

Of Pancakes and Early Mornings

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: K+

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"Open my eyes, wake up wake up wake up WAKE UP ... IN FLAMES!"

Kala slapped her alarm clock before it could get past the fourth line of the song, yawning blearily. "The best part of waking up - Trent Reznor howling in your ear," she muttered under her breath. It was still dark outside; the vacation cabin was on the north side of the ridge, cooler in summer and perfect for viewing spectacular mountain sunsets, but it also stayed dark longer in the mornings.

The teenager stretched gingerly, cautious of the warm lump cuddled up to her back, and turned on the bedside lamp. "C'mon, Kristin," Kala said, rolling over to shake her little sister's shoulder. Only the six-year-old girl's red hair was visible at the moment. She had acquired Kala's habit of sleeping buried in the covers, probably on vacations like this one when the two girls shared a room.

Kristin groaned, burrowing deeper, and Kala chuckled. "Don't make me pick you up and carry you," she whispered. "Wake up, Kristin. You said you wanted to."

"Wanted to *then*," the little girl muttered, her eyes tightly shut. "I'm sleepy now."

"But you have to get up for the surprise," Kala insisted. "Come on, Kristin. Up."

It took a little more coaxing, but when Kristin eventually remembered the surprise she was more eager to wake up. The two girls padded out into the hall and commandeered the bathroom, Kala shepherding Kristin through brushing and flossing and washing up.

In the midst of it all, the two beagles woke up and came to stand in the doorway, staring at the girls with their matching white-tipped tails wagging jauntily. Bagel was six years old now, but still behaving like a pup most of the time. Her cousin Dusty, two years younger, was the Whites' dog. Lana had wanted a golden retriever, researching breeders and going to dog shows, but she'd made the mistake of visiting to Smallville when Ben had a litter of puppies. Richard and Kristin had fallen in love with a red and white pup, and Lana had given in to inevitability. She did get her revenge, though; the dog's registered name was Barkley's Golden Dust.

Kala and Kristin let the two dogs out into their fenced run behind the cabin, knowing they would be well occupied for the next hour sniffing the tracks of every raccoon, squirrel, and mouse that had crossed their yard. As the pair started barking at some poor woodland creature, only Kala heard Lois groan from the bedroom, "Frikkin' dogs are up before dawn ... swear I'll strangle Lana ... damn cheerleader..." Kala had to repress her snickering; she couldn't begin to explain it to her little sister, as that would mean admitting to her superhuman hearing. Kristin was still in the dark about the family secret.

In any case, it was time to go drag Jason out of bed. Kala headed into his room with the casual impertinence of a bratty sibling, knocking on the door after she opened it. "Wake up, sleepyhead," she called, keeping her voice down in deference to their parents sleeping in the other two bedrooms.

Jason mumbled something unintelligible, and Kristin ran to his bedside. "C'mon, you gotta get up!" she said excitedly, grabbing his foot where it stuck out from beneath the blankets and shaking it briskly. "C'mon, c'mon!"

He just groaned, yanking his foot back and curling up in a ball beneath the blankets. "Jason, you wuss, wake up," Kala scolded, shoving his shoulder. When even that failed to rouse him, she turned to Kristin with a wicked grin. "All right, Little Red, you know what this means. He doesn't wake up..."

"...I get t' jump on the bed!" Kristin said, grabbing Kala's hands and letting the dark haired girl swing her up onto Jason's bed. She leaped around enthusiastically, jumping as hard as she could and trying to land on the mattress instead of Jason.

At first he groaned and tried to curl up into a tighter ball, but Kristin leaped so enthusiastically that it felt like his mattress was trying to buck out from under him. Coming awake at last, Jason flung the covers back and grabbed Kristin around the legs, knocking her down gently. Her squeal of surprise was partly muffled by his comforter as Jason wrapped her up in it and tickled the bottoms of her feet. The little redhead yelped and kicked at him, laughing hysterically.

"Hey, lizard-brain, quit it," Kala hissed, smacking her brother's shoulder. "You're gonna wake up the 'rents."

