

Chistmas With The Kents

by Lois Joos & Anissa Roy

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Rating: K+

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'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the Lane house... no one could sleep, not even a mouse. Upstairs Jason and Kala were breathlessly wondering when Santa would arrive, and arguing in hushed voices over whether Daddy helped him deliver presents. No visions of sugarplums there, only Jason's stubborn belief that Superman knew Santa Claus.

Downstairs, Bing Crosby crooning "I'll Be Home for Christmas" should've been soothing, but the atmosphere in the living was frustrated instead. Lois tossed the instructions that came with Kala's new bike into the air and snarled, "Who writes these directions?"

Clark, halfway done putting Jason's matching bike together, looked down to hide his smile and said, "From the look of them, they were translated into English from Korean by a Mexican. The grammar is... Want me to finish hers?"

"Just leave off the tassel thingies on the handlebars." Lois flung herself backward against the sofa, surveying the room. At Clark's insistence, she had sprinkled red and white glitter near the chimney and made fake reindeer tracks outside, while he pressed a large boot into the fireplace ash and gingerly tracked soot onto the carpet. Picking up the glass of milk that rested on the coffee table next to a platter of cookies, Lois took a sip and said with an arched brow, "You know you're eating these cookies, right?"

"Lois, no one's eating those cookies," Clark said, fiddling with the bike chain. "Blasted thing... Honey, the twins misread the recipe and used a quarter-cup of baking powder instead of a quarter-teaspoon. They're kind of..."

"Awful?" Lois whispered, mindful of Kala's hearing, unable to help a small smile.

Clark nodded. "I'll drop them off at the duck pond."

"You sure it won't make the ducks explode? Alka-Seltzer does, you know."

"Lois!" He was ready to scold her, but saw the sparkle of laughter in her eyes. "I know you never did that. You're kind to animals. Except Gazeera."

"Hey, that doesn't count, Mr. Perfect. That scaly little bugger isn't an animal, he's a four-legged menace," Lois said, sipping the milk again and glancing unobtrusively behind her at the couch. The iguana loved to perch there, and even though he hadn't escaped his cage in over a month, Lois didn't trust him. "Tell you what, Kent. In the spirit of Christmas, I won't try to flush Jason's lizard tomorrow."

"Or vacuum it up," Clark reminded her. He was already done with Jason's bike and starting on Kala's. Super-speed was a lovely thing to have when assembling children's gifts on Christmas Eve.

"Or force it down the garbage disposal, or lock it in the freezer," Lois sighed dramatically.

"Why couldn't Perry have gotten them goldfish?"

"Kids need pets, Lois."

"I didn't. My father only ever let us have a watchdog, and Nero was nobody's pet."

Clark glanced at her while bolting the front wheel on. "Lois... Let's just say your father isn't the best example. Your mom, on the other hand, loves Captain Jack and Gazeera."

Lois rolled her eyes. If it had been anyone else, she'd have claimed senile dementia, but this was her mother. "I have no idea why Mom likes the weasel and the dinosaur. Probably because she doesn't have to clean up after them."

Chuckling, Clark attached the seat of the bicycle. "There, I'm finished."

"Showoff," she grumbled, but was clearly amused. "Break a cookie in half and hide the rest. I'm just about ready for bed." One dark eyebrow lifted momentarily, as if to say, *Notice, observant reporter, that I didn't say sleep.*

The nuance appeared to bypass Clark entirely. He was searching through his pockets with a worried frown. "Uh-oh."

"What is it?"

"Lois, I think I forgot a present."

She could only look at him with a stunned expression for a moment before closing her eyes heavily, groaning. *The savior of the human race, ladies and gentlemen.* "Please tell me you're kidding me."

He got up and went to the door, looking through his jacket pockets as well. "Nope. I'm missing one."

"Well, forget about it at this point! It'll be fine, Clark. It's not like the kids will notice with both grandmas spoiling them."

"No, Lois, this one's important. C'mon, it'll only take a few minutes to go get it."

The raven-haired woman groaned at him, sighing heavily. *Well, there go my plans for the evening.* "Need I remind you it's almost midnight on *Christmas Eve* and it's *snowing* out? No. Absolutely not. If you need it that badly, go get it. But I'm not going with you and you'd better be back in half an hour, tops." She frowned defiantly up at him, but it was hard to look fierce when she wearing his flannel, which was three sizes too big for her.

He looked down at her, brilliant blue eyes woeful, that pleading expression she couldn't resist. "Just a couple of minutes, Lois. Come with me. Please?"

Oh, she hated when he did that. Lois gritted her teeth. *What's wrong with me? That I'm even considering this...* "Fine. Let me get a pair of jeans and a coat; I'll meet you at the car. This had better be good, Kal-El. And I mean spectacular."

Clark's smile was worth going out into the blustery night, worth driving God-knows-where on Christmas Eve. Lois quickly changed and pulled on her long black coat. The twins would be fine; Martha and Ben were staying in the guest rooms just up the hall from their bedroom.

But when Lois got to her Audi, Clark wasn't waiting there. Grumbling in frustration, she turned back toward the house, and he was there, the deep colors of the suit shining through the whirling snow. "Lois," he said, and smiled. "As fast as you drive, I can fly faster. Come here, love."

"And you're going to go shopping in the uniform?" Lois said, arching an eyebrow as she walked toward him. After all this time, the sight of him in the suit still made her heart beat faster, almost as fast as it did with him out of it.

He only chuckled and wrapped his cape around her. "Who said we were going shopping?"

"But you said..." Lois tried to glare at him, but it was impossible not to smile with his arms

around her, his warm body shielding her from the cold night. "Fine. Where are we going to pick up this present you forgot, wise guy?"

