

Christmas Carol

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Rated PG

Summary: What do you do when you're alone at Christmas and you've lost your spirit? Listen to a Christmas Carol; it just might change your life.

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I'm not even sure this story was ever beta'd. I wrote it in 2012, in a time I was looking forward to the holidays that year. Then life threw me a curve ball and this, like all my other stories, were put on the back burner. I've since gotten back to my feet and brushed myself off. The L&C fanfic bug has bitten me again, so I'm dusting off all the shelved stories first.

This one is a little different from what I normally write because it's written solely from the perspective of Clark, in first person. If it's horrible, please tell me. And of course, it was inspired from a song. I'd like to thank Skip Ewing for singing a great song of the same name. I'm pretty sure he wrote the song as well, but could not absolutely confirm that. If he didn't, I give total credit to the writer.

And I borrowed most of the characters in this tale. Thanks DC Comic and L&C for a great tale and continued inspiration. No infringement was intended.

I stopped living a long time ago. Now I just exist. I wake up every morning, go to work — in a profession I've dreamed of working since I was a kid — fly a few patrols...

Did I mention I'm Superman?

Superman... the comic book creation I invented so that I could live my life without fear of being discovered. I have all these wonderful abilities. Why not use them?

After the patrols, I go home to an empty apartment... an even emptier life.

It wasn't always like that. I was raised on a farm in Kansas, by two of the most incredible people alive. I mean, they would have to be pretty spectacular to just unconditionally accept a child that fell from the sky. So, I had the proverbial all-American childhood. Even when my abilities started manifesting themselves, my folks stuck by me. When we learned my true origins, I was still their son. College was the typical leap into adulthood — and party central. Although, I did more studying than partying. And college was also where I met the person that would change my life forever. She is also the reason why I'm miserable now.

It's been three years. I should have grieved and begun to heal by now. But I'm in a holding pattern. I can't help but remember the way it was.

Randi... I married a woman named Randi. I was ribbed more times for that than you can count. We dated throughout our junior and senior years of college, graduated together, and moved off to the big city. She was a photographer and quickly secured a position with the LA Times. I earned a spot on the newsroom floor there and within a year, we were married.

Our careers took off at blinding speed. We were so busy we barely had time to breathe. Yet, our relationship grew stronger.

And I have to tell you that she thought my abilities were remarkable. She was the one who encouraged me to create Superman. She's also the only reason I keep him flying now.

Two years into our marriage, we started to discuss the possibility of having children. We both wanted several. A year later, we had none. I blamed my unusual biology, but Randi insisted it would happen when it happened. Six more months passed...

A routine physical revealed something far uglier than incompatible biology. Of course, I didn't know it until much later.

Randi couldn't have children. Randi would never do a lot of things. Three years, eight months, two weeks and four days after we married, she passed from this life. Stage four ovarian cancer attacked so quickly it made my head swim. I was holding her hand when she took her last breath.

She left a video diary for me. It took me a year to watch it. I had just about given up living, but her words convinced me that I still have a lot to give. Although, three years later, I'm still incredibly depressed and lonely.

I still have fantastic parents. They were amazing throughout everything... are still amazing. I also traded a desk on the newsroom floor of the LA Times for one on the busiest news floor in the country.

I came to the Daily Planet eighteen months after Randi died. She had said on the video that if I got the call, I better go. And I got the call. Perry White sought me out because even when I was at my lowest, my work as a reporter seemed to be at its best. I've earned four Kerth awards, a Bailey, a Meriwether, and countless other professional nods over the years. The editor of the Planet wanted me on staff with the other top reporter in the business. It seems he's at the top of his field for a reason, too. I've earned a joint Kerth with that other reporter in the short time I've been in Metropolis.

For all I can do professionally, I struggle personally. I can't help it. I adored Randi, and I dearly miss what we had. I have friends... sort of. Jimmy and I play ball together several times a month. Jack and I catch a movie now and then. And Lois...

Lois Lane... she's the other top reporter at the Planet. As fierce as I am withdrawn, she attacks every story with a passion so few have in the reporting world. She has as many awards as I do, not to mention that joint Kerth we earned together.

I guess you could say she's a friend... or as close to a friend one can get where Lois Lane is concerned. She's also as fierce personally as she is professionally. She's brash, domineering, a bit egotistical, and a lot pigheaded. She doesn't hang out or even socialize a whole lot. I've heard her mention her martial arts classes and groan loudly about her weekly dinner with her father. Her mother died when she was in college. It's very seldom Lois actually seems happy. It's as if she has something on her mind, something so deeply imbedded that she can't get away from it. But every now and then, a brilliant smile will burst through. She'll say something so profound, it brings tears to your eyes. Lois was threatened by me when I first came to the Planet. Once she learned I wanted to work *with* her and not against her, things changed. She went from tolerating me to forced acceptance. In any other situation, at any other time, I might have been offended. Considering how badly I struggled personally, I figured it was for the best.

So, I work, I fly, I go home... there has to be more.

The pile of research before me seems daunting in the busy newsroom. If it was after hours, when I choose to work normally, I could have it done in seconds. But with people around, I have to do my research the old-fashioned way. When the elevator dings, I look up to see Lois storm in — her usual morning dash. She's arguing with someone on the phone, quite loudly.

"Morning, Lois," Jimmy calls out, to which he receives a grunt.

She heads straight for the coffee maker — it must be bad this morning. She runs headlong into the Christmas tree on the

landing and curses loudly.

“Who put this damn thing here?”

“Sheez, Lois,” Jack returns as he passes on the floor below the break area. “You’ve worked here how long and you’ve failed to notice the tree there every year?” The young man shakes his head as he walks away.

“You know, Jack, one day somebody’s gonna knock that sarcastic tone right out of your mouth!” was the return shout.

“Not you, not today,” he calls back and waves over his shoulder. Jack is one of very few who has the guts to stand up to Lois.

Lois fumes in frustration, snatches up a coffee cup, and hastily prepares herself a cup of coffee. She had dropped her phone when she hit the tree and chose to just hang it up. Must have been her father on the other end.

I sigh and read through another page. When she drops her things on her desk, I look up again. “Good morning, Lois.” I’m not sure why I said it. I’ve learned over the months to just keep my mouth shut where she’s concerned. This morning though... it slips out before I can stop myself.

“What’s so damn good about it?” she barks back and drops on her chair.

“Lois hates Christmas,” Jimmy informs me as he steps up to hand me some pictures I asked for. Jimmy Olsen is the best researcher at the Planet... and he’s trained Jack well.

I arch a brow as I look from the other man to Lois. Her desk is directly across from mine — Perry thought it best for when we team up on stories.

“Don’t give me that look, Smallville,” she says as she flops on her chair. “Not all of us grew up in a Norman Rockwell painting.”

“No, we didn’t,” I confirm. “But I happen to think Christmas is still a bit magical.” As I say it, I’m actually surprised I really mean it. Three of the holidays have passed since I lost Randi. If anybody should dislike the holiday, it should be me. She died a week before... I haven’t had a bit of the ‘Christmas spirit’ since her death, but I really do mean what I said. Christmas *is* magical.

“This from the man who didn’t even put up a tree last year,” she says and glares at me.

“How do you know I didn’t put up a tree last year?” In fact... “How do you know where I live?” Lois and I have worked together, we’ve talked at work — a little — we’ve brought down one of the largest crime organizations in the world, but we’ve never hung out. And especially not at one another’s respective houses.

“Kent, if you don’t know by now I’m the best in the business, you never will.” She dismisses me by looking at her computer.

God, sometimes that woman really ticks me off.

“Did *you* put up a tree?” Jimmy goads her.

Lois looks up from her screen with fire in her eyes. “As a matter of fact, I did. I put up a tree every year.”

“You do?” I can’t help but ask.

“I do.” And she dismisses us both again by concentrating on her computer.

“This I have to see,” Jimmy speaks up. He’s laughing softly as he walks away.

Yeah... I wouldn’t mind seeing it myself. Lois Lane’s Christmas tree... that has to be a sight.

“Hey, CK,” Jack speaks up as he whirls a guest chair up next to me. “I need a huge favor, man.”

I turn toward him slightly. “Shoot.” I try to help when I can. Everybody knows it, too. I’m constantly asked to participate in this or that.

“The Walden Center hosts this huge party for the kids every year.”

I get it. He wants Superman to make an appearance. I’ve written one too many articles. Jack is constantly asking me to

‘tell Supes’ or ‘ask Supes’. Of course, that might have something to do with the fact that I think Jack knows I’m Superman. But that’s a different story.

“Anyway, the Santa they booked...”

“You want Kent to play Santa?” Lois asks with a smirk on her face.

Jack glares at her. “We sure as hell don’t want you to do it... Scrooge!” He sticks his tongue out at her.

“Very mature, Jack,” she retorts.

“So, I know it’s last minute,” Jack says, ignoring Lois now.

“Jack, I don’t have a suit,” I tell the younger man.

“The Center has one. Please, CK. It’s tonight,” he says with a hopeful expression.

“Yeah, Kent. I’m sure you’d look jolly as a fat man,” Lois remarks. She chuckles as if she doesn’t believe I could do it.

“What time, Jack?” I ask and cannot believe I’m about to agree. I haven’t had enough spirit to take a deep breath for the past few years, let alone play Santa. But what the hay... it’s for a good cause.

“Seven.” Jack hops up, smacks my shoulder with a grin.

“Thanks, buddy.” And he’s gone.

“This should be good,” Lois adds.

That stops Jack at the bottom of the ramp. He turns on his heel and walks up to lean down next to Lois. “If you show up to gawk at Clark, you have to wear the elf costume.” And just to tick her off more, he kisses her cheek.

She growls loudly, turns to hit him, but he’s gone. I hear a slight chuckle and realize I made that sound. I’m actually laughing. I haven’t done a lot of that since...

I glance at the picture on my desk. I’ve always kept one there — to remind me that life is a wonderful, breathless experience.

“Okay, I hear you,” I say softly to the image of the smiling woman. Randi hadn’t wanted me to waste my life away feeling sorry for myself. She wanted me to move on, create something wonderful again. And until now, I refused to even try.

I glance up in time to see Lois avert her gaze from me. She sighs and lifts her hands to her keyboard. What was that about?

I feel a bit better now and work seems to go quickly. I go out as Superman a few times and by the time I get to the Walden Center, I’m actually looking forward to playing Santa Clause.

The Walden Center is an orphanage on the east side. Jack and his brother, Denny, lived in the Center after their parents died. The second Jack was old enough, he begged himself into a position at the Planet — he was friends with Jimmy. A short year later and the kid applied to the state to take custody of his brother. The pair moved into a cozy little place on Clinton. The same cozy little place I once lived in. I live on Hyperion now, in a brownstone entirely too large for me, but when I first saw it, it felt like home. It was somewhere Randi would have loved and I couldn’t stop myself from buying it.

Lois didn’t make it out to gawk at me, thank goodness. Sometimes she’s the biggest trash talker alive.

The suit is authentic and even the fake whiskers look convincing. The second I slip into my role, I feel... different. I feel... like I’m awakening from hibernation — emotional hibernation. Listening to those kids ask for the simplest things reminds me just how lucky I am. I had a great childhood, the most amazing parents, and I have loved and been loved. I have lost, but I have so much more to do.

Nearly fifty kids have sat on my lap in the two hours I’ve been here. One little girl has watched me carefully, but so far hasn’t gotten close. She’s the cutest thing... long, dark hair and incredible eyes. She’s probably eight or nine, a bit small in stature. She has chubby cheeks that I bet would dimple when she smiles. She hasn’t done that... not all night.

Jack announces that we’re wrapping things up. The kids will have to be in bed soon — school tomorrow. The little girl is still

sitting at a table by the wall, and I decide to go to her. I approach slowly, cautiously. She watches me the entire way to her.

“Hi,” I say softly.

“Hey,” she replies.

I sit down across from her. “Wouldn’t you like to tell me what you want for Christmas?”

“I don’t think you can get it,” she replies.

“I’m Santa. I can do a lot of things.”

She eyes me for a long moment before she nods. But she doesn’t offer up anything more.

“What’s your name?”

“Christmas.”

“Christmas?” I ask in surprise.

“Christmas Carol. I was born on Christmas day.”

“I must say, I’ve never met a little girl named Christmas,” I tell her. Not even a hint of a smile. “Tell me, Christmas...”

“Carol. I like Carol better.”

“Carol,” I correct myself. “What would you like for Christmas?”

She stares at me for a long moment before large tears fill her eyes. The sight breaks my heart.

“I’d like someone to take me home.” It was all she said before she jumps up and runs away.

Jack steps up beside me. “I see you’ve met Carol.”

I stand beside the younger man. “Is her name really Christmas?”

“Yep. Poor kid has had it doubly rough. She was given up for adoption when she was born. A military family took her home. When she was five, her dad finally left her and her mom. Of course, she had never really known him. He had been stationed out of the country four and half years of the five they’d had her. The time took its toll on her mom, too. She broke, became addicted to drugs, and dropped Carol off at social services. That was nearly three years ago. The kid was so devastated, she completely withdrew. That’s why she hasn’t been adopted. And now, of course, she’s almost at an age that she probably won’t be.”

It was Jack’s life. The poor guy had lived the horror of being picked over.

And it made me almost ill. The little girl — Carol — was beautiful. No doubt she was a smart child. Her smile could probably light up the room. I look to where she disappeared. Why do I suddenly feel so drawn to that child?

We clean up, I say my good-byes as Santa, and head out. I fly my usual patrols and when a lull in activity sets in, I find myself hovering outside the Center. I scan and quickly find Carol. She’s not in bed. She’s sitting on the front pew in the small chapel on the first floor. She’s been crying. My heart rages again. This child shouldn’t suffer like that. Does she know she was cast aside so much? Part of me wants to swoop in and whisk her away.

I almost fall from the sky when I find myself wondering why I don’t do just that. Not literally, of course.

I walk the floor at home all night, thinking of that child. I close my eyes and see her face. I can hear her prayer... ‘Why? Why give me life and leave me all alone?’

I find myself lifting my phone way before dawn.

“Clark?” my mom asks in a groggy voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... not really.”

“Son, it’s... three in the morning.”

“Mom, when did you know you would keep me?”

“Clark...” I hear her struggle to sit up. She takes a deep breath, sighs. “Honey, I knew the second I saw you that we would keep you.”

“And Dad? Did he feel as strongly?”

“Well, your father was cautious... insisted we call all the agencies to make sure you weren’t lost or that you hadn’t been kidnapped. But, yes, he felt as strongly.” She laughed softly. “He

trembled in excitement for three days. It was so wonderful to see him that way. Clark, dear, what’s going on?”

“Mom, I played Santa at the orphanage last night.”

“That’s wonderful, son.”

She was thrilled to hear I’d done something... anything... after being stagnant for so long

“I met this little girl...” I feel a little thrill again. Just thinking of Carol makes me feel lightheaded. “She was adorable and gorgeous and Mom, I think I might apply to adopt her.”

“What?” Mom’s completely awake now. I can tell by the tone of her voice.

“I can’t explain it, Mom. It’s like there’s some kind of pull between us.”

“Son...”

“What about Superman?” asks Dad on the other line. No doubt Mom alerted him of the bombshell I just dropped.

“He’s a huge part of who I am, but...” I sigh, run a hand through my hair. “I know now what Randi was trying to say. Superman is not all I am. I need more.”

“And you believe this child could give it to you?” Martha wants to know.

“I believe it would be an incredible thing... to love again.” I drop on my couch. “I felt something tonight for the first time in so long...” I hear my mom gasp. She’s crying.

“Son, if you believe you can care for her...” Dad starts. “And it’s work. It’s hard, around-the-clock work. But if you feel you can do it... then you do it.”

“Jonathan!”

“What, Martha? He needs to do this.”

And just like that, they’ve offered their support. That’s the way it always is with them; it was always like that. They would ask all the questions I needed to hear and if I still wanted to do something, they would back me completely. There aren’t a lot of questions tonight. I think they know what kind of hole I need to crawl out of.

By nine, I am pacing back and forth in front of a social worker’s office. Why I felt I needed to do this, I’ll never know. But I felt that if I didn’t, that little girl would be lost — gobbled alive by this cruel city, this unforgivable world.

“Mr. Kent?”

I look up into the face of a middle-aged black woman. “Yes.” I thrust out my hand.

“Nelly Carson,” she greets me. “What can I do for you today?” She motions me to follow her into her office.

“I’d like to apply to adopt a child.”

She’s about to sit down, but stops and looks up at me. “Really?”

“Yes.” I wait for her to settle, and she hasn’t taken her eyes off me, which makes me a bit uncomfortable. After I’m seated, she smiles.

“This is certainly a surprise. I figured you were here on Planet business.”

“No, ma’am. I, ah... I played Santa Clause at the Walden Center last night...”

“That was you! I have had more calls... Mrs. Pearson said you were the best Santa they’ve ever had — said she’d never seen such gorgeous eyes.”

I blush and smile.

“Wow. Those *are* impressive puppies,” Ms. Carson says.

“Thank you,” I manage around the heat tainting my cheeks. I’ve never been one to take compliments too well. “Is it possible for a young, single man to adopt?”

“Oh, yes. Very possible.” She leans up on her desk. “Years ago, it was nearly impossible, but times have changed and children need good homes. Tell me, Mr. Kent, can you provide a good home?”

"I have a brownstone on Hyperion. Three bedrooms, three and half baths. It even has a backyard — fenced in. My cabinets are full, I have a career with a good future, savings, and an outstanding benefit program. I'm a nonsmoker, only drink alcohol on special occasions, no drugs, no unusual habits... I have great parents." I leave out the bit about moonlighting in tights... Of course, that admission might get me several children.

"I assume that because you're... you, you have a nice income."

"Very nice," I reply. "More than enough to clothe a growing child, pay the bills, and put back some for college."

"What would you do for daycare?"

"We have a facility at the Planet. Of course, my neighbor is a great older lady that might love to sit with a child." I've thought of everything. I've made lists on top of lists. I've argued with myself. There are a million reasons I shouldn't do this. And only one that I should — Carol.

Ms. Carson nods. "And your wife?"

My brows rise toward my hair. "My wife?"

She points toward my hand. "You're wearing a wedding band."

I look down at it. So many times I've nearly taken it off. I twirl it absently. "My wife died three years ago."

"I'm sorry." She tilts her head in thought. "Is that why you're doing this? To try to replace what you've lost?"

"One would think that, but..." I look down at my hands before lifting my eyes back to the woman. "Ms. Carson, I have struggled emotionally since my wife died. She was my entire world. While I do believe loving a child would help heal all the open wounds, I could never replace what I lost. And I would never short a child like that."

Ms. Carson slowly smiles. "Very nice, Mr. Kent." She opens a drawer and pulls out a file. "The paperwork is horrendous."

"Before we proceed... does the agency allow men to adopt little girls?"

That causes the woman's smile to fade. "What?"

"Last night, I met a child. She's the one I want."

The lady sits there for a long moment before opening another drawer. "You've met Carol."

I offer a shy smile. "She's..." I shake my head. "I have no idea what she's done to me, but..." I stop and sigh. "I haven't lost as much as she has, but for some reason, I feel drawn. It's like I'm being told... 'this is the one. This *child* will teach you to live again'."

Ms. Carson smiles brighter than she has yet. "Let's see what we can do to get you approved." And she flips open a file.

Two hours later, I step off the elevator onto the newsroom floor with a bounce in my step. Ms. Carson is going to expedite my application. She was very impressed with me, even told me so. I had brought bank statements, mortgage statements, and any other paperwork I felt she might need. I signed the forms for her to do a background check, run a credit check. She plans to speak with Perry and my former employer in California. There is going to be a home inspection, several actually. After the first one, when I pass the initial process, I will be able to buy a few things to bring my new daughter home. Ms. Carson said she saw absolutely no problem with me being approved. In fact, she wished there were more Clark Kents in the world.

I make it to my desk and even a groan from Lois isn't enough to dispel the way I feel. I'm excited about something for the first time in years.

"Why are you so happy?" Lois asks a while later.

"The sun is shining, I'm alive, and it's two weeks until Christmas. What's not to be happy about?"

She huffs and drops her head. Sometimes I can't help but feel sorry for Lois. She's so bitter, so angry... I've caught myself wondering more than once just why that is. She's young,

beautiful, and at the top of her profession. But I suppose lack of friends takes its toll on anyone. She never goes out, never laughs, never cries, for that matter. Lois is as emotionally dead as I've been.

That prompts me to stand up. I find myself at the break area, preparing a cup of coffee I have no intention of drinking. When I set it on the corner of Lois' desk, she looks up at me with wide, questioning eyes.

"The tree lighting on Central is tonight. Want to go?"

"With you?" she questions me.

"I don't bite," I remind her.

She arches a brow at the mug, as if it might bite her. "Playing Santa stuck with you or something?"

"Playing Santa gave me new perspective," I inform her.

"Come on, Lois." I nudge her shoulder gently. And even though she glares at me for touching her, I don't let it get to me. "I've worked here over eighteen months and do you know I've only seen you smile a handful of times?"

"So? You haven't exactly been Mr. Jolly Old Elf yourself."

"I know." I sigh and kneel beside her. "I've had to deal with some issues. But things are going to change." I've firmly decided that. If, for some reason, I don't get Carol, I'm going to change. I miss the person I was when Randi was alive. And I'm tired of sulking.

I glance at my left hand. I was so resolute about that decision, I finally took my wedding band off. If I am able to build a new life with Carol, I owe her no less than one hundred percent of myself.

Lois is quick, too quick. She saw me glance at my hand. She opens her mouth and I can already hear the retort. But then her expression changes and she turns her chair to face me.

"You'll always have the memories," she says softly, surprising me to no end.

I glance at the floor. "Yeah."

"I lost someone very important to me nearly nine years ago and it still hurts like hell."

That makes me look up at Lois. It's the single most personal thing she's ever revealed about herself. At first I think she's talking about her mother... But Ellen Lane died eleven years ago.

Lois grins before I can contemplate further. "There's always a vendor at the lighting ceremony who has the best hot chocolate. You buy me a cup and I'll 'ooo and ahh' accordingly."

My lips slowly spread out into a smile. "You've got a deal." I squeeze her shoulder before I stand. I can't believe how this feels. Just friends, just a little community thing, but wow... I walk back to my desk, almost breathless. I've just asked a woman to go somewhere with me. When Randi died, I swore I would never be alone with a woman again — unless it was my mom. Yeah, Lois and I have been alone before, but that was work. This is different. I have no intention of talking about work tonight.

I'm not sure what we will talk about, but...

I sit and glance her way. She's smiling.

She's smiling!

Lois Lane is smiling. And she grinned at me just seconds ago.

Wow! That's enough to warrant print on the front page.

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Lois says as she pulls her gloves on. We're on the elevator, riding down, on our way to the tree lighting.

"For the record, I'm glad you came." I reach out to hold the door open while she exits and a couple of others get on. And before she can push through the front, I'm there to hold that door, too.

She arches a brow at me. "What's up, Kent?"

I've been... friendly and polite my entire life. Before Randi, I went out of my way to help others, especially females. Dad has always told me women should be cherished and spoiled and I've

tried my best to do so. Just lately, I haven't felt very much like a gentleman.

"Should we take a cab?" I ask her.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe we could walk to the park. We can catch a bus there." She points at me. "Or keeping with the Christmas hoopla, we'll take the carriage."

"That would be fun," I tell her.

"I wasn't serious, Smallville." And she rolls her eyes.

I laugh softly and we walk along in silence for a while. "So... got any presents under that tree yet?"

"I don't do presents," she tells me.

"Why not?"

"Why so noseey?" she throws back.

