

The Longest Road: The Long Road Home

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Rated PG-13

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Description: Separated for years and having faced life's most difficult challenges, Lois and Clark have to figure out how to move forward when they can't go back to the way things were. The final part in "The Longest Road" trilogy.

Author's note: This story will make no sense if you haven't read the first two parts of "The Longest Road," available on the archive, or in chapters on the Fanfic Message Boards: www.lcficmbs.com. This story took years, including many breaks when life interfered with my ability to write. It could not have been completed without the indefatigable efforts of my beta readers, Ray and Avia, and my peerless GE, Janet Owens. Also, many thanks to all the readers on the Fanfic Message Boards who read this story over the years and provided valuable and much appreciated comments. This story, more than anything I've ever written, reminds me of Winston Churchill's thoughts on writing fiction:

"Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with, it is a toy and an amusement; then it becomes a mistress, and then it becomes a master, and then a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster, and fling him out to the public."

So, without further ado...here is the monster. Any and all comments appreciated.

Rac

"...[T]here are those who have suffered so much and yet have not succumbed to their sufferings, but instead have built up a new fortune on the ruins of their former happiness...I have seen such men; I know that they have risen with such vigor and glory from the abyss into which their enemies had cast them that they have overthrown their former conquerors."

— Albert de Morcerf, *The Count of Monte Cristo*

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"This is the Comm. Chief," Lok Sim said tersely as he positioned his earpiece. "I need a situation report on the evacuation of the school shelter in North Housing Compound Four." He waited for what seemed like an eternity.

<<Sir, that shelter was successfully evacuated by Captain Enza.>> Came the response from Engineering.

"Thank the fates," Lok Sim breathed. "Can you put me through to her?"

<<Negative, sir. Captain Enza didn't evacuate with them. We've lost contact with her.>>

"What?" he bellowed, his sudden calm having dissipated in an instant.

<<Captain Enza had the children evacuate through the security corridor running south along the transport line. She stayed behind in the transit engineer's office.>>

"Why? What happened?" he demanded as he ran toward the security corridor.

<<They were pinned down by rebels outside the office; she stayed to seal up the corridor behind the children.>>

"Can you get me a visual?"

<<Most of the monitoring equipment was destroyed. All I can see is that the entrance to the engineer's office has been completely blocked off; it's impassable.>>

"What about the door from the security corridor? How can I open it?" Lok Sim asked.

<<You can't, sir, it's locked down.>>

Lok Sim paced anxiously outside the opposite end of the security corridor. "Find a way," he said tersely as he disarmed the door and ran inside. The ceiling clearance was low; it wasn't so bad that he had to duck, but he could lay his hand flat against the paneling over his head. He couldn't see anything in front of him in the darkened hallway. The only sound was the echoing of his heavy footsteps. He reached the end of the passageway and futilely tried the door. As the other engineer had assured him, it wouldn't budge. He rushed the door, slamming into it with his uninjured shoulder several times. His only reward for his efforts was a good deal of pain. Frantically, he searched the floor, walls, and ceiling of the corridor for anything that could help him open the door. He reached for his flashlight.

Idiot! He chastised himself silently as his hand closed around the explosive charges on his belt. "Can I blast it open?" he asked the disembodied voice as he pulled off the charges and strung them around the door.

<<No sir, that door is blast proof.>>

He had to try anyway. He finished stringing the charges and ran back a safe distance with the detonator. Bracing himself and keeping his head down, he hit the detonator. The sound and concussive force of the blast washed over him, nearly knocking him down, but he ran toward the door anyway. The damn thing was still intact. He examined it closely with his flashlight. He hadn't even managed to crack it and he was out of charges. Lok Sim turned his flashlight on the walls again, the sound of the blast still ringing in his ears, looking for a doorway or tunnel that might lead him to that office. Halfway down the corridor, he stopped as the beam swept over the ceiling. "There's a vent overhead; is that standard sized?" he asked.

<<Yes sir,>> the voice replied.

"Good," Lok Sim said tersely as he grabbed onto the vent cover with both hands and ripped it from the ceiling. He grabbed onto both sides of the opening and hoisted himself into the vent, oblivious to the pain in his back from the wound that was tearing itself open wider with every movement. Crawling forward on his stomach, he kept going until he reached the venting panel directly over the office.

He ignored the way the metal dug into his fingers as he gripped the panel and ripped it off.

He peered down into the room and saw chaos looking back up at him. The office had been destroyed, torn apart by an explosion and who knew what else. And it was hauntingly quiet. "Enza!" he called out, his voice cracking. He was met by silence. Lok Sim rushed to lower himself into the room.

The sight in front of him nearly dropped him to his knees. He grabbed his stomach to keep from doubling over in pain. "Get me a medical evacuation, now!" he yelled into his communicator.

If he hadn't glimpsed her arm, bloodied and motionless and partially covered by the rubble, he might not have seen her. He rushed to remove the twisted, heavy debris from where it was pinning her to the ground. It took every ounce of his strength to move the metal and rubble. He groaned from the exertion, the muscles in his arms and back ripping under the strain.

"Please hold on," he whispered through tears, frustrated by the incredibly slow pace of his progress. He rubbed savagely at his eyes as he continued to work, so careful not to let the weight of the debris pinning her down shift. After what seemed like a thousand lifetimes, he freed her. He sobbed uncontrollably as he gently placed his arms under her limp form and lifted her up. She was so small and still in his arms, like a sleeping child.

"Enza?" he whispered. Her eyes remained closed. She didn't respond. He placed her delicately on the ground and with trembling hands, searched for a pulse.

The vise on his chest finally eased its grip on him and he drew his first breath in what seemed like days. It was faint and it was weak, but there was a pulse. He knelt down to feel her breath on his cheek and was certain there was no more wonderful feeling in the world. Another sob shuddered through his body as he looked at her. A large cut on her forehead bled profusely; her right arm was bent at an unnatural angle. Pain and panic washed over him in waves, over and over again. She needed help. Immediately.

He reached for his communicator again. "Get me that medical evacuation," he said. "Just get them to the door, I'll get the path cleared."

It tore at him to do so, but he had to step away from her to try to clear the blocked doorway. The office's doorway had been blasted, that much was obvious. Near the debris was the badly burned body of a rebel, he presumed. The sight turned his stomach, but he tried to ignore it and focus on what he needed to do. The door was stuck, half opened, half closed, twisted, warped, and weakened from the blast. The gap between the door and the wall was blocked by debris. Using a loose bit of piping as a crowbar, he forced the door open as far as he could, extracting a few more inches of give from the groaning metal and began clearing out the debris with raw, bleeding hands. Every few seconds he turned back to look at his wife, staring hard to make sure that her chest was still moving with each breath. Soon, the space he was clearing was large enough for a person to

crawl through. In the hallway, he could see the medics approaching.

"In here!" he shouted. They rushed to the doorway.

"We can't get the gurney through there," one of the medics said unhelpfully.

"I'll bring her to you," Lok Sim replied, his voice thick with emotion. With extraordinary care, he gathered her up in his arms and gently carried her toward the doorway, forcing himself to move more slowly than he liked to keep from injuring her further. A pair of hands reached through the opening toward him and he gingerly let the medics take his wife from his arms. They moved with remarkable speed and deftness to secure her to the gurney and rush her away from that hallway.

His mind blank, his body numb, he managed to crawl through the opening, stumbling out into the hall. There were more dead bodies here. He picked himself up and looked down at his uniform, soaked with her blood. He staggered as he walked, unable to steady himself under the weight of her injuries. He reached for his communicator one more time. "Could you please find my niece?" he asked softly, a plaintive tone to his voice.

Talan watched as the medics worked on Kal El. She stood there helplessly, trying not to get in the way. It tore at her insides to just stand by, useless and unnecessary. She crossed and uncrossed her arms over her chest, not sure what to do. The rescue workers started to wheel his gurney away.

"Is he going to be all right?" she called out as she started after them.

"We're going to do everything we can, ma'am," one of the medics responded.

He raced to the site of the explosion, bracing himself for what he knew was going to be the worst moment of his life. Ching didn't want to see this, but he had to be the one to find her. He couldn't leave her here. The lump lodged in his throat made it impossible to breathe and it was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. Turning on his flashlight, he followed the corridor back toward to the blast site.

"Zara?" he shouted out her name, knowing she wouldn't answer him, but he couldn't help himself. The beam of the flashlight swept the area in front of him, landing on charred and twisted metal paneling that had collapsed.

She wasn't there.

He'd been directly on the other side of this broken panel when it fell. She was supposed to be here, on this side of it. His heart tripped and fell out of rhythm, his breaths came in shallow, rapid gasps. "Zara?" he cried out her name, turning around frantically. With the flashlight, he swept the ground. She couldn't have simply disappeared

Blood.

There was blood on the ground – not much of it, just a few drops here and there – leading away from the point of the explosion. He broke out into a run as he followed the

trail toward the emergency doors. Ching burst through the doors out into the pre-dawn light of the early morning. The wind whipped around him, stinging his skin. "Zara!" he shouted her name again, the sound swallowed up by the gusts of air.

He saw the silhouette of a figure sitting against the side of the building, using it as a windbreak. Ching rushed over to find Lieutenant Rul leaning against the wall, her eyes closed, a pained look on her face. He knelt down beside her and touched her shoulder. "Rul, what happened? Where is she?" he asked anxiously.

She turned toward him without opening her eyes. A large bruise covered one side of her face from eyebrow to jaw. "Went to get help," she managed, her expression still contorted in pain. "The tunnels were full of smoke. My leg is broken."

She was alive.

His breath caught in his throat and a shudder ran through his body. His first instinct was to race after Zara, but he couldn't leave the young lieutenant out here in the cold wind, her body probably already going into shock. They would have been locked out once they'd made their way out of that corridor, which was why Zara had to leave her guard here in order to find assistance.

"I'm going to get you back inside," he said. He grabbed his communicator and called for help. Gingerly, he lifted Rul up in his arms and carried her into the building. A pair of soldiers met him in the hallway to take the wounded officer to help. Ching ran back outside, shouting instructions into his communicator, ordering all available hands to join the search for the First Minister.

The emergency doors were all still locked down when the explosion happened and the hangar bays were still the site of mass confusion. It was a long way in either direction toward a viable entrance to the colony. She would have headed toward the eastern wing, where there were undamaged medical facilities – somewhere she could get help. He ran as fast as he could, desperately hoping to catch up with her. She might have been injured, disoriented from the blast, and suffering from exposure.

His heart stopped beating at the sight of a solitary figure walking slowly away from him, limping and stumbling. It took what felt like forever for him to find his voice. "Zara!" he yelled as loudly as he could. She must have heard him over the gale. She stopped walking and slowly turned around as he raced toward her. With labored, uneven steps she rushed to him as well. It took both an eternity and only a single instant to close the distance between them. Though his vision was blurred by a fine film of tears, he never took his eyes off her.

She flew into his arms and time itself ceased to exist. Mountains soared up from the ground and then crumbled to dust, empires rose and fell, rivers ran dry, stars exploded to life in a bright flame of fire and energy, chaos and noise, and then quietly died, all in the span of the gap between heartbeats, in the moment it took for his breath to catch in

his throat and for a sigh to escape his lips in the form of her name.

He held her tightly as he stroked her hair. Her cheek felt frozen against his skin and all he wanted to do at that moment was to shelter her from the cold. "I thought I'd lost you," he managed before breaking down in sobs. His body trembled as he held her. Lowering his head, he kissed her shoulder, before framing her face between his hands and covering her lips with his own. He could feel her clinging to him, and he wished desperately that she would never let him go. Finally, he broke off the kiss and drew in a ragged breath. His eyes still closed, he leaned forward until his forehead was touching hers. He felt her touch his face ever so delicately. There was moisture underneath her fingertips. "You're crying," she whispered.

He nodded as he tried not to sob. He opened his eyes to see tears streaming down her face as well. "So are you," he replied softly. Ching brushed the tears away with the pad of his thumb. "I love you." Tears fell unchecked from his eyes.

"I love you," she said, breaking down in his embrace. Her slender frame shook as she cried.

Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her just a little bit tighter, holding her up. He would never let her fall. "I need to get you inside," Ching murmured.

"I can walk," she assured him as she stepped back and started to limp forward.

"Lean on me," he replied, wrapping his arm around her. She did. Ching reached for his communicator to radio their position to General Command. Within minutes, a transport descended in front of them. Soldiers raced out to shepherd the injured First Minister into the craft.

Lok Sim paced frantically in the hallway. He'd been pacing here for hours and must have traversed the hallway thousands of times. With his long strides, he crossed the length of the corridor quickly and turned around. He was too tall, too big to be confined in this tiny, claustrophobic space. But then, this entire planet was too small to contain the grief and guilt boiling up inside him. The sound of footsteps approaching from behind him caused him to nearly leap out of his skin. He spun around to find himself staring at the old, gray-haired doctor.

"Easy, young man," Tao Scion said.

"What's happening? Is she all right? Can I see her?" he demanded anxiously.

The physician put his hand on Lok Sim's arm. "She's still in surgery. They're working to relieve the swelling and pressure on her brain. She has a chance of recovering consciousness. Once she's stabilized the surgeons are going to have to perform several additional operations."

The younger man dragged a shaking hand through his hair. "More surgery? What, why?"

"Her right arm and leg were very badly broken," Tao Scion explained gently.

Lok Sim closed his eyes as he shook his head slowly. The doctor's words barely penetrated the haze surrounding his mind. They didn't register and instead simply bounced

around inside his brain. It was all Lok Sim could do to try to decipher the words and sentences and make them make sense. "You said she has a chance, what does that mean? What kind of chance?"

"The head trauma was pretty extensive. People do recover from these sorts of injuries, but the longer she's unconscious..." Tao Scion replied, his tone calm and even.

The tall, quiet engineer pinched the bridge of his nose, wiping away the tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes. "This is all my fault," he murmured.

"It most certainly is not. That young woman would not be alive if it weren't for you," Tao Scion retorted.

"If I'd done my job, if I'd figured out what they were doing..." he trailed off, too distraught to keep talking. Confession required more strength than he possessed. Fresh tears pricked at his eyes. He looked up at the ceiling to keep the tears from falling.

"The blame for this lies with Nor and his followers. Not with you," the physician replied, but his words gave no comfort.

"Lok Sim!" He looked over the doctor's shoulder toward the sound of the voice calling his name. His sister was running to him. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine," he replied, knowing how unconvincing he sounded. "Where's Thia?"

"Mother's bringing her; they should be here in about an hour," his sister explained. "I brought you a change of clothes." He looked at her, puzzled. How could she expect him to care about something so entirely frivolous at the moment? "You should get cleaned up; you're going to terrify the poor little girl like that."

"Your wife will still be in surgery for another few hours," Tao Scion said. "I'll show you to the showers."

Lok Sim looked down at himself; he was covered in soot and dirt and sweat. And blood. It covered his hands, almost up to his elbows. Lok Sim nodded mutely in acquiescence and allowed the doctor to lead him down the hall.

The physician left him alone in the locker room, quietly closing the door behind him. Lok Sim stripped off the sparring uniform he'd been wearing since the previous evening, trying not to wince at the brushing of the fabric against the freshly sealed wound on his back. He stepped into the shower, remembering the lighthearted training session with his wife in the officers' gym. The ghost of a smile on his face became a grimace as he sobbed. Under the stream of water, he fell to his knees and bowed his head. His large body shook as he wept.

In another part of the hospital, Talan stood in a corridor, quietly relaying orders over her communicator to the officers in the field. The prison had been re-secured, the remaining rebels rounded up. The fires had been put out and emergency crews had taken control over the blast sites. Rae Et's body had been found on a downed rebel transport, though everyone had presumed she was dead a year.

She ended a transmission, only to receive an incoming call at that moment from a familiar source. "Serick, are you all right? How is Ama?" she asked anxiously.

"We're both fine, as is Raya," he replied.

Her brow furrowed. "Raya?"

"Your niece. She was born a few hours ago."

Talan smiled. "It's a beautiful name," she said. "And fitting." It meant 'brave hearted.'

"We thought any child who has the audacity to be born at such a calamitous moment must be quite courageous," her brother replied. "I heard the First Minister was wounded, will he be all right?"

"He's still in surgery," she said, fighting to keep her voice even.

"Should we be expecting you soon?"

Talan chewed her lip. "I should be here when he wakes up. His Chief of Staff is running General Command. First Minister Zara is with her family; her brother was gravely wounded," she rushed to explain, anticipating the disapproval of her brother.

"There's nothing but unhappiness for you there," Serick cautioned, his gentle tone taking the harsh edge off the words.

"He shouldn't be alone," she replied resolutely.

He had at least started to look like a human being again, he thought as he regarded his reflection. He'd showered and shaved, but his eyes were still red from crying and a lack of sleep. It had been about a full day since he'd eaten, but he wasn't hungry and he figured food would only make the nausea worse. Lok Sim finished dressing and returned to the corridor outside the operating theater to continue his anxious pacing. He thought about that damage control engineer and the twisted poetry of their situation. Her actions put the entire colony at risk, sacrificing the lives of hundreds of people in order to save the life of her beloved. His failure to act meant that his beloved was lying cut open on a table, fighting for her life.

Before long, his mother appeared at the other end of the hallway, Thia holding her hand. The little girl wriggled her way free and started to run to him. He covered the length of the corridor in long, rapid strides, lifting his niece up in his arms. Closing his eyes, he hugged her tightly, cradling the back of her head with his hand. She clung to him as though her life depended on it; her little body trembled as she cried. "Shhh, it's all right," he soothed, tears slipping silently down his face. "Everything is going to be all right."

"Aunt Enza came to get me...and I was so scared...and she didn't come with me. She got hurt because of me," his little niece said between sobs.

"No, no, that's not true. You mustn't believe that," he said, his voice soft but insistent. "You did nothing wrong, it's not your fault." He gently stroked her hair as he held her just a little bit tighter. "I love you so much, and your aunt loves you. She did get hurt but that wasn't because of you."

He opened his eyes and saw his mother hanging back, watching them with a sad expression on her face. Lok Sim

carried his niece over to the bench alongside the wall. He sat down, holding Thia on his lap. She tucked her head under his chin, still crying quietly. Running a soothing hand up and down her back, he rocked her gently. He didn't tell her not to cry. Not only would it have made him a hypocrite, he knew that she needed to be able to let out all the fear and the hurt bubbling up in her little body. And she needed to feel safe enough to do that. He kissed the crown of her hair. Soon, her whimpering cries subsided. Looking down, he saw that her eyes were closed. Her even breathing confirmed that she'd fallen asleep.

"She was too distraught to sleep," his mother whispered as she sat down beside them. "Poor little dear."

Lok Sim merely nodded and continued to rock his niece back and forth slowly. He would keep her safe and protected. He would look after her. He would try to make sure she was never afraid again.

The sound of footsteps startled him. He looked up to see Tao Scion approaching them. The old physician gestured for him to come over. Lok Sim frowned, but the other man nodded grimly and motioned toward him again. He stood up and eased his sleeping niece into his mother's arms. Folding his arms anxiously across his chest, he followed the doctor to the other end of the corridor. "What is it? How is she?"

The grim look on Tao Scion's face caused his heart to sink in his chest like a stone. "The surgeons relieved the pressure and fluid buildup on her brain. They're going to set her arm by inserting a steel rod. It should heal nicely. But there was too much trauma to her lower leg. They need to amputate."

Tears welled up in his eyes as his arms fell to his sides. His hand trembled as he dragged it through his hair. "Can't they...I don't understand...isn't there some other way?" He could hear the panic, thick in his own voice.

"I'm afraid not," Tao Scion replied.

"This isn't right," Lok Sim responded as he shook his head, pacing a tight loop back and forth. "Do you know how ridiculous this is? Are you honestly asking me whether it's all right to cut off my wife's leg?"

"No, young man, I'm not," the doctor replied soberly. "I am telling you that if the surgeons do not amputate, your wife will die."

Tao Scion's blunt words stopped his pacing instantly. Lok Sim clenched his fists tightly as he looked down to avoid eye contact. A sob escaped his lips as his body shuddered. He exhaled slowly as he tried to compose himself. "I can't do this," he murmured, choking back tears. "I can't just sit here while you cut my wife to pieces." A vise closed around his chest, squeezing tightly. He couldn't breathe; he felt like his insides had been kicked out. Folding his arms across his chest, he tried to hold himself together, lest he fall apart into broken, jagged little bits. "Just help her, please." He nearly strangled on the words.

"Are you certain you're all right?" Ching asked again.

She leaned heavily on his arm as they walked slowly away from the hospital. "Ching, I'll be fine," she replied wearily. In truth, her head was swimming and it felt like the corridor around them was spinning. The physician who had seen her – a retired pediatrician who had rushed to the assistance of the overworked medical response teams – had informed her that she'd suffered a concussion along with her cracked ribs and sprained wrist. The blast had pitched both her and Lieutenant Rul forward; the collapsing ceiling panels extinguishing the fires that otherwise would have engulfed the hallway. But thick smoke had filled the corridor, nonetheless. They'd been lucky to survive the initial explosion and luckier still that their injuries had been minor enough that they'd been able to get to relative safety outside.

Exposed to the elements, disoriented and in pain, it had seemed for a time that she would be responsible for doing their rescuing, but she should have known that Ching would find her. Her beloved would have torn the entire planet apart if needs be to get to her. The relief that had washed over her at their reunion was soon replaced by anxiety when Ching told her that her brother was wounded when his Interceptor was downed. She'd insisted they go to see him immediately, despite Ching's pleas that she get her own injuries looked at.

They'd been waiting for hours for news on Dek Ra's condition; her entire family gathered in a small room, quiet and disconnected from the chaos that was consuming the world around them. A tearful Tem Ra had sat beside his mother, holding her hand, while her father had paced anxiously up and down the length of the small room. For her part, Zara had been too exhausted to do anything at all. Ching had silently slipped away to check on Clark and to take care of her responsibilities as First Minister. While she'd fretted over her younger brother, he'd coordinated the effort to bring the colony back to order. Zara hadn't slept in two days; the constant throbbing in her head and the inability to focus her eyes made her completely useless as a leader. Ching had stepped in, just like he always had, to shoulder the burden when it was too much for her. After hours of waiting, knowing nothing other than the fact that her brother had been stabilized, her parents had finally insisted that she see a doctor and get some rest. She'd felt like a child, meekly doing as her parents told. Her only protestation had been to tell them that she was going to wait for Ching's return before she would leave.

When the colony was finally secure enough for Ching to turn responsibility over to the military commanders and chiefs of the rescue crews, he returned to the waiting room where the Ra family sat in hopes of any news. In the intervening hours, her injuries had been examined by the overworked and haggard old physician and pronounced minor. He'd insisted, however, that she needed to rest. When he returned, Ching had unsurprisingly agreed with both the doctor and her parents. Her mother and father had extracted a promise from Ching that he would look after her. As best as her injuries would allow, Zara hugged Tem

Ra and her parents before letting Ching lead her away from the hospital.

The walk seemed longer than it should have, but they eventually made it to the bay where the transport was waiting. It took them back to the First Ministers' compound, untouched by the chaos and destruction. The quiet was disconcerting. Inside her small quarters, she shrugged out of her greatcoat and slowly started to undress. She drew in a sharp breath as she bent her injured wrist too far. Until that moment, Ching had been hanging back, waiting silently.

"May I?" he asked quietly. She merely nodded. With extraordinary caution, he helped her undress, mindful of her cracked ribs and bandaged wrist. An anguished look flitted across his face as he looked at the large, greenish bruise on her side.

"It looks worse than it is," she assured him.

He gave her a stiff, jerking nod, but said nothing. Gently, he caressed her cheek and kissed her forehead.

Ching started to step back and she could feel him pulling away from her. "Please, stay here," she said softly.

"I'm not going anywhere," he replied in a rough whisper, his voice thick with emotion. Ching undressed before turning down the blankets on her bed. She lay down and he slipped into the bed beside her. Zara placed her head on his shoulder, feeling his warm skin under her cheek. Ching ran his fingers softly through her hair.

"I almost lost you," she murmured.

"So did I," he replied. "You nearly..." the rest of the sentence was swallowed in a shuddering sigh that she could feel as it reverberated through his body.

"I love you," she said with tears in her voice.

"I love you," he responded. Ching lifted her hand to his lips.

Tears sprang unbidden to her eyes and she didn't try to fight them. The sobs that shook her slender frame caused a sharp pain to slice through her side, between her injured ribs, but even that wasn't enough to force her to regain her composure. She tried to anchor herself to Ching, to hold on to him as the squall of emotions threatened to sweep her away. But even her rock seemed shaken by what they'd been through. In the silence in the darkened room, she could hear her lover crying quietly. He gently squeezed her hand as he held it against his heart.

"I was so afraid you were gone," he whispered. "I swear I wouldn't have survived losing you."

"It's all right. We'll be all right," she said quietly. Zara curled up closer to him, needing to feel the warmth of his body to remind herself of the truth of her words. They would be all right. Through all of the horrors they'd seen and the difficulties that lay ahead, they would still be together.

Lois chewed thoughtfully on the end of her pencil as she leaned over her notes in the den. A soft knock startled her out of her musings. "Hey," she said as she looked up at her mother-in-law.

"How are you?" Martha asked.

"Fine," Lois said halfheartedly.

"Really?" Martha asked from the doorway, her brow arched.

"Yeah, that's kind of the problem," she replied as she dropped her chewed up pencil on the table. It rolled across the wooden surface as she leaned back against the couch, rubbing her temples. Martha came to sit beside her.

"What do you mean?"

Lois exhaled a shaky breath. "Everything is so ordinary. And ordinary is normal, and normal sounds okay," she said. "But everything isn't okay. I keep doing the same thing, every day. I work on my book, I do my patrols, I read to my son. I live my life and I shouldn't be able to do that." Her voice wavered on the last words.

"Tomorrow is his birthday," Martha replied, her tone quiet.

"And everything is going to be fine and ordinary and normal. But it shouldn't be. The world shouldn't be the same without him. Hell, the laws of physics shouldn't work when he isn't here."

"I know, honey," her mother-in-law said sympathetically. "But we live our lives because it is the only thing we can do. It's what Clark wants us to do."

Lois shook her head. "I feel like I'm losing him."

Martha took her hand and squeezed it gently. "You're not," she insisted.

"Aren't I? I've lived without him for almost four years. I've fallen into a routine that doesn't include him. I think about him, every single day, but it's almost like he's a part of my past." It hurt so much to say the words aloud, to confess to such dark and terrible thoughts, but she couldn't stop herself. Even though it was probably causing Martha no end of pain to hear the awful things that her daughter-in-law was thinking, she had to continue. "Like he came into my life, changed it forever, made me a better person, and then just disappeared. Like the part of our lives that we were supposed to spend together is already over. And that can't be right."

Martha regarded her with eyes brimming with tears. "He will come back," she said. "I really do believe that. But I also know that we can't stop living our lives, doing nothing but waiting. We have to keep doing the best we can. And we can't hate ourselves for finding a way to cope. We're going to get through this. And when Clark comes back, we will be a stronger family for it."

"I hope so," Lois replied tremulously. The thought of never seeing her husband again was still enough to make her heart stop beating. It sent cold shivers skittering down her spine. Martha hugged her tightly, but it wasn't enough to combat the terrible chill that suffused her body. Before Clark had left, if someone had told her that she'd survive almost four years without him, without knowing if he was even still alive, she never would have believed it. Lois Lane would have sworn that that would have demolished her.

Was it strength that kept her alive, or had she somehow grown cold-hearted again? Did she lose the capacity to love as purely and as deeply as she once had, now that he was

away? She didn't want to believe it was possible. And the ache that still gripped her, deep inside, was enough to prove to her that she loved her husband every bit as much as she had that morning, watching him leave, feeling her heart crumble to dust. Lois swallowed roughly, trying hard not to succumb to the tears welling up in her eyes. She would find a way to keep holding on to him. To keep clinging to hope. And she'd do so for as long as it took for him to make his way back home.

Pushing the messy strands of blonde hair out of her eyes, Talan stood up and walked out of the secluded corridor. It would be hours still before they would let anyone see him and she couldn't stand doing nothing for so long.

Twenty-four hours after the blasts, all of the survivors had been rescued. Field commanders with expertise in logistics were now working with the rescue crews to deal with the people who'd been displaced and injured. The engineers and fire crews had dealt with the lingering danger at the blast sites. Fresh forces from elsewhere on New Krypton had arrived to relieve the weary men and women who had been working nonstop since the attacks the evening before.

Finding herself with no particular way to be useful, she'd had to quit that empty hallway in search of something to occupy her mind. Somehow, she found herself heading toward the medical facility's general waiting area. Inside, anxious people waited for news about their loved ones. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the doorway that led out of the medical facility and back into the larger compound. On the other side of the entrance stood an enormous group of people. Were there so many wounded at this facility that their families couldn't all fit into this room? Talan made her way over to them, figuring that perhaps there was some way she could help the overworked medical staff get news to the families.

The din created by all of those people faded into silence as she stood in front of them. All eyes suddenly focused on her. Startled, she didn't know what to say to all of the people looking up at her expectantly.

"Is he all right?" someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

"Who?" she asked, puzzled.

"The First Minister," came another voice. "We heard that you rescued him."

She looked around at the immense group. These people were all here for him. They were waiting and hoping – like they would for their own loved ones – for any small bit of encouraging news. "He is still in surgery," she said. A disappointed murmur rippled through the crowd.

"He saved my life." She heard someone say. The man stepped forward, the emotions at war within him clearly visible on his face. "I heard his voice and I knew it was him. The way he talks, he doesn't sound like one of us. I used to think he sounded odd, but I don't think I've ever been so happy to recognize anyone in my entire life. He

pulled me from the rubble and told me everything would all right. And I believed him."

"He rescued my daughter," a woman said over the whispers of the group. "He held her with a father's love as he brought her to me."

"Is it true? Did he kill Nor?" a man asked.

"He had no choice," Talan replied reflexively. She would not let rumors of a vengeful killing even begin. She owed him that.

"Thank the fates," the man replied.

"We're finally rid of that monster," a woman added.

"It seems fitting that it was Kal El who killed him," another man responded.

"No, it doesn't," came the retort. As one, the entire crowd turned to look at the woman who'd said it. "Kal El is a gentler sort of person than we are. You could see it in his eyes, and like that woman said, in the way he would carry a child. But we made him fight our battles for us. We should have slain our own monsters."

"The First Minister holds his duty to protect this world as sacred," Talan replied. Outwardly calm, the currents of confliction swirled around inside her. "He wouldn't have hesitated for a moment before sacrificing his own life to save his people."

"He's going to die, isn't he?" came a panicked voice. The unease washed over the group as an ominous rumbling.

Talan sighed inwardly at her poor choice of words. This was a bad idea on her part. What did she know about comforting an anxious and grieving world? It was pure hubris to imagine that her skills as a commander would somehow translate into the much lighter touch she needed to succor the distressed. "No, he is not going to die," she said definitively, as though the force of her words alone would keep him alive. "I know that he will be touched to hear that you have all gathered to wish him a speedy recovery. When I know more about his condition, I'll make sure that you're informed." The hero of countless battlefields prepared to beat a hasty retreat.

