

Whatever It Takes

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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Perry White strolled out to survey his kingdom. Everyone was busy trying to look productive when he glanced their way ... except Kent. He was preoccupied by something, so Perry drifted over toward him. The editor paused beside Kent's desk, wondering what had the newlywed reporter so distracted.

A scratching sound came from a box beneath the desk, followed by a low whine. "Kent, what in the hell is that?" Perry asked.

Flinching from the sound of his boss' voice, Kent turned apologetic eyes on him. "It's, um, nothing, Mr. White." 'Nothing' chose that moment to yip and claw the sides of the cardboard box enthusiastically, and Clark had to admit with a sheepish grin, "It's a puppy, sir."

"A *puppy*?" Perry stared at him.

"A little girl was giving them away for free," Clark said. "This was the last one, and, well..." His voice stumbled to a halt, and Perry saw guilt in his expression. Perhaps last night's Valentine's Day dinner hadn't gone exactly as planned?

The Chief shook his head. "Kent, V-Day was yesterday. Enough with the gifts or she'll think you're cheating on her. Besides, this is *Lois* - and you got her a *puppy*? *You got Lois a puppy*?" He took a moment to put a hand to his forehead. There was no way Kent was going to live through this insane marriage business. "Well, you still have a fighting chance if you're lucky. What is it, a mastiff? Doberman? Something big with lots of teeth?"

"Actually it's a beagle, Mr. White," Clark said, and reached into the box under his desk. The puppy he offered for inspection was tiny; clearly the runt of the litter, she was also a shade too skinny. The pup had a fetching black cap of fur over her reddish-tan face, with white dusting her muzzle as though she'd been eating flour. The rest of her body was mostly white, with large patches of black and tan. Her large round eyes were the color of melted chocolate, and she peered up at Perry trustingly, her white-tipped tail starting to wag.

The puppy yapped, and waved one white paw at the editor, who groaned. "Kent, it's *cute*. When have you ever known Lois to be cute? She'll probably eat it raw if it whines at her before she's had coffee."

Kent's blue eyes met his with disconcerting directness. "Excuse me for saying so, Mr. White, but I don't believe you know Lois like I do." In the next moment though, his customary hesitation was back. "I mean, I know you've known her longer, since she was in high school really, but I'm, well, *married* to her, and that's a totally different sort of thing. Anyway, what I meant to say was, um, she has her moments."

Perry nodded slowly, absently stroking the beagle's silky little ears. She growled fiercely

(for a five-pound puppy) and tried to nip his hand; a lot like Lois herself, in fact. Petite, pretty, the sort of creature most people wanted to coddle and protect and fuss over, but more inclined to snarl and bite and make her own way in the world. Perhaps he was stretching the analogy - the pup *was* friendly, she just had a skewed notion of play that included industriously gnawing on human knuckles.

But then, didn't Lois tend to favor her closest friends with the sharp side of her tongue? How many times had she cut down Clark, and now she was *married* to the guy? Perry grabbed the pup's nose gently, and she shoved at his hand with her fat little paws. This might just work out after all ... but in spite of the dog and its owner having such similar personalities, Perry still had one reservation. "Kent, an animal's the worst gift you can give somebody. What if they don't like each other? Then you spend the next ten or fifteen years hearing about what a horrible present this was. Here, give me the box - I'll handle this one. Go buy her some jewelry. Better yet, take her out to dinner again. There's a new Caribbean place up on Walshom Avenue that makes you sign a release before they'll serve you. Should be hot enough for her."

Clark handed over the box reluctantly, but Perry was accustomed to rolling right over his employees' most vocal objections, so a silent look of protest didn't faze him in the slightest. He carried the little dog and her box - containing a blanket, some toys, and a generous amount of newspaper - to his office and tucked them out of sight, waiting for Lois to get back from lunch. He didn't have to wait long.

Lois stormed out of the elevators, still seething at life in general. First, Clark pulled that crap at dinner last night and now her contact in the Senator's Office somehow *forgot* about her *scheduled* 12:45 meeting with him. While that kind of political bull shouldn't surprise a veteran City reporter like herself, she was still twice as irate with her husband for last night's little stunt. The memory was enough to tighten her jaw. *God*, how could one man be so impossibly frustrating! She ground her teeth, the narrowness of those blazing hazel eyes and her high-strung expression making it plain that anyone who crossed her path was in for a share of her anger.

Unfortunately, the one person between her and the City room was Grizzly Lombard, standing in the hallway drinking a soda and pontificating to a younger reporter about the trials of staying in this business so long. Lois merely snorted; if she'd been feeling better, she would've torn into him about how being a sportswriter was far different from being a reporter. Watch a little ESPN, attend a few games, have an opinion about whatever you saw, regardless of how asinine and uninformed said opinion might be - oh, and accept all of those free drinks the agents and the coaches pressed on you. *Such* a difficult job, compared to interviewing serial killers and cornering corrupt officials.

At the moment, Lois was too angry to properly handle Lombard. She needed her wits about her to rip his ego apart in an amusing fashion; otherwise he was about as much fun to deal with as gum stuck to her shoe. She headed past him, rolling her eyes and saving her wrath for a more deserving target.

Steve, however, didn't know when to leave well enough alone. "Well, well, here comes the new bride," he said, beaming at Lois. She shot him a warning glare, but Steve just leered. "Looks like some of the fairytale's finally wearing off, Lo. Didja finally have that historic first fight? Tell you what, sweetheart, when you start looking for a *real* man I'll still..."

