

# Until The End

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Rating: T

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As summer melded into fall and the holidays drew closer, faking out Lois' family started to become quite an ordeal. It was hard enough at times to allay their suspicions day-by-day, but keeping them from learning that the prenatal care was being mainly done by a giant floating head was getting progressively more difficult. Lucy was happy to recommend her own doctor, and Ella wanted to know when Lois was scheduled for a sonogram and if she'd considered doing an amniocentesis. Even Ron asked about Lois' delivery plans, and he knew more about the area hospitals' maternity wards than Lois wanted to think about.

There was no way of telling them that they were using the Fortress' resources to follow the twins' development. Kryptonian technology offered much more detailed information with less invasive procedures. Besides, they couldn't risk any doctor finding out that the twins were hybrids, and there was no way to know if it would become obvious during a routine test.

Clark came to the rescue. He'd been doing a great deal of research - Lois counted *thirty* books on pregnancy and childbirth after his last library trip - and it was his idea to tell everyone they were planning a natural birth at home. This was the truth, except that by 'home' they meant 'the Fortress.' Most people were horrified at first, especially considering that Lois was having twins, but Clark had the statistics at hand to show that natural home births often had fewer complications and less pain for the mother than hospital births. So far, though his mother-in-law's reaction was dubious, it had been enough to keep even Ella and Lucy's disapproval to a minimum.

Lois herself was sold on the idea by the notion of *less pain*, much to Clark's surprise, though she was reluctant to read up on childbirth and pregnancy on her own. First, she was worried that what was normal for most women wouldn't be the case for her, since she was having half-Kryptonian babies. Second, even the *mention* of complications made her incredibly nervous, no matter how rare or unlikely. Besides, she had more than once commented that it made no sense for her to read it since he was constantly quoting one text or another, so why bother?

Martha, who had some midwife experience and who had agreed to help them with the birth, kept reassuring an increasingly nervous Lois that everything would be just fine, but the reporter still didn't want to talk about it. Even as her belly kept growing and she was forced to take maternity leave, Lois tried not to think too much about how her life was changing. It was as if she thought that not discussing them would make all of her fears go away.

Martha also agreed, based on her experience, with everything Clark had learned from books, videos, and the internet. Based on that research, he was convinced that natural childbirth was the best option, *period*, not just because these were half-alien twins who would be arriving anywhere between two and three months overdue for a human pregnancy. Not that he would have presumed to make that choice for Lois; *he* wasn't the one who had to give birth, after all. He was simply glad that she felt the same way, and that Martha supported him. After all, it had only been within the last century that childbirth became viewed as a medical procedure, and little towns like Smallville hadn't quite caught up with the medical-intervention trend.

Jor-El was quite horrified by it all. If he had *his* way, the twins would've been installed in birthing matrices. Clark saw that as the ultimate unnecessary intervention, and he and his father's hologram had argued quite strongly on the topic. Lois had overheard one of those disagreements, and had been surprised to hear Clark say, "Father, this is purest arrogance, to assume we can improve on nature. Assist, perhaps, but only when *necessary*. Not simply because we think it will be easier to cut this or that, to rush the labor with drugs, or to begin it early because it is more convenient to our schedule. The twins will be born when they and Lois are ready, no sooner, and I will not have them cut from her body because *you* fear her influence! They are safest and most comfortable where they are, nourished by her body, soothed by her heartbeat and her voice. I will hear no more about how you would manage this situation - it is not yours to manage, it is mine and Lois'."

That speech had made Lois sniffle a little, and it even touched her that Jor-El expressed his concern for *her* well-being, as well as his heirs. Jor-El had not yet discovered Lois' own secret fear, but he was worried that after generations of matrix-bred Kryptonians, the twins might not be able to go through a normal labor. They might simply refuse to be born, putting more and more pressure on Lois' organs. Or their birth might cause hemorrhaging. But in spite of that, Lois still sided with Clark: the less interference, the better. Besides, she was already terrified and unwilling to hear any more potentially deadly consequences.

Martha had been staying with them since the forty-third week, ostensibly to help out. It was a viable explanation; Lois found it increasingly difficult to do even the simplest things for herself. Cooking, never her favorite activity, had become too difficult to attempt when she had to stand sideways to the counter in order to reach anything.