"Surely there must be something else you can tell us," a woman near the middle of the group called out.

The overwhelmed general commander shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't know anything more than what I've told you," she replied. "I'm sorry." She turned back toward the medical facility, the guard at the entrance allowing her to pass. Back inside, she nearly ran into the tall engineer walking back and forth in the hallway, but he didn't seem to even notice her.

"Lieutenant?" she ventured. The young man did not respond. "Lok Sim?" she tried again.

He finally looked up, seeing her for the first time. His eyes were bloodshot and darkly circled and a look of pure agony had settled on his face. "I'm sorry, Commander," he apologized.

"Is your wife all right?" she asked.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest. "She's still in surgery," Lok Sim managed.

"Some of the best surgeons in the world are working on her," she replied, hoping the words would provide some small measure of comfort.

"I know," he said with a short, quick nod of his head. The young man pinched the bridge of his nose between his index finger and his thumb. "Faral is dead," he murmured.

"I heard," she said softly. His oldest daughter was about to be married and he'd so been looking forward to relinquishing the burdens of the fight, to finally going home to be with his family. And yet, when his fellow soldiers had needed him, he'd laid down his hopes of a happy and peaceful life.

Lok Sim looked downward, avoiding eye contact. "He saved our lives."

"He gave his life willingly to make sure the mission was accomplished." Her old friend had fallen defending his comrades, which was exactly like him. "And it was. You stopped the saboteur and restored the life support systems. Your actions saved probably at least a thousand lives. My soldiers said you saved one of their own in that battle, and you saved Captain Enza's life."

"I shouldn't have left him there," Lok Sim said, shaking his head slowly.

"You did your job, just like Faral did his," she replied resolutely. "You showed great courage, and we owe you a debt of gratitude, Lieutenant."

He looked at her grimly. "You were right, ma'am. About whether it's worth it to know how you'd react to the life or death situation. I'd give anything not to."

Zara cracked open the door, peering into the dimly lit room. "Good morning, Commander." She wasn't expecting to see her there, but she wondered if she should have been surprised. Immediately, Zara pushed the thought from her mind; now wasn't the time.

Talan opened her eyes suddenly and sat up straighter in her chair. She looked around, obviously disoriented, before standing up and saluting crisply. "Good morning, ma'am."

"How is he?" Zara asked, walking slowly into the room, limping slightly.

"He hasn't woken up yet," Talan said.

Zara regarded her friend sadly. He lay completely still in the hospital bed, tubes leading away from his body and to the countless machines surrounding him. "May I have a few minutes, Commander?"

Talan bowed deeply. "Of course, ma'am." With that, the commander strode out of the room.

"I am so sorry, Clark," she murmured, slipping easily back into English. "I have said it before, but we never should have brought you here. This wasn't your fight." She took his hand in her much smaller one. "Please know that I will do everything I can to make sure you get home as soon as possible."

Tears stung her eyes. She wanted him to be gone already. On its face, it was a positively terrible thought, but she wanted him off this world, away from its problems, and back with the people he loved. He didn't belong here

anymore now than he did nearly four years ago when they'd plucked him from his home. Four years later, he still wasn't Kal El. And that may well have been a good thing, but she knew that part of 'Clark' was slipping away. Every wound he received took something away from him. He'd said it himself – he felt like he wasn't whole anymore and for a time, he'd tried to conceal the emptiness behind a mask of anger and ill-temper.

As time had passed and he'd grown closer and closer to going home, the mask had started to slip. She'd seen more of the Clark she'd remembered from their first interactions. There would be moments when he'd smile unguardedly, or even laugh. He would seem like his old self, even if only for an instant. And she'd hope that when he was finally away from this place, those moments would multiply and stretch until they'd blotted out the darkness and bad memories of New Krypton.

"Be strong," she whispered. "Get well soon so we can send you back to Lois." Zara let go of his hand and stepped back. Her parents were waiting for her; Dek Ra's physicians expected him to wake at any moment.

The very first thing he became aware of was a constant hum, punctuated regularly with an annoying, electronic-sounding beep. The assault they launched on his ears was the least of his problems, though. His lungs seemed to have been scorched from the inside and they throbbed painfully in time with his pulse. The nerves in his right arm, too, felt like they were on fire. Clark tried to speak, but his parched and irritated throat made it impossible to form any sound other than a weak croak. And when he tried, he got nothing more than a new stabbing pain for his troubles. It was odd, but he didn't remember swallowing a sword.

Coughing, he considered his predicament darkly. He desperately longed for a drink of water to sooth his raw throat, but he couldn't ask for one, because he couldn't even make enough noise to let anyone know he was awake. The quintessential Catch-22.

Well, at least he wasn't dead.

He couldn't exactly remember what had happened or how he'd ended up here – wherever 'here' was – but he was fairly sure he was lucky to be alive. Lucky, of course, being a relative term in such circumstances. His morbid ruminations were interrupted by the sound of a voice, distinctly feminine and more than a bit anxious, over the background hum of the machines. The voice was familiar, but he couldn't place it, nor could he understand what she was saying.

"Lois?" The way he pronounced the syllables, strangled and strained, hit his ears all wrong. How could he mangle the soft, mellifluous sounds of her name into something so harsh and tinny? His eyes opened a crack and brutal light came pouring in, making him regret the attempt immediately. She would understand. She would turn off the bright lights overhead and he'd see her at last, after four long and empty years, he would finally be able to look at his wife again. He wished she would hurry. The powerful

lights were penetrating the thin skin of his eyelids, making him wince.

Clark reached toward the sound of the voice and brushed against a warm hand. He closed his own around it but it only took him a moment to realize it wasn't Lois's. It was most decidedly a woman's hand, but the fingers were too long, almost as long as his own. The palm, just at the knuckle of each finger, was faintly calloused. The hand under his remained stone still. "No sir, it's just me, Talan," she said. The commander continued speaking, her voice softer than usual, but he didn't comprehend a word of it.

Something inside him began to die. It was hope. The revelation buried him like an avalanche. Oh God, he was still on that damn planet.

No, this was hell; clearly, he'd died and woken up in hell. It made a certain sort of sense, he supposed. Talan had sworn that she'd follow him into hell again and nothing would have made that woman break a promise. Somewhere, a door opened and he could hear footsteps. There was suddenly another woman's voice, but he didn't recognize it. She was asking him all sorts of senseless questions about how he felt and whether he knew where he was and what had happened.

"It hurts," he rasped, the rough words rubbing his throat raw anew.

"We'll increase the pain medication right away, but it will take a few minutes for you to feel the effects," the other woman said.

He was too tired to explain that he wasn't talking about physical pain.

General Command was still a mess, Ching thought ruefully. Crews were working to clean up, but it would be a long time before the physical evidence of the attack could be scrubbed away. Throughout the compound, officers worked at jobs that had been vacated by others who were now injured or dead. Intelligence officers were coordinating civilian relief responses; combat commanders were relaying orders to mechanics and construction crews. The men and women around him had been forced to step into unfamiliar roles in order to bring the colony back from the brink of destruction.

For at least the tenth time that day, he'd stopped himself just before bellowing for Parth. He'd never realized how much he'd come to rely on that young officer. Now he was gone. He'd fallen in the battle, leading a company of soldiers to contain the riots in the prison.

Parth had been born on this planet some years after it had been settled. From the first moment of his life, he'd known nothing except this place and its harshness. He'd only escaped it on those sojourns aboard a Star Runner, where, like Ching, he'd been trained as a navigator. Ching wondered if the younger man had also hoped that by charting the stars and mapping the universe, he'd find his place in it. He supposed it didn't matter anymore. Parth was dead, like so many of his comrades and hundreds of civilians.

Those who'd survived, however, still had work to do. Parth, Rab Dun, General Commander Flad, Councilor Shai, even Trey, had all died in the service of their world. In life and in death, they'd tried to protect their people and their way of life. The most fitting honor the living could bestow on the dead was to remember their sacrifice and carry out their work.

Metal workers were reinforcing the wall panels even as the staff in the command center tried to work. It had only been a few days since the attack, but they were wasting no time in trying to restore order – a difficult task given how many senior engineers had been killed. Over the sounds of pounding and welding, Ching reviewed the reports from the field commanders, still trying to piece together what had happened. The saboteur had been captured; Rae Et and Nor were both stone cold and laid out in the morgue. Rae Et had been shot twice, presumably by one of her own thugs, before her transport was downed. If the gunshots hadn't killed her, the crash would have. Several dozen other rebels had been killed and another fifty or so were now new guests at the recently re-secured prison.

Ching still had a difficult time believing the fact that Clark had killed Nor. Perhaps another man would have found some peace in finally dispatching the monster that had tormented him and threatened an entire world. Not Clark. This was just another psychological burden they'd laid upon his shoulders. The doctors were confident that he'd physically recover despite the horrific injuries he'd suffered. Once more, they'd been lucky that Talan was nearby. If she hadn't summoned help immediately, Clark would have likely succumbed to his injuries alone in that hallway. All that mattered now was getting him well enough to travel. He and Zara had agreed that keeping him here a moment longer than necessary was a cruelty neither could bear to visit upon the man. When he was strong enough to leave, they would let him go – they would send him back to those who could take care of him and help heal the wounds this world had inflicted upon him.

He looked up from the schematics displayed on the table in front of him to see a young lieutenant waiting patiently and quietly, his hands clasped behind his back. His eyes were bloodshot, his face unshaven, but he did his best to project the air of professionalism that an officer should. Like the rest of them, he was holding on to what he knew, clinging to the familiar and the understood. In the roles and rituals that went along with his place in the military structure, he could find a measure of order in the chaos. He could convince himself that some small things still made sense.

Ching had been so absorbed in his thoughts of people who no longer existed and inviolable rules that didn't apply anymore that the other man could have been standing there for half an hour for all he knew. He shook the cobwebs from his mind. "What is it, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Sir, the acting Chief Engineer is here for your briefing," the other man said.

"Send him in," Ching replied absently.

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant replied with a crisp salute before turning neatly on his heel. When there was nothing left but the façade, the rituals, whose symbolism was confused with true meaning, seemed more important than ever. If they could keep up the shell – the solid-looking but brittle, thin exterior – long enough, maybe they could rebuild from within. Maybe they could prop up the world and the structures they'd come to depend on.

He looked at the weary man walking into the command center, carrying burdens better suited to a giant. Like Ching, Rab Dun's replacement was going to have to follow in the footsteps of an almost mythical being. Neither of them could really hope to measure up to their predecessors, but they would still have to do their best.

She sat in a chair in the corner farthest away from his bed, just watching him sleep. He'd woken up several times, confused and delirious, asking for his wife. It cut deeply to listen to his distress, to hear the anguish in his voice and know there was nothing she could do to ease his pain. In truth, she just made it worse every time she had to tell him that Lois wasn't there.

Tao Scion had been by earlier to check his vital signs. The physician had said he was optimistic about Kal El's prognosis, but his tone only conveyed sadness. He seemed to care a great deal for all of his charges, but none so much as the First Minister.

At the moment, Kal El seemed to be sleeping peacefully. It was the middle of the night and she, too, should have been taking advantage of the quiet to get some rest. But she couldn't bring herself to close her eyes, even to meditate for a few minutes. Her gaze remained transfixed on him. It calmed her troubled soul to know that he would recover from this. Kal El was strong, stronger than anyone she'd ever met. The darkness and death of this world could not hope to contain him.

But it could still damage him.

He had taken a life. His actions couldn't have been more justified; it wasn't only self-defense, Kal El had killed Nor to end his reign of terror and the threat against New Krypton. While he had done the right thing, killing changed a person. It was a line one couldn't uncross.

The innocent shall sleep tonight for I will watch over them.

The oath of the Expeditionary Forces rolled around in her mind. She could stand watch over a sleeping world and a wounded leader, but neither was innocent anymore. They knew too much of darkness; they'd seen too much of the ugliness that could destroy a person's soul. Innocence was a quality of the inexperienced – of those who did not have to concern themselves with terrible choices that all had unspeakable consequences.

It should have been her. She should have killed Nor. What was one more death on her head? One more enemy felled by her hand? She'd moved beyond her thirst for vengeance; her battle with Nor wasn't personal anymore. And though she wanted nothing more than to lay down her

arms and be done with the bloodshed, it was still her duty to protect her people from the darkness, even at the cost of her own humanity. That shouldn't have been Kal El's burden. They'd asked too much of him already.

But life was rarely fair. That was, of course, that first realization that came with the loss of innocence. It didn't matter that Kal El was too good and noble a person to have endured what he had, and to have been faced with the choices he'd had to make. He'd found himself at the end of that hallway, already wounded and facing death at a monster's hands – a monster who would have continued to terrorize and murder had he not been stopped. So he'd done the only thing he could. He'd eliminated the last threat against New Krypton. Once more, a chance at peace was possible because of him.

Talan looked up at the sound of him beginning to stir. The bedclothes rustled as he struggled to sit up. "Sir, please, you really shouldn't move," she said, standing up to cross the room.

"Where am I?" he asked, his tone bewildered.

"The medical facility."

He squinted as he looked at her. "What happened?"

"You were shot, sir, by Nor," she said. As she stood beside his bed, she fidgeted for a moment, trying to figure out what to do with her hands. Talan finally settled on clasping them behind her back. It was always easy to just slip back into the military habits that had become like second nature to her. Better to fall back on that particular default than try to navigate the treacherous space that lay somewhere in the middle of a command relationship, friendship, and whatever it was that roiled inside her, making her feel like she wanted to die when she saw him in pain.

"That explains a lot," he mumbled in response.

"You don't...you don't remember?" she ventured hesitantly.

"No," Kal El replied. "There was a Council meeting... Ching was confirmed...then...wait..." His brow furrowed. "There were fires...we were getting people out, weren't we?"

She nodded with a relieved, tight-lipped smile. "That's right. Do you remember anything else?"

He stared blankly at her. "No...I don't. That's weird; I think I should remember getting shot."

"The mind often suppresses intensely traumatic experiences; the memories will probably come back with time," Talan said softly.

"Were you there? Do you know what happened?"

She swallowed roughly around the lump in her throat. "Nor fired on the civilians you were evacuating. You drew his fire by running down a corridor. Nor shot you in the back. He was going to kill you..."

A look of horror crossed his face, his eyes growing wide. "I killed him, didn't I?"

"It was self-defense, sir. He would have killed you and others and he would have escaped if you hadn't," she whispered stridently.

"I killed him," he repeated dully as he stared at her in disbelief. She wanted to shrink from his gaze but there was nowhere she could go.

"You had no choice," she said firmly, but the look on his face told her that he found no comfort in her repeated reassurances.

He lowered his eyes, looking away from her. "I killed him," he whispered again.

"I should get the doctor," Talan replied softly before retreating from the room.

Breathe in and then out.

Over and over again.

Stay alive from one moment to the next.

Keep fighting.

He watched the slow rise and fall of her body, his breaths having long ago fallen into sync with hers. They breathed as one, just like they had, so many times, moved as one. One soul, one body, one life, one heart.

Hesitantly he placed his hand on top of hers, just curling his fingers over hers to avoid jostling the IV that had been inserted in the back of her hand. A dark bruise had formed there; delicate veins, the nurse had explained. With the pad of his thumb, he traced her fingers. Her skin was so soft and warm. There was still life, still fire in this small body. The cuts and bruises that marred her face bore testament to the strength of the fight in her soul. She had survived what should have been certain death. Enza had fought off her attackers, forcing them to retreat, and she'd held on. When any ordinary person would have succumbed, she'd stubbornly refused to die.

Her husband lifted his gaze from where their two hands were joined, taking in the full extent of her injuries. Her entire right arm was held stiff in a complex metal brace. The bedclothes were molded to the outline of her body, the sheets at the end of the bed tented by only one foot; her right leg ended abruptly just below the knee. It was just so...wrong. Feet came in pairs, one the mirror image of its mate. And they were joined to ankles, hard shins, flesh, and blood. She had delicate little ankles, slender and fine-boned. He'd always teased her about them, wondering how a person could stand on ankles that skinny. Lok Sim choked back a sob as he tried not to let the memory overwhelm him.

He looked at her face. A dark bruise surrounded one eye, but her expression was peaceful, as though she were merely asleep. And yet, he didn't even know if she would ever wake up. His eyes flooded with tears as his gaze swept her small body, lying perfectly still in the middle of that large bed, except for the rise and fall of her chest. Why hadn't he kept her safe? He should have stayed by her side. He should never have let her go. He should have prevented the entire catastrophe in the first place.

They had both been right – he to suspect the damage control engineer, she to encourage him to look at who would benefit from Nor's escape, but it hadn't been enough.

He hadn't been smart enough or fast enough to stop Sur Ahn before she could unleash hell on the main colony.

Six hundred and seventy-one people had died in the attacks. Six hundred and seventy-one men, women, and children had been sacrificed in Sur Ahn's single-minded drive to protect her husband. He didn't even know if she'd succeeded. For all of his anger toward her, Lok Sim did hope Sur Ahn's husband was alive. He knew of Rae Et's cruelty and could not imagine a man suffering through four years of it. He'd been suffering less than four days, living and dying between each one of his wife's labored breaths. It was not quite four days and he was certain he was a hair's breadth from oblivion. She'd lived four years like this, knowing that her husband was being slowly tortured. He didn't doubt that it had driven her mad, that those four years had wrecked and warped who she once was.

What would he have done? In her place, after four years of such horror, four years of such unimaginable pain, what would he have been capable of? Would he, too, have become an agent of death? Would he have given himself to everything evil in this world to spare his love unspeakable torment? He didn't know.

He didn't want to know.

Despondent, he lowered his head to the mattress, right by where he still held her hand, feeling the soft blanket under his cheek. He closed his eyes and let the tears fall, silently at first, but he was soon sobbing. Breathe in and then out. Over and over again. It was all he could manage at the moment.

"You gave us quite a fright, young man," Tao Scion said as he checked the monitors.

"Believe me, I'm sorry I got shot, too," Clark grumbled as he struggled to sit up.

"Would you just lay back and hold still?" the old physician chastised. "Those incisions will never heal if you keep moving about needlessly."

"Yeah, well I have a pretty strong aversion to lying still in hospital beds." Tao Scion harrumphed and injected something into Clark's IV. "What is that?" Clark demanded.

"Pain medication," the doctor replied simply. "You'll be a far less irritable charge if those wounds don't hurt quite so much."

"How much longer do I have to stay here?"

"Here in this hospital? A few more days, at least. But it'll be more than a month before you're well enough to travel back to Earth." Clark closed his eyes. Another month. Dammit, another month here. "The First Minister and Commander Talan have both requested to be updated about your condition; is it all right if I speak with them?"

"That's fine," Clark replied, his tone flat.

Tao Scion continued about his business of taking measurements and readings and poking and prodding him. He lifted up Clark's right hand. "Any numbness in the fingers?"

"No."

"Good, then it's not likely you suffered any significant nerve damage. Squeeze my hand," he instructed. Clark did as he was asked. "Good. The commander, especially, seemed particularly worried about you."

"She considers that part of her job description," Clark responded, knowing that was entirely unfair.

"She turned one of our offices into a command post so that she wouldn't have to leave the hospital to do her job." Tao Scion continued. Clark shouldn't have been surprised. Talan was as good a friend as one could hope for, and certainly a better friend than he deserved most days. She'd stood shoulder to shoulder with him in every fight since the day he arrived. But he was tired of fighting and tired of the reminders of the fight. He was just so ready to go home.

"How is he?" Ching asked as she walked into his makeshift office behind the command center.

"He's alert and the doctors are controlling the pain," Talan replied.

He gestured toward the two chairs in a corner of the office. "Does he know about Nor?"

She nodded grimly as she sat down next to him. "He does. He doesn't actually remember it, but he knows that he killed him."

"I imagine he isn't taking it well," Ching mused.

"Should he be?"

"I suppose not," he replied with a sad shake of his head. "I asked you here because Commander Kayden will be formally assuming Commander Flad's responsibilities as Chief of the Ground Forces. Kayden's promotion leaves the position of Chief of the General Staff open. Zara and I were hoping you would accept the responsibility."

It was quite a promotion he was dangling in front of her - an immediate jump of two ranks, making her the direct subordinate of the Chief of the Ground Forces and second in command.

And yet, she couldn't have been less enthusiastic about it.

"I ... really did not expect this ... " she began. "There are certainly still other general commanders who outrank me."

"But there are none better suited for the job. And there is no one Kal El, Zara, or I would trust more."

"Sir..."

"Don't call me 'sir,'" he said abruptly. "Kal El is still the First Minister; I don't outrank you," Ching finished, his tone softer. Talan nodded in understanding. Kal El was Ching's friend, too, and he had no desire to push the other man aside.

"I know this isn't what you wanted," he continued. "That's why you left Joint Command to lead the Scientific Research and Exploration unit."

"It wasn't exactly an intelligent career move," she confessed.

"Unless you were looking for a graceful way out of the military," he said with a faintly detectable smile, one that did not reach his eyes. He leaned forward in his chair. "I am sorry to have to ask you to do this."

"There's no need to apologize," she replied, though deep down, she couldn't help but feel disappointed. Over the last year, during the stretch of quiet after Nor's capture and the rebellion's apparent collapse, she'd realized just how tired she'd been of war. It had given her life form and structure and purpose and it had exhausted her, leaching the life from her soul. The weariness went straight down to the bones. She'd only just started to regain any semblance of hope for the future, when the fragile peace they'd started to rebuild their lives on was destroyed. Talan didn't know where she was supposed to get the strength to put back on the heavy armor she'd cast off. "I knew the nature of this responsibility when I first took my oaths. I made a decision to serve, just like you."

"You've given more than enough to this world."

"Life asks more from us than it should," she said simply, knowing her voice lacked conviction. She could talk all she wanted about sacrifice and the virtue of service, but her spirit wasn't in it anymore. "But I'm not certain how much more there is in me to give."

"We won't ask you to remain a moment longer than is necessary. We'll begin the search for a permanent candidate. Until then, we'd be grateful if you accepted the position."

"I'll do my best," she replied with a somber nod.

In the silent hospital hallway, he dropped to his knees in front of his little niece, covering her shoulder with one large hand. "My mother is going to take you home," he said quietly.

She looked directly at him with wide green eyes, the height difference between them having been eliminated. "Are you going to stay with Aunt Enza?"

Lok Sim nodded. "I'll be home in a little while." Thia wrapped her arms around his neck as he hugged her tightly. He kissed her temple.

"I love you," she said in a small whisper.

"I love you, too," he replied. Reluctantly, he let her go and rose to his feet. Thia turned away from him. With small steps, she walked over to where his mother was waiting, her hand outstretched. He watched his niece go, her tiny, slim shoulders sagging. A sigh escaped his lips. He felt his chest tighten, his heart aching.

Back in Enza's room, he took up his seat beside her bed, listening to the hum of the monitors and machines, watching her breathe. For over an hour, he sat silently, just watching her. He felt his eyelids begin to droop; he was losing his battle with exhaustion. It had been days since he'd slept - trying to spend time with his niece during the day and keeping nightly vigils by his wife's bed.

A soft sound startled him. He sat up straighter, straining his ears to listen. There it was again - the tiniest moan, the distress clear in her voice.

"Enza?" her name crossed his lips as a strangled cry. Her eyes remained closed, but she started to stir, ever so slightly. The corners of her mouth turned downward in a

frown. Lok Sim stood up and reached for the call button, frantically pushing it over and over again.

He knew that mere seconds passed between the time he called for the doctor and when Tao Scion arrived, but those seconds may as well have each been an age. The old, gray physician rushed into the room. "What is it? Is everything all right?" His attention turned immediately to his patient.

"I think she's waking up," Lok Sim said, feeling his heart slamming against his ribcage. He watched nervously as Tao Scion tapped the bubbles out of a syringe before injecting something into Enza's intravenous tube.

"What is that? What are you giving her?" he asked agitatedly.

"Something to help her sleep," the old doctor replied.

"Why? She's finally waking up." The tension coiled inside him to the snapping point. He was certain something in him was going to break.

Tao Scion removed the needle and turned toward him. He gazed unblinking at Lok Sim, his blue eyes hard and unyielding. "She is in a great deal of pain, young man," he said bluntly. "With all the different medications she's on, we cannot control that pain while she's awake. The best thing we can do for her is let her sleep a while longer."

Lok Sim's entire body tensed as he folded his arms across his chest and sighed. He struggled to find the words to express the myriad fears and concerns and frustrations tearing him to bits.

"Listen to me," the physician began again more gently. "I know that there is nothing in the world you want more than to have your wife open her eyes and see you and hear you tell her how much you love her, but she is in pain. Let her rest."

His jaw clenched, Lok Sim nodded in silent understanding. He knew, of course, that the doctor was right, but it didn't make the words any easier to hear. He looked at his wife, his heart aching.

Tao Scion put his hand on the younger man's arm. "Her scans look good and we have every reason to be hopeful. Tomorrow night, we'll let her wake up."

Lok Sim swallowed roughly. "All right," he managed.

The doctor gave him a slight smile before quietly retreating from the room.

Lok Sim opened the door to his apartment and slipped in as quietly as he could. Thia ran toward him, throwing her arms around him. He lifted her up, holding her tightly. "You should be asleep, little one," he murmured.

"I wanted to wait for you," she replied. He kissed her temple as he smoothed her soft hair with one hand.

His mother entered the room from the kitchen. "How is everything?" she asked obliquely.

"Better," he replied. "She's doing better."

"I'm glad to hear that," she replied. His mother gave him a sad smile. "I will see you tomorrow," she said as she touched his arm gently.

"Thank you," he said. He turned his head to kiss his mother's cheek, still holding his niece in his arms. His mother left silently.

"Come on, it's late," he said softly to Thia, who was already dressed for bed. "Did you wash up?"

She nodded her head but said nothing. He carried her to her room and tucked her into bed. Lok Sim kissed his niece's forehead as he stood up straight.

"Would you stay here until I fall asleep?" she asked plaintively.

He nodded. "Of course," he said, his voice soft and low. He turned off the lights and pulled up the chair beside her bed. Thia reached out her hand to him and he took it in his much larger one.

"Is Aunt Enza going to get better?"

"She is," he replied. "The doctors said she's going to wake up soon."

"Then she can come home?"

"I don't know," he replied. "But we'll go see her in the hospital, all right?"

"All right," she agreed.

"Good, now try to get some sleep."

"I love you," Thia said with a yawn.

"I love you, too," he replied. Lok Sim sat silently in the darkness, waiting until he was certain Thia had fallen asleep. He couldn't have loved her more if she were his own daughter. He hoped so desperately that his little family would be all right. It was almost impossible to imagine that only a few weeks ago in the bedroom down the hall, he and his wife had been talking about having a baby. That conversation took place a lifetime ago, in a world far removed from this one.

But now, he had reason to hope again. They couldn't go back to the life they had before all this happened, but maybe they could build a new one together. Enza was going to wake up. She was going to be all right. She had to be all right, because his life didn't make any sense without her. The world didn't make any sense without her.

"Thank you for everything, Ultrawoman," the firefighter said as he removed his helmet.

Lois gave him a curt nod. "I'm just glad I could help, Tom, was it?" Behind them, the rest of the fire crew cleaned up the equipment.

"Yeah, Tom," he confirmed with a grin. He dragged a hand through his sandy brown hair. "Look, could I buy you a cup of coffee? I know it's late, but there's this diner down the street that's got the best peach cobbler..."

"I'm afraid I need to get going," she replied stiltedly, trying not to bristle. It wasn't his fault; it wasn't as though Ultrawoman wore a wedding band. And he certainly hadn't been crass or rude. He seemed like a perfectly nice guy and he had no way of knowing she found even the slightest attention from a man thoroughly unnerving. It didn't help matters that he smelled the way Clark did when he came home from a rescue. The smell of smoke coming from his skin brought back the memories of nights during that year

after she learned Clark was Superman, when he'd come to her place right after a tough rescue. When he'd mumble a halfhearted 'hello' before disappearing into her bathroom to take, what was for him, a very long shower.

He'd come back out dressed in the old sweatpants and soft t-shirt he kept at her place, murmuring quiet apologies about not being able to get rid of the smell of smoke. They'd sit together for hours in each others' arms. In his embrace, she'd tuck her head under his chin and breathe in the faint scent of smoke and soap that would mingle on his warm skin. Sometimes he'd tell her about what happened, the words rumbling in his chest. Sometimes he'd just remain silent. As much as it would hurt to listen to the heartbreak in his voice when he talked about people he couldn't save and lives he couldn't put back together, she was always glad to know that he felt like he could come to her – late at night, no invitation required.

The memories were too vivid, too sharp, recalled too easily by everyday sounds and smells. Any other woman could be politely flattered, but she had to fight off an anxiety attack whenever she was paid a simple compliment. And it was only getting worse with time. As a major celebrity, she got more attention than other women, most of it polite and well-meaning. Mercifully, the tabloids didn't create nearly as many stories romantically linking her to the latest A-list entertainers and athletes the way they had Superman. But then, she'd had less patience for the gala events and charity functions that the paparazzi liked to cover and no one expected her to engage in small talk in Kinwara or at other catastrophe sites. What little they did run was so silly and unbelievable that it could easily be ignored. Now that she spent more of her time handling smaller crises and non-life-threatening calls she was expected to be sociable.

Tom smiled a polite, if disappointed, smile at her. Even under all the soot and grime, it was obvious that he was handsome, probably one of the firefighters they got to pose for those hokey charity calendars. And he lived in a city that put Metropolis to shame when it came to image consciousness. In a town full of actresses and supermodels, superheroes were perhaps the last novelty in dating. "Well, thanks again for your help," he said. With an awkward, tight-lipped smile, she took off, heading away from L.A. and back toward Kansas.

In her ordinary, everyday life, she found other ways to avoid attention. Lois Lane wore an engagement ring and the unfortunate circumstances of her marriage were well known. She wasn't treated like a widow, exactly, but it wasn't all that different. After all of this time, people didn't really know how to act around her. It wasn't as though she was grieving, waiting for time to work its ways and help heal old wounds. She wasn't seeking closure and it wasn't time to move on.

She was trapped in her own, existential limbo – unable to grieve, unable to make sense of her loss, because the very act of defining it would be a betrayal. It didn't matter if she spent the rest of her life waiting – she would keep

waiting. Nothing would ever make her give up on the hope that he was coming back, no matter how long it took. But now, after all of these years, there were finally moments – dark, isolated moments – when she wondered what she would do if she knew Clark wasn't coming back. If something had happened to him and the Kryptonians got word to her, what would she have done?

It was an ugly train of thought and one she derailed whenever it crept up, unwanted and unbidden. And no matter where the terrible hypothetical tried to take her, one thing was clear – there would never be anyone other than Clark. He wasn't the sort of man you got over.

