

Treasure Chest

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Summary: Set in late Summer 2004, this story follows Lois and Clark as they navigate some challenges in their marriage. Assume canon except for 'Family Hour.'

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Disclaimer: Clark Kent, Lois Lane, and many other characters from *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* are not mine. Also, I refer to lines and scenarios from the show.

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Part 1

Clark Kent glanced at his watch.

For possibly the hundredth time in two hours.

It was after ten.

He'd known Lois wouldn't be in before eight, but he had been unable to extinguish his hope that she would be in early enough for them to celebrate her birthday together.

Then he heard the sound he'd been dreading—a cry for help that almost certainly killed off any chance of being with Lois tonight.

With super-breath, he cooled the food he had prepared and with super-speed, he covered it and stowed it in the refrigerator.

He scribbled a quick note. *Happy Birthday, honey. Food in the fridge, Love Clark.* He left it on the table, hoping she would see it.

As he spun into the suit, he pushed away his scalding disappointment.

Perhaps they could celebrate her birthday tomorrow.

Or maybe at the weekend.

* * *

Lois Lane unlocked the front door of her home and headed straight for the stairs to her bedroom.

She dumped her bag on the blanket box at the end of the bed and wearily moved to the bathroom to remove her make up.

Ten minutes later, she tumbled into the empty bed.

Most of the day, Lois had thought tomorrow's lead story would be a rather dry exposition of the deteriorating state of the main thoroughfares into Metropolis. Then, the story Ian Murnane had been investigating for over a week—involv-

ing high-level corruption in the Port Authority—had finally broken open and his hard work had resulted in a scoop for the Planet.

It had meant another late night as Lois had worked with him to put the finishing touches to his story. They had pushed the deadline to its absolute limit, but she knew it would be worth it when the Daily Planet would again lead the way with tomorrow's news.

* * *

Clark selected three eggs from the fridge.

The meal he had made for Lois's birthday was there, untouched and exactly as he had left it last night. He closed the door, cracked the eggs onto his plate, and cooked them with his heat vision.

He ate his breakfast at super-speed. It had been one of those nights where the emergencies had lined up one after the other—a high-rise apartment fire followed by a derailed interstate train followed by a storm that had, amongst other things, taken down miles of power lines.

He checked the time. It was nearly eight. If he flew, he could make the staff meeting.

* * *

Lois scanned the assembled faces of her reporters. Only Clark was missing. She lifted her vision and looked out of the conference room window to the elevator. There was no sign of him. She'd heard the reports of a storm in Alabama and assumed he was there. It seemed there had been a lot of damage—Clark might not be in before lunch. She cleared her throat and the murmur of voices fell silent. "Let's get started," she said.

"Where's Clark?" Murnane asked.

"Alabama," she replied. She paused, waiting to see if there were any other questions, not wanting to appear to

be brushing over the fact that Clark had, yet again, been assigned as the reporter to travel to a story. She scrutinised their faces.

If they felt any animosity at what could be seen as preferential treatment for her husband, there was no evidence of it. Lois felt a quiet wave of relief. She'd mostly managed to keep the petty office squabbles to a minimum in her fifteen months at the helm of the Daily Planet.

Lois turned to Murnane with a genuine smile. "Great story on the Port Authority, Ian," she said. "Well done."

He nodded succinctly, although she could tell he was pleased with her public acknowledgement.

"What are the plans for follow-up stories?" she asked.

He reached for his notes, and the meeting began.

* * *

That afternoon, Clark tapped on the door of his wife's office and stepped in. She had the phone clasped between her jaw and her shoulder and was typing with both hands as she listened to whoever was on the other end of the line. Clark rounded her desk and dropped a kiss to the top of her head.

He settled into the guest chair and waited for her call to finish. A minute later, she replaced the phone and turned to him. "Hi," she said.

"Sorry I didn't make the staff meeting this morning," he said.

"Where were you?" she asked. Her eyes had diverted back to her monitor. "Alabama?"

"I was there overnight and got back in time for breakfast. Then a cruise ship in the Pacific had some engine problems, so I towed it back to Noumea. It wasn't too far from land, but it took a long time because I had to limit my speed to what the ship could handle."

Lois nodded as her fingers busily typed on her keyboard. "Do you have a story from Alabama?"

"Yes. I'll have it to you in less than half an hour."

She glanced across from her monitor. "Thanks. I guessed that's where you were. Ian asked this morning at the staff meeting."

Clark stood. "I should get on with it." He paused at the door. "Any idea when you will be home this evening?"

She grimaced, although she didn't look up from her monitor. "I'll be late; the Port Authority story goes deeper than we first realised. I think there will be rolling revelations for the next few days."

"Do you want me on it?"

"Not yet," she said. "Murnane has it covered, with Matt Bremner as backup. I'll let you know."

Clark closed her door and went to his desk to write up the story of the destruction in Alabama.

* * *

Lois subdued her sigh when she saw the incoming call was from her sister. She picked up the phone and tried to summon an acceptable level of enthusiasm. "Hi, Lucy," she said.

"Hi, Lois. How are things?"

"Busy, you know?"

"I saw the Planet was the first to break the Port story this morning. Congratulations."

"Thanks. How are my nephews?"

"A few sniffles, but nothing too serious."

"Perhaps it's the weather; it's been unseasonably cool lately."

"It feels like I haven't seen you in ages," Lucy said. "Would you and Clark like to come over for dinner soon?"

Lois couldn't hear any resentment in her sister's tone. Her relief registered even as she scrambled for an excuse. "When?" she hedged.

"Your schedule is more structured than mine," Lucy said. "You choose the day that suits you."

Lois saw her escape and took it gladly. "I'll be tied up with the Port story for a few days, so perhaps we could leave it until next week," she said.

"We didn't see you for your birthday," Lucy said evenly. "I was hoping we could make it soon."

Lois winced as she remembered Lucy's call of two weeks ago suggesting they do something together for Lois's birthday. She hadn't given it another thought. "We will make it soon," Lois promised.

"The boys miss you."

Lois's smile flickered at the thought of Lucy's twin sons. "I miss them too, Luce," she said. "It's really busy right now, but as soon as things slow down a bit, I'll call you and we'll get together."

"OK," Lucy said. "Did you have a good birthday?"

Lois suppressed another sigh. She had barely given her birthday a thought. But she couldn't tell Lucy that. "It was great," Lois said brightly.

"What did Clark give you?"

“Perfume.”

“Ooohh—which one?”

Honestly, Lois had no idea. She had opened the present in the twenty seconds she had spent with Clark as he had come in from a rescue and she had been leaving for work. “Ahh, I can’t remember its name,” she said. Then she added, “But it smells divine.”

“Did Clark take you out for dinner?”

“Not yet. But he will.”

Lucy was silent. Lois knew her sister was considering another launch into the ‘you’re working too hard’ monologue. Thankfully, she didn’t. “Call me when you have a free evening,” she said.

“I will,” Lois promised.

She replaced the phone and turned back to the story she’d been editing.

* * *

Two nights later, Clark clung to his wife long after the last vestiges of pleasure had evaporated from his sated body.

His body was sated, but the rest of him—his mind, his heart, his soul were still yearning... yearning for the complete togetherness that had slipped away.

How had it come to this?

Clark knew, yet he didn’t know.

The slide had been so slow, so gradual, so easily lost among all the happy moments and times of closeness.

Lois hadn’t moved either. Her soft body curled against his side felt good—so good that Clark was tempted to try to convince himself, as he had many times before, that nothing between them had changed.

But it had.

He knew it.

She had to know it.

Perhaps that was why she hadn’t moved. If they fell asleep afterwards, it negated the need for conversation or connection on any other level.

In so many ways, they had everything. Successful careers. A great marriage. Good health. Financial security.

Only one thing was lacking.

And that one thing was like an insidious cancer. It had infiltrated their marriage and leached the joy from it. Strangely, the bedroom had been the last place it had touched. At first, when they had accepted there would be no biological child, their longing had been a sadness that

swept over them whenever they discussed their options. It hurt, but in the complete picture, it was nothing more than a small, dark shadow on an otherwise blissful landscape.

One by one, they had dismissed the options and then, with many tears, had accepted that their marriage would remain a couple and never progress to becoming a family.

They had resolved to move on—to appreciate all the wonderful gifts in their lives and not allow one deficiency to rob them of their joy.

For a time, they had succeeded.

But the sun had descended, and the shadow had lengthened—first into their home life, and then into their working life, and lastly into their bedroom.

If there had been a marker—a single point of most significance in the long and gradual slide, Clark believed it had been the birth of Lucy’s boys. Lucy had a loving husband and twin sons. Lucy had everything that had once been Lois’s for the taking.

Lois had stifled her own yearning enough to celebrate the news of Lucy’s pregnancy with genuine joy. The news she was expecting twins had been harder to take. That one sister should be doubly blessed, while the other... Lucy had invited Lois to be at the births, but Lois had declined.

Clark knew that Lucy, and all of Lois’s family, wondered. Wondered why a couple so clearly in love had chosen not to have children.

Of course, the choice hadn’t been not to have children, but to keep secret the reason. They hadn’t even offered a version of the truth. It had been Lois’s decision, and being her family, Clark had gone along with it. But he had often wondered if simply telling them that he was unable to father a child might have been the better option.

Now Lucy had adorable eighteen-month-old sons. Lois loved them, but she couldn’t hide the ache whenever she saw them. Not from Clark. Clark, who watched her... and ached with her.

Lois was thirty-seven now. He knew the pressure of time was adding another dynamic to her longing.

In just a few short years, children wouldn’t be possible for her either.

He still loved her.

Loved her with everything he was.

He knew she still loved him.

But he’d failed her. He couldn’t give her the one thing she craved.

She'd achieved all her other dreams. Not one, but two Pulitzers. Seven Kerths. Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet as its circulation soared and it reached spectacular heights in popularity and respect.

His wife was still beautiful. Not only still, but more beautiful than the day he had married her. Time had deepened her beauty and added a grace and poise that allowed her to walk into any room and immediately command the attention of everyone present.

They had a lovely home—peaceful and serene—a haven from the bustle and stress of their working life. They had everything money could buy.

But money couldn't buy the one gift they both craved.

He was the strongest, fastest man on Earth, but he couldn't give his wife the desire of her heart.

Lois had fallen asleep. Her breathing had become a steady rhythm, and her body had relaxed against his. Clark kissed the top of her head. She sighed and rolled away from him.

The sudden chill on his side had to be more than the absence of her warmth. Clark drew his fingertips across his ribs and then rubbed them against his thumb, feeling the moisture.

He rose onto his elbow and looked down into Lois's face.

Her cheeks were streaked with the tracks of her tears.

Clark subsided back onto his pillow. Lois had been crying.

Her tears stabbed a crevice through his heart.

Crying!

Their lovemaking tonight hadn't been the all-encompassing union of body and mind and heart and soul of his memories, but that wasn't unusual now.

But crying!

He knew Lois mourned that, for them, making love could not result in the child they both wanted. He understood that the act had lost something of its beauty and power because it could only ever be for the here and now, never for the future.

But he hadn't known that her sadness had pervaded so thoroughly that the act of love brought only despair.

He hadn't known that he would make her cry.

Clark felt his own sadness rise in tandem with hers. They couldn't live like this. They couldn't continue to watch helplessly as their love slid inevitably into the pit of disappointment.

He carefully unfolded from her and dropped a quick kiss into her hair, deliberately avoiding her tear-stained face. "Got to go, honey," he whispered. He spun into the suit, but he didn't fly away. He looked down on her sleeping form for a long moment as his pain thrashed around inside him. "I love you," he said around a throat gone tight.

* * *

Martha Kent awoke.

She looked at the slight gap where the curtains didn't quite meet. It was still dark—way too early to consider getting up and beginning the day.

Jonathan hadn't moved.

Why had she awoken?

She shuffled a little, moving closer to Jonathan's comforting presence and hoping sleep would reclaim her.

It didn't. Her eyes didn't want to close, and her mind didn't want to settle.

Why?

She thought back to the days nearly forty years ago when Clark was a baby. So often then, she had awoken—not from his cries, but in anticipation of him needing her. She had soon learnt to rise and begin to warm his bottle. Within minutes, she would hear him and would take his prepared bottle into his room. She would lift him into her arms and sit in the rocking chair, treasuring every moment of the time alone with him in the silent darkness.

But those days were long gone.

So why was she awake now? And not even remotely sleepy?

After ten minutes, Martha became too impatient to remain still and quiet. Sleep had deserted her. She rose quietly from between the sheets and slipped into her robe. After tiptoeing down the stairs and into her kitchen, she put on the kettle to boil and went outside.

It was a warm, balmy night. Still. Dark. Quiet.

It would have been easy to believe she was the only person awake for miles.

Except she knew she wasn't. "Clark?" she said quietly.

She heard a whoosh and a gentle thud as his feet landed a few yards away. He stepped towards her—dressed as Superman. Martha smiled in welcome.

He touched a kiss to her forehead. "What are you doing up?" he asked with much gentleness and the mildest hint of reproof.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. "Want some tea?"

“Yes. Thank you.”

She walked into the kitchen and began making their tea. “Been out on a rescue?” she asked.

When he didn’t reply, Martha looked over her shoulder at her son. He was staring ahead, giving no indication he had heard her question. She made the two cups of tea and brought them to the table. “Clark?” she said gently.

He started. Saw the tea and took it with a smile of thanks.

“Bad rescue?” Martha asked.

“Nah.”

“Good rescue?”

“Nah.”

“What’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer for a long time—just stared ahead, probably, in Martha’s estimation, seeing nothing. She sipped her tea, giving him time.

Her tea was finished and his had gone cold when Clark broke from his reverie and seemed to suddenly realise she was in room with him. “Ah, sorry,” he said.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” she said. “But if you want to tell me what’s bothering you, I’m willing to listen.”

Clark smiled, but it was such a sad version of his smile, it ripped a piece from her heart. He took a gulp of his tea, grimaced, shot it with a spurt of heat vision, and then put it back on the table.

Martha waited, outwardly serene, inwardly in turmoil. What could be worrying her son? Lois? Was Lois ill? No, Clark would just come out and say so.

Something else? A problem with their marriage? Martha hadn’t seen them much lately. In fact, now she thought about it, she hadn’t seen them together since the spring. Clark had visited Smallville regularly, but Lois hadn’t come with him. All of Martha’s enquiries had been met with the same reply—Lois was busy in her new position as Editor-in-Chief.

But Perry White had retired over a year ago. Lois couldn’t still be adjusting to the added pressures of her new position.

Were there problems at work? Was Clark struggling with Lois being his boss? Surely not. Clark was one of the least chauvinistic men she knew. But people could be different at work.

Martha studied the sombre face of her son, but she could detect no hint as to the cause of his melancholy.

He breathed deeply, lifting his blue spandex-clad shoulders. His eyes rose slowly and met hers. “I’m going to suggest to Lois that we get a divorce,” he said.

Part 2

“You’re *what?*” Martha shrieked.

Clark had the grace to look abashed, but he didn’t back down. “I’m going to offer Lois a divorce,” he said evenly.

“That would be the biggest mistake of your life.”

“No,” Clark said. “It would give her the chance to undo the biggest mistake of her life.”

“Have you talked to her about it?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, thankfully, you still have a chance to regain your senses.”

Clark’s eyes dropped to his fidgeting fingers, and his shoulders slumped. “You think it is a bad idea?”

His uncertainty melted Martha’s exasperation. “Don’t you remember how you did this once before?” she asked gently. “Before you were married, you broke up with Lois because you thought it was too dangerous for her to be connected with a target like Superman.”

“I now think I was right; I should have gotten out of her life then. And stayed out.”

“Why Clark?” Martha said. “Do you regret marrying her? Surely things can’t have gotten that bad between you?”

“Things aren’t that bad between us—not on the surface, anyway.” He stared at his hands as they toyed with his cup. “And I will never regret marrying her—not for me. But I can’t be who she needs me to be, and I can’t give her what she wants most.”

“So you’re doing this for her?” Martha asked with biting scepticism.

“Yes,” Clark said on a rushed breath. “I want to be married to her. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. But, as I realised that time before our wedding, it simply isn’t fair to Lois.”

“How can you think you were right all those years ago?”

“I was,” he said with solid-rock certainty that plunged fear through his mother’s heart.

“Then why did you change your mind and get back with her?”

“Because I was young... and in love.”

“You’re still young,” Martha said. “So, I assume you’re saying you’re no longer in love.”

Clark's head jolted up, and his eyes bored into hers. "I will *always* be in love with Lois," he declared.

"She is going to struggle to see the offer of a divorce as the actions of a man in love."

"Mom," Clark said wearily. "I'm thirty-eight years old. Don't you think it's time I accepted reality and stopped chasing dreams that simply aren't possible?"

"What dreams?"

"The dream of a wife and a family."

"You have a wife."

"And I can never give her a family." He stood and paced the length of the kitchen. When he turned, his face was riddled with the isolation Martha hadn't seen for many years. "I'm *different*, Mom," he said. "I'm not like everyone else. I have to accept that. It means I get certain advantages, but I also have to accept that it means there are some things I can't have. There is absolutely no need for Lois to miss out on those things, too."

Suddenly Martha understood the tortuous track of his thinking. But understanding did not bring agreement. "You're offering her the freedom to find someone else and have the child she wants with him?"

"Yes. And I need to do it now. Before it is too late for her."

"You really think she would rather have a child with another man than remain childless with you?"

"I know not having a child is eating away at her," Clark said. "I know it is changing her. I see her becoming someone else right in front of my eyes. I see her cramming every moment with her job so there is no time to think about what could have been. I see her struggle every day, and there is *nothing* I can do to help her."

Martha searched for a way to suggest—very gently—that Lois had to take some responsibility for how their childlessness was affecting her life. She couldn't find words that didn't sound as if she were taking sides, so she said nothing.

"I know that her job and her home and her marriage simply aren't enough for Lois anymore," Clark continued. He lifted his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "I know *I'm* not enough anymore."

This was firmer ground. "I think you're wrong," Martha said. "Very, very wrong."

"If I don't do something now—if I continue to ignore the obvious and hope it will magically fix itself—I will look back in five, ten years and wish I had acted now. I will wish I'd had the courage to do this while there was still time for Lois."

"I think it will destroy her."

"Staying with me is destroying her."

"Have you forgotten that she loves you?"

"She can learn to love someone else."

"If Lois loves you and she knows you want to be with her whatever the circumstances, she won't leave you, even if you somehow manage to convince her that is best for her."

"So, I have to pretend that I want this?" Clark said incredulously.

"No!" Martha exclaimed. "No, Clark, nothing good ever comes from being dishonest about how you feel."

"You think I don't know that?" he said, his frustration vibrating through his voice. "If I'd been honest with her, right from the beginning, if I'd told her I'm an alien, right from the first day, she wouldn't be in this position now."

"You don't think Lois could have loved you if she'd known about—"

"She would have understood the costs." He began pacing again. "Instead, I was so stubbornly insistent that she love the man and not the powers. I wanted her to love Clark, but in doing that I robbed her of the chance to make any real decisions about her own future."

"She had plenty of opportunities to back out after she knew your secret," Martha said.

"She was already in love with me by then," Clark grated. "That is what I wanted. I wanted her to love me... Clark... the man. I kept telling her—I kept telling myself—that Clark was the real person and the suit was just a disguise so I could use my powers."

"That's the truth."

"No, it's not," he exploded. "This is me." He gestured to the suit. "This is who I am—an alien. I am not a real man. I never have been. I never will be."

"So, you have no right to a life? To happiness? To be with the woman you love?"

"Not if Lois has to pay the price."

An oppressive silence filled the small kitchen, broken only by Clark's agitated steps on the wooden floor. Martha stood and stared out of the window at the darkness. It mirrored her heart. Occasionally, she would glance to her son, but the anguish on his face was more than she could bear, so she quickly turned away.

She heard him slump into his seat.

Martha turned from the window. "I do understand the pain of wanting a child and not being able to have one," she reminded him gently.

"I know—but it's different for you."

"How?"

He shot her a shadow-like counterfeit of his real smile. "I know it's dangerous territory for a man to compare his wife and his mother," he said. "But hear me out. Lois has a drive—something inside that compels her to chase what she wants. It is one of the things I love about her. You have that drive too—but you don't have the... the raw fear of failure that she has."

Martha stared at him, processing his words.

Clark tried again. "I think it has to do with your fathers. You grew up knowing that your father loved you and approved of you. That gave you the confidence to chase after the things you wanted—but it also gave you the security of knowing that if you failed, it didn't make you less of a person. Lois's father was distant and disapproving. He still is. Lois has an incredibly powerful compulsion to try to fill the hole left by Sam not being the father she needs. That compulsion drives her to succeed, to chase the impossible, but for her, failure is unacceptable—it eats at the very core of who she is, because it has never been buttressed by her father's love."

Martha leant closer to her son. "If you and your marriage and your love and her job—if all of that can't fill the gap in Lois's life, do you really think a child will?"

"I don't know," Clark said with a sigh. "But it will be one less area where Lois feels she has failed."

"A divorce isn't a failure?"

"The upheaval will be temporary," he said. "I'm not saying this won't be difficult for Lois, but if, in five years' time, she is happily married with a child, the adjustments of the next few months will seem insignificant."

Martha shook her head and decided to try a different tack. "What have you told Sam and Ellen?"

"Nothing. When Lucy's twins were born, both Sam and Ellen constantly made little remarks about Lois following her sister's lead, about time getting short. Lois pretended to ignore them, although I know every single comment wormed into her heart and festered there."

"Why not tell them the truth?" Martha asked. "That you—Lois and you—are unable to have children?"

"I wanted to," Clark said dispiritedly. "I wanted to tell them I am sterile. Lois wouldn't agree. Now, she believes

they think she is so wrapped up in her career that she doesn't have the time or the desire for children."

"Even if that were the case, is it so bad?"

"Lois feels it is another area where her parents disapprove of her choices. And the irony burns like acid. She would give up her job in a moment if she could have a child."

"Are you sure about that?"

"She might not give up her career, but she would give up the position of Editor-in-Chief. When Perry retired, we talked about applying for it. I knew I couldn't do it—not without severely limiting my Superman activities. Lois said she couldn't do it if there was any chance of having a child. By then, we had accepted—*said* we had accepted—that there would be no baby. I encouraged her to go for the job because I thought it would be some small compensation for not having any children."

"And is it?"

"On the surface, maybe. But where it really counts..." Clark stood suddenly, and it seemed as if he were closing down their conversation.

But she wasn't finished yet. "When was the last time you talked about this?" she asked. "With Lois?"

Clark looked at his feet—a gesture she'd learnt to read over three decades ago. "It's been a while," he admitted. He stepped to the door. "You should go back to bed."

Martha moved over to him and took her son into her arms. "Will you do something for me?" she asked.

"What?"

"Don't say anything about a divorce to Lois. Not yet. Talk to her about how she feels, tell her how you feel, but please don't suggest a divorce as the solution."

"I can't keep putting it off," he said darkly. "The sooner it is done, the sooner she will be able to start a new life."

"A few weeks won't make any difference."

"And what can happen in a few weeks that will change anything?" he demanded. "And please don't tell me you're hoping for a miracle pregnancy."

"No, I'm hoping for a miracle onset of common sense," Martha retorted.

Clark's face closed as he opened the door. "I'll see you," he said woodenly.

Martha stalled him with a hand to his arm. "Think about it," she begged. "Please don't do anything you'll regret."

"I'll give it one week," Clark conceded. "But then, I'm going to talk to Lois and tell her I think it is best if we

divorce.” He stepped out of the door and flew into the darkness.

Martha brushed back the hair that had fluttered across her face in his backdraft and stared at the spot where he had disappeared. “Oh, honey,” she whispered. “Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t do this to Lois.”

* * *

Clark flew home slowly, pondering his mother’s words.

She was right; Lois *did* still love him. His wife would probably believe the honourable thing to do would be to stay with him—to sacrifice her desire to be a mother in order to keep her commitment to their marriage. If Lois had the slightest inkling of how much this would devastate him, Clark knew she would never agree to leave him.

Therefore, he needed to draw away. He needed to suppress his love for her. He needed to stop touching her. Pull back. Loosen the connection between them. Unbind the ties that kept her imprisoned in a childless marriage.

A childless marriage that was fast becoming nothing more than a crumbling house of wasted dreams.

Last night, she had *cried* as they had made love.

Cried.

Clark hated seeing Lois cry. He hated himself when he made her cry. But this... somehow this went so much deeper than careless words or unthinking actions. This went to the very core of their love.

For her, their marriage was already a source of pain.

For him, it was everything that mattered.

He needed to convince Lois to follow her heart. If she didn’t, it would destroy her. He couldn’t face the agony of watching her suffer—nothing, not even superpowers, could ease the pain of that.

Yes, he decided. It would be preferable to be alone, knowing she was happy, than to be with Lois and have to watch her slowly die from the inside out.

There had to be a good man out there. A man who could love Lois as Clark loved Lois. A man who could give her everything.

It wasn’t as if she would have limited choices. Clark was well aware of how many men eyed his wife with admiration... and eyed him with ill-concealed envy.

His mom was right. If he just came out and said they should divorce, Lois wouldn’t take him seriously. She would claim that she was fine. She would ply him with the tired excuse that her job was draining and stressful. She would smile the fabricated smile that didn’t even begin to

cover her pain. She would kiss him and tell him not to be silly.

Then, she would slip back into the solitary bubble of her world.

He had one week to begin to ease himself out of her life.

He was nearly home. Instead of flying through the window, Clark veered away and went in search of an emergency.

* * *

Lois awoke the next morning with a pressing sense of heaviness. She was alone in the bed. It was too early for Clark to be up; he must be out as Superman. She rubbed her gummy eyes – she had fallen asleep crying.

Then she remembered why.

She and Clark had been making love—more from habit, if she were brutally honest, than from the unrelenting passion that had characterised the early years of their marriage. And then, the unthinkable had happened.

How had it come to this?

Her thoughts moved back fifteen months—to the day she had been told she was the new Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet.

She had embraced the position with all the dedication and commitment she could muster. She had been determined to prove that a woman could lead a newspaper to heights never before seen. She had been determined that every single edition would be momentous, every single story would be the best it could be.

She had ridden all her reporters hard. She had goaded them and badgered them and berated them and refused to accept anything less than brilliance.

It had cost her three fine reporters—people who had found her obsession too intense and her high standards too rigidly and abrasively set.

The first one had left within two weeks of Lois’s appointment. She had watched him leave, her contempt bristling as she reminded herself that if the Planet were to become the paper of her dreams, it could not be a harbour for the half-hearted.

The second one had been harder to attribute to a lack of commitment. Lois knew she had lost a young woman whose instincts and dedication were uncannily close to those of Lois Lane a decade earlier. But young Lois had had the advantage of Perry’s extensive experience. Lois knew that, at this stage, she was no Perry White. And the young reporter had suffered because of it.

The third one gouged deep into Lois's psyche. She had spent many dark and sleepless hours, reciting the Planet's continually increasing circulation to numb the impact of losing Jimmy Olsen. Jimmy—who was a friend as well as a good reporter and a talented photographer. Jimmy—whom she had pressured once too often.

He had simply looked at her and said quietly, "This is a newspaper, Lois. It is important, but it's not worth my life. I want to work hard, and I want to be successful, but I don't want it so much that I'm willing to sacrifice every other part of my life for it. You'll have my resignation within the hour." With that, he had walked out, returning half an hour later with a formally worded letter. He'd wished her the best of luck and left the Planet office.

That was two months ago. Lois hadn't seen him since.

The truth was—the truth Lois tried to deflect with a steady stream of excuses—the Daily Planet had become her entire life. She devoted every waking moment to stories, to features, to introducing new sections, to increasing readership, to attracting advertisers, to staying ahead of the game.

And she had done it. Perry White had handed her a newspaper that was clearly the best in North America. In fifteen short months, she had taken it to being a newspaper that had no peer in the entire world.

She was proud of that. Immensely proud.

She'd known there would be a cost. She and Clark had talked about it before she'd applied for the position. They had both known it would eat into their lives, but they had both been convinced their relationship was resilient enough that even with less time together, their love would remain strong.

And, they had assured each other, it would only be for a time. A time of adjustment while she settled into the new responsibilities. While she became accustomed to the pressures of the job.

But it hadn't been only for a time.

Now, more than a year later, her drive to improve the Planet had only intensified, her time dedicated to her job had increased. Her preoccupation had become an obsession.

So much so, that...

Lois felt the rise of the tears that had lain dormant as she'd slept.

So much so, that last night...

She felt the gush of moisture flood her eyes and spill onto her cheeks.

Last night, as Clark had made love to her, she had caught herself thinking about a story.

Not a front-page story... not a breaking story that would be huge... not a story she had chased down for weeks and was on the cusp of nailing.

No. It had been just a small, quickly forgotten story that didn't deserve to be any closer to the front of the paper than page six.

Lois swallowed roughly as her tears tumbled down her temples and onto her pillow.

Clark deserved so much better than that.

When had it started? When had their lovemaking been reduced to something that could be multi-tasked?

Lois's tears surged as she faced another truth. She had allowed the pain of knowing they could never have a child to dilute her joy in her husband's love. When they still had hope, their lovemaking had been infused with wonderful possibilities that seemed to imbue the actual act with almost magical joy. As the months and years had passed and there had been no pregnancy, the joy had been replaced with desperation—as if somehow, they could force conception by sheer willpower.

They couldn't, of course.

And when Dr Klein had confirmed what they already suspected, their lovemaking had moved to another phase. Sadness had clouded them. A realisation that this was all they had. That they could enjoy all the beauty of their intimacy, but it would remain as making love and could never progress to making life.

That had been heart-breaking.

Lois had been devastated that she couldn't give Clark the chance to be a father. She knew he had wanted a family for so long.

And she'd been devastated for herself, too. It was only after the final death knell had sounded on their hopes that Lois had realised how much she wanted children, how much she longed to see Clark hold their child, how much she yearned to watch a new life grow and flourish in the shelter of their love.

But it was not to be.

In essence, the Planet had become her baby. Her child. But it was an undisciplined and demanding child—a child whose needs and wants were never satisfied.

And Lois had become a willing slave to its constant demands.

The cost had been huge. Far higher than she could have anticipated.

She wasn't the only one paying.

Her relationships had taken a battering.

Her parents—the last three times her mother had called to suggest they go to lunch together, Lois had declined. She simply couldn't afford the time.

Yet...

She could have gone. Should have gone. What was one hour away from the office? Would the paper collapse if she were out of the office for an hour? Would she lose one reader if she took the time to have lunch with her mother?

And her father. She hadn't seen him since the twins' birthday six months ago.

And Lucy. In the time since the boys had turned one, Lois had seen her sister only once. Her nephews were growing and changing, and she had missed so much of it.

And Jimmy. She had lost one of her truly dear friends. All in the pursuit of driving the Daily Planet to dizzying heights.

And doing it mostly alone.

She wasn't a team player.

Lois grabbed a bunch of tissues from the box next to her bed and soaked up her tears.

And Clark.

Surely, he had paid the greatest price of all.

Her husband. The most wonderfully loving and caring person she had ever known. The man she knew loved her with every ounce of his being.

She had pushed him into the shadows of her heart and relegated him to the background of her life. She realised with a sickening start that she could not remember the last time they had relaxed together over a meal.

The last time they had laughed together.

The last time they had simply enjoyed each other's company.

They ate together once or twice a week. Usually, she would come in late and Clark would put before her the meal he had prepared. She would gulp it down, barely tasting it, barely showing any appreciation, barely taking the time to ask about his day... unless it was directly related to a story, either something he'd written or a Superman activity that had become a story or a case he was pursuing in the hope of a story.

She didn't remember the last time she had asked him how he felt about anything.

Was he still mourning that they would not have a child?

Did it still hurt him? It would, she realised. But was his hurt still a sharp stabbing pain, or had it dulled to an ache that had been somewhat eased by time and acceptance?

She didn't know.

Because she hadn't bothered to ask.

Hadn't thought she had the time to listen.

Lois reached for the tissues again and blew her nose. She rose from the bed and checked Clark's closet. His three pairs of business shoes were all there. He was definitely out as Superman.

She wished she could call his cell phone and ask him to meet her for breakfast. When was the last time they had done that?

They hadn't done it this summer. Perhaps in the spring. They must have. She couldn't remember it, though.

Lois showered, dressed, and applied her makeup, constantly listening for the whoosh that would signify Clark's arrival.

She ate a hurried and scant breakfast as she drove to the Planet.

Just as she did every morning.

Except this morning was different.

Instead of her mind being full of stories and leads and advertising space and column inches, it was full of one man.

Her husband.

She missed him.

She wanted him back.

Part 3

Clark straightened his tie and turned from the mirror. As he perused their bedroom, the coming separation lay like a shroud over his heart. There was so much of Lois here. So much about her that he'd shared during the years of their marriage. So much he treasured.

His heart splintered at the thought of giving it away.

More than giving it away—pushing it away.

But he had to do it.

There was no other way.

The alternative was to witness Lois grieve endlessly for the child he couldn't give her.

And that would be unbearable. For both of them.

With a sigh, he turned from the room.

Halfway down the stairs, his cell phone rang. It was Lois. She was probably expecting he was out on a rescue and would have a story to call in. He stifled the automatic spark of joy that flared in anticipation of her voice and deliberately distanced his. "Hi, Lois," he said in a tone not unlike the one he would use to an acquaintance.

"Clark, I'm so glad you answered." There was no indication that she had noticed his tone.

"What's up?" he asked.

This time, there was a slight hesitation. "Nothing's up," she said. "I missed you this morning."

"I was out," Clark said. "But it didn't turn into a story."

"OK," she said, accepting that without any obvious disappointment. "Are you coming into the office now?"

Clark's intention had been to use his super-hearing and x-ray vision to search for anything that could possibly be a story, thereby giving him an excuse for avoiding the office. The less he saw Lois, the more possible this was going to be. But now she'd called him, and he didn't have a ready excuse. "Unless you've got something you want me to chase up first," he offered.

"No. I was hoping to have coffee with you. Or even lunch. We could go out somewhere."

Clark clamped down on the big breath that pushed for escape. "Sure," he said, although he knew his tone was far from enthusiastic. "Unless a story pops up."

He had deflated her. Lois didn't even need to speak for Clark to know he had sucked the vitality from her suggestion. "I'll see you when you get here," she said.

"Bye." Clark hung up quickly, unable to bear a moment more of the hurt surprise in her voice.

He got into his car and drove to the Daily Planet office, horribly conflicted. He had seen so little of Lois lately. Having lunch together sounded like the best idea he'd ever heard. But lunch wouldn't solve their problem.

It would only make the solution more difficult.

He had to do this. It was best for Lois. He had to give her the chance to be a mother.

That meant he had less than half an hour to come up with a reason why he couldn't have lunch with his wife.

* * *

Lois slowly replaced the phone. It rang again immediately. She saw it was one of her junior reporters and let it go through to voicemail.

She sat back in her plush leather, ergonomically designed chair. Clark had sounded agitated. As if he hadn't been expecting her call. As if her call was not only unexpected, but also inconvenient.

What could he have been doing? He didn't carry his phone when he was Superman. If she needed him, she knew she just had to call—literally—and he would hear her.

So, his preoccupation wasn't due to being in the middle of a rescue.

Maybe he was just surprised.

When was the last time she had simply called him? Called him for no real reason? No work-related reason?

Called him to suggest they do something together?

Lois felt her cheeks heat as shame burned through her conscience.

Again—she couldn't remember the last time. The summer had come and almost gone and they had done nothing. Not together. Not something that could be considered fun. Or relaxing.

But Clark didn't call you either, her defiant side argued.

Yes, he did, she argued back. And he had done—many, many times. In the weeks and months after she'd taken the position of Editor-In-Chief, he had regularly come into her office and insisted she take a break. He had left notes on her desk and messages on her phone—asking her out, telling her he loved her, reminding her that she was Lois Lane and well able to do the job she had taken on.

Until...

Lois swallowed around the guilt-laden lump that ballooned into her throat.

Until one day, Clark had come in just after she'd discovered that a story she'd counted on as a front-page headline had fizzled into nothing remotely newsworthy. She had told him in forceful terms that he had no understanding of the stresses of trying to run an entire newspaper and he was going to have to accept that she wasn't available to accompany him out for a meal whenever he had nothing better to do.

She'd apologised later, but he hadn't asked her out much after that.

Not when she was working anyway.

And considering she'd worked close to sixteen hours just about every day for the past fifteen months, the opportunities for Clark to suggest times of togetherness had been limited.

How had it affected him?

Had he been hurt?

The little notes of love had dried up. As had the phone messages.

Even with his enormous capacity for understanding, had he ever felt animosity towards the job—the paper—that had claimed an exclusive hold on his wife’s attention? Did he resent that she had allowed it to happen?

Did he still believe this was an adjustment phase? Something that would, eventually, end and permit their lives to return to normal?

Or had this become their normal?

Clark would hate that.

Lois knew that their marriage was his greatest treasure.

And it was hers, too.

But somehow, she’d lost sight of that.

