

# Family Man

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: With the help of a Christmas visitor, a very different Clark is shown what his life could be if only he will allow it to happen.

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I'm not even sure exactly when I wrote this, but felt it was time to dust it off and send it to the archive. Below is what I wrote not long after I finished writing it.

This story was absolutely one of the easiest stories I've written. The ideas fell out, almost faster than my fingers could type. I wish they were all this easy. I'd like to thank the wonderful writers of a movie of the same name. I'm not sure who he/she/they are, but they do and they did a wonderful job. I wasn't as thrilled with the actors as I was with the storyline, but it obviously made a great L&C story.

Thanks to everyone who helped me beta this story (in one form or another- some without even realizing it). Erica, you might have been busy with real life, but you made time to read this for me. You're the best! Ann, you've become a wonderful friend — offering feedback that I might not have wanted to hear, but needed to. And Sue! Busy with your own stories, but not so much that you can't make time to help out a friend. Thanks a bunch. If I missed anyone, I didn't mean to.

I'd also like to say a big thanks to my dear friend Jenni Debbage. She's always helping me- in more ways than she realizes. We don't keep in touch like we once did, but I consider her a dear friend. Good friends are hard to find. Like the Clark of my story, I understand that completely now.

L&C and all likenesses thereof are property of WB and DC Comics. No copyright infringement is intended in any form. I just borrowed the characters for a bit, but I promise I returned them unscathed.

I hope you enjoy and even if you don't, I'd love to hear from you.

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Soft music punctuated the silence of the elaborate interior of the spacious room. The first bright rays of sunshine pierced through the morning haze, leaving little doubt that it was going to be another beautiful morning.

The dark haired man smiled as he lifted his coffee mug to his lips. He loved mornings in the city, the time just before the usual rush began. Although the pace never fully quieted down, it was almost mesmerizing to watch as the masses awoke to greet another day.

And it was invigorating to know that he held this world in the palms of his hands.

One last look and he turned from the windows that made up the entire east wall of his bedroom to start his day. His cup was deposited on the dresser on his way toward the full length mirror on the inside of his closet door. He smiled at the image he projected — to him, a picture of perfection. His hair was immaculately groomed, his face smooth, and his tie was straight. The only thing missing was the expensive jacket that matched his

equally expensive slacks. He slipped into the item, admiring how perfectly the garment fit his well toned physique.

How does one man get to be so... me? He thought, as a wide grin spread across his face. With a swipe across his patent leather shoes, he was out the door. The world awaited his entrance; he couldn't let them down.

He strode purposefully through the lobby of the high-rise apartment complex where he resided in his expansive three bedroom condo. Though he didn't really need all the room his residence offered, the place seemed to fit his expensive tastes. Besides, what good was having money if you couldn't show it off?

"Good morning, Mr. Kent," spoke up the doorman as Clark approached the entrance of the building.

As usual, the young man waved off the older one without comment. Clark stepped out onto the sidewalk and inhaled deeply. Another day of possibilities lay ahead of the most powerful man in the world.

A satisfied grin spread across his face as he headed for his office downtown.

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Clark barely noticed that most people would go out of their way to cross the street when they noticed him coming. Most of the time, their reaction to him only seemed to please him more. They were the *little* people, ants to him. They knew their place in *his* world, he thought as he crossed the street and headed toward the business district.

He stopped in front of a store to admire the items in their window display. A mannequin was dressed in a flashy blue suit with a large stylized 'S' splashed across his chest. A long, red cape was draped from his shoulders. A large sign proclaimed that Superman should be under everyone's Christmas tree.

Yes, Clark agreed, Superman *should* be under everyone's Christmas tree.

He continued his confident strides down the busy sidewalk as he thought of his other persona.

Superman was a clever invention that afforded him the finer luxuries in life. Clark had discovered growing up that he was a bit unique. As he grew into adulthood, he developed a host of extraordinary powers, including the ability to fly. Though extremely shocked with each new power that surfaced, the young man accepted his fate and learned to harness his incredible gifts. He'd had wonderful guidance in the form of two amazing parents, and he'd looked forward to a world of possibilities.

That was until 'Dark Sunday'. That's what he'd named it. The day his entire life had changed.

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The doorman at Clark's office building rolled his eyes as he tipped his hat, but he made no move to offer his services. Clark simply smiled and entered the building without comment. The young woman at the front desk looked up as he entered. He flashed her a smile, completely unaware that her smile had faltered the time she'd noticed him. Others had noticed him as well because a small path seemed to clear for him as he approached the elevators. He pressed the button, only waiting a brief moment before the doors opened to an empty car. He stepped in and held the doors open.

"There's plenty of room," he told the many others waiting outside.

"Ah, we'll catch the next one," offered a voice from the crowd.

"Suit yourselves," Clark told them as he released the doors. He wasn't about to allow a bunch of idiots to dampen his mood this morning.

The elevator deposited him on the top floor of the Kent building, right smack in the middle of a busy room.

Business is good, he thought as he crossed the room and

headed down a long hallway.

“You have a stack of messages already from Lois Lane,” Clark’s secretary told him as he approached two large doors at the end of the hall.

He grumbled a few obscenities as he took the offered paper from his secretary.

“You’re welcome,” the older woman shot at him just before the doors to his private office closed.

He flipped through the messages as he made his way across the room and flopped down on the plush chair behind his desk. Lois Lane left messages for him almost daily. She was the country’s best investigative reporter and had been trying for months to land the very first in-depth exclusive interview with Clark. Since his debut as Superman two years earlier, she’d had a handful of articles with quotes from his alter-ego, but she wanted to talk to the man behind the suit, insisting that the public had the right to know everything about him. He’d refused her first request for an interview and continued to do so. There was something about Lois Lane that made him nervous. And for a man of his power, that was a hard lump to swallow.

He dropped the messages in the trash can and opened the morning edition of the Daily Planet. Lane’s by-line graced the front page again. Clark had to admit she was a very good journalist. She was also beautiful. It was Clark’s experience that beauty and brains could be a bad combination for him.

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Lois grumbled as she made her way back into the newsroom. She’d had enough dead ends to last her a lifetime. Another source had failed to pan out, leaving her without a single angle to follow. Before she could throw her case down the way she wanted to, Perry bellowed for her to join him in his office.

“You growled?” she teased as she stepped into her editor’s office.

“Lois, I’m sure you’re aware that Clark Kent is being honored by the government on Friday night,” Perry said without looking up from the papers on his desk.

“Don’t you mean Superman?” Lois retorted almost in disgust. “Yeah, well, I think there’s more to that boy than meets the eye,” Perry commented as he eased down to his chair.

“Of course there is! And he shows it off quite regularly.” As if on cue, a commercial featuring Superman played across the screen of the television hanging in the corner of Perry’s office. “See!” She waved her hand at the device, further proving what she’d said was true. Superman was everywhere.

“Anyway, I like to call a man by his name,” her editor continued.

“That is no man,” she said as she turned from the set to look at Perry. “That is a walking, talking mass of arrogant, self absorbed, useless space!”

The old man couldn’t suppress his smile. “Why don’t you tell us what you really think of him?”

“I just don’t like him,” Lois declared before dropping to the chair across from her boss. “Was there something you wanted before we started talking about ‘Mr. Wonderful’?”

“Yes. I want you to cover the ceremony honoring the big guy Friday night.”

“WHAT?! Come on, Perry, you know I hate those things. Shouldn’t Cat go?”

“She’ll be there, but I need my best reporter there. There’s more to this event than just gossip. We can’t forget what this means to the world.”

“I know what it means,” Lois complained. And she did. She wasn’t shallow enough not to recognize the contribution Superman had made to the world, but she’d been a reporter long enough to be able to read people better than she liked. She knew Clark ‘Superman’ Kent had never had any intention of committing such a selfless act on behalf of humanity. He only

wanted the notoriety that came with the recognition.

“Then you understand that I can’t have Cat writing this up. Besides, you know what an article on Superman means for sales.”

Like the world needs another article on Superman, Lois thought. Or book or toy. The flying moron was everywhere!

“Do I have a choice?” she finally asked in defeat.

“There’s a fashion show at the Grand Hotel.”

How could Perry do this to her? This... man... person... whatever he was — she’d heard he was barely human, with absolutely no pun intended to his origins. Clark Kent was cruel and boastful. He was arrogant and self-absorbed. In short, he was an ass and while she wanted nothing more than to expose him in a tell-all expose, the absolute last thing she wanted to do was attend another event where people declared how wonderful and selfless he was. The whole affair would only further inflate his massive ego.

“Don’t let it be said I’m not a team player,” she told Perry after images of tiny women in gaudy dresses filled her mind.

“That’s my girl.”

Lois only offered a perturbed grunt as she left Perry’s office. Not only did she have to watch as Superman received another sickening dose of appreciation, she had to find a dress to wear. The event was formal!

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“I had a really good time tonight, Claarrkk,” the young woman purred as she snuggled up to her date. “Or should I say Superman,” she finished in a whisper.

He smiled and wrapped his arms around the woman’s waist so he could hold her to his chest while he kissed her. “Mmm, Clark’s fine,” he told her when he broke the kiss. “And I had a good time, too.”

“Then why are you making me leave?” the woman asked as Clark guided her toward the door of his apartment.

“Told you. I have to go out tonight. I won’t be here.” He took her coat from the rack and held it up for her.

“I could keep the bed warm.”

“I know.” He leaned to kiss her neck from behind. “Another time?”

“You got it, Clarkie.” She gave him a final kiss before she left.

Clark sighed heavily as he leaned against the closed door. Tiffani was a distraction he’d picked up after lunch that day. Her blonde hair and long legs were an instant turn-on, making her irresistible to the Man of Steel. They’d spent a few pleasant hours together, but he’d been left far from satisfied. That’s why he’d lied, telling his lover that he was going out. All he wanted was to be alone, so he’d hurried the young woman out of his place. He ran a hand through his hair and went in search of something to wash down the bad taste that was suddenly left behind from another empty encounter.

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Clark whistled as he strolled up the sidewalk. He’d spent the morning signing autographs at the opening of a new gym. He’d endorsed the training equipment in the new fitness facility and had been paid a small fortune by the establishment to make an appearance.

As he continued down the sidewalk, he passed a newsstand. Since he hadn’t been to the office yet that day, he hadn’t read the newspaper. The day’s headline stopped him in his tracks. ‘Why Does the World Need Superman?’ was splashed across the front page of the Daily Planet. He quickly snatched up a copy and began to scan the article.

“Hey, buddy, you have to pay for that,” came the irritated voice of the vendor.

Clark snatched a bill from his pocket and tossed it on the counter. “Keep the change,” he snapped as he went back to perusing his paper.

“Cheapskate,” came the angry mumble from behind him.

He almost wanted to turn and tell the man that he had superhearing. Instead he glanced down at the by-line of the unflattering article. Lois Lane — he should have guessed. Deciding to finish the piece in his office, he folded the paper and hurried into the building.

“Hold my calls,” he clipped out when he made it to his office.

“Yes, your highness,” came the reply of his secretary.

Clark rolled his eyes in exasperation. He should think about finding a new secretary soon.

It was ten minutes later before he looked up from the article in the Planet. He’d read it three times, trying to decide if Lois Lane had crossed the line into enemy territory. Apparently she was planning a series of articles leading up to the presentation the government had planned for him at the end of the week. Undoubtedly, she’d decided that if he wouldn’t grant her an interview, she’d lead a hate campaign instead.

‘No one can deny the fact that the world has profited from knowing Superman. His incredible biology has led to the scientific discoveries that are the focus of the upcoming recognition the government wishes to bestow upon him. But why does the world really need Superman? With the incredible advances the human race has made through time, I refuse to believe that we couldn’t have continued toward these eventualities even if we had never been graced with the presence of a would-be god.’

Is that how she saw him? Is that what Lois Lane thought of him?

‘While his scientific contributions are to be commended, one has to wonder why this man refuses to truly harness his gifts.’

She thought of his abilities as gifts. That’s eventually how he’d come to see them. They’d granted him more privileges than most; they’d provided him with wealth and status beyond imagination. But never once had he thought of them the way Lois described them in her article.

‘With such power comes great responsibility. So why does he refuse to take on that responsibility? How can he call himself a productive member of this society if he refuses to use the abilities he’s been given to help?’

I’m productive because I earn more in a month than most people earn in a lifetime, he thought sarcastically. Not only was he known for his super persona, he owned a successful company. He’d managed to scrape his way through college and knew a little about the corporate world. Enough so that he’d turned a failing publishing house into a Fortune 500 company after bailing out the floundering business. And that was the first of many businesses Kent Enterprises had pulled from the brink of bankruptcy.

‘How can he turn a deaf ear to this world?’

Why? Because this world’s tragedies were not his problems! He’d worked too hard to learn how to tune out the many noises that invaded his hearing. He’d felt at one time all those things — those cries for help — would drive him crazy. But he’d learned to deal with them. He’d learned how to . . . turn a deaf ear.

He leaned back in his chair when he realized that what Lois said was true. He chose to not listen to the problems of this world. Just because he *could* help didn’t mean he had to. And it certainly didn’t mean he wanted to.

‘That kind of power would be deadly if it were ever unleashed. Is that why, as a society, as a government, we keep him happy? Is that why he’s been placed up on a pedestal? Wake up, people! We’ve unintentionally given him exactly what he wants. Maybe we should be grateful that he’s content to reap his rewards, content to bask in the glory we seem to like surrounding him in. But this reporter will never be happy. Because not only is he an arrogant, selfish playboy, he’s the most powerful being alive.’

Clark turned in his chair to stare out of the window, the words of Lois’ article resounding loudly in his head. Not today, he decided. He wouldn’t allow her words to get to him. She’d written unflattering articles before and he’d shrugged them off. This one was no different.

But even as he made that declaration, he wondered just why it was that Lois Lane had the power to infuriate him the way no other did.

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Lois sighed heavily as she clicked the button to send her latest article to her editor. Though Pery hadn’t been very happy when he’d read her piece on Superman, he knew it would sell papers. She’d known she was skating on thin ice by painting such an ugly picture of ‘Mr. Almighty’. A lot of people liked Superman, loved him in fact. There was merchandise everywhere displaying that famous ‘S’. In theory, she liked him. Or at least what he could represent. But the person behind the suit was another matter altogether.