He let go of Kristin only to grab a pillow and solidly whack Kala with it, making her stagger back a step. "Well, you got your wish, Elvira," Jason muttered threateningly. "I'm awake."

"And surlier than *Mom*," Kala growled, snatching the pillow away. "Come *on*. Get with the program. Remember what today is?"

"No..." Jason began, and then his eyes lit up mischievously. "Oh *yeah*. Lana's birthday. We're making breakfast in bed for everybody, right."

"Right. And we need *you*, pancake-boy extraordinaire, to help us." Jason had inherited all the cooking skills that had skipped over Mom; though both twins knew their way around a kitchen, he had a real flair for it. Kala reached out and ruffled her brother's hair. "But first you'd better comb your hair and brush your teeth."

"Yes, Mother," Jason grouched. Kristin was sitting on the bed beside him now, swinging her feet, and he attack-tickled her once more before getting up. Kala had to carry her, giggling helplessly, into the kitchen.

"You're the silliest little sister ever," Kala commented, hugging her as she set Kristin down and brought a chair over to the counter. "C'mere, silly goose, let's get started. Help me make the coffee."

By the time Jason came back out, Kristin had carefully measured out the ground coffee and poured water into the coffeemaker. Kala had just gotten down a bowl, a mixing spoon, and the pancake mix. "I wanna help you," Kristin said, grabbing Jason's shirtsleeve and looking up at him adoringly. She had Richard's blue eyes and charming smile, and the family debated whether or not she knew how irresistibly cute she was. "Please? Pretty please?"

"Sure," he said, kissing her forehead. Jason was one of the ones who believed Kristin was innocent of all manipulative tendencies. "Let's see, did your goofy sister get down the

measuring cups?"

"Right here, oh great and radioactive one," Kala teased, tossing one at him. She claimed that Kristin knew perfectly well how adorable she was, but was too sweet to intentionally take advantage of it. "Help the munchkin mix your secret recipe, I'll get the griddle warmed up. How many eggs do you need?"

"Two, and milk," Jason said. "That's the *basic* recipe," he told Kristin. "We're gonna make it special, because we're special, and our parents are pretty special, too. Blueberries, please, Kala."

She handed him two eggs, the milk, and a pint of the blueberries they'd picked yesterday. Kristin noticed that she was holding the egg carton in her other hand, and asked curiously, "Whatcha makin'?"

"It's called 'chickens in the woods,'" Kala told her, setting the eggs on the counter carefully. She opened the bread and dropped four slices into the toaster, rummaging through one of the kitchen drawers while she waited for it to pop up.

"What's that?" Kristin asked.

"Eggs inside toast," Kala replied. "Grandma's recipe. Daddy loves them."

"Mom thinks they're gross. Pay attention," Jason said, holding a blueberry in front of Kristin's nose. She took it and ate it while he poured the pancake mix into the bowl, then she held out the correct measuring cup so he could pour the milk. He cracked two eggs expertly on the edge of the counter while Kristin started stirring the mix, and then took a lemon out of the fruit bowl.

"We're havin' lemon pancakes?" Kristin asked as Jason cut the lemon in half.

"Nope, but we're putting a *little teeny bit* of lemon juice in them," Jason replied.

"Freshly squeezed," Kala muttered, sharing a chuckle with her brother. She'd found a couple of cookie cutters and set them on the counter. The Thanksgiving one, shaped like a turkey, would be close enough to a chicken to delight Kristin.

Jason showed Kristin how to squeeze the juice from the lemon and put a little into the mix, along with some baking powder and sugar. Kala leaned on the counter, snickering at them; her brother was so earnest sometimes, you'd think he was doing brain surgery instead of making breakfast. He stuck his tongue out at her over Kristin's head as the little girl stirred industriously, and Kala crossed her eyes at him.

The toast popped up then, and Kala grabbed the slices out, cutting out the centers and eating the chicken-shaped bits of toast. The griddle was hot - it was good cast-iron, passed down from Lana's family, and Lois was terrified of it. Kala dropped the toast slices onto the hot surface and quickly cracked an egg into the center of each piece of toast. "Want me to start the sausages and bacon?" she asked Jason.