Okay, that's it. He asked for it. He never finished the sentence, because Lois whirled around on her heel, grabbed his tie and yanked it tight, staring into his reddening face as she

snarled. "I might want to *kill* him at the moment, but Clark is still *twice* the man you are, Grizzly. Hell, that's not even as much of a compliment as I want it to be, considering that my five-year-old nephew is more of a man than you." Eyes still glittered with scorn and her jaw set, she shoved the former quarterback away from her with clear disgust. "If you keep insisting you're tough enough to play with the big boys, one day that other hand's gonna get broke, hotshot." The look in those hazel eyes was poisonous when she turned away, turning back to boldly hold his gaze. Finally, the petite reporter stalked furiously down the hallway, straightening her blouse. Even once she was out of sight, the echo of her heels rapped thunderously across the tiles.

The younger man he'd been talking to was watching this with his jaw hanging open. So this was the legendary Lois Lane, star reporter and spitfire of the highest order. "She's going through a rough time," Lombard said lamely, and the younger reporter snickered.

"Wow," he said, still trying not to outright laugh at Lombard. "She's a lot shorter than I expected."

Lois came back exactly on time, taking the seat directly across from Clark without a word. By now, Perry was used to seeing the pair of them smile at each other just like the newlyweds they were, but he couldn't help the nagging feeling that something more was going on. The look they typically shared had the feel of a shared secret; could it just be that Lois had finally figured out Clark was a lot more than a diffident farmboy, and he'd seen past her temperamental façade to the woman she really was? Perry wasn't sure, but since they were both operating at peak efficiency - and hadn't lost any of the competitiveness that had led him to frequently send them on assignment together - it was fine with the editor-in-chief.

Of course, today seemed a little different. Lois didn't even glance at Clark on her way in, and the tension in her shoulders seemed to be due to more than just her usual nerves while chasing a story. Perry watched with interest for a moment, seeing how Kent eyed his wife nervously, and how Lois immersed herself in her notes the moment she arrived at her desk. The only sound she made was letting out her signature annoyed sigh as she pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Perhaps the first marital spat had recently occurred? Well, that meant it was time for an intervention. And since talking to Kent earlier, he'd had the perfect distraction snoozing in its box under his desk.

Perry scratched the puppy's head and then picked her up, tucking her into the crook of his elbow. The rest of the department was trickling back from lunch, and they were all so busy scurrying to their desks that no one seemed to notice the beagle. Perry strolled up to Lois' desk and barked, "You're back from lunch on time, Lane? Kent, I don't know what you've done to her, but I like it. Send Stepford my compliments."

Her gaze was as sharp as a laser beam when she glared up at him. "I'll give you Stepford... Soon as I can figure out where this senator's getting his extracurricular income, you'll see Mad Dog Lane in action. I've already had to loose her once today on Lombard; I'm pretty sure I'll have to do it again before the day's out." It took all of her restraint not to glance Clark's way, especially when she could feel his eyes on her.

"Good, I was worried," Perry said gruffly. He reached around Lois and plopped the puppy onto her desk, making it look like a careless drop even though he was watching to make sure she landed gently on all four feet. "Here's your bonus for working over Christmas, Lane. Train it to piss on the *Star*."

That simple action completely derailed any train of thought she'd had of utter annihilation

of reputation and body to be perpetrated on the men who were annoying her today. Her brain just couldn't comprehend what had just occurred. This was the absolute last thing she had expected to be confronted with this morning.

The raven-haired reporter stared at the dog, startled speechless, as the rest of the reporters chuckled. Some of them had seen Clark come in with the beagle and were waiting for Lois' reaction, which was currently slow in coming. The look of complete disbelief didn't change as Lois continued to stare. The puppy looked up at her new owner as well, cocked her head fetchingly, and started wagging her white-tipped tail. Before Lois could do more than blink in bemusement, her red-lining fury beginning to drain away, the baby beagle padded boldly to the edge of the desk and put her paws up on Lois' shoulders, licking her mouth with enthusiasm while her tail lashed so hard her entire body wagged.

That seemed to bring Lois back to reality, as she looked at the puppy like it had become a six-headed hydra, but DEFCON seemed to have been avoided. Then she turned that incredulous look on her boss. "I *must* be hallucinating. Chief, there's a puppy on my desk. *Why* is there a puppy on my desk?"

The beagle yapped loudly in excitement, giving an extra-hard wag and a little pounce that tumbled her off the edge of the desk and into Lois' lap. Without a thought, Lois automatically caught the pup to keep her from falling further. Perry chuckled and patted Lois' shoulder. "Aww, look. She's as accident-prone as you are, Lois. You'll get along fine."

Lois craned her head back, trying to stop her new puppy from licking the *inside* of her mouth. "Yeah, right. Now tell me what possessed you to get me a puppy, old man, before I call the cops and have your senile butt hauled to a nursing home."

"Actually, Kent got her," Perry said. "I told him you'd probably drown the thing for being cute, if you didn't kill it with neglect first..."

"I'll have you know my cat is twelve and the picture of health," Lois retorted as the pup wiggled her head into Lois' palm for a rub. Shaking her head in utter disbelief of herself, the reporter scratched the soft fur and tried to hold back the fondness she felt as the little one yawned.