* * *

Clark waited for the elevator doors to open. His heart was pounding—which was so ridiculous he didn’t even want to think about it. But there it was—he felt the same as he had in the moments before interviewing with Perry White for the job at the Daily Planet.

Now, eleven years, five Kerths, and countless stories later, he was again to face the Editor-In-Chief and for some stupid, illogical reason, he felt just as nervous.

If he were honest, he could see the similarities.

That momentous day, his whole future had seemed to rest on the upcoming interview. And he’d had more than a few doubts about his ability to do what would be required of him.

Now, his whole future rested on what happened in the next few days. And he had way more than a few doubts about his ability to do what needed to be done.

The elevator opened, and Clark stepped out of it. His eyes automatically sought Lois’s office, and he caught a glimpse of her through the window.

His heart surged again. She was so beautiful.

And he loved her.

* * *

Lois sensed, rather than saw, Clark arrive. She looked up from her work, her heart suddenly exploding at the thought of seeing him again.

He opened her door, and she was struck afresh by how good he looked, how tall, how handsome. But it was so much more than physical looks; it was his heart. That was

what she loved the most, and that was what everything within her responded to now.

She shot from her seat and only just managed to maintain a reasonably dignified manner as she skirted her desk. When she reached him, her hands slipped up his chest and around his neck. “I’ve missed you,” she said.

For the tiniest moment, his brown eyes softened as they had so many times in the past. Then he touched his lips to her cheek, forestalling her intention to capture his mouth in a long and lingering kiss. He put his hands on her waist and gently eased her away from him. “We’ve both been busy,” he said. Maybe he saw her bewilderment, because his smile surfaced briefly. “I have to remember that my wife is the editor of the most successful newspaper in the world.”

Lois backed away to her desk, leant her butt against it, and folded her arms. “You also have to remember that your wife loves you.”

Clark flinched. The smile she’d been expecting didn’t come. Pushing through her bewilderment, she said, “I’d like you to take me to lunch.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Superman is visiting the children’s hospital today.”

“That won’t take more than an hour, will it?” she persisted. “I don’t mind if we eat early or late. I can fit in with the hospital visit.”

Clark smiled, although Lois didn’t need a decade of studying his smiles to discern that this one was forced. “We’ll see,” he said. “If I’m back in time and you’re not tied up with work, we’ll see.” He turned to leave.

Lois sprang from her desk, determined to connect with Clark before he left her office. Again, she draped her arms around his neck and deliberately crowded right into his space. His arms came around her waist, and an avalanche of wonderful memories engulfed her.

She had missed his arms. He smelled so good. So Clark. She had missed that, too.

She tightened her hold and sighed with pleasure. How could she have become so engrossed in anything that she’d forgotten how incredible this felt? She turned, expecting to find his mouth already seeking her, but he had turned aside. Lois placed her hands on his cheeks and straightened him. She reached up and emphatically captured his mouth with hers.

His response wasn’t instant, but when it came—when *he* captured *her*—it weakened her knees and surged desire through her insides.

Far too soon, Clark broke away. “I have to go,” he rasped.

“See you for lunch,” she said. And I *will* see you tonight, she promised both of them.

“I’ll try.” Clark shut her door. Lois stepped forward to the window and watched her husband disappear up the stairwell.

* * *

Clark leant against the wall of the stairwell, his heart thrashing and his breath ragged. Lois hadn’t kissed him like that for... He didn’t know how long. He felt exactly as he had so many times in the days before their marriage. He desperately wanted to storm back into her office, pick her up bodily, super-speed her into the supply room, and make love to her in a way that transported them both back to the heady days of their honeymoon.

But he couldn’t.

Because if he did... if he made love to her like that... there would be no going back. Child or no child, he would never be able to let her go.

So, he forced himself to the top of the stairs and out onto the roof. He spun into the suit and flew to the hospital, hoping they wouldn’t mind a surprise visit from a superhero.

* * *

Lois looked up from her desk as she heard her office door open. She already had her smile formed, expecting Clark back from the hospital.

It wasn’t Clark; it was Lucy.

Looking awful.

“Lucy,” Lois said as she stood and rounded her desk. She held out her hands to her sister. “What’s wrong?”

Lucy dissolved into heart-wrenching tears. Lois pulled her into an embrace and tried to soothe her. Then a terrifying thought struck her. “Lucy?” she said, panic-stricken. “It isn’t the boys, is it? Are they all right?”

Lucy backed away, and Lois could see new tears flowing from the already red-raw eyes that told of sustained weeping. “Y...y...es,” Lucy stammered. “The boys are f...fine.”

Lois clutched Lucy to her again, still concerned, but with very real relief that her nephews were safe. She allowed Lucy some time to cry—clearly, she needed it—and tried to think of what could have led to her sister’s distressed state. Lucy had matured a lot since becoming a mother. It wasn’t like her to be overwrought without a real reason.

When she couldn’t contain her curiosity any longer, Lois took a firm but gentle grip on Lucy’s shoulders and eased

them back. She looked into Lucy’s streaming eyes. “Tell me what happened,” she said.

“It’s D...Dan.”

“Dan?” A river of icy dread wound through Lois’s insides. She should have thought of that first. His job came with inherent dangers. “Oh no, Lucy,” she breathed.

Her compassion served only to increase Lucy’s tears. Lois moved to hold her close again, but Lucy stopped her. “It’s... it’s n...not what you think,” she managed.

“It’s not?”

Lucy shook her head. “He isn’t h...hurt.”

A wave of relief rolled through Lois. “Then what?”

“He’s having an affair.”

The words hit Lois like the crack of a whip. “He’s *what*?”

“He’s having an affair,” Lucy cried. “He’s been having an affair since before the boys were born.”

“The filthy cheating...” Lois saw the effect of her words on Lucy and quickly shut them down. “Who with?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does if we know her.”

Lucy shook her head again. “No one we know. Not really. Someone he works with. Someone he’s partnered with on more than one assignment.”

“Roxy Williams?” Lois guessed. “I know he worked with her on the weapon smuggling case last year.”

Lucy nodded. “I knew he respected her. I knew he enjoyed working with her. I knew it was important that he work with someone he trusts, someone he gets along with.”

“But you didn’t know he...” Lois couldn’t even bring herself to say it.

“No. Not until this morning.”

“What happened?”

“I was supposed to take the boys to see Mom. Then I realised I’d forgotten Ethan’s blanket—the soft rug he likes to sleep with. So I went back to get it, and...” Her tears rose again.

The horror of it burst into streams of nausea that twisted through Lois. “You saw them?” she gasped. “They were in your home?”

Lucy nodded from behind the fresh wave of tears. “I went into the boys’ room to get the blanket, and I heard a noise from our bedroom. I thought it could be an intruder, so I went in and there they were.”

“Actually doing—” Lois stopped herself. But the reporter in her had to know there had been no misunderstanding. She couldn’t allow Lucy to suffer this pain if there was a simple, innocent answer. “They couldn’t have been doing anything else?” she asked gently.

“In my bedroom?” Lucy exploded. “In my bed? Both naked? And intimately attached?”

So, there was no doubt. Lois pulled her sister close. “They admitted it?”

She felt Lucy nod. “Admitted it has been going on for nearly two years.”

“The cheating dog.”

“Dan said he thinks our marriage should continue for the boys’ sakes.”

Lois spluttered with disbelief. She put Lucy at arms’ length and looked into her eyes. “Did you agree to that?” she asked.

“I don’t know what we should do.”

“Where are the boys?”

“I left them with my neighbour. I couldn’t face going to Mom. She is going to erupt into a lather of hysterics when she hears about this.”

“What can I do to help?”

Lucy gave a sad smile. “You’re busy here. I just needed to talk to you.”

“You know I’m here for you,” Lois said. “Whatever you decide to do, I’ll be there for you. And the boys.”

“I know that.”

“And Clark, too. You know we’ll both help however we can.”

Lucy hesitated.

“What is it?” Lois asked.

“I... I have to go back... back home... but I don’t want to risk facing Dan... not alone. I told him to get his cheating butt out of the house, but I’m not sure he will.”

Lois reached for her bag. “I’ll come with you.”

Lucy stopped her with a hand to her arm. “No, Lois. I think—don’t take offence, but you’re too close... and too volatile. Do... do you think Clark would come with me?”

“Of course he will,” Lois answered. *Except he’s Superman at the moment.*

“Where is he?” Lucy asked. “I didn’t see him as I came through to your office.”

“He’s out on a story,” Lois said. “Go home, but don’t go in. Wait outside. Or with your neighbour. I’ll call Clark and tell him to meet you there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Clark will want to help you.”

Lucy smiled weakly and squeezed Lois’s arm. “He’s a good man,” she said. “You’re very lucky.”

Lois sank back into her chair as she watched Lucy cross the bullpen and disappear into the elevator. Lois couldn’t imagine the pain and humiliation of coming home and finding her husband in bed with another woman.

But she didn’t have to imagine it. Because she knew Clark would never do that.

Never.

Even though things hadn’t been totally great between them lately, Clark would never do that.

Lucy was right. Lois was a lucky woman.

* * *

Clark had worked his way through three wards. The kids were incredible. Most of them were sick or in pain and facing grim circumstances. It was his privilege to bring a little enjoyment to their day.

His progress had stalled at the bed of a little girl with impish brown eyes and a winning smile—a little lady whose cuteness was increased substantially by the fact her two front teeth were missing. There was something about her frank assessment of him that reminded him of Lois. Their conversation was interrupted by a nurse sidling up to him.

“Superman?” she said hesitantly.

He turned from the eager little face. “Yes?”

“We really appreciate you taking the time to visit us, but the children’s lunches are about to be delivered and then it is their rest time.”

Clark realised he could no longer hide away in the ward of a children’s hospital. He needed to go back to the Planet and face Lois. He nodded his understanding.

“I’m sorry,” the nurse said sincerely. “But we need some time for their excitement to return to reasonable levels if they are to rest this afternoon.”

Clark smiled, waved to the children, and flew from the hospital. He dropped into a vacant alley and spun into his Clark clothes.

He’d only taken a few steps when his cell phone rang. It was Lois. He wasn’t going to be able to get out of this lunch

date. He half smiled as he reflected that he should know that Lois Lane never gave up easily. “Hi,” he said. “What’s up?”

“It’s Lucy. She was just here, and she’s very upset, and she wants you to go to her house in case he’s there, and she has to get the boys from the neighbour, and she’ll need to get the locks changed so he can’t come back. Could you go there and make sure there are no problems for her?”

Clark shook his head, but he couldn’t keep the smile from his face. Being the Editor-in-Chief had not cured Lois’s propensity to babble. “Lois, honey…” The endearment slipped out—some habits were going to be hard to break. He tried again. “Lois. Can you tell me what’s wrong? Is Lucy all right? And the boys? Was she burgled? Has she called the police?”

He heard Lois take a deep breath and could clearly visualise her expression as she realised she had, yet again, jumped straight to the end of the story. “Sorry, darling,” she said. “I’m pretty upset, too. Lucy went out with the boys this morning. When she had to go back home unexpectedly, she found Dan and another woman in their bed together.”

Her words rocked him. Clark had never totally overcome his aversion to Dan Scardino. But Lucy had fallen in love with him and now he was family, so Clark had tried to swallow his dislike and get on with Dan the best he could. But despite his own misgivings, Clark had never expected Dan would do something like this. “Are you sure there is no mistake?” he asked quietly.

“No mistake,” Lois said grimly. “I asked Lucy, and what she saw is indefensible. Dan admitted the affair has been going on since before the boys were born.”

Clark rubbed the bridge of his nose and let loose with a big breath. “Ah, honey,” he said. “I’m so sorry. Are you all right?”

He didn’t wait for her reply. He glanced around, and seeing no one, he spun into the suit and flew to the Planet building. Less than a second later, he was back in his Clark clothes and running down the stairs from the roof. He crossed the bullpen with as much speed as was believable for Clark Kent and shot into his wife’s office, his phone still connected to her call. Lois rose from behind her desk and rushed to him. He took her into his arms, noticing the tears that were poised along her lower eyelids.

He held her for a long time, listening to her erratically beating heart and feeling the shaky breaths shudder through her body. “I’m so sorry, honey,” he murmured. “Are you all right?”

He felt her nod.

“How’s Lucy?”

Lois straightened from him and skimmed her forefinger along the lower edge of her eye. “Distraught. Angry. Shocked. Feeling betrayed.”

Clark slipped his hand into his pants pocket and retrieved the clean, folded handkerchief. He offered it to her. Lois took it with a little smile and used it to dry her eyes. “You said something about going to her place,” Clark said.

“Yes, she wants to go back into the house. The boys are with the neighbour. She doesn’t want to run into Dan, especially if she’s alone with the boys, so she would like you to go with her.”

“Of course,” Clark agreed. “How long ago did she leave?”

“About five minutes ago.” Lois smiled up at him, melting his heart. “Thanks for coming.”

“I always come for you, you know that.”

Her smile deepened, and her fingers trailed down his cheek. “You’ve been coming whenever I call for a long time now.”

He couldn’t help answering her smile; she was so beautiful. But then he remembered last night. He hugged her briefly and stepped away. “I should go,” he said. “I won’t be able to make lunch. Sorry.”

She kissed him—directly to his mouth and straight into his heart. “That’s OK.”

He reached for the door handle, needing to escape.

“Clark?”

He turned back to her. “Uhm?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thanks for being who you are.”

He waved a casual acknowledgement of her words and scurried away.

Part 4

That evening, Lois sat at her huge desk and stared ahead, seeing nothing.

It was late, but that was normal now. Since taking over from Perry White, she had stubbornly refused to leave the office until the paper had been put to bed.

She’d finished over half an hour ago, but she hadn’t moved from her desk. Instead of shutting down her computer and wearily picking up her bag, Lois had collapsed into her comfortable chair and absently twirled a pencil as her mind had churned through a labyrinth of reflection.

Her thoughts travelled to her sister. Lucy, who had awoken this morning with the blissful belief that all was right in her world. That her husband loved her, that her marriage was strong, and her boys were happy and healthy.

Just a few hours later, that illusion had been shattered. By now, she'd probably put the boys to bed. Would they sense something was wrong? In the way of small children, would they sense their mother's distress? Would it make them restless and difficult to settle? Dan was often away working, so his absence wouldn't alert them that their lives had changed forever.

Once the boys were asleep, how would Lucy cope with having nothing to occupy her mind except the one thing she probably wanted to avoid? She would be alone, facing the harsh reality that this was her life now. Again, in practice, it wouldn't be that different. But all the other evenings she'd spent alone, she'd been secure in the knowledge that her husband was working and would come home to his family.

Now, she knew differently—he wasn't at work, he was with another woman. And he wouldn't be coming home.

Lois sighed. Lucy's heart must feel like a chunk of lead inside her chest.

Had Lucy suspected?

Had there been any slight loosening of the bond between husband and wife? Any small clue that Dan's heart and body had wandered? Had there been anything that could have prepared Lucy for the sight she'd encountered when she'd walked into her bedroom this morning?

If there had been, Lucy had said nothing to Lois. The sisters had a reasonably good relationship. They had, on occasion, experienced times of closeness when they had more openly shared their feelings and hopes and dreams.

But... this last year...

Lois sighed.

This last year, her life had been consumed with work.

And in her single-mindedness, she had neglected the most important person in her life. They had drifted apart, and she hadn't even noticed.

Clark hadn't wanted to go to lunch with her.

Not *couldn't* but hadn't wanted to.

Mid-afternoon, Lois had called the children's hospital and pretended she was a reporter working on a story. Thankfully, the nurse who had answered the phone hadn't known enough about the running of a newspaper to question why the Editor-in-Chief was personally chasing up a heart-warming, but hardly earth-shattering, story.

Superman's visit had been a surprise. A very welcome surprise, the nurse had hastened to add, but the hospital had had no prior arrangement with the superhero.

Clark had used it to avoid their lunch date.

Was it relevant that he'd gone to a *children's* hospital?

Was he trying to overcome his disappointment that there would be no children in his home? Was this his way of coping? Did he use these activities the way she had used her job? As a means of trying to fill the void of their childlessness?

Lois felt her tears rise again. She straightened and wiped them away before they could gain a foothold. She needed to think—or better, act—not dissolve into an emotional mess. She picked up her phone and punched in her home number.

After a short wait, she heard Clark's voice, but her pleasure was immediately quashed by the sinking realisation that it was the answering machine.

Another layer of shame seeped through her conscience. She had very little idea of what Clark did with his evenings. She spent her evenings at the Planet—and had done so almost every day since she had become the Editor-in-Chief. In the beginning, Clark had probably gone home and eagerly awaited her, ensuring everything would be perfect for when she arrived.

But as her arrival times had become later and more erratic, he had probably grown tired of waiting alone. She vaguely remembered seeing a story in the Star about an initiative to give teenagers something to do in the evenings. It had told how a hall had been made available for volunteers to provide homework help, a nutritious meal, and activities such as sports and games for kids who would otherwise be unsupervised while their parents... Lois gulped. ... while their parents were not at home.

Clark's name had been mentioned in passing as one of the volunteers. Her husband probably felt an affinity with the kids who were left alone long into the evening.

Is that where he was now?

Lois didn't know. Because, she hadn't asked.

In fact, she hadn't given one thought to what Clark did after he left the Planet and headed to the home they were supposed to share.

Why had he been so determined to avoid her today?

Had he engineered his whole-day busyness? Or was it just that the events of the day had conspired against them?

If it weren't for her call to the hospital, Lois could have accepted that it was just the natural consequence of two

people having busy lives. Three people, if you counted Superman.

But the knowledge that Clark's visit to the hospital hadn't been pre-planned sat rigid in her stomach.

She reached for her mouse to close down her computer, intending to go home and wait for Clark. She wanted to be there for him when he got in—to hold him, to talk with him, to listen to him. Just to *be* with him.

But... her hand stalled. She... *they* needed more than that.

Much more than that. It was going to take more than one evening to bridge the remoteness that had developed between them. It was going to take more than one paltry gesture to reassure Clark that, despite this past year, she loved him deeply and was wholly committed to their marriage.

It needed to be something dramatic.

Something that made a strong statement and began to regain the ground they had lost.

Something that helped Clark forget the long evenings he'd spent alone.

They needed to get right out of Metropolis. If she were here, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from analysing every edition of the Daily Planet. She needed to go to a place where it didn't exist. Where she could clear her mind of all the stresses of her job and simply fill it with her husband.

Lois opened her internet browser, googled 'relaxing, romantic getaways' and began her research.

* * *

An hour later, Lois unlocked her front door. "Clark?" she called. "Are you home, honey?"

He hadn't answered her repeated phone calls, but despite that, her anticipation had risen as she'd neared home.

She wanted her husband.

She dropped her almost-empty bag—she had removed all the work and left it on her desk—and her keys on the table. The downstairs lights were off. It was after eleven—perhaps Clark had already gone up to their room.

As Lois skipped up the stairs, her hope bubbled again, refusing to be subdued. She leapt up the final step and burst into their bedroom.

It was dark. She switched on the light, hoping he would be in the bed.

The bed was empty—tidy, made, deserted.

Disappointment flooded through her. Someone, somewhere, needed Superman.

But she needed Clark.

She slumped onto the bed, struggling against the rise of tears that threatened to overwhelm her. She looked around the bedroom. It was a quiet, empty, lonely place without him.

How many hours had Clark spent here, waiting for her? Hoping she would join him early enough that they could have time together before exhaustion claimed her?

Lois backhanded the few tears that had pushed through her defences. She crossed the room to the telephone and called Lucy. It was late, but if Lucy were in bed, the answering machine would deal with the call. And tomorrow morning, Lucy would know that her sister had been thinking of her.

She heard the click as her call was answered. "Lois." Lucy's voice sounded thick with recent tears.

"Are you all right?" Lois asked.

"The boys are finally asleep."

"Did you see Dan today? Later, I mean?"

"Didn't Clark tell you?"

No—the one time Clark had come into her office, Lois had been on the phone. He'd nodded, lifted his hand in farewell, and left her to her call. By the time she'd hung up, he had gone from the office. "No," Lois told Lucy. "I was busy when he came in."

"Dan was there when Clark and I went into the house with the boys," Lucy said. "Clark was wonderful, Lois. He stood beside me—so calm and reassuring. Dan told him this was none of Clark's business and ordered him from the house, but Clark said he would be staying until I told him to leave. Dan got angry and said some horrible things, and without Clark, it would have been just awful. After Dan had gone, Clark helped me to comfort the boys, then he made me coffee and sat down with me and let me talk. He wasn't judgmental or disapproving. He was so incredibly understanding and supportive."

That was Clark. That was exactly Clark.

Lucy continued. "I could, perhaps, have forgiven the affair over time. What I can't forgive is that Dan tried to make this my fault. He asked me what I expected a man to do when his wife has no time for him."

A bitter mound of regret heaved inside Lois. She shoved it aside and concentrated on Lucy's voice.

“He said he loves Roxy and although he is willing to remain married to me for the sake of the boys, he’s not willing to give up Roxy.”

Lois bit back her acid comment and went with a sanitised version. “You can’t stay with him like that.”

“I know,” Lucy said quietly. “But it’s going to be hard. I feel so much for the boys. They’re so little. I wanted them to have what we didn’t have. I wanted them to…” Her words dissolved into soft weeping.

“They still have you,” Lois said, torn between going to Lucy and staying at home to await Clark’s return. She could picture Lucy, mired in the anguish of knowing her husband was with another woman. Knowing her marriage was over. Knowing her children would be raised by separated, hurt, and hostile parents. “Would you like me to come over?” Lois offered.

Before Lucy had answered, Lois heard a noise downstairs. She closed her eyes, wishing she could retract her offer.

“It’s late,” Lucy said hesitantly.

Clark’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. The door swung open, and he entered—wearing jeans and a casual blue sweater. He crossed the room to his side of the bed, stopping only briefly to kiss her cheek. Lois covered the phone. “Lucy,” she whispered.

He nodded. Lois watched as Clark put his wallet, cell phone, and keys in the drawer next to his bed. As he leant over to close the drawer, she noticed—for the first time in a long time—how his jeans stretched so very enticingly across his butt.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Lucy said. “I know you don’t get much time with Clark.”

Lois wanted to go to her sister—to hold her as she cried, to listen as she mourned, to assure her that Lois would be there for her as she faced life as the single mother of twin boys.

But Lois desperately wanted to be with Clark, as well.

She missed him. He had been right here—in their bedroom, in their home, at the Planet—yet she felt as if she hadn’t connected with him for a long, long time.

“I can come if you need me,” Lois said. As she spoke, she watched Clark for a reaction to her words. Would he be disappointed that his wife had—once again—chosen something other than being with him?

She saw nothing to indicate he had even heard. He sat on the bed and undid the laces of his tennis shoes.

“Really?” Lucy said. “Oh, Lois, that would be wonderful.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” she said firmly, already planning to spend fifteen minutes with Clark and then get him to fly her to Lucy’s.

“Lois, thank you,” Lucy said. Lois could hear a groundswell of gratitude in those three words.

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye. And thanks.”

Lois replaced the phone and crossed to where Clark was still sitting on the bed. “How’s Lucy?” he said.

“Not too good.” Lois put her hand on Clark’s shoulder. “I’m going over there—just for a short time. Do you mind?”

She thought she saw a slither of surprise cross Clark’s face, but he didn’t say anything other than, “Of course not. This has to be really hard for her.”

Lois brushed her fingers through the hair just above the wing of his glasses. “Would you fly me?” she asked. “Then I can be home earlier.”

“You have work you need to do?” Clark said. There was nothing in his voice—no disappointment, no condemnation. Just a simple request for information. He stood and manoeuvred between her and the bed without even brushing against her.

“No, I thought—”

Clark’s hand lifted and cut off her words.

“You’re needed?” Lois asked as she recognised the expression on his face. Her question oozed disappointment, but Clark didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah, car wreck, people trapped.”

“I’ll drive to Lucy’s.”

Clark nodded. He spun into the suit. “See you tomorrow,” he said.

He flew out of the window.

Without even kissing her.

Lois collapsed onto the bed, shocked.

How could she have missed the growing gulf between them?

For Clark to leave—no matter how dire the emergency—without kissing her...

How long had that been happening?

How long had he found no pleasure in her touch? Her presence? How long ago had his hands stopped reaching for her at every opportunity?

Was he protecting himself from the pain of her constant absences?

Had he learnt to live without her attention? Her love?

Lois slowly descended the stairs.

Her husband had drifted away.

And she had been so caught up in a newspaper, she hadn't even noticed.

* * *

Lucy met Lois at the door with a tight hug and a gush of tears. They sat together on Lucy's sofa, drinking coffee.

"I can't imagine how you must feel," Lois said, realising it was true.

"Why would you?" Lucy said pragmatically. "You know Clark would never do anything like this."

"But you didn't think Dan would do it, did you?" Lois asked in dismay.

Lucy hesitated. She shuffled further back into the sofa, and her eyes dropped to her cup. "Things haven't been too good for a while," she admitted.

"Lucy!" Lois exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You have your own life," Lucy said. "You were busy—with the Planet and with the new home you bought with Clark."

Lois contemplated her sister. Is that how Lucy saw her life? The Planet first, the home second, and Clark trailing a distant third?

More importantly, is that how Clark saw her priorities?

"I would always make time for you," Lois said, knowing as she said it that it hadn't been the truth in the recent past.

"I thought having the boys would help things," Lucy said. "I thought having a family would bring Dan and me closer together."

"It's been bad that long?" Lois asked in surprise.

"Honestly?" she said with a despondent shrug. "It was never... exhilarating. Even in the first months of our marriage, I sometimes wondered if we had gotten married because we thought our families expected it of us. Dan seemed as good as anyone—he was certainly better than any of the other men I'd been with."

"Lucy!" Lois said. "I never knew. I thought you and Dan were happy together."

"We were... sort of," Lucy said. She looked straight into Lois's eyes. "But we never came anywhere near what you and Clark have."

Have?

Or had?

Lucy wiped a breakaway tear from her cheek. "I guess I wanted someone who looked at me the way Clark looks at you. None of my boyfriends were ever like that. Then Dan came along, and he was no Clark Kent, but he had a certain charm and even though he'd once had a thing for you—"

"I never had anything with Dan."

"I know that, Lois," Lucy said. "Dan admits that. He was interested, but he accepted he couldn't compete with what you felt for Clark. It was pretty obvious way back then that to get to you, any other man was going to have to go through Clark Kent." She drank from her coffee. "What I'm saying is that maybe both Dan and I had reasons for getting married but maybe neither of us had good reasons."

Lois's brain was spinning. "I didn't realise," she said quietly.

"Dan is a federal agent, Lois. Pretending to be something he's not is a part of his job. I can play along, too. And we had you as role models. Just copy Lois and Clark—then you'll look like the perfect couple."

Lois searched for resentment in her sister's face but found none. "Is that what you really think?" Lois asked. "That what Clark and I have is an act?"

Lucy spluttered. "Are you kidding? If your marriage is an act, there's no hope for any of us. You have the closest thing imaginable to a perfect marriage."

We did, Lois corrected. "Is it over?" she asked gently. "Is it over with Dan?"

Lucy took a shaky breath. "Yes," she said sadly. "Yes, it's over. It's not so much the affair and how long it has been going on, but Dan's complete lack of remorse. He says a man has needs, and I know that for most of the pregnancy, I was either sick or so big and uncomfortable that... well, being a wife to him in the bedroom just wasn't a priority. Then my blood pressure skyrocketed and I was in hospital for weeks, and the boys came early, and even when I left the hospital with Ethan, Tyler had to stay, and I was stretched between being a mother with a newborn at home and being a mother with a sick baby in the hospital. Then when Tyler finally came home, the days were just never long enough."

For the first time, Lois could see the parallels between her life and Lucy's. They had both become caught up in new responsibilities. "That doesn't excuse what he did," Lois said.

“No, it doesn’t,” Lucy said. She wiped her wet cheeks with a sodden tissue.

Then they were silent, both thinking.

“Can I ask you something?” Lucy said suddenly.

Lois detected heavy significance in her sister’s tone. “OK,” she said warily.

“Do you want children?”

Lois paused. “If children came, we would be thrilled.”

“But?”

“But at this point, it doesn’t seem as if it is going to happen.”

“So you’ve tried?”

“Yes.”

Lucy placed her hand on Lois’s arm. “I’m sorry, Lois.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Sorry for thinking you didn’t want children. Sorry for thinking your job was so important to you, you didn’t have the time for them.”

“One of the reasons I am so engrossed in my job is because I don’t have children.”

“But if you became pregnant, you would be happy?”

“I would be ecstatic.” Lois felt the longing crawl up her throat. “And Clark would be, too.”

Lucy smiled a teary smile. “I guess we are both going to have to learn to be happy with what we have and try not to obsess about what we don’t have.”

Lois sighed. “I think you’re right.” She stood. “I should be getting back to Clark.”

Lucy stood, too. “Thanks for coming, Lois. I needed some company, and there’s no one I would have preferred to see tonight.”

Lois wasn’t completely sure that was the truth, but she appreciated Lucy saying it. “Do you mind if I have a quick peek at my nephews?” she asked.

“Of course not,” Lucy said. They tiptoed up the stairs and into the boys’ room.

Lois peered at the sweetly sleeping faces, trying not to show her shock at how much they had grown since she last saw them. They didn’t look like babies anymore. “They grow so fast, don’t they?” she whispered.

Lucy nodded. “It seems only a few weeks ago that I was in hospital with them. They were so tiny then, and now they’re big, healthy boys.”

“You have so much,” Lois said. “Try to concentrate on that.”

Lucy straightened the soft blanket over Tyler. “I know,” she said.

At the bottom of the stairs, Lois and Lucy embraced for a long moment. “When you need help,” Lois said, “or just someone to talk to, call me.”

“I will,” Lucy promised, but Lois wondered if she really would. “Thank you so much for coming. I know you don’t get enough time with Clark.”

Lois drove home, deep in thought. The darkness pushed into the car, accentuating her tiredness. Together, they proved a fertile breeding ground for fear.

What if Clark didn’t love her anymore?

She couldn’t lose Clark.

She could lose *everything* else in her life, and painful though that would be, she would survive if she had Clark.

But if she lost him...

If she’d *already* lost him...

Lois straightened her shoulders and turned on the radio. She hummed tunelessly to the not-immediately-familiar song, but a few bars in, it caught in her throat.

Clark loved her.

He did.

He would always love her. She had allowed herself to be lured away by her very demanding job, but it would take more than that to extinguish Clark’s love for her.

When she’d told him on that park bench that she only loved him as a friend... his love had survived that.

When she’d gone perilously close to marrying Lex Luthor... his love had survived that.

When she’d gotten so hurt and angry after his proposal had morphed into an earth-shattering revelation... his love had survived that.

When she’d been swapped for a clone and he’d married a sham bride... his love had survived that.

When she’d lost her memory and told him she was in love with a kooky psychiatrist... his love had survived that.

When Zara and Ching had come and urged him to accompany them to New Krypton... his love for Lois Lane had only grown stronger.

The one absolute in her life—a life that often spiralled way beyond weird—was Clark’s love for her.

And her love for him.

He knew that, didn't he?

Despite her distraction and neglect for over a year, he had to know she still loved him.

Didn't he?

He knew she would always love him.

Didn't he?

Or had the hours alone allowed his doubts to take root and grow?

Had her neglect seemed like a dying love?

"Aww, Clark," Lois muttered. "I still love you. Please know that."

Part 5

Clark pulled the now-empty car from the road so the lane could be re-opened. The police officer came over and thanked him for his help.

Clark nodded and scanned the area for anything else requiring his powers. Satisfied there was nothing, he lifted from the ground, relieved it was late enough that interested onlookers were few and the media was unrepresented.

He didn't feel like answering questions. Didn't feel like talking.

Not about a car wreck.

He settled on the top of the highest building in Metropolis and leant back with a deep sigh.

What a mess.

His heart ached for Lucy. Dan's betrayal was surely the worst of all traitorous acts. Somehow, it struck right at the essence of trust.

If Lois...

If Lois left him... and married someone else... she would... they would...

Just the thought of it sent shooting stabs of pain through his heart.

He had so firmly fixated on the image of Lois with a child that he had been able to ignore the things that would have to come first.

He just didn't want to think about that.

Was there any other way?

Was there any other way for Lois to have a child?

Any way that meant they could stay together?

He'd become lost in the fog of his decision that he needed to cultivate a distance between them in order to lead into their separation.

Now... now he just wasn't sure he couldn't actually do it.

He loved Lois so much.

But he wasn't enough for her. He could never give her the child she wanted. She had chosen to fill that hollowness with her job—not with him.

What could he do?

He groaned as his mind spun faster and faster in ever-decreasing circles of confusion.

Then he stood and flew to Smallville.

* * *

Martha Kent dabbed two splotches of pastel blue paint across the deep blue that represented the ocean. She stepped back, her paintbrush still poised, and studied the canvas.

She smiled. It had a pleasing balance now—a slightly offset symmetry that she enjoyed.

But the true test would be how it looked at first glance tomorrow morning. She checked the clock and was astonished at how much time had passed. Jonathan had gone to bed over two hours ago.

She gathered her brushes and palette and headed for the kitchen sink.

Before she reached it, she heard the so-familiar swoosh and detoured to open the door. As Clark walked in, she searched his face, hoping for an indication he had changed his mind about leaving Lois.

"Hi," she said, reaching up to kiss him, while being careful to ensure that her brushes didn't contact his suit. "How are you?"

It was a superfluous question. His face said it all. "OK," he said grimly.

Martha went to the sink, deposited her painting tools and filled it with water, trying not to think of the damage soaking would inflict upon her brushes. She sat next to the disconsolate figure of her son. "It's not going so well?"

"Lucy and Dan have broken up."

"Oh, Clark," she said, squeezing his arm briefly. "I'm so sorry."

"Dan is having an affair with a work colleague."

"Oh, no." Even in her compassion for Lucy, Martha felt a tiny thread of hope for her son. Perhaps this would make him realise that marriage was not disposable. Perhaps it

would help him see that his plans—however altruistic—were totally misguided. “How’s Lois?”

“She was upset when Lucy told her.”

They fell to silence—a heavy silence. There was so much Martha wanted to ask. So many questions that had formed as she had brooded over their previous conversation. “How’s it going?” she said.

“I hate it,” he replied darkly.

“You hate what Dan did?”

Clark absently drummed his fingers on the table. “Of course I hate what Dan did,” he said, “but that’s not what I meant.”

“Leaving Lois isn’t going to be easy?” Martha guessed.

“It’s killing me.”

Martha decided she needed to speak frankly. She would probably embarrass herself and almost certainly embarrass her son, but if it could save his marriage... “Clark,” she said gently. “There are other options, you know.”

“Like finding a spaceship?” he snapped. He groaned instantly. “Sorry, Mom, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Like adoption,” she said.

Clark sighed. “We tried that. We missed the first appointment because Lois had been left for dead in a disused mine by two men who didn’t appreciate her investigating their habit of renting out apartments they didn’t own. We missed the second appointment because there was an earthquake in China. Lois went, and they asked where I was, and of course she couldn’t tell them I was hauling survivors out from under tons of rubble. They said the third appointment was our final chance—but we missed that because Lois was tied to the underside of a pier in Hobb’s Bay as the tide rose. I arrived at the adoption agency and got as far as the interview room before I heard her screams. I made the usual inadequate, stammering excuses and ran out.”

“Oh, Clark.” His arm under her hand was so tense that it felt like granite.

“A week later we received a letter informing us we were unsuitable as adoptive parents because of our high-risk lifestyle and our low level of commitment to the adoption process as evidenced by our casual attitude to the appointments.” Clark pulled his hand out from under Martha’s and sat back in the chair, his arms folded.

His posture was as unapproachable as Martha had ever seen from him. She was trying to formulate her next question when he spoke.

“Would you like to hear the details of why we decided against using donor sperm?” he demanded harshly.

Martha flinched, but she tried to hide it. “What happened?” she asked, pouring a reservoir of love into her question.

He glared—not at her, but at the table. “Reputable sperm banks won’t deal directly with people,” he said coldly. “The *transaction* has to be supervised by a medical practitioner.”

Martha could fully appreciate that this was uncomfortable for Clark—both discussing it now and the actual experience. But she couldn’t see how it was worse than considering a divorce.

He saved her from having to ask another question. “Do you know what happens when a couple walk into a doctor’s office and says they are unable to conceive? The first thing the doctor does is order tests on the man’s semen. But, of course, we couldn’t do that, because one look at my semen is going to turn the medical world on its head.”

“What happens when you refuse?” Martha asked gently.

“The doctor decides I’m stupidly stubborn and not at all committed to becoming a father.” Clark shrugged, and Martha could see the hopelessness in his gesture. “Finally, he realises that all of his reasoning and explanation is not going to get the tests done, so he moves to Lois. The tests for her are much more intrusive, but the doctors insist and won’t accept our argument that we have no reason to suspect Lois can’t conceive.” Clark glanced up to her. “And all that’s before any doctor will even *talk* about donor sperm.”

“Has Lois had the tests?”

“After we tried four doctors and always arrived at the same point, yes—she had the tests.”

“And?”