"Sure," he replied, tickling Kristin's side. "Keep stirring there, or you're gonna lose your sous-chef job."

"Whatsa soo-chef?" Kristin asked him.

"Ooh, Jason's re-learning French to impress girls," Kala teased as she hunted through the refrigerator. "It's really working well, huh?"

He stuck his tongue out at her. "It's the chef-in-training, basically," he told Kristin. "Your sister over there, she's never gonna be better than a short-order cook in my kitchen. Got that, grill-monkey?"

"Sure thing, Chef Lizardbreath," Kala replied jauntily. While the eggs were cooking, she got out the bacon and some of the fancy gourmet sausage they'd bought down at the farmer's

market yesterday. Putting both on the grill, Kala sniffed deeply and savored the scent of hickory-smoked bacon mingling with pork, apples, and Gouda cheese in the sausage.

"Don't snort all the flavor out of it, Kal," Jason teased her, and she stuck her tongue out at him, making Kristin giggle. The eggs were done, so she removed them to a plate and turned the grill over to Jason. "Now see, we've got the grill all nice and hot, with just a teeny bit of grease from the bacon and the sausage," he explained to Kristin. "When we pour the pancake batter on, it'll have a little bit of smoky flavor to it."

"Yummy," Kristin said. "When are we gonna eat?"

"We have to taste-test everything before we serve it, of course," Kala said haughtily. "Want a chicken in the woods?" Giggling, the little redhead accepted and ate the toast-and-egg combination while watching Jason make pancakes. It was his breakfast specialty, and he let Kala and Kristin have the first two pancakes to forestall any whining.

Polishing off the last bite of pancake - Jason made them small, but not too small - Kala took out another pan and set it on a spare burner. The kitchen here was almost big enough to do catering; though technically owned by the Whites, it was available for the Troupes and the Lane-Kents to use as well, and at least one person in each family really enjoyed cooking. The cookware was a mix of new, high-end stuff, built to last forever, and hand-me-down cast-iron pieces that looked as though they had already been around forever. It gave the kids plenty of room to cook up a huge breakfast like this, with everyone's favorite foods. Including the omelets Kala was about to make.

She wound up using the rest of the eggs as well as the last of the sausage and bacon, but it was worth it. While Jason took care of Kristin and the grill, Kala managed to make enough equal portions of her famous 'garbage disposal' omelet - the one containing whatever happened to be left over in the kitchen. She also pulled aside a small amount for Kristin to try. So far, the youngest child of the extended family had proved to be a miniature gourmand, willing to try *anything*, and both twins liked sharing with her.

"Are we done?" Jason asked, setting out four fancy plates on two trays and beginning to arrange the food. Mom hated eggs, Dad liked his chickens in the woods but didn't care for omelettes, Lana preferred bacon to sausage, and Richard would eat a little of everything.

"I think so," Kala replied, preparing the four coffees. Black, iced black, black with sugar, black with sugar and cream... "Oh, wait - do we have those strawberries still, or did Daddy Richard eat them all?"

"There's some left, why?" Jason asked.

"Gimme, and the chef's knife," she said. "I saw this cool thing on the Food Network..." It took a couple of tries, with Jason and Kristin cheerfully eating the mistakes, but she managed to garnish each plate with an artfully sliced strawberry.

Some more fresh fruit for each tray - they'd really overdone it at the farmer's market yesterday - and everything was ready. The three kids had mostly eaten while they worked, although they took a moment to savor Kala's omelet and some sausage and bacon.

"All right, if Chef Godzilla will carry one tray, I'll help you with the other," Kala told Kristin.

"Can we put flowers on 'em?" the little girl asked. "Like in a hotel?"

"Sure," Jason said. "Come outside with me, I don't think anyone will mind us taking a couple. Kala, can you put some water in a couple glasses for us?"