Her protruding belly looked impossible to her, both massive and fragile. She was shocked that she didn't have to keep some kind of wheeled table beneath it; it didn't seem as though it would support itself, but it did. And thanks to her crazy little sister, she had the photos to prove it.

Fortunately, Martha was more than willing to pamper Lois, almost to the point of spoiling her. It annoyed the reporter to lose a measure of her independence, but she enjoyed not having to worry about cooking or laundry or cleaning, tasks that had been shared between herself and Clark.

Clark sat up in bed, gasping. His skin was running with icy sweat, and he felt his heart

hammering. He reached for Lois beside him and found her bare shoulder warm under his palm. With a sigh, Clark began to relax. "Just a nightmare," he murmured, while Lois slept on obliviously.

But what a nightmare ... the details had been so *real*. He'd been alone, missing Lois; he had foolishly left her, left the whole planet, and when he returned, she had moved on with her life. She was seeing another man, had children by him, and she was utterly *furious* with Clark for his betrayal. He couldn't remember all of it - thankfully, this nightmare was fragmenting like any other dream now that he'd awakened - but it seemed to have something to do with the way he'd felt right after they fought General Zod. Clark remembered how horrified he'd been by the danger Lois had been in, how he'd felt that it would be best if he just stayed out her life.

Lois had shot down *that* foolish notion quickly. She had not only informed him that she had no intention of leaving her husband or of letting him leave her, Lois also let it slip that she'd just learned she was pregnant. That news had shocked Clark to the core, and the half-formed thought of leaving her for her own good had never crossed his mind again.

Until now, when it arrived in his nightmares, bringing a weight of guilt and phantom grief. How close had he been to making that terrible mistake? How slender a thread in the tapestry of life separated this reality from his nightmare? Clark didn't know, and didn't want to know. With one last caress of Lois' side, reminding himself of his wife's very real presence beside him, Clark got up to get a glass of water.

Lois woke in the night to a sudden bolt of pain. Unaware that she was mirroring her husband's position only a few minutes before, she sat there in the dark while taking slow breaths. *Goddamn crazy-ass fruit juice*, she thought sourly, ruefully remembering the quart of blueberry-pomegranate juice she'd drunk yesterday. The cravings the last little while had been completely berserk. Just because she craved something didn't mean it would refrain from giving her indigestion, no matter how badly she wanted it...

A swift sharp pain stabbed her side, and this was somehow different. Lois' dark brow furrowed. It felt as if something was moving inside her, not just the twins, as if some giant hand had reached in and squeezed. Protectively, her hands flew to her belly, growing panicked to feel it seemingly rock-hard.

After a moment the pain passed, and Lois looked over to the other side of the bed to find it empty. That just scared her worse. What if he wasn't here? What if he was out on a save? Oh God, what would she do if...? Knowing that it wouldn't do any good to do anything but calm down, Lois finally managed to get her voice to work again. "Clark ... *Clark!*"

To her relief, his voice sounded as if only as far away as the kitchen. "Lois?" he called worriedly, dashing back into the room.

"Clark, the contractions ... I think ... I think they're starting."

*That* widened his eyes, and drove out the last vestiges of sleep. "Oh, God. How long, and how far apart?"

"I don't know yet, it just started." Lois sounded a bit snappish, but it was clear from her expression that it was just apprehension. Panic was again sinking its long claws into her as she realized that it was going to happen; there was no way out now. She'd been able to fool herself into putting off dealing with the reality of her situation so far, but the moment of truth had arrived. Now she would find out if she was up to the task of giving birth to these children. And the proposition clearly terrified her. It was the dead of night. This was not what was supposed to happen. This wasn't happening the way they had planned.

And this change of plans had clearly affected the father-to-be, as well. Clark rested his hand on her shoulder gently, but she felt the tension in him. "Let me get Ma," he said soothingly, determined not to show his own concern. "We need to time the contractions ... we need to get to the Fortress... First let me get Ma, okay honey?"

Lois sat there as he asked while he hurried to go wake Martha. Neither of them mentioned the most obvious source of anxiety.

Lois' due date was still a month away.

