. Both understood it was strong enough that they would act on it should either indicate that was what should happen. And both accepted that to rush this attraction, to rush this friendship would cause irreparable damage.

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Life had a way of bogging down to a near crawl, making you incredibly miserable. It also had a way of flying by in the blink of an eye, until you felt like you’d missed everything. This was one of the fast weeks. Lois was in conference with Mayson two different days as well as on the phone with Henderson another day. The prosecutor was rolling quickly with his case against Lex, hoping to work out a plea bargain long before the case could go to trial, a situation that wouldn’t hurt Lois’ feelings one bit. She was not looking forward to testifying against him.

Clark had rushed to work each morning to tackle his stories so that he could get to the new house to work on the garage. Superman was on a limited-rescue basis; he didn’t go out unless it was for major emergencies.

And he talked to Lois every morning and every night, if he didn’t fly out to see them. She told him she understood he wanted to get done with the renovations and would be okay if he didn’t visit much.

“Damn, Clark, this place looks phenomenal,” Jimmy said as they stood in the middle of the new living room in back of the garage.

Rather than cutting the space in the original garage, he’d expanded behind the building. There was an entrance into the new space from inside the garage as well as a separate entrance

with a large covered patio that extended out into the backyard. There was a small living room, a kitchen, and a laundry room with a half bath. The expansive, open space on top of the garage was now two bedrooms and a modern bathroom. The area above the new addition was a covered, screened porch so that his parents could sit outside on nice nights. It boasted new patio furniture and a fire pit. With the help of Jimmy and Jack, the aid of low visibility at dusk, and the fact that the lot was fairly secluded, Clark was able to complete the outside in three days. It would have been done in mere minutes if he’d been able to use true super speed. But the possibility of being seen forced him to work at a slower pace. The inside was done much quicker, aided by the fact that Mayson pushed all of the permits through in record time.

“Your folks are gonna love it,” Denny told him. He’d come along with Jack to help with final clean-up.

“I think so,” Clark said as he looked around with a smile. The only thing missing was the furniture, but he was going to let his folks decide what furniture from the farm should go in. New stuff could be added later if it was needed.

“So, Lois is really gonna stay in the house with you?” Jack asked, a grin quirked his mouth.

“In her \*own\* room,” Clark pointed out as he gathered up the vacuum he’d used to give the floor a final once-over.

Jack shook his head, clicking his tongue. “Clark, my man, let me talk to you.” Clark stopped and looked at him. “I need your man card. No horsing around this time. Hand it over.” He held out his hand to his friend. Clark just chuckled at him.

“Leave him alone, Jack,” Jimmy spoke up. “Lois is in a bad place right now.”

“Yeah, I know. But come on, Jimmy. You have to admit—she’s hot!”

“Lois has always been hot. You should see her dressed in a business suit. Wow!”

“Would you two stop?” Clark said as he stepped out the door of the new house. The others followed behind him and he locked up.

“I’m just saying,” Jack continued. “If the mother of my kids was moving in with me, and she looked like Lois, she would never have to ask for a shoulder to cry on.”

“She doesn’t,” Clark said under his breath as he headed for the back door of the big house.

Jack jogged to catch up with him. “Did I hear that right? My man isn’t as blind as I thought he was?”

Clark stopped at the bottom of the stairs and sighed. “I have x-ray vision,” he pointed out.

A knowing grin spread across Jack’s face. “You know, that ignorant, blissfully unaware attitude works for you.”

“So, exactly what \*is\* going on with you two?” Jimmy wanted to know as he walked up and grasped Clark’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” Clark breathed, immediately feeling ashamed of himself for how he felt. While he would love to have an intimate relationship with Lois, he wasn’t about to put his desires ahead of her needs. And right now she needed something much deeper than just a physical relationship.

“By the way you said that you want more,” Jimmy said.

“I shouldn’t have said it quite like that,” Clark began to explain. “We’re friends, can’t help but be, considering we have two kids together.” He glanced back toward the pool where Denny was sitting on the diving board. “Jimmy was right, though. Lois has a lot going on and more than anything, she \*does\* need that shoulder to lean on.” His eyes moved to Jack. “And yes, I can see how beautiful she is.” That was all he was giving them. “Grab your suits, would you? I’ll drop the steaks and we’ll see how cool that water is.”

Jack and Jimmy exchanged a knowing look, then headed inside behind Clark. They were going to test out the pool and grill

some steaks- it was part of the deal. They help Clark, they get food. Playing a while was an added bonus.

For the remainder of the evening the guys ate, passed around insults, and swam. Lois was mentioned once or twice, but they seemed to respect Clark's unspoken request to respect her by not turning her into fodder for gossip. And by not talking about her, it kept Clark from dwelling on the fact that he was so incredibly attracted to her.

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Clark had finished moving all of his things into the new house. He'd also helped Jack and Denny settle in his apartment. They were stoked to be out of the one-room efficiency they'd lived in for entirely too long. But Jack had chosen to stay in the less expensive place in order to save some money. It had paid off, too. He told Clark that he hoped he'd have enough money to buy Denny a really nice car by the time he graduated. Denny was on track for a scholarship and his big brother insisted he'd have to have a car for college. Jack was banking on Denny getting into a good school. He also wanted to reward the younger brother for a job well done.

With everything done on his end, the only thing left to do was wait on the moving truck bringing his family home. Martha and Jonathan had rented a small motor coach to bring the twins out from Kansas, insisting that the experience would not soon be forgotten. The truck would get in later today, but his family wouldn't make in for three more days. They were having a good time on the road and weren't in much of a hurry.

Sitting on the porch of the house, Clark was waiting on the truck. The movers had called earlier to say they should be there by six. He looked up when a sleek, silver sedan pulled into the driveway. A dark-haired woman wearing shades climbed out and smiled at him.

"Lois?"

"Hey, flyboy." She pulled her sunglasses off as she approached him.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm supposed to move in," she replied as she stepped up the stairs and sat down beside him.

He chuckled at her answer. "I thought you were with Mom and Dad."

"I hopped a plane from somewhere in someplace a while ago so I could surprise you. Are you surprised?"

"Yeah." He glanced at the car. "How did you get a car?"

"It's a rental."

"I meant the fact that you don't have a license."

She smiled and reached into the bag she'd dropped beside her. Flipping open her wallet, she showed him her new driver's license. "Landed in Alton and hit the DMV in Glover. Was in and out in two seconds. Well, not really, but..."

"And where did you get a car for the driver's portion of the test?"

"Jimmy's mustang is still a sweet ride."

He smiled at her satisfied grin. She'd accomplished something on her own and she was proud of herself. "It's good to see you," he told her as his smile faded a bit. He hadn't been able to get to Kansas in three days. They'd talked on the phone, but this was much, much better.

"It's good to see you, too," she said and leaned over to bump her shoulder against his.

Clark's eyes moved from her face to her hair. She'd had it trimmed and dyed it back to its natural color. And it was as amazing as he knew it would be. "The hair..." Clark lifted his hand and slipped his fingers through the long locks.

"Like it?"

"Oh yeah," he breathed. His eyes bored into hers as heat simmered between them. Would it be like this every time he saw her?

"I won't promise I'll keep the length long. It's hot as hell with all of this hair." She smoothed her hands over the length hanging down by her face.

"I'm glad you let me see it like this." His hand was still buried in the back of her hair. It was so soft and felt...

More precisely, it made him feel... glad to be a man. She looked so much different with the dark brown than the red. Gorgeous either way, but the natural color took his breath away.

They continued to stare at one another a moment, then Lois reached out to slap his knee. "What do you say we have dinner after the movers get here?"

"If they can manage to get the truck unloaded before midnight."

"If the time starts getting away from us, I'll go pick us up some take-out."

"Sounds good." He finally smoothed her hair down and let his hand drop away from her. He was about to say something else when the truck rolled out front. "To be continued," he uttered as he stood up.

"In its entirety," she put in as she went after him. She'd thought of little else but this man the last few days and couldn't control the overwhelming urge to see him. Martha had suggested she call him, ask him to come see her.

How was it that woman knew how she felt? She and Martha had become the best of friends since she'd been in Kansas. The older woman's insight into life, love, and healing was what she'd needed most. She was glad she'd gone out to the farm.

Martha also knew how Lois felt about her son, even if Lois didn't know herself. When she'd insisted she couldn't call Clark and ask him to stop what he was doing to come to her, Martha suggested flying out the rest of the way. Both she and Jonathan understood Lois' need to be with Clark, so she hugged the kids and booked a ticket to sanity.

That was exactly what she felt like. That she was hovering just outside the realm of sanity and being with Clark grounded her, made her feel that she could wake up again, face the challenges ahead of her. He made her feel safe and gave her direction she so desperately needed. She didn't understand it; she didn't want to. All she knew was that she needed Clark Kent.

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Lois froze when she walked past the doorway of the master bedroom. Her stuff, her bed and other bedroom furniture that had once been in her apartment were there. A few boxes sat around, too, and her clothes were in her closet. She hurried to the other bedroom and gasped. Clark's bedroom was completely arranged. All of his things that had been in his bedroom in the apartment were there. A few of his mementos that had been in his former living room had been placed on a bookshelf that looked new. His clothes were hanging in the closet and his toiletries were in the bathroom.

He'd chosen for her. He'd given her the biggest room. This was his house, but she had the nicer space, the biggest closet.

The fireplace.

Tears filled her eyes as she leaned against the frame and stared at his bed. This man was unbelievable. Easily the most compassionate, generous soul she'd ever met, Clark Kent was also the only man she'd ever met that made her feel like this. Would he be there when she decided she was ready for a deeper relationship with a man?

"Hey, that box goes in the twins' room," Clark told her as he stepped onto the top floor landing. He was headed toward one of the other bedrooms when he noticed her wipe her face. He stopped next to Lois. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said with a smile as she faced him. "Nothing at all." She shifted the box she held so her hand could go up to cup his cheek for a second before she continued toward the other room.

Clark glanced inside the room and grinned. There had never been a question which room he'd give her, but he'd asked which she wanted. When she'd been indecisive, he reverted to his first choice. It looked to be the right one.

Thankfully the moving company sent over four more local guys to help unload the truck. It was Saturday afternoon and they didn't want to have to pay out any more overtime than they had to. With so many hands, and Martha having marked everything clearly, the furniture was inside the houses by ten. Lois had run out to grab Chinese take-out and when Clark found her, she'd set up the table near the pool, complete with candles and a bottle of wine. The torches surrounding the area were lit to ward off the bugs, casting a warm glow.

"Wow! This is great," Clark said as he dropped on a chair at the table. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She sat down and lifted her wine glass. "Here's to... our new life."

"May it be full of healthy, happy babies. Or two anyway," he said with a grin.

She laughed and sipped her wine, but pulled the glass back and made a sour face. "I just can't help it. Wine doesn't taste the same anymore. Lex drank it religiously."

"I can slip out and grab something else," Clark said and made a move to stand up.

"Cold beer or cream soda?" she asked as she leaned over to open the top on the cooler beside her.

He chuckled as he grabbed one of the food containers. "You choose. I'll drink whatever you have."

Lois tossed him a soda and popped the top on her own. "I thought you might like the wine."

He shrugged as he stuffed part of an egg roll into his mouth. He chewed, then swallowed. "I can drink it or not. I prefer a cold beer if I drink alcohol."

"I used to love wine, but..." She glared at the bottle on the table. "Did you see the cellar?"

"Luthor's?" She nodded. "Yeah."

"He collected wine from all over the world. When he was searching for a particular bottle, he was more of a nightmare than usual. God help everybody if he didn't find it." She shook her head and turned up her soda. "Luckily there's cream soda," she said as she set the can down on the table.

"Absolutely," he agreed as he took a drink from his can. They exchanged a glance, then dove into their food. Talk was mostly about the kids and what they'd been up to since Clark had seen them last. They discussed putting them in the same room for now, which both agreed was a good idea. They were still too young for their own rooms. And besides, they'd always shared a room. One would be lost without the other anyway.

"Mayson says that there will be a hearing next week," Lois said as they cleaned up from their late dinner.

"She told me," Clark said as he walked over to toss the trash in a can just over the pool fence.

"Will you come?" Lois wanted to know when he stepped back over to the table.

"I will," he told her. "Want to come watch me unpack?"

She glanced at the pool. "I was thinking we'd go for a swim."

His eyes drifted to the blue water glistening in the dancing lights. "We do have suits tonight." He looked at her. "Or I do."

"I have one." And the surprise was evident on his face as she quickly peeled her shirt off. Lois was wearing a bathing suit underneath her clothes, which caused the air to leave Clark's lungs in a rush. "What's wrong, Kent? Did you think I'd be... naked underneath?" She tossed her shirt in his face and turned around to slip off shoes so she could finish undressing.

"The thought did cross my mind," he mumbled as he watched her lower her pants. He was behind her and had a perfect view of...

His eyes flashed back up to her face when she whirled around to face him. She quirked a brow at him. "Nice... suit," he commented. She was wearing a one piece that looked like it belonged on a diver. He guessed she chose the modest clothing because she needed the security it provided. But it didn't matter. To him, she looked incredible.

"Uh huh," she said as she looked at him. "Are you going to change or wear your underwear?"

"Maybe I like the suit I was born with," he tossed at her, a gleam in his eyes.

"Suit yourself. I'm going in." She walked over to the steps leading down in to the water and was only in to her knees when a second wind indicated Clark was back. She watched the water bubble and he surfaced near the rope.

"Thought you were coming in."

"Show off," she said and eased further into the water. "Some of us don't have super skin. We like to ease in." She sank down so that the water came up to her neck. "This feels nice."

"This is nice," he clarified, then disappeared under the water. When he came up, he was in the deep end. He shot up and grabbed the diving board. With one swift move, he was standing on the end, looking back at Lois.

"No cheating," she said. "And I want a flip."

"One flip coming up." He bounced and executed a perfect flip without using his powers.

Lois lifted her arms from the water and clapped. "Nice."

He disappeared under the water and came back up two inches from her. "Your turn," he said

"I haven't dived since college." But even as she said it, she swam toward the ladder at the other end. A moment later her head came up after she'd performed an equally graceful move as Clark.

Clark clapped the same way she had. "A perfect ten." He watched as she swam underwater, surfacing in front of him.

"I think I'm gonna enjoy this pool," she said as she moved toward the steps in the shallow end. She sat on the bottom one which kept her submerged up to the top of her chest.

Moving over to sit next to her, Clark leaned back, ducking his head to wet his hair. They sat in silence for a while before Lois looked over at him.

"I've been writing." She waited until his eyes met hers.

"About everything. I felt like I needed to... \*do\* something. And once I started writing and it made me feel better..." She sighed, a sound that meant she was satisfied with whatever she'd written.

"I think I'll keep writing. Maybe turn it into something readable."

"A novel?"

"Maybe," she answered with a shrug. "What do you think?"

"I think if it makes you feel better, I'll buy you a truck load of paper or flash drives to save it on."

She smiled at him. "That's not what I meant."

"I know." Clark shifted to face her. "Write it, Lois. I'd love to read it."

"I will," she said and shoved Clark backwards. "You're it."

She was off and swimming as hard as she could.

Clark chuckled softly and followed. He even did so at normal speed, prolonging the fun as long as he could. Of course, they played for nearly an hour before deciding they'd had enough. Wrapped in towels, Clark took Lois to see the new apartment. She raved on and on about how good it looked.

"I wish I'd had parents like yours," Lois commented as they stepped out of the little house a while later. "To want to do things like this for them."

"I do what I can," Clark said as he leaned against the post holding the cover over the patio up.

"And how about tonight? You've stayed all night. No one yelling for Superman?"

"I've been working overtime tonight." He held the towel

around his neck on either end, a wide grin spreading across his face.

“Then dry me off, would you?” She opened her towel for him to dry her suit. “I’m getting cold.”

His eyes glossed over as he swept the length of her body.

“You need a girlfriend,” she said in exasperation.

“What I need is for you to stand still.” He managed to control himself long enough to shoot a blast of heat vision over her body, drying her suit.

“You know,” she said as she tucked the towel back around her shoulders. “That vision thingy could be just as kinky as the ceiling.”

“Dammit!” Clark mumbled under his breath as she walked away. Every time he thought his traitorous body would cooperate with his rational mind for a minute, she went and said something that sent him soaring right back to that place where he could easily get himself into trouble.

Shaking his head to clear away the naughty things rattling around inside, he went after her. He chose to deliberately steer the conversation toward safer subjects for the next few minutes. Then he purposely begged off, claiming exhaustion from everything he’d been doing the past week. She seemed to accept that and closed herself off in her room. He sighed heavily and went to bed—alone. It wasn’t what he wanted to do, but if he didn’t, he might do something he’d regret. And he’d never forgive himself for that.

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An alarm tore him from his sleep the next morning. Superman spent the first few hours after dawn fighting a fire at an office building just inside the business district. Luckily he’d heard the fire call from the station close to the house. Every fire crew within ten miles had been called to help. Clark had the situation under control in minutes, saving six people in the process. He helped with clean-up, then sped home for a shower.

Lois was jogging up the stairs when he came out of his bedroom. She’d been for a run. “Hey,” he said, appreciating the affect sweat had on her body. Her skin glistened, causing a flash of a different kind behind his lids. One of her skin, sweat, and his skin.

“Clark?”

He blinked several times before focusing on her. “Sorry. I was...” He stopped and glanced away. He’d been two seconds from telling her exactly what he’d been thinking.

“Thinking about me?”

“Oh yeah,” he breathed, then blushed furiously when he realized just how he’d sounded. “I think I need to go find some breakfast,” he said and stepped around her to start down the stairs.

Lois grasped his arm to halt his progress. “I think about you, too.”

“Not like that,” he said under his breath. He was staring down, refusing to look at her.

“Yes.” When he turned toward her, she smiled at him. “Like that.”

“Lois, whatever this is, I won’t ever force anything on you.”

“I know that.” She wiped the sweat from her face with her palm. “I also know that the things I think when I look at you should be the last thing on my mind. Everything I’ve been through... everything ahead... None of it matters. It doesn’t matter that I cry myself to sleep now and then. It doesn’t matter that I have a hard time controlling the shaking when I think about... \*him\*. It doesn’t matter that I still get butterflies when I look at my children because I’m wondering if I’m doing everything right.” She took a breath as she continued to look at him. “It doesn’t matter that we’ve only known each other a few weeks. Or that I break out in hives when I think about having sex again. My body refuses to cooperate. It just reacts and my mind

isn’t far behind.”

He gulped hard, feeling the intensity of the moment washing over him. She felt the same way about him as he did her. He turned and lifted his hand to cup her face. “Looks like we’re in this together then.”

“Good,” she said as her hand came up to cover his on her face. “I didn’t want this to be one-sided.”

“Not one-sided a bit,” he told her as he dropped his hand away.

“Where are you going?” she asked as he started down the steps.

“To get breakfast. I’m starved.”

She shook her head with a laugh and went to take a shower. Things were about to get a bit more interesting around here. And for the first time in a long time, she was looking forward to the future.

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The rest of Lois’ furniture had also been in the storage room at Lex Towers. Her stylish but uncomfortable sofas were now the centerpieces of the formal living room of the house. Her small dining table fit perfectly in the kitchen and her fish tank would be a topic of conversation for the den. Clark’s more comfortable sofa was positioned in front of the wall that would hold a new television. Clark had explained that he wanted a larger set to hang there—to see the games better. He’d left his dining table for Jack and Denny, along with a few other pieces of furniture. As they surveyed the house, they decided they needed to go shopping. The larger space was desperately empty despite having both sets of furniture in place already. New big kid beds would be purchased for the twins so they could make the transition from their cribs. Even though Jonathan had converted the baby beds into daybeds, it was past time for new ones.

Clark closed the door of the trophy case he’d put in the oversized front hall. His lonely Kerth award was now joined by two more.

“My Kerths!” Lois said as she walked over to stare at the case.

“I hope they’re okay here.”

“They’re...” She tore her eyes away from the trophies and smiled at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, grinning back.

“Oh, Jack called when you were in the garage. He said, and I quote, ‘tell CK that the new furniture is bitchin’.”

Clark laughed as he headed back toward the den. Lois was sorting through the things he’d unpacked, giving him instructions where it should all go. He’d told her he’d do all the work in a blink, but she insisted on helping. She’d chosen spots for his various trinkets he’d collected while traveling. It appeared now that she’d moved on to photos, if the array of frames spread out on the coffee table and couch were an indication. He reached down to lift an image he’d never seen before. It was of the twins when they were very small.

“Three days old,” Lois told him. “It’s the only picture I’ve kept close. I was completely lucid that day. Sara took the picture.” She moved over to look at the image with him. “I had mine blown up from a wallet.” Her fingers smoothed over the glass covering the photograph. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” His eyes met hers. “Thank you for doing this.”

“Thank you... for giving that sample.”

“Lo-is,” he breathed. The look in her eyes conveyed more gratitude than she could ever show him. He adored those wide, expressive eyes.

“I thought we could hang it in the middle of the wall in the hallway.”

“I think that’s a great place for it.” He went in the other room and carefully chose the right spot. When he’d finally placed it on the hanger, he stood back to admire it.

“Now, hang these around it.” She shoved a stack into his hands.

He chuckled and went to retrieve more hangers. She certainly wasn't shy about keeping him busy. Of course, he didn't mind working with her either. She was wearing a pair of shorts and a tank top with no shoes. Putting the house together slowly allowed him plenty of time to catch glimpses of her perfectly sculpted body. He hadn't realized just how toned she was.

“Hey, Lois,” he said after eyeing her for the tenth time in the last two minutes. “I was thinking we could use part of the third floor for a gym.”

“Are you trying to tell me something, Kent?” she asked as she put a hand on her hip.

“Yeah, I'm telling you that you're fat and need to drop a few pounds.” He rolled his eyes as he walked across the room to pick up another photo.

“I know I'm small,” she said briskly. “But I've gained seven pounds,” she told him defensively. “I eat, but every now and then I still get sick.”

Clark stopped to look at her. “Lois, I think you're doing great. Mom told me you've been upset a time or two about your weight. And you \*do\* look better. I also happen to think the muscle tone is impressive. I thought you might want to keep up with your workouts.”

“You like my muscles?” she asked, although she still looked rather upset.

“I do,” Clark said as he lifted his hand and smoothed it over the arm propped on her hip.

Her eyes moved over to watch his hand. It stopped at her elbow and she looked back up at him. “Go back to work,” she told him and stepped back over to grab the last few frames from the coffee table.

After a couple deep breaths to steady himself, Clark zipped around the house hanging the pictures and putting away everything he could. When he stopped, he grinned widely at Lois. “It's lunch time and I think we should grab a sandwich on the way to the antique mall in the Corridor.” The Corridor was a popular shopping district on the outside of the city and it just so happened, this was the side it was on.

“Philly steak with extra peppers?”

“And lots of cheese,” he said as he went to retrieve his wallet and keys from the counter. After she grabbed her shoes and bag, they headed out. The rest of the day was spent shopping, talking, and laughing, all of which was exactly what they needed.

Stopping off at the store, Clark grabbed the stuff to grill burgers for them for supper. They ate just before dusk, swam for a while, then put away a few of the things they'd purchased that afternoon. Plans were made to shop for the new electronics the following day and they both headed up to bed. Settled with thoughts of the other on their mind that night, they fell asleep quickly. Life was certainly better today than it had been a few weeks earlier. It was also very, very different.

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On Monday Clark headed to work while Lois stayed at the house to write. They'd talked to the twins that morning and Martha said they'd be in the next evening. Lois was going to go to the market for a few things they needed before everyone else got there. They also had to have other supplies. Clark had said he could stop off to shop on his way home, but recognized the look in her eyes to feel that she'd accomplished something, that someone depended on her for something. He even went so far as to jot down a couple of items he needed from the store as well.

She wrote for an hour or so, then headed out to do the shopping. She stopped off at the Costmart, sure she'd find a wide variety there. And she wasn't disappointed. She chose everything on her list and a few things that weren't. She decided to put off buying groceries until after lunch because she'd decided to

surprise Clark.

Clark was talking with Jack, laughing at something he'd said, when the younger man patted his shoulder. “Damn! That's the best looking woman in two states.”

Swiveling his chair so he could see who Jack was talking about, Clark smiled when his eyes fell on Lois. “You do know that's Lois?”

“You do know if I was a few years older you'd have a bit of competition?”

Chuckling at his friend, his eyes met Lois' as she made her way down the ramp. She'd chosen something casual to wear today- slacks and a form-fitting blouse- which made her look as good as always. As she neared his desk, Clark noticed she was holding a bag.

“Hey,” he told her, still leaning back in his chair.

“Hey.” She glanced up at Jack. “Hi, Jack.”

“Hi, Lois. You look great.”

“Thank you. You're not so bad yourself.”

His face lit up as if she'd agreed to go out with him. “Told you, buddy.” Jack patted his shoulder and went to find more work to do.

Clark laughed as the other man walked away.

“What was that all about?”

“He's young and male.” His eyes glanced at the bag she held. “What's in the bag?”

“Lunch. And a couple of things I bought the kids I wanted to show you.”

“Why don't we head to the conference room?” He stood and led the way.

Lois looked over toward Perry's office. “Where's Perry?”

“Meeting with the board.”

“Ah...” She set the bag on the table and pulled out a couple of containers. “Hope you like grilled chicken fettuccini.”

Clark's eyes flashed at hers, but he didn't say anything, although Lois didn't miss it.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he lied and sat down, reaching over to grab one of the plates.

“Nothing my foot.” Lois sat and glared at him. “Tell me.”

“You don't want to know.” He took the top off his lunch, looked at the food, and sighed.

“Clark, you don't have to eat it if you don't like it.”

Clark paused, the fork halfway to his mouth, then sighed again. “It's not that I don't like it. I love pasta.” He sat back and looked at her.

“I know we're not... whatever we're not, but I'd love for us to be truthful with each other.”

