

Connections

by Kala Lane Kent

© 6-Oct-07

Rating: T

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Lois dropped her keys on the table with an exhausted sigh. Home at last - and with the notes for a front-page exposé in her purse. Of course, she still had to type the story, but her byline would be on the front page tomorrow ... and a senator would have some serious explaining to do. *I loathe hypocrisy - and I love getting a chance to tear someone apart over it. I know just how much money and political clout this sleazeball has diverted for his personal use, and that makes watching him go down in flames very sweet indeed.*

The only thing that could make her feel even better would be a hug from the twins. Strange that they hadn't come running when she opened the door after she'd been gone at work for thirty-two hours straight - and as a matter of fact, the apartment was oddly quiet...

Lois' hand dropped to her purse instinctively, unzipping it. Even after a year, she was still wary of Luthor. Not to mention, there were plenty of other people out there who would wish harm - and perhaps *visit* harm - on her family. Getting past Dad to get to the twins was unlikely, but still. Lois was not the kind of woman who could ignore such a possibility; far better to be prepared for it.

The silence unnerved her, but she kept her calm. Lois stalked through the foyer, her gun up, peering around corners. She didn't call out; if Clark or the kids were home, they could hear her heart beating. Calling for them would only let anyone else in the house know exactly where she was.

The living room was deserted; so was the dining room and kitchen. The master bedroom and bathroom were also empty, all the windows still locked, the closets holding only clothes. She went back to the living room and checked the balcony door carefully. It was still locked, so Lois turned down the hallway, her pulse pounding. The twins' rooms were empty as well, Gazeera asleep and Captain Jack staring at her from inside his cage.

Up the stairs next, pressed against the wall, straining her ears for any faint sound. The

study upstairs had been intended as a master bedroom when the apartment was remodeled, but it was right above Kala's bedroom and thus had been turned into a home office for both reporters. It was also empty, Clark's desk neat as always, and the profligate sprawl of papers across Lois' desk hadn't been disturbed.

Well. An empty house, that was odd. But evidently Clark and the twins had left of their own volition - any attempt to force them would've left the place looking as if a tornado had blown through. *Maybe he took them out to dinner*, Lois thought, putting her gun back in her purse and glancing at her watch with chagrin. *It's probably better this way; he and I have been quarrelling enough as it is. And I haven't pulled an overnigher - not on purpose, anyway - since I came back from Paris. If they were here, I'd probably get another freakin' lecture.*

Lois headed back downstairs, feeling strangely lonely. She and Clark had been sniping at each other lately. They both led extremely busy lives, both were deeply committed to their careers, and so far neither had shown any willingness to slack off at work in order to spend more time with the family. In fact, just last week Clark had disappeared from Jason's piano recital to assist the fire and rescue department. A tractor-trailer had gone partially over a bridge railing, and it was the work of moments for Superman to pick it up and set it back on firm ground, the driver unharmed except for the damage alcohol was doing to him.

But those were the moments when Jason sat down to play, and he looked into the audience to see an empty chair next to his mother and sister. Lois hadn't imagined the heartbroken look on her son's face, and she'd been so furious that she couldn't even look at Clark when he came back. It didn't matter that he'd been able to hear the recital from halfway across town; he wasn't *there*, and Jason had been disappointed. There had been cold silence from the driver's side of the car the entire ride home.

However, Lois and Clark had argued sharply once they got there and got both twins settled in front of their evening's allotment of television. "You don't have to rescue every damn fool in town from their own stupidity," Lois had snapped under her breath.

"And if that truck had gone over, I suppose you'd say he deserved to drown because he's an alcoholic?" Clark hadn't shown any signs of backing down, his voice just as low.

"Drunk drivers kill a lot of other people," Lois had retorted. "And they usually don't even wind up hurt, themselves. Police and rescue were on the scene, Kal-EI! Let *them* handle it. Wasn't that the whole point of that article I wrote? We need to do some things for ourselves..."

"Lois, that would've been incredibly dangerous for the rescue workers to get to him. I could handle it in five minutes with no risk to anyone..."