"Have you always been so... Lois?" I want to know, a hint of a smile playing on my lips. Jimmy and Jack both love to rub her the wrong way. I've never done it, but...

"Bite me, Kent."

"Somehow I think I'd enjoy that more than you would," I say and nearly die right there. I can't believe I've said something so bold. I look away, to keep her from seeing my embarrassment.

The remark takes Lois by surprise, too. She gawks at me.

"Wow," she manages after her shock wears off. "You've got a spine under all that silence."

"Sorry," I mumble, a bit more comfortable because she didn't rip me a new one.

We turn and enter the park at the corner. The carriage is waiting for a passenger just inside the gate. I take that as a sign.

"Come on," I tell Lois and head that way.

"I wasn't serious, Kent."

"It'll be fun," I say and dig into my pocket for some cash.

"Two... for a trip to the Central gate," I tell the man.

He tilts his hat as he takes my money. "Thank you," he says when he notices the generous tip I've given him.

"Ladies first," I tell Lois. And she rolls her eyes.

"I'm not riding the carriage," she insists.

"Chicken," I challenge her. No one calls Lois Lane a chicken. I smile when her expression changes from approval to determination.

Her eyes narrow and she reaches up to grasp the handles. "I can do it," she tells me when I step forward to assist her.

I wait until she's seated before climbing up. This particular carriage has only one seat, so I'm forced to sit beside her.

"Not very large, is it?" she asks, scooting over the slightest bit to put distance between us.

"Seriously, Lois, I don't actually bite."

She turns to look at me. "Why not, Kent? It can be kinky as hell."

"In that case," I shoot back after the statement registers. I reach for her and she almost jumps out. That causes me to chuckle. "Too easy," I comment and sit back to enjoy the ride.

"You'll pay for that one, Farm boy," she lets me know.

I have no doubt. No doubt whatsoever.

I lay awake long into the night, propped on my folded arm, staring at the ceiling.

Kent. Smallville, Farm boy... how many names did she call me tonight?

How many times did I see her smile? Hear her laugh?

Lois Lane can actually laugh. Not a grunt or a snort, but a full out glorious sound.

I roll over and close my eyes, only to see hers. She has big, dark pools. I've never noticed that before.

Randi's eyes were blue. And her hair was red.

Lois' hair is dark brown, I find myself thinking. She cut her long bob for a more conservative, short wavy style a few months ago. Others had gawked at her. It seems she'd had the same hair style since first coming to the Planet... and before then. It had

shocked everyone she would do something different. Lois is predictable in so many ways... and completely unpredictable in others.

Why I am lying awake thinking about my colleague?

She's the first woman I've spent time with. I had thought the night would have been awkward and uncomfortable, but it hadn't been. It had been smooth and easy going, light and... fun. I'd had fun... with a woman.

I sigh heavily and force everything from my head. I've made a huge decision to change my life. That was enough for one day.

The following morning I'm typing furiously when someone speaks.

"Very professional, but I already knew you were."

I look up to see Ms. Carson smiling at me. I'm on my feet immediately. "Ms. Carson!"

"Could we speak?"

"Yes, ma'am." I lead her to a conference room and shut the door.

"Mr. Kent, the adoption gods must be on your side." She pulls out a file and lays it on the table. "The background check was back early afternoon yesterday. Credit check was outstanding. I've spoken with your parents. I've spoken with your wife's aunt."

Randi's parents died when she was young. Her aunt raised her. I love her aunt. I call her every Sunday. I see her a few times a year.

"I met with Mr. White for breakfast this morning." She chuckles. "He was a bit surprised you were interested in adopting. I talked to a young man... Jack..."

"Oh, no," I say and glance out the window.

"He's your biggest fan. I quote, 'it doesn't get more real than CK.'" She opens the file and spreads out some papers. "Will this evening be acceptable for a home visit?"

"What?" I ask her. She had told me the process might take three months. I had been disappointed. I had wanted to bring Carol home for Christmas.

"If your home passes first inspection, we'll do the second one as soon as you can get a few things for Carol."

My brows shoot toward my hair. "Really?" I ask in disbelief.

"Mr. Kent, I spoke with my supervisor. Carol is quiet, withdrawn... She gets worse with each day that passes. The counselor is worried about her well-being. Last year, a child much like Carol, dove off the top of the observatory on a field trip."

I gasp in horror. Where the hell had I been?

"He purposely waited for Superman to be out of the country. He was depressed and lonely... angry because he had been abandoned and picked over. He just felt he couldn't take it any longer. We don't want that to happen to Carol." She holds out a pen. "You do know you'll need an attorney and there will be fees..."

"I've paid the fees already," I say as I take the pen. "And I called my attorney yesterday."

"Then we have somewhere to send the application." She points out where I need to sign and in a few seconds, I have promised to care for another living being.

The visit went well. Ms. Carson was very impressed with my home. I even managed to take out all those special trinkets that define a home. I had packed them up after Randi died. The next day I cash in a vacation day and head toward Costmart. By noon, I have painted one of the bedrooms and turned it into a little girl's paradise. There are a few clothes, but I didn't buy a lot. I want her to choose her own things. There's food, more appropriate for a child, toothbrush in the bathroom, a new book bag for school, and some toys. By three, I've spoken with the officials at the private school near the Planet. I want her close and the expense is worth the peace of mind. Mrs. Collins is more than willing to sit

in the afternoons. And she offers up lots of pointers. She even lets me know that she knows about my other job. I was shocked, and didn't really admit to anything, although I'm also secretly thrilled to have someone else know.

I get a call in the afternoon, from Lois. She's in a huff over a Superman rescue she felt she shouldn't have had to cover. She's on the rail about my other persona. She likes, in theory, what he represents. She just doesn't have any faith in the human spirit overall. She's incredibly cynical in that respect.

The following day, Ms. Carson is back. And I have the go ahead for the first meeting with Carol.

I've never been so nervous in my life. Not even the day I married Randi. I pace back across the room as I wait for Carol. I'm in the small greeting room at the Center. We'll be introduced, talk for a while, and if Carol agrees, I'll come back tomorrow to take her out to lunch. We'll have a total of three meetings before I can take her home.

The door opens and I whirl to face my future. Mrs. Pearson has a gentle hand on Carol's shoulder when they step in. The child's eyes meet mine and I can't tell what she's thinking. She looks terrified.

"Hi," I say to her.

She looks at me, then offers a slight wave. "Hey."

She's just as breathtaking now as she was a few nights ago. I walk closer. "I'm Clark."

"Clark Kent," she tells me. "I've seen the pictures." Promotional pictures Lois and I took for the Planet. "And I read some of your articles. I like the sappy stuff best."

I smile as I kneel in front of her. "Thank you. Mrs. Pearson has shown me stuff you've written. You're very talented." She writes poems. I've read some of those and have seen some of her drawings. She's quite the artist, too.

"Thank you."

"I'll leave you two to talk," the older lady says before she leaves.

"Would you like to sit down?" I ask her and wave toward the sofa.

She walks over and settles on the extreme edge. She's been here before, to this point with perspective families. Ten... ten have met her and ten have left her behind. She's too old; she's too smart for her age; she's too sad. They all had some kind of excuse.

I sit down on the chair next to her, so I can see her. "Tell me about yourself."

"You've read my files. What else is there?" she asks without lifting her eyes from the floor.

So lost. There's a reason I met her when I did. She needed me to save her as much as I needed her to save me. "There's things like... what's your favorite subject in school? What do you like to eat? What do you like to do? Do you like Christmas? What would you like to receive as a gift? Would you mind having a new daddy without a new mommy?"

Her head snaps up and she stares at me. "I thought they were kidding when they said a man wanted to meet me." Her eyes are bright, shimmery. "I like reading. When I read, I can go anywhere in the world. I like salad, but we don't get a lot here. I like to write poems and draw. I'd really like to visit the zoo. I've never been. My name is Christmas, but I like the holiday better than I do myself. The only gift I've wanted for a while is to have a real family." A tear spills down onto her cheek. "I read once that a family can be large or it can be small. Even just a daddy and little girl."

I smile at her, tears filling my own eyes. "In that case, you should know a few things about me." And I spend the next half hour telling her about myself. She agrees to lunch the next day and I watch her walk away. It's all I can do to leave her. She turns

at the door and looks back at me. Those sad eyes meet mine and I know with absolute certainty I've made the right decision.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Carol," I tell her.

"See ya'... Clark." I told her to call me that. Mr. Kent's my dad.

I stuff my hands into my pockets and head to the Planet. I have to work to keep my mind busy. That little girl is all I'll think about now.

I stop typing when I notice Lois perch on the little wall separating work stations right beside my desk.

"Need something?" I ask her.

"Okay, well, here's the thing. I, ah, I... jump out on a limb the other night. And to my complete and utter shock, I had a fairly decent time. Since then..." She sighs, stands up to walk around, and perches on the corner of my desk. "What's up, Kent? You've barely spoken when you've been here. And you've only been here for a couple of hours. What's going on?"

Wow. Lois Lane was... impressed with me? And by the way she's talking, she felt our outing was what? A date? One she wants to repeat?

I sigh and sit back in my chair. "I've been busy."

"I've heard a rumor that you're adopting a child."

I can't help but smile. She's good. Too good. "It's not a rumor. I'm taking her to lunch tomorrow — our second meeting of three before I can bring her home."

"Her? You're adopting a girl?"

"I very beautiful little girl," I say proudly.

Lois just stares at me, for so long I didn't think she was going to say anything. Then she glances away. "I would have never pegged you the type," she lets me know.

"Me either," I reply. "But..." I sit up closer to her. "Have you ever met someone and just knew they would change your life?"

I almost missed it. A slight flash in Lois' eyes... a longing flash.

"Are you ready for this, Smallville?" she wants to know. "No more late night stakeouts. No more dinners in the office. No more dawn start times."

"No more Friday nights alone. No more dinners alone. No more silent nights in a house too damn large for one." I take a breath. "Lois, I've been emotionally dead long enough. I'm a young man, and I have a lot of love to give yet."

"Have you ever heard of dating? Marriage? Having babies with your wife?"

That cut... deep. I glare at her. "Have you ever heard of cancer? Here today, gone tomorrow? How about the word widower?" I rise to my feet. "That little girl needs someone now."

"And don't you think others are going to peg you as a pervert? Men don't adopt little girls unless they're up to something."

I cannot believe the nerve of this woman. I knew she was brash, but this is downright cruel. "Yeah," I relent. "Maybe they will. But as long me and my daughter know differently, to hell with what others think. Including you!" I almost shout the last before turning to jab the keyboard to shut down my computer. I have to get away from her and in a hurry.

"Come on, Kent."

I hold up my hand. "Just don't, Lois. I never expected anyone to understand what I'm doing. I don't care if anyone approves. I'm doing it. And that's that." I grab my stuff and head up the ramp. If I stay near her a second longer, I might blow up. She has the ability to infuriate people in two point three seconds flat.

I knew going into this that others might look at me strangely for wanting to adopt a little girl. I would never hurt a soul, especially a child. I just can't explain it. I feel like I *have* to do this.

I smile when she walks into the room. They've dressed her in her best clothes, which isn't saying much. I can't wait to get her home and into nicer stuff.

"Ready?" I ask her, forcing my eyes away from the scuff marks on the knees of her jeans. Her clothing is clean, even if a little small. Her hair has been brushed, but it still lacks luster. It probably has something to do with her state of mind.

She merely nods and I raise my hand toward the door. I hold the door for her and we step out into the bright sunshine. It snowed a couple of days ago, but it's been sunny and it's all melting.

"Where would you like to eat?" I ask her.

"I get to choose?" she wants to know.

"Sure," I answer with a smile.

She just shrugs.

"I know the perfect place," I tell her. We won't be able to see everything in the hour we have, but the only place to take her is...

She stops when we reach the entrance. Carol looks up at the sign and her mouth hangs open.

"They have the best corn dogs," I let her know and motion with my head. I plop down enough cash for two tickets and lead her inside. When I glance down, she's crying. "Hey," I say and kneel in front of her. "What's wrong?"

"This is really nice, Clark," she says and even offers a slight smile.

"Oh, wow. Look at that," I gush. She does have dimples. And I bet they're incredible in a full grin.

I buy us both a corn dog and we munch slowly as we go quickly from one exhibit to the other. Carol knows all kinds of facts about the animals. She wants to be a zookeeper when she grows up. After a soda to wash down our food, I offer to buy her some cotton candy. She asks if she can buy food to feed the fish instead. We do that and we watch the keepers feed the gorillas. She loves those. Though we're rushed through to make it back to the Center in time, she has a ball.

And she smiles several times. None quite reaches her eyes, but it's a start.

Just before we step back into the Center, she stops and looks up at me. "Do you really want me?"

I kneel in front of her, reach up to rub her arm. "I really want you."

"Will you leave me like my last daddy? Will you drink too much and go out with strange women? Will you work too much to make it to PTO? I would love to play soccer. Would you ever see a game? Will you yell at me when I make a bad grade? Or maybe you'll make me sleep with you like Debbie's dad did her."

"Carol," I say firmly, interrupting her. "I want you. I will not leave you. Once I take you home, you'll be home — for good. I like to drink a cold beer from time to time, even a nice glass of wine. I haven't been out with a woman since my wife died." I shrug. "Who knows? Maybe someday I'll date again, but right now, I'm more interested in building a relationship with you. PTO — I'll be president if they'll let me. I'll coach the soccer team. I can't promise I'll never yell. Truth is, adults sometimes let their tensions build and explode in the wrong ways. I can tell you that I'm a calm person. I'd rather smile than frown. And if you get a bad grade, we'll work together until you understand whatever you need to in order to do better." I lift my hand to cup her face. "I would never, ever dream of hurting you in the way you've suggested. It might be fun to snuggle though... after we've gotten close." I smile and drop my hand. "Carol, I'd like to be your dad. But I want you to be my daughter. To do that, you'll have to give me a chance. This is new to me, being a parent. And from what I hear, being a daughter is new to you. No one's ever given you a chance. I happen to think you would be amazing at it. And if you'll give me a chance, I can't wait to find out."

Carol looks at me for a long moment before she blinks out several tears. "Mrs. Pearson said the next meeting will last all day."

"Yeah. Tomorrow?" I ask her. "I'd like for you to be home in time to get comfortable before Christmas. And I've waited to decorate. Maybe we could go shopping for those tomorrow."

"You'd let me help you?"

"Sweetie, my home is going to be your home. Or I want it to be. I want you to help."

Another intense stare before she nods. "Pick me up early."

"I can't be here until eight, but I'll be early," I assure her as I stand and take her back in.

She turns to look up at me. "Thanks. I had a good time," she says.

"I had a wonderful time. Maybe you'll go with me to the zoo again... and we'll spend the whole day."

"I'd like that." And she smiles, just a bit wider than she has all day.

"Ah, honey," I whisper and her eyes widen. I have to blink back tears. She is going to be so incredible. I wave as she's ushered out by the counselor.

"You can be here at eight and she has to be back by six," Mrs. Pearson informs me.

"I know." I wipe my face, embarrassed to be crying in front of this lady.

"You are going to make an incredible father," the older lady tells me, holding out a tissue.

I offer up a watery smile as I take the offering. We say our good-byes and I leave. I stop on the sidewalk and look up toward the window I know is Carol's room. She's there, peering down at me. I wave and she holds up her hand.

"Just a bit longer," I say softly. It's all I can do to turn and walk away. I hate leaving her there. How is it a little girl has affected me this way?

"She's so incredible, Mom," I say into the phone as I float around the kitchen. I called the second I got home earlier. After leaving Carol, I went to the Planet to work for a bit. I finally abandoned it because I couldn't concentrate on anything but the little girl I spent time with. And it didn't help that Lois was brooding with me at work.

"She's smart — knows tons of things about animals. She wants to be a zookeeper." I know I sound like a kid with a new toy, but I can't help it. I feel so good.

My folks and I talk a bit more. As soon as Carol's home, they'll fly out to meet her. After hanging up, I grab a beer and go out to the living room to watch the game. Before I can sit, a picture of Randi catches my eye. I walk over to stand at the fireplace and lift the frame. "Is this what you saw?" I ask the image. She had said in her video that she saw me changing the world — and not as Superman. She said she saw me touching lives and loving again — fiercely.

"I miss you," I say and set the frame back down. I smile warmly, remembering all the good times. For the first time since her death, I actually enjoy watching football.

By eight the next morning, I'm fit to be tied. I've been up since five. I know everything there is to know about soccer. I've read a hundred poems and checked the website for the opening time of the art museum. I want to be able to talk to Carol about her interests. It's vital she feels special. It's vital she feels like I want her.

She's ready, her small backpack firmly in place. Her coat is so small and worn... I can't wait for her to wear her new one.

I hail a cab and she's utterly dumbfounded. She's never ridden in a cab. We head uptown and stop for breakfast at a little diner not too far from the Planet. We sit near the window and order waffles.

"I ate at the Center," she tells me as the waitress sets her plate down.

"Yeah, I know," is all I offer as I pour syrup on my food.

She does the same and eats for a while before looking out the window. "Do you think we can visit the Planet sometime?"

"Absolutely. I'll take you there first thing. Just not today," I say and stuff more food in my mouth.

"Why not today? Are you ashamed of your choice?"

I have to look as horrified as I feel. I drop my fork and stare at her. "No, no, no. I'm not a bit ashamed of my choice. It's just I'd like to be a little selfish today. And if we stop at the Planet, a couple of the guys I work with will want to show you everything and tell you all about me."

"You're not a horrible person at work, are you?"

I smile at her. "No. Although one of my colleagues might argue otherwise."

"Which one?"

"Lois Lane."

"I'll bet she's as pretty in person as she is in the pictures," Carol says and picks up her milk for a drink.

"Well..." I blush despite myself. "Yeah, I guess she is."

Carol smiles a little. "Then she's really pretty," she deduces from my reaction.

I chuckle and point to her plate. "Finish up. We have a lot to see."

And she did so most of the day with her mouth hung open in astonishment. She had never been to the art museum... They had gone to the history museum on a class trip, but this was a treat. She loved the paintings and sculptures. She asked if she might be able to experiment some... maybe with clay. I told her I would provide whatever she needed to pursue her passion.

We ate lunch at little Italian restaurant and headed to the Costmart after to buy Christmas decorations. We chose fun, whimsical, and cartoon choices over the more elaborate and fancy ones. I told Carol we could string popcorn and cranberries and even make a few homemade decorations. I actually saw her eyes light up a bit.

I chose to have the things delivered to my place because I wasn't allowed to take her there yet. I bought her an early dinner before taking her back. She asked if we would always eat so much. I told her she would eat as much as she wanted.

And now I'm dreading leaving her again.

She turns to face me once we're standing inside the entry of the Center. "How soon until I can come for good?" she wants to know.

I kneel and smile at her. "I have to call my liaison as soon as I leave. Hopefully we can get a hearing within a couple of days."

She nods.

"I would give you my number, but they don't want me to." God, I really hate to leave her today.

"I had a good time, Clark."

"I did, too, Sweetie." I reach up to cup her face. "Be a good girl and just as soon as I can, I'll come for you. You *do* want to come, don't you?"

She looks at me for so long I wasn't sure she would say yes. Finally she smiles. "We have to eat dinner together every night. And breakfast... I can help cook and clean up and maybe you can help with homework."

"I'll help with homework," I let her know. "And we'll cook and eat together and watch TV and hang out." I reach out to grasp her fingers. "I know it's unusual for a man to want a daughter, but Carol, I'll be good to you. I'll even let you paint my nails to practice when you're old enough."

And she does something that changes my entire world — again. She laughs... a soft sound that shoots straight through me.

"Oh, wow," I whisper, tears blinding me.

"See ya'," she tells me with a wide smile on her face before

turning to run down the hall.

I stand up slowly, like I'm in a trance. She laughed. My little girl laughed.

"That was amazing."

I turn to look at Mrs. Pearson.

"She's been here for over three years and I've never heard her laugh."

I place my hand over my chest. "Then I feel very honored."

"I have to say, Mr. Kent, I had my reservations when they told me a man wanted Carol. But..." She seems to check me out, gazing from head to toe. "I'm very impressed. Carol hasn't drawn in over six months, until after meeting you. I have a feeling this match was preordained."

I don't know about that, but I do know that this child is the kick I needed to start living again. Little Christmas Carol will soon be mine.

And she will never be alone again. Neither of us will be alone any more.

I wake with a start the following morning to the insistent ringing of the doorbell. I'm not sure who would be calling so early. Probably Lois. She's never been to my place before, but she has a bad habit of calling at all times. She feels the world should revolve around her.

I open the door to see Ms. Carson.

"Well, a plus for remembering your robe," she says as she nudges me aside to come in. "Please tell me you're wearing PJs underneath."

"Ah..." I close the door and follow her to the corner where she's inspecting the pile of decorations Carol and I bought the day before. They were delivered around eight last night. "I usually wear sleep shorts and a tee shirt," I inform her. "Like last night."

"The lock on your bedroom door *does* work?" she asks me, still perusing the contents of the bags. "You know, just in case you decide to sleep with less clothing on or spend some time alone."

My brows rise in surprise. Up until this moment, she's never hinted that it bothered her I was a single male, but now...

"Ms. Carson, is there a problem with my application?"

She looks up at me and sighs. "The district supervisor is having a cow because you're male and Carol is female. She wants to be absolutely certain you won't present a problem, of the sexual nature."

"I assure you, I have no interest in hurting that little girl... or any other. I fully intend to sleep with appropriate attire on. If I feel the need to do otherwise, my bedroom door does have a lock. And my bathroom door does, too... *if* I feel the need to be alone." I move closer to her. "Ms. Carson, I'm not some kind of sexual deviant. Yes, I'm still male and I'm still alive, but I can fully control myself."

"I never had a doubt you could, Mr. Kent. I am one hundred percent in favor of this adoption. Now..." She turns and heads toward the stairs. "Have you bought things for Carol?"

"I have," I answer as I follow her upstairs. "I asked for her sizes so I could get a few things, but I'll let her choose more. The room closest to mine," I tell her when we're in the upstairs hall.

She opens the door and stops to gasp in surprise. "Oh, my," she says softly.

I've created a little girl's wonder land in the room, complete with canopy bed and matching furniture. It really helps to be Superman.

And it's the first time I've thought of him in relation to my new life. I hope Carol can accept that side of myself. I intend to tell her almost right away. She's too smart to deceive long. Besides, if you can't trust family, who can you trust?

"That's one lucky little girl," Ms. Carson observes as she runs

her fingers over the clothes I've laid out on the bed.

"She likes to draw and write poetry. I plan to buy her some things, maybe create a mini studio over by the windows." It's a large room. Large enough to divide into sections. "This corner..." And I point to the left of the door. "Would make a nice reading nook and place she could write."

"This room is certainly full of inspiration." I've painted the walls to depict a child's paradise. There's an enchanted forest and a castle on a hill. The case worker turns to me. "You have a hearing at ten."

"This morning?" I ask incredulously.

"I rushed it through. I told you I supported this adoption. Can your lawyer be there?"

"I'll call her."

"Good." The woman smiles and heads out, toward my room. "I'm going to apologize before I do this, but I was told to. If I can't document it, the hearing won't take place until January."

"Document what?"

She opens the drawer on my nightstand. After a second, she walks around to the other one to look inside.

"What are you looking for?"

She stops and looks up at me. "Anything to indicate you're... preoccupied with sex."

My brows shoot toward my hair. "Ms. Carson, I am male. I do still have... those kinds of thoughts. But there are no condoms in my nightstand or medicine cabinet or anywhere... because I haven't had sex with anyone since my wife was alive. No women have stayed over. In fact, I haven't been on a date. Well... I did go with my co-worker to a tree lighting the other night. But no romantic dates. Does that mean I'll suddenly grow insatiable and feel the need to attack my new daughter? Of course not. I've met that child three times and I'm crazy about her. I can't imagine feeling more for a natural daughter. I'd rather die than hurt her... or any child. But yes, I have done... *that*..." I wave my hand as if that would explain everything. "If you must know. I am entitled to... private things."