He kissed her forehead gently. "You'll see."

Sighing in annoyance, Lois started to pull away, "Okay, be cute, keep secrets..." Then she glanced down. They were already rising, the roof of the house several feet below. She clung to him out of sheer reflex for a moment, feeling him laugh quietly under his breath.

"Very funny," Lois muttered, forcing herself to relax. "What next, you pretend to drop me as an excuse to hold me tighter?"

Still spiraling up, he smiled and whispered, "Do I *need* an excuse?"

Lois swatted his shoulder, muttering, "You're just determined to be a wiseacre tonight, aren't you?"

"Love you, too, honey," he replied.

"Okay, they're gone," Kala said, leaning back against her pillows.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked.

Kala just glared and pointed at her ear.

Jason sighed. "Fine," he said. "Do you think she'll say yes?"

"Of course she will," Kala replied. "She's not *stupid*."

Her brother plucked at the comforter. "Daddy says not even *he* knows what she'll say."

"Mommy says no man ever could figure what a woman was thinking," Kala retorted proudly.

Jason thought about it for a few minutes, and then his eyes brightened. "Hey! D'ya think they'll see Santa Claus?"

The gentle ascent brought them above the heavy, snow-laden clouds, into the clear, cold air of higher altitudes. Lois' breath smoked and she nestled closer to him, glad of her coat and his cape and the constant warmth of his skin. At this height, they seemed to be in a fantastic landscape; the clouds underfoot completely blotted out the city lights far below, and the star-strewn sky seemed almost close enough to touch. Lois felt as if she and Kal-El were the last two people on earth.

"Many men give diamonds to the women they love," he said quietly, those amazing eyes regarding her so warmly. The smooth cadence of his voice told her he had rehearsed this moment for quite some time. "But those are only stones whose spark is dim. My gift to you is the light of the stars, whose fire burns like your spirit, shining across miles and years, and whose beauty comes close to your own." He smiled then, the memorized lines finished. "I'll bring you up here to see them any time you want, Lois."

His words touched her deeply, taking her by complete surprise, the when and where and annoyance of only moments ago utterly forgotten as she watched him with wide eyes. It even now awed her, the way he saw her. Sometimes she felt undeserving of it, wanting to argue that she wasn't quite what he made of her. He'd only smile at her like he was even now. But as romantic as he was capable of being, her lover was not the type to just randomly make proclamations like this. Ordinarily she would be looking around in wonder, even now stunned by these amazing things he was able to share with her.

But now she couldn't take her eyes off him, smiling up at him as she touched his cheek. Again there was that feeling of *déjà vu* she had felt so often with him in the past six months. *Something's about to happen...* "What can I say to that? Except I love you and what are you up to, Kal-El? I sense an ulterior motive. And I know your plays better than anybody, remember?" Her eyes twinkled with an impish amusement, even as she felt herself grow

nervous.

"Nosy reporter," he said gently, kissing the palm of her hand. "I love you, too, Lois, even if you do tend to spoil a surprise by over-thinking everything."

"Oh, hush," she groused. And while she was gearing up to say something sarcastic and witty, desperate to deny that anxious feeling in the pit of her stomach, he was taking one hand off her waist. Lois' eyes fastened on the black velvet box he held out to her, her breath caught in her throat. "Oh. My. God," she whispered. *He couldn't be... he can't be asking...*

"Lois," Kal-El said softly, and his true self was speaking to her, neither of his disguises. He opened the box deftly, revealing a platinum ring with a large emerald and two diamonds. "We can't stay up here forever, looking at the stars together, and I want you to have something to remind you of my love when we come back down to earth. Because I always love you, no matter where we are or what I'm doing or *who* I have to be at the moment. Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

The dark-haired woman could only stare at him, stunned beyond speech. The unreality washed over her to such an extreme, she had to close her eyes just to get her bearings. In spite of everything the last month had brought her, in spite of the way their lives had fallen together so almost perfectly, this ring was the last thing she had begun to suspect when he had asked her to come with him. And hearing him say those words... Standing there in his arms, silver moonlight shining down on them and only the stars as their witness, she started to shiver even as she bit her lip, overwhelmed by the strength of the emotion building in her chest. *Oh my God. Oh my God...*

A part of her cried out *Yes!* ecstatically, leaping for joy that this most treasured of her dreams had come true. But another part hesitated, wondering, *Does he feel obligated, because of the twins? Would he have ever asked if not for them?* "Kal-El... you don't have to do this. I mean, I don't necessarily need to be married."

"Lois," Superman said, and his voice was stern. "All kidding aside, I'm asking you because I want to marry you. Not because I think you want me to, or because I want the kids to have my name, and certainly not because I think you *need* to get married. All *you* really need in life are a few simple things: the twins healthy and happy, a story to chase, and the knowledge that if you really, totally, completely, absolutely, utterly *have* to have one... you can smoke a cigarette."

"Since you know that," Lois grinned, still a little teary-eyed from the wonder and surprise of his proposal, "I guess I'd better marry you."

The expression on his face was one she'd treasure for the rest of her life. Relief, a little surprise, and overwhelming joy. He hugged her even tighter and kissed her hard, kissed her laughing smile. And then, with a strange combination of delight and solemnity, he slipped the ring onto her finger.

Lois looked down at it on her hand, then looked a little closer and laughed. "An emerald? You have a very strange sense of humor, Kal-El. Give me a ring that looks a lot like the one thing on this earth that can harm you."

"Losing you would be worse than getting stabbed with a kryptonite shiv," he said seriously, kissing her forehead.

She kissed him back, adding with a gleam in her eyes, "For the record, I didn't see that coming."