"Cats are different. They can practically take care of themselves, and half the time they give you the idea they'd prefer to. Dogs, now, a dog is a responsibility. And I warned the boy, if he got you a dog, he'd wind up taking care of it. I know full well you don't have the patience..."

"Bite me, Chief," Lois said poisonously, suddenly picking the puppy up and leaning her against her shoulder. Whether she realized it or not, it was a protective gesture. Cuddled close to her warmth, the little beagle decided at that moment that she had had enough of playing. With a little yawn, she nuzzled into the silk-clad shoulder for a nap. Lois, however, was too busy giving Perry what-for to even notice.

"I know you're trying to goad me into taking this puppy by making me think you think I can't do it, old man. Well, to hell with that. I'm keeping her because she was a gift from *Clark*. You can roll up your reverse psychology and smoke it like those god-awful cigars." With that, she defiantly kissed the sleeping puppy's round little skull, and favored Clark with a smile. "Thank you, Clark. She's absolutely adorable."

Clark beamed; whether Lois knew it or not, she'd still been manipulated into keeping the dog, and by extension, accepting his apology. "You're welcome, honey. What do you want to name her?"

Lois looked down at the warm bundle of fur slumbering in her lap, avoiding Clark's eyes

for the moment, and said aloud, "She's a beagle, but Snoopy is a male name. Maybe Spot? She's got those big spots on her back and the little freckles on her feet..."

"Any dog can be a Spot, Lois," Clark said. "This one's special, like her owner. She needs a special name."

"Like White Fang?" his wife teased, kissing the puppy's nose. "Or Lassie, maybe?"

"Call her Cujo," Perry suggested, reaching in to pet the little dog. "That's the same kind of special as her owner."

"You're very funny, Perry," Lois said, swatting his hand.

"Fine," the editor replied. "I'll leave you two to name the dog, but don't be surprised if I spend the next ten years laughing at you both for calling it Dee-oh-gee."

The unnamed beagle rested her head on her owner's shoulder and sighed heavily, large brown eyes blinking slowly. Lois stroked her back several times, the warm weight of the puppy affecting her much more than she'd expected. Something about the utter trust this little scrap of canine life granted her moved the reporter, and at last she looked up at Clark.

A glimmer of hurt still lurked in those lovely hazel eyes, and Clark reached across their desks to take Lois' hand. "I can't take it back," he said softly, "and 'I'm sorry' is just words. But Lois, I do love you. More than I ever imagined I'd ever love someone. I never thought... never dreamed... all of this would be possible for me."

Lois glared at him, but he could see her softening. "You owe me *two* dinners now," she finally said sulkily. "You big jerk."

Clark sighed. They'd had their historic first fight two days ago, and dinner on Valentine's Day had been meant as an apology for that. The fight had been over the one thing Clark feared most: trying to balance his time between his love and his duty. Lois had been furious at a couple of important events he'd missed, including dinner with her sister - she'd been hard-pressed to explain his absence that night.

But then, after bringing her flowers and imported chocolate and arranging, at the last minute and at considerable expense, a romantic dinner in the Gold Room, Clark had been called away *again*, this time in the middle of the first course. A fire to the south, which he'd whispered would take about fifteen minutes. And it would have, if it had been an ordinary wildfire. But it turned out to be a coal fire, the ore smoldering underground, and he'd been gone over two hours dealing with the stubborn blaze. When he'd gotten back to Metropolis, Lois had already left the restaurant and gone home. Clark found the apartment dark, Lois sleeping heavily thanks to a dose of Tylenol PM, and the receipt for their dinner stuck in the exact center of the refrigerator door.

He smiled wryly, remembering. *Another historic first for the Kents: the first night I slept on the couch.* Stroking the back of Lois' hand gently, he murmured to her, "I am sorry, you know. I would much rather have been with you. Especially after I had to get up and leave before you this morning. Anyway, when I went to get lunch, I saw this puppy, and I figured she could do the sad, apologetic look better than I can. So the next time we fight, you know, she's my stand-in. My pleading-eyes substitute. And, when I'm out, at least you'll have a little company."

"I'll remember that the first time she pees on the carpet," Lois said archly, still petting the puppy. And steadfastly avoiding his eyes.

"Love you," was all Clark could think to say, giving her his best soulful expression.

Lois finally looked up, but only to give him a hurt look. Despite herself, she knew she was already halfway to forgiving him. "Try to remember me, then."

Clark got up to come around to Lois' side of the desks. She watched him come, trying to force away the upset she'd felt all morning, and then he was there and kneeling beside her chair. "Lois, I've never forgotten you," he murmured. "Not even for an instant. Since the moment I first saw you, completely preoccupied with a grisly murder and mayhem story and without a moment to spare for the shy, goofy farm boy Perry was trying to introduce you to, you haven't left my heart or my mind for a single second."

With that said, she could no longer fight against it. Her arms were around his neck, closing her eyes. She had spent so much of her life resisting one thing or another. Things were different with Clark. Even now it amazed her just how much disagreements between the two of them unsettled her. With all of her other lovers, she'd sometimes even willingly provoke a fight just to keep things interesting. Now all things like that did was hurt. Taking a deep breath, she rested her cheek against his shoulder and let go of all of the jumbled emotions as she felt him hold her tighter, his breath against her ear.

While they were wrapped up in apologies, Gil came in from lunch and set a bagel stuffed with sausage and cheese down on his desk, walking away to get some coffee. The puppy smelled this interesting object and woke up, hopping out of Lois' lap. Neither reporter noticed her, absorbed in each other as Lois whispered, "I love you, too." So the beagle toddled unchallenged across the pushed-together desks, floppy ears perked as much as possible, her brown eyes bright with curiosity.