"Believe me, Mr. Kent, you don't have to explain a thing to me. My husband died eight years ago. I only recently started dating again. And I completely understand the loneliness." She glances at the bathroom. "I understand so well that what you have in your medicine cabinet is your business. But you do know that even following the final hearing, you will be subject to surprise home visits and inspections?"

"My house is open to you all. I have nothing to hide. Will I... stop having intimate thoughts after I get Carol?" I shrug. "I doubt it. Will I share those thoughts with her? Absolutely not! Will I have women coming to stay over? Not a chance. If another woman ever stays the night at my place, she'll be my wife. Is that good enough?"

"If you tell me you don't have porn hidden..." She lets that trail off.

I can't help but chuckle. "No porn," I assure her. "Unless you count the naked baby pictures my mom insists on embarrassing me with."

The woman grins widely at me. "I do the same thing to my son," she says and heads back downstairs. She makes a quick sweep through the kitchen before heading back to the living room. "Carol told Mrs. Pearson you took her to the zoo, the museum, and to pick out Christmas decorations."

"I did," I say with a smile. "There's so much she hasn't done. I can't wait for her to see my folks' farm in Kansas."

Ms. Carson faces me with a serious expression. "I spoke with your parents. Very wonderful people."

"Very," I stress.

"They told me they were surprised with your sudden decision to adopt Carol, but completely understood because you were adopted."

"I just feel drawn to Carol," I say.

"That's good. Because if this hearing goes well this morning, you can pick Carol up right after."

I grin widely. "I can't wait."

"Did you set up child care?"

"Yes. My neighbor is so excited. I filled out the form and the one for school."

"I glanced at them." She heads toward the door. "I have to read them over before the hearing. You're choosing private school, I noticed."

"It's close to the Planet," I point out.

"Yes, but further away should Mrs. Collins have to pick Carol up from school for some reason."

"I hadn't thought of that. I'll discuss it with Carol and Mrs. Collins. There's a very good school a block over."

"Exactly." She gives me another grin before she opens the door. "See you in court." And she leaves as quickly as she came.

I guess this was just the first of many strange visits. And they'll question Carol each month until the six month trial period is over. Of course, it doesn't matter to me. My life is an open book... except for that one thing. And I will have to cut way back until the final paperwork comes through. I would hate for my other job to become subject to state review.

I'm awake now, so I head upstairs to get ready. I shower and dress, in a smart business suit, although I don't go over the top. I want to impress, but not appear phony either.

I call Mom and Dad to let them know about the hearing, then head out for breakfast. I choose a diner right down the street from the family court. I intend to be early.

Constance Hunter is my attorney. I met her first as Superman, but have since worked with her on several cases. She takes on things no other lawyers in the city will, including single fathers looking to adopt. She meets me half an hour before the hearing outside the court building.

The district supervisor is there... to voice her disapproval. And she does so loudly.

"Your Honor, I do not feel this adoption is in the best interest of this child," she insists. "A young, impressionable girl — alone with a man of active sexual age... He's freely admitted to being lonely and missing his wife. I feel if you approve this motion, you're sentencing that young girl to a life of abuse at his hands."

"Do you know who Mr. Kent is?" the judge asks the woman.

"I am well aware of his status in the professional world. I am fully knowledgeable of the fact that his application is more impressive than most couples. The fact still remains that he specifically asked for a girl. And not any girl, but Christmas Carol."

"Ms. Carson, can you address this issue?" the judge asks.

"Yes, Your Honor," the case worker says as she stands up. "Mr. Kent did indeed ask specifically about Carol. He said he became aware of her when a friend asked him to play Santa Clause at the Center where she's housed. As his application reflects, Mr. Kent is also adopted and he felt a certain kinship with Carol. A mutual friend told him of Carol's brief history and he was drawn to her. They've since met one another and Mr. Kent is completely enamored with the child. She, too, is fond of him."

"I've read the report from Mrs. Pearson. She says that Carol has shown a remarkable improvement in her overall outlook since meeting Mr. Kent."

"Further, I feel to deny this petition would be sentencing that child to a certain emotional death," Ms. Carson adds.

"At the very least," speaks up the supervisor. "Mr. Kent should produce reliable character witnesses to vouch for his behavior."

Constance smiles and lifts some papers. "If it pleases the court, Your Honor. I have signed affidavits from Clark's co-workers, his boss, his parents, and some of the people he grew up

with.”

I lift my brows in surprise. I hadn't known Constance had done that.

“And just to prove Mr. Kent is fit to be this child's father, I have a live witness outside waiting to testify to his character.”

The judge motions and the bailiff hands him the papers Constance is holding. As he reads them, he says, “Have the witness brought in.”

The bailiff steps to a door on the side of the room and motions for someone on the other side. I groan when I see who it is — Lois.

“She might not have been the best choice for witness,” I whisper to Constance.

“Relax, Clark. She's the best choice.” Constance stands and holds out her hand toward the witness box. “Please, Ms. Lane.”

Lois glances at me before taking a seat in the chair next to the judge. She takes her oath and waits patiently for Constance to ask her a few questions. She looks pissed as hell to have had her day interrupted by my court hearing.

This might not be good at all.

“State your name for the record.”

“Lois Lane.”

“And what is your relationship to Mr. Kent?”

“He and I are colleagues at the Daily Planet.”

“Do you know him well?”

“No, not well.”

The supervisor jumps to her feet. “Your Honor...”

“Please. Let her speak,” the judge says.

“Go on, Ms. Lane,” Constance tells her.

“Clark and I work together. We know each other in a professional aspect.”

“Is he mean?”

She smirks at me. She actually smirks at me. “Clark is the biggest pussy cat in the bunch. He's asking to adopt a little girl. Doesn't that tell you something?”

“Yes. It tells me he has a big heart and wishes to share it with someone.”

“Exactly,” Lois almost shouts. “He's been sad and withdrawn since he came to the Planet because of losing his wife. But you'd be blind not to see the real man underneath that loneliness and despair. Clark has a big heart and wants to share it. There's nothing wrong with that.”

“Do you find it strange he's asking to adopt a girl?”

“Honestly, Ms. Hunter, I did at first. And I pointed that out to him. But...” She looks at me. “It doesn't matter to Clark that the child is a girl. If the child had been a boy, he would have been drawn to *that* child. Will he hurt her? Not a chance.”

“Thank you, Ms. Lane.” Constance sits back down, a smile on her face.

The supervisor stands. “If I may, Your Honor?” she asks.

“Yes,” is the answer.

“Ms. Lane, is Mr. Kent a ladies man?”

“Are you asking if women like him? Well, yeah. Look at him.” She waves at me. “He's gorgeous, successful, intelligent... did I mention he's gorgeous?”

I gawk at her. She had never, ever, *ever* hinted that she even knew I was male let alone anything else.

“So, he's a busy man?” the other woman asks.

“I didn't say that. I said women like him. And they never fail to let him know it, but he gently begs off. As far as I know, he hasn't been on a single date since he's been at the Planet.”

“Is he... gay?” is the next question.

“Your Honor,” Constance protests. “We're not here to put my client's sexuality on trial.”

“I agree. Move on or I will.”

The other woman sighs, but before she can ask another question, Lois speaks up.

“I'd like to answer that,” she says. “Clark is not gay, he's not sexually promiscuous, and it's absurd to believe him some kind of child molester. I can't say he and I are the closest of friends, but he is probably the best person you could ever want to meet. He's generous, hardworking, and loyal. He opens doors for women, goes out of his way to help his neighbors and friends, gives food to homeless people, plays Santa Claus for Pete's Sake!” She finishes her statement loudly, with a pointed glare at me. But then her expression softens and she almost smile. “He calls his folks daily and even when other people are horrible to him, he treats them like the most precious of gifts.”

Her expression hardens and she looks directly at the supervisor with determination. “He will adore that little girl and win another Kerth next year on his way to earning father of the year accolades.”

“I've heard enough,” the judge says. “I have to agree with Ms. Carson when she says Mr. Kent is the most impressive applicant in years. The fact that he asked for a nearly nine year old girl impresses me. It says that he doesn't think it's going to be too much work.” He picks up a pen and scribbles on several papers. “Mr. Kent, pick your daughter up and take her home. Give her a good Christmas and a wonderful birthday.”

With a bang of the gavel, I am somebody's father. Constance turns to me and grins widely.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, shaking her hand with a smile of my own.

“You can pick her up in an hour,” Ms. Carson tells me.

“I'll be there,” I assure her as I stand up.

“You're all right, Kent.”

I turn to look at Lois, a new respect for her washing through me. “Thank you,” I tell her earnestly.

“Yeah, well, it'll cost you some of that really good Chinese you buy now and then.”

“I'll buy you buckets of Chinese, Lois,” I let her know and reach out to touch her arm. We exchange a silent conversation, and new understanding, before I'm coaxed over to sign paperwork. By the time I'm done, Lois has left. I'll be sure to thank her again later.

An hour later, I take a huge breath and step through the door of the Center.

Carol is sitting on the couch in the waiting room I first met her in. Her bags are beside her on the floor — all three of them. She looks up when I step in and she smiles.

She smiles!

“Hey,” she's first to say.

“Hey. Are you ready to go home?” I ask her.

“I've been ready to go home for over three years. And probably before then.” She stands and lifts her backpack to her back.

I rush over and pick up her other bags before we step into the hall. Clapping greets us from the children and staff who have gathered to see Carol off. She glances up at me, tears brimming in her eyes.

“We'll miss you, Carol,” comes the voice of a little girl.

“Way to go, Carol,” is the chant of a couple of the older boys.

“He's cute,” was another remark.

A little boy steps up and holds out a card. “Merry Christmas, Carol.”

“Thanks, Billy,” she says and takes the card. A couple of the staff steps forward to hug her. Mrs. Pearson hands her an envelope.

“Pictures of you since you've been here and some that were left with you. You and your dad might want to make a scrapbook.”

“Thanks, Mrs. P,” she says.

“We can come visit, if you’d like,” I tell her.

She nods and waves at everyone. “Merry Christmas.”

They all shout their good-byes as she leaves. We stop in the entry for her to admire her photograph. It’s been moved from the ‘waiting’ wall to the ‘forever family’ wall. She looks up at me and smiles. I urge her on, into the waiting cab.

“Your new address is 348 Hyperion Avenue. You should learn it. And I’ll write down our phone number and my numbers at the Planet.”

“Will I go to daycare?”

“No. We have a wonderful neighbor, Mrs. Collins... if you like her, she would love to sit with you. Of course, we don’t have to worry about that right away.” It’s eight days until Christmas. Schools are out for holiday break right now. “I’ll show you the schools and we’ll visit, to see which one you like best.”

“I can choose?”

“You can choose. Of course, the one closest to home would also be closest to Mrs. Collins, should she need to pick you up.”

“Wouldn’t she do that anyway?”

“Or the bus would drop you. But not the public bus. I don’t feel comfortable with you riding the public one alone.”

“I ride alone all the time,” she informs me.

“Not anymore,” I say and smile at her. “You’re mine now, and I’d be too worried about you.”

She looks at me for a long moment before she smiles. “I like that someone is going to worry about me now... besides my case worker. She’s paid to do that.”

“And she’ll be paid to for a bit longer until the adoption is final.”

“I know.” She looks out the window. “Christmas Carol Kent.” She looks back at me. “I was told that my birth mother named me Carol. My first adoption mom called me Christmas. They changed it in the adoption.”

“Would you like to change it again? We have that option?”

She thinks that over for a second. “I think I’ll keep my name. It’s different.”

“Okay,” I say and smile at her. The cab pulls to a stop in front of the brownstone and to my utter surprise, we have visitors. Jimmy, Jack, and, of all people, Lois, are standing on the stoop. They’re holding balloons and a huge banner is draped over the door.

“Welcome Home,” Carol reads. “Who are they?” she asks me.

“My co-workers.”

“And friends?”

Yeah, looks like it. “And friends,” I confirm before climbing out. I retrieve her bags and lean in to pay the cabbie. Carol slowly climbs out and stares at the other people.

“Hey, CK!” Jack shouts. “Congrats!”

“Look at her, Jack,” Jimmy says. “She could pass for CK’s real daughter.”

Could she? I look down at Carol. Her dark hair and eyes certainly go a long way toward that possibility. Of course, the dark hair and eyes remind me of Lois, too. I look up at the woman, whose expression is a bit more serious than the others. She seems to be concentrating on Carol, almost studying her.

“Come on,” I nudge Carol on. We walk up the steps toward the door.

“Hey there, Beautiful,” Jack tells Carol the second we’re close enough.

“Hey,” she answers. “I know you.”

“I think you do.”

“I didn’t know you knew Jack,” she says to me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I tell her. “And this is Jimmy.” I point him out.

“Hi. You’re a lucky little girl. CK is the best,” he lets her know.

“And this is Lois. She helped me in court today.”

“What?” Jack asks and he and Jimmy gawk at the woman.

“I am capable of helping others,” she tells them. She rolls her eyes at them, then looks back at Carol. That... little something I can’t explain is in her eyes again. “Your dad is a pain in the butt, but he can get the best Chinese.”

I laugh softly and Carol smiles. She glances at me. “It’s nice to meet you,” she tells everyone. “Thanks for coming.”

“Our pleasure,” Jack tells her. “I’m so glad you made it out, Carol.”

“Carol?” Lois asks. “Her name is Carol?” She looks at me, but before I can answer, she’s looking at the child. “Your name is Carol.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I see another flash behind Lois’ eyes — more pronounced than before. It’s a longing, a deep regret. But before I can study her for long, she blinks and it’s gone.

“Are you gonna make us all stand out here in the cold, Kent?” Lois barks.

I grin at her as I dig out my key. “You just want to see my place.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve already seen it.”

I’ve just unlocked the inner door and I turn to stare at her. “What?”

Jack chuckles wryly. “You do know this is Lois Lane?” He pats my shoulder. “Man, I thought you were Clark Kent, Kerth award winner.”

He and Jimmy step inside as I look down at Carol. “Ready?” She nods and I step aside for her to enter. She does and stops to look around.

“This is really where we live?” she asks me.

“It is,” I tell her and move to set her bags down on the bottom step.

“This place is nice, CK,” Jack informs me, obviously not the least bit shy about making himself at home. He’s drinking a soda already — from my fridge.

Carol moves around the room slowly, looking at the various things I have. Lois, who came in last, is looking at a picture of Randi.

“Is this a picture of Randi?” Jimmy asks me, lifting another photo from a shelf. “She’s a knock out.”

Jack steps up beside him and whistles loudly. “Damn, CK.”

“Language, Jack,” I reprimand him and glance at Carol. She’s touching everything. She stops beside Lois to gaze at the photos on the mantle.

“Where is your wife buried?” Carol wants to know.

“Ah... she’s not,” I say as I lift my mail to go through it. I brought it in the day before and haven’t even looked at it yet.

“What?” Lois is the one to ask.

“She was cremated. I scattered her ashes across the Rocky Mountains. It was her favorite spot in the world.” I drop the mail and look up at them. “But I put a memorial stone in the family plot on my folks’ farm.”

Carol’s eyes move to another picture. “Are those your parents?” she wants to know, pointing at the people in an image.

“It sure is. I called them right before I picked you up. They’ll be here at eleven tomorrow morning. We have to meet them at the airport.”

“They’re coming to meet me?”

“Absolutely.”

“How did your folks feel about you adopting?” Jimmy asks me.

“They asked all the tough questions — made sure I knew what I was doing. Now they’re tickled to death to be grandparents.” I smile fondly. My mother had cried softly earlier when I was on the phone with her. She’s so great.

Carol lifts the frame down. “I’ve never had grandparents.”

“Me either,” Lois tells her. “And not much of a father. My

mother was a great person, but she died when I was a teenager.”

Carol looks up at her with regretful eyes. “Sorry.”

Lois’ brows furrow a bit, then she does something that shocks me. She smiles at Carol. “Thanks,” she offers. That look is back — longing combined with regret — maybe even guilt. I can’t help but wonder what’s going on with her.

“Hey, guys, this place has a laundry room,” Jack says as he steps down the first landing. I hadn’t even missed him. Jimmy’s looking at my computer — in the office. I can see him through the dining room door.

Carol puts the picture down before moving on. She glances at the Christmas decorations still in the bags before moving into the dining room, then on to the kitchen. I follow along behind her, allowing her to soak everything in at her pace.

A phone rings and Jimmy calls out to Jack. They’re needed at the Planet. They congratulate me again, say good-bye to Carol, and head out. We don’t see Lois again until we make it to the bottom of the landing on the kitchen side. She’s sitting on the steps of the second landing, writing on her notepad.

“Please don’t tell me my place is news,” I joke with her.

“Hardly. I’m making notes from this morning. I’m going to write a human interest piece about adoption. Don’t worry,” she says quickly, obviously noting my distressed look. “I happen to think now is a great time to mention that the Walden Center has a lot of beautiful girls and handsome boys that need a home.”

My brow arches and I stare at her. “Wow. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you had a heart in that block chest of yours.”

She shakes her pen at me. “Watch it, Kent. I’ll tell your daughter you wear pink underwear.”

“How did you know?” I ask with exaggeration. That causes Carol to laugh softly. I love that sound. I grin at her and her dimples shine. “Want to see your room?” I ask her.

She nods and I motion for her to go up. We pass Lois and I can’t help but lay a hand on her shoulder. I almost do a double take when the woman smiles at me. At me... not in general, but *at* me. Has she ever really done that? Yeah, she smiled when we went to the tree lighting a few days ago, but this... She seems to be directing it on purpose. What have I done to deserve that?

“It’s this one,” I say of the rooms and open the door for Carol. She walks in slowly, then gasps aloud.

“Oh wow,” she can’t help but say. “This is...” She glances at me and her eyes are full of tears. “Did you do this for me?”

“For you... a couple of days ago.” I walk in and wave a hand toward the windows. “I want to get some art supplies to go over there. A comfy chair for over there.” I point. “Some book shelves that you can fill with books. And curtains... My mom’s going to make you some while she’s here.” I walk over and open a door. “This is your bathroom.”

“My own bathroom?!” she nearly shouts and runs that way.

I walk a few paces to the other door. “And walk-in closet.”

“No way,” she breathes as she hurries to look. She steps inside, twirls around. She stops and looks at me. “This would make a great reading cave... part of it anyway. I’m not a girly girl. I don’t have to have lots of clothes.”

I look to the left. “We’d have to get good lighting, maybe a different door — with a screen. I wouldn’t want it to get to stuffy in here.”

She grins at me. “Wow,” she says and heads back out again. When she stops in the middle of her room, she notices the new clothes. She might have said she didn’t have to have lots of clothes, but she sure liked the few I’d bought. Her little fingers move over the denim and cotton... the book bag... the new shoes.

“Welcome home, Carol,” I say softly.

She turns to look at me and she’s crying. My heart breaks, but I force a smile. She does, too, and her dimples pucker her cheeks. She’s so adorable.

She asks if she can shower and change. I tell her she’s home, to act that way. When I step into the hallway, Lois is leaned against the frame of my room, smiling at me.

“Very nice, Kent.”

“Very,” I agree. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“I would, but I have to get out of here. A source I’ve been trying to track down surfaced a while ago. I need to nail his butt down before he disappears again.”

“Got it,” I say and fall in step beside her when she walks my way. “Thank you again, for earlier.”

“Hey,” she says and turns to face me at the top of the stairs.

“I might not understand your need to have a child, but I’m not blind either. Since you’ve met that little girl, it’s like a cloud that hung over your head has cleared.” She mock punches my arm in a sweeping gesture. “Because you just became a dad and to prove I have a heart, I’ll cover for you a few more days.”

“I appreciate that,” I say with a smile. I’ve spoken with Perry, taken vacation time. And I agreed to write him something for print about my whole experience.

Lois looks at me for a long moment before turning to hurry down the stairs. She stops at the bottom and looks back up at me. “I hear the lights at the zoo are incredible... and it’s supposed to snow tomorrow night. Carol...” And she glances in the general direction of the space behind me. “Would probably like to see them.”

“Are you asking us to go with you?”

“I’m... saying that I’m going. Seven. If you two, and your folks, just happen to go, too...” She let that trail off as she looks at me. After a second, she tears her eyes from mine. “Yeah, so...” She turns to head down. “Take care of that girl,” she shouts as she leaves.

I’m left to stare in amazement. Lois Lane just asked me out... I think. Sort of anyway.

As I descend toward the kitchen, I can’t stop my heart from racing. It’s been years since I’ve been on a date.

Don’t be ridiculous, I scold myself. She didn’t ask me on a date... just for me to show up where she was going to be... just...

I stop at the counter and pause as I reach for the coffee.

Carol, I say silently. Carol is what’s important. She needs my undivided attention. She needs me much more than Lois. And I’m only too happy to give her what she needs.

Carol talks a little over lunch. I cooked... a simple pasta dish and I made salad. The child nearly inhaled that. She loves salad — all kinds, I learn. We spend the afternoon decorating the house. We even string lights outside — around the door and the windows. I’ll put lights across the edge of the roof tonight — super style so no one sees them go up. We decide to wait on my folks to get a tree, but everything else is up. The place sparkles with lights. We even wrap picture frames on the wall to look like hanging presents, stack pretty holiday boxes on the steps. There’s garland and character decorations, candles and nativity scenes. We hang ribbons and stockings. I tell her about my stocking — how I’ve had it since I was a tiny child.

She hangs hers on the pewter hook and steps back to smile.

“Looks great, huh?”

“It looks incredible,” I let her know. “Ready for a snack?”

“Hot chocolate and cookies?” she asks hopefully.

I laugh softly. “I think we can do that today.” I almost reach out to lay my hand on her shoulder, but drop it at the last second. She might not like that.

I prepare us both a cup of hot chocolate and grab a bag of cookies to eat at the kitchen table. She eats for a second before she looks up at me.

“Why did you stop from touching me out there?”

I pause with a cookie halfway to my mouth to look at her.

She's quick — quicker than I had given her credit for. Slowly I lower the food. "I wasn't sure you'd like it."

"Do you like to hug?"

"I do," I tell her. "Although I haven't done it a lot since my wife died. My mom wouldn't let me stop with her. But Dad carved me a wide path."

"My mom never hugged much."

"Maybe soon you'll want to."

"I want to, but..." She shrugs in her confusion. "I'm scared, too."

"I'm terrified," I confess. "I want you to like it here."

"I love it here," she rushes to tell me.

I lean forward, reach out to graze her hand with my fingertips. "I love it that you're here," I think she should know.

We stare at each other for a long while before she stuffs another cookie in her mouth. "Does Lois like you?"

I arch a brow and smile at her. "I'm not sure Lois likes herself," I tell her.

"She likes *you*," Carol says with a smile. "She was looking at you with puppy eyes."

"Puppy eyes?" I ask through a chuckle.

"Mmm," she says as she takes another bite of cookie. "You know, the way a girl does when she likes a boy."

"Believe me, Carol, Lois doesn't like me like that."

"Do you like her?"

I chew for a second as I think about that. Do I like Lois? As a person — not so much. She's, quite frankly, awful. After what she did today, I find myself wondering what her angle is. Lois doesn't do anything without a reason. Payback was going to be hell.

"I like her as a co-worker."

"Not a friend?" Carol asks.

"I'm still undecided there. It was great what she did today. I'm just not sure why she did it." I take a sip from my cup. "I'm sure she'll have no problem telling me sooner or later."

"Is it okay that I like Lois?"