"I know," he replied, "that's why they call it a surprise, Lois." He changed his hold on her and began to fly northward.

A sudden thought distracted Lois. "What are we going to tell the twins?"

Kal-El smiled broadly. "They know. They've known since I bought the ring. As a matter of fact, I asked their permission first."

"But... how? They never said a word..."

"They're good at keeping secrets. Wonder who they get that from?"

Lois punched his arm lightly. "Both of us, *Mr. Kent*. But they get their eccentricity from you."

He chuckled, cuddling her close to his side. "No, that's from you, love. Just look at your acceptance there. It's traditional to answer the proposal with yes, no, or maybe, but you couldn't be that normal. Even a 'heck no' would count as an answer."

She closed her eyes a moment, still having trouble believing that this was real. Trying for her usual snarky tone, she said, "Well, what made you think I wanted to get married?"

"I didn't know, that's why I asked, silly." Kal-El kissed the bridge of her nose. "Besides, I wanted to marry you practically since I met you. But I won't make you take my name if you don't want it. There's another reason right there - as Jimmy would say, the Kents don't leave 'baby mamas' running around."

Lois threw her head back and laughed so hard she nearly fell from his grasp. Slang had always sounded so awkward from his lips, but that was... *There's something to put on your resume, Lois - 'I was Superman's baby-mama'. Holy crap!* "Oh... oh, my *God* don't say that again, I'll die laughing!"

"If you insist - but I'm warning you, Lois, we're actually going to *have* this wedding, if my mother has to prod you down the aisle with a shotgun. No more indefinite engagements."

She socked his shoulder, but gently. "Hey, the main reason I kept stalling was because I didn't want to get married then. No one gave me a chance to say yes, no, or maybe - he proposed at the office Christmas party! How could I say 'I like you a lot but let's wait' in front of all those people? No, you did this the right way: no witnesses, no guilt."

He only smiled slightly. "No witnesses? Lois, we were right above the house, and barely a mile up."

At first she didn't understand, and then Lois slowly smiled and kissed his cheek. "I guess it's fitting that the twins are the first to know."

Far below and behind them, Kala frowned and said, "Jason, we gotta remember to ask Uncle Jimmy what a baby-mama is."

Lois curved herself to his side as they flew, snowy landscapes flashing past beneath them. Tundra replaced mountains, and gradually gave way to ice. By that time Lois knew where they were headed, and looked askance at him. "What are you up to?" she whispered.

Kal-El smiled at her. "I do have one more gift for you."

"Can I get a hint?" *Please tell me it has nothing to do with your father... unless you've somehow rewritten the crystals so that he approves of me.*

"It's something you have to unwrap first."

"Something we have to fly to the Arctic for me to unwrap?"

They were nearly at the Fortress, and he kissed her brow as he murmured, "This gift isn't one you want to play with anywhere in Kala's hearing."

"Oh." Lois' eyebrows shot up. "You've been hanging around me *way* too long, Kent. Sounds like something I'd say."

"I know," he laughed, and they drifted down through the interlocking crystals.

Lois looked around curiously. The last time they'd come here, the twins were missing, and

they discovered Luthor's theft. Everything had been dark and cold, desolate looking. Combined with the memories they both had of this place, it was not a comfortable visit. Now the Fortress was welcoming again, a warm light suffusing the giant crystals.

That wasn't the only change. The table at which they'd eaten that dinner together so long ago now glittered with crystal and china. Lois felt her stomach rumble eagerly as she saw array of finger-foods he'd laid out. "Hmm... snacks we can feed each other. I think I see where this is going."

He didn't answer, grinning as he lifted a bottle from the table. "Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame, 1996. And yes, I know you don't like it too dry."

Lois couldn't help grinning. "What, no Dom Perignon?"

"This was rated higher by Wine Spectator, actually," he said, gently working the champagne cork loose. No loud pop this time, just the faint hiss of escaping bubbles. Kal-El poured into a pair of tall fluted glasses and watched Lois closely as she took the first sip.

"Mmm," she sighed. "Perfect."

"Glad you like it," he replied, sipping from his own glass.

Lois looked at the glass in her hand, at the table with its hors d'ouvres, and at him, then chuckled. *Oh, now I definitely know what he's up to. How can I not love this man?* Teasingly looking at him over the rim of the glass, she quoted herself from that night, remembering how the conversation had gone. "Must be tough being Clark Kent, isn't it?"

He laughed. "No, actually I kind of like it sometimes. Even if I do make a fool of myself. And even if my fiancée does tend to pick on me for having such a good memory."

"As if I could forget that night. Without assistance." Lois arched an eyebrow at him over the rim of the glass as she said it.

"So nice to see you joking about it instead of trying to verbally slaughter me."

Lois crossed her arms as well as she could with a champagne glass in one hand, and said archly, "Are you trying to fix the past or just piss me off again?"

"I love you," he replied. "Want a strawberry?"

"Is that your idea of a peace offering?" she said with a smile.

His grin, which had been pretty much constant since she accepted the ring, grew wider and more wicked. "The peace offering is for later. You might call it dessert."

She burst out laughing again. "My God, you salacious... You're awful!"

"I am not," he protested. "I'm practically the definition of a good man. Including a healthy sexual desire for the woman I love."

Lois hid her face in her hands, unable to stop blushing in spite of herself. *Get a grip, Lane, you had his twins! Stop acting like a dithering idiot.* "Okay, okay. It's one thing out of uniform, but this is like, 'Oh my God, Superman is hitting on me!' I feel like I should squeal like a high school girl or something."

When she looked up, he was standing very close to her, those amazing eyes looking intensely down at hers. Very softly, he said, "Oh, so you want me out of the uniform, is that it?"