No one really knew Clark Kent. He burst onto the scene right after the Nightfall asteroid had threatened to end life as the world knew it. The man had actually deflected the monstrous rock from impacting with the Earth, effectively saving mankind. Many had thought they’d received a savior into their midst. Instead, they’d been introduced to yet another parasite who was only too happy to take his accolades for self promotion. Kent, as Superman, had made sure the world knew exactly who had saved mankind from extinction. And that had only been the beginning.

Superman’s logo graced the packages of so many products it was hard to find something that didn’t carry the familiar ‘S’. The world was only too happy to receive their savior with open arms and full pockets. Superman had made Clark Kent a very wealthy man. Other than that, there wasn’t much known about him.

Superman had given a few interviews, divulging that he was from another planet, declared he was a friend, and then gladly accepted his rewards. People were happy to be alive and it showed. It had been a little over two years since a flying man had first appeared in the skies above Metropolis and other than the scant information that had filled a few dozen articles, Superman was still a mystery.

For a brief time it had only been Superman. The world hadn’t always known him as Clark Kent. An incident involving a crazed ex-military Colonel named Jason Trask had revealed the caped wonder’s true identity. Lois had been shocked, along with the rest of the world. Kent was a farmer’s son from Kansas. At the time he was outed, he had been working his way up the corporate ladder in an investment firm in L.A. He’d done remarkable things in the business world, so he was known in many circles. His picture had been on the covers of several financial magazines, leading Lois to question her abilities as a capable reporter. How was it she, and the world for that matter, had never noticed those two men were the same?

Kent had spoken to the press only once. He’d declared his personal life off limits, and he’d shed his mild mannered facade right along with the glasses he’d worn to help protect his real identity. Using his money from his endorsements as Superman, he’d relocated to Metropolis and had quickly risen to the top of the corporate world. And unless it involved his business dealings, there had been no articles or interviews with Clark Kent. He continued to make appearances as Superman, continued to promote one product after another, but he remained a total mystery to the world.

And that was what Lois disliked about Clark Kent. More than the fact that he was a self proclaimed savior, she disliked all the secrecy. If he truly was a friend, why not become familiar with others around him? Why hold himself so aloof? Many had tried over the years to discover the things Kent wished no one to know. They’d hounded his adoptive parents until the couple had been

forced to move from Kansas. Now their location was unknown. They'd combed the small town he'd grown up in trying to find just one person that would talk about him. Many remembered the mysterious man as a quiet, reserved child. A good student, Kent excelled in sports. He'd never displayed unusual abilities and many were shocked to find out he was Superman. But other than that, other than the fact that Kent had left Smallville when he was just twelve, no one knew anything else. Not until he surfaced years later.

Lois had even tried to discover the secrets behind the Earth's visitor from another planet. All she'd been able to find out was that when Kent left Smallville, his folks had told others that his real family had come for him. She couldn't find so much as a hint that he'd existed after that until he enrolled in college in Washington state when he was eighteen. She hadn't even found high school transcripts for him. He'd graduated a mere two years later with a degree in business and had then disappeared again. It was only when he helped negotiate a successful takeover of a huge advertising conglomerate did he surface again. Apparently he'd been content to live quietly in Los Angeles, but he'd made a huge name for himself inside the business world. Two years after that, he made an even bigger name for himself — Superman.

She glanced down at the picture of Superman on the front page of the Planet. "Why all the mystery, Superman?" she asked the image. Every reporter in the world wanted to be the one to finally nail the interview of all time. But Lois was beginning to wonder if anyone would ever get that opportunity.

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"What is this?" Clark demanded of a young man that carried a stack of papers.

"I, I don't know, sir," the man answered nervously, his eyes wide with fear.

Clark waved him off then turned back to face the large Christmas tree that had been erected in the center of the main room of his office floor. Hundreds of tiny lights sparkled amid an array of beautiful decorations. Beneath it laid a handmade tree skirt depicting a country Christmas.

"Who authorized this tree?" he demanded in a loud voice. Everyone stopped what they were doing to look up at their boss, all holding their breath in anticipation of what he might do. In past years, he'd knocked down the symbol then ordered it cleaned up. "Haven't I told you all that there is to be NO displays of this season?"

He was furious, almost shaking with controlled anger. He hated Christmas and wanted no part of it in his life.

"Pipe down, you old bear," came the gruff voice of his secretary.

Clark turned toward the aging woman. "Excuse me?!"

"You could certainly dream," she replied sarcastically.

"Ms. Brown..."

"Don't Ms. Brown me, young man. I'm only telling the truth. The way you act, you can only dream that people would excuse you!" She pushed past him and lifted another decoration to place it on the tree. A few audible gasps could be heard behind them.

"What do you think you're doing?" Clark asked as he reached out to intercept the small angel.

"I'm putting an angel on the tree," she replied as if the answer was obvious.

"You know how I feel about Christmas," he said through clenched teeth.

"But it's not how the rest of us feel, *Mr. Kent*. You are not the entire company, even if you'd like to be. There are over a hundred people that work for you on this floor alone. Several hundred more work in this building. *They* like Christmas and you should be ashamed of yourself for not letting them decorate a place they spend over half their time." She placed her hands on her hips, standing toe to toe with the young man.

Why in hell had he hired this woman? Not for the first time he asked himself that question. She'd been his secretary for nearly nine months, longer than any other he'd had. She had withstood his rude comments, his angry outbursts, and his cold silences. She'd argued with him on more than one occasion, but never in front of others. She'd thrown his smart replies right back at him with some of her own and had often defied him openly. Yet, for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to fire her.

"Now," she continued. "We are going to decorate this year, and *you* are going to let us!"

He could only stare into the woman's eyes. She had large, compassionate eyes. Eyes that reminded him of another woman he'd once known.

Is that why he'd hired this woman? She was easily thirty years older than any other secretary he'd had. And though he'd had an affair with every one of the four others that had worked for him, this woman had been his immediate choice once he'd seen her profile. Had he liked this woman because she reminded him of...?

That was another time, he told himself as he shook his head and turned away from Ms. Brown.

The lady reached out and plucked the angel from his hand, then placed it on the tree. "If you ask me, you should be using that fancy pants alter ego of yours to bring a few smiles to some less fortunate kids..."

"I didn't ask you," he barked. He crossed his arms over his chest in the position he often assumed as Superman.

"Well I'm telling you," she shot right back once she'd finished hanging her decoration. "You come in here every day with a chip on your shoulder the size of Texas and expect everyone to sit back and take it while you treat them like something less than human."

"If you say anything about my origins..."

"I should slap the taste from your mouth," she whispered fiercely as she took a step toward him. "I am not that shallow!"

Clark watched as the woman stared him down. He'd fully expected her to make a smart remark about him not being human — just like everyone else. But she hadn't. She'd threatened to reprimand him. As he continued to look at her, the expression on her face changed. Her hard edge softened and he swore he saw tears in her eyes.

"Oh, bless your heart," she breathed so low he had to use his super hearing to make out her words.

He watched as she reached out to place her hand on his arm, offering him... comfort? His eyes snapped back up to hers, but he didn't make a move to dislodge her limb. They exchanged an entire conversation in their silent observation — a conversation he didn't want to acknowledge, though he couldn't deny it either.

And he refused to give it thought. Not now, not here.

Maybe not ever.

His eyes flashed back at the tree. "Not in my personal space," he told her sharply before pushing around her on his way toward his office.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

He stopped, clearly annoyed. "You can decorate anywhere but my office," he told her again, sharply. Why did this woman have to push his buttons?

Ms. Brown smiled. "Thank you... Clark," she told him.

"Yeah," he answered with a wave of his hand, then turned to start back toward his office. "And the name's Mr. Kent," he called as he opened the double doors leading into his huge corner space.

"Whatever," came the shouted reply.

Just as he closed the doors behind him he heard the excited shouts of the other employees that had assembled to watch his exchange with *Ms. Brown*. Damn that woman, he thought as he plopped down in his chair.

But even as he swiveled around to look out at another day coming alive in Metropolis, he couldn't suppress the small smile that spread across his lips.

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Another obscenity escaped Lois' lips as she lifted the hem of her dress. Why did there have to be fifty steps leading up to the Metropolis Museum of Science and Technology? And why did she have to pick out a dress that was so damned long?

"Good evening," started the security officer at the door as he glanced down at the invitation she'd handed him. "Ms. Lane, a pleasure." He bowed slightly, offering her a smile.

"Thank you," she replied half-heartedly. She couldn't blame the poor guy; he was only doing his job. Stepping through the door he held open, she took a deep breath. Society's most influential people filled the expansive atrium of the most elaborate building in the city. Lois didn't think it was possible to pack so many stuffed shirts into the same place.

She hated these events. Being a top reporter at the Planet, she'd attended many functions like this one. The wealthiest of the wealthy gathered together in an attempt to make themselves appear as unselfish as they were rich. To top things off, it was Christmas!

Gaudy decorations met Lois at every turn. Lights, garland, and yes, a huge tree were all in the room. It was bad enough she was having to cover *another* event for Superman. Did they have to add all the materialistic hoopla to go with it?

Before she had a chance to analyze that, the man of the hour entered amidst the cheers and applause of those gathered. She watched as his cape flowed out behind him. He landed, not on the stage, but in the middle of the crowd. A forced smile told her he was uncomfortable. Didn't he want to be here? Didn't he enjoy these praises?

Superman greeted several people before he made his way up onto the stage. He took his place at a table that had been set up, shaking hands with the dignitaries that had been awaiting his arrival. And to Lois' relief, it wasn't long before an official stepped up to the microphone.

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Clark turned the corner, glad that no one was around. He leaned heavily against the wall, taking a calming breath of air. He hated these events. *Superman* had been praised for his selfless generosity.

Hah! What a joke! Superman might have received the praises tonight, but Clark Kent had paid the price. The medical world had wanted to thank Superman for his contribution to mankind.

He laughed again. The government bureaucrats were only covering their collective asses. They'd discovered a cure for a deadly form of cancer, only because they'd put him through hell.

"I thought you'd be basking in the spotlight for weeks."

Clark's head shot around when he heard the feminine voice address him. To his surprise, he looked directly into the eyes of Lois Lane.

"What's-a-matter, *Superman*? Can't handle the pressure?"

If she only knew how right she was, thought Clark. But he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing how much the events of the night really bothered him. "Miss Lane! I wasn't aware that you'd be here tonight."

"Why wouldn't I be here? The world seems to think you're the hottest thing alive." She crossed her arms in defiance.

"And you disagree?" Clark managed with a smile as he pushed away from the wall.

"If you knew me, you wouldn't even have to ask that question," she told him as she crossed in front of him.

"Is that an offer?" He smiled brightly, the expression he knew had melted many women.

But not Lois Lane. He should have known it wouldn't have an effect.

Lois stopped, her hand perched on the smooth surface of the ladies room door. "I'd be bored and you'd be confused," she clipped out before she pushed her way into the room.

Clark was left with an amused grin. Each and every encounter with that woman left him almost breathless. Just what was it about her that made her so much different than the many other women surrounding him? He shook his head before heading back out to the party. He might not like it, but he owed it to the crowd to spend a little time answering their questions.

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"Clark Kent!"

The use of his real name stopped him dead in his tracks. No one ever used his name when he was dressed in the 'suit'. He turned, for the second time that night, to look Lois Lane in the eyes.

"Why won't you answer the real questions?" she asked, jumping immediately for the hard stuff.

"I thought I had," Clark answered, almost grinning despite his annoyance.

"You answered the questions asked," she replied. "But not the ones that really matter."

He watched in his peripheral vision as people seemed to drift away from them, almost as if they were afraid of what might happen. "And which ones are those?"

"Why do you refuse to grant a personal interview?"

"To the public in general, or just to you?" He could tell his comment had an effect; she furrowed her brows in frustration.

"The world has a right to know about you," she continued.

"Why is that, Miss Lane?" He wanted to know — really wanted to know. What gave others the right to think they had to know about his personal life?

"You're the most powerful being on Earth..."

"And the government has my pledge that I would never abuse my powers."

"The government might have that pledge, but what about the people's right to know?"

"What about it? Don't you realize that if I chose to I could simply disappear? No one would know where I was. Or for that matter, *who* I was. I lived as two people once. I could do it again." He'd had enough tonight. He'd allowed the 'oohs and ahhs' but there was no way he was going to take a personal lashing from a reporter.

"I don't believe that's possible," Lois challenged him as she took a step closer to him. "You've had a taste of celebrity and the fame that comes with it. I've watched you and I've seen the gleam of satisfaction in your eyes when you think the world is bending to your vanity driven ego."

"Aren't we one to talk?"

"I've earned my arrogance through good old-fashioned hard work. But you've taken yours."

"How do you figure that?" By now the pair was toe to toe, face to face.

"You are who you are because of your birth."

"And because of an intelligent race of people!" Damn this woman! Who was she to question him? His motives? To speak of him as if she really knew anything about him?

"Mr. Kent, Miss Lane," interrupted the voice of an anxious little man. "Please calm down."

"Just remember," Lois continued as if she hadn't heard the man. Her gaze was fiercely trained on Clark. "That intelligent race of people felt this world good enough to rear you." She spat the final words out, then turned sharply on her heel to stomp across the room.

"She's something else, isn't she?"

Clark glanced down at the man standing next to him. A good foot shorter, the man wore a black suit that looked to be as old as he was. A bowler hat, of all things, sat atop his head. "She's

infuriating,” Clark told the man. He wasn’t in the mood for this. “Ah, yes, but she’s also exhilarating, don’t you think?”

The man was looking at him with expectant eyes, like he’d actually agree! Before Clark could answer, the man continued.

“She has a strong will.”

“And a stubborn streak,” Clark added as he turned to make his way toward the door of the balcony. He didn’t even notice the man had followed until he’d spoken again.

“Stubborn enough to stand up to you.”

His red cape flowed around his body as he stopped. The graying man was still beside him, pushing obnoxiously round spectacles back up onto his face. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“No, Mr. Kent... at least not yet.”

The last of the man’s statement had been mumbled, but Clark had heard it just the same. Didn’t this man know that he could hear that? “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Ah, well, that’s a loaded question,” the man replied.

“Look, I don’t have time for this.”

“No, certainly not. I’m sure there’s a young woman waiting on you...”

Furious beyond belief, Clark took his patented Superman stance, deliberately trying to intimidate the man. However, it only seemed to amuse him.