After an hour, Lois' discomfort had only continued on and Martha finally agreed that the contractions were growing stronger. It was becoming obvious that the twins had decided to make their debut in the world early without regard to either of their parents' wishes, and with the rate at which Lois' labor was progressing, there wasn't much they could do to stop them. Even Bagel knew something was up, pacing and whining outside the door of the bedroom from which she'd been banished. "Clark, take the extra pillows and blankets to the Fortress first," Martha told him. "Thank the Lord we got everything we need packed up already - take those baskets, too. We'll be all right here for a moment."

Neither noticed the look of unease that flitted over Lois' features at those words. It was bad enough that this sudden turn of events was making her anxious, but he was going to just up and leave her like this? The frustration of this brought tears to her eyes. But even as she thought it, she realized that she was being ridiculous. It's not as if Martha wouldn't be here. And if he didn't go up before them, it would take that much more time to get things set up when they couldn't afford it or they would end up doing without. In the end, she just stayed silent so Clark could do what he needed to do to get things ready.

Rushing to gather up everything they'd need, Clark was gone mere seconds later. Martha chuckled at her son's speedy exit before turning a more serious look on Lois. And it was apparent to her that the expectant mother was not nearly as calm as she would have liked others to believe. Even in the most dangerous of the situations Lois had found herself in, she couldn't ever remember being this perturbed. Eyes still riveted to the open balcony doors, Lois didn't even notice her mother-in-law was still there until after Martha spoke.

"It's going to be all right, dear. I know you're afraid and you feel like you can't do this, but it will be just fine."

Lois wasn't quite so sure. The reporter gave a disbelieving laugh before it was cut off as another pain struck. Wincing, she realized she could feel something else now as well, a strange sense of growing pressure in her abdomen unlike anything she'd felt before. Brows furrowed, she couldn't help the whimper that escaped her lips. It seemed like something somewhere was going to rupture before that pressure eased, and Lois involuntarily clenched every muscle tighter to try and hold it back. That made the pain stronger, and she gritted her teeth, balling her hands into fists. There had to be some way to stop this. All of this was happening too soon...

"Shh, Lois," Martha murmured, taking her hands. She had seen that look in far too many soon-to-be mothers' eyes not to recognize the panic in the younger woman's eyes. And that would do her no good in this situation. "Lois, don't fight it. You need to relax as much as you can - just let your body do its job for now. I know it hurts, sweetheart, but you have to let it happen."

Trying to tell herself that the glimmer of fear she felt wasn't clear as day to Martha, Lois looked over at her mother-in-law. As much as she was growing to love Clark's mother, it

wasn't the same as having her own mother there. And she couldn't remember wanting her mother with her this badly since she was twelve and afraid of unseen beasties in the closet. Forcing the longing away since she knew that they couldn't take that chance, she managed to rally, muttering, "Like standing in front of a bus and letting it run you over," between her teeth.

"Not the metaphor I'd have chosen," Martha replied, easing Lois' hands open. "You can do this, Lois. You're going to be just fine."

A haunted look crossing her features, Lois took a deep breath before saying what she hadn't dared *think* while Clark was in the room. What had been preying on her mind quite a bit in these last few weeks. "What if I'm not, Martha?" she whispered, the look on her face heartbreaking in its uncertainty. "His people ... they haven't done actual birth in centuries... We have no real way of know anything beyond the fact that we know now that a human can carry a hybrid to term. Beyond that, who knows?"

"That doesn't matter as much as you think," Martha told her soothingly while she clasped one hand and squeezed. It was a moment before Lois looked back at her with apprehension. Leaning forward, she touched the younger woman's dark hair. "The mother's background and health count more than the father's. Forgive the comparison, but that's why mules look more like horses than donkeys."

Her smile forced a chuckle from the reporter, even if it sounded a bit teary. "Great, even my mother-in-law thinks I'm a horse's ass." Martha merely smiled, excusing the language due to the circumstances, and Lois became serious once more. "There's so much that could still happen. Martha, we don't know for sure. The twins might be all right, but if I'm not..."

The response to that worry was immediate. "Don't you even think it," Martha warned. She had had a feeling that there was something like this on Lois' mind of late. "Child, you are one of the strongest people I've ever met. Don't you dare assume the worst. Not when you have every chance of getting the best possible outcome."

"Someone has to worry, and I won't let *him*. He's already anxious; I don't want him to think..." That dark thought always seem to be in the back of her mind. Just the thought of it was enough to get her emotions roiling again, just adding to the pain.