"Yeah, well, that was the five minutes that your son *needed* to see you in the audience while he played," Lois shot back, raising her voice slightly. "He was *terrified*, and Daddy wasn't there to reassure him. So much for 'I'm always around, ' huh?"

"You knew who you were marrying, Lois. And the twins know who I am and what I have to do. I *can't* always be there..."

"You can't hardly *ever* be here..."

It had just gone downhill from there. If Lois were totally fair and objective with herself, in retrospect, she had been lashing out at him because she'd seen that wounded look on Jason's face. That had been the final straw in a series of disappointments for the twins and for herself. She also had to admit that she knew he was still suffering from guilt. Two weeks ago there had been an industrial accident upstate. Chlorine gas had been released from a water processing plant, killing thirteen people and leaving many more with permanent damage to their lungs and eyes. Kal-EI had gotten there in time to prevent further damage, but he couldn't have saved the

people who were closest to the leak. The gas was silent, nearly colorless, and as concentrated as it was, the workers nearest it had been killed almost instantly.

But those thirteen lives goaded him, making him hypersensitive to any kind of danger. Lois knew that was why he had been overreacting lately, rushing off at the least hint of trouble, but she hated to have to tell the twins, "Daddy will be back soon," and then have Clark turn back up after Jason and Kala were in bed and out like a light.

Of course, the way the argument had ended didn't resolve anything. Kal-El had heard shots fired, and hastily told her he was leaving; she'd heard about the shootout in Suicide Slum on the radio later that evening.

On the *car* radio. After his abrupt exit, Lois had taken the twins and gone to her mother's house. If she'd stayed home, she would've just verbally slaughtered him the moment he walked back in, starting with, "How *dare* you just *tell* me you're leaving and fly off! In the middle of an *argument*, no less! I'm not just your girlfriend anymore - I'm your *wife*, *they're* your *children*, you owe me more than five words if you're going to run off in the middle of a fight!"

Ella had not asked questions when the three arrived, just given them the guest bedroom for the night. It probably owed quite a lot to the look of utter wraith on her face as they came in. The twins had whined a bit about leaving their pets and their favorite pillows, also about Daddy not being there, but it was late enough that they were tired and went to sleep after a story from Nana. Lois had been icily polite to Clark the next day at work, and wisely, he'd left her alone all day. Only on the way home had they spoken, and then it had been an utterly civil exchange with frost forming on the edge of every word.

Clark resented her taking the twins without a word to him; fine, let him be angry. Now he knew how *she* felt. They'd gradually warmed up over the past four days, especially since Clark hadn't missed any more important events. Not even on the weekend. Things were improving - until this afternoon.

Lois had been hot on the trail of a story, and had stayed at the office last night. This one was just too hot to let go of, and the stakes were high enough that she didn't trust the City department to handle it without her supervision. In the old days, Perry would've stayed and shepherded the other reporters along, but his cardiologist - and his wife - had put an end to that.

Clark had tried, unsuccessfully, to get her to come home for a few hours at least. But Lois had a spare set of clothes at work, and had decided to stay until they broke the story. At last, this afternoon, they got the lead they needed, and Lois went to track it down herself. On her way out, she'd told Clark to pick up the kids from school. He'd tried to waffle, but she wouldn't let him - she only had one chance to get a peek at the senator's personal expenses, and she wouldn't pass it up.

Well, the story was everything she'd hoped for. Several million dollars had been quietly bled from state coffers and poured into the senator's lavish lifestyle - not to mention, his personal friends had received several lucrative government contracts that they weren't precisely qualified for and had not had to bid on. Lois felt justifiably heroic - now it was up to the police and the prosecutors to act on her information. But instead of a reward, she'd come home to an empty house. *He probably thinks taking the kids out to dinner without me is just retribution for me making him pick them up. Whatever - there's plenty to eat in the fridge.*

Lois headed back to the kitchen, miffed at Clark. He was a reporter, at least for a few hours a day; he knew the rules changed when it was about a hot story like this one. Not to mention, they'd *both* said when they got back together that neither of them were willing to give

up their careers. He should've known that Lois would never turn away from a chance like...