“I don’t mean to... annoy you,” the little man went on.

“Then what do you mean?”

“I was only making conversation.”

“About Lois Lane?”

“Yes, well...” The man removed his hat as he looked out at the woman of which they spoke. “I happen to think she’s a wonderful woman.”

“Obviously,” Clark remarked in a sarcastic tone. Who was this man?

“Just look at her.” A dreamy tone had replaced the anxious one of earlier as the man turned to fully face the crowded room. “She knows what she wants and goes after it.”

A glance told Clark that the woman in question was almost arguing with another unsuspecting victim. He wasn’t sure what the latest crusade was she’d set out on and was fairly certain that neither did the person she was talking with.

“She’s driven.”

“Driven isn’t the word for what she is,” Clark added as he relaxed his stance slightly.

“She has to be,” the man remarked as he replaced his hat on his head. “She’s made a living in a man’s world.”

“Her choice,” Clark countered.

“Yes, but you have done no less.”

He couldn’t argue with that. The things he’d done were his choice as well. “She’s just a woman,” the man in blue stated.

“She’s extraordinary.” The older man faced him. “Did you know she overcame huge obstacles to get to where she’s at? Her parents divorced when she was a baby. Her father never wanted a child, so he was non-existent in her life until her mother died of cancer when she was ten. She was forced to go live with him and his new wife. By then she had a half sister and a baby brother that later died. Another brother was doted upon. *He* was the child her father really wanted.”

“There are a lot of people that had tough childhoods...”

“Like you?”

Clark could only stare down at the man. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough,” the man told him. “I know enough to say that Lois Lane is the one person that can cause you strife. She could also cause you to rethink everything you’ve ever known to be true.” The man folded his arms behind his back, a huge smile spreading out across his lips. “She might be the one.”

Was that a knowing smile? How did this man know Lois Lane bothered him? He’d never discussed how he felt about her

with anyone. And what was he talking about? “The one what?”

“The one, Mr. Kent.” The man pierced him with as serious expression as he’d ever seen.

“Don’t be ridiculous. There is no *one* person for anyone.”

“I beg to differ,” the man argued.

“And if you know me at all, you’d know that it would take a special kind of woman to be able to keep up with me.” There! Take that, old man. It was apparent the man thought he knew him. So there was no harm to point out that a regular woman like Lois Lane could never be a match for him.

“I’m aware of that.”

“Then you know an ordinary woman like Lois Lane is *not* that woman.” Clark crossed his arms over his chest. “Besides, why should a man like myself be expected to be content in a relationship with just one woman?”

“Maybe because everyone needs a special someone.”

Again, this man was being ridiculous. He didn’t need anyone!

“And, Mr. Kent, looks can be deceiving. What you see, or what you *think* you see, is not necessarily all there is to someone.”

How true that was, Clark thought. The world saw him one way while he was made up of many layers. One as equally frustrating and painful as the one underneath.

“It would take an incredible woman to not only keep up with me, but to satisfy me as well.” He glanced back out at Lois as she made her way through the front doors of the museum. “And Lois Lane is not her.” Clark turned to walk away. A distinct sonic boom could be heard just seconds later.

The older man simply smiled as he looked down at his pocket watch.

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“Good morning, Metropolis! It’s going to be another beautiful day. Bright sunshine and a balmy 34 degrees. Just right for a brisk walk in the park!”

Clark rolled over and slammed his hand down on top of the annoying machine beside the bed, remembering to reign himself in at the last second. He’d already replaced three clocks in the past month.

Not bothering to move another inch, he reached down to pull the comforter around his shoulders. Just five more minutes. The world could wait on him that long.

Suddenly his eyes shot wide open as a piercing scream from somewhere in the distance invaded his hearing. He must really be attuned to those around him this morning, he thought. That sounded almost as if it were in the apartment with him.

Before he could close his eyes again, the scream turned into a plaintive wail.

“Your turn.”

This time his eyes almost jumped from their sockets. That sound had been right behind him.

And it was a voice. What had he done last night?

The crying continued to invade his hearing as the bed began to move. There was definitely someone in the bed with him.

“Come on. You know it’s your turn.”

The voice was a pitiful plea, then suddenly a warm hand smoothed across his back. An even warmer body pressed against the length of his, gently coaxing him to wake up. Instead, he screwed his eyes together as tightly as possible. Had he been desperate enough to bring a woman home that had a child?

Wait! That didn’t make sense. She was insisting it was his turn. His turn to what?

“Daddy!”

Again, his eyes flew wide open. Before him stood a small girl, her face mere inches from his.

“The baby’s got a messy diaper,” she whispered fiercely. “You know I can’t change that.”

He shot straight up in the bed as his eyes searched his

surroundings frantically.

‘Where am I?’ he thought as he failed to recognize his surroundings. Definitely not his apartment. While the room was large, comfortably decorated, it had four walls- four solid walls. The window on the east side, or any side for that matter, was prominently missing.

‘Thanks, honey,’ came the grumbled reply from the woman beside him as she rolled back over and snuggled deeper into the covers.

‘Come on, Daddy. He’s really smelly.’

The dark haired little girl reached for his hand, but he immediately snatched away from her. What the hell was going on? And why the hell was she calling him ‘Daddy’? His eyes locked with the surprised ones of the child as if she held all the answers. What he saw nearly broke his heart. Her tiny lip had started to quiver and huge tears had filled her eyes. She simply stared at him for a moment before she turned and ran from the room.

Part of him wanted to run after her.

Why would he do that?! He had no idea who she was.

‘Yo, Pops, Baby Kent is noxious!’

Clark barely caught a glimpse of a boy as he passed the door of the bedroom. He was taller than the girl, so obviously a little older. But what he’d said registered loud and clear in Clark’s mind.

Baby Kent!

BABY KENT!

His feet hit the floor with speed just short of super as he headed toward the sound of the crying. Across the hall from the room he was in, stood a crying baby boy, his pudgy little hands wrapped around the rail of his crib. Almost immediately the child stopped crying when he noticed Clark in the doorway.

‘DaDa!’ chanted the baby as he jumped up and down happily.

Clark couldn’t breathe as he stared at the child. He wasn’t sure if it was because he was staring at a baby that referred to him as his daddy or because of the smell! Man, this kid really was noxious!

‘Do you realize that is really serious stuff to a man with super senses?’ he asked as he approached the child. Like the kid can answer you, Kent, he told himself.

And why are you even getting closer? Why are you... reaching in to lift him?

He simply stood there, holding the baby under his tiny arms. What now? There was no way he was going to change this kid!

‘Gee, Dad, he won’t bite.’

Clark turned his head just in time to see the older boy walk off again, shaking his head. He looked back at the baby he held at arm’s length. Huge, soulful, brown eyes simply gazed upon him, almost in fascination. Obviously this child thought him to be his daddy, too. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but he knew his sensitive nose couldn’t handle the awful smell much longer either.

He moved toward a changing table against the far wall and gingerly placed the baby on his back. Now what? He glanced down when he felt something touch his arm. The little girl was there, diaper in hand.

‘Thank you,’ he said as he took the item.

‘You’re welcome,’ she answered then moved to push a stool over to the table. She reached up and retrieved a large plastic box from a shelf just above the table. ‘You’ll need these.’

He was about to ask what ‘these’ were when she pulled a wet cloth from the box. Baby wipes! Of course he’d need those. Now, what do I do? He looked down at the baby helplessly.

‘His pants, they snap at the top,’ the girl offered as she pointed the obvious out to him.

He merely shook his head as he unsnapped the pants. Oh,

thank God it’s not running everywhere, he thought as he removed the baby’s bottoms. This was going to be an adventure. But you’re Superman, he told himself, you can do this.

And that’s just what he did. His hands flew through the process of changing the soiled diaper and disposing of the offending item in a little contraption the girl pointed out. When he was done, the baby was clean and dry, pants back in place, and smiling at him. Two tiny teeth glistened from inside the boy’s mouth, almost causing Clark to smile in return.

‘I was wondering why you were wasting so much time,’ the girl replied as she jumped down from the stool. ‘You never change the bad ones at regular speed.’

What? He hadn’t given much thought to using his powers; he’d just wanted to get the smell taken care of. He was almost relieved to find out that she at least knew about his super side. It was something that was familiar in this... dream?

Is that what this was? A dream? But why would he dream about something like this? This was more like a nightmare.

‘Mom’s in the shower and wants me to tell you she needs someone to wash her back.’

The older boy was back. He reached out and took the baby from him.

‘Honestly, Dad, you two gross me out. That’s why you have three kids, you know.’

And he was gone. But Clark could only stare at his retreating back. The kid looked almost exactly like he had when he was a boy. What was going on?!

He dashed back out into the hall, his eyes frantically searching his surroundings. Stairs led down just off to his left, another door was closed just beside the one he stood in, one more down from that, and another one across and to his left. The hallway wasn’t very long, but it was wide. The walls were covered in pictures. He stood frozen as he looked at the images. They were of him, these children, and a woman. A woman he knew!

He raced into his bedroom and into the bathroom. A startled scream came from the woman in the shower when he jerked the shower curtain open.

‘Honestly, Clark, why do you insist on scaring me like that?’ She didn’t remain irritated long because Clark was still standing there, staring at her. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Lois,’ he breathed.

‘The last time I checked.’ She grinned. ‘Expecting someone else?’

He backed up toward the door. No! This *was* not happening. He turned and ran from the room.

‘Clark!’

He ignored the desperate call behind him as he raced down the stairs and out the front door. Snow covered the ground as he stood barefoot on the sidewalk. Beautiful houses stood in both directions. He was in suburbia! Not knowing what else to do, he shot into the sky. A few minutes later he landed with a resounding thud in front of his apartment building in Metropolis. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but it was time to wake up now.

‘Good morning, Mr. Kent. To what do we owe this pleasure?’

The doorman was just as cheerful as usual, he thought, as he reached out to snatch the door open.

‘Mr. Kent!’

Clark continued without a word. Curious glances from the other people didn’t slow him down; he didn’t stop until he was standing in front of the penthouse. He was about to reach out to grab the doorknob when the door suddenly opened.

‘Oh, Mr. Kent!’ The man had been momentarily stunned to find someone standing in front of his door. ‘Mr. Kent, are you all right?’

No, he was not all right! He was in virtual hell, and he didn’t

know how to get out.

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He shot off the roof of another building, the resounding sonic boom echoing loudly in his own ears. He didn't live in the penthouse of the Casey building on Carter Avenue any more. A man named Eduardo lived there. Well, at least he still owned the building. He'd learned that much before he'd left. He still owned Kent Enterprises in the business district. And he was still Superman. He'd seen a few billboards. But he still didn't know what was going on.

He raced across the city, not sure where he was going. The huge globe of the Daily Planet caught his eye, so he turned and landed on the roof. Maybe he could find answers there. He was always in the news and Lois was...

God, Lois Lane was his...

What was she exactly? His wife? The older boy had called her mom, so obviously she was the mother of... those children.

He couldn't bring himself to say *his* children. Those were not his children. Lois Lane was not wife. And this was not his life! "Hmm, humf."

Someone cleared their throat just as Clark reached the door to the stairwell. He turned to see who it was.

"You!" It was the little man with the strange clothes and bowler hat from last night.

"Yes, quite. It's just me." He smiled as he approached Clark.

"What are you doing here?" Clark demanded. "And do you know anything about what's going on?"

"If you're referring to your life..."

"You mean my hell!"

"Oh, oh, well I can see you're not taking this well."

"Taking this well? How am I supposed to take this? Whatever *this* is!"

"This, Mr. Kent, is a glimpse into things to come."

"Things to come?!"

"Or rather, things that could be." He clasped his hands behind his back. "You have a destiny, Mr. Kent..."

"Yes, to get back home! My real home!" Clark placed his hands on his hips and glared down at the man.

"Do you realize that your life means far more than you have ever imagined?"

Clark had grown exasperated. "Just tell me what's going on?"

"You have been given a rare opportunity, to see what life could be like should you choose to accept it."

"Accept it? A wife, three kids, and a house in the suburbs? I don't think so," Clark almost shouted as he stepped around the man to look out over the city. "I'm married to Lois Lane! I don't think either of us would ever accept that."

The man walked up beside Clark and smiled. "As I told you before, Mr. Kent, she's an incredible woman."

"You're telling me that, what? I will eventually marry Lois Lane? I don't think so." He crossed his arms over his chest. "And how is this possible anyway? People cannot be transported into... into.. the future!" He waved his arms frantically.

"You haven't been transported to the future. You're only receiving a glimpse of what *could* be the future."

"Why?" he shouted. "Why would I want a future like this?"

"Because it's better than the alternative." And before Clark could speak, the man reached out and took his hand. The world began to spin and images flashed behind his eyes.

Images of himself, eating alone. His penthouse, cold and empty. People around him, angry and bitter — with him. Superman existed, but had lost his popularity. Clark Kent remained, cold and arrogant as ever. He didn't have friends and those that worked for him disliked him.

Ms. Brown was still there, but she'd lost her fire. She was like everyone else around him; she simply tolerated him.

He saw the graves of his parents. Tall grass almost engulfed

them completely. The ruins of his childhood home sat off in the distance.

Lois... she was there. She was chasing down another lead. She worked and went home alone. No one had ever been able to 'keep up with *her*'.

The Daily Planet, new modern, was still a beacon in the city. But everything was different. Metropolis was darker somehow. Graffiti had almost taken over the buildings, trash spilled out of the alleys, and crime was rampant.

Then suddenly he was standing on the rooftop again. The little man in the bowler hat looked up at him gravely.

"You see, Clark, that is your future. That is the way things will be in just a few short years."

Clark's breathing was almost labored as he tried to make sense of what he'd just seen and felt. He'd felt the emotions of the people of that future place. Ms. Brown, the stranger, and Lois... he'd felt her incredible loneliness. He'd also felt his own despair. The man he was going to become was not happy at all. He merely existed. He had no friends, no parents, no wife... no children. He was truly alone.

His eyes met those of the man before him.

"Painful, isn't it? But you have the power to stop it."

"H... how?" he asked, swallowing to wet his dry mouth.

"Go back to the house in the suburbs, live this alternate life for a while. You might find the answers there."

Clark watched as the older man turned to walk away. "How long?" The man stopped and smiled back at him. "How long... will I be there?"