“Me, too. And the truth is pasta metabolizes a bit differently in my body for some reason.”

“Makes your blood sugar go up?”

“Ah, no.” He leaned up again, prepared to eat the dish no matter how much he didn't want to. Not that he didn't want to, but well, eating it with Lois... “Pasta makes me...” He felt his face burn in embarrassment.

“Makes you what?”

“It... excites me,” he finished in a quick whisper, shoving the first bite in his mouth.

Lois' brows furrowed for a second, then dawning flashed. “Oh,” she replied. She ate for a minute, then looked over at him. “Really?”

“Really,” he replied. A slow smile spread across her face as she continued to eat. “You don't have to be so... happy with my discomfort and embarrassment here.”

“Yeah, I know.” She chewed the food she'd shoved into her mouth before grinning widely. “I'll be sure to learn how to cook pasta.”

He nearly choked on his next bite. “You would,” he said and

pointed toward the bag. “Show me what you bought, okay?”

She pulled out two little outfits, then showed him two of the cutest swim suits. She informed Clark she thought they would be perfect for the twins. She also had bought each a pair of flip flops. He couldn't help but be thrilled with her enthusiasm. Lois was proud of her choices and it showed.

They finished lunch and she packed up to leave. There was more shopping to do, she explained, and headed out. Just as he did every time he was with her, Clark felt like he'd been hit with an electric jolt. Suddenly he looked forward to getting done with work so he could go home.

\*\*\*

Clark took a quick peek inside the house when he got out of the Jeep. Lois was sitting in her room on the floor against the wall under the window. She was nursing a beer and she'd been crying. He zipped upstairs and stopped outside the door. “Lois?” She didn't even acknowledge he'd spoken. He hesitantly stepped inside and walked toward her. He sat down and leaned against the wall beside her. “Hey.”

She turned up her beer as she stared unseeingly across the room.

Tearing his eyes away from her, he looked across the room, too. What happened since lunch? To put her in such a mood?

They sat there for over ten minutes before she spoke.

“I went to see Daddy after lunch.”

His eyes moved back to her. “He upset you?”

“Oh yeah,” she replied sarcastically. “That bastard sold me out for a million dollars.” She jerked her head around to look at him. “Do you think that was a fair price for my sanity? Or how about my womb?” His brows rose a bit, but he didn't answer. “His daughter was exchanged for money... like she was a piece of meat!” She slugged back the beer, then looked at him again. “You know what he said? ‘At least you can have more children’. At least I can have more children?! What kind of crap is that?”

“How does he know you can have more children?” If his guess was right...

“Working with doctor feel-good gave him a chance to look at all the research and records.”

That was what Clark thought. No matter Sam's motives for helping get Collin out of a madman's grasp, the man was a scientist to the core.

“I know, in some twisted, deep ravine inside his infinitesimal brain, he thinks he did this amazing thing by rescuing Collin. But that one thing doesn't make up for all he's done.”

Clark pulled his leg up and rested his arm on his knee while she vented.

“I have a hard time thinking sometimes because of the hokey dust he created!” Polishing off her brew, she slammed the bottle down beside her. “So, how 'bout it, Clark? Want more kids? You might be able to get a real steal now. He needs money for a good lawyer.”

She ran out of steam and they sat there in silence for a moment. Finally she answered the biggest question on his mind.

“I don't even know why I went to see him.” Staring at a spot near the door, she nodded her head. “Yes, I do. I needed to look him the eyes while he explained to me exactly why he did what he did. I needed to hear him say he willingly took that monster's money.”

“And now?”

“And now...” She sighed heavily. “I feel... violated on an entirely different plane.” She turned her head so their eyes met. “He might as well have been the one raping me.”

Clark reached out and hesitantly touched her hand. “I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, and if I could have gotten my hands on him...”

Lifting both her hands, she made a squeezing motion. She yelled loudly in frustration. “There... I feel better.”

“Good.” They lulled into another silence. Finally Lois stood up.

“I think I'm gonna turn in early tonight.”

It was still light out, but Clark didn't say anything. He stood up when she made it clear she meant what she'd said. “Don't you want some supper?”

“Not tonight,” she replied.

That was his cue to leave. She'd pulled away and he was not about to push her. The last thing she needed tonight was to fall into the abyss of anger and pain that seemed to call to her all too often. He pushed his hands into his pockets and left. As he stepped into his room he heard her door close. His enthusiasm from earlier quickly slipped away.

Clark closed his own door and slowly changed his clothes. Inside his bathroom he noticed the new aftershave on the sink. He also had a bottle of shampoo, shower gel, and a new toothbrush. Looking around he noticed the other changes. There was an entire bathroom set- new rug in front of the shower, another under his feet at the sink. The rugs matched the soap dish, tissue holder, and trash can. It seemed Lois had been busy today.

Downstairs he found she had shopped for the kitchen as well. A very nice tablecloth with matching napkins and pot holders were all in their places. Stainless steel canisters, matching salt and pepper shakers, and a brand new coffee pot all lined the counters. There was a new place setting for four in the cabinet.

Everywhere he looked he saw things she'd bought. New pillows in the den, a rug in the mudroom, another at the front door. There were curtains in every room- beautiful, rich colors. Yes, she'd been busy. Had she put everything in place this afternoon? As a way to vent her anger? She'd said she'd come to the Planet after stopping off at Costmart. Surely she hadn't done this earlier.

She'd stayed busy, trying not to think about the things Sam had told her. But at some point it had all hit her- hard.

He was glad when he heard a call for Superman. At least if he was doing something, he wouldn't be in the house near her knowing he couldn't be with her.

Lois heard the sonic boom that indicated Clark had left. She rolled over and pulled the covers up around her neck tightly. Not tonight, she told herself. Tonight she wanted, \*needed\* to clear her mind and take a break from her demons. She closed her eyes and was glad when her body began to relax. A short time later, she was asleep.

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It had been a while since he'd felt like someone was watching him, but he knew even before he opened his eyes. Lois was sitting on the bed next to him, watching him sleep.

“Hey,” he told her.

“Hey.” She cocked her head to the side as if she was studying him. “Do you know you snore when you sleep?”

“Only when I'm really tired.”

“Was it that bad?”

“Just messy. A chicken truck wrecked on the interstate, then there was a mudslide in California.”

“That's why you smell like dirt.”

“I showered... twice,” he defended himself. He still hadn't moved, lying on his side facing the middle of the bed.

She leaned over and sniffed. “Might need another one.”

He chuckled softly and closed his eyes. “It'll have to wait till daylight.”

“That's still at least three hours from now.” She watched him for a moment. “Can I stay here?”

His eyes opened again. “In my bed?”

“I won't bite, Clark,” she told him sharply.

“I know that. Besides, if you do, you might lose some teeth.”

She laughed when he waggled his brows. “Can I?”

“Yeah,” he answered, closing his eyes back. He was still

pretty tired.

Lois stretched out on her side so she could watch him, her hand tucked under her head.

“Are you gonna watch me the rest of the night?” he asked without looking at her.

“Maybe.”

Any other time he’d be thrilled to have her in his bed. But tonight he was beat. Even so, he reluctantly opened his eyes.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Razor blades.”

“Razor blades?”

“You didn’t have those on the list. You had aftershave, but not blades. I thought it odd, then I figured it made sense. I mean, you can’t shave like normal people. You’re invulnerable.”

“I use my heat vision. The aftershave cools the burn.”

“It burns?”

“It... tingles.”

“And your hair? Do you cut it the same way?”

“Yep.”

“Can I watch you shave in the morning?”

“If you’ll go to sleep.”

“Sorry.” She closed her eyes, but they popped right back open.

“What?” he asked, having kept his open, knowing that wasn’t what was really on her mind.

“Lex is ready to make a deal with the prosecutor.”

That brought him wide awake.

“He’s trading some of his dirty little secrets for life in prison.” She rolled over on her back and stared up at the ceiling in the dark. “He won’t plead to anything about me until he talks to me.”

“Are you up for that?”

“Yeah. I want closure.”

Clark could understand that.

“He wants to talk to you, too.”

“Me? Why?”

“He’s found out the kids belong to you.” She shrugged.

“Probably wants to face the man he feels out done him. Mayson’s trying to talk the prosecutor out of both meetings.”

“Is that why I haven’t heard about it yet?”

She nodded and stared up at the ceiling for a moment before looking back at Clark. “Are you up for that?”

“I’d only talk to him if you wanted me to.”

“I don’t \*want\* to do it myself.”

“You know what I mean.” He sighed and rolled over to throw his arm above his head.

She pushed up on an elbow to look at him. “I’m curious to know what the hell he wants.”

“Me, too,” he admitted, glancing up at her.

“Thanks,” she said, knowing he’d go. Her eyes moved down to his chest. He hadn’t put a shirt back on after his shower tonight. “Why don’t you have hair on your chest?”

“I don’t know,” he answered through his laughter. He rolled back over and reached out to grasp her side. “Why don’t you?”

“Very funny.” Lois shifted and turned on her other side, facing away from him. She grinned when his arm settled around her. “This is nice,” she said after a while.

“Mmm,” he replied through his haze. He was almost asleep again.

She sighed and threaded her fingers through his where his hand rested against her stomach. A girl could get used to sleeping like this, she thought as she closed her eyes. Moments later, she was asleep, too.

\*\*\*

His body became aware of the proximity of the female lying close to him before his mind did. He was instantly on alert, fire raging through him. This is bad, he thought as he squeezed his

eyes shut and took several deep breaths to control himself. But the smell of her shampoo, the shower gel she’d used, and the scent that was uniquely Lois all worked to remind him just how male he was.

Don’t move, he said to himself as he felt the change in her. Please don’t move.

Her hand smoothed over his arm and she leaned her head back against him. The rapid drum of her heart told him she was affected by their position as much as he was. She shifted and he moved so she could lie on her back, which brought his hand to rest on her stomach. Her wide, dark eyes met his and they stared at one another.

“I think we should go out soon,” Lois said softly.

Clark moved his hand, just a bit, to feel her solid abs, he told himself. “Friday night?”

“Let’s make it Wednesday,” she replied.

He smiled and rolled over onto his back, taking a deep breath to calm himself. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, me, too,” she shot right back. She, too, was breathing heavily. They both lay there, staring up at the ceiling, until they could breathe normally. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever had sex without doing a thing,” she finally said.

Clark’s lips spread into a smile, then he started to laugh. Before long, they were both laughing. “I’m gonna shave. Still want to watch?”

“Yep,” she answered and jumped to her feet to follow him into the bathroom. Two minutes later, she was staring at him with wide eyes. “Wow!” Her hand went up to feel how close he’d gotten. “Think you could shave my legs?” She stuck one of her limbs up.

“It’ll burn.”

“Burn or sting?”

“Sting. Are you sure?”

“Yep.” She moved so that she was sitting on the counter, her leg lying across the sink. He shook his head and moved his eyes up her skin, searing the short stubble as he went. When he was done, he smoothed his hand up to her knee. “There.”

“Don’t forget this one.” She hopped down, ran around him and threw up her other leg. He chuckled and repeated the unconventional shave.

“Nice and smooth,” he announced when he was done.

She ran a hand over the skin to check his work. “Too bad you can’t do bikini lines,” she mumbled.

His eyes glanced at her for a second before he whirled around and headed back into the bedroom.

Lois giggled and closed the bathroom door. When she came out, Clark was putting on his tie. “I saw this really great tie yesterday.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t buy it,” he answered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she stopped and asked him.

“Nothing. I just meant you bought so much...”

“It was my money,” she defended herself.

Clark looked over at her, recognizing her expression immediately. “Lois...”

“Lois, what? If I want to buy stuff, I can.”

“I know you can,” he tried again. “I just meant...”

“I know what you meant.” She tossed the box in her hand at him, then turned on her heel and stomped from the room.

Clark caught the box that had been sitting on his dresser. He hadn’t noticed it last night. He took the top off and felt like kicking himself. Underneath a hand written note was a tie that looked like a drawing, only without color. The note explained that it could be colored with the special pens included. Lois thought he might like for Collin and Perry to color it for him. ‘Just because’, the note stated.

“Dammit!” he said and finished putting on his clothes before going to look for her.

She was standing at the window in the den, staring out at the pool. He walked up behind her, not quite touching her, but close enough she could feel his breath on her ear. "I like the things you bought. The stuff in my bathroom was the perfect color. I want you to feel at home and if you want to fill this house with things, please do." He lifted his hand and squeezed her upper arm. "The tie is great. Thank you."

Lois remained stiff for several more seconds before she relaxed a bit. "I take everything the wrong way."

"No. I said it the wrong way." He tugged gently to get her to turn around. "I really do like the stuff."

"I just wanted..." She looked around, unable to explain what was on her mind.

"I know." Clark opened his arms and she stepped forward into the hug he wanted.

"This is a switch," she mumbled against his chest.

"Huh?"

"You wanting the hug instead of me."

Clark chuckled as he squeezed tighter. "Yeah, well, even Superman needs a little TLC every now and then."

"Just let me know. I'm more than willing to help you out."

She drew back so she could smile at him.

"I'll keep that in mind." Clark gave her another quick hug, then pulled away to go cook breakfast. Before he left for work, they were laughing again. One emotional disaster averted.

Thank God.

\*\*\*

Cursing his abilities for the third time, Clark was finally able to land in the alley next to the Planet so that he could pick up the Jeep from the parking garage and head home. The rest of his family should be home by now and he'd wanted to be there before they got in. Unfortunately, it seemed everyone needed Superman today. When he turned the last corner, he couldn't help but smile. The coach his parents had rented was pulled alongside the curb just past the house. Lois' rental was gone, which put the frown back on his face temporarily. He pulled into the drive and heard the sound of laughter and splashing coming from the backyard, so he headed in that direction.

"Hi, son," his father called from his position in front of the grill.

"Hey, Dad."

"Daddy!" Perry climbed out of the pool and came running.

Clark had just enough time to toss his jacket on a lounge-where had that come from- before he bent to catch his wet little girl. "Hey, Sunshine!" He held her close, sighing to finally have her home. He drew back and they exchanged their usual nose rub before he kissed her several times. She started laughing loudly. When she'd had enough, she struggled to get down and he set her on her feet. Collin wasn't as happy to see him. He was still in the pool with Lois. Clark walked over to the edge and smiled down at them. "Hey, son."

"Hi, Daddy. I'm swimming with Mommy."

"You are?"

"Uh huh. Watch!" And he went under the water and swam to the side. "See?" he said when he came up and grabbed the side.

"Wow!" Clark bent to touch his hand. Collin had learned to swim a while ago, but he was so proud of himself.

"That's great, big guy!"

"Let me go get changed so I can join you."

"Kay." The boy told him and turned to swim back to his mother.

Clark's eyes lifted to Lois' who was smiling brightly. "Looks like you've been busy."

"They wanted to get in." She shrugged and went back to playing with her boy.

With a shake of his head, Clark stood back up and moved over to where his dad was grilling burgers and dogs. "You didn't

have to cook."

"Oh, I don't mind. Besides, we're enjoying watching them play."

"Where's Mom?"

"In the kitchen getting everything else ready."

Clark glanced up at the house. "Where's Lois' rental car?"

"The company picked it up a little while ago."

"Maybe we need to pick out a second car. We're not in the heart of the city anymore and calling a cab every time you go somewhere seems like a waste of money."

"Sounds like a plan." Jonathan finished flipping the burgers, then grinned up at his son. "The house is great, boy. You didn't have to go to so much trouble. Just a couple of nice rooms would have been okay."

"Are you kidding? I can offer something a bit nicer and I did." Clark leaned over and kissed his dad's cheek before stepping around him. He grabbed his jacket and jogged up the back steps. Martha was on the way out when he entered the mudroom. "Hi, beautiful."

"Hey yourself, handsome," she returned and stuck her face over to accept the kiss she knew he was going to give her. "Hang your shirt up so it'll dry," she told him before going out the door he was holding open.

"Yes, ma'am." He laughed softly after she went out, then went to find his swim trunks. Five minutes later, he was tossing a squealing little boy across the pool. Lois yelled at him to no avail. Collin loved the rough play and Clark was only too happy to oblige. Perry, however, was much too timid. She remained firmly in the shallow end of the pool. She and Lois played together for a while, then he moved in their direction with Collin. They all played until Martha called them to eat.

"Here's to our first family dinner in our new home," Jonathan said, holding his glass of iced tea up.

"Here, here," Lois added with her own glass. The other adults joined in and she grinned at Clark when their eyes met. Their life was going to be very different from now on and she was looking forward to it. For the first time in a long time, she couldn't wait for another day.

After dinner, after bath time, Clark carried Collin in to sleep in his bed. Perry would join Lois because they'd failed to purchase the twins' new beds yet. They made plans to do so the next day. Clark was going to meet them at a popular furniture store not far from the Planet right before lunch. They planned to pick out new beds, then share lunch. Hopefully, things would stay calm enough for Clark to get away long enough.

Once Perry was settled, Lois went downstairs to get a cup of coffee. There was a light on in the room Clark wanted to turn into an office. She grabbed her coffee and walked over to the doorway to watch as Clark's hands became a blur as he worked. He was building a set of bookshelves. When he stopped, the wood was assembled. He stepped back to admire his skills.

"Not bad."

He turned to see Lois behind him. "You're the only person that can actually scare me."

"Sorry." She walked over next to him. "Do you plan on building all of the furniture for this room?"

He shrugged. "Maybe." He pointed toward a wall. "I want to put three of these on that wall, which will fill it up. I'd thought about an oversized desk that can accommodate a work station on either side."

"Why one on either side?"

"You need a place to work." He leaned over to pick up the scrap wood left over from the shelf. When he stood back up, she was looking at him with an expression he hadn't seen before.

"You're adding me to every aspect of your life."

"You're already there," he told her as he stepped past her to deposit the pieces of wood into a can. "I thought I'd use these to

make Perry a dollhouse for her birthday.” Lois was right in front of him when he turned back. “What?”

“It’s where I want to be,” she said softly.

“Good,” he replied with a smile.

Lois lifted her hand and touched his cheek, smiled at him, then headed out the door. Clark was left in stunned silence, the tingle where she’d touched him lingering on his skin. That woman was not only part of his life, she was quickly becoming part of his very being. She’d moved in and took over, and he wasn’t about to ask her to leave. She was where she wanted to be.

She was where \*he\* wanted her to be.

Lois had settled and wrapped her arms around Perry when Clark made his way upstairs. She could see his outline as he stood just outside the door for a moment, then headed toward his room. With a smile on her lips, she closed her eyes. She hadn’t lied to him; she was exactly where she wanted to be. It might not be the most rational place to be, but it was certainly the place that made the most sense. Everything about him just seemed to make sense to her. In her crazy, mixed up world, Clark ‘Superman’ Kent made sense.

With a satisfied sigh, she hugged her daughter closer and waited for sleep to wash over her.

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Mayson called the next morning and told them that a hearing was scheduled for Friday morning. She also informed them that Lex wanted to see them both on Thursday. When they informed her that they would, indeed, see Lex, she set up separate meetings on Thursday. That meant there was nothing for them to do until then but take care of their family and go on their date Wednesday night. Lois had mentioned it several times. Martha seemed to be fueling the excitement and anticipation, which caused a smile to grace Clark’s face nearly all the time. They also managed to pick out new beds for Collin and Perry.

Early Wednesday evening found Clark standing in the middle of his bedroom trying to decide what to wear on his date. He’d mentioned that he wouldn’t mind getting dressed up, a statement that sent Lois on a shopping trip. Now, as he stood there looking down at his choices, he wished he’d gone as well. Finally he chose a charcoal suit with a crisp, white shirt and a solid tie. He’d just finished dressing when his mother stepped in the room.

“Hey,” she said softly as she approached him.

“Hey. Is my tie straight?” He worried with the item for the tenth time since putting it on two minutes ago.

“Relax, son.” His mother walked over and pinned a red rose bud to his lapel. “There. Very handsome.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he said with a smile. “Is she ready?”

“For the date?” she asked, reading deeper into her son’s eyes and question.

“For any of this,” Clark clarified.

“She’s ready, Clark. And she needs this,” Martha told him. “Just... be patient, always tell the truth, and love her like crazy,” his mother finished in a whisper.

Clark’s smile faded and he looked at her with as serious an expression she’d ever seen on his face. “I already do,” Clark whispered back.

“I know,” Martha let him know as she checked him over. “Now, go have fun.”

“We will.” Clark grinned and left the room. He was informed on the top of the steps that Lois would meet him downstairs in ten minutes, then the older Kent hurried into her bedroom. Not sure what that was all about, Clark continued downstairs to wait for his date.

He checked the oil and other vital fluids in the Jeep, made a last check to make sure it was clean, then walked back inside. It was still three or four minutes before he finally looked up when Lois stepped off the stairs. His breath left him in a rush. She was wearing a little black dress with thin straps. Her hair hung loose

around her creamy shoulders, framing her face. There was a silver necklace around her neck, with matching earrings on her lobes. A beautiful silver watch was wrapped around her left wrist, and she was holding a small black clutch to match her dress. Long, perfectly toned legs ended in shoes with a slight heel.

And he could smell the faintest scent of perfume that accentuated her own fragrance. The entire effect was so profound it made him lightheaded.

“Clark?” she asked when he didn’t say anything.

He blinked several times to get his bearings. “Ah...” His eyes swept down her body again. “Wow!” His hands had been in his pockets, but he pulled one out to wave at her. “You look...”

“Is it that bad?”

“Oh, baby, it’s that good,” he mumbled and stepped forward to hold out his hand. “Ready to go?”

She smiled widely. “Yes.” And she took his hand, allowing him to lead her out of the door. They’d said goodnight to the twins already and left Martha and Jonathan on the steps grinning at them.

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When Clark glanced at her the sixth time in two miles, Lois shifted so that she could see him clearly. “What?” she wanted to know.

He grinned, but waited until they stopped at the stop sign before he looked at her. “Lois, you look sensational.”

“Really?” she asked, glancing down at herself. “I was so nervous it was... over the top. But then I saw you, and well...”

“Well what?” he asked as he turned left and headed further away from the city. “Should I have dressed up more?”

“Are you kidding?” Her eyes were wide and very appreciative as they swept over him... again. She’d been tongue tied when she’d first seen him. “Clark, you look... sensational,” she repeated the same thing he’d told her. “I love that tie.”

Clark ran his hand over his tie with a frown. “You don’t like my other ties?”

“Actually, I don’t think you could pull off solid very often.”

“I’ll take that to mean you like my ties.”

“I love your ties,” she said softly as she settled back in her seat. When he pulled onto the interstate, her eyes went to him again. “Where are we going?”

“To dinner,” he informed her.

“Har, har,” she replied and decided to enjoy the ride. Fifteen minutes later they pulled into the parking lot of a bed and breakfast.

Clark placed his hand on hers when her frantic eyes refused to meet his. “Relax. They happen to have one of the best restaurants around.”

She let out a breath of relief. “Sorry.”

“No need to be.” He squeezed her hand before he jumped out and ran around to open her door. As she stepped out, he held up a red rose. “For you.”

Her eyes snapped down to the flower, then back up to his. “When...?”

“My secret,” he insisted and stuck out his arm. She slipped her hand in the crook and they walked inside. Lois was surprised when the hostess greeted them by name.

And she was floored when they were led into an empty dining room lit entirely by candlelight. Hundreds of candles were everywhere, casting a warm glow on the entire room. In the middle of the room was a beautifully decorated table, with flowers and more candles. Once seated, Lois found it difficult to tear her eyes away from her surroundings. Soft music was playing in the background, completing the effect.

“Clark, this is...”

He looked up from his menu to watch her gawk at her surroundings. “Too much?”

Her eyes came around to meet his, her expression almost

making him want to skip right to desert. Only the desert he wanted had nothing to do with dinner.

“If this is what you do for a first date, I can’t understand why any woman would walk away from you,” she said very seriously.

Clark closed his menu and laid it aside. “This date is a bit more special than any other I’ve ever been on.”

“Why is that?”

He reached across the table and lightly touched her hand, his fingers stroking her skin gently. “A first date never meant as much to me.”

The sound of his voice, the look in his eyes- she felt a rush of heat through her body. Why this man? Why now? After everything she’d been through?

Her hand flipped over quickly and she wrapped her fingers around his. “It means everything to me,” she confessed.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Clark glanced down at their joined hands. This felt \*so\* right. \*She\* felt so right. Her hand in his- it was exactly where it should always be. His eyes went back to hers and they stared at one another for a long moment before Lois smiled.

“I think we should order pasta.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her. “I think I’ll have seafood.”

She pulled her hand away and opened her menu, glancing at him with a wicked grin on her face. “Ah, come on. What’s the fun in that?”

Clark laughed softly and went back to perusing his dinner choices. It was going to be a \*long\* night.

A long, exciting, \*hot\* night.

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Had dinner ever been as good as it was tonight? Lois thought as she walked along holding Clark’s arm. Had she ever had such a nice time on a date?

After leaving the restaurant, they’d driven to a park just a few miles from the house. It was much different than Centennial Park in the heart of the city. It boasted fountains, benches, play areas, and even a pond; two in fact, but there was more vegetation. Large trees of every variety, small trees, bushes, and flowers of every kind known to man grew everywhere. One pond was large, offering visitors a choice of activities. Paddle boats, regular boats, and kayaks were available to rent. Or you could bring your own. There was a bridge across the neck from one side to the other. A creek wound its way through the woods, offering more opportunity for visitors to enjoy the outdoors. During the summertime, on the south side of the park, there were amusement rides of all kinds.

“Want to go over?” Clark asked as he motioned toward the flashing lights of the carnival in full swing.

“Dressed like this?”

“Then how about we check out the concert?” He started them walking again.

“Concert?” she asked as they stepped off the bridge and headed toward the back end of the park.

“Summer concert series. They showcase local artists. On Saturday mornings at the amphitheater, there’s an artisans’ fair.”

“Local talent?”