"Don't tell Lana you raided her garden," Kala warned, laughing as Jason picked Kristin up and set her on his shoulders for the brief trip outside. To be honest, both twins spoiled their

younger sibling rotten. They were fortunate that Kristin had a sunny disposition; she could've turned into the worst attention-hogging brat by now, but somehow she'd remained sweet and affectionate. Richard claimed that was his influence, the endless ability to soak up attention, while most of the family agreed it was more likely Lana's level-headedness showing through.

At last the breakfast trays were finished, and Jason carried the one for Lois and Clark while Kala carried the one for Lana and Richard. They went up the hall slowly, and Kala knocked at the Whites' door. "Room service," she called. It was always wise to give either set of parents a few seconds' warning; Kala and Jason had long ago learned not to simply barge into the adults' rooms.

The faint rustling from within told her that they were probably both up, and a moment later Richard called for them to come in. Jason held his tray balanced on one palm as he swung the door open for the girls, and Kristin toddled in carrying the tray all by herself - or so she thought. In 'helping' her balance it, Kala actually carried most of the weight. "Happy birthday, Mommy!" Kristin said excitedly, Kala echoing the sentiment.

Lana's smile was worth getting up in the predawn darkness, and while she thanked Kristin profusely, she also looked over the youngest's shoulder to add, "Thank you too, Kala, Jason. This was very sweet of you."

"You're welcome," Kala said for both of them, giving Lana a kiss on the cheek as Richard took the tray from Kristin and hugged her. He also had a hug and a kiss for Kala, rumpling her hair a bit just to make her whine. "*Daaaad*, stop it!"

"Kala Josephine, you shouldn't look quite so awake and chipper in the mornings," he informed her with a chuckle. "Nobody should. It ought to be illegal."

"Hush, lazybones," Lana told him, stealing the strawberry off his plate. Kristin climbed up onto the bed and snuggled down between them, already looking dozy, and Kala grinned a little as she headed out the door to the other master bedroom.

Jason was waiting for her, balancing the heavy tray on one hand again as he leaned against the wall. As cheerful and animated as he'd been while making breakfast, the dark-haired boy now looked as if he was starting to regret waking up so early. "It's safe," he said quietly. "I checked."

"With x-ray vision?" Kala asked, raising an eyebrow in perfect imitation of Lois. "Jase, doesn't that kinda defeat the purpose of knocking anyway? The whole point here is *not* to traumatize ourselves into having to go back to Dr. Marrin."

"Oh," he said, thinking about it. "Yeah."

Kala hugged him impulsively. "See, this is why I call you Dopey."

Jason tried to scowl, but he managed to look only tired and slightly mental, not threatening. She relented, swinging their parents' door open with a cheerful call of, "We bring hazelnut coffee with vanilla creamer; don't kill us!"

The sound they heard next was obviously Lois groaning, burying herself in the covers in defense of the perky tone, while Clark laughed. *He* had probably been awake as long as the kids, possibly even flying out for his morning rounds already. Kristin was under the impression that Daddy Clark took a solo walk every morning, and was always rather disappointed that she couldn't go along. Those few protests had brought chuckles from Kala and Jason. The parents knew how lucky they'd been, in that the twins had been able to keep such a huge secret at such a young age. They weren't likely to risk telling Kristin about Daddy Clark's *other* job until she was quite a bit older, no matter how often they were tempted.

"Thanks, you two," Clark said as Jason brought the tray in and handed it to him. "Your

Mom would thank you, too, but..."

"The sun's not fully up, and Mom's been around us long enough she thinks *her* powers come from the sun, too," Kala supplied, sitting on the foot of the bed. She grinned at the lump under the covers beside her father. "Really, we all know her superpowers come from coffee."

"I'll agree with that," Clark replied. "Hmm, chickens in the woods. My favorite."

Jason, meanwhile, had circled around to Lois' side of the bed, sitting down gingerly beside her and holding out her coffee. Where the other two had no real concept of how difficult this was for her, he genuinely understood. "Sorry, Mom," he said with a guilty smile. When the twins were younger, they had often 'surprised' her with breakfast at an hour Lois found positively unholy - and though she had tried desperately to seem enthused, their chipper behavior had to have been incredibly frustrating. Now that they were older, Jason sympathized with Lois' hatred of mornings. "I know it's obscenely early, but this was the only way we could stop Lana from making breakfast for everyone on her own birthday."