"You will be here as long as you need to be." And that was all he said before he was gone.

The city was just coming alive, and it was still fresh and bright. That other place had been dark and stale, even fearful. How had that happened? How *would* it happen? If he could really believe this man, and Clark felt that he did indeed believe him, that world was his future. Metropolis would become just another statistic, another haven of crime. Countless people would be lost in the shuffle just to survive.

The sun glistened off the pristine snow-capped buildings as he continued to stand there. It was Christmas time in this place, too. The city was decorated at every turn and for the first time in years, he realized he liked it.

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"It's a good thing you're invulnerable," Lois commented when he stepped through the back door of the house he had fled from earlier.

Clark glanced down at his bare feet, then smiled a little sheepishly. What else could he do?

"Where did you go?" she asked as she continued to pour orange juice into the glass she held. She set the glass on the table in front of the little girl, ruffled the hair on the baby's head, then waited patiently for him to answer. "Did you have an emergency?"

He should have asked the old man to explain a few things to him before he disappeared. These people thought he was part of their lives, had always been part of them. And he had no clue what she was talking about. After standing on top of the Daily Planet building for what seemed like hours, and finding no answers, he'd decided to return to the house on the outskirts of town. The answers might not be there either, but what choice did he have? Everyone in this place thought him to be 'this' Clark Kent.

Lois set the pitcher down on the table and stared at him. "Clark, are you okay? You seem..."

"He's okay, Mommy," answered the little girl as she turned to flash him a smile. "He was just trying to hide your Christmas present. Isn't that right, Daddy?"

Clark couldn't help but smile at the child. She was so cute.

Her top teeth were missing and her long hair fell across her face. “Ah, yeah, that’s right,” he quickly agreed. She gave him a knowing wink before turning back to her breakfast. Could she possibly know he wasn’t who he was supposed to be?

Lois grinned widely. “What did you get me?”

“Give it up, Mom, he’s never going to tell you,” came the voice of the oldest child. He shot Clark a bright smile. “Looks like she’d learn after all these years, huh?”

“Yeah,” was the only thing he could say as he stepped over and dropped onto a chair next to the boy. Obviously this was some kind of tradition for them, so he’d play along. “Thanks,” he told Lois as she set a cup of coffee down in front of him. He could actually use something a little stronger, but coffee would have to do.

She ran a hand through his hair before moving back toward the expansive kitchen. He felt an unexpected tingle from her simple touch. Again, his mind whirled to comprehend it all. How was he going to be able to pull this off?

Slowly the kids started to talk. They exchanged unsanitary insults and discussed their day. Lois asked about homework and reminded him that it was his turn to drop them off at school. He felt a momentary panic rise within him, but was settled again when the girl reached out to cover his large hand with her smaller one. For the second time, she gave him a knowing smile.

I don’t even know their names, he thought, as he looked down at her, but managed to return her smile. A deep breath for courage, and he reached across the table to grab a piece of toast. Since he was here, and hungry, he might as well eat.

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Clark stared down at the pair of jeans lying on the bed. Lois had told him that she’d laid his clothes out. Admittedly the pants were nice, but still jeans nonetheless. He’d stopped wearing jeans years ago. They reminded him too much of his past.

“You’re not my daddy, are you?”

His head snapped up and his eyes locked with those of the little girl. She *did* know. And just how was he supposed to answer?

“No,” he said softly, deciding the truth was best.

She looked him over carefully from head to toe. “Well, you look like him.”

“Then what makes you so sure I’m not him?” The question slipped from his mouth before he could stop it. Slowly, so that he wouldn’t frighten her, he eased down onto the bed.

“Cause my daddy never looked at me the way you do,” she told him as she moved over to the closet and retrieved a pair of boots. “He never snatched his hand away from me,” she went on as she dropped the boots on the floor in front of him.

“And just how do I look at you?” He was curious to know just what this child thought of him.

“Like you’ve never seen me before.” The child picked up a pair of socks lying on the bed and bent to push one up onto Clark’s foot.

God help him. How did he answer this child? This... this mess wasn’t her fault, and for the life of him, he couldn’t bring himself to hurt her feelings. Not again. Not like he had when he’d pulled his hand from hers that morning.

He leaned over and took both her hands into his and pulled her to her feet. “But I have now, and I’m sorry for this morning.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You just didn’t know me.”

“Still...” He rubbed his thumbs across the backs of her small hands.

“Where is my real daddy?”

He looked back up at her with sad eyes. “I’m not sure. Maybe... maybe I’m supposed to be him... soon.” Could he have said anything more lame? This child would never understand that.

“He’s okay?”

“He’s fine,” Clark told her, not knowing what else to say.

She eyed him for several minutes before she pulled her hands from his and bent to put his other sock on. “Well, if you promise to give him back soon, I’ll help you out while you’re here.”

Was this kid for real? She took this revelation in stride and just accepted him.

Rising to her feet, she pushed her hair out of her eyes. “I’m Lara. Robin calls me Girl Kent. He’s Boy Kent, and Baby Kent’s name is Wyatt. I guess you know Mommy’s name is Lois because you didn’t look at her like you did us kids.” She pulled him to his feet and shoved his jeans in his hand, then pushed his body toward the bathroom. He stepped behind the door and changed while she continued to talk.

“I’m eight, Robin’s ten, and Wyatt just turned one. You guys waited forever for that kid.” He buttoned his pants and stepped back into the room. As she guided him back toward the bed, she continued. “You and Mommy had to heal your hearts first.”

“What?” he asked as he dropped down to the bed.

“You both were sad when Clara died.” She stopped and looked into his horrified eyes. “She was only two days old when she went to live in heaven with Gramma Ellen.” The little girl swiped a hand across her face, clearing away a large tear that threatened to spill down her cheek.

Clark felt awful. He, or Clark rather, and Lois had lost a baby. He wanted to ask what had happened, but the girl, Lara, he reminded himself, was reaching out to help him take off his shirt. He quickly pulled the garment over his head and shoved his arms into the clean one she held. He could only watch as she deftly buttoned it up.

“Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are your days. You get up with the baby and take us to school.” When she was done with his shirt, she bent and moved one of his boots over for him to slip his foot into. “Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays are Mommy’s days.”

“And Sundays?” he asked as he bent to lace up the boot.

“We all pitch in because we go to church.”

What?!

He sat straight up and stared down at the top of her head. They go where? It wasn’t like he had anything against the place. Or God for that matter. It just seemed... odd that a man from another planet would...

Oh, what was he saying? God was infinite. At least that’s what the religious scholars proclaimed.

“We go to school at Carver Road right down the street. Mommy goes to the office on your days and you go on her days. ‘Cept Saturday. Weekends are family time. After chores, we all do things together. You know, like soccer, football, or go to the park. Something like that.” She shrugged and helped him put on his other boot.

“What do I do when I’m not at the office?”

“You write. You and Mommy have an office downstairs, right by the front door.” She looked him over once before she smiled. “You might want to comb your hair.”

He couldn’t suppress the smile as he got up and walked into the bathroom.

“That’s your toothbrush,” Lara pointed out after she’d followed him in.

“Do I have bad breath?” he joked.

She hid a giggle behind her hand. “You’re funny like my daddy.”

“Clark!” came a shout from somewhere outside the room. “Have you seen Lara?”

“Ah, yeah, Lois. She’s in here with me.”

“It’s showtime,” Lara whispered before she jumped from the stool in front of the sink. “Don’t worry. You’ll do great.” And she was gone.

“Hey, sweetie. Get your coat,” he heard Lois say just before

she stepped into the bathroom.

He leaned over to spit the toothpaste from his mouth, then took the offered towel Lois held for him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him.

“What? Is my fly open?” He looked down at himself.

“No.” Her eyes roamed his body, making him feel uncomfortable.

Almost.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over how good you look in blue jeans,” she remarked.

And before his cheeks could heat up, she reached out and squeezed his rear. But he didn’t have time to dwell on her actions because she was already back in the bedroom.

“Hurry up, Flyboy. We’ll be late,” she called, leaving Clark in stunned silence.

This really was his life. He’d married Lois Lane.

Well, obviously. They had three children together. He knew this, but at the same time a woman he’d previously almost loathed had just groped him. How had they gotten to this point?

And why did he like it so much?

He guessed he knew now why he wore blue jeans.

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He’d just buckled the baby into his car seat when he heard another boy shouting.

“Hey, guys, wait up!”

Two boys about Lara’s age dashed across the yard from the house next door, scrambling to get into the back of the SUV. Clark had no idea who they were, but he supposed they rode with them to school. A younger man waved at him from the porch next door.

“Morning, CK!”

“Morning,” he answered automatically. It wasn’t until he’d climbed behind the wheel of the car that he realized someone had just voluntarily spoken to him. When was the last time that had happened when he wasn’t in the ‘suit’?

And he’d called him CK. He had a nickname that wasn’t related to his alter ego.

“I’ll be ready by four today,” Lois told him as they backed out into the street. She rode with him into work... How... lame! He’d seen for himself that he still owned a booming business. So why didn’t she drive her own car? And it was a very nice car — an expensive car.

“I have practice today, Dad. Last one before Christmas break. I’m riding home with Tommy.”

Clark glanced in the mirror at the oldest boy, Robin.

Robin? What an unusual name for a boy, he thought as he nodded at the child.

“So what do you and Wyatt have planned for today?” Lois asked him.

He looked over at her. How should he know?

Wait! Had she said Wyatt? That was the baby. That meant he was... Mr. Mom?!

Lara had completely forgotten to mention that little detail! “Clark?”

He was brought back to the present when Lois touched his hand. He realized that he hadn’t given her an answer.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Ah, yeah. I guess I’m a little tired.” Boy, was he!

“Guess that earthquake took more out of you than you’d thought.”

Earthquake? What earthquake?

Before he could answer they’d reached the school. The kids piled out and offered their folks a bright smile. Lara stepped up to the window on the passenger’s side. “Two-fifteen, Daddy. Don’t be late.”

She gave Clark a wink and was gone.

“What was that all about?” Lois asked as Clark pulled the car back out into the street.

He simply shrugged as they made their way out of suburbia and into the city. Lois rattled on happily about work while he desperately tried to make sense out of his situation. Before he knew it, they were parked in front of Kent Enterprises.

“Nothing spicy for dinner, Clark. You know I had heartburn for two days last week after I ate those fajitas.”

“Nothing spicy,” he repeated methodically, then realized she was waiting for him to tell her good-bye. “Have a good day,” he offered lamely.

“Come on, Kent. You can do better than that.” Without waiting for him to say another word, she reached out and grabbed his shirt, tugging him toward her.

Clark’s mind went completely blank when her lips touched his. Soft, supple lips pressed against his, threatening to take his breath away.

“Mmm,” she sighed with a sappy smile when she pulled back. “That’s good stuff.” She twisted in her seat to smile at the baby. “See ya, later, sweetie. Mommy loves you.” Her hand smoothed across Clark’s face just before she hopped from the car and started toward the building.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kent,” came the cheery greeting of the doorman.

“Good morning to you, Ralph!”

He watched her, with his special vision, long after she entered the building. People went out of their way to speak to her, held doors for her, smiled at her. And why wouldn’t they? This Lois was nothing like the one he knew. This Lois was bright, happy... gorgeous.

If he was honest, he’d have to admit that the Lois he knew was gorgeous as well. But he suddenly wondered if she was stuck up and hateful to everyone or just to him. The blaring of a horn tore him from his thoughts and he grumbled before setting back out toward... home.

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“So, what do I do with you?” he asked the bright eyed baby boy sitting on his lap. They’d managed to make it back to the house without much trouble. But now he was just sitting on the sofa in the den staring at the boy before him. The child rubbed his eyes in answer.

“Are you sleepy? We can do sleepy... I think.” Clark looked around the room, noticing a playpen in front of the sliding glass doors. “Would you like to lie down?” He sat the baby down in the pen, then straightened with a sour expression. “Guess we could take off your coat and hat.” Once that was done, he could only look at the helpless child again. “Maybe you need something to drink.” He hurried into the kitchen and fetched a baby cup using his x-ray vision. “Well, you’re off the bottle,” Clark commented when he noticed the lack of that particular item in the cabinets. A cup of milk was returned to the baby who reached for it happily. Ten minutes later, the little guy was fast asleep.

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. “We made it through the first...” He glanced at his watch. “... hour.” He shoved a hand through his hair roughly, then went off in search of a few answers.

According to the things he’d found, it was December 2006. It was indeed the future for him. He and Lois had been married for eleven years, which meant they had married only six months after the last night he remembered before waking up in this alternate reality. Robin was born just a year later. He’d seen the video of all three of the kids’ births. Correction — all four.

Baby Clara had been born with a heart defect. Something not even he had been able to fix. Superman had been powerless to help his own child.

And Superman was another mystery. Newspaper clippings he’d found suggested that he used his other personality to help

during natural disasters and other major emergencies. He'd saved an entire family when their apartment building had caught fire. He'd stopped a wildfire in California from spreading over countless acres, a border skirmish in Bosnia, a terrorist cell in the Middle East, volcano in Japan. The list went on and on. He'd even rescued Lois from the hands of Lex Luthor.

He'd thought that man was a good person. Yet, he was reading proof that Luthor had been a criminal, now serving two life sentences thanks to his wife.

She'd stopped working for the Daily Planet when Clara died. He'd found her farewell piece in the on-line archive of the Planet. He wasn't exactly sure what she'd done for the two years right after she'd left the Planet. But she'd since written a book. 'Clara's Heart' was a wonderful tale of a mother and father who'd longed for a baby only to lose her two days after her birth. He'd sped through the pages when he found the hardback on the shelves in their office.

Their office wasn't very big. Most of the space was consumed by two large desks that faced one another. The walls were essentially bookshelves, containing a huge array of books, including his.

He was a writer. Though he wrote under a different name, there was no mistaking the style. He'd written a few things before for various financial magazines when he'd been in school. He'd known immediately he'd written those books.

By two o'clock, he'd introduced himself to the man he was supposed to be. He'd become acquainted with his family and had done it all while taking care of the baby. He hadn't realized he'd done it until he looked at the little fellow when he'd snapped him back into his car seat to pick up Lara at school. Somewhere during the course of the day, he'd very easily stepped into his new role.

