

# Unique Individuals

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Summary: Issues surrounding identity and deepening relationships are at the core of this sequel to "That Old Vat of Mine."

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## Prologue

*One month ago...*

'Life is interesting,' thought the man who had been born in a vat.

Barry looked at Lois — his Lois — and smiled. It seemed impossible that she was here with him, kissing shamelessly in the middle of Centennial Park. But everything about them seemed impossible, so he really shouldn't have been so surprised.

After all, he was a clone of a superhero from another planet. And she was a clone of a reporter from the Daily Planet. Though they were created two years apart, it seemed like they had been made for each other.

Not true, though: Lex had made him to destroy and replace Superman. Lex had made Lois' clone for — well, he didn't know the reason. But knowing his father, the motivation couldn't have been pure.

None of that mattered, though. What mattered is that he had found her — that he had been wandering through his favorite place in the world during lunch on a warm, sunny day and he had happened upon her sitting at the edge of the pond. His life as Barry had begun in this park two years earlier; it was right that the rest of his life should begin here, too.

Oh yes, he was sure, with a certainty that seemed to touch every fiber of his being, that his life had changed in a way that made it so clear that half of it had always been empty. Because he had finally found his Lois Lane.

Not his brother's Lois — the one he had stolen kisses from and harbored inappropriate feelings for. She belonged to Clark. Lois' sister, though — and he grinned broadly at the beautiful woman gazing at him — she belonged to him.

She reached out with her right hand and gently caressed the curve of his cheek. "So, you're a clone, just like me?"

Barry placed his right hand against her side, smoothing his hand down the contour of her waist, and settled at the curve of her hip. "I bet there are a few differences," he said seductively.

She smiled — a deliciously wicked smile that he'd dreamed of seeing for so long — and her eyes sparkled with mischief. She stroked her fingertips past his neck and spread her palm over his chest. Her thumb restlessly wandered across his sternum, teasing him to distraction. "I bet you're right, Barry."

He sucked in a breath at the lilt of her voice as she said his name. *His* name, not his brother's name. It was like every fantasy he had ever had just came true.

Barry was about to breathe her name — moan her name, really — but he stopped himself. Because if he wasn't Clark, then surely she wasn't Lois. She needed her own name, her own identity.

He leaned forward slightly, and she swayed towards him, as

if it was the most natural thing for them to do. His hand gripped firmly on her hip as he pressed his lips securely against hers, and he swam in the sensation of their shared intimacy. Her hand curled against his chest, and he moaned softly, an unintelligible sound that identified nothing other than his bliss.

Their kiss ended and they broke apart slightly. "So what should I call you?" Barry asked, curious as to what she might say.

She looked slightly confused. "Can't I be Lois, too?"

Barry shook his head firmly. "No. You're you. Unique. Perfectly wonderful in your own right. You should have your own name."

She leaned back, her eyebrows knit in thought. "Well, while I was pretending to be Lois, she was pretending to be Wanda Detroit. So since she's Lois again, I guess that makes me Wanda now."

Barry cocked his head slightly as he considered the logic. "Wanda, eh?" Then he smiled. "Yeah, you look like a Wanda to me."

Wanda smiled seductively, then leaned forward. She bent her head to the side, then whispered in his ear, "Say it while I'm doing this." Then she licked the column of his neck, trailing soft kisses against his skin.

Barry shuddered slightly, and then moaned, "Oh, Wanda."

She giggled — a flirty, feminine sound that he recognized from the moms at the kids parties and the women at the adult parties. Those had all been fun ladies, and he liked having a good time. But suddenly, it felt like no other woman existed, that his entire world had narrowed, and that he'd spend the rest of his life doing everything in his power to please her. A crazy thought, but hey, they were both clones, so their whole existence was crazy.

Barry leaned back as he heard a vendor's bell chime. "Do you want some dessert?"

Wanda's face lit up. "Oh, yes!"

Barry laughed as he pulled a ten dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to her. She squealed as she shook the money in her fist. "What do you want?" Wanda asked.

He winked. "Surprise me." Barry watched Wanda skip away towards the vendor. He pulled off his shirt, balling it up as he tucked it under his head and laid back onto the grass. He closed his eyes and basked in the warm, radiant sunlight. He could feel his cellular structure recharging, like a crock pot slowly warming nacho cheese to a bubbling boil.

Barry felt her presence a moment before Wanda said, "Wow." He opened his eyes and saw her licking a Popsicle as she gawked appreciatively at his body.

"Enjoying your treat?" Barry asked playfully.

Wanda deliberately slid the Popsicle past her lips before answering, "Absolutely." Then she held out an ice cream bar to him before sitting down on the grass.

Barry bit into the chocolate coating and scooped up some of the underlying ice cream with his tongue. Such a simple treat seemed infinitely more enjoyable because she was by his side. "So," he asked between bites, "What do you want to do next?"

A small frown appeared on Wanda's face. "I don't know. I don't have anything to do. Lex is dead, and Clark has Lois, and I'm all alone."

Barry sat up quickly, taking Wanda's free hand in his. "You will never be alone again. You'll always have me."

"Really?" She smiled shyly. "I don't even have a place to live. I don't have money or a job — gosh, if I'm going to live longer than two weeks... I don't even know where to begin!"

"Wanda," he whispered sympathetically. Two years ago, he had been in her position — had to create a life for himself other than the one that had been built on Lex Luthor's lies. Thankfully, he had found a friend in Sammy.

Barry smiled as their course of action seemed clear. He said with conviction, "Stay with me. I have a friend who can help you

get a new identity and a job. And I'll give you everything else you'd ever need."

Wanda smiled and said, "I'd love that." Then she leaned forward, and Barry responded, pressing forward and kissing her back. The taste of her cherry-flavored lips was delightful.

He felt a drop of ice cream melt onto his hand; Barry laughed as he broke the kiss. "Oops!" he said, before trying to catch another drop with his tongue.

Wanda laughed and pushed Barry back onto the grass. She leaned over him and slowly, seductively, kissed him. Then she looked into his eyes, and it seemed like time had frozen, like the universe had paused at this perfect moment, giving them both time to memorize every detail.

"You're so sweet," Wanda said with a teasing smile. Then she backed away slightly and licked her Popsicle.

Barry felt a familiar pressure building as he watched her knowingly tease him. He finished his ice cream bar, and then stretched out to soak in the rays of the sun. After Wanda ate the remainder of her treat, she laid down beside him. Barry reached his arm out and she laid her head on it like a pillow, snuggling into the crook of his arm. Perfection — she fit like they were made for each other.

"My friend Sammy is a talent agent. We could talk to him tomorrow about finding you a job."

Wanda nodded enthusiastically. "Lois is a good singer. I can sing, too. I can do everything she can."

Barry looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "I want you to do whatever you want to do. I don't want you to be her."

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. "What do you do?"

"I pretend to be Superman. It pays more than you'd think."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! Can you..." Then she stopped short and firmly shut her mouth.

Barry turned his head to look at her. "I can do lots of things."

Wanda chewed on her lip, then looked into his eyes. She whispered, "I know a secret about Clark. But I was bad and told Lex, and then Lex tried to hurt him. So I promised Clark I'd never tell anyone else ever again."

Barry grinned conspiratorially and whispered, "I know his secret, too."

Wanda's face lit up. "Can you do what he does?"

Barry nodded, though he was slightly concerned by the delight in her voice. "Yeah, but I don't if I can help it. I just want to be me."

Wanda rolled onto her side, laying her leg on top of his. She placed her left hand on his chest. "I totally get it. And I won't tell anyone. I pinky swear."

"Cool," Barry said, sealing the promise with a kiss.

She wandered her palm over his chest, lightly drawing a random pattern with her fingertips. His skin tingled at every place she touched him. "I was supposed to take her place for Clark, you know."

Barry cocked his head and glanced at her with a look of curiosity, hoping she'd continue her thought.

Wanda seemed to grimace slightly as she recalled her memories. "Lex had me watch movies so I'd know what to do. I took her place at the wedding and then I went home with him, but we never..." She shook her head and glanced away for a moment before adding, "As soon as Clark realized I wasn't his Lois, he didn't want me anymore."

Barry felt that familiar, conflicted feeling at her mention of Lex's name, but decided that Wanda needed to hear his story, too. "Lex made me and trained me to replace Superman. He also told me to stay away from Lois, but I went to her apartment and kissed her anyway. As soon as she realized I wasn't my brother, she didn't want me, either."

Wanda pressed her hand into Barry's chest and rose to hover over him. She looked at him meaningfully and said, "I want you."

Barry placed his hand at her hip and replied, "I want you, too."

She sucked in a breath, then laid her chest on top of his, stealing a smoldering kiss. Barry's lips parted as his tongue rolled out to meet hers; his hand slid up her back possessively. She moaned and tilted her head, deepening the kiss, and his body reacted with a heat that he recognized, and yet more powerful than he had ever sensed.

And then she moaned, "Barry..." His name, not his brother's. Perfection.

"Wanda," he gasped, and he felt her press her body more securely against his.

He broke the kiss, pushing her slightly away, fully aware that they were behaving rather inappropriately in light of their public location. But he smiled wickedly at the thought of what he could do with her in private.

And she seemed to read his mind. "Take me home," she said with a rapturous gleam in her eye.

"Absolutely." Wanda rolled off him; Barry stood up, reaching his hands out and pulling her into his arms. He hugged her, then released her so that he could put on his shirt. He laced his fingers with hers and began to stroll through the park, headed for home.

Then she laughed, almost to herself, before sliding her eyes sideways. "Hey, Barry..."

He looked back at her, mirroring her happy expression. "Yes, dear?"

She winked, and then said, "Stand by to be stunned."

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Barry unlocked and opened the door to his apartment and politely motioned for Wanda to step inside.

As she passed him, Wanda gave a flirtatious smile, which he returned. It seemed the most natural thing for them to do, as if their easy friendship had been built up over years together instead of an hour of real time.

It hadn't been this easy with Clark. Oh, she had tried — she had been determined not to let Lex down — but from the beginning, that awkward first night together...no, something had just felt wrong.

Wanda paused before entering the apartment; she reached out with her hand and stroked Barry's cheek, and his smile grew wider. She leaned towards him and he responded, bending down slightly and giving her a quick kiss. A giggle bubbled out of her, and then she continued past the threshold. Barry followed behind and closed the door.

It was a modest place in a modest neighborhood — a studio apartment with a corner kitchen, table with two chairs, a comfortable sofa, and the largest television she had ever seen. Wanda ran towards it, throwing her arms wide as if to measure the TV's width. "Oh my God, that's so awesome!"

Barry laughed. "I love TV. So many stories about different kinds of people, and I've learned so much about life by watching it. And sometimes my brother's on there. I like seeing what he's up to."

Wanda turned to face him. "Your brother? You mean Clark?"

He nodded. "Yeah. That's what we call each other. I mean, I know it's not really true, but I guess it makes me feel better to know that I'm more than just a carbon copy."

Wanda's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "You two are friends? Do you actually talk to each other?"

"Sure. Not every day or anything like that, but we run into each other. He's pretty busy, though."

Wanda nervously asked, "Do you talk to Lois, too?"

A look crossed his face; Barry glanced away for a moment before answering, "No."

"Oh." Wanda tried to stop herself from asking, but curiosity got the better of her. "Why not?"

Barry took a few steps towards his kitchen counter, setting

his keys down, clearly stalling. Then he turned towards her and said, “It’s too hard.”

Wanda’s eyes lowered to the floor. Something about the tone in his voice — no, it was better if she didn’t analyze it. Better if she didn’t think about his feelings for another woman.

Barry sighed audibly. “I thought I loved her. Right from the moment I laid eyes on her, I was drawn to her. I kissed her — I’ve kissed her twice, actually. But she loves Clark — she always will. So it was too hard to be around her, because I had these dreams that would never come true.”

Wanda frowned slightly. “Well, I know I’m just a copy, but I can try and be her for you.”

She saw him stride towards her and looked up in time to see him shaking his head. “No, that’s just it. I don’t want her. I was wrong. I just didn’t know it until I met you.” He took her hands into his, squeezing gently. “When I saw you in the park and found out that you weren’t her, it’s like everything in my life suddenly made sense. And when I kiss you — wow, it doesn’t even compare to her or any other woman in the world. One hour ago, I learned why I’m here: I was born to love you.”

Wanda’s heart leapt into her throat; she was caught by the onslaught of emotion in his voice. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely. His arms embraced her, and the world faded away.

“Wanda…” He moaned softly, then continued the kiss as he pressed against her. Wanda’s body tingled in excitement, which, she thought, meant something important.

She hadn’t felt this way about Clark. Honestly, Clark had kind of scared her. Her mind flashed back to the night of their wedding. She had put on sexy lingerie, just like Lex taught her, and she had climbed into bed. Clark didn’t have a shirt on, and he had so many muscles — not her type at all. Well, she hadn’t thought so at the time, but she had been wrong about so many things.

She thought her type was lean and domineering. Thought she loved a man who controlled and commanded her. She had thought she was in love with Lex.

So she had been determined to prove her love for Lex by obeying his wishes. But then Clark started whispering heartfelt words, showing her a kindness and sincerity she had never seen before. The emotion in Clark’s eyes and voice had been more frightening than Lex’s harsh attitude had ever been.

It was easier to lie — to put off Clark’s sexual advances and to tell Lex that Clark wasn’t her type. She hadn’t wanted to admit the truth: nobody really loved her. Clark loved Lois, Lex loved Lois, and Wanda was just a pathetic copy not good enough for either of the men she’d willingly be with.

When she had learned Clark’s secret, she had immediately seen the advantages — being Superman’s wife seemed cool. He could give her anything she needed, everything she wanted — he could provide for her and protect her. And that realization had made her begin to think about Lex in a different way. She didn’t need him — she had other options. It gave her the confidence to assert herself. And it hadn’t taken too long for her to change her mind about Clark’s physical attributes.