Clark leaned up to kiss Lois, and as he leaned back from her, he heard Gil yell. Both he and Lois looked up to see the puppy on Gil's desk, bits of cheese clinging to her whiskers, all of the sausage and most of the bagel gone. "What the hell?" Gil snapped, and the puppy barked at him, bouncing happily.

"Why you little brat!" Lois laughed, getting up to fetch her dog. "I've had you five minutes and you're already in trouble, you bagel-snatcher. You little bagel-scarfing brat." Each time she said 'bagel', the pup yipped, splaying out her forepaws and wagging her tail excitedly.

"I think she just named herself," Clark commented, giving Gil an apologetic smile. "Bagel the Beagle."

Lois shot him a disgusted look, picking up the puppy and looking at her seriously. The tiny dog met her stare with a broad, foolish doggy grin, her breath redolent of cheese and sausage. "Bagel," Lois said.

The puppy yapped and wriggled, and the reporter had to admit defeat. "Jeez," she growled. "My reputation is ruined. I own a dog named for breakfast food."

Bagel's only comment was to lick her owner's face, removing makeup and replacing it with sausage grease.

The magnetic energy in the solar atmosphere had been building for days, immense power barely held in check, until it suddenly reached the tipping point and burst forth. Superheated plasma flared out of the sun's corona, carrying with it a full spectrum of radiation. The sheer energy released was millions of times more powerful than any atomic bomb.

One unfortunate object, apparently a piece of space debris spiraling toward a collision with the yellow star, was caught in the path of the solar flare. It was shattered instantly, and its contents cast forth on a wave of particles accelerated to near light speed. Ahead lay the third planet that circled this star...

Perry had finally sent Lois and Clark home early with the boisterous little hound, knowing

they'd have to get the puppy settled in. Not to mention that the yapping little monster had distracted more than a handful of the other employees. Clark had managed to scrounge together blankets and food, but he and Lois still had to find a pet store to buy a collar and leash, a bed, bowls, toys, a crate, tags, more puppy food... They had even argued slightly over whether to buy red or green accessories, and whether they needed a baby gate for the apartment. Since it had been Lois' apartment originally, her opinion won out, and they purchased two, carefully not talking about how similar this trip was to shopping for a newborn.

Now, several hours later, Bagel was finally asleep in her little crate, surrounded by soft toys and a chew toy to gnaw if she awoke. Lois had collapsed onto the sofa with a groan, feeling unexpectedly tired - well, it *had* been an emotional day. Waking up pissed at Clark, blown off by a story, cutting Lombard down to size, and now coping with an entirely-unexpected new puppy. Lois figured she was more than justified in chilling out in front of the evening news.

Apparently she wasn't the only one who felt that way. Clark came in, bringing her a glass of wine, and sat down beside her just as she leaned her head back. He set his own drink on the coffee table along with his glasses and lay down on the couch, resting his head in her lap and looking up at her. Lois simply opened her eyes to look down at him, her eyebrow arched, until Clark chuckled. "We're married," he said by way of explanation. "That means we share everything. Including your lap. Besides, it's comfortable."

Lois stared at him a moment longer before snorting softly at him. "You are the world's most massive dork, you know that?" she murmured, looking down at him with affection. "That's something I never would have guessed I'd be saying to you, O Great Protector of the World, but geez. Sometimes I forget exactly how much of what everyone else sees is real." She just grinned down at him, all of the upset and hurts of the last few days forgotten for this moment.

That just amused him. "Keep talking like that, I won't give you any more Superman exclusives," he taunted, lazily reaching up to twine a strand of her hair around his finger.

Those hazel eyes made their customary way heavenward as she smirked. "*Sure*, hero. That's not a viable threat, y'know? I've already had several this week, none of which I was aware that I scheduled. And none of them were the kind you can print," Lois returned pointedly, her eyes warm in spite of her sarcasm. She might not have been aware of the appointments, her expression said, but she sure wasn't complaining.

Clark chuckled at that, all too aware of her meaning. The electric attraction between them had thus far shown no signs of waning. And it wasn't something either of them was any good at denying. Lois could feel it all the stronger as those blue eyes stared up at her. "Wicked thoughts," he murmured.

It was impossible to miss the pitch of his voice, the meaning there in spite of the indirect words. As always, their gazes locked and the world disappeared for a wordless moment. Nothing else mattered beyond this room and the two people in it. Lois couldn't help the way her voice lowered, and she ran her hand into his hair just to feel the texture of it. "Seems to be a tradition where we're concerned."

Clark's eyes slid closed, sighing in contentment as he leaned into her. Lois felt several parts of her body both tense and throb. The hell of it was that he knew exactly what he was doing these days. And that she had altogether too much of a weakness for him, as evidenced by the way her body reacted to just his nuzzling his face against her belly. Locking her jaw, Lois forced herself out of the bewitching daze she was falling into. Her voice was obviously

husky when she nudged him slightly and reached for the remote, "Now shut up and stop doing that so I can watch the news, will you?" He laughed, softly, and turned his attention to the television as well, sparing her for the moment. Only for the moment - Clark tended not to forget about such things.