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Lara and the two little boys from that morning settled in their seats, happily chatting about their day. Clark glanced back at them in the rearview mirror, then smiled as he pulled away from the curb. The boys were dropped off at home — he'd learned they were Jimmy and Lucy's twin boys. Lucy was Lois' half sister and Jimmy worked at the Planet. Jimmy Olsen, he'd realized, having seen his photographs in the Planet archives. He'd also read that Jimmy was an award winning photo journalist. Lucy was an artist. There were several of her paintings hanging throughout the house.

It was Wednesday, which meant it was also his night to cook. Lara helpfully pointed him toward the supermarket and together they decided on frozen lasagna. He'd explained to Lara that he didn't know how to cook, so she'd suggested the frozen entree. She'd explained that her daddy was a very good cook, although sometimes he'd opt for something quick to spend extra time with his family. They'd use that excuse tonight. So, they made their purchases and drove into the city to pick up Lois.

For the second time that day Clark's mind went blank. Lois had gotten into the car and promptly kissed him. This time when she pulled back, he smiled at her. He wasn't about to analyze what was happening to him. Not after a moment like that.

They drove the distance back home as they talked about their day. Clark told Lois that he'd worked a little without elaborating further. She was thrilled about a new client at work and he was only too happy to let her talk.

He managed to get dinner cooked, and it was even edible. He helped with homework, figured out how to work the washing machine, bathed the baby, read a bedtime story, and tucked his kids in.

"You did great today," Lara told him as he pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Thanks. You helped out a lot."

"No problem."

"There was something I was meaning to ask you," he said as he eased to the bed. "I'm... Superman."

"Duh," she replied with a grin.

"What I meant was... well, you kids... are you guys...?"

"Special?" she asked. When he nodded, she continued.

"That's what Mommy likes to call it. Robin's never been sick and is really, really smart. Nothing else yet though. I'm a little faster than most kids my age, but Mommy insists I don't show off. Wyatt seems normal, just like Clara."

"Is that why Mommy and I had such a hard time when she died? Because I felt she should have been super?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"It's exactly what I'd have thought." He retucked the covers under her chin. "Thanks again."

"Stick with me, kid," she told him with a wink. "You'll do just fine. 'Night!"

He smiled at her as she rolled to her side and closed her eyes. "Night," he offered softly before making his way out of the room. He looked in on the baby one more time, then headed into his room. Lois was propped against the headboard with her laptop.

"I just want to get these notes down, honey," she told him without looking up from her work.

"Sure," he offered before shutting himself off in the bathroom. He methodically changed into a pair of sleep pants and a tee shirt without bothering to think about much of anything. He realized he was tired. Though he was fairly sure it had nothing to do with how much he'd exerted himself during the day. He went back into the bedroom and climbed into bed. He wanted nothing more than to just close his eyes and block out everything and everyone, if only for a little while. The steady tap of Lois' keyboard continued for several more minutes before he heard the click that meant she'd closed it. Her light went off and she rolled over to snuggle up to him.

Clark had to fight to control his libido when she began kissing his back. Her hand smoothed across his side and around to his chest.

"Clark, honey..." Another kiss to the back of his neck — he had to squeeze his eyes closed tightly. "I want you," she breathed.

Anything but that, his mind screamed. He couldn't do that. As much as his body screamed otherwise, there was no way he'd do that to her. He reached down and took her hand in his. "I'm really tired, Lois," he said softly and placed a kiss on her hand for good measure. Maybe that would be enough to keep her from asking questions.

She sighed heavily, and he knew she wanted to say something, but instead she kissed his neck again. "Okay, sweetie. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," he replied, almost painfully so. He continued to hold her hand so she snuggled closer to his back. He could feel her tension ease, hear her heart slow to a steady pace. Lying with her, knowing that she wanted him, was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Usually there was no problem when it came to a beautiful woman in his bed asking for him. Yet, here with this woman, he couldn't help but feel she deserved more.

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He was up before the others the following morning. He'd awakened long before the alarm went off. The day before replayed itself over and over in his mind. He'd never imagined himself married, with children. He'd known having children were a possibility, yet he just hadn't liked the idea all that much. And as strange as this new life was, he couldn't help but find it interesting as well.

Unable to sleep, he'd padded down to the office and called up a few programs on his computer. Clark Kent's head was definitely full of Lois Lane, he thought as he tapped in another password. It seemed that she was his password for every program on his hard drive.

He'd recently started another book. There were a total of twenty books to his credit. All had been best sellers. And apparently no one but Lois and the kids knew he wrote them under the name Charlie King.

He didn't realize he had so much talent; his work was eloquent and beautifully done. Various reviews raved over his writing. Why had he started to write? What about his company?

The firm was still very much a large presence in the business world, but rather than tackle the task of being head of the company, he'd appointed a board. Pete Ross was chairman of that board.

Pete Ross? That had been the name of his best friend growing up. Was it possible it was the same person?

A few quick clicks on the computer later and he'd learned that indeed, Pete Ross from Smallville was chairman of his international company.

He pushed back and looked out the window as dawn began to break across the horizon. An empty lot across from the house gave him a beautiful view of the rising sun. In his other reality, his east walls were covered in large windows. He'd always been fascinated with the sun, with the universe in general. He'd spent so many long nights gazing up at the stars and wondering just why he'd been sent to this world.

He'd been born on a planet a galaxy away. He'd learned that from a small globe he'd had since he was a kid. Even during the shuffle of his teenage years, he'd held on to that one piece of his origins. The globe contained holograms of his birth parents. Jor-El was a scientist and Lara...

He swiveled back around and lifted a picture on his desk. His daughter was named after his birth mother. A small smile tugged at his lips as he set the frame back down. His birth parents must have been remarkable people. They'd sent him to Earth to save his life right before their world exploded. He had been lucky enough to have been found and raised by farmers from Kansas. They'd treated him as their own son.

That is until Dark Sunday. That was the day he had been stripped from his life, from his home. A couple had shown up that day claiming to be his natural parents. They'd told the Kents that Clark had been kidnapped, and they only wanted him back. There had been paperwork — a birth certificate, pictures of his birth. It had been excruciating for the Kents to let him go. He'd begged them not to give him up, but what choice was there? They'd contacted a lawyer and the paperwork had been verified. Clark said good-bye to his parents and was carted off to hell.

Those people had not been his natural parents, of course. They'd been from a secret branch of the military that tracked alien activity on the planet. They'd known exactly who he was. He'd been studied and analyzed, his body tortured in the name of science and humanity. When he became too strong for them to keep him a prisoner, he'd left. He was seventeen by then. He was also bitter and angry with everyone and everybody, including the Kents. That's why he had never contacted them again.

He'd moved into a halfway house in Washington state and entered college, with forged transcripts provided by his captors. Needless to say, they'd been unable to deny him much, especially after he'd torn down one of their labs with his bare hands. When Clark discovered he could fly at eighteen, he started to form a plan to take care of himself for the rest of his life. He took his plan back to the government. Knowing there was still research they wanted to do, he agreed to be studied, to a degree, if they'd continue to open doors and provide financial support. He'd threatened to expose himself, start an alien conspiracy story to scare the masses unless they helped him. So for the next five years Clark was studied while he honed his powers. He'd earned a degree in business and invested his blood money, because that's how he'd come to see it, in several wise business ventures. He'd been content to live out his days quietly in his little corner of the

world, but Nightfall changed everything.

The government contacted him, claiming he was the only hope for survival. He'd flown into space and disposed of the threat, after being told they would keep it all quiet. But not everyone agreed. Someone leaked information to the press and his picture had been splashed all over the front pages of newspapers worldwide. That's when he'd invented Superman. Still he wanted to just be Clark Kent. So he'd lived two separate lives. But he'd fallen under the hypnotic spell that fame had woven around him as Superman. He became accustomed to the money. By the time Jason Trask exposed him, he was no one he recognized any more.

While his debut as Superman had been welcomed with an assortment of reactions, his exposure as Clark Kent had shocked the world. Some still saw him as nothing short of amazing while others were skeptical about his intentions. No matter that Superman was a huge success and had made Clark a very rich man, the money had never been enough to make him truly happy. He was extremely bitter from the things that had happened to him. He turned that bitterness into rage before eventually settling for forced resolve. He allowed his prominence in the world to rule his behavior and adopted a cold, arrogant attitude. He took advantage of his situation and enjoyed his success to the fullest. A steady parade of girlfriends had graced his bed but none had satisfied him. A high rise penthouse took the place of a corner apartment in a run down building on the east side of Seattle. Flying replaced the old, beat up truck he'd owned, and he'd retired his glasses permanently.

Looking back, he couldn't explain why he'd kept the name 'Clark Kent'. It was something he felt he had to do. He wasn't even sure why he remained Clark at all after he was exposed. It was definitely easier being Superman, but no one would have taken him seriously in the business world with a name like that. Not to mention that flashy suit. He'd worked hard for his degree, finishing in half the time thanks to the need for less sleep than most. Corporate finance intrigued him and finding success that had nothing to do with his powers gave him a sense of accomplishment like nothing else could.

He glanced at the books on the bookshelf. Is that why this Clark had started to write?

This was getting confusing, he thought. This Clark, this reality he'd found himself in, it was him, yet not. It was his future, but not really. Yes, very confusing. Before he could delve into anything else, he heard the soft cries of the baby boy upstairs. It wasn't until he reached into the crib did he realize he'd automatically gone to check on him.

But there was no time to dwell on that either. The other kids were up and Lois was yelling for him to get in the shower.

Confusing had taken on new meaning in the last two days.

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"Good morning, Mr. Kent," came the greeting from the jovial doorman at Kent Enterprises.

Still reeling from the kiss his wife had graced him with earlier, he almost slipped into the building without acknowledging the man. "Ah, good morning," he managed.

"Are the kids excited about Christmas?"

Clark stopped when he realized he liked this kind of attention. Even better than the attention he was used to. Yet, he had no idea if they were excited about Christmas. They hadn't mentioned it, other than the morning before when Lara had helped him make an excuse. There was a huge tree in their den, a small one in the game room, and there was even one on the landing upstairs. The dining room was elaborately decorated and lights covered the lawn as well as the back deck. They definitely celebrated the season.

"List that long?" the man asked when Clark failed to answer him.

“Ah, yeah,” Clark agreed quickly. “They want everything.” Or at least he would if he was their age and had parents with money.

“Mrs. Kent swears she won’t spoil ‘em this year.”

Clark chuckled softly. She probably had.

“How ‘bout the Missus’ gift? Is it something good this year? Has she figured it out yet?”

Apparently everyone knew that Clark fought hard every year to keep Lois’ gift a secret, only to have her find out eventually. Lara had told him about that the day before. And he’d gotten her some very impressive items over the years. Maybe he should think about getting something soon. He didn’t know how long he’d be here.

“I’m going to try something different this year,” Clark began as an idea formed in his mind.

The doorman smiled a knowing smile. “Gonna wait till the last minute, huh?”

“Well, maybe not.” No, that might prove to be too late. He’d definitely have to get to work on her gift. Maybe today.

“I should let you go.” The man moved to open the door for Clark. “Have a nice day!”

“I will.” Clark was still smiling when he entered the building. The girl behind the information desk looked up, and instead of her smile faltering, it widened. She greeted him the same way the doorman had. Others didn’t move to make a path for him to the elevator — they walked up to join him. Some even made polite conversation while they waited for the car. For the first time in years, Clark had company on the ride up to his office.

A burst of red and green invaded his sight when he stepped onto the top floor. Several passersby greeted him happily as he made his way down the hallway toward his office. A little old lady that he recognized smiled as he approached.

“‘Bout time you made it in, slow poke. I was beginning to think I’d have to run this place by myself.”

“Ms. Brown,” Clark said softly, trying to keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Who’d you expect?”

Just as sharp as ever, he thought as he reached for the paper she’d extended to him. “Thank you,” he offered just before he pushed open the doors of his office.

“You’re welcome,” she answered from behind him.

Things were so much different in this reality, he thought as he read through the morning edition of the Daily Planet. Crime was down, thanks to Superman. And Lois Lane. His office walls were decorated with the many accolades she’d received from her writing over the years. She’d earned four Kerths, a Bailey, and Distinguished Medal of Honor.

And she’d traded it all for a family and a house in the suburbs. Was she really happy?

There were articles about him as Superman and as Clark. Lois had finally nailed that tell all expose.

So much was different here. His office was decorated for the holiday. He would have never allowed that before. Yet, here he liked it.

His clothes — the jeans had been replaced with a suit and tie this morning and while he was glad to see that he still owned nice things, he realized he was nowhere near as comfortable today as he’d been the day before.

He couldn’t suppress a smile as he remembered what Lois had been wearing this morning. The smart business suit had been replaced by baggy sweats, and she had been every bit as beautiful.

What was wrong with him?!

Suddenly his head snapped up. Sirens, lots of them, invaded his hearing. There was something huge going on. He stood and walked over to look out of the window. With enhanced vision he could see the emergency vehicles descending upon the school on

Lee Street. What was happening? What should he do? In this place Superman was a savior of sorts.

“Lois put a clean suit in the closet.” Ms. Brown had rushed into the room and jerked a door open to reveal a small closet. Inside hung one of his suits. “Don’t just stand there! The scanner said there’s a gunman and he’s threatening to shoot a teacher!”

Without another thought, Clark zipped across the room and left the building as Superman. Behind him papers dropped to the floor in the wake of his departure. Not today, he’d decided. No one would die at that school today.

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Clark paced back and forth in front of the large windows in his office, his crisp slacks making the slightest whisp of noise with each turn. He was wound up tighter than he’d ever been before in his life. He’d disarmed a disgruntled teacher, saving a room full of kids in the process. When he’d reached the school, his first instinct had been to burst in and rip the gun from the suspect’s hands. Good sense had prevailed and he’d taken the time to assess the situation with the officer in charge.

He stopped to look out of the window. The emergency workers had been happy to see him. The captain of the mid-town division of the Metropolis Police Department had explained the situation. A teacher had been fired for suspicious behavior involving some of his students. Although not very happy about what that meant, Clark had been determined to help the man. So, instead of brute force, he’d talked the guy out.

And if that wasn’t enough, on his way back to the office he’d spotted a pile-up on the freeway. He hadn’t been in time to save everyone. A four-year-old boy had died in his arms on the way to the hospital. He’d felt like dying himself. The mother had begged for her child back, but had amazingly thanked Clark for being there. She hadn’t felt he’d somehow let her down even if he felt that way himself.