Wanda broke off her kiss and pulled back to look over Barry’s body, at the bulging muscles peeking out from his short sleeves, and at the tight t-shirt that hugged the magnificent flesh he had bared in the park. Wanda gently placed the palm of her right hand against his chest. She slid her hand over his firm pecs; he stood confidently, allowing her hand to roam freely over his body.

Wanda giggled to herself. Barry was delicious. He was sweet and charming and gorgeous and he was all hers. He would support her and protect her and give her everything she’d ever need or want. Which was good, since she only had a few days left to live.

Sure, Barry said that Lex had lied, that she’d be around for much longer. She wanted to believe that so much, but maybe he was wrong. Well, she wasn’t just going to mope around for the next few days — she was going to live life to the fullest. She’d make a lifetime of memories with him now, and if she was still here in a week’s time, she’d be well on her way to building a life with him for the future.

Wanda kissed Barry again, then smiled against his lips. “So, you gonna give me the grand tour of your place?”

Barry threw his head back and laughed. He swept his hand around the room. “Ta-da.” Though he did nod his head towards a closed door and said, “The bathroom’s in there.”

Wanda surveyed the sparse furnishings. She shrugged off her jacket, tossing it onto the back of his chair. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“I know it’s not glamorous, but I really don’t need much. Sammy set up a bank account for me and automatically deposits all of my paychecks, so I’ve got a nice bit of savings piled up. I mostly just live off my tips.” He looked around the room once, and then added, “But if you’re going to live with me, we could find a better place.”

She coyly batted her eyelashes and said, “You’re here. This is my home.”

He smiled. “Well, then, welcome home.”

Wanda gave him a quick kiss, then cocked her eyebrow as she noticed the absence of an important piece of furniture. “Where’s your bed?”

He grinned broadly. “You’d never guess! It’s the coolest thing ever!” Barry crossed over to a large wood frame on the wall and pulled it down. “It’s called a Murphy bed,” he said.

Wanda squealed with delight. “Oh my God, that’s so frickin’ awesome!” She toed off her shoes, climbed onto the bed, and bounced lightly, testing the quality of the mattress. “Comfy,” she said playfully as she patted the bed.

Barry kicked off his shoes and sat down on the bed next to her, nudging her over to make room. “It gets the job done.”

Wanda’s eyes pointedly surveyed him. She wanted him, badly. She didn’t need prior experience — her body instinctively knew what to do.

Barry puckered his lips and Wanda kissed him. He said, “Now that you’re here, I’m never going to let you go.”

She smiled. “Good, because I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

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Barry quietly closed his front door, glanced at his sleeping girlfriend, then silently made his way to the bathroom. He set the plastic bag full of his drugstore purchases onto the counter and then smiled at his reflection in the mirror.

Amazing how one day could so radically change a person’s life.

Barry closed the bathroom door and flicked on the switch. He frowned at the harsh glare cast by the fluorescent light. No, that wouldn’t do at all. He pulled out four vanilla-scented candles and strategically placed them around the small room. He focused his heat vision and lit the candles, then quietly laughed at his use of super powers to create a romantic mood.

Barry leaned over his bathtub and turned on the faucet, carefully checking the water’s temperature. He fished a bottle of Calgon from the shopping bag and squeezed a generous portion into the pooling water, amused by the foaming bubbles. Wanda would love it.

A glow seemed to radiate from his heart as he thought about her. Wanda was, without a doubt, the love of his life. He knew it — he felt it with an absolute certainty. He took a pair of bottles out of the bag and set the shampoo and conditioner, the most expensive ones he had seen in the store, next to his humble store-brand shampoo. He added a bar of Dove, chosen because the

package claimed it was good for moisturizing soft, sensitive skin. He nodded with satisfaction as he turned off the faucet, and then placed the last item from his bag on the counter. Secret was apparently strong enough for a man, but made for a woman. Barry flicked off the light switch and quietly opened the bathroom door.

He laid down on the bed beside her. He rolled onto his side and pulled up the light blanket he had placed over her, making sure she was warm. Then he watched her, content to lay silently by her side, drinking in her presence.

She had fallen asleep moments after they had shared what, for him, had been the most intensely pleasurable encounter of his life. Wanda must have been tired, which wasn't surprising given what she had told him about nearly dying in a collapsed building earlier in the day. Barry let his eyes wander over her exposed arms and frowned as he saw the beginning of a bruise forming, marring the perfection of her porcelain skin.

Guilt flashed through him — he should have noticed the bruises before. He should have been more attentive earlier. But no, he had rushed his time with her, caught up in the sudden joy her existence had brought to his life. Barry resolved to make up for the oversight. He would treat her like a queen.

Wanda stirred; her eyelashes fluttered open. She seemed to search the room with confusion, but then smiled when her eyes met his. Barry smoldered a seductive smile as he felt his body react to the sight of hers.

Wanda rolled onto her side to face him, tucking the top edge of the blanket across her chest. "How long was I asleep?"

Barry glanced at a clock. "A couple of hours." He smoothed his fingers over her hair, tucking some strands behind her ear. "You must have been exhausted."

Her lips curled into a wry smile. "Well, it's been one heck of a day."

"It sure has." He frowned as his right hand lightly skimmed across her arm. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine. Really."

Barry tugged at the edge of the blanket. Wanda rolled onto her back, allowing him to pull the cover away. His eyes travelled up and down her body, and he discovered more bruising along the outside of her legs. "I'm here now," he said. He got up from the bed and scooped her into his arms. "I'm never going to let anyone hurt you again."

Wanda giggled and pulled an arm around his neck. "My hero!"

Barry smiled radiantly as he carried Wanda to the bathroom. He set her down at the doorway and gestured towards the tub.

Wanda squealed in delight. "That's perfect!"

"Just like you."

Wanda pressed her body against his and ran her hand along his side. "Too bad that tub doesn't have room for two."

He winked. "Let's put that on the 'Must Have' list for our next apartment."

Barry kissed her again, and then cleared his throat as he stepped past her towards the tub. He directed a burst of heat vision into the pooled water. He swirled his hand through the bubbles to check the water's temperature. Satisfied, he said, "Hop on in."

"With pleasure!" Wanda carefully stepped into the tub, then sat down, immersing herself in the warm water. She moaned with rapture as she closed her eyes and laid her head back against the wall. "This is heaven," she said. "You're too good to me."

Barry sat down on the tile floor next to the tub and leaned against the wall with his legs outstretched. "Nothing is too good for you."

She lolled her head to the side and looked at him with a sparkle in her eyes. "How did I ever get lucky enough to find you?"

"It was more than luck. It was fate. Destiny. Like the universe wanted us to find each other and drew us together."

"You're a hopeless romantic, aren't you?" she asked with a light laugh.

"I guess you could say that. But it's really more about what I've seen in the world. You can watch the news on TV and hear about crime and corruption, but then you can turn around and see small acts of kindness and charity in your own neighborhood. It's like there's a cosmic balance — every evil act is countered by a good one. Positive and negative. Yin and yang."

"Oh. Not a romantic — a philosopher!"

Barry shrugged. "Maybe just an optimist." He paused for a moment, and then quietly said, "Maybe I just need a way to justify my life. I wasn't born out of the love two people feel for each other. I was created by one man whose heart was filled with hate. He didn't want me — he just wanted to use me." He shook his head. "But my life should mean more than that. I'm better than what Lex Luthor wanted me to be."

"It doesn't sound like the universe tipped the balance. You did it all by yourself."

Barry sighed deeply. "Yeah, but I've been selfish. I could do so much more — I have the ability to make the world a better place. But I just want to be me, living quietly and happily under the radar. Clark is out there saving the world, and I just sit by and let him. I think that's why the universe gave him Lois, and I've just been given a string of meaningless relationships."

"Well then, by your own theory, you must be doing something right, because the universe just gave me to you."

"Ah, well see, that's all about you. Lex created you so he could use you for his own selfish purposes. So the universe is balancing that out by making you the light of my life."

"Hey, watch it, mister. I didn't kick Lex to the curb just to become your kept woman."

Barry flushed with embarrassment. "Oops. That came out wrong. It's just..."

Wanda sat up and leaned towards him. "I'm the yin to your yang?"

Barry shivered at the seductive pitch of her voice. "Absolutely."

"The other half of your whole?"

Barry got onto his knees, bracing his hands against the tub surround. With his lips an inch away from hers, he whispered, "Absolutely," before sharing a kiss.

Wanda's wet hands encircled him. He parted his lips and she deepened the kiss, slipping her tongue against his. As the kiss ended, she murmured, "Thanks, universe."

A thought flashed into his consciousness: he loved Wanda with every fiber of his being. He wanted to belong to her, be part of her, share everything with her.

Wanda carefully stepped out of the tub, pulled a towel off the rack, and dried herself off. Barry grabbed his comb off the counter and stood behind her. Heat seemed to radiate off her body as he pulled the comb through her hair, gently working knots out of the strands. He saw the slight smile playing on her lips when he glanced over her shoulder and took in their reflection in the mirror. They looked perfect together.

He finished with her hair, and she turned to face him, looping her arms around his waist and stealing a kiss. She leaned against his body and the kiss deepened on instinct, but then Barry broke their embrace. "Get dressed."

Wanda pouted. "Awww. Party pooper."

He kissed the tip of her nose, then led her out of the bathroom. He picked their clothes off the floor and apologized, "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to wash these. The laundry room is downstairs. I didn't know how long you'd be asleep, and I wanted to make sure I was here when you woke up."

"Don't worry about it," Wanda said as she got dressed.

Barry picked up his wallet and keys. “I’ll make it up to you,” he said with a wink. “Let’s go shopping.”

Wanda’s whole face lit up in excitement. She ran to him, jumped into his arms, and squealed with glee, “You are officially the best boyfriend ever!”

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## Part 1

*Today...*

Lois Lane gasped as she read the return address on the piece of mail in her hands. She dropped the rest of the mail onto her coffee table and sank onto her couch, willing herself not to cry. A wave of nausea rolled through her stomach and she closed her eyes, but her hands flipped the envelope over and her thumb broke the seal along the top edge.

She had been so happy a month ago, on the cusp of a new and exciting beginning to the rest of her life. It had taken so long to get to that point, working her way through a lifetime of heartbreak and disappointment. And it had been worth it; every painful experience in her past had shaped the woman she was today, a woman that Clark Kent loved with all his heart and soul.

Which is why the content of the envelope was so devastating — it made a mockery of the incredible love they shared. Her fingers grasped the edge of the paper, and she removed it from the envelope. She breathed with purpose, steeling herself to the truth. Refusing to acknowledge the fact wouldn’t change anything. So she opened her eyes and confirmed her suspicions.

It was her marriage certificate. Proof from the state of New Troy that Lois Lane was married to Clark Kent.

Lois had never signed the license. Lois had never stood at the altar and said her vows. Those precious moments had been stolen from her when Lex Luthor had taken her from the church and replaced her with a clone.

*She* had signed the license. *She* had said the vows. *She* had stolen Lois’ identity and had become Lois Lane Kent.

Lois’ mouth set in a hard line as she resisted the urge to crumple the certificate in her hands. Lex’s final sick act, reaching from beyond the grave to torment her one more time. He must have submitted the signed license, no doubt taking a twisted kind of pleasure in the perversion of her love, sealing a legal bond between Clark and *her*.

Not *her*. *It*.

That thing, that frog-eating collection of cells pretending to be a person. Lois’ mind rebelled at the idea that *it* was anything more than a freak of science, an abomination.

At least it was dead. At least Lex was gone and Deter was out of her life and her memory had been restored. And thank God, through all of it, Clark had always been there, never wavering in his love for her.

He did love her — Lois never doubted that. But their relationship since regaining her memory had been strained. Totally and completely her fault — she knew that. This should be the most joyous time in their lives: they should be newly married, fresh from their honeymoon, truly partners in public and in private.

But they weren’t. It wasn’t that simple; when were their lives ever that simple? They were stuck in time — still living apart, engaged, with some undefined wedding do-over in their future. And everyone knew, which was beyond humiliating.

She couldn’t stand the looks of pity evident in the eyes of her co-workers, who had witnessed Clark’s confrontation with her clone and had let the rumor mill fly. She hated the caustic cynicism of her mother, who had taken charge of medical decisions while Lois suffered from amnesia and, rather than casting aspersions on criminally insane ex-boyfriends and criminally abusive psychiatrists, derisively chided Lois on her poor taste in men. And the unconditional emotional support through it all from Clark’s parents, whose kindness stood in such

stark contrast to that of her mother’s, somehow made Lois feel even worse.

Lois didn’t even have the ability to process her pain in private; the reactions of everyone around her constantly caused her to dwell on all the things she didn’t have. She certainly didn’t feel married, no matter what that piece of paper in her hand said. And she had missed out on their honeymoon.

Clark said nothing had happened with her — *it* — on their wedding night. But come on, how could she be expected to believe that? They had waited so long for that moment, and *it* was her identical twin; she couldn’t blame him for not noticing the difference. But it still hurt. Deeply.

Clark was probably trying to spare her feelings. She should appreciate his long-practiced skill at deception — it allowed her to reset the clock, ignore the past month, pretend that they could move beyond the insanity and step forward with their lives together.

She’d get there. It would just take a little time.

Lois heard a knock at the door; she was sure it was Clark. They were supposed to go to the Daily Planet’s charity street fair today. A perfectly ordinary thing for a couple in love to do. She had been looking forward to strolling past the vendors with her hand securely held in his, taking a child-like joy in attempting to win prizes at the carnival games. Publicly confirming to their co-workers and, really, to themselves, that the chaos of their lives over the past month hadn’t torn them apart. That clones and dead ex-boyfriends and amnesia and unscrupulous doctors couldn’t sever the bond between them.