“And there is no reason why she couldn’t conceive.”

“So?”

“So, we thought it would be simple, but it’s not. They always want to use hormones to stimulate ovulation and the whole process becomes so involved and so cold and so contrived.”

“But if it resulted in the child you both want...”

Clark was staring at the table again. “We spent hours going through profiles of donors,” he said sadly. “It was so unnatural, so weird to be shopping for the father of your child.”

“But others have done it,” Martha said. “It has worked well for them.”

His head jolted up. “But others don’t have to consider the possibility that the world will one day find out that Clark Kent is Superman. Imagine that, Mom. Imagine if the world knew. They’re going to want to know how the freak managed to impregnate his wife. The records will show that Lois used a sperm donor, and suddenly, there will be dozens of men wondering if they are the father of Superman’s child.” Clark squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Imagine the uproar. And in the middle of it will be a little kid who didn’t ask to have an alien as his father.”

Martha didn’t know how to respond. It was true she hadn’t thought through the difficulties Clark and Lois would face. But she would never accept that divorce was the best solution.

“You still disagree with me, don’t you?” Clark said.

Martha looked at her son, and in his eyes, she saw steely defiance. “Yes,” she said. “I will never believe that it is best for you and Lois to be apart.”

He stood abruptly. “Then you come up with a better solution.” He stormed from her kitchen, his cape slapping against his legs.

Martha stood slowly and returned to her neglected brushes. As she washed them, her tears fell, landing on her wet hands and dissipating into the coloured water.

If only her son’s pain could be washed away as easily.

* * *

The house was still empty when Lois arrived home.

She felt its oppression as she walked through the eerie silence.

Usually when she arrived home, she was so tired that her only thought was to get to bed and try to get sufficient sleep to enable her to function the next day.

But now, it was still and quiet and so very, very empty.

She wanted Clark.

She needed Clark.

This house wasn’t a home without Clark.

She stood at the end of her bed and wished he were here, wished they could go to bed together—to talk, to cuddle, maybe to make love... although right now, she needed his presence more than his body.

With a sigh, Lois glanced at the clock. It was after midnight. She had no way of knowing how long Clark would be away.

If he’d been called to another emergency, it could be hours before he came back.

But if it were just the one car wreck, it shouldn’t take too much longer.

Unless...

What if Clark deliberately stayed away? What if he felt the loneliness so much that he had started avoiding it—looking for things to do as Superman, looking for anything that would postpone having to face an unwelcoming house?

Lois resolutely pushed away her exhaustion. If she went to bed now, she would be asleep when Clark came in and she wouldn’t see him until tomorrow morning at the earliest.

She circled the room, touching things, opening drawers, re-connecting with an environment she came back to every night, but hadn’t really looked at in months. She picked up the perfume that had been Clark’s birthday gift to her and sprayed a little on her wrist. It was called *Treasure Chest*.

Had Clark chosen it for the name? Or because he thought she would like the scent? Or because a store assistant had recommended it?

Treasure Chest.

If the chest could be considered her life, what was her most cherished treasure?

Clark.

Clark. No question.

Clark.

If she’d had to choose between losing Clark and never again working another day at the Planet, which would she keep?

Again. No question. Clark. She would cling to him.

But there had been nothing in her behaviour these past months that represented what was in her heart.

Lois gently replaced the bottle, brought her wrist to her nose, and breathed deeply.

It was beautiful. Fruity, sweet and with the hint of vanilla that she loved.

If Clark had chosen it for the scent, he knew her well.

Lois continued around the room, stopping at the closet. She opened the door and saw the row of Clark’s shirts. She clasped one against her cheek, inhaling the essence of Clark that lingered in the fabric.

She slid open one of his drawers and was met by a splash of garish green. She held up the piece of clothing and saw it was a basketball jersey. The front was emblazoned with the words, *Kent’s Cougars* and a picture of a startled kitten.

Lois’s laughter echoed around the empty room.

She turned the jersey. On the back was written *Purr-fect* and the number, 21.

Did Clark play basketball?

As much as he enjoyed many sports, Clark had avoided playing competitively since his college days. He figured it wasn't fair on everyone else.

Lois folded the jersey and replaced it in the drawer.

She moved to the next room—the second bedroom they used as a study—and turned on the computer. She again googled 'relaxing, romantic getaways' and found some of the sites that had interested her earlier.

Some of the places sounded perfect. The South Seas Summerhouse. Just the name evoked feelings that resonated strongly with what she was hoping for—tranquillity, sunshine, empty beaches.

She imagined Clark, dressed only in a pair of old shorts, the sea breezes tousling his hair, his eyes shining with happiness, his smile constant. She imagined him leaning down to kiss her as the waves splashed over their bare feet.

But it was in Florida, and Lois wanted to get out of the United States.

She noticed a link for an international hotel chain. She moved the cursor to the drop-down and skimmed over the far-flung countries of the world.

She paused on the Caribbean and clicked through to an island called Anguilla. There were pictures of white sand and blue sea and villas made for two. The images called out to her and drew her into their idyllic ambience.

The hotel was called the Caribbean Coral. Lois sighed wistfully at the beauty and serenity set before her. It looked perfect. Impulsively, she clicked on 'book' and a box appeared, asking for the dates she required. She took her diary from her bag and flicked to the end of September. Next week she had eight appointments, but only two of them were crucial.

Crucial?

Perhaps she needed to redefine 'crucial'.

One meeting was with the owners of the Daily Planet. It was a strategy meeting—to plan the direction of the paper for the coming three months. It was vital that she be there. Two of the owners were flying in from interstate.

Lois flicked to the following week. She already had thirteen appointments booked.

She turned the pages and looked ahead—week by week.

The first clear week was in early December.

She couldn't wait that long.

She wouldn't wait that long.

She would do it next week. Monday. That would give her three days to prepare the paper for her absence. She hadn't taken leave for nearly two years. She would simply tell the owners that she was taking some of the vacation time owed to her.

What would happen to the Planet if she were gone for a week?

Fear snaked through her heart. Would they lose readers? Would the standard drop? Would they be scooped in a really big story? If she wasn't there, overseeing every published word, would -

Lois clamped down on her fears. They were not the important questions. The only important question was how Clark would feel if she continued to put her job before him.

Next to that, nothing else held the slightest significance.

Lois keyed in next week's dates, chose a mid-range villa, and waited with growing suspense. She wanted this. She wanted it badly.

What if they had nothing available at such short notice?

The page came up—telling her a White Wonderland villa had been reserved for her, pending payment.

Lois's squeal of excitement echoed around the empty room. She put in her credit card numbers and clicked on 'purchase'.

As she waited for confirmation of her booking, Lois felt her new exhilaration rise from the dust of her detachment. She felt alive—as if she had just awoken from a long, long hibernation.

Five days away with Clark! Just the two of them! Together!

When her booking was finalised, she printed out her receipt. As it emerged from the printer, she heard the swish of the curtain in the bedroom. She jumped from her seat and skipped into the bedroom. "Clark," she greeted, grinning and breathless.

He looked up quickly. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She stopped. "Nothing's wrong," she said.

He eyed her for a long moment. "You sure?"

"I'm sure." She gestured through the door and towards the study. "I've just been—"

He spun out of the Superman suit and into his robe. "I need a shower," he said. "I'm covered in grease and oil from the car."

"Want some company?" Lois asked.

He had already reached the door of their bathroom, but he turned at her words. "I was going to do it at super-speed," he said. "It's late. I'm tired. You must be tired, too."

He entered the bathroom. Five seconds later, he walked out, wearing his sleep shorts and a tee shirt. He hung up his robe and came over to where Lois was standing at the end of their bed, still holding the print-out of their vacation booking. He leant down and dutifully kissed her cheek. "G'night," he said. He climbed into bed and pulled the covers to his shoulder.

Lois's enthusiasm evaporated in a haze of indecision. Should she leave him and let him sleep? Or should she pursue this now? She moved to his side of the bed and knelt on the floor. "Hey, Clark?"

His eyes opened slowly. "Uhm?"

"I think we need a vacation."

"A vacation?" he said doubtfully.

She thrust the paper at him and watched as his eyes skimmed the details.

"Next week?" he said. "Why next week?"

"We have spent so little time together since... well, for a long time, and I thought this would be perfect."

"You've already booked it?"

Lois sensed it required effort for him to keep displeasure from sounding in his question. She nodded and pushed the last dregs of her dwindling enthusiasm into her reply. "If I hadn't booked it, we'll talk about it, agree it's a good idea, and keep putting it off, waiting for the ideal time."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Clark said flatly.

Lois felt her shoulders slump. "Why not?"

"Because we both have important things scheduled for next week," he said. "You have the strategic planning meeting with the owners. I have things I have promised to do." He still refused to meet her eyes. "And then there's Lucy. I don't think we should go away when her life has just fallen apart."

"I saw her tonight," Lois said. "She is going to need support, but she will be all right if we go away for five days."

"I wish you'd discussed it with me first." There was something in his tone—reproach, maybe. No, not reproach. Hopelessness.

"I thought it would be a nice surprise."

He met her eyes for a fleeting moment. "Can you change the dates?"

"Why is it so important that we don't go next week?"

He rose onto his elbow and the sheet fell from his shoulder, revealing a muscle-ripped upper arm. "We hadn't planned this," he said. "We both have commitments here—things not easily changed or postponed. A big vacation like this is usually planned weeks in advance."

"But Clark, we've both worked really hard for so long. I want to relax and rest and not think about anything except us."

"I don't think we should go," he said.

"Why not?"

"I just don't think now is the right time."

There was something he wasn't telling her. Her heart went cold. What could it possibly be?

That he didn't love her anymore?

That he didn't want to be married to her anymore?

That... Lois felt her heart constrict... that he had found someone else?

Is that what he did in the evenings while she was at the Planet? Had he—either Clark or Superman—found someone to share those long empty hours? Neither would lack for opportunities. Clark was an extremely good-looking man, with a kind and gentle spirit that would prove irresistible to many women. And Superman—Superman had had women fawning over him since he'd first appeared.

Clark slid back down the bed. "I'm tired," he said. "Could we discuss this tomorrow, please?"

Lois pushed down her annoyance—annoyance that was laced with fear. She slowly rose from the floor and returned to the computer.

The pictures of the beautiful beaches didn't seem at all appealing any more.

Not without Clark.

* * *

Clark kept his eyes closed until he heard Lois in the shower. Then he lifted from the bed and flew into the study at super-speed. The computer was still on. He checked through the recent pages and speed-read the information about the villas at the resort on Anguilla.

When he finished, he groaned. Now he understood.

She was hoping for a miracle.

She was pinning all her desperate yearning for a child on a week together in a Caribbean paradise. That's why she was so adamant about the timing.

He groaned again, dreading his wife's heart-broken despair when they returned home and she discovered she wasn't pregnant.

He couldn't go.

He couldn't let her build hope for something he knew was impossible.

And if he went, if he spent five days, five long glorious days with his wife, he would never be able to suggest they divorce. It would be impossible. If he spent five days being reminded of every little thing about Lois Lane—the things he had glimpsed for the first time in Perry's office, the things that had captured his heart within seconds of meeting her, the things that would be embedded there for as long as he breathed—how could he ever let her go?

It had been hard enough not to respond to her little touches today. It would be impossible not to respond to her when they were alone in the warm, relaxed atmosphere of a Caribbean villa.

And when that atmosphere and closeness led to steamy, passionate lovemaking but no baby, it was going to rip them both to shreds.

She had looked so breathtakingly beautiful when she had bounded into their room—her eyes sparkling with excitement and her face alight with anticipation.

It had tugged at everything within him and made him long to sweep her into his arms and laugh without restraint from the sheer joy of seeing her happy.

Clark heard the shower door open. He quickly shut down the pages and flew back to bed. When Lois slipped in beside him, he was already settled, his back to her, his heart heavy, his tears pushing against his tightly clamped eyelids.

Part 6

When Lois awoke early the next morning, her first awareness was Clark in the bed beside her. She opened her eyes and saw his back.

Why was he so insistent about not going away together?

Was it just the inconvenience of having to reschedule plans? Or did he have a deeper reason?

She didn't know, but sleep had refreshed her and gone some way to dissolving both her dashed spirits and her pessimism about the state of their marriage.

Reaching forward, Lois found the hem of Clark's tee shirt and slid under it onto the warm smooth skin of his back. She travelled up his spine, allowing her fingernails to skim at exactly the depth of pressure he liked.

He was awake. At her first touch, his underlying muscles had tensed and his breathing rhythm had lost its regularity.

Having reached his neck, she fanned across the top of his shoulder blade, rediscovering the curves and slopes, finding all of his favourite spots.

She continued, languidly covering every inch of his back. Then she swept to the upper reaches of his spine, readjusted the angle of her fingertips, and began to massage his neck, meandering into the short bristles of his hair.

Clark still hadn't moved, but she could feel the loosening of his muscles as his tension was enticed away by her touch.

Suddenly, she wanted far more of her husband than his broad back and wide shoulders. She slid her hand down the valley of his spine, climbed up the slope to his hip, and burrowed her fingertips under the waistband of his shorts.

He lurched from the bed in what had to be more than human speed.

He stood for a moment, back to her and then glanced over his shoulder. "No time," he muttered. "Gotta get to work."

An avalanche of conflicting feelings—shock, rejection, confusion... and a dash of illogical humour—swept through her. The humour won—because all the other emotions were too complex to grapple with right now. "Clark?" she said.

He halted in his passage to the bathroom. "Yeah?"

"Look at me."

He stilled and then half turned. His head was low, but that just brought his eyes directly into line with hers.

She smiled, noticed he didn't, but spoke anyway. "I'm sure your boss will understand if you're late today."

His hand lifted and his mouth flailed, and Lois had a flashed memory of a younger Clark Kent trying to extract a not-completely-feeble excuse from an uncooperative mind that had already zoomed ahead to a rescue. Despite their current situation, the memory made her smile.

"You have a video to return?" she teased.

She caught the glimmer of his smile—not so much in his mouth, but in the almost undetectable crinkling at the edges of his eyes. "I'm expecting a call about a story," he said.

She patted the bed in an invitation for him to sit next to her. He took a step forward, to the edge of the bed, but he didn't sit down. "Why don't you want to go to Anguilla?" she asked.

He sighed. "I wasn't expecting it, Lois."

"We haven't spent enough time together lately. Nowhere near enough."

His settled his hands on his hips. “Lois, I can’t just drop everything with no warning. Neither can you.” His right hand lifted to emphasise his point. “You have the strategic planning meeting next week. If you’re not there, they’ll make decisions and you’ll be stuck with those decisions when you get back.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Why not?”

Lois grinned. “Because if I don’t like their decisions, I simply won’t implement them.” She shrugged. “Then we’ll have to have another strategic planning meeting in a few weeks.”

He didn’t respond to her light-heartedness. “Superman has commitments.”

“Superman doesn’t actually need to live in Metropolis to honour his commitments here,” she reminded him.

Clark sighed, and she sensed the excuses were done with and the truth was coming. “I don’t want to go,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because I know why you are doing this, and it won’t achieve what you are so desperately hoping for.”

His words bulldozed a valley of dismay through her heart.

“Lois,” Clark said solemnly. “A vacation won’t change anything. You need to accept that.”

Before she could reply, he turned and went into the bathroom. The door closed, and she heard the shower begin.

Lois sank back into her bed.

Clark hadn’t wanted to have lunch with her yesterday.

He didn’t want to go away with her.

Her touch had repelled him.

And now he’d said that nothing could bridge the chasm between them.

He had given up hope.

His heart had moved on from their relationship.

Lois’s tears came in ferocious waves, and she was helpless to contain them. She let them flow; let them vent her fear and her regret and her loneliness.

A loneliness she hadn’t felt since before she had made up with Clark in the anteroom at the Smiley Institute.

She needed Clark.

She wanted him back.

She had to find a way to close the distance between them.

She had to.

* * *

Clark heard Lois begin to cry.

Not just cry, but weep as if her heart was breaking.

He fought against his yearning to go to her, fiercely reminding himself that nothing was going to change their reality.

He could hold her. He could comfort her. But he couldn’t give her the baby she so desperately wanted.

He turned the faucet to its fullest extent but the pounding water wasn’t able to drown out the sounds of her pain.

When he’d made love with her, he’d made her cry.

Now he’d refused her advance and he’d made her cry again.

He had to talk with her—soon.

But he had promised his mom he would wait a week, and anyway, every time Clark tried to rehearse the words he would need, his mind shut down in mutinous rebellion.

He couldn’t see a way forward.

But he had to find one.

For both of them.

* * *

Lois’s tears slowed, and her mind roared into action. She would not lose Clark without a fight. If he thought this was over, he had reckoned without Mad Dog Lane.

Did he really think he didn’t need her?

Did he really think she didn’t need him?

Perhaps that is what it had looked like, she realised. Perhaps that was a reasonable conclusion given her total absorption with her work at the Planet.

But now, she intended to take whatever delusions he had fostered in that Kryptonian brain of his and systematically demolish them until he realised the truth.

They were meant to be together.

Always.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a beep—the incoming message alert from his cell. Perhaps he did have a story.

Expecting Clark to have heard, Lois quickly mopped the tears from her cheeks and settled back on the pillow.

The shower continued running.

Clark didn’t come.

Why hadn’t he heard?

Compelled by curiosity, Lois leant across the bed and reached into Clark's bedside drawer. She took out his cell phone and looked at it.

Who had messaged Clark?

This early in the day?

She should read it. If it concerned a story, he needed to know. And Clark had no secrets from her. He didn't. Lois's thumb hovered on the button, and then, with a quick movement, she opened the message.

Come now 4 action.

Lois stared at the words, reading them over and over.

She scrolled down and saw that the message was from 'Vivienne'.

Who was Vivienne?

And why was she messaging Lois's husband this early in the morning? With such familiarity?

Obviously, Clark knew her well enough to have her number in his phone.

People needing Superman was nothing new, but they didn't message Clark's phone to summon the superhero.

And what sort of *action* was she offering?

Lois heard the shower shut off and quickly stashed Clark's phone in the drawer. As she settled back onto her pillow, Clark emerged, bare-chested, with a towel secured around his hips.

"You... you got a message," she said, trying to sound casual.

He took his phone from the drawer. Lois watched his face as he read the message. There was no discernible change to his expression. He looked up. "It's... uhm... I have to go," he said.

He spun into his work clothes—business suit, shirt, and tie—and left the room in a blur.

Lois stared at the gently swinging door.

This could not be what it looked like.

It couldn't be.

She would never believe that of Clark.

* * *

Lois replaced the phone with something approaching satisfaction. She had called Franklin Stern and told him she would be unavailable for the strategy meeting next week.

Initially, he had insisted that her presence was required. But Lois had been unmoved. She'd reminded him that she

hadn't taken leave since becoming the Editor-in-Chief well over a year ago.

When Stern had suggested she move her leave to the following week, Lois had stated that wasn't possible.

Finally, he had accepted her decision.

The first obstacle was cleared. Lois felt a wavelet of optimism trickle through her.

She picked up her notes and went to the conference room.

* * *

Lois eyed the faces at the table. As first-thing staff meetings went, this had been a productive one—lots of possibilities for stories and Ian Murnane was still milking good copy from the Port Authority corruption.

Clark wasn't present. She had made no comment; neither had anyone else.

Had they all noticed the distance between her and her husband? Was it the topic of conversation and speculation at the coffee machine? Did they know anything about 'Vivienne'?

What if they all knew *something*? Something that had been deliberately kept from her?

Lois squashed that thought. Clark simply wouldn't do that.

He wouldn't do it to her.

He wouldn't.

But Dan had, a catty little voice piped.

Dan had, she admitted, but Clark never would.

Lois realised Matt Bremner had stopped talking and everyone was waiting for her. She coughed to give herself a moment to drag her thoughts back to the staff meeting. "Does anyone have anything else?" she asked.

No one did. They started to gather their pencils and notebooks, assuming the meeting had finished.

"I have something else," Lois said.

The shuffling stopped as all eyes trained on her.

"I will be taking leave next week," Lois announced crisply. "Monday to Friday, inclusive."

She heard the communal intake of breath. She had to admit that her announcement would probably rank somewhere beyond unexpected.

Lois switched her attention to Murnane. "Ian, would you be willing to step up as Editor-in-Chief for the week?"

She had surprised him, but she could see that he was pleased, too. “Ah... yes, if you think I’m up to it,” he said as he received multiple backslaps from the people around him. “Ah ... thanks, Lois. Thanks a lot.”

She smiled at him. “Get the Port story finished, and then come into my office,” she directed. “And don’t plan anything for tomorrow; you’ll need to spend the day preparing for next week.”

He nodded his agreement, but Lois’s attention moved away as Clark appeared. She watched as he took the three steps in one leap. He crossed the bullpen, coming towards the conference room with satisfaction evident in every step.

Clark was pleased about something.

What?

And what did Vivienne have to do with it?

He swung into the room, his face carefully neutral. “Sorry I’m late,” he said, addressing his apology to everyone.

“Where were you?” Lois asked sharply.

She heard a muted gasp at her tone, but Clark didn’t visibly react. “On a story,” he replied evenly. “Burglary this morning. The police caught them red-handed.”

“And you were there?” Lois asked, trying desperately to make it sound as if this conversation was solely about a story.

He nodded. “I got a message that it was going down. I’ll have the preliminary story for you in less than an hour.”

“Anyone else on site?” Lois asked. “Any other paper represented?”

Clark shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “I had a good source watching for me.” He gave her a hesitant smile.

Lois returned his smile with interest as the tiny fragments of unacknowledged suspicion melted away. “Good job,” she said.

His smile deepened—not much, but enough to shine a ray of warmth into her world.

A world that stopped as she became lost in his incredible brown eyes.

And felt again the full force of his power to captivate her.

She was dimly aware that the reporters were beginning to filter out of the conference room.

But for her, there was only Clark.

Their eyes locked together as her heart thundered and her mouth dried.

Then Clark gestured in the direction of his desk. “Should get on with my story,” he mumbled.

The unnatural huskiness of his voice coursed through her insides like a stream of pulsing lava. “You should,” she rasped in an equally unnatural voice.

Still he didn’t move. Then, with an abrupt jolt, he broke away and strode to his desk.

Lois picked up her notes and pencil with hands that trembled and retreated to her office.

* * *

By the time Clark had worked his notes into a skeleton story and sent it to Lois, his satisfaction at having gotten the exclusive had dissolved completely.

First, he knew there was more to the story than a simple burglary.

Second—and of far greater significance—he was still shaken by his exchange with Lois in the conference room. They’d said little, but mere words couldn’t have communicated as tellingly as the look on Lois’s face. She’d realised he was pulling away from her, and she was hurt and confused by his distance.

He just wanted to give up the whole stupid idea of leaving Lois.

But if he did that... she would *never* have a child.

Clark forced his mind back to his story. He re-read it, frowning at the holes—holes that were still without answers.

He knew his safest course of action was to get out of the office. If Lois kissed him again like she had yesterday...

Clark swallowed roughly and shoved his chair backwards.

Too late, he realised. Lois was halfway across the bullpen and heading straight for him.

He watched her, hopelessly tangled.

She was his entire world.

She had been since the first moment he’d seen her.

She would be for as long as he lived.

He wanted to be with her.

His entire life boiled down to that simple fact. He wanted to be with Lois.

Always.

* * *

Lois smiled as she reached Clark's desk. "Tell me about your story," she said.

He didn't respond to her smile. "I sent it to you."

The barrier was back. Lois mourned its return but decided that if they couldn't communicate as husband and wife, they could try as editor and reporter. "I read it quickly," she said. "Enough to know you think there is more to it."

"I'm sure of it."

Lois leant her hip against his desk. "This isn't the first burglary?"

"No. It would have been the fourth. The police are not convinced they are connected."

"But you are?"

He nodded.

Lois smiled. "My money's with you," she said. She didn't wait for him to respond. "What connects them?"

"What is taken; it's always luxury goods—fine art, collector's pieces, jewellery, timepieces, leather goods, silverware, antiques."

"They were definitely targeting the top end of town?"

"Definitely," Clark said. "But it's more than that. They're very specific—they take one clock and leave all the others. They take one piece of jewellery from a box and don't touch anything else."

"Random?"

"Not at all. Their selections are flawless. Generally, they take the best or the rarest, not the imitations or the pieces of slightly lesser quality."

"Has anyone been arrested for the first three?"

"Not yet."

"The arrests this morning?" Lois asked. "Do they seem like guys who would have the sort of knowledge to take the most valuable pieces?"

"No. They are claiming they worked alone and know nothing about the previous three burglaries."

"Did they have anything on them this morning? Notes? Photographs? Anything they had already removed?"

"No notes. The police arrived too quickly for them to have taken anything."

"So they *could* be telling the truth?" Lois surmised.

"My gut says there is a whole lot more to this," Clark said. He stood. "I'm heading back to the police station to see if there are any further developments."

"Have any of the stolen pieces been recovered?"

"Two turned up at different dealers," he said. "Neither of them trace back to anything useful."

"These houses would surely have the latest in security systems. Why weren't they set off?"

"That is something else that ties these burglaries together. The systems were disabled every time."

Lois edged further onto his desk. "So how were they caught this morning?"

"The police received a tip-off."

"Lucky." Clark shrugged, but something in his expression spoke to Lois. "Unless," she added with a smile, "they had a little *super* help."

"Not really," Clark said without returning her smile. "Although if things had turned nasty, I'm sure Superman wouldn't have been too far away." He pushed his seat into his desk. "I need to get to the police station. The story I sent you is just the bare bones. I'm hoping there will be a lot more to it by deadline."

"Have you got a few spare minutes?" Lois nodded towards her office. "Can we talk? Alone?"

Clark's mouth fell open—presumably to repeat his need to speak to the police—but then it closed, and he strode across the bullpen to her office, opened the door, and waited for her to enter. After he had shut the door, he turned and faced her. "This is about the vacation, isn't it?"

"No, it's about Vivienne."

Lois wasn't sure what reaction she had been expecting from Clark, but she certainly hadn't foreseen his smile breaking out like it did. His finger pointed at her. "I knew you read my message," he accused.

She grinned back at him. "It could have been something important," she defended.

His eyebrows arched above eyes still glinting with amusement. "It could have been something private," he said with mock seriousness.

Lois laughed as beautiful warmth and reassurance spread through her. She had missed sparring with Clark, missed that smile, missed the gentle teasing. "So... who's Vivienne?" she asked. "A cop?"

"No," Clark said. "She was watching the house."

"Why her—if she's not a cop?"

"It's her house."

So, Vivienne was rich. And possibly older rather than younger. “Sorry,” Lois said. “I shouldn’t have read your message.”

Clark’s face became serious. “Lois,” he said. “You can read anything of mine. I would never do to you what Dan did to Lucy.”

“I know,” Lois said. “I didn’t think you did. I just wondered.”

“I didn’t have time to stay and explain,” Clark said. “I had to make sure Vivienne stayed out of trouble.”

Lois smiled. “I deserved it for reading your message.”

“I should get to the station,” he said, moving a step away.

“Clark?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve cleared all my commitments for next week.”

Clark thrust his hands into his pockets. “You’re serious about this?” he asked.

Lois couldn’t decide if he was surprised or annoyed. “Yes,” she said. “Very serious.”

“Why?”

“I want to spend a week with my husband.” She put a thin layer of emphasis on the word ‘my’.

He looked up and breathed out deeply.

“Is that OK?” she asked tentatively.

“I wish you’d told me before you booked.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t. It was kind of impulsive.”

Once that would have drawn his wonderful smile. Now it didn’t.

“Is this story the reason why you don’t want to come with me to Anguilla?” Lois asked.

He sighed. “No.”

Lois swallowed down the dismay that rose into her throat. A story she could have understood. She would have been disappointed, but hey, she was in no position to call him out over putting work ahead of their marriage.

“I heard you announce that you’re taking vacation time next week,” Clark said.

Lois tried a nervous smile. She wasn’t sure he would like this next bit. “You are, too.”

“You applied for leave on my behalf?” he asked, clearly surprised.

She nodded. “And it’s been approved—for both of us.”

“OK.” He gestured towards the door. “I have to go,” he said. “See you later.”

Lois watched her husband walk away, her mind ticking over.

Clark was distancing from her. She got that.

But why?

Was it a defence mechanism against the continual disappointment of her absences?

Or did it go deeper than that?

Did he know something she didn’t? Was he worried about something? Something that threatened their life together? Was his secret about to be exposed? Was someone blackmailing him? Was someone threatening her safety?

Lois didn’t know.

But she intended to find out.

Soon.

* * *

Lois spent the day trying to cram in enough training and information that Ian Murnane would be able to do her job next week. After a few hours, she was feeling tired and discouraged. He was eager and quick to learn, but she wasn’t convinced that being the Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet was something that could be learned in a matter of days.

She’d also watched Clark. After returning from the police station, he’d gone to his desk and half an hour later, Lois had received his updated story—although the extra information was minimal. During the afternoon, he’d divided his time between his desk—he’d made a lot of phone calls—and being out of the office. She didn’t know if his outings were related to Superman or the story.

He didn’t come into her office to update her. Not once.

He was definitely avoiding her.

Just after seven o’clock, Clark knocked on her door and informed her he was heading home.

“Any leads on the burglary story?” she asked with a smile.

“I’m still searching for connections,” he said, his tone conveying that he hadn’t met with much success.

Lois stood from her desk and went to Clark. She put her hand on his arm and reached up to drop a quick kiss on his cheek. “I’ll be home soon,” she said quietly. “See you there.”

He nodded, his expression deadpan. Did he believe her? Would he go home and await her arrival? Would he cook a meal for them?

Lois returned to her desk, determined to get tomorrow's edition finalised in the shortest time possible.

* * *

Two hours later, only Lois and Ian remained in the office. She gave him a tired smile. "We're done," she said.

His face was full of uncertainty. "Lois, I really appreciate the offer," Ian said. "But I'm not sure I'm ready to take on the running of the Planet, even for a week."

Lois pushed aside her own doubts. "It's only one week, Ian," she said. "You'll be fine."

"I'm not sure. There's so much to learn."

"But you want to do this, don't you?" she questioned. "I know you're ambitious. I know you have the potential to do this job."

"The potential," Ian echoed dispiritedly. "I think it's only fair to tell you that I don't feel ready. Not yet."

"You'll have a team of fine reporters working under you." She forced a smile. "Don't ever tell them I said this, but they do all the work."

Ian's smile was equally forced. "Do you have plans for next week?"

"Yes, I do." Lois put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Go home," she said. "It'll seem easier when you're not so tired."

He looked doubtful but agreed. "See you tomorrow," he said.

Lois shut down her computer and left.

When she arrived home, the house was empty.

* * *

"What am I going to do, Mom?"

"What do you want to do, Clark?"

Clark slumped back in his chair, giving up all pretence of being remotely interested in the apple pie she had put before him. "I *can't* go away with her."

"Why not?"

"Why does a woman plan a romantic getaway with her husband?"

"Because she loves him?" Martha suggested.

Clark sighed. "This isn't about whether Lois loves me or not. I know she does. But she loved me a month ago and the month before that and she didn't plan a romantic vacation for two."

"Why do you think she's done this?"

"I think her birthday shook her," Clark said. "She's realised that she is thirty-seven; that forty is only three short years away. She's realised that if she is going to have a child, it has to be soon."

"You think this vacation is about having a baby?"

"I think this is Lois's all-out last-ditch attempt to get pregnant. She is pinning all of her hopes on relaxation and a magical setting somehow overcoming our... incompatibilities."

"Is that so bad?"

"It will be when we get back to Metropolis and she has to face the reality that she isn't pregnant and will never be pregnant while she remains married to me."

Clark glanced at his mom and saw her studying him. He managed to resist the urge to squirm. "This isn't just about her, is it?" she said. "It's about you, too."

He pulled away from her scrutiny with a ragged sigh. "Mom, it is going to be the hardest thing I have ever done—to move away from Lois and convince her that she should leave me and find someone else before it's too late. I'm... I'm not sure I can actually do it. But I believe with all my heart that if I don't, we will spend the rest of our lives regretting it."

"And a week alone on a romantic getaway..."

"Is just going to ram home exactly how much I love Lois and how empty my life will be without her and how much it is going to hurt to let her go."

"I think you should go away with Lois."

"I can't, Mom."

"I think you should go."

Her quiet conviction grated on him. Clark knew he had no reason to be annoyed with his mom, but he had—illogically—expected her to assist him in thinking of an excuse to avoid going to the Caribbean with Lois. So far, his mom's advice had made it clear she didn't fully understand why he was doing this. "If I go, I will never be able to suggest she leaves me," Clark said. "I will never be able to pretend that is what I want."

"That's what I'm hoping for."

Now he was downright annoyed. Didn't his mother understand anything of what he had said? "Mom!" Clark took a deep breath. This was not his mother's fault, he reminded himself. "Mom," he said more reasonably. "If we go away, we will probably have an incredible time. But it won't solve the underlying problem. We will come home, and Lois will be shining with health and vitality—she's looked so tired lately—and everything will seem perfect, but there will be

no escaping that the reality hasn't changed. She will still be a woman who yearns to have a child. She will still be married to someone who cannot give her a child. She will still battle with that emptiness. She will still be slowly dying on the inside."

"I agree that you need to find a solution," Martha said. "But I will never agree with the solution you are suggesting."

"There are *no* other solutions," Clark insisted. "Don't you think I have been through this a million times?"

"Have you talked with Lois?"

"Yes!" Once again, Clark had to calm his voice.

"Have you talked with Lois recently? About your plans to end your marriage?"

"I promised you I wouldn't," he said. "Not until next week."

"So, you're distancing yourself from Lois and she has no idea why?"

Clark could hear the disapproval in her voice. "Mom, I know you mean well," he said, more coldly than he had ever spoken to her. "But until you let go of impossible dreams, you really aren't helping."

"Nothing you've told me justifies your belief that your marriage can't continue happily—with or without children."

Clark's expelled breath whistled through his gritted teeth. "How's this then?" he said bitterly. "The last time we made love, Lois wouldn't even look at me afterwards. And when she fell asleep, I saw that she had been crying. I made her cry," he said, not too far from tears himself. "My love made her cry. I can't go on doing that."

Without waiting for a response, Clark stood, dropped a cursory kiss on his mother's cheek and left.

Part 7

Lois shivered a little as she waited for an answer to her knock. She hadn't been sure about coming, but now she was here, she realised her instincts had been perfect.

The door opened, and there he was. Lois sprang into his arms and let his comforting presence surround her. Then, she leant back and drank in his big smile.

"Perry," she said. "It's so good to see you."

His grin was like a salve. "Darlin'," he said. "It does an old man good to see your pretty face."

They walked into his apartment together. "It's not too late, is it?" Lois asked. "I wasn't sure about calling on you so late."

"No, it's not too late," Perry assured her. "All those late nights at the Planet are a hard habit to break."

He led her to his small and tidy kitchen and began to make coffee. "How are you?" Lois asked. "How's retirement?"

"I'd swap places with you in a heartbeat," he said. "But I suppose a man has to accept when his time is up."

"Your time will never be up," she said fondly.

"I dream about going back," he said. "I dream about the adrenalin rush of a great story. I dream of the smell of ink on paper." His grin flashed. "Then I wake up and realise that I simply couldn't go back to that again."

"Could you do it again for a week?" she asked.

Perry's eyes fired with interest. "A week?"

"I'm taking vacation time next week," Lois said. "I have a young reporter with a ton of potential, and I've offered him the position in my absence."

"But?"

"But he's not ready for it. He knows it. I know it."

"What do you want me to do?" Perry asked.

"Be available," Lois said. "Perhaps come into the office for a few hours each day—just be there when he has questions. If you see something he misses, alert him before he makes a big mistake."

"Is he going to be willing to take advice from an old newshound like me?"

"Yes," Lois said. "He's eager to learn, and he doesn't think he knows it all. He'll be honoured to work alongside you."

Perry slowly stirred his coffee. "You shouldn't dangle temptation in front of an old man," he said, pretending severity.

Lois grinned. "You'll do it."

He laughed. "Of course I'll do it, darlin'. You didn't think for a moment I'd be able to refuse you, did you?"

Lois laughed. "No. I knew you'd be there for me."

Perry put the spoon on the sink and eyed her thoughtfully. "I'm glad you can take the time away," he said. "I never could and look where it landed me—rattling around this empty apartment, all by myself."

"I can't lose Clark," Lois said.

Perry's astute eyes settled on her. "But you've let it get closer than you should have?" he guessed gently.

Lois nodded and felt her tears push up. "I just hope it's not too late for us."

Perry took the two cups to the table and sat down. "What's happening?"

Lois sat next to him. "Clark is so distant. It's as if he's made a life for himself—maybe he had to with me spending so much time at the Planet. It's as if I hardly know him anymore. He has changed this past year. I have, too. But we haven't changed together—we've moved apart."

Concern lined Perry's face. "But you think you can save it, don't you?" he asked. "You don't think this is the end?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. It is a lot worse than I realised." She found Perry's eyes. "What should I do, Chief? I can't lose Clark."

"Taking a week away from the office is a good start."