All was comfortable silence in the room until WGBS had a short segment on science news, which was usually the point at which Lois got up to make another cup of coffee, reemerging only once it was over. Her brand of news was more the 'how do you spell *massacre*' type than 'guess what, Pluto was never really a planet, whoops'. But since Clark was lying across her, watching the television avidly, she stayed.

A look of real disappointment passed over that handsome face as he watched. "Darn," he sighed. "Near-record sunspot activity, with a huge solar flare yesterday, and I missed it."

"Oh, yeah," Lois said with as much enthusiasm as she was capable. Every time he got wound up about these things she felt like a blind man in an art gallery asked for his opinion. "Heartbreaking."

He rolled his eyes up to look at her. "Lois. I get my power from the sun, remember? If you like those powers - and I don't recall you objecting to a little judiciously-applied heat vision the other night - you might want to encourage my interest in their source."

"What? Clark, I wasn't discouraging," Lois protested, shrugging. "Look, I just don't speak science geek."

He reached up to bat at a tendril of her hair playfully, smirking at her expression. "Don't be silly. If you can learn rudimentary Kryptonese, you ought to pick up science jargon just by being around me."

Lois shook her head, giving a groan of exasperation. "One, this is assuming that I'd *want* to. I really love you, you know that, but it's not my thing. And to be honest, you're the only part of science I *want* to understand. The mere thought of being mistaken for a nerd makes my head hurt more than trying to follow half of what you're saying. I'm on the City beat for a *reason*." Now she looked down at him with an affectionate smile. "And two, I actually have a *motivation* for learning your language."

Their current project was teaching Lois the basics of a language never meant to be spoken by humans. It gave them a private language to speak to each other, as well as preparing Lois to eventually meet Jor-El's hologram. Clark winced slightly at the mention of that part of the plan, and Lois' keen mind spotted it. Her look grew suspicious. Once she was sure that he was willfully avoiding her gaze, she gave his hair a tug to make him look at her. "Clark, why do I get the feeling that you're avoiding this discussion?" Her expression grew darker as it occurred to her that she knew the likely reason for this. Taking a deep breath, she asked bluntly, "And why do I get this feeling that you're playing keep-away with the topic of your father? He doesn't even know we're together, does he, let alone married?"

"Um..." Clark's feelings on this topic couldn't have been more obvious if he had dove off the couch and hid under it.

This wasn't the first time they had had this discussion or the last time that he'd been called on the carpet for his hesitation. Still he had promised her to at least try. "*Clark*," Lois growled with feeling, pulling away from him. The urge to beat him with a pillow was almost inescapable. How ridiculous could this possibly get? "I can't believe this! It's been *two months*."

"Lois, he's still getting used to the idea that you know the whole truth," Clark protested. "We haven't even gotten into how you found out, or why I'm absolutely certain I can trust you."

I've been avoiding booting up the AI program because the first thing he always asks is 'Have you come to your senses, my son?' I'm getting really sick of that."

"And if he's that freaked out about it, how pissed d'ya think he's gonna be when he finds out you *married* me? God, I remember being scared to death of poor Martha and you sure didn't get cold feet about telling *her*. You weren't ashamed to stand up for me then." Her irritation plain and becoming all the more so, Lois considered bolting up to leave him sprawled on the sofa. Sensing this, Clark caught her hand before she could and brought it to his lips for a gentle kiss.

"Lois, you're right. You're right," he admitted, stroking the palm of her hand in an attempt to soothe her and himself. "It would be best if I just told him and waited out the inevitable storm of protest..."

His wife relented a little; she was still stung, but she hated to see him upset. She softened her tone a little to ask, "Is it just because I'm *human*? That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

Clark couldn't help but wince. "Don't... Don't say it like that. Like it's a racial epithet or something."

She snorted a trifle bitterly. *I should have known. A man who sends his only child, his son, out to be the savior of another world has to think himself above all of this. And it's an advanced civilization? Explains a lot.* "Okay, so I take it that that *is* the problem. So, we're good enough for you to save, to live amongst, but you're not really for the likes of us, right? You're supposed to set yourself above us. From the look on your face, I'll bet that's exactly what it is."

"Lois, it's not like that. There... There's certain things the human race does that ... would be perceived as very primitive on Krypton. And socially unacceptable." This whole conversation was clearly making Clark very squeamish, but Lois was too much of a reporter to let it go.

Making herself stop, knowing that this wasn't exactly his fault, Lois took a deep breath. This was getting them nowhere, only stirring up trouble between them to be so accusatory. "What, because we're still using flint to make fire and slaughtering woolly mammoths? What is it that's so primitive about us?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood a little even as she probed for the truth.

"No, it's..." Clark gave a heavy sigh and waved a hand to indicate the pair of them, cuddled together so casually. "It's this. The ... physical intimacy. In my father's time, Kryptonian culture was very ... sterile. Germ-phobic. Most people never touched one another in the course of a normal day. The human greeting of a handshake would be seen as very intrusive, sort of the way you would feel if someone said hello with an open-mouth kiss. Someone besides me, anyway." He was trying to hide the smile that came to his lips at that image.

Lois smirked at that. Ah-ha, we come back around to the hero's greatest weakness. All too aware of what she was doing, she ran her hand over his chest. "Yeah, you sure know how to make a girl feel welcome... You're picking up these savage Earthling mating traditions pretty fast, hero."

He had to chuckle, and that reassured him enough to continue. "Well, I kind of like them, you know. But when Jor-El finds out ... *if* he finds out ... he's going to be shocked and horrified. One of those '*my son would never do that*' kinds of moments."