Lois looked at the marriage certificate again, glowering at the legal proof of that bond. That piece of paper sealed a vow between him and *it*. Lois shoved the certificate back into its envelope, then buried it under a stack of junk mail.

She couldn’t show it to Clark yet. She needed to understand it first, come to terms with what it meant for their future. She needed to process the jumble of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. She needed time.

He knocked again. “Lois?” Clark’s voice pitched her name like a question, with concern for her well-being evident in his tone. And who could blame him? With all they had been through, anything could be waiting for them around the next corner.

“Coming!” she reassured him. Lois dabbed her eyes lightly and pulled in a calming breath, trying to find the appropriate veneer of happiness. He was too perceptive, could identify her moods too easily, and she just didn’t want to deal with her depressing thoughts right now. She plastered a smile on her face as she opened the door.

Clark leaned in for a quick kiss on her cheek, and then tilted his head with a look of concern. “Everything okay?”

“Fine.” Lois backed away from the entry and allowed Clark to step through. “I was just getting ready.”

Clark stopped near the couch and turned to face her. Lois took his hands, willing herself not to look at the coffee table, not to draw any attention to what was hiding there. She focused instead on his eyes, the chocolate brown pools of warmth that shined back at her. Gosh, she could drown in those eyes.

“You look beautiful,” he said. His lips curled into a gorgeous smile.

Lois glanced down at her V-neck t-shirt, which must be giving him an eyeful. “What, this old thing?” she asked, trying to engage him in playful banter.

Clark’s eyes dipped south; Lois smiled wickedly at his typically male reaction. She traced her finger along her collar and watched with amusement as Clark’s eyes followed the path. His obvious interest sparked her own desire to tease him. Lois placed her palm on his t-shirt, then slowly slid her hand up to his neck. “You look good, too.”

She saw Clark swallow as he put his hands on her waist. Lois

edged closer, barely touching her body against his. She slid her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, then gently pulled him down for a kiss.

Their lips met; Lois wrapped her left hand around Clark's back and pulled him more securely against her. Kissing was surely one of his super powers; she moaned softly at the magical feeling his lips evoked. She pressed harder against him, insistently sweeping her tongue into his mouth.

Clark's hand slipped under the hem of her t-shirt and stilled against the small of her back. His spot — that piece of her he had claimed for years, long before she had acknowledged any romantic interest between them. That she had never objected to his gentle touches should have clued her into her feelings for him much sooner.

She loved him. Lois slipped her hand under his shirt, pressing it against his back. His skin was smooth and warm, and her mind suddenly flashed the memory of seeing him bare-chested just days after meeting him for the first time. She had been captivated by his incredible physique, and for as long as she had known him, despite how long she had resisted falling for him, the desire to see his skin again had been ever-present.

She had been waiting for years — years! And she was still waiting. Because they were waiting — by some unspoken agreement, they had decided to wait until marriage before becoming intimate. So much waiting! Lois squeezed her eyes shut and kissed him harder to keep the frown from her face, to make sure he wouldn't sense the thoughts in her head.

She shouldn't have to wait anymore — they should already be married.

She shouldn't have to wait anymore — according to that certificate in the mail, they already were married.

And then, the darkest of her thoughts, the one she struggled to bury the deepest: she shouldn't have to wait anymore — because he hadn't. He had, she was sure, consummated their relationship on their wedding night. Not with her, of course, but with her clone.

Clark moaned softly, and it seemed like she could feel the heat radiating from his body. His hands wandered across her back. Lois lowered her hands to his backside.

Waiting was stupid. *It was gone* — there was nothing Lois could do about the moment that the clone had stolen from them. But Lois could reclaim what was hers — take Clark now and get on with their lives.

Clark pulled away as if jolted by an electric shock. “God, Lois...” His pained voice was full of tortured desire, an unmistakable mixture of lust and desperation. His eyes shut firmly behind his glasses as his face contorted in concentration. He took a few steps back away from her. “You’re making it really hard to wait.”

She stepped forward. “So let’s stop waiting.”

“Soon. I promise.” Clark looked at her with love shining in his eyes.

Lois crossed her arms defensively; she tried to shield her emotions — rejection, anger, betrayal. But she doubted her face was wearing a neutral mask.

Clark placed his hands at the sides of her face. “Oh, honey. I’m sorry. I know this is frustrating. With everything you’ve been through in the past month, we just need to ease you back into your life. Let’s just take it slowly.”

“You don’t want to marry me anymore.” The fear whispered past her lips, and she hugged herself tighter.

Clark gazed at her with a sincere intensity. “There is nothing I want more than to be your husband.”

Lois spun away from him, determined not to let him see her cry. He didn’t deserve to be burdened by her insecurities.

She felt Clark move behind her and wrap his arms around her waist. His chin rested on her shoulder, and he pressed his cheek

against hers. They stood silently, slowly syncing the cadence of their breaths. Lois closed her eyes and concentrated on the soothing peace of his embrace, as if his aura was a physical bubble that could protect their happiness from the pain of the outside world. Being held by him helped Lois box her emotions, burying her dark thoughts under the crushing weight of his love. A temporary fix that could hopefully hold permanently with time.

Clark kissed her cheek and released her, as if he could sense that her mood had lightened. But only she understood the tenuous nature of her emotional walls, how one false move could cause her frail tightrope to snap. Lois turned to face him; Clark ran his thumb over her cheek, and then kissed her softly on the lips. He stood back with a reassuring smile on his face. “Come on. Let’s go down to the fair now. I’ll buy you a funnel cake.”

Lois rolled her eyes skyward, shaking her head as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. “I’m not wasting empty calories on anything that doesn’t involve chocolate.”

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The bell at the top of the strongman game rang and the carnival worker yelled, “We have a winner!”

Barry smiled and set down the hammer while Wanda squealed in delight. She reached out for the prize he had won for her: a small stuffed bear. Barry tipped his head in thanks and the carnie winked, and then Barry placed his arm around Wanda’s waist, leading her away.

“I love it,” she said as she looked down at the bear. Then she gave him a seductive look out of the corner of her eye. “I love you.”

Barry smiled radiantly. “I love you, too.”

Wanda twisted her body to face him, holding the bear in her right hand as she looped her arm around his body. She tipped her face up, and Barry reacted instinctively to the signal, bending down to kiss her. Kissing was fun, and he enjoyed shamelessly doing it in public, showing everyone in the world just how much he felt for her.

She broke the kiss and laughed lightly as she stroked her left hand lazily up his chest, then along his shoulder. “You’re a big cheater,” she said as she squeezed his bicep.

“Just using what I was born with. That’s not a crime.”

“Oh, you’re a master criminal. You steal my heart every day.”

Barry kissed her again, basking in the glow of their shared love. “How was I ever lucky enough to have found you?”

“It was fate. Destiny. We were meant to be.”

Barry slid his hand into Wanda’s and began to stroll through the street fair. He had seen an ad for it stapled onto a telephone pole and was sure Wanda would enjoy herself. But he glanced around, feeling a tinge of guilt for not being completely honest with her about his true motivations.

Barry had been with Wanda for a month, and had considered his options numerous times. To tell or not to tell. But he had busied himself in that time, convincing Sammy to help establish Wanda’s identity, squaring away her papers and giving her a job at the agency. He had used some of his savings to let her furnish his place to her liking. He had focused his work on the children’s parties and faux-celebrity appearances, backing away from the adult parties, which no longer held any appeal. Every day, he fell more deeply in love with her, and he wanted the world to know.

No, that wasn’t quite true. There was one person in the world he wanted to tell: his brother. If anyone should share in his joy, it should be Clark.

He just hadn’t been sure how to tell him, concerned about how he’d react to knowing that Lois’ clone was still alive. And he really had no clue how Lois would react to that news.

But when he had seen the ad for the annual charity street fair, sponsored by the Daily Planet, a plan had formed in his head. He would take Wanda, and would be on the lookout for Lois and Clark, who would surely be there, too. He’d stage a casual run-in,

in a wide open place, and he'd introduce Wanda to them, and then...

They'd be a family.

Barry scanned the street. Their meeting would go well. He was sure it would. He ignored the flutter of doubt in the pit of his stomach — a sensation so utterly unfamiliar to him, because he lived his life confidently, without fear.

Wanda squeezed his hand, breaking Barry away from his wandering thoughts. She was looking up at him with a question in her eyes, but he reassured her with a smile and quick kiss on the lips. "Dessert?" he asked.

"Oooh, absolutely!" She pointed towards a vendor and said, "They have deep fried Twinkies!"

Barry tried to grimace, but his half-smile betrayed him. "Those things will kill you."

She shrugged. "I should have been dead weeks ago. I'll take my chances."

Barry let out a light laugh. Funny how looking death in the face can make you appreciate life that much more. He took her stuffed bear and said, "Get me one, too."

"Anything for you." Wanda winked before she made her way to the food truck.

Barry watched her walk away, entranced by the sway of her hips; he willed himself to look away before he became unable to control his physical reaction to her. He concentrated and scanned the area, seeing past the crowd of nameless faces and searching for his twin.

And he finally saw them. Lois and Clark had stepped around a corner, coming into view. Their hands were clasped, and they were smiling at each other, clearly enjoying their time together. His mind flashed to Wanda — it was like he was watching their future walking towards him. He wanted her to be a part of his life, for the rest of his life.

He looked back towards Wanda and saw that she was still in line. He nodded to himself — he could greet Lois and Clark on his own first, and then introduce Wanda. His eyes found the pair again, and he made sure not to lose them as they meandered through the crowd. They stopped momentarily, and he stretched his hearing to learn that they were discussing what to eat. Barry quickly closed the remaining distance between them. "Fancy meeting you here," he said.

Clark turned towards him, and then his face lit up. "Barry!" he said with excitement. Clark pulled Barry into a hug, slapping the back of his shoulder, and Barry did the same. When they pulled apart, Clark asked, "What are you doing here?"

Barry laid the groundwork for his introduction. "Sharing a day at the fair with my girlfriend." He turned to Lois and smiled.

Lois smiled back, reaching out and kissing him lightly on the cheek. "It's so good to see you again. I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks. She's the love of my life. We were made for each other. Just like you two."

Lois snuggled next to Clark as he wrapped his arm around her waist. "Well, some days are crazier than others, but in the end, I think we'll be okay."

Clark gazed down at Lois, his love for her evident in his eyes. "We will be. Together." Then he turned his attention back to Barry. "I haven't seen you in a few months. What have you been up to?"

"Oh, same ol', same ol'. Pretending to be you. It..."

"Pays more than you'd think," Barry and Clark said at the same time.

Barry laughed. "Well, it's true! And I'm looking for a new apartment. I've wanted to get a nicer place ever since we started living together."

Lois said, "Oh! So it's serious."

Barry nodded. "Very."

"So when are we going to meet this mystery woman?"

Barry let himself tune in to Wanda's heartbeat — an odd habit that somehow seemed instinctive. He recognized that she was headed his way. "In just a few seconds." He reached out his hand in her direction.

And then Wanda squealed with glee. "Oh my God! Clark! Lois!" She hurried towards them, her hands full of Twinkies. "I can't believe you're here!" She gave the desserts to Barry, then clapped her hands.

"I'd like you to meet Wanda." Barry tipped his head towards her, then turned to watch their reaction.

Clark's face was stunned. Lois' face had paled.

But Wanda seemed oblivious as she wrapped her arms around Clark and squeezed him tightly. "I've missed you so much!" Clark loosely hugged her, then quickly dropped his arms. Wanda let go of him, then pulled Lois into a hug. And Barry saw Lois' body go rigid as Wanda happily said, "My sister!"

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Clark stared at Lois' twin, shocked to see her alive. Wanda's bright eyes and wide smile lit up her face, a stark contrast to Lois' tight frown. Wanda's very existence seemed impossible, and yet...

"I thought you were dead." The words fell from his mouth; he should have found a more tactful way to say it. Clark saw the look that passed between Barry and Wanda — the silent, almost telepathic way that partners can communicate with each other. Barry nodded his head, and Wanda returned the nod before turning her attention back to Clark.

Wanda smiled patiently. "I probably looked dead. It's okay — I forgive you for leaving me under all that rubble. It was crazy down there, and I'm sure you were concerned about her." Wanda glanced at Lois; a flash of worry crossed her face, and she quickly looked away. Then she wistfully said, "It would have been nice if you had checked up on me, though. Just to be sure."

Clark took a step forward — his hand reached out instinctively to offer comfort, but he froze, because this wasn't his Lois; he had no right to touch her. He dropped his hand and said sincerely, "I am so sorry."

And then Wanda smiled, the light touching the corners of her eyes. She grabbed his right hand with both of hers in a gesture of friendship. "It's okay. Life's too short to hold a grudge." Then she released his hand and looped her left arm around Barry. "Besides, if I hadn't saved myself that day and gone to the park looking for food, I never would have met him." She turned her attention to Barry and batted her eyelashes. Barry bent down and gave her a sweetly intimate kiss.

Clark heard Lois give them an ugly, derisive grunt of disapproval. Her face was scrunched in distaste, and a cold fury seemed to radiate from her. Lois narrowed her eyes at Wanda and quietly seethed, "Get out of here."

Barry jumped back slightly at her tone. "Excuse me?"

Lois' eyes darted to the crowd around them. "Someone from the Daily Planet is going to see all of us together and have questions. I don't want to have to explain away the existence of clones." She looked at Barry's face, and then at Clark. She pitched her voice low. "You're not even wearing glasses. You're going to ruin us!"

Clark could see Barry lose his relaxed attitude: straightening his spine, squaring his shoulders, and pulling Wanda protectively closer. "Hold on, there. We have just as much of a right to be here as you do." Clark heard the hard edge of anger that had crept into Barry's voice.

Clark tried to maintain the peace. "You're absolutely right. But, please... as a favor to me? Brother?"