I smile at her, reach out to pat her arm. "It's more than okay." We finish our snacks before heading up to her room to put her things away. I suggest tossing her old clothes. She wants to donate them to the Center, but I think they've served their usefulness. We decide to buy more to donate before Christmas.

She explores my room, even sits on my bed. She asks about Randi — if I still sleep in our marriage bed. I tell her about buying new things — things with no memories because the old stuff held too many every time I looked at them. By dinner time, we decide to order burgers from the place on the corner of Grand and Shelby — two blocks over. She likes burgers.

We eat in the living room, on a blanket in the floor. She tells me about her friends from the Center and from school. If she goes to the school close to home, she'll be with her friends. We decide that's where she'll stay — at least for the rest of this year. We plan to go to the Planet early the next morning and when she yawns for the tenth time in an hour, I ask if she's ready for bed.

I lean to tuck the covers under her arms, then sit when I have. "Thank you... for agreeing to be my daughter," I say softly.

"Thanks, for wanting to be my dad," she returns.

I reach up to smooth her hair back, gazing into her eyes. I can already see the healing taking place. She's going to be okay now.

And so am I.

"Goodnight, Carol," I tell her.

"Goodnight, Clark."

I smile at her, not quite able to bring myself to get up.

"Is it okay I call you that?" she wants to know.

"It's my name," I tell her. I reach to take one of her hands in both of mine. "Honey, it doesn't matter what you call me, we both know who I am."

"Okay." She smiles up at me, puffy dimpled cheeks I've

come to crave.

I offer one last smile, squeeze her hand, then stand up. Her eyes drift closed, but still I stand there. It's nearly five full minutes before I ease from the room. I leave the door open and the nightlight on. Once she's used to things, maybe those won't be necessary. I stand at her door watching her for a long while after she's fallen asleep. I'm still stunned. I have a beautiful little girl. I'm not alone any more.

And I can breathe again.

I wake the following morning from the feeling that someone's watching me. I open my eyes to see Carol standing in the door.

"Hey," I offer as I rub my eyes.

"Hey. I wake up early," she tells me and takes a tentative step into the room.

I push up on my pillows, half sitting so that I can look at her. "I usually do, too. I guess I was tired. I haven't slept well lately because I was so excited." I grin at her.

By now she's standing right beside the bed. She looks as if there's something on her mind. I'll be so glad when she feels she can talk to me.

"Do you feel okay?" I ask her.

She shrugs and eases against the edge of the bed.

"Carol, honey, I hope that one day you'll feel like you can tell me things," I coax.

She nods as she tucks her hair behind her ear. She's staring at the floor and looking so unsure of herself.

I sit up, closer to her and reach out to play with her hair right above her ear. "You have beautiful hair."

"I guess... I came in here to make sure you're real," she tells me softly.

"Very real," I tell her. "And I know how you feel. I watched you sleep last night."

Slowly she lifts her eyes to look at me. "Clark, why didn't anybody ever want me?"

"Aw, honey," I croon. She's on the verge of tears. "I have no idea why things happen the way they do. Your birth mother and father might have been young or felt they couldn't care for you as well as others could. She might have been alone herself. And your other family..." I sigh and move my hand down onto her back. "They must have been crazy. I don't see how anybody could look at you and not love you," I whisper.

Her head snaps up and she gawks at me with wide eyes.

I smile softly and cup the side of her head. "I love you already... so much."

Her eyes spill over and her little lip trembles. She's so adorable. Sometimes it's hard to forget she's only eight.

"Hey," I say brightly. "Somebody's got a birthday coming."

Wiping her face, she shrugs again. "Jesus," she tells me matter-of-factly.

I laugh softly. "Yeah, but I was thinking about yours."

Again she looks at me. "I didn't think..." She stops and looks back down at the floor.

"You thought I'd forget... just because it's Christmas?"

Another shrug. "Not a chance, Sweetheart." I shift and throw the cover back. "I thought you could have a party... with your friends from school and the Center."

That gets her attention. Her eyes meet mine. "Not on Christmas Day."

"We could have something this weekend. Christmas isn't until next week," I suggest.

She studies her fingers for a second before looking at me again. "Could we... have it at the Center?"

"Absolutely. I'll call Mrs. Pearson later today." I scoot closer to her. "Tell me, what would you like?"

"Just cake and ice cream?" she asks rather than tells me.

“We’ll have those, but I was thinking about your gift. What gift would you like?”

Back to the shrugging again. I lift my arm to drape lightly around her. I feel her stiffen and she glances at me.

“Would you like... a bike?” I ask her.

She shrugs again.

“A doll.”

A definitive shake in the negative. A good sign, I think.

“Come on. You must want something,” I tell her.

Suddenly she jumps up and turns to wrap her little arms around me. She squeezes tightly. “Just this,” she whispers, then withdraws before I can respond. She runs through the door without a hug in return.

I feel cheated. She moved so quickly I was unable to do a thing.

And I feel... “Wow,” I breathe. I can still feel her. I also miss her so much. I jump to my feet and head downstairs. She’s in the kitchen. I can hear the clink of cups and running water. I step into the room and she turns to smile at me.

“I made the coffee. I read on the internet at the Center how to do it. I read about a lot of things, so I could help out.” She moves over to the fridge. “Can we have pancakes? I can’t make those, but I can get the ingredients.”

A grin bursts across my face as I head toward her. I reach out to take the eggs and milk. “We can have pancakes. They won’t be as good as my mom’s,” I warn her as I turn toward the counter. She’s taken out the griddle. I’m not sure how she knew I had one. I guess she looked, which is perfectly okay. She can look through everything.

For the next little bit we work together to prepare our breakfast. We sit down at the table and she smiles at me. I’m about to stick some food into my mouth when she speaks.

“Thank you, Jesus... for my new daddy and for all my blessings. Amen.” She looks up at me and grins.

“Amen,” I repeat and can’t stop myself from reaching out to rub the side of her head. She grins wider, causing those cute little dimples to be as pronounced as I’ve seen them yet. I’m temporarily breathless. Do all new fathers feel this way?

After breakfast, Carol clears the table. I help her load the dishwasher, then she runs out of the kitchen. I find her in her room. She’s made the bed, has dressed already, and is tying her shoes. She smiles at me. I can’t believe how much I’ve craved that simple gesture from someone.

“I’m gonna shower,” I tell her.

“May I watch TV?”

“Sure. But don’t answer the door and let the machine get the phone if it rings.”

“Okay.”

She’s bounding down the stairs before I turn to head into my room. I pause at a picture of Randi and can’t help but smile.

“I’m listening... finally,” I say aloud. I gather my clothes and head to the bathroom. I dress in jeans today. I don’t officially have to go back to the Planet until after Christmas, but I thought I’d take Carol by on the way to the airport. Just as I’m running the comb through my hair, I hear the doorbell.

“I’m coming,” I yell to Carol. I finish up quickly, slip my glasses on, and run downstairs. Carol is sitting on the floor in front of the set, watching cartoons. I can’t help but grin. I throw open the door to see Lois Lane standing there.

“I got home last night and realized I came to welcome your daughter home and I didn’t even bring a gift.” She shifts a bag she’s holding. “So...” She holds it up and pushes in past me.

Carol turns to look at her and even offers her a smile. “Good morning, Miss Lane.”

“Good morning, Miss Kent,” Lois tells her and sets her bag on the coffee table before shrugging from her coat. She tosses her stuff on the sofa before sitting in the chair. “So... tell me how

you like your new home.”

Carol twirls on the floor to face Lois. “I love my new home. We decorated and cooked together and my room is incredible.”

“I saw that room. My mom painted me a moon and stars on my ceiling when I was little. I was always a bit fascinated with space.” She laughs softly. “I even told her once I was going to marry an alien.”

I almost choke, but cough to cover it as I move Lois’ stuff aside so I can sit on my couch.

“Hey,” Carol speaks up. “Superman’s an alien. Maybe you can marry him.”

Again, it’s all I can do to keep from choking. That’s an hilarious thought — Superman and Lois Lane... Yeah!

“He is pretty amazing, huh?” Lois asks her.

“Uh huh,” Carol replies.

It’s amazing how well these two seem to be connecting. Why is that? Lois Lane doesn’t like herself, let alone people... and *especially* children.

“Okay, so, I went out last night,” Lois tells Carol and reaches for the gift bag on the table. “I wasn’t sure what you’d like, but...” She holds it out toward Carol.

The child slowly takes the offering to peer inside. A large box is pulled out. “Oh wow!” Carol exclaims.

“I thought back to when I was eight,” Lois tells her. “I liked space, of course, and I liked animals.”

“Look, Clark,” Carol tells me and turns the box for me to see. “It’s a zoo play set!”

“Very cool,” I say as I lean forward.

“This is so great. Thank you, Miss Lane,” the girl tells her.

“Hey, Carol,” Lois speaks up. She waits until she has the child’s attention. “Why don’t you call me Lois?”

“I’d like that,” Carol returns. She jumps up with her new toy. “Could I take this to my room and open it?” she asks me.

“Absolutely,” I say and she’s gone. Is she kin to Superman? I laugh softly and look up at Lois, intent on thanking her. But she’s gazing in the direction Carol ran, with that expression on her face again. Before I can question it though, it’s gone. She faces me with a smile.

“How about you?” she starts. “Still think you made the right decision?”

“Naw,” I say as I sit up on the edge of the sofa. “I know it.”

She stares at me for a long moment. “Yeah,” was her response as she rises to her feet.

“Where you going?” I ask her.

“Work. You know, the place you’ve abandoned so you can play with your little girl?” She’s teasing and proves it by winking at me. I’m too damned stunned to speak. Lois slips her coat on and extracts another, smaller gift. “I didn’t forget Daddy,” she tells me and tosses the box at me. “Later, Kent.” She grabs her bag and starts for the door. “I have to go to work,” she shouts loudly.

“Thank you,” is the loud reply.

“You’re welcome. Take care of your daddy.”

“I will.”

Lois grins — *she grins* — turns to offer me a little wave of her hand and she’s gone.

Wow... What in hell is wrong with her? You would think she had made some life changing decisions herself.

I look down at the box in my hand. I open it to find a note. ‘Thought you might want to capture some of the new memories’. It’s a memory card for my camera. Lois had picked out the perfect gift.

And to prove it, I get up to load it into my camera. Seconds later, I snap a picture of my little girl as she hunches over her new toy. She looks up at me and smiles.

“Beautiful,” I say aloud and snap a few more images before going over to help Carol. I even smile for her to take some

pictures of me.

How had I lived without this kind of connection for so long?

Carol clutches the rose in her hand that I bought on the way to the Planet. I plan to give it to my mother — or she will now. She glances up at me as we ride the elevator up to the newsroom floor. She's so cute in her new clothes, and her jacket fits much better than the old one.

The doors open and she inhales sharply. The usual morning rush greets her, stealing her breath away.

"Come on," I urge her. We step out and walk down the ramp. Lois is first to see us and smiles at us.

"Hey, you two," the woman tells us.

"Hey, Lois," Carol says, immediately pleased to see her new friend. And that's what Lois has become. I'll have to speak with her — make sure that's her intention. If she hurts my baby's feelings by leading her on, me and Lois Lane will have problems.

"Hey, CK and... CK," Jack says with a lopsided grin. He leans over to look Carol in the face. "Is the old man treating you right?"

"Clark's the best, Jack," Carol lets him know.

"I know, kiddo." He ruffles her hair. "Want to see the place?"

Carol glances up at me, seeking permission to go with Jack.

"Go. Have fun, but I need her back in twenty, Jack. We're picking up my folks at the airport this morning."

"Got it." He reaches out to lay his hand on Carol's shoulder. "Come on, Beautiful. Let me show you how we create the news."

I watch them go before walking toward my desk. While I'm here, I'll check my mail.

"Being a father suits you," Lois says.

I look up to meet her gaze. "Being a friend suits you," I return. Might as well jump right in.

She looks at me for a second before dropping her eyes to her desk. "Does that bother you?"

"No. What would bother me is if you let that child fall..."

"Clark," she interrupts me as she lifts her eyes again. "I haven't been a friend in a really long time." She glances toward Jack and Carol. They're talking to Jimmy. "Think you could handle that? Becoming a dad and gaining a crazy, obsessed co-worker friend all at the same time?" She looks back at me before I can answer. "I don't intend to be her friend without being yours, too."

"Wow," I can't help but say.

"You know what, Kent. I can see right now that you're gonna be a pain in my butt," she says with a smile.

"Yeah, maybe," I find myself saying through a chuckle. Just as I'm about to open my email, my hearing kicks into overdrive. There's a huge wreck near the bay. So far I've done good as far as my alter ego is concerned. But this... I need to go to this. I glance up to see that Jack is leading Carol into the copy room. I jump up and stop beside Lois' desk. "I need to run out and get something before we head to pick up my folks."

Lois smiles at me. "Good son, Kent. Always see your mama with gift in hand."

"Yeah," I say nervously.

"Go," she tells me.

"Carol," I say.

"She's in good hands."

"You won't run out to meet a source and forget her?"

"I won't run out," she assures me.

"Thanks, Lois," I say with a smile before taking off. By the time I reach the roof, I'm in full Superman mode. I have to hurry.

Thankfully the wreck wasn't as bad as I'd first thought. There were no major injuries and I had it cleaned up in minutes. I step back into the newsroom, small bag in hand. I even managed to pick up a small gift for Mom to keep Lois' questions at bay. I look around for Carol. At first I don't see her, and I have a tiny

panic attack. I finally locate her and Lois, in Perry's office. They're watching the man as he talks and walks back and forth. I tune into what he's saying to learn he's telling a story about meeting the President. Perry's met four total in his life. This particular story is about JFK. He met him as a young man.

Carol is sitting on Perry's sofa with Lois and now and then she looks up at the woman and smiles. Lois — now there's the single biggest enigma of all.

I decide to leave them. I sit and finish checking my email and smile a couple of times when I hear Lois laugh. My heart nearly stops when I hear Carol. I look up and tears sting my eyes. She's laughing! A great, big grin is covering her face and her eyes are twinkling. Has anything ever been so beautiful?

Perry tugs Carol to her feet and they start to dance around. After a second, the girl looks over at Lois. A nod of her head and they start for the door.

"Clark!" Carol runs my way, stopping at my desk. She's still clutching the rose I bought that morning.

"Hey, Honey, did you have fun with Jack and the others?"

"Uncle Perry is so cool!"

I arch a brow. "Uncle Perry?"

"He says I have to call him that. And I can come any time I want to. He said he'd make me an honorary editor and give me my own name plate. Isn't that cool?"

"That's very cool," I tell her.

"And Lois..." She glances back at the woman now engrossed in a phone call. "Could we invite her to my birthday party?"

"Sure."

"Thanks." She hurries over to Lois, waiting patiently for the woman to finish her call.

And the most amazing thing happens.

Lois, who's almost shouting, glances at Carol. "Hang on a second." And she covers the mouthpiece of the phone. "Are you leaving to go get your grands?"

"Yeah, but I wanted to invite you to my birthday party this weekend."

"It's your birthday?" Lois asks in surprise.

"Not yet. It's on Christmas, but we're having my party this weekend. Will you come?"

Lois slowly lowers the phone, lays it on the desk. "Your birthday is on Christmas?" she asks Carol with a strange expression on her face.

"Uh huh. Will you come?"

"How old will you be?" was the woman's next question.

"Nine." Some of Carol's excitement has died. "I guess we need to go."

When her head drops, Lois' expression changes just a bit. "Let me know when and where," she tells the child.

Carol's smile bursts forth again. For a second, I can't help but think the pair look alike. Lois' smile lights up her entire face and her eyes crinkle in the corners — just like Carol's.

My little girl glances at the rose she's holding, then at me. When her eyes move to Lois again, she inches the flower toward her. "I want you to have this."

"But that's for your grand," Lois tells her.

"You need it more," Carol tells her.

Lois lowers her eyes to the flower as she slowly takes it. I can tell she's struggling to keep her emotions at bay. When she's finally able to look back up at Carol, her eyes are shining brightly. I feel so many things at that moment. I've never really cared for the kind of person Lois is, but I find myself so drawn to her now. It's all I can do to keep from telling her. I want to go to her, offer comfort. I've never seen Lois emotional — except for angry — and this... hurts.

"Go meet those grands," Lois manages to tell Carol through thick emotions.

"Will I see you soon?" Carol wants to know.

“You’ll see me very soon,” she replies.

I stand and gather our coats. After helping Carol with hers and slipping mine on, I step over beside Lois. I set the gift intended for Mom down in front of Lois. She looks up at me. I just smile. She looks so lost I can’t help but squeeze her shoulder before heading out.

Our eyes meet just before the elevator closes and I can’t help but feel I’ll soon be introduced to the real Lois Lane.

Carol has another rose. I managed to convince her that it was okay she had given away the other one to her new friend. We’re waiting patiently... or as patiently as we can. I haven’t seen my folks in a couple of months. I was lost again in my depression and hadn’t flown out to the farm. And Carol is meeting her new grandparents for the first time.

“There they are,” I say as the couple I adore come into view. Mom sees us and starts waving. They pick up their pace through the throng of people.

“They look so great,” Carol tells me.

“They are,” I return.

They reach us, stopping to gaze down at Carol.

“Hi,” my little angel tells them.

“Hey, Sweetie,” Mom says, tears welling in her eyes already.

“Ah, Mama, she’s a pretty one,” Dad remarks and kneels to hold up a rose to her.

“I have one for you, too,” she tells Mom.

They exchange their flowers and smile at one another.

“We’re so happy to have you in the family,” Mom lets Carol know.

“I’m happy to be here.”

Dad reaches out to rub her arm, unable to stand not touching her. He’s where I get my need to be affectionate. He likes to hug and touch more than Mom.

Carol smiles at him.

I can’t stand it any longer either. I move in to greet my folks, hugging them both and kissing Mom’s cheek. Carol watches intently. I can tell she wants to be in on the affection but she’s just so unsure about it all. She doesn’t know if we’ll like that. Or if she’s ready. Or if it’s the right time. I lay a hand on her back, just to let her know it’s okay to share in this family — even hugs.

She doesn’t hug right now, but she does gaze at everyone affectionately. And she answers the questions my folks bombard her with on the way out to catch a cab. She and Dad chat away while we wait for their bags.

“She’s so adorable, son,” Mom tells me as she wraps her arm around my waist.

I loop my arm around her shoulder. “Thank you.”

“It’s so good to see you smile again.”

I look down at her. “It’s so good to want to smile again,” I return. “I didn’t realize just how dead I was. Thanks for putting up with me.”

“Oh, Honey, I’m your mama. There’s nothing you could do that would change how much I’ll always support you.”

“I know.” I lean and kiss her forehead. “I love you, Mom.” She tears up. I haven’t told her that in so long. I feel like an ass. It’s so hard losing someone you cherish, even harder holding on to those who love you. That was a tough lesson for me to learn, but now that I have, things will be much, much different.

Over the course of the day, Carol has opened up a little more. She’s relaxing and I couldn’t be more thrilled she’s doing so this quickly. She’s crazy about my folks; I knew she would be. She’s beaten Dad at checkers five times. She helped Mom with lunch. She’s even taken my couple of disappearances in stride. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she knows.

After lunch, we all go out to choose a tree as a family. The rest of the afternoon is spent decorating the monster. Mom

insisted Carol have a very huge one. I have to admit — it looks great in front of the window. We’re almost done with the trimming when the bell rings.

I laugh at something Dad said as I move to answer the door. “Ms. Carson,” I say as I open up for her and her supervisor — the same lady who protested Carol’s adoption. “We’re decorating the tree,” I tell them, stepping aside to allow them in. The district lady has no problem coming right in.

“Please know I did not approve this visit,” Ms. Carson lets me know.

Carol is standing close to my dad as the supervisor moves closer to her.

“My name is Rachel Johns,” the lady tells her. “I am here to make sure Mr. Kent is taking care of you.”

“Of course he is,” Carol tells her, moving closer to my father. He lifts his arm to lay a hand on her shoulder. God, I love that she feels so comfortable with them.

“Yes, well, I’ll look for myself.” She looks at Dad. “You are?”

“Jonathan Kent. I’m Clark’s father. This is my wife Martha,” he introduces Mom.

Johns actually snubs her nose at them before whirling on her heel to head into the kitchen. She plunders through my cabinets, huffing as she does. She’s probably upset that she doesn’t find the cleaning products there. I put those on the top shelf in the laundry room.

Take that for good parenting, I say silently.

I follow behind her. She moves to inspect the locks on the back door. She grunts again when she finds the chemicals out of Carol’s reach. She actually digs through the laundry. When she lifts a dirty pair of Carol’s undies, Ms. Carson rushes to her side.

“What are you doing?” Ms. Carson growls at her.

“Just making sure...”

“Making sure of what? That he didn’t assault her last night and throw the evidence in the laundry hamper? Come on, Rachel. This is ridiculous.”

“Saving a child is not ridiculous.”

“It is if you’ve targeted the wrong man.”

Johns huffs and heads out, snooping everywhere. She makes her way upstairs, to Carol’s room. She plunders through everything. And yes, she inspects her sheets — and mattress — to make sure nothing ugly took place in the child’s bed.

My bed is next. Then my dresser. She even inspects the contents of my waste basket.

“I flush the wrapper, too,” I say after my anger rises to my boiling point. “And you’ll never find my stash. I keep those in my briefcase. And last time I checked, that’s off limits. But please, come back tonight and I’ll give you a complete show.”

“Are you trying to be smart, Mr. Kent?” Johns asks me.

“Smart, sarcastic, whatever you want to call it. This is ridiculous. I haven’t hurt Carol. I never intend to. I love her.”

“Please,” the woman practically spits out. “You’ve just met. You can’t possibly love her.”

“How would you know how I feel? You’re so busy trying to condemn, you would never be able to see love if it bit you on the face!” I don’t mean to raise my voice, but I’ve had enough. I’m not some sex craved maniac who wanted to adopt a little girl to get my jollies with and I’m tired of being accused of it.

Johns blinks and takes a step back.

“I will speak with my lawyer about some kind of formal injunction. I don’t intend to be inspected daily so you can further this vendetta against me. Now, please.” I turn sideways and lift my hand toward the door. “Please leave. We’re trying to bond as a family and you’re creating too much stress for that to happen.”

“Aren’t you the bitter one?” Johns remarks.

“Bitter? Lady, you come into my home and accuse me of abusing my daughter. You did so even before I was able to bring

her home. You don't know me. If you did, you'd know how absurd your accusations are. Now, excuse us." She glares at me for a long moment before huffing and stomping past me.

She's literally boiling by the time she makes it downstairs. I sigh and look over at Ms. Carson.

"I'm sorry to have spoken out..."

"I'm not," she says and steps over to Carol. "Carol, do you like your new home?"

"I love my new home," she tells the woman.

"And your dad? Has he treated you well?"

"Oh, yes. He let me help him cook and we decorated and he took me to see his work. I made a new friend — Lois. She brought me a gift. And Uncle Perry knows everything about Elvis. I get to be honorary editor. And I like my grandparents. They said I could come to the farm. I even get to stay for a whole month next summer."

"Has your father asked you to do anything you're not comfortable doing?" Johns wants to know.

"He didn't hurt me, Ms. Johns. And he won't."

"We'll be back to make sure," is the lady's parting remark.

Ms. Carson sighs and smiles. "Forgive our intrusion." She stops to look at me. "We won't be back until after the New Year. If she comes back, it will be unauthorized. Call the police and report her trespassing."

"Thank you," I say and hold the door for her.

"Congratulations again and Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." I close the door and face my family.

"Sorry, Honey," I tell Carol.

"It's okay. Jackie West told me at school that same woman came to his new house — to see if his new mom was hurting him. She must have been hurt when she was a girl, 'cause she don't trust nobody."