Lok Sim stood at attention, trying not to let his exhaustion show. The door opened and the general commander entered the room. He saluted smartly and she stopped to return the salute. "How is your wife, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"Better, ma'am," he said quietly. "The doctors expect her to wake up tonight."

"I'm glad to hear that," Talan replied as she stepped behind her desk. Even though she'd been working off and on out of General Command since the attack, she'd just assumed the role of Chief of the General Staff. All of General Command seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief at her appointment. Her stern and sober presence in the hallways was oddly comforting – a reminder that someone was in charge and that chaos would not be allowed to reign over the military, even for a moment. "I'm making your promotion permanent and returning you to active duty." Her eyes locked with his as she spoke. She certainly delivered bad news directly.

His heart sank. This was the last thing he wanted or needed. Especially now. He wanted to protest, but it wasn't only forbidden, it was pointless.

"General Command has been completely crippled and we desperately need engineers with your abilities to restore the systems. I promise that you won't be sent away from the main colony. And I know that you need more time with your family before we can ask you to begin." Her expression unclenched just the tiniest bit as she seemed to struggle to inject some degree of humanity into the chain of command.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. Her choice of words was odd: *asking* him to begin. As though the military was simply extending an invitation to him and hoping he would be agreeable. He tried to bite back his anger and frustration.

"I know this situation is not ideal. You were recommended for promotion to officer three times during your service and each time you declined. You don't want a career in the military and I understand that, which is why I have no intention of allowing this assignment to turn into open-ended service," she assured him.

Lok Sim nodded in silent agreement. "Thank you," he managed. As relentless and demanding as she may have been, she was also scrupulously honest. The general

commander did not make promises she didn't intend to keep.

"There's just one more matter remaining," she began. "I understand you are to command the honor guard for Faral's memorial."

"Aye, ma'am," he confirmed.

"It would mean a great deal to me if you allowed me to serve in the guard," she said.

He frowned, confused by her words. "I'll step aside..." he began.

"I'm not asking you to give up your command," she interrupted. "I just want to say goodbye to my friend." A look of sadness settled on her normally impassive face.

"Of course, ma'am," he replied, trying to regain his balance. He knew that people all around him were grieving and mourning, some numb from shock, others feeling raw, shattered, and exposed. Even the powerful had been laid low by their grief; such was the magnitude of their wounds. But he'd been too enveloped in his own anguish to really notice.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "That will be all, Lieutenant."

Lok Sim saluted before leaving the office.

"Clark?" Zara called out his name as she entered his room. She looked around – he was nowhere to be seen. "Clark?" she repeated. Perhaps he was in the washroom, she thought. She sat down to wait, but minutes passed with no sign of him. Zara knocked on the washroom door. "Kal El?" There was no answer. She tried the door. It was open and the washroom was empty.

Rushing into the hallway, she stopped the first staffer she saw. "Has Kal El been moved?" she asked breathlessly.

"No, ma'am," the young man replied with a shake of his head.

"He's not in his room," she said, anxiety growing inside her.

"I'll call his doctor," the orderly responded, fumbling for his communicator. Tao Scion found them within moments.

"Do we know how long he's been gone?" Tao Scion said, short of breath, as he approached.

"I just went by his room a few minutes ago, he wasn't there," Zara explained. She could feel her chest growing tight. Her heart was threatening to burst against her ribcage.

"Half the hospital is looking for him," Tao Scion assured her. Except it wasn't terribly reassuring. She tried to tell herself that he was fine. He was healing well and there was no reason to believe he was in any danger in the hospital, but she had no idea why he wouldn't be in his room. Where could he have gone?

She started to pace and did the only thing she could think of.

"Repairs are proceeding on schedule," Talan explained as they walked down the corridor. She realized that Ching had fallen out of step with her. She turned around and

noticed the frown on his face as he looked at his communicator.

"It's Zara," he explained as he held the communicator up to his ear. The color drained from his face. "Kal El is missing," he croaked.

"What?" Talan demanded.

"They're searching the hospital for him," Ching continued.

Calm down, Talan told herself. Think clearly, breathe. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine where she would have gone if she were him. "Tell her to check the morgue," she said at last.

"What? Why?" Ching responded tersely.

"Just tell her to look for him there," Talan insisted.

The lights overhead bathed the cold, sterile room in a haunting glow. Clark opened each of the vaults one by one, feeling his insides tie themselves in knots. He wanted to throw up, and the sickly sweet smell of the chemicals wasn't helping, but he kept going, he had to know. He pulled out the drawer and uncovered another body. It wasn't him. Clark closed the door and tried another of the refrigerated vaults and then another. His body ached from standing for so long, the muscles in his back seized and cramped with every movement, but he couldn't stop. Not yet. He pulled open another door.

It was him.

Clark looked down at the livid, rigid corpse – bloodless, lifeless, colorless. The wound in the center of his chest contrasted starkly with his pale, almost yellow skin. He stared down at Nor's body, his jaw clenched so tightly the muscles in his face and neck hurt. He could feel his teeth grinding together. His right hand curled into a fist, tensing his arm until the injured muscles started to fray and rip. He could feel the sutures in his wound begin to tear, blood oozing between the stitches and soaking through his clothes.

His hand and then his entire arm began to tremble. He fought it, like he had for more than a year, trying to control his uncooperative body. Suddenly, violently, he slammed his fist against the shelf right beside Nor's body.

"Damn you!" he shouted at the corpse. "Damn you!" He lowered his head as he beat his shaking fist against the cold, metal table once again. His body quivered with rage. Fire burned through every cell in his body. He had hated before, but never like this. Clark wanted to despise Nor for forcing his hand, for putting him in a position where he'd had to take a life.

But he knew, somewhere in the darkest part of who he was, that that wasn't the source of the hatred raging inside him. He wasn't angry about killing Nor.

He was angry because he hadn't killed him sooner.

Almost seven hundred people were dead because of the failed attempt to break Nor out of prison. Seven hundred people who would be alive if Clark had simply killed Nor when he had the chance, back when he'd first been

captured. The blood of all those people; how could he not acknowledge that it was on his hands?

He stumbled backwards, still shaking. Tripping, he tried to break his fall by reaching backward for the exam table behind him. Instead he knocked the table over, sending the coroner's instruments clattering to the floor. He followed immediately after, falling to the hard ground. Wincing in pain from the reopened wounds on his arm and back, he sat up.

"Clark?"

He heard Zara's voice behind him, but he didn't acknowledge her. He wondered just how pathetic a tableau he must have made. Lowering his head, he closed his eyes, wondering if perhaps she might not notice him. What was she doing looking for him in the morgue anyway?

"Clark?" she repeated his name again. He could hear her footsteps as she approached. She sank to her knees beside him, placing her hand on his arm. Keeping his head down, he managed to avoid eye contact. A sigh shuddered through his body. Her arm came around his shoulders, but he didn't respond.

"It's all right," she said softly. "You did the only thing you could," she continued, absolving him of a different sin from the one that plagued his conscience. She wouldn't have been able to understand. She couldn't have known what he was thinking. And he would be doing her no favors by enlightening her. So he remained silent, and allowed her to continue believing a more tolerable lie.

Lok Sim crossed the hallway in long, rapid strides. The physician met him outside the door to Enza's room. "How is she?" Lok Sim asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

There was kindness in the doctor's sapphire blue eyes. "She should be waking up any moment."

Lok Sim let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding in. "Thank you," he murmured.

"Let's go see her," Tao Scion said with a warm smile.

He could hear his heart pounding in his ears as he stepped into his wife's room. His throat was dry, his breaths rapid and shallow. He sat down in the chair beside her bed as Tao Scion checked the monitors. The other man moved about unobtrusively in the background. Lok Sim had gotten so used to the doctor's presence that he could comfortably ignore him. He covered his wife's hand with his own, letting his thumb trace the soft underside of each of her fingers. "Come on, love. Please, wake up," he whispered.

The minutes seemed to stretch out into hours as he waited and searched for some sign, any sign that she could hear him. Every change in her breathing, every slight movement caused his heart to stop. Was this it? Was she finally waking up? Each moment ended in letdown.

"Be patient, young man," Tao Scion counseled gently.

Lok Sim looked up, his eyes meeting the old physician's. He nodded, tight lipped, trying to keep up hope. Beneath his hand, her fingers slowly curled around his thumb. He didn't move, he couldn't move. He had to stay perfectly still in order to prove to himself that he wasn't

imagining it, that she was actually holding on to him. She squeezed gently and his heart stopped.

"Enza?" he managed, his voice a small whisper. He heard her moan faintly as she turned her head toward him. "Please, wake up, love," he murmured.

Her eyelids fluttered. An eternity seemed to pass in the mere seconds that ticked by. He thought he would die from the waiting, but finally, her eyes opened. It took her a moment to focus on him, but her mouth turned up in a faintly pained smile. "Lok...Sim," she whispered his name softly and his eyes flooded with fresh tears.

"I'm here, love, I'm here," he said hoarsely. He lifted her hand to his lips as he tried to blink away the tears.

"How are you feeling?" Tao Scion asked his patient as he came to stand beside the bed.

"Head...hurts," she rasped.

"I imagine so," the old doctor replied sympathetically. "I want to check a few things, but your husband can stay here."

She nodded slightly. Lok Sim stood up and stepped back, allowing Tao Scion to do his job. Trying to make himself useful, he crossed the room to get her a glass of water.

"Now, can you tell me your name?" Tao Scion asked as he shined a light in her eyes. Lok Sim held up the glass to her lips. She took a small sip, coughing weakly.

"Enza," she managed.

"Good," Tao Scion replied. "Do you know who the First Ministers are?" He continued with frustrating questions that she answered one by one as her husband stood impatiently by, crossing and uncrossing his arms over his chest.

"Everything looks wonderful," the old doctor said. "I know that you're uncomfortable. I will give you a pain killer, but it is likely to make you drowsy."

"Thia?" she asked. "Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Lok Sim confirmed. "She's eager to see you." He stepped back out into the hallway to find his mother and his niece. He brought Thia into the room. Her little face wore a look of anxiousness as she took small, hesitant steps toward her aunt's bed. Enza stretched out her hand to her.

"Hello, little one," she said softly. Thia stood beside the bed as Enza touched her cheek gently. "I am so happy to see you."

Thia started to cry. "I was so scared," she whimpered.

"So was I," Enza replied. "But everything is going to be all right," she promised.

"Does it hurt?" the little girl asked as she regarded her aunt with wide eyes. Enza's face was still covered it bruises and cuts.

"It does," she confirmed. "But I feel much better now that I know you're all right." Enza looked up at Lok Sim, where he was still hanging back by the doorway. She smiled at him and for the first time since the attack, he knew everything was going to be fine.

He walked toward the bed, putting his hand on Thia's shoulder. Enza took his hand once more. Her skin felt so

soft and warm against his, so full of life and promises they would get a chance to keep. "I love you," he said.

"I love you," she replied.

"You're certain?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. Her eyes darted back and forth as she scanned the deserted hallway.

"Yes, ma'am," the surgeon replied. "He won't regain more than thirty percent of his vision in his left eye."

"So he'll never fly again," Zara said, more to herself than to the doctor.

"I'm afraid that's right," her brother's physician confirmed.

Zara closed her eyes. "Thank you, doctor," she said softly.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, I wish I had better news," he said earnestly.

"I appreciate your sympathies, and shall pass them along to my family," she replied absently.

"If you will excuse me, ma'am, I must continue with my rounds." He bowed slightly.

"Of course," she said. Zara couldn't help but envision in her mind's eye the image of her younger brother, lying in a hospital bed, half his face covered in blistered burns. He was barely more than a boy and his life had changed forever. As long as she could remember, Dek Ra wanted to be a pilot. It was all he wanted. He wanted to fly. She'd never told him that on Earth, she'd flown under her own power, breaking the bonds of gravity to float among the clouds and see the place in the distance where the edge of the world curved beyond sight.

The only thing he wanted, the only thing he'd wanted to be, had been taken away from him.

Her disquiet thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footfalls coming from the other end of the corridor. She looked up to see the general commander approaching.

"Good evening, ma'am," Talan said with a bow.

"Good evening, Commander," Zara replied. She stepped in front of the other woman to prevent her from passing. "How did you know where he would be?" she asked abruptly, giving voice to a thought that had been bothering her the entire day. Subconsciously, she sized up the other woman, wondering what gave her such perceptiveness, such insight into Clark's soul.

"I know what he's going through," Talan said simply, invoking an unwanted strand that connected the commander to Kal El. For the longest time, she'd wondered, in passing thoughts and partially formed musings, how to define the relationship between those two, eventually deciding that it did not concern her. But she'd seen it in Clark's eyes; the only thing that made him smile, the only times he was happy was when he spoke of Lois. He certainly wasn't carrying on an affair with another woman. No matter how lonely or alienated he seemed, he loved the one he'd left behind too much.

"Is there anything else, ma'am?" the commander asked politely, causing Zara to realize that she'd been standing silently for long moments.

"No," she replied with a curt shake of her head. "Thank you."

A foreboding sense of trepidation settled over her as she walked into her therapist's office. She'd thought this over calmly and rationally and she'd convinced herself. Or at least, she thought she'd convinced herself. Well, whatever, she wasn't going to let Dr. Friskin talk her out of this with rational arguments.

"Ultrawoman, how are you?" the kindly doctor asked as she stood up from her desk.

"Fine," she replied reflexively. "But I've been doing a lot of thinking...about our sessions and what we've worked through."

Dr. Friskin gestured toward the couch. "Please, continue."

Lois sat down, fidgeting with the edges of her cape. "You've helped me make sense of a lot of things that seemed senseless. I mean, I'm not sure I'd be functioning if it weren't for these sessions."

"You've done this on your own, I just helped you talk through a few things," her therapist demurred.

She dropped her cape and folded her hands in her lap. "What I'm trying to say is, I think I'm ready to do the rest of this on my own..."

"I agree..."

"I know you might not think that's such a good idea... what?" Lois blinked, certain she'd heard wrong. "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

"I said, 'I agree,'" Dr. Friskin repeated patiently. "I think we've accomplished what we set out to do. I know there are things you haven't told me about, very big things that you're not comfortable discussing." Wasn't that the truth? Lois mused ruefully to herself. "But if you're opening up to your family and your friends more, I think you can handle this without professional help."

"You really think so?" Lois heard herself say.

Dr. Friskin regarded her thoughtfully. "Why does that surprise you?"

"I dunno, I guess everyone wants to feel needed, including shrinks...I know, I'm distancing."

"Ultrawoman, I know that you've been holding things back, and it makes you feel guilty. You want to be candid with me, but you don't think you can be..."

"Believe me, it's not because I don't trust you. It's just, some of these things...aren't mine to share, really," Lois rushed to explain.

"But that still leaves us at an impasse – the big, scary issues you're facing aren't the ones I can help you with. Is there someone you can talk to about these things?"

"There is," Lois confirmed, nodding her head. She didn't say that she actually was talking about everything that was bothering her, but she was still building up to that point – it was a work in progress.

"Then I think we don't need to meet regularly, anymore," Dr. Friskin concluded. "I'm always here in the event there's something you want to discuss. We can have a session if you need to talk and if not, so much the better."

"Okay, then," Lois agreed, standing up swiftly.

"There's just one thing. I want you to make sure that you are actually talking to someone about whatever it is that's still bothering you. A good friend, family, anyone who you think can be supportive and understanding. You have to keep building back up those relationships you've allowed to weaken. Pushing away the people who care about you won't keep them or you from getting hurt." Dr. Friskin's tone was kind, yet firm.

"I know," Lois replied quietly. "Thank you for everything, doctor."

"It's been my pleasure."

Talan pulled the simple, black greatcoat over her dress uniform. She wore none of the designations of her rank, none of the commendations of her many achievements, or the silver cloak she was entitled to don as a member of the Order of the Guardians. She looked, for all intents and purposes, like a simple soldier. She walked the long distance to the transport, through deserted corridors, meeting not a single soul along the way. The ride in the transport, too, passed in silence. The sun was starting to peek over the horizon when she stepped off the transport, the sky still a deep violet. She walked toward the barracks in the harsh wind, holding the edges of her greatcoat together. Talan kept her head bent down, her strides long and even.

The barracks door was opened for her as she approached. Inside, the young soldier on guard duty saluted. At the back of the compound, in a darkened room, was Faral's coffin. She turned on the lights, staring silently for a moment at the casket that contained her faithful sergeant's body. With slow steps that echoed loudly, she approached the coffin and laid her hand against its cold, polished metal surface. Inside the sterile box was all that was left of a brave and decent man. An honorable and loyal comrade. A devoted husband and doting father. He'd spent years away from his family, following her into every battle, carrying out every command, when he should have been with his daughters.

"Goodbye, old friend," she murmured. "Your work is done and your world is safe. I only wish you could have lived to see the end of this journey. You carried me so far. Let me carry you the rest of the way."

The double doors behind her opened and the remainder of the guard entered – four enlisted men, all at least as tall as she was, followed by Lok Sim, their commander. "It's time, ma'am," the lieutenant explained softly.

She nodded silently as they took their positions around the casket, Lok Sim at the head of the guard, she at its end. "Ready," he said, his tone clear and strong. Each soldier gripped a handle. "Up," Lok Sim commanded. They lifted the coffin up onto their shoulders, steadying it with both

hands, bearing its heavy weight upon their bodies. At the tapered end of the coffin, Talan and the soldier across from her braced their burden as they wrapped an arm around each other's shoulders to support it.

"Commander, would you call the cadence?" Lok Sim requested.

"It is a long road, gentlemen," she said, trying to find her voice, to keep it even and clear when it wanted to falter and fail on her. "Take small steps." As one, they began their long, solemn march, carrying a fallen warrior to the earth he had defended and would now reclaim him.

Enza opened her eyes slowly. Everything, every fiber and muscle, tendon, ligament, and bone seemed to ache and burn with pain. "Good morning, my young friend," Tao Scion said, in that cheerful voice of his.

"Morning," she managed, her eyes not yet able to focus. Slowly, the room and its contents became clear. Fuzzy, indistinct shapes grew solid and sharp. She saw her doctor smiling as he leaned over her, lifting a light to shine into each of her eyes. Enza winced slightly, but followed his patient instructions to follow the light.

"Good," he declared. "Now how are you feeling this morning?"

"Lucky to be alive, but otherwise, everything hurts. I'm guessing by the brace that I broke my arm," she said, nodding toward her immobilized arm.

"Quite badly, in fact," Tao Scion confirmed. "Your surgeons had to insert a steel rod to stabilize it. You'll need another surgery in about a year to remove it."

"My leg feels even worse," she said with a wince. From the knee downward, her right leg felt like it was being crushed and burned both at once. "How bad is it?"

He sat down in the chair beside her bed, regarding her with his soft, blue eyes. A look of deep sympathy settled onto his expression as he covered her uninjured hand with his. His hand was warm, the blue veins distinctly visible under his wrinkled, translucent skin. "I'm sorry, Enza," he began. Her heart sank, knowing the news could be nothing but terrible. "The surgeons had to amputate, below the knee..." She struggled to sit up, unbelieving the words. They didn't make any sense. She could still feel the excruciating pain. If she could just sit up, she'd see that her leg was still there. Her arm seemed to split apart as she jostled it accidentally in her awkward attempt to move. Tao Scion laid a hand on her uninjured shoulder. "Lie back," he counseled gently. He continued talking, but she didn't understand a word of it. The sound of his voice blurred into background noise as her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away and stared up at the ceiling, crestfallen. The whole room and the world beyond it faded away until there was nothing left except the pain in the leg that wasn't there anymore.

Clark dressed slowly, glad to finally be out of the hospital. The First Ministers' compound was largely deserted. Zara and Ching were busy attending to the

colony's work. Enza was still hospitalized, recovering from gruesome injuries that would never really heal. A new pair of guards waited outside his quarters – replacements for Lieutenants Parth and Rul. Parth had been buried the day before. Rul was only now beginning to move about on crutches. The faces that had become so familiar over the last few years were all absent now.

Was this how he was expected to spend the next month? Was he supposed to wander about shiftless, waiting for the time to pass?

He tried to keep himself occupied, if for no other reason than his mind was starting to piece together the events around his shooting Nor. He remembered getting shot in the arm as he was evacuating the last shelter. And he remembered racing down a corridor to draw Nor's fire. But the last thing he could recall, the last sound, and feeling was the blast of Nor's weapon, the fire tearing into his back. Then there was nothing. Clark had no choice but to fill the blanks in his own mind. How did he get from that spot, falling under the force of that shot, to killing Nor? What had been going through his mind? Had it been fear? Panic?

Or was it rage?

Had he killed Nor because he'd had no choice, just like everyone kept repeating in their soft, sympathetic tones? Or had he killed Nor because he wanted to? Because he'd wanted Nor to die? Because he'd needed vengeance? Ugly, cold, brutal vengeance.

Clark began to wonder if it mattered. Didn't he admit, back there in the morgue, that he wanted Nor dead? What difference did it make what had gone on in his head in the seconds surrounding Nor's demise? Nothing changed the fact that he'd done the one thing he'd sworn he would never do here. He'd told Ching, all those years ago, that he was not prepared to kill. That he would not kill. But perhaps that had been a different man speaking. A man who still had some shred of innocence in him. A man who still believed that it was possible to stay good, in the face of so much evil. A man who had believed himself to be decent and honorable and strong in character.

That man didn't exist anymore. He couldn't exist. Not after this war, not after the six weeks he'd spent being tortured, not after the chaos and destruction of the last battle, and not after Nor's death.

The sound of the door opening woke her up. She opened her eyes as she turned toward the doorway, watching as her husband stepped into the room. Enza tried to smile at him. "Look at you," she murmured drowsily. He glanced down at himself; he cut a dashing figure standing in front of her in full officer's dress.

Lok Sim smiled almost sheepishly at her. "How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice soft.

She couldn't help the tears that flooded her eyes, aware that the expression on her face told him that she knew everything. In a heartbeat, he was holding her hand, kneeling beside her bed. His own eyes were suspiciously

bright. "I'm so sorry," he whispered hoarsely. She could feel his hand trembling.

Enza swallowed roughly. "You saved my life," she managed, her voice thick with emotion. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Her husband shook his head. "I should have gotten there sooner. I should have stopped Sur Ahn before all of it started." She could see the tears streaming down his face. Shaking, she lifted his hand to her lips and held it there. He caressed her cheek, his touch feather light.

"This was not your fault," she whispered fiercely, needing him to understand the truth of what she was saying. "I love you."

"I love you," he replied tearfully. "I love you so much. Everything is going to be all right."

She felt tears slip down her cheeks as she nodded. "I know," she said. "I have you."

"Always," he said softly.

"Congratulations, Madam Speaker," Zara said as she continued walking through the corridor. "I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Shai was a good friend and a wonderful leader," Dural confirmed sadly. "I will miss his counsel and his wisdom."

"As will we all," Zara replied.

"Are any of the Star Runners operational?"

"No." Zara shook her head. "Their navigational and hyperlight systems were all infected by the computer virus Rae Et let loose. It will take at least a few months to repair them." The Chief of Air Command had informed her of the problem. They would have no choice but to send Clark home in a capsule, instead. Waiting for the repairs was out of the question; this world had taken enough of a toll, in months and years, tears and blood, from him. Perhaps it was for the best; he would sleep through the months' long journey and they'd pass as though in an instant for him. He'd be back at home with the woman he loved and the family that had taken care of him his entire life.

"Ma'am, if I might ask, what is to be done about the issue of succession?"

Zara stopped and turned. "What about it?"

"With Kal El injured and his departure delayed, and with the change in the Council leadership..." Dural began.

"The plans will not change. Kal El will remain the First Minister until he leaves; at that point, Ching will succeed him," Zara replied, cutting off that subject of discussion immediately. "Is there anything else?"

The newly-elected Speaker began enumerating issues of grave concern before the Council as they continued through the administrative compound.

"Commander," Kal El said somewhat curtly as he stood up. She bowed before crossing the large reception room toward him.

"You look well, sir," she replied in greeting. Talan sat down across from him.

"Congratulations on the promotion," he said.

"Thank you," she said. She hesitated before continuing. "We haven't had much of an opportunity to speak in the last few weeks."

"I figured you were busy with the new assignment." His tone was noncommittal.

"I've left several messages for you, sir," she pressed. "I wanted to know if everything was all right. After what happened with Nor..."

"What happened is that I shot him," he replied sharply. "There's no need for euphemisms."

"Sir, I don't know if there's anything else I can say to convince you that you did the right thing."

Kal El leaned forward in his chair, his expression earnest. "What if I did the right thing, for the wrong reason?" he asked, his tone suddenly softer.

"I was there, sir. I saw everything. You didn't fire out of malice. There was no vengeance in your expression; you fired because you had to."

"You don't know what was going on in my mind..."

"With all due respect, sir, neither do you. You don't remember what happened and now you refuse to believe you could have done the right thing."

"And you refuse to believe I didn't." The edge to his voice let her know that she'd pushed too hard. He was upset, full of doubt, and she pushed him. "What if I gave in? What if the darkness in me won?"

"I don't believe it did," she said softly. She wanted to elaborate, but how could she? What could she say? *I was there, when both of us thought you were breathing your last breath. I saw the look on your face as I held you in my arms and the only thing I saw there was relief that you had done your job and protected your people.*

He laughed humorlessly. "Maybe it didn't. Maybe I only killed Nor to keep him from hurting anyone else. And maybe I did it because I figured that if I was going to die, I'd take the bastard to hell with me."

His words stung, piercing her skin like shrapnel.

"Believe me, sir, I know how taking a life tears at you."

"Don't patronize me!" he shouted suddenly. "Don't assume that because you're an old hand at killing people and I'm not, that you know everything about me. That you can lead me out of the darkness and save me."

"I am so sorry," she began to backpedal, completely uncertain what she should say. What he was saying to her was so brutal and unkind – so unlike him, and yet, she couldn't even consider the pain these words were meant to inflict. Instead, she focused entirely on just how quickly years of friendship and trust were crumbling. Her eyes darted downward to where he held his hand against his thigh, balled up in a fist. It was shaking almost violently.

"You've built up this heroic image," he continued. His voice sounded calm, but she could tell that he was using every bit of self control to keep his rage in check. "And you can't stand the fact that maybe I won't live up to it. Maybe I'm not as strong as you need me to be."

Her throat constricted and she swallowed roughly. "It seems my coming here has caused nothing but an argument. If you don't need anything of me, sir, I'll go."

"I think that's best," he replied coldly.

Talan stood up. Ignoring the feeling like she'd been kicked in the gut, she drew herself to her full height and saluted. She walked out with calm, measured strides, but in reality, she was running away.

He gently pushed open the door to his wife's room and peered inside. She turned her head to look at him and smiled from where she was sitting propped up in bed, a digital tablet in her hand. Of course she'd be working; she never managed to stop.

"I thought you were supposed to be resting," he chastised her mildly, unable to help the smile that turned up the corners of his mouth. It hadn't been a particularly pleasant day, but the look on her face told him how genuinely happy she was that he was there. How could he not immediately feel better?

She arched a brow at him. "Do you have any idea how boring it is to sit in bed all day, every day, for weeks?" Setting aside the tablet, she reached out her good hand toward him. Her right arm would still be in a brace for many weeks to come and she'd been forced to adjust to doing everything left-handed in the interim.

He crossed the small room and took her outstretched hand in his much larger one. "Actually, that doesn't sound like such a terrible proposition at the moment," he teased. Her hand slipped from his as she maneuvered to inch away from the top of the bed. "Careful, love," he heard himself say. "What are you doing?"

"Making room for you," she said simply. "Come here."

"Are you sure?" he asked, his tone hesitant, even to his own ears.

"I'm suggesting we sit, not ... spar," she replied with a note of amusement in her voice. "I'll be fine."

He vacillated for a long moment. For weeks now, he'd barely done more than hold her hand. He wanted to hold her, he needed to hold her. But he wasn't about to do anything that might have the slightest chance of aggravating her already severe injuries. "The moment this hurts, or feels uncomfortable at all, you'll tell me?"

"Of course," she assured him.

He removed his boots and ever so cautiously, sat down behind her on the bed, stretching his legs out on either side of her. She leaned back against him as he slipped his arms around her waist. Awkwardly, she moved her right arm, bent at the elbow and completely immobilized in its brace, so as not to pin his arm against her. Lok Sim lowered his head to kiss her shoulder and listened as she sighed contentedly. He couldn't believe how much he missed this – the feel of her body against his, the softness of her hair under his cheek as he gently rested his head against hers. The weeks had stretched out like ages and he'd grown too afraid to wonder how long it would be before he'd know the

feeling again. She placed her left hand on his, knotting their fingers together.

"That's better," she murmured.

"Much," he agreed softly.

For a long moment, neither moved nor spoke. They simply enjoyed each other's quiet companionship, indulging in something both had feared would never again be possible.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear.

"I love you," she replied, lifting his hand to her lips.

There was a short knock at the door before it opened and Tao Scion stepped inside. "How is the patient this evening?" Lok Sim felt his body go rigid with surprise as the intimate moment was shattered. The doctor looked up from his notes. "Don't bother getting up, young man," Tao Scion said cheerfully. "I'm just here to see how your wife is feeling. I'll be gone in a moment. Besides, there's little room in a hospital for formality and distance."

The kindly physician turned back to his notes. "Any pain or numbness in your arm?" he asked.

"No," Enza replied.

"And your leg?"

"It hurts less," she confirmed.

"Good. It seems like you're feeling better today," Tao Scion said.

"I am." Enza placed her hand on her husband's, where it rested against her stomach. She gently brushed the back of his hand distractingly with the tips of her fingers.

"Wonderful. I'll be back later to check on those bandages." With that, the old doctor left, silently closing the door behind him.

"Maybe I should let you get some rest," he murmured, closing his eyes.

"You're not going anywhere," she replied, stifling a yawn.

"See? You're exhausted," he countered.

"Tell me the story of Revan and Sirin," she whispered.

"Now?" he asked, surprised. "Why?"

"Because I love the sound of your voice, but I'm too exhausted to hold up my end of a conversation."

He smiled as he kissed her temple. The poem came back to him, the rhythm of the lines and verses flooding his memory. He picked up the threads of the characters and events, weaving them together into the story's tapestry. Lok Sim tried to let the familiar tale cascade over him, washing away the day and its trials. But the words started to trip over his tongue; he faltered and the meter got away from him.

"What's wrong?" she asked him sleepily.

"Nothing," he said.

"Liar," she replied.

"It's nothing," Lok Sim insisted.

"I'm half asleep and drugged on painkillers, and I can still tell that you're lying."

He smiled against the crown of her hair and dropped a kiss there. "A joint military-civilian inquest was called to investigate the attack. I have to testify in a few days," he

tried to keep his voice even and calm, though the very thought terrified him. He wasn't going to be able to hide from the things he'd done and what he hadn't done. His failures, his shortcomings would all be laid out. He didn't care what it did to him, but what about his family? What would they endure?