All the laughter was gone, the teasing melting away almost instantly. Lois' reply came in a small, husky voice as she locked her hazel eyes to his rich blue, "Thought you brought me up here for dinner."

"It'll keep," he said, and kissed her again, the rich taste of the champagne on his lips.

At that she smiled against his lips, willingly deepening the kiss as she slid her arms around his neck. "You do have a point. Too bad I didn't bring a change of clothes," she whispered

against the movement of their lips. It was working, this little rewrite on history he had planned. Everything felt just the way it should, his hand curled into the hair at her nape, his arm around her lower back, and the taste of the Veuve on his mouth as they began to lose themselves in each other.

"I don't think you'll need clothes for what I have planned," he whispered, pulling back from her slightly. Before Lois could question, he swept her up into his arms and carried her from the room.

Lois tried not to yelp; she'd always hated being picked up, paranoid about being dropped. "Just what do you think you're doing?" she said as she tightened her arms around his neck.

"Having dessert before dinner," Kal-El replied, kissing the bridge of her nose again. "I promise it won't spoil my appetite."

Lois' eyes widened again. "All of a sudden I'm reminded of Perry's cheesecake comment the other day. Try and make it sound a *little* less scandalous, would ya?"

Kal-El couldn't help laughing at her. "Lois, I can't help it. The look on your face is priceless." When she just narrowed her eyes at him, he added teasingly, "Consider this revenge for all those sarcastic little remarks you made to Clark back in the day. *Especially* the one about going to the Gold Room if you were a good girl, and getting Jimmy to take the pictures if you weren't."

Lois' impish grin was just as he remembered from long ago. "Nice to see you remembered."

"As if I could forget," he replied, setting her down. Here was another room full of memories, though the sheets on the circular bed were now ivory instead of silver. More candles on every horizontal surface, their amber light reflecting off the crystal. Nuzzling her neck, Kal-El began to loosen her coat and slide it from her shoulders.

All of a sudden, Lois felt shy again. In this room six years ago, the love between herself and this amazing man had reached its fulfillment; Jason and Kala had been conceived. Her life, and his, had changed forever. But now she thought of all the changes six years had wrought. He was certainly more confident, but other than that time had not touched him. Lois, on the other hand, was acutely aware of the fact that this body had borne his twins. She'd kept herself in shape, but couldn't help wondering nervously if she still looked good enough.

Get a frikin' grip already! the General's Daughter and Romantic yelled in unison. *You've already been to bed with him again, you twit! Not like he can't see you naked any time he wants. If he didn't like the view, he wouldn't be unbuttoning your shirt right now! Speaking of which...*

Just then he opened the flannel shirt to slide it off her shoulders... and stopped, staring. Those fantastic eyes came up to meet hers, and he grinned wickedly. "Hmm, I think now I know why you didn't want to go out shopping."

"Sorry it's not pink," she teased, some of her boldness coming back, as he bent his head to kiss the tops of her breasts in the black lace corset. Lois purred, leaning her head back, and murmured, "As a matter of fact, the underwear I wore during that interview weren't supposed to be pink, either... Mmm, that's nice... I'd washed them with my red blouse..."

He unbuttoned her jeans, glancing back up into her eyes to say, "Only you would wear lingerie under my shirt and a pair of jeans, Lois..."

"Damn right," she whispered huskily, getting tense again. "Somebody has to keep you guessing."

"You're good at that," he replied, running his hands lightly up her sides. "And quite a few

other things, as I recall."

"That was a loaded comment," the dark-haired woman murmured, running her fingers along the neckline of his uniform. *Skin tight. This thing is going to be an absolute bitch to get off him. The belt, on the other hand...* Lois had the satisfaction of seeing him shiver as she started to unbuckle it.

They undressed each other unhurriedly, as if they had been together hundreds of times instead of only a few. Their intimacy came from having saved each other's lives, from having worked so closely together for so long, and not just from being lovers. Lois was on edge until the moment she stood naked before him, her loose black hair shining down past her shoulders, the warm light tracing every curve, and Kal-El simply gathered her in his arms with a sigh of longing. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are, Lois?"

Her doubts shrank away, even as she replied, "I think you're just the slightest bit biased, Kal-El."

"Lois," he scolded gently, brushing the tips of his fingers over her belly, "You are incredibly lovely. And I never lie, so don't argue that with me."

"No, you don't lie," she whispered teasingly, kissing his collarbone. "You just omit like hell."

"I'm not the only one," Kal-El said, running his hands through her hair, and then down her back, making her shiver.

"I only ever omitted... once..." Lois' eyes began to slip closed, her entire body atremble and she found it hard to speak.

And then he lifted her gently and laid her on the bed, and joined her there with a kiss to the hollow of her hip that made her gasp. Hazel eyes met cerulean and there were no more words between them until the candles had burned down...

She would have missed it, but for a sudden chill in the room that made her shiver. Burrowed down into the warmth of the bed, Lois whimpered softly in her sleep, moving to curl into her lover and chase the cold away. When she encountered the distinct absence of another being in the bed, one eyelid cracked open slightly. Frowning as she opened her eyes, Lois woke fully to the sound of the one voice she least wanted to hear.

"Again you would defy me? Did you learn nothing from your prior mistake, my son?"

"Father, I love her," and the warning was clear in his tone.

Jor-El. What kind of time warp is this? Lois thought grumpily, scrambling out of the circular bed and looking for her clothes. She only paused a moment to glance down at the emerald ring on her finger with a look of continued awe and determination. *If that frikkin' hologram convinces him to... if he's that stupid again, especially after last night, I'll just strangle him and do the whole world a favor. Oh, one of these days I'm going to use that damn father crystal for target practice!* Unfortunately, most of her clothes were no longer in the room. In desperation, she snatched up the uniform top and yanked it over her head. It fell to mid-thigh, and she hurried out into the main chamber, rolling up the sleeves and thinking, *Now I really feel tiny. Jeez, how long are his arms anyway?*

Kal-El was standing in front of the control panel, his arms crossed, his expression thunderous. "Why can I not have both? The woman I love and the mission I'm sworn to fulfill?"