On the refrigerator was a note, written in Clark's neat hand.

Lois,

You knew I had a meeting with the investors after work. Ron had to take my place while I got the twins. They're with me tonight. Turnabout is fair play.

He hadn't signed the note, but then, he didn't need to.

At first, Lois just groaned on seeing the opening statement. *The damn investors! God save me. I wish Perry would find some freakin' secretary to take with him to those meetings - there's no real reason for a department head to go. And I just went with him last quarter.* But then, as she read the rest of the note, her fury built. "Oh, hell no," Lois snarled, ripping the piece of paper off the fridge and not even caring that the magnet holding it there had flown across the kitchen.

She stormed into the living room and paced back and forth, fists clenched, while she tried to get herself under control. It was all she had not to yell at the ceiling in angry fury. And calling up Martha and Ben and screaming as soon as someone answered wouldn't do any good...

Lois paced until she felt a little better about her chances of staying civil, then picked up the phone and dialed. Martha answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Martha," Lois said, and she had to take a deep breath to steady herself. "May I speak to my husband, please?"

"What?" Martha asked. "Lois, he isn't here."

"He isn't there..." Lois trailed off, gritting her teeth. Suddenly, the urge to scream was nearly painful. Only a slight tremor in her tone betrayed her. "Thank you, Martha. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

"Lois, wait..."

But whatever Martha intended to say was cut off as Lois hung up the phone. Gently, so as not to produce a loud and annoying clack in the older woman's ear.

Then Lois flung her head back and let go. It began as a wordless howl of pure frustration, but ended with, "*Goddamn you, Kal-El, I'll kill you for this! I hope you hear me, goddamnit!*"

There was only one place he could be: the Fortress. Her vision nearly red with fury, Lois snatched up the phone again and dialed his cell number ... only to hear the phone ringing from the kitchen an instant later.

Lois erupted in enough profanity to scorch Clark's ears, slamming the house phone down hard enough to crack the plastic. *He's taken the twins. He's taken them millions of miles away. And just because he felt like it.* She could only stand there and shake for a moment, battling for control. And then it was too much. She picked it up the phone up again, yanking the cord from the wall, and flung it across the room for good measure.

Clark winced, listening. Lois was *furious*. The last time he'd heard her this angry was when Luthor kidnapped the twins. And in hindsight, he should've realized that bringing Jason and Kala here would have this affect.

Only once in their entire lives had the twins been out of Lois' keeping for more than a few hours, and that had been the work of a megalomaniac bent on destroying them all. To take them so far away, and deliberately prevent her from having any way to contact them, now seemed incredibly cruel.

But then, she had done it to him. Clark's blue eyes went as cold as the ice around him.

Lois probably still didn't know just how angry her actions had made him. Yes, Jason was disappointed, but Clark had talked to him, and he seemed to understand why Daddy had missed his recital. But Lois hadn't understood, and her reaction had been to snatch up the twins and run to her mother's house.

Just because he hadn't broken anything in the house didn't mean he wasn't as furious then as she was now. How *dare* she take the twins! He'd missed enough of their lives without her heavy-handed reminder that he could be missing a lot more. Even after they'd been together a year and married for five months, Lois *knew* Clark still wasn't secure as a parent. Those six years were gone and could never be brought back; the photographs and videos from the twins' early years were no substitute for actually having been there. To even *threaten* to take Jason and Kala away...

It had been very lucky that Clark felt the sudden stinging dryness in his eyes seconds before his heat vision flared. He hadn't had that particular power escape his control since he'd been a teenager, but then, he hadn't been that angry before in his life. Not even at Luthor - Lex was a sick and twisted man. Clark *expected* him to do depraved and hurtful things. But *Lois*? She of all people should have known better...

Clark forced his mind away from that night last week, but then he was only reminded of their fight yesterday. All he wanted was for Lois to come home for a little while, to rest and eat something besides vending-machine food, and to spend some time with the twins. The rest of the reporters called in to devote themselves to the senatorial story could've handled it for an hour or two. But Lois wouldn't hear any of it. Perry couldn't stay, therefore she had to. Never mind that in the days when Perry had stayed around the clock at the paper, he hadn't had a wife and a child.