"It'll be all right," she murmured. "You stopped Sur Ahn."

"I should have figured it out sooner," he replied instinctively.

"I'm the one who told you to change strategies. If you hadn't listened to me, you would have figured it out long before. If anything, this is all my fault."

"You know that's not true," he replied, his tone strident.

"Because there was nothing to find," she said. "Sur Ahn didn't make any mistakes. She didn't leave a trail."

He closed his eyes. "You're right," he admitted.

"Of course I am. No one could have done more than you did. People are alive today because of you, me included."

Lok Sim sighed. "I want to believe that."

"You saved my life," she said as she squeezed his hand.

"You stopped the attack. Believe me, the inquest will recognize that. You're mad at yourself because you didn't do the impossible. You wish you could go back and do things differently. If you only knew then what you know now, you could have saved all of those other people. I know what that's like. And I know how hard it is to keep yourself from feeling that way. But you did everything you could; you can't ask any more of yourself."

"I know," he whispered. And he knew that she was right and that she understood the grief and the regret tearing at him. But it wasn't enough to cut through the thick and cloying guilt wrapped tightly around him.

"We're going to get through this together," she said softly.

"We are," he agreed.

She turned her head to seal the promise with a kiss. Lok Sim closed his eyes, reveling in the feel of her lips against his. He withdrew ever so slightly. "I love you," he murmured, trying not to think of the inquest.

"I love you," she replied.

Lok Sim drew in a shaky breath as he stood before the inquest panel. Three women and two men sat staring down at him, their faces grim. "First Lieutenant Lok Sim, you have been called to give evidence to this tribunal on the events leading up to and including the attacks on the main colony by Nor's followers," the head of the panel intoned. Lok Sim tried to focus and stay calm. He looked straight ahead, his square jaw grimly set, as the head of the panel continued to speak. "You understand that you are under oath, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," Lok Sim replied, swallowing roughly. He felt a cold sweat break out on his skin. The lights in the examination room suddenly seemed too intense.

"Good, let's begin with your investigation prior to the attacks," one of the panelists said, looking down at the table in front of her.

Tao Scion looked up from the monitors as she stepped into the gymnasium. Clark continued to stare straight ahead, not acknowledging her presence, if it even registered with him. He ran on the treadmill, his body moving gracefully, even as he breathed hard from the exertion. He lifted one hand to wipe the perspiration from his brow. His entire upper body was covered with a thin sheen of sweat. Monitoring leads placed on his arms and chest took measurements which the old doctor seemed to study intently. He was a bit leaner and paler than he had been when they'd first met him. Four years of living on New Krypton, with its weak sun and harsh conditions, had taken a distinct toll. Of course, far more obvious were the numerous scars that marred his body; large and dark, they stood out prominently against his fair skin.

"How are you feeling?" Zara asked.

He nodded toward her. "Better," he said curtly.

"I think that's enough for today," Tao Scion announced as he gradually turned off the treadmill.

Clark slowed his pace to a walk before stepping off. He grabbed a nearby towel to wipe away the sweat and began to pull off the leads.

"I can't believe you were shot only a month ago," Zara said incredulously.

"He won't let me off the planet until I can run five miles," he replied, nodding toward his physician.

"Space travel is extremely brutal on the body," Tao Scion countered. "Especially since the flight capsule won't simulate gravity."

"I'll be asleep for four months, how brutal can it be?" Clark asked.

"You'll lose bone density, suffer muscle atrophy and orthostatic imbalance, and the drop in blood volume and blood pressure will prevent your injuries from healing. It is not going to be a pleasant little nap. If you're not strong enough, you could suffer serious physical harm. But the good news is you're making excellent progress. I suspect you'll be ready to go in about a week."

Zara expected to see a look of relief on Clark's face. Instead, his expression was unreadable. She regarded him quizzically, causing him to turn away from her. "Was there something you needed?" he asked.

"Just a few final issues to address with the Council leaders, and Ching was hoping to speak with you this evening."

"I just need half an hour," he replied noncommittally.

"Of course," she said as she started to back away. In the interim, she had time to visit her brother, who would just be finishing his own session with his physical therapist.

Clark watched Zara walk away, feeling oddly numb. "I would have assumed you'd be in a better mood," Tao Scion said casually.

"What do you mean?" Clark replied. He regarded the physician through narrowed eyes as he pulled his shirt back on. He lifted the chain he'd hidden under his neatly folded shirt and put it back on.

"You're finally going home, and yet, you do not seem particularly happy. What troubles you, young man?" The look in the other man's eyes was so earnest, Clark couldn't help but look away.

"Nothing," he mumbled. Clark dragged a hand through his hair unconsciously. It was only as he lowered his hand that he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that it was trembling. He clenched his fist to make it stop.

"I'd really rather you didn't lie to me," Tao Scion chastised him sternly. "It took you so long the first time to find your way back out of the darkness and I can tell you're descending again. You don't have to deal with this alone."

"You have no idea what I'm dealing with," Clark heard himself reply, his tone soft, but still grave.

"Of course I don't, because you won't tell me and you won't tell anyone else," the older man retorted.

"I just need to get through the next week," Clark whispered, wondering who he was trying to convince.

"Do you think this won't follow you home? Do you think you can just leave everything about this place behind when you leave? You cannot run from the past, Kal El. And if you think you can hide from the things that haunt you, you are terribly mistaken."

Clark looked down at the ground. "Before I came here, I knew who I was. I knew what I believed, what lines I wouldn't cross."

"The measure of a person isn't just what he believes, but what he's willing to sacrifice. You weren't the one who put Nor in that hallway or put the gun in his hand. Nor's death is no one's fault but Nor's. I know it's easy for me to say that; I wasn't there. I've never had to do what you've done, but I could not respect you more for it. You've put others above yourself in everything you've done. You are the man your parents hoped you would be, even though they never would have wanted you to endure all of this. But it doesn't matter that I believe these things, if you don't."

Clark said nothing, unsurprised that yet again, another friend, another person he respected, thought that the turmoil and anguish tearing him apart at the seams stemmed from simple guilt over having killed Nor. What would they think of him if they knew the truth? He couldn't do that to Tao Scion. The older man would be heartbroken to know that his friends' son was not the noble man Tao Scion thought he was. He finally looked up to meet the doctor's sympathetic gaze. "I'm going to be late," Clark said simply before turning to walk away.

"Jon's going to be so excited to see you," Lois said as she placed Jimmy on his feet.

"Does he remember me?"

"How could he forget the uncle who got him all the dump trucks for his birthday?" Lois asked with a smile. She spun out of the suit and back into her normal clothes.

Jimmy shook his head. "You know, I'm never going to get used to that."

She held open the screen door for her young friend as they entered the farmhouse. They were immediately greeted by the sound of little footsteps rushing down the steps. "Careful," Lois said to her pint-sized superhero as he bounded toward them; the red cape Martha had made for him was tied around his neck, and his blue and red Superman underwear were on the outside of his jeans. Lois had no idea what the swimming goggles were for, but they looked adorable on him. Any other mother would have thought nothing of her little boy dressing up like Superman. It was a child's game and nothing out of the ordinary. Superman cartoons were still popular on Saturday mornings and what little boy didn't pretend he was a flying superhero? Yet, how could she not feel the sting of irony, watching her son pretending to be Superman?

"Hi, Mommy!" Jon said cheerfully.

"Did you say hi to Uncle Jimmy?" she asked.

"Hey, hey, Little J, what do you say?" Jimmy said with a grin as he leaned down to give Jon a high five.

Jon leaned back to wind up and give Jimmy the biggest high five he could. "Hi, Unca Jimmy!" he exclaimed.

"Whoa!" Jimmy said as he stumbled back, still smiling. "You're pretty strong, little guy."

Jon tugged on Jimmy's arm and whispered in his ear. "I'm Superman!"

"Wow. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone, not even your mom," Jimmy promised.

"Mommy knows," Jon said.

"All right, Superman, let's go make lunch," Lois said. Her little boy stretched his arms out over his head and she lifted him up so he could 'fly' to the kitchen.

The pain woke her again; the intense pressure tightening around her knee made it impossible for her to think of anything else. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on something, anything, else. Enza clutched at the bed sheets with her left hand. Turning her mind inward, she tried to concentrate, to meditate the pain away, but she couldn't center her thoughts. Clumsily, she fumbled for the call button, pushing it repeatedly before simply closing her fist around it.

Her doctor came running into the room. "Are you all right?" he said breathlessly.

"It hurts," she managed through gritted teeth.

"It's all right," he soothed as he gently took her left arm, encouraging her to release her fist. She felt a pinprick as he injected something into her arm. The medicine burned a bit as it crawled through the vein, up her arm and into her shoulder, but in truth, she was glad to feel anything other than the crushing pain in her knee. "It'll take a minute or two for it to start working," Tao Scion said gently. She could hold out that long, she tried to tell herself. Then again, it wasn't like she had much of a choice in the matter.

The shapes and figures in the room started to soften at their edges, they were all fuzzy and indistinct. The pain

grew dull and then receded. "Better?" the doctor asked. She nodded silently. "Where is that husband of yours? He's usually here by now."

"He's testifying before the inquest again," she managed.

"How is it progressing?"

"He says it's fine," Enza replied.

"But?" Tao Scion pressed gently.

She sighed. "I don't know. He seems so anxious. He tries to hide it; I think he doesn't want to upset me."

"And you? Have you been completely honest with him about your concerns?"

"What do you mean?"

"Enza, you will walk again. You will watch your niece grow up. You will have children and you will hold them in your arms. But you are still afraid. You're afraid that your life will never be the same. You cannot hide those fears and hope he doesn't notice them."

She looked away from him, tears pricking at her eyes. Tao Scion had just listed every single one of her concerns as though he could read her mind. "He has so much to worry about. I don't want to add to that."

"You see, that's exactly what's wrong with our people. We think that difficulties will disappear if we bury them. We believe sharing our burdens doubles them, instead of lessening them. Believe me, he wants to know. He wants you to let him in."

"When the inquest is over..."

"Don't wait," he interrupted her. "Trust me; I'm old, I know what I'm talking about." He covered her hand with his own and squeezed gently as he gave her a warm smile.

"You leaving, Commander?" She turned around at the sound of Kal El's voice. She should have figured he'd be skulking around the docking bays. He looked haggard, like he hadn't slept in days.

"I have work in one of the outer settlements," she replied, not bothering to add that she planned to spend a few days visiting her niece afterward. He said nothing in response and an awkward silence settled between them. Talan opened her mouth to speak but shut it firmly.

"If you have something to say, say it," he said, his tone defensive.

"If I thought it would make a difference, I would," she replied before slowly turning away from him, betraying twenty years of service with her most unmilitary-like behavior. She started back down the causeway but he rushed in front of her, blocking her path.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"It means you were right. I can't lead you out of the darkness, especially not when you're determined to plunge headlong into it. There is a better man inside you than who you've allowed yourself to become. If you can't remember that—if you can't hold on to that—then all is lost."

He looked momentarily taken aback by her insubordination. Talan had never taken so much as a rebellious breath, but her patience was gone and her time was up. She'd failed; her friendship couldn't help him

through this. She hoped that at home, surrounded by the people he loved, he'd find his way again. That task was certainly beyond her and it would have been arrogant for her to assume otherwise. She remembered a promise she'd made so long ago to a woman she would never know, and silently apologized for breaking her vow to send back to Earth the same man who had come here to help. Without saying another word, she stepped around him and continued toward her waiting transport.

Clark watched one of the best friends he'd ever had walk away. She'd given up on him. And why shouldn't she have? He'd already given up on himself. He hadn't simply pushed her away, he'd been cruel; a bitter, self-absorbed, petulant child. But the long metal causeway above the docking bay was no road to Damascus. The realization that his inner turmoil was making him a jerk and hurting the people around him didn't make his problems disappear.

Was there still a good man inside him? Was there anything in him worth saving? And could it still be saved?

He knocked softly before opening the door to her room. "Are you still awake?" he whispered. In the dimly lit room he saw her turn her head toward him and smile faintly.

"Hello, love," she murmured as she sat up. "Come here."

He removed his boots and sat down behind her on the bed, wrapping his arms around his wife. Lok Sim sighed contentedly as she turned her head to kiss him.

"How was it?" she asked. He knew she was talking about the inquest.

"Fine," he said reflexively. Enza took his hand and raised it to her lips.

"Talk to me," she said, her tone quiet and soft.

Lok Sim sighed and closed his eyes. "They covered every detail of the investigation and the attacks. They asked so many questions, I couldn't keep them straight. There they were, looking down at me, and I knew they were wondering why I hadn't done more."

"They ask hard questions because they don't know any other way to get to the truth," she replied, knotting her fingers through his. "You did everything you could and you told the inquest the truth. They'll see what I see."

He lowered his head and kissed her shoulder. "What's that?"

"A good man," she said simply. "The kindest, most selfless, and generous man I have ever known."

"The panel could find that I was derelict in my duties. I could be reduced in rank or even thrown out of the military. I don't care about any of that, but if they find me culpable, do you think you'll still be able to serve as the First Ministers' chief of staff?"

"I can't believe they'll hold you responsible, or that Zara and Ching would feel that the results of this inquest would have any bearing on my ability to do my job, but even if you assume that both were true, and I had to choose between you and my position, do you honestly think I

would waste a single moment worrying about some job? There are so many things we cannot control, but this..." she squeezed his hand gently as she spoke. "This isn't one of them. Whatever we face, we'll face together."

"Thank you," he whispered, pressing his lips against her temple. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too," she replied. "And I miss you."

"I miss you," he whispered. "I hate sleeping without you."

"Tao Scion thinks I'll be able to go home in a few weeks."

"I'm not sure I can wait that long." He knew that her recovery had been slowed substantially by her badly broken arm. She'd been unable to start walking on crutches and it would be a while before she could be fitted for a prosthetic. Her doctors were still worried about infection, but she was strong and every day, getting stronger.

They were both quiet for a long moment. "I had a terrible dream last night," she said, breaking the silence. "But I don't think it was a dream, I think I was remembering what happened in the engineer's office."

He held his breath as his body went still. Lok Sim had considered it a blessing that his wife didn't remember the attack that had nearly taken her life. The carnage he'd seen in the aftermath of that battle had been enough to give him nightmares.

"The rebels broke down the door," she continued. Her voice was even and calm but he knew that was because she was fighting so hard to control it. Her fingers had been tracing absent patterns on the back of his hand, but they stopped moving. Her skin felt warm and soft against his. "I was terrified; my hands were shaking and I didn't think I could do it, but I made myself wait until they'd all come through the doorway before I set off the charges. A few of them survived and started firing. I didn't fire back. I just kept my head down and hid. I didn't want to die, but I was sure I was going to. I was so afraid. The rebels started to retreat. I think even the survivors were wounded. Before they left, they threw what must have been a grenade into the office. I heard it bounce on the floor and then nothing. The next thing I remembered was waking up and seeing you."

He held her just a little bit tighter, hoping somewhere deep inside that if he wrapped himself around her and kept her close, he could keep her safe. "When I saw that room, my heart stopped beating," he said softly, swallowing hard as he blinked back tears. "And it didn't start again until your eyes opened and you looked up at me. My life stopped without you. The only way it goes on is with you." He was whispering by the time he finished, his voice too weak to be trusted. The world around him disappeared, fading away into darkness until there was nothing left except the woman in his arms, the center of his universe. But she was more than that, too. She was a part of him. The part of him that hoped, that believed. The part of him that struggled every day to be a better person than he thought he could be.

With a groan of frustration, he gave up. Meditating wasn't supposed to be this trying. It was supposed to be calming. He just couldn't shut his mind off; there were too many thoughts swirling restlessly in his head. Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised that he couldn't relax. He normally thought about the few things that could still make him happy – his wife, his family, his life before he came here. But now, he couldn't concentrate. He couldn't hang on to a single pleasant thought. Clark stood up and headed toward the door. This session in the gymnasium was proving to be useless. Ching appeared in the doorway and managed to intercept him.

"Ching, what can I do for you?" Clark asked, his tone somewhat impatient.

"If you have a few minutes, I'd like to talk," Ching replied.

"Sure," Clark said with an absent-minded shrug. He stepped away from the doorframe and leaned back against the gym wall.

Ching stepped around him and sat down on the bench that ran along the adjacent wall. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I hope you'll pardon me for saying so, Clark, but something is very obviously troubling you."

Clark looked away, feeling a headache forming behind his eyes. "Ching, I've already had this conversation with Tao Scion."

"Indulge me, sir," Ching responded. "Please."

"So, are you going to tell me I did the right thing?"

"You already know that you did," was Ching's simple reply. "But abstractions of right and wrong don't mean much when you cross lines you didn't intend to."

Clark gave the other man a wry smile as he shook his head slowly. "I was so adamant when I told you I couldn't kill. I must have sounded so naïve."

"Not naïve, determined," Ching corrected.

His head down, Clark avoided making eye contact with Ching. "Maybe I'm not the same person I was then, because I don't think I believe those things any more. I let Nor kill those people. You asked me to come here and protect these people and I failed them. I let my weakness and my softness stop me from doing my job."

"Since when were honor and compassion weaknesses?"

Clark pushed off the wall and started to pace slowly.

"The only reason those people died is because I let Nor live. When Talan captured him, I had the chance to kill him and I didn't take it. It didn't make any difference in the end. Nor's dead anyway. But if I'd killed him the first time, instead of waiting to do it to save my own skin, none of this would have happened."

"And if you'd killed him back then, when you had that chance, you would have become a murderer. You would have turned your back on Clark Kent, on the man who saved this world."

"Ching, enough with the hyperbole," he said as he turned on his heel to face the other man.

Ching arched a bemused brow. "Hyperbole? Sir, I thought you knew me better than that. I am not

exaggerating when I say that the divisions in the Council would have torn our society apart had it not been for you. And what you call weakness is the strength that saved my life."

Clark frowned, his eyes narrowed. "So what are you saying, that knowing how many people were going to die, you still wouldn't have killed Nor back when he was caught?"

"That isn't the question, Clark. We couldn't have known a year ago what was going to happen. You had every reason to believe that Nor wasn't a threat any longer. You did what you could with what you knew. No one can ask more of themselves than that."

Clark tried to muster up the will to argue with him, but it wasn't there. He was just so tired of it all. "It's not that simple..." he began pathetically.

Staring down at his hands, Ching interrupted him, but the subtle challenge in his tone was gone. "When you ask good people to fight a war, you ask them to turn against their better natures. And you hope the violence you do to their character isn't permanent or overwhelming. We've made decisions that have cost people their lives, that have destroyed people's lives; we can't hide from that, it's just the way war is. But we've tried to minimize the suffering. We've tried to remember what it means to be men and not monsters. That you would have spared Nor's life if you'd had any opportunity to do so only proves to me that the good in you is more powerful than the weakness or the fear."

"And so what if it was? Is the fact that I can say I didn't become a monster worth the lives of 671 people? Even if it would have been murder, even if it had destroyed every good thing I ever was, wouldn't it have been worth it to save those people?"

Ching leaned back against the wall and shrugged almost diffidently. "We could save everyone by locking them all up for their own good. But that isn't the way the world works. As far as I know, you can't predict the future, so unless you were ready to break every law and become a hated tyrant, you couldn't have prevented this attack, which, by the way, none of us anticipated. And you certainly couldn't have prevented it and kept any semblance of what makes this a civilization worth fighting for. It isn't enough just to survive. You taught me that."

The future leader of New Krypton spoke with a conviction Clark used to feel. Clark looked the other man in the eyes, so earnest, so utterly certain that what he was saying was true. Some time ago, he would have been proud to know he'd had a profound impact on Ching's outlook. But now, even though he knew that every word Ching spoke was heartfelt, Clark couldn't help but have his doubts. He wanted to snap out of it, he really did. He wanted nothing more than to go back to being Clark Kent – a guy who knew what he believed and what his place in the world was. But if he still believed those things, then killing Nor out of rage would have destroyed Clark anyway. And if he wasn't that man, if he no longer had Clark Kent's values and

his idealistic way of looking at things, then who exactly was he? Could he learn to live with this new man?
Could Lois?

Lok Sim sat at the back of the courtroom. For security reasons, the proceedings had been closed to the public, but as he was technically the arresting officer, he'd been allowed in. He watched silently as Sur Ahn was led into the room in chains. Her face was expressionless, her eyes unblinking. She took her place alone at the defense table. No one stood with her. Clasp her shackled hands in front of her, she looked up at the judge. Lok Sim wished that all he felt toward her was hatred. Something pure and simple. Enza, after all, was lying in a hospital bed because of this woman. Faral had died because of her. So had Rab Dun. So had almost 700 other people.

But though she was responsible for it all, she grieved as much as anyone. On the day of the attack, her husband had been murdered. After four years of unspeakable torment, he'd been killed. Rae Et, unsurprisingly, had not kept her word.

All of it – the death, destruction, and chaos – all of it had been for nothing.

He set his jaw grimly as he stared across the courtroom at the somber looking judge. From the panel, the judge looked down at the slight woman incongruously charged with mass murder. "You have waived your right to counsel, your right to a trial, and to all appeals, is that correct?"

"It is, sir," she replied, no trace of emotion in her voice.

The judge narrowed his eyes. "Do you understand the nature of these waivers?"

"I do," Sur Ahn said with a solemn nod.

The old judge turned to the prosecutor. "What punishment does the government seek?"

"Given the shocking nature of this crime, the extraordinary damage done, and the incomprehensible loss of life, only the most severe punishment is fitting: a lifetime of exile and hard labor in the outerlands."

Frowning, the jurist listened to the government's lawyer. He then turned back to the defendant. "Have you anything to say in your defense?"

"As the victims of my crimes found no mercy, I seek none." Lok Sim could only see her face in profile, so he could not tell if the stoic mask had cracked at all, but her voice did not waver.

"Then I hereby sentence you to a lifetime in exile in the outerlands and hard labor. The sentence is to be carried out forthwith."

Sur Ahn seemed to freeze for a moment; her small body went rigid as the guards grabbed her arms, but she did not resist. Her head hanging low, she allowed herself to be led toward the courtroom doors, swiftly finishing another dark chapter of the tragedy. But she looked back suddenly, turning her head to glance over her shoulder at the gallery. Lok Sim made eye contact with her, entirely by accident. Before he could look away he saw her bite her trembling lip. A tear slid down her face. She remained silent, but she

mouthed something to him, the words obvious from the exaggerated movement of her lips.

'I'm sorry.'

In the darkness, he could barely make out her image in the photograph. The picture frame he held between his hands was one of the few possessions he had, and one of the most precious. His fingers stroked the cool surface of the glass.

"I'm coming home," he whispered. "But I don't know if you're going to like the man who comes back to you. I'm not sure you're going to be able to forgive him."

Clark lay back across the small bed, placing the photo on the small table next to him. He folded his hands over his stomach and closed his eyes, hoping sleep would find him soon. He felt so small and he finally understood why. Who he'd been, what he'd wanted to be, what he'd hoped to become, all of that had been taken away from him. Bit by bit, strip by strip, those things had been stolen from him until there was almost nothing left. There was a tiny sliver, nothing more than a thin ribbon, of him remaining. All of who he was had been reduced to that very last inch. The reporter, the farmers' son, the sometime superhero, the college free safety, and world traveler – they were all gone. When all of that was taken away, what was left? What occupied that last tiny inch of him? That part of him that he couldn't let go?

He was the man who loved Lois Lane.

Whatever else he'd lost, whatever he couldn't claim to be, there was still one good thing left. It was the only thing he could hold on to. He'd gripped tightly to it and it had pulled him from the darkness once before. Maybe it wasn't enough. Maybe he couldn't hope to be whole again, but didn't he have to try? Didn't he have to keep holding on?

Reaching under the collar of his shirt, he curled his hand tightly around her wedding ring. He felt the shape of the band press into his palm. In that last inch, he found what was left of his humanity and he swore he wouldn't let it go.

She was up almost the very instant the baby began to cry. Rushing silently into the darkened nursery, she lifted Raya from her crib and with only the tiniest bit of awkwardness, cradled the little girl in her arms. "Shhh ... " she soothed. "It's all right." Raya's cries subsided to a whimper, but the child was obviously hungry. She squirmed unhappily in her aunt's arms as Talan carried her toward the kitchen to prepare a bottle. The entire household was quiet, its other members fast asleep.

"There now," Talan whispered as she offered her niece the warmed bottle. Raya looked up at her as she sucked contentedly on the bottle, studying her aunt with large, gray eyes. For her part, Talan found herself marveling at how very tiny her niece was. Raya lay almost completely on her aunt's forearm, her head supported at the crook of her elbow. Talan had been told that her little niece was actually quite long for a one month old child and was expected to be particularly tall, just like her father and her brothers, but

that was all a long time off. For now, she was small and soft, possessed of only the thinnest wisps of blonde hair, and plump, round cheeks and a little nose that did not yet resemble the sharp, angular features of the rest of her family. She turned away from the bottle, no longer hungry, and moved her arms and legs restlessly.

Talan lifted Raya to her shoulder to gently pat her back. "That wasn't quite so bad, was it?" Talan asked her little niece as the child burped. "I may not be as good at this as your mother or father, but they haven't slept in a month, have they? We should let them rest." One corner of Talan's mouth turned up in a bemused half smile. Here she was, having a rather one sided conversation in whispers with a one-month-old. It was important to talk to children, even newborns, she countered mentally. It was vital to their neurological development and it was how they learned to recognize the voices of family members. Raya's developing mind had apparently had enough stimulation, however. A quick glance down at the infant resting her head on Talan's shoulder confirmed that the little girl had fallen back to sleep. Ever so carefully, she carried Raya back to the nursery and laid her gently in the crib. She covered her niece with her blanket and lightly brushed her long fingers over the soft hair on Raya's little head.

Stepping back, she continued to look down at her niece. In all the time she'd spent traversing the planet, tracking Nor and his army, hunting and destroying, her brother and his wife had been raising their children. They had created life and brought it into the world. They loved and cared for these little ones. And Talan knew that nothing in the world mattered more to them.

Born at the very end of the war, during the battle that was the birth pangs of a new era, Raya might never know the fear that came from living in a world at war. Talan hoped desperately that would prove true. She wanted to believe that all the fighting, all the horrors she'd seen and the things she'd done had played some role in purchasing a more peaceful future, a world in which mothers and fathers could raise their children and not be afraid. She wanted that for Serick and Ama and for their children.

The young men struggled to sit up as he entered their room. Wounded and still hospitalized over a month after the attacks, these were the soldiers who'd received the worst injuries. They were reservists and they seemed so very young to his eyes – too young to have seen the horrors they'd witnessed. And yet, when he entered the room, they turned toward him and smiled.

"Sir!" one of them exclaimed with a grin. He had a bandage wrapped around his head, but his eyes still lit up as he turned toward the First Minister.

Clark couldn't help but return the smile. "Evening, gentlemen."

"Good evening, sir," the soldiers replied.

Clark looked at the three injured men sharing the tidy little hospital room. Their limbs had been bandaged and set carefully by the gentle hands of the medical staff. The

burns, welts, and cuts on their skin distorted their features. "I wanted to come by and let all of you know how grateful the whole world is for what you've done and what you've sacrificed. We owe you more than we can say. Thank you."

The soldiers introduced themselves as Clark pulled up a chair and sat down between two of the beds. "Where are you from, Corporal?" he asked the young soldier on his right.

"Vetis, sir," the young man replied. "It's in the Belaar. Small, quiet. It's nice, or at least as nice as a tiny outpost on a frozen desert planet can be," he explained with a wry grin. The other two soldiers laughed.

"I miss how quiet home was," one of the other soldiers added. "It can be quiet here too, but it's not the same. Here, when everything's silent, it's lonely. You feel like you're the only person in the world. At home, I don't know, the quiet was comforting. Peaceful."

"It sounds like where I grew up," Clark responded softly.

"I can hardly wait to get out of here and go back," the third soldier added.

"It's not all that bad," the first soldier countered. "No marches in the cold. Hot meals, no mortar fire."

"That nurse you like so much."

The soldiers laughed again. They continued telling stories about where they grew up and what they did when they weren't fighting. An hour passed almost unnoticed by all four of them. Eventually, Clark stood up and prepared to leave.

"Sir?" the oldest of the soldiers – a young man no more than twenty-two – turned toward him. The surgical scars over his broken jaw and cheekbone had begun to fade. He still didn't hear well out of his left ear – thanks to a ruptured eardrum – and he spoke a little louder than necessary as a result. "It means a lot that you came. And even more that you fought with us. You didn't have to."

Clark nodded slightly, his jaw squarely set. "Yes, I did," he replied quietly. "This was our fight. Yours and mine. We had to do it together." He felt his lips turn upward, cracking the slightest smile. Turning on his heel, he walked out of the room and back into the hospital corridor.

The hallway was empty and silent. The only sound was his footsteps echoing all around him. A few twists and turns through the maze and he was where he was supposed to be, staring at a door he wasn't yet ready to open. He crossed his arms over his chest and drew in a deep breath.

"What are you doing here? We don't have an appointment today."

Clark looked over his shoulder to see Tao Scion approaching him from the end of the hallway. He turned back toward the door he'd been staring at. "I'm here to see a friend."

"It looks to me like you're here to see a door."

"Very funny," Clark replied dourly. He turned toward the old doctor, to the man who had treated him like a son these last four years. "I've made a mess of everything, haven't I?"

Tao Scion smiled sadly at him. "You still have time to make things right."

"I hope you're right," Clark said. "And I guess I should start with you. I'm sorry for everything. I know I haven't seemed grateful for everything you've done for me, but I am. You've helped me more than you can know."

"All is forgiven, Kal El. Assuming you learn to forgive yourself."

"I'm trying," Clark replied. He stepped forward and knocked on the door.

"It's open," a voice came from the other side. Clark gave Tao Scion one last half smile before pushing open the door.

He heard Enza's voice as she patiently explained something. "...New Krypton's orbit is an ellipse and the sun is at one of its..."

"Foci," came Thia's response.

"Very good," Enza replied.

He stepped into the room and saw Thia's eyes light the moment she saw him. She scrambled off the bed where she was sitting beside her aunt.

"Careful," Enza chided. She put aside the digital tablet and looked up at him. "Good tidings, sir," she said.

"Hello, Commander," he replied, trying out her new rank. "Hello, Thia," he added as the little girl wrapped her arms around him.

"Aunt Enza said you're going back to your home."

"That's right," Clark said as his arm came around Thia.

She looked up at him with wide, hazel eyes. "I'm not going to see you again, am I?"

He shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid not."

"I don't want you to go," she said plaintively.

Clark put his hand on her shoulder. The look on her little face was so somber. "I've been away from my family for a very long time," he explained. "And I miss them so much. It's time for me to go home."

"I'm going to miss you," Thia replied.