He heard Mom give a heavy sigh before muttering something unintelligible, then finally reaching out from under the covers for the coffee. Covering her mouth to stifle a yawn, she blinked blearily at Clark, looking at the breakfast tray with interest. Rolling her eyes at his obvious interest, she took a few sips of the fragrant brew before trying to reply. "Thanks, sweetheart," the reporter murmured, brain cells beginning to warm up under the influence of coffee. "Thank God one of you has mercy."

Kala couldn't resist a snicker at that. "They made us that awesome sausage we found at the market yesterday, honey," Clark told his wife, leaning in for a quick kiss.

Now awake enough to catch one scent in particular, Lois wrinkled her nose as she stared at his plate. "I really wish I could smell it. But, unfortunately, I *can* smell that godawful sulfur-smelling egg mess from over here," she grumbled, making a face. "Kal-EI, that is so disgusting ... and oh, look." The trademark Lane smirk came into view for the first time of the morning. "Someone got cute with the cookie cutters."

Hazel eyes opened enough to meet her daughter's, the exact same shades of green and amber. "Your idea or Kristin's?"

"Mine," Kala replied with a proud grin. "I also sliced the strawberries all fancy for you. Like it?"

"Not too bad, munchkin," Lois replied, finally beginning to sit up slightly as she smiled at Kala. "You're getting to be a regular Martha Stewart in pajamas. Speaking of which," she paused, glancing at said pajamas with an amused chuckle, "Kala, it's not Halloween."

Kala looked down at the oversized shirt she had slept in; a pattern of bat silhouettes flitted across the front and back. "I like it, though."

Lois just shook her head before glancing in turn at her son, who had actually bothered to get dressed. He, however, was just as hopeless as Kala - Jason's typical summer outfit consisted of jeans and a t-shirt, in this case one with a head shot of Albert Einstein on it. Sighing, Lois leaned on Clark's shoulder as she snagged a pancake off the plate. "Thank you both, Jason, Kala. If I have to wake up this early, this is pretty good compensation. With the exception of your Dad's absolutely nasty eggs."

"Love you, Mom," Jason said, leaning in to hug her now that it was safe. She kissed his cheek, smiling bittersweetly. It was strange to almost disappear into her son's hug. It seemed like not too long ago he was small enough for her to pick up and carry; now Jason could have easily carried Lois, and it had nothing to do with super-strength.

Kala hopped off the end of the bed to kiss her father's cheek. "Love you both," she

announced jauntily. She leaned across him to kiss Lois' cheek as well, giving her a long hug. Lois kissed her on the forehead and leaned back, lovingly brushing a stray hair out of Kala's eyes. Her baby girl was her height now, and every day Kala grew more confident, more self-possessed. It was good to see that she hadn't become too 'cool' to hug and kiss her mom.

"We ate while we were cooking," Jason explained. "So we'll leave you two to eat and go take care of the dogs."

"Enjoy your romantic breakfast," Kala said, heading for the door. "Remember, we want a brother this time."

"*KAL!*" Jason yelped, the door closing on their parents' laughter. They had just barely made it into the hallway when Jason shoved Kala, and she retaliated by taking a swipe at his head. They pushed and wrestled each other all the way out to the deck, holding back on their powers. Only the conflicts that were more playful than truly angry ever turned physical; Kala and Jason were growing into their powers, and they no longer trusted their own self-control. Actual fights between them were always strictly verbal for fear of causing real harm.

This, however, was hardly a real fight. Jason grabbed Kala in a headlock and dragged her out onto the deck, the two beagles running up to join in with excited yips. Kala managed to twist around and bite Jason's arm, causing him to let go of her. "*Ow!* Jeez, Kal, you're an alien, not a freakin' vampire!" he yelped.