A fraction of the tension in the air between them dissipated; Barry looked down at Wanda and said, "Let's go." Then he looked at Lois and said, with harsh sarcasm, "I guess your lives are more important than ours."

Lois said nothing; she stared impassively.

As Barry and Wanda turned to leave, Clark stopped them with a hand on Barry's arm. "That's not true. I think this is just a shock for all of us." He thought quickly for a way to make things right, and then said, "Come to dinner with us. Tonight, at my place. We'll all sit down and get to know each other better."

Barry looked to Wanda for her reaction; she flashed him a supportive look. "Okay. We'll be there at seven."

Clark let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "Thank you. We'll see you tonight." He looked at Wanda and said, "It was good to see you again, truly."

Wanda gave him a half-smile, but pointedly refused to give Lois even the briefest of glances. Barry frowned at Lois, but then gave Clark a quick smile and nod. And then Barry guided Wanda away through the crowd, dropping their desserts into the nearest trash can.

"Can you believe that?" Lois scowled after the departing couple. "How dare they come here?"

Clark was taken aback by the tone in her voice. "They didn't do anything wrong."

"Their very existence is wrong," she seemed to say under her breath. She turned to him and said incredulously, "And you! You invited them over to dinner like they're our best friends."

"We need to get to know them," Clark said simply. "They're family."

"They most certainly are not. You may think he's your brother, but that thing is definitely not my sister."

"Wanda is a person, not a thing."

"She's a science experiment. One that stole my life, ruined our wedding, and tried to kill me."

"And you should blame Lex Luthor for all of that. She was being used by him; she didn't know any better. Barry started out the same way, but he's different now. I'm sure she is, too. You'll see."

"Yeah. Great."

Clark tried to hold her hand, but Lois shook off the attempt. "I'm going home."

"Okay," Clark said with disappointment. "But you'll come over tonight, right?"

Lois began walking away, but muttered to herself, "Sure. You'd probably just pick me up and drag me over there anyway if I didn't."

Clark watched her go, shaking his head sadly, and began planning the dinner menu, hoping that extending the invitation had been a good decision.

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## Part 2

The rumbling subway car caused the standing pair of clones to sway gently. Wanda had her right arm hooked around a pole in the middle of the car, quietly lost in her own thoughts. Barry's right hand gripped the pole to keep him steady. His left arm was snaked around her waist, holding Wanda securely against him.

Barry cast his eyes around the train. An older woman with a magazine on her lap caught his eye. She looked between Wanda and himself, slowly smiled, and gave him a wink. Barry smiled back at her and hugged Wanda closer.

He loved standing like this with her, a couple in a crowded sea of individuals. Loved the sense of pride he felt when strangers looked at them with approval. Loved the sense of belonging that settled over him when she was in his arms. She fit in his world and, together, they fit into the world around them.

Barry wondered if he'd ever adequately be able to express just how much Wanda meant to him. Oh, he told her he loved her every day, and he demonstrated that love in a hundred different ways. Still, he wondered if she knew — if she could ever truly know.

Barry glanced back at the seated woman, who was now

flipping through her magazine. She was studiously avoiding contact with the passengers to her left and right, carefully keeping a social distance between her and the strangers around her. An invisible bubble surrounded her, cushioning her against the bubbles that protected the personal space of everyone else on the train.

They all had bubbles — every passenger, every resident of the city. And he had a bubble too, one that kept him isolated from all of them.

He had felt it all his life; the knowledge of what he was and what he could do thickened the walls and made them less permeable. He hid it well, turning the walls transparent through his genial nature, allowing him to enjoy the times he pretended to be his brother. But alone, the walls turned opaque, and he felt cut off from the rest of the world, wanting so much to connect with the people around him, but knowing that he was destined to be set apart.

Until Wanda had come into his life, he hadn't even realized what it was he needed, what his soul craved. What had been ripped from him as a child, torn away when he had severed his connection with his father. What he wished for every time he saw his brother on TV. A family.

The train came to a stop, and Barry gently guided Wanda through the doors and onto the platform. He followed quietly behind her as they joined the throngs of commuters making their way through the station, marveling at her ease and grace as she flowed with the crowd. Despite how young she really was, she thrived in the Metropolis pace as if she had been here forever.

He had taught her, of course, anything that she had needed to know, the practicalities of daily life that had been glossed over by the man they both knew. He had been with her every step of the way, every day, giving her everything she needed and most of what she wanted. It only now occurred to him what Barry had never given Wanda — the chance to be alone.

He had spared her from the loneliness that he had lived through for the past two years. He had given her a home, a job, a sense of security. She would never need to struggle on her own.

But, as Wanda marched confidently out of the subway station, he wondered if he had done too much. If struggle caused organisms to adapt and thrive, had he suppressed her natural instincts? Would she one day feel smothered by the life he had provided for her and strike out on her own? Would she, someday, leave him alone?

God, he hoped not. Barry stepped next to Wanda and took her hand, walking in stride with her down the sidewalk towards Clark's apartment. He observed her out of the corner of his eye and noticed her nervously biting her lip, so he squeezed her hand reassuringly. She glanced at him and offered a brief smile.

"This will be fine. I promise," Barry said.

Wanda furrowed her eyebrows skeptically. "But isn't it a little weird? I mean, you're him and I'm her. Them and us."

"Just because we look the same on the outside doesn't mean we're the same on the inside. For example, I rarely fly in my tights."

"Be serious!"

"I am totally serious. Who you are isn't just a matter of DNA. Our experiences shape us into the people we become, and our lives have been nothing like theirs. That makes us all unique individuals."

"So we're more than just carbon copies?"

"I left my vat behind a long time ago."

"Yeah, well, when she looked at me with such loathing in her eyes, part of me went right back to that tunnel I was nearly buried in."

"Okay, so meeting them at the fair didn't go so well..."

"You can say that again!"

"But," he stressed with emphasis to talk past her objection,

“they’ve had time to think about it now. So it won’t be a shock. Everything will be cool.”

Wanda rolled her eyes in disbelief. “You do know that I tried to kill her, right?”

He gave her a sympathetic nod. “You should probably apologize for that.”

“Oh, well, why hadn’t I thought of that?” she asked sarcastically.

“Hey, I tried to kick Clark’s butt, and he forgave me.”

“That’s because he’s a great guy. I bet Lois is the type to hold grudges.”

“Lois is going to love you, just like Clark loves me. And do you know why? Because we’re family. And family sticks together.”

Clark’s apartment building came into view and suddenly, Wanda stopped short. She gazed at the building as she gathered her thoughts, then said, “He already has a family. His mom and dad are the sweetest people ever. And he has Lois. They don’t need us.”

Barry faced her, taking both of her hands in his. “Well, we need them.”

Wanda wrinkled her nose. “We don’t need them. We have each other.”

“And we always will.” Barry bent down and kissed her, silently reaffirming his love. “But trust me, Wanda, family is important. And I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that they see that, too.”

“Clark already calls you brother.”

“So we’re halfway there.”

Wanda mocked him with a shake of her head. “You’re so cute when you’re delusional.”

Barry laughed, then laid his arm over her shoulder, guiding her to continue on to Clark’s apartment. “Trust me. This will be the best dinner party ever.”

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“This was a bad idea,” Lois said. Her mouth was set in a hard line as she stood rigidly with crossed arms near the kitchen counter.

Clark took his eye off the tomato sauce he was preparing to glance at Lois. “It’ll be fine,” he said. “Barry’s a great guy. And I’m sure you’ll like Wanda once you get to know her.”

“And just how well do you know her?” she asked, with an undertone of accusation.

He sighed. “Look, I know she made some mistakes. But it wasn’t entirely her fault. She was being manipulated.”

Lois scoffed. “You don’t always have to assume the best about people.” She wrinkled her face into a frown, then amended, “She’s not even a person anyway.”

Clark turned the sauce down to simmer, then faced her. “Of course she is.”

“No, she’s not. She’s just a…”

Clark supplied the missing word, “Clone.”

“Cheap copy.”

Clark took a few steps towards her and ran his hands over the outside of her arms, as if that was supposed to soothe her. “Well, if she’s just like you, then she’s the most wonderful person in the world.”

Lois bristled at his contact and at his ready defense for that… thing. “You would know. You slept with her.”

Clark’s eyes widened and he took a step backwards. “I absolutely did not!”

“Okay. If you say so.”

Clark deliberately took a breath, as if he was calming himself down, backing away from the fight she knew she was provoking. “I wouldn’t lie to you about that.”

Lois quietly said, “I wouldn’t blame you if you did. We waited so long. And it was our wedding night, after all. She looks

just like me. You had no reason to suspect she wasn’t me.” Though Lois tried to speak plainly, even she could hear the deep pain in her voice that she was trying to hide.

Clark glanced at the clock. He was probably judging the time, wondering if they should have this conversation now, or if they should wait until their guests came and went. He looked nervously down at the floor, but then raised his eyes to her. “I didn’t realize she wasn’t really you that night. We didn’t have sex, though.” He took a slow breath, then admitted the whole truth. “But that wasn’t because of me. She said she was tired. I was confused, and I tried to convince her, but she just didn’t want to. She rolled over and went to sleep.”

Lois narrowed her eyes. “Were you naked? Was she naked?”

Clark’s eyes closed briefly as he searched his memory. “She was wearing a black negligee and I was wearing…” He cut off the end of the sentence.

“Nothing?” She heard the bitter tone in her voice.

“Sleep shorts.”

There was something that didn’t quite ring true in the way he said that, though. Lois gave him a sharp look.

“Silk boxers,” he amended.

“And?”

He turned his palms upwards and gave her a helpless look, clearly meaning he had nothing more to add.

“So you were half-naked. And you would have done it if she hadn’t stopped you.”

“It was our wedding night!” he said with exasperation.

“No, it was yours. I wasn’t there. But your hormones sure thought I was.”

“There is nothing I wish more than for you to have been there. But I don’t have a time machine and I can’t change the past. This last month has been pure hell for both of us. Don’t you realize how much it hurts me to know how close I was to ruining that special moment between us?” He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “And it wasn’t even my fault. I blame myself for something I couldn’t have done anything about.”

Lois pressed her lips harder together, stopping herself for saying anything that was even more hurtful. But she doubted her ability to mask a pain in her heart she feared would never heal.

Clark looked away for a moment and blew out a breath. “Okay, fine, I admit it, I was a bit distracted that night. I wasn’t on the lookout for a clone masquerading as my wife. But it didn’t take very long for me to realize she wasn’t you.”

Lois cocked an eyebrow. “What gave her away?”

He tilted his head, seeming to search his memory. “There was something off about her. She was shopping like crazy and got really defensive when I mentioned it. Her taste in clothes was abysmal, and her voice had a babyish whine to it. She was just really immature.” He shrugged, then added, “Not too surprising once I realized she was only a few days old.”

Lois put her hands on her hips. “So you caught her right away?”

He flushed. “Well, I needed time to be sure.”

“Mmm hmm,” she said derisively.

“What do you want me to say? I’m not perfect.”

“I’d like you to say you could recognize that the thing lying half-naked in your bed wasn’t your soulmate. Ugh! It probably doesn’t even have a soul.”

“Of course *she* does.” Lois didn’t fail to hear Clark’s emphasis of the pronoun.

“It’s not even human,” Lois muttered.

Clark straightened his spine, crossed his arms, and paused until the weight of his stare felt unbearable. Then he said, “Neither am I.”

“Oh, come on. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Really? Then what exactly did you mean?”

“She…” The word slipped off her tongue, and Lois struggled

as she searched her mind for a way to complete the sentence.

“Doesn’t deserve love because of who or what she is?”

His hard tone rankled. “Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Everyone has a soul, Lois. It’s the thing that makes each of us unique, the part of us that makes us who we are. It’s how we think and feel and act. It’s what makes us capable of happiness and misery, love and hate. And regardless of how much time we have on this earth, it’s the piece of us that will live on forever.”

His words cut deeply with their kindness, irritating the festering wound she held onto. “You can’t just expect me to accept her like she’s family. She is what she is.”

Clark glanced in the direction of the front door, as if he had heard something. He dropped his arms before looking back at her. “She’s part of you. And I don’t expect you to just forgive and forget. You’ve been through a lot this past month. I get that. But I hope that you’ll look past the surface and see her soul. If you take the time to get to know her, then maybe you can begin to heal.”

With that, Clark turned off the stove and made his way out of the kitchen, leaving her isolated with her confusion, anger, and pain.

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The apartment was silent, except for the clink of forks lightly scraping against porcelain plates. Clark cast his eyes around the room, searching for a way to cut through the tense atmosphere.

Lois stared at Wanda. Wanda stared at Lois.

Barry shoved a forkful of pasta into his mouth and chewed happily. “This is so good! I love pasta!”

Clark smiled back, grateful for Barry’s positive attitude, and said, “Thanks. I enjoy making it. I have some great recipes that I picked up in Italy. The key is fresh ingredients.”

“Definitely,” Barry agreed. “Thin crust pizza pulled right from the oven is the best. And the gelato — so good. Oh, and the best bacon I’ve ever had in the entire world was from...”

“Florence,” Clark and Barry said at the same time. Then they laughed in unison.

Lois stabbed a piece of lettuce and stared at Wanda. Wanda stabbed a piece of lettuce and stared at Lois.

Clark shifted his gaze between the two of them, then attempted to draw them into the conversation. “So, Wanda, what have you been up to?”

Wanda tore her eyes away from Lois and said, “Oooh, I’ve been having so much fun. Barry’s friend, Sammy, hired me for his talent agency. Sometimes I get to sing for people and sometimes I pretend to be famous stars like Madonna.”

Lois said with a dark edge to her voice, “You’re good at impersonating people.”

Wanda flushed slightly and looked down at her plate. Clark reached out and squeezed Lois’ leg in what he meant to be a warning.