"I'll miss you, too," he said, somewhat surprised at the emotion in his voice. "More than you can know." He looked back up at Enza. His lawyer and young friend smiled sadly at them. "I'm sorry it's been so long since last time." Clark hadn't visited in weeks. A few days after she'd first woken up, he'd come by to see her, but since then, he'd made excuses. It was harder to feel sorry for himself when he was confronted by what she'd suffered and what she'd lost.

"I know you're busy, sir," Enza replied.

Clark shook his head. "That's no excuse. How are you feeling?"

"Much better, sir," she said. "Tao Scion thinks I should be up and about soon."

He smiled. "That's wonderful news." And just as Enza's wedding had made him feel hopeful for the first time in ages, her spirit, her determination to pull her life back together, reminded him that sometimes strength could be a deceptively simple thing.

"You're not going back already, are you?"

"I am," she replied as she started packing her bag.

Gosem, the younger of her nephews, came running into the room, his older brother Tyvos following closely behind.

The boys giggled and yelled as they raced around the room.

"All right, that's enough," Serick declared as he hoisted Tyvos up in his arms. "Your sister is trying to sleep."

"Raya's always sleeping, that's all she ever does," Gosem complained as he hid behind his aunt. "She's boring."

"Speaking of sleeping, I think you both need a nap," Serick replied. He hoisted up Gosem and carried both boys out of the room.

"But I'm not tired!" Tyvos protested.

"Nap time," Serick insisted.

Talan shook her head and continued packing. Her brother returned a few minutes later, apparently having succeeded in putting the boys down for a nap.

"Why don't you stay a few more days? You have no idea how much Ama likes having you here."

"I have work to do," Talan replied simply.

Her brother frowned. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine," she replied diffidently.

"Really? The First Minister is leaving in just a few days, isn't he? And you haven't said a word about it."

"We had an argument," she confessed, fully expecting her brother to prod her into telling him what about. But instead, Serick simply frowned thoughtfully.

"Then maybe it's better you stay. Maybe this way it'll be easier."

"I have to do my job. And whatever my personal feelings, I'm not going to use them as an excuse to run away." She knew how stubborn she sounded, but she also knew that she wasn't wrong.

Lok Sim looked up at the panel, musing how unusual it was for him to have to look up to see anyone. He swallowed roughly, his throat constricted and raw. The chairman of the inquest frowned studiously as he looked down at his folded hands. After a long moment, he looked up at Lok Sim, his expression stern. "Lieutenant Lok Sim, it is the finding of this panel that you discharged your duties with competence and professionalism. Moreover, during the course of the attack, you conducted yourself with heroism and gallantry in the finest tradition of the service. Your commanders have testified that your actions saved the lives of Corporal Tyrg and Lieutenant Commander Enza. We are confirming Commander Talan's recommendation that you be cited for valor and awarded the Order of the Guardians. The inquest thanks you for your testimony and your assistance, Lieutenant."

He blinked a few times, not certain he heard them correctly. He was being cited for valor? It was the one thing he wasn't prepared to hear. His head swam with strange sounding words like gallantry and heroism. Chewing his lip, he nodded slowly. "Thank you," he managed. Fighting to keep his hands from trembling, he saluted and the officers on the panel returned his salute. Turning neatly on

his heel, he walked out of the room, listening to the sound of his footsteps on the solid metal ground.

Outside the chamber, he leaned against the corridor wall and closed his eyes. Relief crashed over him in waves, but his heart still pounded against his chest. He could hear it echoing in his ears. Swallowing around the lump lodged in his throat, he opened his eyes and exhaled a shaky breath. His day wasn't quite done just yet. There was still something he needed to do.

Pushing off the wall, he continued down the corridor. Enlisted personnel saluted as he walked by. Familiar faces nodded hello as they passed him in the halls. It was almost like life was ordinary again. He made his way through the administrative compound and through the security checkpoints. A lone guard arrived to escort him the remainder of the way. Disarming the door to the waiting room, the young guard turned toward him, a nervous expression on his face. "Sir, I need your sidearm," he finally managed.

"Right," Lok Sim replied, unholstering his weapon. Given the circumstances, it wasn't hard to see why they wouldn't let anyone in there armed. He turned over the gun to the guard and opened the door. Once inside, he sat down at one of the two chairs at the plain table in the middle of the otherwise empty room. Lok Sim drummed his knuckles on the table's metal surface as he waited. A few minutes passed before the second door opened and another guard entered, escorting the prisoner. The guard waited by the door, but Sur Ahn turned toward him. "It's all right," she said. Apparently the prisoner was the only one who knew that Lok Sim hadn't come there seeking revenge.

With her hands shackled in front of her she managed to pull out the other chair and sit down. "What are you doing here, Lieutenant?"

"I want to know why," he began. "Why didn't you say anything in your defense?"

"That's odd. I thought you were going to ask why I did it," she replied with a humorless smile. She looked pale and thin. He doubted she'd eaten in days.

"I already know why you did it," he said, folding his arms uncomfortably across his broad chest.

"No you don't," she said. Sur Ahn shook her head sadly. "My Leov was a good man. If he'd known what I was doing, he would have begged me to stop. He would have rather died. But this stopped being about Leov's pain at some point and became about mine. I would have done anything to spare his life, even if it would have made him hate me. It doesn't matter now, though. I knew the consequences of my actions. I'm ready to bear them." Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears.

He shook his head. "But exile...you'll never see your family again..."

"I don't want them to see me like this. I've done something unspeakable. I let myself become a monster. It's better that this world just forget me."

"The outerlands are dangerous. Please, let me testify on your behalf..."

"You are a good man and I'm sorry for everything I did to you. I wish you could have stopped me."

Lok Sim bit his lip and nodded grimly. "So do I."

"I know what you're thinking, Lieutenant. I didn't make any mistakes. I left no trail. I had four long, empty years to do nothing but plan this. There was nothing you could have done."

He opened the door and walked into his wife's room. Thia was sitting beside her aunt on the hospital bed. She looked up from her homework as he stepped inside. "Hello," he said with a smile. Lok Sim gave his niece a kiss as he helped her off the bed. He leaned down to kiss Enza. She took his hand and smiled up at him.

"How did it go with the inquest?" she asked.

"Really well," he said.

She closed her eyes and smiled as she squeezed his hand a little tighter. "I'm so glad."

He pulled Thia closer to him. "I love you both so much," he said. Nothing else mattered to him. Nothing else was truer.

Thia wrapped her arms around him. "I love you, too, Lok Sim."

"We both do," Enza replied.

Perry held the door to his office open for her. "How was the meeting with your editor?" he asked. Turning over the very last chapters of her book had been a relief, but not the cathartic release she'd hoped it would be. Perhaps it was because there was still so much editing to be done. She was certain she'd feel differently when the galley proofs were finally finished and the book was on its way to the printer.

She sat down on the old couch. "I don't like her as much as I like you," Lois said simply. "It bugs me when she edits my work."

"Well, that is her job," Perry replied with something approaching patience.

"The only people I could ever stand to have edit my copy were you and Clark," she said. Her voice began to break and she drew in a shaky breath. God, she really wanted him there with her. Every time she got stuck on a sentence that refused to write itself or had to relate the experiences in Kinwara that were still raw, she couldn't help but think how much easier it would be if Clark were there. Every time she read a story with Jon, she thought about all of the things he'd been missing. And every night when she went to sleep, she missed him even more. "Perry, I can't do this anymore. I'm running on empty and I don't even know where the finish line is. I work better to a deadline, you know?" She was choking back a sob now. Lois wiped at the tears with both hands, feeling Perry's arm come around her shoulder as he sat down beside her.

"Come here, darlin'," he said.

"Just tell me how much longer I have to do this. Another year, five years, I'll wait as long as it takes. I just need to know how much longer it's going to be. I need to

know he's coming home." Her body shook as she wept, not sure where this tidal wave of emotions had come from.

Perry held her tightly. "It's okay, honey. Everything's going to be all right."

"Tell me he's coming home," she whispered.

"He is. I know he is. Because that boy loves you more than anything and there is nothing that can keep him away from you. He crossed the universe once to be with you. He'll do it again."

Lois wiped away the last of the tears and looked up at her mentor and surrogate father figure. "I'm sorry," she said somewhat sheepishly. "I don't know why I'm so damn fragile these days."

"You've nothing to be sorry for," he insisted. "And you're not fragile. You're stronger than you know. I wish I could help you more. I wish I knew when he was coming back, but he is coming back, I'm sure of it."

Nodding silently, she leaned back against the couch, sinking into the cushions, thinking she might be swallowed up and just disappear.

"One more day," he whispered as he slipped his arms around her waist. Zara turned to look over her shoulder at him and smiled. He took the opportunity to kiss her, remembering the very first time he'd kissed her.

"I love you," she murmured, her lips inches from his.

"And I you," he replied. "We have been through so much to get to this moment."

She suddenly stilled in his arms. "Ching, you don't think all the tension and the danger and the obstacles...you don't think they've been what's kept our relationship interesting, do you?"

He laughed as he lowered his head to kiss her shoulder. "Being with you has been nothing if not eventful," he replied. "But it isn't why I love you. If we could have a quiet life together, nothing would make me happier. Whatever need for adventure I might have had as a younger man, believe me, I have outgrown it. But fortune has never intended to allow you a quiet life. All I've ever wanted is to be with you; it doesn't matter how."

"Tomorrow," she whispered. "It won't do for someone to notice if you spend the night in the First Ministers' compound."

"Technicality," he replied quietly as his lips wandered along her neck and up to her ear. "Tomorrow night it'll be my home, too."

Zara sighed softly and it was nearly his undoing. Fifteen years after he'd first fallen in love with her, she could still take his breath away. "It's a big day for everyone," she replied.

"Clark is finally getting to go home," Ching said.

"I never thought he would be here this long," she responded.

"He has given up so much for us. I just hope that he'll finally be free of this."

She turned around in his arms. "So do I."

He'd left Tao Scion's apartment hours earlier, but saw no reason to go back to the First Ministers' compound just yet. His one small bag had been packed. His last duties as First Minister had been discharged. Tomorrow morning he would abdicate, Zara and Ching would be married and he would go home. The High Council had already arranged some elaborate ceremony to mark his departure and there was no way around it. The people wanted to express their appreciation, everyone had told him.

Clark paced in the empty Council chamber. He'd sat through so many debates in this room – so many arguments about war and the potential for peace. Tomorrow, he would leave this planet and all of the responsibilities he'd borne. The war was over. The threat was gone. What the Kryptonians did to rebuild their lives and their society was now their task and theirs alone.

And he had to find a way to rebuild his own life. He had to figure out how to move past this place, and he couldn't yet. Not with the things still hanging over his head. It might have been too late, but he still had to try. He left the chambers at a walk, but soon, was running through the compound.

It was far too late for a social call, but he didn't care. He had exactly one chance to make this right. Breathless, he knocked on the door. He didn't have to wait long. Talan pulled the door open only seconds later. "Good evening, sir," she said guardedly. "Come in."

Talan walked back into her apartment, knowing the First Minister was following. "I wasn't sure you'd be here," Kal El said.

"I have a medal ceremony to preside over tomorrow," she said coolly. She sounded calmer than she actually was. In truth, she wanted to know why he was there because she didn't have the emotional wherewithal for another fight. It just wasn't in her.

"I am so sorry," he began. Talan turned to look at him and he looked up from the ground to make eye contact.

"Sir..."

He held up his hand, seemingly pleading with her to let him finish. "The things I said, they were unforgivable and they weren't true." She could hear a waver in his voice as he spoke.

"All is forgotten, sir," she replied softly.

He shook his head with a sad smile. "You always say that. You don't just forgive, you forget. You've been one of the greatest friends I've ever had. You were with me in every fight; you've saved my life I don't know how many times."

She looked into his dark brown eyes, glimmering with tears he would never let fall. And all she could see was the man in the wreckage of Silban, in the cold, dark pit of a collapsed building, holding a little boy in his arms, comforting a crying child. He would always be that man to her. A man who'd risked his life time and again for others, who had risked his life to save hers. "It's what friends do," she demurred.

"I'm going to miss you," he whispered harshly.

She closed her eyes as she pulled him into a fierce embrace. He hugged her back just as tightly. "I'm going to miss you, too," she whispered. How did you say goodbye to the man who'd saved your soul?

"You were right, you know," he said softly. "I lost sight of who I was. I'm not the man I should be."

Talan bit her lip. "That's not true and I shouldn't have said it."

"I needed to hear it," he replied. "I would have become a monster if it hadn't been for you. I would have killed him a long time ago if you hadn't stopped me."

She stepped back and took his hands in hers, ignoring the pang that sliced through her from the gesture. "I didn't stop you," she said. "You stopped yourself."

"No," he replied stridently, shaking his head. "You stopped me, you pulled me back, I would have killed him."

She gave him a tight lipped smile and watched as the hard expression on his face softened. "Sir, I might be tall, but you're a lot bigger and stronger than I am. I wouldn't have been able to stop you if you'd really wanted to do it."

Kal El closed his eyes and gave her a slight nod, but she didn't think he was convinced. "You're a good man, Clark," she said, finding the sound of his Earth name so odd to her ears, but he smiled so genuinely when she said it. "The best man I've ever known." She tried to ignore how much it hurt, but she was saying goodbye to him. She would never see him again and her only consolation was that she only needed to get through one more day of talking with him and being near him and pretending she wasn't in love with him.

Ching picked up the silver pin, shaped like the four pointed star of the House of Ra, inscribed within the circular shield of his own family's crest. He'd had the two combined; the Ra family was as responsible for the man he was as his own family had been. He placed the pin in the Mandarin collar of his black tunic. Ching picked up his silver-lined greatcoat and pulled it on. He took the two worn, thin envelopes from the table and tucked them into the coat's inner pocket. He'd carried these two letters around for nearly four years. One to Lois. One to the Kents. Tonight, once Clark was safely on his way home, he and Zara would both burn their copies—never opened, never read—and thank the fates that they'd never had to deliver them. There was a soft knock at his door. "Enter," he called out.

He turned around to see his soon to be mother-in-law enter the room. Meiren smiled at him. "Your mother and father would be so proud of you," she said. "We all are."

"It means so much to me that I have your blessings," he replied.

"You make Zara so happy and we are so glad that the two of you can finally be together. She has loved you for a very long time."

"As long as I've loved her." He frowned, deep in thought. "There has been so much tragedy, so many wounds

that have not yet healed. Is it wrong that I'm so happy today?"

Meiren smiled and shook her head. "No, my boy, it isn't. Especially in a world as harsh as this one, we must find happiness wherever we can."

Ching smiled. Meiren used to call him 'my boy,' when he was younger. It didn't matter to her that he was a grown man and about to become leader of the world. She'd known him ever since he was a frightened young boy, lost in a confusing and terrifying world. She and Tek Ra had taken care of him, had shown him how to be a good man. "Thank you," he said softly.

"Come now, you don't want to be late to your own wedding," she said cheerfully. He offered Meiren his arm and they walked out of his quarters.

Clark watched the ceremony, solemn and dignified but for the grin Ching couldn't help but wear as he looked at his beloved. The Chief Jurist repeated the same rites he'd performed four years earlier when Clark and Zara had stood before him. Their divorce had been finalized but a few hours ago, in a process even simpler than this one. He looked at the gathered group, at Zara's proud family. Her mother and father watched together with her two brothers in their full military dress. Dek Ra stood beside his twin brother, their faces no longer identical. The scars on the one brother's face would never fully heal and they would never again be able to fool the unknowing by pretending to be each other.

In another quiet ceremony elsewhere in the administrative compound, Talan was bestowing the Order of the Guardians onto the heroes of the last battle. The past was being honored so the people of New Krypton could find their way forward. The last words were being written on the last page of these chapters of his life. By tonight, he'd be in a capsule, asleep and racing back to Earth.

The ceremony ended and Zara and Ching couldn't seem to stop smiling. They walked arm in arm out of the room, the guests following not far behind.

The largest assembly room on all of New Krypton was packed full of people – Councilors, jurists, representatives of all of the guilds in their formal robes, soldiers in full dress uniforms, and ordinary people all gathered to see their First Minister off. As one, they all stood when Clark walked alone into the hall. The room was whisper quiet; no one so much as breathed as he walked the aisle toward the front of the room. Toward the front of the hall, Lok Sim stood at the aisle; Enza sat in the wheelchair beside him, their dress uniforms decorated with citations for heroism and bravery. They both smiled at him as he walked past. In the very first row, Talan stood at attention, her expression serious except for a glimmer of softness in her gray eyes.

At the front of the assembly, Zara and Ching stood waiting for him. Zara gave him the slightest smile as she stepped forward. She bowed slightly and he did the same.

"Kal El, for your extraordinary courage and service to the people of New Krypton, we present to you the Order of the Guardians. You have sacrificed so much and given so much to our people. We cannot begin to express to you our eternal gratitude. You have our respect, our admiration, and our love. May fortune be with you." She placed the medal around his neck before he stood up straight. He smiled slightly at her as he clasped his hands in front of himself. "Thank you, Clark," she whispered.

"You have led with such extraordinary wisdom, with courage, and most especially, with grace," Ching said. "We have been blessed to have your guidance and your leadership and I am humbled to succeed you. If I can show one tenth the compassion and strength you have demonstrated, I will consider my administration a success. Kal El, you bring honor to the Houses of Lo and El, and to the Houses of Clark and Kent." Clark looked at him questioningly, but Ching only gave him an enigmatic half smile. "Last son of Krypton, favorite son of Earth, beloved leader of New Krypton, you are our servant no longer, but our brother forever."

He turned around to face the enormous crowd, still standing silently. His eye caught Talan's. She bowed, but did not stop there; falling to one knee, she genuflected deeply, her eyes lowered. The rest of the assembly, too, fell to its knees. He turned and looked over his shoulder; even Zara and Ching were kneeling. The most ordinary and the most powerful of Kryptonians knelt, side by side, all around him. He hadn't expected this. He'd expected just about anything but this. Clark stood there, surrounded by a sea of grateful people, unsure what to say or do. Taken aback by the outpouring of support, he was struck dumb. "Please, stand up," he said too softly. "Stand up, please," he repeated a little more loudly. "Thank you, all of you," he said as the crowd slowly rose to their feet. "Your appreciation and your kindness mean a lot to me. We've accomplished what we set out to do and it's time for me to go home. This world has every reason to be hopeful. It could ask for no better leaders than Zara and Ching. And I leave knowing that you will be able to build a better future and that the next generation of Kryptonians may know only peace."

A much smaller group assembled in the docking bay to see him off. Tao Scion finished checking the life support systems on the capsule and placed Clark's single, small bag in the ship. "It looks like everything is all set, young man," he announced.

"Thank you," Clark replied.

Tao Scion gave him a wavering smile, his blue eyes glimmering with unshed tears. "Safe travels, my friend," he whispered hoarsely. "Jor El and Lara would be so proud of you."

Clark blinked back stinging tears as he nodded. "May fortune be with you," Clark said as he hugged his old friend. He stepped back and looked at his lawyer and her family.

"I don't want you to go," Thia said plaintively.

"I know," he replied. "And I'm going to miss you so much."

"I'm going to miss you, too."

"I have something for you," he told Thia. She looked at him somewhat skeptically. He presented her with a globe. "It's a copy of the one from the library," he explained. "The one with my planet on it."

Thia took the softly glowing globe with both hands. "Thank you," she said with a voice so small he barely heard her.

Clark placed a hand on her shoulder as he dropped to one knee. "Can I have a hug?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment before stepping forward and wrapping her arms around his neck. Clark closed his eyes and held the little girl tightly. "Be good and study hard," he whispered.

"All right," she replied quietly.

"That's my girl," he said with a sad smile as he stepped back.

Enza looked up at him from the wheelchair. "Safe journey, sir."

"Thank you, Commander," he replied as he took her uninjured hand. "For your counsel and your friendship."

"It's been an honor to serve, sir," she said with a solemn nod.

Clark looked at her husband and clapped his shoulder. "Take care of each other," he said, glancing from the young man to his wife.

"Of course," Lok Sim replied.

"And when you spar with Ching, don't pull your punches."

"I won't, sir," the younger man said with a smile.

Ching and Zara stepped toward him, holding hands. "Goodbye, Clark," Ching said. "And thank you, my friend. For everything."

"Yes, Clark, thank you for everything," Zara repeated. Her hand slipped from Ching's as she hugged Clark. "Thank Lois for us," she whispered. "And may fortune be with you."

Clark turned to kiss her cheek and smiled at the woman he loved like a sister. "Thank you." He glanced at Ching. "Be good to her," he said.

"I will, sir," Ching replied good-naturedly.

"You can drop the 'sir,' now, Ching."

"As far as I'm concerned, you will always be the First Minister, sir," Ching responded.

"That goes for me as well," Talan added.

Clark turned to look at her. "Commander," he started, not sure what it was he wanted to say. He didn't know if there were words that could make sense of what it was he wanted her to know.

She gave him a tremulous smile. "May you know great joy and may all your burdens be easily borne. And may fortune be with you all the days of your life, sir." Talan closed her sharp gray eyes and bowed deeply.

"Thank you," he said quietly, feeling tears prick at his eyes. "It's not enough; I just don't know what else to say."

"I know exactly what you mean, sir."

"Goodbye, everyone," he said with a tight-lipped smile. Tao Scion led him to the capsule. Clark climbed into the passenger compartment.

The old physician injected something into his arm. "You'll sleep the entire way," Tao Scion said kindly. A pair of mechanics sealed the hatch to the passenger compartment. He was already starting to feel dizzy and drowsy. Before the metal plated cover was placed over the hatch, his eyes were already closed. This was it. When he woke, he'd be home. He just had to drift to sleep and dream of Lois until he woke up. He could feel the ship start to rumble, but he barely noticed it.

'I'm coming home,' he thought, just before he succumbed to the heavy, insistent pull of sleep.

"Come on, Dr. Lane, you're going to be late!" Jimmy yelled out as he jogged toward her. The sky was a perfect, cloudless blue, but he really wished for at least a slight breeze to stir the unreasonably hot air. But the elm branches overhead were absolutely still and all the seats in the shade had already been claimed.

"It's just an honorary doctorate, Jimmy, I'm not actually going to be a doctor. Besides, they haven't even given it to me yet." Lois replied as she met up with her young friend. The quad at Metropolis University, the second largest green space in the city, after Centennial Park, was packed with graduates in their light blue robes and mortarboards, milling about, waiting for the ceremonies to begin. For weeks, as he'd come up here to work on his portfolio with Professor Martin, Jimmy noticed the crews of groundskeepers tending to the grass, setting up the stage, and hanging the banners displaying the crests of all of the university's schools.

Jimmy grinned at her. "Where are the Kents and Jon?"

"Finding seats," she replied. She adjusted the hood on her doctoral gown. "Is this thing on straight?"

Jimmy looked at the velvet and satin 'v' of fabric that fell over her shoulders and down her back. "I don't know; how is it supposed to look?" he asked quizzically.

Lois merely shook her head and smiled. "I think I'm supposed to be up there," she said, nodding up toward the stage.

"We'll see you after," Jimmy replied. Scanning the crowd, he finally found Perry and the Kents, waving toward him from a group of seats near an aisle. The grass field had become a sea of plastic folding chairs occupied by proud families with cameras and congratulatory bouquets of flowers and balloons. The graduates sat in the rows of seats closest to the front of the stage. And up on the stage itself were the faculty and deans and the dozen or so recipients of honorary degrees being conferred. Lois was, by far, the youngest in the group. He'd only heard of a few of the politicians and academics and luminaries of public life seated up at the dais. The old, distinguished-looking gentleman sitting next to Lois leaned over and started talking to her. Lois apparently said something amusing and the other honoree laughed.

Jimmy made his way over to the seat that the Kents and Perry had saved for him. Lois's parents sat in the row in front of them. They all exchanged pleasantries, saying how proud they were of Lois. Before long, the ceremony began. They sat through the dean's address about the talent and the accomplishments of the graduating class and the Treasury Secretary's seemingly interminable remarks on the virtues of public service and the rewards of civic life. Jon fussed and squirmed in his Grandpa Sam's lap as Jimmy fiddled with the aperture on his camera. Beside him, Perry seemed to have dozed off. Jimmy nudged his boss gently.

"They're starting with the honorary degrees," Jimmy whispered.

The old editor snapped up, sitting up straighter. "Bout time," he muttered softly. "Secretary Stanton's so full of hot air he actually managed to make it even warmer out here." He fanned himself with his program, as almost everyone else in the audience seemed to do.

Jimmy shifted in his seat; the heat and the perspiration on his skin made the plastic chair feel like it had melted on to him through his clothes. He'd decided against the sports coat, knowing how hot it was going to be, but even in a pale blue button-down shirt and khaki slacks, he still felt like he was being roasted under the May sun.

"Our next honoree is one of Metropolis University's favorite daughters..." the dean began. Jimmy lifted his camera and focused on Lois. "Since graduating from the School of Journalism a little more than a decade ago, she's interviewed presidents and princes, uncovered scandals, introduced superheroes to the world, and most recently, raised the call to our consciences with her reporting on the Kinwaran genocide. She has won every major prize in journalism, including the Pulitzer. To many of us, she is the voice of the Daily Planet, and thus, the voice of Metropolis. For her extraordinary achievements as a journalist, writer, and activist, Metropolis University proudly bestows upon Lois Lane the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters." The audience applauded, no group more loudly than the Journalism School students, excepting, of course, Lois's family.

"Way to go, Lois!" Jimmy yelled out between shots. He snapped a flurry of photographs as Lois stood up and accepted her honorary degree. She smiled graciously as she shook the dean's hand before retaking her seat. The ceremonies proceeded and eventually closed with all of the students throwing their caps in the air. Jon cheered and clapped as they did so. It took Lois a few minutes to work her way through the crowd back toward them.

"Hi, Mommy!" Jon called out excitedly as she approached.

"Hi, sweetie," she said back, smiling brightly. Lois took Jon from his grandfather's arms.

"Mommy, you have a funny hat," Jon announced.

"I do," she agreed. Lifting the puffy velvet cap, she put it on Jon's head. "Now you have a funny hat." Jon grinned.

"Congratulations, princess," Lois's father said.

"We're so proud of you," her mother added. "My daughter, the doctor."

"Just an honorary doctorate, Mother," Lois repeated.

"And the dean called you one of the University's favorite daughters," Ellen Lane gushed. "Is this going to make the society page?"

"Mother..."

"I'm hungry," Jon said.

"Yes, I think it's time for lunch," Sam agreed. "And we've got reservations at Chez Josephine." Jimmy smiled across the group at Lois. She seemed oblivious to her parents' cross talk. She was calm and serene and happy, playing with her son.

Leafing through the album, she turned the pages slowly. She lifted her mug of tea to her lips and took a small sip. Her eyes blurred with unshed tears as she looked down at the images of her husband. She touched the image of his face, trying to remember how it felt to touch him. Trying to remember the slightly rough feeling of the stubble on his cheek and the smell of his skin. And the way she could wrap his dark locks around her fingers.

More than four years had passed now. And she didn't know when the waiting would end. The sound of Jon's little feet scampering down the steps cut through her maudlin thoughts. She looked up from the album and the picture of Clark and his parents, taken at Christmas the year before he left.

"Hi, Mommy!" he called out cheerfully, carrying Binkie the bear.

"Hi, sweetie," she replied, feeling a single tear slip and fall from her eye, spilling down onto her cheek. Jon ran over toward her easy chair.

"Mommy, are you sad?" Jon asked.

Absently, she reached down and scooped Jon up easily. "I am," she admitted.

"Why?" Jon asked as she sat him down in her lap.

"I miss your daddy," she replied.

Jon looked up at her, a somber expression on his little face. "When is Daddy coming home?"

She kissed his temple. "I don't know, sweetie, but he's going to come back as soon as he can." Lois held her son in her arms, content to let him turn the pages. He asked questions about every picture.

Jon looked up from a picture of her and Clark at the Planet. "I don't want you to be sad anymore," he said.

"Tell you what, if you give me a hug, I think I'll feel a lot better," she replied with a slight smile.

Jon turned around and wrapped his arms around her neck. She closed her eyes and hugged her little boy. "I love you so much, sweetie," she said.

"I love you, too, Mommy." The sound of his voice soothed her soul. Lois held him close, listening to the soft 'thump' of his heartbeat. Jon was her strength. He was everything that mattered to her. The only reason she'd been able to hold together some semblance of a life was because he needed her to. And no matter how long she had to keep

going until Clark came back, she'd do it. For Jon, she'd do anything.

"Yes, the quotes for the back cover look fine. I'm happy with the order," she said into the phone that she cradled between her shoulder and her ear. "Let's discuss the cover tomorrow, okay? Thanks, Joan," Lois said before hanging up the phone. The minutiae of publishing never ceased to exasperate her. Of course she was happy with the order of quotes from bigwig writers, diplomats, and politicians on the back cover. Negotiating it the first time had been tougher than brokering a strategic arms reduction treaty. That wasn't a hornets' nest she needed to stir up again. Returning to the more mundane matters at hand, she began to tackle the stack of dinner plates on the counter, turning on the faucet and letting the water run hot.

She looked up from the sink full of dishes. At first, she wasn't sure anything was there. The sound was just an echo, and one she always carried with her. But this sound wasn't just in her head, was it? It was all around her, pervading her consciousness, filling her mind. There was nothing else. The steady thump-thump beat out a rhythm she'd know anywhere. Her breath caught in her throat. The plate fell from her hands, shattering on the cold tile of the kitchen floor. She didn't notice it. For a moment, her feet felt glued to the ground – every muscle in her body frozen in disbelief. It felt like forever passed in the span of a heartbeat, in the length of time it took her to get past the shock and race for the door. Not knowing exactly how she got there, she found herself standing out on the porch, staring out at the gently waving young wheat stalks, rippling in the soft summer breeze as twilight descended slowly upon the farm.

His name formed itself in her throat, but she couldn't produce the sound. Instead a tiny sob escaped her lips as tears blurred her vision, making it almost impossible to make out the solitary figure slowly making his way through the wheat field toward the house. She drew in a shaky breath at last and ran to meet him. She never took her eyes off him, afraid that if she looked away, he'd disappear, swallowed up in the stalks or whisked away on the ethereal wind, another ghost sent to haunt her. His heartbeat was louder now, thundering in her ears, drowning out all other sounds – the wind rustling through the leaves of the oak trees, the cicadas chirping in a pastoral orchestra, signaling the onset of another summer night.

He moved faster as he approached her, or he tried to. He was limping badly and was forced to stop, stooped over as he struggled to draw in a deep breath. She could hear his pulse racing. She closed the distance between them in an instant, tearing through the offending wheat, leaving a path of trampled stalks in her wake.

His eyes met hers.

She was in his arms, holding on to him so tightly she thought she'd never be able to let go. She held him so tightly that no force in heaven or earth could have separated

them. She held him as tightly as she should have four years ago.