"Never do what?" Lois asked, and then the answer arrived. Those dark brows rose in amazed disbelief. "Wait, wait, wait. What are you trying to tell me here? If they never laid a

hand on each other, how did they...? They had to have had sex..."

"They didn't," Clark replied, wincing at the question. There was simply no way to have a delicate conversation about this with Lois - not Lois, the woman who saw absolutely nothing wrong with wandering around the apartment in a bra and panties, chain-smoking, trying to remember where she left her tape recorder. At least the inevitable distraction caused by her state of undress was keeping her from smoking quite so much...

Still absorbing that information, Lois' expression was utterly floored. "But... Obviously they were reproducing if they had survived as long as you say they had. Odd as you can get at times, love, I'm pretty sure you weren't hatched from an egg."

"Well, sort of." Clark closed his eyes, waiting for Lois' reaction. It wouldn't be good; perhaps he should've phrased that differently.

"*WHAT?!*" Lois' voice was the perfect example of horrified surprise.

"A birthing matrix," he answered quickly, stealing a glance at her. "Everything was done in the lab."

After a statement like that, the dark-haired woman could do nothing but stare at him with incredulity. "So what you're basically telling me is, you're a test-tube baby and you were hatched from a mechanical egg. Sure, okay. I'd sit here and stare at you like you're from another planet, but you *are*."

Clark couldn't help it. He burst into laughter, burying his face against her stomach in a futile attempt to smother his amusement. "Wonderful," Lois grumbled, frowning at him while trying to hide her own smile. As always, his mirth was contagious to her. The thought of what he was telling her was beyond anything she could rationally imagine and was honestly of no consequence. No matter how it was that he came into existence, Kal-El had made it to Earth, to her, and none of that changed one iota of what she felt for him. If anything, this news made her all the more protective of him.

Then again, it wouldn't very well do for *him* to know that. Forcing herself to take up the droll tone again, she continued, "I can see you shaking with hilarity there, Mr. Experimental Lab Rat. So nice to see you're amused by our primitive human way of doing things."

Still chuckling, he leaned back to look up at her. Lois was teasing him - not an unusual occurrence - but a thread of sincerity lurked beneath the bantering tone. "Oh, I'm not laughing at your primitive human ways," Clark said in that completely serious, correct speech only she had heard him use. The speech he used during their language lessons. "I actually quite enjoy them, as you very well know. But in case you have the tiniest doubt, let me show you."

Unable to help herself, she shivered. She only had a split second's warning before the solemn tone she connected with Superman and Krypton gave way to a mischievous gleam in his eyes. *Unfair advantage, Kal-El*. Lois' next scathing retort was lost in a yelp of surprise as he swept her up, and she found herself lying on her back on the couch, his weight sweet upon her. "Oh, I know you enjoy it," she whispered wickedly, sliding her arms around his neck, curling her leg over his. Her smile was all too knowing. "I tend to have that effect."

"You certainly do," he murmured in reply, nuzzling her neck to make her shiver. Agreeing with her arrogant remark turned it from banter to an honest compliment, and Lois felt herself blush, her body responding without reserve as he ran his hand down her side. Turning her head to making it easier for him, she purred in appreciation. How could this man so completely unbalance her just by being honest?

"Besides," Clark told her, unbuttoning her blouse slowly. "There's nothing primitive about this. You've elevated lovemaking to a fine art."

The warmth of his hands against her skin brought on a wave of heat so strong she had to close her eyes. And what was more: how could just knowing him so well, in a way that no one else ever would, drive her absolutely mad for him? Just knowing all, looking up into those blue eyes and knowing just how badly he wanted her, made her desire almost painful. "If there's nothing primitive to this, I'm not doing it right," Lois whispered breathily. Her eyes were half-lidded when they opened again, body arching under him provocatively, her hands tangled in his hair.

"Not primitive," he argued, kissing the pale and perfect skin he had just bared as he folded back her blouse. "Primal, yes." With that he rose back up to claim her mouth for a long, passionate kiss.

She couldn't resist the smile that rose to her lips just before he silenced her with sensation. "Leave it to you to correct my wording at a time like this."

This was surely the strangest place he'd ever seen. The terrain was unlike anything he'd ever known, and the inhabitants were completely incomprehensible. He understood some of their language, but these people didn't speak it quite the way he expected them to. Perhaps some dialect shift had occurred between the time he learned it and the present. Even when he could understand the words, however, he had no sense of the conversation. Their speech was riddled with nonsense, random interjections, and occasional phrases that simply *could not* be translated literally. Listening to them, even from afar, made his head ache.

Their habits were even more inexplicable. These people rushed hither and thither to no discernable purpose, sometimes gathering in small impromptu groups to yammer at each other. All of their activity was conducted either in an unseemly rush, or a slothful dawdle; they seemed to have no sense of organization, of precision. He had felt disdain when he first looked upon them, these primitive creatures little better than beasts, but a few hours of observation had sharpened that disdain to loathing.

"Disgusting," his companion murmured, then glanced at him, perhaps wondering if the words had been spoken out of turn.

At exactly that moment, one of the nearer individuals switched on some clunky piece of machinery, which proceeded to emit a cacophonous assortment of shrieks and thuds. It wasn't mere noise, however. The sounds had a regular mathematical repetition, which indicated that this unseemly squawking was their idea of music. He flinched back, mouth twisting in a sneer, and echoed the sentiment. "Absolutely revolting," he replied, and a thought was growing in his mind already. How much better this world would be with all of this wastefulness swept away, transformed into an orderly society like the one he'd known...