"The world needs you," Jor-El's disembodied head scolded. "Will you turn your back on them yet again?"

"They need me, but I need her," Kal-El argued. "How can you deny me this, Father, when even you were married? Your marriage didn't interfere with your calling, and neither should mine. It is through loving her that I come to love all of humanity even more."

"You are not one of them," Jor-El replied. "Loving a mortal will not make you mortal, either. Even if you sacrifice your powers, you can never truly be one of them. Your Kryptonian heritage will always set you apart."

"You're wrong," Kal-El retorted, and Lois watched silently, her breath caught somewhere in her chest. "I can never forget where I've come from or the legacy you bequeathed to me, but this is my world, Father. *This* is my home, and *these* are my people." He sighed heavily, looking down, then turned resolute eyes to his father's visage. "I am not asking your permission, Father. I am telling you, as one grown man to another. Lois is the woman I love, and the mother of my children. Yes, the legacy of Krypton lives on in my son and daughter. I am going to marry her, and raise our twins. This is my will."

Jor-El's expression seemed caught between surprise, distaste, and anger. "You cannot..." he began, and then the hologram flickered. "Not one of them... not..."

Kal-El winced as his father's image vanished. Apparently he had just exceeded the limits of the artificial intelligence programmed into the crystals. Sadly, he started to turn away, his heart aching for some kind of resolution.

"My son."

He whirled around, and Lois on the balcony above stepped forward in surprise. The hologram before them was a beautiful woman, and though Lois had never seen her before, Kal-El knew her. "Mother..."

"Your father does not know I am recording this," she said, and her voice was slightly rushed. "He has great plans for you, but he is a man of logic and science. Perhaps he has not thought enough about the state of your heart." She paused, and glanced away, then back. "Very well. He has considered that you may think yourself in love with one of these humans, and he has devised a plan to discourage you. But I am your mother, and I think this idea will fail. If you are seeing this recording... it has already failed. You have lost your powers once, and regained them. Perhaps you have learned that the effects of our sun are not permanent, and can be reversed by high-intensity exposure to the rays of a yellow sun. Most importantly, you have come here again to question your father about this woman you love."

"If she has been with you through these trials and remains at your side, then your relationship can stand the many tests you will face together. It will not be easy to balance the needs of the world against the demands of your heart, but your love is strong enough to defy your father's will. It shall be strong enough to endure all else. And there is one more thing..."

The image flickered. "So you have spoken of children. My grandchildren, whose dear faces I will never see, whose voices I will never hear. Know that they may inherit your great powers, my son, and see to it that they also inherit your mission, your responsibilities." She sighed, and the smile she gave her son was heartbreakingly beautiful. "Through you, Kal-El, our glory lives on in your new home. Upon you and your family, I bestow a mother's blessing of love. Love is the key that unlocks so many doors, my son. Cherish it..."

Lara faded, but just before her holographic projection disappeared, she turned her head to glance up and to her left. Kal-El followed her gaze, and saw Lois standing there above them, one hand pressed to her lips as she watched. In the last instant before her image disappeared, his mother's blue eyes seemed to be locked on the pair of hazel ones he adored.

For a moment, neither could speak; this was so far from anything they ever expected to

hear. Kal-El was struck speechless by the sight of her there, her ruffled hair, wearing only his uniform shirt, most especially when she smiled at him and shrugged a little guiltily. All he wanted was to take her in his arms and tell her he loved her, forever and ever...

His exquisite hearing picked up another sound, though, that made him turn pale. "Lois, we need to go," he began, and seeing the frightened expression on her face his tone provoked, he laughed. "No, no, it's nothing bad. It's just that the twins are waking up."

"You can hear..." she started to say, then rolled her eyes in irritation of herself. *Idiot*. "Of course you can. Damn! What time is it? They usually sleep in until seven!" Lois turned away to start back toward the other room, already muttering, "Where are my clothes?"

"We have a little time," he said, flying up to her side and landing soundlessly. "Their heartbeats are just a little faster, not all the way up to fully conscious speed." He caught the sleeve of his own uniform before she had gone more than two steps and pulled Lois into his arms, kissing her quickly. "I love you, beauty."

"And I love you," she replied with a soft smile, forgetting all else as clung to him for a long, breathless moment. "So what are we waiting for?"

"Lois, I need my shirt."

Both raven brows rose at that, his deadpan tone breaking the romantic mood slightly, "I'm wearing it!"

"Yes? And I need it. Hand it over."

"Kal-El, holograms of your parents were just *right there*. Get the thought of me stripping right here out of your head," she muttered, squirming out of his embrace and heading back to the bedroom. He followed, padding barefoot in the spare clothes he kept at the Fortress.

"Lois, c'mon, I really need that..." Just as he reached the threshold, his uniform came flying at him, the shirt catching him right in the face.

"She shoots, she scores!" Lois crowed, scrambling into her clothes. "Now hurry up, will you?"

He sighed. "All of a sudden I remember why I don't argue with you."

"Because I always win?"

They made it home while everyone seemed to still be asleep, and they crept quietly into the house. Clark frowned and headed for the living room. Lois followed, his expression making her tense.

The first thing Lois saw on entering the living room was Jason, sprawled asleep by the tree. But where was Kala?