"Even that didn't work," she said disconsolately. "I booked a romantic Caribbean villa for a week, but Clark doesn't want to come with me."

"Did he say why?"

"Only that it wouldn't achieve what I was hoping it would achieve."

Perry's gnarled hand rubbed across his chin. Lois waited. Then he spoke. "Do you remember the moment you met Clark?" he asked.

Lois nodded. "It was in your office. Clark had interviewed for a job and he had a story about... about a gecko or something."

Perry smiled at the memory. "You flounced in, and I introduced him, and you barely even glanced at him."

Lois smiled. "I was young and too foolish to know a good thing when I saw it."

"I don't suppose you remember his reaction to you?"

"No," Lois admitted. "Although Clark has told me he fell in love with me right there, right then."

"He did," Perry confirmed. "I saw it happen. He stood—slowly—like his knees had turned to Jello and all the breath had been syphoned from his country-boy lungs. He lifted his hand in greeting, realised you hadn't even looked at him, and turned it into an adjustment of his glasses. But his eyes never left you—not for one moment. He looked like a man who knew he had just surrendered his heart. I chuckled inside and began laying bets with myself about how long this greenhorn from Kansas would last. The shortest odds were for less than a month. I figured he'd be scuttling home

with his tail between his legs and a solid dose of Lois Lane ringing in his ears."

Lois smiled tremulously. "Instead, he's here eleven years later and Lois Lane is still totally captivated by the greenhorn from Kansas."

"Does he know that?"

"I don't know anymore," Lois admitted. "What am I going to do, Perry? How can I make up for this last year?"

"Do you remember the early days?" Perry asked. "The days when you said you didn't want a partner and you were adamant that you weren't going to work with him?"

She nodded. "I wasn't very nice to him."

"But he loved you, anyway."

"Yeah."

"How did he show that love?"

"He didn't," Lois said. "I'd already told him not to fall for me."

"He did show his love for you, Lois," Perry said quietly. "But you weren't looking out for it."

"How did he show his love?"

"By being there for you, by being willing to be your background when you took centre stage, by anticipating your needs and trying to meet them, by allowing you to be you, by pulling you up when you needed it, but always doing it in such a way that you knew you weren't going to lose his friendship, and by always searching for your heart, even when you put up such prickly barriers."

Lois felt a tear splash down her cheek. "He did, didn't he?"

Perry nodded. "And he never gave up."

"No, he didn't."

"I think you should try that now," Perry said. "Be there for him; let him know there is nothing he can do that will shake your love for him. Be the friend to him that he was to you."

Lois wiped her eyes. "He still is that friend to me," she said.

"And he always will be," Perry said. "Because if I know one immutable thing about Clark Kent, it's that he loves Lois Lane."

Lois smiled through her tears. "You think I should give Clark a taste of Clark Kent?"

"It worked on Lois Lane, didn't it?" Perry said, smiling. "And if it could work on you..."

“I think he might be more naturally suited to it than I am,” she admitted ruefully.

“You can do it, Lois,” Perry said gravely. “You can do anything you set your mind to. It just comes down to how much you want it.”

“I want it more than I have ever wanted anything.”

Perry grinned suddenly. “More than you wanted that first Pulitzer?”

“There’s no comparison, Perry,” she said. “I would give up everything to have Clark smile at me the way he used to.”

“Then you can do it,” Perry said.

* * *

Driving home from Perry’s, Lois rounded a corner and her vision filled with three people—two armed men and the third, a woman, with her hands raised. At the sound of her car, the woman turned and raced frantically onto the road. Lois slammed the brake to the floor and skidded, only just managing to avoid hitting the fleeing woman.

Lois jumped from the car and was immediately confronted by two guns.

“Give us your bag,” one of the men ordered.

Lois stared at them.

“Now!” the second man screamed. “We need dough, and we need it now.”

The gun came closer, and Lois inched sideways so she could reach into her car.

“Don’t try anything stupid,” the first man snarled.

Lois glanced down to locate her bag. When she turned back, the guns had gone.

The men had gone, too.

They were in a rather undignified heap on the sidewalk with Superman standing over them. He tied them together and materialised next to her. “Are you all right?” he asked, his anxiety quickening his words.

She smiled a little shakily. “Yes. Thanks to you.”

“Why did you stop?”

“Because they were trying to rob a woman, and she ran onto the road in front of me.”

“Where is she now?”

“I think she kept running.”

“Why did you get out of the car?”

Lois stared at him, determined to continue staring at him until the superhero veneer cracked enough to acknowledge the absurdity of his question.

Finally, his expression eased a little. “I guess I should know the answer to that,” he conceded.

Lois smiled. “After all these years, you should,” she said. “How did you know I needed you?”

“Your heart rate accelerated.”

Lois couldn’t touch him—not here, not now. They had long ago learnt their lesson about Lois Lane and Superman showing affection in public. But she could look at him. She could venture into those luscious brown eyes. “Please don’t ever stop listening, flyboy,” she said quietly.

He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“I don’t suppose you feel like giving me a lift home?”

“You have your car,” he said.

She smiled. “You can’t blame a girl for trying to wheedle a free lift from her favourite hero.”

He said nothing.

“I’ll see you at home?” she whispered. “In a few minutes?” The sound of a police siren cut through the air. “Looks like everything here is under control.”

“OK,” Clark agreed.

“Good.” Lois got into the car and closed the door, knowing Superman would watch over her as she drove home.

That hadn’t changed. She hoped it never would.

* * *

Lois let herself into their house and smiled as she saw Clark, dressed in jeans and a black tee shirt, making coffee. Even after all these years of him seeming to ‘appear’, it still caught her off guard occasionally. “Hi,” he said, without turning to her.

She wanted to go to him—to stand behind him, perhaps slide her hands down his arms or lean into his broad back. But in the very early days of their friendship, Clark had never crowded her.

“Are you making that for two?” she asked pleasantly.

“You want coffee?”

Lois noticed he’d already taken out two cups. “Yes, please.”

He filled both cups, picked them up, and turned to her.

“Let’s sit on the sofa,” Lois suggested. She moved into the living room and switched on a single lamp. She sat

on one end of the sofa, allowing Clark to determine their closeness.

He settled next to her—not within touching distance, but not at the extremity of the sofa either. He offered her one cup.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile.

They drank in the muted light of the little lamp. Lois waited, wanting to show him she had the time to listen if he wanted to talk.

“How’s Lucy?” he asked eventually.

“She saw her lawyer today.”

“It’s really going to happen? The divorce?”

“Yeah. Dan didn’t leave her with too many choices.”

Clark stared into his coffee. “Maybe it’s a good thing sometimes to know that you don’t have any other choices. Then you just go ahead and do what needs to be done.”

His words formed a constricting band around her heart. What did he mean? That they should accept there were no other choices? Lois wanted to protest—vigorously—but held back. She tried to think what Clark would do. He wouldn’t pressure her. He wouldn’t make demands. He would try to find a non-combative way to emphasise their togetherness. “How’s your story going?”

He accepted her change of subject without reaction. “The guys arrested this morning are still claiming they had nothing to do with the other three burglaries. They are adamant they weren’t working with anyone else.”

“Do the police believe them?”

“They’re not sure.”

“You still don’t believe them?”

“I’m sure there is more to this story.”

“What are you thinking? What did you follow up today?”

Clark turned towards her and seemed to relax into the sofa a little more. “I put the four victims of the burglaries into the computer and looked for common ground.”

“Find anything?”

“Nothing other than the obvious,” he said. “They are all extremely rich—one family from old, inherited money and the other three from very successful businesses. Those businesses are no more similar than you’d expect—for instance, all of the families hold blue-chip shares.”

“You said the owners were away at the time of the burglary?”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “Two were combining a vacation with business—one to Africa, one to Mexico. One was on business in Chicago, and the other was on vacation in Hawaii.”

“I assume they all flew to their destinations?”

“Yes.”

“Commercial or chartered?”

“Both—two and two.”

“Same companies?”

“Three different companies.”

Lois pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “There has to be a connection,” she said. “Four burglaries, all in Metropolis within a month, the owners all away. There has to be something.”

“I know,” Clark said.

“You said they disabled the security systems. Anything there? Same company? Same type?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Why was Vivienne watching? Was she expecting to be targeted?”

Clark’s smile surfaced for a moment. “Vivienne noticed that all of the three robberies included, among other things, a porcelain piece from the British manufacturers, Royal Worcester.”

“Good work,” Lois said with admiration. “Vivienne is a collector? She knows about these things?”

“She figured there was a good chance her house would be hit.”

“And that didn’t frighten her?”

Clark chuckled. “Not Vivienne.”

Lois visualised an older lady, still with unquenchable spirit, waiting behind a door, armed with a poker. The picture elicited a smile. Clark’s eyes settled on her, his smile hovering, too. “Are you busy tomorrow evening?” she asked casually.

His smile died. “Ah... yes. Why?”

“I was going to suggest we get a movie or something.” Lois smiled. “But if you have other plans, that’s OK.”

Clark looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Are you going to be home tomorrow evening?”

“I’m planning to be.”

“What time?”

"I'm hoping I'll be in by six," Lois said. "I have a lot to get through with Ian, but my plan is to let him put the paper to bed. I'll be on call if he needs me." She settled back and stretched out her legs. Why?"

"I've made plans for tomorrow evening," Clark said. He took a slow sip of his coffee. "I don't think you will want to be here. Maybe... perhaps it would be best if you visited Lucy."

Lois deliberately took a moment before replying. "What are your plans?" she asked conversationally.

"I've been helping out at an after-school activity program."

"The one for kids whose parents aren't home in the evenings?"

He seemed surprised that she knew. "Yeah."

"What's happening tomorrow night?"

Clark's mouth stretched to a sheepish smile. "They're coming here to make pizzas."

A bunch of teenagers? In their kitchen? "Sounds like fun," Lois said.

"It's really not your thing," Clark said hurriedly. "It'll be noisy and messy and... I'll have it all cleaned up by ten at the latest. It's a perfect opportunity for you to spend some time with Lucy and the boys."

"It's a perfect opportunity to spend some time with you."

Clark winced. "Lois," he said awkwardly. "You'll hate every minute of it."

"Can I come?" she said, straight to the point.

He shuffled in his chair. "Of course you *can* come," he said. "But—"

"Good, I'll be there," Lois said. "Do you need any help with the preparations? Need anything bought? Pizza bases? Tomato paste?"

Clark's surprise was plastered across his face. "No," he managed. "No. I have everything we'll need."

"Just three questions," Lois said.

"OK," he said uneasily.

"These kids? Do they know you as Clark? Or Superman?"

"Clark," he said. "Superman has never been there."

"How old are these kids?"

"Maddie's fourteen. The rest are sixteen and seventeen."

Lois leant forward and put down her empty cup.

"What's your other question?" he asked.

"Will there be a chocolate and marshmallow pizza?"

Clark's uneasiness dissolved into a grin. "No," he said firmly. "Definitely not. That would be way too messy."

Lois chuckled. She leant over, rested her hand on his chest, and gently kissed his cheek. "I love you, Clark," she said.

Then she stood and walked away, heading for their bedroom and hoping that nothing would keep him from joining her very soon.

* * *

Half an hour later, Lois was in bed when Clark came through their window dressed in the Superman suit.

"Everything OK?" she asked.

"Yeah," Clark replied. "I just did a quick patrol. It seems quiet out there."

"Good," she said with a smile.

He went into the bathroom, and Lois wondered if he would linger in the hope that she would be asleep when he came to bed. She was happily surprised when the door opened only seconds later and Clark walked out, dressed in his sleep shorts and tee shirt.

He climbed into bed and lay on his back.

Lois rose onto her elbow so she could look down into his face. "Are you going to work on the burglary story again tomorrow?"

"Officially, it's my day off, but I thought I would do some research at home in the morning."

Lois smiled and gently pushed at his upper arm. "And then spend the afternoon preparing for the teenage invasion?"

He half-smiled, half-grimaced. "Are you sure you want to be here?"

"Absolutely."

"OK." Clark lifted his head to brush her mouth with a fleeting kiss. "Goodnight," he said. He flicked off the light.

Lois inched a little closer to him. "Goodnight, darling," she said.

* * *

"Lois Lane, Editor-in-Chief of the world's greatest newspaper."

At the sound of the quiet voice at her door, Lois's attention broke from the story she was editing with Ian. She leapt from her desk and hurried forward, her arms stretched out to

embrace the visitor. “Perry,” she said. “I didn’t know you’d be coming in today.”

Perry returned her hug, and then his eyes swung to Ian, who was watching them. “I thought I should meet my partner,” Perry said with a big grin. “Before we go into harness together.”

Ian stepped forward, clearly excited to be meeting a legend of Daily Planet history. “Ian Murnane,” he said, his hand outstretched.

“Perry White,” he said. “Or you can call me ‘Chief’.” He turned to Lois with an exaggerated wink. “Once the Lady Chief has left the office, that is.”

“Mr White,” Ian said. “I am honoured to meet you.”

“Perry,” he corrected. “And you should hold back any opinions about meeting me until we’ve faced a looming deadline together, armed only with a half-baked story that refuses to take on anything approaching a printable form.”

Ian smiled hesitantly as Perry turned to Lois. “Your leave starts Monday?” he said.

Lois nodded.

“Then I suggest you spend tomorrow packing and getting y’self sorted. The kid and I will see to it—call it a practice run.”

“No, Perry, really—”

Perry put a firm hand on her shoulder. “Lois, you will be a phone call away if we need help.” He grinned to Ian. “See you bright and early tomorrow, son.”

With that, Perry White kissed Lois’s cheek, gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze, and left the office with a very pronounced spring in his step.

* * *

Lois could hear the laughter from the kitchen as soon as she stepped out of her car that evening. It was after six—but only twenty minutes past. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been home this early.

She entered the kitchen, and immediately the noise stopped and six pairs of eyes trained on her. “Hi,” she greeted.

Five teens were gathered around the table. Two were wielding rolling pins on raw pizza bases, the other three were cutting up toppings.

Clark moved towards her from his position at the stove. Behind his back, one of the boys began motioning to Lois and urgently shaking his head.

She turned to Clark and noticed he had a large smudge of flour on his cheek. She glanced to the young man, who brushed his cheek and sent her another heavily meaningful look.

Lois smiled at the kid and then reached up to Clark, gently dusting away the flour as she quickly kissed his mouth.

“Hey, why did you do that?”

The young man who had spoken was grinning so widely, Lois figured there was a good chance she could see every tooth in his head.

“Clark is always so purr-fectly dressed, we weren’t going to tell him he was covered in flour,” the kid explained. “I’m Beau,” he added.

Lois smiled in the general direction of the crowd.

Clark brushed his hand across his cheek and then gestured to the boy next to Beau. “Ah... and this is Boston, Todd, Maddie and—”

The final one—a girl—broke from the table and lunged at Lois. “You’re Lois Lane?” she screeched.

Lois nodded.

The girl turned on Clark. “Why didn’t you tell me she was coming?”

Clark shrugged. Lois could tell he was trying not to smile.

The girl turned back to Lois, her floury hands clutching Lois’s upper arms. “I am your biggest fan,” she said excitedly. “I am going to be a detective, and I want to be just like you—chasing down the bad guys and solving cases and bringing the criminals to justice.”

“I’m a reporter,” Lois managed.

“You are a great investigator,” the girl gushed. “And I want to be just like you.”

She turned again on Clark and landed an almost wince-worthy thump to his arm. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me Ms Lane would be here tonight,” she said. “You know how much I admire her.” She scowled at him. “You could have told me.”

Clark tried to look penitent but failed spectacularly. “Lois Lane,” he said formally. “This is Vivienne de Wolde.”

Vivienne? Lois shot her husband a questioning look. Clark replied with a droll smile and a lazy wink.

He would probably never know exactly how close he’d come to being vigorously assailed by his wife.

Pushed back onto the table and thoroughly... extensively... kissed.

And that would just be the beginning.

Regardless of the spectators.

And the pizza toppings.

Instead, Lois smiled demurely. "I... ah... should go and get changed," she said. "Then I'll be back to help."

"You don't have to help," Boston said. "You can sit and direct us."

"You can be our official taster," Beau said.

"You can help us keep Clark in line," Todd added.

The kids laughed, and Lois smiled. "OK," she said.

As she left the room, she heard a not-quite-muted squeal. "I met her," Vivienne squeaked. Excited feet tapped on the floor. "I actually met Lois Lane."

From amidst the laughter, Lois heard Clark's voice. "Better get on with those bases, Viv. You wouldn't want Ms Lane dying of starvation on your watch."

There was more laughter. Lois climbed the first stair but paused as she heard another voice. It was one of the young men—she wasn't sure which one. "Hey, Purr-fect," he said. "Why'd you hang out with a bunch of feral kids when your wife looks like that?"

Clark didn't reply. As least, not that Lois heard.

She went up the stairs, pushing aside the mountain of remorse and determining that from now on, there would be no more regrets.

Part 8

When Lois arrived back in the kitchen, it was filled with activity. And laughter. And loud voices. And there was a lot of flour on the floor.

Clark grimaced as he saw her enter. "I probably should have gone with pre-made pizza bases," he admitted.

"Then we'd miss out on half the fun," Lois said easily. The hands of the kids had stilled; their eyes were fixed on her. "What can I do?"

Beau energetically waved his knife. "If you really want to help, you can come and cut up these olives," he said. "Clark made me do them because I told him I was going to pick off anything that started life as a weed."

"And Clark told you that if you did that, you'd be getting a vegetarian pizza," Maddie said.

Their laughter squeezed out the silence. Lois brushed past Boston, and Beau moved across to make a space for her at the table. Todd passed her a knife, and she began halving the olives.

In the centre of the table, the plates held steadily growing piles of toppings, all chopped with varying degrees of uniformity. Clark was at the stove, stirring something that permeated a deliciously subtle aroma through the stronger smells of onion and peppers.

Lois's presence seemed to dampen the light-hearted banter, reducing it to an occasional sober comment. She glanced across the table to where Vivienne was trying to roll a base into something resembling a circle. "Thanks for your help with the story yesterday."

Vivienne looked up. "I was so scared Clark was going to miss all the action," she said. "But that wouldn't have been a complete disaster because I was taking notes for him."

"Thanks," Lois said. "Were you in the house when the thieves broke in?"

Vivienne's face fell with almost comical regret. "No," she said. "It's *my* house, but the police wouldn't let me. And Clark said that if I tried to sneak back in, he would call my parents."

The kids laughed again—still restrained, but Lois hoped it was a sign they were slowly adjusting to her being among them. "Where were you?"

"In the neighbour's house, across the street," Vivienne replied. "They let me stay in the front room upstairs, so I could do a stakeout."

"And the thieves came the first night?"

"Oh, no," Vivienne said. "They came the fourth night. I was so excited when I saw them. A real crime! Right in my house! And I was there! I was on the stakeout! I *was* the stakeout! I almost forgot I was supposed to call the police. I wanted to race across the road and bail them up then and there." She jabbed the rolling pin in Clark's direction. "But I knew if I did that I would be in *huge* trouble with Clark."

Lois returned her smile. "And being in trouble with Clark isn't much fun."

There were sounds from around the table that could have signified agreement.

Maddie spoke up. "Boston got into trouble with Clark the first night he came to the hall because he brought a—"

Boston cut in. "And you, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, what about when you stole the puppy?"

"I saw his owner hit him!"

"But Clark said you shouldn't have stolen the puppy. And he made you take it back."

"It wasn't me who put salt in the sugar container and watched while Clark put three teaspoons of it in his coffee."

Todd joined in. “It wasn’t me who blended green peppers and oatmeal and week-old fish and told Clark he had puked all over the bathroom floor.”

“It wasn’t me who started calling him ‘Purr-fect’.

“It wasn’t me who hid his shoes at the back of the supply cupboard.”

“I *still* don’t know how he found them so quickly.”

“It wasn’t me who hit the fire extinguisher with a basketball and set it off.”

“That was an accident!”

“It wasn’t me who photo-shopped Clark and gave him long blond curly hair and dressed him in a tight mini-skirt.”

“It wasn’t me who hung it on the notice board.”

The last comment drew roars of laughter. Lois looked over to Clark. He had turned off the heat from under the saucepan and was casually leaning against the bench, his arms folded, his face relaxed to a small smile. He caught her look and rolled his eyes.

Beau sliced the last olive and laid down his knife with an exaggerated sigh. “Finished,” he said.

Clark came to the table. “Work in pairs,” he said. “Get a base, and I’ll give you some tomato sauce. Spread it out; put on the meat first, then the vegetables, then lastly the cheese.”

“Do we have to have any of that spinach?” Todd asked.

“Not if you have other vegetables.”

From her left side, Boston looked down at Lois. She estimated he was the oldest of the kids—he was certainly the tallest. “Would you like to share with me, Ms Lane?” he asked shyly.

“Only if you call me Lois,” she replied.

He smiled, still a little hesitantly. “OK.”

Clark came around and ladled his tomato sauce on each of the three bases. Then, with a continually running commentary—much of it voicing their dissatisfaction at the inclusion of vegetables—they assembled the toppings as Clark watched over them. “Remember,” he said. “Too many toppings will mean you get a soggy base that isn’t cooked properly.”

Lois pushed the slices of pepperoni into the tomato sauce and added pineapple chunks and strips of spinach. Boston covered his half with pepperoni and ham and bacon. He glanced at Clark and then quickly added a smattering of onion. And half an olive. Then he covered it with a generous layer of cheese. He looked at Lois’s half and grimaced. “Ugghh,” he said. “That is gross.”

Lois leant closer to him as she scattered the cheese. “It’s not for me,” she whispered.

Boston’s face cleared to understanding. “Ahh,” he said. “I forgot Clark likes weird food combinations.”

“How’s this, Clark?” Maddie asked, lifting a pizza for Clark’s inspection.

“Great, Maddie,” he said with a smile. “Bring it over, and we’ll put it in the oven.”

“We’re ready, too,” Boston said.

“I’ll take it,” Lois offered. She picked up their pizza and lifted it high as she manoeuvred past Beau to get to Clark. He put the three pizzas in the oven and then straightened. “You can all make another one while these cook,” he said.

“Want to make one with me now?” Lois asked him.

“OK,” he said. “Get a base while I give everyone more sauce.”

“Hey,” Todd said suddenly as he looked directly at Lois. “I bet you have lots of dirt on Clark here. I bet he’s not as pur-r-r-fect as he wants us to think he is.”

Lois glanced at Clark. He was ladling sauce onto Maddie’s base with more attention than the task seemed to require. “Dirt?” Lois asked innocently.

“Yeah, you know,” Beau said. “Anything he wouldn’t want us to know about.”

“Well, he comes from Kansas,” Lois said.

Judging by the howls of laughter this was news to them. “He does?” Boston said. “He comes from *Kansas*?”

His expression suggested he couldn’t have been more surprised if she’d announced Clark had come from... well, Krypton. Lois nodded. “He’s a country hick.”

“Do they have television there yet?” Todd asked solemnly. The gathered group stared at him in startled silence. Then, his grin cracked open, and the laughter erupted.

“They had television before you were born,” Clark informed them as he took his place next to Lois and began topping his half of their pizza.

“OK,” Vivienne said. “Clark coming from Kansas explains why he was so insistent we had to *make* our pizzas instead of ordering them in like normal people do.”

“No, this was so he could force us to eat stuff like spinach.”

Todd slapped his head. “Now I understand,” he said. “You *had* to make them yourself because Kansas doesn’t have pizza take-out yet.”

That comment elicited another round of laughter.

Lois smiled with them, her glance darting sideways to Clark. He was concentrating on his pizza, but his quiet smile suggested he was enjoying the teasing.

“How did you escape?” Beau asked.

“More importantly,” Todd chimed in, “how did you know there was somewhere to escape to?”

“Ah,” Vivienne said. “That would have been from watching the television.”

They laughed again. Clark pointed at them, a half-smile on his face. “I’m proud to have been raised in Kansas,” he said.

“Sure you are,” Beau said. He shot Lois a beseeching grin. “There must be something else you can tell us. Being married to him doesn’t mean you can’t give us something to have some fun with.”

“Such as?” Lois asked.

“Did he ever get drunk?” Todd asked.

“Or break the traffic rules?” Beau added.

“Or get arrested?” Vivienne said.

“No, no and... no,” Lois said.

The chorus of groans reverberated around the table. “There *has* to be something,” Beau said. “No one can be that pur-r-r-fect.”

“He must have done *something* to make you mad,” Todd said. “My mom is always mad at my dad.”

“Oh, I get mad at him sometimes,” Lois said.

“Why?” Vivienne asked eagerly. “What does he do wrong?”

Lois smiled as she leaned her shoulder against Clark’s arm. “I didn’t say *he* did anything wrong,” she said. “Maybe I was wrong to get mad.”

They groaned again—all five of them. But what Lois noticed most was how Clark leant a little closer to her.

“He *cannot* be that pur-r-r-fect,” Beau stated. “He just can’t be.”

“How did he propose?” Maddie asked.

“He took me to the park and sat me on the side of a fountain,” Lois replied. “Then he knelt down and asked me if I would marry him.”

“Aww,” Maddie said. “That is so romantic.”

“What did you say?” Vivienne asked.

The memory caused a wave of sweet amusement. “It started raining, and we had to run for shelter and when we got there, he asked me again.”

“And you said ‘yes’?” Maddie asked. She had stopped assembling her pizza, her eyes glued to Lois.

“I said ‘no’,” Lois admitted.

Maddie’s face creased with horror. “Oh, no,” she groaned. “Why?”

“I bet I know,” Vivienne said.

“Why?” Boston asked.

“Because it can’t be easy being married to Mr Pur-r-r-fect.”

They laughed again, but Maddie hadn’t finished. “But... you’re married. He asked you again, didn’t he?”

“No,” Lois said. “I asked him.”

Maddie smiled. “Was he happy?”

Lois slipped her arm around Clark’s waist and pulled him close to her. “Very happy, as far as I could tell,” she said. “He said ‘yes’ anyway.”

Maddie sighed around a wistful smile. “And then you had a beautiful wedding and lived happily ever after.”

Lois felt Clark chuckle. “Something like that,” she agreed.

“I don’t want to get married,” Vivienne declared. “I don’t want any man slowing me down and telling me what to do.”

“I used to feel exactly the same,” Lois said.

Vivienne’s eyes bounced up. “You did?”

Lois nodded.

“What happened?”

“Clark happened.”

“I hope nothing like Clark happens to me,” Vivienne said. Then she grinned at Clark. “Sorry, no offence. I just don’t want to get married.”

Clark waved away her apology.

Maddie spoke up. “So... if you really didn’t want to get married... how did Clark convince you?”

“Just by being Clark,” Lois said.

This time there were no laughs, no exaggerated groans, no smart comments. The silence spoke volumes to Lois. They understood. They knew what Clark being Clark meant. She wasn’t sure if any of them would admit it in public, but Clark being Clark had made all their lives better.

“Everyone ready?” Clark said. “The first ones should be done by now.”

He bent low to open the oven. Lois picked up their raw, assembled pizza and laughed. Clark’s half was covered in mushrooms, which he hated, green peppers, which he tolerated, and arugula, which he’d once described as an insult to a pizza.

They were, however, her favourite combination of pizza toppings.

* * *

They sat around the table that was chaotic with sprawling piles of toppings and a squat floury tower of unused bases. Boston brought cans of cola from the fridge and handed them to everyone.

There was silence as they began eating. “Hey,” Todd said with overstated surprise. “These are good.”

“They taste just like bought ones,” Beau said, grinning.

Clark pointed at him with mock severity. “One more insult,” he warned. “And you’ll be going home hungry.”

Beau grinned wider before taking another huge mouthful of pizza.

Lois cut a slice from the pizza she had made with Boston, put it on a plate, and offered it to Clark. He took it with a smile. “I noticed your favourite toppings have changed,” he said. “You’ve never liked pepperoni, pineapple, and spinach before.”

“No, they haven’t changed,” she said. She found his eyes. “None of my favourite things have changed.”

Clark’s eyes softened as they melted in hers. He started to move towards her.

“ARRGGHH!”

Clark sprang back. “What’s wrong?” he asked Beau. “Did you get burnt?”

Beau pointed a long, lean finger at Clark. “You were going to kiss her,” he accused with a wide grin. “Don’t try to deny it, Purr-fect, you were going to kiss her. I saw you.”

Clark settled back comfortably in his chair. “Don’t talk with your mouth full,” he said.

Beau swallowed, still grinning. “I didn’t try to kiss someone at the table,” he said.

“Yeah, Clark,” Todd added. “When you caught Abby and Scott kissing out the back of the hall, you told them it wasn’t allowed.”

Clark slowly chewed his pizza, gazing at them with a small smile. He swallowed and reached for his can of cola.

“When you’re married, you’re welcome to bring your wife here and kiss her at the table,” he said easily.

“Do it, then,” Todd goaded. “Do it. We dare you.”

“Do it.”

“Do it, Clark,” Boston said. “Kiss her. We dare you.”

Clark slid his cola onto the table and turned to Lois. His expression was a mix of amusement and apology. He came in closer and kissed her, his mouth directly on hers.

From around them came a cacophony of hoots and cheers.

Clark lifted from Lois and turned to them. “Eat your pizzas,” he said. “The next ones will be ready soon and you’re talking so much, you’ve barely started on these.”

* * *

After the pizzas had been eaten, they went into the living room and Clark turned on the Play Station. The kids loudly debated who would play the first game. It became clear to Lois that the boys wanted only one thing—to beat Clark at the car racing game they were playing.

He declined, saying he would challenge the winner of a round robin competition, which he expected them to organise without resorting to arguments.

Having settled the boys, Clark turned towards the kitchen. Lois followed. He stopped. “You stay here,” he said quietly. “I know the girls would love to talk with you.”

“Are you sure?” Lois asked.

“I’m sure.”

“OK,” she agreed, knowing that, despite the damage done to the kitchen, it wouldn’t take him more than a few seconds to restore it to order.

Lois sat down on the sofa, and Maddie and Vivienne came to join her. Maddie looked at Vivienne. “Aren’t you playing the Play Station?” she asked. “You usually whoop their butts.”

Vivienne shot the boys a disparaging look. “Of course I’m not *playing*,” she said. “Not when I have a case to work on.”

“But they caught the guys who broke into your house.”

Vivienne rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t *solve* the case,” she said.

Lois tried to hide her smile. “You think there is more?” she asked.

Vivienne leant forward, her face alight with enthusiasm. “I’m *sure* there is more,” she said.

“What do you think?” Lois asked.

“You’re asking *me*?” Vivienne squeaked.

Lois shrugged. “It’s Clark’s story, not mine. I don’t know much about it.”

“Well, first, I think the police have it wrong,” Vivienne said. “I don’t think whoever is behind this is motivated by money. I don’t think he wants to sell these things. I think he wants to keep them.”

“A collector?”

Vivienne nodded vigorously. “Or someone who wants to be a collector.”

“Maybe he can’t afford to buy nice things,” Maddie said.

“Some of the things stolen can’t be sold because they are too recognisable,” Vivienne continued. “And also, not many of the general public even know about pieces like the Royal Worcester vases—either because they can’t afford them or because they have no interest.”

“But you have an interest and your parents have the money?”

Vivienne wrinkled her nose. “I don’t have any real interest,” she said. “But Mom’s father was English and she collects Royal Worcester, so I’ve seen them in the house all my life. I went with Dad once when he went to a dealer to buy Mom a present.”

“You can’t just walk into a store and buy what you want?”

Vivienne shook her head. “Not usually. Sometimes you can get lucky at an antique store. But if the current owner of a piece doesn’t want to sell, you can’t buy it regardless of how much money you offer.”

“Did you tell the police this?” Lois asked.

Vivienne groaned with frustration. “I told them, but I’m a kid so they think I know nothing and I’m a girl so they think I get caught up in wild, improbable ideas. They are concentrating on the clocks and jewellery that were stolen, but I think they were secondary to the vases—probably to throw the police off the real trail.” Vivienne grinned suddenly. “When Dad and Mom said they were going away, I thought there was every chance our house would be hit. The police didn’t really believe me, but they let me do the stakeout from the house across the road because that was the only way they could stop me harassing them.”

Lois couldn’t hide her smile. “Well, I think you have a good point,” she said.

Vivienne beamed. “You do?”

Lois nodded. “I’ll give you my email address,” she said. “Would you mind sending me all you know about what has been stolen?”

“Mind?” Vivienne gasped. “You think you could use my notes?”

“I think so,” Lois said gravely.

Vivienne covered her cheeks with her hands. “Wow!” she said excitedly.

“You said your parents are away?” Lois asked.

Vivienne nodded. “They both go away a lot on business; this time they went together.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re in Mexico. Staying at the Riviera Resort.”

Clark came into the room, carrying a laden tray. “Anyone want more pizza?” he asked. “And hot chocolate?”

“I’m full,” Beau said, his eyes not leaving the screen where the cars were racing around a track.

“This is dessert pizza,” Clark said. He looked directly at Lois in silent reminder of his assertion there would be no marshmallow and chocolate pizza.

She stood from the sofa so she could see onto the tray he carried. Among the cups of hot chocolate, there was a large marshmallow and chocolate pizza. She looked up from the tray and into his eyes. “That looks incredibly messy,” she said.

Beau paused the game and swung away from the screen. “Clark is in trouble now,” he said delightedly. “He made a mess in Lois’s kitchen.”

“Would you like a piece?” Clark asked, his eyes not moving from Lois.

“Ah!” Todd exclaimed. “Now he’s trying to wriggle out of it.”

Lois managed to keep a straight face for a long moment before sniffing snootily. “I suppose I will have a small piece,” she conceded.

The boys howled with laughter, and Todd came over to slap Clark soundly on the back. “Nice move,” he said. “I’m impressed.”

Clark loaded a piece of the sticky, drizzling-with-melted-chocolate pizza onto a plate and offered it to his wife with a small smile.

Lois sighed with happiness.

And it had absolutely nothing to do with the chocolate.

* * *

“OK, guys,” Clark announced half an hour later. “Time to clean up.”

The dissent rose as if orchestrated. “It can’t be time to go already,” Vivienne whined.

“Beau and Maddie have to walk, and I have to drive the rest of you,” Clark said. “We need to start cleaning up because I said you would be home by nine-thirty.”

Vivienne grinned at him. “My parents are away. They’re never going to know you got me home late.”

“You’re going to be home on time,” Clark said in a tone that gave no leeway for argument.

They turned off the Play Station and moved to the kitchen. Ten minutes later, bags over their shoulders, the group congregated near the front door.

“Thanks, Clark,” Boston said. “Thanks for a great night.” He glanced at Lois. “Thanks for letting us come.”

“Yeah, thanks,” the others chorused.

“It was nice meeting you all,” Lois said.

“Will you come again?” Vivienne asked.

“I hope so,” Lois said, realising it was the truth.

Clark turned to Beau. “Walk Maddie all the way to her door,” he said.

Beau grimaced. “Ah, come on, man. It’s not like she’s my girlfriend or anything.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Clark said firmly. “You’re a man, and a man always sees that a woman gets home safely.”

Beau waved his hand in defeat. “OK,” he sighed.

One by one, they trudged through the front door. Clark was the last to leave. He gazed at Lois for a moment without speaking. “Thanks,” he said softly.

Lois smiled.

Clark smiled back.

Her heart leapt.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said.

Lois moved into the kitchen—a kitchen that, despite the efforts of the kids, looked like it had hosted a wild party that evening. A kitchen, if she were honest, that had more appeal now than when it was display-home perfect.

Because now, it looked like a home, not just a house.

With a happy sigh, Lois began to sweep the flour from the floor.

Half an hour later, the kitchen was clean again but Clark still hadn’t come home. Lois went upstairs to the study and turned on the computer.

Something Vivienne had said was stuck fast in her mind, and Lois knew she would not be able to rest until she had checked it out.

Part 9

Clark entered his house and went to the kitchen. It was spotlessly clean.

He tuned in his hearing and heard her heartbeat upstairs. Awake, he estimated. Then he heard the tap-tapping on the computer keyboard. And working.

He took the steps two at a time and went into the study. Lois turned, already smiling.

“You didn’t have to clean the kitchen,” he said. “But thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Lois said. “It was a fun night.”

“Really?” he said, stepping closer to her.

“Really,” she assured him. “Were there any problems? You took longer than I expected.”

“No problems,” Clark said. “I dropped off Boston last. He wanted to chat for a while. He doesn’t have anyone else he can talk to.”

“He seems nice,” Lois said. “They all do.”

Clark smiled. “They are. They’re good kids.” He gestured to her computer. “I should...” He recognised the page as being from the Caribbean resort Lois had booked and a veil of heaviness settled over his heart. “... let you get on with it.”

He turned and walked away without waiting for her reply.

In their bedroom, Clark sat on his bed, put his elbows on his knees, and sank his face into his palms.

He loved Lois so much.

He didn’t want to lose her.

He would do *anything* to stay with her.

These past few days, being with her more, seeing her smile, feeling her hands on his chest, his shoulder, his arm—it had been sweet agony.

She was preparing the way for their vacation—the vacation that she hoped would result in a pregnancy.