“I’m sorry about that,” Wanda mumbled.

Clark smiled reassuringly. “Nobody blames you for that.”

Lois narrowed her eyes and made a derisive snort.

Barry placed his hand on Wanda’s thigh in what Clark suspected was a gesture of support. “She didn’t know any better. She just did what Lex wanted. It’s the same thing that happened to me.” He turned his focus to Clark. “But we’re past that now. We’re brothers, and family should stick together.” As Clark nodded, Barry looked back at Lois. “We’re all family.”

Lois said under her breath, “A dysfunctional family.”

Wanda threw her hands up in the air. “I said I was sorry! I’m sorry I took over your life. I’m sorry I tried to steal Clark. I’m sorry I tried to kill you. So now you just have to forgive me.” There was just the hint of petulance in her voice.

Lois gave Wanda a hard look. “Make me.”

Clark admonished her by hissing, “Lois!”

Barry set down his fork. “Maybe we shouldn’t have come.” He began to push back his chair.

Clark held up his hand. “No. Stay. We’re going to sit here and work this out.”

Barry glanced at the looks that Lois and Wanda were shooting at each other. “It’s getting late. Maybe we should do this another time.”

Clark stood and offered Barry an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry,” he said, as Wanda got up from her chair. Lois remained seated with her arms crossed.

“It’s okay.” As Wanda began walking to the door, Barry said to Lois, without much enthusiasm in his voice, “It was good to see you again.”

“You, too,” she said, offering him a tight smile.

Barry looked at Clark, giving him a genuine smile. “I’ll see you around.”

Clark nodded. “Count on it, brother.”

Wanda and Barry left, shutting the front door behind them. And then Clark turned to Lois and said, in the calmest voice he could muster, “I have known you for three years. I’ve seen every possible mood you’ve ever been in, and have loved you through it all. But I have never been as disappointed in you as I am right now.”

And with that, Clark spun into his suit and flew out of the building, leaving Lois alone.

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Wanda slammed the front door shut behind her, which made her feel slightly better. She stomped her feet as she crossed the wood floor, the echo validating her emotions. Barry said nothing — he just followed behind her patiently as she let off steam.

Ooooooh, that was so annoying! He was supposed to yell at her for her bad attitude. That’s how a girl knows her guy cares, right? Lex would have screamed at her in a second.

Wanda froze and squeezed her eyes shut. She could see Lex in her mind’s eye, his hair flying wildly around his face, his finger shaking in her direction, as cruel words raged off his tongue. She stood in front of him, quiet as a mouse, knowing she deserved his punishment for failing him so completely. She would have done anything for him; after all, he had done everything for her. The very definition of love, right?

Wanda opened her eyes and cast them around the apartment. Hot pink curtains, a purple rug underneath the glass coffee table, next to the white leather couch, surrounded by knick-knacks and overstuffed pillows — she had bought it all with Barry’s debit card. He had allowed her to furnish their apartment with the same attitude he had now: quiet acceptance. He demanded nothing, asked for nothing, expected nothing. The very opposite of Lex’s definition of love.

It was so confusing. Wanda marched to their Murphy bed and pulled off her clothes, intent on going to bed and leaving this disaster of a day behind her. She frowned, though, realizing she had nothing to sleep in — she hadn’t ever bothered to buy anything, too used to falling asleep in Barry’s arms every night. She picked up one of his t-shirts off the floor and slipped it on. She drew in a breath and her eyelids fluttered shut, instinctively reacting to the scent of her mate. Her brain warred with her body, as she was determined to hold on to her anger.

Wanda felt Barry watching her — it was like she had a sixth sense, always tuned in by default to his presence. A connection she had made the moment she had met him, destined never to be broken.

Why wouldn’t he just fight her? She had given him the opportunity; she had berated him for his idiotic decision to agree to dinner with Lois and Clark as they began their walk home — really, he should have anticipated that disaster in advance. She had tried the silent treatment, seething at him from across the seats in the subway car, but he had contentedly tossed a few coins at the teenaged busker performing on the train. And now, as she tried her best to radiate her feelings throughout their shared

apartment, he just stayed by her side, reflecting back his solid support. It was infuriating.

She wheeled around at him and stated, “I blame you for this mess.”

Barry tilted his head in acceptance. “Fair enough. I guess I just expected more from her.”

Wanda’s hands went to her hips. “Why? Because you know her so well?”

A sad frown tugged the curve of his lips downward. “I guess I don’t really know her at all. I thought she was more like you.”

“Oh, yeah? How’s that?”

“Generous and kind. Innocent and sweet.” His eyes lingered at the bottom edge of the shirt she was wearing, which fell over the tops of her thighs. “Gorgeous and sexy.”

Wanda’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, no. Don’t you try and score points with me. I’m mad at you.”

Barry stripped off his shirt and stood without shame. Her eyes followed the contours of the hard muscles of his abdomen, the masculine plane of his chest, the bulging swell of his biceps. Heat rose in her body, but her mind forcefully squelched her desire for him. No, she was mad, and she was going to stay mad.

“I totally get how you feel. Lois was being mean. She had no right to treat you that way.”

“Yeah,” Wanda said, crossing her arms. “We’re never ever, ever never talking to them again.”

“Yes, we will.” He said it without inflection, countering her in a maddeningly even-tempered way.

Wanda scowled at him. And something just made her want to fight him more, to hide her passion under petulance. “Fine. Do whatever you want.”

Barry took a breath, then shook his head. “I’m not going to fight you.”

Though she didn’t understand why, a small piece of her wanted to score a victory by hurting him. And she knew there was one name that always rubbed him raw. “Why not? Lex would have.”

She saw his even keel waiver: a twitch of his eye, a stiffening of his spine. But then his shoulders relaxed as he said with resignation, “Sometimes I forget you’re only a month old.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked indignantly.

He took a step towards her, as if he were physically trying to bridge the distance between them. “It means that I’ve had a lot longer to get rid of the ugliness that he put in my head. You just need some more time.”

“No amount of time is going to make me happy about tonight.”

“No, but you will eventually get over it. You’ll learn that life is better when you can move beyond the things that have hurt you in the past and can start to forgive. And I’ll spend my whole life proving to you that the way to treat someone you love is with kindness, not cruelty.”

Wanda squeezed her eyes shut, trying to close herself off from emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. She felt Barry close the gap between them. He put his arms around her waist, but she remained stiff, unwilling to collapse against his body.

Barry whispered, “He’s still in my head. He tells me twisted bedtime stories to teach me that night is right. He’d carry me on his back to tuck me into my vat at night, and I remember feeling completely safe. I know what it felt like to love him.”

Wanda laid her head on his shoulder and tears began spilling down her face. She accepted his hug as her arms tightened around him. So many times he had shared his love, but rarely had he ever shared his pain.

“But I also remember his hate. How he withdrew his love when he was angry, when I disappointed him. As a child, I believed that love was conditional — it could be threatened and easily lost. That one wrong word could cause it to snap. That love

was gingerly balanced against hate.”

Barry pulled back slightly and placed his hands on her cheeks, encouraging her to look up into his eyes. The raw emotion blazing there unguarded was almost too hard to look at. It was the kind of honesty reserved for personal pain, and it hurt to see it in him. Wanda did her best to hold his unwavering gaze.

“I have spent two years muting that voice. I keep myself in check, because if I start to get upset, his voice gets louder, urging me to lash out at the world with all of the power I have inside me. It’s so easy to hurt people — too easy. Every time I stop myself from acting like he would have, his voice gets quieter, his memory is suppressed, buried under a thousand better memories I chose to create.” He cocked half a smile and said, “See, you just need to build up more happy memories. Then you can bury his voice as deep as the rubble you left his dead body in.”

It was suddenly so clear why Barry seemed to understand her so well — he just understood himself. “Gone, but not forgotten, eh?”

“Lex Luthor left a lasting legacy.”

Wanda nodded thoughtfully. Barry let his hands slide off her face and encircled her again, resting them against the small of her back. She laid her cheek on his chest and he pulled her body closer to his. She wanted to return the emotional honesty he had just given her, so she resisted the temptation of his warm skin. “I really did think I loved him,” she quietly admitted.

“I know you did.”

“He knew it, too. He used it against me.” Wanda glanced up at him, then said, “You never do that.”

“Nope. And I won’t. Because I know what love really is.”

“Oh, yeah? Tell me.”

“No.” He smiled down at her. “You already know.”

She did. Oh, it was so clear that she did. She just couldn’t express it in words. Fortunately, she knew other forms of communication. She dropped her right hand south.

Barry shifted his weight, moving away from her hand. “That’s not love, Wanda.”

“I know that. It’s an expression of love. Emotion in physical form.”

He cleared his throat. “What is love, Wanda?” he asked with a husky tone to his voice.

She moved her right hand to his hip; her left hand tugged at the back of his neck, encouraging him to bend towards her. She whispered a breath away from his lips, “It’s what I feel when we do this.” Then she pressed her lips against his.

She heard him moan as swelling emotion consumed them like the fingers of a blazing fire. It was like she could touch his soul with her tongue. He picked her up, never breaking the kiss, and she hung onto him. Barry walked them to their bed, laying her down on the mattress, then covered her body with his, reengaging their passionate kiss. The weight of his body pressing onto hers sent a wave of desire through her.

He asked, “So, are we done fighting?”

Wanda smiled. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

“Good.” Barry smiled back. “Because fighting sucks.”

She closed her eyes. “Got something better to do?”

He chuckled. “Oh, yeah.”

They spent the next several minutes together, sharing their love for one another.

Barry rolled onto his back, and Wanda snuggled into the crook of his arm.

“So,” Wanda said, “Our first fight. How did we do?”

Barry bent his head against the top of hers. “Well, no personal attacks — that’s always a good sign.”

“Hmm, dragged out some old, dirty laundry, though.”

“Let’s call that laying out some cathartic, emotional truths.”

Wanda laughed. “Okay. We didn’t go to bed angry.”

“Definitely not.” Barry pretended to think for a moment. “I

give myself a nine out of ten. I'm deducting a point for giving in to your emotional blackmail."

Wanda slapped him on the shoulder. "Jerk!"

He captured her hand, rolled them over, and pinned her back onto the bed. "And you're getting a five out of ten for trying to pick a fight in the first place."

Wanda batted her eyelashes. "Don't I get some extra credit for making it up to you?"

Barry wrinkled his nose. "Six out of ten."

Wanda tugged his head down and kissed him rather ineffectually, because she couldn't wipe the smile from her face.

"Fine. Seven out of ten, but I'm not going any higher."

Wanda giggled and pushed him away. She rolled out of bed and pulled down the covers. "Get the lights."

"Yes, ma'am." He was gone and back in a flash, tucked under the sheets with a come hither look on his face. She began to strip off his t-shirt. "Leave it," he commanded. She arched an eyebrow, and he shrugged. "Honestly, you've never looked sexier."

She beamed radiantly and slipped beneath the sheets, rolling onto her side. He threw his arm around her waist, and snuggled against her back, spooning them.

Wanda drifted off to sleep in peace. She might not be able to define love, but she sure knew it when she felt it.

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### Part 3

"Yeah, come on over. I'll see you in a few," Clark said into his cell phone, before ending the call and tucking the phone into his pocket.

"Barry?" Lois guessed.

"Yes." Clark looked across the apartment towards the kitchen and saw Lois cross her arms.

"I suppose there's no point in asking if he's alone."

Clark tilted his head impatiently. "Wanda is coming here, too."

"Great," Lois deadpanned unenthusiastically.

Clark let the comment slide and wandered slowly towards the window. He looked out at the street below absently; his mind was elsewhere. He could practically feel the waves of simmering heat radiating from Lois, and part of him wished he'd hear a cry for help, urgently requiring him to fly off. The rest of him cringed inwardly at his cowardice, at his instinct to avoid addressing personal problems head-on.

Those people out on the street, they'd never believe that Superman was afraid of anything. But that's because they believed a lie, trusted that their hero was nothing more than a self-sacrificing stalwart of truth and justice, tirelessly working to make the world a better place.

They'd probably be disappointed if they knew the truth — that their hero was just a man, no better than anyone else. No less subject to doubts and fears, no less capable of making mistakes and causing pain. That a person so powerful was really so powerless in so many ways.

Powerless — that's how he had felt countless times over the past month. Staring uselessly as Lex drove away with Lois in that alleyway; staring uselessly as Deter walked away with Lois in that hospital. Time and again, failing to act.

And he knew those failures stretched back further; he shied away from identifying each of them individually, focusing only on the common denominator: Lois. When confronted with situations that threatened his relationship with her, something deep inside often caused him to freeze. It was self-sabotage designed to protect his fragile heart — invulnerable to physical harm, but easily damaged by emotional stings.

So he was hardly one to throw stones. He knew how it felt to wrap oneself in a protective cape and pretend that shooting lasers beams from eyes, metaphorically or otherwise, could solve real-

world problems.

He turned away from the window and asked Lois, "Do you want to talk about last night?"

"Not really."

Clark sighed. He could hardly blame her: that dinner party had been a disaster. He had thought that by sitting down over a nice meal and engaging in light small talk, the tension between Lois and Wanda would thaw, and the pair could begin to break the ice in Lois' frozen heart.

He may have been a tad too optimistic.

Still, he was determined to try again, stubbornly refusing to let Lois avoid reality and cloak herself in pain, because as miserable as the evening had been for her, Clark had found a measure of joy for himself. He loved his brother.

Barry was funny and warm, a genuinely nice guy to be around. Someone who understood him in a fundamental way, on a level impossible for anyone else in the world. Someone who wasn't quite human, didn't quite fit in, and shared a gift that was both a blessing and a curse. The two of them were parts of a whole.

