

IAL - Ever, Ever After (Epilogue)

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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Jonathan and Mia were perfectly happy to crawl about their playpen while Clark set up the picnic blanket. He'd chosen a spot behind the Kent farmhouse, with a view of the creek and plenty of shade from tall poplar trees. The twins enjoyed the fresh air and exercise, but they'd been doing so throughout the family's trip to Smallville. Even Lois had been having a good time since the four of them had arrived at the Kansas City Airport.

That, in itself, was a miracle: he'd had to do some fancy footwork to talk her into this little trip when she had been in the midst of an exposé of the Metropolis Electric Authority's sudden summer deluge of outrageous surcharges and just where all that cash was going. Just because she was a wife and mother, that didn't mean that Lois Lane had shown any signs of slowing down or scaling back on her career or on the hunt for that ever-elusive Pulitzer. *Well, beyond being home in time for dinner*, Clark thought with a grin.

One of them burbled loudly, and Clark stopped to check. It was Jonathan, patting at a spot of sunlight that seemed to dance as the leaves above shifted in the wind. The little boy laughed, his eyes bright, and Clark couldn't help the immediate way he smiled. Moments like this made his chest tighten with more love than he'd ever thought he could feel.

Mia, meanwhile, was teething. Again. She gnawed on a clean washcloth Martha had left in the freezer overnight - far cheaper than all the teething rings they'd been buying, and Mia seemed to prefer it. Lois had just sighed in aggravation and grumbled that it had to be Clark's influence.

The tall man sighed with contentment. These first months of fatherhood were amazing; equal parts overwhelming and exalting, but always full of wonder. Every part of his life had changed, starting with his wife.

Lois had always had the kind of figure that inspired men's dreams: impossibly long legs, and just enough curve in all the right places. Pregnancy had rounded her entire body, which he liked and she loathed, and immediately after the twins were born she'd gone to work losing the extra weight. Clark had been very pleased to see that some of the curves had stayed - a little more fullness in her bust, a little more flare to her hips. Lois growled about the extra few pounds, but in Clark's opinion she tended to be a little *too* thin, living on cigarettes, coffee, and deadlines. The slightest bit of roundness in her belly only emphasized her feminine figure to him.

Other changes had taken place. Clark now saw the world first through the focus of being a father; he evaluated each new situation, each new person, place, and object, based on how the twins would react. Would they be over-stimulated by too much noise? Would they be

frightened by someone wearing a large hat? Was it safe to let them crawl on the floor of a given room? Was any object small enough to be swallowed or large enough to hurt them if it toppled on them?

Bagel found her master's new behavior endlessly fascinating. When Clark got down on the floor to peer underneath the furniture, the young beagle enthusiastically licked his face. He had preferred not to use his x-ray vision, just in case a spring or something in the couch blocked some tiny hazard forgotten on the carpet. The very first day of baby-proofing the apartment, Clark had found sixteen loose staples, three pens, and almost four dollars in change. And the twins hadn't even been able to crawl yet.

At least Bagel was finally starting to like the twins. Her relationship with them had started badly when their residence in Lois' womb had robbed her of her favorite sleeping place. And then, when they started getting lots of attention from the parents and from visitors, Bagel had sulked. The beagle's face, with her drooping ears, softly hanging lips, and large eyes the color of melting chocolate, just naturally looked mournful, and Bagel was smart enough to enhance that impression with pleading looks. She was a world-class pouter. When she gave him that pitiful look and lay under the table refusing to come out, Clark felt like the most horribly inconsiderate person ever to live. He walked around feeling guilty for breathing.

Lois had studied the situation, then gone out and bought a special box of treats, which she kept in the nursery. Once Bagel realized that she could score lots of extra-yummy snacks by hanging around the twins, they became her favorite humans. While Clark didn't leave the kids and the dog alone together, he was happy to see that Bagel had grown to like her 'siblings'. And if the way that the babies crawled after her was any indication, the twins liked her, too.