"Clark," she murmured against his neck as they fell to their knees. He buried his head against her shoulder, whispering her name over and over again like a benediction. She tried to anchor herself—to the earth, to him—as she was buffeted by emotions so intense, so powerful they defied understanding, let alone explanation. Relief, amazement, disbelief all swirled around her in a chaotic storm. In a sudden flood, they welled up inside her. She felt them so strongly that it ached inside; her heart pounded furiously, so enraged at being confined in such a small space, that it might have burst in her chest. The whole world was still too small to contain these feelings. But it didn't matter. None of it mattered. The only thing that was important was that he was home. She could deal with the feelings and the questions some other time.

Right now, all she needed to do was to keep touching him, keep proving to herself that he was no phantom, no specter sent to build up and dash her dreams, to haunt her nights and leave her cold, confused, miserable, and alone. No, he was warm and solid and comforting and if there was anything she could do about it, never leaving again. She threaded her fingers through his too-long hair. The tears coursed down her face. Lois thanked whatever power it was that sent her husband back to her. He was thin—painfully thin—and he was hurt, but he was home.

Clark was home.

She held his face in her hands, hardly noticing the unfamiliar beard that obscured his perfect, beautiful features. "You came back to me," she whispered before kissing him. His arms around her tightened and he kissed her deeply. The sound of his heart hammering out an erratic rhythm filled her mind. Her whole body trembled. As did his. She kissed him as though she needed to remind herself of him, his taste, his touch, the way he invaded all of her senses. But she didn't. She knew these things. She remembered. How could she ever forget his touch? She would know him anywhere. No distance, no measure of time could ever make her forget. Without conscious thought, her own heart sped up, coming into sync with his.

He finally pulled away to look at her, tears in his eyes. He exhaled a shaky breath and raised a hand to her cheek. She dropped a kiss in his palm and closed her eyes. She placed her hand on his, holding it against her skin, letting its warmth banish the tiny, insistent voices of fear that had taken up residence in her soul, that had whispered, over and over again, that she would never again know what it was like to touch him. To feel the warmth of his skin against her own.

"I made a promise," he said, his voice hoarse. He coughed and she could feel his slender frame shake. She had been too overjoyed by his return to see just how weak he was. He leaned his weight against her, obviously exhausted from the effort of coughing. Lois placed an arm around his waist and lifted him gingerly from the ground. She could have carried him the way he always carried her,

but she wasn't sure he'd forgive her the ignominy of being cradled like a child by someone half his size. A brief flash of sheer joy—ecstasy, really—suffused every part of her being at the simple pleasure of being able to worry about mundane things like how Clark would react to being carried. It passed in an instant, though, as she concentrated on getting Clark inside and making sure he was properly cared for. She quickly flew him into the house, mindful of her precious cargo. She tried to keep from shaking as she carried him toward the staircase. He was going to be okay, she told herself. He'd made it home; he was going to be okay.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw their son, regarding them curiously. "Mommy?" He looked up at her with his big brown eyes full of questions. Supporting his weight while keeping his feet within millimeters of the ground, she hoped she could maintain the pretense that she wasn't floating a grown man across the room.

She hesitated. Lois knew she had to get Clark help. She continued carrying him up the stairs and to his room, where she laid him down carefully on the bed, treating him as though he were made of glass and could break at any moment. She knew that he wouldn't; he was strong, but she was still so afraid for him. In the background, she could hear voices, trying to penetrate the fog that had enshrouded her mind, but she ignored them. Clark reached a hand to her and she knelt beside the bed and took it. With some effort, he turned to look at her. "I love you," he said, so softly she barely heard him.

She kissed his hand. "I love you," she said. "Oh God, Clark, I love you so much. Hold on, honey, I'll be right back." She stood up swiftly and with a long look back, headed toward the window.

"Lois, honey, what's wrong?" Martha's voice coming from the doorway stopped Lois in her tracks. "Oh, my God!" Martha cried.

"Clark!" That was Jonathan's voice. Clark's parents raced into the room.

Lois looked at them anxiously. She swallowed several times, trying to form enough moisture in her mouth to simply speak. "I have to get help," she announced to her stunned in-laws. Martha merely placed a hand over her mouth and nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks. She and Jonathan rushed to Clark's side, probably trying to convince themselves that they weren't dreaming, just as she had done. Without another word, Lois darted out the window.

Minutes later, she was flying back through the same window, this time with a passenger. She landed and placed Bernie on his feet.

"Now will you tell me why...oh my...it's Clark!" Bernie looked positively flabbergasted. He turned to look first at Lois and then at the Kents. The three of them stood mutely in the dimly lit room, unable to do anything except stare at Clark. "It's Clark!" Bernie repeated when no explanation was forthcoming.

"Please, help him," Lois managed hoarsely.

Bernie nodded and went to Clark's side. "Clark, can you hear me?" he began gently as he held Clark's wrist, taking his pulse.

"Bernie? What are you doing in my room?" Clark asked drowsily, so softly that Lois needed her superhearing to understand him.

Lois waited with bated breath as Bernie completed his examination, all the while wishing she could go to Clark, to hold his hand and reassure herself that he was really there. She glanced at her in-laws, watching the process with the same trepidation written on their faces as she knew must have been written on hers. They held hands in a silent gesture of comfort and support. Minutes that felt like hours passed before Bernie finally turned to speak to them.

"He'll be fine."

"Oh, thank God," Martha exclaimed as she sobbed.

Lois let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. "Thank you, Bernie."

"I'm just glad he's home," Bernie replied. "He's exhausted, though. He'll need a lot of sleep, so just let him rest. And his body is very weak. He's been without his powers for years and he isn't the best shape for an ordinary human being at this point, either. He needs a few days' bed rest, and not too much sunlight."

"I don't understand, why shouldn't he have sunlight, he needs it, doesn't he?" Lois asked, a note of agitation creeping into her voice.

Bernie frowned for a moment. "A famine victim," he began, unhelpfully. In response to what she was sure was her puzzled expression, he continued. "You can't take a famine victim to an all-you-can-eat buffet; it'll be worse than the starvation. His body is too weak right now for the sunlight. He can't deal with the overload. He needs to get up a little bit of strength the old-fashioned way first."

Lois nodded. She wasn't sure if Bernie's analogy made all that much sense, but she wasn't about to do anything that could hurt her husband further. She would have done anything Bernie told her to do if it meant that Clark would get better. "Thank you," she said again.

"If his situation changes, or he needs anything, just call," Bernie replied. "Now, I'd offer to see myself out, but I can't exactly get home from here." He managed a small but genuine smile.

Lois smiled, unsure how to express her gratitude to her friend. She picked Bernie up and flew him home, counting the seconds before she could return to Clark's side. She was forced to fly more slowly than she wanted on the way to Metropolis to keep from injuring Bernie, but as soon as he'd been safely delivered to his home, she turned back toward Kansas and broke every speed record in history getting back to Clark.

She slowed down as she approached the farm, feeling her heart soar as happiness welled up inside her. It was as though an immense burden had been lifted from her. She flew through his bedroom window and her heart flip flopped again at the sight of him. He was home. She could barely believe he was finally home.

Martha and Jonathan looked up at her as she entered; broad, tremulous smiles on both of their faces. She could see the tears in their eyes. Martha held one of Clark's hands in both of hers. Lois walked gingerly toward the bed, afraid of waking him.

"I love you guys," Clark murmured. He coughed, his body shaking from the effort. Lois was beside him in an instant. Martha quickly got up and brought him a glass of water, holding it in a trembling hand. Lois held him up as he managed a few small sips. Clark placed his hand on Martha's as she held the glass for him. Mother and son made eye contact and Martha began to weep again.

"My boy," Jonathan said, his voice thick with emotion. They sat together silently for a long while, afraid that saying or doing the wrong thing would break the spell and Clark would be taken away from them. Eventually, Martha and Jonathan slipped out of the room, after extracting a promise from Lois to call if they needed anything. Lois was barely able to hear them, but she nodded in agreement, unable to take her focus off Clark for even the briefest of moments.

She held his large hand in both of hers. For hours, she just sat and watched him sleep, listening to the sound of his breathing and his heartbeat – now slow and steady. The room grew dark as the sun set and night descended. A soft breeze drifted through the open window, carrying with it the smell of jasmine and honeysuckle. Every once in a while, Martha or Jonathan would enter – to check on him or just to convince themselves that he was really there.

It was completely dark outside when she heard Jon's voice coming from the doorway. "Mommy?" he asked softly. She turned to look at him standing in the doorway as though he was afraid to enter the room.

"Come here, sweetie," she said, a pang of guilt slicing through her as she realized that Jonathan and Martha had been watching him so that she could maintain her vigil by Clark's side. She picked Jon up effortlessly as he tried to climb into her lap. She sat him down and wrapped her arms around him, dropping a kiss on top of the little boy's head.

"This is your daddy." She whispered the words she'd been waiting years to say.

"Is he tired?" Jon asked as he whispered into his mother's ear.

Lois felt fresh tears prick at her eyes. "Yes, he's very tired," she said. "He came such a long way to be with us. But he's home now." Jon sat quietly in her lap for a long while and finally fell asleep in his mother's arms. She wondered if her son could really understand what was happening. The only thing that mattered, though, was that Clark was home - her son would know his father and Clark would be able to watch his little boy grow up.

She wanted to wake Clark, to introduce him to his son, but she knew she shouldn't. He was still incredibly weak and tired. The trip had doubtlessly left him exhausted and drained, but it was also clear that he was recovering from some pretty horrific injuries. She grieved silently for all the pain he must have endured.

She looked up at the sound of footsteps in the hallway, her movement waking her dozing son. Jonathan appeared in the doorway. "All right, kiddo, time for bed," Jonathan said cheerfully.

"I'm not sleepy, Grandpa," Jon protested. He, however, held his arms up, allowing his grandfather to pick him up.

"Up we go," Jonathan said as he hoisted up his grandson. "The sooner we go to bed, the sooner it'll be morning."

"Will Daddy wake up in the morning?"

"I hope so. But he came a long way and he's still pretty tired. He might need lots and lots of sleep." Jonathan cast a long glance at his son. "Say goodnight to Mommy." Jon squirmed to turn around so he could hug and kiss his mother.

"Goodnight, kiddo," she said. "I love you."

Jon yawned, his eyelids drooping. "Love you, too, Mommy."

Lois smiled as she watched her father-in-law carry her son off to bed. She took Clark's hand in hers and continued watching him sleep. Her silent vigil continued through the long hours of the night. She sat perfectly still, studying every detail of his face in peaceful repose, mesmerized by the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

Dawn broke and the farmhouse slowly stirred to life, but she did not move. There were chores to be done, yet she couldn't bear to drag herself away from his side. Once, during the night, Martha and Jonathan had come into the room. They had crept quietly down the hallway, but she had, of course, heard them. They apologized for disturbing her, but she'd told them it was unnecessary; of course they wanted to see their son, to make sure he was okay. They hadn't stayed long, claiming that they had to be up early in the morning, but Lois had doubted that they'd get any more sleep than she would.

She sent up another silent 'thank you' to the fates that had returned Clark to them. A knock at the door startled her. The door opened and Martha poked her head in. "How are you?" she whispered, her eyes smiling.

"Good," Lois replied with a nod. "He isn't awake yet, but I think he's doing better."

"You should get some rest," her mother-in-law said. "And breakfast is ready."

"I'm fine," Lois said. "I just want to stay here with him."

Martha nodded in understanding. "Call if you need anything." She closed the door behind her.

Lois didn't notice the hours pass. It was late afternoon before Clark began to stir. Since the curtains were closed, she only realized it by looking down at her watch. At first, she'd thought she'd imagined it, or that perhaps he was just shifting in his sleep. But then the soft sound of his voice broke the almost mournful silence that had shrouded the room.

"Lois."

He spoke so softly that no one without super hearing could have heard him. He said her name again, this time a little louder.

"I'm here, Clark, I'm here," she coaxed him gently, squeezing his hand. He squeezed back. She swallowed hard, a quiver in her throat threatened to become a sob as a flood of emotions she wasn't even sure she understood almost swept her away.

"I have to get home. I have to get to Lois," he mumbled.

"You're home, honey. I'm here. I'm right here." She brushed away an errant tear.

"Lois, I need..."

"What is it? What do you need?" she asked.

"sa dream. Not real." He shook his head, but didn't open his eyes.

"It's not a dream, come on, Clark, open your eyes."

"Then you'll go away...not real." He kept shaking his head.

She reached out to smooth a lock of hair away from his face and bent down to kiss his forehead. "I'm real, I promise. And you're home. Just open your eyes, Clark."

He did, hesitantly at first, but his eyes focused on her immediately. He squinted despite the dimness of the room. "Lois?" His voice was full of disbelief, as though he'd fully expected to wake up somewhere else without her.

She smiled at him, tears forming in her eyes again. She had no idea what to say. "I love you," she managed at last. She kissed his hand, holding it tightly in both of hers. She held it against her heart and shut her eyes, trying to fight the tears.

"I love you, too," he replied. "Oh, God, Lois, I..." his words dissolved in a shuddering sigh.

She reached out to touch his face and closed the distance between them. Her lips met his and an entire world of hurt and pain and loneliness seemed to melt away. The coldness that she'd felt deep down in her chest for so long, the coldness that had eventually made her feel numb inside, was gone. Now that she had him here with her, she wanted to spend every moment of the rest of her life basking in his warmth. She felt tears course down her face. He reached up to caress her cheek, brushing the tears away with his thumb. Clark started to prop himself up on his elbows. He closed his eyes and lines of pain began to form across his brow from the effort.

"What is it? What do you need?" she asked anxiously.

"To hold you," he replied.

She drew in a ragged breath and smiled. She lay down beside him on the bed and allowed him to gather her into his arms. There was so much they could have said, and so they said nothing. There would be plenty of time for words. Later. She spent an eternity staring into his eyes, allowing herself to drown in their depths, searching for, she wasn't sure exactly what, but she knew that if she looked long enough, she'd find it. "I missed you. I missed this," she murmured.

Clark took her hand in his much larger one and raised it to his lips. "God, I love you so much," he whispered. He reached under the collar of his black Kryptonian uniform and pulled out a long chain. Undoing the clasp, he let the chain slip into his hand. He pulled the gold band off the

chain and held it between his fingers. She looked down at her wedding ring, its smooth surface now marred with the tiniest scratches. She tried to imagine all the places he carried that ring, all of the places when it was with him, close to his heart when she couldn't be.

He slipped the ring on her finger. "I have loved you from the beginning." She looked down at the ring, finally back where it belonged, returned by her husband, her lover, her partner, her friend – the man who had promised to keep it safe.

She removed the chain from around her own neck and let the ring fall into her palm. She took his hand in hers and placed the ring on his finger. It slipped on too easily and she worried it would fall off. "I will love you 'til the end," she whispered as she lowered her head to kiss his hand, sealing her promise. She looked into his eyes once more. "There's someone you need to meet." Confusion settled on his expression, his eyes pleading with her. She kissed his lips softly before standing up and walking out of the room.

She found Jon in his room, quietly playing with his wooden building blocks. As she entered the room, he looked up at her and smiled. She noticed the same thing that she did every time she looked at her son. He looked so much like his father. But this time, none of the pain that always came with that thought was there. She no longer wondered if she would only see her husband's smile in Jon's. "Let's go see Daddy," she said to her son, her hand outstretched to him. He said nothing and simply put his tiny hand in hers. Her heart leapt up into her throat.

She pushed open the door to Clark's room, letting the light from the hallway spill into the dim room. Jon took a step behind her and she squeezed her son's hand a little tighter. Her heart slammed against her ribs, beating so fast it felt like it would explode. She looked at her husband, who'd managed to move into a seated position on the bed. Quietly encouraging her son to follow, she entered the room.

Clark's expression went from puzzled to completely shocked. He sat in stunned silence, the little bit of color in his face quickly draining away. He swallowed visibly several times and finally managed to say her name in a hoarse whisper. "Lois?"

Lois drew in a shaky breath. "I want you to meet your son, Jonathan Clark Kent." She looked down at Jon, who was still hiding and gently guided him in front of her.

With obvious difficulty, Clark stood up. Lois tried to help him, but he held out a hand, silently asking her to let him do this on his own. He took several steps forward, closing the distance between him and his son. She could see the tears in Clark's eyes. This time, the tears fell, first one, tracing a lonely path down his face, disappearing in his gruff beard. And then another. And another. He bent down and pulled his little boy into his arms, closing his eyes tightly.

"My son," he whispered.

Clark felt the tears slip down his face as he held his son. The realization that he had a son, a child, whom he didn't even know, hit him with a force that threatened to knock the wind out of him. He had only dared to dream of being able to have children, he'd never fully believed it was possible. And now he knew that it was more than simply possible. He had a son. The little boy stood perfectly still in his father's embrace and while Clark wanted nothing more than to have his child hug him back, at that moment, it was enough that he could show his son that he loved him. That he cared about him and that he would never, ever leave him again. He placed a gentle hand on the back of Jon's head, smoothing his soft, dark hair. A million thoughts swirled through his head as he thought about Lois having to go through pregnancy and raising their little boy alone.

A pang of guilt tore through him. He was a father. And he didn't even know about it. All the time he'd been on New Krypton, he'd left Lois here to do this alone. How could he make that right? And his little boy, how could he make up to him the lost years? How could he ever get back the things that he'd missed? He hadn't been there when Lois had found out, he hadn't been there for her during her pregnancy, or when their baby was born. He hadn't been there to hold her hand during the delivery. He hadn't been there to see him take his first step, or say his first word. His son had been growing up without a father. How could he make that up to him?

"My son," he said again, his heart aching with love and guilt and grief. He looked up at Lois, who was watching them silently, tears in her own eyes. Reluctantly, he let his son go. The little boy took a cautious step backward, almost immediately bumping into his mother. Clark reached out a hesitant hand to gently smooth a lock of hair off his son's forehead. Jon watched him, his big brown eyes following Clark's hand, but he didn't move. Lois placed a reassuring hand on Jon's small shoulder.

The quiet moment ended as he heard footsteps on the stairs. His parents.

His stiff knee ached as he slowly stood up. Looking up, he saw his mother and father standing in the doorway, looking back at him as though they were staring at a ghost. "Mom? Dad?" he whispered incredulously.

"My boy," Martha cried as she rushed into the room. She threw her arms around her son.

"Mom," he repeated, hugging her tightly. "I missed you so much."

"It's so good to have you home, son," his father said, his voice rough and thick with emotion. Clark felt his dad put a hand on his shoulder. He stepped back and suddenly started to sway, unsteady on his feet. His father's arm was immediately around him and Jonathan and Lois were suddenly helping him back onto the bed.

"I'm okay," he insisted as he lay back.

"You must be starving," his mother said.

"Bernie said he should start with soup," Lois interjected. "And milk. He's supposed to have a lot of calcium."

"I'll be right back," Martha said. Clark watched his mother leave the room and noticed his son standing shyly by the door. Jonathan walked over to pick up his namesake.

"Come on, little man," Jonathan said. "Let's let your daddy rest a little more."

Lois took his hand and sat back down beside him. He craned his neck to watch his dad carry Jon out of the room before turning back to look at his wife. "We only made love once," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Well, technically..." she began, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear almost shyly.

"You know what I meant," he replied with a bashful smile, memories of their one night together flooding his mind. They certainly hadn't slept at all. "I guess neither one of us really thought about what might happen. I mean, I think I didn't even really believe it was possible..."

"Looks like we're more compatible than we thought," she said with a wavering smile. Tears shone brightly in her eyes.

"I should never have left you," he replied, his voice breaking on the words. He could feel the tears spill over and slip down his face.

She squeezed his hand. "You couldn't have known," she assured him. "And if you had, you never would have gone."

Clark nodded, knowing it to be true. He would never have left if he'd known she was carrying their child. His heart clenched painfully as he thought about how she must have felt, finding out alone, raising their son without a father. "I should have been here for both of you," he whispered as he tried, and failed, to suppress a shudder. He sobbed and heard her sob, too. "I'm so sorry."

She lay down beside him on the bed and wrapped her arms around his body. They cried together, holding on to each other because otherwise, they'd be lost. Neither one of them had the strength to face such immense and overpowering emotions alone. "You've nothing to be sorry for," she whispered through her own tears. "You came back to us. To Jon and me. That's all I've ever wanted. That's all that matters."

He held her face between his hands, brushing away her tears. He traced the edge of her soft, full bottom lip with his thumb before kissing her. "Thank you," he said quietly. "For being such a wonderful mother to our son."

His wife smiled brightly at him, her eyes still glimmering with tears. "He is an amazing little boy."

Clark nodded, his expression fixed in a wistful smile. "What's he like?" Having to ask the question made him feel terrible; what kind of father didn't know his own son?

"He's a bit shy... I know, he definitely didn't get that from me. But he'll warm up to you really quickly. He's curious—that he did get from me. He's smart and he's sweet, just like you. And I love hearing him laugh more than just about anything."

"I can't wait to get to know him."

"You know, he has your eyes and your smile."

"But he has your ears," Clark replied, drawing one finger around the shell of her ear. She shivered slightly at

the whisper soft touch. "They're adorable ears." Lois leaned into his touch, turning her face to kiss the palm of his hand. He caressed her cheek.

"And he has such a big heart." He could hear the tears in her voice.

"I love you," he whispered. "You and Jon... I love you both so much." Clark Kent had already known you could fall in love in a split second. And that brown-eyed little boy had owned his father's heart and soul the very moment he walked into the room.

"I love you," she replied, taking his hand in hers. He smiled and suddenly winced at the myriad aches and pains claiming his entire body.

"Oh God, Clark, did I hurt you? Are you okay?"

"No, no, I'm fine," he assured her. "Just sore and exhausted. I never thought sleeping for four months could take so much out of you."

His attempt at a joke did nothing to alleviate the look of concern on her face. "Honey, do you need anything?"

He loved it when she called him that. Clark smiled as he closed his eyes. "This is going to sound really weird," he said. "But I really want to shave. The beard itches." It was a lie. Well, not technically. The beard did itch, but that wasn't why he was so desperate to get rid of it. The last time he'd been unable to shave was when he was Nor's prisoner.

Shaving was suddenly so important to him. It was a way of proving that he still controlled his life. Proving that he was still civilized. Still a man.

She kissed the back of his hand. Slipping off the bed, she disappeared in a blur. In a blink, she was back with a tray, a mirror, a bowl of water, a pair of scissors, shaving cream and a razor. He struggled a bit to sit up, grinning at his wife. "You're amazing," he whispered.

"I get that from you," she said with a tearful smile.

Clark picked up the scissors and looked at his reflection. He saw his hand tremble in the mirror. "Uh uh," Lois said as she gently took the scissors out of his hand. "Let me." She sat down on the edge of the bed next to him and placed a towel around his neck.

He leaned back against the stacked pillows as she carefully clipped away the long whiskers covering his face. Watching her small, deft hands move, the intent expression on her face, he felt like he was falling in love with her all over again. She moved closer to him and he breathed deeply the scent of her skin and the soft, familiar perfume she'd always worn. He wondered why she kept wearing it after all these years. Was it maybe because she knew how much he liked the smell – like lavender and jasmine? She lathered his face with shaving cream, her fingers soothingly massaging his skin. Picking up the razor, she shaved off the stubble in smooth, clean strokes, taking great care not to cut him. She cleaned off the remainder of the lather and caressed his clean shaven cheek.

"Much better," she whispered as she removed the towel.

"Much," he agreed, closing the distance between them to kiss her. He coaxed her lips to part under the insistent pressure of his. Their tongues met and he groaned deeply.

Her mouth matched his, pull for pull. She sucked gently on his lower lip. His heart thundered in his chest and he broke off the kiss to take in a shaky breath. She stroked his cheek with the tips of her fingers.

"I love you," she said softly.

"I love you," he replied.

Lois looked over at the door. He turned to see what had caught her attention. It took a few moments for his mother to appear, carrying another tray. It took a moment for it to dawn on him that she'd heard his mother coming because of her superhearing. Lois cleaned up all of the shaving accoutrement, allowing his mother to put down the other tray.

"I knew my boy was under that beard somewhere," Martha said, smiling.

"He still cleans up pretty good," Lois replied.

"It's nice being waited on by my favorite women," he joked.

"We're just so happy to have you home," his mother said as she bent down to kiss his forehead. "Now eat, you need to get your strength back."

"Yes, ma'am," Clark replied. "And it's good to be back." He started to eat the soup, the sharp edge of hunger cutting through him. He hadn't realized how famished he was until that moment. The chicken soup was warm and comforting and familiar. It reminded him of all those times when he was a little boy, coming in from the cold weather outside, to find a hot bowl of soup and a grilled cheese sandwich waiting for him. He was really home.

"Is Jon around?" he asked, anxious to see his son again. Clark still couldn't believe it. The little boy he'd held in his arms, the beautiful, brown haired, wide eyed child was his son. His flesh and blood. His only biological relative. He'd gone to New Krypton in part to find some ties, something on a visceral level that told him he belonged, that he was with people like himself. And the irony, of course, was that he belonged on Earth, not on New Krypton. He'd left behind not just everything and everyone he'd ever loved, he'd left behind his only biological tie in the universe.

"I'll go get him," Lois said with a smile. His mother took away the tray and he sat up, stretching his sore and tired muscles. Lois came back a few minutes later, holding Jon's hand.

Clark couldn't help but grin. Jon, however, looked at him, clearly puzzled and uncertain. "Hi, Jon. It's still me," Clark said patiently, wondering what sort of nicknames Lois and his parents used for Jon, which terms of endearment his son was used to hearing. What should he call his son? Was he the first father in history to get so paralyzed over something so simple? Wasn't this supposed to be one of those things you just knew? "I just shaved the beard."

"Hi," his little boy said shyly. Jon slowly approached him, regarding him curiously. "You need your glasses," he announced. He walked over to Clark's desk and opened the top drawer. He pulled out Clark's old glasses—the horn rimmed ones he'd worn back when he first started at the

Planet. Jon walked over to the bed and silently handed his father his glasses.

"Thank you," Clark said as he took the glasses and put them on. It was so odd how much he missed these things.

Jon frowned as he studied Clark. "That's better," he declared. Clark smiled at him, tears forming in his eyes.

"Sweetie, why don't you show Daddy your dinosaurs?" Lois asked their son gently.

"Okay," Jon replied. He dashed out of the room and came back with a plastic bucket full of prehistoric monsters with spikes and sharp horns and claws and fearsome teeth.

"Come on up here, buddy," Clark said, patting the bed. Jon climbed up onto the bed and emptied the bucket onto the quilt. His little boy proceeded to show him which were the mean dinosaurs and which were the nice ones. Clark watched in rapt attention, amazed at the way his son carefully thought about each little toy, making up stories to go along with them, giving the dinosaurs names like Hank and Susie. His tiny hands sorted the dinosaurs into piles.

Light came pouring into the room, spilling over them. Clark looked up, shielding his sensitive eyes with one hand. Lois was pulling back the curtains over his windows. "Bernie said you should get a little bit of sun, not more than an hour or so today." It was evening, so the sunlight wasn't particularly strong, but he felt its effects immediately. It washed over him, making him almost lightheaded.

Clark frowned, his brow furrowing at what she'd just said. It was funny, earlier she'd said that Bernie was the one who said he needed to have calcium. He didn't know why he hadn't picked up on it before. "He knows?" he asked.

Lois nodded. "He knows," she replied. "He was my doctor, when I was pregnant with Jon."

Of course. Superpowered and carrying a half Kryptonian child, who else could she have seen? "His bedside manner any better?"

She smiled at him. "Not really. But he's a good doctor and I trust him a lot. He was here yesterday, but you were pretty out of it." She sat down on the corner of the bed, watching father and son as they sorted the dinosaurs.

Jon stopped suddenly and looked up at Clark. "Are you going to stay here?"

"I am," Clark confirmed with a nod. Tentatively, he put an arm around his son. Jon didn't shy away. He smiled at his father and went back to playing with his toys.

She drew the curtains back over the windows a while later, blotting out the steady stream of light that had poured into the room for the last hour. The sun had just about set anyway and it would be dark out soon enough. "How are you feeling?" she asked anxiously.

Clark looked up at her and smiled. "A lot better," he said. And he looked better. There was color in his complexion and his eyes didn't seem as darkly circled. She'd thought briefly about leaving the curtains open a while longer; if it was making him feel better, what could be the harm? But she'd squelched the thought immediately – she wasn't going to second guess Bernie on this. Clark's

health was far too important. "But I could use some help getting to the bathroom," he admitted. As he stood up, she put her arm around his waist. They walked slowly down the hall to the bathroom.

He reached for the doorknob as her arm slipped from around his waist. "I, uh, I'll be fine," he assured her awkwardly. She nodded – a nervous, jerking bob of her head – and stepped back as he closed the door.

"Lois?" he spoke quietly and she didn't know if it was because he knew she was still waiting for him or because he knew that he didn't need to speak above a whisper for her to hear him. "Honey, could you get me a change of clothes? I want to take a shower."

She chewed her lip as she leaned against the door that separated them. It had been a challenge for him to stand long enough to walk down the hallway. "Sweetie, are you going to be okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine. But no matter how clean the inside of a Kryptonian space capsule is, four months is a long time to go without a shower."

She had to dig through boxes in his closet to find his sweats and a t-shirt. Her own stuff now took up the space in his dressers. Pushing aside the thoughts that she'd put Clark and their life together away when she'd moved his things to make room for her own, she hurriedly unpacked some of his clothes. She wanted him to feel like he really was at home. Lois sat down on the corner of the bed, the sweats and t-shirt folded in her hands. Her hands gripped the soft material as tears welled up in her eyes.

He was home. He was finally home. It didn't matter that the clothes in her hands no longer smelled like him. They would again. He would step on the fifth step in the staircase that tended to squeak. And he'd sit in his chair at the dinner table with them.

Clark was home.

Drying her tears, she carried the clothes to the bathroom. She could hear the shower still running and she opened the door. "I'm leaving the clothes here on the counter," she announced as she placed the sweats next to the sink. He didn't answer and she assumed he simply hadn't heard her. She slipped out of the bathroom to call Perry and Jimmy and her parents to let them all know the good news.

Clark was home.

A short while later, she walked back upstairs to Clark's room. It really was his room again. From the doorway, she smiled at her husband, who was turning down the covers on one side of the bed. It had been more than four years since they'd shared a bed and though he might not have been well enough for them to end the equally long spell since they'd made love, she wanted so badly to lie next to him and listen to him breathe. Clean-shaven, but with his hair too long, he looked a bit like he did when she'd first met him. His time away, however, had aged him; lines of worry creased his face. His old, soft gray t-shirt and sweats hung too loosely on him. But he smiled at her, one of those bright, beautiful

smiles, and none of it mattered. For tonight, nothing mattered except how much she loved him.

Clark was home.

"Where have you been?" he asked, still grinning.

"Rendering my mother speechless for the first time in well...ever," she replied.

"So she didn't think I was coming back, huh?"

She pulled a pair of flannel shorts and Clark's old football jersey out of the dresser and changed. "I don't think she can imagine a man who would cross the universe to be with his wife. I mean, she can't imagine a man who would choose his wife over fishing, a boxing match, or his secretary."