“Mmm,” Clark answered with a nod.

“Maybe we could come out Saturday.”

“Maybe.”

Lois looked around the park as they walked, the music beginning to slice through the night air. “The kids would love this place.”

“I can’t wait to bring them to play.”

“I know.” They continued on until they reached the top of the wall above the stage. Rock seating had been stacked up a hill, giving the effect of being a natural part of the landscape. They chose a spot in the middle of the wall at the top and sat down. They listened for nearly twenty minutes before a new group was

introduced. Lois gasped when she recognized the keyboard player. “Jack!” she breathed.

Clark looked over at her with a smile. “His group is good, but his true gift is writing. Some of his songs are amazing.”

“Shhh,” Lois hissed, entranced by the music she heard. Jack’s group only played four songs in their set, but all four were fantastic. She clapped enthusiastically when they were done. “That was great,” she said after.

“I thought you’d like it.” He stood and held out his hand. “Ready?”

“We’re leaving?”

“Just moving on to the next part of our date.”

She kept her eyes on his as she took his hand and rose to her feet. He led her back to the car and drove them toward home.

“Clark?” she asked when they turned on their street.

He just smiled at her as he drove past the house to the end of the cul-de-sac. There was an empty lot between their house and Perry’s, owned equally by each of them. He parked and led her through the sparse thicket toward the back of the property. They faced one another and Clark smiled at her.

“Are your shoes tight?” he asked her.

“What?”

He pulled his glasses off and tucked them into his inside jacket pocket. Her eyes were wide, questioning as she watched every move he made. His hands went down to grasp her sides. “Let me give you the moon,” he told her and the air rushed around her. When they stopped moving and hovered among the stars, Lois gasped. He hadn’t taken her up this far before. The stars looked close enough to touch. “There she is,” Clark pointed out the moon hanging in the blanket of blackness. From this distance it was huge.

“Oh, Clark,” she breathed as she looked around. “This is...”

“I know.” He glanced at the stars. “I never get used to it.”

“How could you? This reminds you just how small you are.”

Her eyes kept searching her surroundings, awe all over her face. This was beyond stunning. They hung there in silence, Clark allowing her to soak it all in.

Of course, while she was busy taking in her surroundings, he was busy staring at her. Had he ever seen a woman as beautiful as this one? Not being able to control his wayward limb, his hand lifted and he trailed his fingers down her neck, from below her ear to her shoulder. His action caused her to bring her eyes around to meet his.

“Will you go out with me again?” he asked her, not even close to what he wanted to say, but the safest by far.

“Yes.” Not an instant of hesitation in her reply.

His hand opened and he barely touched her shoulder as he moved it over and down her back. It came to rest on her side again. “I think I should take you home.”

That surprised her. By the way he said it, things had changed from a few moments ago. The expression on his face had changed, and he kept his eyes averted from hers as he brought them back down to Earth. They were parked in the driveway when Lois reached out to grasp his hand, effectively stopping him from getting out.

“I’ve had a wonderful time.”

“So have I.” He smiled, but it didn’t come close to reaching his eyes. He tried to get out again, but she was still holding his hand.

“What happened, Clark?” she prodded softly. “One minute you were with me up there and the next you were gone.”

Clark sighed and eased back against the seat. “Lois, you move me like no woman ever has.” His free hand gripped the steering wheel, though he was careful not to grasp it too hard. “Being with you tonight, holding you close...” He turned his head to look at her. “It was time to come home before my blood started boiling.”

He was being a gentleman. His explanation was tame compared to what he truly felt. But he wouldn't tell her the depth of his feelings. Not now. He felt it was too soon, felt she wasn't ready to handle it.

She wasn't... ready to handle it. Maybe ready to hear it, but it \*would\* be too soon.

"Aren't you gonna open my door?" she asked him.

He laughed, her expression telling him she completely understood. She completely accepted it, even if she didn't want to. He saw that, too. Her eyes were too expressive not to see it all.

He jumped out and hurried around to open her door. They talked softly and laughed a little on their way up to her room. They stopped at the door and Clark cupped her cheek. "Thank you."

Her hand covered his, her eyes searching, begging for more. More than she'd ever had before. More than she'd ever felt before.

Don't do it, he told himself even as he leaned forward. Just one touch, on and off before she knows I've been there.

He's going to kiss me, she chanted silently as his face moved closer to hers. Oh, oh...

And he was there. His lips touched hers, soft, gentle, undemanding. He tasted \*so\* good!

Gone before she could stop him, she was left standing there with her eyes closed, stunned by how good it felt to be kissed by Clark Kent.

"Beautiful," Clark whispered as his thumb stroked the skin under her eye. Her eyes opened and he smiled at her.

"Goodnight," he said.

Left to watch him walk the distance to his bedroom, Lois missed him already. "Goodnight," she whispered. He stopped and looked back at her, then stepped into his room. When his door was closed, she was finally able to take a breath. It was another moment before she could move. Inside her room, behind her door, Lois wanted to sing. She hadn't felt this lighthearted, this good in a years.

And suddenly all she could think about was their next date.

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The lighthearted feeling was completely gone, replaced by overwhelming dread. Sickening, painful aching washed over Lois in waves as she paced back and forth beside the table while she waited for the guards to escort the devil into the room.

"Lois, you're making me nervous," Mayson told her. The lawyer had refused to allow Luthor to see Lois alone.

"I'm making \*you\* nervous?" She snorted a wry, humorless sound, clearly indicating she felt Mayson didn't have a thing in the world to be nervous about. The door clanged and she stopped, fear washing over her in waves. She wished Clark was here, but he would see Lex after she had. The prosecutor refused to honor the madman's request to see them both at the same time.

Lex stepped into the room and his evil leer washed over his face. "Lois, darling," he drawled.

"I'm not your darling," she told him coldly.

"Ah, I see you've already regained a bit of your fire." He hobbled over to the table as best he could with his hands and feet shackled, and with a bullet hole in each leg, and dropped on a chair. "So, how is my wife these days?"

"I'm not your wife either," Lois said. She refused to sit down, not wanting to be in the room with that slime longer than she had to be. "Just tell me why you wanted to see me."

"A man has the right to see his wife."

Lois stepped forward and slammed her hand down on the table, bringing herself face to face with him. "I am not your wife!" She stressed each word as she said it.

His brow arched and his leer deepened. "That's the reason I chose you," he said softly. "I just \*had\* to taste that fire."

Mayson shot to her feet and reached out to grab Lois when

she lunged for Lex. "Sit down, Lois. Don't give him the satisfaction," Mayson told her.

Lois stared him down for a long while before she finally eased to a chair. "I should have killed you when I the chance," she bit out.

"That goes both ways," Lex admitted, the smile on his face slowly dissipating. "Tell me, are your... little bastards well?"

Mayson placed a hand on Lois' arm to disarm the next explosion. "Mr. Luthor, I don't think that's called for. Her children are none of your business. Your lawyer has informed you that the DA has filed a motion to bring charges for the many crimes you've committed against my client."

"Yes, which is utterly ridiculous. Lois married me. She is my wife. I did not rape her."

"Yes, you did," Mayson spoke up before Lois could. "Paul Lang has supplied evidence to support that fact, as you will find out during the hearing tomorrow. Now..." Mayson stood up. "Being as you have nothing further with my client, I think this meeting is over."

"Oh, but I do have something for your client," Lex said with that tone that left little doubt that he'd been hiding something. "You see, Paul Lang was not the only doctor who worked for me."

Lois felt a moment of panic. What in hell did he mean by that?

"My personal physician performed a few tasks for me that Lang knew nothing of."

"What tasks?" Mayson asked him, sitting back down.

"Oh, no, Ms. Drake. I will not divulge such precious information until I have a signed agreement that I will not be charged with the rape of my wife."

"A charge of rape is not going to make much of a difference in light of the murder charges, Luthor," Mayson spoke up, all pretense of formality gone.

His eyes bored into Lois', who didn't waver a bit. "It will make a difference to me," he replied. "I will know that \*she\* knows I've gotten away with what I've done to her."

"Go to hell!" Lois spat at him and stood up to leave.

"I assure you that you want to hear this information," he called after her. "It involves your children." That stopped Lois at the door on the other side of the room and when she turned back toward Lex, he grinned. "I thought you might be interested."

"What about my children?" she asked as she walked back over to the table.

"I want my deal."

"You tell me what I need to know or I will climb over this table and choke you with my bare hands," Lois said between clenched teeth.

"You will go back to jail."

"It would be worth it," she insisted.

They stared at one another for a long moment before Lois turned back toward the door. "I'd rather the DA ask for the death penalty," she said and tapped the window for the guard to open the door. "Even if it means you're never charged for anything you did to me."

"The girl is dying," Lex said as she stepped through the door. Lois froze. The expression on her face was worth it, he thought as he grinned at her. "A nasty little bacteria is eating her up as we speak. She'll be dead by Christmas."

Lois went back again, a thunderous roaring in her ears.

"What?"

"She was injected with a little concoction my physician was experimenting with." He shrugged. "Another test involved with the mind control drugs. We wanted to see how her death affected you. But then things got out of hand and, well, I figured if Lang had her when she died, no great loss. She meant nothing to me anyway. The boy either for that matter." He laughed aloud.

"Actually, he meant fifty billion dollars to me."

"This bacteria," Mayson began. "Was designed to work slowly?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, I'd bet your little angel is a sickly child. You've probably been told she has cancer, which the attack on her system closely resembles."

Lois and Mayson exchanged a look, then slowly Lois smiled. "I'll be sure to tell her doctors what to look for." This time she did leave. Clark was waiting in the hallway a few rooms over when she came out. "He's mad!"

"That bad?"

"Yeah. Go see what he wants with you, so we can get out of here."

"Okay." He reached out to squeeze her arm before heading in the direction she'd come from. He stepped into the room with Luthor a few minutes later.

"Ah, you must be the anonymous sperm donor," Lex said with a smile. "Of course, you're not so anonymous anymore, are you?"

"Cut the crap," Clark told Lex.

"Looks like Perry White has a taste for reporters with attitudes. Tell me, Mr. Kent, are you sleeping with my wife?"

Clark cut his eyes at Mayson, who shook her head in disbelief. Luthor was trying to get under his skin, but he was not about to give him the satisfaction. "What do you want, Luthor?"

"I just wanted to meet the man Paul felt should father \*my\* children."

"Your children?" Clark asked incredulously. "You have a hell of a way of viewing things."

"I am a man of vision and the only way to achieve brilliance is to pursue greatness."

"Is that what all of this was to you? Lois is a human being, not some piece of meat you can do with what you want to do."

Lex grinned widely. "You \*are\* sleeping with my wife."

Clark, who had remained standing when he walked in, leaned over the table to bring his face close to Lex's, placing his hands on the surface to hold himself up. "Just so you have something to think about while you're waiting to die in this hellhole, I don't have to rape her to get what I want." Clark stood up and turned around to leave, but stopped at the door. "And, Luthor, nothing is quite as sweet as stoking a fire into a raging inferno."

Mayson snickered as she stood up to follow Clark out. "The charges \*will\* be filed," she told Luthor before she left, too. Clark was leaning against the wall taking deep breaths in through his nose when she made it to the hall. "Nice, Kent," she told him and tugged on his jacket so they could leave. Lois was standing in the parking lot looking fit to be tied.

"It's about damn time!" she snapped and jumped in the car. "Come on, Clark. We have to meet your parents at S.T.A.R. Labs."

"What?" He looked between the women as he stood beside the car holding Lois' door to keep her from closing it.

"Lex told Lois that his personal physician injected Perry with some kind of bacteria that was supposed to kill her."

"WHAT?!" he nearly shouted.

"Relax," Mayson told him, reaching out to place a hand on his arm. "Her super blood must be fighting it off because Lex said she should be ill. And last time I saw her she was wide open."

"She's on the way to Bernie for tests to make sure," Lois told them. "So let's go!"

Clark gave Mayson an apologetic look before hurrying around the car.

"I'll see you at the hearing tomorrow morning," Mayson shouted as they drove off.

An hour later, Bernie came out of his lab carrying a happily chatting Perry. He gave the worried parents a wide grin. "I don't

think we'll ever have to worry about this child being sick," he told them.

"Hi, Daddy," Perry said as she fell over into Clark's arms.

"Hi, baby," Clark said as he held her close.

"Uncle Bernie gave me a sucker." She showed him her prize. "Hi, Mommy!"

"Hi, sweetie," Lois told her.

"Perry definitely inherited your blood, Clark," Bernie went on. "Any bacteria that might have been there is long dead." He reached out to hold Perry's hand. "Come see me again, Perry."

"I will. Bye-bye!"

"Thank you, Bernie," Clark told the doctor and carried his little girl out into the hallway. His parents had stepped out to allow Collin to walk a bit and when the boy saw his daddy, he ran that way. Clark bent to catch him with his free arm and smiled at him.

"Well?" his mother wanted to know.

"She has super blood," Clark told her.

"Bernie doesn't believe she'll ever be sick," Lois finished the explanation.

"That's my girl," Jonathan announced and reached out to take her. "Who wants ice cream?"

"Dad!" Clark whined when both children yelled their agreement.

"Oh, hush, boy," his dad said. "Getting poked with needles deserves a little ice cream."

"Give it up, Clark. Grandpa outweighs Daddy," Lois told him as she wrapped her arm around his back and leaned over to tickle Collin.

Clark laughed softly, giving up his protests. They'd all eat ice cream today. For once he was glad to be Superman. If he hadn't been...

Well, the alternative probably wouldn't matter. If he hadn't been Superman, these babies probably wouldn't exist in the first place. But he was really glad Perry had inherited his super blood. It had saved her life.

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It was barely three in the morning and Lois was up- again. Finally giving up trying to go back to sleep, she got up and padded out of her room. She stopped in the doorway of the room the twins shared. They were both sound asleep in their new beds they had all picked out. One was pink, one blue- toddler size. Clark said they could get bigger ones later. He wanted them to be little as long as they could. So did she. After a final look, she headed toward another room where she knew she could find a bit of solace.

Why Clark had become so important to her well-being she'd never know. The door was only half closed, the way it usually was. He left it open for her, she was sure. Venturing inside, she could see he was lying on his back tonight. One arm was above his head, the other resting on his stomach. He had kicked the cover aside in his sleep and she got a full view of his perfectly sculpted body. She'd never seen him go to bed without a pair of shorts on, but tonight all he was wearing was the tight boxer briefs he wore instead of traditional underwear. The cloth stopped mid-thigh, accentuating his toned muscles. Black- he was wearing back underwear. Underwear that sat low on his stomach where perfect abs gave way to...

She tore her eyes away from his lower body, feeling herself burn in embarrassment. Clark was certainly built a lot differently than Lex.

And even as that thought entered her mind, she forced it right back out. Lex Luthor didn't have a place in this house. Yet he was the reason she was awake. Almost painfully anxious about tomorrow's hearing, she didn't think she'd be able to sit still until it was over, much less sleep.

Standing in the middle of Clark's room in the dark ogling his

near-naked body wasn't going to get her back to sleep either. But it was much better than thinking about Lex, she had to admit as she stood there looking at the man on the bed. He was beyond gorgeous. She moved closer, gently eased onto the mattress, and reached out to touch him.

By the time the mattress moved, Clark was awake. He'd been on the edge of sleep all night, his thoughts too troubled to rest. He'd been thinking about everything that happened earlier in the day and was keyed up tighter than a stretched rubber band. He'd been flying, taken three showers, worked on the furniture in the office, checked on the kids, and had been lying here for a while wondering if he should just go ahead and get up. When Lois' hand touched him, he kept his eyes closed. He was curious to see what else she'd do.

And excited as hell. He'd almost jumped up when he realized she was standing in the room looking at him. After his last shower, he'd left his shorts off and he was briefly worried about his state of undress with her in the room. But undoubtedly she liked it. Or didn't dislike it. She hadn't run screaming from the room.

Her hand smoothed over his solid pecs, down just under his arm. The hair in his pits was a faint white, indicating he'd used a bit too much deodorant. She liked his deodorant; it smelled really good.

Her hand kept moving, across his shoulder, over his arm, to his hand. He had a lone freckle on the back of his left hand. Her finger touched the mark and she smiled. He had great hands.

She continued down, onto his stomach. Could she hear his heart beat? It was slamming rapidly against his chest; her touch driving him wild.

"I know you're not asleep," she said softly.

His lips curved into a smile, but he didn't move, didn't say a word.

"You feel..." She leaned over and laid her head on his shoulder. "Dangerous."

"Huh?" he asked, opening his eyes to look at her.

"Have you ever wanted something you know might not be good for you? Something that you know is the best thing in the world you could ever have? Something that's the safest, most gentle thing you could think of even though it's also the scariest thing in the world?"

He brought the hand down from over his head and smoothed his way up her arm. "Lois, we don't..."

"I know that. I really know that," she said as she sat up, leaning on her elbow. "We don't have to do anything. But God help me, Clark, I want to," she told him softly.

He leaned up on his elbow so they were face to face. "I don't want to scare you..." He lifted his free hand and touched her face, threading her hair through his fingers. "... but I want that, too."

"I'm scared," she admitted.

"I know." He continued to play with her hair, moving it behind her ear. "I made a decision a long time ago that because I was different, I would have to be careful who I shared an experience like that with. Lana and I were together six years before we ever slept together. Yeah, we started dating when we were fifteen..." He shrugged, grinning widely. "Mayson and I were together six months before we were intimate." He watched his fingers trail down her arm. She was wearing a tank top, exposing her creamy shoulders. "I've met other women I was attracted to. Some I've thought about that with." His eyes met hers. "But I have never met a woman that I was attracted to the way I am to you." His voice was low, husky with pent-up desire. "When I look at you, I'm very glad I'm a man."

"I'm glad you're a man, too," she told him and grinned. He chuckled softly as he lay back down, bringing her with him. He wrapped his arm around her and squeezed tightly.

"God, lady, I'm glad I know you."

"I'm glad I know you." She held him around the waist, scooted a little closer, and threw her leg over his stomach.

"Even if it might kill me," he mumbled.

She giggled and sighed heavily. "I'm staying."

"I know." He kissed the top of her head, then closed his eyes. He might have to take a swim in the Arctic at dawn, but he was going to hold this woman tonight.

Lois, too, was content where she was. Her libido screamed one thing, her mind another, and her heart still another. She'd figure it out, eventually.

They'd figure it out together. She closed her eyes and relaxed for the first time that night.

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Thankfully Lois was gone when Clark woke up, but it still didn't help ease the tightly wound tension in his body. Holding Lois the way he had for those few blissful hours reminded him painfully that it had been a while since he'd had sex. It also reminded him how much he missed it.

Well, maybe that wasn't exactly true. He \*did\* miss having sex, though right now he didn't want just a quick physical release. He wanted so much more, which he was fairly certain he could attain in a relationship with Lois Lane. He'd admitted to his mother right before their first date that he already loved Lois. It wasn't a lie. He did love her, baggage and all. It didn't matter to him what she might have to deal with in order to heal. It didn't matter to him if it was months before she was ready to progress past friendly affection. It might be heart wrenching, physically painful, and frustrating beyond belief, but for her, he'd wait as long as she needed him to.

He showered and went to find the woman of his dreams. She'd showered and dressed already.

"Hey," she told him when he came into the kitchen.

"Hey," he said, offering her a bright smile. "I missed you when I woke up." He told her as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"I thought I'd let you sleep. You looked so peaceful." She looked up at him, her eyes studying his.

He lowered his coffee cup and lifted his hand to touch her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Will you go out with me tonight?"

"Can we fly?"

He chuckled softly. "We can."

"Then yes. And I want to do something fun. Really fun," she told him as she started toward the door. "The twins are watching TV in the den."

"Yeah, I saw them. Are you going into the city with me this morning?"

"If you don't mind," she said as she stopped to look back at him. "We have to be at the Hall of Justice at ten anyway..."

"Maybe after the hearing we can go look at another car. You guys need one here."

"Perry won't mind you ducking out on him?"

"Are you kidding? He's going to get a nice little bowtie to put on the Luthor story." Clark took another drink of his coffee.

"True. Down in ten," she called as she went through the doorway.

Clark went out to the den to say good morning to his kids before they left. Twenty minutes later his mom had come to sit with the twins so they could head to the city. Lois hung out at the Planet until time to go the hearing at the Hall of Justice, looking into information on Lex's personal physician. If something hinky was going on, Mad Dog was determined to sniff it out.

As the time for the hearing approached, Lois became more agitated. She snapped at both Jack and Jimmy before they left, which she immediately apologized for. Perry gave her a warm hug and told her to hang tough. On the way to the hearing Clark

had to grasp her hand to keep her from biting her nails.

"It's going to be okay," he told her.

"Yeah." She pinched the bridge of her nose to relieve a bit of the stress slamming into her especially hard today. "I just want it over with."

Clark rubbed her hand with his thumb as he made the final turn toward the parking garage next to the Hall of Justice. They had to sit in the Jeep for several moments to allow Lois the time to work up enough nerve to get out. There was a huge crowd of media already gathered outside the building waiting to hear the fate of Lex Luthor. Wisely, Clark took them in through the back entrance. Mayson had called him earlier and instructed him to do so in order to save Lois a little stress. The hearing itself was going to be bad enough. Luthor's crimes were going to be detailed for the court. And even though the DA had agreed to a plea bargain, the judge could decide against it and order Luthor to be bound over for trial.

"How are you doing?" Mayson asked Lois when they made it to where she was standing outside the door of the courtroom.

"I'm... here," she said. "But you didn't have to be."

"Of course I did," Mayson replied with a smile as she rubbed Lois' shoulder. "I've been with you guys from the beginning and I'll be here until the end."

"Do you realize that might be years?" Lois asked her. "It won't be over until the bastard's dead."

"Then I'm glad we're friends."

Lois gave Mayson a smile of appreciation as they were called in to speak with the DA. The deal was outlined and he briefly explained what would happen during the hearing.

And before Lois was truly ready, they were watching the bailiff bring a shackled Lex Luthor into the room. She shivered involuntarily as his cold eyes met hers, but she didn't look away. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He leered at Clark, then sat down beside his attorney. The judge entered and court was called into session.

The district attorney was a middle-aged man with a proven track record for getting justice. He'd helped put away some of the biggest criminals in the city, but this case was, by far, the biggest of his career. He outlined several of the charges against Luthor, including fraud, racketeering, kidnapping, and murder.

"This brief says that you are adding additional charges," the judge said as he read over a paper in his hand.

"Yes, Your Honor," the DA replied. "We have charged Mr. Luthor with kidnapping, criminal neglect, imprisonment, medical interference, assault, nine counts of rape, and four counts of sodomy."

Clark's eyes widened just a bit when the new charges were read. He'd known Luthor had raped her, but sodomy? That was...

Luthor truly was a sadistic individual.

Beside him Lois bounced her leg at a frantic pace, her hands nearly white where she was squeezing the edge of her seat on either side of her.

"All charges are in relation to a single victim?" the judge wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Is she in the courtroom?"

"Yes. But, Your Honor, we are respectfully requesting that she not be acknowledged. I will read the statements myself detailing the crimes which led to these additional charges," the prosecutor said.

"Objection," came the quick response of Sheldon Bender, Luthor's attorney. "My client is entitled to face his accuser."

Lois' leg stopped and she held her breath.

"Come now, Mr. Bender," the judge said. "Your client is well aware who his accuser is."

"Yes, Your Honor, but Mr. Luthor states that he will reject this deal unless his accuser gives a statement."

Spots danced in front of her eyes as Lois sat there. Mayson had assured her she wouldn't have to speak at this hearing. There was more than enough evidence to support her claims in the form of statements they'd attained from different people that worked for Lex. Now that the monster was behind bars, everyone he'd ever wronged was coming forward. Since his initial arrest, charges had been added almost daily to the already incredibly long and mind boggling list of atrocities.

"Are you kidding me?" came the remark from the bench. "Mr. Luthor, don't you think you've humiliated this poor woman enough?"

"Your Honor!" Bender protested.

The judge held up his hand. "Relax. I am not making her do this. And just for the record, Mr. Luthor, I don't care if you reject this deal or not. You will be bound over for trial and I can assure you there is more than enough evidence to present to a jury."

"Then my client pleads not guilty to all charges."

"Suit yourself," the judge told them.

Luthor tugged on Bender's sleeve and the balding man leaned down to listen to his client for a moment. Whatever Luthor said caused him a great deal of surprise. He argued with him for a moment in hushed tones.

"Mr. Bender," the judge spoke out.

Bender sighed heavily, then looked back at the man on the bench. "Your Honor, my client wishes to take a brief recess to speak with the DA."

"I don't think we need a recess."

"He's willing to agree to a new deal." Bender looked toward the DA. "One I'm sure the prosecutor would be only too happy to hear."

"With the court's permission," the DA spoke up. "The state is willing to hear him out."

"Very well," the judge said. "You have ten minutes." The bang of the gavel gave them a brief reprieve.

Lois turned to Mayson with wide eyes. "I can't do this," she said fiercely.

"Relax. You're not." Mayson jumped up and went to find out what that monster was up to.

Lois practically ran from the room. Clark followed her out to where she was pacing back and forth in the hall.

"I can't do it, Clark," she said as she looked up at him, not slowing her journey across the tile.

"You don't have to."

But that didn't make her feel any better. Her short heels clicked as she nearly stomped down the hall then back again. Clark recognized her need to vent some and wisely stayed across the hall. Mayson came out a few minutes later, a grim expression on her face.

"You were right, Lois. The bastard's mad."

"What does he want?" Clark asked her.

"He's willing to plead guilty on all charges if she details for the court what he did to her."

"NO!" Lois said immediately.

"Lois, he's willing to take whatever sentence the judge deems fit."

Her eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"He's willing to lay his life on the line."

"Just to hear me say it out loud?" Lois shook her head in disbelief. "That sick, sick, twisted, perverted... bastard!" She walked a few paces away and threw up her hands. "Either way I'll have to do it. If I don't go in there now and do it, I'll have to at his trial."