"Quit being a pansy," Kala laughed. "I didn't hurt you. God, Jase, you're such a cheeseball sometimes."

"No, it didn't hurt, but you haven't had your rabies shot," Jason retorted. He swatted at Kala's head, which she neatly dodged, and then ducked back inside to get the dogs' food. Both beagles were whimpering and prancing on their hind legs at the sound of kibble rattling into the bowl, but as soon as he set the bowls down they dove in. The only sounds were the crunching of kibble, and somewhere in the woods, an early bird beginning to sing.

Kala leaned back against the railing, tilting her head back and narrowing her eyes to slits. The sky was definitely lighter, and she expected the sun to top the ridge any moment. Jason came to stand beside her, mirroring the pose their parents called 'sun-worshipping'. Any moment now...

"I love vacation," Kala sighed happily.

"I love this cabin," Jason responded. "Thirty acres of woods and meadows, our own pond, and a stream with its very own waterfall. And enough space for all of us."

The younger twin's eyes sparkled with a very familiar deviltry. "Enough room to practice our special Creep-tonian skills," Kala said, grinning. "Wanna race me to the ridge?"

"When the sun's up. I'm still half asleep." He yawned prodigiously to make his point, and Kala snickered. She let herself slide sideways until she was leaning against his shoulder, and Jason angled his neck to lightly bump his head against hers.

The sun chose that companionable moment to finally rise, and both teenagers froze, lifting their faces to its light. They could *feel* the sun as no human could, feel the strength of it flowing into them. Neither Jason nor Kala had the words to explain it; the closest they'd come was comparing it to a warm, golden mist blowing against them, but instead of just hitting their skin, it soaked in until that glorious feeling of power and contentment resonated even in their bones.

Breakfast was devoured, and Kristin was already gently snoring; she had the enviable ability to sleep anywhere, anytime. It had been a godsend during her infancy, when she slept

through the night much earlier than anyone expected. Even during her toddler years, she'd gone for her nap without ever making a fuss, and rarely woke in the night. Lana knew how very blessed she was to have such an agreeable and affectionate child. Of course, once Kristin was a teenager, they'd have to watch out for the easy naptimes becoming laziness, but that was far away. She was a bright, active first-grader, always tagging along at Jason and Kala's heels.

The older children were considerate of her; almost no sibling rivalry existed between them and the little redhead who idolized them. Perhaps if they'd lived together all the time, it might have developed, but the shared living arrangements between two households seemed to minimize those kinds of problems. Lana was especially proud of the way Jason and Kala had let Kristin help this morning. They'd made her feel important and excited about her own contributions, something many adults couldn't do when working in a group.

Truth be told, Lana was proud of all of them. The kids for being so smart and responsible at their ages, among other things. Lois for letting her and Richard become an integral part of the twins' lives, when her every instinct was to protect them from everyone. Clark for learning to trust them with his secrets and for letting them see the personal side of the hero. Richard, too, for adjusting to a different status quo than he'd ever expected. She was even proud of herself, for managing to stamp out those last creeping twinges of jealousy whenever Richard was around Lois.

They had all come a long way in the last seven years. From disparate individuals with broken and newly-formed relationships, they'd somehow welded together a close-knit family. It no longer seemed strange to Lana, despite whatever weird rumors floated around the *Daily Planet* offices. She loved Lois and Clark as much as if they were the siblings she'd never had, and then some. By the same token, she loved Jason and Kala as if she'd carried them, instead of meeting them when they were six years old and in peril. She looked over at Richard and smiled, the warmth of that love and serenity shining in her sea-green eyes.

He returned the lazy grin, reaching out to stroke her cheek. "Pretty near perfect, isn't it?" Richard murmured, guessing the flow of her thoughts.

"As near as we can get, this side of heaven," she replied, nuzzling against his hand. "I love you, Richard."

"I love you too," he whispered back, leaning over their youngest child to kiss her. "You're the fulfillment of the dreams I wasn't bright enough to have."