Then when Lois had brushed him off on her way to expose the senator's perfidy - not even listening to him as she breezily ordered him to take care of the kids that afternoon - Clark had suggested that she delegate some of her responsibilities. Lois' response had been to ignore him and walk out, waiting until she was in the elevator alone to mutter poisonously, "If that isn't the pot calling the kettle black, Kal-El. Try taking your own advice, you'll miss fewer recitals."

The utter hypocrisy of it - Clark's train of thought was abruptly torn from musing on his resentment by the sound of Jason's voice calling for him. "Daddy! Daddy, what's 'ossentatious' mean?"

Chuckling, Clark got up and went to his son. Jason was standing in the doorway, and he continued, "Jor-El's saying somethin' 'bout ossentatious displays of ... what's the word?" The little boy's brows knitted, and he repeated slowly, "Ossentatious human displays ... of 'fection! That's it!" His triumph was quickly eclipsed by a scowl. "What *is* that?"

Clark grinned and ruffled his son's hair. "Kissing, mostly."

"Ewwwww!"

Ella took the safety chain off the door, composing her expression into a mask of serenity in spite of her worry. This was the second time in a week that her daughter had spent the night here, instead of at home with her husband. Maybe a little motherly advice would be welcomed...

Much to her shock, Lois came in alone. "Where are the twins?" Ella asked, surprised into bluntness.

"He has them," Lois growled. "Dammit, Clark took them! Up in the goddamned Fortress!"

Just picked them up from school and took them without a word until after he'd done it! He knew I was working late! Momma, I swear, I'm going to kill him as soon as I can find a big enough piece of freakin' kryptonite..."

"That doesn't sound like him..." Ella's mind was whirling. Clark, taking the twins? And on a weeknight?

"*Mother!*" Lois snarled. Whose side was she on, anyway?

The pain and fury in her voice brought Ella's focus back. "Honey, I'm not doubting you," she soothed. "Come in, sit down, I'll make you something to drink."

She ignored Lois' disparaging mutter about chamomile tea as she got her daughter seated on the living room sofa. Ella tried to get the facts in order quickly as she pulled the stepstool out of the pantry and used it to reach the top cabinet above the refrigerator. *Hmm, Lois was here with the twins last week. Now Clark's taken off with the kids - I don't think he'd do it out of pure revenge. And he'll be back with them tomorrow, I'm sure. Which means there must be some logical reason for his actions.*

As she took down the bottle of aged bourbon that she kept for medicinal purposes, Ella reluctantly concluded that Lois had probably done something to provoke this. And if she was feeling guilty about it, she would be even angrier. *I wonder if Clark really **knows** how furious this made her, though. No one has ever taken those children from her - no one except Lex Luthor, and I fully believe my daughter would've torn his throat out with her teeth if she got the chance.*

A moment later, as she poured the liquor into two glasses half-filled with ice, another disquieting thought occurred to her. *No one knows just how angry she made him when she brought the twins here for a night, either. I found out later that she hadn't consulted him - this business of stealing the kids and running away isn't good for either of them. Or for Jason and Kala.*

Lois looked up, startled, as Ella pressed the glass into her hand. It wasn't standard custom for her mother to serve alcohol except champagne at New Years. "Drink up," her mother said. "You look like you need it." She sipped her own drink and set the bottle down on the coffee table where both of them could easily reach it.

Sighing with gratitude, Lois took a long pull of her drink. The bourbon went down smoothly and bloomed into pleasant warmth in her belly, almost thawing the block of icy rage that was her heart.

"So tell me what happened," Ella prompted gently.

Lois sighed, running a hand into her hair with a familiar gesture. It was hard to talk about, but she supposed that it was best to begin at the beginning. "Last week, Clark left in the middle of Jason's recital..."

The entire story poured forth, the arguments, the coldness that had settled over their house, and then today's outrageous affront. Ella listened, murmuring encouragement here and there, and tried to take in what she was hearing.