Lois reclined on the couch Saturday afternoon, her feet propped up on the end of it, reading a book with the beagle snoring on her lap. Bagel lay on her back, her spine aligned with Lois' legs, and all four feet sticking up in the air. Every time Lois turned a page, she reached out to grasp Bagel's hind foot and wiggle it slightly, which made her stop snoring for a moment. "How come your little paw pads are pink with black spots, but you don't have spots on your legs?" Lois asked, getting no answer other than a lazy flip of Bagel's tail. "And how the hell can you possibly be comfortable like that? All the blood must be rushing to your head, drowning whatever excuse for a brain you have." Again the tail flipped, and one front paw twitched slightly. Lois looked away from her book and stared at the puppy. Upside down, her lips hung loosely and exposed her sharp baby teeth. "Jeez. You only need enough intelligence

to look incredibly cute, and we'll do everything else for you. Including brush your fangs, which your *daddy* will be doing - I'm not down with the puppy breath."

At the word *puppy*, Bagel raised her head blearily, licked her lips, yawned in Lois' direction, and flopped back down with a heavy sigh. The reporter couldn't help cracking up, her laughter jiggling the beagle and disguising the faint click of the French doors.

"Stop mocking your own dog," Clark said severely from the balcony. He strode toward her, cape swirling about him. "I saw you playing with her; it's no use trying to convince me you don't love her."

"Yeah, right. Just don't start giving me orders just because you're in the suit, hero." Lois rolled her eyes toward him, smirking defiantly. "Might work on some girls, but not on me."

"Oh, really?" He came to the edge of the sofa and bent over her, staring into Lois' eyes seriously before he said in that special deep voice that so disarmed Lois, "Put the puppy in her crate, Ms. Lane."

Lois' throat went dry, a state not echoed by the rest of her body. While she was trying to formulate a comeback, Bagel opened her eyes and saw Clark. She yapped loudly and ran up the length of Lois' body, standing on her owner's head to lick Clark's face.

"Come here, brat, and stop stepping on your mom," he scolded gently, picking up the puppy while she wagged and wriggled frantically. Clark frowned at her, which didn't deter her glee in the slightest, and said mock-sternly, "I was not expecting a face-full of puppy drool, Bagel. Mommy can kiss me whenever she wants - you need to warn me."

"Enough of the Mommy-Daddy stuff," Lois said finally, making a face as she sat up. "I can't believe I picked that up from you. This is getting weird."

"What?" he asked, ignoring the incongruity of a uniformed superhero holding a puppy who tried repeatedly to lick him, even though his face was well beyond the reach of her pink tongue. "It *is* a lot like having a child, except she'll never grow up and move out."

"Oh, joy," Lois muttered. "I get to look forward to ten to fifteen years of having romantic moments interrupted. Yay."

Clark kissed the beagle on the nose - fast enough to avoid getting licked - and set her back down. "Never mind, Bagel, go pester your owner. Remind her why she loves you so much. Add an extra serving of cute."

"Smartass," Lois muttered, even as the excitable puppy pawed at her knees until the reporter picked her up again. "So what's the plan for this evening, hero?"

"Steak for dinner?" he suggested, leaving the room to change into normal clothes. "I found a great place in Córdoba. Argentina, not Spain."

"Sounds good," Lois said, a smug smile curving her lips. Who knew that marrying Clark Kent would include the side benefit of enjoying some *really* international cuisine? But it was still quite a bit earlier than their customary dining hour. "Between now and then?"

Her question was answered at first by silence, and Lois arched an eyebrow, rearranging the happy beagle in her lap. After a moment, Clark came back into the room, looking like a scolded schoolboy. "Well, I need to run by the Fortress... An amateur astronomer was watching the sunspots and claims to have seen some kind of object headed toward the sun and 'blown up' by a solar flare. So far the major observatories aren't paying much attention to him, but I want to see if the Fortress' sensors picked up anything."

"Doesn't stuff normally float around space?" Lois asked. "And if it gets close to the sun, flares on no flares, doesn't it usually blow up?"

"This isn't a meteorite. The guy claims it was a flat square and appeared metallic or

reflective. Stuff like *that* didn't 'normally' float around space until this planet's space programs started leaving their debris up there," Clark replied with some irritation. "It's like some of these scientists think the orbit is like the curb outside their house - if you leave your trash there long enough, someone will pick it up eventually."

She was nodding her head thoughtfully as he spoke. "Remind me to 'bring that up' in the next interview," Lois mused as Bagel chewed on her fingers. "If *you* scold people about it, using those words exactly, someone might actually take it to heart."

"Sure," he replied before continuing on. "Anyway, most scientists are dismissing this man's observations, but if he can see an object of that size that far away, he's invested a lot of money in his telescope. He might be an eccentric, but he's a dedicated eccentric. And it won't hurt to go up to the Fortress and check on things. What worries me is that he claims debris from the explosion was headed toward the earth. Now, if something is in the path of a solar flare, there shouldn't be any debris. We're talking about millions of Kelvins here..."

"Whoa there - geek overload." Lois was giving him that long-suffering look that is generally the hallmark of one who is being forced to learn foreign customs and it wasn't their idea. "I swear you should have come with a warning label. It's a lost cause, Kal-El. I don't know what a Kelvin is, except that there was one in one of my grade school classes. Just stop."