"You let me worry about that," Martha said sternly. "Getting yourself all wound up will only make this worse. *You* concentrate on the work ahead of you. And it *is* hard work."

Struggling against the wave of fear and heartache these thoughts brought about, her usual safe-guarding reaction kicked in and she frowned in fast-growing irritation. "I know," Lois retorted, "but *listen*. Something *could* happen to me. We don't know about their powers..."

Martha's eyebrows lifted. "Is that why you've been keeping the curtains pulled in here, telling Clark you have migraines? I noticed you only come out of here in the evenings. You're trying to keep them from being exposed to sunlight, aren't you?" Lois nodded sheepishly; nothing could be more embarrassing than the idea that a woman could be afraid of her own children. Or more correctly, what those children might do to her when they were born.

To her surprise, Martha laughed. "Lois, you ninny. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you would've told Clark," Lois whispered with more than a little shame. "And he'd feel guilty for this. For me being scared. I know he already feels guilty; whenever I moan about how huge I am or how my back hurts, he gets this look on his face..." Her eyes shined just a bit as she added, "I didn't want him to think..."

"Lois, if they had super-strength, you would know," Martha told her gently.

"You've felt them kicking. Sweetheart, it's going to be *fine*. Besides, Clark didn't get his

full powers until he was a teenager. He had the strength when he landed here, but we found out later that the crystal ship was designed to allow the sun's rays through it. He'd been exposed to yellow sunlight for a few months before he got here." She placed a hand on Lois' belly gently. "They're fairly well shielded in there. I've heard they can tell light from dark, but I doubt they're getting any real sunlight. Stop worrying..."

Her voice seemed to fade out as the most vicious pain yet struck, swamping Lois in a wave that began at her back and encompassed her entire belly. She flung her head back, tensing up in spite of Martha's advice, as that pressure grew and grew and grew.

It subsided a little again, and Lois panted, clenching her fists again. "Easy, Lois, *breathe*," Martha said. "Slow, deep breaths. Slowly..."

Clark reappeared at that moment, looking worriedly at Lois' sweaty brow and wild eyes. "Lois?"

Hearing his voice, Lois instantly tried to regain her calm in spite of her current predicament. "It's okay, hero," she managed to say, giving him a tremulous smile. "Just a bit ... uncomfortable. Your twins have one heck of a wake-up call, y'know that?"

Clark looked back and forth between Lois and Martha, tense and unsure of himself. "I could bring both of you at the same time..." he began.

Martha shook her head. "No, son. I want you to have all of your attention on Lois. You take her up there, nice and slow, and make sure she's settled in before you come back for me. I'll get everything tidied up here so you won't have to worry about the house. Bagel should be all right for a while by herself - I'll make sure she has water and food."

Sighing in relief, Clark kissed her cheek. "Thanks, Ma. Lois, how do you want to do this? What will be most comfortable for you?"

"I don't care, let's just go," Lois said, gritting her teeth against another contraction. Most of the pain seemed to be coming from her back now, and she pressed against her lower back, trying to relieve it. "Really, Clark. Please. Let's just go."

Clark winced in sympathy, and Martha told him, "Just carry her cradled, Clark. That should give enough support." She stroked Lois' shoulder as she spoke, trying to soothe the younger woman.

He gathered her up so tenderly that Lois nearly wept at his care, and wrapped his cape around her to protect her from the cold air. Arms around his neck, Lois pressed her forehead against the underside of his chin as she rode out another contraction. Then they were off, flying into the night, and Lois could almost forget some of her pain in the wonder of flying.

All too soon, they were at the Fortress. Things had been rearranged so that everything they might need would be close at hand. Clark set Lois gently down in the bed, and she curled up on her side, letting Clark tuck pillows around her. "Are you going to be all right?"

Lois started to nod, trying to put him at ease, but another pain struck and she winced and fought a small sound of hurt. That pressure was back, intolerable, and Lois felt her back spasm as well. Clark held her, tried to soothe her, but she saw the panic begin to bloom in his eyes. "It's okay," she whispered soft. "I'll be fine, Clark. Go get your Mom - I'll be okay here."

"But..."