Life at home had finally settled into a comfortable routine after those first weeks when no one got any sleep. And Perry was willing to cut a little slack here and there for the new parents; although not without his usual bluster, of course. Trying to reconcile his mission with fatherhood had been ... interesting. Clark smiled at the thought. He and Jor-El had already had several arguments about the raising of the twins, Clark agreeing with Lois that they ought to enjoy the benefits of both halves of their heritage, and Jor-El insisting that they be brought up as Kryptonians.

And the mission itself - at first, it had been almost impossible. Getting up for midnight feedings, trying to manage two tiny babies who had no intention of sticking to a schedule while simultaneously having to dash off at all hours for rescues, had worn Clark down. He'd been exhausted all the time, and worried that Lois wasn't getting enough rest, either. Pure madness, the first two months had been. Luckily for them all, no major disasters had occurred in the world until the twins began to sleep through the night. Clark shuddered to think how he would've dealt with an earthquake or tsunami during that time when he considered a two-hour nap an impossible luxury.

Still keeping an eye on the babies, Clark strung the hammock between two trees. As he did so, Lois came out of the house, her clear laughter instantly broadening Clark's smile. He watched her approach, noting the mischievous gleam in her eyes at the same time he noticed the way the light breeze made the hem of her little white sundress ripple as she came toward him, and crossed his arms in an effort to appear stern. "What on earth has you so devilishly amused?" he asked.

The impish smile just grew wider then, the sway in her gait becoming a bit more pronounced now that she knew his eyes were on her. "Talking to my sister," Lois chuckled, both arms sliding around his neck as she came to his side. She paused only long enough to kiss

him before continuing, "You'll never guess what happened back home today."

How could anyone resist her when she was like this? It was a wonder he'd lasted as long as he had against her. "I won't have to," Clark replied in a knowing tone, grinning warmly back at her before returning the kiss. "You're going to tell me."

Lois snickered, leaning to glance around his shoulder at the twins and the picnic preparations. Her smile softened when it fell on the babies. Despite her earlier reservations on motherhood, her instincts had been right on cue. In the last few months, it seemed as though her reflexes had been faster than his in instances where they could hurt themselves, he thought with a loving smile. And it wasn't only that. More than once he'd come home late after his nightly rounds to find her in the nursery, leaning on the railing of the crib and watching them raptly. From the look on her face, it was clear that it wasn't just he himself that had fallen under their children's spell. He had no doubt that anyone who even dreamed of harming Mia or Jonathan would find themselves in a world of hurt that not even Superman could stop.

She must have felt his gaze on her then, her smile back on high-beam when she reassumed her former place in his arms. "Uh-huh. *Riiight*. Says you, hero," she drawled, her gaze locked on his as if he were the only person in the world. Even now, he was still getting used to that. "Your mom says the food will be a few more minutes. How about I consider the possibility of telling you when we're comfortable in the hammock?"

"Sounds good," Clark commented, sweeping her into his arms. Lois yelped at being picked up, but Clark carried her over to the hammock and got them both settled in it regardless of her protests. Once he had Lois snuggled against the curve of his body, her chin resting on his chest as she stared at him, he asked, "Now what were you going to say?"

Those hazel eyes he loved rolled briefly toward the clear blue sky above them, although he didn't miss the way the corner of her mouth quirked up. "I was going to say you're a jerk, you big show-off," his wife muttered, reaching up to tap his nose with a fingernail. Clark just laughed, reaching out to run a hand through her loose hair, waiting for the rest of the story. For a time, she just glaring sulkily at him - Bagel was not the only creature in the house who knew how to pout - before surrendering with a heavy sigh of defeat and going back to her story. "Anyway, Momma was spending the day with Lucy today. She does that on and off, but it kinda surprised Lucy because this was short notice. Well, they spent the morning doing girly stuff, going to a salon, Lucy buttering Momma up over her new dress, yadda yadda."

In spite of her tone, Clark knew perfectly well that Lois enjoyed the occasional leisurely day with her mother. Ella Lane was a formidable woman, whose poise and graciousness always made him feel honored to be a part of her family. He admired her strength of character and the amount of guile and tact it must have taken to raise two very different daughters into the strong, capable women Lois and Lucy were today.