That’s why he couldn’t sit still now. While he felt elation for having saved a classroom full of kids, he felt absolute misery for the one child that had died. How did this Clark do this so often? Admittedly, it wasn’t as often as it had once been. He’d seen the multitude of articles about Superman when he’d first decided he’d help save the world. Those articles had dwindled over the years. The Man of Steel attended the major emergencies, but most minor ones were handled by the men and women who’d chosen that life.

A hand was shoved roughly through his hair as the phone rang. Damn that secretary! Didn’t she know he was in a mess right now?

But the phone insisted and he finally snatched it up in irritation. “What?”

“Excuse me?”

Clark sighed heavily when he recognized Lois’ surprised voice. “I’m sorry,” he told her automatically.

“Rough morning?”

“You could say that,” he replied, unable to keep the sarcastic tone at bay.

“It wasn’t your fault, Clark.”

How did she know? He glanced over at the blank television in the corner of the room. Of course!

“You know yourself that some things are just meant to be. Say a prayer. It always brings you peace.”

Is that why this Clark and his family attended church? Did he find solace in the teachings of the Bible?

“There are twenty two other boys and girls alive because you were there. And that trucker, the mother of the boy...”

“It doesn’t help much, Lois,” he snapped.

“I know, honey,” she replied softly

“He was so young,” Clark whimpered, tears filling his eyes.

“And he’s happy now, forever.”

There was a long silence. Clark wiped his eyes in an attempt

to compose himself. There was no way he could do this all the time. The man in this reality must have really been a glutton for punishment.

"I'm here, when you're ready to talk," Lois told him finally.

He nodded his head, then realized she couldn't see him.

"Okay," he managed.

"And, Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

Tears welled in his eyes again. It had been nearly thirty years since he'd heard those words spoken to him. Again he wondered how he and Lois had gone from loathing to loving one another in such a short amount of time. What was he supposed to say? That he loved her back? He was sure this Clark did love his wife, but he couldn't say that.

She must have thought him too choked up to say anything because he heard the slight catch in her voice as she said, "See you tonight." Then she sighed and cut the connection.

This hurt worse than those tests he'd endured as a teenager.

And when did I start crying? He thought as he wiped his eyes again.

He'd only just replaced the receiver of his phone when it rang again. God help him, he didn't think he could take another conversation with his wife. The concern in her voice was almost as bad as the ache from failure.

Glaring at the phone didn't stop the incessant ringing though, so he picked it up. "Yeah?"

"Oh, honey, you must be feeling horrible to answer like that."

Clark's eyes widened as he stared across the room. It was a woman's voice, calling him honey, but it wasn't his wife.

"It's been, what? Three months since you've lost someone in an accident?"

She knew who he was and what he'd done. "Uh, huh," he could only mumble, still unsure what this woman meant to him.

"Remember that God has him now."

Another person talking about God... When had he developed such faith?

"We said a prayer, for the boy and for you. We also said a prayer for those school children. You did a wonderful job with that. Your father said you looked a little unsure of yourself, but we're so proud of you, Clark."

He almost dropped the phone. His father? And this woman? This voice he felt he should know... it was his...

"Mom?" he breathed.

"I know you weren't expecting us back until the weekend, but Opal was doing fine so we came home early. We're about to head out to see Lois and Wyatt. And we'd like to pick up Lara and Robin at school. We've missed them so much."

He had to cover his mouth with his hand to stifle his gasp. He hadn't said a word to this woman since the day he was packed into the back of a blue sedan and stripped from his life.

"Clark?"

He swallowed quickly to gain a bit of control. "M... ma'am?" It was an automatic response.

"Why don't you give us ten minutes to pick up Wyatt and then go home to talk to Lois? She could always put things in perspective for you."

Blinking quickly, several tears made a trail down his cheeks. He looked up at the ceiling, as if the answers were there. "Okay," he managed weakly. What else could he say?

"We love you, son," she said, then disconnected the phone.

Clark could only stare at the object in his hand. He'd combed through this man's life, yet he'd missed that very important piece of information. Looking around his office now, he could see the pictures. He also remembered the ones from the house. Maybe he'd been too shocked to give much thought to who the older couple was in those images. Finding out he was married to Lois

Lane was definitely something to be surprised about.

But this... this was...

How? He asked himself as he rose from his chair. After all those years, all that pain and anger... they'd forgiven him?

Suddenly it was all too much. He changed into his suit and flew from the building as fast as he could. He wasn't sure where he was going, but just knew he had to get as far from that place as possible.

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It was after midnight when Clark finally stepped through the back door of the house he now lived in. He'd flown for hours, trying to make sense out of things. The little old man that had felt he should remain in this place told him he might find answers here. At first he thought that impossible, but he *had* found a few answers.

This Clark was exactly where he wanted to be. It wasn't a bad place or the wrong place. It was right for *him*. It just wasn't right for who he really was. His life was totally different, and he liked it that way. He liked his penthouse, his wealth, his many expensive things. He liked the rich coffee he imported personally. The endless parade of women, the suits, the fame of being Superman. He missed his life and he wanted it back.

He turned to pull the sliding doors closed and froze when the light clicked on. He hadn't heard a thing when he'd entered the house.

"Where have you been?" Lois asked him softly.

"Out," was all he offered as he hurried past her toward the stairs.

"Don't walk away from me, Clark," she replied, but it had fallen on deaf ears. He was already half way up the stairs.

He didn't need this tonight. It was exactly why he didn't have a steady girlfriend. He was a grown man and didn't need someone to baby-sit him.

Stripping out of his suit, he stepped into a hot shower. Hopefully the water could wash away some of the tension. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Lois threw the curtain back.

"I'm not exactly sure what's going on with you, but hear this. You won't treat me like I don't matter. I know you're hurting. I'm hurting for you. If you think you can handle it alone, fine. But at least tell me so I can give you the space you need. And remember that I'll be here when you *do* need me." She pulled the curtain back again when she was finished.

Clark was left in stunned silence. He'd just been given a glimpse of the strength contained within that small woman. Not once had she yelled at him. She'd known he was in pain, accepted that as her own. She'd offered him space and reminded him that she would be there for him no matter what. How had she become this person? He'd seen what their life had been; he knew the things they'd gone through. Yet, she was still a tower.

Definitely stronger than me, he told himself as he finished showering. Is that why this Clark was married to Lois? Because he needed her strength? A few days ago he'd have argued that was impossible. He didn't need anyone.

Maybe someone to talk to every now and then couldn't hurt, he decided as he slipped into his sleep pants and tee shirt. He entered the darkened bedroom; Lois was already in bed, lying on her side with her back to him. He eased into bed facing her. A tentative hand reached out, but he withdrew it. Maybe she wouldn't want him to touch her. After how he'd treated her, he couldn't blame her. But this Clark was married to this Lois and they'd obviously learned to work through their difficulties over the years. Clark was pretty sure it wasn't from ignoring one another.

Again, he reached out to her slowly. Gently he touched her shoulder.

"Lois... I'm... sorry." And he realized that he was. He was truly sorry for hurting her. She was only trying to be his friend.

“It’s okay,” she told him without rolling over.

He guessed that was all he’d get, but what had he expected? This was not his life; she wasn’t his wife.

He smoothed his hand down her arm, then withdrew it and rolled onto his back. Lois gave in to sleep long before he did. His thoughts raced around inside his head, keeping him from being able to find peace. It was impossible to make sense of everything, impossible to understand. The one thing he knew for sure was that it was a lot easier just being Superman. Not the savior this Superman was, but the one he’d created. The Superman that showed off, posed for pictures, and made commercials. This guy, this god in tights, was entirely too complicated.

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A smile spread across his face and he pulled the warm body in his arms just a little bit closer. He wished she wasn’t wearing so many clothes though. His hand smoothed over the material covering her back, coaxing a satisfied moan from her. Yes, right there, he thought as she pushed her hand under his shirt. His blood began to boil as she continued her exploration of his skin. Her hand moved down.

Further... just a little... Ahhh! This time it was him sighing in deep relief. She wasn’t satisfied with touching him through his clothes. He helped her rid himself of the barrier between them, then moaned appreciatively. He had been aching for this kind of attention.

It wasn’t until a moment later that he woke up fully. He lay there, staring up at the ceiling, as his mind tried to comprehend what was happening. Then he realized that Lois was...

His mistake was looking at her. He was lost. He should stop her, his mind screamed, but his body disagreed.

And why shouldn’t he do this? She thought he was her husband.

That was just it, he *wasn’t* her husband.

But this was *so* good. His hand reached out, gently smoothing her hair back from her face. They must have spent countless hours loving one another physically.

You should stop this, Clark, he reminded himself. But it was too late, and Lois knew her husband too well. Clark, however, couldn’t believe how Lois affected him. No other woman had ever been able to make him feel this way before.

And none had made him feel quite so good.

A slow deep groan escaped his lips as his entire body seemed to melt into the mattress. Finally Lois sent him spiraling further when she initiated the most passionate kiss he’d ever experienced. It was as if he was someone else altogether. His mouth opened up and accepted her without hesitation. His hands came up to hold her to him while hers cupped his face. When she pulled back to look down at him, he could only stare into her dark eyes.

Before a single word could be uttered, they heard the clamoring of little feet downstairs.

“To be continued,” Lois told him before she placed a kiss on his nose, then jumped from the bed.

Still clearly too shaken to think coherently, Clark reached out to grasp her hand. When she turned to look back at him, he smiled at her. “Thank you.”

She didn’t ask what for. She just smiled and disappeared through the door.

Clark flopped back against the bed and sighed heavily. He was in big trouble.

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He’d known the voices belonged to these people when came downstairs. Of course, he’d known. He’d known that’s where the kids had been the night before, but to be standing there looking at them...

“Clark!” his mother breathed as she came around the table to greet him when he made it downstairs.

“Mom,” he whispered and almost fell into her outstretched arms. It felt so good to be wrapped in her embrace again.

She pulled back to look up at him. “You’d think we’d been gone for a year the way you’re acting,” she told him with a smile.

“I’m... just really glad to see you,” he offered lamely, then lifted his hand to caress her face. She was real. She was standing here... with him.

Martha smiled up at her son, just as happy to see him.

“Are you as happy to see your old man?”

Clark turned to his dad and a million things raced through his head. He wanted to just blurt out how sorry he was for the things he’d done. But this man already knew. This man had already forgiven him. He pulled away from his mother and grabbed his dad. It seemed this wasn’t something new for the men because Jonathan chuckled softly and clapped his son on the back.

“Come on, you two. You do this every time,” complained Robin.

“Well, maybe every time is like the first time,” came the reply from Lara.

Clark smiled over at her and she winked. How was it she was the only one that knew who he was?

“Let’s just eat. Grandma’s biscuits are getting cold!”

Everyone laughed but managed to find a seat around the table. Clark reached over and ruffled the baby’s hair, receiving a toothy grin. Lois reached out to lay her hand on his and he offered her a slight smile. As he listened to his father say a prayer, he began to understand things he hadn’t before.

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The next few days passed in a blur. Clark had remarkably settled into his unexpected life. He’d attended the Christmas play at school, shouted the loudest at Robin’s football game, played dress up with Lara, and pulled the baby in the wagon when they all took a walk on Saturday afternoon. He’d listened intently to the sermon in church on Sunday while he bounced the baby on his knee. He and Lois had traded story notes for a new book they were writing together. They’d gone shopping, loading up on gifts from Santa. Kent Enterprises had the following week off for the holiday and he and Lois had given them a huge party. He’d spent Monday with his dad. He’d even baked in the kitchen with his mom. He’d diverted catastrophe as Superman and had attended an event to honor the super hero. He’d learned that the celebrity had mostly worn off for those that lived around him, but there were a few that were still in awe. He’d even signed a few autographs.

And he’d learned more in a few days with that family than he’d learned in his entire life. Compassion, patience, and understanding had all been obtained but not without a cost for this Clark. He’d also achieved success in a rare form many others seldom do. He had a good marriage, strong and full of love. He had beautiful kids, parents that adored him. He had friends, lots of them, and they truly cared about him. This Clark was a true super man.

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Clark smoothed his hands over the black shirt he’d chosen. It had a zipper half way up in the front and he left it open. The material stretched tight around his chest, accentuating every muscle. His black slacks were perfectly pressed and he slipped his feet into his shoes. One last smile and he set out in search of his wife. They were going to a Christmas party at Jimmy and Lucy’s house. It seemed the party was an annual event and the entire neighborhood attended.

He stepped out into the hall, noticing Robin sitting on his bed. “Hey, sport.”

“Hey,” the boy told him half heartedly.

“What’s wrong?” Clark asked as he came in to sit beside him.

“I couldn’t find Mom the perfect gift.”

“I’m sure any gift you give your mom will be perfect.”

“Yeah, but Mom is...” He waved his hands as if Clark should understand.

And he did. He understood perfectly. “What did you want to give her?”

“I’d thought about a song.”

“A song?”

He looked up at Clark. “But Tommy said it was stupid.”

“Do you think it’s stupid?”

He shrugged and looked back down at the floor. “Mom likes to hear me sing.”

“So do I,” Clark told him. He’d heard the boy sing the night before and it had blown him away.

“I have something written.” Robin pulled a notebook from his nightstand and held it out to Clark.

The man read for a moment, then looked back up at his son. “This is amazing, Robin.”

“Think so?” His eyes had grown hopeful.

“I know so.” He scooted over and wrapped his arm around Robin’s shoulder. “This is the perfect gift for mom. Please give it to her.”

Robin glanced down at the paper, then back up at Clark with a smile. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied as he lifted his hand to cup the boy’s cheek. “... Son.” He leaned forward to place a kiss on the boy’s forehead, squeezing his eyes closed to stop the sting of tears behind his lids. He pulled back and offered Robin a smile before rising to his feet.

“Have fun tonight,” the boy offered.

“I will. Don’t stay up too late. And be good for your grandparents.”

“I will.” Robin smiled brightly at his dad before pushing back onto his bed and looking down at his notebook.

Clark smiled again, then headed downstairs. He stepped into the den just in time to see Wyatt pull up in front of the couch. The boy looked up to offer him a smile, then turned and started to waddle toward him.

This time Clark couldn’t stop the tears from entering his eyes. His baby boy had taken his first steps. The large man knelt and held out his arms. Wyatt stumbled once, but managed to make it to his father. His tiny arms wrapped tightly around his father’s neck.