That brought a chuckle from Lana. "And you're a hopeless romantic masquerading as a cad," she told him. Kristin muttered in her sleep, and Lana sighed. "You know, I think for once I'll forgo my usual morning ritual and sleep in. Think you can remember to put the cap back on the toothpaste?"

"Nah, but I can sleep later than you," Richard teased, running a hand through her hair. Lana leaned into the caress, her eyes closing in contentment. Richard's voice was lower as he added, "Seriously, Lana. There's no place I'd rather be, than here with you, right now."

"Except maybe in the beach house on Paradise Island, *without* our daughter in bed with us," she murmured playfully. "You do have that insatiable reputation to keep up."

"Hey," he said, running his knuckles lightly down her cheek. "I'm not the only insatiable one in this marriage." They both laughed, softly enough not to wake Kristin, and cuddled down for a post-breakfast nap.

Back in the Lane-Kent set of rooms, a certain non-Early Bird at least had her eyes all the way open. "My children are insane," Lois grumbled idly, still sipping coffee as she

contemplated the events of the morning. Clark smoothed her hair with an amused chuckle; it was sticking up all over the place. Not surprising when he remembered how thoroughly rumped it had gotten the night before. "Seriously, Clark. They're nuts. They woke up at dawn to make breakfast."

"They've been up since well before dawn," he commented. "Seems a certain reporter's determination bred true."

"Bull. Everyone in this family knows that Kala gets the early-rising madness from *you* and drags poor Jason along for the ride. Although, I have to admit that Jason's just as infected with the too-nice-for-their-own-good disease as Kala is. Face it, Kent, they're just like you."

"No, love," he argued softly, kissing her cheek. "They're just like *you*. Stubborn, brilliant, and far sweeter than they'd ever admit."

"Oh, for the love of..." Even now that comment annoyed the living daylight out of her. Especially at this hour. "I am *not* sweet," she growled for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, you are. And I would know," he asserted, with the wicked grin that let her know she'd walked into that old joke *again*.

He knew the swat was coming even before she raised her hand, ducking away just in time. "Knock it off, you pervert. You're just going to make me spill my coffee, and then I'll have to kill you." She held her left hand out to him, curled into a fist with her knuckles inches from his eyes. The emerald engagement ring just above her wedding band seemed to fill his vision, gleaming green as kryptonite. That was another old joke they hadn't given up in seven years.

"I'd catch the mug if you dropped it," he told her, gently untangling her hair. Some things seemed to never change. Seven years later, she was still just as beautiful as she'd always been, and he still found her morning surliness just as endearing. Clark's heart hadn't changed at all. Like a compass, it had found its true direction and never wavered. For him, Lois was first and last, his one and only, and the strength of his love for her filled him with awe and a sense of completeness.

Admittedly, the circle of people who held a place in his heart *had* expanded. Based on their first meeting, Clark could never have predicted how much he would eventually grow to care for Richard. But more things stayed the same than had changed; Richard himself was essentially the same man he'd been when they met, although his mischievous nature was more fully expressed these days. Fatherhood and marriage hadn't mellowed out that wicked streak, but he *was* a lot happier and mellower than he'd been at the start.

And Lana ... her aura of quiet competence had never wavered. She was so content with her life that she seemed to live in a state of permanent bliss, and the sweet-natured girl he'd once wanted to love romantically had become the wise, serene woman he loved platonically. Attraction between them had dimmed, but the friendship and fondness remained as strong as ever.

No, the most important things in life hadn't changed, not in any way that mattered. Love, and joy, and hope, and the closeness of family, those things were immutable. Sighing contentedly, Clark kissed Lois' cheek again.

Lois, however, had not been silent out of reverie so much as she had been starting to fall back asleep with coffee in her hand. Eyes closed, her mug still gripped tightly, it didn't surprise him at all when she jumped at that affectionate brush of lips, surprised and wide-eyed. *Some things never change*.

Both embarrassed to have been caught napping and startled at the sudden waking, she

glared at him. "Dammit, Kal-El, don't you know a death threat when you hear one? Don't you jostle my coffee!" she growled, and he could only laugh.