"As it turns out, Lucy had plans to drop by the office and see Ron this afternoon," Lois continued, laying her head down to better relax. "So Momma went with her, because she loves both her sons-in-law and Ron is always glad to see her, et cetera, et cetera. Much to Lucy's shock, the bullpen was *clean* - neat and organized like it's never been. Not a stack of paper in sight. And Ron started snickering his ass off the minute they walk in."

"Did someone decide to photograph the office or something?" Clark asked.

"Oh, no," Lois chortled. "Better than *that*. So Momma makes nice with Ron for a couple minutes, and then who should walk back into the office but the Chief? Lucy said she almost didn't recognize him - he actually got a haircut, *and* bought a new suit."

"Whoa," Clark said, impressed. "Did *Time* want to interview him or did someone die?"

Lois burst out laughing, raising herself up on one arm to give him that mischievous grin again. "No, Clark - he must have heard it through the grapevine that Momma was going to be there! And Perry fancied the place up for her. The crusty old bastard even *polished* his *desk*!" She frowned then, something else occurring to her as her brow furrowed. "Although if he laid a hand on my desk, not even Momma's gonna save him."

Just the notion of Perry White and Ella Lane as a potential couple threw poor Clark for a loop. He simply stared at his wife wordlessly for a moment, trying to fathom it. "You mean, your mom and the Chief..." Clark faltered in disbelief.

One of Lois' dark brows arched up, she gave a little shrug of her shoulders. "Yeah, it's no secret if you've been around him long enough. He's always had a thing for her, even when Dad was still alive," she commented almost casually. "And with both daughters married off at last, Momma has to match-make for someone. Might as well be herself. Lucy said they spent about an hour in his office. I guess I was away from home just long enough for the old man to get his guts up."

Clark, meanwhile, was still trying to get his brain to wrap around the image, amazed at her level of non-reaction. "Oh, my, that's... wow," he said finally. Then he stared at the woman watching him much more calmly than he'd ever expected. If he himself had ever thought the pairing was possible, this absolutely wasn't the response he'd have prepared himself for. More of a swearing, life-threatening fit of epic proportions. Something... wasn't right about this. "Lois, you're not... You're taking this awfully well."

She tilted her head to return the look, the reason for his scrutiny completely eluding her at first, and then he saw understanding dawn on her. That was enough to make her burst into laughter. "What, you expected theatrics? The whole reason he's never done it before now, I think, is because he thinks I'll be horrified, which I don't really mind him thinking. And then there's the fact that Momma's too good for him," Lois explained with a gleam in her eyes. "But they both know that and Momma doesn't seem to care now, so it's okay. Honestly, Clark, I was never close to my father. The old man's probably been thinking about it since he broke up with Loueen. And, to tell the truth, I think Momma's been alone too long."

Lois' clear understanding and acceptance of events left Clark feeling rather perplexed, but he could see where Ella and Perry would be a good match. For one thing, they were the only people who used each other's full names. And Perry already treated Lois like his own daughter - he was harder on her than any other reporter, expecting more from his protégé. It was a strangely backward form of favoritism, but Lois thrived on it and so did the newspaper.

Musing on that, Clark glanced to check on the babies. Mia had given up gnawing on the washcloth for the time being, and was currently grabbing at Jonathan's ankle. He was trying to crawl away, and neither of them were having much success.

"Clark! Lois! *Kids!*" Martha called from the back porch. "C'mon, dinner's ready!" That was enough to get both of them moving, Clark keeping an eye on the twins even as he trotted to the house. Martha had him carry most of the food, reserving the light stuff for herself and Lois.

"Martha, that smells *delicious*," Lois raved, leaning around Clark's shoulder to sniff at the basket he carried.

The older woman chuckled, give her daughter-in-law a fond smile. Yet another thing Clark was immeasurably grateful for: that two women as different as Lois and Ma had become as close as they were. "While I appreciate the compliment, Lois," Martha said with teasing amusement, "you're going to have to reign in that appetite of yours a few more minutes. Ben

Hubbard will be joining us."