Which is why Clark had invited the pair of clones to come over to Lois' apartment to try again, to give Lois the opportunity to find a similar connection with Wanda. No home-cooked meal, no artificial small talk — just honest, open communication.

Oh, he was aware of the hypocrisy. He, who shaded the truth every day, deflecting and evading questions that touched too closely to his secret. That's how he justified it anyway: his little lies only existed to protect a greater truth. But no — that, in itself, was a lie, one that he had blinded himself to for years.

Every time he flew away from an uncomfortable situation, as he had at the end of last night's dinner, pretending that a minor accident outside was more important than dealing with a major issue at home.

Every time he told half a truth to avoid a larger fight, as he had when he had admitted to not sleeping with Wanda on his wedding night, but utterly failing to reveal his active attempts at seducing her the next day.

Clark had been telling white lies and partial truths for years because it was easier than dealing with conflict. In that, he was just as human as everyone else.

Maybe that was part of the problem, he realized suddenly: their lack of open, honest communication about the events of the past month. After Lois had recovered her memory, they had just moved forward with their lives, avoiding any analysis of the past. It was half a lie — pretending that a scab wasn't there, itching to be scratched, on the verge of cracking open and spilling fresh blood.

Clark cleared his throat to gain Lois' attention. "You know, she's not going to disappear just because you want her to. The only way to come to terms with this is by talking to her."

Lois narrowed her eyes skeptically. "I'm not interested in holding hands and singing 'Kumbaya.'"

"You're deflecting. You don't want to deal with the real issue, so you're taking it out on her."

"Oh, look who earned a psychology degree! Tell me, Dr. Kent, what is the real issue?"

Clark kept his even temper, refusing to rise to her bait. "Wanda represents Lex's attempt to control you. -She represents the accident that caused you to lose your memory, leading to Deter's attempt to control you. And she represents my failure to protect you from everyone and everything that has hurt you so deeply."

"I..." Lois closed her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. She shook her head. "No."

"It's true. You don't have to admit it out loud, but I know it's true. And all I can say is that I'm sorry."

Lois tucked her chin and hugged herself, her face an

expressionless mask. “It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not hers, either. Lex took advantage of her innocence and used her. You, of all people, should be able to sympathize with what she went through.”

Lois turned sharply away. She whispered, almost to herself, “Sometimes I don’t know who I am anymore.”

Clark quickly stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist in a backwards hug. “You’re the love of my life and the strongest person I know.” He kissed her cheek gently, then murmured against her skin, “And I’m pretty strong, so I need someone who can stand up to me.”

He felt her smile briefly, but then she rearranged her features, containing her emotions. Clark released her and took a step back, giving her a measure of space. He heard a knock, so he made his way over to the apartment’s front door. He unlocked the bolts and put his hand on the doorknob, then turned his head to look back at his partner. “Lois?”

She faced him and pulled in a breath. With a tight frown, she nodded her head reluctantly, and Clark turned the knob.

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The door opened and Clark offered Barry a smile. “Come on in,” he said.

Barry felt Wanda grip his hand nervously; he squeezed it reassuringly, then let go, placing his hand on her back to usher her into the apartment. As he stepped past the doorway, he asked Clark, “You sure this is a good idea?”

Clark said, “I’m sure it’s worth trying.”

Wanda stood just inside the doorway and rocked back and forth on her heels, casting her eyes around the apartment as if she were interested in the decor, but Barry knew that she was merely avoiding eye contact. “Nice place,” she said in a timid voice.

Barry remembered the last time he had been in Lois’ apartment: a year ago, when he had thought he was in love with her and was furious at Clark for pretending to be dead, and for Clark’s cowardice at not revealing the truth about himself to her. The kiss Barry had shared with Lois, the punching match he had fought with Clark — all of it seemed like a lifetime ago.

He tried to break the tension of the room. “Looks like you fixed the drywall.”

Lois cracked a small smile. “Oh, believe me, Clark served his penance.”

Clark rolled his eyes and muttered, “You can say that again.” Then he motioned to Wanda, “Please, have a seat.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Wanda gingerly sat down on the edge of the couch. Lois crossed her arms, removing even the hint of a smile from her face, and remained standing.

Awkward silence settled over the apartment as Lois and Wanda pointedly avoided eye contact.

“So...” Barry looked at Clark and shrugged.

“Yeah...” Clark looked as clueless as Barry felt.

Barry slowly walked over to Clark with his back to the ladies, and said very quietly, “Why don’t we just let those two work this out for themselves.” He nudged his head towards the window.

Clark’s eyes dashed between Lois, Wanda, and the open window. He held his lips together as if he were suppressing a smile, and then whispered, “Good plan.” Then he cleared his throat and said, “So, we’re just going to go out for a bit.”

Lois and Wanda snapped their heads towards Barry and Clark and said in unison, “Don’t you dare!” Then the women glared at each other.

Barry crossed over to Wanda, kissed her lightly on the cheek, and said, “You’ll be fine. Let her get to know you. She’ll love you as much as I do.”

Wanda grumbled, “I doubt it.”

Barry saw Clark kiss Lois softly on the lips and heard him say, “Behave.”

Lois grimaced and said, “Not likely.”

Clark spun into his suit, scanned outside the window, then motioned to Barry with a nudge and a smile. Then they both flew out of the window and blasted up into the sky. Clark led them above the clouds and out over the ocean, and then he flipped onto his back and floated like he was lying on a lounge chair.

Barry floated next to him, drifting with his hands behind his head. Then he rolled his head and looked Clark in the eyes.

And they both laughed out loud.

Clark shook his head and said, “I am going to be in so much trouble.”

Barry agreed. “You’re telling me. Wanda’s going to kill me.”

Clark blew out a breath. “Good thing we’re invulnerable.”

Barry disagreed. “Not from them.”

“No kidding.”

Barry closed his eyes and floated quietly, enjoying the warm rays of the sun on his face. He sighed contentedly. “This is like heaven.”

“I know.” Clark was quiet for a minute, and then added, “The city is so loud. I’ve learned to tune it out — I focus on other things. But something always eventually draws my attention. Somebody always needs me. But up here... peaceful silence.”

“Hmmm. It’s not really like that for me. I have to think about using your powers, if that makes sense. Like I have to turn them on.” Barry shrugged. “Maybe that’s because I don’t use them very much.”

Clark glanced over at him and then closed his eyes, turning his face to the sun. “They’re your powers, too. I don’t have to be the only superhero in the world.”

Barry felt a pit in his stomach and immediately rejected the idea. “No, I don’t think I’m qualified for the job. My father...” Barry stopped himself, wishing that those words didn’t so easily roll off his tongue. “Lex Luthor wanted me to use your powers. I love flying — there’s such a sense of freedom in it. But the strength, the x-ray vision... it’s too easy to be tempted by that, to use those abilities for my own selfish purposes. That’s what he wanted me to do — impose my will on others.” Barry shook his head with resolve. “No. I’m not Lex Luthor’s son. I’m not defined by him. I don’t want to be you. All I’ve really ever wanted was to be a normal guy.” He laughed with self-deprecating humor. “Besides, shooting laser beams out of my eyes is kind of intimidating.”

“You’re telling me. I couldn’t always do this stuff. My powers developed as I grew up. I felt like such a freak — I didn’t understand what was happening to me, and every new thing I could do only made me more different. It was frightening, actually.” Clark’s eyes opened, as if he had suddenly struck upon a startling thought. “Maybe Luthor did you a favor.”

“How so?”

Clark sat up, bobbing slightly up and down, drifting on the current of the wind. “Well, at least he taught you how to use what you can do. You’ve always known who you are. You didn’t spend half your life afraid of yourself.”

“No, I’ve just spent half my life trying to get rid of the twisted lessons he programmed into my mind.” Barry flipped onto his side, propping up his head with his hand. “Having my big brother out there as a positive role model to look up to has had a far greater influence on me.”

“You know,” Clark said, “It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. I could use some help every so often. Isn’t that what brothers are for?”

“Thanks for the job offer.” He asked with a laugh, “What’s the hourly rate?”

Clark winked. “It pays less than you’d think.”

“Very tempting, then!” Barry shook his head. “No, I’m happy with my life the way it is. I love entertaining kids.” He dropped his voice and waggled his eyebrows. “And I’ve enjoyed entertaining some of the adults.” Then he sighed dreamily. “But

ever since Wanda came into my life...she makes me want to be a better person.”

“Yeah, the right person can do that to you.”

Barry flopped onto his back, floating happily and thinking about the love of his life. “Wanda is perfect. She’s funny and sweet, passionate about everything she does. She’s so curious and inquisitive, loves life itself. She’s just a joy to be around. Honestly, she makes my world a better place.”

Clark smiled. “She sounds a lot like Lois.”

Barry glanced at him and admitted with a tinge of guilt, “Well, I used to think I was in love with Lois.”

Clark said with a lilt of humor in his voice, “Stay away from my girl.”

Barry laughed. “Hey, she kissed me last time.”

“Yeah, well I tried to have sex with Wanda.”

Barry narrowed his eyes in mock-anger. “Don’t make me kick your butt.”

Clark held up his hands in defeat. “I promise I’d recognize the difference now.”

Barry nodded. “So would I. So would they.”

Clark dropped his hands into his lap and seemed introspective. “You know, I envy you sometimes. I’ve always lived my life in fear — fear of being discovered, fearing for the safety of my family and friends. But you...you just seem to have fearlessly jumped into life.”

He was surprised. “But you’re Superman. I should envy you.”

Clark scoffed. “Which part? Constantly seeing the worst in people? Being a second too late to save someone’s life? Nearly ruining my relationship with Lois because I couldn’t be honest with her about who I really am?”

Barry sat up and crossed his legs, resting his hands on his upper thighs. “I was more thinking along the lines of knowing how much good you’ve done in this world. Knowing how much of yourself that you sacrifice to be you, and doing it anyway. Finding the one person in your life that you were always meant to be with and fighting through everything to make it work.”

Clark opened his mouth to speak, then tilted his head and gave a short laugh. “How did you get so smart?”

Barry smiled back. “It’s part of my DNA.” He looked back in the direction of Metropolis, and then asked, “How long should we leave those two alone?”

Clark shrugged. “Knowing Lois, she’s just getting started.”

“Knowing Wanda, she can hold her own.” Barry gave Clark a playful smile. “And I’m in the mood for bacon.”

Clark’s eyes lit up. “I’ll race you to Florence!”

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“God, what a nightmare,” Lois seemed to say to herself.

Wanda folded her arms, intentionally shifting on the couch to turn her back on Lois as much as she could. “You’re telling me,” she said.

Tension filled the apartment: neither woman spoke, moved, or deigned to look at the other. A ticking clock was the only sound, audibly marking the time they wasted while simmering in their anger.

Lois stomped to the kitchen, and moments later, slammed the refrigerator door. She returned to the living room with a can of cream soda. She popped the top, and Wanda heard the distinct fizz of carbonation escaping the can.

“Wow. You’re not even a good hostess.”

Lois set the can onto her table forcefully. “Excuse me?”

Wanda shrugged. “I’m a guest in your home. A good hostess would have offered me something to drink.”

“You’ve got some nerve,” Lois seethed. “I never invited you here in the first place. I don’t want you here.”

Wanda stood up with a pout, putting her hands on her hips.

“Well, get used to it, because I’m not going anywhere. Barry says

that we’re family and that we have to work things out between us. So you just have to deal with it.”

“Deal with what? You?” Lois shook her head. “I don’t have to deal with you.” Then she mumbled, partially to herself, “Maybe if I ignore you, you’ll just fall back into whatever hole you crawled out of.”

Wanda gasped. “You’re so mean! What did Barry ever see in you?” She saw Lois give her a withering look. And that look burned, so Wanda vindictively added, “What does Clark even see in you?”

“Don’t you dare...”

“He’s too good for you, anyway.”

“I swear to God...” Lois flashed her a menacing look.

Wanda recognized how petty she was being, knew that she should back down from the fight, but...oh, it was so hard to control herself! Every light jab that connected just made her want to punch harder. She wielded her own personal pain like a knife and took a stab. “I don’t even know what Lex saw in you.”

Lois’ face flushed and her jaw dropped, but any angry words she might have had seemed frozen in her throat. And Wanda felt a petulant pride in having struck such a sensitive nerve.

“You know,” Wanda said, “I used to be so jealous of you. No matter what I did, it wasn’t good enough. Lex always compared me to you — he only ever wanted you. I loved him so much, but you stole him away from me before I was even born.”

“He didn’t love me,” Lois countered. “He wanted to control me. He took advantage of me when I lost my memory and manipulated me into being with him. He was insane. I could never love anyone like that.”

“But you did. Lex told me — you were going to marry him.”

“I...” Lois grimaced. “That was different.” She shook her head, as if she were fighting with her own memories. “I never loved him.”

“Liar!”

“I didn’t!” Then Lois took a step back. “God, why am I even talking about this? I don’t need to justify myself to you.”

Wanda balled her hands into fists, feeling the tips of her fingernails dig lightly into her skin. “Gosh, that’s even worse! Lex could have had me. I would have done anything for him. But he threw me away for you. You!”

Lois scoffed. “Consider yourself lucky. I did you a favor.”

Wanda was about to shout again, but she blinked back her response and found a measure of control. “Well, yeah, I guess you did. Without all that drama, I never would have met Barry. Actually, without you, I never would have even been born.”

“Created.”

“Whatever.”

Lois glanced at Wanda, shuddered, and then began to pace. “Every time I look at you, all I see is everything Lex took from me. God, I hate you.”

Wanda stood defiantly. “You don’t hate me. You hate yourself. You hate that you’re stuck in the past — that instead of appreciating what’s right in front of you and moving on with your life, you’re just dwelling on things that you’ll never be able to change. Get over it.”

“Oh, sure, fine advice coming from someone who’s only a month old. You don’t get to just forget about heartache, betrayal, and pain.”