"Lois, you don't have to do this at all," Clark told her.

"Yes, Clark, I do. If I don't, he'll get away with it. Is that what you want?"

"I want you healthy and able to breathe every morning when you wake up."

"I want that, too," she said. "But it won't happen if I don't do this."

"Lois, he has so many charges on him..."

"Clark, I know..." She shoved a hand through her hair in frustration. Stopping a few feet away from him and Mayson, she stared toward the exit where she could see the gang of reporters on the other side of the door. This was absolutely not what she'd wanted to do today, but... "It's like pulling the Band-Aid off fast," she declared when she turned around. "Let's go send this monster to hell."

Clark watched helplessly as she walked past him, back inside the courtroom. "Mayson, you can't let her do this."

"I can't stop her," the woman told him. He was about to protest further, but she placed a hand on his chest. "Clark, you might not want her to do this, but I think she has to."

"But..."

"If you can't handle it, stay out here." Mayson left him standing there arguing with himself.

The absolute last thing he wanted to do was go in that room and listen to Lois talk about the things Luthor did to her. But he couldn't stay here and let her do this alone. Against his better judgment, he took a deep breath and went inside.

The unorthodox situation was explained and the judge agreed to pass sentence after Lois testified.

"Now, you understand that you do not have to do this, Ms. Lane," the judge said after she'd taken her oath.

"As long as you understand that I do," she said, looking straight at the graying man.

He seemed to understand completely and nodded his head. "Very well. Let the record show that Lois Lane is ready to give her statement."

Lois sat down, took a deep breath, and looked straight at Lex. The DA stood up and walked closer.

"Ms. Lane, we will keep this informal. You just tell the court what you wish to say."

"Could you move?" He'd stopped between her and Lex. If she was going to do this, she was going to look that devil in the eyes.

"Excuse me?"

"I need you to move. If he wants to hear me say it, then I need to look at him when I do." The DA, too, seemed to understand and moved back over near his table. She met and held Lex's gaze while she began to speak. "Just so you know," she said directly to him. "This will be the abridged version. I won't drag this out for hours so you can get whatever sick, perverted pleasure you hope to receive from it." Lex gave a nod of his head, a huge grin on his face. "I met Mr. Luthor at a charity event several years ago. He agreed to an interview. During that interview he was charming and impressive, and I agreed to see him again. We saw one another over the course of few months before I shared dinner with him at his penthouse one evening. The next morning I woke up in his bed. At the time I thought I'd had too much champagne and lost my mind. Since then I've learned that Lex himself helped me to lose my mind. I was drugged."

"Objection," Bender said.

"Your Honor," the DA protested.

"Mr. Bender, the agreement was that she speak freely," the judge reminded the attorney.

Bender sighed and sat down as Lex tugged on his sleeve.

"Please continue, Ms. Lane," the judge told her.

"Just weeks later I found myself married to Lex, another affect of the drugs. And it became painfully clear why he'd wanted to get married. The first night he drugged me, he had Dr. Paul Lang inseminate me. Of course, the drugs were supposed to make me believe the children were his. I did until much later." She tucked a wayward hair behind her ear, still intent on looking

at Lex. "During our \*marriage\* I was drugged daily. Most of the time I didn't know who I was or where I was. I was pregnant with twins I never bonded with because I was denied that right. I birthed those twins inside a room in the penthouse with nothing for pain. Lex needed a boy so my little girl was never acknowledged. Her birth was never registered. He needed my son to collect money from his other life, but my daughter was kept to control me. She was six weeks old the first time he threatened to kill her if I didn't perform oral sex on him."

Clark's brows shot toward his hair and he looked away. No wonder she felt like clawing men's eyes out!

"That became a weekly event. He'd hold his hand around her neck until I fell to my knees in front of him." Lois paused to allow her hatred to give her enough strength to continue. "I discovered the drugs in my juice and stopped taking them. When I became lucid enough to think for myself, I got my daughter out of there. When he discovered she was gone, he hit me, killed the babysitter, then framed me for murder."

"Ms. Lane, I have to ask you to describe..."

"I know," she told the DA, interrupting him. "After I was off the drugs for a while, things started coming back to me. The first time I figured out things weren't quite what they seemed was on our wedding night. He had sex with his secretary. Or at least the secretary for that week. He went through a lot of those. I'd check missing persons reports. I'm sure some of those women have never gone home again."

"Objection!"

"Mr. Bender, please sit down," the judge told him.

"Continue," he said to Lois.

"Of course, the sex with the secretary was after he'd raped me. I realized things didn't feel quite right, so I told him no." She glared at Lex, conveying in her dark eyes just what she thought of him. "No was not a word I was allowed to use. We never had a conventional relationship. I slept in one room, he in another. I slept alone, he slept with whomever he wanted to. The night he found out I was pregnant he raped me. Told me it was a reward for being such a good girl."

Clark's leg was the one bouncing now. How had she lived through that?

"After that, he left me alone until Lang told him I'd reached my first trimester. He celebrated that by holding me down across his desk. That was the first time he sodomized me." Her eyes jumped to Clark briefly. He looked miserable. Why couldn't he have stayed outside? He'd never want to touch her again after today, let alone go out with her tonight.

Who was she kidding? She wouldn't want to go tonight. She was going to want to spend the next three days taking scalding showers and trying to scrub her skin off. She was already beginning to literally feel that monster.

She went on to describe each and every time Lex raped her, leaving out how those encounters had made her feel or the fact that she'd bled for hours after the last one. She'd hid that from him, hoping at the time that she'd lose the baby. Then she couldn't have imagined a sweeter revenge. But now... He'd made that one count the most. He'd made her scream in pain and further humiliated her because he'd made her watch while he raped another woman just an hour later.

Lois stopped talking when Clark shot to his feet and hurried from the room. Lex turned to watch the other man leave, then grinned even wider when he looked back at her. Lois glared at him again.

"After all you've done, I'm still here. But look at you. Getting your jollies listening to the woman you kidnapped and raped repeatedly talk about what you did to her. I hope you enjoyed it because unless you become big Bubba's bitch on the inside, this is the last time you'll ever get your jollies, and never again from a woman." She finished with a satisfied sigh when she

saw the expression on Lex's face cloud over. "Is that enough?" she asked the DA.

"More than enough," was the answer.

"You can step down," the judge said.

Lois stood and held her head high as she walked past Lex and Bender. She thought about going after Clark, but she'd started this. She had to see it through to the end. Mayson reached up to pat her shoulder when she sat down.

The judge sat there for several long moments before he looked up. "I have never had an accused man agree to lay himself at the mercy of the court just so he could hear something so..." He just shook his head. "Mr. Luthor, your request tells me that you are indeed a very disturbed man. However, because you have chosen to put yourself in such a position, I am inclined to pass judgment quickly and firmly. The people of this state deserve closure. For your victims, you owe them nothing short of justice. I am not saying it is right or even the best thing to do. However, I feel it would be a burden on the state to house you for the remainder of your life. Considering the evils you've perpetrated, it's an expense I'm not willing to inflict on my constituents." He picked up a pen and wrote for several seconds. "Stand while I pass judgment." After Luthor was on his feet, the judge looked him in the eyes. "Lex Luthor, in accordance with the laws of this state and in light of the nature of your crimes, by your own admission, New Troy seeks justice. You are hereby sentenced to die by lethal injection for your crimes at a date and time no more than ten years from this date, barring appeals fail to render a different outcome. May God have mercy on your soul."

The bang of the gavel resounded loudly, echoing inside Lois' head. It was her turn to get up and hurry from the room. Clark was standing just outside the bathroom with his head lying against the wall. He looked up when she breezed past him into the women's room. She barely made it to the toilet before she emptied the contents of her stomach.

"Did you hear?" Mayson asked Clark outside when she made it to his side.

"No."

"Lethal injection."

Part of him wanted to cheer. But his more rational side wouldn't allow him to celebrate any man's impending doom. Not even Lex Luthor's. He was more angry that men snapped and became like Lex Luthor. Of course, he didn't really believe Luthor had snapped. He believed he'd always been rotten.

The ladies room door opened and Lois stepped out. Her face was white, her hands were shaking.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked her.

"Are you?" she wanted to know as she stepped closer to him.

He offered her a sad smile and reached out to cup her cheek. "I'm better now that it's over."

"Me, too," she said and wiped her face with the paper towel she was holding. She noticed he was holding a towel, too. "It made you sick?" she asked in a whisper.

"Lois..." he breathed. It had made him sick. For the first time since he was little, Clark had thrown up. But they didn't need to talk about that now. Not here.

"Lois, you were amazing," Mayson told her, interrupting their exchange. "Strong beyond anything I could have ever imagined." She reached up to clap Clark on the upper part of his arm. "You might want to take lessons from this woman."

"Believe me," Clark told her. "I am constantly taking notes." He held out his hand and was relieved when Lois took it. "I think we're going home," he told Mayson.

"I'm filing a motion Monday for an expedient decision on Lois' legal state," she called after them.

Lois stopped and turned toward the other woman. "Thank you."

"Thank you. You made sure today that a serious threat to

society was put away."

With a sad nod, Lois tightened her grip on Clark's hand and allowed him to walk her out. When they settled in the Jeep, he turned toward her. He was about to say something when she spoke.

"We need to get to the Planet. I have to write this up before I lose my nerve."

"Don't you think that can wait?"

"Clark, I \*need\* to do this." Her expression begged him to understand. She couldn't explain, just felt that if she didn't do this now, she'd never be able to do it.

He finally sighed and twisted back toward the wheel. "Okay," he said and started the car. As he drove, he recalled the things she'd said. Mayson was right. Lois was a very strong woman. She hadn't needed to do what she'd done. Yet she'd sat there, stared her captor- her rapist- in the eyes and told everyone what was done to her. He knew how much it had cost her to do it, what it was going to cost her. She'd done it and now she'd tell the world she'd done it.

They pulled into the parking garage of the Planet and climbed out of the car. The subdued mood clouding around them felt stifling. Clark watched as Lois seemed to walk on autopilot into the building. Nothing was said on the elevator ride to the newsroom.

"Use my computer," Clark told her and held out the chair for her.

She gave him a grateful smile and sat down. "Why don't you write a tag for the article? You were there, too. It would be a great addition."

She wouldn't look at him, but he heard the desperation in her voice. Why desperate? "I'll see if Jimmy will let me use his computer."

"I can use his..."

Clark placed his hand on her shoulder. "Stay. Please," he said. She nodded and turned her eyes to the screen. He left her and walked over to Jimmy's desk. Jimmy relinquished his station and went to say hi to Lois. With a sigh, Clark shrugged out of his jacket and got to work.

Lois spoke with Jimmy, then pulled open the bottom drawer on the desk to put her bag inside, smiling when she saw how neat Clark's workstation was. Her eyes lit on the picture on the corner of the desk of her two babies. That was what she was working so hard for, she thought as she called up a program on the computer. For them and the man across the room. Glancing at Clark she felt sick all over again. He must think her horrible and filthy now. How could she ever look at him again? He'd told her he was better now that it was over. What did that mean exactly? He'd been sick. Clark was Superman. Superman didn't get physically ill. Had it all repulsed him that badly? How much would her presence affect him now?

And why was it so important to know exactly what he'd been thinking? How he felt? More than anything else right now, that was what she wanted to know. Needed to know.

It was important because she was banking everything on that man. She wanted... something with him.

A life! She wanted a life with him, she admitted. No matter how irrational, she wanted a life with him. Was it possible now? Had she ruined everything?

Had Lex ruined everything? Had Lex ruined the rest of her life? Even now? Even though she was free of him?

But she'd never be completely free of Lex Luthor. He'd always haunt her, in some way, in some form, Lex would be with her for the rest of her life.

Right now, though, she was going to tell the world that at least one day it would be free of him.

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Sighing for what seemed like the hundredth time since they'd

gotten home, Clark was beginning to wonder if he should see Bernie about getting an oxygen tank. It would probably be easier to have a steady supply. He and Lois had written up their pieces on the day's events and headed home. She'd told him she just wasn't up to looking at cars today, even though he hadn't asked. Just as they pulled into the driveway, she'd also told him she wasn't in the mood to go out either. He'd known she wouldn't be. He also knew she was hurting.

Martha knew when they got home, too. She'd looked devastated because Lois was in pain, but she hadn't said anything. She'd graciously cooked dinner for the small family and offered to take the twins home with her and Jonathan tonight. Lois, however, said she wanted them to stay with her. She managed to smile and laugh a bit as she played in the pool with Collin and Perry after the kitchen was cleaned. And even though she included Clark in their play, she still wouldn't look him in the eyes. She insisted on handling bedtime duties, so Clark was relegated to staring at the wall in the den because he still hadn't picked out a new television. He'd also left his old one for Jack and Denny. Maybe he'd head to the electronics store tomorrow. At least with a TV, he could have watched the game.

Deciding that working on the furniture in the office was better than doing nothing, he got up and headed that way. He'd sanded the last bookshelf and was cleaning up when he looked up to see Lois standing in the doorway. "I was beginning to think you had already gone to bed."

"I have too much on my mind."

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. For the first time since they'd left the Hall of Justice, she held his gaze. "That's understandable."

"How about you?"

"What?" He picked up a towel to wipe his hands.

"What's on your mind?"

He cocked his head so that he could really look at her. She wanted the truth and nothing less would do.

"Please tell me," she said. "Because it can't be worse than I'm imagining. I realize your opinion of me has probably changed now."

"What?"

"Excuse me for being raped repeatedly." She held up her hand to stop him from speaking. "I knew if I told you exactly what he'd done, it would make a difference."

"Lois, it does matter than you suffered. I hate that you did. You didn't ask for any of that. But what difference is it supposed to make? I feel the same way now that I did before today."

"It's made some kind of difference. You didn't even speak to me on the way to the Planet. Or on the ride up to the newsroom."

"Oh, Lois," Clark said as he tossed the towel on one of the shelves. "It wasn't because I didn't want to. I didn't think you wanted to talk. You seemed so distant."

"I was distant. I was thinking about how much what you heard was going to effect us."

He walked over to her and lifted his hand to cup her cheek. "I hope it brings us closer together."

"How? How could it?" she asked and turned around to walk back into the den. "After what you heard, after all of that, how can you stand to look at me, much less touch me?" She stood in front of the fireplace, staring at the screen, her arms crossed over her body.

Clark walked up behind her and gently wrapped his arms around her. His hands gripped her wrists, his face rested on her shoulder. "You mean like this?" He smoothed his hands over hers, back up her forearms. "Like this?" He rubbed his cheek against hers. "Or this?"

With each touch she'd tensed. When his face touched hers, a sob escaped. Then another.

"Or how about like this?" Clark asked as he turned her

toward him and pulled her against his chest. She slowly began to cry. Her arms unfolded and she reached around him to grasp the back of his shirt. He held her while she let go one more round of grief and frustration. When she calmed, Clark ran his hands up and down her back. "Nothing, *\*nothing\** could change how I feel about you."

She pushed away from him and wiped her face as she put some distance between them. "You can't honestly tell me that you weren't a little sick listening to what you heard."

"Yes, I was. Physically. That's why I left the courtroom. But, Lois, Luthor forced you to do those things. If you think *\*you\** somehow make me sick because of those horrible things, you have a lot to learn about me." She slowly turned to face him. "I was and I still am horrified that he... humiliated you like that. To think of how badly he hurt you makes me want to forget I'm Superman and kill him myself. But this idea you're trying to create is not going to happen. I could never be sickened by you. After all of that, you're still here and you're still beautiful and..."

"Desirable?"

"You have no idea how much," he told her as took a step in her direction. "When you came to me last night, and let me hold you..." He took a breath. "That was incredible. The trust you put in me... I told you last night and I'll tell you again, except this time I'll say it clearly so you can't mistake what I mean... I am incredibly attracted to you. I find you so desirable, it hurts at times." He moved to stand just inches from her. "And I want you as much now as I did last night."

"How can you, Clark?" she groaned. "How can you possibly want to be where he's been?"

Clark sighed heavily and glanced away from her. "My first instinct is to kiss you senseless and make love to you right here, right now." Her brows crept toward her hair and his eyes went back to hers. "I know that's not possible. But I promise you, I *\*want\** you. I want to make love to you, but when I do... And yes, I said when. *\*When\** I do, it will be *\*nothing\** like that." He stepped a little closer, nearly touching her. "I want to replace those memories with wonderful, exciting memories that leave little doubt about where I want to be."

She stood there staring up at him, searching his eyes for any hint that he didn't mean what he'd just said. His words set her on fire. She wanted him to make love to her, too. Yet she was terrified. Although the conviction she saw and felt from him left anticipation deep in the pit of her stomach. He'd do what he said. One day, Clark Kent would replace those nightmares with sweet memories. Finally she smiled. "Well, okay then."

"Okay then," he replied with a smile of his own. "Now, since we didn't get to go on our date tonight, what do you say we do something here?"

"Like what?"

"We can play cards or a board game or..."

"Look at cars on the internet?"

"Race you to the computer." His eyes flashed, but it was too late. She was halfway to the kitchen. The laptop was on the counter. They decided to set it up on the coffee table so they could sit on the couch and settled to spend the next couple of hours haggling over which vehicle would be best. Clark was relieved that another breakdown was behind them. Patience, he reminded himself. He needed tons of patience. As long as he had that, his time would come. The time when he'd be allowed to hold Lois the way he truly wanted to.

As they sat there looking over the choices on the computer, Lois kept snatching glances at the man beside her. Jack was right. Clark was one of a kind. She wasn't entirely convinced that he could get past what he'd heard, but she had too much vested in him not to find out just how deep his feelings ran. She'd lost her heart to this man and couldn't ignore it even if she wanted to.

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‘Even though the sentence seems to have been dealt unbelievably fast, the public is screaming it was the right path to take. When the evils of Lex Luthor were first revealed, disbelief swept across the city. After all, he was the biggest benefactor Metropolis has ever had. As the evidence came forth that indeed Lex Luthor was everything he’d been described to be, the public demanded justice. Well, yesterday they got it.’

Lois turned from watching the television broadcast from where she sat at Clark’s desk.

“I like this a lot better,” Clark said as he held up a copy of the Daily Planet. The next morning nearly every news channel was broadcasting the final chords of Lex Luthor’s swan song. Lois’ article was splashed across the front of the Planet with Clark’s sidebar below the fold.

“You know,” Perry said as he stepped out of his office. “I think you two should try a little piece together,” he told Lois and Clark.

“Funny you should mention that,” Lois started. After perusing the net for vehicles for a while the night before, she’d mentioned that the only thing she regretted in the whole Luthor, Delcont situation was that Bill Church seemed to be getting away with way too much. Clark agreed that the Costmart CEO was as dirty as Luthor. That sent them surfing through the net where they uncovered several inconsistencies, which was easy considering they knew where to look. They decided they would work together to bring down the final leg of criminal activity in Metropolis in the form of Bill Church and Intergang.

For the next week and half, the team of Lane and Kent worked to root out all of Church’s dirty activities. Martha was only too happy to sit with the twins. She saw the work as therapy for Lois and secretly hoped the extra time with Clark helped them grow closer.

The first venture of the new reporting team was as volatile as it was successful. They had a huge argument over creative differences just two days into the investigation. By the fifth day, Lois was the one to say she was sorry first, citing she missed Clark too much to care who was right or wrong anymore. That led to an emotional apology from Clark and a short, late night date out by the pool. They simply sat staring at the water and holding hands- reconnecting. The next day they were on fire. The Friday before Father’s Day the first Lane/Kent byline graced the front page in huge sixty-point headline.

“Let’s hope this isn’t a one-shot wonder,” Perry said as they stood around the newsroom celebrating the fall of Intergang.

“Maybe not,” Lois said as she cut her eyes at Clark. They had a date that night and all she could think about was getting out of there so she could get ready.

“Don’t forget,” Clark said as he looked around at Jack and Jimmy. “Cook-out at our place on Sunday.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Jack told him. “And we’re swimming, right?”

“Swimming, eating, maybe playing a game of basketball.” He was going to put up a goal over the garage doors tomorrow.

“We’ll be there,” Jack told him. “Early. Your mom invited us to breakfast.” He patted Clark’s shoulder and was gone.

“She invited me, too, buddy.”

“I’ll be sure to sleep in,” Lois joked as she stood up.

“Oh, funny, Lane,” Jimmy said as he wrapped an arm around her neck in a mock choke. “How long’s it been since you had a noogie?”

“Don’t you dare!” Lois said loudly.

Clark’s phone rang and he laughed as he picked it up. “Clark Kent.” His smile faded as he listened for a moment. “When?” He listened again. “Yes. She’ll be there.” Lois was waiting patiently when he hung up. “Lucy is asking for you.”

“What?”

“She’s asking for you.”

Lois grabbed her bag and took off for the elevator. Clark just made it through the doors before they closed.

“I’m glad I’m Superman,” he said with a chuckle. She grinned at him, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. Her mind was on her sister.

Luckily traffic cooperated and they made it across town to the hospital where her sister was receiving treatment in less than forty minutes.

“Ms. Lane,” said the charge nurse as she met them at the front desk. “Your sister has made quite a turn.”

They walked along beside her toward the wing Lucy stayed in. “Why such a drastic turn?”

“Well, it’s not exactly drastic.”

“If she’s lucid enough to want to see me, it’s quite drastic,” Lois argued. “I was here a couple weeks ago and she barely knew me.”

“After the detox, her mind cleared. Her new treatment has succeeded our expectations.”

“What new treatment?”

The nurse stopped them. “Your father has been treating her.”

“My father?!”

“Believe me, we had our doubts. However, his treatment has produced visible results.” She turned and opened the door on the closed wing. “As you will see.”

When they stepped into the room occupied by her sister, Lucy looked around and smiled. “Lois,” she breathed.

“Lucy,” Lois whispered as she looked at her baby sister. Her dark eyes were wide and clear. Moving around to sit across from Lucy at the small table, Lois reached across to grasp her sister’s hands. “How are you?”

“I’m better,” she replied. “Really better. My mind is clear for the first time in a long time.”

“I’m so glad to see you,” Lois told her softly, tears filling her eyes.

They shared a wide smile before Lucy’s eyes glanced up at Clark. “Who’s your friend?”

“Lucy, this is Clark.” Lois motioned for him to come closer. “This is Collin and Perry’s father.”

“What? I thought Lex... Perry? Did you get remarried and have another baby?”

Lois laughed softly. She forgot that Lucy didn’t know everything.

“Lois, you’ve been in prison. When did you have time to get pregnant?”

“Lucy, Collin has a twin sister- Perry.” Lois was about to dig in her bag when Clark flipped out a photograph. She gave him a grateful glance and took the picture to show Lucy. “See?”

“Oh,” Lucy gasped as she saw the image. “Look at them!”

“Lex is a maniac,” Lois told her. She gave Lucy the abridged version of the past few years and when she was done, Lucy looked back down at the kids in the picture.

“They’re gorgeous.” Her eyes lifted to meet Lois’. “I miss Collin. He kept me sane for so long.”

“Maybe I can bring him to see you.”

“Both of them?”

“Yeah.”

Lucy looked up at Clark. “I’m really glad you’re their father, and I don’t even know you.”

“Well, why don’t we change that?” Clark stepped forward and sat down in the other chair. “Clark Kent,” he said and held out his hand.

Lucy took his hand and smiled. “Lucy Lane. And I’m really glad I can remember that with clarity now.”

“Me, too.” Clark held her hand just a beat, then drew away. “Can you remember any juicy stories I can use to blackmail Lois... you know, just in case I might need to one day?”

“Don’t listen to him, Luce.” Lois said as she pushed his

shoulder. “He’s a practical joker who loves to give me a hard time.”

Lucy laughed softly, but proceeded to tell Clark a story she did, in fact, remember about her sister. For the next hour or so the sisters caught up and included Clark in their conversation.

Lois held Clark’s arm as they walked out as he smiled down at her. “How do you feel?”

“Oh, Clark, I can’t describe how I feel.”

“Well, however it is, I love seeing it.”

She stopped them beside the car and grinned up at him. “Wait till you see me after our date tonight.”

“Still want to go?”

“Are you kidding? If we don’t go, I won’t talk to you for a week.” She patted his cheek and held out her hand. “Give me the keys. I’m driving.”

“Did I ever tell you I love an assertive woman?”

“No, but get used to it,” she replied as she took the keys. “I’m the most assertive woman you’ve ever met.”

“I have no doubt,” he said and climbed into the car. They both kept grins on their faces as they headed home.

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Clark told Lois to dress comfortably because they were going to ‘play’ on their date, whatever that meant. He also told her they were going to be outside and since it was hot, she chose a stylish pair of shorts and the burgundy blouse Clark loved so much. He hadn’t told her that, of course, but she hadn’t missed the admiration in his eyes when she’d worn it the first time. She chose solid white sneakers with low-cut socks, stuffed a little money, even though she knew she wouldn’t need it, and her ID in her pocket and went to find her date.

In the middle of the den stood three of the best looking people she’d ever seen. Clark, too, wore shorts, khaki with a light blue shirt buttoned down over a muscle shirt. Both Perry and Collin were dressed to match their father- khaki shorts, blue shirts, and white sneakers.

Clark nudged Collin and he stepped over in front of Lois. He held up a white rose she hadn’t seen before now. “Mommy, will go out wif us?”

“Oh, honey, I’d love to.” She took the rose and smoothed a hand over the side of his face. When she straightened up, she smiled at Clark.

“I kinda’ thought it would be fun to hang out with all of my favorite people.”

“It would be terrific fun,” she agreed.

“Mommy, you look purdy,” Perry told her as she reached to take the little girl’s hand.

“So do you, Perry bug.”