"Ben's coming to the picnic?" Clark said in befuddlement, and he glanced curiously at his wife when Lois chuckled.

Something like a warning look flickered between his mother and Lois, the younger woman hiding a smile as they neared the blanket. "Yes, dear, he is," Martha replied calmly. "He's going to bring some potato salad, too. I told him where we were setting up, so he'll come right out. Lois, how's Mia? Are her gums any better?"

They had arrived back at the playpen by then, and Lois returned her attention to checking up on her daughter. Glancing in, she snickered slightly, "Well, considering she's biting his toes... reminds me of Lucy at that age."

"If she feels like starting trouble with her brother, I'll consider it a good sign," Martha chuckled. He's a feisty one. Then again, you *did* name him Jonathan."

Clark looked even more bewildered, the expression so utterly baffled that Lois couldn't help a chuckle at his expense. "I take it Pa Kent was a bit of a troublemaker in his day?" she laughed.

The light in the older woman's eyes made it clear how much she had loved her husband. "Oh, Jonathan was never one of the *bad* boys," Martha corrected with a tender smile. "But when he really wanted something, well, he'd move heaven and earth to get it, and never mind anyone who told him he couldn't get it. A lot like me, in fact. Luckily we both got our hearts set on each other."

While she reminisced, Clark was down on his knees setting up the picnic. He'd just gotten everything arranged when Ben Hubbard made his way toward the group of them. "Afternoon, ladies," the older man called, and Lois and Martha called their hellos. Ben had been a common enough sight on the farm when they visited recently. The man had been helping Martha around the farm for years, ever since Clark had left Smallville at eighteen, and that Martha had invited him to their 4th of July picnic shouldn't have been such a surprise. Though what happened next was: as Martha took the container of potato salad, Ben leaned in and kissed her cheek softly.

Clark had turned around at just that moment, and his jaw dropped as he stared from Ben to his mother. Those blue eyes had opened wide, astonishment roaring through him at an alarming rate. "Are you two *dating*?" was all he could manage, not even hiding the incredulity he felt.

It had the expected result. Ben shuffled his feet, looking briefly embarrassed, but Martha put that to an end very shortly. Giving him a reproving look, the older woman only replied primly, "That will be enough of that, Clark. You *did* ask him to look after the farm, son. And Ben's been taking me fishing of late." She turned to smile at the man in question then, a smile that Ben quickly returned.

In the face of such a united front, what could he say? At least without incurring a scolding in front of company. "Yes, but..." Clark trailed off, his gaze going from his mother to Mr. Hubbard before turning to Lois with a plea for someone to be on his side.

From the smirk on her lips, it finally occurred to him what she had been snickering over with his mother. The instant she started to open her mouth, he just *knew* a saucy retort was on the tip of her tongue. Whatever she was going to say was lost, though, when they all heard a little voice behind them call out, "Mama!"

The sound startling them, all four adults turned simultaneously to see little Jonathan holding onto the side of the playpen, pulling himself into a standing position. His blue eyes fixed on Lois, and he grinned.

It was his grandmother that was the first to speak. "Oh my!" Martha exclaimed, her hand to her mouth. "His first word! Oh, Lois, did you hear that?" Clark was rather stunned, and looked to Lois, only to see her eyes mist over as she bit her lip. There was such wonder and awe in her gaze when she glanced over at him. They shared a smile then and Clark couldn't ever remember her looking more beautiful, nor a moment when he loved her more.

And just when it seemed that the moment couldn't be more perfect, Mia, still clutching her brother's ankle, was not to be outdone. In perfect mimicry of Jonathan, she added with a giggle, "Mama."

*In another lifetime,
It would be forever.
In another world
Where you and I
Could be together.
In another set of chances,
I'd take the one's I'd missed
And make you mine.
If only for a time,
My life would matter
In another life.*

*And I'd stay as strong and I'd stay as true,
And you'd have forever now to think it through.
'Cause I believe what wasn't meant to be
Wasn't meant for now and
Someday you'll see.
In a place and time we never know,
I'd be standing there waiting for you.*

~Gary Valenciano, *In Another Lifetime*