So. That's what that was about last week. Lois didn't want to talk about it then; but she doesn't have much of a choice now. The older woman didn't let any of her thoughts show on her face, keeping her expression a listening mask.

When Lois had finally talked herself out - three glasses of bourbon and much profanity later - she slumped back on the couch, drained. "God, Momma, I can't stand this! What am I going to do?" she asked miserably.

The question was rhetorical, but Ella had an answer ready. "Divorce him," she replied

smoothly.

"*What?!*" Lois sat up abruptly, almost spilling her bourbon, and stared in wide-eyed disbelief horror. That was absolutely the last solution that had entered her mind. "What are you *talking* about?"

"Divorce," Ella said slowly, as if her child could possibly not have understood. "You know the meaning of the word, Lois. If you can't stand it anymore, divorce him before you tear each other apart."

Lois' jaw had dropped, and it was several moments before she could reply. "But ... you're *serious?*"

"It's what other people in unhappy marriages do," Ella pointed out casually. "True, you've only been married five months, and people will talk, but people always talk. If you can't live with him, you'd better end it now."

"What would that do to the twins?" Lois pleaded, her earlier argument forgotten. "We only just got back together last year. I already uprooted their lives once..."

"Which is worse, changing everything now when you're just starting to have trouble, or making the kids deal with the two of you fighting? Jason and Kala know when you're miserable, Lois. Do you really want them used like this, with whichever parent feels most wronged snatching them up to punish the other?"

Lois' mouth shut abruptly. She hadn't quite seen it like that until her mother said something. "I couldn't leave them there, he wasn't home..."

"So you could've stayed 'til he came back, and then told him you were taking them to me. Or told him you were coming here, and asked if he minded if they came with you."

"They're *my* kids, why the hell do I have to ask *him* anything?!"

"Because they're *his* kids, too, Lois," Ella snapped. "He *is* their father. Richard let you get away with this nonsense because they weren't biologically his. You can't pull the same stunt on Clark. He has just as much right to them as you do."

"But..." Lois looked lost, unsure of how the tables had turned.

"He didn't have the right to snatch them up and take them to the Arctic, either," Ella added. "Neither one of you has that right. You *share* responsibility for those children, and you're *both* wrong for having taken them without so much as a by-your-leave. You two have to stop acting like a couple of kids fighting over a toy. Remember you and your sister? Anytime you fought over a doll, it generally ended with the doll in rags and both of you in tears. The metaphor applies, Lois."

Lois was looking very small and lost, sitting on the corner of the couch and staring at her mother in disbelief. Ella continued, never raising her voice. "But what both of you did isn't the point. *Why* you did it is. He's going to miss out on things, Lois. It's who he is, and you knew it when you married him. You even knew six years ago that this would become a problem. He has a duty to the entire world, and sometimes family has to wait for duty."

She chuckled then. "Welcome to life as a general's wife, Lois. Sam never abandoned me or you girls for the Army, but there were a lot of times we had to wait for him to get home to celebrate birthdays, a lot of holidays spent far away from family. And we dealt with it - that's the price I paid for loving a man whose country needed him so much. I did the best I could to keep our family together - with precious little help from Sam's attitude about *you*. At least you don't have to cope with that. Clark loves the twins equally, and as far as he's concerned the pair of them hung the moon and stars."

"I don't want to have to do it despite him, Momma," Lois argued. "They shouldn't have to

go through that, missing their father all the time. He was gone the first six years..."

"They don't miss him *all* the time," Ella corrected. "It's not like you and Sam. When he's home, he's all theirs and yours; he loves you three with every ounce of his heart. And I imagine it's a good thing that the twins realize that having Superman for a daddy is offset by the fact that you have to share him with all the people that need him. They're proud of him, proud of being his kids, but they understand his responsibility. You never got that with Sam, but Lucy did. You should talk to her sometime about it."

Under her breath, Lois muttered, "I'd rather not." But before Ella could scold, she raised her voice and looked her mother in the eyes. "Momma, you didn't see Jason's face. He was *crushed*. His father should've been there. I couldn't fix that; Mommy being there was great, but he wanted *Daddy*. And, by God, he should have been able to have that."