The inevitability of her pain pounded him like a physical assault.

Clark rubbed his hands down his face and stood as he exhaled a tortured breath.

What now?

What now?

Was it kinder to warn her before they left? Or kinder to let things take their course and try to be there for her when she had to face the reality that not even the magic of a Caribbean paradise could achieve the impossible?

From the far distance, Clark heard the wail of an emergency siren and was flooded with an equal mix of relief that he wouldn't have to face Lois now and disappointment that he had to leave her.

He spun into the suit and stuck his head into the study. "Siren, honey," he said. "Gotta go."

Clark flew away, his heart throbbing with indecision.

* * *

When Clark awoke the next morning, Lois's side of the bed was empty. He lifted his head enough to see the clock. It was just after six. She had probably gone to the Planet early to make up for last night.

The memory of the pizza party brought a smile. The kids had loved Lois. Driving home last night, they had raved about her. They thought he was the luckiest guy in the world.

He was.

But tomorrow, he and Lois were booked into a romantic made-for-two villa in a Caribbean resort. Sometime today, they were going to have to discuss it, and there was every chance it would shatter the closeness that had been building between them the past few days.

Clark heard a small rattle from below, and he looked through the floor to the kitchen. He watched as Lois picked up an overfull tray and carried it to the bottom of the stairs.

Just a few seconds later, she swung into their bedroom, grinning. She deposited the tray on the blanket box, straightened and pointed directly at him. "Don't move," she ordered.

Clark felt the pull of his smile. With a smooth movement, he sat up and leant against the bedhead.

He heard her footsteps skip lightly down the stairs. When she returned moments later, she was carrying two cups of steaming coffee.

"Did I forget something?" Clark asked. "The anniversary of our engagement? The anniversary of the day we met?"

"No, you didn't forget anything," Lois said as she sat cross-legged on the bed and positioned the tray between them.

Clark couldn't drag his eyes from her. "You still look pretty decent first thing in the morning," he said quietly.

That earned him a smile. "You look decent, too," she said.

He wanted to smile freely and naturally. He wanted to banish the whole stupid idea of separating. It was just too difficult to maintain the pretence that he wasn't totally, completely, absolutely, breath-takingly in love with this woman.

"Want a bagel?" she said.

He examined the plate she held towards him. "Did you cook them?" he asked.

She grinned at his tone. "I put them in the griller," she said.

"They aren't burned," he noted evenly. Lois's laughter burst from her. Clark gave in to the compulsion to grin like a love-struck teenager. "I miss your laugh," he said quietly.

Their eyes remained locked for a long moment. Then Clark eased away, turning his concentration to piling cream cheese on a bagel and topping it generously with jam. When it was done, he offered it to his wife.

She took it from him. "Thank you," she said with a smile that sweetened every part of him.

Clark mustered enough dexterity to manage a repeat performance on a second bagel. He took a bite, and Lois giggled.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm not going to tell you," she said, still chuckling.

"What?" he pressed.

"I'm not going to tell you," Lois repeated. "But if you come here, I'll fix it for you."

Clark's heart thundered as he contemplated her, taking the time to relish the wonderful warmth that had enveloped them. Very slowly, he eased away from the bedhead and leaned towards her.

Lois pitched forward to meet him, and when the distance between them had closed, she used the tip of her tongue to lick the cheese and jam from the corner of his mouth.

A torrent of desire scorched him. He was alone with Lois, and she was relaxed and looking incredibly sexy in her satiny pyjamas. He wanted her. With an intensity that shook him.

But last time...

Last time he had made her cry.

His desire crumbled, and Clark took refuge in another bite of his bagel.

“I’ve been thinking about the luxury goods burglaries,” Lois said. “I agree with you—there is more to it. There is definitely someone orchestrating this—someone else.”

“Vivienne is sure it’s not about luxury goods, as such, but the collector’s items.”

“I agree with her,” Lois said. “She sent me her notes. I think the more generic pieces were to camouflage the real motive. Have you followed through on that line of thinking?”

“I made lists of dealers and known collectors, but nothing seemed to link with what we already had.” Clark shrugged slightly. “Some of the stolen pieces reminded me of Luthor’s collection. Remember the—”

“The White Orchid Ball,” Lois said dreamily. “Our first date.”

“Date?” he spluttered, trying to control the impulse to smile. “Date? I had to wait outside for you. Then you walked straight past me with only a cursory glance to make sure I was dressed according to your criteria. Then, when I tried to dance with you, you hit me and said you preferred to dance with Luthor.”

As his words had tumbled out, her smile had grown as if she, too, had enjoyed this taste of shared memories. “You can dance with me any time you want to,” she said.

Clark was tempted to tell her he wanted to now, here in their bedroom, dressed in their sleepwear on this Sunday morning, but he quashed the thought, distracting himself with adding an extra dollop of jam to his bagel.

“I did some digging last night,” Lois said nonchalantly.

His attention snapped back to her. “Is that what you were working on?”

She nodded. “We know all four homes were hit when the owners were away. I decided to follow up on where the couples went. Vivienne’s parents are staying at the Riviera Resort in Mexico, and another couple went to the Chateau Chicago. The Riviera is owned by Martin Marelli, and the Chicago is owned by Lisa Lancaster.”

“Yeah, I checked that,” Clark said.

“Did you also discover that Marelli and Lancaster are married?”

Clark felt the oh-so-familiar surge of admiration. How many times had he watched Lois find links where others

didn’t even look for connections? “No,” he said. “Do they also own the hotels where the others stayed?” he asked.

“No,” Lois said. “One stayed at the Dar-Jamai in Morocco and the other at Spa Kea in Hawaii.”

“Owned by?” Clark asked.

“Different people,” Lois said. “Carlos Bernhardt and Liam McAvoy.”

“Any links to Marelli and Lancaster?”

“None that I could find,” Lois said. “Other than they are all in the business of luxurious accommodation. I did a search on several genealogy sites and could find no family link. I couldn’t find any connections at all.”

Clark gave her a look of empathy. “Dead end?”

Lois grinned. “Not at all,” she said brightly. “Not for two people willing to do some legwork.”

“Two?” Clark questioned.

Lois nodded, still grinning. “Perry’s going to help Ian while I’m away so he suggested I stay out of the office today to give them a trial run.” She put her hand on Clark’s arm. “I thought you and I could chase down this story together and see if we can share a byline again.”

At that moment, Clark fell in love with her.

Not that he had ever been out of love with her, but he felt exactly the same as he had in Perry’s office when he’d had the overpowering revelation that this woman completed him. Would always complete him.

Her touch, her smile, her vitality, the way her eyes shone with enthusiasm—he loved everything about her.

He couldn’t remedy their inability to have children, but maybe they could solve the case and write the story. And right now, Clark couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do more than spend the day with Lois, tracking down leads. He forcibly cleared his mind of the things that haunted him and decided to simply enjoy being with his beautiful wife. “Where do we begin, Ms Lane?” he asked.

She grinned. “Martin Marelli,” she said. “His office is in downtown Metropolis.”

“Convenient,” Clark noted.

“I think we should look beyond the owners,” Lois said. “Huge places like this must employ a lot of people. If we find nothing there, we could try the booking agents.”

Clark nodded his agreement. “The owners might be willing to divulge the names of their employees if they think it will shift the suspicion from them.”

Lois squeezed his hand. "That's what I was thinking, partner."

"Lane and Kent," he said. "The hottest team in town."

She squealed and leapt into his arms.

And kissed him. Just once. But it was brimming with feeling and warmth and meaning.

When she backed away, their bedding was smeared with cream cheese and strawberry jam.

"Oops," Lois said as she tried ineffectually to wipe away the damage.

Clark wasn't looking at the mess; he was looking at your wife. His words spilled out. "I love you," he said. "I will always love you, Lois Lane."

Her laughter died, her eyes turned serious, and her hand stroked the length of his cheek. "Thank you."

"Lois," he began. "Lois, you need to accept that we can't —"

She kissed him. Fully and wonderfully, but there was something innocent about it—something that reminded him of their early kisses. Kisses that held wonder and tentative exploration. Kisses that were an end in themselves. Then she moved away, and he saw her smile. "Do you want first use of the shower?" she asked.

"You have it," he said. "I'll clean up this mess."

"I should do it," she said.

"I'll do it," he said. "I owe you for the kitchen last night."

"OK," she agreed.

As she entered the bathroom, Lois turned to him, one hand on the door jamb, hair delectably mussed, pink pyjamas rumpled. "I love you, Clark," she said.

* * *

Martin Marelli was in his office, despite it being Sunday. He stood as they entered. "Mr Kent, Ms Lane," he greeted.

They shook his hand and sat in the guest chairs.

"Are you here on my business or your business?" he asked cordially.

"Our business," Lois replied. "But it involves your business."

Marelli leant back in his expensive-looking chair as his fingers met in an arch in front of his chin.

"Do you collect luxury goods?" Lois asked.

"I have some that could be considered luxury," he answered. "But I don't 'collect' them per se."

"Do you have any interest in rare pieces?"

Marelli straightened. "This is about the recent burglaries, isn't it?"

"Yes," Clark said. "Our investigations lead to you."

Marelli sighed. "I can't say I'm surprised, Mr Kent. When I read about the failed attempt on Mr and Mrs de Wolde's house, I knew it was possible someone would realise that the Stephensons were staying at the Chateau Chicago at the time of the earlier unfortunate incident."

"And the Chateau Chicago is owned by your wife," Lois said.

Marelli nodded. "Hence the connection."

"And the reason we'd like to ask you some questions," Lois said.

Marelli didn't react to the underlying suspicion in her words. "How can I help you?" he said.

"You want to help us?" Lois asked.

"Of course. The very nature of my business is ultra-competitive. There's always another hotel, usually just down the road. We need every advantage to stay ahead. The slightest whiff of trouble will result in vacant rooms."

Clark slid his glasses down his nose and scanned Marelli's room, beginning with his desk.

"So you are keen to avoid potential clients realising that staying at one of your hotels could increase the chances of being the next victim of a burglary?" Lois said.

"Exactly," Marelli agreed. "If I can do anything to help you find who is behind these robberies, it is in my interest to assist you."

"Unless you've cultivated a lucrative side-business," Lois said.

Again, Marelli didn't respond to her implication. "Ms Lane," he said patiently. "I have already explained that reputation is everything in my business. I understand that the value of the stolen goods is considerable, but they would not compensate for even a few weeks of reduced patronage should this become public knowledge. Frankly, it would be economic suicide."

"Would you give us a list of your employees? And your wife's employees?"

"Of course, although I should warn you that the list will be extensive—reaching into the thousands."

"Thank you."

"Paper copy?" he asked. "Or electronic?"

"Electronic," Lois said.

Marelli picked up the phone and gave directions for a copy brought to his office.

When he replaced the phone, Clark asked, "Do you know anything about any of your employees that could be helpful? Anything that strikes you as suspicious?"

"Other than the managers of each hotel, I don't know any of the staff personally," Marelli said.

"Do you trust the managers?"

"Yes. If I didn't, they wouldn't be managing my hotel."

Lois cut in. "That doesn't mean they have never been tempted to misuse their position for their own benefit."

Marelli nodded sadly. "I know," he said. "I hope you are wrong, but if you aren't, I want this resolved as quickly as possible."

Two minutes later, the disks were delivered. Marelli held them out to Lois. "Would you like to check these now?" he asked.

"No," she said. "You can be assured we will be back if we need further information."

"Please do," he said with a parting smile.

"Do you believe him?" Clark asked when he and Lois were on the sidewalk outside Marelli's office.

"I think so," Lois said. "Did you see anything in his office?"

"Nothing," Clark said. "There are some paintings in the office next to his that look as if they come with a high price tag, but that is hardly unexpected."

Lois slipped her hand under his jacket and rested it on his hip. "Bernhardt's office is in San Francisco and McAvoy's office is in Miami," she told him.

Clark grinned. "What are you suggesting?"

"Do you think Superman would mind giving up his Sunday to help our investigation?"

"He would want something in return."

Her eyebrows shot up, and a delighted grin spread across her face. "Surely, Mr Kent, you're not suggesting Superman would require favours from a married woman?"

Clark brushed back a lock of dark hair that had strayed onto her forehead. "I was suggesting that Superman would want you to have lunch with your husband."

Lois smiled. "Sounds good," she said.

Lunch together would be wonderful, but... "Lois," Clark said solemnly. "We need to talk. Really talk."

Her hand lifted to his cheek. "We will," she said. "But it's been so long since we chased down a story together."

Clark experienced a surge of nostalgia for his early days in Metropolis. "It's been too long," he said.

"We nail the bad guys first?" she asked.

"Yep." Clark searched the street. "We'll find somewhere a little less public, and your ride will be ready for you, madam."

* * *

Two hours later, Lois and Clark walked into a little cafe in the Bahamas. Bernhardt and McAvoy had responded in similar fashion to Marelli. Any link with these robberies would alienate their hotels from their very wealthy clientele.

Clark pulled back the seat for Lois to sit at a table in the alfresco area. They perused the menu and placed their orders with the waitress.

"I guess the next step is to go home and start cross-referencing all of those names," Clark said.

"No, the next step is to enjoy lunch with your wife," Lois said. She gazed out to the ocean. "This is so beautiful."

"Yes," Clark said. But he wasn't looking at the scenery. Not the Bahamian scenery.

Perhaps Lois caught his meaning, because she turned with a smile that made him feel like a young man, freshly in love. "Tell me about the kids," she said. "With Vivienne's parents away, who looks after her?"

Clark dragged his mind back to the present. "Vivienne has a nanny and a tutor, and there is a live-in housekeeper."

"She doesn't go to school?"

"No. Her mother is very protective. She worries that because of their wealth, Vivienne could be kidnapped, so until recently, Viv wasn't allowed to leave home without a security guard."

"Is that somewhat excessive?" Lois asked.

"It seems excessive," Clark agreed. "Until you know the rest of the story. The de Woldes had a child who was kidnapped before Viv was born—a son."

Lois covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, Clark, that is terrible."

"The police found his body two weeks later."

"What happened?"

"Case unsolved. That's why Viv wants to be a detective."

“Oh, Clark,” Lois repeated, compassion radiating from her beautiful eyes. He slid his hand across the table, palm up. Lois put her hand in his, and his fingers curled around her. “How did Vivienne come to the after-school program?”

“She had started leaving the house when her parents weren’t home, which is most of the time. She saw the hall lights on and heard the noise and came in. She kept coming—we didn’t know she had snuck away—until one day, the housekeeper discovered her missing and called the police in a panic.” Clark could smile at the memory now. “I think I came close to being arrested that day. Viv’s parents rushed home to be met with a defiant daughter who threatened to keep escaping if they didn’t allow her to continue coming.”

“Wow,” Lois said. “She really is a poor little rich girl?”

“Yes.”

“What about the rest? Boston?”

“Boston comes from a family who lives in Suicide Slum. They had four kids of their own, and it was a struggle. Then Boston’s uncle and aunt were killed in a gang raid, and their four kids moved in with Boston’s family.”

“Eight kids,” Lois breathed.

Clark nodded. “Boston wants to change his world. Yesterday. One day, he wants to be a doctor and heal their diseases, and the next day, he wants to be a lawyer and fight for justice, and the day after that, he wants to be a counsellor who can help them see their potential and worth.”

“Big plans for one so young.”

Clark smiled ruefully. “And it hasn’t helped that his hormones have kicked in, and he’s realised that Miss Vivienne ‘I never want to be married’ de Wolde is a very attractive young lady.”

“You think Vivienne is attractive?” Lois asked quickly.

Clark’s gaze remained steady on his wife’s face. “I think Viv has some qualities that remind me of the woman I have always found supremely attractive.”

Lois smiled. “Tell me about Maddie.”

Clark slid his thumb across the back of Lois’s hand. “Maddie’s father left the moment he discovered her mother was pregnant. She has never met him.”

“How sad for her.”

“Yeah. She’s a sweet little kid. Sometimes...”

“Sometimes what?”

“Sometimes I wish I could find her father and force him to see how much his little girl needs him.”

“Maddie’s life wouldn’t necessarily be better with him in it.”

“I know that,” Clark said.

Lois squeezed his hand and smiled into his eyes. “You are doing an amazing job, Clark,” she said. “I could tell how much they think of you. They respect you and look up to you.”

“I enjoy being able to make a difference as Clark,” he said.

“Never underestimate Clark Kent,” she said gravely. “He is a man who doesn’t need superpowers to make a difference.”

Clark’s fingers tightened around her hand. “Thank you,” he said.

* * *

They arrived home mid-afternoon. Lois went into the study to download the lists of employee names onto the computer. A few minutes later, Clark came in.

“Honey?” he said. “Are you going to be all right with that list of names?”

“Sure,” she said. “I have a whiz-bang program that Jimmy gave me before he left. It will do most of the cross-referencing for me. Why? Do you have something you need to do?”

“I just called my folks but they’re not answering,” Clark said. “I tried their cell phones and still couldn’t reach them. I’d like to check that they’re all right.”

Lois stood and put her arms around his neck. “Are you worried?” she asked.

“No. It’s probably nothing. It’s just unusual that they aren’t home and don’t have either of their phones with them.”

“Do you want me to come?” Lois asked.

Clark smiled. “No, you follow up those leads. I’m sure I’ll find my parents in the barn or doing the chores or something. I’ll have a quick cup of tea with them and be home for dinner.”

“OK. Give your parents my love.” She leant up and kissed him. “Tell them I will visit them soon.”

Clark kissed her, spun into the suit, and flew out of the window.

Part 10

Lois leaned back, stretched, and surveyed the desk that was mostly hidden under piles of paper and scribbled notes.

She had been lost in another world—a world of names and half possibilities that stubbornly refused to offer any answers until, eventually, the leads converged in one place.

Martin Marelli employed a general technician called Jack Smith who worked at the Riviera Resort.

Lisa Lancaster employed a maintenance manager called Joe Smith who worked at the Chateau Chicago.

Carlos Bernhardt employed a groundsman called Dave Smith who worked at the Dar-Jamai in Morocco.

Liam McAvoy employed a computer specialist called Monica Smith who worked at the Spa Kea in Hawaii.

Lois accepted that Smith was a common surname.

But she already had solid evidence that Jack and Dave hailed from the same hometown in Ohio.

And Joe had a police record for burglary.

It was enough to follow up.

On site.

She needed to talk with Clark.

But, although it was past six o'clock, he hadn't yet returned from Smallville.

Lois stood from her chair and went downstairs. She turned on the television, flicked to the news channel, and immediately saw Superman emerge from the window of a burning factory carrying two unconscious people.

She watched to the end of the report—the factory was on the western side of Metropolis and the cause unknown at this stage—and then turned off the television.

She wandered into the kitchen and made a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

Lois ate it in silence, recalling her time with Clark today. She had so enjoyed working with him again. She hadn't realised how much she'd missed working the beat, being out there, chasing down the leads, asking questions, talking to people, scavenging for anything that could tie together two pieces of seemingly unrelated information.

But her enjoyment wasn't just because she'd been investigating.

It was because she'd been investigating with Clark.

Lois again sifted through their current case. She wasn't sure she knew who was behind the spate of burglaries, but she was sure she had a lead worth following up.

She finished eating and lingered over her coffee, always listening for the swish of Clark's return. She switched on the television and watched with minimal interest until they returned to the story of the burning factory. They replayed

the report she had seen earlier and added only a few lines to update the number of injured.

Lois muted the television and hunched back on the sofa.

She missed Clark.

She wished he were here with her now.

She wanted him.

To talk to. To laugh with. To share her progress with the story and hear his thoughts. To mull over it together, their ideas bouncing off each other until it seemed as if their minds were working as two halves of the same whole.

The way it used to be.

She wanted to lean into his broad body and feel his arm around her shoulders.

To soak up his presence.

Lois stood and wandered aimlessly through to the kitchen. She washed her plate and cup and spent a few moments remembering the youthful energy and laughter that had filled the room yesterday as the kids had made the pizzas. She recalled what Clark had told her about Vivienne. And Boston. And Maddie. What about Todd and Beau? Were their stories equally sad?

She went to the phone and called Martha and Jonathan.

No one answered. Their phone rang out.

She called Lucy. "Lois," came her sister's voice. "It is good to hear from you."

"How are you?"

Lucy sighed. "I'm realising how lonely and how difficult it is being a full-time single mother."

"Have you had any more contact with Dan?" Lois asked.

"His lawyer has contacted mine," Lucy said. "Dan is keen to formally end this marriage."

"Ah, Lucy," Lois said. "I'm sorry."

Lucy sniffed and then was silent for a long moment. "I was expecting it," she said with what sounded like forced cheerfulness.

"But still, it must be hard," Lois said. "So cold and so official."

"Yeah, it is."

"Are you happy with your lawyer?"

"Yes. He came highly recommended. Apparently, he's not someone to be pushed around and he specialises in divorce settlements." Lois heard Lucy take a deep, wobbly breath. "I still can't believe this is happening to us. I mean,

I knew things weren't perfect, but I never expected it could all unravel this quickly... this permanently."

"You know I'll help however I can," Lois said, realising she meant it wholeheartedly.

"Thanks."

"Don't let money be an issue," Lois said. "I don't want you or the boys to miss out on anything."

"Thanks."

They were quiet for a few moments. Then Lois said, "I'm taking leave next week."

"You're taking time away from the Planet?" Lucy said.

The surprise in her tone hurt. Not that Lois blamed Lucy. "Yeah," Lois said. "I'm hoping to go away."

"Is there a story involved?"

"Lucy!"

Her sister giggled. "Well... *is* there?"

Lois smiled. "As it happens, yes."

"Lois!"

"Clark and I are going away together," Lois said, hoping it would be the truth. "The plan is to wrap up the story quickly and have the rest of the week to relax."

"That sounds wonderful. Come and visit us when you get back."

"OK."

"Both of you."

"OK."

"Thanks for the call, Lois," Lucy said. "I... I love you, Sis."

"I love you too," Lois said. "Sis."

She heard Lucy chuckle. "G'night."

Lois hung up the phone, switched off the lights, and climbed the stairs. After a long shower, she pulled on clean pyjamas, collected a few pages of notes from the desk, and slipped into bed.

She shuffled through the notes, but they couldn't hold her attention for more than a few minutes.

She wanted Clark.

Her hand drifted to his vacant pillow, and she smoothed away the non-existent creases.

She wanted Clark.

Lois was jolted from her longing by a blur of movement as the curtain billowed and Clark landed beside the bed. His

eyes immediately sought hers, and she saw the deep concern furrowed on his face. She had a flash of memory—another time when Clark had come into her bedroom, dressed as Superman.

A flash of memory that ignited her mind.

A flash of memory that took an incident from the past and infused it into the present, creating sudden insight. Lois gasped, but there was no time to digest it. No time to respond.

Clark crossed the room, and Lois caught a whiff of lingering smoke. When he sat on the bed, she reached for him, her hand cupping his forearm. "What's wrong, Clark?" she said. "Did something happen in the fire?"

"It's Maddie's mom," he said. "She works in that factory."

"Oh, no," Lois groaned. "How bad?"

Clark swallowed roughly. "I don't know. There could be burns and smoke inhalation. Some of the people in the back part of the factory were in a bad way when I got to them."

"Is she expected to live?"

"I don't know."

"Where's Maddie?"

"She must have heard about it because she came to the factory and had to be restrained from running in. She didn't recognise me, of course. There was a female police officer who was trying to calm her. I heard the cop tell Maddie that they would find a nice family she could stay with tonight."

"What did Maddie say?"

"She cried and screamed and said she wanted to stay with Clark."

"Of course she can stay," Lois said quickly.

"You'll have to be here," Clark said. "There's no way they'll allow a fourteen-year-old girl to stay alone with a man."

"I'll be here," Lois promised.

"You will?" Clark said.

"Of course." Lois squeezed his arm. "You change your clothes, I'll get dressed, and we'll go to the police station together."

Clark's uneasy smile was interrupted by a loud knock to their front door. He stood, spun into jeans and a tee shirt, and headed for the stairs. Lois pulled on her robe and followed him.

* * *

The moment Clark opened the door, Maddie flew at him and clung to him, her body shaking with sobs. He put his arm around her and looked over her head to a female police officer and another woman.

"I'm Sergeant Howard, and this is Mrs Nicholls," the officer said. "You must be Clark."

Clark lifted his hand from Maddie's shoulder and extended it to the women. "Clark Kent."

"You know Maddie?"

"Yes—through an after-school activity program." The officer's gaze moved beyond Clark, and he took a half-step to the side. "This is my wife, Lois Lane."

The officer seemed to assess both of them. She turned to the woman beside her. The woman's disdainful expression didn't waver, but Clark thought he detected a tight nod in response to an unspoken question. The officer turned back to Clark. "Maddie has said she would like to stay here tonight. In circumstances such as this, we try to locate a relative of the child, but Maddie has no one suitable. Standard practice is that we choose a family from our list of licensed foster parents, but it is late and she is very upset."

"Maddie is very welcome to stay with us," Clark said. He felt a sigh shudder through the small body that was still clinging to his waist.

Mrs Nicholls reached forward to tap Maddie's shoulder. "It will only be for one night, you understand, Maddie?" she asked stolidly.

Maddie turned her tear-stained face to the woman and nodded.

"Is there anything else you need?" the officer asked.

Lois stepped forward. "No. We have everything Maddie will need. Does the hospital have this number?"

Mrs Nicholls nodded. Clark couldn't decide if she were always so poker-faced or if she were trying to hide her lack of hope from Maddie. He stepped back from the door and ushered Maddie further into the house.

Sergeant Howard offered them a printed piece of paper. "These are the numbers to call should you require any assistance," she said.

Clark took it. "Thank you," he said.

The women hesitated. Lois stepped past Clark and decisively gripped the doorknob. "Thank you for bringing Maddie," she said. "I think it's best that we try to settle her for the night now."

"Thank you," the officer said.

Lois shut the door.

"Come this way, Maddie," Clark said, moving towards the kitchen. "We'll get you something to drink. Have you eaten?"

* * *

Maddie sat at the table, staring ahead, occasionally swiping at new tears as they drizzled down her cheeks.

Clark crouched beside her. "Maddie?" he said gently.

Slowly her eyes focussed on him. "Uhm?"

"What did they tell you about your mom?"

"Nothing," she said as her tears leaked again. "They wouldn't tell me anything except she had been taken to the hospital and I wasn't allowed to see her."

"Will you be OK here with Lois if I go to the hospital?"

"You'll find out about Mom?"

Clark nodded.

"They think she's gonna die," Maddie said brokenly. "That's why they won't let me see her."

"They won't know anything until the doctors have checked her over," Clark said.

"When will they do that?"

"I'll go to the hospital and find out what I can."

"K."

Clark stood and nodded for Lois to follow him into the living room.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Clark lowered his voice. "I didn't recognise her mom," he said. "I didn't know she worked at that factory until I saw Maddie there."

Lois laid her hand on his chest and looked up at him, her eyes soft with concern. "I'll stay with Maddie while—"

"I can't find my parents."

"You can't find them?"

"No," Clark grated. "They've gone away. I talked to Wayne Irig and he told me Dad asked him if he would do their chores for a few days."

"Did they say why? Did they say where they were going? When did they leave?"

Clark loosely wrapped his arms around Lois's waist, needing her closeness. "They left this morning. They said something had come up that they needed to deal with, but they didn't say where they were going."

"Family? Have you called your aunt?"

“Yes,” Clark said. “She hasn’t heard from them. I tried to be vague because I didn’t want to worry her, but it was clear she didn’t know anything.”

“Did they drive? Fly?”

“The truck is in the barn, so they haven’t gone away on farm business. The car isn’t there.”

Lois lifted her hand to caress his face. “Honey, they’ve probably just gone away for a few days and forgotten to tell you.”

The knot in Clark’s stomach twisted tighter. “There’s something else, Lois.”

He saw his anxiety reflected in her face. “What?” Lois asked.

“I checked the last number dialled on their phone, and I got a... a diagnostic medical clinic in St. Louis.”

“*St. Louis?*” Lois’s arms slipped up to his neck and drew him into her embrace. He could feel her heart beating just below his. He could feel her love seeping into him, could feel her strength coursing through him. “That doesn’t necessarily mean that’s where they’ve gone.”

Clark wanted to ask why else they would call that number but resisted—speculation wouldn’t help anything. And in the kitchen, they had a very scared girl who needed to know about her mom. He eased away from the sanctuary of Lois’s arms. “I should go to the hospital,” he said.

Lois nodded, but before she released him, she reached up to kiss him—a kiss that poured comfort through the choking cords of fear that were knotted around his heart.

Overcoming his reluctance to leave her, Clark stepped towards the door. “I’ll call as soon as I know something,” he said.

* * *

When Lois returned to the kitchen, Maddie hadn’t moved.

“Clark has gone to the hospital,” Lois said. “You’ll know something soon.”

Maddie tried to push a smile through the cloak of her fear. “Thanks.”

“Would you like to go and have a shower now? I can find some pyjamas for you.”

“No. Thanks. I don’t want to do anything until I know about my mom.”

“Would you like a drink? Something to eat?”

Maddie nodded, although Lois suspected that the real motivation was not hunger, but an instinct to take whatever path seemed easiest.

Lois put on the kettle to boil and opened the fridge.

Her mind filled with thoughts of Martha and Jonathan. Had they gone to a medical clinic in St. Louis? If so, why? What tests did they need that couldn’t be done in Kansas? Which one of them required tests?

Lois tried to recall the last time she had seen them. She had visited the farm with Clark... when was it... in the spring? They had both seemed fine then.

Why hadn’t they told Clark they were going?

Perhaps they feared it was something serious. That had to be the reason for not saying something. Even if the need to go to this particular clinic was sudden and pressing, they could have called Clark. Knowing he could come to their farm, they could have left a note for him on the table.

But they hadn’t.

They were probably hoping the results would be good and they wouldn’t need to worry Clark.

Lois’s heart ached for her husband. He loved his parents so much. If one of them was seriously ill, he was going to be devastated.

Lois opened a packet of chocolate chip cookies and put them on a plate as her mind whirled back half an hour. She had been sitting up in bed and Superman had approached her, his face lined with anxiety.

The situation had been a replica of the one years ago—the time when Clark had come, dressed in the suit, to tell her he was breaking up with her to keep her safe.

Sure, tonight, his concerns had been about Maddie’s mom and probably his own parents, too, but the similarities had been enough to spark illumination.

Now, she understood Clark’s distancing.

He’d again decided that her life would be better without him.

Lois clamped down on a wobbly sigh.

What twisted machinations of his brain had led him to that conclusion?

What possible failing in himself had he managed to dredge up and allow purchase in that super-active conscience of his?

Her eyes closed as another wave of realisation rolled through her mind. A baby!

This had to be all about a baby.

He couldn't give her one, so he was freeing her so she could find someone who could.

After all these years, he still battled the doubts that seemed to come with being the only one of his kind in an alien world.

And—Lois swallowed down the shame that pushed into her throat—the one thing that assuaged his isolation was her love. For all his strength and powers, he needed her love.

Her mind replayed snatches of memories.

I used to come up here a lot by myself and just... drift. Not part of the stars, not part of the Earth. Not knowing where I fit in... till I met you.

I kept waiting for some incredible feeling of connection... A feeling that I was exactly where I belonged. But that's only happened to me once in my life.

This thing with us, whatever it is... is stronger than me. Being with you is stronger than me alone.

And emotionally, he had been alone for much of the past year.

This time her sigh was out before she could drag it back.

Oh, Clark. You fatheaded, lamebrained, gorgeous hunk of self-sacrificing idiocy.

Lois collected the two cups of hot chocolate and put them on the table. She followed with the plate of cookies and sat next to Maddie.

The girl broke from her reverie and nodded her thanks. "When will Clark be back?" she asked.

"Not yet," Lois said. "It will take some time to drive to the hospital. And once he's there, he'll have to explain that he's there on your behalf. They don't just give information to anyone."

"Do you think she's going to be all right?" Maddie asked in a voice that shook.

Lois looked into the young face that was etched with fear. "I don't know," she said. "But we can hope she will be."

"What happens if she dies?" Maddie said, her eyes wide. "I don't have a father."

"I don't know what will happen," Lois said honestly. "But I do know there are people whose job it is to make sure you will be looked after. And..." She tried to inject some optimism into her tone. "We don't know anything yet except your mom has been hurt. She could be back at home in a few days and ready to look after you herself."

"You don't know that," Maddie said.

"No, I don't," Lois agreed, "but we don't know for sure that she is badly hurt either."

Maddie was quiet for a long moment as she toyed with the simple bracelet on her wrist. Then she looked up at Lois. "What's it like having someone like Clark who loves you?"

Lois was taken aback by the question. "It's... it's wonderful."

A small smile crossed Maddie's face. "I can't imagine what it must be like," she said. "To have someone so strong and so caring and so kind and to know he loves you more than anyone else in the world. That must be the most amazing feeling."

"It is."

"I wish... I wish someone loved me the way Clark loves you."

"You're young, Maddie," Lois said. "Someone will come along who loves you."

"No, they won't," Maddie said disconsolately.

"Why?"

"Because no one came along who loved my mother," she said obstinately. "My father got her pregnant and left her. He didn't love her. And since then no one has come along. She hasn't had a date in five years."

"Maybe she doesn't want another relationship yet. Maybe she's happy raising you."

Maddie sighed. "If she found someone who loved her, she wouldn't have to work two jobs. If she found someone who loved her, we wouldn't always be late paying the bills. If she found someone who loved her, maybe she would be able to buy nice clothes. Maybe she'd laugh sometimes."

"She has a daughter who loves her," Lois said quietly.

Maddie looked squarely at Lois. "Why don't you have children?" she asked. "Don't you want them?"

"It's not that we don't want them," Lois said. "It's just that they have never come along."

"Like a husband for Mom?" Maddie said dejectedly. "They just never come along?"

Lois nodded.

"If I had a man who loved me... someone who would stay with me no matter what... I wouldn't care if I never had children. Just having someone love me... that would be enough."

Lois swallowed down her tears. "It's enough for me, too," she said softly.

Maddie dropped her eyes to the floor. "I have something I should tell you," she muttered.

"What?"

"Something I did that's real bad."

"I doubt it was that bad," Lois said.

"It was." Maddie looked up, her eyelids speckled with tears. "Before I knew you... when I knew Clark was married to someone he didn't spend much time with... I sort of hoped... I wondered... if he wasn't happy with you... maybe... maybe if you didn't really want him... maybe he would... like my mom."

"I can understand that," Lois said.

"It was a terrible thing to think," Maddie said.

"But I can understand why you would think that," Lois said. "It's hard not having a father."

"Do you have a father?"

"Yes, I do. Although he separated from my mother when I was very young."

"Does he love you?"

"I think he loves me," Lois said. "But he wishes I could be different."

"How?"

"He wishes I was less opinionated and more gentle. He wishes I was less stubborn and more reasonable. He wishes I wanted the things he wants for me."

"He must have been pleased when you married Clark."

"I think he was pleased. He didn't say much."

"Did he marry again? After leaving your mom?"

"No. They tried to reconcile, and for a short time, it seemed to work, but then they remembered all the things they didn't like about each other and separated again."

"Did you hope it would work?" Maddie asked. "Do you hate it when they fight?"

"I used to hate it. But now I've accepted that they are both happier apart."

"And you have Clark," Maddie said.

"And I have Clark."

"You're very lucky."

"I know."

Maddie smiled shyly. "I think he's pretty lucky, too."

Lois covered Maddie's hand with hers. "Try to drink some of your chocolate," she said.

"I... I'm not really hungry."

"I know," Lois said. "But I know if Clark's mom were here, she would suggest that you try to drink it."

"Clark's mom? Is she nice?"

Lois rammed down the rising clod of trepidation. "She's very nice. She makes great cookies—much better than these bought ones—and she has great advice, and she always knows exactly what to say to make someone feel better."

"She sounds like Clark," Maddie said.

"Yes, she does."

"Does Clark have a dad?"

"Yes. His name is Jonathan."

"Does his dad love his mom?"

"Yes. Very much." Lois took a gulp of her chocolate, hoping its warmth would dissolve the hardening lump trying to invade her throat.

Maddie fell silent. She stared at her hands.

Lois watched her, wondering what she could say to help.

The jangling of the phone cut across their thoughts. Maddie lurched. Lois sprang from the table to answer it. She saw the displayed number and turned to Maddie. "It's Clark," she said, as she picked up the receiver.

Part 11

"Clark?"

"Lois," Clark said. "Tell Maddie it is good news. They were worried about burns to her throat and airways, but that is minimal. She has other burns, but nothing that won't heal in time."

"You tell her," Lois said. "She's right here." She passed the phone to Maddie.

Maddie took it. "Clark?"

Lois watched while Maddie listened. Her eyes pooled, and her hand began to shake. After a short time, she offered the phone to Lois and turned away, her shoulders heaving.

"Have you heard anything from my parents?" Clark said when Lois had the phone again. "I left messages for them to call me."

"No. I'm sorry, honey."

She could feel the growing uneasiness in his hesitation. "I'll be home soon," he said.

"Bye, honey." Lois hung up and gave Maddie a hug. "Your mom's going to be fine."