They piled into the Jeep and headed for the park where she and Clark had been on their first date. They walked along behind the twins as they explored their surroundings, running from one new thing to another. Dinner was corn dogs and French fries from one of the vendors at the carnival after several rides. They took a short boat ride to give their food time to settle before going to play a few of the games. More rides, a walk on the trails, and a brief perusal of the latest band playing at the amphitheater before they headed for the Jeep to go home. Both kids were fast asleep by the time they pulled into the driveway. Lois carried Perry up to bed followed by Clark with Collin. They tucked them both in, gave out goodnight kisses, then stepped into the hall.

“Well, Mr. Kent, that was the best fun I’ve had on a date in a long time.”

Clark smiled as he stuck his hands in his pockets. “I aim to please.”

“Do you now?” She walked slowly toward her door. “How about joining me for lunch tomorrow?”

“If you don’t mind stopping off with me to pick out a television. I’m pretty tired of that empty wall down there.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said. Her smile faded a bit and she reached out to touch his face. “Until tomorrow, Mr. Kent.” And before he knew what happened, she stepped forward and kissed him softly.

His mouth was still hanging open when she closed her door. His lips still tingled when he settled on the side of his bed a few minutes later. He’d been on stunned autopilot as he dressed for bed. With a huge grin and a satisfied sigh, he fell back onto his mattress. “Wow,” he managed to breathe and fell asleep a short time later with a wide smile.

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Sunday morning dawned clear and beautiful- the perfect day for a cook-out. Clark and his father had spent most of Saturday making sure the yard was perfect, the pool was clean, and everything was set for their guests. Martha served breakfast on the patio, going all out to make Jack, Denny, and Jimmy feel at home. The small group ate, talked, and laughed as they shared their morning meal. By mid-morning Collin and Perry were ready to go swimming. Clark made sure they were loaded down with sunscreen and turned them loose with Jack and Denny. He sat with Jimmy and Lois and talked while his parents went to visit with Perry and Alice.

By noon, the grill was smoking and more guests had shown up. Perry and Alice ventured across the street and took up camp with the older couple of the house. Denny was inside discovering that a toddler had mad skills on a video game he loved, while the younger Perry shared tea with Jack. Jimmy set up a computer for Lois in the office while she talked with Mayson and became acquainted with Dan.

Dinner was eaten under the new canopy Clark had put up the night before to block the sun a bit. Thankfully it wasn’t an overly hot day.

“Okay, okay,” Jonathan announced when most everyone was done eating. “My wife informed me that this year I had to pass the Kent torch to my son, since he’s a father now. To me, and to him, he’s been a father since we first got little Perry, but...” He waved a hand in indecisiveness. “Anyway...” He took the gift Martha held out to him and passed it to Clark. “Happy Father’s Day, son.”

“Dad, you guys didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Yeah, well, you know your mother,” Jonathan told him, causing everyone to laugh.

Clark opened the gift and grinned. “On second thought, I’ll take this one.”

“Damn straight. Those cost me a pretty penny.”

“Season tickets to the upcoming season of Knights football,” Clark said as he held up the item in his hand.

“Hey, who’s your buddy, CK?” Jimmy asked.

“Don’t worry, son,” Jonathan told him. He tossed Jimmy and Jack both a box. “You can go with that sorry joker.”

“But I’m not a father,” Jimmy protested.

“No, but you’re my son’s friend,” Martha said with a smile. “Enjoy!”

“Hey, wow! Mrs. K, Mr. K, this is too much,” Jack spoke up.

“Now, as far as we’re concerned, you \*are\* a father. He might be your brother, but you’re taking care of him,” Martha said.

“Speaking of which,” Denny said and held out a small box to Jack. When his brother looked at him with questioning eyes, Denny pushed it toward him. “Open it.” There was a card inside with a date and time on it. “Your group’s playing the showcase at Centennial Park.”

“What?” Jack and his group had been trying to get in the showcase for months. It was where all the hottest talent in the city came to show off their skills. It was also the jumping board for several successful careers.

“Happy Father’s Day, Jack,” Denny told him.

Jack looked as if he'd cry, but smiled at his brother instead. "This is cool."

"Well, since everyone else is giving out their Father's Day gifts," Mayson spoke up. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small box to give Dan.

"Is it season tickets so I can join Clark there for the football games?" he asked enthusiastically, which caused another round of laughter. His wide grin faded into a shocked expression when he realized what the picture he was looking meant. "Really?" he asked Mayson.

"Really. I wanted to be sure so I waited. I know you missed the first sonogram..."

"Sonogram?" Lois asked.

Dan turned his picture around. "Looks like I might be a daddy, too," he said with tears in his eyes. Everyone cheered and congratulated the couple.

After the excitement died down, Clark gave his father the keys to his new mower. Jonathan had been miserable with nothing to do all day, so Clark bought him a riding mower and all the accessories to take care of the property. But his real gift was for both of his parents- a weekend away, at a nice place in the mountains about a hundred miles north. He and Lois, Jack and Jimmy, along with Mayson, had gone together to give Perry and Alice a similar gift, which humbled the other couple to no end. Jonathan also received a couple of hand-drawn pictures from his grandkids, which he raved about. They had pictures for every man there as well, including their father. Clark hugged and kissed them both, declaring their gift the best yet. They both also had given him a new tie, very loud, very Clark.

As the afternoon wound down, Perry and Alice, along with the Kents, ventured across the street to play a game of pool in Perry's game room while the younger people stayed behind. Clark managed to get the other men out to the driveway to play a game of basketball. Mayson and Lois sat on the patio to watch and shout insults. Collin and Perry stood at the fence and watched, when they weren't drawing on the cement walk with their chalk.

Clark and Dan took on all three of the younger men and were holding their own pretty well. After shifting points back and forth, falling even once again, Clark stood bouncing the ball as he stared at the other guys.

"You know," he said. "We're making this too easy."

"Want to put up some stakes?" Jimmy asked him.

"Yeah," Clark said, still bouncing the ball. "Let's play for..."

"Losers buy all the beer for the poker game next week," Jack spoke up.

"We could do that, but that kinda' cuts Denny out," Clark said as his eyes moved from one man to the other. "Beer and... tuition."

"What?" Jack asked.

"Losers buy the beer for the poker game for us big guys and tuition to Barclay Academy for Denny."

"Clark, that's not even funny." Barclay Academy was the best high school in the city. To have Denny attend would be a dream come true. It would also be impossible. BA was as expensive as college.

"I happen to know the coach and he's looking for a catcher for the baseball team." Clark caught and held the ball. "If Denny can pass the entrance exam, he's in." He threw the ball at Jack. "That is if you lightweights can put the ball in the net."

Jack stared at Clark for a moment, then dropped the ball, making it bounce again. "Game on."

Clark grinned and went to work, but he refused to cheat by using his super powers. Jack and Jimmy were both quite skilled, proving to be more than he could handle at regular pace.

"Did you let us win?" Jack asked Clark.

"Jack, you know I wouldn't do that," he insisted.

"Yeah," Jack said.

"Double or nothing," Dan spoke up. "Losers have to cook steaks for the Fourth."

"Now you're talking," Jimmy spoke up.

"I got one better," Clark added as he reached into his pocket to pull out a set of keys. "If we lose, the keys to a nice used truck are Denny's, too."

Jack stopped bouncing the ball and looked at the older man. "Okay, what gives, CK?"

"Nothing. I just think that if Denny's gonna be a senior at one of the most prestigious schools in the city, he should have a car."

"Clark, I can't accept that," Jack spoke up.

"Jack," Denny whined.

"You haven't beaten us yet," Clark pointed out. "Now, bring your A-game." He gave the younger man another look and within minutes the men were tearing up the court. Clark fought hard, harder than he had the last game. But it wasn't enough. Without super help, he and Dan really were no match for Jack and Jimmy.

"This is too much," Jack told Clark as he stared up at him when their game was over.

"It's not enough," Clark replied. "An investment, remember? Besides, when your band wins that showcase, he's gonna need that truck to haul your sorry butt to all your gigs." Clark wrapped an arm around Jack's neck and pulled him closer to rub his head. They wrestled for a moment before Jack reached out and hugged Clark. He drew back just as quickly as he'd grabbed him and walked away.

"Is that what you wanted, CK?" Jimmy asked him.

"Yeah. Thanks, guys," he told Jimmy and Dan.

Lois had watched from her chair and when Clark went toward the cooler for a drink, she got up to go speak to him. "That was priceless," she informed him. "But why didn't you tell me about it? I could have helped."

"The whole school thing came about just yesterday. And the truck- I bought it from Dan this morning. He asked me if I knew anyone that might want it. I'm sorry I excluded you."

"I'm not. Well, I am, but..." She turned around to look at Jack and Denny talking. "The look on his face and that hug..." She turned back and hugged Clark much the same way Jack had done.

Clark was left to watch her hurry inside. If he'd known something like that would affect her that way, he might have done it a long time ago.

"Clark?"

He turned to face Mayson. "I wanted to say I'm sorry I sprang that announcement the way I did. I should have spoken with you first."

"I thought we had gotten past the awkward stage."

She smiled at him. "We have."

"Good." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "I'm thrilled for you two."

"Yeah, well, I won't be able to relax until the kid is twenty."

That caused Clark to laugh out loud. "At least he or she will be clean."

"Very funny, Kent."

He and Mayson shared another laugh as they joined the others. Lois came back a few moments later and rejoined the group. After talking and sharing a few drinks, a dinner of leftovers was enjoyed under the canopy. They all went swimming and eventually the day came to an end. It had been a very good Father's Day as far as Clark was concerned. He would sleep soundly tonight, he thought as he carried one of his sleepy children in to bed.

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After putting the kids to bed, Lois disappeared inside her room. A few moments later she was standing in Clark's doorway. "Clark?"

He looked around from dropping his glasses on his nightstand and smiled when he saw Lois. She'd already dressed for bed and was walking toward him slowly. She was also holding two gift-wrapped boxes. "Hey, you. I thought you were beat."

"Yeah, well..." She shrugged as she stepped up in front of him. "I, ah, I have a couple of gifts... I would have given them to you earlier, but I wanted to share these privately." She held up the boxes.

"Lois, you didn't have to get me anything."

"Just sit down and open them," she ordered.

The look in her eyes told Clark she was worried about how he'd feel about the gifts. Whatever was in the boxes he was sure he'd be thrilled. He took the boxes while he held her gaze, then settled on the edge of the bed. Lois slowly sat down beside him as he took the top off the first box. Inside was a book. Opening it, he found it was a photo album. Inside were pictures of the twins, obviously taken when they were younger. His questioning eyes went up to meet hers.

"Sara was a good person," she explained. "She knew I'd need those even if I didn't at the time."

Clark's eyes went back to the book. There were a couple of a very pregnant Lois and even a sonogram shot. Other pictures progressed from what was obviously the day they were born up until the age Perry had been when he got her.

"I wish there were pictures of Collin when he was with Lucy. There might be somewhere. I'll have to ask her." Lois touched the edge of a page. "Do you like it?"

"I love it. Thank you."

"I went to the penthouse once," she told him. "I had these hidden. I was surprised they weren't found during the searches to find Lex's dirty secrets."

Clark remembered that night. She'd been upset, with him, among other things. He'd followed her, watched her from the shadows. He came to the end of the book and closed it. "Thank you," he told her again when he looked up at her.

"One more," she pointed out.

"I can't imagine you giving me anything I like more than the pictures," he said as he took the top off the other box. He lifted the papers inside and read for a second before his eyes filled with tears. "I was wrong," he croaked out. The papers were the revised \*legal\* birth certificates for his twins.

"Perry exists now," Lois said.

"Perry Ella Kent," Clark read.

"Collin Jerome Kent," Lois told him. "You don't know how hard this has been to keep from you. And I'm sorry I did, but Mayson called me Wednesday. I have a new legal status, too." Clark lifted his eyes to hers. "I am legally Lois Lane, single, unmarried. The judge ruled that because I was drugged and held against my will, the marriage, to either guise of that madman, was illegal. At least in the states. The authority in Sydney recognized the union, but annulled it on grounds of mental instability of the groom. So, in every country in the world, I'm a legally free woman." She pointed to the papers. "Which allowed me to do that. I know we were supposed to discuss this with Mayson, but I figured you wouldn't mind if your children were yours and..." She stopped when Clark leaned over and kissed her.

She'd been off and running and Clark couldn't think of any other way to stop her. His hand lifted and held her face as he deepened what was meant to be a brief peck. But one touch was not enough and it was much too sweet not to linger a moment.

Lois sighed and lifted her hands to both sides of Clark's face. He tried to withdraw, but she deepened the kiss even further.

He moved the boxes to the bed so that he could bring his other hand over to her side. That caused her to break the kiss and draw away. Her wide eyes searched his and it broke his heart to see the fear and apprehension behind her dark orbs.

"Lois," he said softly. "It's just me. And just a kiss."

"On a bed," she said as she stood up. She hadn't meant to say it, but it slipped out.

"To me it's just a kiss anywhere," he insisted as he looked up at her, his expression begging her to understand. "A touch will never be anything you don't want it to be."

"And what if I want it to be more? Because I do. I want you to touch me whenever you want to, however you want to. And kiss me- you're a great kisser. At least I think you'd be a great kisser. The soft, gentle ones have been great." She threw her hands up in frustration. "I want one thing, but I feel something else. Well, I feel that, too, but at the same time..." She stopped and looked away.

Clark reached out and took one of her hands, gently tugging her toward him. "Just a touch," he said. She moved over to stand in front of him, between his legs. "I want to touch you." He held her gaze as he moved both hands out to her sides, right above her hips.

In their position, Lois had to look down just a bit. She moved her hands back up to hold his face. They stared at one another for a moment before she leaned forward to kiss him again. It was an undemanding touch and she drew back to look into his eyes again.

"Just a touch," he repeated. He flexed his hands on her sides, itching to move them down. She felt so good and his blood was starting to boil. But she was scared. He could hear her heart race. She was also determined. Slowly enough for her to adjust to what he was doing, he moved his hands to her hips. When she didn't try to stop him, he smoothed them further, onto the skin of her thighs below her shorts. She'd recently started wearing the sexiest little sleep shorts. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was deliberately trying to seduce him. Of course, all she had to do was look at him.

Her hands moved down to his neck, then over his shoulders. He was still wearing his muscle tee and the skin she could feel was warm, soft, inviting. Pure desire washed over her and she leaned forward to kiss him again. One touch, two, then she moaned and licked his lips. But before he could react, she pulled back quickly. His eyes were closed and he was breathing a little harder. He liked that, she thought as she watched him. His fingers tightened around her legs, and he sighed. He really liked it. Feeling braver from his reaction, she leaned back in for another kiss. She licked his lips three times, yet he never attempted to open his mouth and force his way into hers. He really does mean what he says, she decided.

She was the one to move her hands back up to his face and turn his head just enough so that he could open his mouth. His lips actually parted more on a sigh than anything and when they did, she probed forward with her tongue. A deep guttural moan escaped Clark's mouth and his hands moved back up. When they went around to grasp her rear, she shoved away from him. His hands dropped and his eyes opened.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"No, I am." She moved back within his personal space. "Just a touch."

"Yeah, but I could have found another place..." Her mouth was on his again. She asked for and received permission back into his mouth. Her hands made a searing path from his face to his neck, then his shoulders. She stopped abruptly, but didn't pull away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're not touching me at all now." She studied his expression, deciding that he was safe. Clark would never hurt her. It was only fair to expect him to want to touch her, even her rear. "Please, Clark."

Hesitantly he put his hands back on her thighs, moving them to the backs so that he could pull her a bit closer to him. "You

feel so good,” he said softly. He stopped when his fingers felt the edge of her shorts at the top of her thighs. Clark’s mind clouded once more when she kissed him again. Getting lost in the movement of her mouth on his, he brought a hand up to cup her cheek so that he could deepen the kiss the way he wanted to. He felt the brief hesitation, then she was pouring everything she had into it. Caught up in the moment, Clark’s hand went back to her body, moving down her side and finally back around to her backside. She drew away from the kiss, but not out of his arms. His eyes bored into hers as he slowly moved both hands over her body, gently squeezing. She leaned her head over and placed it on his while she took several deep breaths to steady herself.

Clark’s hands moved over her gently, warmly. They moved from her rear to her thighs and back again, up to her sides. Steadily moving, steadily building the heat in her body. She kissed him briefly, then leaned back to look at him. “I want to touch you.”

Large hands gripped her hips and Clark shifted them. He was the one standing and she was sitting on the bed. His eyes stared into hers as his fingertips skimmed over her cheek. It took her a moment, but she finally reached out to place her hands on his hips. He stood a bit higher than her, which put his stomach almost right in front of her face. Her eyes flashed to the cloth covering what she knew to be perfectly sculpted abs. As much as she’d like to touch him there, she wasn’t going to ask. She didn’t know if she was feeling bold enough to allow him the same pleasure. Looking back up at him, her hands moved over his hips, down to his thighs. His lips met hers and she allowed her palms to smooth their way to the backs of his legs, up, over his butt. He moaned and she flexed her fingers. He had the best butt she’d ever touched.

Not that she’d touched many or even wanted to, but this one was fantastic. Of course, she knew that already. Had seen it anyway... under cloth. And had been pretty sure it would feel as good as it looked. But it felt better.

And she babbled even in her thoughts. She giggled and Clark leaned back to smile at her.

“What?”

“I babble when I think.” His brows furrowed and she blushed. “I was thinking about how good you feel.” And her hands smoothed over him again. “Very nice,” she told him. Her eyes moved away from his, down, past his waist. And her hands stopped moving. Gulping hard, she stood up. “I think it’s time to go to bed.”

Clark reached out to grasp her sides. “Lois, it’s just a touch. Yes, you affect me, but it’s just a natural reaction. It doesn’t mean I want to do anything more.”

“You don’t?” she asked surprised.

“Well, of course I do. Hell, I think I’ve wanted you from the first time I met you.” He tugged gently when she looked as if she’d run. “That doesn’t mean I expect anything. It doesn’t mean I’m hoping for something more tonight. Yeah, I’d love to, anytime you felt you were ready. But *\*only\** when you’re ready.”

Searching his eyes to make sure he was telling her the truth, she sighed and leaned over to lay her head on his chest. “I will be ready one day.”

“I know.” His hand threaded under her long hair and he gently massaged her neck. “Why don’t we get some sleep?”

“Okay.” She leaned back to look at him and grinned. “You *\*are\** a great kisser.”

“So are you,” he said with a smile and leaned to give her a soft peck.

She drew away and backed toward the door. “Goodnight... Daddy.”

“Goodnight,” he said as she stepped out of the room. A deep sigh to collect himself when she was gone, he knew he wouldn’t get a bit of sleep tonight. He could still feel her hot hands on his

body. She had no idea what she did to him. He couldn’t stop the reaction of his body if he tried. He hated that it made her feel uncomfortable.

Hell, he was terribly uncomfortable. He mentally kicked himself and reached down to pick up his gifts. Thank God he had something else to focus on so his body had time to calm. He turned off the lamp on his nightstand and settled in bed. Wow! he thought as he closed his eyes. Soon, he told himself. Soon she would be ready to put her complete trust in him. He just hoped he was up for the task of guarding her trust.

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Lois woke in a cold sweat, again. She’d done so at least ten times in the last month. Since the night Clark first touched her and she touched him, he was nearly all she thought about.

They’d settled into a familiar routine of caring for the twins, working, and sharing a home together. They went on dates, alone and with the children. They shared dates at home, sitting alone and talking when the twins were sleeping. Family game nights became a popular pastime and so did heated kisses stolen throughout the day. They kissed one another, touched one another- a hand, an arm, shoulders, back, even legs, but they hadn’t shared another night like the one on Father’s Day. And Lois was beginning to itch to do so.

She threw her legs over the side of her bed and headed in the one direction she knew she could find solace. Frowning when she found Clark’s bed empty, she looked toward his bathroom. But the door was open and the lights off. He must have gone out as Superman, she thought as she went downstairs to continue her search. A lot of times he’d grab something to eat after a rescue. Maybe he was in the kitchen. She found him lying on the couch in the den watching a ballgame on the large television they’d finally managed to purchase.

“Hey,” she said when she stepped into the room.

“Hey,” he answered and smiled at her. “What are you doing up?”

“Looking for you.”

He smiled wider. She hadn’t done that in a while and he was missing her horribly. He’d thought briefly a couple of times to go to her the way she did him, but decided against it. There was no way he’d make her uncomfortable if he could help it. It was bad enough his body instantly reacted when he thought about the night they spent touching one another so boldly for the first time. He hadn’t spent so much time alone since he was a teenager. He was ashamed of how he’d begun to handle the unspent tension, but it was preferable to making her feel like he couldn’t control himself.

She walked over and sat down across his thighs. “Can I make a confession?” she asked right away.

“Sounds serious.” He struggled so that he was sitting up a little more against the arm.

“It is serious.” She sighed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Clark, the night we... well, on Father’s Day- that was a huge step for me.”

“I know.” He reached out to touch her arm.

“And we’ve been touching and kissing regularly ever since. It’s great, heated even. But...” She looked at him, her eyes darkening a bit with desire. “I want to touch you like that again.”

“Lois, you can touch me like that anytime you want to.”

“Clark, you know I’m not gonna walk up to you and say, ‘hey, let’s make out.’”

He chuckled softly as he realized what she meant. He hadn’t tried to touch her like that either. Shifting so that he could sit up, he leaned to kiss her softly. “Never doubt that I want to touch you all the time. But you have to understand that being that close to you... turns me on.”

“And it’s hard,” she said, more of a statement than a question.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “It is hard. It’s hard to walk away. Don’t

get me wrong. I will. Every time until you're completely ready for more."

"I know it's hard and I know it's unfair to ask you, but I think I need you to... be with me and walk away, so I'll know."

"Know that I'm willing to give and not take?" he asked. When she nodded, he cupped her cheek. He kissed her softly, then moved so that he was kneeling on the floor between her legs. "Do you trust me?" he asked as he reached out tentatively to place his hands on the tops of her thighs.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then relax. Lay your head back and give yourself to me."

She stared at him, unsure if she could do that.

"Go on, baby. Relax." He stretched her arms out and smoothed his hands up both toward her shoulders. Up over her neck, he smiled when she laid her head back. He leaned forward to kiss her neck, then moved his lips down to her shoulder. She was wearing a tank top and her creamy skin begged for attention. "Relax," he repeated when he felt her tense. His hands moved to her sides just under her armpits, then down, barely skimming her sides. He went across, on to her hips, gently tugging so that she was sitting more on the edge of the cushions. He leaned up when she started to tremble. "Just a touch," he reminded her. "It's all just a touch," he said and smoothed his palms over her thighs, onto the bottom part of her legs. He reached down and touched her foot before making the path back up. When she seemed to melt into the couch, he moved his hands across her stomach. He hesitated briefly before going up further. When she opened her eyes and lifted her head to look at him, he moved his large hands up, covering her completely.

Before she could say or do anything, Clark leaned forward and kissed her. His hands hadn't moved, allowing her time to get used to the feel of him there. She was the one who moaned and wrapped her arms around him. He took that as incentive to continue, gently smoothing, giving her time to adjust- to draw away if she needed to. His mouth tore away from hers and he kissed down her neck again.

"You feel so good," he breathed. One of his hands went around her side, down her back, and in his excitement, he pulled her a bit closer. The movement brought her body up against his, causing him to moan.

Lois abruptly stopped kissing him and shoved him backwards. Clark's eyes focused on her instantly, watching her breathe heavily.

"Not tonight," he told her and reached out for her gently. "Don't push me away. I'm Clark. You know me." His hands ran down her arms, then back up to grasp her face. "I would never ever hurt you. Yes, my body responded. Yes, you felt good pressed against me. And yes, we can stop, but if we do, I'm going to hold you." He kissed her softly, then drew back to look at her. "Do you want to stop?"

"No." She eased up on the edge of the couch and pulled him back to her again.

Clark continued to stare at her while he moved his hands back to her hips, over her thighs, and back again. He gently kneaded, his fingers probed. He smiled when she sighed and dropped her head back in pleasure. He kissed her neck, eased her back against the cushions again. His lips moved down further.

"Oh," she breathed in surprise. Her eyes flew open and she reached out to grasp Clark's head. She didn't stop him though, just watched him kiss her over and over. So intent on what his mouth was doing, she didn't realize his fingers moved again.

He lifted his head and looked at her. "Just a touch," he whispered and pushed his hands further under her body. "You have a nice butt, too," he told her with a smile. But she didn't smile back. She was breathing heavily and she'd started to tremble. "Do you want me to stop?" She shook her head with determination. Clark's smile faded as he leaned back over to kiss

her.

Suddenly Lois pushed him back and sat up. Her posture changed, the determination clearly evident. Her lips went back to his, causing him to moan when her tongue forced its way into his mouth.

Her movements grew bolder, more insistent. As she sat up and wrapped herself around him, he realized something was wrong. He tore his mouth away from hers and rested his head against hers. "Lois," he said softly to get her attention. Gently, he pulled her arms out from around his neck. When her questioning eyes opened and stared at him, he brought her hands up to kiss her knuckles. "You said you trust me."

"I do. But why did you stop?"

"Because you're doing this for the wrong reasons."

"What?"

"Just now. Something changed."

"Don't you want me?"

"Of course I do, but not because you feel like you've got to do it or just to get it over with. I want you to want me because you want \*me\*. I want you to want me because you want to make me feel good, because you want me to make you feel good."

Lois sagged back against the cushion, moving her arms to cover herself. She felt exposed now, embarrassed, after being so open with him.

Clark reached out to grasp her hands. "We can't make love completely until you learn to be comfortable with me. I want you too much to rush this." He watched as he trailed his fingers across her neck, her shoulder. "You're so beautiful," he told her as he leaned to kiss her.

"I'm..."

"Perfect," he countered between kisses.

"Yes," she told him. She liked his kisses, his touches, even if she was back to trembling. Her eyes flew open when he gripped the edges of her shirt.

"Tell me yes," he whispered, hovering just above her, his eyes boring into hers. He wanted to see her completely.