Clark eased toward the boy, not wanting to startle him awake, and never even saw the string stretched a few inches above the floor. As his foot brushed it, the bell wreath that had been on the twins' door started jingling.

Kala herself jumped up off the couch, wild-eyed, swinging a skillet. "Get 'way from our presents, Grinch!"

Her yell woke Jason up just in time to hear the *bong* noise as the skillet hit Clark's leg and reverberated. Kala had to drop it, feeling suddenly wobbly, and while Clark and Jason stared at her, Lois slumped against the wall, wheezing. She would've yelled at Kala for setting up a Grinch trap and catching Daddy, but she was too busy laughing hard enough to cry.

"Daddy's the Grinch?" Jason said confusedly, and then Lois broke down into another round of helpless laughter.

"No, Jason, Daddy's not the Grinch," Clark whispered. "You know perfectly well *who* I am. Kala, what's the meaning of this?"

"Jason said since you weren't home we had to protect the presents," Kala said. "Daddy, is the Grinch real?"

"No, honey, the Grinch isn't real," Clark sighed, looking at her hands. Thankfully she hadn't hit him hard enough to hurt herself. Then he glanced over at Lois and said with annoyance, "They get this from you, you know."

She straightened up enough to point at Jason. "Oh, no. You see your son over there looking innocent? He's the one who started it. He gets that 'please, underestimate me, I'm cute and clueless' look from *you*." Before Jason could try to figure out exactly what that meant, Lois had scooped him up. "You two are going back to bed. You can get up and open presents *later*, okay?"

"But we're awake now!" Kala protested, yawning hugely as her father picked her up.

"Don't argue with your mother, sweetheart," Clark said.

Jason snuggled in his mother's arms, but felt something hard and angular on her hand. He patted it blearily, then sat up in excitement. "Kala! Kala, she's wearin' the ring! She said yes!"

"Told you so last night," Kala yawned.

"Told you we were in her range," Clark said to Lois, and she stuck her tongue out at him in return.

They got the twins back in bed just as Martha and Ben were waking up. Martha started coffee and glanced slyly at her son, then at the clock, which read 5:34 AM. "Good to see you still keep farmer's hours, son," she said gently.

"Yes, well, I do tend to get up early," Clark said.

Neither Ben nor Martha saw Lois twiddle her engagement ring around so that the stone was hidden. She yawned, a little melodramatically, and said, "Not this city girl. I'm not fully awake until I'm showered and had coffee. Since the one is brewing, I'll go take care of the other. See you in a few."

Martha cut Clark a knowing look, but didn't say anything more. Her point had been made.

Ben, however, unwittingly scored it a little deeper. "So, did you sleep well?" he asked, still a bit uncomfortable talking to his sweetheart's son and searching for a neutral topic.

Somewhere up the hallway, Lois stifled laughter as Clark simply replied, "About as well as expected."

After the twins came downstairs for the fourth time between six o'clock and six thirty, Lois gave in and let them start opening presents. The matching sweaters that Martha knitted for Captain Jack and Ignatius were a particular favorite, but the grand finale was of course the two bicycles that Clark had hidden in the garage before they left last night. For Lois, watching Clark beam with paternal pride was worth all the times she'd had to stop him from drastically spoiling the twins with gifts.

She smiled as she remembered that day in the giant toy store, Clark trying to sneak action figures into the cart when she wasn't looking. At last she had caught his face in her hands and looked directly into those blue eyes. "Clark, m'love, I don't care if you're paying for this trip, stop trying to single-handedly keep the store in business."

"Lois..." he began, and in that one word she read everything, and hushed him with a finger over his lips.

"Clark, listen to me. It doesn't matter what you buy them, you can't make up for missing the first six years of the twins' lives. But that wasn't your fault. You're part of their lives now, that's what matters. And having you for a dad is the coolest gift they'll ever get. Honestly, it does wonders for me, too."

He had smiled, and they'd leaned in a little closer to each other, and just before they kissed a kid in the next aisle had started wailing for a toy. "Mommeeeeeeeeee... I wanna wanna wanna..." Lois and Clark had started laughing, glad they'd left the twins with Ella even though they were better behaved than that little monster...

"Mommy, look!" Kala's voice brought Lois back to the present. "It snowed last night! Can we go make a snowman?"

"I don't know, honey. It's awfully cold, and I don't want you to get sick."

"Sweetheart, they'll be all right," Clark soothed, winking at her. "I'll make sure they both stay warm."

Lois rolled her eyes but didn't even try to hide her smile. "Admit it, Kent, you just want an excuse to make a snowman. Fine, go. We need to start dinner soon anyway." Clark kissed her forehead, the twins each gave her a peck on the cheek, and then they were hurrying to get dressed and go outside.

"Oh, no, Lois, I've got that handled," Martha said smoothly. "You go out and keep the kids - including the big one - occupied. Ben and I will get the turkey started."

That earned her a raised eyebrow. "Did your son say something about my cooking, Martha?"

The older woman gently took hold of her shoulders with a sweet smile. "He said you make a fabulous soufflé and the pies this year will be fantastic because you baked them. But he did ask me to use my famous secret recipe herbed butter rub on the turkey this year, and I can't let you see exactly what goes into it."

Hazel eyes narrowed, and Lois thought, *You're a better b.s. artist than your son, Mrs. Kent.* "In that case, I won't mind telling you I only tried cooking a turkey once. My mom begged me never to do it again after she had to make dinner for the firefighters."

Martha laughed. "Darling, I love your sense of humor. Now shoo. It's Christmas. Relax and have fun."