Maddie backhanded her tears and nodded.

Lois suspected she would appreciate some time alone. “Feel like that shower now?”

“OK. But I want to see Clark before I go to bed.”

“You will.” Lois led the way up the stairs. “And tomorrow morning, as soon as your mom is ready for visitors, we’ll take you to see her.”

* * *

Clark was trying very hard to be patient as he drove home. He wished he could fly, but then Maddie would have questions about how he had returned from the hospital so quickly.

He was worried about his parents, and his anxiety had translated into a yearning ache for Lois.

He wanted her.

He needed her.

His cell phone rang, and Clark picked it up immediately. It was Lois. “Maddie’s in the shower,” she said. “If you wanted to leave the car—”

Ten seconds later, Clark was home. He went straight to Lois and swept her into his arms, clinging to her. Her hands cradled his face, and his forehead rested against hers.

“We don’t know why they called the clinic,” she reminded him.

Clark straightened, releasing a long sigh. “Why didn’t they tell me they were going away?”

“Have they said anything to you?” she asked. “Have they mentioned any health problems?”

Clark shook his head. “They’ve said nothing. When I ask how they are, they always say the same thing... ‘fine, just fine.’”

“You didn’t notice anything the last few times you saw them?”

Clark felt the tug of his conscience. “I only saw Mom, and I was... sort of... self-absorbed.”

Lois caressed his cheek. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“It isn’t your fault.”

She slid her hands around his neck, her fingers burrowing into his hair. Her touch was wonderful. Her nearness restored him. It filled him. It stabilised him.

It simply wasn’t possible for Clark to live without this woman.

Lois ran her fingers down his left arm and lifted his hand. With the tip of her forefinger, she traced across his knuckles.

At his third finger, she clasped his wedding ring and gently removed it.

She took off her own ring and sat them together in her palm. She gazed at them, then her head lifted, and her solemn eyes drilled into his. “See these rings?” she said quietly.

“Y...” The rest of the word snagged somewhere in his throat.

“When we put them on, we said this was forever.”

“Ye...” He swallowed.

“Nothing changes that,” Lois declared. “*Nothing.*”

She enclosed his ring in the circle of her fingertips and slowly, emphatically, replaced it on his finger. Then she bowed her head and kissed next to his ring.

When Lois straightened, there were unshed tears glistening in her eyes. She turned his hand and dropped her ring into his palm. She held up her left hand, her third finger separated from the others. “Forever,” she whispered.

Clark’s heart was battering against his sternum. “Lo...”

“Forever,” she repeated.

He slid her ring the length of her finger and held it there, staring at it as his warring emotions jostled inside him—his indecision, his fear, his hope, his deficiencies, his wonderment at her love for him. From the fracas rose one truth.

He loved Lois.

She was the air he breathed. She was his heartbeat. She was his life.

He needed her.

He looked up from the ring and into her face.

He felt as if he were drowning in the soft brown velvet of her eyes. He blinked against the gathering mist in his own eyes. As she looked at him, a tear broke free and shimmered down her cheek.

He reached and tenderly brushed it away.

“I’m sorry,” she said brokenly. “I’m so sorry, Clark.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he said. “I thought—”

She closed off his words with her mouth on his—gently plying him with layer upon layer of her love.

The telephone cut through the air, and they jumped apart. Clark moved the fastest and snatched the phone to his ear. “Clark Kent,” he said.

“Clark.” It was his mom’s voice.

“Mom! Where are you? Are you all right? Is Dad all right? Why didn’t you tell me you were going away?”

She chuckled—just a little nervously, Clark thought, although perhaps that was his overactive imagination. “I didn’t realise we had to inform everyone before we take a little vacation,” she said.

Clark felt his pent-up breath expel like a bursting dam. “*Vacation?*”

“Clark, we saw you called. We had our phones turned off. Do you need us? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. I was worried about you. I didn’t know where you were.”

“Oh,” Martha said. “I’m sorry, Clark.”

“Where are you? Are you in St. Louis?”

“Some friends had booked a couple of nights away and then, at the last minute, they weren’t able to go, so they offered it to us.”

“You just *went?*”

Her short silence told Clark he had allowed his anxiety to sound like reproach. “Yes, we just went,” his mom said calmly.

“Sorry, Mom,” Clark said. He hesitated. “There isn’t anything wrong, is there? No health problems? If either you or Dad... you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Clark,” his mom said, softer now. “What about you? And Lois? Are *you* all right?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t done anything you’re going to regret?”

“No. I haven’t.”

“And you’re not going to?”

Clark glanced at Lois. “No,” he said firmly.

“Good,” his mom said. “Bring Lois to visit us when you get back from the Caribbean.”

Before he could reply, Clark heard a click as their call was disconnected. He slowly replaced the phone.

Lois put her hands on his shoulders. “Are they OK?”

“They’re on vacation.”

Lois’s responding chuckle was a little unsteady. “Good on them,” she said. “They deserve some time away.”

Clark felt a few streams of his good humour seep back. He put his hands on Lois’s waist. “How’s Maddie?”

“A lot better now she knows her mom is going to be OK.”

“Some of the burns are quite extensive. It will be a long road back, but the doctors are confident she’ll be OK.”

“Maddie was one scared little girl before your call.”

“Poor kid,” Clark said.

“It must seem an incredibly lonely world without any family.”

“Yeah.”

Lois brushed her hand down his face and smiled at him. “Luckily I will always have you,” she said.

Clark pressed his thumb against his wedding ring, remembering how she had taken it off, only to put it back with such clear symbolism.

How much did she know? How much had she guessed of his thoughts? Enough, he realised. She was, after all, Lois Lane.

Maddie’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. “I heard your voice,” she said to Clark when she appeared. “How’s Mom?”

Clark moved over to meet her at the bottom of the stairs. “With all burn victims, the doctors are most worried about damage to the airways. That can be fatal. Your mom has minimal damage there. She has some quite severe burns on other parts of her body—her hands and arms—but the doctors believe she will heal.”

Maddie’s chin wobbled. “She’s not gonna die?”

“No, Maddie,” Clark said. “She’s not going to die.”

She gripped the rail. “Can I see her tomorrow?”

“The nurse said she thought that would be OK. Your mom was asking after you, and they told her you were safe with Lois and me. She will rest better knowing you are being looked after.”

“She trusts you,” Maddie said. “She’ll know that if I’m with you, I’ll be OK.”

Clark smiled. “Good,” he said. “You should try to get some sleep now.”

“OK,” she said. She put one foot on the first step, stalled, and turned to Lois. “I remember that you used to get lots of Superman stories, so I figure you might know him. He got Mom out of the factory. If you see him again, could you tell him ‘thanks’?”

Lois nodded. “I’ll be sure to tell him.”

With a small smile, Maddie climbed the stairs to her room.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Lois and Clark were in bed. He was lying on his back. Lois had wedged herself against his side, her head on the junction between his shoulder and his chest. Her warm softness felt amazing, but Clark couldn't help wondering how much closer she planned to take their proximity.

He knew with certainty that if she initiated anything, he would capitulate within seconds.

But it wouldn't get them a baby.

"I made some progress on the luxury goods story," she said.

"You did?"

"Yep."

Her hand was resting on his stomach with her thumb gliding along the bottom of his ribcage, which was doing nothing for his concentration. "What did you discover?"

"All of the four hotels have groundsman or maintenance guys with the surname Smith."

"Smith?" Clark said, trying not to sound as if he were dismissing her discovery.

"Two of them are from a small town in Ohio."

"Smith is a very common name," he noted cautiously.

"It is," Lois agreed. "And it could be nothing, but if we are going to investigate the employees, this is as good a place to start as anywhere."

"How are we going to follow it up?"

Lois turned onto her stomach. She folded her arms across his chest and looked at him, grinning.

A grin that was loaded with meaning.

"What?" Clark asked.

She shrugged. Still grinning.

"What?"

"Are you up for a little undercover work?" she asked.

"Undercover? Do you think it's needed?"

"I think it's exactly what is needed," Lois said. "If it is one of the employees who is feeding out the information that the owners are away, our best chance of proving it is to be there."

"OK," he agreed hesitantly.

"We both happen to have vacation days this week."

"We could change it."

"No..." Lois took a deep breath and cannoned directly into his eyes. "Clark, I know you don't want to go, but the

Caribbean Coral where we have a booking also happens to be owned by Martin Marelli—he owns hundreds of luxury hotels world-wide. I didn't know when I booked it, honestly, I didn't, but I noticed that all the resorts he owns repeat the initial letter. There's the Caribbean Coral and the South Seas Summerhouse and the Parisienne Palace, and when Vivienne said her parents were at the Riviera Resort, my reporter's instinct started twitching because, of course, his name is Martin Marelli and his wife is Lisa Lancaster and her hotels also alliterate like the Chateau Chicago, and I think we should go."

Clark could feel an unruly smile pull at his mouth. Lois contemplated him, awaiting his response. Her mouth was mostly contained, although the sparkle was vibrant in her eyes. "What about Maddie?" Clark said.

"If she needs us, there's no question," Lois said. "We'll stay here for her. But Mrs Nicholls said she would only be allowed to stay with us for one night."

Her smile pushed him right to the edge of surrender. "You think we should simply flit to Anguilla sometime tomorrow?"

"Why not?" Her fingertips skimmed down his neck. "Shouldn't be too hard for a man who can fly."

From the shadows of his mind, Clark's conscience thrust one final time. He had to try to save her from the anguish of shattered hope. "Lois—"

"This is just about you and me," she said gravely. "No one else. Nothing else."

"Lois—"

"OK, it might be about a story, too," she conceded. "But all I want is time to reconnect with you."

"You won't be disappointed when we come home and there's still just us?"

"Nothing about you disappoints me," she said. Then her earnestness was pushed away with a sudden grin. "Except occasionally, you give way, way too much credence to exceedingly nonsensical ideas."

So, she did know. "Lois—"

Her grin widened. "Of course, if you really are worried about my ulterior motives, I could promise separate beds. Or I could sleep on the couch."

Her words evoked a memory that dissolved the last of his doubts. "There's probably a big bed," he said.

"A *really* big bed."

"We could share."

She giggled and nestled into his side again. "It couldn't have been very comfortable on that couch."

"It wasn't."

"Did you think about coming into the bedroom?"

"I thought about nothing else all night."

"You should have come in."

Clark snorted softly. "And make my life even more complicated?"

"Complicated?"

"I was in love with you and pretending I wasn't, and then we went undercover as newlyweds, and I was supposed to pretend I was in love with you."

Her little chuckle vibrated across his chest. "I still think you should have come into the bedroom."

"Easy for you to say," he said. "The thought of you in that bed—just a few feet away, but totally unreachable—was agony. If I'd come in, I would have kissed you."

"You did kiss me."

"Only as a ruse when I saw the maid was coming."

"You enjoyed it though, didn't you?" she challenged.

"I loved every second of it," Clark breathed. "It was like all of my best dreams coming true. I was desperately hoping the maid would decide she needed to clean the room for half an hour."

"And what would you have done if she had?"

"I would have kept on kissing you. I mean, the surveillance equipment *had* to be protected."

She giggled again. "Did you ever think it was significant that I didn't tear a few strips off you after she left?"

"I was petrified you would."

"But I didn't."

"No, you didn't." Clark brushed back her hair from her face and arranged it behind her ear. "I suppose you've already checked the list of employees at the Caribbean Coral?"

"Yep," she said.

"And found an employee called Smith?"

"Yep."

He sighed so deeply it lifted her head on his chest. "Then I guess we have to go," he said, knowing she would see straight through the resignation of his tone.

The breath carrying her little squeal floated across his arm; then she reached across him to turn off the light. "Goodnight, my love."

"Goodnight, Lois."

She settled back against him, her fingers splayed on his ribs. "I enjoyed working with you today."

"I enjoyed it too."

"I love you, Clark."

"I love you too, Lois."

"Clark?"

"Uhm?"

"I think tomorrow night you should sleep on the couch at the Caribbean Coral. And I'll sleep on the bed."

"That doesn't sound very fair," he protested mildly.

"And you should definitely think about me all alone in that big bed."

"That doesn't sound fair at all."

"But if you were to get *off* the couch and come into my room... you might change your mind about the unfairness of it all." Lois kissed his chest and sighed happily.

Clark smiled, his heart full.

* * *

Clark woke to sharp rapping on the door the next morning. It was past seven-thirty. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept this late.

Lois was still draped across him. Her hand was on his stomach, her head on his chest.

He couldn't remember the last time she had slept this late.

He eased from her, spun into clothes, emerged from the bedroom, looked around to make sure that Maddie wasn't watching and flew down the stairs. He opened the door. Mrs Nicholls stared back.

"Ah... good morning, Mrs Nicholls," he said.

"Mr Kent," she said with formal stiffness. "How is Maddie?"

"I think she is still asleep," Clark answered. "We all had a late night."

"Have you heard the news from the hospital?"

"We heard that Maddie's mom's injuries are not critical."

Mrs Nicholls gave him a tight smile. "But she will be requiring an extensive stay in hospital, so arrangements had to be made for Maddie's welfare."

"I understand that, Mrs Nicholls."

Clark heard Lois's footsteps behind him. He felt her hand rest on his back. "Good morning," she said. "Maddie is still asleep. When she wakes, she will want to see her mother. Could we meet you at the hospital?"

"It's highly irregular for a minor to be left in the care of people not registered with the Administration for Children and Families," Mrs Nicholls said.

Lois shone her winning smile. "But the best organisations are those that are flexible enough to adjust to the situation, and last night we had a distraught child who was scared that her mother was going to die."

"It has been pointed out to me that I was remiss to leave her here." Mrs Nicholls stared stonily ahead. "Particularly with a couple who were deemed unsuitable for adoption."

Lois stepped forward. "This experience has made me think it is time for the Daily Planet to showcase the wonderful work done by the ACF in providing safe and appropriate care for children in a crisis," she said.

Mrs Nicholls face unbent slightly. "You *will* bring her straight to the hospital?"

"That is what Maddie will want," Lois said. "We'll bring her as soon as she has eaten her breakfast."

"And you'll help her to accept that she can't remain with you while her mother recuperates?"

"Yes," Clark promised.

"I will meet you at the hospital at ten-thirty," Mrs Nicholls said crisply.

She turned away, and Clark closed the front door.

Lois turned to him, slid her arms up his neck, and came in real close. "Uhhh," she purred. "I haven't slept that well in ages."

Clark folded his arms around her back. "Me, either."

Lois lifted off his chest and looked into his eyes. Then her gaze dropped, and her mouth closed in on his. She kissed him, backed away, came again, deepening their contact.

Above them, Clark heard a cough, and he gently broke away from Lois. He looked up the stairs and saw Maddie, her face blushing. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Clark didn't release Lois. "There's nothing to be sorry about," he said easily. "Mrs Nicholls was here; we're going to meet her at the hospital after breakfast."

"Did she say anything about Mom?"

"Nothing that we didn't already know," Clark replied. He unfolded from Lois and began climbing the stairs. "How

about we call the hospital and you can talk to them?" he suggested.

"Would that be OK?" Maddie asked.

"Of course," Clark replied as he went into the study. He picked up the phone and began dialling the number. "When you've talked to them, would you like to go out for breakfast?"

Maddie's eyes widened. "Like to a restaurant?" she asked. "For *breakfast*?"

Clark nodded. "That would be fun, huh?"

Before she could reply, his call was answered. He explained who he was and said that Maddie wished to enquire about her mother. Then he handed her the phone and went into the bedroom he shared with Lois.

"Maddie's talking to the nurse, and then we're all going out for breakfast," he said.

She smiled. "Good idea," she said. She gestured out of the window. "Are you still OK with going to Anguilla today?" she said.

Clark smothered his smile. "What if I'm not?" he questioned.

"Then we stay here," she said. She shot him an overdone wink. "I'm sure we can think of a way to fill in the long hours at home. Alone."

Clark felt his smile burst free. "Sounds like fun," he said.

She stepped over to him and ran her forefinger across his t-shirt. "Oh, it *will* be fun," she promised.

He wanted her. Now.

But Maddie was in the next room, so Clark made do with kissing her—kissing her with promise and heat and all the desire burning through his body.

When he broke away, he was breathing hard and Lois's face was flushed. "You've always been a supreme kisser, Mr Kent," she drawled.

He brushed back her hair and looked down deep into her eyes. "As good as staying at home sounds, I think I'd like to go to a romantic villa in the Caribbean with my wife," he said softly.

Her eyes lit. "You would?"

"Honestly?" he said. "Right now, I just want to be with you. I don't really care where we are."

"Then let's go," she said. "Let's chase down the leads we have and see if we can find some stolen treasures."

"A treasure hunt," Clark said. "That sounds like fun."

She caressed his jaw. "I think we might find some treasure worth far, far more than an old vase or some jewellery."

"I hope so," Clark said.

She kissed him. "We will, darling," she said. "We will."

Part 12

Lois followed the porter along the row of charming sun-bleached villas. When they reached the last building, he opened the door, and Lois and Clark stepped into a spacious room with simple furnishings that complemented the relaxed ambience. On the far side of the room, there was an expanse of glass looking out onto a tropical paradise of white sand and azure sea.

Clark tipped the porter, and he slipped away, leaving them alone. Lois circled slowly, trying to take in everything at once. "Wow!" she said. "This is amazing."

Clark went to the oversized couch. He sat down, comprehensively testing it for size and comfort.

Lois laughed at his efforts. "Good?" she enquired.

"I should be very comfortable here," Clark said.

She came to him, put a hand on each of his knees, and leant forward, nose-to-nose. "Not too comfortable I hope," she said.

He grinned. "Why don't you check out your bed?" he suggested.

Lois ran into the adjoining bedroom. The bed was huge. She sank into it with a little squeal of delight. She heard Clark's footsteps approaching and sat up. "What shall we do first?" she asked as he entered the bedroom. "Maybe we should try to find Mr Sm—"

With a swift movement, Clark gently threw her back onto the bed. Lois was still bouncing softly when his body landed on top of her. His elbows surrounded her, one on each side as they thrust him forward, bringing his mouth down on hers.

Her giggles drowned in his kiss. His mouth wooed hers, teasing, testing, tasting. He broke away, and his head came down next to hers. "Careful," he whispered against her ear. "We're bugged."

"Bugged?" she squeaked.

"Sshh! It's audio only, and it's in the other room."

"You're joking, right?"

He grinned at her tone and shook his head.

Lois traced a line across the mouth that only moments ago had been expertly luring her to things far more exciting

than spy equipment. "Nice move," she murmured. "Did you practice that?"

Clark grinned. "I may have used it once or twice before," he acknowledged.

"Twice?"

"OK," Clark said as he ran his finger down her nose. "Only once." He leant to one side, taking his weight onto an elbow. He adjusted his position slightly and then lowered his glasses. "Off the mirror," he said. "And a direct hit to the target." He looked down at her with a boyish grin.

"You could have zapped it before coming in here," Lois said.

"And miss the chance to kiss the prettiest partner I've ever had?" He surveyed the room. "Hey, this is cool." He bounced a little. "And this bed is enormous."

"Do you think it's big enough for two people?"

He pretended to consider. "Maybe," he said. "I'll have to remember exactly how good you've got it when I'm suffering on that couch."

"I'll have it a whole lot better as soon as you get yourself off the couch and into here," she said.

Clark tried valiantly for severity. "Ms Lane," he scolded. "That sounded suspiciously like an invitation."

"You bet it was an invitation," she growled.

Clark grinned at her. "Perhaps I should check for cameras in the other room," he said. "This one's clear." He leapt from bed and walked into the other room, glasses lowered. He returned a few seconds later.

"Anything else?" Lois asked from where she was stretched out on the bed.

"Just the security system," he replied. "The one that uses the key-card to access the villa."

"How did you know about the bug?"

"I heard it—a low droning sound."

"Have you applied a little heat to the security system?" Lois asked. "Then we could meet the guy who deals with security."

"Good thinking," Clark agreed. "But if we leave it alone and the security guy shows up anyway, we'll know he's been monitoring the bug."

"Better thinking," Lois said. "I bet you lunch his last name is Smith."

Clark sat on the bed and pointed his forefinger at her. "Don't try that with me, Lane," he said. "I looked at the

website. I know all meals are supplied as part of the accommodation.”

“You read the website?” she said.

“Yeah.”

She smiled gently and pulled him down, resting the back of his head on her stomach. “You really didn’t want to come, did you?”

“I’m not sure I was thinking too straight.”

She skimmed the pads of her fingers down his cheek. “We are going to find a secluded place somewhere on this island, and you are going to tell me every one of the silly thoughts that somehow invaded your head and got stuck there.”

“Every one of them?”

“Yes,” Lois said firmly. “Because if we don’t talk about them, they will remain hidden in the dark corners and spring to life again the moment I’m not looking... and then you’ll probably do something stupid like decide you can live without me.”

Clark exhaled sharply. “I can’t,” he said.

Lois glided her fingers into his hair. “I know that,” she said. “And I also know I can’t live without you.”

“I lost sight of that bit,” Clark admitted.

“I lost sight of some pretty important things, too.”

He lifted his head, turned onto his side, and fixed his eyes on her mouth. A little shuffle later, his mouth claimed hers. He kissed her, his intensity escalating quickly and as he lured her into the thrilling world they shared.

Then that world came crashing down as a sharp knock sounded on the door.

They groaned in perfect unison.

Clark lifted from her, his eyes still glazed. Lois snapped from her trance and sat up. “OK,” she declared purposefully. “We are going to get the bad guys... very quickly... and we are going to get back here... very quickly... and I warn you now, Kent, it’s not gonna be for the fainthearted.”

The tap sounded again before Clark had given any sign that he had recovered sufficiently to attempt a response. Lois leaped from the bed and opened the door. A man, probably in his fifties, stood there. He glanced at the paper in his hand. “Mr and Mrs Kent?” he enquired.

“Is there a problem?” Clark asked curtly.

“The central computer is reporting a malfunction with your security system.”

“Really?” Clark said. “We only just arrived, and it seems to be working just fine.”

The man gestured through the glass doors towards the beach. “I don’t want to spoil any part of your vacation,” he said. “Why don’t you young people go and enjoy the beauty of Anguilla and I’ll have everything shipshape for you in no time at all?”

Lois beamed at him. “That would be wonderful,” she gushed. “You can’t be too careful with security, can you, Mr ...”

He smiled at Lois. “Mr Smith,” he said. “Darien Smith.”

Lois took Clark’s hand. “Come on, darling,” she said. “Let’s go so Mr Smith can get on with his work.”

They went through the glass door and turned away from the neighbouring villas. Once hidden from view by the side wall, they stopped. Lois slipped her arms around Clark’s waist, ensuring he was facing the villa. “Can you see him?”

“Yep.”

“And?”

“And he’s gone straight to the bug, not the security system.”

“Why would he have a bug?” she said. “You wouldn’t think people would discuss their collections when they’re supposed to be enjoying a place like this.”

“If they were to call home, he would know someone else was in the house and it’s protected. Or maybe they call dealers or other collectors,” Clark said. “People relax here; they feel they can talk freely.”

“Particularly when they think their conversations are private,” Lois said grimly. “What’s he doing now?”

“He’s replaced the burnt-out wires in the listening device. Now he’s looking at the security system.”

“Seems to know what he’s doing,” Lois said.

“Yeah, he does.”

“Wonder how long he’s worked here?” Lois stepped away. “I think I’ll get out my investigative skills and see if they still work,” she said. “Watch my back.”

Clark smiled. “Always.”

Back at the villa, Lois opened the glass sliding door. “Mr Smith,” she said.

He turned. “Nearly done.”

“Already?” Lois said with delighted surprise. “That was quick. What was wrong?”

“Burnt out wire.”

“You found it and repaired it already?” Lois said with unmistakable admiration. “You don’t make house calls, do

you? All the tradesmen I call charge by the hour and always seem to take an inordinate amount of time just to find the problem and then they realise they didn't bring the right tools or they need to order in a part and that is going to take at least a week."

Mr Smith chuckled. "I always carry everything I need."

Lois knelt on the floor and unzipped the suitcase. "And house calls?"

She threw open the lid of the suitcase, fully aware that Mr Smith's gaze had lingered on where her skirt had ridden a little way up her thigh. "Sorry, Mrs Kent, no house calls. I've been working on Anguilla for nearly thirty years. I don't leave the island much these days, I have everything I need right here."

Lois rummaged through the suitcase. "Why would you leave?" she said. "This is paradise."

Mr Smith snapped shut the cover of the security device. "There, now you shouldn't have any more problems."

"Thank you, Mr Smith."

"Enjoy your stay at the Caribbean Coral."

He left the room, and Lois returned to Clark. "Has he fixed it?" she asked.

Clark nodded. "The bug isn't one of the latest—it only has a range of about twenty feet. We can talk freely out here."

Lois held out her hand. "You owe me lunch, Mr Kent."

He took her hand and stood. "Are you hungry, Ms Lane?"

She grinned at him. "Very hungry, Mr Kent."

* * *

At the resort restaurant, they asked for a table outside, away from the crowd. Clark pulled out Lois's seat for her and then sat opposite.

"This is so beautiful," she said. "In a place like this, you could forget that work and bad guys and stories even exist."

"Did you even look at this morning's Planet?"

"Yes," Lois admitted with a grin. "I snuck a look while you and Maddie were ordering breakfast for us."

"And how was it?"

"Perry and Ian did a great job. They led with the latest revelation on the Port story. Your story about Vivienne's attempted burglary was on page two."

Clark nodded. He opened the menu and pretended to be studying it. A fleeting glance up told him Lois was doing the same.

He knew they needed to talk. He wanted to talk—to clear away some of the misunderstanding that had crowded between them. But he didn't want to risk the buoyant playfulness they had enjoyed since leaving Metropolis. It had an element of fun that hadn't been there for a long time. Clark felt young again—young and rapturously in love.

And Lois had never looked more beautiful.

When the waiter came, they ordered a seafood and salad platter to share.

After he'd gone, Lois stared out to the expanse of ocean. The breeze played with her hair, whisking it around her shoulders. Clark knew he would be content to sit and watch her for hours.

But they needed to talk, and he wanted to do it before they got back to their villa. Now was the perfect opportunity. "Lois," he began.

"Clark," Lois said at the same moment. She put her hand on his. "I think I should go first," she said.

He smiled. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"No," she said. She smiled at him, caressing his heart. "Do you want to tell me what you were trying to do? Or would you like me to tell you what you were trying to do?"

He smiled, winced, smiled again. "Ah... if you tell me, there is probably more chance we will both understand it."

Lois's smile warmed him inside and gave him hope they could get through this without damaging their newly rediscovered closeness. "You decided that I still want a child," she said.

"You do."

"You decided that I want a child so much, I would be willing to give up our marriage to have one."

"I can't give you a child, Lois."

"I know that."

"Lois, it's your only chance... it's the only way you—"

"My only chance to *what*?" she demanded. "My only chance to ruin my life? The only way to ensure I spend years mourning what I love most?"

"If you don't go now, you'll spend those years mourning for the child you never had."

"I do want a child," Lois admitted. "And I don't know if the ache will ever completely go away." She brushed at her eye. "But you need to understand this, Clark Kent—we can't have a child. This is not about me or you, but us."

"You can have a child," Clark stressed.

“No, no I can’t.”

“You can. Your tests came back saying there was no reason why you couldn’t conceive.”

She smiled sadly. “Clark, sometimes you astound me with your obtuseness. *We* can’t have a child. *We* can’t. That’s just how it is. It’s sad. But that is how it is. I have accepted that.”

Clark searched her face. “Have you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lois said solemnly. “I admit that one of the motivations for applying for the editor’s position was to try to ease the emptiness. To take something—the job—that I would love and allow it to fill the void of not having children.”

“But it didn’t fill it, did it?” Clark grated. “I can still see it there.”

The waiter arrived with their meal. They thanked him, assured him everything looked wonderful, and he left them. “Clark, I’m surprised you can still see anything in me... I’ve been so preoccupied with everything at the Planet... so caught up with that to the exclusion of everything else. Everyone else.”

“I understand,” Clark assured her. “I understand that you need to work long hours, I understand that it’s hard to leave it all at the office.”

“But it was more than that, wasn’t it?”

“More?”

“On some level, some unique-to-Clark-Kent-level, you figured my throwing myself into my job was something you deserved because you aren’t able to give me a child.”

Clark didn’t say anything.

“Didn’t you?”

He couldn’t deny it.

She smiled. “Clark! That is ridiculous. And lunkheaded. And so very, very you.”

“But I can’t give you the child you want,” he protested. “I’m the alien, and you pay for it. That is just so unfair, and I wish I could make it different. I can do just about everything else, but the one thing that defines a man—I can’t do.”

“There are so many things that define a man,” she said. “His strength, his caring, his kindness, his integrity, his character, his heart for others, his love for his family. In all those things, you are ahead of everyone else I have ever met.

“But you want a child.”

“I want you.”

“I’ve tried so hard to find a way through this, but I can’t think of anything,” Clark said, again feeling his looming hopelessness. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to love each other,” Lois answered decisively. “We’re going to remind ourselves of how blessed we are to have each other. We’re going to get our life more balanced. We’re going to remember to take the time to laugh and to kiss and to appreciate all the beautiful moments that will dot our wonderful years together.”

“But what if that isn’t enough for you?”

“Do you remember the last time you broke up with me for my own good?” she asked.

Clark nodded.

“Do you know what I learnt from that?”

“That whenever I get into situations I can’t control, I’m likely to behave like a complete idiot?”

She grinned. “That, too.”

“What else?” Clark asked.

“That you can’t live without me. You may think you can, but you can’t. And I can’t live without you either.”

“I have never thought I could live without you.”

“Good,” Lois said. “We agree. Eat your lunch.”

* * *

Lois bit into a juicy prawn but she barely tasted it. Her attention was captivated with the man across the table.

His hair was as long as he ever let it grow. He’d probably planned a haircut this week, but coming to Anguilla had postponed it. She was glad, because the wind had tousled it, and he looked endearingly close to the young man who had walked into Perry’s office all those years ago.

Walked in and changed her life.

Walked in and filled her life with so many good things.

Walked in and so steadfastly offered her his friendship, then his love, then his total commitment.

She wished there was a way to show him how much he meant to her.

Her actions the past year had sent exactly the opposite message.

Her eyes filled, and her smile died. “Clark,” she said shakily. “Clark, what I did was even more stupid than anything you’ve ever done.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” he said with a rueful grin.

"It is," she insisted. "I was hurt about not being able to have a child. I did use my job to fill the void. I did try to tell myself that if we could have a child, I wouldn't have been able to take over from Perry. But that was over a year ago now."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it became a habit. I became obsessed, and I allowed myself to be sucked into caring about nothing more than the next edition. And I became blind to everything else. Half of the time I forgot that we can't have children—maybe that was a part of the grieving and accepting process, I don't know. But I also lost sight of the greatest treasure in my life—and that's you."

She saw his throat jump.

"Clark, I'm sorry," Lois said, her hand over his. "I can see how you would come to the conclusion you did, and I'll be sorry forever that it was because of me that you believed I would even think about leaving you... for any reason."

She saw the flutter of his lashes over moisture-laden eyes.

"You are the most wonderful blessing in my life," Lois said. "The only thing I want is for another chance to show you that."

He brought her hand to his mouth and brushed it with a soft kiss.

"Please, Clark," she said.

"Lois," he said, his voice rough. "I'm yours. Always."

She smiled at him, knowing her eyes were teary too. "No more silly thoughts about divorce?"

He shook his head.

"No more backing away?"

"No."

"No more trying to ease out of my life?"

"No."

She pinned him with a smile. "You don't have your fingers crossed behind your back?"

He opened his other hand on the table for her to see.

"Did you really think you could push me out of your life by being a little aloof?"

He shrugged. "I didn't know what else to do."

She raised her eyebrow. "I guess being politely aloof is about as mean as you can get. Now if you'd been Mad Dog Kent..." Her laugh burst suddenly. "What would happen if I crossed this table and started kissing you right now?"

He swallowed again. "I'm no expert on Caribbean law, but I think there is a fair chance we would end up being arrested."

Lois groaned. "We can't go back to our room. Even the audio is not something I want to share with Mr Smith."

"And if I zap it again, he'll be back," Clark said darkly.

"We could fly home."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"No," she said. "I want to catch Mr Smith and find the lost treasures and then go back to our not-bugged, romantic, idyllic Caribbean villa with my husband."

"What do you want to do now? About catching the bad guys, I mean."

"I want you to scan everything."

"Lois!" Clark hissed. "I can't do that. People are probably -."

"Doing exactly what we should be doing," she said. "Doing what we won't get to do unless you use a few skills."

Clark lifted his hands in surrender. "OK, but I'm going to start with the administration block. That should be safe."

Lois smiled and bit off a piece of succulent rockling. "You do that."

Clark lowered his glasses and began to scan. "Got him," he said a moment later.

"Really," Lois squeaked in excitement. "What?"

"There's a room at the back of the administration block. It looks like it used to be a big room, but now there's a partition down the middle. On the entrance side, there are all sorts of tools and equipment and behind the partition there are all sorts of treasures."

"Stolen treasures?"

"I'm confident I can identify at least two pieces from the first robbery. And one of those vases Viv kept talking about is there, too."

"How confident?"

Clark looked at Lois, eyebrow raised. "*Super* confident," he said.

She giggled. "I guess it's time for Superman to pay a call on the Metropolis Police Department and give them all the information they need to organise raids on the Smiths at all the various hotels."

"You don't want to check them out personally?" Clark asked, surprised. "You don't want to follow through right to the end?"

"I do want to follow through right to the end," she said with a suggestive look. "But not with the story."

Clark stood hastily. "I'm going," he said.

Lois smiled at his sudden urgency. "I'll wait here."

He hesitated. "Lois, you won't do anything dangerous, will you?"

"Me?" she said with wide-eyed innocence.

"You," he said. "Just leave Mr Smith alone. The Metropolis police will call the local police, and they'll be here very soon."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" she asked.

"Rest," he replied. "You're supposed to be on vacation." He bent low to kiss her.

He walked out of sight and seconds later Lois heard the low roar of his departure.

She drained her pineapple juice, pushed back her chair, and walked away.

But not in the direction of the villa. Instead, she headed to the back of the administration block in search of stolen treasures.

Part 13

Lois positioned herself behind a large palm tree. From there, she could see the door to the shed at the back of the administration block. On the door was a sign, saying 'Security'.

She had climbed one fence and picked the locks on two gates to get here. She was now in a tiny area, bare except for the palm tree that afforded her some cover. She settled in for what she hoped wouldn't be a long wait. The prickly trunk was unforgiving against her shoulder.

Her mind drifted back to the lunch she had shared with Clark.

She was so glad they had talked, so glad they had had the chance to air his thoughts and hopefully, drive them from his mind. There was still one thing she wanted to avoid—unless he already knew.

Had Clark noticed her tears the last time they had made love?

If he had, she knew he would automatically assume they had been caused by her mourning for the child they couldn't have. That would explain his almost virginal skitishness every time they had approached intimacy during the following few days.

But it was also possible he hadn't seen her tears. And if he hadn't, she really wanted to spare him the hurt of knowing how far she had allowed their relationship to slide.

His distancing could have been merely a part of his plan to loosen their bonds. And it was also possible he had decided that if they didn't make love, she wouldn't be disappointed every month.

So maybe he hadn't noticed.

"Oh, Clark," she murmured. "How could you *ever* think I could love someone else?"

She willed him to hurry back. Her mind was already leapfrogging the dual necessities of nailing Mr Smith and writing the story, and homing in on the time when she and Clark could be alone in their villa. She intended to show him that her love for him had not diminished one bit.

"Ms Lane."

Lois jumped at the voice from behind her. She turned.

First, she saw the gun—only a foot from her face. Then, she saw Mr Smith. "I told you I always carry everything I need," he said.

"What are you doing, Mr Smith?" she asked.

He laughed gruffly. "Don't play games with me. I know who you are. You're Lois Lane, Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet. You and your husband, Clark Kent, are here investigating the burglaries."

"As you said, Mr Smith, I'm the editor," Lois told him coolly. "It is not my job to chase down leads and write stories."

"Old habits die hard, Ms Lane," he said. "And today's Daily Planet has arrived, and I have read a very interesting story by Mr Kent on page two."

"Even reporters take vacations," she said.

He sniggered. "Next you'll be telling me you believe in coincidences, Ms Lane."

Lois's thoughts flitted back to his lingering gaze on her partially uncovered thigh and figured there was a good chance she could keep him talking until Clark arrived back from Metropolis. And get the story at the same time.

"Nothing to say, Ms Lane," Mr Smith sneered. "From what I hear, that's not like you. Well, just for the record—not that you'll have a chance to write the story—but in case you're taking notes in that pretty head of yours, I don't believe in coincidences either." He stepped closer. "You see, Ms Lane, you aren't the only one who can put two and two together and come up with four. Consider this... a high-profile Metropolis couple with a nose for trouble make a booking with a hotel. And it isn't a vacation they've had planned for weeks, or even months. Oh no, they book and pay and arrive all within less than a week. That is unusual. That makes me very interested in why they are here. That

makes me wonder where they got their information. That makes me nervous.”