"Yes," she responded automatically. Unable to touch him, she gripped the cushions on the couch as he removed the material.

When she was uncovered, Clark could only stare. "Perfect," he repeated in a whisper. She'd closed her eyes, but the trust she had shown by allowing him to see her blew him away. His eyes moved down her body and that was when he stopped. He moved to the side to allow the light from the TV to shine on her. "Lois, is this...?"

"Teeth marks," she replied, sighing heavily as she stared up at the ceiling. She'd been hoping the dim light was enough to hide the scar. But of course, Superman could see clearly in the dark.

"Oh, baby," he said softly, smoothing his fingers over the light mark. "Are you sure you're... okay now?"

She lifted her head to look at him. "What?"

"He didn't cause any permanent damage, did he?"

Paul had pronounced her healthy, but what if she wasn't? She hadn't felt like she was unwell in any way. "Maybe I should get a good check-up... by a doctor that's not a quack."

Clark smiled at her. "I didn't mean to..."

"I know," she said and brought her hand up to cup his cheek. "And just so you know, I have a couple of other scars. I'm pretty sure there's teeth prints on my butt..."

"On your...?" She nodded and he glanced down. "You're kidding?"

"No. Thankfully he didn't like... other kinds of... sex things," she said and turned her head in embarrassment. "I could imagine that would have hurt like hell."

"Yeah," Clark agreed automatically, glancing down without really meaning to. He'd rather look to make sure, but...

"I have scratch marks down my back," she said, cutting into his thoughts. "He liked to hear me beg him to stop."

"Damn," Clark breathed. He leaned over to kiss her, just to reassure her he cared that she'd suffered. "Just so you know, I'm not that kinky," he joked, hoping to make her smile.

She not only smiled, she laughed softly. "I don't know, Clark, begging might be fun with the right person." She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him closer.

He grunted and kissed her neck. "It might be," he said as his body registered the heat from hers. "This is too close," he said, but didn't pull away.

"I want you closer." His head came up so he could look at her. "Touch me, Clark," she whispered.

His eyes searched hers, trying to find any hesitation, any doubt, any indecision. He saw trepidation, but the determination and desire clouded it over heavily. Moving her to lie down, he leaned to kiss her while he continued to touch her, love her the only way he could.

And God, how he loved her. He felt so strongly right then. He leaned up to gaze at her, but she turned her head.

"Don't look at me," she told him.

He remembered her saying Luthor liked to watch her. He leaned over and kissed her neck, sucked her earlobe into his mouth, and delved his tongue into the cavity. "You feel so good, Lois."

"You... what you're doing..." She completely released herself to him for a brief time, allowing him to touch her, kiss her, love her... It was so unfair to them both, but it was all she could offer right now. Was it enough?

Clark drew away from their kisses a few moments later and turned around to drop on the floor. He was the one shaking now, from the incredible tension in his powerful body. Lois rolled onto her side and wrapped an arm around his chest as she leaned up to kiss his neck.

"Clark," she breathed.

His hand came up to grasp her arm, and he turned his head enough to kiss her. "I love you," he told her when he broke the kiss. It was time she knew that, time he admitted it out loud.

That stopped her probing lips. Her eyes opened and she stared at him. "I, ah, I... What?" She knew he cared for her, knew he was attracted, but this was more than she imagined.

And it was too much to hope for. Did he mean it? Could he love her? With all of her faults? All of her insecurities?

Clark shifted just enough so he could see her. "I love you, Lois," he told her again. "You don't have to say anything back. I just wanted you to know."

She studied his expression for a second, clearly seeing the depths of his feelings behind his dark eyes. He meant every word. Her hand came up to cup his cheek as tears filled her eyes. "I love you, too, Clark," she whispered.

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

"I think I've loved you my whole life." She couldn't believe he'd doubt her feelings.

She couldn't believe her feelings. Never had she felt things like this for a man. This man had become part of her very being and the only way to describe it was love.

Clark smiled and kissed her again. "And because I love you, I'm going to help you put your shirt back on." He shifted onto his knees and helped her sit up. When the material fell back around her, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I knew men could be different, but..." She turned her head and kissed his neck. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he returned and squeezed gently. They drew apart and he held her hand as they made their way upstairs. He kissed her softly at her door and closed himself off in his bathroom. She'd given him a very special gift tonight, and while it was worth every second, his body was so tense he felt like he

was going to explode. Touching her, seeing her, feeling her- it had worked him up to nearly explosive levels. He decided that when she finally trusted him enough to completely give herself over to him, it would be worth every second, every bit of tension and frustration, and every second he'd spent alone lately.

And just thinking about that day was enough to get his blood boiling again. He had to take a deep breath and shake his head to clear it. He was almost grateful when his hearing picked up a call for help.

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The first rays of sunshine came through her window the next morning and prodded her to wake up. Lois stretched, long and slow, uncoiling the tension in her muscles as she did. She slowly opened her eyes and saw Clark standing in her doorway watching her.

"Hey," she told him softly.

"Hey," he replied. He walked over and sat down, carefully placed his hands on either side of her, then leaned to kiss her. "Good morning," he said when he leaned up.

"Good morning."

"Let's pack up the kids and take a trip," he said suddenly.

"Where to?"

"I don't know. Somewhere, anywhere."

"We could... go to the beach," she suggested.

"I know this place down the coast where you can rent a cabin right on the ocean," he replied. "Or we can stay at the resort in Folly. It has its own water park."

"The kids would love it." She struggled to sit up, gratefully taking his hand so he could help her. "Can you get away?"

"Already called Perry... just in case. He said we've been plugging away pretty hard, so..." He pushed her hair off her shoulder so he could kiss her there. "Want to go? We can stay as long as three days."

"Will we... have to share a room?"

His eyes went to hers. "Only if you want to. And only to sleep. I don't expect a thing other than a beautiful smile or two."

She kissed him soundly. "Let's go."

His lips spread into a smile and he kissed her again, moaning when she allowed him to deepen the touch. He drew back and stood up. "I'll pack up the twins while you get ready. We'll stop for breakfast."

She was left to watch him walk away- a sight she certainly appreciated. The view from this side was incredible. An hour later, they'd grabbed a couple of bags, said good-bye to Clark's parents, and set off for a bit of fun. They spent the next three days at a full service resort in a beach community a short drive from Metropolis. They spent the days on the beach, in the water park, or exploring the town. They shopped, ate wonderful food, and laughed more than they had in a while. They chose a room with a king-sized bed and tucked their twins in between them at night. Though they held hands constantly, touched frequently, and kissed often, they wisely kept everything else modestly tame. It was as if they'd made an unspoken agreement to share this time together as a family.

They went home with their first set of professional pictures, having had them taken at the resort. The sitting had been in the pool area on the bottom floor and the photographs turned out to be remarkable. They had tons of snapshots as well. It had been a wonderful trip, giving them much-needed time together.

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Work set in with a vengeance upon their return. Lois ventured into the Planet three days a week, just to get her feet wet, she'd said. The other days she stayed home with the twins and wrote about the things that happened to her. Clark, however, was running himself ragged. The Planet called early every day and Superman called late every night. Things at home were a struggle to keep a grip on. He and Lois fought a lot, over work and more

personal things. One week faded into two until they both snapped. He had flown from one rescue to another and hadn't made it home in two days. When he finally walked in the door, Lois was sitting on the couch in the den staring at the television.

"I almost called the cops," she said as she glanced up at him. "I thought someone was breaking in."

"Lois, please don't start tonight." He walked through the den toward the hallway. He was beat. Too beat to spar with her tonight. They'd done enough fighting the last couple of weeks.

"When am I supposed to start?" she asked him. "You're never home long enough for me to look at you let alone say anything to you."

He turned and let out a frustrated sigh. "Okay, let's hear it."

"Go to hell," she spat at him and shot to her feet.

"Very mature, Lois," he said and followed her into the kitchen.

"Mature?" she asked as she turned around to gawk at him. "You don't even know what that word means! You, in all your mature, \*super\* glory, fly in and out of here, barely stopping long enough to even know what your kids look like anymore."

"I know what my kids look like!"

"Oh, yeah. I bet you have no idea." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Did you even check your messages today?"

He looked away, putting his hands on his hips while he waited for the next round of her barking. And that was what it seemed like today. He'd seen too many people die today to placate her.

"Well, Mr. 'I'm so on top of things it doesn't matter if anyone needed me', go upstairs and take a look at your son."

"What?"

"Go look at your son!" she ordered and pointed in that direction. When he didn't move, she stomped over to the switch on the wall and slammed her hand on it to cut it off. "Fine. But don't get your sorry ass up and look at him tomorrow." She stormed out and up the stairs. The house shook when she slammed her bedroom door.

Clark heaved a frustrated sigh and walked over to click off the TV, cut the rest of the lights, and head upstairs. He wasn't even going to check to see if there was dinner for him. He'd seen the take-out packages. Besides, he was much too wound up to eat. He just wanted a hot bath and to fall in bed. He paused at the top of the stairs and glanced at the room the twins slept in. Deciding to see what Lois thought was so damn important, he walked over and peered inside. Gasping in shock by what he saw, he rushed over to kneel beside Collin's bed. His small left arm was bound in a brace and lying on a mound of pillows. His little fingers were blue and swollen, his knuckles scraped badly.

Not wanting to touch him for fear he'd hurt him, Clark jumped up and hurried into Lois' room so he could find out what was wrong. He didn't bother to knock and she looked up in surprise on her way out of the bathroom. "What the hell happened to him?"

"He fell off his bike." She grinned sadly. "He was so excited. He called you six times to tell you he'd learned how to ride without his training wheels." Her smile faded and she reached out to pull the covers down on her bed. "He swerved to keep from hitting Perry and over corrected. I heard it crack from twenty feet away."

Clark felt like he'd been kicked in the gut. He snatched his phone from the case on his side. Thirteen messages. They'd called him so many times.

"Don't even think about smashing that phone before you listen to that kid's messages. I want you to hear how he felt." She climbed into her bed and pulled the cover over her lap because she'd remained sitting. "Perry was more upset than Collin because she just knew it was all her fault."

Large tears filled Clark's eyes and he looked away. Hadn't he

learned his lesson before about leaving his family hanging?

A soft cry from the other room pulled him from the impending self-pity trip and he hurried in. Collin was whining, trying to move his arm.

"Hey, big guy," Clark said softly as he kneeled beside the bed. "Don't move your arm."

"It hurts," the boy cried.

"I know, son. Maybe we can give you something to help with the pain." He looked up when Lois held out her hand. He took the two small pills she was holding.

"I go potty," Collin said as he struggled to get up.

"Here..." Clark placed the pills on the nightstand and reached down to lift the boy up. "Daddy'll help you." He carried him down the hall to the bathroom and brought him back when he was done. Once he had him settled, he propped his arm back up and helped him take the pain medicine. "Should he take so much?" he asked Lois, who was still standing by the bed.

"One was not enough. I guess he's his father's son."

"I called you," Collin said as he looked up at Clark with pain filled eyes.

"I know. I was busy and couldn't answer."

"You not call back," Collin said as large tears spilled from his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, baby," Clark said, crying himself. He lifted his hand and smoothed Collin's hair off his head. "I should have called."

"I ride by myself," came the tired voice.

"I know. Mommy told me." Clark leaned to kiss his head.

"I'm really proud of you," he said softly.

"Don't cry, Daddy. I okay."

Clark smiled through his tears. "I love you, Collin."

"I lub you, Daddy." He smiled and closed his eyes.

Clark continued to rub his head until he was back asleep. He gently kissed his swollen hand and stood up. Lois had left them alone and he stopped in the hallway to listen to his messages. Collin's excited voice talked so fast he barely understood that he'd told him he could ride his bike with no training wheels. Another excited message. By the third one, he wasn't as excited. One simply asked, 'where are you?' The last two sounded as if the little guy's heart was broken. One from Lois telling him to call. Another blessing him out. Then a frantic call-

'Clark, where the hell are you? We're on the way to the emergency room.' She sobbed. 'Collin broke his arm'.

One from his mother. One from his father. There was one from Jack. He'd never heard so many colorful words from the young man. The last one was from Jimmy. He sounded disappointed more than anything.

Clark closed his phone and leaned his head back against the wall, guilt and regret washing over him. How could he have done this to them again? Hadn't he learned his lesson from the first time? He lived with them now. How could he? Yes, his job at the Planet was important. Yes, being Superman meant a lot to him. But nothing meant as much as the people in this house. He opened his phone and called his mother's phone. It was off at this time of night, but he left a very apologetic message to her and his father. He left similar messages for Jack and Jimmy before he looked in on the twins once more, then headed toward Lois' room. The light was still on and this time she'd left the door ajar. She was sitting in the middle of her bed working on her laptop. He didn't say word until after he'd sat down on the bed.

"How did you get him to the ER?"

"Ambulance. Alice brought your folks and Perry to the hospital and Jimmy came to bring us home." She didn't look up at him, just kept working.

"Will you go with me tomorrow to pick out another car?"

"It's being delivered in the morning."

He just nodded. Leave it to Lois to have taken care of that on

her own. They should have bought a second car long ago. Most days he left the Jeep for them, but for some reason he'd taken it two days ago when he left for work.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me, too." Still typing.

"I should have learned from when I made the mistake the first time about my incessant need to help."

"Yeah, and you'd been doing so good. How do you spell...? Never mind. Got it."

"I know the only way I can make this up to any of you is to show you how I feel."

"Uh huh," she replied and kept typing.

He sighed when he realized he wasn't going to get anywhere. "I really am sorry," he said softly and stood up. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and headed toward his room. He felt so bad he thought he was going to break down right there in front of Lois.

Lois looked up as he disappeared into the hallway. Poor guy did sound horrible. Maybe she could have been a bit more compassionate.

Why? He wasn't compassionate this afternoon. He wasn't anything. She'd needed him, needed his strength. She'd been so sure she was going to break down before she could help Collin.

Glancing toward the hallway, she shifted and dropped her feet on the floor. Damn him, she cursed as she walked toward his room. He was hurting and she couldn't stop herself from going to him. It didn't matter that his pain was his own doing, she needed to see him, hold him. His bedroom door was open, but the bathroom door was closed. She could hear the shower running and when she stepped over to the door, she heard Clark crying. He'd never done that, never even hinted he could. Sure, she'd seen tears in his eyes, but this was raw, biting pain. She wanted to go hold him now desperately. The door was locked though, an obvious indication he wanted to be alone.

Clark finally pulled himself together and decided that feeling sorry for himself wasn't going to repair his fractured relationship with his family. He finished his shower, pulled on his underwear, dried his hair with a towel, and headed in to bed. He didn't even know Lois was in his bed until she reached out to touch his back after he sat down. His head snapped around and their eyes met.

"I still love you," she whispered.

"I love you, even if I haven't showed it very much lately."

Clark swung his legs around and laid down on his side to look at her across the darkened space between them.

"Will you let me hold you tonight?"

He blinked. "After all I've done to hurt you?"

"Love is love," she told him, something she'd heard from Martha earlier that day. She'd broken down when they got home, so upset from Collin getting hurt while in her care. Through her sobs, she'd wondered why any of them would want her around. The older woman had smiled and said, 'Love is love.' She also said, "'You can't stop it just because you're hurt or angry either'". Smart woman, Lois had thought. Very smart woman. No matter what Clark had done, she loved him desperately and in doing so that meant she needed to support him the same way he'd done her countless times over the last few months.

Clark moved over until his head was lying on her shoulder. She held him the way he did her, smoothing one hand over the arm that was thrown across her stomach. "I don't deserve any of this," Clark said after a long while.

"You deserve to be happy, just like everyone else. I think sometimes you stay away because you think if you mess up bad enough, you'll start to believe you don't deserve us. Then if you were to lose us, you wouldn't be so disappointed."

"Do you feel like that?"

"All the time at first. But then... Clark, I'm so in love with you, there's no way I could lose you. We might fight. We will

disagree. But I don't want to ever be apart from you."

"I don't want to be apart from you either," he said. "And I'm going to make a change. I'm not alone and it's time for me to treat you guys like I should."

"Then you think we can go out again?" she wanted to know.

He laughed softly, tightening his hold on her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Will you stay home tomorrow and help me with Collin?"

"Absolutely. You can go to the Planet if you want to."

"Nah. I want to stick close to my little man."

"Okay." Clark closed his eyes and before long, the stress and frustration caught up with him.

He and Lois slept in a tangled web of arms and legs, restless and anxious. But they woke up with a clearer understanding the next morning.

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Collin sat on the porch steps staring at his bike. Every now and then his little finger went over to his other arm to scratch as best he could. His cast itched him. He couldn't wait to get it off.

"Hey, big guy, whatcha' doing?" Clark asked as he sat down beside his son. It had been six weeks since Collin had broken his arm. Clark was taking him in today to get the cast off.

"I wookin at my bike." He'd been riding it with his broken arm for three weeks now. He loved his bike.

"Ready to show off without that cast?"

"Tink I could have a new one for my birstday?"

"A new one?"

"Uh huh? I big boy one?"

Collin had seen a bike in a catalog that first week after breaking his arm. The sleek, black racer had been all he'd talked about since then. It came without training wheels. Lois had declared it huge, even though it was still small enough for their boy. "Maybe," Clark said as he rubbed the boy's back.

"Daddy, will you work all da time affer my cass off?"

"No, son. I work four days now. No questions." He'd worked that out with Perry the first week after the accident. He needed to be home with his kids more and the only way to do that was to work less. He really didn't need the money anyway, but liked being a journalist. Perry understood his need for his family was greater than his desire to have a career. Besides, Clark did more work in four days than most men did in two weeks. Lois helped him out, too, so the Planet hadn't lost.

"How 'bout Superman?"

"Well, he's grounded unless it's something really big. No more going two days without taking a break or coming home."

"Pomise?"

Clark ran his hand over the side his son's head. "Promise. You ready to go get that thing off?"

"Uh huh." Collin stood up and ran inside. He came back out, followed by Lois and Perry. They were dressed and ready to go.

"I thought you two were staying here?" Clark wanted to know.

"Perry wants to see for herself that Collin is okay." Lois rubbed the top of the little girl's head.

"Then let's go," Clark said as he bent to pick his daughter up. "He's okay," he told the girl again for the thousandth time.

"Okay."

Clark buckled her into her seat in Lois' new SUV. She'd chosen a monster of a vehicle- a Tahoe, one of the larger ones. It comfortably seated eight, large enough for them all to go places together, Lois had explained when it was delivered. They had actually looked at the Tahoe, moving it to their short list. Hers was black with an appropriate amount of chrome. Jack said she looked like she worked for the Secret Service. Clark was just thrilled she had a car at home all the time now.

"When are you gonna let me drive?" he asked as he buckled himself into the passenger's seat.

"When are you gonna let me wear your cape?"

Clark leaned over on the console so he could grin at her. “That can be arranged tonight,” he said softly, wagging his brows at her.

Lois snorted at him. He was relentless. Since Collin broke his arm, they’d reached a new level of understanding. He was home now when he should be. When he was working, he called at least three times a day, even when she was working, too. He cooked on his days off, made sure his parents had ample time alone, and told her as often as he could he loved her, which was about every other minute. They also touched more, held hands sitting on the couch, and talked about everything. Weekly date nights were a religion, ranging from elegant dinners to baseball games. There was also one day of the week that was spent with the twins—swimming, having tea parties, going to the carnival, and just about anything else you could think of. Clark had groveled to his friends and spent as much time as he could with them as well. Cook-outs were a favorite weekend event. He’d reverted back to wonderfully attentive and completely irresistible.

Irresistible on all levels. He positively exuded sexuality. Though they hadn’t shared another night like the one in the den, they did have pretty heavy make-out sessions. He wasn’t shy about touching her either, often patting her on her rear or fondling her breasts when they kissed. She wasn’t quite as bold about touching him, but didn’t protest when he did either. And his incredible restraint had impressed her to no end. It had earned him immense trust in her eyes. It had also made him nearly impossible to resist. Lois had decided on more than one occasion that it was time to cross that final threshold, only to chicken out halfway to his room. She didn’t mind a bit sleeping in his arms, and her body begged him to lavish more attention on it. But she also accepted his need to hold back. Poor Clark spent more time showering lately, and it wasn’t because of his need to get clean. She wanted to give him what he needed, but her mind just wasn’t as cooperative as her body.

“You’d really look good in it,” Clark whispered. “Of course, you’d look good out of it, too.”

“Clark,” she said and cut her eyes toward the back.

“Relax. They’re watching cartoons.” Lois’ truck also had a television in it, to keep the twins occupied when they went somewhere. It was invaluable when traffic was backed up.

She glanced at him. He had that look on his face—the one that told her he was more than ready to become lovers. And right now, so was she. “Tell you what... you sit over there and be a good boy, and I’ll think about trying it on for you soon.”

“Mmm, the images that creates...” He sat back and sighed dreamily. He’d give anything to see her in his cape. Nothing but his cape.

A little while later, Collin was making a face as he stared down at his pale arm. “It tinks!”

“We’ll take care of that,” said the nurse and brought over a pan of soapy water to carefully wash his arm.

“See, Perry,” Lois told her. “His arm is just fine.”

“It doesn’t hurt?” she asked Collin.

“Nope.” He moved it to prove his point. The break hadn’t been very bad, so he’d only had a cast up to his elbow. “I ready to ride my bike!”

“Isn’t that how you broke your arm?” the nurse asked.

“He hasn’t slowed down a bit,” Clark informed her.

“Good. Take care of this arm,” she told Collin as she dried it.

“I will.”

They walked out a few moments later, the twins admiring their stickers. Clark reached over to grasp Lois’ hand as they made their way to the car. She looked up at him and smiled. Talk revolved around the birthday party coming up in a few days. Dinner was eaten out by the pool that evening to allow Collin to swim without his cast sleeve on. He also rode his bike.

\*\*\*

Turning three years old was a huge event at the Kent home on Saturday afternoon. The backyard was packed with all of their friends. Clark reluctantly allowed Dan to be grill meister so he could spend the extra time with the twins. Dan and Mayson had finally moved in next door as well.

Right before it was time to sit down to eat, a new guest arrived.

“Lana!” Martha greeted the young woman who walked around the house.

“I wasn’t sure I should come,” the younger woman said as she hugged Martha.

“Nonsense. You were invited.” By Martha herself. She hadn’t consulted Clark, but was sure he wouldn’t mind. Taking the gifts Lana held, Martha steered her toward the crowd.

“Lana!” Clark stopped his game of hopscotch with Perry when he saw the woman with his mom. He hadn’t seen her since that night in his apartment a few months ago. She’d been called back to work for EPRAD on a top-secret project. He’d spoken with her on the phone, but he always enjoyed seeing her. He walked over and gave her a warm hug. “How are you?”

“Good. You look great. And the house...” She glanced up at it. “Look at Perry... She’s so big.”

“Collin’s in the pool with Jack and Denny.”

“Wow!” she commented when she saw him. “He can swim!”

“Lois taught him.”

She glanced around Clark to see the woman he’d mentioned sitting by the pool talking with Mayson. “Hi.” She waved at her.

“Hi, Lana. Come have a drink,” Lois said cheerfully, even if she really didn’t feel cheery. Lana was a reminder of the past. Lois knew she wasn’t to blame for her father’s mistakes, but still...

“Be nice,” Mayson whispered.

“I will.” She cut her eyes at Mayson and they laughed.

The blond-haired woman sat up so that she was closer to Lois. “Why is it I don’t bother you, but she does?”

“She doesn’t... not for that reason. I see Lana, I think Paul. And we all know what Paul did.” She shrugged and took a drink of her beer.

Lana and Clark talked for a moment before she glanced at Lois again. “She doesn’t like me, does she?”

“She doesn’t like your father,” Clark told her honestly.

“Neither do I,” she admitted.

“Come meet everyone.” Clark wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her over to introduce her to Jack, Jimmy, and Dan. Lana talked briefly with little Perry and Collin before settling at the table to talk with Jonathan. After a few moments, Dan announced it was time to eat. Clark was surprised when Lois sat next to Lana.

Dinner was a laughable, conversational affair. Presents were a hit, especially the new bike and the dollhouse.

“Clark, you did a wonderful job,” Lois said of the dollhouse. She couldn’t believe the detail he’d put into the house and the furniture. He hadn’t let her see it before today, working on it nearly every night for the past two weeks.

“It’s gorgeous,” raved his mother. She’d made tiny curtains to Clark’s specifications and even cushions for the furniture, but he hadn’t let anyone see it until now. All of the adults were gathered around the table it was sitting on, in awe of the toy.

“I wike it, too, Daddy,” Collin spoke up.

“Well, it just so happens...” Clark moved over to the other end of the table and uncovered another creation—a farm.

“Oh wow!” the boy yelled and jumped up and down.

“Oh, Clark,” Lois gushed as she got a look at the other toy. It looked just like the Kent farm in Kansas, complete with barn, tractor, and animals. Again the adults all raved over his work.

“Think you could make a Daily Planet?” Perry asked as he bent to peek through the window of the farmhouse.

Clark chuckled as he watched his family study his woodwork.

“Daddy?” Perry asked as she tugged his shorts. “Do I get a new bike, too?”

She was hoisted into the air as he smiled at her. “Do you really want a new bike?”

She seemed to think about that for a minute. “Not really. I’d rather have a new doll.”

“You mean one that might fit in this box?” Lois asked her as she held up a gift-wrapped box.

Perry jumped up and down after Clark set her on her feet, then she opened the doll that was nearly as big as she was. There was also a brush so the little girl could spend hours playing with the baby’s hair.

“Her’s purdy,” Collin told her as his fingers touched the new doll.

“Her name is Wois,” Perry informed him.

“Hi, Wois,” he said to the doll. “Want to go for a ride?” he asked Perry.

“Yes, please.” She tucked her new doll under her arm and held Collin’s hand as he led her to the wagon. When he was sure she and Wois were safely settled, he grabbed the handle and pulled them down the driveway.