Clark walked over to her, placing his hands on her hips. "I was never very good at fishing, you've forgotten more about boxing than I ever knew, and I don't even have a secretary."

She stood up on her toes to kiss him. "Those are all very good things to know."

"Lois, nothing was going to stop me from coming back to you. Nothing."

She smiled up at him before stepping around the bed. Lois lay down beside her husband. In the darkness he leaned over and kissed her, almost as though by instinct, and she sighed contentedly.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you," she replied, her voice thick with emotion, her eyes welling with tears.

A soft breeze stirred the elm branches overhead. The patterns of sunlight dappled on the grass underfoot shifted and changed. She slipped her hand into his, intertwining their fingers. "How are you feeling?" she asked as she fell in step with him. The late morning sun warmed the air and the soft earth under their feet. He'd slept until nine and as much as she'd wanted just to sit and watch him, she'd needed to start pulling her weight around the house and farm again. When he'd finally come down the stairs that morning, he'd looked healthier and stronger than he had the night before.

He grinned at her. "I'm fine," he assured her, squeezing her hand gently. "The sun's making me stronger."

"We shouldn't stay out too much longer," she said as she looked up at him.

He kicked a little pebble in the path and it skittered off in the dust. "Bernie's orders, huh?"

"Yeah, and we're going to do what the doctor ordered." She nudged him gently.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "So tell me more about what's gone on the last four years. My city girl moved out here to be with my folks?"

"I wanted Jon to be close to your parents. I could never have taken care of him without them. And I'm a columnist now, so I can write from anywhere."

"Columnist, huh? So Perry's paying you to have opinions?"

"That's what I said," she responded with a smile. They turned down the path back toward the farmhouse. The breeze felt good against her skin, the air laced with the scent of honeysuckle and the clean tang of ozone that meant a thunderstorm was on the way. The sky overhead may have been an almost cloudless cobalt blue, but in the distance, thunderheads gathered and the gentle wind would soon push them closer.

As they ascended the steps to the porch, she raised his hand to her lips. "I have to fly a patrol."

"That's my wife, the superhero," he said.

"Ultrawoman's been out of action for two days and I don't want the criminal element in Metropolis getting too excited. I'll be back soon."

He let his hand slip from hers and framed her face as he kissed her. "Be careful."

"I will," she said.

"Thanks, Mom," he said as he took the glass of homemade lemonade from his mother's hand. She sat down next to him on the couch in the den, a pile of scrapbooks in front of them on the coffee table. "Is Jon asleep?"

"He is," Martha confirmed. "He'll probably be down for about an hour and a half or so."

In the background, the old grandfather clock ticked patiently and evenly before chiming the quarter hour. His mother picked up one of the scrapbooks and put her lemonade down on a coaster. Beads of condensation formed and trickled down the tall, cold glass, gathering on the old cork coaster with "Midwestern State" emblazoned across it in maroon and gold lettering. "I've been keeping these for you," she explained as she opened the book. "This one is Jon's."

Together, they slowly turned the pages, looking at the somewhat blurry sonogram picture, Jon's replica birth certificate, and the birth announcement. On the next page was the first photo of mom and son together. A very tired, but happy, Lois Lane sat up in bed, holding her tiny newborn son. Jon was swaddled in a light blue blanket with a little white cap on his head. His mother gave the story behind every photograph and memento. Clark watched his son grow up in the pictures – his first Christmas, his first birthday, his first steps. Tears began to gather in his eyes and his heart ached for all that he'd missed. He should have been in all of these family photos: standing proudly by Lois's bedside when their son was born, holding Jon's little hands as he practiced walking, changing diapers, heating bottles, doing the things a father was supposed to do. He turned the last page and closed the book.

His mother took his hand and squeezed it gently. "I know how much you wish you could have been here," she said softly, voicing his thoughts.

"I should never have gone," he replied, repeating his deepest regret.

"The son I raised could never have turned his back on people who needed him, no matter the cost."

"Lois needed me, too. So did Jon," he insisted.

She shook her head sadly. "You couldn't have known."

"I wish there could have been another way..." He dragged his hand through his too-long hair.

"We all do," she agreed, tears shining brightly in her eyes. She took the book from his hands and gave him another album. "Jimmy took these."

He opened the album, immediately surprised. "Jimmy took these?" he asked quizzically as he looked back up at his mother. She merely nodded, smiling tearfully. On the pages in front of him were gorgeous pictures of his parents and Lois and Jon, taken, he guessed, about a year ago. The pictures made him smile; his little boy had been running and laughing and playing with his mother and his grandparents during another beautiful Kansas summer day. The deep affection the photographer had for his subjects was clear in every shot and Clark figured he shouldn't have been so surprised that these were Jimmy's. But they were assembled with a technical skill that his young friend had never before displayed; the light and shadows all carefully considered in each well-framed shot.

Clark turned the page again and almost gasped. The large photo centered on the page, of Lois holding their son as he slept peacefully, the look on her face perfectly serene, took his breath away. As easy as it had been in the last day to see what a terrific mother she was, he was still trying to reconcile the woman he'd left behind four years ago, still skittish around kids, with the extraordinarily patient and maternal Lois Lane he'd come home to. In the picture, he thought that he finally understood the change. Lois had an incredible ability to focus on whatever was most important in her life. Now, that was Jon. And there wasn't anything she wouldn't do to protect him, and make sure that he felt happy and safe and loved.

"Isn't that one beautiful?" his mother whispered reverently.

"It is," he agreed. "She is an amazing woman."

"She really is. She's been through a lot, you know," Martha said gently. He looked up from the photograph and could tell his mother was holding something back.

"You don't just mean with me being gone and with raising Jon without his father around," he said, his tone flat. It wasn't a question.

She regarded him with sad eyes. "I've been living with her for four years now and I know that she's going to hold back, because she doesn't want to burden you, at least not so soon after you've come home. But she's seen terrible things and she's had to make sacrifices no one should ever be asked to. If you two are going to be okay, you can't shut each other out."

"Did you keep her work?" It wasn't as much of a non sequitur as it would have sounded to anyone else. He knew that there would be things written between the lines of her columns and stories, windows into what she was thinking and going through.

"Every last article and column," his mother replied as she handed him a stack of three more scrapbooks. She stood and leaned down to kiss the top of his head, the way she

used to when he was a little boy, before leaving him to go through the articles.

He began leafing through the pages, just reading the headlines, trying to get a feel for what had happened before going back to pore carefully over every word and phrase. The first year and a half's worth of work proved that Perry had been dead on the money in making Lois a columnist. A boastful headline from the Daily Planet announced that she'd won her first Pulitzer for Best Editorial Series. But not very long after that, the subject matter of her work shifted dramatically. Clark didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't what he saw. War, ethnic cleansing, unspeakable suffering, and misery. The anger, frustration, and pain radiated from each line she'd written.

Of course, she'd taken a one-two combination to the problem, doing double duty as reporter and superhero. Being Lois Lane, she could have done no less. Often, she seemed to find herself in what he'd always considered an incongruous position – writing about her own deeds as though they were performed by a completely different person.

He turned the page and suddenly stilled. It was like a cruel mockery of the picture of her and Jon. In the fuzzy composition of color newsprint, Ultrawoman stood in the foreground, behind her, a village burned. In her arms lay a tiny child. She shielded the baby's face with one hand as she held him close to her body. But the caption under the photo told him that all her efforts were not enough.

The little infant in her arms, the long shadow she cast and the squat, low-slung buildings way back in the distance all served to make her look like a towering, imposing figure, larger than life. But he knew exactly how she would have felt in that moment.

Small.

Insignificant.

Powerless.

Helpless.

He felt an arm slip around his neck and he looked up to see Lois. She smiled before sitting down next to him. "Hi, honey," she whispered. He'd been so engrossed in the articles and pictures he hadn't heard her enter the den.

Clark turned to kiss her. "How was the patrol?"

"Fine," she said, running her fingers through his hair. "What are you looking at?"

"Your articles. Mom saved them all."

Lois glanced down at the open scrapbook in front of him. "I hate that picture," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

He took her hand in his and looked into her beautiful brown eyes, shimmering with unshed tears. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that." How could he have been so naïve? How could he have imagined it wouldn't have been like this? He'd told her so many times that the burden of being Superman would have overwhelmed him if it hadn't been for her. Why would it have been any different for Lois? He knew that life wasn't going to stand still and wait for him to come back, but so much had changed.

She gently squeezed his hand. "That was one of the worst days of my life. I went home and held Jon and cried so hard I thought I'd never stop." He felt a twist of pain in his heart at the words. Yet another reason why he should never have left her. "But I had to learn to keep going, to be strong. Because it's what people needed me to do. It's what you would have wanted me to do."

Clark shook his head, trying to find the right thing to say. "Lois, I..."

"You're strong. You always have been. And in order to love you, I had to learn to be strong, too. Because I always knew that you were never really going to belong to me. I was always going to have to share you with the world and live with knowing that the world might one day take you away from me." Every fiber of his being yelled at him to deny it. To tell her it wasn't true. But hadn't he already proved that it was? He'd left her for four years and even though he'd come back, he could very well have died on New Krypton and he'd known that from the start.

"Before you, I wasn't strong. I hard and cold and distant, and if you pushed me just a little too much, I would have crumbled to dust. Being with you changed me," she continued. "And because of you, I managed to do a lot of good."

He shook his head, trying to think of a time when he agreed with his wife less. "You've always been strong. You were never cold. And everything you've done is because of who you are."

Her gaze held his, unwavering. "I'm sure of two things," she began. He could hear her struggling to keep her voice even. "That you and I love each other more than any two people have ever loved each other before. And the world is better for it."

He caressed her cheek. "You're absolutely right." Clark leaned closer and kissed her gently. She truly was remarkable. And he didn't just mean the Pulitzer and all the lives she'd saved. Just sitting next to her, holding her hands, made him stronger. He was going to need that strength.

Clark put his toothbrush back in the holder and looked up at his reflection. The blue tiles and the squeaky hinge on the medicine chest were exactly the same as they'd been when he was a kid. But he wasn't the same. His cheeks were hollow and gaunt, his body thin and covered in scars. And his conscience was weighed down.

He pulled on his shirt, buttoning it up and concealing the dark scars. Padding barefoot down the hall, he crept silently toward the addition Lois and his father had built for Jon. He pushed the door open and stepped into the darkened room. Jon was fast asleep, breathing deeply. Clark pulled the rocking chair up beside the bed and sat down. His mother had held him and rocked him in this same chair many years ago. He imagined Lois had held Jon in this chair, nursing him when he was a baby, singing him to sleep. She was right, Jon did look like him. He had father's eyes and he looked like the pictures of Clark as a kid on the mantle over the fireplace downstairs. Soon after learning he

was adopted, Clark found himself scrutinizing strangers, searching vainly for some resemblance, trying to link himself to someone, to prove that he fit in somewhere.

As his powers started to develop and it became clear just how different he was, he'd grown despondent. Not only didn't he look like the people around him, the people he called family, he wasn't like them at all. He did things he shouldn't have been able to, things no one should have been able to. It terrified him and made him feel even more isolated and lonely.

Jon wouldn't have to go through that. If and when he started to develop powers like Clark's, he wouldn't have to feel like a freak, like there was something wrong with him. He wouldn't feel alone and he wouldn't have to wonder with terror at what was happening to him. Clark's own parents had been terrific, but they couldn't explain why he was different, why he could start fires with his eyes, or why he would hear things he shouldn't have.

For a long moment, he simply watched his son sleep. Eventually, he stood up and kissed the top of Jon's head. "I love you, little guy," he whispered. He opened the door and took a long look over his shoulder at his son before leaving. The walk down the hall toward his old room seemed strangely long. An odd sense of trepidation settled over him and he didn't know why. He was simply going to bed. He might have had cause to be nervous if there was even the remote possibility that anything was going to happen, but just going for a walk today had exhausted him. As much as he'd thought and dreamed about making love with his wife, it wasn't going to happen tonight.

So why the nerves? He hadn't been nervous last night. Then again, he'd been completely wiped out. Also, last night, he hadn't known that Lois had won a Pulitzer, ended a civil war, and written a best seller on top of being an extraordinary mother. He'd been fighting a losing battle with the darkest parts of who he was while she'd accomplished things no ordinary person could hope to in a hundred lifetimes. Before long, they'd have to talk about all the things that had happened. He couldn't hide the things he'd seen and done forever.

She smiled, pretending to sleep, as she heard him pad softly into the room. He pulled back the covers and slipped into bed beside her. She frowned slightly when he made no move to touch her. She rolled over to face him and lay her head against the warm, soft...

Flannel of his pajama shirt. Lois placed a hand on his chest, tracing absent circles over the material. "Aren't you going take this off?" she asked innocently. They hadn't shared a bed more than a few times, but she'd stormed into his apartment in the middle of the night often enough to know that he never slept with a shirt on.

"Not all of us are impervious to cold," he replied, his voice devoid of emotion. It was August and still quite warm at night, so the comment made no sense, but she let it pass.

"That's why you have me to keep you warm." She felt his body stiffen. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have...I didn't mean to push."

He placed an arm around her awkwardly. "It's okay," he said. But it wasn't. She knew that.

She pressed a brief kiss against his lips. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois," he murmured. She closed her eyes and after a very long time, finally fell asleep.

She woke immediately when she felt him slip out of the bed. It was the middle of the night, but she'd ceased to be a heavy sleeper years ago when he'd first left. He walked quietly across the floor to the bathroom, obviously trying not to disturb her, but she heard every footstep. She opened her eyes slightly. It was still dark out. A few minutes later, he returned to the room. She sat up and looked at him. He froze. Slowly, hesitantly, he reached for the buttons of the shirt. In the darkness, she could still see the anxious expression on his face. She watched as his shoulders rose and fell as he sighed. "Are you sure you want to see this?" he asked.

Lois swallowed the painful lump in her throat, and nodded, closing her eyes to keep the tears from spilling. How could he ask her that? How could he possibly think that she wanted him to hide his suffering from her? Pain clawed at her, threatening to hollow her out, to rip out her heart and soul and leave her empty. She opened her eyes to see him slowly unbuttoning his flannel pajama shirt. He let the shirt fall open, exposing a ribbon of skin. But it wasn't the perfect, unblemished skin she remembered. A scar cut its way across his chest. He shrugged out of the shirt, letting it fall gently to the floor. She bit her lip and stood up, making her way toward him.

He stood silently in front of her, his body so much thinner than she remembered. She could see all of his ribs and the sharp curve of his hipbone just above the waistband of his pajamas. The scar she'd first seen trailed a long path from one shoulder to a few inches above the opposite hip. It was thick, and dark, a deep gash that had been cut into his vulnerable flesh. In the center of his chest, at its thickest point, it was about two inches wide and it was an old wound, long covered with cheloid tissue. Another deep scar ran over the top of his other shoulder, dark and jagged. He said nothing and merely turned around. She drew in a sharp, audible breath as tears stung her eyes. She felt her lip tremble and her entire body shake. She wanted to close her eyes, but she forced herself to look at the crisscrossed lines that marred the skin of his back, countless, painful, permanent reminders of what had been done to him.

He'd been tortured.

Her heart leapt up into her throat as she realized it. Her husband had been tortured. A tear slipped down her cheek.

At that moment, she would have sold her soul to be able to travel across time and space and go back to that place and throw herself between Clark and his tormentor, whoever they had been. To take against her own body the stripes meant for him. She couldn't have felt the pain any

more acutely than she did now. Pain didn't merely clench her heart; it tore it to shreds. Some distant part of her mind wondered who could do something like this. Who could possibly inflict this much pain? The image of her husband, bleeding and broken, filled her mind, and her knees buckled. She hated them for doing this to him. And she hated herself for not having been able to stop it. For not having been able to protect him.

His head still down and tilted to one side, he looked over his shoulder at her. "It's not like I could hide this forever, but I didn't want you to see this now."

She reached out a hand to touch the scars on his back, hesitantly at first, even though she knew that they no longer caused him physical pain. She brushed her lips over one of the scars in a butterfly-light kiss. She slowly, wordlessly stepped around him and kissed the deep scar on his shoulder and the one in the middle of his chest. "You can't protect me from this, Clark. I love you too much to let you shut me out. I hate that this happened to you, that you had to go through it alone, that I couldn't take the pain away for you." She opened her eyes and looked up at him.

He let out a ragged breath that caused his thin frame to shudder and closed his eyes. She wrapped her arms around him, laying her head against his chest. "I love you," she whispered. "I love you so much." She sobbed and held him more tightly. She felt his arms come around her and they held each other in silence for a long while.

She woke in his arms, feeling warm and secure. She placed a hesitant hand against the warm, soft skin of his chest, the once smooth planes now marred by ugly scars. It hurt so much to look at them and it was worse in the harsh light of day. She'd always raved about how physically beautiful he was, but it wasn't the fact that the scars blemished his skin that worried at her, gnawing away at her soul, it was that along with every scar probably came some horrible memory, some awful event that haunted him. She hadn't asked about any of them last night, unwilling to risk upsetting him, but she wasn't going to let him keep her out. For now, however, it meant she was left guessing what cruel torture had been visited upon him and that particular mind game was leaving her sick in her heart.

"All right, breathe deep." Clark inhaled and exhaled slowly. Klein moved the blasted ice cold stethoscope on his back.

"These scars, the sun won't heal them, will it?" Clark asked. He looked past his doctor out the window of his bedroom. The branches of the old oak tree in the yard swayed in the gentle breeze that stirred the hot air.

He heard Dr. Klein sigh. "The underlying injuries are old and they didn't heal well. I take it you didn't have immediate medical attention?"

"It wasn't until about six weeks later," Clark responded.

Bernie took the ends of his stethoscope out of his ears and put the stethoscope around his neck. He frowned, worry lines creasing his forehead. "You going to tell me what

happened?" Clark bit his lip and hesitated. "Clark, I can't treat you unless I know your medical history."

Clark let out a long, slow breath. "This one," he said, as he gestured toward the large scar that cut across his chest, "was from a laser rifle. I was shot when I was ambushed. I was abducted and held captive for six weeks and the wound got infected. When I was captured, I had my left kneecap cracked and about half a dozen ribs broken. I suffered a concussion, both of my shoulders were dislocated, and a lot of the ligaments were torn. The scars on my back are from a braided whip. I was also shot in the right shoulder, arm, and just below the right shoulder blade, but those injuries were treated right away. I have a tremor in my right hand, but it's not nerve damage, it's just nerves." He spoke mechanically, his voice dull and unaffected as he enumerated his injuries like a grocery list. "I think that's it, but there might be something I'm forgetting."

Blinking rapidly, Bernie seemed to be trying to process the litany of injuries Clark had rattled off. He sighed as he frowned. "What kind of treatment did you have when you were on New Krypton?"

"Do you mean physical therapy, or are you asking if I was talking to a shrink?"

"Well, both," the doctor replied.

"It took a while, but I recovered. My knee was always a little stiff, but I was pretty much okay when I left. I figured once my powers were back, the injuries wouldn't matter much."

"That's probably right. And psychologically? You said you were held captive for weeks; that had to take a toll."

"I had friends I talked to. Couldn't really deal with the therapist," Clark admitted.

"Clark, you should really think about talking to a professional. Readjusting to life after four years of war isn't going to be easy."

"I have my family," Clark replied confidently. He knew that everything would be okay. He'd been thinking of almost nothing except coming home to them, day and night, for four years.

"So you've been talking to them?" Bernie asked, looking heartened.

"Well...no," Clark admitted. "I mean, Lois has seen the scars, but we haven't talked about them yet."

"You can't put this off. I'm not an expert on this, but the longer you go without talking about it, the harder it's going to be to readjust."

"I'll be fine, Bernie," Clark replied.

The older man frowned. "I can't tell you what to do, but I'm going to recommend a therapist who works with torture and trauma survivors." He dug around in his bag for a notepad and pen and scratched out a name and phone number.

Clark took the proffered slip of paper and looked down at it for a long moment before folding it up. "Thanks," he said absently.

"Now, I want you to start spending a lot more time in the sun. It's only been two days and you're gaining weight

and getting stronger, so you're progressing really well. But no strenuous activity of any sort for another few days, which uh... includes sex, I'm afraid. I know the recovery process seems slow and that has to be frustrating, especially given the fact that you don't have your powers yet..."

"I've been without them for four years. I got used to long, painful recuperation," Clark responded, slightly discomfited by the fairly personal turn of the conversation. Bernie was the quintessential lab rat and never really had the disposition for human patients. He tried to imagine what it must have been like for Lois to have Bernie as her doctor during her pregnancy with Jon. Bernie would have been the one to do the ultrasound, to tell her she was having a son. He was there when Clark's child was born. More than that, he would have been the very first person to see Jon when he entered the world. He would have been the first person to hold him. Awkward though he was, he was a good man, and Clark was glad that Lois had been able to depend on him.

Bernie gave him a wry half smile. "Of course. Well, luckily for you, it should start getting easier. The sunlight is going to accelerate your recovery. You're going to get stronger and put back on the muscle and bone weight you've lost over the last four months, but the models I've run suggest it'll take a little while for your powers to come back."

"So they will come back?" Clark asked anxiously.

"I see no reason why they wouldn't," Bernie replied.

Clark nodded in understanding. Bernie was careful not to make any promises, but the prognosis seemed pretty good. "Is that it? Do you want me to get Lois to fly you home?"

"Actually, while I'm here, I should give Jon his checkup," Bernie said.

"How is he? I mean, is he...normal? Is he going to develop powers, too?" Clark fumbled to ask his questions, the words tripping inelegantly off his tongue. He grabbed his shirt and pulled it on, doing up the buttons.

"He's a very healthy, happy, bright little three-and-a-half-year-old boy," Bernie said with a comforting smile. "And for now, he's just like any ordinary kid. A blood test, even a DNA test wouldn't reveal anything atypical. But then, you'd really need to know what to look for to tell the difference between your blood or Jon's and any other person's. The differences are subtle and discrete, but they are there. For both of you. I have no way of telling for certain, but it looks to me like Jon's going to be...super..." Dr. Klein continued on about plasmid rings and the cellular theory of incorporation, but Clark wasn't exactly following him.

"Okay," Clark said, rolling up his shirtsleeves. It was a strange thing to know – like being able to get a tiny glimpse into his son's future. Was he going to take up the family business? When would the powers start to manifest? Which would he get first? Would he develop the same way Clark had?

"You know what's strange is, you may be Kryptonian, but you're entirely human. Genetically, the differences aren't enough to make you a different species. The chances of convergent evolution of two different groups on two planets separated by trillions of miles is infinitesimal. It's, well, mind boggling."

"Kryptonians are originally from Earth." Clark cut off the scientist's breathless musings.

"Now that makes a lot more sense," Bernie replied. "But how did they end up on Krypton?"

"Let's talk about it another time," Clark begged off.

"Oh, right, sure thing." Klein seemed a bit disappointed. "Like I said, you're human, but I'm not sure Lois would have been able to carry her pregnancy to term if she didn't have your powers."

"Really?" Clark asked. The thought had never occurred to him.

"Well, I had no way of knowing for certain, but it's very likely it was a factor. It's like Rh sensitization. Without your powers, Lois's body probably would have recognized the baby as something foreign. But since she had your powers, baby and mom weren't different enough to trigger an immune response."

Clark sat dumbly for a moment. Lois would never have become Ultrawoman if he'd never left. Not only would Jon not have been conceived if they hadn't eloped, they might not have been able to have children at all if they hadn't decided to transfer his powers to her. Would they have ever thought of it as a possibility? Or would they have tried vainly for years to get pregnant, never knowing why they couldn't have kids? He sighed, not sure what to say. "I'll get Jon," he said at last. He stood up and walked out of the room, crossing the hallway to Jon's room, where his young son would be just finishing up his nap.

He woke Jon up by placing a hand on his little shoulder. "Come on, buddy, Dr. Bernie wants to see you."

Jon rubbed the sleep from his eyes and let his father pick him up. Clark carried him back to his own room, where Bernie was still waiting. "Hi, Jon," Bernie said.

"Hi, Dr. Bernie," Jon said somewhat shyly. Clark set him down on the bed and stepped back.

Bernie proceeded to look in Jon's eyes and ears and take his temperature. He finished up his examination and put away his stethoscope. "Okay, Jon, I need to take a little blood." Klein looked up at where Clark was still hovering in the background. Clark sat down beside his son and took his little hand. He watched as Jon's eyes grew wide as Bernie gently took his arm and found a vein. The doctor frowned as he concentrated. "This is going to sting a little bit, just hold Daddy's hand," Bernie said as he very carefully inserted the needle.

Clark felt Jon squeeze his fingers tightly. His heart constricted as he watched Jon's bottom lip quiver and tears form in his eyes. His son let out a wail and the tears flooded over his eyelids. Anxious, not knowing what to do, Clark stroked his other hand up and down Jon's little back. "It's

okay, buddy, it's almost over," he said, nearly choking on the words. Jon continued to cry.

"All done," Bernie announced as he removed the needle and stored the blood sample. He put a Superman bandage over the needle mark. Clark quickly gathered his son up in his arms and held him tightly.

"I want Mommy," Jon wailed.

Clark stood up swiftly. "It's okay, buddy," he repeated. He held Jon in one arm as he reached for the doorknob. He shouldn't have done this; he should have waited for Lois. She said she'd be finishing up her patrol about now. Panic started to rise up within him as he wondered frantically where she was.

He didn't have to wonder for long. Before he could close his hand around the doorknob, Lois had pulled the door open. Jon reached for her instinctively and Clark let his wife take their son in her arms.

"It's all right, sweetie, I'm here," she soothed as she held him close. Jon wrapped his arms around her neck, holding on tightly. She smoothed his hair and kissed his temple. His sobs turned to whimpers. "That's my boy," she said softly.

"I'm an idiot," Clark murmured. "Now my son's going to associate me with getting jabbed by needles." He ran his hand anxiously through his hair.

Holding Jon with one arm, Lois reached toward Clark and took his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "You're fine, honey," she said. "You just have to distract him when Bernie does that." She released his hand to stroke Jon's hair.

Jon buried his face against her neck and continued to cry. "Come on, sweetie, it's okay, it's all done," she crooned. He looked up at her with tear filled eyes. "That's my brave boy," she said. "Do you remember the spider song?" Jon nodded, his bottom lip still quivering. "Can you sing it with me?"

She took his little hand as they sang "Itsy Bitsy Spider," together. Clark hung back and simply watched as Lois tenderly calmed their son. She kissed away his tears and soon, he was laughing as she tickled his tummy when the rain washed the spider out. "Did Dr. Bernie give you a Superman bandage?" she asked. Jon nodded vigorously as he proudly showed her the blue, red, and yellow bandage. The irony wasn't lost on him. Superman may have been Jon's hero, but he certainly wasn't the one who could comfort the boy, dry his tears, and make him smile. That was a job for Lois Lane. "Come on, I'll bet Grandma will give you a cookie for being such a good boy," she said. Lois carried Jon out of the room, leaving the two men awkwardly waiting behind.

"We should have waited for her," Clark said staring at the door.

"Yeah," Bernie concurred.

"She's always been this way with him, hasn't she?" Clark asked.

Bernie turned toward him and nodded, smiling slightly. "She was only a little more than a month pregnant when she came to see me. And she already adored him completely then. Don't get me wrong, we were both in pretty uncharted

waters, but she's always had the best instincts and she's always put him first."

It heartened—but hardly surprised—him to know that his wife had been an amazing mother right from the start. He'd always just assumed that he'd have those parental instincts, too. He dragged his hand through his hair again. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he wouldn't have a knack for parenting. Clark sighed, hoping he was wrong.

Jon deserved to have a great father.

Clark leaned against the railing on the porch, staring out at the fields, softly bathed in moonlight. Crickets chirped and he thought he could see the tiny lights of little fireflies dancing and bobbing in the distance. He looked back at the sound of the screen door creaking open. His father stepped out onto the porch, the screen door banging shut behind him. "Nice night, huh?" his father asked in that simple, understated way of his. It was his unassuming way of letting his son open up if he wanted to.

"I messed up today, Dad," Clark confessed. "Jon started to cry; he was wailing for his mother and I had no idea what to do. The only thing I could think of was to find Lois. I couldn't take care of my own son."

"Lois has had four years to build her relationship with Jon. You've been at this for two days. Give it time, son."

"I'm just so angry about everything I missed and I feel so awful that I wasn't here for him, or for Lois. What if I'm not a good father? What if it isn't in me?"

He felt his father's hand on his shoulder and he turned to look at the older man. "You see Lois now and you can just tell right away that she's a wonderful mother. She knows she can trust her instincts. But she wasn't always this certain. When she found out she was pregnant, she was terrified. She said she didn't know if she could raise a child without you. And even later, when she already had a great relationship with Jon, she worried that Ultrawoman and the paper were taking away too much time from her son. She struggled with that. I know she makes it look easy, son, but it isn't."

What his father was saying made perfect sense and he found himself nodding as he listened. Parenting couldn't have been about knowing all the answers before you ever heard the questions. It had to be a learning process. But it was still so frustrating to be so far behind the curve. He was starting the journey four years too late.

Lois returned from her evening patrol late that night. He'd waited up, sitting in bed, reading through the scrapbooks of her articles and when he'd finished with those, he'd started on her book. Clark had lingered on the dedication page, feeling tears well up in his eyes at the beautiful words she'd written to him.

To my partner, my best friend, the father of my son, and the love of my life. To my husband, my hero.

She'd dedicated a Pulitzer and a pair of Kerths to him, too. It was a heck of a record and a monument she'd built to their love. On top of that were Ultrawoman's awards, not

least of which was the Nobel Peace Prize. He knew that he shouldn't be wondering how he could possibly compete with her – their relationship wasn't a competition after all – but how could he not feel like he didn't measure up?

He looked up at the sound of the door opening. Lois smiled at him as she entered the room. She changed into a pair of flannel shorts and his old Smallville High School t-shirt. His wife didn't have the most alluring taste in sleepwear these days, but perhaps that was for the best. As Bernie had pointed out, he wasn't in any position to act on his desires. But in reality, it didn't matter what she wore to bed. She was still achingly beautiful and just thinking about her made him want to touch her and hold her. Being in the same room with her made the temptation almost overpowering.

And yet, he couldn't exactly touch her without her touching him, and he couldn't help but flinch when she did. It wasn't that the scars still caused him pain; they were oddly numb, but they didn't hurt. It was that whenever she touched them, all he could think about was New Krypton and all the things about that place he wanted to forget. He thought about all the ways he wasn't the same man who left four years ago. He thought about the things he'd lost and that he might not ever find again.

"Hi, honey," she said softly.

"Hey," he whispered in reply. "It's wonderful," he said, holding up the book in his hands.

"Thanks," she said with a smile. She pulled back the covers and slipped into bed beside him. Clark closed the book and placed it on the nightstand before draping his arm around her. She placed her hand on his chest, over the soft cotton of his worn, old t-shirt.