“What do you have to be nervous about, Mr Smith?”

“Not as much as you do, Ms Lane.”

“What do I have to be nervous about?”

“The fact that a person who has lived here for so long would know exactly where and when to dump a body in the ocean so that the tides ensure it is taken out to sea—to provide a banquet for all those exotic sea creatures—such that when the body does, eventually, wash up on a faraway beach, it will be unrecognisable.” He gestured with his gun towards the door. “Get into that room you find so fascinating,” he said.

Lois came out from behind the tree and shuffled to the door. She stopped there and felt the end of the gun prod into her back.

“Keep going.”

She pushed open the door and entered the dimness of the shed. She heard a switch behind her and the room flooded with light. It was meticulously neat, with tools and equipment lined up like soldiers on the wall of shelves. She turned to face Mr Smith as he shut the door and locked it. “My husband will come looking for me,” she warned.

“Really?” Mr Smith said with evident scepticism.

“Really.”

“Then why isn’t he here now?” he taunted. “Legend has it that Lane and Kent do everything together—or they did, once.”

“He went... ah, to the bathroom.”

Mr Smith chuckled. “Or maybe you two just aren’t that close anymore. The Daily Planet is delivered here every day, and I am an avid reader. I told Mr Marelli that many of our guests appreciate having a taste of home. It’s been over a year since you had a story together.”

“I told you, I’m the editor now.”

“Good, good,” Mr Smith drawled. “Professional jealousy. That’s motive.”

Lois gasped. “You’re going to try to pin this on Clark?”

“Unless he’s foolish enough to try to find you—in which case there will be double helpings for the fish.” Mr Smith smirked. “Thirty years here has taught me this, Ms Lane—any time a couple is not together in this place, at least one of them can be found on the pool deck or in the bar, looking for a like-minded stranger to... ah... put the zing into a tropical retreat. Perhaps your husband has already found a scantily

clad young thing on the pool deck. Perhaps he’s already halfway to forgetting he’s a married man.”

Lois bit back her defence of Clark, realising it was infinitely preferable that Mr Smith think Clark was a wandering husband rather than a superhero currently informing the Metropolis police about the collection of stolen goods in the next room. And her captor did seem inclined to talk—she should benefit from that. “Why do you do it?” she asked. “Why do you organise burglaries on the homes of the hotel guests while they’re on vacation?”

“Because I like pretty things,” he said.

“But they’re not your pretty things,” Lois said.

“Wealth gives people a strange faith in things,” Mr Smith mused quietly. “They believe that if something cost a lot of money, it must be infallible. Hence they buy exorbitantly priced security systems and believe that due to the resulting hole in their bank balance, it will protect their precious belongings.”

“But that doesn’t stop you.”

He preened for a moment. “There’s nothing about security that I don’t know,” he boasted. “The moment a new system comes onto the market, I suggest to Mr Marelli that we would be remiss in our duty if we didn’t install it here. Once he has paid for it, I have the opportunity to study it and figure out how to circumvent it.”

“Why luxury goods?” Lois asked.

“Luxury goods?” he said as his top lip curled with distaste. “Luxury goods are simply minimally improved versions brandishing a name that adds a few zeroes to the price. They are not for the rich, but for the stupid.”

“You really wanted the special pieces? The one-of-a-kind treasures and antiques?”

He nodded, a dreamy look on his face.

“Why?”

He pulled from his distracted stance and looked at her, his eyes hard and unrelenting. “My name’s Smith,” he said.

“So?”

“Smith,” he said derisively.

“Because you have a common surname, you want to own rare things?”

“Precisely. I worked here for over twenty-five years and saved every dollar I could. There was a Royal Worcester bowl I wanted—just a small one.” He spread his hands about ten inches apart. Lois eyed the gun he seemed to have almost forgotten he held. “Even after saving for so long, I

didn't have half of what I needed for one piece. I knew there had to be a better way."

"Not if it lands you a long prison term."

"Well, that doesn't seem likely, does it, Ms Lane?" he challenged. "You and Mr Kent come away together to a romantic paradise. You are about to disappear. He will only be able to give scant details about where and when you were last seen because he wasn't with you. That's suspicious. And he doesn't have an alibi. Unless he chooses to bring the young thing he found on the pool deck into this and then he has motive. I can see the Daily Planet headline now—Cheating Husband Kills Vengeful Wife."

"You wouldn't want this place crawling with cops," she said.

"Exactly," Mr Smith agreed quickly. "Which is why you have been granted a few extra minutes of life—in the vain hope that Mr Kent does remember he has a wife—because I would much prefer a nice, clean, all-ends-tied-up tragic drowning accident than a messy murder investigation that will besmirch this establishment for months."

"You care about the reputation of this place?" Lois asked with surprise.

"Of course I do."

"You never hit on people staying here at the Caribbean Coral?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he said sharply. "That would lead directly to me." He eyed her speculatively. "Why did you choose the Caribbean Coral? Why not one of the other hotels in the Marelli chain?"

"Would you believe me if I said it was pure luck that we came to your hotel?"

"No."

Lois shrugged. "I don't have any other explanation," she said.

"Someone talked," Mr Smith said bitterly. "Probably those idiots Ed and Howie who bungled the de Wolde job."

His sudden agitation wasn't going to help either her story or her chances of being unhurt when Clark arrived. "How do you know who is staying at the other hotels?" Lois asked nonchalantly.

His manner changed. He really did seem to enjoy talking about himself. "Ever seen a baseball fan who knows more about his favourite ball player's career than the ball player did himself?"

Lois didn't, but to keep him talking, she said, "Yeah."

"Call me a fan," Mr Smith said. "I can't actually play with the big boys—the collectors of beautiful and rare things—so I watch them, learn about them, catalogue their collections and bide my time until they take a vacation."

Lois could hear the pride in his voice. "You have people working for you at other hotels?"

"My nieces and nephews followed in my footsteps."

"Into crime, you mean?" she asked, keeping her tone even.

"Hospitality," he explained. "With a major interest in security. The bright ones I train in security systems, the dumb ones are just groundsmen or maintenance lackeys."

"Obviously the brightest ones take after you," Lois said, managing to keep most of the sarcasm from her tone.

"Or not," said a deep voice from the doorway.

Lois jumped, although she had been listening for his arrival since first positioning herself against the palm tree.

Mr Smith looked flabbergasted. "S... S... S..."

"Superman," Clark supplied helpfully.

Mr Smith managed to gulp, before his lower jaw plummeted again.

"Perhaps you didn't read the Daily Planet carefully enough," Lois said.

"Uh?"

"Lois Lane and Clark Kent, the hottest team in town—a reputation partially built on hundreds of Superman stories—many of them exclusives."

"S..."

"So you see, Mr Smith," Lois said. "My husband wasn't busy sampling the young ladies on the pool deck, he was busy giving Superman all the details of your carefully hidden collection."

"And Superman was busy informing the Metropolis Police Department," Clark said.

Mr Smith looked around frantically and then lurched for a possible escape, but Superman was faster. Within less than a breath, the security officer was tied to his own work bench with a length of his own white cable.

The door swung open, and three local policemen stormed into the room, guns poised. They summed up the situation, relaxed their stance and turned to Clark. "Thanks, Superman."

Clark nodded to Lois. "Nice working with you again, Ms Lane," he said. "We've missed you on the beat." Then with

a blur of red and blue, he disappeared, leaving the door to swing slowly in his wake.

“Well, I have a story to write,” Lois said nonchalantly. “And a vacation to continue.”

Three steps out of the door, she met Clark, dressed again in his shorts and t-shirt. “Lois,” he chided. “I thought we agreed that you weren’t going to do anything dangerous.”

She smiled in welcome as she put her hand on his chest. “No, Clark, you agreed that I wasn’t going to do anything dangerous.”

“Lo-is.”

She smiled at his grave expression. “I knew you would rescue me.”

He came closer and lowered his voice. “I was in Metropolis, and you were on the end of a gun in Anguilla.”

“I also knew I could keep him talking long enough for you to get to me,” Lois said. “So I really wasn’t in any danger at all.” She reached up, enfolding his neck with her arms, and settled into her place on his chest. She felt his arms surround her. “I suppose we have to write the story first,” she said regretfully.

“The hotel manager had offered us the use of his computer to show his gratitude for our help. And they have upgraded our room as an apology for the bug in our current room.”

“Another room?” Lois said. “An upgraded room?”

“It’s hard to imagine how you could get better than what we already have,” Clark said. “Minus the listening device, of course.”

“Does it have a couch?” Lois asked.

She felt Clark chuckle. “I didn’t ask. I wasn’t particularly keen to announce publicly that I would be sleeping on it.”

Lois kissed him quickly. “Let’s get the story written, partner,” she said. “The couch awaits you.”

* * *

When the story had been sent to Ian and Perry, Lois and Clark were taken to a new room. This one was bigger, grander and included a small section of private beach. Once they were alone, Lois turned to Clark. “Anything here requiring your attention?” she asked. “Bugs? Hidden cameras?”

“Nothing requiring my attention,” he said. Clark put his hands on her waist. “Except you, my beautiful wife.”

She smiled.

“I offer several options for your consideration,” he said.

“You do?”

“We could dress up and go out on a date. We could eat in the restaurant here, or anywhere else in the world that you choose.”

“Sounds nice,” Lois said. “What are my other options?”

“We could stroll along our own beach.”

“Uhhmm. Nice.”

“We could swim. Also at our own beach.”

“Uhhmm.”

“We could go to the pool.”

Lois shook her head. “Too public.”

He grinned. “I was going to suggest we could go to the Night Club and dance, but that would be public as well.”

She nodded her agreement. “Any other suggestions?”

“We could go to bed—me to the couch and you to that very big bed.”

“I assume all these options lead to the same eventual outcome?”

Clark winked at her. “A man can hope,” he said.

Lois pretended to consider. “I think all the options sound wonderful—so wonderful I can’t decide which one I’d like.”

“So...”

“So I think I will simply kiss you.” Her mouth claimed his. “... and kiss you.” Her hands on his neck pulled him closer. “... and kiss you until you are incapable of thinking about anything except what I am doing to you.”

He swallowed. “That would be—”

Clark’s responding kisses ignited her simmering need. Lois opened her mouth, inviting him deeper. Her world became all about him.

Then, Clark picked up his wife and took her to the very big bed.

* * *

Clark Kent stared at the star-spotted black-blue sky.

How could he have imagined he could live without Lois?

His body hummed with sated heaviness. His mind was deliciously dulled. His heart was full. His soul felt like it had melded again with its one true mate.

He loved Lois so much.

They had made love on the bed ... and then on the couch ... and then moved outside to their beach to make love under

the array of stars, surrounded by the scent of the ocean and the rhythm of the waves.

Clark sighed with contentment. He had everything he needed—right here, tucked under his arm.

He loved Lois so much.

He loved the weight of her head on his chest. He loved the silkiness of her hair on his skin. He loved the touch of her fingers as they skimmed the base of his throat. She shifted a little, and he felt something else. Clark jolted and touched the spot on his chest next to where she lay. He felt the moisture.

He had made her cry again.

Lois rolled more fully onto his chest, lifted her head, and looked down at him. “My tears have absolutely nothing to do with not being able to have a baby.”

“Then what?” he asked. “What made you cry?”

“Mostly, you,” she said. She put her finger on his mouth to curtail his protest. “Your amazing love makes me cry—tears of absolute happiness.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, still concerned.

“I’m sure.” She glanced away. “You saw that I had been crying the last time, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes were back, diving deep into his. “And was that when you began to think about freeing me so I could have a child with someone else?”

“Lois,” he said desperately. “I can’t do anything that is going to make you cry. I just... *can’t*.”

“It wasn’t you that time.”

“Then who was it?”

“Me.”

“You?”

Lois smoothed back his hair. “Clark, I didn’t want to tell you this, because it will hurt you, but it won’t hurt you as much as what you are currently thinking, so I’m going to tell you.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her explanation. And with Lois here, loving him, kissing him he felt invulnerable to pain. “Tell me,” he said.

“Last time we made love I caught myself thinking about a story. I was so shocked that I had let things slide that far. So ashamed that I had become so engrossed in the Planet, I couldn’t shut it out while we made love. After we’d finished, I cried, although I tried to hide it from you because I didn’t want you to know.”

Clark didn’t say anything.

“It was then that I realised how little I had given to this marriage in a long, long time.”

“You have a stressful, demanding job.”

“I have a wonderful husband.”

He caressed her hair.

“I’m so sorry, Clark.”

“It’s OK, honey,” he soothed. “It’s OK.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry too, Lois,” he said. “I’m sorry I made decisions about our future without talking to you.”

She scrambled higher up his chest and looked down into his face. Her smile banished his hurts, his insecurities, his doubts. “I love you, Clark,” she whispered. “I will always love you.”

“Never leave me,” he begged. “Even if I ever do something unbelievably stupid and ask you to, please, never leave me.”

“I won’t,” she promised.

She nestled into his neck and he caught another whiff of her scent. “You smell wonderful,” he said appreciatively.

She lifted her head and smiled at him again. “Treasure Chest,” she said.

“Ahh,” he said, recognising the name. “It smells even better on you than it did in the store.”

“I love the name,” she said.

“You do?”

She wriggled down his body, crossed her arms on his chest, and rested her chin on them. “It’s very apt.”

Clark wasn’t really up to thinking deeply about anything. “It is?” he said.

“Well,” she said, as her fingers lightly stroked across the valley running between his pecs. “A treasure chest is a thing of beauty that holds something of even greater worth.”

This was definitely beyond Clark’s current capacity for comprehension, so he merely waited for her to continue.

“This is my treasure chest,” she said, as her hand skimmed across his skin. “A thing of beauty that holds your heart.” She kissed him, just above where his heart was wildly reacting to her words and her presence and the low, sexy timbre of her voice.

Then her mouth came down and claimed his and everything else was driven from Clark’s mind.

* * *

On Friday afternoon, they flew back to Metropolis. Clark lay on their bed watching as Lois unpacked her suitcase. She looked up from her task and smiled. "Aren't you going to help?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "I'm going to watch you."

"And I suppose you can always cheat and get your unpacking done in less than a second?"

"I could get yours done, too," he offered. "And then there'd be time for other things."

She grinned. "And what might those other things be?"

"Bonding?" he suggested.

Lois chuckled. "I thought we bonded on Anguilla."

"Oh, we did. Repeatedly. But you can never have too much bonding. Not when your wife is Lois Lane." He kicked the half-full suitcase off the bed. "Come here," he said, patting the space next to him.

She lay next to him, rested her lower leg across his knee, and took his hand in hers.

"Lois," Clark said. "I feel so incredibly good right now. I feel like I'm about fifteen years old. I had the most amazing time with you on Anguilla. I love it when you're relaxed. I love it when you smile and laugh. I realise that much as I love working with you, I love playing with you even more. I love it when you tease me. I love how your eyes sparkle when you're having fun."

She smoothed her hand down his face. "I need you to help me, Clark. If I ever again get too caught up in work, or anything else, you need to drag me away—physically, if I don't have the good sense to respond to a polite suggestion."

He smiled. "And if you object to being dragged?"

"I want you to dress up in blue tights and don a big red cape and fly in, pick me up, and take me away."

"And if you yell at me?"

"Kiss me. That'll shut me up."

He laughed. "I should have recorded that."

Lois smiled, though her eyes were solemn. "I'm serious, Clark. I might need you to pull me back sometimes. Don't ever let me get as far away as I got this time. Promise me?"

"I promise."

"Thank you." She leant up to glance at the clock. "We should get ready to go to the hall."

"Are you sure about coming?" Clark said. "You don't have to. *I* don't have to. We can both stay here if you're tired."

"No," Lois said. "I want to see Vivienne and thank her for her notes on the story, and I want to see how Maddie's mom is, and I've been promised that if I come, I'll see a big game of basketball."

"Hardly a big game," Clark said. "It's just a tradition that on Friday nights Brad Tucker's boys go up against my boys in four-a-side basketball."

"Four a side?" Lois asked.

Clark looked away. "Uhhh."

She gently poked his chest, and he saw her wide grin. "You didn't tell me you were *playing*," she accused. "You made it sound like you were coaching."

"*I am* coaching," Clark said. "And playing, too."

"Then I am definitely coming," she said. "Are you going to wear that sleeveless jersey I found in your drawer?"

He winced. "You saw that?"

"Yeah, Mr Purr-fect, I saw that."

"Why do you want to know whether I'll be wearing it? Other than that particular green is definitely not my colour."

Lois ran her fingers down his shoulder and along his upper arm. "The colour is irrelevant to my plan of indulging in a little appreciative ogling."

He tried to contain his amusement. "If you come, you're supposed to set an example for the kids, you know."

Lois grinned. "A woman who is infatuated with her husband. Sounds like a fine example to me."

He grinned and rose from the bed. With a whirl he finished all the unpacking and then offered her his hand. "Let's go, Mrs Kent."

* * *

Lois sat between Maddie and Vivienne at the side of the court watching the game between Clark and his boys—Boston, Todd, and Beau—and Brad's boys. They were evenly matched and the game was tight.

"I'm so pleased your mom is recovering well," Lois said to Maddie.

"I go and see her every day after school."

"The family you're staying with—are they nice?"

"Yes," Maddie said. "But I'm glad I didn't have to go to strangers that first night. Thanks for letting me stay with you."

Lois smiled at her, and their attention swung back to the game. "Our boys are playing well," Lois said.

"Yeah," Vivienne said. "Even Boston has managed to hit a few shots."

"You sound like that's unexpected."

"Todd and Beau always play well," Vivienne said. "Clark does a lot of running, and he shoots pretty decently, but mostly he looks as if he's not giving it absolutely everything."

"He has to coach as well," Maddie defended.

"And he is old," Vivienne said. "I suppose that makes it hard to keep up."

Lois chopped off her smile. "And Boston?"

Vivienne snorted. "Boston just looks uncomfortable out there."

"Maybe you should cut him a break."

Vivienne turned on Lois, her face full of horror. "You're saying I should go out with Boston?"

"No. I'm saying you could treat him like he's a friend."

"He doesn't want to be my friend."

"What does he want?"

"He wants to be my boyfriend," Vivienne said wearily.

"Has he said so?"

"No. But I can tell."

"And you don't want that?"

"No! I don't want any guy hanging off me."

"Tell him that clearly and then try to be nice to him."

"Friends?" Vivienne blurted with exaggerated horror. "Why?"

"Because everyone needs friends."

"Why?"

"Because it's not easy being able to see all the problems in the world and wondering how best you can make a difference."

"You make him sound like Clark."

Lois smiled sideways at her. "I was thinking that, too."

"Were you Clark's friend?" Maddie asked. "When you first met him?"

"Not really at first," Lois said. "I had always worked alone. I didn't want anyone hanging off me."

Vivienne laughed. "Did you tell him that?"

"Yep."

"Was he willing to just be friends?" Vivienne asked. "He didn't fall for you?"

"He was willing to be friends, but it wasn't what he wanted."

"Do you regret it?" Vivienne asked. "Do you wish you'd stayed as friends? Or just colleagues? Or got him out of your life altogether?"

"Not for one moment."

Vivienne looked at Lois, a question in her eyes. "Truthfully?"

"Absolute truth," Lois declared. "My life couldn't be as good without Clark. But that doesn't mean you have to be with Boston."

"Boston's... all right," Vivienne conceded. "It's just that I am philosophically opposed to being dependent on a man."

"Do you think Boston would ever force you to do something you don't want to do?"

"Never. He just isn't like that."

"Then cut him a break."

At that moment, Clark passed to Boston, who hesitated, then desperately threw the ball towards the ring. It bounced off the backboard, rolled around the ring, and fell through it.

"Good shot, Boston," Lois called out. She nudged Vivienne. "Go on."

Vivienne scowled at her but then said. "Good shot... Boston."

"See," Lois said. "It doesn't hurt to be nice."

Vivienne turned on her, face serious, but eyes glinting with amusement. "If Boston takes that as encouragement, I'm going to send him to you."

"OK," Lois agreed easily.

They laughed together.

* * *

Clark had managed to ram the key into the keyhole, unlock the door, and get both himself and Lois into the house—all without breaking the kiss that had begun seconds after he had opened her car door.

He bent low and swept her into his arms. As they reached the stairs, the phone sounded loud through the house.

"Ahhhh," Lois groaned.

"Shall we leave it?" Clark said, only backing away just enough to speak.

"I suppose we should see who it is," she said.

They crab-stepped towards the still-ringing phone. Clark hauled his mouth from Lois's and looked down. "It's my folks," he said raggedly. He took two settling breaths and picked up the phone. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Clark." His Mom hesitated. "How was your vacation?"

"It was perfect," Clark said.

"Is everything... OK?"

Clark smiled at Lois, noticing that her lips still shone from their kisses. "Everything is better than OK, Mom."

"Lois is there now?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to..."

"I couldn't, Mom." Clark put his arm around Lois's shoulder and squeezed her close to him. "I'll never be able to do that."

He heard his mother sigh—probably with relief.

"How was your vacation?" Clark asked. "Where did you go?"

"It was good." But he sensed uncertainty in her tone.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"Nothing... just are you and Lois busy tomorrow?" Now her words spurted forth. "Could you both come and see us? Tomorrow? Or Sunday, maybe?"

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Your father and I need to talk to you—both of you."

Clark could feel his anxiety rise from its dormancy. He'd never been totally satisfied with their vacation story. "Mom, we're coming now."

"No!" she exclaimed. "No, I don't want you to come now."

"Mom, if it's something bad, we should come now."

"Clark!" She actually snapped at him. "Would you please stop asking questions and believe me when I say there is nothing to worry about?"

"OK," he agreed, taken aback by her tone.

"And you'll bring Lois to Smallville tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

With that, she hung up.

Clark slowly replaced the phone as apprehension twisted through his stomach.

"What's wrong?" Lois asked.

"Mom says there is nothing to worry about, but she wants to see both of us tomorrow."

"You're worried?"

He tried to smile, but he knew it wasn't very convincing. "A little."

Lois took him into her arms and held him. "If your mom says it's nothing to worry about, maybe you should try to believe her—at least until tomorrow when we'll know."

Clark nodded.

Lois took his face in her hands and kissed him. "We can't do anything about it tonight," she said. "So why don't you take me to bed?"

He smiled and pushed away his concerns. "Good idea," he said, as he picked her up and carried her up the stairs.

Part 14

Martha Kent looked at the three faces around her table. Jonathan knew what was coming. His cheeks were already ruddier than normal. Martha knew this was going to embarrass him. The knowledge amused her and touched her in equal measure. He was a farmer, for goodness' sake, and the son of the farmer. But he was also a gentleman, and she loved him—both for his uneasiness and his willingness to push it aside.

Her gaze moved to Clark. He was eyeing his father with concern. Martha knew Clark wasn't buying the explanation for their sudden disappearance a week ago. The way he was looking at Jonathan now, Martha suspected her son was still concerned about his dad. Martha hid her wry smile. No, there was nothing wrong with Jonathan.

From there Martha moved to Lois. She also looked concerned; her eyes were on Clark. Of all of them, Martha was most apprehensive about the reaction of her daughter-in-law. Multiple times, Martha had tried to imagine herself in Lois's position, but she hadn't been able to decide how she, Martha, would react and was still no closer to being able to prepare herself—and Jonathan—for what Lois might say.

The closeness between Lois and Clark was back. He barely seemed able to keep his eyes off her, and she touched him at every possible opportunity. Their togetherness warmed Martha's heart and gave her the impetus to do this.

She took a deep breath. Her eyes skipped around them again—from Jonathan—he gave her a little smile of support

—to Clark who stared at her with anxious eyes and to Lois who had taken Clark’s hand and was holding it tightly.

Martha needed to do this.

She needed to let them know that it wasn’t what they were thinking.

But the only way she would be able to convince them of what it wasn’t, was to tell them what it was.

And that was the awkward part.

She took another deep breath, and they all turned to her expectantly. She looked at her son. “Clark, I’m sorry that we worried you,” she said. “But I can assure you that this is not about any health issues for either of us.”

His anxiety didn’t lessen. “Then what is it about?” he asked.

Martha had thought extensively about how best she should do this and still didn’t have a plan formed in her mind. She squarely faced Clark and Lois. “Your father knows what I am about to say,” she said. “But I want you both to know that this was my idea.”

“OK,” Clark said cautiously.

“I also want you to know that this isn’t easy. I want you to know that I... we both have reservations about this. However you react, I want you to know it will be OK.”

“Mom,” Clark said tightly. “You’re worrying me.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Martha said. She could see Clark didn’t believe her. “I also want you to know that if you never speak of this again, we will understand. If you decide you want to pursue this, we will also understand.”

Jonathan put his big hand over hers. “Just say it, Martha,” he said in his quiet, steady voice.

Martha breathed deep again. “Clark, you came to me and told me you intended to offer Lois a divorce because you are unable to have children.”

Clark nodded tightly, discomfited at being reminded.

Lois must have seen it, too. “We have worked through that misunderstanding, Martha,” she said. “It wasn’t Clark’s fault. There were some things we had both let slide.”

Martha nodded to Lois and then returned her attention to Clark. “You told me to come up with a better solution than Lois leaving you,” she said.

“I’m not going to leave him,” Lois said firmly.

“I can see that, honey,” Martha said with a smile for her daughter-in-law. She turned back to Clark. “But I thought about possible solutions, and I remembered what you’d said about how difficult the usual methods had been for you...

so I...” OK, she just had to say it. “I thought... if you were to tell us when the time was right and then Superman could come to our back porch and collect a batch of donor sperm and take it back to Lois and...”

Both Clark and Lois stared at her—eyes wide, jaws hanging. Then, in unison, their eyes swung to Jonathan.

He looked right back, not flinching although Martha didn’t need forty-two years of marriage to know he was supremely uncomfortable under their gaze. “We *did* go to the medical testing clinic in St. Louis,” he said quietly. “I had all the tests... and there is no medical reason why this wouldn’t work.”

“And if it did work,” Martha added hastily, “we would never think of the child as ours. It would always be yours—ours to enjoy as grandparents, but nothing more than that.”

“The father on the birth certificate would be Clark Kent,” Jonathan said. “And no one need ever know anything different.”

“It wouldn’t be the first secret the four of us have kept,” Martha said. She studied the faces of her son and his wife. It was obvious that neither of them had the foggiest notion of what to say. She stood. “Jonathan and I are going to the barn. If you’re not here when we get back, we’ll understand. You have a lot to talk about.”

Lois and Clark nodded, both still dazed.

Jonathan stood and took her hand. Together they walked to the door. “It’s your decision,” Martha said. “Totally your decision.”

* * *

Lois sat, stunned, in the Kent kitchen.

Speech was not possible.

Complete thoughts were difficult enough. She’d start one and then jump to another before the first one had even found completion.

A child?

With Jonathan?

Her instinct was to recoil from that.

But why?

Why was using him as the donor any worse than an unknown man?

It was.

Jonathan was Martha’s husband. And she was Clark’s wife.

But there would be no contact—they would be in different states, miles apart.

But *Jonathan*?

For Clark, this would make their child as close to him as possible. He couldn't be any closer to Martha and Jonathan if they were his biological parents. For his child to carry Jonathan's genes—surely that would mean a lot to Clark.

The child would be a 'Kent'. In every way, the child would be a Kent.

Or would Clark find it unacceptable that his father could do the thing Clark couldn't do?

What if she wanted this and Clark didn't?

What if Clark wanted this and she didn't?

His hold on her hand was almost tight enough to be painful. She squirmed a little. His grip loosened, and he gave her an awkward half-smile. "Wh... what do you think?" he said.

"I don't know what to think," she said. "Do you hate the idea? Or do you think it is something we could consider?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what I feel, and even if I did, I'd be hesitant to say it in case you thought I had made up my mind already."

"I think we can agree that this is not a decision we should make quickly."

"No. Whatever we decide, we would need to be really sure."

Lois put her hand on his arm. "Clark, I want you to promise me something."

"I won't pressure you into anything," he said. "I promise I won't do that."

"That wasn't what I was going to say," she said. "I was going to ask that no matter how difficult this gets, we will be honest about our feelings."

Clark nodded. "Although it's difficult to be honest when I'm not even sure what I'm feeling."

"It's OK to say that," Lois said. "And it's also OK to change what you're feeling. I'm not sure either of us could be decisive right now."

"What was your first reaction?" Clark asked.

Lois raised her hands but could find no words.

"Be honest," Clark said softly.

"OK," she agreed. "My first reaction was... negative."

"Because he's my father?"

She nodded. "And because he's a lot older than me and because he's your mom's husband."

"That was my first reaction, too."

"It was?"

Clark nodded. "Then I thought about it and..."

"And on some levels, it makes sense."

"And it's possible for you and Dad to be miles and miles apart and the... the donation... to get to you quickly."

"Without any records."

"If the secret—the *other* secret—ever came out, we wouldn't have someone we don't know making the most of the notoriety of being the father of Superman's kid."

Lois could see the hope in her husband's eyes. But it was hope clouded by indecision. "We need to realise that even if we decided to go ahead, nothing is guaranteed," she said.

"You would be devastated," Clark said quietly. "If we tried and there was still no child, you would be hurt all over again."

"We would still have each other," Lois said. "And we've already established that having each other makes us two of the luckiest people on earth."

Clark looked down. "We're talking like we are willing to consider this," he said.

"I think we would be silly to dismiss it without thought," Lois said.

"What do you want to do now?" Clark asked. "Stay here? Talk to Mom and Dad? Do you have any questions you want to ask them?"

"No," Lois said. "I want to fly."

"Home?"

"No, just fly. Being up there always clears my mind."

Clark took a piece of paper and scribbled a quick note: *Thanks for everything, love Lois and Clark.*

He took his wife into his arms, and together they lifted high above the earth.

* * *

On Sunday morning, Lois and Clark remained at their table long after they had finished eating their breakfast.

They both had a cup of coffee. They both sipped intermittently. They both stared long into the nothingness as the silence engulfed them.

The morning edition of the Daily Planet lay on the table between them. Neither had given it more than a cursory glance.

Clark looked up and met Lois's eyes. He tried to read what was in her face, but he could determine nothing beyond lingering shock. "What do you think?" he said.

She lifted her hands. "I still don't know what to think. You?"

"My mind is all over the place," he said. "Sometimes I think there is no way we could do it. I mean, in one sense the baby would be my brother or sister—my father's child."

Lois nodded. "Except biologically you have no ties to Jonathan, so the child wouldn't be your sibling."

Clark tried to gather his splattered thoughts. "There's something... I don't know... there just seems something morally wrong with my wife having a child with my father."

"But I wouldn't be *with* him."

Clark glanced up quickly. "You think we should do this?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "Like you, there seems something... wrong... about it, but when I try to grasp exactly what is wrong, I can't pinpoint it."

"Do you have any worries that my parents would cause problems? Would insist on having more input into the child's life than we would want?"

"No," Lois said. "I believe them when they said it would be their grandchild, not Jonathan's child."

"Would it make you uncomfortable being with my dad? Later, I mean. If you were pregnant, would you find being with him, with both of you knowing it is his child you are carrying, would that make you uncomfortable?"

Lois thought for a long moment. "With anyone else, maybe. But your parents are very comfortable people to be around."

"But you've never had my father's child before."

She took his hand. "Clark, if this is going to work, we have to think of it as your child. Our child. Yours and mine. We can't, even in our minds, think of it as your dad's child."

Clark nodded.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "Does this feel different from when we considered using an unknown sperm donor? How do you feel about your wife having a child that isn't biologically yours?"

He sighed. "Lois, I never really told you this because I have absolutely no right to feel this way, but I was never totally comfortable with you having a child that had come from you and another man."

"I understand that."

He was surprised. "You do?"

"I would hate it if, in other circumstances, your sperm was used to impregnate another woman. I would feel as if she had accessed something personal. Something that was meant for me and me alone."

Clark nodded his understanding. "We can't do this, can we?"

"I don't know."

"There's too much involved. There's Dad. Is it fair on him? Whatever he says, would he feel a responsibility for the child—a responsibility that he is too old to take on properly? There's Mom. It was her idea, and she followed up on the idea to suggest it to Dad and then bring it to us. But is she really OK with her husband fathering a child with another woman? Is it just going to dredge up all the hurt because she couldn't give him the child they both wanted?"

"They must have talked about this."

"Probably all the way to St. Louis and back."

The silence fell again.

The clock had moved more than five minutes when Lois spoke. "I have an idea," she said.

Clark looked up, hope flooding him that she had found some illumination that could guide them through this quagmire. "What?"

"I think we should go into the Planet for a few hours," Lois said. "I need to talk with Ian and Perry and catch up with the stories we will run into this week."

"And I should get up to speed, too," Clark agreed. "I need to hunt down some possible leads for tomorrow."

"Then I think we should take in a movie this afternoon. Something light—a comedy, maybe."

Clark stood and offered her his hand.

She stood and hugged him. "We're in this—whatever *this* is—we're in it together."

Clark resisted the urge to sigh and produced a smile for her. "We're together, honey," he said. "And that is all I want."

Part 15

A week later, they were no closer to a decision. Lois and Clark had returned to the Planet. Lois had asked Ian if he was interested in dividing his time between reporting and taking on an assistant editor role to lessen her workload. His response had been very positive—working with Perry had been great for his development and self-confidence.

She'd had two late nights in the week, but the other three, she had been home early enough to enjoy the evening with Clark.

From her desk at the Planet, Lois had often caught herself glancing through the glass door to Clark's desk. Their eyes met across the room numerous times and always brought a smile. He brought her coffee. He kissed her. Touched her.

Lois felt like Clark had returned to her.

And it was wonderful.

Through the closeness, they had talked.

And talked.

And talked.

And made very little real progress.

Clark's parents hadn't called.

Lois knew they wouldn't. They would do nothing to appear to be trying to influence the decision. She appreciated the space. But it didn't make the decision any easier.

They had moved through so many stages.

There had been a time on Tuesday evening when Lois had wanted to go ahead and Clark had been plagued with doubts. A few hours later, as they lay in bed, their positions had switched. On Wednesday evening, they had both been sure they should not do this, only to wake up on Thursday morning, convinced it was the answer to their dreams.

Now it was Saturday morning. They had eaten breakfast and read the papers and then lingered over a second cup of coffee.

Lois looked up from her drink and saw that Clark was looking at her.

He smiled encouragingly, probably expecting she was going to say something—something about Martha's proposal—something that had, more than likely, already been said multiple times.

Lois returned his smile. "I think we should go and visit Lucy and the boys."

"Any specific reason?"

"A few," Lois replied. "We haven't seen her this week, and I really want to be there for her as she comes to terms with being a single mom. Also, we haven't seen nearly enough of our nephews lately. And thirdly..."

"Thirdly?"

"There is something about children that helps to cut through the extraneous stuff and get straight to the crux of an issue."

"Let's go," Clark said as he drained the last of his coffee.

"We could get some chocolate fudge ice-cream on the way," Lois said. "The boys love ice-cream."

Clark grinned. "*Just* for the boys?" he teased.

"Well, I doubt they could eat an entire tub, so they might need a little help from their Aunt."

"Come on, Aunt Lois." He stood and helped her to her feet. "Chocolate fudge ice-cream and the nephews await us."

* * *

There was no response to their first knock. The second knock was met with a red-eyed, teary Lucy. She stared at them, seemingly unsure how to respond to their presence. "Ah... come in," she said finally.

"Is this a bad time?" Lois asked.

"No," Lucy said. "Yes." She pushed a tremulous smile through her tears. "It is a bad time, but I'm so glad to see you."

They stepped into her home and from up the stairs came the sound of muffled crying.

"They haven't stopped crying," Lucy said dolefully. "Ethan was up until two o'clock, and when I finally got him to sleep, Tyler woke up and I just couldn't settle him." She winced as the screams surged again. "I have done everything I can for them, and I just needed a few minutes of silence, so I put them in their cribs and came downstairs."

Lois gave her sister a quick hug. "Are they sick?"

Lucy shook her head. "They have no symptoms," she said.

"Do you know what has upset them?"

Lucy's eyes filled again. "Dan came last night. It was late—he probably thought the boys would be asleep. They weren't, and that made him angry, and he wanted to take some things from the house, but I told him I didn't think he had the right to just come here and take whatever he wanted. That made him angrier, and we ended up screaming at each other and then he left. And it feels like the boys haven't stopped crying since."

Clark stepped up to Lucy and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'll go up there and see what I can do," he offered.

"No," Lucy said wearily. "I'm their mother, I'll do it."

Clark put a second hand on Lucy's other shoulder and masterfully turned her away from the stairs. "You go with Lois," he said. "She'll make you coffee or whatever else

you want. Just forget about the boys for a while. I'll look after them."

The relief was evident on Lucy's face. "Are you sure?"

Clark nodded. "It's a nice day. Is it OK if I take them outside? Even if they keep screaming, it won't seem so loud out there."

"Thank you," Lucy said with shaky gratitude.

Clark hurried up the stairs, and Lois guided Lucy to her kitchen. "Do you want coffee or ice-cream?" Lois asked.