“No, but you can chose to move past it. You can take what you learn from those experiences and use that to make the world around you a better place. You can forgive the people that have hurt you, and you can learn to let it go.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is,” Wanda stressed. “You’re just making everything complicated.”

“Complicated?” Lois stopped pacing and strode over to her coffee table. “You want to talk about complicated?” She sorted

through her mail, found a manila envelope, and thrust it into Wanda's hand. "Then let's talk about this."

Wanda's eyebrows narrowed in concentration as she removed the document from the envelope and read the information. Then her eyes flew wide open in surprise. "Oh my God! That's so awesome! Congratulations."

Lois scowled. "I'm not married. You signed the license. So that means Clark married you."

Wanda reeled back. "He so did not!"

"You were at the ceremony. You were at the reception. It was supposed to be me, but you stole every one of those moments."

Wanda paled. "I..." She shook her head and softened her voice. "I only did what Lex told me to do. I didn't mean any of it."

"Yeah, well..." Lois swallowed against a lump in her throat, apparently struggling to contain threatening tears. She sat on her couch and covered her face with her hands. "It was one thing when I thought you were dead. But now..."

Wanda felt her stomach drop and she sunk onto the couch, sitting as far from Lois as possible. "No!" She searched the document again, shaking her head. "No, that's not right. I'm Wanda Detroit." She waived the piece of paper and said, "This says Clark Kent is married to Lois Lane."

A dismissive hiss passed between Lois' lips. "Your license. Your ceremony. Your wedding night."

Wanda blushed. "Our wedding night? Oh, gosh, you don't think..." She shook her head vigorously. "We didn't do anything together. I pinky swear."

Lois let out a slow, controlled breath. "Well, at least that's something."

Wanda cocked her head curiously. "Clark must have told you that nothing happened."

"Yeah." Her inflection was cool and aloof.

"Didn't you believe him?"

Lois glanced at her, then admitted, "I guess." She sighed audibly. "I've just been lied to so many times in the past month, it's hard to know when I'm hearing the truth."

"Yeah, I get that." They let a few moments of silence settle between them. Wanda suspected she shouldn't say anything, but something compelled her to state, "If Clark loves you as much as Barry loves me, then you must know that he'd never lie to you."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Wow. I wonder if I was ever that naive. You've got a lot to learn about the world."

"Well, maybe you should have more faith in people."

Lois scoffed. "You'll find that people always let you down."

Wanda frowned. "I really hope not. Seems like the world would be a pretty lonely place if you believed that."

Lois shrugged. "It is what it is."

"You can't mean that. Not really." Wanda gestured towards the certificate that she had set back down on the table. "At the very least, you can't believe that about Clark."

"I try not to."

Wanda was confused. "But when you're intimate with someone — when you share everything with them — that shows how much trust you have in them."

"We've never consummated our relationship," Lois muttered, uncomfortably looking away.

Wanda's eyes sparkled. She patted Lois' knee excitedly. "Oh my God, you should totally do it. It's so much fun!"

Lois glared. "It's not like I don't want to!"

"So why don't you?"

"We were waiting until marriage." Lois suddenly looked at her with astonishment. "Why am I even telling you all of this?"

Wanda smiled. "Maybe you just need a girlfriend to talk to. Someone like a sister."

"I already have a sister."

Wanda shrugged hopefully. "Doesn't hurt to have one more."

Lois sealed her lips and looked up and away, shaking her head slightly.

"You know..." Wanda pushed the marriage certificate towards Lois, then waggled her eyebrows. Her face transformed into a playful grin. "You're already married. So that waiting stuff is kind of a moot point."

Lois held her head in her hands. "I'm not talking about this anymore."

Wanda bent her elbow against her leg and cushioned her head in her hand. "Every time I look at you and Clark, I see everything I could have with Barry: a good job, a wonderful husband, a happy life. I want my life to mean something. Barry and I are only alive because of Lex's hate, but we're going to spend the rest of our lives together because of our love."

She stood up from the couch; Lois looked up at her. Wanda continued, "And we want you and Clark as part of our family, but if all you're going to do is live in the past, well, you can do that without us. Because we're not defined by our past — we have defined our lives for ourselves."

"Must be nice. Just forgive, forget, and move on." Lois frowned skeptically.

"No," Wanda said thoughtfully. "But you could start by releasing some of your anger. You might find that your heart has room for so much more."

She heard Lois catch her breath, then watched as Lois quickly got up and left the room. Wanda stared in the direction of the kitchen for several minutes, wondering what to do, considering just how long she should wait in silence.

Then she heard the refrigerator door open and close. Lois returned, brushing a tear away from her eye. She set a can of cream soda on the coffee table.

Wanda felt a flutter of excitement. "A peace offering?"

"Let's call it the bare minimum required of a decent hostess." Lois' voice held a hint of humor hiding behind the deadpanned sarcasm.

Wanda picked up the can and popped the top. She raised it in a mock cheer and said, "It's a start."

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A rush of wind signaled Barry and Clark's return. Lois saw Clark spin out of his suit and then watched as the two of them scanned her apartment. They walked towards the couch where she and Wanda were seated.

"I don't see any holes in the drywall," Barry said to Clark with an air of humor.

"No toppled furniture. That's better than we did," Clark said, clearly referring to the fight they had had a year ago in this very apartment.

"No black eyes."

"No torn clothing."

Lois stood up. "That's because we're not cavemen like you two."

"Yeah," Wanda agreed with a nod of her head. "We are two sophisticated ladies who can calmly talk through our problems."

Barry said, "Uh huh," and then added as a humorous aside to Clark, "Scan them for broken bones."

Clark laughed. "I knew they'd work things out on their own."

Lois shook her finger at Clark. "Oh, I'm not done with you yet. We're still going to talk about you flying out on me."

"Busted," said Barry with a snicker.

Wanda stood up and crossed over to Barry, grabbing a handful of his shirt in her fist. "You're gonna get it too, mister."

Barry's eyes twinkled as he said in a low, raw tone, pitched for Wanda's ears alone, "Are you going to punish me?"

"Trust me," she said with a playful tone, "You're gonna get everything you deserve." She started backing her way to the apartment door, dragging her willing partner along with her.

"Don't be strangers," Clark called out to them as Barry

opened the door.

“Oh, we’ll be around. After all, we’re family.” He looked at Lois for her reaction.

Lois looked between Barry and Wanda, and said, “Family.” She smiled — a genuine smile that she felt in her soul.

Wanda beamed back at her and gave her a wave. The two clones left, closing the door behind them.

Clark moved towards her. “Well, that seems to have gone better than expected.”

Lois shrugged. “Maybe she’s not as horrible as I thought she was.”

“I’m proud of you. I know how hard that must have been for you.”

“Yeah, well...” Lois trailed off, avoiding eye contact. Her vision settled over the coffee table, drawn by the secret hidden there. “She made some good points.”

Clark held out his hand; Lois took it and allowed herself to be pulled into his embrace. She kissed him, then looked at him curiously. “You taste like bacon.”

Clark pressed his lips together, looked up towards the ceiling, and tried to affect a look of innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right.” Lois rolled her eyes.

“Are you hungry? I can go out and get something. Anything you want.”

“No, I’m fine.” Lois released his hand and sat on the couch. “Actually, we need to talk.”

“Uh oh,” Clark said.

Lois tried to give him a reassuring smile, but the flutter of nerves she felt in the pit of her stomach interfered with the attempt.

“How did it go with her, really?” Clark asked with concern.

“We’re fine. She and Barry are great together. It’s still strange to look at them, though.” Lois shook her head lightly, trying to gather her thoughts.

“I know. It’s weird to think that there’s another person in the world that looks like me — is a piece of me, actually. But he’s totally different. He’s his own person, living his own life. And I want to be part of that — I want to know what he’s doing, and if he’s okay.” Clark tipped his head in thought. “Maybe that’s a little like how it feels to have a child.”

Lois leaned away from him. “I’m just trying to come to terms with thinking of Wanda like a sister. Don’t start bringing kids into the mix.”

Clark place his hand on her leg. “I’m not saying that. I mean, yes, I want a family — children — but it’s a little soon. We’re not even married. And I don’t know if it’s possible for me anyway.”

The silent pressure of her secret grew stronger. She deflected momentarily, though. “Well, we’ll know if it’s possible soon enough, the way those two apparently go at it.”

Clark laughed. “Really?”

“Trust me. You do not want to know.”

He smiled. “Good for them.”

Lois cleared her throat. “So, about our marriage...”

The grip on her leg tightened; Clark looked worried. Lois slid her right hand over the top of his hand, seeking to silently reassure him. He drew in a slow breath and seemed to relax.

He said, with absolute sincerity, “I will marry you any day, any time. You can take as much time as you need...”

Lois cut him off. “We’re already married.”

Clark looked at her incredulously, but said nothing.

Lois leaned forward and picked up their wedding certificate. She turned it in her hands as she said, “Wanda signed the marriage license, and Lex must have turned in the paperwork. This came in the mail a few days ago.”

Clark took the document and looked at it, barely suppressing a smile. Then he rearranged his features and looked solemnly at

Lois. “How do you feel about this?”

She sorted through her jumble of emotions, and then finally said, “I think I’m okay with it.”

“Really?” Clark allowed his smile to shine brighter.

She scooted closer to him, taking the certificate from his hand and putting it back on the table. “Well, if the state of New Troy thinks we’re married, who am I to argue?”

“Lois...” He reached out to touch her, but then hesitated. “If this isn’t what you want, we could figure something out. An annulment, or a divorce, or...” He shrugged helplessly.

Lois narrowed her eyes. “You’re not trying to weasel your way out of this, are you?”

Clark’s eyes sparkled. “Never! I’ve never wanted anything more in my entire life.”

“Well, then...” Lois slid her hands along Clark’s cheeks, curling her fingers around the back of his head and pulling him slightly to her. “In that case...”

Clark placed his hands at her waist and brushed his lips against hers. Soft and unhurried, he seemed content to chastely kiss her without pushing for anything more.

But she was sick of waiting. Lois crawled onto his lap, pressing her body more fully into Clark’s, and deepened the kiss, breathlessly capturing his lips with hers. She heard his soft moan as his mouth parted; Lois swept her tongue past his lips, chasing the taste of his passion. She moved her hands, bringing them to the bottom edge of his shirt, and she began to untuck the fabric from his waistband.

“Lois...” he moaned. His hands brushed hers away from his shirt as he continued the kiss.

She was persistent, though, and tugged at the shirt again, working her fingers under the hem and sliding them against the bare skin underneath.

Clark’s right hand snaked around her body. He placed his left hand against her back, holding her against his body. “Lois...” he moaned again between kisses. “We don’t have to do this.”

“But I want to.” Her right hand slipped further up his torso to his chest. “I’ve wanted to for so long.”

Clark’s hand stroked up and down her back, sending tickling sparks of desire along her spine. He pulled away slightly so that he could look into her eyes. “We were waiting.”

“I don’t want to wait anymore. We already had our wedding, even if I wasn’t actually there for it. We missed out on our honeymoon. We should already be doing this.”

Clark unwrapped his arms and gently lifted Lois off his lap. He stood, tugging her along with him, then placed his hands in hers, intertwining their fingers. He bent down and kissed her, squeezing her hands gently, and it felt like part of them was already joined together.

Lois leaned back, capturing his gaze. “I love you, Clark. And I don’t want our lives to be interrupted with clones or kidnapping or amnesia or God-knows-what else might come our way. We’re already married, and I want that piece of paper to mean something.”

Clark smiled. “I don’t need a piece of paper or an expensive ceremony to know how I feel. In my heart, you are my wife.”

Lois smiled at the sincerity of his voice. “In my heart, you are my husband.”

Clark took a step back and drew in a breath. “Lois Lane, I take you as my lawfully wedded wife. I promise to love you, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, ‘til death do us part.”

His vows took her breath away; the words seemed so much more intimate said here in her apartment rather than in front of a hundred people. She clutched his hands tightly, knowing how much he meant the words, and knowing how much she meant them as well. “Clark Kent, I take you as my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to love you, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, ‘til death do us part.”

Clark's smile blazed brightly. "Do I get to kiss the bride now?"

Lois laughed, feeling like a weight had finally been lifted off her shoulders. "You can do a lot more than that."

Clark released her hands, wrapped his arms around her waist, and pulled her close. "Let's start with this." Then he kissed her — warm, passionate lips sliding against hers. A thrill glimmered through her body — an erotic feeling he had stoked before, made hotter by the certainty that they belonged together forever.

"Clark," she said between kisses. "The honeymoon starts now."

He spoke against her lips. "I think I can make that happen." He trailed kisses across her cheek and sucked on her earlobe as he asked, "Where do you want to go? Paris? Hawaii? Tahiti?"

Lois reached around Clark's body and grabbed his ass. "My bedroom," she said definitively.

Clark's tongue traced her earlobe and licked in and out of her ear. He held her body securely against his and lifted off the floor, floating the two of them out of her living room and landing at the side of her bed. "Done," he said, before lightly nibbling the plane of her neck.

"Yes," Lois moaned. Then she finished untucking his shirt and slid her hands underneath the fabric. She touched his firm abdomen and spread her fingers wide over his smooth skin. "Take this off," she said, knowing he'd understand what she meant.

Clark yanked the shirt off his body and tossed it aside. "Anything for you."

Lois' eyes took in the gorgeous chest. She shook her head and said to herself, "Three years."

Clark tilted his head with a question in his eyes? "Hmmm?"

Lois smoothed her fingertips lightly over his chest again. "I have been dreaming about this chest for three years, ever since I caught you half-naked in that run-down hotel you were staying at when you first moved to Metropolis." She looked up into his eyes and said with regret, "I have wasted so much time."

Clark placed his hands against her cheeks. "Not at all. Every minute of that time was worth it. Good or bad, those experiences made us who we are today."