"Lois, life isn't fair," Ella said gently. "And mothers and fathers can't be there all the time. It hurt you to see Jason hurt, but is *he* still upset?"

Grudgingly, Lois had to admit that Jason seemed to get over the disappointment quickly. In fact, he'd insisted on playing his recital piece for Daddy that next night, and Clark had been there to encourage every note.

She didn't need to say a word for Ella to comprehend it. "Lois, life isn't a fairytale. Just because you finally got the man of your dreams - and he's a *superhero*, for the love of God - doesn't mean you aren't going to go through all the same issues as other couples. Actually, you probably have more and worse fights than an ordinary couple."

"Thanks a lot, Momma. That's reassuring," Lois groused, looking away.

"It's real," Ella told her. "You two have so much, I'd hate to see you destroy all because you couldn't learn to live with each other. You can risk your life to save his, but you can't compromise to get your kids home from school on time? Please, Lois. The woman who made the front page for rescuing Superman from Lex Luthor is not going to divorce him over an argument."

Lois couldn't fault her reasoning; she had been furious, and was still angry in spite of Ella's words, but leave him? Never. Ella got up and kissed Lois' forehead. "Now, you get some rest, and think about what I said. I'll see you in the morning, sweetheart." Her job here was done, Lois having gone silent with contemplation. With that, Mrs. Lane was off to bed.

Kal-El finally got the twins to bed, but he wasn't ready for sleep just yet. He paced the darkened Fortress, the looming crystals seeming to echo his mood: dark and cold.

He'd been listening in on Lois, afraid she might actually hurt herself or do something else incredibly rash. And when she'd started talking to her mother, he couldn't help eavesdropping. Knowing Ella, the conversation was at least partially meant for him anyway; at times she had far too much in common with Ma Kent.

That one word had frozen his heart in his chest: divorce. How on earth could he bear to lose Lois again, after all they'd gone through? Things had seemed so clear, back when they'd gotten engaged. He loved her, she loved him, they both loved their children. And they were both willing to risk their lives to protect the twins or to save each other. In light of those facts, it seemed obvious that they should be together. So how on earth had they gone from that blissful certainty to talking of divorce in just one year?

As tempting as it was to blame Lois' temper, Kal-El knew that some of the fault lay with him. Maybe even most of it. He had let his resentment smolder after Lois took the twins to her mother's house that night, and instead of trying to work things out, he had just pretended

everything was okay. Until tonight, when he'd left that note with its bitter ending. Turnabout is fair play, indeed. He hadn't been getting away from Lois because he was angry at her for being so cavalier about picking up the twins - even though that's what he had told himself as he flew with the twins to the Fortress. No, he had really been punishing Lois for doing the same thing to him, and that was cruel.

He brooded, his face set in a stern scowl, examining all of his motives and recent behavior. The conclusion he drew was painful. *I can't believe myself. I hurt her on purpose - how could I do that to someone I love so much? Ma warned me it wouldn't be all roses and sunshine, but I never really believed her. My God, what have I done?*

There was one good thing, however. Lois had been shocked nearly speechless by the mention of divorce. As furious as she was, she hadn't even begun to think of leaving him. *I still have a chance to make this right. Forget about who did what to whom first; I need to apologize for my own mistakes. And bringing the kids here, where she can't follow, was a mistake. A big one. Almost as big as taking her memories...*

He glanced up through the crystal. *Tomorrow. It's too late to wake the twins up and move them tonight. But I'm not looking forward to dealing with this tomorrow.*

Lois arrived to work early the next morning. Ella, in spite of being retired, kept disgustingly early hours and saw no reason why her daughter shouldn't rise and shine as well. Lois had fled to the office in search of people who weren't wide awake and cheerful before nine o'clock in the morning.