After putting on her coat and gloves, Lois stepped outside and shook her head with silent amusement at the scene before her. Jason and Kala were ganging up on Clark in a snowball fight, and he was laughing as he tried to defend himself. *If you'd told me seven years ago that I would be watching my twins play in the snow with their father, Superman, right after my soon-to-be-mother-in-law - Superman's Mom, the sweet little old lady from Kansas - chased me out of my own kitchen... I'd have been too busy laughing myself nauseous to have you committed. My God, my life hasn't turned out at all like I expected. I thought I'd be on top of the world and thoroughly burned out by now. As it is...*

A snowball striking her shoulder interrupted her musings. "C'mon, Mom!" Jason yelled. "Let's get Dad!"

"Hey, no fair!" Clark called back, lobbing a snowball at his son. *His son.* The words still sent strange and marvelous echoes through him. The only thing more weirdly wonderful than that was *his daughter.* In a way, he'd imagined having a son even when he thought it was impossible, a boy to whom he could pass on his legacy as Jor-El had passed on his own knowledge. But he'd never envisioned Kala, never realized how much a man could love his daughter.

"Mommy says all's fair in love an' war an' th' front page!" Kala yelled, getting him in the face with a snowball.

Spitting snow, Clark grinned and thought, *Oh, yeah, she's her mother's child. And I love her for it.* "Lois, a little help here? Kids against adults?"

The dark-haired woman laughed, quickly making a snowball behind her back. "I'd love to, honey, but let's have girls against boys instead. Okay, Kala?"

The snowballs hit Clark and Jason simultaneously.

They built a whole snow family instead of just one snowman, and made snow angels, and had another snowball fight, all of it interspersed with brief breaks for hot cocoa. At last, Clark and the kids seemed a little worn out, and Lois was personally more than ready for a nap by the fire.

Ella's car was pulling into the drive as they headed inside, so they helped her unload casserole and gifts. Martha introduced Ella to Ben, and the two women took over management of the kitchen while Lois got the twins out of their wet outer clothing. Melted snow was already puddling in the foyer, but for the moment, Lois didn't care...

As the twins scampered off to change clothes, strong arms encircled Lois' waist, and warm lips touched her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned back against Clark, sighing. "Hello, love."

"Hello, beautiful. Is this the typical Lane family gathering?"

"Hectic and enjoyable at the same time? Yeah, pretty much. Wait 'til Lucy and her brood get here."

He snuggled her a little tighter. "Do you have any idea how much I love you, Lois Lane?"

Tipping her head back for a kiss, she murmured, "Well, last night was a bit of a hint... So was this morning."

Clark smiled as Lois put her hand up to touch his cheek, bring him closer for another kiss. At that exact moment, the front door opened and Lucy walked in, followed by Ron and the three kids. "No making out in the hall, lovebirds!" she teased, and then her blue eyes got very wide. "Lois Joanne Lane, is that a *ring* on your finger?"

"Lucy, shut up! I was trying to keep it... Shit." Lois frantically twisted the ring back around, cursing the fact that it had evidently turned when she took her gloves off, but she was too late. Ella and Martha had both seen the Troupes' car pull up, and they were already coming into the foyer.

As Lucy grabbed Lois' hand and started showing it around like a courtroom exhibit, and Lois scowled like a cat dropped into the bathtub, Clark met Ron's eyes above the excited women's heads. The other Lane husband just grinned and gave him a thumbs' up. From the mutter of excited voices, Ella's was suddenly clear. "Good Lord, Lois, you aren't pregnant again... *are you?* Two more babies within a year - that's *all* we need!"

"Mother!"

Upstairs, Jason hurriedly yanked the new Christmas sweater over his head and rushed downstairs into the general hubbub. Kala waited a moment longer, pausing by Ignatius' cage.

The iguana, already three feet long, looked at the girl with interest. Kala stared back, then lifted her chin in the manner of a haughty princess. The lizard lifted himself up off the perch and nodded his head back at her.

Kala nodded, and Ignatius bobbed his head from side to side. Listening carefully to make sure no one else heard her, the little girl unlatched the cage and reached in, gently scratching the lizard's scaly chin. He closed his eyes in apparent bliss. "Ugly ol' dinosaur-wannabe," Kala murmured in fond tones. "Jason'd kill me if he caught me pettin' his stupid lizard."

After a moment, she reluctantly closed the cage door, but didn't latch it. Then as she was leaving the room, Kala turned with a wicked grin, flung her hands out, and hissed, "Gazeera!"

Four pounds of iguana hit the cage door with a thud and clung there, bobbing his head

frantically as it swung open under his weight.

Even Houdini needed an assistant to accomplish his famous escapes.

"Dinner!" Lois called out there, and five children rushed inside. There was no 'kids' table' in this house; the ridiculously large dining room table could seat all of them.

Everything looked and smelled delicious, but before anyone could pick up a serving spoon, Martha Kent cleared her throat gently. "If we could all join hands for the blessing?"

Lois and Ella exchanged a look. General Sam Lane had never had time for the trappings of religion; they went to church a few times a year, on holidays, and kept a Bible in the house, but that was about it. Everyone was joining hands, this was a familiar ritual for the Troupes, so Lois went along.

Martha's voice was steady, but it sank into Lois' mind like a polished stone dropped into a clear stream. "Lord, we thank You for this food which we are about to receive, and ask that You bless it for our use. We thank You for this time that we have together, and for the joy that You give us when we are gathered here. Most of all, we thank You for this glorious day, the anniversary of our Savior's birth, when we are reminded of the greatest gift of all: Your love, and its echo in the love we have for each other and our families. In Your name, Amen."

"Amen," everyone said quietly, and slowly let go of each other's hands.

Martha's eyes twinkled merrily. "Well, dig in!"