"Doesn't," I correct her. "She doesn't trust anybody."

"Come on, Dad. We're not in school," Carol drones as she rolls her eyes at me. She's the exact picture of Lois at that second.

And I might have thought about that more if I hadn't been rendered breathless. She called me Dad. And she realizes it a second later. She stops with her hand in mid-air, holding the decoration she was about to hang. Her eyes slowly meet mine and I smile at her.

"Yeah, well, it doesn't hurt to remind you," I say, deliberately choosing to act as if I'm ignoring her comment. I move over to hang another ornament. She stands there for a long moment before she finishes her task, grinning as she does. I didn't fall in love with Randi as quickly as I've fallen for this child. What has she done to me?

Three days later, things still seem surreal. It has been amazing. We've spent the time getting to know one another as a family — dinners, games, movies, long walks, longer talks. Carol has fit in as if she's been here forever. And my folks are like kids again. They've helped us shop and plan the birthday party. They've taken Carol out to dinner — alone. I was lost that night, so I caught up on my Superman patrols. It's incredible how much different it feels around here. Mom told me I'm almost like my old self again. Others have noticed, too.

We met Mrs. Collins. She and Mom have a lot in common and Carol is crazy about her. She's going to be a great sitter.

We managed to get back to the zoo for much longer than an hour. That was Carol's favorite day so far — she told me so.

I've worked a couple of hours, too. I stopped by the Planet after a Superman rescue to write a brief article — although it was unrelated. I'd thought things were going good with Lois, but she would barely talk to me. And she didn't even ask about Carol. This after she called to beg off the trip to the zoo that she had suggested. Before I let her attitude bother me — more than it

already has — I left. I have no idea what's up with her, but I really didn't care at the time. My job is to protect my daughter. And I'll do that, even from Lois Lane.

Carol is in bed late tonight. She went caroling with my folks and Mrs. Collins. I had planned to go, but Perry called and asked me to write a mood piece for him. It seems I'm the only one at the Planet who can do that. Or so he thinks.

The house is quiet by the time I go up to my room. My folks are watching an old Christmas movie and cuddling on the couch, so I give them some privacy. Alone in the shower, I find myself thinking things I haven't thought in a while. It's a bit surprising, although I'm more shocked how exhilarating it feels.

It's been so long since I actually felt anything. Yeah, I've done this before, even as a substitute for my depression. But I didn't really *feel* it. I just... did it. Now though, I tingle all over as aftershocks dance through my body. I've missed feeling so alive.

I've missed so much. I dry off and slip on my shorts, but I've forgotten my shirt. When I open the bathroom door, I'm surprised to see Lois lying across the foot of my bed on her stomach with a photo album open in front of her. She looks up at me and inhales sharply.

"Wow, Kent. You're packing under those dress shirts."

I've forgotten my glasses, too. Thank God I didn't comb my hair back. It's still unruly and apparently enough that she doesn't recognize me. "What are you doing here?" I ask as I pick up my shirt from the bed.

She moves to sit on the side of the mattress, the smile completely gone. Something's wrong with her.

"I came to see Carol, apologize for being such an awful friend."

"She's asked about you a few times." I put my glasses on and grab my comb and run it through my hair before I sit beside her. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." She's lying. I can see it in her eyes. She stands and points to the book she had been looking at. "You were a cute kid."

"I'm still a cute kid," I say with a grin.

She looks at me for a second. "Yeah," she agrees and walks around the bed. "Can I bring breakfast tomorrow?"

"You're leaving?" I ask as I stand up and follow her out.

"Yeah. It's late. You're getting ready for bed. Your folks went a few minutes ago." She looks over at me. "Although, I don't think they're asleep," she whispers.

I chuckle softly and jog down the stairs behind her. Probably not, I think. Even after all these years, my folks have a very active sex life. I still cringe when I think of how I know that.

Lois' bag is on the hall tree and we reach for it at the same time. The confusion causes it to spill.

"I'm sorry," I say and kneel to help her clean up. But I stop when I notice a picture of Carol. I snatch up the rest of the papers in the pile before Lois can, reading as I stand up. "Why do you have information on my daughter?" I ask Lois.

"Clark..."

"This is her personal file," I say and look up at her, anger boiling within me. "Every person you meet isn't a story, Lois."

"I know." She reaches for the papers.

"Why did you do this?"

"Clark..." She tries to grab the stuff again, but I pull it back.

"Why? I thought you wanted to be a friend."

"I do. I am." She sighs and gives up trying to get the papers. She turns and walks over to look at the Christmas tree.

"If you plan to hurt her..."

"I can't hurt her more than I already have," Lois says softly.

What? What is she talking about? I move up beside her, just waiting for an explanation. Researching my daughter was uncalled for.

“Carol’s birthday is December 25th.”

“And?” So what? That was no reason for her to research her.

“My daughter’s birthday is December 25th.”

My brows shoot toward my hair and I gawk at her. It takes a second for that to repeat itself in my head. “What?” I manage around my shock.

“She’ll be nine this year.”

“Your daughter?” I ask again, just for clarity.

A large tear rolls down her cheek and she swipes it away.

“Her father wanted me to abort her. He thinks I did.”

Slowly, as if in slow motion, her words register. “You gave her up for adoption,” I whisper.

“I just couldn’t kill her,” she strangles out. She looks up at me. “I named her Carol.”

That takes longer to get through my thick skull. I stare into Lois’ eyes.

I stare into Carol’s eyes.

“No way,” I say and take a step back. “It’s a coincidence,” I tell her.

“DNA doesn’t lie.” She taps the file in my hand.

“You had a DNA profile worked up?” I ask her.

“Carol’s was already on file. Hell, mine’s on file. It was just a matter of comparing them.” She glances up the stairs. “Of all the little girls in the world, Kent, you fell in love with her.”

I stare for a second again. “She’s mine now,” I let her know quickly.

Lois smiles sadly at me. “I gave up any rights to her a long time ago.” She tilts her head to look at me. “Somehow I think she was meant to be yours from the beginning.” She turns to head to the hall tree. “Ironic as hell though. I was crazy about the stars as a kid. Now blood of my blood lives with an alien.” She buttons up her coat and grins at me. “Lucky girl,” she says before she steps out the front door.

It’s a full ten minutes before I can form a coherent thought. I have to replay her words at least fifty times before what she said registers. When it does, I move over to drop on the couch. Lois knows. She knows I’m Superman.

And she’s Carol’s birth mother. I glance at the file in my hand before zipping upstairs to read through the papers I’d been given on Carol. Birth mother was young — a senior in high school. Said she was just too young to have a child. Nothing else about her.

I dress quickly. I have to see her, talk to her about this. I stop and tap on my folks’ door, ask them to listen out for Carol. They call back to be safe. When Lois gets to her place, I’m leaning against the door frame waiting.

“I thought you might show up here,” she says and unlocks her door. Her apartment is a swank place, much like her personality — cold and void of feeling. The furniture has hard lines and there’s barely a thing in the place but the larger pieces. The kitchen is off to the right and she heads that way, trusting me to close the door.

I study her while she makes coffee. I wait until she places a cup in front of me before opening my mouth to speak, but she jumps in before I can.

“I was a different person then — popular, outgoing... alive.” She looks down at her cup. “Danny was the love of my life. We had dated since middle school, planned to marry after graduation. Sex had never been a problem, but somewhere during our sophomore year, he started to change. I guess he grew up.” She runs her finger around the rim of her cup. “I put him off for another year. Prom night our junior year... we became adults in his bed while his parents were in Aspen. I found out I was pregnant in June.” She picks up her cup and heads back to the living room. I grab mine and follow.

After we’re seated on the most uncomfortable couch I’ve ever sat on, she shifts toward me.

“The abortion was his idea almost right away. We were on the way to Met U and success in this big ole world. A kid would have stopped that. I lost my mother in July, my mind a week later, and I left to go to California to stay with my Aunt Lucy. She held me while I cried and she helped me lie to my dad for the next few months. Carol was born almost two months early and I left her in that hospital, sure I’d chosen the best parents I could.” She drank down some more coffee.

“You chose her adoptive parents?” I ask. Of all the things I could have said at that moment, it jumps out first.

She nods. “Friends of Lucy’s. I didn’t find out what they had done to her until I read the paperwork three days ago.”

I sip my coffee for a moment, trying to sort out everything she’s told me.

“The first time I saw her...” Lois inhaled slowly. “I felt like I’d been hit with a canon right in the middle of my stomach.” Her eyes were full of tears again. “And to hear her name was Carol... I practically flew home to run a search.” She glances at me. “I had to call up guys who know guys to get the info I needed. I hadn’t gotten it yet when she told me her birthdate. I was almost one hundred percent sure then.”

We sit there for nearly three full minutes, her allowing me to digest what I’ve learned. “Her biological father...?”

“Danny,” she points out.

“Danny... He still thinks you aborted her?”

Lois turns to look at me, inhales past fresh tears. “Danny shot himself four years ago.”

My eyes widen and I almost drop my cup. “Wh... what?”

“When I said earlier he had started to change... there was a reason. He had a tumor. It was inoperable and for a while, it was controlled with medication. But it started to grow. The pain ate him up, drove him crazy.” She wipes her cheek. “I told his father after his death about Carol.” Lois half laughed, half cried. “He told me the kid was better off.”

“How about his mother?”

“She died when he was little.”

God, this is... “Unbelievable,” I whisper. And it is. Completely unbelievable. I adopted Lois Lane’s biological child.

“I don’t intend to... do anything. I just... thought you should know,” she says softly.

“How do we handle this?” I ask as I set my cup on the coffee table. “How do I keep something like that from her? Lois, she’s crazy about you.”

“Oh, I think that would change if she knew who I was,” Lois remarks.

Maybe it would, but I highly doubt it. I think Carol would work through her anger and bitterness and fall completely in love with her mother. “Does your father know about her?”

“No. And neither does anyone at the Planet. When I left California, I left that... piece of my soul behind. I became this angry, self-controlling, egotistical workaholic I’ve been since you’ve known me. Just like you did when Randi died, I stopped living. I just got up every morning and went through the motions. I thought if I worked enough and hard enough I wouldn’t be able to think.”

“It doesn’t work,” I inform her.

“Not for a single second,” she agrees. She stares at the table for a long second before she rises and goes into another room. She’s back a moment later, holding a book. “I debated giving you this for the last two days. And it’s just copies. I still have the originals.”

She has me curios now. I take the book and open it, gasping at the sight that greets me. It’s a sonogram picture. There are a total of three. There are half a dozen pictures of a tiny, wrinkled red mass with dark hair. She’s so small. One is of her sucking her fist. There are a few more, at varying ages — all the way up until she looked to be about five. I lift my eyes to Lois in question.

“They sent me photos. Until a year ago, I had never opened the damn letters.” She runs a frustrated hand through her hair. “I flip flopped so much over the decision to give her up... I wanted a completely open adoption. Then a closed one.” She props her elbows on her knees, holding her head after she did. “I wanted to die. I almost stayed in California with her.” She rubs her face vigorously for a few seconds. “I was doing so well. I had finally gotten to a place I could take a deep breath without feeling as if I would explode. In waltzes this shy, unassuming, polite, handsome man from Nowheresville. I try not to notice him, try not to let him bother me, but...” She stares at the coffee table. “You were in as much pain as I was, and I saw it the second I looked at you.”

“I’m what made you...?” I ask, not entirely understanding what she means, so I can’t finish.

“You reminded me that I made mistakes. In my rush to distance myself, I became convinced I couldn’t make mistakes.” She turns her head to look at me. “With each day that passed, more and more emotion came back. I needed to figure you out.”

“So you ran a check on me?” I ask it, although I know it’s true. We had it out over that right after she did it.

“And to let you know, nothing I found is remotely telling.”

“Then why do you think I’m Superman?” She hadn’t come out and said Superman, but who else would she mean?

“I don’t think. I know.” She turns, pulls a leg up on the sofa. “I’ve known for quite a while now. Absolutely brilliant cover,” she says, barely a hint of a smile on her lips. “Hiding in plain sight... I don’t think many people would believe Clark Kent is from another planet.”

I still don’t admit to anything, just stare down at the pictures again.

“Do you plan to tell Carol?”

I don’t answer right away. To do so would be admitting what she already knows. I’ve just hid it so long, it’s almost second nature to hide it. And I’m not sure I’m ready to admit it.

Lois nods with a sad expression on her face. “I, ah, I won’t mention it again.”

“Lois,” I almost sigh. My eyes slowly move to hers. “You have to look at this from my perspective.”

“I know.” She turns and drops both her feet back on the floor. “Would it be easier if I just... leave?”

“Leave?” I ask with raised brows. “As in... move away?”

“Yeah.” She tucks her hair behind her right ear. “It’s what I almost did... without saying a word.”

Even though her revelations have floored me, I don’t think I would have liked that much. Besides, having a friend in on my secret might be interesting.

“That wouldn’t have been the answer,” I say to her.

“What is, Clark? I gave up my baby.”

“You tried to insure she would have a good life,” I counter.

“Yeah, only she didn’t have one. She was given up again.”

Lois sighs and flops back against the cushions. “I can’t believe how grounded she is.”

And before I really think it through, I say something that maybe I shouldn’t. “Think how grounded she could be if she knew the truth.”

Lois’ head snaps toward me and she gawks with an open mouth. “I can’t tell her,” she insists.

“You can’t tell her or you can’t live through the scrutiny she might put you through?”

“Clark,” she whines and attempts to stand up.

I reach out and grasp her forearm gently. “You can’t change what you’ve done.”

“Exactly,” she shouts. “And now I know leaving is best because I shouldn’t have said a word.”

She wrenches her arm from my hand and shoots to her feet. I sigh again when she stomps toward the door.

I stand and go that way. She obviously wants me to leave. I

stop and look at her. “Why did you even tell me?”

“I don’t know,” she returns. She sounds so defeated I can’t stop myself. I reach out to squeeze her arm. When she lifts her eyes to mine, they’re full of tears.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t stunned. This was quite a surprise. But you told me for a reason.” I slide my hand up, to cup her shoulder. “Maybe you told me for the same reason I adopted Carol — to find a way to feel something again.”

“Do you?” She wipes her cheek. “Do you feel anything yet?”

I can’t help but smile. “I had no idea how emotionally dead I truly was.” I move my hand up to cup her cheek. “Don’t make any hasty decisions. Let’s take that trip to the zoo we missed out on. Come spend Christmas with us. Maybe even go shopping with Carol and Mom.” I step a bit closer, move my thumb up to smooth under her eye. I just can’t help myself. Her pain is ripping me up. “If you’re still numb when the holidays are over, I’ll move you myself.”

She stares at me for a long moment before reaching up to cover the hand on her face. Her eyes drift closed, blinking out more tears. “And what if I’m not numb?”

God, what am I doing? I think as I step even closer, gently coax her to lay her forehead on my chest. My hand slides around to cup the back of her head. “Then we’ll figure out how to become good friends,” I whisper and lean so that my chin is resting against her head. I inhale deeply and I’m assaulted by all kinds of emotions. It’s been so long since I’ve been close to anyone like this, and it feels... good.

She reaches up and grasps my shirt, choking back a sob. My other hand lifts to her arm. We stay that way for a long while — taking and receiving comfort from one another. It’s comfort long overdue for both of us.

“Tomorrow?” she asks without lifting her head.

I lean up and wait until she’s looking at me. “Tomorrow?” I ask her.

“It’s supposed to snow tomorrow night,” she tells me.

I can’t help but smile. Slowly I release her and step toward the door. “And just so you know, I didn’t ask you out. We’re planning on being there and if you just happen to show up...”

She laughs, and I feel something else — something deep within me roar to life. I like that sound... so tentative, yet so strong. Lois Lane is a remarkable person... or she will be once she learns to feel again.

“Goodnight, Lane,” I tell her.

“Goodnight, Kent,” she returns.

I open the door and stop to smile at her. Her eyes actually twinkle when she smiles back. I find myself hoping to see her do that more.

And I find myself extremely attracted to this soft side. I give her a final look before I walk away. Tomorrow night suddenly seems so far away.

I roll over the next morning to see bright eyes staring at me. I smile at my beautiful daughter and she grins back.

“Hey,” she tells me.

“Hey,” I return and lay my hand on hers. She’s kneeling in the floor so that her face is extremely close to mine.

“We have to get the stuff for the party today,” she reminds me.

“I know,” I tell her. Dad suggested I hire a company to bring animals to her party, and Jack found a great place that does parties. I’m almost as excited as she is. She told Mom she couldn’t ever remember having a birthday party. I’m hoping she won’t soon forget this one.

“We have a guest for breakfast,” she leans and tells me softly.

I can’t help but chuckle at her grin. She does that so much more now.

“And she brought the food,” she informs me.

“She?” I ask.

“She says to tell you to get your sleepy head up.”

“Did she?” I have a pretty good idea now who our guest might be. She must be anxious about my feelings over her revelations.

I can see it now — the resemblance between Carol and Lois. Of course, she reminded me a lot of her before. I lift my hand to trail my knuckles over her cheek.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I tell her softly.

“Me, too, but I’m hungry.” She rises to her feet and drags the cover off me. “Get up.”

I laugh as I sit up. She’s too cute. “Could you give me a few minutes?” I ask her. I need to use the bathroom and wash my face.

“If you’re not down in two, I’m coming back,” she warns before hurrying out of the room.

After she’s gone, I head into the bathroom to take care of business and clean up. I forego getting dressed yet because I’m not sure what the plans are for the day. My tee shirt and shorts will do for breakfast — I hope. Lois might not appreciate my state of undress. I need to find time to speak with Mom and Dad at some point soon — about the things Lois revealed. They always know how to put things into perspective for me. They’ll ask all the right questions.

I step into the kitchen a few moments later and the people at the table look up at me with bright smiles. My eyes meet Lois’ and I can’t miss the appreciative glance she gives me. I actually blush from the attention. I duck my head as I sit down. Lois has gone all out... or least all the way to Callard’s for their family breakfast. Everyone is chatting and making their selections. I thank Mom for the eggs she pushed off onto my plate. I notice Lois is helping pile food onto Carol’s plate.

I also notice they are talking a mile a minute. I’m actually getting tired listening to them. I hear them mention shopping. Dad leans over and asks if I’ll join him this morning to pick out Carol a little something special.

So, I guess our morning is set. More plans are made — we’re meeting at the Planet at one to judge the decorating contest. Lois and I have been selected to be judges this year. I’m still not too sure how that came about, but my little girl is thrilled to be going to the newsroom again. As long as she’s happy, I’m happy.

And right now, I’m as happy as I’ve ever been.

“So... what’s on your mind, son?” my dad says about a block away from the brownstone.

I look over at him and smile. “Is it that obvious?”

“No, but I know you. And I’ve watched you all morning.” He says hello to a passing woman — which shocks the poor lady. But it has the desired effect and she responds in kind.

“I learned some things last night,” I start.

“Like the fact that Lois knows who you are?”

I stop and when he turns to me, I almost gawk at him. How he does it, I’ll never know.

“It’s nothing she’s said, but body language is more telling,” my father lets me know.

“You can tell she knows secrets by the way she acts?”

Dad chuckles a bit. “It’s not that telling, son. But Lois is in love with you and it’s hard to miss the way she looks at you.”

My brows shoot toward my hair. “Lois isn’t in love with me.” I start walking again.

Dad catches up, chuckling as he lays his hand on my shoulder. “Ah, boy, life is short. You, of all people, should know that. You like Lois, too. Don’t waste months dancing around it any longer.”

I just keep walking, too keyed up to speak right now. Dad is... he’s... so close to the truth that I can’t argue with him. The night before when I held Lois — or sort of held her — something

inside me woke up again. I do like her. And I’m not blind. I’ve seen the way she looks at me, especially the last few days. The day we went on the carriage ride... I sigh heavily. I felt like a kid again that day... out on his first date with his sweetheart.

Dad stops me again, tugging on my arm. He waits until I’m looking at him before he speaks. “Clark, we all adored Randi, but she wouldn’t want you to grieve for the rest of your life. You’re young, successful, and I’ve raised you well.”

“Dad,” I speak up to stop him. I glance away for a second. “Before she died, we had time to discuss a lot of things.” I smile. “I can actually hear her telling me to ask Lois out.”

“I have a feeling you better because Lois seems to be the kind that would skip the going out and jump straight into the relationship.” He laughs softly and I can’t help but join him.

“I guess she is a bit assertive.”

“A perfect match for your dual personalities.” Dad pats my chest and starts walking again. “So, I guess you better pick out a gift for your new... friend as well.”

“There’s something else,” I say and pull Dad to a stop. I glance around, but nobody is concerned with us. They’re busy rushing around, busy with their own lives. “Lois is... Carol’s biological mother.” And by the way Dad smiles, he knew that, too. “Am I last to know everything?” I throw up my hands and walk away.

When Dad catches up, we’ve crossed the street at the corner. “She didn’t tell us, but your mother knew the time she saw them together. And she and Martha talked a while. The things she said, without actually saying so, proved Martha was right.”

“I want her to tell Carol.”

“To tell her would be to share her.”

“You just told me Lois was a perfect match for me. If she and I...” I wave my hand to say what my mouth can’t. “We would share her.”

“Hey, I’m just saying the things you need me to,” Dad points out as we turn the corner.

“I know.” We walk for a moment before I stuff my hands into my pockets. “Wouldn’t it be something? To reunite them? Lois was so messed up when she gave Carol up. And the person she’s become — it’s a direct result of doing that.”

Dad glances at a window display and immediately heads in that direction. He’s stopped at a jewelry store. “Look here at these necklaces.”

I step up beside him. “I bought Carol a necklace,” I tell him. When she was out with my folks, I managed to do a bit of shopping.

“I was looking at this for Mama,” Dad tells me. “Those,” he points. “I could put your birthstone and Carol’s on the heart...” And he steps over to open the door.

I laugh softly and step in behind him. It takes a little while to make his selections, and we’re told to come back in two hours to pick up the items. He even manages to choose a bracelet for Carol. We leave the jewelry store and head toward the toy store. Santa’s cart is nowhere near full enough for his stop at my place. After picking out a few things, we head to one of the nicer department stores. I peruse the selections of various items, trying to decide on something for Lois. But what does one get for a woman who’s more than a co-worker but not quite a... whatever she’s not quite? I find myself becoming a bit... excited at the possibility of spending Christmas with someone. Yeah, I spend it with my folks every year and wouldn’t miss that for the world. Thinking of spending it with a woman...

I have to leave Dad a couple of times to be Superman, but manage to catch up with him for coffee at the diner across from the Planet. It’s almost time to meet up with Lois, Mom, and Carol.

“Sorry it took me so long,” I tell Dad as I sit down.

“Nonsense. You are who you are,” he says. He sets his cup

down to look at me. “I haven’t told you lately how proud I am of you.”

I smile and duck my head. Receiving praise is so hard for me, even from my folks. “Thanks, Dad.”

“When are you planning to tell Carol?”

I look up, through the window to see the new light of my life coming down the sidewalk with the other two women who have a place in my heart.

That stops me cold and my eyes shift to Lois. Has she worried her way into my heart?

Dad shifts to see what I find so interesting and smiles. “Ah, now there’s a sight I could get used to,” he says. He pulls a couple of bills from his pocket as he stands up. “We’ll have to have coffee another day, boy.”

“We will,” I return as I stand, too. I grab the bags we’ve accumulated — those not delivered to the house — and we head out of the diner. The women have just reached the front of the Planet, but stop to wait on us when Dad yells. Carol sees me and waves excitedly. When I step onto the sidewalk, she greets me with a hug. I can’t return it because my hands are full, but I lean in so that she can hold on as long as she wants to.

“Wow,” I say as she squeezes. It’s a few seconds before she draws back. “That was nice.”