Much to her surprise, her office wasn't empty when she walked in. Clark was there, sitting in the chair across from hers. He stood up when she walked in, a worried expression on his face. Before Lois could even wrap her caffeine-deprived mind around his presence, he was speaking softly to her. "Lois, I apologize," he said. "I had no right to take the twins like that. I know how protective you are, and I knew not having them nearby would drive you crazy. It was selfish of me to want to get back at you for what you did - at least when they were at your mother's, I could've gone over there and checked on them." He looked down and sighed unhappily, then forced himself to meet her eyes again. "Lois, I hurt you. Deliberately, this time. I wish I could take it back, but I can't. All I can do is apologize, and promise never to do something so cruel again."

He'd caught her before she had a chance to get really angry again. Lois chuckled bitterly. "Don't even mention taking it back - I'm having flashbacks as it is. What are we going to do, Kal-El? We're right back to the same problem that screwed us over the first time. Not quite the same office, but close enough."

He approached her cautiously. "What we've been doing. Making compromises, working things out. Arguing and making up and moving on."

"And heading right back in the same direction," Lois added.

He smiled wryly. "Lois, we only have one real, serious problem. And we're even lucky enough that we have the *same* problem. Both of us are a little too dedicated to our careers."

"And neither of us is willing to give ours up," she replied.

"Neither of us can," he told her. "Lois, you're saving the world, too. At times you have a farther-reaching impact than I do. Just because you're not on television in tights doesn't make you any less heroic. We just need to argue a little less and compromise a little more - and in all fairness, I could've found a better way to deal with last night. I was still angry at you for when you took the twins, so I didn't look any further than getting back at you for hurting me."

"Well, it worked," Lois said, that acidic edge to her voice. "Happy?"

"No," he said very softly.

"Me neither," Lois replied.

"Then let's not do that again," he said. "I don't ever want to hurt you like that again. I don't think I could stand feeling like this much of a heel."

He had been easing closer to her as he spoke, and now he was close enough to touch. But he didn't reach for her; trying to touch Lois when she was angry generally earned a punch, and the last thing Clark needed right now was for her to break her hand hitting him.

Lois sat down in her chair, looking up at him. It was a measure of her strength of personality that she didn't seem weak even when she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. She appeared perfectly calm and poised, her expression a mask of sternness, but Clark could see her left hand moving slightly. That was one of her little habits, fiddling with her engagement ring when she was nervous or simply deep in thought.

"The twins are in school?" Lois asked finally.

"Yes," Clark replied. "And Barbara's bringing them here afterward. I wasn't sure whether you were planning a follow-up on the senator, so I thought I'd make things easier for all of us."

Lois nodded. She'd planned to go home that evening anyway, but this way they could all ride home together. Maybe stop for dinner somewhere - the twins would keep her and Clark from talking about anything upsetting.

She was silent and thinking for so long that Clark presumed himself dismissed. He took a few steps back toward the door, opening it behind him and keeping his eyes on her. It wasn't the complete forgiveness he'd hoped for, but then, Lois was a woman of her principles. No matter how well-worded the apology, she wouldn't accept it until she'd given it some serious thought. But when she did forgive, it was total.

Just as Clark finally turned to leave, Lois called his name. He looked back at her, one hand on the doorknob. Now he could see the turmoil beneath the façade of calm, and Lois took a deep breath before she spoke. "I'm still wearing this ring, and I'm not a quitter."

Clark sighed with relief. That was his number one fear, banished. "You were never one to give up when the going got tough, Lois. It's one of the things I've always admired about you." He held up his left hand, showing her the gold band with her name inscribed on the inner surface. "I said forever, and I meant it. No matter what happens, we'll face it together."

Then he allowed a small smile to show. "Even if it means both of us have to learn how to delegate responsibility. The whole world's too heavy a burden to bear alone."

"Well, that's good to know, considering the fact that you owe *us* dinner and some quality time this evening." Lois had turned her computer on, and she was looking at the screen instead of him. Tucking one errant strand of hair behind her ear, she added, "Now quit cluttering up my office, Kent. I believe you have a department to run."

No, he might not have been utterly forgiven, but at least things were back to something nearly normal. Grinning, Clark replied, "Yes, Chief," before heading over to International.

He glanced back once as he left, catching Lois' unamused glare ... but her lips curved up in a tiny smile. The expensive soundproofing was no match for his hearing, and he caught her muttered, "Jerk."