“Don’t go past the Elm tree,” Lois called. “You need to fence in the driveway,” Lois told Clark and smacked his chest, hard.

“Ow!” he said.

“Come on, CK, you didn’t...” Jack stopped and stared at him. More precisely, his chest. “How did she do that?” Clark’s chest had a bright red spot where Lois had hit him.

Clark rubbed the spot and shrugged. “She can get into my aura,” Clark informed him. “Actually, she seems to be in it all the time.”

“Kinda’ like crawling under your skin? Your super skin?”

“She doesn’t crawl,” Clark told him. “She jumps in with both feet.”

“I heard that,” she called across the patio from where she’d gone to check on the twins.

“I think she has super powers, too,” Jimmy said.

“Oh, she does,” Clark let him know.

Lois cut her eyes back at him, a wide grin on her face. Maybe she’d see just how far she could get under that super skin later.

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Lana was the last guest to leave, just after dark. She and Clark were standing on the patio talking when Lois came out of the house.

“Thank you, for not asking me to leave,” Lana told Lois.

“I’ll admit that I’d thought about declaring you an enemy by default, but you can’t be held responsible for your father’s actions.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

“I know, too, that you mean a lot to Clark.” Lois smiled up at him, then moved closer to his side to wrap her arm around him, his automatically coming up to hold her. “So, I guess you mean a lot to me.”

Lana’s eyes widened. “Oh, wow! Really?” Her eyes flashed from one to the other.

“We’re not living in sin or anything,” Clark joked, but grunted when Lois elbowed him.

“We are... creating something wonderful,” Lois corrected him.

“I like the sound of that... something wonderful. You certainly deserve it,” she told Lois.

“Thank you.” Lois accepted the hug the other woman offered, then looked up at Clark. “I’ll read the story tonight.”

He nodded and she went inside. “I’m glad you came,” he told Lana.

“Me, too.” She stepped forward and hugged Clark. “Take

care of those babies,” she said when she pulled away.

“I will. And call soon.”

“I will.” She turned and hurried down the driveway.

Clark made sure everything was cleaned up from the party and carefully transported the new dollhouse and farmhouse into the extra room upstairs. He and Lois had decided that the top floor was too far away for a playroom. So the extra bedroom was used as a guestroom and playroom, for now. When the house was secure, he took a quick shower. Toweling his hair as he exited the bathroom, he stopped and nearly passed out when his eyes fell on his bed. There, wrapped in his cape, was Lois. The towel he held slipped through his fingers to the floor as he stood in disbelief.

“What’s-a-matter, Clark?” she asked in a whiny voice. “Cat got your tongue?”

“A minx has my cape,” he managed as he closed the distance to the bed and sat down, facing her. “You gonna let me see what’s under this?” he asked and lifted an edge of the material.

“Nothing,” she replied.

He swallowed hard. “Nothing?”

“Not one thing... except me.”

He stared at her, his body beginning to hum. “Are you...?” His eyes flashed down over the red cover. “Oh, God, I’m not sure I have that much patience,” he whispered when his eyes met hers again.

“You don’t need it,” she told him softly.

His brows crawled upward. “What?”

Lois lifted her arm to rub his bare chest. “I think it’s time to see if you feel as good as you look.”

Clark laid his head back and took a deep breath. He was more than ready to see if she felt as good as she looked. But he wouldn’t hurt her, wouldn’t do anything she didn’t want him to do. He took a deep breath and looked back down at her. His hand went up to cup her face. “Are you sure?”

“Clark, if we don’t soon do something, I might blow up, too.”

He gave a little snort. “I do that daily,” he mumbled as he rolled over and stretched out beside her.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what? Lois, I’ve been right where I want to be.” He was propped up on an elbow and he leaned over to kiss her softly.

“Well, maybe not exactly where I want to be,” he said huskily as he stared down at her.

“Is it okay that we leave the lights off?”

“I have super eyes,” he reminded her as he lifted the cape lapped across her chest. He could see naked skin underneath and he smiled. “May I?” he asked, holding the material.

“Please,” she replied.

He slowly pulled the red cover back and exposed the left side of her chest. She was the one to move the other side down. Clark’s mouth covered hers as he slowly became acquainted with Lois more intimately. She moaned and deepened the kiss, causing him to melt further into their encounter. His lips moved from her mouth, down her neck, around to nibble on her ears.

Before she knew what was happening, his mouth was driving her wild. Though her body was tense and was trembling, she gave back as good as she got. When he became caught up in the moment and allowed his body to react, she became rigid, unresponsive.

Clark lifted his head to look at her. “I have to respond. It feels too good not to.”

“I know,” she said shakily. Her hand reached out to smooth over his chest, trying to give back some of the thrill he’d been giving her.

“Damn,” Clark uttered as his eyes closed. Just the feel of her hot hand on his skin made him dizzy with desire. His own hand began to move, down to her stomach. She really was naked, he thought as his fingers made contact with even more skin.

Opening his eyes again, he moved his gaze down, watching as he

uncovered her completely. “Damn!” he said again.

“I’m way too small, aren’t I?” she asked, a blush creeping over her face to be exposed to him fully.

“You’re small, but you’re gorgeous,” he told her and leaned to kiss her again. His hand continued its journey, trying to touch her everywhere. He’d waited on this for so long; she felt incredible. “So nice,” he breathed. And nearly enough to make him delirious with pleasure. His entire body felt like it was on fire. He pulled away and rolled onto his back, heaving to catch his breath and give himself a bit of a reprieve.

Lois leaned over to look down at him. “Too much?”

“Way too much?” he whispered, refusing to open his eyes. “And not nearly enough,” he went on when he was able to look at her.

Her lips came down on his, her hand moving over his arm, across his stomach. She moved her head up so she could look at him while her palm soaked in the feel of his silky skin. The air hissed through Clark’s teeth as his right hand gripped the sheets. She hesitated momentarily, having never touched him quite so intimately. She’d seen him in nothing but his underwear, but touching was completely different.

And completely scary.

Completely exciting.

Was every part of this man perfectly sculpted? Suddenly she wanted to see him. She rolled over to flip the lamp on. His eyes were studying her as she turned back to him.

“Take these off,” she said softly, tugging his briefs.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She moved back enough for him to strip. She noticed that he was trembling nearly as much as she was. Slowly and deliberately she ran her eyes over his body. “Clark,” she breathed. “You’re beautiful.”

“So are you,” he said and reached over to grasp her face while he kissed her. When she moved closer, he drew her back to look at her. “Baby, you’re shaking.”

“Yeah,” was all she said as she kissed his neck.

“Maybe we should stop,” he said when her shaking increased.

“Uh uh,” she said as she bit her bottom lip.

“We should at least stop long enough for me to take precautions.” He grinned at her, but sucked in a deep breath as her lips touched his skin again.

She nibbled near his ear before looking at him. “I saw a doctor a while back, in case this moment came earlier rather than later. And just so you know, she ran every test known to man. I’m perfectly healthy. Too thin, but all of my organs are working fine. No permanent damage. I can even still have children, hence my need to take the pill.”

He smoothed a hand over her back to sooth her a bit. Her trembling was driving him wild. “I can still wear a condom if you want me to.” When her brows furrowed, he shrugged. “I thought maybe you’d feel better if I kept certain things to myself. You know, the whole... invasion thing. And damn, that came out wrong.”

Lois kissed him quiet. “That’s thoughtful, but really, Clark, I need you.”

“Then why are you shaking so much?”

“I’m scared. The last time I was this close to a man...”

His finger covered her lips. “Not tonight, baby. I wish I could just lay here and let you do this so you’ll be comfortable, but I \*have\* to touch you.” And he moved his hands down her back, over her hips.

“Can you stay on your back?”

“Oh yeah,” he said with a grin.

“Clark,” she whined and leaned forward to kiss his neck.

“Hold me.” His arms wrapped around her back and he held her close, allowing her the time she needed to become comfortable with him.

“Oh, God, Lois,” he breathed. Just having her lie in his arms was threatening to dissolve his control

“What would you do if this is all I wanted to do?”

“I’d soon be asleep. Because you are driving me to the edge of my limits in a hurry.” His hands smoothed down her back again, relishing in the fact that she’d placed so much trust in him.

Suddenly she wasn’t content being still any longer, causing the breath to hiss from Clark’s body again.

“You okay?” he managed to ask her after a moment.

She nodded determinedly, even as the first tears slipped from her eyes. A sob escaped her lips and he grasped her sides.

“Stop, baby.”

“No!”

She was determined to do this, to face her demons and there was no way he’d stop her. Clark wrapped his arms around her, holding her as she struggled through her fear. His hands moved up so that he could hold her face and he kissed her, softly at first, then more insistently. He was gentle and deliberate, distracting her from her apprehension. Slowly it worked. She began to kiss him back. He nearly shouted when she seemed to get lost in their haze.

Gorgeous, glowing, and amazing. That was all he could think as he looked at this woman. She’d been through so much, overcome so many demons. And she loved him... both emotionally and physically.

But there was no afterglow. She rolled to her opposite side, held herself drawn up in a ball, and began to softly cry again.

“Ah, baby, don’t,” Clark told her as he rolled over and held her. His hand smoothed her cheek, wiping away the tears. “Did I hurt you?”

“No!” She turned to look at him. “Clark, that was fantastic.”

“Better than fantastic,” he said with a smile. “You are amazing.”

“I don’t mean to cry,” she said as more tears slipped from her eyes.

“Hush, baby. I understand.” His fingers skimmed her cheek and he kissed her. “I love you.”

“I love you.” She managed to smile, feeling better by the second. Clark was slowly replacing every bad memory she had. “Do you feel better?”

“Oh, I feel incredible.”

“Want to do it again?”

“And again and again,” he said as he nibbled her neck. “But we don’t have to do it tonight.”

“We don’t \*have\* to do it at all.” She grinned at his horrified expression. She reached out to grasp his neck and tugged, pulling him closer. The first time had proven that she could do this, that she could love Clark the way he deserved to be loved. This- she wanted this time to be for him. Her gift to him. “Make love to me, Clark,” she told him.

By the sound he made, she would have thought him in pain... only she knew better. It meant a lot to him for her to say those words, to allow him this. It meant a lot to her. She’d wanted him for so long and now she was ready. Her body didn’t shake this time, it trembled in excitement. The fear was being replaced with total and complete trust.

In her haze, she opened her eyes to stare at the man she loved. Clark was the one shaking now.

“Clark?”

“That was...” He kissed her again, then rolled so that he was holding her close to his chest. “I had no idea sex could be that good.”

“This from the man who’s had sex on the ceiling,” she said with laughter in her voice.

“Baby, I just crossed another plane of existence.” His hand smoothed over her back. “Wow!”

“It was pretty good, huh?”

“Better than good,” Clark corrected her. “I feel like I just came home for the first time,” he told her after he realized exactly how he felt.

“Like you’ve found your other half?”

“Like I’ve found my other half,” he agreed, pulling her closer. They lay there in silence for a long while before he sighed in complete contentment.

“Happy?”

“Very,” he said. They held one another and drifted to sleep, smiles on their faces. Sometime during the night, Clark covered them up when Lois became chilled. When she snuggled closer, the grin returned to his face. Of course, now he was probably going to have a permanent smile.

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She was watching him. He could feel her eyes on him long before he woke up. Finally he forced his lids up and her large, expressive brown orbs were staring at him.

“Hi,” she said softly.

“Hi,” he replied, lifting his hand to play with her hair. “Sleep well?”

“Better than I have in a long time,” she told him.

“What’s wrong?” He knew there was something on her mind.

“Nothing. I was just looking at you.” Her hand smoothed over the side of his face. “Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?”

He smiled at her. “I’m afraid I’m not exactly my type.”

“I hope not. That would be \*too\* kinky.”

Laughing softly, he shifted her so that he could reposition her leg over his body.

“Will you move into my room with me?” she asked him. “I’d move in here, but the other room is bigger. And it has that nice closet.”

“You want to share a room?”

“Well, duh. We can’t have sex all the time if you’re way over here.” She said it as if the answer was perfectly obvious. But she smiled at him.

“Should we move my bed or use yours?”

“Let’s go pick out a new one. Or you could make us one? You did such a great job on those toys.”

“Wait until you see the desk I’m making for the office.”

“I saw the plans, but it’s always hard to picture the real thing until you see it. I was thinking you could make the furniture for the dining room, too.” They still hadn’t put furniture in that room. They’d looked at a ton of different styles and designs, but nothing had appealed to them both.

“Sure.” His eyes shifted to where his hand was playing in her hair. “Your hair is amazing,” he said absently.

“Don’t say that. I was thinking about getting it cut.”

His eyes went back to hers. “Please don’t. Not right now.”

“Then you wash it and brush it.”

“I will if you’ll keep it a little longer.”

“You would, too,” she said as she shifted completely on top of him, causing him to grunt.

“Lois,” he whispered, grasping her hips.

“What?” she asked innocently, knowing perfectly well her position was compromising his resolve.

“That feels…” he whispered as she kissed his neck.

“How about this?” She moved around to the other side, sucking a lobe into her mouth.

“My God,” he breathed and titled his head to give her better access. So lost in his euphoria, he failed to notice that something wasn’t quite right. It wasn’t until what she was doing went from sensual to frantic that he refocused on the woman above him. Her expression was fierce, determined. Her fingers were digging into his chest and she was crying. “Lois,” he said softly. She didn’t stop. Clark’s pleasure was quickly becoming discomfort because her fingers were clawing. He seriously needed to figure out how

she was able to get inside his aura like this. Finally deciding enough was enough, he sat up and wrapped his arms around her. “Stop!” he said with a bit of force. “Whatever this is, we’ll figure it out.”

Her body sagged against his and she pushed her hands around to hold him, her crying becoming sobs. “I don’t know what this is,” she admitted when she’d calmed a bit.

“I know,” he told her, holding the back of her head. She was so emotionally spent it was a miracle they’d made love at all the night before. He knew the main reason she’d probably done it was to prove she could, and while part of him felt ashamed of himself for taking advantage, another part was relieved. Living with Lois was torture at times. She kept him constantly excited. He was also a bit hurt that she’d used him that way. And yet, he couldn’t have denied her either. She’d needed to do this. If not now, at some point and time. Since he was completely in love with her, he was the only one she was going to do this with.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a few moments.

“I’m not,” he said and meant it. They continued to sit there in silence, Clark stroking her back and head, offering her the comfort she needed. And the comfort he needed.

“Clark?” she asked a while later.

“Hmm?” They’d woven a spell around themselves and he didn’t want to disturb it.

“Will you still move in the room with me?”

“I will,” he assured her.

“Can we still have sex?” She leaned back to look at him.

“Not now, but sometimes.”

“Lois,” he said and moved his hand around to cup her cheek.

“We can have sex any time.”

She smiled and kissed him softly. When she drew away, she shifted to get up. “Want to take a shower with me?”

“Are you ready for that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked, pausing just before she pushed off the bed.

“The light will be on,” he told her.

Her eyes bored into his, an expression that seemed to explain what she couldn’t with words. She needed to do this, needed to see for herself that Clark was Clark, and he was never going to hurt her. “I think I want to see your package.”

Clark shook his head with a grin as she hurried into his bathroom. He threw the cover back and followed her in. How in hell was he going to be able to stand taking a shower with this woman? Naked, dry Lois was one thing. Naked, \*wet\* Lois was another. Seeing her in the pool was enough to send him to the Arctic for an ice bath.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the shower. Her back was to him, thank goodness. He smoothed his hands over her skin. He could see the scars she’d mentioned. His eyes flashed down. The other scar was high on her left cheek. His hand went down, his fingers tracing the outline the ugly mark made.

Lois held her arms up close to her chest as he moved his hands over her back and bottom. He was looking at her scars, no doubt brooding because she’d suffered. She loved that about Clark—that he cared so much. “Not very pretty, are they?”

“Why in hell did he feel he had to do this?” Clark asked aloud, more to himself than her.

She turned around to face him, but gasped when her eyes swept across his chest. “Oh, God,” she breathed, her hands going up to touch him. “I’m so sorry.”

He bent his head to see the marks she was referring to. “It’s okay, Lois. They’ll be gone in a few minutes. They’ve already started to fade.”

“This makes me no better than Lex,” she spat.

“Stop it,” he insisted. “Don’t bring him into this.”

“He’s already in this! He is this!” she snapped, her eyes flashing wildly as they met his.

“No.” Clark grasped her shoulders. “He only has a place if you continue to give him one.”

“He has a place because he took it,” she hissed.

“He has a place because you give it to him,” Clark barked back his insistence.

“Yeah, I give it to him.” She stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel. “I’ll finish my shower in my room.”

“Lois, wait,” Clark said as he stepped out on the rug.

“Why? So you can tell me next that I gave it to him then, too?” she asked as she whirled around to face him.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“You were the one who started this, studying my scars.

\*You\* asked why he’d done it.”

“Are you always so damned literal?”

“Are you always so damned infuriating?”

“Infuriating? Lady, you give new meaning to the word.” He snorted unhumorously and threw up his hands. “Why do I even bother?” He turned and stepped back in the shower. Before he could close the door, her hand flew up to stop it.

“Yeah, why do you bother? Of course, you don’t have to anymore. You got what you wanted last night.”

Clark’s expression was surely as shocked as he felt. “Is that what you think?”

“I think I’m too tired to keep trying to pacify you because you get bent out of shape over my emotional instability. Sorry you can’t handle the fact that I was raped, over and over. Sorry I haven’t quite recovered from that because the mighty Superman has been my friend.”

“It’s not me who can’t handle this. You’re the one who has to remind me constantly. Lois, I’m sorry you were raped. I also know it, too well. You don’t have to remind me. And I know you’re not over it. I didn’t ask you to let it go or forget it happened. Excuse me for wanting to take a shower with the woman I love and asking her to leave her rapist where he belongs- in that prison he’s going to die in.” He made a move to turn toward the shower spray, but looked back at her. “Superman has never been your friend. \*I\* have.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that should change.” She slammed the door closed and stormed from the room.

Clark sighed heavily and finished his shower. He dressed slowly in jeans and a tee shirt. He was off today and had planned on working around the house. He went to check on the twins, who should be waking up by now, but a note on their door told him they were gone with Martha shopping. That was probably best, he thought as he glanced at Lois’ closed door. He made his way downstairs and prepared the coffee machine. He needed a strong cup this morning.

Could he keep doing this? Lois was so volatile, going off when he least expected, about things that really didn’t make much sense to him. He was sure it didn’t make sense to her either, but she was so confused still. After all this time, she wasn’t much better than when they’d first met. He couldn’t imagine how unstable she’d been when she first went to prison. Had they treated her for depression? More than anything she was still very depressed. She needed to speak with someone a bit more qualified to help her than he was.

Lois walked into the kitchen a while later, clearly as agitated as she’d been upstairs. Clark was sitting at the table with his laptop. Before he could close down the page he was on, she saw it. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” he lied and closed his computer.

“You’re not a good liar.”

“Among other things,” he mumbled as he stood up.

“Why were you looking at files on me?”

“I wanted to know if you had any treatment in prison.”

“So, now you think I’m a quack?”

“No. I just think you’re having a hard time healing.”

“Are you a doctor now, too?”

He sighed and looked at her. “Lois, why are you mad? Right now? Why are you so mad?”

“Because you’re an ass!”

“Why am I an ass? Because I asked you not to bring Luthor into our intimate moments? I asked last night and it didn’t tick you off enough to stop making love to me.”

“Go to hell, Clark.” She turned and snatched open a cabinet.

“See? Off and running again. But I’ve noticed that you only do this with me. I’m not a rug you can wipe your feet on when you get upset. I have feelings, too, Lois. How do you think I feel when you blow up and I have no idea why? How do you think I felt when you cried after we made love last night? My heart was breaking, but I can’t tell you that because I have to be strong for you. When is somebody gonna be strong for me?”

“Oh, poor baby,” she said sarcastically when she turned around. “What the hell are you whining about? You got your fancy tickled!”

Clark looked at her, not recognizing the woman before him at all. She was deliberately picking a fight and he didn’t know why. Right now he didn’t care either. That last statement had cut to the core. “And since it was the first and last time, I’m glad I enjoyed it,” he said with a deadpan tone.

“Typical male response,” she snorted out.

“I’m not your typical male,” he informed her as he dumped the rest of his coffee in the sink.

“Why? Because you didn’t push me to have sex sooner?” He sighed in frustration, but didn’t turn around. “It wasn’t exactly like you were deprived or anything. I can see why you don’t keep girlfriends long now.” She opened the fridge to look in. “Who wants a man who would rather spend time alone than sleep with her?”

Clark saw red. He took several deep breaths to calm himself, then turned to walk over to her. He reached out to spread his hand on the door of the fridge and slammed it closed. “At least when I’m alone I don’t have to hear all this yapping!”

The sound of his voice, the look in his eyes- it was enough to cause Lois to take a step back. Her eyes were wide, disbelieving.

“I’ve tried. I really have,” Clark went on, his voice still harsh, his expression still thunderous. “I’ve eaten more crow than I think I should have so you could have time to heal. But dammit, Lois, I can’t do this anymore. I know couples disagree and I’ll be the first to tell you that a good fight can solve more problems than ignoring each other. But this is ridiculous. I never know where I stand with you when you get angry like this. If we were fighting over something I’ve done, I’d argue all day. But I can’t... I won’t pay for another man’s sins. Lex Luthor did unspeakable things to you. I know that. I know that nearly killed you. I know you must have wanted to die. You didn’t though. You survived. You walked away. But you’ll never beat him if you keep giving him control.” Clark took a deep breath, holding his head back to help him regain control. He’d gotten entirely too angry. “I knew the first time you were intimate again would be tough for you. Maybe even the first few times. But at some point you owe it to your lover to go to his bed alone. Without Luthor.” He took a step toward her and was glad when she didn’t back away. “I know it might be years before you actually make love and not see him when you close your eyes, but if you open up your heart and believe in the trust you’ve built into your relationship, one day it’ll only be you there when you slip between the covers. And that man you finally give yourself to completely will be the luckiest bastard on the face of the Earth.”

“That man? You say that like it won’t be you.”

Clark looked away from her, his eyes filling with tears. “I want it to be,” he said when he looked at her again. “But right now, it’s not. There’s too many of us in this relationship.”

“So that crap you spouted about being without me was a

line?”

“No. I want you with every fiber in my being. But I want \*you\* and only you.”

“You knew coming into this that I had baggage,” she said in defense.

“Baggage is one thing. This anger, this bitterness- Lois, please. If you love me, go see somebody. Get well. You owe it to yourself and you owe it to the twins to be healthy.”

“I owe it to you?”

“You owe me nothing. I just don’t want to keep going in this circle and wake up one day wondering why we did this for so long.”

“You don’t want to wake up and regret wasting your life with me,” she said as tears blurred her vision.

“I don’t want to wake up and find that you’ve had a complete breakdown. Or worse,” he whispered.

Lois looked away from him, the first rational thoughts she’d had all morning beginning to penetrate her armor. He was right. She didn’t want him to be, but he was. She still felt like she was going crazy some days. Those were the days when the least little things could set her off. Days like today, when she argued and said hurtful things and wasn’t even sure why she’d been angry in the first place. One thing set her off, then everything after that seemed to tick her off.

“For all you fight and claw, I’ve seen a glimpse of what’s lying under that bravado.” Clark stepped close enough to reach out and rub her cheek with the backs of his knuckles. “I want to see that fire unleashed.”

“I’m not that person anymore.”

“You probably never will be who you once were, but you can be strong and passionate and intense again.” He moved until his body was touching hers and bent his face to kiss the side of her head. “You can be incredible,” he whispered. “If you’d just believe it.”

He didn’t try to touch her, just stood there giving her the opportunity to come to him. She leaned her forehead over on his chest. When she pushed her arms around his neck, he enclosed her in his strong embrace. She didn’t cry this time. He suspected she was nearly cried out.

Lois turned her face into his neck and inhaled. “I love you. I do love you... so much,” she told him.

“And you deserve to love and be loved,” he told her as his large hands held her, smoothing her sides and back. “You deserve happiness.” Clark kissed her shoulder. “You deserve to have a lover and friend. I want to be that lover, Lois. I want to be the best friend you’ve ever had. You just have to let me.”

“It’s time, Clark. I’ll see somebody.”

He squeezed tighter, lifting her from the floor as he straightened up. He walked with her in his arms toward the den, causing her to giggle. Releasing her so he could sit down, he tugged her hand, asking her to sit on his lap. She did and he held her close. It was nearly an hour later before she eased off his lap and went to make a call she’d been trying to avoid.

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Therapy was the best thing Lois had done since she’d been with him. Seeing Dr. Friskin had given Lois back a confidence she’d been missing. The nightmares didn’t come very often anymore and when she and Clark were alone, he felt they were truly alone.

Therapy was also the most frustrating thing she’d ever done. One of the first pieces of advice she received was that she needed to heal herself before she could offer anything to anyone else. That meant Clark still slept alone. It also meant that other than kissing, hugging, and touching, he was relegated again to pleasing himself in order to relieve the incredible sexual tension that seemed to be ever present. Of course, this time he was better able to deal with it mentally because he’d begun to attend

sessions with Lois. Dr. Friskin believed that since Lois insisted that she was going to make a life with Clark, they should understand one another. He learned that she lashed out because deep inside she believed he’d eventually do to her what Lex had done- what every other man in her life had done. She might not truly believe Clark would physically hurt her, but she did believe he’d hurt her, and her subconscious wanted to get it over with. Under close supervision so that the fire could be doused, they exploded several times over their bruised psyches. Clark now understood her a little more, and he also understood a little more why he lashed back the way he did. A part of him wanted to make her feel as bad as he did when his feelings were hurt. And it was all perfectly natural- human nature.

But the bigger part, the part that had come to cherish Lois Lane wanted to protect her and love her the way she deserved to be. He also wanted her to love him back. That was all he’d ever wanted- a woman that loved him as much as he loved her.