Conversation soon rose around the delicious aromas of the meal. The topic of choice since lunch had been Lois and Clark getting engaged. Speculations on the date of the marriage had ranged from 'next week in the courthouse' to 'right after the twins graduate'. "I'm just glad the kids are finally going to be respectable," Ella said with a wink at Lois.

"Mother!" Hazel eyes rolled. "I'm over thirty and I have two children. 'The kids' are getting engaged? Please!"

"Just because you're old doesn't make you a grownup," Lucy teased.

"Just because you're finally bigger than your older sister," Lois growled, raising her fork threateningly. "What're you carrying there, one and a playhouse? Mine was just two and a swing set."

While Lucy looked embarrassed, Clark gently put his hand over Lois'. "Don't threaten your sister, sweetheart. I know you're still angry about not getting to announce this the way you wanted."

"I *wanted* to announce the *marriage*, not the engagement," she muttered. "I *hate* all this attention."

"Well, darling, I guess I'll have to help you with that," Martha said sweetly. "Ben?"

The older man laughed nervously, glancing at Clark. "Um, yes. Martha and I... we're engaged, too."

Clark's jaw dropped. Lois' head smacked into her palm. "What else?" the dark-haired woman muttered. "Mom? You shackin' up with the mailman or something?"

"Lois!" Clark, Ella, and Lucy all said at once.

"Does this mean you're our granddad now?" Kala asked Ben, who turned pale.

Martha sat back, laughing, and rolled her eyes. "I try to take the attention off her, and she just jumps right back in for another serving of drama."

A hush fell over the household, the quiet of full stomachs. Only the fireplace popped; all five children had woken early to open presents and were now sound asleep, sprawled on the floor. Martha, Ella, and Ben were in the kitchen talking quietly as they divided up leftovers. Lois leaned against Clark's chest, put her feet up on the coffee table, and gazed sleepily at the

tree.

The tree on which several ornaments were askew.

Unfortunately, now that she'd seen it, she couldn't un-see it. One of the painted and glitter-covered stars Kala had made was about to fall off, and if it got stepped on she'd be devastated. Lois reluctantly got up from the sofa and went to straighten the ornament.

Just as she reached for the branch on which it hung, something in the tree hissed at her.

Lois staggered backward, almost tripping over Nora, as Ignatius stuck his head out of the branches and hissed again.

"CLARK! Jason! Get this god... forsaken lizard out of my tree!"

Sometime later, after the iguana was captured and returned to his cage, the rudely-awakened children were settled back down, and Lois herself was calmed by a cup of hot tea liberally laced with brandy. In the other room she could still hear Jason protesting that he had latched the door, really. "Mommy scared Ignatius," he whimpered as Martha soothed him. Kala was sniffing, too; Lois figured it was one of those twin things.

Clark was with Lois in the kitchen, rubbing the tension out of her shoulders. "Thank you so much for not killing the iguana, honey."

"It was a struggle," Lois muttered, sipping tea. "I swear that little bastard can get out of anything. I'm half tempted to send the beast to Perry's for a while out of revenge."

"Lois, that would be too cruel."

"To Perry or the dinosaur?"

"To Jason," Clark scolded gently. "You know he loves Ignatius."

"Glad somebody does," Lois grouched. "I'd ask why we can't just have a *normal* Christmas, but I know this family."

"It doesn't have to be normal to be good," he told her, kissing her hair. "I didn't get, um, called in at all today. Isn't that blessing enough for one day?"

"That I get to share it with you?" Lois asked, looking up at him, and her face softened into one of her rare, completely open smiles. "Yes, that's enough of a Christmas miracle for me... Kal-El." Her voice dropped to a whisper on the final words.

The radio on the kitchen counter had been playing Christmas songs all day, but now one came on that Lois hadn't heard in a long time. Ella Fitzgerald sang, "I really can't stay," and Louis Armstrong answered her, "Baby, it's cold outside."

Lois grinned, not least because Fitzgerald's rendition of 'Heart and Soul' had gotten her in trouble in the past. "I love this song," she remarked pointedly, reminded of those old photos Jimmy had found.

Clark lifted her out of the chair easily, one arm sliding around her waist. "So let's dance."

"In the kitchen?"

"Famous Midwestern tradition, dancing in the kitchen after a big meal."

"Cute," Lois said, and they were already swaying to the music.

I simply must go Baby, it's cold outside
The answer is no Ooh baby, it's cold outside
This welcome has been I'm lucky that you dropped in
So nice and warm Look out the window at that storm

The song was almost finished when Lois leaned up to kiss him, and just before their lips met she thought, *Now **this** is a perfect moment.*

Two seconds later, she faintly heard Lucy gasp, shortly followed by Ron calling, "Lois!"

You've got four-wheel drive. Get the car warmed up, we need to get to the hospital, *now!*"

Suddenly realizing what was happening, Lois called back, "Relax, Ron! It's not like Lucy hasn't done this all before... *several times.*" Her head thudded onto Clark's chest, and she lowered her voice. "But never on a major holiday. *God.* Christmas with the Lanes, ladies and gentlemen."

Clark chuckled and hugged her briefly. "Would it be any less crazy if it was Christmas with the Kents next year?"

"I doubt it. Anywhere I go, chaos follows," Lois chuckled.

"It's why I love you, sweetheart," he replied, kissing her again. "You keep me on my toes."

There was only a moment for them to share a contented grin before Ron yelled again, "Lois, *come on!*"

"Go, love," Clark said softly. His mouth curved up in a quirky grin as he added with a wink, "For once *I'll* stay home and keep an eye on the kids while *you* go save the world. Ron's world, anyway."

"Very cute, Kent," Lois said, trying to look angry, but she was smiling too broadly. With another quick kiss, she hurried out to the living room before Ron could yell again.