She knew him, knew he wouldn't leave if she didn't want him to, knew that there was no other choice. "You have to get her," Lois tried to soothe. "Either you get her now, or we do this on our own, or it'll happen while you're gone." She paused to kiss his hand, locking eyes with him as she did, once the pain and pressure subsided again. "You know if anything goes wrong, I can just yell for you. But queue up the giant floating head if it makes you feel better."

"Will having Jor-El hovering over you make *you* feel any better?" he asked, stroking her cheek.

She was quiet a moment before she admitted, "Not really."

"Then just wait here for me," Clark murmured, kissing her again. "I promise I'll be right back."

He was gone so swiftly that her ironic chuckle echoed off empty walls. "Wait here, he says. As if I'm in any condition to go wandering off ... as if there was anywhere to wander, besides the frikkin' tundra outside..."

The next contraction came sooner than expected, startling tears from Lois, and she bit her lip on a loud cry. *Please get back soon*, she thought, and whispered to the twins, "Okay, guys, do Mommy a favor, huh? Settle down in there until your Daddy and Gramma get here, okay?"

Four hours later, Lois had largely transcended her initial disquiet. It helped that most of her pain was in her back now, and Clark had been massaging her lower back steadily to relieve it. That had enabled her to relax and let the labor progress, though that sense of pressure was still annoying her.

The latest contraction turned her belly to granite, Lois closing her eyes with a hiss. Clark wondered how anyone without his powers could keep this up for so long; he'd been rubbing her back for hours, and even he felt a little tired by now. He couldn't imagine how Lois bore it, and winced inwardly to think that *he* had done this to her.

Lois was lying on her side, Clark curled around her, periodically glancing into her womb to see how far along they were. Martha was seated beside them, holding Lois' hand and murmuring words of encouragement. The pressure in Lois' belly was maddening; Clark had reported that the first twin was actually pushing against her womb with his feet in an effort to be born. "That must be why I feel like a trampoline, huh?" she managed to joke tiredly.

"How are they lying, Clark? Still both head down?" Martha was watching her son as he kept watch over the twins.

"Mm-hmm," he replied absently, as Lois turned her head into his shoulder, not wanting him to see the pain in her expression. The contractions were much closer together, and each one was much longer; a minute and a half seemed like eternity to Lois. "I think we're getting close," Clark added.

Just then, at the height of the contraction, the pressure suddenly let go, and Lois gave a startled gasp as hot liquid splashed down her thighs. Her eyes flew to Martha's. "Oh my *God*, Martha, what was *that*!?"

"Your water broke, most likely," the older woman murmured, hiding a smile at the horrified expression on Lois' face. "That's probably just the first twin, so it will happen again."

"Oh, lovely," Lois muttered, hiding her face in Clark's shoulder out of sheer embarrassment. That was definitely something she would have preferred him not to be present for. "Something to look forward to. It'll break up the monotony of the contractions."

Even Clark chuckled at that, despite the tired yet arch look it earned him. He was still smiling when he glanced down again. "That's our son, ready to be born," he told Lois. "And I think... Lois, you should be able to start pushing soon."

"If you feel like you should," Martha cautioned. "Your body knows what it's doing."

"Yeah, well..." Lois had a snappy retort for that, but her body tensed again and she forgot it utterly. The urge to push was suddenly overwhelming, and she didn't even think about holding back.

Lying on her side went from being the most comfortable choice of position to the least in a mere moment, and Clark helped Lois roll onto her back and then sit up slightly. He supported her, never slackening the steady massage at the point on her lower back where the pains seemed to start. Martha, unhurried and serene and thus comforting both of them, pulled her chair around in front of Lois and bent forward for a look. "So far so good," she said calmly.

Leaning back on Clark, Lois took a long and shaky breath before muttering grumpily, "Easy for you to say." The moment the words were out of her mouth, the next contraction began, a wave of pressure and pain that made her clench her teeth. Instantly, Clark caught her left hand while Martha took her right. Lois squeezed gratefully, bearing down as the pressure intensified.

Time ceased to have any meaning for Lois. There were only the contractions and the rests between them, punctuated by her own low, desperate cries. She heard Martha murmur something about fast labor, but the older woman spent much more time alternately encouraging and soothing her. At one point, while Clark smoothed her sweat-damp hair back from her forehead, Lois' façade broke and she sobbed, "I can't do this! It's too much. Just make it stop."