“That was great,” Clark breathed into his soft skin.

“DaDa,” the baby chimed.

He’d heard that several times over the past few days, but it suddenly took on new meaning. He finally recovered enough to pull the baby down and place soft kisses on his pudgy little cheeks. The baby laughed out loud causing Clark’s heart to swell with pride.

It also caused his heart to ache. This wasn’t his family, and he’d have to leave them soon.

Not tonight, he told himself. Tonight he *was* here. Tonight they *were* his family. And he was going to enjoy it.

He rose with the baby and entered the kitchen. “Hey, guess what?” he asked Lois and his parents. “Wyatt just took his first steps,” he answered without giving them a chance to say a word.

He was lost. Hopeless to do anything about it.

The others gushed over the baby’s newest accomplishment when the proud father finally allowed them to. Several minutes later, he and Lois were slipping into their coats.

“Daddy?”

Clark turned to see Lara standing there. “Yes, sweetie.” It was so easy to just slip into this role. He knelt to look at her.

“This is for you.”

He took the paper she held out and opened it. She’d drawn a huge heart and under it were the words: ‘I love my daddy’. “This is beautiful, Lara,” he told her honestly. “Thank you.” He folded the paper carefully and stuck it in his pocket, then reached out to

hug his daughter.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered in his ear.

And he didn’t have to wonder what she meant. He clung tighter to her small body before releasing her. His mother kissed his cheek and he smiled brightly at his father before he and Lois set out across the lawn toward the house next door.

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The Olsen Christmas party was a huge event. Their front driveway and front lawn was filled with cars. The street was lined with even more. Before being sent to this place, before living this life, Clark would have never imagined a single couple could have so many friends. And while he’d fielded his fair share of questions about his alter ego, these people were clearly more interested in the kind of man he was. They were here because they wanted to be. They wanted to share the season with their special friends. No one had forced them to come; they weren’t trying to impress a soul. They were here because of the bonds they’d built and cultivated. It was nice just to be in the room with them.

Clark laughed at something Jimmy had said. There had been a lot of laughing tonight. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much fun. They’d talked about sports, playing Santa Claus, and sex. They’d drank good wine, had eaten great food. It was amazing how it felt to be in the company of other people.

He’d also shared a few heated glances with his wife. She’d flirted with him endlessly, exactly the way she was doing now. Clark watched as she ran her finger around the top of her glass, then deliberately held his gaze while she stuck it between her lips. If this kept up, they’d have to say goodnight early.

“So, CK,” Jimmy interrupted his interlude with his wife. “Do you have Lois’ gift yet?”

“Ah, yes, Jimmy. As I matter of fact...” He glanced down at his watch. “...it should be in place as we speak.”

“In place?” asked one of their other friends. “You make it sound like an event.”

“Well, he had to top last year’s gift,” Jimmy continued. “It’s not every man that can buy his wife an entire city block.”

Clark knew what Jimmy was talking about. Apparently, he’d bought an entire block of real estate in Suicide Slum and offered it up to Lois so that she could turn it into something more livable. An apartment complex had been remodeled and a rec center had been built. Thirteen kids had graduated high school the last term before because they’d had some place to go after school rather than being on the streets. Lois had given a speech at their graduation. There was a picture hanging in the game room of her and those kids.

“This year I wanted to get Lois something a little more personal.”

“Don’t tell me you guys are having another baby,” groaned another friend. The man had eight of his own. He’d joked earlier that he got another kid every year for his gift.

Clark chuckled softly. “No. At least...” He glanced over at Lois. “... I don’t think so.”

That caused everyone to burst out laughing again. The conversation slowly drifted back around to sports when his hearing picked up the happy squeal of his wife.

“So, Lois, have you figured out what Clark got you yet?” Her sister Lucy was perched on the counter separating the dining room from the kitchen.

“Not a clue this year. He’s really covered his tracks.”

“He seems... different somehow,” another woman observed.

“What?” Lois glanced his way, but he pretended to be absorbed in conversation. “How?”

“I don’t know. Just... I don’t know... more,” the woman concluded.

“I think Peggy’s right, Lois,” Lucy put in. “I noticed at church the other day that he had a sparkle in his eyes that hasn’t

been there for a while.”

“I think maybe he’s finally stopped blaming himself for what happened to Clara,” Peggy added.

“I don’t think he’ll ever stop blaming himself,” Lois remarked. “He lost a boy last week during a rescue and he was devastated. I haven’t seen him like that in a long time. He wouldn’t even let me in.” She took a sip of her drink. “But I watched him the next day. He seemed to find forgiveness in the eyes of those around him. It was like he was expecting everyone to blame him, and when they didn’t, he was surprised. That childlike wonder... that’s what made me fall in love with Clark in the first place.”

“It’s amazing he still has that wonder after everything he’s been through,” Lucy said softly.

“Exactly,” Lois added. “Despite everything, Clark still looks at the world like it’s the first time he’s seen it.” She looked straight at him, and he couldn’t help but turn to meet her gaze. When he had, she added, “That’s why he still moves me.”

She simply smiled at him, knowing he could hear what she said if he chose, but trusting him not to intrude. That made him feel a little guilty for having listened to her conversation. Yet, he felt privileged to have heard it. He winked at her, unable to stop himself. She’d made him feel breathless and he wasn’t about to analyze his situation any more tonight. He was here, and he was her husband. She was his wife, his very beautiful wife.

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It was very late when Lois and Clark stumbled through the back door. They were wrapped around one another, softly whispering about the party and Christmas. She was trying to get him to tell her what he’d gotten her, and he was deflecting her attempts. She’d even tried persuasion of the female kind. While his temperature had risen a few notches, he hadn’t budged.

“Not even a hint, honey?” she begged as she held the lapels of his coat, her bottom lip poked out in a pout.

“Not one,” he told her as he smoothed his hands up and down her arms.

She groaned softly, but released her hold on him so he could help her out of her jacket. The kitchen light had been left on and a note on the refrigerator explained that the kids had gone home with their grandparents. Clark had also been thrilled to learn that not only were his parents in his life, they lived directly behind them. Their back yard connected to his. He could see his folks any time he liked.

He had just finished hanging his and Lois’ coats on the rack at the back door when he heard her squeal. In under a second he was at her side. She was standing in front of the fireplace in the den, her hand covering her mouth, staring up at her Christmas present. He’d painted her a portrait of their family and it was hanging above the mantle. In the large image she was seated on a stool holding Wyatt. Clark was seated on the floor, one leg drawn up, and he was looking up at her. Lara held a flower extended to her mother, and Robin was laughing at something. But what stood out was the angel hanging above them. The angel was a child, and her little arms were stretched out as if she were encompassing the entire family in her bosom.

“Oh, Clark, this is gorgeous,” she gushed.

“Do you really like it?”

“I love it,” she told him as she stepped forward to touch the canvas with her fingertips. She turned to him with surprised eyes. “You painted this?”

“Yes.”

“Honey...” Her voice broke on a sob as she turned back to look at the portrait. Her finger traced the bottom of one of the angel’s wing. “Clara,” she whispered.

Clark stepped up and wrapped his arms around her from behind. “If I could have changed things...”

“Shhh,” she told him as she turned in his arms. “I know.”

He lifted a hand and used his thumb to wipe a tear from under her eye. “So, did I surprise you this year?”

“You surprised me and touched me deeply.”

“Lois,” was his breathless response right before her lips touched his. She asked for and received entrance into his mouth. She broke the kiss and smiled up at him, but he was lost. Completely and utterly lost to this woman. He bent and lifted her in his arms, then flew them slowly upstairs. Her feet had barely hit the floor of their bedroom before he’d devoured her lips in another kiss.

He groaned when she pushed her hands under his shirt, lifting it from his body. He broke the kiss long enough to pull it over his head. Short, sweet kisses continued while he toed off his shoes. Clark trailed a line of kisses down her neck, then gently guided her to turn around. Her zipper was lowered excruciatingly slowly. He placed a kiss to her shoulder, then pushed the material from her body. His breath left him in a rush when he saw that she’d had nothing on underneath.

“What’s-a-matter, Kent? See something you like?” she asked as she cast a flirtatious glance over her shoulder.

“You have no idea,” he told her honestly as he moved closer to her and reached around to smooth his hands over the skin covering her stomach. He began kissing her neck, nibbling her ear, while he moved his hands over her body. She arched into him, enjoying the feel of his touch.

“Yes,” she told him as she dropped her head back against him.

Clark spun her around and captured her mouth in a sensual kiss. His right hand smoothed down her side, then to her hip, gently coaxing her to lift her leg. He pulled her shoe from her foot, then leaned up to smile as he tossed it over his shoulder. She giggled softly as he repeated the action on the other side. When she stood before him completely naked, Clark stepped back and gazed at her.

“You are so beautiful,” he told her as he guided her to the bed. He stopped long enough to pull off his socks, then he was there. Lying with her, making her hum in pleasure. He kissed her everywhere, touched her gently. Their eyes locked and they stared at one another, an entire conversation taking place in the span of moments.

His lips seared a path every where he kissed her. One taste and he was falling into an abyss of pleasure. He was content to stare at her all night. But she wasn’t so patient. Her hands worked to quickly get him as naked as she was.

And suddenly his world began to spin. He could only look at her, his breath coming in short bursts, as he fell deeper and deeper. The immediate warmth not only engulfed his body, it engulfed his heart. It engulfed his very soul. He had just come home. While this was nothing new for her, it was the first time he’d tasted pure heaven and he didn’t want it to end.

But soon enough soft moans and breathless gasps punctuated the air. His hands continued to roam over her body, committing every touch to memory. His mouth branded her body, her lips. He moved as slowly as possible, not wanting it to end too soon.

He’d started to sweat, only giving it the slightest thought that he’d never done that before. Her hand came up to pull his head down to hers and he swallowed another shout. Glorious respite, he thought, as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Then he was there. He buried his head in her shoulder and crossed over into bliss.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered. She lifted her hand to push his hair back on his head.

He’d heard that twice in the last few hours and just like the first time, he completely understood it. He lifted his head to look at his beautiful wife. “I’ve missed you,” he told her, then kissed her lips tenderly. He settled beside her, a large hand covered the back of her head as he tucked her close.

"I love you, Clark," she said a few minutes later.

He'd thought she'd fallen asleep until her softly spoken declaration. And as he held her, staring up at the ceiling, his mind and body still reeling from the incredible experience he'd just shared with this woman, he finally understood. He understood how a couple was able to forgive a long lost son. He understood how a hard edged reporter had fallen in love with an egotistical playboy. He understood why a Superman flew the skies protecting others. He understood why a woman would trade a successful career for a family. He understood how a couple healed following the loss of their baby. He understood why one man could have so many friends. He understood why he'd felt so complete as a father and a husband.

Love. Love made him feel truly alive for the first time in his life.

"I love you, too, Lois." He lifted her chin and kissed her sweetly. She sighed in contentment as she tucked herself back against his body. They fell asleep with smiles on their faces.

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The first thing Clark thought as he drifted from his haze the next morning was that he forgot to set the clock. He opened one eye hesitantly to see what time it was. He was taking the kids to the zoo and they wanted to get an early start.

He bolted straight up in bed when he realized the clock next to the bed was all wrong. It was too fancy. He glanced around the room in a panic. This wasn't his house!

But it was. He was back in the penthouse on Carter Avenue. He was back in his own reality.

He dropped heavily onto the bed as pain like he'd never known ebbed within him. He'd finally understood — that's why he was back.

Reluctantly he eased out of bed and went to look out at Metropolis. It looked so much different to him now. It was darker, lonelier.

And he didn't want to be here. He wanted to be back in that house in suburbia. He wanted to be in the haven of people who knew him, accepted him, loved him.

"Did you find the answers you were looking for?"

Clark's head snapped around and his eyes met those of the little man in the bowler hat.

"I want to go back," Clark told him without bothering to ask how the man had gotten into his apartment. It was irrelevant anyway. He just wanted to go... home.

"That reality doesn't really exist," the man said with a sad smile.

"But I was there!"

"Yes. A rare glimpse into what might be." The man walked over to look out of the large windows. "This is truly a remarkable view."

"They were real," Clark told him desperately.

"Yes, for a time they were. But you see, my boy, they cannot ever exist if you don't choose to allow them to."

"What does that mean?" Clark almost shouted at him.

The man faced him. "Your life affects so many others..."

"Yeah, yeah, you've said that already." Clark shoved a hand through his hair and paced around the man to stand on his other side, watching as the world went about their day, oblivious to his plight.

"Think about your life, Clark. What is it like? What is it really like?"

Lonely, desolate... now that he'd lived in his own little utopia.

"That is the life that will shape the future."

Clark turned to face the man with horrified eyes. "But you said..."

"Yes. If you continue to live *this* life, it *will* shape your future. But you've known another future. You've lived another

life. Tell me, how do you think that Clark was able to do that?"

And he truly understood. He'd lived his life as if he were too good to be associated with others, and they'd treated him accordingly. The other Clark had opened his heart and reaped his rewards.

The old man smiled brightly. "Utopia is not out of reach, my boy. It's just a little distorted right now." The man glanced down at his pocket watch. "I have to go." He strode to the other side of the room, then stopped to look back at Clark. "Merry Christmas, Clark."

His eyes slowly met the bespectacled ones before him, and he smiled. "Merry Christmas, Mr..."

"Wells," the man answered, then disappeared into the other room.

Clark turned back to look out the window, and for the first time in years, he slowly allowed that world to invade his senses.

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An hour later he stepped off the elevator into the lobby of his building. It had been all he could do to force himself to get dressed. He'd quietly mourned the loss of people that had been very real to him. That other reality was a possible future. A future he desperately wanted. Now that he'd had a taste of just how sweet life could be, there was no way he could live the way he'd been living. Starting today, Clark Kent was going to change his ways.

"Good morning, Mr. Kent," came the usual greeting from his doorman.

Instead of passing him by without notice this morning, Clark stopped and extended his hand. "I don't think I've ever asked your name."

The man eyed the hand before him suspiciously, but finally took it. "Name's Tom, Mr. Kent."

"Well, Tom, my name is Clark."

"Y... yes, sir... Clark."

Clark smiled at the man, causing him to chuckle softly.

"I have to admit that you surprised me, Mr... Clark," Tom admitted.