Lois sighed. "There's been a lot of bad lately."

Clark kissed her sweetly. "So then we're due for a lot of good."

She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck; he dropped his hands and encircled her waist. "Absolutely, Mr. Kent."

He held her close. "Absolutely, Mrs. Kent."

She wrinkled her nose. "Ms. Lane."

He countered, "Mrs. Lane-Kent?"

She considered the possibility, and then said, "Don't make me change my name."

Clark scoffed. "I certainly know better than to think I can make you do anything."

Lois removed her arms from his neck and crossed her arms, affecting a scowl. "My name is important. I've worked hard to establish my professional reputation. Besides, 'By Kent and Kent' is redundant."

Clark took her hands in his and brought them to his lips. He kissed her fingertips, then suggested, "Lois Lane in public, Lois Kent in private?"

"Lois Lane-Kent," she said, as if it were a negotiation.

"How about this: let's table the discussion and see how you feel about it later."

Lois arched her eyebrow. "Is there something else on the table right now?"

His eyes widened in delight and he pressed his lips firmly together, trying to suppress a laugh. "Definitely." He quickly grabbed her and pulled her into his arms, picking her up and holding her like he did when he took her flying. She squealed and

automatically hooked her arms around his neck. He walked over to the doorway of her bedroom. "I should start over. I forgot to carry you over the threshold."

"That's right," Lois said as she giggled. "You get one chance at doing this right."

"Only one?" he pouted. "I was planning on doing this again and again and again for the rest of our lives."

Lois placed a hand on his chest, causing him to pause. She ran her right hand lightly over the ridge of his brow and along the side of his cheek. "You really do look different without your glasses."

He winked. "I look different without my suit, too."

Lois rolled her eyes. "I'm serious."

Clark quickly kissed her, then set her down on the bed. "I am, too. Lois, a pair of glasses or a Spandex suit doesn't change who I am. My DNA doesn't define me. I'm a farm kid, a high school jock, a college grad, a world-traveler, and an award-winning journalist. I'm the sum total of the experiences in my life, and that's why I could never be threatened by the idea of a guy who shares my DNA. Because he's a different person — Barry's life experiences are worlds apart from mine. He might be my clone, but that doesn't mean he's me. Just like Wanda isn't you."

Lois rolled onto her side to face him, placing her hand on his hip. "I know. Even though she looks like my twin, she's nothing like me."

Clark joked. "Well, that's not entirely true. She's got a thing for men who can fly."

Lois shoved his chest for his cheeky remark, and Clark let himself roll onto his back. "Do you know the one thing that really is different about Barry and me?"

"What's that?"

Clark smiled. "I'm married to you."

Lois placed her hand in his, intertwining their fingers. "And don't you forget it."

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## Epilogue

*One month later...*

"Stop that!" Lois said while giggling, knowing she really wanted him to continue. It would be too easy to let him push her into his couch cushions — their couch cushions — but she knew their dinner guests would be arriving soon.

Clark nibbled lightly on her neck, kissing her skin as he pulled her tighter into his embrace. "Never."

She squealed as his tongue touched a ticklish spot. "They're going to be here any minute."

He kissed his way up to her ear and sucked lightly on her lobe. "I'll be quick," he murmured.

Lois stroked her hands lightly over his lower back. "Save it for later, when you can go slowly."

Clark moved to capture her mouth, parting his lips and kissing her deeply, thoroughly, with a lazy, languishing pace. Lois moaned softly as her head swam in the sensation.

The doorbell rang; Lois smiled against Clark's lips. "Told ya."

"Fine." Clark released her, backing away slightly. "I'll take a rain check." He stood up from the couch, and she gave him a playful wink. He skipped up his living room's steps and opened the front door to his apartment. "Hey."

Barry and Wanda stepped through the entry. "Hey, yourself," Wanda said. Then she cast her eyes across the room and said, "Hey, Lois."

Lois smiled, and then smiled wider at the realization that she was smiling. A month ago, the last time the four of them had been together in this apartment, she certainly hadn't been smiling. Part of her had believed she never would.

But she had. Lois had truly come to accept Wanda's existence, had started seeing her as a friend. And though she

didn't feel quite the same kinship as Clark and Barry had with each other, she did believe that maybe, in time, she and Wanda would one day be as close as sisters.

"Hi, Wanda." Lois picked up an unopened can of cream soda from the coffee table. "Care for a drink?"

Wanda laughed. "Why, thank you! How kind of you to ask."

Barry shot a questioning look at Clark. "I think we're missing something."

Clark nodded. "Clearly."

Wanda turned towards Clark. "What's for dinner?" she asked.

Clark stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Well, that's up for debate. I was going to cook, but there was an apartment fire this afternoon that required Superman's attention. It took longer than I thought it would."

"Not a problem at all," Barry said. He clapped Clark on the back before descending the steps into the living room.

"So, what are you all in the mood for?" Clark asked.

Lois thought for a moment. "Chinese, from the good place?"

Wanda suggested, "Italian?"

"Wanda!" Barry said with a hiss. He lowered his voice as he crossed over to her. "You know what pasta does to me."

Clark burst out laughing. Lois blushed slightly, but then began laughing as well.

Wanda's eyes flew open as she looked between them. "No! Really?" She sidled up next to Lois and asked, "Does Clark get... insatiable?" Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"No comment."

"Italian sounds good to me," Clark said with a wink.

"Me, too," Wanda said, running her index finger across her lower lip as she batted her eyelashes at Barry.

Barry lightly admonished her with a look and said, "Chinese would be better."

Clark dashed away, and a moment later, reappeared in Superman's outfit. "How about a little of both?" He tossed a spare suit at Barry. "Race you around the world?"

Barry smiled brightly as he started to take off his shirt. "Oh, you're on! But you have to show me how you change so fast."

When Barry's hands went to his pants, Wanda clamped her hand over Lois' eyes. "No peeking!"

"I've seen something similar before," Lois teased.

"Similar is not the same!" Wanda lowered her hand after Barry finished changing into Superman's costume.

Clark shook his finger. "I expect a receipt in Italian."

Barry pretended to be insulted. "Me? Cheat? Never."

Clark's eyes radiated excitement. "Ready, set..."

Barry took off without waiting for "Go."

"Cheater!" Clark shouted before dashing out the window.

Lois shook her head with a laugh. "Those two..."

"Seriously." Wanda hooked her arm into Lois' and dragged her to the couch. She pulled Lois down, curled her legs underneath herself, and said, "Okay, you've got one minute to give me gossip. Spill."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh my God, you so do!" Wanda poked Lois' arm playfully. "Is married life fun?"

Lois rolled her eyes and pressed her lips together. "Maybe," she confessed.

"Pfft." Wanda crossed her arms. "He must be doing it wrong if that's all you have to say about it."

Lois sank back into the cushions and looked upwards. "Oh, he's doing it right." She felt her heart beat slightly faster as a memory came to the surface of her thoughts. "Last week, on the ceiling..." Her eyelids fluttered shut and a satisfied hum escaped her lips.

"The ceiling?" Wanda sounded confused, and then she gasped. Lois looked at her as Wanda's face transformed into a look of understanding. "He uses his powers!" She sank into the

cushions and looked up with unfocused eyes and a sly grin, clearly lost in her own thoughts.

A rush of wind signaled Clark's return. Lois got up to help set the table as Clark spun out of his suit, then opened the lids off the Chinese steamer baskets. "What's with her?" he asked Lois as his head nudged towards Wanda.

"You don't want to know."

Barry returned. "Darn it," he said with a laugh. He set his Italian food on the table and began flipping open the boxes.

Clark winked at Barry. "Better luck next time."

"Heat," Wanda muttered to herself. "Cold." She tugged down at the hem of her dress as she rubbed her legs together.

"Is she okay?" Barry asked.

Lois turned to him. "I apologize in advance," she said, before blushing and turning away to set serving spoons into the containers.

Wanda seemed to snap out of her daydream. "Barry!" She crossed the room, stuck a fork into a piece of penne, and then brought it to his mouth. As he ate the bite, Wanda whispered something into Barry's ear. His eyes widened.

Clark cleared his throat and looked embarrassed. He concentrated very hard on dishing out a plate of food.

"Excuse us," Barry said as he dragged Wanda off towards the bathroom. The door slammed shut.

After a few moments, Clark put his hands over his ears and called out, "You can keep that suit!"

Lois smiled seductively, sticking her fork into a piece of penne and twirling it in the air. "Do you need a distraction?"

Clark let out a laugh, then leaned over the table and met Lois in a kiss. "I certainly wouldn't pass one up."

"They were made for each other."

"So were we."

Lois braced her hands against the table, leaning over the food, and deepened the kiss. She heard the bathroom door open behind her.

"Are we interrupting something?" Barry asked with undisguised irony.

Lois sat down in her chair, glancing over her shoulder to see that Barry had changed out of the suit. "Nope."

Clark waggled his eyebrows as he sat down opposite her. "Certainly not."

Wanda sat next to Lois and began to serve herself. "Oh my God, this all smells so good."

Barry sat next to Clark and smiled. "Good food. Great company."

Clark nodded at him in agreement.

They all sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes as they began eating their dinner. Then Wanda started up a conversation. "So, Lois, what's been going on lately?"

Lois grumbled as she bit off the end of a Chinese dumpling. "Ugh. Mother called today and talked my ear off for fifteen minutes straight. She's still livid that Clark and I eloped."

Clark added, "That's what we told her, anyway. It seemed easier than going into all the details of what really happened."

"I totally get it," Wanda said. She nudged Lois with her elbow. "Does this mean I shouldn't expect an invitation to your parents' house for Christmas dinner?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Trust me. My gift to you is not making you ever deal with my parents."

"Well, I'm sure my parents would love to have you both come out to Smallville," Clark said.

"That would be cool." A trace of sorrow crossed Barry's face. "I bet your father is a lot nicer than mine was."

Clark clasped him on the shoulder. "And I bet he'd be open to the idea of unofficially adopting another son." Barry smiled.

Wanda pushed her food around her plate. "Yeah, they were super nice. But I don't think they'd be too happy to see me again.

If I hadn't told Lex about Clark's secret, he wouldn't have come here to hurt everyone."

"They don't blame you. None of us do." Clark held out his hand across the table, and Lois squeezed it reassuringly.

Lois released his hand, then said to Wanda, "Jonathan and Martha are the most forgiving people I know."

"Really?" Wanda asked with a glint of hope in her eye.

"Really. I bet Martha will even offer you a drink without you having to ask."

Wanda grinned.

Lois sighed wistfully. "Martha is wonderful. She doesn't harp at me over missing our wedding."

Barry said, "I bet she's just happy that you're a part of Clark's life."

"Exactly," Clark agreed. "Your mother will get over it eventually."

"Oh, no. As far as she's concerned, our first ceremony didn't count and our elopement didn't happen. She's insisting we have another huge wedding with all the trimmings." Lois shook her head in exasperation. "I cannot deal with one more seating chart, or floral centerpiece, or fabric aisle runner."

Clark snickered. "I bet you appreciate Wanda now. She spared you all of that last time."

"Don't even get me started," Lois warned, though the humor in her tone of voice was evident to everyone at the table.

Wanda sighed dreamily. "I'd love to have a big, fancy wedding. But we don't have the money for anything like that, and we certainly don't have enough friends and family to fill the guest list."

"You're assuming I'm even going to ask you to marry me someday." Barry could barely cover his impish grin.

Wanda pointed her fork at him. "And you assume I'm just going to wait around until you do."

Clark leaned over towards Barry. "Do you want me to teach you how to crush carbon into a diamond?"

"That might come in handy."

Wanda sank back into her chair with a satisfied smirk.

Lois shoved a ravioli into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "You know, you should just take our places."

Wanda's eyes grew wide and she shook her head emphatically. "Oh, no! I'm not doing that again. I just finally convinced you to stop hating me from the last time."

"I'm serious. You two get your license. I'll let Mother plan the wedding of her dreams. And then, when it's time to walk down the aisle, you two slip in there and get married. And you can party at the reception while we hightail it to Bora Bora for the honeymoon."

Clark laughed. "Superman and Ultrawoman can be your best man and maid of honor."

The four of them all looked at each other in silence for a moment, then at the same time said, "Nah!"

Barry took a few bites of food before saying, "You two never did have an actual wedding, did you?"

Clark looked meaningfully at Lois. "Not really."

Lois shrugged. "We said our vows." But she bit her lip, unwilling to reveal more. That night in her apartment had been beautiful. And that should have been enough. Still...Lois sighed and cast her thoughts aside.

Barry barreled ahead. "You should have a ceremony. I'd love to be the best man."

Lois rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "It's not worth dealing with Mother."

"So don't do it for her. Do it for yourselves. Go fly to Vegas or something."

Lois froze. A vision of a little white chapel, glowing under neon lights, flashed through her. Perry dressed in an Elvis costume, Jimmy taking photos, Martha and Jonathan sitting in the

front row. Maybe Lucy would even drive over from L.A. "Barry and Wanda could be there as Superman and Ultrawoman," she said out loud.

Wanda squealed and clapped her hands. "Oooh! Yes! Dressing up is so much fun!"

Clark smiled slowly, as if the idea lit him up from within. "No one would think twice about seeing celebrity impersonators in Las Vegas. And I would love for my brother to be my best man."

Lois nodded, then looked at Wanda. "And my sister should be my maid of honor."

Wanda reminded her quietly, "You already have a sister."

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. For the first time in months, Lois felt complete, as if the scars cutting across her heart had instantly healed. She set down her fork and turned in her chair. She pulled Wanda into a hug, laying her head on her twin's shoulder, trying to share her sense of joy. She could feel Wanda's shock as she tensed, and then her delight when her shoulders relaxed.

Lois whispered into Wanda's ear, "It wouldn't hurt to have one more."

THE END