“We found so many wonderful gifts,” she starts. “I found something for Papa and you and Uncle Perry. And Lois helped me pick out a special ornament for the tree. I found candy for the party and I get to help with the choices for the contest.”

“Absolutely,” I let her know.

“And guess what? We’re going to the zoo tonight!” She jumps up and down. “Lois said we can have hot chocolate and ride the carriage back home.”

“I guess we have a full day ahead of us,” I say, the smile still on my lips. It’s so good to see her smile like this. I glance up at Lois, who gives me that... look. There’s something extra in her eyes. If I’m honest, it’s been there for quite a while. I just chose not to see it until now.

We head inside and I glance down at Lois when she stands beside me in the elevator.

“Did you have a good time?” I ask her.

“I had a great time,” she lets me know with a satisfied smile.

“Doesn’t look like you found many gifts?” I observe. They don’t have a single bag.

“We dropped the stuff off before coming here,” she lets me know and leans to peek into one of my bags. “Did you find what you needed?”

“I did,” I say and shift the bags closer to my side. She looks up at me with that look — the one that says she would love to know what I bought. “Be good,” I tell her.

She laughs softly and reaches out to smack my arm. “Oh, honey, I’m so much better than you’ve ever imagined.”

She drops that bomb as the doors open and I almost get shut in again as I stand and gawk at her. She grins wickedly and walks away. She’s a minx, I decide right there. And a relationship — of any kind — with Lois Lane is going to be... interesting.

We have a great time judging the contest. There were so many great doors. The winner ends up being Edna Landers, Mr. Stern’s personal assistant. Her door depicted an entire stable. She had made the little people of modeling clay. It was an incredible display. And you would have thought we gave her a million dollar reward. First place was a gift card to Costmart, but to that little blue haired lady, it was gold. She intended to buy her two grandchildren something extra special for Christmas this year.

After the contest, we head back to the brownstone to hang out. The new ornament is hung on the tree and we watch a movie. Lois even stays with us.

I find myself getting lost in the feeling of it all. And I find myself wanting more.

“She had so much fun,” Lois tells me as we sit down on the sofa. The trip to the zoo was incredible. It started snowing and gave the entire place a magical feel. Add the ambiance of the lights and it was spectacular. Carol was in heaven. She told Lois and her grandparents all about the animals. We ate dinner at the cafe inside the park. Carol educated all of us on the life of the gorilla — her favorite animal. It was nearly ten before we decided it was getting too cold to stay any longer.

Mom and Dad took a cab home while Lois, Carol, and I took that promised carriage ride. Snuggled in that cart, my daughter between Lois and I... that was incredible.

“Lois?” I speak up suddenly. She looks over at me. “Will you have dinner with me?”

She arches a brow at me. “Alone?”

“Alone,” I confirm.

“As in a date?”

“As in a date,” I return and find myself holding my breath.

She draws her legs up and shifts to face me. “I don’t know, Clark. You would have to top tonight.”

I laugh softly as I shift and prop my arm on the back of the sofa. “I’d like to try.”

She looks at me for a long moment. “I’d like for you to try,” she says softly.

The smile on my face fades when I notice the look on hers. God, those eyes...

I’m about to reach out when Carol bounds down the stairs. I drag my eyes from Lois just in time to catch my little girl.

“Miss me?” she asks.

“I did,” I say with a chuckle. I shift her so I can see her face, pulling her legs up across my lap. “Want to read a story tonight?”

“Lois is reading to me tonight,” she says.

I glance to the lady beside me. “Who’s gonna read to me?” I ask her.

She laughs at me. “Maybe Lois will.”

“Maybe,” I say and rub her leg. “Did you have fun today?”

“The best. And tomorrow night’s my party!”

“It is,” I confirm. “Are you excited?”

“Very.” She turns and hugs me tightly. “I’m glad to be here,” she whispers before she draws away quickly and jumps back to her feet. “Night.”

“Goodnight.”

“Coming?” she asks Lois.

“I’ll be right up,” Lois tells her. After she runs off, Lois looks at me. “Are you okay with me reading the story?”

“More than okay,” I let her know.

She just gives me that grin. She shifts to stand up, but turns back again. “Thanks... for today.”

I watch her walk up the steps. “You’re welcome,” I whisper. And thank you. I had almost as good a time as Carol had. All the new feelings... Well, not exactly new, but they had been dormant for so long.

I lay back and prop my feet up, tuning my hearing in to listen to the story. Carol tells Lois if her friends knew she was read a story to, they would think she was a baby. Lois tells her it would be their secret, then confesses she still likes to hear a story from time to time. I find myself wondering who read to her last.

The story is animal related — a book they had picked out during their shopping trip earlier. When it was over, Carol tells Lois she’s glad to have her as a friend. Lois tells her she is, too.

So am I. Maybe some day Lois will even be comfortable enough to tell Carol who she really is.

I turn my head to look at Lois when the couch dips. She’s looking at me... that expression that makes a man glad he’s alive. Neither of us say a word, just stare. When her hand lifts to my face, I close my eyes. The feel of her skin on mine is invigorating, electrifying, and breathtaking. I look at her, just in

time to see her lean. Her lips touch mine, soft and warm. Before I can register she's there, she's gone — drawing completely away and standing up.

"It would be nice if you do breakfast tomorrow," she's saying.

I slowly lean up to watch her. "Where ya' going?" I ask.

"Home... for a cold shower," she mumbles as she takes down her coat.

"Ah, I can hear you," I let her know as I stand up.

"So?" she asks as she turns toward me. "I need one."

I laugh softly as I step up to her. "Maybe I do, too," I whisper.

She giggles and pats my chest before opening the door. She's about to step through when I reach out to grasp her arm gently. When she turns, I lean to kiss her again.

"Goodnight, Lane," I say softly, looking into her beautiful dark eyes.

"Goodnight... Kent," she returns. She stares at me for a long moment before heading out.

I step out into the entry, holding the door to watch her walk down the sidewalk. If you had told me a couple of months ago I would be where I am tonight, I would have laughed at you.

But I knew, even then, that something had to change. I had begun to feel almost ill with my life. Dad's right. I can't grieve my life away. Promising Randi I would live and love again had been the most difficult thing I'd ever done. She was right, too. I need somebody to care for, to... love. As wonderful as Carol is, she can't be everything I need.

I close the door and lock up before heading up to bed. I peep in on my daughter, listen at the door of my folk's room — and wish I hadn't — then slowly dress for bed. Just as I lay down, my cell phone rings.

"Hello?"

"I either have to stop staying so late or I have to get a place closer."

I laugh softly. Lois is one of a kind.

"Or maybe I'll just buy a car."

"Or you could ask for a lift," I suggest.

"Lift? As in... Wow, you'd do that?"

"I'd do that," I say through a chuckle. And I know how I can top tonight on our date.

"Clark, what do you want for Christmas?"

"I want..." I almost said something totally... I don't even know what to call it. My head is suddenly stuck in the gutter. I'm not even sure how it got there, but now that it is...

"Me, too," she whispers.

And I sit straight up in bed. There's no way she just said what I thought she said.

"I, ah, I..." She goes on, but stops. "Sleep tight, Kent."

Before I can say anything else, she hangs up. I'm left to stare at the phone in stunned silence. Surely I misunderstood Lois. Or she misunderstood me. I was not thinking anything remotely chaste a second ago.

Wow... I think as I lay back down. I haven't thought like that in so long. Hell, I wonder if I would actually be able to do *that* with another woman. Randi's the only lover I've ever had. I've kissed a few — before Randi. And Lois is the first since.

I actually scare myself when the thought crosses my mind that I would like for her to be the last.

Way too soon, Kent, I tell myself as I roll onto my side. I fluff my pillow and force myself to clear my mind. The sooner I go to sleep, the sooner I can see Lois again.

The sooner I can get up!

I think I'm in trouble.

I wake up to Carol staring at me again. She's grinning, too, and I can't help but smile.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," she returns and crawls onto the bed. "Could I brush your hair?"

I notice she already has the brush. "Sure." I shift to sit up and she crawls onto her knees behind me.

"You have great hair," she tells me.

"So do you," I let her know. I'd love to brush hers.

"Clark, do you like Lois?"

"Yeah, Honey, I guess I do." I glance back at her. "Is that okay?" She asked that a few days ago and my answer was very different. Funny how quickly things change.

"It's more than okay. I like her so much." She pulls the brush through my hair. "Are you gonna go out with her?"

"I am. Tomorrow night, I hope."

"Take her to a great place to eat."

"I will."

"And to do something really special after." She leans over to place her chin on my shoulder. "Will you go out with me the next night?"

"Aw, Honey." I shift and silently invite her to sit on my lap. She does and I rub her back. "Where would you like to go?"

"Flying."

My smile wanes a bit and I stare at her, unable to utter a word.

She grins at me. "I giggle every time I see you on the news in that suit."

"Ah..."

"I know you wanted to tell me, but I just couldn't keep it in a second longer. I won't tell anybody else — ever. I just wanted you to know that I knew."

"Ah... how?" I finally manage.

She shrugs. "I just watched you. And I get to see you without your glasses." She crinkles her nose at me and I can't help but laugh.

I squeeze her sides and lean to rub my nose against hers. She stuns me when she presses her lips to mine in a quick kiss.

"Oh wow," I whisper. She grins wider and wraps her arms around my neck. I soak her in, allowing her to fill my heart and soul. It took a little girl to make a superman even more impressive.

I jump a bit when Lois walks up beside me. I'm standing against Carol's door frame, watching her sleep. Her party was a huge, huge success. All of her friends were glad to see her and each offered up a small gift of some sort. And they squealed when the animals were brought out. My little girl raved on and on about that part of the celebration.

"You did good tonight, Kent," Lois says as she rubs my arm.

"So did you," I let her know. She had fawned appropriately, marveled at the gifts when she was supposed to, and gave Carol the most beautiful locket I've ever seen. It had been her mother's and her grandmother's before her. The significance of that gesture was not lost one bit.

Lois looks at Carol, a teary smile on her face. "Clark..."

"I know," I say softly. I wrap my arm around her shoulder and turn her toward the stairs. My folks went out for a late date — which I find immanently romantic. I almost sigh when Lois leans into my side, hugging me in return. As we start down the stairs, I swing her up and float the rest of the way, causing her to giggle.

"Nice, Kent. Nice."

I sit her on the couch before easing down beside her. We both laugh softly.

When we calm, she tucks her hair behind her ear and looks at me. "Did Randi accept your differences?"

"She did. She encouraged me to become Superman."

"Very smart woman," she tells me, leaning forward on her

knees to look at me. And not just any look, but that look that tells me she knows I'm male.

"Very." I'm leaning forward, too, and I reach out, smoothing a finger over her hand.

She watches me touch her, then looks up at me. "I'm kinda' crushing on you right now," she tells me.

"Yeah." My smile slides from my face and I lean closer. She meets me halfway and the kiss is soft, sensual... incredible. I linger, just to taste her a bit more. When I draw back, I almost gasp. Her eyes have turned smoky and she looks... I kiss her again. When I draw back, she grins.

"Those things should be certified," she whispers. Her hand lifts to cup my face before she leans to kiss my nose.

I laugh softly as she rises to her feet. I can't believe how I feel right now. I've just kissed Lois. I've known her, worked with her for so long. To feel this way now... I rise and follow her to the door. After her coat is on, she turns to look at me.

"I can't see you guys early tomorrow. I have a meeting and then I have a proposal for a column to get together."

"I guess I'll have to survive with the company of a gorgeous little girl I know."

"Hey... I know what we can do on our date. We can finish shopping for Carol."

"You want to Christmas shop on our first date?"

"First?" she asks with a smirk. "Do you intend to ask me out again?"

"Maybe," I say, grinning wickedly at her. I'm about to see if she'll allow me to pull her closer when my hearing kicks in. I cock my head to the side to hear the call.

"What?" she asks me.

"Fire," I return. "A bad one." I lean to kiss her quickly. "Lock up on your way..." And I stop. Mom and Dad are out.

"Why aren't you going?"

"I can't leave Carol," I return.

She starts shrugging out of her coat. "You're not. Go!"

I want to argue, but the fire is really bad. I make a face.

"Thanks." I step back and spin, stopping again as Superman.

"That's cool," she tells me with a grin.

I kiss her quickly. "So is that." I leave her smiling when I zip out. I have to hurry.

I even manage to focus past the lingering effects of Lois' kisses.

When I drop on the balcony outside my room, I'm exhausted. Not so much physically, but emotionally. Two kids and an adult died tonight.

I open the door and step in, immediately invaded by the smell of Lois' perfume. She's lying on my bed, asleep. I stop to look at her and can't help the fleeting notion that she looks so good there.

I turn and hurry into the bathroom. I'm thinking things I shouldn't be... not at this stage in our relationship. Slow down... I just need to slow my thoughts way down. I shower, dress, and head back into my room. I lay down on the bed, on my side so I can look at the woman across from me. Her eyes open, full of concern.

"How do you do it?" she asks me. "You looked devastated when you carried out that baby."

She must have watched the news coverage. I want to say all kinds of things — that it comes with the territory and that I vent to my folks or to myself at times. I want to say it's life. Things happen. But all I manage is to blink back the tears that have filled my eyes. Lois moves her hand forward and she grasps mine.

"I have new respect for you," she whispers, then scoots forward to kiss my eyes. She pushes her arm under my head and pulls me to her chest, wrapping both arms around me. Her fingers move through the hair over my ear. For a second I'm motionless. But her warmth assails me and I pull myself even closer to her,

burying my face against her body. "You're not alone anymore," she tells me some time later and it was what I needed to hear. I start to cry softly and Lois squeezes tighter.

It's well over half an hour later before she moves her hand up on my cheek. "I have a feeling you've needed to do that for so long." I feel her lips on my forehead. "Did you even cry for Randi?"

"So many times," I whisper. My hands smooth up her back. I'm becoming aware that I'm lying in a woman's arms, my face pressed against her chest.

"You're a pretty special person, Clark Kent," she tells me.

"So are you," I say as I shift and lay her down to lean over her. I can't help but stare anew. She's so gorgeous. I lift my hand and trail my knuckles over her cheek. Her eyes flash and her hand moves up my side. I can't stop the pull a second longer. I lean to kiss her. Once, twice, then a third time. My hand cups her head as I open my mouth to deepen the touch. She moans and her tongue darts out to meet mine halfway. Before either of us realize it, we're lost in the moment. It's only when my hand moves down her arm and back up her side, on to her breast, that I stop. I glance down to where my large palm is covering her, then jump up quickly. "You need to leave," I tell her as I stand up. I almost reach out to grasp her hand to pull her up, but decide not to tempt fate.

"Clark?" she asks, clearly confused by my reaction.

"Just go," I practically bark.

She has sat up and her gaze is intense and confused as she sits there looking at me. "What? Did I do something wrong?" she wants to know.

"I can't do this. Just go."

"Can't do what?" She stands up to face me. "Clark, we don't have to do a thing. I was trying to give you a little comfort. I know you're hurting because those people died."

"And you gave me comfort. I just don't need anything else you have to offer."

She glares at me for a long moment. "Oh, I see. Clark, she's gone."

"What?" Her statement rattles me a bit.

"Randi's gone. Don't you think three years is long enough to keep yourself apart from other women?"

"I know Randi's gone. I know exactly how long it's been."

"Do you? I know how emotionally dead you've been. I've been exactly like that."

"So the answer's to jump in the sack together?"

"Maybe it is," she nearly shouts at me. "Is there a right or wrong answer here, Clark? You loved your wife. You lost her. And you're still alive. You're also still very male."

"I know that," I shout back. "I just don't believe I have to jump in the sack with you to prove it."

"Hello, you're the one who touched me!"

"I know!" I stand there, staring at her, breathing heavily because I want to touch her again. I want to touch her completely. That scares me. I feel like wanting to do that is betraying Randi's memory. I feel like wanting to do that is contradicting everything I told the social workers about Carol. I feel like wanting to do that would finish closing that gaping hole in my heart. I shove my hand through my hair and look away.

Lois moves closer, reaches out to lay her hands on my chest.

"Lois..." I whine. Does she know what she's going to me?

She doesn't say a word, just leans forward and kisses my neck, close to my ear. "Goodnight, Superman."

She leaves me there, so confused over how I feel. I miss my wife and part of me wants to remain faithful to her for the rest of my life. But another part — a huge part — is so aroused right now I can barely think. My body is more than willing to make love to Lois. And my head knows that if she would have pushed just a bit...

I sigh and drop to the bed, lying down to stare up at the ceiling. What has Lois done to me? Or is it just the natural progression of life? Is this the way it was meant to be?

Nearly an hour later, with no more answers than I had to begin with, I roll over and dial her number.

“Hello?”

“I just wanted to make sure you made it home all right,” I tell her. How lame is that?

“I made it home all right,” she returns.

“Lois...” I sigh. “It’s not just... I have Carol now. I don’t want her to see me in bed with a woman I’m not married to.”

“Yeah. She’s been through enough.”

“I still want to go out tomorrow night.”

“Tonight now.” It’s nearly one in the morning. “Just for the record, the last few days with you... Carol’s special. Being with her is incredible. I feel overwhelmed that you’re allowing me that. But with you... Clark, I haven’t felt like this in so long.”

“I know. I feel the same way.”

“I have had this secret little thing for you... probably since you first came to the Planet.” She laughs softly. “Even when everybody was fawning over Superman, you were so much sexier.”

She laughs again and I can’t help but chuckle. “You’re sexier than Superman, too,” I say.

“See? That’s what I like about you. You can say the best things exactly when I need to hear them. You’ve done it so many times since we’ve known each other.”

I’ve had no idea I’ve touched her like that.

“And tonight... stopping like that... you became a thousand times sexier.”

“Lois,” I whine. I sigh and lay on my back. “My body didn’t want to stop,” I confess.

“I would have made love with you in a heartbeat,” she tells me.

God... why did she have to say that? I sit up, throw my legs over the side of the bed. “Please stop,” I say softly. “I can fly... fast.”

She laughs. “Go take a cold shower.”

“I think I’ll go swim... in the Arctic.”

She laughs again. “Tell Carol hi for me in the morning.”

“I will.”

“Dream about me.”

“Ah, damn,” I groan. She laughs again before the phone clicks off. I sit there staring at my own phone for a long while after I close it. My parents are home now. I could be at Lois’ in two seconds. I could be inside...

I toss my phone aside and crawl into bed. What in God’s name is wrong with me? Just thinking of having sex with Lois gets me so excited I can hardly breathe. And to know she would do it... At the same time, I feel like it’s wrong, that it’s dirty in some way. Randi’s only been dead...

I roll over to look at the photo that still graces my nightstand. “Is this really what you want?” She had told me so many times. She made me promise to love again. To marry again. To live again. I smile sadly up at the image before I shift and stand up. I lift the picture frame and walk over to the dresser. There are some pictures lying on the surface — some my mother has taken since she’s been here. I replace the photo of Randi in the frame with one of me and Carol. I smile at the image of Randi before tucking it into a drawer. I replace the frame by my bed. There’s enough room for another frame... Maybe I’ll put a picture of another lady there soon.

Carol doesn’t wake me the following morning. Lois does. She calls before dawn.

“Hi,” I tell her with a slow smile.

“Hey. I don’t have long, but I had something to tell you.”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“I’m still crushing on you.”

I laugh and sit up. “I think maybe I’m crushing on you, too.” It sounds like a balloon deflating. Had she been worried about how I feel?

“Anyway, I thought it would be awkward for us to see each other. You know, after having known each other for so long. But it feels so natural, like we’re supposed to do this. So, okay. I have this meeting. Tell Carol I miss her. I’ll be ready at seven.”

“I’ll be early,” I say.

“You better. Later.”

“Later.” And she was gone. That woman is a whirlwind, I decide as I head into the bathroom. I make my way downstairs and when I step into the kitchen, Carol yells at me.

“No! You’re not supposed to be in here.” She runs over to me, ushering me back out. “You ruined it.”

I look down at her, then kneel. Her eyes are filled with tears. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

“I was going to surprise you with breakfast in bed,” she whines. Mom had been beside her and they were cooking up a storm.

“Oh, baby.” I lift her face. “It’s okay. I’ll go back to bed.”

“It’s too late now,” she lets me know, her bottom lip protruding in a pout.

“Carol, this was a very nice surprise. I love it.” She looks up at me.

“Really?”

“It’s the best pre-Christmas gift I’ve ever received.”

Slowly she smiles. “Will you still go back to bed?”

“I will.” I stand and hurry up the stairs. Half an hour later, I gush over the wonderful breakfast Dad helps Carol bring in. I ask her to share it with me, and we spend the first part of the morning tucked away in my room. After I set the tray aside, I look up at Carol. She looks even more like Lois today.

“Carol, do you like Lois?”

“I love Lois. Is that okay? That I love her so quickly?”

“That’s perfectly okay,” I return with a smile. “Is it okay that I might... be falling in love with her, too?” And I am. Despite everything, I’m falling for Lois Lane.

“Oh wow! That would be so great. Would that mean she’d be around a lot?”

“I hope so. I want her here all the time.” And I realize I mean that. I want her... completely.

“This is the best Christmas ever,” Carol says with tear filled eyes. She throws her arms around me for a big hug before leaning back again. “Does she know you’re Superman?”

“She does.”

“And she’s okay with that?”

“She is.”

“And me? She likes me, too?”

“No, Honey,” I say softly and reach up to cup her face. “She loves you.”

Carol grins again before hopping up. “Come on. We have to go get her a special Christmas gift,” she tells me. A little while later, we are out the door. I guess my little girl likes this new situation. Why can’t adults adapt so easily?

Just as promised, I’m early picking Lois up. She opens the door and my breath leaves me in a rush. I had called to tell her tonight was casual and to dress warmly. She’s wearing jeans. Lois Lane is wearing jeans!

And a turtleneck sweater that outlines every curve. God, help me, I’m at complete attention now.

“Wow,” I breathe. I’ve seen her in business suits, casual slacks, and even an evening gown. But I’ve never seen her look as good as she does right now.

“And I have a matching coat,” she tells me, stepping aside to

grab a leather coat much like the one I'm wearing.

I smile and extend the rose I'm holding. Red — I didn't want a second's confusion of what tonight was.

"Nice, Kent," she tells me as she takes the rose. She decides to hang on to it as she locks up. I bend my arm and my heart does a little skip when she takes hold. "How's Carol?"

"You tell me. You two talked for two hours this afternoon."

"And? We had stuff to say," she tells me.

"Lois, I can't be more thrilled with your relationship with her," I let her know. I lead her toward the roof. We're flying tonight. That should be special enough.

And it is... so incredibly special. She wraps her arms around me loosely, but holds tight when we take off. And she keeps looking at me, as if she would like to bite me. By the time dinner is over, I'm so turned on I can hardly breathe. Tonight it feels electrifying instead of wrong. By no means did I set out to end up in bed with her tonight, but God help me, I absolutely want to.

The last part of the date is on the roof of a building in the Slums. It's one of the tallest on this side of the city, our height giving us an amazing view. I've set this up in advance. There's a small table for two, complete with champagne or coffee — whatever she prefers. There's chocolate covered strawberries and I've cleared away some of the snow, to give us a place to dance. I've hung Christmas lights and even have a small tree.

"Oh wow," Lois says as she sees everything.

"I thought you might like the view." And it's breathtaking. You can see all of the twinkling displays of the season, especially the park.

"I love the view," she says and when I turn, she's looking at me. I gasp at the look in her eyes, but recover just in time to take her in my arms. She kisses me, softly and sensually. Her hands move into my hair and she deepens the encounter. The music's already on and she draws back to smile at me. We begin to sway, staring into each other's eyes. I don't try to stop her when she removes my glasses. She tucks them into her bag, then lays it aside before moving her hands up to grasp my neck.