And she did. She loved him fiercely. He could see it in her eyes, feel it in her touch. If she didn’t love him so much, she wouldn’t fight so hard to get well either. She loved her kids, would die for them. But she wanted to get well for him. ‘Collin and Perry are wonderful gifts,’ she’d told him. ‘They’re our gift. But you- you’re my gift. You’ve given me yourself completely, and I want to give you no less.’ That had moved Clark beyond belief. There was a time he felt set apart from this world because of his alien biology. He felt set apart now because of her love.

He just wished she was at a place she felt comfortable enough to resume their sex life, he thought as he watched her bend to pick up the toys on the den floor. It had been nearly three months since they’d first made love. Thanksgiving had come and gone. Christmas was only a couple of weeks away. And as much as they’d worked on her healing and their relationship, he missed her. He’d only had a taste and it wasn’t even what he’d truly wanted, but some of Lois was better than none. He put her needs before his most of the time, had done so religiously up until the last few days. But ever since their date the week before, all he’d been able to think about was making love to her. They hadn’t done anything special, just dinner and a movie. Something had changed though. The subtle touches felt different, more pronounced. The look in her eyes was different, deeper.

She dropped on the couch beside him and leaned her head over on his shoulder. “How did we get so many toys?”

“You like to shop,” he said with a grin. He wouldn’t touch her, couldn’t touch her. He was entirely too aroused at the moment. Thank God he was wearing loose fitting pants so she wouldn’t notice.

“Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I have to finish that article on the robbery at Finster’s Jewelers.”

She reached out to grasp his hand. “I love you, Clark.”

“I love you, too, baby.”

He called her baby all the time. He was the only man that could do that and get away with it. It sounded sexy as hell when he said it.

Lois sighed. She was so happy, in a much better place than she’d been the day they had their biggest blow out yet. Seeing Dr. Friskin was the best decision she’d ever made. And as she sat there, inhaling Clark’s shower gel, she wondered if the good doctor would agree she was ready to give herself to this man. Her body certainly agreed it was time. Not making love with Clark the last few months had been the most difficult thing she’d ever abstained from. She wanted him constantly, especially lately. She was glad she’d taken the time to heal because he deserved to make love with her and her alone.

Turning her head to kiss his shoulder, she knew she’d healed enough to give him what he craved. She was ready. She’d left Lex at a session of therapy nearly six weeks ago. That had been a

cleansing session and she was finally able to move on. And she'd been thinking of nothing but just how she'd do that for the last week. Tomorrow, while Clark worked, she was going to make some changes in the house. Then he'd come home and they'd get dressed and go to the Kerth awards.

Speaking of which... "Are you nervous about the awards tomorrow?" she asked him.

"Nope. My baby's gonna win her third Kerth," he said matter-of-factly, still staring at the television. He wasn't watching it, of course. The time she'd kissed his shoulder, his whole body had jumped to attention. He briefly wondered if she might be up to helping him relieve a little tension tonight.

"What about you?" Lois asked and sat up. "You're nominated for one, too." He was nominated in a different category, and they were nominated for one together- the story on Intergang.

He shrugged. "I'd rather you win."

"You mean that, don't you?"

His eyes moved to hers. "I mean that," he said softly, then sat up to kiss her fiercely. He pulled away abruptly and stood up. "I'm going to bed." And nearly ran from the room. If he didn't get away from her, he was going to explode.

"Poor baby," she whispered. Just one more day, she thought as she stood up to cut the lights. One more day and she'd finally give him his heart's desire.

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"You look bootiful, Daddy," Perry told him as she straightened his tie.

"Thank you, Perry," he said and leaned to rub his nose against hers. He stood up and turned when Lois walked into the den. His breath left him in a rush and his mouth went dry. She was wearing the black dress she'd worn on their first date... No she wasn't. This one was new. "Nice dress," he said. "Nice woman," he went on. "New dress?"

"Yes. My other black number was too tight." She held her arms up and whirled around. "I've gained fifteen pounds!"

"You look amazing," he breathed.

"So do you." It was the first time she'd seen him in a tux. He certainly made it look good.

"Wow, Mommy," Collin said as he came in from the other room. "Will you go out with me sometime?"

"Of course," she told him and leaned over to rub his nose with her own. "How about Sunday?"

"Okay." He grinned at her, then went to plop down in front of the TV.

"Here, Daddy," Perry said as she tugged his pants. He looked down and took the rose she was holding for him. "Thank you." He gave her a smile, then walked over to Lois. "For you."

"Thank you," she replied as she took the bud. They stared at one another until the bell rang. "Must be Denny." The young man was sitting with the kids tonight because Clark's parents were joining them for the awards ceremony.

Clark tore his eyes off her and went to open the door. "How many times have I told you that you're home when you come here?" he asked the young man. "You don't have to ring the bell."

"Remember that when I walk in on a hot interlude," he joked. "Wow! Lois, you are a knock out!"

"Thank you, Denny."

"Stop gawking at my date, boy," Clark said as he reached for Lois' coat. He held it up while she slipped in it. "Hey," he yelled at the twins. "Be good and don't beat Denny too badly."

"They always do," Denny said as he went over to tickle his two favorite people. He often sat for the twins to earn extra money. Clark insisted on paying him.

The couple said good-bye to the twins and set out for the city. The ceremony was taking place at the convention center and was packed with the elite of the journalism world. Clark was as far from that place as he could get without leaving. His mind was

firmly on the woman hanging on his arm, pride welling within him when he noticed quite a few men seemed to be looking at them with a bit of envy in their eyes. That made him keep her tucked close, and she hadn't strayed very far from him. He'd thought he was going to blow up when they'd danced. She'd moved in close, her leg between his, her hot breath whispering across his neck, his ear. By the time the dance was over, he was sure he was smoking.

"Clark, you're sweating," Lois whispered as they drew apart slowly.

"Yeah," was all he said as he stared at her. He watched as her eyes widened, then darkened in understanding. "Come on. I think they're ready," he said and motioned with his head toward their table. He was more than relieved it was time to start. Another second next to Lois would have sent him spiraling out of control.

They left the ceremony a little while later, laughing and holding three new crystals. Both won in their category and they won the award they were nominated for together. Although there was a table full of people there to congratulate them, they were too wrapped up in one another to notice the others very much. The drive home seemed to be electrically charged. They kept exchanging heated glances and Lois kissed and nibbled on Clark's hand. Denny congratulated them on their success and headed out. Clark placed their crystals in the case in the hallway and went to find Lois. He looked in on the kids and found Lois in her room. She was stoking a fire.

"Hey," he said as he walked in, being sure to keep a respectable distance. He was still a bit worked up from being so close to her tonight and didn't want to tempt fate. He noticed that her bed, or rather her mattress set, was lying on the floor. Looking around he noticed her furniture was gone. "Where are your things?"

"My clothes are in boxes in the closet," she answered him as she straightened up from the fireplace.

"Why?"

"I'm getting new furniture."

"Really?" She nodded. "Why?"

"Because I feel there should be furniture in here that we both like."

"What?"

She smiled at him as she slowly walked his way. "Your clothes are in the closet, too. We'll move your other things in as soon as you build our new furniture. I was going to just move rooms, but then I thought about the beautiful furniture you make and decided I'd rather have something we both like that you'd made."

She had come to stand inches in front of him. "You're ready for me to move in?"

"I'm ready." She lifted her hands and placed them on his chest. "I'm completely ready."

Clark took a deep breath, grasped her face, and dove in for a deep, passionate kiss. He drew away to rest his forehead on hers. "Please mean that." He was more than completely ready.

"I mean it, Clark." And to prove it, she pulled on his tie. "Shut the door."

Clark looked up and blew hard at the door so it would slam closed. He stood there, anticipation like he'd never known building as she pulled his tie from his suit. Lois held his gaze as her hands slipped under the edge of his jacket and pushed it over his shoulders. It fell in a puddled heap on the floor. Being constantly aroused for weeks, Clark was much too impatient to undress slowly. He reached down and jerked his shirt open, sending buttons flying around the room. He sighed when her hot hands seared a path across his chest. Her grin told him she appreciated the gesture.

"I can't wait," he told her and reached down to grasp her hips. With one swift motion, she was lying on the mattress and he

was kneeled above her, working furiously to get his belt undone. She must be as impatient as I am, he thought when she leaned up to help him.

“Show me, Clark. Show me how much you want me,” Lois whispered.

“I don’t want to scare you.” His hand slipped under her hair and he kneaded her neck, barely able to stand the heat between them.

“Show me,” she repeated more firmly.

Clark’s eyes flashed and a second later, his mouth covered hers as he laid her back again. As the kiss deepened, his hands worked furiously toward his prize. “Oh, God,” he breathed when he realized she was urging him on. He drew back to look at her, wide-eyed and waiting- expectant. “Are you still taking the pill?” He thought she was, but wanted to be sure.

“Yes.”

He grinned and leaned back in, intent on a quick conclusion to months of built up tension. He glanced down and realized what he was doing. This wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted slow, deliberate, passionate sex. Sex that meant something. This would be release and nothing else. He slowly reached up to cup her cheek as he kissed her again. He felt her pull his glasses off his face, then her lips branded his skin. She kissed his cheek, his chin, his nose, his eyes.

That was what he wanted. He took his time, enjoyed the feel of her in his arms. She was warm and so...

“Beautiful,” he breathed, reaching forward to smooth his hand over her stomach. He leaned to kiss her there, dipping his tongue into her navel. He loved kissing Lois. To be able to do so freely and completely was nearly breath taking.

“Right there,” she told him when he found that sensitive spot behind her ear.

Clark felt the wave wash over her, crashing with intensity. She seemed to melt into the bed as she fell on the other side of her euphoria. He’d never seen anything as beautiful as she was at that moment. Lois was finally and completely free. Wanting to feel her, to be there with her, he leaned to kiss her neck as he pulled her even closer. Her eyes focused just as he felt his very soul merge with hers.

“Clark,” she breathed and wrapped her arms around him.

Incredible, he thought. He’d known she’d be passionate when she was finally free of her demons, but this was nothing he’d imagined.

And he couldn’t believe how much it meant to him. He’d never loved her more.

The storm had passed, but it left behind brilliance he’d never known possible from a physical release. His lips descended on hers and he held against her briefly.

“I thought I loved you before,” Clark said as he looked down at her again. Another kiss and he sighed and fell over on his side, throwing an arm across her body. “If sex is going to be like this all the time, I’m damn glad I’m Superman.”

She giggled and turned over to face him. “So, that’s what it’s like?”

“Trust me, I’ve never had sex like that in my life,” he told her, and reached up to smooth the hair off her face.

“I love you, Clark.”

“Oh, baby, I love you.” He moved over and kissed her again, then tucked her into his body.

“Was it worth it?”

“The wait?”

“Yeah.”

“As frustrating as it was, it was worth every second.

Although I hope we don’t wait three more months before we do it again.”

“Oh, no. We \*have\* to do that all the time.”

Clark chuckled and rolled onto his back. “What better time to

get a start on round two?”

She laughed but slipped on top of him. Round two was no less intense and no less breath taking.

They moved into the master bedroom together the next day. Clark made new furniture, including a large bed- with plenty of room to work.

And they worked on it often. She’d mention her past now and then, and she’d even cry from time to time, but she’d finally given herself to Clark completely. And he was loving every second.

But he’d had no idea she’d meant \*have\* to quite so literally. They made love everywhere, sometimes several times in a day. She’d told him she was glad he was Superman and could recover so quickly. He was, too, because she wanted him all the time. They’d made love in every room of the house, in the garage, in the cars, sitting outside on the patio in a chair. Snow was falling that night and they were wrapped in a blanket, but they’d had sex. Nowhere was off limits, including the Planet. Lois was suddenly as insatiable as she’d been reserved. He spoke with Dr. Friskin about it and she assured him it was quite natural. Her desire would wane away, she told him.

Two weeks later, she was still just as amorous as she’d been the first week. On Christmas Eve, they put the twins to bed and made love under the tree. Then in their room. Of course, they were at it again before the twins got up to see what Santa brought them. Later Christmas Day, with the house packed with people, Lois had cornered him in their bathroom. He’d made love to her right there.

“If you’re so worried about this”, Dr. Friskin had said to him. “Why are you condoning it by participating?”

Was she kidding? He was participating because he’d never felt so good, so alive. And the sex was incredible. Why would he stop?

How utterly whacked was that? he thought as he walked up the driveway dragging the trash can. The New Year had come and gone. February was almost here.

And Lois was still insatiable. The only break he’d gotten was the week she was on her period. If you could call it a break. She’d teased him relentlessly. Of course, she’d helped him with the tension, too, but still...

He looked up at the woman standing in the window upstairs. She was waving at him. He grinned and waved back. When he made it inside, she was standing at the stove.

“Are you cooking?”

“Funny, Kent.”

He teased her all the time about her cooking, even though she was becoming a really good cook, with help from his mother. “Smells good, baby,” he said as he bent to kiss her neck. Hell, he was as bad as she was. He could have very easily made love to her right there.

She turned around to look at him. “Do you think there’s something wrong with me?”

“What?”

“I chose my family over my career. I mean, yeah, I work. Hell, I won a Kerth last year. But I would much rather be home with my kids than in the city running the rat race.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We were at play group today and I overheard some snooty little heifer talking about how she’d never give up her career for a man, no matter how many beautiful children he gave her.”

“Heifer?” he asked, with a raised brow.

“Clark!” she whined.

“It’s just words, baby,” he told her and reached out to hug her. “Are you happy?”

“Well, I thought I was, but then I got to thinking.”

Clark pushed her back and looked at her with concerned eyes.

“I don’t think I am happy.”

“What?” he asked, fear washing over him. He was happy.

“Lois...” he started, but stopped when she grinned.

“I’m not happy because something’s missing.”

“What’s missing? Honey, if I’ve done something...”

“This is missing.” She pushed a book across the counter toward him. It was a bride’s magazine. “I hadn’t meant to ask you like this. I wanted something a bit more romantic.”

Clark’s eyes snapped up to hers. “This is what’s missing?” he asked as he pulled a box out of his pocket.

Lois’ mouth fell open as she got her first look at the gorgeous ring inside.

“I bought it with the intention to ask you to marry me at Christmas, but...” He shrugged. “It just didn’t seem like the right time. I was waiting on Valentine’s Day.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, crying today for a different reason. Clark laughed softly as he hugged her close.

“Is that a yes?”

“You didn’t ask yet,” she told him as she drew back to look at him.

“Lois,” he said, his smile fading into a serious expression.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Yes, yes, yes!” She kissed him hard, then drew back to hold out her hand. He slipped the ring on her finger and kissed her again. “I love you, Clark.”

“I love you, Lois.” He laughed again when their eyes met.

“Feel better now?”

“I feel so much better. I didn’t know how much I wanted to be your wife until today.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“More than ready.” She grinned at him wickedly. “Besides, if we keep having sex the way we’ve been doing, we’ll need to be married.”

His brows rose. “You’re not...?”

“No, no. I’m not pregnant. But I want to be married for real before I am the next time.”

“Next time? Do you intend to get pregnant again?”

“Well, I’d like to... one day.”

Clark reached out to cup her cheek. “I would love for us to have more babies.”

“Good.” She kissed him solidly. “Go get the babies you already have ready for dinner.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He walked toward the door.

“Hey, Clark?” She waited until he turned back. “Can we get married sooner rather than later?”

“Why the rush?”

“There’s no rush. I’d just like to have a spring wedding.”

“Spring? \*This\* spring?”

“Yes, this spring.” She rolled her eyes at him.

He cocked his head to look at her. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since I was ten,” she told him.

Every little girl imagines her perfect wedding. Lois just told him that their wedding was the one she’d been looking forward to her whole life. He closed the distance to her and kissed her again. “Am I your knight in shining armor?” he joked.

“You’re my wind in blue and red spandex sails,” she answered with a grin.

He laughed softly.

“What’s so funny?”

Clark turned to look at his mother and father who’d come for dinner the way they did most nights. He held Lois close as he grinned even wider. “I cast her across the stormy seas,” he replied. Lois laughed again.

Martha just shook her head. Those two were always full of something.

Clark’s eyes went back to Lois’. “What do you say we have a \*Kansas\* spring wedding?”

“Oh, that does sound good. The twins would love it. And we could make out in the hayloft,” she finished with a waggle of her brows, causing him to laugh.

“Did I hear wedding?” his mother asked.

“Yes,” Clark answered without looking away from the incredible woman before him. “We’re getting married... in the spring.”

“Hot dog!” Jonathan shouted, but he’d have to wait to congratulate his son because the boy was kissing his fiancée.

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Clark whirled Lois around in a circle, then dipped her back deeply while he kissed her neck. They were dancing in the living room, still celebrating their engagement. Even after a week, it seemed surreal to Lois. Just months ago she would have sworn she’d never get married again. They were in the middle of a party Jack and Jimmy insisted they have. The house was packed with all of their friends and family, everyone having a wonderful time.

“Hey, CK, mind if I cut in?”

Clark lifted his eyes from Lois to look at Jack. He was about to tell the young man that he did mind, but thought better of it when he noticed the expression on the young man’s face. “Take good care of her, Jack,” he said as he stepped back, slowly releasing her.

“Absolutely,” Jack replied as he stepped in front of her.

Lois smiled at him as she lifted her hand to his shoulder. “Thank you, for the party,” she told him.

“Thank you, for taking care of him.” He glanced over at Clark, who was now dancing with Lucy. She’d been doing so well that she had been released from the hospital. The prosecutor, with a lot of prompting from people who cared for Lucy, decided that pressing any kind of charges against her would not benefit anyone. Lucy had been introduced to her other sister, Lana, and had been staying with the other woman, trying desperately, with the help of Dr. Friskin, to make sense of her life as well. The younger Lane woman was also working at the Planet as a research assistant.

“Clark means a lot to me,” Jack went on. “He’s the big brother I’ve always wanted.”

“Yeah. You mean a lot to him, too.” Lois couldn’t believe how much the young man before her had grown up. Jack was a very special person. “He told me that he was impressed that you and Jimmy never made a big deal out of him being Superman.”

“To us he’s just Clark.” Jack whirled her around. “But he’s so much more, too.”

“Yeah. I feel the same way about him.” It was hard to describe. Most of how they felt about Clark had nothing to do with the fact that he was super.

“He needs you, Lois, as much as you need him.”

“I know. I hope I can be all he needs.”

“You just have to be here. That’s all he needs.” They danced for a minute before he smiled at her. “You do know if I was a little older, CK wouldn’t stand a chance?”

“Oh, I know.” They laughed briefly as the dance continued.

“I’m glad you’re here and I’m glad you’re well.” He leaned over to hug her tightly. “And I’m glad you put up with me like CK does.”

“Oh, Jack, I love you as much as he does,” she replied as she held him. He drew back and she smiled at him. “I hear we’re gonna have another party soon. A graduation party.”

Jack glanced toward his brother. “That kid’s really gonna do it, Lois. Thanks to CK.” Denny’s senior year in high school had been outstanding. He’d already had three schools offer to have him study there.

“I think that kid’s gonna do it because of you,” she answered.

They stopped moving as Jack looked back at Denny. “What am I gonna do without him next year?”

Just then Lucy stepped up to them. “Hey, Jack, would you

like to go for a walk?"

Lois grinned when his eyes met hers. "Oh, I think you'll find something to do," she answered the question he'd asked.

"Maybe I will." Jack leaned over and kissed Lois' cheek, then grinned widely at Lucy. "Come on, gorgeous," he said as he threw his arm around her shoulders. "Let me show you the play set I'm helping CK build." It was a bit cold out, but he'd keep her warm if she got cold, he decided. Who was he to turn down such a sweet request from a pretty lady?

Lois looked around the room. Jimmy was dancing with Lana, of all people. He'd actually been out with her three times, which was... weird at first. But Clark had insisted he was completely okay with it if that was what they wanted to do. Judging by the way there were looking at each, it was definitely what they wanted to do, among other things.

She snorted softly and walked across the room to cuddle with her twins. They had been dancing earlier with one another, which was adorable. After a hug or two, they were off to find something else to do. She noticed Martha was sharing a laugh with Alice, Perry and Jonathan were talking about the stock market. Mayson and Dan were cuddling, something else Lois found hard to grasp. Clark was laughing at something Denny said. When he felt her eyes on him, he looked up and grinned at her. That man had become her life. He'd worked through her defenses, showed super human patience, and loved her like crazy. She would give him no less.

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"I think the party was a success," Lois said as she picked up Clark's foot and sat down on the couch in the den.

"Easy for you to say. You didn't have to clean up."

"Oh, shut up," she said as she swatted him with one of the pillows. "You were done in like ten seconds."

He laughed as he caught the pillow and tossed it back at her.

Lois smoothed her hand over his foot, down his leg. He'd changed into his sleep shorts earlier. "I never get tired of your body."

"Yeah, I know."

"Watch it, Kent. I'll cut you off."

He sat up and kissed her below her ear. "Don't do that. After you've been so thoroughly taking care of me lately, I'd die if you cut me off," he said softly.

"Do you think I'm insatiable?"

"Insatiably, uncontrollably, wonderfully, perfect." He nibbled her lobe, causing her to giggle.

The giggle subsided when he hit a particularly sensitive spot. She turned and kissed him, thrusting her tongue deep into his mouth. He'd helped create a mad woman, she thought as her hands threaded into his hair. Since she'd finally, finally learned that this man was her other half, she'd given herself over to him completely.

Well, almost completely, she thought as she maneuvered so that she was straddling him. He'd turned and sat against the back of the couch so that they could continue their latest quest to please one another. The twins had gone home with their grandparents tonight to give them some time alone and she wasn't going to waste it. She was also going to cross the final barrier between her and this incredible man.

Drawing away from the wonderful, full lips plundering hers, she slipped to her knees between Clark's legs. They'd made love in every possible position and in nearly every place imaginable. He'd loved her completely, his lips and mouth bathing her entire body on more than one occasion. But she'd yet to show him the same appreciation. Her hands had branded him more than once, but...

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" he asked as she drew away from a kiss.

"I think I maybe I do," she said as she smoothed her hands

over him slowly. His breath hissed through his teeth and he laid his head back to enjoy what she was doing. They'd done this more than one time. Lois loved to watch him while she touched him with her hands. She'd done it often. Yet she'd never been this daring, this bold.

"Oh, God, Lois," he breathed. He knew certain aspects of their sex lives might be something he would never receive from Lois, considering how thoroughly Luthor had humiliated her with those acts. Though he'd longed to experience it all with her, he'd relegated himself to the fact that it probably wouldn't happen. Now though...

"What? Don't you want me to do this?"

"Yes!" he shouted, then leaned over to kiss her. "It's just... give me a minute."

She smiled at him, thrilled with how she made him feel. She'd thought she'd never affect a man like that again. But with Clark, she wanted to.

"Just watching you... Don't do this unless you really want to."

"I really want to," she assured him and kissed him before he could say another word.

A new admiration for the woman she was washed over him as he looked into her eyes. They'd talked about how Luthor had subjected her to such deep humiliation.

Luthor had made her do unthinkable things- had degraded even the simple act of touching someone. Then he'd done it again, over and over. True intimacy was the one thing Lois had the most trouble dealing with. She knew Clark was nothing like Luthor- would never force her to do anything. Yet she'd been unable and unwilling to indulge him in a truly gloriously pleasing, wonderfully intoxicating experience that only comes from physical intimacy... and deep love. And now that she had, his respect for her grew.

"Clark, when we make love and you..." She waved her hand to explain what she couldn't speak. "I feel like you... own me."

His brows rose, a horrified expression on his face.

"Not like that," she was quick to tell him. "It's as if I become part of you, become yours."

"I feel that way every time we make love."

"I do, too, but the other... it's different. I can't explain it. All I know is that I want to, I \*need\* to feel the same way."

"And you think this will make you feel that way?"

"Only one way to find out," she said with a grin. She stared at him for a moment, then pushed up so she could kiss him.

Right then, he'd indulge her anything, one experience fading into another.

"Clark... oh, God, I felt it. I still feel it," she told, then held his head while she kissed him, running her tongue over his again and again.

"Damn," he breathed.

Two minutes later, Lois was smiling at him with all the love she felt for him. He kissed her softly once more.

"I love you, Lois," he told her when he drew back.

"I love you, Clark." Another kiss before she hugged him close. "So, you gonna let me do that some more?"

"Oh yeah," he breathed as his hands held her close, causing her to laugh softly. He couldn't believe this woman was real. How had Jor-El known when he'd sent his baby boy away so long ago that some day the man his son would become would find a woman that could not only match him step for step, she had the power to bring him to his knees? After a moment, he drew back and grinned at her. She smiled back and before long they were laughing. Coming home had never been so sweet.

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Perry White sat back in his chair and grinned widely at the picture on the front page of the Planet. Wedding announcements didn't usually make the front page, but this one was special.

Clark Kent had been a gamble Perry had taken at a time when his heart was broken over the loss of his daughter. That gamble had paid off. His daughter had come home and all was right in his world.

The Planet proclaimed Lane and Kent the hottest team in town. They'd found their way to one another after overwhelming trials and obstacles. Lois survived life with a maniac, brought beautiful life into this world, and created something special with an extraordinary man. They'd make it, Perry thought as he looked at the happy smiles on the faces of the couple in the image Jimmy had snapped.

"I wonder if he knows he's going to be a daddy again," Jack asked as he looked down at the photo over Perry's shoulder.

"He'll know soon enough."

"You did it again, Chief," Jack said as he clapped the older man's shoulder. "You knew what she needed even when she had no clue."

"When are you going to learn, boy? I'm not a man in my position because I can yodel."

He and Jack laughed out loud. All was well with the world again. The Daily Planet was a beacon in a city of injustice. Perry White's kids were all well and home where they should be. Superman was flying the sky and had his super woman.

And Lois Lane was married to Clark Kent.

What could be better than that?

THE END