The look of agony in his eyes haunted her. Clark had been keeping his worries under wraps for most of her pregnancy, but now, seeing her in pain, he felt both frightened and guilty. Trying to be supportive, trying to help in any way he could, Clark could not escape the fact that this was essentially *Lois'* struggle. There was no way to fix it for her. He couldn't believe that he, in a moment of passion, had brought her to this desperate moment.

"You *can* do this," Martha told her, still holding her hand tightly. "And you *are* doing it, right now. You're all right, Lois; everything will be just fine. Clark, how are we progressing?"

He'd forgotten he was supposed to be monitoring his son's journey into the world. Clark tore his gaze from Lois' eyes then, his own widening as he looked within. "He's crowning," he said, surprised.

"Facing her spine?" Martha asked.

Clark barely had time to nod before another contraction began, and Martha squeezed Lois' hand. "Push!" she said urgently.

Still trying to her tears under control, Lois found a reserve of strength somewhere and pushed as hard as she could. She could barely believe what her body was doing, the pain intense, but the will to finish this even stronger. Her whole abdomen tensed for one massive effort...

"His head's out," Martha said, reaching for the ultra-soft blankets nearby. "Lovely little boy ... hello, Jonathan," she crooned. "Next contraction ought to do it, Lois. Just one more push."

"Why..." the reporter panted, worried. "Martha, why ... why isn't he crying...?"

"He doesn't need to," Martha murmured reassuringly. "He's still getting oxygen from you. Come on now, last push."

Lois complied wearily, and heard Clark gasp in wonder as Martha caught the newborn. Now Lois could lay back and rest, her son quickly lifted up to lie on her chest, his wide blue eyes seeming to fix on hers. He seemed so perfect, the tiniest bit of blonde fuzz on his head, tiny hand waving as Martha gently rubbed him dry.

"What about the other twin?" Clark asked his mother softly.

"She'll be along shortly," Martha replied, stroking Jonathan's back. "He's just perfect, Lois. A little small, but then, twins often are."

Lois hadn't heard a word either of them said. She was caught up in her newborn son, lost in the wonder of seeing this tiny life she'd carried within her so long. He was starting to breathe now, his lungs taking their first hesitant sips of air.

Martha waited for the cord to stop pulsing, for the last transfer of blood and antibodies between mother and son to cease on its own. Only then did she sever the tie that had nourished Jonathan during his long months in the womb. By then he was breathing on his own, without having cried even once. That made Lois a little nervous, led to expect a screaming infant, but he seemed fine. He was even *looking* at her, damn what the books said about babies not being able to focus. *Mine. He's mine.* The thought seemed to echo through mind and heart, a fierce feeling of protectiveness blooming as she watched him. "Hey, you," Lois finally managed softly, giving the baby a slight smile. "I think your lease was up, huh?"

"Let him have a drink," Martha whispered. Lois blinked at her for a moment before the sense of the words penetrated her fog of amazement. Slowly, she unbuttoned the top of the nightgown she'd been wearing, feeling a little self-conscious.

Clark was watching avidly, and Lois finally nudged him with her elbow as she looked up at him. "Okay, hero, I can't do this with you watching."

Martha couldn't help but laugh at his perplexed stare. "Lois, he just watched your cervix dilate. We're past modesty." Lois recognized the ridiculousness of her request, but merely raised an eyebrow at Clark, and he turned away. Still laughing, Martha helped Lois prop Jonathan up so he could nurse.

At first, the sensation was very strange and uncomfortable, but his suckling relieved the heavy feeling in her swollen breast, and Lois found herself sighing in contentment. He only nursed for a few minutes before closing his eyes and taking a nap. Lois felt as though she could almost drift off to sleep too...

...but Jonathan's sister had other ideas. The contractions began again, startling Lois out of her momentary calm, and Martha quickly transferred Jonathan to the waiting bassinet. This time was much faster, or maybe Lois had simply learned what to expect. Either way, she was eager to get down to those last few pushes so she could finally rest. Gripping Clark's hands, Lois bore down hard, helping her daughter make her eager way into the world.

"Wait," Martha commanded, and Lois stared at her in weary bemusement. She could feel Mia, her head already out, the baby turning her shoulders to better slip through. Martha was doing something down there, Lois gritting her teeth against the urge to push and be done with it already.