"This isn't dancing," I tell her and slowly lift off the roof. "This is."

"Very nice, Smallville," she whispers before pressing her lips back to mine. When her tongue slides into my mouth again, I'm lost.

"I don't want to leave," I say as I nibble her neck. We're standing in Lois' doorway. We danced and kissed for over two hours on the roof. If it hadn't been so cold...

Her hand cups the back of my head. "Don't," she whispers.

And it's all the prompting I need. I urge her inside and close the door. Without pulling my lips from her neck, I grasp her sides and float us to her room. My lips are covering hers the second I lay her down. She moans and pulls me closer. She's so incredible — so sexy. I can't believe how excited I am.

A very short time later, we are standing beside Lois' bed, holding one another, both breathing heavily as we look at each other. The kisses and touches have been amazing. Right now though, I want more — need more.

I lift my hand to caress her face, her head. "You are so beautiful," I tell her.

"So are you," she returns and causes my eyes to roll back in my head when she moves her hands over my chest. She's the first person who's touched me intimately since Randi, only the second ever. I had felt sure, especially with all my confusing feelings, that I would want to bolt at this moment. Right now though, my late wife is not on my mind. This woman is.

And her eyes... she has the most expressive eyes.

"Clark..." she breathes before leaning to kiss my neck.

I pull her closer and she comes into my arms easily enough, wrapping her arms around my neck. "God... we have to stop," I

pant as she nibbles my ear.

"No, we don't," she tells me as she continues her trek over my neck to the other ear.

"We do. I don't have... protection." I hiss through my teeth. She's as excited as I am.

"I do," she informs me before capturing my lips with hers.

I stumble forward, reach out to place a hand on the wall. After a few moments of kissing her deeply, I lift her and move back to her bed.

I can feel her tremble; she's as nervous as I am, too. I lift my hand to trail my fingers over her cheek and she smiles at me. I smile back. I can't believe I'm here, about to make love with Lois Lane. Does it get any better than this?

Oh, it gets much, much better.

Much, much later I lift my head to look at her. She has never been so beautiful. "I can't believe you're allowing me this privilege," I say softly.

"I love you," she whispers.

My heart nearly stops and I stare at her. Her bright eyes looking back at me and in that second, my entire life spirals into a shaft of light — so bright I have to blink out the tears stinging my eyes. My lips claim hers and I can hear Randi's voice — approving of this relationship. I touch her. I kiss her. I nibble and suck. I pull her as close as I can get trying desperately to impart how much this means to me.

Two and half glorious hours later, I turn my head to look at her. She is so happy, smiling at me and I can't help but chuckle. When I calm, she lifts my hand to place a kiss in the palm.

"Clark, will you marry me?"

The smile slides from my face and I blink, then blink again. My mind is whirling with thoughts — too many even for me.

Then suddenly it all stops. Absolute clarity washes over me. I pull her hand up, kiss her fingers, then roll so I can kiss her softly, then pull her closer. "Yes," I whisper in her ear.

I feel the electricity race through her as she grins devilishly at me. "Help, Superman."

I laugh softly and tickle her side just to hear her laugh.

And she does. I love that sound.

Before I know what's happened, I'm laughing. I realize that her fingers moving over my sides actually tickle. That's never happened before.

She finally draws back and smiles at me. I can't help but laugh.

"Proud of yourself?" I ask her.

"So proud," she returns before kissing me softly. "Mmm," she moans. "Good stuff."

"Very good." I lift my hand and push her hair behind her ear.

Her fingers move over my skin. "I'm going to have so much fun having sex with you," she tells me with a grin.

"And I'm going to have so much fun making love with you," I tell her. I kiss her, pouring my heart into it. I can't believe I've just made love to Lois Lane. I can't believe I said I'd marry her.

And I'm right where I want to be.

"We have to hurry," Lois says as she throws back the covers. She woke me in the most incredible way this morning. Now she's about to show me that a petite brunette can completely control Superman. "Carol's gonna be up and you won't be there," she as she kisses my neck.

I absolutely don't want Carol to wake up with me gone, but I just can't help myself. Lois is so gorgeous. Our sex life is going to be incredible.

A short time later she kisses me, deeply and quickly, before drawing completely away. "Let's get a quick shower."

I can't help but chuckle as I follow her into the bathroom.

This situation is so surreal, I have to keep touching her to prove it's happening. She doesn't seem to mind though. We step under

the warm spray and my eyes roam the gorgeous body before me. I must look like a boy, gawking at my first lover. Lois is smaller than Randi was, but more toned, with such flawless assets I almost look to see if she's real.

Almost.

"What?" she asks as she looks up at me after wetting her hair.

"Nothing," I say and grasp her hips to tug her closer. "I'm just soaking up the moment."

She smiles and wraps her arms around my neck. After a long, sensuous kiss, she pushes me back and tosses me the shower gel. "Wash my back."

"Gladly," I say and lather up the sponge. Naked, dry Lois was incredible, but naked, wet Lois... That sight makes me so glad I'm a man. "You have a nice... package," I tell her and glide my soapy hand over her shoulder.

"Thank you," she says, then whirls. "Let me see yours," she tells me.

I chuckle, but turn around. I believe at this point I would grant her any wish she asked of me.

"Very, very nice," she says and uses both hands to wash my back. "But we have to hurry," she reminds me.

I chuckle and become a blur. When I stop, we're both standing on the mat, completely clean and dry.

"Show off," she tells me and heads for the bedroom.

We dress quickly, then fly toward my place. The sun is just beginning to rise as we step through the back door. My mom looks up from the table and Lois bursts out laughing.

"Busted," she whispers.

I blush furiously as she tugs me toward the table. I haven't been caught sneaking in since I was sixteen.

"You two have fun?" Mom asks, that knowing little smirk on her lips.

"We had a fantastic time," Lois tells her, pushing me to sit down, then plops herself on my lap. "Clark showed me the lights from the top of a building in the Slums and we danced and flew up close to the stars and..."

I reach up and cover her mouth with my hand. "Why don't you just tell her everything we did?"

She takes my hand down. "Oh," she says and looks straight at my mother. "He spent the night at my place because we were so worked up..."

"LOIS!" I yelp, my face on fire from embarrassment.

Mom laughs out loud as she looks at us. She lays her paper aside, leaning closer with a wide grin. "It's about time."

My head snaps around and I stare at my mother. "What?"

"Oh, honey, from the day you went to work at the Planet, I knew this woman would change your life. And the first time I met her... The fire practically raged beneath the surface for both of you."

"I've been in love with your son for so long," Lois confesses.

"I know. And I can't tell you how glad I am you waited for him."

Lois looks at me, a sappy smile on her face. "I didn't have a choice. He had my heart."

"Lois," I whisper and pull her closer.

With a sigh, Lois focuses on Mom. "I asked him to marry me."

"Oh, Honey," Mom gasps. "Please tell me he said yes."

"He did," Lois confirms and lifts my hand to kiss my knuckles. "But I have to tell you something." Her eyes go up to Mom's. "Well, two things. First, I know he's Superman."

"Of course you do." She pats Lois' hand. "I would have kicked his butt if he had made love to you without you knowing."

"I knew before last night," Lois lets her know.

"I know."

Lois smiles at her. "And... I'm Carol's biological mother."

The door to the kitchen bursts open and two surprised eyes

stare at us. I close my eyes for a brief second. I had wanted her to know, but not hear it like this.

"What?" Carol demands.

"Oh, Honey. I didn't want you to hear like this," Lois tells her as she falls to her knees before the girl.

"You... gave me up?" Her lip is trembling and her eyes are full.

"I didn't want to, but I was young and alone and so very wrong," Lois gasps through tears of her own.

"You wanted me?"

"I wanted you then. I've wanted you every single day since. I want you now."

"Is that why you're marrying my daddy?" the child asks. She's too smart for her own good.

"Carol, no. I'm marrying Clark because I'm in love with him. To be able to be with you, too — that's a special gift."

Carol stares at her for a long moment before she looks up at me. "Were you going to tell me?"

"I was going to tell you," I assure her.

"Is that why you adopted me? You knew who Lois was?"

I shake my head. "No, Carol. I had no idea until Lois told me. I adopted you because I wanted you. I had no idea Lois and I would be together now. Or ever."

She nods and stares at Lois again. "What about my other daddy?"

"He's dead," Lois tells her softly. "He was sick and eventually lost his battle to live."

"Did you love him?"

"A long time ago, yes. But it wasn't the kind of love that creates a long, happy life together. It was young love, blissful and quick."

Carol stands there for a long moment again, just staring at Lois. "Did he have family?"

"His father is alive, but he's a very difficult man."

"And your parents?"

"My mom's gone, but my father lives here in the city. He doesn't know about you."

"You never told him about me?"

"No. When I found out I was pregnant, I went to stay with my aunt. He never knew I'd had you." Lois wipes her cheek. The tears keep spilling over.

Carol looks up at Mom. "Do you think I can trust her now?"

I can't help but smile. Carol has bonded with my folks completely — especially my mom. If Mom trusts Lois, Carol will.

Mom turns toward her and smiles. "Carol, Honey, I have loved Lois since before I met her. After, I absolutely adored her. I've thought she was meant for Clark from the second I heard about her. But I don't want you to trust her because I do. You have to like her for you."

"I do like her. I told Clark that I think I love her already, but that was before." Carol walks over to slump against my mother. "I'm mad at her, but at the same time..."

"I know, Honey," Mom croons as she cradles her head. "It's okay to be angry with her and love her all at once."

"Absolutely okay," Lois says through more tears. I reach out to squeeze her shoulder.

Carol leans up to look at me. "What do you think?"

"I think I was stunned when she told me. And I was so thrilled for you. I was angry for you, too. You had to have hurt so much, being rejected like that. But now..." I look at Lois. "Carol, Lois loves you. She's not asking for anything other than for you to be her friend. I want to ask you to accept her as my future wife because we *are* going to be married."

"Do I have to call you Mom?"

"You can call me anything you want to," Lois lets her know.

Carol nods. "I think I need to be alone."

I want to follow her so badly, but she needs this. She needs to be alone so she can find acceptance — for Lois as her mother and for Lois as her future mother.

Lois stands up, gives me a sad glance, then hurries through the door. I jump up and go after her.

“Lois...” I catch her at the front door. “She’s hurting, too,” I tell her, wrapping my arms around her.

“Because of me... again,” she whines.

“No, no, no...” I nuzzle her neck. “She’s a child. And she’s incredible. She’ll come to terms with this.”

“How could I have ever hurt her the way I have?”

I turn her to face me, lifting my hand to cup her cheek. “You gave her life when her father wanted to end it. She’s alive and beautiful because of you. She’s here with me — she’s changed me because of you. We’re getting married... because of you.”

She lifts full eyes to me. “I was going to ask you out anyway,” she says.

I laugh softly and lean to kiss her left eye. “I would have said yes, too.”

She laughs and wraps her arms around me. “Yeah. You know I can kick your super butt.”

I laugh again, and swing her up into my arms. I float us over to sit on the couch and lean in to nibble her neck. “So...” I sit up to look at her. “When do you want to get married?”

“Being as we can’t have sex in the house with Carol until we do, the sooner, the better.”

“Mmmm...” I smooth my hand up her leg, to her hip. “I guess we better. Mom and Dad will go home soon and we won’t be able to spend the night at your place either.”

“Is tomorrow too soon?” she asks.

I chuckle and kiss her cheek. It still feels like a dream. To be here with Lois, like this... To be with any woman like this again.

“A Christmas Eve wedding sounds divine.”

We both look up to see Mom standing there grinning at us. I can also see the twinkle in her eyes. She thinks Lois is serious.

“She wasn’t serious, Mom,” I tell her.

“Actually, I was,” Lois tells me.

“Lois, we can’t get married tomorrow.”

“Why not? If we go apply for the license this morning, it will be ready tomorrow morning. And county offices will be open until twelve tomorrow.”

“But...”

“But what? I asked, you said yes. Why wait? Life is so short, Clark.” She grasps my hand. “If you had known you would have so little time with Randi...”

“Don’t do that,” I tell her. “Randi’s gone. This is about us.”

“And if Randi was still alive, it wouldn’t be. Clark, Randi was your past, a very important part of your past. She was your world and you would have done anything you could to have kept her a little longer. I’m just asking you to give me that time now. Haven’t you wasted enough time sulking and grieving? It’s time to be happy.”

“Lois is right, son.” Mom has sat down on the other side of me. “Go get the license. Get married and spend the rest of your life figuring out if you should have waited. In the meantime, cherish every second.”

I look at her for a long moment before I sigh and turn to look at Lois. Carol is standing at the bottom of the stairs and my eyes move to hers.

“Can I go with you to get the license?” she asks.

“Is that okay with you? That we marry so soon?” I want to know.

Carol moves closer, standing on the other side of the coffee table. “I’ve never had a real family. If you get married tomorrow, this will be the best Christmas of my life.”

I smile and look at Lois. Her eyes are dancing, her expression is begging me to say yes. “Don’t you want a big ceremony?”

“I want you,” Lois tells me. “We can renew our vows in a few years and have a huge ceremony. Let’s just vow to take care of each other.” She looks at Carol. “And Carol.”

“Do I have to wear a dress?” Carol wants to know.

We all laugh and I hold out my hand. When Carol takes it, I lift her up over the coffee table, and sit her on my lap. “You’re okay with this?”

She’s laid her head against my chest and she’s looking at Lois. “I’m okay with this.” She reaches down to smooth her fingers over Lois’ knuckles where her hand is holding my arm. Lois lays her head on my arm, her face just inches from Carol’s. “Will you leave me again?” my little girl whispers.

“Never,” Lois whispers back. She lifts her hand to cup Carol’s face.

“What if you and Clark don’t stay together?” she wants to know.

“Carol, the only way Clark and I will separate is in death.”

I wrap my arm around Lois and pull her close. I hope that eventuality comes many, many years from now.

“He and I might have huge disagreements,” Lois continues. “But we will not separate. I don’t believe in divorce.”

“He might be busy a lot,” Carol tells her.

“Then I’m glad I’ll have you to keep me company.”

Carol stares at her for a long time before she lifts her head to look at me. “I’m hungry.”

I laugh softly. “Me, too.”

Mom, who’s been quiet until now, stands up. “Want to help your Nana cook?” she asks Carol.

“Yes,” she answers and stands up. She looks back at me and Lois, who is sitting up slowly. “Don’t leave me when you go to get that license.”

“Not a chance,” I return. She heads off with Mom and I lift Lois’ hand to kiss the back. “Lois, do you really want to get married tomorrow?”

“I really do,” she answers.

I rub her fingers with my thumb. “I don’t even have a ring for you.”

“We can go find something when we leave county offices.” She looks at me. “I want you to wear a ring.”

“I want to wear one,” I assure her. “I’ll have to take it off when I’m Superman...”

“I know.” She lifts my hand to smooth her finger around my ring finger. “I noticed you took your other one off recently.”

“When I decided to adopt Carol,” I clarified. “I was holding on... to anything in hopes of it giving me some kind of peace.” My eyes meet hers. “I’ll always love Randi.”

“I’ll always love Danny,” she counters.

I nod. “I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to have more children... that is if you might want them. Randi and I were trying... tried for a while.” I shrug. “I’m... different, so I just don’t know.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for that right now, but maybe one day. And if we do, we do. If not...” She glances at the dining room door. “We have Carol.”

“There was a couple of times I thought maybe I’d lost my mind wanting to adopt a little girl. Then I thought, why not? I can love her as well as I could a boy. I knew there would be challenges — some things I wouldn’t know how to help her with. I would have figured it out.” I squeeze her. “I have to say though, I’m glad to share her.”

“Will this affect your adoption?”

“Why don’t we stop by and see Ms. Carson after filing for the marriage license?”

“Maybe we should keep the fact that I’m her biological mother to ourselves... until everything’s final.”

“Yeah.” I lift her hand to kiss her fingers again. “I have a confession.” She looks at me with a serious expression. “This all

feels so... surreal to me.”

“Clark, I have wanted this my entire life — my prince charming. And I have wanted you since nearly the first time I saw you. It does feel unreal, but it also feels so wonderful.” She smiles at me.

I lean to kiss her. With each one, I can feel Randi pushing me closer. She would have liked Lois, even when she was in full Mad Dog mode. I draw Lois to my chest for a warm hug. I’m looking forward to those the most. Randi and I were close, very physical with one another, but not nearly as much as we should have been. We were often in a hurry, too busy to stop and share a hug or kiss. Then we tried to make up for not sharing the closeness sooner. She was gone all too soon.

But I won’t waste time with Lois. I’ll show her every day how I feel. I’ll touch her often, kiss her deeply, and hug her close. And I will not go to bed angry at her. I won’t have a single regret.

I laugh as I hold Carol’s hand. She’s walking on a short wall surrounding the atrium at the mall. She went along with me and Lois this morning to apply for our marriage license — we pick it up at ten tomorrow. Ms. Carson was thrilled for me and said she saw no problem with the adoption going through. She had already done a brief background on Lois and was as impressed with her as she was with me. Of course, Mrs. Johns would be back out for another home visit. I just hope Lois is in a good mood that day — so she won’t choke the woman.

We hit a few shops downtown and chose matching wedding bands. Lois asked me not to buy her an engagement ring. She wants me to spend the money on Carol. We all went to meet Sam, Lois’ father. He was utterly stunned when Lois told him who Carol really was. Then he cried and reached out with shaking hands to touch the child. Another friendship was formed. Sam is going to attend our small wedding tomorrow.

I took my daughter out for our promised ‘date’. We had dinner at a Chinese place I like before venturing to the mall. She insisted I had to buy Lois something even more special than the earrings we had already bought her. Maybe she’s right.

“Hey, Clark, do you think Santa will remember all my friends?”

“I know he will, Honey.” I’ve made sure he will. All of the sixteen kids currently living at the Center will get a brand new toy, a new outfit, a coat, and a pair of shoes Christmas morning. Sometimes it’s really good being Superman.

“Well...” She reaches the end of the wall and jumps down. “His trip will be shorter because he doesn’t have to stop at our house.”

“What?” I ask her.

She turns to look up at me, shaking the hand she’s still holding. “He’s already come to see me. He brought me a brand new daddy and grandparents and my mom. I don’t want anything else.”

I grin at her. “Maybe just a little something?” I ask her.

“Well...” She tugs me to walk with her. “Maybe I could... crawl in bed with you on Christmas morning.”

“You can,” I tell her.

“But Lois will be there.”

“I’m sure she’ll scoot over.” I reach down and lift her up, holding her as I walk. “I know you’re too big to be carried, but I’d like to.”

She wraps her arms around my neck. “I like it.”

We walk along in silence for a while before she lifts her hand to catch the snow that’s starting to fall. “Beautiful, huh?” I ask her.

“Very,” she tells me. “Could we go home now? I want to see Lois.”

“She might be at her place. She said something about packing some of her things.”

“Could we call?”

“Sure.” I dig into my pocket with my free hand and take out my phone. “It’s two on speed dial.”

She takes the phone. “Who’s number one?”

“My mom,” I tell her.

“Good choice.” She puts the phone to her ear and listens. Her eyes light up when Lois answers. “Lois?”

“Carol! How’s your date with Daddy?” I can’t help but listen. Lois sounds so thrilled to speak with Carol.

“Good. But I want to see you now.”

“I’m at your house.”

“Okay. We’ll be there soon.”

“I’ll make hot chocolate.”

“Bye, Lois.”

“Bye, Baby.”

Carol closes the phone and grins at me. “She called me baby.”

“I know. I heard.” I feel so good for her — to have so much after having so little... kinda’ the way I feel. We hurry home. By the time we get there, the snow is really coming down. Mom rushes to us with towels when we step into the house. We shake our coats out before hanging them up. I pull out the new gift for Lois and take it to the tree. I notice there are quite a few more gifts under the tree than before we left. But I don’t ask about them.

Carol rushes into the kitchen to see Lois — Mom told her that’s where to find the other woman. They come back a few minutes later with hot chocolate. We all sit down to watch a movie together, but end up playing a game instead. I learn that Carol is exactly like Lois — competitive as hell. The game comes down to a showdown between the two. It’s so cute to see them together.

I read the bedtime story and tuck my little girl in. She allows Lois to say goodnight, too. And Lois cries softly when Carol tells her she’s glad to have found her. Mom and Dad head up to bed, leaving Lois and I to talk. She informs me that she’s taken a few vacation days, for us to have a short honeymoon. Perry knows we’ll be married tomorrow, and so does Jimmy and Jack. They were all stunned, but very pleased with the news.

It’s nearly midnight before Lois stands up to go home. Tonight I fly her to her place. She has indeed packed a few things — the boxes along the wall are testament to that. We make plans for breakfast tomorrow. We’ll pick up the license at ten, and we plan to say our vows at seven. The most impressive Christmas Eve I’ve ever had.

I lift my lips from hers. I’ve backed her against the apartment door and kissed her senseless. Now that I’ve had a taste, I can’t get enough.

“Last night alone,” she tells me.

“Last night,” I repeat and kiss her again. She tastes so good. “Carol wants to crawl in bed with us Christmas morning.”

“Oh, yes. That would be so incredible,” Lois says and grasps my shirt, tugging me close so she can kiss me hard. When she draws away, she shoves me backward. “Go... before I lay you down.”

I chuckle and step toward the door she’s opened for me. “I’ll miss you,” I let her know.

“I’ll miss you,” she returns.

I look at her for a long moment before I hurry down the hall. Funny how quickly life changes. Just a short time ago I was lonely and depressed. Now I have a beautiful daughter and after tomorrow, I’ll have a gorgeous wife. Life really is surprising... and wonderful.

Christmas Eve on the farm was always a special time. Mom would get up and bake the morning away. We would pack up some of her creations in small gift bags before going out to

deliver them to neighbors that were shut in because of illness. Dad would make toys between Thanksgiving and Christmas to distribute to kids of families less fortunate than us. The looks on the faces of those we blessed was always incredible. I felt sure this year would be different. How wrong was I?

I wake up when the bed dips. My eyes light on Carol as she climbs up beside me. She nudges me and I lift the cover for her to crawl in. She snuggles close, a large grin on her face. I tuck her head against my chest and smile. Life doesn't get much better, does it?

"Clark?"

"Yeah, Baby?"

"I love you."

"Aw, Honey, I love you, too." I kiss her head.

"Nana's baking like crazy."

I chuckle. "She does that on Christmas Eve." Although I'm not exactly sure who she'll give her treats to this year.

"Papa has like a million toys in the dining room. I'm gonna help him wrap them."

"Then we better get up and get started," I suggest, but I don't move. I snuggle closer.

"What was Randi like?"

I lean back enough to look down at her face. "She was smart, energetic... adventurous. She worked hard, loved harder."

"She was very pretty."

"She was," I agree.

"My mom is pretty, too."

"Your mom is very pretty," I add.

"Are you excited about marrying her?"

"I am." I lift her hand to look at her fingers. "There was a time I thought I would never be able to care for a woman again. Lois took me by surprise."

"Good surprise?"

"The best." I press a finger to her nose. "Kinda' like you." She grins and I lean to kiss her forehead. "Are you sure you're okay with me marrying Lois?"

"More than okay. When I go back to school after the holidays and the teacher asks what we got for Christmas, I get to say a forever family — with a daddy and a mama. And three new grandparents."

I smile and hug her close. "I get to say I got a forever family, too, with a beautiful new wife and a sensational daughter."

We snuggle for a long while before Carol hops up. "Time to help Nana and Papa," she declares.

I chuckle and slowly sit up. "I'll be down in a few."

"Okay," she yells as she runs down the hallway. It feels so good to hear footsteps in the house. How good would it feel to hear more?