"Ice-cream?" Lucy said with a teary smile. "It's not even lunch time yet."

"Does that matter?" Lois asked.

Lucy chuckled. "Not today, it doesn't."

Lois hunted through Lucy's cupboards and found two oversized bowls. She heaped the ice-cream into them.

"Thank you," Lucy said as she took her bowl.

They sat together. "Is every day like this?" Lois asked. "Or is this particularly bad?"

"This is particularly bad," Lucy said. "Although I can't remember the last time I didn't feel utterly exhausted."

"There are two of them and only one of you."

"Yeah. I'm realising that more than ever."

"Has Dan said anything about taking them?" Lois asked. "For a few hours? Have you done anything about custody arrangements?"

"Roxy doesn't like children," Lucy said flatly.

"But Dan loves the boys."

"I get the feeling that, at the moment, Dan can't see anything except Roxy. I think he's found his true love."

Lois checked her sister's face for bitterness but found none. "But he's said he will see them?" Lois said. "He will take them sometimes?"

"He said he will, but when I pressed him to make a definite time, he said he needed to check with Roxy."

The sisters ate in companionable silence for a time. Through the closed kitchen door, they heard Clark and the boys coming down the stairs. One of the boys—Lois wasn't sure which one—was still crying, but Clark was talking cheerfully about all the fun they were going to have when they got into the garden.

When Lucy put down her bowl and began to stand, Lois placed a firm hand on her sister's arm. "Sit down," Lois said. "If Clark can't handle them, he'll say so. Meanwhile, you're having a break."

Lucy collapsed back into the chair with a deep sigh.

"Are you OK?" Lois asked with concern.

Lucy nodded, again fighting back the tears. "I am now I have ice-cream," she said in an attempted joke.

"Do you think Dan's absence has unsettled the boys? Do you think it will get easier when they get used to the new living arrangements?"

"I know it has unsettled them," Lucy said. "Ethan asks for 'Dada' all the time."

"That must be difficult."

Lucy nodded sadly. "As for whether it will get easier..." She shrugged. "Not in the foreseeable future."

"Have you thought about childcare?" Lois asked. "Just for an afternoon? You are going to need a break."

"I've thought about it," Lucy said. "But right now, I don't want to add something else that is unfamiliar. And I'm worried that if I leave them somewhere, even for just a few hours, they will think I have left them, too."

They could no longer hear the boys crying. Occasional sounds floated in from the back yard, but nothing that sounded like tears. Lois noticed Lucy seemed to be relaxing. "We can stay for a few hours," Lois said. "Would you like to go up and try to get some sleep?"

"No, thanks," Lucy said. "I'm exhausted, but not sleepy at all. I'm too tense."

"OK," Lois said. "Would you like coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Lois stood and filled the coffee maker. "Have you told Mom?" she asked. "About Dan leaving?"

She heard Lucy sigh. "Yeah."

"No surprises?"

"No. It was just as bad as I had feared."

Lois rested her hand on Lucy's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Luce. That can't have been easy."

"She covered an amazing amount of ground—most of it without noticeably drawing breath. It started with the fickleness of the entire male population and quickly moved to my chronic lack of wisdom in choosing a husband and then developed into a lot of advice about being a single mom and finished with a stern warning that if I didn't do the job properly, my boys would grow up to be no better than their father."

Lois slipped back into her seat and caught Lucy's eyes. Without warning, they both erupted into giggles. Lois heard the edge of hysteria in her sister's laughter but figuring it

would help her to relax she made no effort to restrain her own humour.

When they had laughed uncontrollably for a length of time more suited to a pair of teenagers, they dabbed at very wet cheeks with clumps of tissues and steadfastly avoided meeting each other's eyes, knowing that would be a catalyst to further foolishness.

Lois stood and escaped to the relative decorum of the coffee preparation. When she put the steaming cup in front of Lucy, there was still a smile on her sister's face.

"I needed that," Lucy said.

"Don't worry about anything Mom said," Lois advised.

"Thanks."

"Luce?"

"Uhm?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"If you had known this would happen—if you'd known Dan would find someone else and leave, would you have still married him? Would you have still had the boys?"

"Yes," Lucy said without hesitation.

"You sound very sure."

"I am."

"But..." Lois gestured towards the back garden. "But Luce, this is going to be so tough for you. The practicalities of looking after two small boys by yourself and all the emotional baggage of Dan's unfaithfulness and betrayal..."

Lucy nodded her agreement. "But what's the alternative?" she said. "If I hadn't married Dan, the boys wouldn't be here."

"So, no regrets?"

"None."

"Even with Dan showing minimal interest in the boys?"

"Lois, I took a risk," Lucy said. "Deep down, I knew Dan and I didn't have the sort of can't-live-without-each-other-love that you and Clark have. But I was tired of being single and tired of looking for a good man to share my life. In some ways, that risk backfired. Dan has left me, and he's in love with Roxy. I'm angry and hurt, and sometimes I wonder if I can do this. But I have two beautiful boys, and I wouldn't be without them for anything in the world."

"Even when you get no sleep all night?" Lois asked with a smile.

"Even then." Lucy stood and stared out of the window for a moment. She reached over and took the bright pink hair tie from the windowsill. "I know my life would be easier if I were still a carefree single girl who had never married," she said. "I know it's hard enough to find a good man without having two young boys as part of the package. But I also know I wouldn't swap back, even if I could."

"Clark and I will help you."

Lucy smiled her thanks as she finger-combed her hair and then bunched it into a ponytail. "Are you considering IVF?" she asked.

Lois tried to stifle her surprise at the directness of the question.

Lucy shrugged. "Sorry," she said. "But after you said that you and Clark wanted kids and nothing has happened, I wondered if you'd thought about other ways. You don't have to answer; it's none of my business."

"If I had the chance to have a child, do you think I should take it?"

Lucy turned back to the window. "Come and look at this."

Lois stood next to her sister. Clark was tumbling on the lawn with the two little boys crawling over him. She could hear their squeals of laughter.

"Don't ask me what you should do," Lucy said. "Ask what is in your heart and what is in Clark's heart and find your answer there."

"Are you saying Clark would make a great father?" Lois said. "Or are you saying he makes a great uncle and we should leave it at that?"

Lucy put her hand on Lois's arm. "Only you can answer that," she said.

"I don't know the answer," Lois admitted ruefully.

"You will," Lucy said, with a gentle squeeze of Lois's arm. "You will."

* * *

After coming home from Lucy's, Lois and Clark stood side-by-side preparing their evening meal.

"Did it work?" Clark asked as he chopped up vegetables to add to the chicken stir-fry.

Lois cleared away the scraps from the vegetables. "Did what work?"

"Did being with the boys clear away the junk and make it easier to see the real issue?"

"No."

Clark glanced sideways with a smile. “Oh well, it was a good day anyway.”

“Do you want more days like that?”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “Lucy is going to need our help.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Lois said.

“I know.”

Lois reached across him and turned off the heat under the pan. “I want to go and see your parents.”

“Now?”

She nodded. “Now.”

“To ask them questions?” he said. “Or to tell them... what?”

“I want to talk with them,” Lois said. “Specifically, I want to talk with your mom. I want to know exactly how she feels about this.”

Clark quickly completed cooking the chicken with a zap of heat, cooled it with his breath, and put it in the fridge. “Ready?” he said.

Lois smiled, feeling less confused than she had in days. “Ready.”

* * *

Jonathan Kent was in the barn. The last of the animals had been fed, and he only had to put away a few tools and do a final check before heading to the farmhouse for dinner with Martha.

They hadn’t heard from Clark and Lois.

The passing of time had brought Jonathan to the conclusion that they would not accept Martha’s suggestion.

He didn’t know if he was disappointed or relieved.

Martha believed they were just taking the time to make the right decision.

Jonathan didn’t know if she would be disappointed or relieved, either.

Then he heard footsteps—footsteps too heavy for Martha. He looked up and saw Clark.

“Hi, Dad,” Clark said.

“Hi, son.” There was awkwardness between them. Awkwardness that had never been there before.

“How are things?” Clark asked. “Are the animals all OK?”

Yep, awkward. “Everything’s fine,” Jonathan said. “How about you?” Normally, he would ask after Lois, too. But that

just didn’t seem as easy as it used to be. What *did* you say to your son after you’d offered to inseminate his wife?

“Good. We’re good.”

“How’s work?”

“Good.”

Jonathan dragged his eyes from the far wall of the barn and looked at his son. Their eyes met, and Jonathan saw all his own uncertainty and indecision reflected in his son’s face. Then, with three quick steps, Clark came to his father and wrapped his arms around him. Jonathan held his son close.

“Thank you, Dad,” Clark muttered. “Thank you.”

“You’re... you’re going to do it?”

“I don’t know. But thank you.”

They pulled apart and both smiled hesitantly.

“Dad,” Clark said. “I need to know if you really are OK with this.”

Jonathan went to the rough-hewn log that had served as a seat since before Clark had come into their lives. He sat down and waited for Clark to sit next to him. “I’m OK,” Jonathan said. “I’m concerned about Martha and you and Lois. But I’m OK.”

Clark looked at him searchingly. “Truthfully?”

Jonathan nodded. “Yes, son. Truthfully. When your mom first raised the idea, I felt like I’d been kicked in the head by a bull. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that if it’s what you and Lois want, then it’s OK by me.”

“What has Mom said?” Clark asked. “Does she feel pushed into this because she was worried that Lois and I were going to divorce?”

“She would do anything if it meant you stayed with Lois.”

Clark sighed. “That’s what I thought. So... she doesn’t really want this—she just feels she has to do it?”

Jonathan took a deep breath. “No, son. I don’t think so. I think she really wants to give you and Lois the chance to choose this if it’s what you want.”

“If we decided to go ahead, would she be all right?”

Jonathan chuckled. “Have you ever met a woman like Martha who wouldn’t be over the moon at the thought of a coming grandchild?”

Clark’s smile broke suddenly. “When you put it like that,” he said.

Jonathan stood. "We should get over there. I need to wash up before dinner."

Clark stood too. "I love you, Dad," he said.

Jonathan put his hand on Clark's shoulder and together, they walked from the barn.

* * *

"Martha, are you all right with this?"

Martha turned from the gravy she was stirring with a small smile. "I assume you're talking about the one thing we're both thinking about and carefully avoided mentioning?"

Lois nodded. "I need to know why you suggested it."

Martha sat down next to Lois. "I couldn't stop thinking about what Clark told me. Then this idea came from nowhere. At first, I thought we couldn't do it. I thought I couldn't suggest it."

"But you did."

Martha gave a little shrug. "I wanted it to be your decision. Yours and Clark's. If I'd said nothing, I'd made the decision for you." She looked directly at Lois. "I'm sorry if I put you in a difficult position, Lois. Jonathan and I discussed whether we should tell you first or tell Clark first. Then we decided that the only way was to tell you both and trust you to make the right decision together."

"I admire your..." Lois stopped, not sure exactly which word best described what Martha had done.

Martha smiled suddenly. "Recklessness? Impropriety? Lack of discretion?"

Lois smiled, too. "Is Jonathan truly OK with it?"

"He is," Martha said with quiet certainty. "He's a little embarrassed, but he also wants it to be your decision."

"Martha, I want you to be honest with me," Lois said sombrely. "Are you really OK with Jonathan fathering a child who isn't yours?"

Martha put her hand over Lois's. "Honey, I've known for forty-five years that nothing could ever challenge my place in Jonathan Kent's heart."

The door opened, and Clark and Jonathan came in. Martha jumped from the table with a little squeal.

"What wrong, honey?" Jonathan said.

Martha turned from the stove with an anguished look. "We have lumpy gravy," she said.

Jonathan chortled as he went over to his wife and encompassed her in a big hug despite her frantic efforts with the

gravy. He bent low to kiss her cheek. "I like lumpy gravy," he said.

Martha swatted his arm. "Go and wash up," she said, smiling again. "Dinner's nearly ready."

* * *

They ate the dinner Martha had prepared with something close to normalcy. Martha and Jonathan *were* comfortable to be around. The food was, despite the gravy, delicious. The atmosphere was cheery and relaxed. The talk was of normal things like the farm and the Planet.

It was almost possible to believe that nothing had changed.

But something had.

Lois knew it.

She knew Clark knew it.

She knew Clark's parents knew it.

It sat between them like a huge unopened gift. A gift that had been given but not accepted.

After they had eaten and cleared away, Lois edged closer to Clark. "Walk with me?" she said.

Clark looked to his parents. "We'll be back soon," he said.

"Take as long as you like," Martha said cheerfully. "I'll have the coffee pot on for when you get back."

"Thanks, Mom." Once outside, Clark took Lois's hand in his. "Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"I want to go to the place where your parents found you," she said.

"OK," he said. If her request surprised him, he didn't show it. "Walk, fly or drive?"

"Drive and then walk," she said.

"I'll get the keys from Dad and be right back."

* * *

Clark stopped the truck near the gate to Shuster's Field. He helped Lois over the gate and took her hand as they began the short distance to Rocky Cove.

Lois was silent as they walked, but Clark could sense a new purpose, a new certainty in her manner. He strongly suspected that she had made her decision.

Clark wondered what she had decided. When she had suggested they visit Lucy, he had thought that perhaps being with the boys would influence her towards accepting his parents' offer. Then, things had been so chaotic at Lucy's, he'd thought it would have the opposite effect. He'd been

aware that Lois and Lucy had talked while he played with the boys, but he had deliberately kept himself from listening.

He'd known, almost from the moment his mother had spoken, that the ultimate decision had to rest with Lois. Sure, if he'd had a strong and definite aversion, he knew Lois wouldn't force him into accepting their offer. But in the absence of such feelings, he'd known the decision would be Lois's.

He would certainly accept her decision without question if she didn't want to do it.

And if she decided she did want to... he'd known for a long, long time that he couldn't deny Lois anything if it were within his power to give it to her.

What had she decided?

And what was he hoping for?

His gut feeling was that Lois had decided against the idea. He wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was her sudden serenity. As they neared Rocky Cove, Clark tried to imagine what he would be feeling as they walked back—their future decided.

He realised, with profound shock, that he would be devastated. Somehow, the hope had taken root within him and grown despite the choking vines of confusion and qualms. It had flourished in the background, almost unnoticed as he had battled to bring clarity to the possibilities and wisdom to the decision they faced.

He realised his grip on Lois's hand had tightened, and he consciously loosened it.

She must have noticed because she glanced up and smiled at him. Clark saw a quiet peace in her face. Yes, she had made her decision, and she was happy with it.

So, whatever it was, he would accept it.

Because Lois was happy. And there was nothing he wanted more than that.

She stopped and faced him, taking both of his hands. "It was here, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Right here where a spaceship landed carrying an alien baby."

"I've been thinking about your parents a lot," Lois said. "About the risk they took in taking you in."

"Risk?"

"Well, they must have known you were from another planet. I mean, the fact you were in a spaceship would have been clue enough, but if they had thought there was any chance you were from Earth, they would have known that

there were parents somewhere who had lost their baby boy and would have taken you to the authorities."

"I guess so."

"And while they couldn't have expected you to develop the powers, they must have known there was the definite potential for some surprises."

"Yeah."

"And one very real possibility—which did happen—was that if others ever came here from your planet, either hostile or friendly, they would look for you."

"That's true."

"If they'd turned away from you, think of all they would have missed."

"Think of all I would have missed."

Lois put her hand on his face and looked into his eyes. "Ten years ago, I was wary of loving anyone. I didn't want to get hurt again, and for a time, that seemed more important than anything else. But you changed my mind—and saved me from missing out on being in love with you."

Her eyes, her touch, her words—they conveyed her heart. With a surge of pure, impossible joy, Clark knew... they were going to do this. "You've decided," he breathed.

She smiled, and her smile warmed every part of him and infused him with glowing excitement. "I've decided what I would like to do."

"What *you* want to do?" Clark said, trying to keep a tight rein on his emotions. "Or what you think I want to do?"

"I want *us* to have a child," Lois said. "I had thought... hoped... that I had subdued that desire enough that we could live happily without children. And I think I did."

"But?"

"But now we have been offered a chance, and I want to take it."

"Lois, there are risks."

She laughed—freely and exultantly—her head thrown back with joy. "Of course there are risks, Clark," she said. "But it seems to me that people who choose to live risk-free miss so much." She grinned impishly. "And no one has ever accused Lois Lane of being too cautious."

Clark threw his arms around her and swung her in a fast circle. Then he kissed her, but it was a clumsy effort because he just couldn't wipe the smile from his face. He knew she was smiling, too.

They separated just enough to see each other's faces. "What do *you* want to do?" she asked, her smile beaming.

Clark pulled his smile enough that speech was possible. “I want to give you the world,” he said. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

She smiled and lovingly grazed his cheek with her fingertips. “But you want this? For you? Not just for me?”

Clark nodded, as emotion pushed hard into his throat.

She smiled, excitement shining in her eyes.

Clark just wanted to look at her—to commit how she looked right now to his everlasting memory—but something within him urged him to speak. “Lois,” he said roughly. “I want you to know that whatever happens, I am with you. Always.”

Her fingers draped down his face. “I know,” she said. “And that’s what makes this possible.”

Clark felt another wave of emotion. “You know...” He stopped and fought for the control and coherence to express something of his feelings. “You know... you and Mom and Dad, you have given me everything. I’m an alien on a foreign planet, yet from the first day, they gave me love and acceptance and protection. And then I met you... and you talk about their risk, but Lois, you took a huge risk, not just in loving me, Clark Kent, but in loving an alien... and actually marrying me... giving me the chance to be married, to fit in, to be just like everyone else. And now this... again, the three of you are combining to give me far, far more than any alien has the right to expect.”

“You’re not an alien,” Lois said gently. “You’re their son... my husband... and maybe one day, somebody’s daddy.”

Clark looked into the face of his wife—the woman he would always love more than anything else in the world. “I love you, Lois Lane,” he said.

“And I love you, Clark Kent. Always.”

Epilogue

Lois looked up through the glass door of her office to where Clark was giving a very creditable impression of being engrossed in a story.

He wasn’t. Lois would have known that even if she hadn’t already received two stories from him today—two stories that had been super-written, if she wasn’t mistaken.

She knew why he had deviated from his usual practice of not working at super-speed. And it had nothing to do with time pressures. He was struggling with the same condition that had beset her—a mind that kept being drawn back to one place.

Today was the day.

The third of such days.

The first one, eight weeks ago, their hopes had been dashed early.

The second one, four weeks ago, their hopes had survived until lunch.

But today, they had reached late afternoon and so far, the possibility remained that there could be new life growing inside her. Lois leant back from her desk and rested her hand on her abdomen.

What if?

Right now?

A little someone was growing there?

A little someone... conceived because of the love she shared with Clark.

She felt eyes on her and looked up to see Clark at her door. He’d caught her. He knew exactly what she was thinking.

He stepped into her office and shut the door. “Anything?” he enquired anxiously.

“No.”

“Do you feel *anything*?” he persisted. “Anything at all?”

“Nothing.”

He slumped down in the chair. “This is killing me,” he said dramatically.

Lois smiled at that. So far, not even kryptonite had managed to kill her husband, but this... She could stand it no longer. Leaping from her seat, she rounded her desk and grabbed Clark’s hand. “Take me home,” she demanded.

She saw his initial reaction morph from surprise to delight and then fade as his second thoughts kicked in. “Of course,” he said. “Why?”

“I can’t stand the suspense any longer either,” she said. “I have a test in my bag, but I’m sure you’ll want to be there and you can’t come into the ladies’ bathroom here or in any other public place, so we need to go home.”

“Cab or car?” he asked.

“Superman,” she answered. “I’m done waiting.”

They crossed the bullpen with an urgency that probably lifted more than a few eyebrows, entered the elevator, and waited with foot-tapping impatience for it to rattle to the next floor. They spilt from the elevator car the moment the doors opened. Clark picked up Lois and sprinted to the top of the stairs and onto the roof of the building. Seconds later, they were home.

* * *

“Well?” Clark asked.

“Nothing.”

“How long’s it supposed to take?”

“A minute.”

“Is there any way to hurry it up? Heat? Cold? Anything?”

Lois looked up from the test and grinned at him. “Not everything can be done at super-speed, you know,” she said.

He dragged his hand through his hair and expelled a sigh of impatience. “I know.”

Lois put down the test and took her husband into her arms. “Kiss me,” she said. “I always lose track of time when you kiss me.”

He did, tasting her, savouring her, causing her to question whether Metropolis really did need an edition of the Daily Planet tomorrow. When Clark eased away, his tongue ran the length of his lower lip. “I love kissing you,” he said softly.

“Whatever the test says, we’ll always have each other,” she said.

“And that makes me the luckiest man on the planet.”

“But you’ll be disappointed, won’t you?”

He looked like he was about to deny it, but then he shrugged. “I’ve tried really hard to keep the hope under control,” he said. “If this doesn’t work, no one has failed. It just... didn’t work.”

“We can try again next month... and the month after.”

“It’s not too traumatic for you?” he asked. “We can stop any time you want.”

“I want to keep trying... for a little while anyway.” Lois smiled up at him. “And we haven’t struck out on this month yet.”

“A minute must be up by now.”

Lois turned from his arms and to the test. Inside the little circle was a ‘+’.

Positive!

Lois stared at it, her mind swirling in a thousand different directions.

She heard Clark’s gasp and turned to him. Then she was in his arms and shaking so much she couldn’t tell if the trembling originated in her body or his.

When she met his eyes, they were damp and his smile was radiant. She tenderly brushed away his tears. “Clark Kent,” she said solemnly. “You are going to be a father.”

He gently separated them and gazed at her stomach. She reached forward and slipped his glasses down his nose. “Have a peek,” she said.

Clark gently put his hand over hers and slid his glasses back up his nose. “No,” he said. “I want to do this just like everyone else. I want my first look at our baby to be at exactly the same moment as yours.”

“Our baby,” Lois said in an awestruck whisper.

They stood and looked at each other for a long time, trying to comprehend the enormity of the changes that had begun. It still felt like a dream, and Lois would have wondered... except for Clark’s smile.

A smile replete with such joy had to be real.

Lois traced her thumb gently along the underside of his lower lip. “You look so happy,” she said softly.

Clark blinked against the swell of his tears. “I feel so incredibly full... so extravagantly blessed. I have everything... *everything* I have ever wanted.”

Her hand slid higher and brushed across his glistening lashes. “Our baby has everything... a father who loves him, a mother who loves him, and parents who love each other.”

Clark’s smile shone again. “Him?” he said.

“Or her.”

“Do you have a preference?” Clark asked.

“No. Do you?”

Clark shook his head. “A little boy to play football with... or a little girl who looks just like her beautiful mother. How could I possibly choose?”

“What if *she* wants to play football with you?”

“Then I’ll gladly play football with my daughter.” Clark lowered his mouth and kissed his wife with such tenderness, Lois felt her knees buckle. His strong arms surrounded her, held her, supported her.

It was like a sign, a promise. As they walked this road, they would be together.

Every step.

Together.

* * *

For three days, they kept the secret.

It was like being suspended between two worlds—the everyday world of home and the Planet and the secret world

they retreated to whenever they were alone. For Clark, the knowledge of the coming child was like a constant awareness that weaved through every thought. They said nothing to anyone. *Said* nothing, although Clark knew that if anyone actually took the time to study either of them, it would be obvious that their lives had changed.

They had changed.

He would not have believed it possible, but his wife was more beautiful than ever.

He couldn't look at her without wanting to gather her into his arms and hold her and tell her he loved her and she amazed him.

Every time he looked at her—*every* time, he couldn't help but smile.

He'd caught himself at the staff meeting this morning—staring at her like an awed teenager in the throes of his first crush. He just couldn't wrench his eyes away.

Late on the third day, Clark closed down his computer and glanced hopefully into Lois's office. She was already halfway to his desk, her bag on her shoulder. "Let's go," she said.

"But the paper isn't put to bed yet."

"Ian can do it," she said offhandedly. "He needs the experience."

Clark rested his hand on her back as they walked to the escalator. "Do you think he's ready to take on the job of Editor-in-Chief?" he asked quietly.

"No," Lois said. "But whoever does come in, they're going to have a fine assistant in Ian."

They stepped into the escalator and were alone. Lois turned to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "How are you doing, Daddy?" she whispered.

Clark laughed. "I'm not sure this level of excitement is sustainable for nine months, but I can't imagine not being excited."

"I think we should share the excitement around."

"You do?"

"Let's go to Smallville tonight."

"Is that what you want?"

Lois nodded. "I can't wait any longer to tell your parents that they are going to be grandparents."

Clark smiled as his excitement rose to another level. "We'll go home, get changed, and go."

"Perfect."

* * *

"Clark?"

"Yes, honey."

"I don't want to tell Superman how to fly, but... shouldn't we be in Smallville already?"

A slightly embarrassed look crossed Clark's face. "We'll be there soon," he said.

"Why is it taking so long?" Lois straightened in his arms and peered into his face. "You aren't hurt, are you? Somebody didn't hit you with kryptonite?"

He laughed self-consciously. "No. Nothing like that. I'm fine."

"Then why are we flying so slowly?"

"I didn't want to hurt the baby."

Lois chuckled. "I think the baby will be fine if we go just a little faster. At this rate, we'll get to Smallville just in time for its first birthday."

Clark kissed her and increased their speed.

Ten minutes later, they landed in the back yard of the Kent farm.

* * *

Clark took Lois's hand, and together they walked into his mom's kitchen. She was at the stove and turned at the sound of their arrival. Her face lit with welcome. "Lois, Clark," she said as she crossed to greet them. "It's so good to see you. Will you stay and have dinner with us? There's plenty."

"Thanks," Clark said, bending to kiss her. "Sorry we didn't call ahead. It was a last-minute decision to come."

"No need to call ahead," Martha said easily.

"Where's Dad?"

"In the barn. He should be in at any moment."

As if on cue, the door opened, and Jonathan walked in. He saw them and smiled in welcome. "Well," he said. "It's good to see you both."

Clark felt Lois's hand enclose around his and squeeze meaningfully. *Tell them!*

He cleared his throat and tried to apply a measure of control to the smile that was tugging at his mouth. "Mom, Dad," he said.

They both looked expectantly at him.

"Lois and I are going to have a baby."

Their excitement erupted instantly. They engulfed both him and Lois with hugs and love and laughter and congratulations and a joy that bubbled over.

Clark stretched his arms to include all of them—the three people who were his world. Four, if you counted the little one nestled deep inside Lois.

Over the heads of his wife and his mother, Clark's eyes met those of his father.

His dad's eyes were moist. His dad, who rarely cried, was clearly struggling to keep his emotions under control.

Clark smiled his own surging joy. "Grandpa," he mouthed.

"Dad," Jonathan mouthed back.

They both laughed.

* * *

Lois heard the click of her call being answered, followed immediately by her sister's voice. "Lois! It is so good to hear from you. How are you?"

"Great," Lois said, smiling at Lucy's enthusiasm. "You? The boys?"

"I'm really well. The boys are, too."

"You sound wonderful," Lois said. "Relaxed." She sounded happy, but Lois wasn't sure if she should say that.

"You do, too," Lucy said. "We should get together this weekend."

"That's what I'm calling about," Lois said. "If you're not busy Saturday evening, can Clark and I come over and bring Chinese take-out?"

"I'd love that. The boys want to see you."

"OK, we'll come early so they're still up. About six?"

"Sounds great." Lucy hesitated. "Ah, Lois?"

"Yep."

"Would you mind if someone else joined us?"

Lois's attention jolted. "Someone else?" she asked. "A male someone else? Or a female someone else?"

Lucy giggled. "Male," she said.

"Dan?" Lois asked cautiously.

"No. Not Dan. Someone else."

"Is that why you sound so chirpy?"

"Could be."

"Is he nice?"

Lucy sighed happily. "He's very nice, Lois. And... it's still very early days for us and I'm not really looking ahead too much, but..."

"But right now, you're happy?"

"Right now, I'm very happy."

"And the boys?"

"The boys love him. He's so good with them."

"That is such good news, Lucy," Lois said. "I'm so pleased for you. And I'm really looking forward to meeting him on Saturday."

Lucy giggled again. "See you Saturday, Lois."

"Bye."

Lois replaced the phone with a smile, already impatient for Saturday.

* * *

Lois stood with Clark at Lucy's door on Saturday evening. At their knock, they heard a happy shout from one of the boys. Lucy opened the door, smiling broadly and holding Ethan. She hugged both of them.

"Where's Tyler?" Lois asked as she reached to take Ethan.

"With... the someone else," Lucy said with a grin. "Come and see them."

Lucy led the way into the kitchen. As Lois rounded the door, she stopped in shock.

Sitting at Lucy's table, with Tyler on his lap was Jimmy Olsen.

"Jimmy!" Lois said.

He rose from the table, still holding Tyler. His smile was slightly hesitant, as if he wasn't sure how they would react to his presence.

Lois stepped forward quickly and hugged him. She dropped a kiss on Tyler's cheek. "Jimmy, it's so good to see you. What are you doing here? Last I heard of you, you were —" She stopped suddenly and turned to Lucy. "This is the someone else?"

Lucy nodded, still grinning.

Lois's eyes volleyed from her sister to Jimmy, hoping her shock wasn't too evident. Clark moved in behind her and shook Jimmy's hand.

"CK," Jimmy greeted with a smile. He put Tyler in the closest highchair as Lucy did the same with Ethan.

They all sat at the table and began the business of unpacking the take-out. Lucy spooned rice into the two

plastic bowls and gave one to Jimmy; he filled two plates and pushed one to Lucy. She looked up at him, and they both smiled.

Jimmy put a soft plastic spoon in Tyler's hand and placed the bowl on the tray of the highchair. "How are things at the Planet?" he asked, although his attention hadn't moved from Tyler. "I noticed that circulation figures just keep on getting better."

"I have a great team," Lois said, watching him. "We miss you, Jimmy."

He looked across to her with a little smile. "Thanks," he said.

"Where are you working now?" Clark asked.

Jimmy guided Tyler's hand as he loaded his spoon with rice. "I've got a job at a newsstand."

"A newsstand?" Lois said, trying to keep her tone from disclosing her surprise.

"I've only been back in Metropolis for six weeks," Jimmy said easily. "This job came up, and it's not what I want to do long term, but it suits me right now."

"What is so good about it?" Lois couldn't help asking.

Jimmy's quick lunge saved Tyler's bowl from being pushed over the edge of the tray. "I do the early shift, so I finish by mid-afternoon. That gives me time to do other things."

Again, Lois looked from Jimmy to her sister and deduced that those 'other things' were a big reason why Lucy looked so relaxed. Clearly, this was not the first time Jimmy had helped out with meal times.

"I heard you had left Metropolis," Clark said.

"I did," Jimmy said. Tyler reached forward and grabbed Jimmy's shirt with a sticky hand. Jimmy's only response was to smile down at the boy. "I had no responsibilities, no ties, so it seemed like a good time to travel the world and try to make a living taking photos of beautiful places."

"Freelance photography," Clark said. "Nice life if you can make some sales."

"It was a nice life," Jimmy said. "I had some early success—enough to make me think it was a viable way to earn a living. I was offered a commission for photographs of the penguins in Fiordland in New Zealand."

"A commission," Clark said, obviously impressed. "Except New Zealand is a long way from Metropolis," he added with a smile.

And freelance photography is a long way from feeding a restless toddler, Lois thought as Jimmy held the plastic cup so Tyler could drink.

Jimmy smiled. "When I arrived in Christchurch, I had a night there before travelling southwest to Fiordland. I chased up a guy I went to school with, and we swapped news of various other people we knew, and it came out that he had done a bit of travelling with Mitch Williams."

Lois could see this was meant to be significant but wasn't sure how.

"Roxy Williams' brother," Lucy informed them.

"Oh."

Tyler was squirming restlessly. Jimmy calmly wiped his face and hands. "He told me Roxy had a new relationship..." Jimmy's attention swung from the toddler to Lois, and a smattering of colour rose to his cheeks. "The truth is Lois—I didn't only leave the Planet because of the job. And I'm sorry for making it sound like it was something you had done." He looked to Lucy, and she smiled at him. "The truth," Jimmy said, "Is that I'd hoped for years that Lucy Lane might look in my direction, but she never did. And with her being with Dan and having the boys, I figured it was dumb to stay around and be miserable over things that were never going to be."

Lucy reached across two highchairs and put her hand on Jimmy's arm. "So, after he heard about Roxy and Dan, Jimmy emailed me—just as a friend. Just to see if I was OK and ask how I was doing. I emailed back and very soon, Jimmy's emails were the thing I looked forward to every day."

"But you were stuck in New Zealand," Clark said with a grin in his voice. "With a commission."

Jimmy groaned. "Yep, stuck in one of the most beautiful places on earth... and one of the most remote."

"No internet?" Lois guessed, trying very hard not to grin.

"Not without a long journey across water and rugged terrain."

Lois smiled at Lucy. "But you still got an email every day?"

Lucy nodded, and her eyes turned to Jimmy. He had gone several shades deeper in colour, but his discomfort faded magically at her smile. He lifted Tyler from his highchair and handed him to Lucy. Then he began cleaning up Ethan.

"I figured our timing sucked big time," Lucy said as she stroked Tyler's hair. "Then Jimmy asked me if he came home when he'd completed the job, was there any chance

that..." She smiled at him. "... that I might look in his direction."

"Jimmy," Lois protested with a big smile. "You never said anything to me."

He shot her a self-deprecating look. "I don't know too many men who are willing to admit they are interested in a woman who clearly has no interest in them." His eyes swung to Clark with a cheeky grin. "Except for you, CK. You mooned over Lois for years before she noticed you."

Clark nodded. "It's true," he agreed easily.

"But when you finally got together, I'd never seen anyone happier," Jimmy said.

Lois chuckled. "We weren't too happy when you kept turning up at inopportune moments."

Jimmy tried to look contrite. "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean to keep interrupting. It just sort of happened."

"No worries," Clark said easily.

Too easily.

Lois read the look on his face and knew he was planning revenge. She kicked him under the table and was rewarded with a wide grin that made him look about fifteen years old.

"What's news with you?" Jimmy asked. "Lucy said you had a vacation to the Caribbean a few months ago."

"We did," Clark said. "We had a wonderful time."

Lois cleared her throat. "We do actually have some news."

Her words were barely out when a huge, excited grin spread across Lucy's face. "Lo-is!" she shrieked. "Lois? Is it what I think it is?"

Lois grinned. "If you're thinking that the boys will have a little cousin next year—"

She never finished the sentence. Lucy sprang from the table and rushed them. She hugged both of them, to the consternation of Tyler. "That is wonderful," she gushed. "I am so excited for both of you."

Jimmy was now holding Ethan and had stepped towards them, his right hand stretched forward. "Congratulations, guys," he said. "I'm so pleased for both of you. Well done, CK." After shaking Clark's hand, Jimmy offered his hand to Lois.

She refused it and instead wrapped both Ethan and Jimmy in a big hug.

Lucy grinned at Lois. "See, I told you," she said.

"Told me what?" Lois asked.

"I told you you'd find the answer in your heart."

Lois looked at Clark and smiled. There was so much in her heart, it felt like it couldn't possibly be contained. His arm came around her shoulders and pressed her into his side.

"Anyone for ice-cream?" Jimmy said.

* * *

Lois and Clark were almost home when he stopped the car beside a park.

Lois had been lightly dozing next to him. She opened her eyes and looked around. "Emergency?" she asked.

He shut down the motor, released his seat belt, and turned to her. "Not really."

She chuckled. "How can an emergency be 'not really'?"

"It's not an emergency out there," he said with a toss of his head. "But in here."

"In here?"

"I need to kiss you."

She giggled. "That's the sort of emergency I like best."

He shaped his hand along her jaw and kissed her—his tongue and lips exploring her mouth thoroughly. He separated them just enough so he could speak. "Thank you for being my everything," he said.

"Thank you for being mine," she replied.

"It feels like... it feels like I just fell in love with you, Lois. I was never out of love with you, but every time I see you, something inside me wells up and I know that you are... that you will always be the greatest treasure of my life."

"And now we are going to have a baby."

Clark shook his head. "You must know how excited I am about that, Lois, but this is about you, my wonderful wife. And even in all the joy of the baby, I'm not going to lose sight of us—you and me—because that will always be the most important thing of all to me."

Her hand gently stroked his face. "We lost sight of that for a while, didn't we?"

He nodded. "But never again. I promise you, Lois, never again."

"I promise you, too, Clark."

He jolted away from her and refastened his seat belt. "Another emergency?" she asked.

Clark hurriedly started the motor. "Yep."

“What this time?” she asked, sounding exasperated, but he could hear the smile in her voice.

“I need to do far more than kiss you,” Clark rasped. “And as almost-parents, I don’t think we should be caught doing it in our car.”

Lois placed her hand on his thigh. “Let’s go home, my love.”

Clark glanced sideways to his wife, knowing again, just as he’d known in Perry’s office the moment he had met her—he would go anywhere, if only it meant being with Lois Lane.

His amazing wife.

And the mother of his child.

Clark smiled and put his hand on hers. “I will always love you, Lois Lane. Forever.”

“And I will always love you, Clark Kent.”

The End.