Clark just sighed heavily. "Suffice it to say, it should've been vaporized."

"See?" His wife raised both her hands and her eyes to the ceiling, despite the tiny smile in the corner of her mouth. Bagel immediately sat up and watched her movement raptly.

"Obviously it has to do with heat. Now, how hard was that to say? Huh?" Noticing the puppy's curiosity, Lois knocked her over and rubbed her little belly.

He folded his arms and tried to glare, but as usual, he was hiding a smile. "I could've said it's hotter than you - barely."

That made Lois look up with a chuckle, thinking that it was probably the nerdiest and most complex compliment she'd ever received, and one of the most sincere. "All right, Mr. Know-It-All, how long do you figure that'll take?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "If you want, you could come with me. We'll let the puppy out before we go, and she should be all right for a couple of hours."

Lois snorted. Had he been paying *any* attention the last week? "Right. A couple of hours. Gee, good thing you have *two* bladders, huh, kid?" Bagel just wiggled happily on her back, yapped, and tried to get her owner's hand. The reporter gently grabbed the tiny beagle's head and shook it. "Let me just put down a double layer of the *Star* on the kitchen floor for the Brat. If this keeps up I may have to take out a subscription. Raines will have a fit, thinking I actually read her paper."

"Considering how you treat your friends, I fear for your enemies," Clark replied.

"Who said I was friends with anyone working for that tabloid?" Lois retorted jauntily, and got up to carry the puppy into the kitchen. She was starting to adjust well to all of the extraordinary changes in her life. "Good thing it's a Saturday. I just hope I don't get jetlag on the way home this time. Let's get the little one set up and we can head up north."

Placing the papers down, she managed to get the baby gate up while Bagel was distracted by the way they slid under her feet. Snickering at the puppy, Lois commented, "Oh, and I might have to grab some clothes. It wouldn't be so bad if we weren't going to such extremes. I have to figure out what will work. February's hot in Argentina, but frikkin' freezing in the Arctic..."

Things that would make a normal person's head spin were becoming a daily reality for Lois, something that she was taking to quite well. She was a marvel, his Lois. Clark just shook

his head, watching her, and thought that of all the unbelievable occurrences in his life, winning her heart was the most amazing.

Lois opened her eyes slowly, curled up in the circular bed with the silvery sheet flung over her. The flight here had made her queasy, not to mention a bit chilled, and she chalked her sudden intolerance for flying up to the frequency with which Clark had been taking her up. It had never bothered her until recently.

Yawning hugely, the reporter wondered if Clark was done checking over the data from the Fortress' sensors. She was starting to be hungry - that was another weird thing. If anyone had told her how much her appetite would pick up once she was married, she would've stayed single. Lois was already notorious for eating more than the average sumo wrestler, *when* she remembered to eat. But lately, whether it was Clark's cooking or his tendency to take her out to dinner in a different country each week, Lois found herself enjoying her meals even more than usual.

Well, whether he was done or not, her one-track mind was insisting that she feed her empty stomach. Lois got out of bed and ran her fingers through her rumpled hair, padding out to find Clark. She left the bedroom and walked out onto the ledge overlooking the Fortress' main room...

...only to hear a strange voice thunder something ominous, and Clark reply sternly. Eyes wide, Lois stared out at the crystal console, where Clark stood with defiance radiating from every inch of him. In front of and above him loomed a giant floating image of a man's head, scowling with anger. Clark was arguing in what Lois now realized was Kryptonese, and she picked up one of the words he'd taught her: "married".

The image - *that's Jor-El, or the hologram of him anyway* - looked both shocked and furious, silenced for a moment by the enormity of what his son had just told him. But then he spoke, and though Lois couldn't understand exactly what he'd said, she caught enough of it. "...dare you... the House of El... *human*..." The final word was spoken with such venom that Lois knew what he must've said. *How dare you pollute the House of El with this human*, or words to that effect. Lois felt as though she'd been slapped in the face, furious on Clark's behalf. But then she heard the words for "duty" and "indulgence", and saw Clark wince as if rebuked. With that, her outrage became simply *rage*.

"Hold on just a goddamn minute," she snapped, hopping down from the ledge and stalking over to the incredulous hologram. He understood English, Clark had told her that, and Lois didn't have the words for what she wanted to say in Kryptonese anyway. Staring up at blue eyes so like her husband's, a tiny core of fear buried beneath righteous anger, Lois snarled, "So we're good enough to save your son, good enough to spare him from *certain death* and raise him to manhood *as one of us*, but not good enough to marry, huh? *Bullshit*. You can go on whining about how advanced your civilization is, Jor-El, but it was a human's instinctive - *primitive* - love for a child that saved his life. Kal-El is alive today because of *us*. So you can take your high-minded line of crap and shove it. We're married, we love each other, I will *not* leave him, and if he thinks he's leaving me, he's got another think coming!"

She had to pause for breath, seeing the dumbfounded look in Jor-El's eyes and dimly aware of Clark staring at her in open-mouthed shock. Flinging her hair back, Lois finished by saying with steel in her voice, "Learn to deal with it."

Jor-El recovered himself enough to glare at Lois. Far from being intimidated by the oversized image floating above her, Lois glared right back just as angrily. Clark looked from

his wife to his father, wondering what on earth he was going to do *now*.