I sigh at that thought. Will Lois and I be able to have more children? I can't help it. I find myself wanting more... with her. Why is she marrying me?

Why am I marrying her? That one's simple. I'm tired of being alone. Being married to Randi taught me something — that I'm well suited for being a husband. I'm better with someone than without, and I like it that way. I like the idea of having someone at home to care for, come home to. I like knowing that at night I will climb into bed with a woman who loves me and wants me. That's what it truly boils down to. Because of my differences, I need to be wanted. Wanted as Superman is one thing, but being wanted as a man — just an ordinary man — that's something else.

Just as I finish up in the bathroom, I hear a call for help. I yell down that I'll be right back before zipping out. It only takes a second to take care of the robbery. I decide to grab some pastries, and flowers, before heading home. Deciding to stop off and see Lois for a second, I scan her apartment from the air. It's empty and I can't stop the disappointment that washes over me. Then I

perk up when I think she might have gone to my place. I land in the back yard a second later and enter the kitchen still dressed as Superman. Lois is there, helping Mom and Carol with her treat bags. They all look up at me.

"Did someone call for help?" Lois asks with a grin on her face.

I chuckle softly as I step closer. "Good morning," I say and extend a rose to her.

She smiles at me, then looks at the flower. "Very good morning," she says as she takes the offering. Her eyes are bright, shimmery, and I can't help but reach out to grasp her arm. I hesitate a second before leaning forward to kiss her cheek. She's grinning wider when I draw back. "Very good," she says again.

I smile and turn to give Carol a rose. She inhales sharply.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." I move over to offer my final gift to my mom and to give her the bag of pastries.

"Mom, who are you taking all these treats to?" I ask as I steal a hot cookie.

She swats my hand. "We're taking some to the Center, more to the shelter, and the rest to the Christmas party at the Planet."

"I'd forgotten about the party," I say.

"I hear you have a hot date," Lois comments and winks at Carol.

She's in a playful mood today. Must have something to do with the fact that she's getting married.

"I do," I return. "She's so hot, I think I'll bring her home and make her my wife."

Lois snorts at me. "Make her your wife? You must think this woman is sweet on you or something."

"Must be the or something," I say as I move closer. "Maybe she likes the way I dance." I place my hands on her hips from behind and lean to lay my chin on her shoulder. "Or maybe she just likes the fact that I fly."

"Oh, that would be a plus for you," she tells me.

I laugh softly and kiss her neck before I move away. I lean to kiss Carol's cheek. "Maybe she's crazy about my daughter." I grin back at Lois.

"She's definitely crazy about your daughter." Lois shares a gaze with Carol and I feel warmth all the way to my heart. These two are going to be so good together.

Dad pushes through the kitchen door. "Clark, come give me a hand with the wrapping."

"You mean come wrap them at super speed," I say with a wink.

"Now, would I use my son like that?" He looks positively shocked and I laugh.

"Not a bit," I tell him.

"But I thought I was helping you, Papa?" Carol wants to know.

"You are. I have wrapping to do for your Nana and your mama and your daddy."

"Okay," Carol says with a wide smile.

I love family, I decide as I head out to the dining room. Dad has small gifts spread all over the table. Some are his homemade toys, others are store bought. "Where did you get all of this?" I ask him.

"Mr. Stern made a donation in the names of his star reporters." Dad claps my shoulder. "See how your life affects others?"

"Wow," I can't help but say. "I did this?"

"You and your future wife. See what a great team you two are going to make?"

"We are, huh?" I ask with a smile.

"An incredible team." Dad moves around to grab some wrapping paper.

"Dad, what if she and I can't have children?"

“Clark, Lois knows what she’s doing. Just trust that.”

I nod and reach for the paper. I become a blur and when I stop, one hundred fifty toys are wrapped, and marked if they are for a boy or girl.

“I’ll never get used to that,” Dad tells me and starts to pack the gifts in one of his ‘Santa’ bags.

I smile and head into the living room. I need to make a couple of calls for arrangements for tonight. I change first, then take care of my business. By the time I’m done, Carol has moved into the office with Dad to wrap gifts. They’ve closed the door, but I can hear Dad telling her stories of my childhood and her laughing. Mom and Lois are sharing coffee and some girl talk that I butt out of quickly. I decide to go upstairs to make some room in the closet for some of Lois’ things. When I step into the bedroom, I sigh. There are two suitcases at the foot of the bed. She’s hung a few things in the closet, including something in a bag. I wonder if that’s what she’ll wear tonight.

In a few short hours, I’ll share my home, my room, my life with another woman. It took me months to pack up Randi’s things. And the decision was finally made for me. Mom came to my place and started putting it all in boxes. I yelled at my mother that day. She scolded me to no end.

I smile. Mom is the only person I know that has never been scared of me, not even for a second. Even Randi had flinched during an argument once. I look at the pictures of my dead wife. There’s five total in my room — three of her alone and two us together. I walk over and lift one.

“I hear you,” I tell her image. I gaze at her for a few more seconds before gathering up the frames. I’ll put the pictures in an album. This is going to be Lois’ house soon, and she doesn’t deserve sharing it with my dead wife.

“I would like to keep one of her in the living room and the one in the hallway.”

I turn to see Lois standing against the door frame watching me. She is definitely the only person in the world that can sneak up on me. I look down at the frames in my hands.

“I just didn’t think you should have to share your home with her memory.”

“Clark, as long as you breathe, I’ll share my home with her memory. And that’s okay.” She walks over to me. “She’s helped shape you into a great person. And I love that great person.”

I look at her and smile. “Why did I never notice what a great person you are?”

“I hid it behind scorn and depression.”

“I’m glad you’re letting the real you out now.”

“Me, too.” She lifts her hand to cup my face.

I close my eyes and lean into her touch. It feels so good to be touched like that again. I sigh when Lois places her lips next to mine. It’s those little kisses, like this one, that make a man feel alive. I lift my free hand to pull her close. I can’t wait to marry this woman.

Carol had a big time at the Center passing out the toys. And the kids all loved seeing her again, even though they had just spent time together over the weekend at her party. They all met Lois, after Carol introduced her as her new mom. Lois absolutely beamed with pride.

The looks on the faces of people when we passed out the little treats Mom made was just as incredible here as it is in Smallville. Mom told me that Maisey and the Irigs were going to make the deliveries this year back home. And more of Dad’s toys would be given, too. That’s what Christmas is all about, I thought.

“Can we do this every year?” Carol asks as we sip hot chocolate on our way to the Planet. The party starts at one.

“We can. Although if Nana’s home, we’ll have to find a really good bakery to help with the goodies,” Lois tells her.

“Why? Clark can bake,” Mom speaks up.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say.

“You’re welcome. But if you guys aren’t in Smallville for Christmas, Papa and I will be here.”

I can’t help but grin. Lois moves in close to wrap an arm around my waist and I pull her closer. Life is so good.

The Christmas party at the Planet turned into a joint engagement party for Lois and I. We graciously accepted the well wishes, and a few gifts, from our co-workers. We exchanged our secret Santa gifts. I’d had Perry’s name this year. He raved on and on about the CD collection he received. My gift was a loud tie. I’m famous for my loud ties. I think Peggy, in accounting, drew my name. She kept eying me all afternoon, which sent the hackles on my future wife’s neck standing on end. The only thing that kept her from raking the woman’s eyes out was the fact that I kept her close all day. And I kissed her for all to see. She loved that, even if she would never admit it. I never knew Lois was so jealous or possessive.

By seven, I’m nervous as hell. Perry and Alice, Jack and his brother Denny, Jimmy and his girlfriend, Sam and his girlfriend, Mrs. Collins, and Ms. Carson — which was a huge surprise — all showed up for our small ceremony. I promised to cherish another woman. I vowed my life to her and accepted hers in return. I promised to honor and protect my daughter. I gave Carol a necklace, as a symbol of my promises. And I slid Lois’ wedding band onto her finger. As I did, all of my past hurt and loneliness faded into blissful warmth. My new ring glistened on my finger. It was white gold, unlike my last one. Lois kissed it after putting it on my finger and in the moment my lips touched hers, I saw my future. It was bright and warm and happy. It was filled with laughter and life.

A small celebration followed our vows. Mom had managed to make a beautiful cake that we cut together. We toasted to our future, in engraved glasses Lois’ dad gave us. We shared a dance as husband and wife. We opened several gifts — including the large box of condoms from Jack. My face had burnt for an hour after. Jimmy took tons of pictures, including some gorgeous shots of Carol. When the guests were gone, Dad read the Christmas story and Lois and I tucked our little girl in bed. I took my wife with me as Superman delivered toys to the Center so those children would have a bright Christmas morning. We shared coffee with my folks, then headed up to our room for a dance alone before Santa arrived.

Our dance turned hot near the end. And now...

Was sex with Randi ever this good? I’m so shocked to have that thought, but I can’t help it. Lois feels incredible. And I feel... alive.

We’ve been making love for nearly an hour. I have amazing stamina... and Lois is... incredible.

Much later, we just sit there, staring at one another. Randi loved me. There’s no doubt about that, but the look in Lois’ eyes is nothing I ever saw in Randi’s. This woman makes me want to be a better man. With a simple look, she transforms me all over again.

“We need a shower,” she tells me.

I laugh softly and zip us into the bathroom. Of course, before we’re done, we christen the shower.

I grin like a fool the whole time we’re playing Santa. Lois keeps looking at me, as if she’ll eat me.

And once we’re back in bed, she tries!

I feel like a teenager, experiencing everything for the first time. Yeah, okay, so I’ve done this before... Sheez, I was married! Randi was a great lover; she just wasn’t very... experimental. But this... Lois is... sensational.

It’s hard to believe this woman’s my wife.

It’s hard to believe I feel this way again.

We greet Christmas morning a little before daylight. Carol is so excited. Her eyes light up when she sees all the gifts. She loves the new bike. I was going to buy her one for her birthday party, but chose a handheld video game instead — with a game about animals. She squeals when she sees the box Lois left under the tree. Carol is now the proud sponsor of Cory — the silverback gorilla at the zoo. And she'll get to go on a private tour soon. But the highlight was the membership to the Keeper's Club. It's like the scouts, only at the zoo. And the position came with a uniform. She wore it to dinner.

Lois loved her earrings and the mini — trip for our honeymoon. We'll leave Christmas night. Carol gave her a shirt and framed handprints to all the adults. Those were a huge hit. Mine was immediately placed on the wall in the upstairs hall. We received pictures and I got a wallet and new briefcase. Mom adored her mother's necklace.

So did Lois. I gave it to her while we shared a few minutes alone on the back patio. She gave me a necklace, too — a dog tag with an engraved picture of Carol. I plan to have the other side engraved with a picture of Lois.

We share dinner that night with our family, including Lois' dad, before saying our good-byes for our trip. Just before we go, I give Carol another gift, for her birthday. It's a bracelet, engraved with the words 'forever love'. She calls me Daddy again.

For the next three days, I make love to my wife. Over and over. I can't seem to get enough. And she's just as insatiable as I am. We don't see very much of the small town I chose for us, but we see every inch of each other. We talk, we laugh, we even cry a bit. And we kiss... Lois is a fantastic kisser.

We make it home the day before my folks head back to Smallville. They had wanted to stay until after the New Year, but a problem with the farm called them back early. Carol is so miserable for a day or two. She hangs out with Lois and I at work, all of us reluctant to be apart quite yet. We met her teachers and took her to New York to see the ball drop on New Year's Eve.

By February, we've all settled into our new life. Carol is soaring in school. The teachers tell us they've never seen her so bright and happy. She has a best friend and the little girl comes over often. There's a new team at the Planet — Lane and Kent — and their work is amazing.

Yes, Lois kept her name — for professional reasons. Though she'll answer to Mrs. Kent just as quickly.

She's extraordinary. She works hard and loves harder. She makes love to me at least four times a week, no matter how tired she is. She's not a very good cook, but she makes sure we have a wide selection of groceries in the house at all times. And she is the most incredible mother. She and Carol have bonded as if they have never been apart — maybe even closer. They took me out for Valentine's, for a tour of a chocolate factory.

Did I mention I have a wonderful family?

Four months... Has it really been that long since we married? It's been four of the best months of my life. I got a call this morning that the final hearing for Carol's adoption was rushed through. I'll be in front of the judge tomorrow.

I whistle as I head down the ramp toward my desk. I do that a lot now. I'm just so happy... Was I ever this blissful with Randi?

I glance at my wife, expecting her to look up and smile. Instead, she hunches over her desk more. I'm immediately concerned. She doesn't look well. I kneel next to her.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She's lying. I can hear it in her voice.

"Lois..." I grasp her hand and wait until she looks at me.

There are tears in her eyes and I can't help but gasp. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"Can we talk later?"

"No." I stand and pull her to her feet to lead her to the

conference room. With the door closed, I face her. "Tell me."

"My daddy called. Aunt Lucy died last night."

"Aw, Honey." I step forward and wrap my arms around her. I met Lucy once. She was a great person.

She lets me comfort her for a while before leaning back to look at me. "I have to fly out to California."

"I'll go with you."

"You have the hearing tomorrow."

"I'll be out as soon as it's over."

She nods her head before hugging me again. "I love you, Clark."

I pull her closer, burying my face in her neck. I'd give anything to take her pain away. I hate to see her hurting.

Lois takes a flight to California, for appearance sake. Carol and I share a somber dinner before story time and bed. The hearing goes without a hitch. Even Johns doesn't object. Each and every home visit has contradicted her opinions and for once, she's impressed. I leave the courthouse with a huge grin on my face. I'm the legal, forever father of Christmas Carol Kent. She and I celebrate with a trip to the zoo.

I fly out to be with Lois, after dropping Carol with Jack and Denny. They weren't my first choice for sitters, but she insists she wants to stay with them. I offer my wife the comfort she needs, both emotionally and physically. But it's not enough. I can feel the difference.

Two weeks later, I still feel the difference. She doesn't touch me as much, doesn't kiss me as often, and she hurries through sex. The second we're done, she's up and closing herself off in the bathroom. Something's bothering her, and it's not her aunt's death.

She's still amazing with Carol, but the smiles don't quite reach her eyes. She starts to stay late at work and by June, I hardly ever see her.

I'm up when Lois comes in. It's nearly two in the morning. She is surprised to see me on the couch, but doesn't say a word as she hurries toward the stairs.

"We need to talk," I tell her.

She stops with a hand on the banister and sighs before turning to walk my way. She sits down, but doesn't speak.

"What's wrong, Lois?" Nothing, just silence. "Are you... having an affair?"

Her head whips toward me. "How can you ask that?"

"Well, I've tried to seduce you four times this week and you put me off. Before, all I had to do was look at you. You're never home. And I've heard rumors."

"What rumors?"

"That you're working with Tyler Cowen."

"We worked on a project for the column, that's it. Clark, I would never cheat on you."

"You would just stop making love with me at all?" I ask.

She blinks and tucks her hair behind her ear.

"Do you want out?"

"Of our marriage?" she counters.

I nod. "I know we rushed into this, but, Honey, I've been happy. Are you that depressed over your aunt's death?"

She sits for a long time before she looks at me with tear filled eyes. "Clark, do you love me?"

"What?"

"Do you love me?"

"Of course I do." And I do, so much. She has become vital to my existence.

"Then why don't you tell me?"

"I..." close my mouth. I can't remember a single time I've told my wife that I love her.

"Not once," Lois whines. "I tell you all the time. And you've shown me. But sometimes a girl likes to hear it." She looks down

at her hands. “You tell Carol and your folks. Just not me.”

And before I can say a thing, she jumps up to run upstairs. I feel like a complete heel. She’s right. I’ve never told her how I feel. At first that might have been understandable, but now... I do love her, so much. I rise, cut the lights and lock the door, then head upstairs. Lois is sitting on the bench at the end of our bed, head hung, sniffing quietly. I kneel in front of her and reach out to grasp her hands.

“Lois, Honey, I’m so sorry.” I lift her hands to kiss them. “You have given me beautiful, amazing life, and I can’t say exactly how I feel. So, I’ll say this. I feel... so many things. And all at once.” I rub her hands with my thumbs. “I’m happy but kinda’ scared, too.” I look up at her and smile. “Excited... it only takes a look. Calm... so calm. Lost... and found. I feel... safe in a way I’ve never known. At the same time, I feel in danger — more than I’ve ever been. I feel so much stronger than even my abilities. Lois, being with you is stronger than me alone. That’s new for me. It’s heady and refreshing and makes me feel so alive.” She blinks out tears and drops her head. I lift her face again. “I do love you... so much more than I ever thought I could love again.” I blink out tears of my own. “I love you more than I did Randi. I’ve known that for a while now, but I didn’t want to admit it. If I said it aloud, I was scared my memories of her would fade away.”

“You’ll always have those memories. And we can talk about her. I never wanted you to stop loving her. I just wanted you to love me, too.”

“Aw, Baby, I do.” I stand and tug her to her feet. I cup her face with both my hands. “I love you and I won’t forget to tell you any longer.” I lean to kiss her softly. When I draw back, I see the twinkle in her eyes. “I love my life. I adore my wife and daughter.” I kiss her again... and again.

I make love to my wife, slowly, reverently, completely. I tell her I love her. I tell her how good she makes me feel. And I show her. When we’re done, there’s no doubt I’ve never loved or been loved like this before. We’re both lying on our backs, staring up at the ceiling.

“Clark?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“There was another reason I’ve been so... off lately.”

I turn my head to look at her.

“I’m six weeks pregnant.”

It’s a long moment before those words penetrate my brain. I sit up and stare down at her. My eyes glance at her stomach, then move back to hers. My hand covers her mid-section and I close my eyes to listen. It’s there. A soft steady drum. Tears sting my eyes as I open them.

“Wow,” is all I can manage.

“I was a little worried you would think this was too soon. Or that I did it on purpose.” She sits up. “I swear I didn’t, but I did forget a few pills... when we were chasing down the Johnson story. And then I was scared that we had hit the mark and that I’d hurt the baby if I took more and well, I just didn’t know...”

I cover her mouth with my own. I’ve learned it’s the only way to stop her when she’s off and running like this. The kiss quickly escalates, much the way it usually does.

I’m leaning over her, gazing down into her eyes. My fingers smooth over her face, her lips, her nose.

“My God,” I say softly. “You’re so beautiful.” My hand moves down to her stomach. “We’ve created life, Lois. That’s amazing. And it’s perfect timing.”

“We’ve only been married six months.”

“If we had created a life that first night, it would have been the right time.” I pull her to my chest and sigh heavily. “I just fell in love with you all over again.”

“Oh, Clark,” she gasps and holds me close. “I love you... so much.”

“So much,” I repeat and draw back to kiss her again. I lay my head on her stomach so that I can listen to our baby’s heartbeat, even though I don’t have to be this close. “Perfect timing,” I say again. Lois sighs and we fall asleep just like that. Could life get any better?

Life could get better and it did. Carol was ecstatic about the new baby. We had worried that she would think we wouldn’t love her as much. But it was misplaced. She was excited as could be.

She cared for Lois like a mother hen, managed to find time for her daddy, and cried softly when our baby boy was born too early. Just like Carol, Jon was nearly two months early. And get this... he was born on Christmas Day. How is that for fate?

We didn’t name him Christmas. He carries his grandfather’s name... and the name of a very special person in our home. Jonathan Randal Kent... It was Lois’ idea. And Carol swore it was Randi looking after Jon when he was able to come home in a week. Maybe he was blessed with his father’s genes as well.

A third, and fourth child, wasn’t born on Christmas... they were born on Labor Day... four years after Jon. We took very good precautions until then. Well, actually, Lois decided it was time to try again. And the twins were our last. Little boys... bright eyed and energetic — nothing like Jon or Carol.

Beautiful, beautiful children... They’re all so big now. Carol graduated college last year and she’s completely blissful in her position as assistant to the chief zoo keeper at Metropolis Zoo. She came home to work... after school at my alma mater.

Jon’s the star of his middle school football team, surprising considering he’s a brainiac, and shy, and quiet. A good child. And he didn’t inherit a single power from me.

Caleb, on the other hand... He’s our youngest. Second born twin by six minutes. He’s lifting furniture these days. Colter is strong, but not like his brother. I guess I’ll pass my mantle off to Caleb someday.

For now, I’m Superman, reporter, father, and husband... I cherish the roles of father and husband the most. The gifts they’ve given me are indescribable. There’s nothing quite like the feel of several little arms around your neck at the end of a long day. Or bright eyes staring at you first thing in the morning. I adore my children... all of them.

And I am so in love with my wife... We’ve been married for almost thirteen years. We’ve had our trials... like the time Superman was nearly killed by a meteor that threatened life on Earth. Or the woman who claimed to have had Superman’s love child. Or when an old flame from Lois’ past returned... he ended up trying to kill her.

She kissed him. That had rocked my entire world. I walked in on them and that image nearly killed me. I left her for a while. Then I sucked it up and took responsibility for my part in the kiss. She had been alone... for weeks. It seemed the whole world had needed me... and not just as Superman. We had barely seen each other. We hadn’t made love for over two months. She was hurting and lonely and gave in for a moment. I couldn’t very well fault her for that kiss when I had done the same thing.

It seems I wasn’t alone in the universe after all. More Kryptonians are alive, and they came for me. I was their rightful leader, and I was married at birth to the Lady Zara. During that whole situation, I kissed Zara. Lois had ranted and cursed — so loudly the cops were called — she had cried and paced and asked if I needed more than an Earthling could give me. She was terrified I would leave her and the kids, choose to lead my people. For me, it was never a choice. I had kissed Zara because I had felt drawn to her. It turned out it was a biological control the Kryptonians use to manipulate to ensure strong political alliances. I could never lead people like that, even if that race did give me life. Making up after that crisis had been soul shattering. I’ve always known Lois was passionate, but after that... I was so

glad to be a man — the man she blessed with her love and her body.

I never said a word when I went home after our separation.

And did I mention Carol was angry with me for that? We had told her that we would never leave one another. It took longer to make up with my daughter than with my wife.

I had forgotten how to stoke that passion within my wife and she had turned to another man to excite her. While we don't have explosive, mind blowing sex every time we make love, I haven't forgotten again how to stoke that passion now and then.

I'm alive today, and living a dream because of a Christmas Carol. As she lifts her hand to wave at me, I grin widely. We meet every Wednesday for lunch at the zoo. I tell her every day how much she means to me. And every now and then I thank Jack for inviting me to play Santa so long ago.

I should mention, too, that Carol is dating a boy she met at the Center. Kindred spirits, she calls them. Nice guy... though I'm not sure I want to share my daughter.

I go back to the Center every year now. Lois and I have helped dozens of couples — and a few single men and women — take home their own little blessings.

Mom says my life is full because I listened with my heart instead of my head. I don't care how I got here. I'm just glad I did.

"Hey, Daddy," Carol squeals, the same way she does every week.

I laugh softly as I hold her close.

"Christmas Eve," she says as she draws back.

"I know, Honey. Are you done?" Today I've come to take her home for lunch... and after, the annual Kent family gift distribution.

"I'm all done." She holds my arm as we walk through the gate. "I have the best gifts this year," she tells me.

'The best.' She says that every year.

We arrive home, to more hugs and kisses. She's close to her siblings, especially Jon.

And her mom... Lois hugs her like she hasn't seen her in weeks. She sees her nearly every day.

"Merry Christmas, Carol," Lois says. "Welcome home."

At least for the next few days. She has her own place a few blocks away. But she spends Christmas Eve at home with the family.

Or on the farm the years we go there.

I sit down and immediately my lap fills with bodies, including my wife and daughter. As listen to the laughter of children, my wife, and my parents, I'm so glad I decided I needed a Christmas Carol of my own.

THE END