Clark's tone held more than a little worried when he glanced down to see what was happening. "Ma? Ma, is that...?" A new tendril of fear slipped down Lois' spine at his tone.

"She's all right," Martha reassured them. "She's just got the cord around her neck. Give me a moment ... there. See, that was easy. Now *push*, Lois."

One more effort, Lois groaning with the strain, and then little Mia was free. *She* came out squalling, a lusty cry the moment Martha caught her, and then a rising wail like a fire engine's siren. Lois heard a couple of gurgles and a thin cry from the bassinet beside her as Jonathan woke to his sister's complaints.

Laughing, aching from the delivery but drunk on relief that she'd actually *done* it, Lois reached for her daughter and soon had both twins propped on her chest. Mia, with her thatch of black curls, quieted down once she managed to nurse a little, and Jonathan never really had his heart set on screaming, anyway.

Martha quietly withdrew, letting Clark hover over the babies, his blue eyes bright with

wonder. "They're so beautiful," he whispered, kissing Lois' sweaty temple. "So perfect. Oh, Lois."

She gave a relieved sigh, slumping back against him in the aftermath. The tone of awe in his voice brought a tired but proud smile to her lips. Her belly was still trembling, but that seemed far away and unimportant now. For now, looking down on these two miracles made the craziness she'd dealt with worth it. Lois herself couldn't stop watching every movement they made with utter fascination. She was almost frightened to touch them and wake up from this. It had a year of huge changes that she was just now adjusting to, but it was an adventure she wouldn't have changed a moment of. Martha cut the cord for Mia, and then tapped Lois' knee lightly. "C'mon, sweetheart, just a few more pushes."

With that, the reporter managed to raise her sleepy eyes from the newborns. "Wha?" Lois murmured incoherently. She'd already given birth to the twins, they were both *right here*. What else could she possibly have to do?

"The afterbirth, Lois," Martha explained, smiling at the exhausted new mother. "This will be easy. Then we can get you cleaned up and you can rest."

The weight of the many hours this had been going on was starting to press down on her more heavily than she had expected. "Oh, do you promise?"

Martha laughed at the obvious fatigue in her voice before getting her ready. That final chore seemed to occur in a haze, Lois helped into a clean nightgown and fresh sheets were laid on the bed as soon as it was over. Even as her eyelids were trying to close on her, her body demanding rest on no uncertain terms, she murmured that she wanted the babies with her. The twins, fed and warm, were then snuggled down beside her. Nestling them in close protectively, the reporter barely even registered Clark and Martha talking as oblivion claimed her...

"I don't really like the way they're breathing, but they seem strong enough," Martha whispered, watching the twins carefully. Clark, proud and excited and tired as only a new father could be, looked at her uneasily. "They're just a little blue - not as bad as some I've seen. Why, the smallest, sickliest baby I ever delivered grew up to be Gene Wilson, and you've seen how tall *he* got."

"So they look sickly?" Clark asked, keeping his voice hushed.

"Not really," Martha said, patting her son's arm. "Just small, and fragile. I worry about Mia a little, having had the cord around her neck. It was easy to slip it off her, but that could just as easily have become a catastrophe if it had tightened or gotten torn. It's probably just an old woman's maunderings, Clark."

"They are a little premature," Clark fretted. "Almost a month, by Kryptonian standards. And they are *tiny*. And so quiet."

"Well, some of that's from not being born in a hospital," Martha told him. "We didn't rile them up with bright lights and loud noises and swatting them on the bottom right away. We didn't take them out of Lois' warm body and drop them right on a freezing-cold metal scale, either. The temperature they keep those hospitals would make *me* yell."

Clark had to chuckle at that. Martha had exclaimed upon being brought through the Arctic winter night to the Fortress; her first trip here, in fact. Even wearing several layers and a coat and wrapped in his cape, she'd felt the bite of the wind. Strange that she should be complaining about hospital air-conditioning when it was fifteen below just outside the door. But then, the crystals could warm this area of the Fortress quite efficiently.

"Still, I worry about them a little," Martha confessed. "I'm sure they'll be just fine, but I

think you should have them checked out in a hospital just for safety's sake."

"We'll have to make sure they can pass for human on a blood test first," Clark said worriedly. "I'll need to have Jor-El scan them thoroughly. But there is something I can do now to help them if they're not doing quite as well as they should be."