"Tom, I'd like to apologize for my behavior." The man's eyes widened considerably. "There will be a Christmas party for the tenants on Saturday night. I'd be honored if you and your family would attend."

"Ah... ah... sure, Mr... Clark."

"Good." Clark released the man's hand and stepped through the doors. "Have a nice day, Tom," he told the man before he headed off down the sidewalk. Behind him, the poor man was so shocked he could only stare.

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He saw Metropolis through brand new eyes as he made his way down the street toward his office. As excruciating as it was to leave that alternate life behind, he knew so many possibilities lay ahead. Though he'd never forget them, any of them, he actually looked forward to meeting them all again for the first time.

And that's exactly what he'd do, he'd decided. He would meet them all. It was the only way he could breathe without the pain consuming him.

The doorman at his office building had long ago stopped greeting him. The man simply stepped up and opened the door, without so much as a smile.

"Good morning, Ralph," Clark told him and was again greeted with a shocked expression. "How are you this morning?"

"I, ah... ah... Okay," he finally decided on.

"Ralph, do you have a family?"

"Yes sir. A wife and... and four kids."

"That's great!" Clark reached out to clasp the man's shoulder, noticing his eyes shifting to the hand that had touched him. He waited until Ralph was looking at him again before he continued.

“You bring the family to work with you on Friday. There’ll be a huge Christmas party complete with Santa and toys.”

“Oh... Okay, Mr. Kent.”

“Great!” Clark clapped his shoulder again. “Have a nice day, Ralph!”

Another man was left to gape behind Clark as he entered the building. He stopped at the information desk and cleared his throat. When the young woman saw who was standing before her, she turned three shades of white.

“Good morning,” Clark told her. “Your name is...?” He waited patiently for her to answer.

“Felicia,” she said after a beat.

“Felicia, I’d like for you to do something for me.” She nodded, but didn’t speak. “I want you to contact personnel and have them take a count of the employees here. I want to know who’s married, who has kids, and the kids’ ages and sexes. Can you do that for me?”

Again, she nodded.

“Good. I really hate to be impatient, but ask them if they could it have it ready by the end of the day.”

“Yes sir,” she managed to squeak out.

Clark smiled, bid her a nice day, and headed for the elevators. He greeted several people before stepping onto the car. As usual, he held the door open. And today a young boy stepped on with him. Clark learned on the ride up that his name was John Ross, Pete Ross’ son. He worked in the mail room, but was going to visit his father. Pete was the company’s financial advisor. All this time, Clark thought as he stepped off onto his floor. His childhood friend had worked for him and he never knew it. He immediately headed in the direction of Pete’s office.

Thirty minutes later he wiped a tear from his face as he headed toward his own office. He’d successfully repaired a friendship.

“Where have you been?” came the jovial voice of his secretary. “That Lane woman has been about to drive me...” Whatever she was going to say died on her lips because Clark had stepped up and wrapped his arms around her.

“Thank you, for reminding me of someone I desperately need back in my life.” He leaned back and smiled at her. She stared at him as if he had three heads. “I want you to spend the rest of the week planning a Christmas party for the entire building.” He stepped around her and picked up the phone. “Yes, this is Mr. Kent. Would you send a credit card up to Ms. Brown? That’s right, my secretary. Leave it open. Yes, I’m sure. Thank you.” He replaced the receiver and faced the older woman who was still staring at him. “Spend whatever’s necessary. I want gifts for everyone, their spouses, and their kids. Hire the most realistic looking Santa you can find. Have it catered and put up some more decorations. This place is too dreary.” He took a step toward the doors leading into his office. “Ms. Brown, give everyone a three percent bonus check for Christmas.”

“Do you know how much that will be?” She’d finally found her voice and it was just short of a shout.

“Yeah, I do,” he told her with a grin. “Also, I’d like to talk to Richard White.”

“The financial wizard?”

“Yes.” He’d decided on his way to work that he’d establish a foundation linked to the works of Superman — works that were about to change. The new firm would help provide financial support for those in need. He was about to push the doors to his office open when he stopped. “And Ms. Brown, the office will be closed next week to celebrate the holiday.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” was what he heard when he closed the doors behind him. He chuckled softly as he headed toward his desk. With each passing moment, he felt the pain gripping his heart ease just a little.

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Clark hovered in the sky above the house outside the city. It was exactly the same as the one from the alternate reality. He’d been on his way out west to visit a couple of people it had taken him all week to locate, but couldn’t resist stopping to take a quick peek when he’d realized where he was. The house was for sale. Without a moment’s hesitation, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed back to the office.

“Ms. Brown, there’s a house on Clinton Street in the New Troy district that’s for sale. Call the agent in charge and buy it. Yes, you heard me. No, I don’t care what it costs. Yes. Thank you.” He snapped his phone closed, smiled, then shot up in the sky before banking to the right and heading west.

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The small house stood in the middle of a grape orchard in northern California. It wasn’t exactly a farm in Kansas, but they’d made it home. Hanging baskets of flowers filled the top of the porch. A larger bed of flowers lined the walk leading up to the steps. Two rocking chairs gave testament to the fact that friends shared this space.

Clark heard a woman’s voice from inside just a second before she stepped through the screen door. When her eyes met his, she dropped the pitcher of water she held. Only a single drop hit the boards of the porch before Clark held the container in his hand. He slowly eased back upright. They simply stared at one another for long moments before she took a step back.

“What do you want?” came the voice of a man behind him.

He turned to see Jonathan standing at the bottom of the steps. “I, ah, I...” He had no idea what to say. He couldn’t very well tell them what he really wanted, not after he’d been gone for so long. He glanced between them, fighting the tears that were quickly filling his eyes. “I shouldn’t have bothered you,” he mumbled as he deposited the pitcher on a table, then practically ran down the stairs.

Jonathan’s hand reached out to grasp his arm. “Now listen here, boy. I’ve rocked your mama to sleep a million times since we lost you. I’ve argued with her when she insisted that one day you’d come. Just this morning in fact. And I’ve listened to her cry. If I listen to her cry tonight, it’s not going to be because you’ve hurt her.”

The tears flowed freely down Clark’s face as he stood there looking at his father. The father he thought he’d never see again.

“And I won’t waste another night’s sleep on you,” the older man told him fiercely. “Not tonight,” the man declared as he pulled Clark into his arms. “Not tonight.” Both wept softly as they held each other.

When Jonathan finally released him, Clark was engulfed in his mother’s arms. He smoothed his hand over her hair and face making sure she was real. There was nothing said for a long while. Nothing needed to be said. But when they did start to talk, the words poured from them. Clark told them everything and begged for their forgiveness. When he flew back to Metropolis that night, he left them making plans to join him in the city for Christmas. He silently hoped he could talk them into staying forever.

He’d have to call and see if the house behind the one on Clinton was for sale.

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Lois Lane shook her head as she stared down at the picture of Superman on the front page. His image had graced the front cover every day this week. First it had been when he’d saved a small office building from burning down. Then a boat was rescued in Hobb’s Bay. A pile up on the interstate, a fire out west, a robbery in Canada, a lost kitty in Washington, train wreck in England, the restoration of a castle in Scotland... It seemed he’d been everywhere. He’d plucked a beach whale from the shores of New England, rescued a hiker in Alaska, and had even posed for pictures with the kids at the Sixth Street YMCA. Just what was

he up to?

She pushed the picture aside and lifted the manilla envelope she'd received in the mail today. It was some of most incriminating evidence she'd ever seen against anyone. And it happened to be evidence implicating one of the city's most well loved benefactors. The note with the papers read: 'This is all very true, although my methods for obtaining the evidence weren't so legal. I thought maybe you'd know how to use it to find evidence that *is* legal. This has the making of a Kerth.' It was signed, 'CK'.

"It couldn't be," she told herself again. There's no way Clark 'Superman' Kent had sent her this.

She lifted an invitation in her other hand. An invitation to an office party at Kent Enterprises. And it *was* from Clark Kent himself, handwritten.

"What the hell are you up to?" she asked the image of Superman. She didn't know, but she'd be only too happy to find out.

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Lois stood just inside the large conference room in the building that housed Kent Enterprises. She tried to blend in with the crowd so she could observe the host. He'd come dressed as himself, but had demonstrated how he changed into his Superman suit for the kids. They'd all been extremely impressed with the spin thingy, and he'd even taken them on a short flight around the room. He'd announced there would be an office picnic in the spring in Centennial Park, complete with carnival rides and clowns. He was also sponsoring a parents' night out for the New Year. The bottom floor of his apartment building would be turned into a daycare center for the night so those with young children wouldn't have to worry about getting home so quickly. He'd passed out bonus checks, nearly causing some of his employees to pass out. Then Santa showed up to hand out gifts for the kids, with Superman's help.

"I'm glad to see you could make it," Clark said as he stepped up beside Lois sometime later.

She turned and eyed him suspiciously. "Okay, Kent. What gives?"

"Let's just say it was time for me to grow up."

He faced her and Lois almost gasped at the look in his eyes. This was not the man she'd argued with just a few days ago.

"If you'd still like that exclusive interview, I'll be at a party in my apartment building tomorrow night."

"What's the catch?" she asked as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"No catch. I'm ready to tell my story and I want the best reporter in the business to write it."

"Uh, huh..." She stomped her foot at him. There was no way this man had changed that much. Before she could say another word, an older woman approached them. She watched as Clark smiled at the woman and leaned to hug her.

"Ms. Lane, this is my mother, Martha Kent."

She really was shocked then. She didn't think he was in touch with his parents.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Lane," Martha told her as she reached to shake her hand.

"And you, Mrs. Kent."

"Please, call me Martha."

"Only if you'll call me Lois," the young woman replied automatically. She watched as Clark smiled at his mother, love jumping between them like she'd never seen.

"The house is beautiful, Clark," his mother said softly.

"It's yours, if you want it," he replied.

"We just couldn't."

"You can." He hugged her closer. "And I sure wish you would."

Martha reached up and touched his face, then looked at Lois. "He's such a good boy," she gushed, then drifted back into the

crowd.

"What just happened here?" Lois asked him after a moment. "I didn't think you were... close to your parents."

"Things have changed. And if you want to know all the details, you'll join me tomorrow night."

Her eyes cut quickly toward his hand when he reached out to touch her elbow softly.

"Enjoy the party... Lois."

Lois clamped her open mouth shut as she watched him stop and talk to a few people. Every instinct she possessed screamed that the story of the century had just walked across the room.

And there was no way she would miss it.

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'Why the World Needs a Superman' was the sixty point headline the day before Christmas. And instead of a man in a flashy blue suit, a man in a pair of jeans and a button down shirt graced the front page.

"This one is going to win you the Pulitzer, Lois," bellowed Perry White as he grinned down at his paper.

Lois just smiled back. She was lost in thoughts of the man that article was about. She'd gone to that party and she'd spent a lot of time over the last three days with Clark Kent and the people that lived and worked around him. No one had really known the man. He'd kept himself separated from those around him with his arrogant behavior. And he'd lived a lonely existence. He'd only shared the barest of details with her for print in the Planet because he'd asked her to co-write his autobiography with him, and she'd nearly fallen over herself at the chance.

The book had almost written itself. They'd completed it in just under two days, thanks to super speed. It was only a rough draft, and they'd likely have a lot of edits ahead of them, but it had been worth every second. She'd come away from the entire process with a better understanding of who Clark Kent really was.

She'd listened to the details that made up his life. The things he'd endured had been shocking. For the briefest of moments, she'd been ashamed to be American — her government being the force that had nearly destroyed such a beautiful person.

She wasn't exactly sure when she'd started to think of him that way. Spending the last few days with the man, hearing every emotional detail of his existence had made her rethink a lot of things. Not just how she saw Clark Kent, but also how she viewed the world. She'd felt like she was part of the transformation as he'd explained things to her. He'd told her of a dream he'd had, of how life *could* be and how much it could change if he allowed it to.

She looked up when a commotion broke out across the newsroom. The man in her thoughts had stepped off the elevator. The entire room stopped and began to clap. It seemed that she wasn't the only one who'd learned to appreciate Clark Kent.

He finally made his way over to her desk, smiling brightly at her. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she replied, a smile of her own. "I see we've managed to change the public's perception of you."

"Yeah, well, there's only one person's perception that matters to me." His smile faded a bit as he continued to look at her.

"Hey, CK!" came the excited voice of Jimmy Olsen. He'd been the photographer for the biggest story in the world, and he was still riding his high.

"Hey, Jimmy." Clark shook the young man's hand.

"One more?" He motioned to the camera in his hand.

"Last one," Clark said with a grin, but it was too late. Jimmy had already snapped the shot.

"Thanks, CK." And he was gone.

Clark chuckled softly as he watched Jimmy trot off.

"It was nice of you to give him an opportunity to advance his career," Lois told him as she leaned up on the desk.

“He’s a good kid. He deserves it.”

Lois nodded as she continued to look at him. Why was it she’d never noticed what beautiful eyes this man had?

Before another word could be said a report came across the television. Heavy rains in Texas were threatening to break the levees on the river and flood an entire town. Clark’s eyes snapped down to meet hers.

“Wanna go?”

“You’re serious?” she asked excitedly. Any time she could break a story was a thrill, but the thought of flying with Superman... well, that was even better.

“Absolutely.”

“Good thing I wore something casual today,” she said as she grabbed her jacket and followed Clark toward the entrance to the stairwell. She shivered slightly when he placed a hand on the small of her back. She gasped when he hauled her up against him and they shot toward the roof. She was deposited on her feet only long enough for him to spin into his suit, then they were airborne, flying southwest.

They flew in silence for several moments before Clark asked, “Lois, would you have dinner with me?”

She pulled her eyes from the passing scenery to look at him. Not for the first time in the last few days, Lois really saw the man behind his dark eyes. She offered him a bright smile and answered, “Only if we can fly. I don’t date guys unless they can fly.”

Superman’s hearty laugh echoed through the quiet morning air as they continued on.

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Behind them, a little man with a pocket watch and bowler hat stood on the roof of the Daily Planet. A huge smile spread across his face as he watched the couple fly away. He’d had to implore a little help from beyond this realm when he’d noticed a horrifying future ahead for this world. Only an extreme situation could have possibly changed the man that Clark had been. But now it seemed Utopia would be okay after all.

He whistled softly as he turned and walked away, disappearing in a flash of light.

THE END