Martha looked at him quizzically. "If they inherited my powers, and Jor-El said they should, the sun will help them," Clark told her.

"But Clark, it's after midnight," Martha began to protest. "And *freezing* outside!"

"They're little," he replied. "I can keep them close enough, wrapped in the cape, that they'll stay warm. And it will only take a few minutes to get to the other side of the Earth - it's a lot closer up here at the pole."

Still reluctant, Martha eventually let herself be persuaded. They didn't even have to discuss it with Lois; the reporter blinked at them blearily, realized who they were, and let them take the sleeping infants from her without truly waking. Clark got changed while Martha wrapped them both in warm blankets. He held them cradled against his chest, winding the cape completely around them to hold a bubble of warm air for them to breathe.

Neither twin protested during the swift flight, and Clark nervously checked on them with his x-ray vision during the few minutes they were in transit. They were soon above the cloud on the opposite side of the planet, the sun's rays shining warmly. Clark unwrapped the cape, exposing the twins to sunlight for the first time. He kept them facing against his chest to spare them the blinding brightness.

Jonathan woke at the touch of the sun, squirming against Clark's chest and making happy noises. He waved his little arms, trying to turn his head and not quite managing it yet. Mia soon followed suit, becoming more active by the second. Clark could hear their heartbeats growing stronger, their breathing coming easier, and he sighed in relief.

Now, finally, it struck him: these two little lives, these two brand-new children, were *his*. His responsibility and his delight, to share with Lois. He would never again be alone ... he was no longer the Last Son of Krypton.

At first, Clark didn't realize why his vision was blurring, but when he blinked, the tears of gratitude cleared. "I love you, Jonathan," he whispered. "I love you, Mia. You two may never know how much..."

Lois woke up, blinking blearily. She felt strangely hollowed out, and it took her a few moments to remember why. *The twins*. Lois tried to sit up, felt the twinge in her back become an ache all over her midsection, and realized she was in a different bed. A much narrower and less comfortable bed.

She looked around, seeing pale beige walls instead of the glow of crystal. Jonathan and Mia, at least, were safely nearby, and as Lois reached out toward the bassinets she saw the plastic bracelet around her wrist.

Well, at least *that* answered some questions. Familiar voices in the hall filled in a little more, and Lois turned to look at the door just as her mother and sister walked in. "Hey there, *Mommy*," Lucy trilled, rushing to her bedside to hug her. "I'm so proud of you!"

"You just *had* to outdo your sister," Ella scolded lovingly. "Having them both at *home*. Good Lord, Lois."

"We didn't have much choice," Martha added, walking in behind them. "Jonathan and Mia decided to make their debut a little too quickly for us to get here."

Lois blinked, remembering the story they'd agreed beforehand to tell everyone. "Yeah,"

she murmured rustily. "A bit of a surprise..."

Lucy had moved on to cooing over the twins, and Jonathan was looking up at her wide-eyed. Little Mia was asleep, and Ella stroked her hair gently. While they were preoccupied, Martha caught Lois' eye and smiled warmly. "Hi there, sweetheart. The three of us wanted to stay until you woke up, but of course you waited until we went to the vending machines." She tipped Lois a wink before adding, "Unfortunately, Clark had to step out for a moment."

Lois smiled back lazily; she seemed to remember a shot for pain somewhere in the recent past. "Why am I not a bit surprised," she murmured, before closing her eyes again.

She was asleep again when Clark got back, but when he stopped in the doorway, he could see Lois and both babies comfortably dozing. Clark gave a huge sigh of relief, making Ella and Lucy - his in-laws, though he hadn't begun to think of them as such until they learned about Lois' pregnancy - look up. Lucy beamed at him, saying in a teasing tone, "Hi Dad. How are you taking all this?"

"Like the miracle it is," he replied, smiling sheepishly. "I never expected to have a family, especially not one like this. I've never felt so blessed."

Only Martha knew the deeper meaning behind his words, and hugged her son. "Congratulations, my boy," she whispered, and the tears in her eyes were as much for the end of loneliness as for the beginning of fatherhood. It seemed her son had embarked on another new adventure, and she wasn't the least surprised that this would be as wondrous as all of his other escapades. It was also no wonder that this adventure involved Lois - which was exactly as it should be.