"You're amazing, you know that?" he murmured.

"I just did what I could," she replied with a shrug.

"Lois, I'm serious," he said as he looked deeply into her eyes. "All of the awards, stopping a war, raising our son. I don't even know how you do it. I mean, I was barely keeping things together for four years. It was all I could do to keep my head above water."

"I know you think I've been on top of everything, but I haven't been," she said, removing her hand from his chest to put it on top of his hand, where it rested on her shoulder. He was relieved; even through the material of his shirt, he could feel her hand on the edge of the scar. "I have been barely holding on for the last four years. And I made it from one minute to the next and one day to the next because I had your parents, and Perry and Jimmy, and Jon. More than anything, I made it because of him. Because he needed me. But I still couldn't do it alone. I spent two years in therapy just trying to figure out how to deal with my life, how to live with the things I saw in Kinwara and the choices I had to make."

He listened silently as she bared her soul. Clark knew that she was trying to tell him that she wasn't as strong as he thought, but nothing she said did anything to discount his admiration or his faith in her. "I know that I don't even

know half of what you went through and I wish you didn't have to go through it. I wouldn't have left if I'd known..."

"Shhh, I know," she whispered. His wife laid her cheek against his chest as he pulled her closer. There it was, the contact again. He tried not to be bothered by it; what kind of husband got this anxious by the simplest touch from his wife? And he'd initiated it, no less. What was she supposed to do when he pulled her closer? God, why was he such a mess? Why couldn't he figure it out? Did he want his space or did he want to hold her? Clark forced himself not to react. Closing her eyes, she looked so peaceful. "You still haven't told me what happened. On New Krypton," she murmured. His whole body went tense and she lifted her head and gazed up at him. "I'm sorry, I'm pushing again, I ..."

"No, I know," he said. "I'm just not...I need some time...just to figure it all out in my head." Clark ran his free hand through his hair and let out a sigh.

Lois reached across his body to take his hand and raised it to her lips. "I understand," she whispered. "And I love you. You can tell me anything, you know that, right?"

"I know," he heard himself reply.

Over the next few days he spent a lot of time in the sun. It was a wonderful Kansas August, warm, but not unbearably hot, and the sun gave him strength, if not superstrength. No one in town knew he was home yet. He wasn't ready to deal with the media frenzy that would result, the curiosity, the questions, the speculation that would all come with the news of his return. He needed a few days of peace and quiet. Maybe when his powers returned, he'd feel up to it.

He tried desperately to reclaim his life and to fit into a world that had changed while he was gone. It was funny; he'd always thought that life in Kansas would be the same, that nothing here would ever change, but here he was, a father. A father with a young son who didn't know him at all.

That morning, he'd gone to the barn with his father and his son and simply watched as his little boy 'helped' Grandpa milk the cows. Clark could remember doing the same thing when he was Jon's age, thinking he was all grown up and responsible as he helped do the farm chores. In reality, of course, there wasn't an awful lot a three-year-old could do to be useful, but watching him try was the most amazing thing Clark had ever seen.

Jon was warming up to him, but the little boy was still quiet and reserved around Clark. And when he needed help with anything, from tying his shoes to getting a cup of milk, he always asked his mother or grandparents. Never Clark. It hurt so much to be a stranger to his son. To not have what he took for granted as the relationship fathers and sons should have. His parents and Lois did everything they could to encourage Jon to go to Clark instead. And Jon accepted his father's help, but with those wide brown eyes always regarding Clark curiously, as though he still didn't know what to make of this new person in his life.

He waited outside the bathroom as Lois helped Jon brush his teeth. The door opened up and a little bundle of squirming energy wrapped up in Scooby Doo pajamas raced out into the hallway, right past Clark. Clark watched as his son darted into his bedroom. Lois stepped out of the bathroom and into the hall, shaking her head.

"Are you sure you didn't have superspeed when you were three?" she asked with a smile. "Do you want to read him his bedtime story?"

"It's something you guys always do together, right? I don't want to get in the way," he said reluctantly.

"Come on," she replied, taking his hand.

They entered Jon's room together. The little boy was already sitting in bed, waiting expectantly for his story. "Honey, what if Daddy reads your story tonight?" Lois asked him.

"No," Jon replied stubbornly.

"Come on, sweetie," Lois coaxed.

"It's okay," Clark replied, already taking a step back.

"Clark," Lois began. She turned back to Jon. "Why don't we let Daddy read it to you? He's great at reading stories."

"But he doesn't know how to do the voices," Jon pouted. "You hafta read Winnie the Pooh and you hafta do the voices," he said quietly.

"It's okay," Clark said again, trying to smile. "You can read him the story."

"Clark, wait," she protested.

"Goodnight, kiddo, I love you." Clark left, closing the door softly behind him, but he could still hear Lois's voice through it, reading 'When We Were Very Small' to their son. He knew it was stupid to feel hurt. He shouldn't envy Lois's bond with their son, but he was beginning to doubt he would ever have the same kind of relationship with Jon. Maybe he couldn't.

Lois had spent four years building a wonderful relationship with their son, he'd spent the last four years doling out pain and ugly death, fighting a war, destroying — doing the exact opposite of being a parent. Lois still didn't know. He still hadn't told her. He was running out of time. He knew that, but what was he supposed to say? How was he supposed to broach this particular subject?

They still hadn't made love.

It had been almost a week since he'd returned and though he'd dreamt about being with her, almost every night for four years, he'd been home for days and had barely touched her. She'd seen the scars now, they weren't an excuse, but what lay under those scars, the marks that would never heal or even fade, the ones that were burned onto him forever, deep inside, they drove them apart. Everything that had happened that he couldn't talk about kept him away from Lois. Kept him from being honest with her.

It had to stop.

He knew that. He couldn't do this without her. He couldn't make any of this work, make any of it make sense, without her. Clark entered his room and changed into a pair of sweat pants. He'd stopped wearing a t-shirt to bed

because it only led to Lois asking him to take it off. He knew that she was trying to prove to him that she still loved him, that no matter what had happened, she would always love him and be attracted to him, but she had no idea the depths to which he'd sunk. She had no way of knowing what had gone on there, and the more he thought about it, the more he wished he could just bury the past and pretend it hadn't happened.

He heard a knock on the door. "You decent?" Lois asked from the other side.

"What if I'm not?" he asked back.

She opened the door and entered the room. "Spoilsport," she said with a mock pout. Lois crossed the room to the dresser, pulled out a tank top and a pair of shorts and changed. She was totally casual about it, not at all self-conscious, almost as though he wasn't in the room. Or maybe she was just a better actor than he was. But why should she be self-conscious, he wondered. They were married, for goodness' sake. It wasn't like he'd never seen her naked before. But then again, it had been so long since they'd made love...

Almost as though she was just becoming aware of his presence, she turned back to him and drew him into her arms. They stood quietly for a long while, their arms wrapped around each other. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "About Jon. It's all so confusing for him. It's just going to take time."

"I know," he replied somewhat halfheartedly.

"I love you," she murmured against his chest.

"I love you, too," he replied, holding her just a little tighter. He closed his eyes and tried to wish the last four years away. He hated the fact that he'd left her. That he had missed so much. And that he'd caused so much pain. She withdrew from his arms to turn off the light and in the darkness, took his hand and led him to the bed. He pulled back the covers and they lay down. He draped an arm around her, holding her close the way he had for several nights now. It felt good to hold her, but he wanted more. He needed more. He needed her.

She pushed slightly against his shoulder and he rolled onto his back. He looked up at her, his eyes capturing hers, surprised to find not passion, but just tenderness, in their depths. He realized with a start just how surprised he was. It had been so long since he'd known any sort of gentleness and now it was cutting him right to the bone. He felt pain claw at the empty space in his chest, the deep chasm that had formed there, hollowing him out. Clark wanted to shy away from it, from the feelings long lost and suddenly roaring back, but he couldn't. Sure, she had him nominally pinned to the bed, but he wasn't really physically trapped. Craving the warmth he'd been denied so long, he was dazed, unable to move. He wanted nothing more than to bask in her warmth. Except, he wanted to deserve it. He wanted to be loved, but he wanted to earn that love. He wanted to be someone deserving of her.

She smoothed a lock of hair away from his face and pressed a delicate kiss against his forehead, his cheek, the

corner of his mouth. She dipped her head to place a butterfly-light kiss against his neck and then the center of his chest, the soft silk of her hair brushing wonderfully against his skin. He closed his eyes and felt her place her head against his chest. His arms wrapped around her, marveling in how perfectly she seemed to fit against him, how good it felt to hold her.

"Every night for four years I fell asleep imagining that I could hear this sound, that I could feel your chest rise and fall underneath me, and your arms around me," she whispered. He felt his body shiver slightly as he held her tighter.

She placed a hand on the center of his chest, over the large, gaping scar that ran across it. He flinched. He didn't mean to, and he tried to mitigate his reaction, but he flinched. "I'm sorry," she murmured softly. He said nothing. "Does it still hurt?" she asked.

"No," he said, but he placed a hand on hers and moved it higher slightly, to unmarred skin. "I just..." he began.

"What is it?" she asked. When he didn't say anything, she continued. "You have to know that you can tell me anything."

"I just, I wish you didn't have to see these," he said.

She freed her hand to trace it along the length of the scar across his chest. Her eyes caught his and held them. "Do you really think these could possibly change the way I feel about you, at all?"

"No. I guess..."

"Do you think they make me less attracted to you?"

"No."

"But they bother you. Because you don't want to talk about how you got them. Because you don't want me to know what they did to you, but you know I'm going to ask. You don't want to tell me, but you don't want me to wonder about them, either. About whether I should feel pity or horror about them."

He closed his eyes and swallowed roughly. Every word seemed to pierce him. She placed a hand on his cheek and briefly kissed his lips. He drew in a ragged breath. "It's too..."

"Soon, I know," she said. "I'm not going to push, but don't shut me out."

He reached up to touch her face. "I love you." He left unsaid the rest: 'And I never want to do anything to make you doubt that love.'

"I love you, too," she replied. "More than I've ever loved anyone or anything in my entire life. You know that nothing can change that, right? Nothing."

God, he wanted to believe that. He wanted to be firm in his confidence that nothing he could tell her would ever cause her to lose faith in him. He should tell her. He knew that. Clark knew that he should tell her the whole awful, unbearable truth about what had happened on New Krypton, but he couldn't. He could barely stand to think about what happened; how could he talk to her about it? How could he look her in the eyes and tell her what had happened? How could he watch the disappointment settle

on her face, and know that he was the cause? How could he put her through that? Although he had to admit, he didn't want to put himself through it, either. He couldn't bear it if her knowing meant that she didn't want to be with him anymore, if what had happened was too much for her to accept. He needed her. Nothing was clearer than that.

He let his thumb stroke the soft skin of her cheek and drew himself up to kiss her. His lips brushed gently over hers. She moaned as her lips parted and she deepened the kiss. He felt her arms slide up to wrap around his neck, her hands buried themselves in his hair, as they closed the remaining space between them. His hands settled on her hips and slowly slipped under the hem of her tank top. He loved the feeling of her warm, soft skin beneath his fingertips. His hands trailed languidly up and down her sides. It was amazing, really, how this slender, beautiful woman in his arms was the most powerful being in the universe. Although, in a sense, he'd always known that. Sure, he used to be able to bench press space shuttles, but no force in heaven or earth could ever stand in the way of Lois Lane.

He'd wondered idly when his powers would return. He'd been home almost a week now and still nothing, though he was up to full normal human strength. And they'd put off being intimate long enough. His injuries had healed, and he needed her. It was clear that she too, needed him. As though she'd read his mind, she slipped out of the tank top in one simple, fluid motion, discarding the superfluous article and letting him enfold her in his arms. She felt so incredible.

He rolled to lay her down on the bed and for a long moment, just looked at her, letting his eyes drink in the sight of her, knowing it would never be enough. Her arms around his neck, she gently pulled him toward her, but he placed his hands on her arms, pulling her hands into his. He brushed the barest whisper of a kiss against her lips before trailing his lips down the soft skin of her neck. "You are so beautiful," he murmured against her skin, feeling her shiver in response.

And she was. Every soft curve, warm hollow, and smooth line was absolutely perfect. Every freckle, every tiny and almost invisible scar was just as it had been before and just as it had been burned into his memory. He let his hands trail along her sides, his fingers splayed to run across the flawless skin of her stomach, fanning out over the gentle curve of her hip. He paid silent homage to every inch of her with his hands and his lips.

He stretched himself out to lie beside her, drawing her into his arms. She fit so perfectly against him. He kissed her lips softly and pulled her into his embrace. She rested her head against his shoulder. "I remembered every perfect detail about you," he whispered against her hair. "I was afraid I'd forget what this felt like, or that I'd remember it wrong. But everything about you is just like it was. I feel like I know you better than I know myself."

"We could never forget this," she murmured. He tilted her chin up and captured her lips in a kiss that began gently but soon grew more passionate. She pulled away and he felt

a sigh shudder through her. "Are you okay?" she asked. The question confused him, but she quickly continued. "I mean, we don't have to do this yet, if you're..."

"Yes, we do," he replied earnestly. "I haven't made love with you in four years and I feel like if I have to wait another minute, it might kill me."

She responded by kissing him fiercely. He wrapped his arms around her more tightly, unable to get enough of her, feeling like no matter how close she was, it wasn't close enough. Their remaining clothes were discarded, with speed, if not with grace. He felt her hands roaming over every inch of his roughly scarred skin. A thought, unbidden and unwelcome, poked through his consciousness. She was still so perfect, but he wasn't. He'd come back...wrong. Sick in body and in spirit. The scars on the outside, the mutilation of his body, were nothing compared to the twisted wreck of his soul. She deserved to know that, didn't she? He should tell her. Not now, though, he thought to himself. Not now. Later, he could tell her the truth. Right now, he needed her. He needed to be with her, he needed to lose himself in her.

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind, thinking about nothing except for the fact that when he was with her, surrounded by her, the smell of her skin and the feel of her body against his, it didn't hurt. His conscience couldn't prick at him, couldn't taunt him. He could forget himself and everything else.

Lois held her sleeping husband in her arms, cradling him gently to her, his head pillowed against her chest, their bodies entwined. She ran her fingers through his hair absently and suppressed a shiver. God, it hurt so much. She looked down at her beloved, and her heart ached. Pain's grip upon her heart had tightened and she'd felt a quiver in her throat, but she'd tried to fight it. She'd held him silently until he'd fallen asleep. She wrapped her arms around him, willing their physical closeness to bridge the emotional gap between them. But no matter how close she held him, he wasn't with her. She could feel it. And whatever he'd said before, he hadn't made love to remember. He'd made love to forget. To forget something so awful he wouldn't talk to her about it.

She pressed her lips against his hair. The cold, sharp pain seemed to explode from the center of her chest, threatening to consume her whole. She couldn't breathe. How could he be so close, lying here in her arms, and still be so far away? Silent tears slipped down her cheeks.

She awoke suddenly when he began to stir. He fought their embrace and she immediately let him go. His heart thundered loudly, echoing in her ears. Rolling away from her, he murmured something she couldn't quite understand, his voice agitated, almost strangled.

"Honey?" she whispered as she touched his bare shoulder.

"I am Clark Kent," he mumbled, puzzling her.

"Clark?" she ventured. He didn't respond and she realized he was still completely asleep.

"I have a mother and a father and a wife who love me dearly. I will not die because they need me."

"Honey?" she said again, a little louder this time, trying to mask the sound of tears in her voice. Oh God, what had he gone through? What had they done to him? He said the words as though he was used to repeating them. As though he'd said them over and over again. She ran her hand gently along the length of his arm. "It's okay, you're home. You're home, Clark." She took his hand and squeezed it and he squeezed back, holding tightly. He turned back toward her, a haunted look in his eyes.

"Oh, thank God," he whispered breathlessly. He screwed his eyes shut and exhaled a shaky breath. His entire body shuddered as he pulled her into his arms. She let him enfold her in his embrace. He held her so tightly she was certain she would have found it uncomfortable if she hadn't been the superpowered one.

"I'm here," she murmured softly. "And everything's all right, you're home." She could still feel his heart pounding harshly against her chest, but eventually it slowed.

He continued to hold her close, running one hand up and down the bare skin of her back. She knew what he was doing; he was trying assure himself that she was solid and real and not some cruel dream. Neither one said a word for a long while. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked quietly, breaking the silent spell over them.

"It was just a dream," he said before kissing her temple. Her husband played it off like it was nothing, but she'd seen enough of terror and fear to know true torment and his body belied the nonchalance of his words. She didn't know if he'd been reliving old traumas or imagining new ones, but whatever it was, it had been awful. Lois tried not to tremble as the tears came. She bit her lip to keep from sobbing.

"I love you," she managed to whisper as she tucked her head under his chin.

"I love you," he replied softly. "I...Lois, I love you so much." He stroked her hair and she hugged him just a little tighter, realizing that they were clinging to each other as though for dear life. And perhaps they were.

Lois sat down on the sofa in the den beside Martha, folding her hands nervously in her lap. "Lois, honey, whatever's wrong you can tell me," her mother-in-law said reassuringly.

"I'm worried about him," she said at last. "It's been a week and he hasn't said a word about what went on on New Krypton. I know something terrible must have happened to him and he won't talk to me about it."

Martha frowned thoughtfully, obviously troubled by the younger woman's words. "What do you think happened?"

"I don't really know," Lois said. "I can start to guess, but I don't even know how Clark would react to me talking to you about it. I think it might upset him. I know that my asking him about it is bothering him." She looked down as she spoke softly. "I'm trying not to push him, but it can't be

a good thing for him to just act like nothing happened, can it?" She knew from her own experiences—talking with Dr. Friskin, doing her own research on the effects of traumatic stress, the dangers of isolation and self-delusion. Just burying problems and pretending they weren't there never worked.

"It takes a lot of courage to ask for help. Especially for someone like Clark, someone who's always been used to being strong. Do you remember how long it took you to open up to Jonathan and me about Kinwara?"

Lois nodded somewhat feebly. "But shutting you guys out was exactly the wrong thing to do," she said.

"What about Dr. Friskin? Talking to her seemed to have helped you a lot," Martha offered.

"It did. And I've been thinking about suggesting it to him. I'm just...I promised him I wouldn't pressure him about this, and now I keep worrying about what I should say to him." She looked up and sighed in frustration. "Martha, I was never like this. I hardly ever think before I speak, and I never had to worry about what I was going to say to Clark. I could always tell him anything."

"I wish I knew what to tell you," Martha replied sadly. "I'll try to talk to him, but I don't know if he'll open up to me, either."

"Thanks," Lois said in a voice barely above a whisper. Perhaps the thought that Clark could talk to his mother but not to her should have bothered her, especially given how often she'd tried to reassure her husband that he could talk to her about anything, but all she cared about was that Clark start to open up, even if it wasn't to her.

"It's almost lunchtime. Why don't you go get Jonathan and Jon? They should be out in the barn," Martha said.

Lois nodded and stood up. She headed out to round up her son and her father-in-law and brought them back in for lunch. On the porch, she helped Jon shed his muddy sneakers and lifted him up so he wouldn't track God-knew-what into the house. "All right, little man, time to get cleaned up," she said as she carried him to the bathroom. He endured a few minutes of having his hands, face, and feet washed off and she finally let him go. Jon ran to the kitchen, where Lois could hear the sounds of the table being set.

"How about grilled cheese for lunch?" she heard Martha say as she walked to the kitchen.

"Yeah!" Jon agreed enthusiastically. Lois stopped in the doorway to watch Clark and Jonathan set the plates around the table and pour glasses of lemonade for everyone.

"Do you know who makes the best grilled cheese sandwiches?" Martha asked.

"Grandma!" Jon replied.

"No, your daddy does," Martha said.

Lois said nothing, but watched the silent exchange between her mother-in-law and her husband. An anxious, hopeful expression flitted across Clark's face. "Okay, grilled cheese sandwiches coming up," he said. Jon watched his father curiously as he found a frying pan and started making the sandwiches. Clark finished with the first one

and squatted down beside his son. "Do you want me to cut off the crusts?"

"Okay," Jon said.

Clark neatly trimmed the edge off the sandwich and cut it into little triangles, just the way his mother always did for Jon, and Lois realized that Martha must have made the sandwiches the exact same way for Clark, so many years ago. He put Jon's plate down on the table and helped his son into his chair. "There you go, buddy," he said with a hesitant smile.

Jon picked up one of the little triangles, pulling it to pieces in his small hands. He took a bite and smiled. Clark seemed relieved as he tousled his little boy's hair slightly. He looked up from where he leaned down next to Jon's seat and grinned at Lois. She returned his smile, a profound and almost confusing sense of relief washing over her.

Clark helped his mother clear the table as Lois took Jon upstairs for his nap. "Somehow, I'm guessing they didn't have you doing your own dishes on New Krypton," Martha said as she turned on the faucet.

Clark shook his head. "I haven't washed a dish, made my bed, or cooked a meal for myself in more than four years," he admitted.

"Well, it looks like you did okay there with the grilled cheese. You won over the house's most discriminating critic."

"It was just a sandwich," Clark replied, putting the last of the dishes in the sink. He wasn't about to turn every minor point in the parenting ledger into some sort of crowning achievement.

"Yes, but now Jon knows that his daddy makes the best grilled cheese sandwich around," his mother said as she started to wash the plates.

"I'm just his father right now," Clark said softly. "That's simple biology. Being his daddy is something I'm going to have to earn."

Martha placed a dish in the drying rack as she turned toward him. "And you will. Clark, this takes time. Parenting isn't something you perfect overnight."

"I don't know, Mom, you and Dad certainly made it seem that way. And Lois clearly has Mother of the Year wrapped up along with the Pulitzer, and the Kerths, and a Nobel Peace Prize, for crying out loud." He grabbed the sponge and took over washing the dishes, keeping his head down so he didn't have to make eye contact with his mother, who was probably about to scold him for being petulant.

She turned off the tap. "I'm not going to tell you that I know how hard this is for you. I don't. But you're going to have to be patient. We're all here to help you; it's okay to ask any of us if you don't know what Jon's bedtime is, or what cereals he's allowed to have."

He sighed. "I just never thought I'd need a crash course in remedial parenting," he confessed.

"Honey, you don't. But everything you figure out as a parent is built on the things you already know about your

child. If you get started four years late, it stands to reason that you're going to be playing catch up, at least for a little while."

"I guess so," he murmured. They finished the dishes in silence and Martha poured two more glasses of lemonade. She handed him one and gestured toward the kitchen table.

"Now besides the fact that you never cooked or cleaned, you haven't told me anything about New Krypton," she said, placing her lemonade on the table so she could pick up the tray of fresh snicker doodles she'd placed by the oven to cool off.

He popped one of the little cookies in his mouth and washed it down with the lemonade. "It was a war, Mom," he said. "It was ugly and brutal and I couldn't wait for it to end so I could come home."

"Have you talked to Lois at all about it?" she asked gently.

Clark sighed in frustration. "She doesn't need to hear that crap...sorry," he mumbled off his mother's sternly disapproving look.

"She does need to hear it, and you need to tell her about it. Lois is a strong woman and she's seen an awful lot. She can handle it, but I'm not sure she can handle you shutting her out."

"I'm not shutting her out," he insisted. "I just don't see the point in rehashing the awful details when there's nothing anyone can do about it. New Krypton is a trillion miles away and the Kryptonians have to figure out their own way now. There's no sense dwelling on what happened." He stood up and took his plate and glass to the sink, rinsing them out before leaving the kitchen.

That evening, Lois sat in the den, reviewing the advance copy of her book. She held the hefty hard cover book in her hands, feeling a peculiar sort of pride in knowing that she could turn to any page in the book and recognize the words as her own. She'd already sent signed copies to Perry and Jimmy, and all the book critics would have theirs by morning. The actual release was still a few weeks away, but she had another dozen copies to do with as she wished. The sound of footsteps on the porch startled her out of her musings. She turned to X-ray through the walls. In the twilight, Clark sat his son down on the porch and helped him take off his muddy little sandals. They both smiled. Lois stood up and walked out to the entryway. The screen door opened and Jon ran inside, his feet and hands muddy.

"Mommy, Mommy, we caught a frog!" he exclaimed.

His enthusiasm made her smile. "You caught a frog?"

"Yeah," he said with a vigorous nod. "We put it back."

The screen door opened again and Clark walked in, barefoot like his son. "Because frogs like the pond, right?"

"Yeah!" Jon agreed.

Her husband grinned happily. "All right, Mr. Frog Catcher, we need to get you cleaned up before bed," she said to her little boy. Lois turned toward Clark. "Help me give him his bath?"

"Sure," he said.

When all that remained of Jon's nightly ritual was his bedtime story, Clark demurred. He'd been fine all throughout and Jon seemed happy to have his daddy's help in getting ready for bed, but Clark had insisted when it came to reading the story. "This is something that's just about you and Jon. I'm okay with that," he said. But there was a look of sadness in his eyes and as much as he claimed otherwise, Lois knew that he wanted to do this with his son. She was unwilling, however, to go through a repeat of the previous evening, with Jon potentially pouting and Clark leaving the room, looking wounded. She wasn't certain Jon would object to Clark taking part in reading the story—father and son seemed much more comfortable together than they had just the day before—but she still had no idea just how much she should push either of these two. It had been tempting to ask Clark to just stay in the room with them while she read the story to Jon. That way, he could ease into the routine. But what if Clark refused, or Jon pouted again? How was she supposed to handle that? She couldn't let Jon think that he could cut his father out by simply throwing a tantrum and she knew better than to start an argument with a three-year-old just before bedtime. She couldn't force them into a normal family routine; that had to develop on its own. But she hated feeling like there was nothing proactive she could do to help the process along.

Clark sat in the den while Lois read Jon his story. He'd found the box of copies of her new book, turning the thick volume over in his hands. The back cover was filled from top to bottom with glowing quotes from ambassadors, former secretaries of state and foreign ministers, and generals. The front of the dust jacket was plain white, except for the banner image stretched across it, halfway down the cover – a photograph of a lone, gnarled tree on a green hill. The title, "The Shade of a Bitterwood Tree," was written above the picture in plain, black font. In smaller lettering, below the image was written "Lois Lane." He opened the book to the prologue.

The rolling hills around Lake Regina are renowned for their lush, verdant vegetation. Among the trees that fill the valley, though, are ones known by the locals as bitterwoods. The fruit of the bitterwood is poisonous. The sap is a harsh irritant. Its branches are covered in thorns and provide a home to disease-carrying insects that plague the shepherds' goats. Its wood is too soft and gnarled to be used for building. Its roots leech the nutrients from the soil, starving the farmers' crops. The tree isn't even useable as firewood, as it creates a horrible, acrid stench when burned. The bitterwood was the bane of every farmer and shepherd's existence until the introduction of dynamite, when they began blasting them out. But Kinwarans still have an old saying about these tough and unpleasant plants that have created such hardship for them: "Even the bitterwood tree gives shade."

When faced with overwhelming tragedy, we search for some sliver of hope to latch onto, some shred of evidence to convince us that all will be right with the world again. That

good will triumph and that someone really is in control. We remind ourselves that it's darkest before the dawn and we search the distant horizon for some sign of the coming light we know in our hearts is there. Like the Kinwara farmers and shepherds considering the bitterwood tree, we will look at an ugly, hurtful thing, gnarled, with poison flowing through its veins, until we find something redeeming, something that convinces us that even from a horrible thing, some good can come. For it is tragedy that gives us heroes, desperation that produces noble sacrifice. And while we know we'd be better off without the bitterwood tree if we could just extirpate it from the ground and wipe it off the face of the Earth, we still find comfort in the shade. Because if even the bitterwood tree gives shade, then surely the forces of good in the world cannot be vanquished, and in the end, day will conquer night.

But in my time in Kinwara, I began to wonder, what if there was no dawn? What if the light had been permanently extinguished? What if good was unable or unwilling to defeat this evil? Because how could the world truly be good if something this awful had happened? It was easy to succumb to despair and truth be told, that despair remained with me long after I left Kinwara. I wasn't freed of it until I returned. In the months between my visits, the people of Kinwara had begun the daunting task of rebuilding their lives amid the rubble. It was hard, slow, frustrating work, and while they were sad and angry and confused, they were also hopeful. It took me a while to get past my own anger to realize how this was possible. How could people who had lost everything still have hope?

I finally realized that even though I couldn't see the dawn and had no evidence of its approach, that didn't mean people stopped looking for it. It is the very fact that we keep looking that should inspire us. Hope continues to exist even when it has no logical reason to. In the face of the greatest sadness and the deepest tragedy, hope goes on. We continue to believe that dawn will come. That the light beyond the horizon will appear, even if it seems like it has been night for a thousand years. And even if we're not here to see it, we believe that one day, others will bask in warm sunlight again. What makes humanity great, what makes us worth saving, is that in our darkest hours, we continue to search for the light.

He flipped back to the dedication page, blank except for a single line:

To my husband: my constant source of strength, hope, and courage.

This was the second book she'd dedicated to him. He almost couldn't wait to read it, to read all of her thoughts and to get a better sense of what she'd gone through. He wanted so desperately to understand what it had been like for her these last four years.

Clark looked up at the sound of the door opening. His wife smiled at him as she walked into the room and sat down beside him. "Are you going to sign mine?" he asked. She stood up and walked over to the desk in the corner and picked up another copy of the book.

"This one's yours," she explained as she handed him an identical book.

He opened it up to the blank page just inside the cover. Completely and eternally yours,

LL

she'd written there in rich, dark ink. Lois had a somewhat elaborate hierarchy of signatures; she signed official documents with her full name, and notes to friends and family 'Lois,' but she always signed things for him with just her initials. It had always been that way. She saved 'LL' for him and no one else.

Holding the book open in one hand, he draped his arm around her and pulled her close. He closed his eyes and kissing her temple. "Thank you," he whispered against her hair. There was so much more he wanted to say to her, but he didn't know how.

"Writing this book took more out of me than I thought I had to give," she murmured. "But when it was over, I was relieved. I couldn't write everything, especially a lot of the stuff Ultrawoman saw, but writing this was a release I didn't even know I needed until I'd done it."

"I want to read it. I want to understand everything," he replied.

"I know," she said. "And I want the same thing, Clark. I want to know what happened on New Krypton. I want to know what you went through. Even if you think it's too much to hear."

"Not tonight," he responded.

"Dr. Friskin once told me the best way to deal with something traumatic was to talk about it right away. It lets you process the memories like normal ones, instead of letting them overwhelm you. The longer you wait, the harder it gets."

Would that she only knew, he thought ruefully to himself. But she had no way of realizing it was far too late for that. So he told her the only thing he could – a truth, but an incomplete one. "Today was the best day I've had since I got back. It was probably one of the best days of my life," he said. "The way Jon looked at me today...like I was really his dad...I don't want to come down from that feeling. Not now, anyway."

"Okay," she acquiesced with a nod. It wasn't like her to give in without a fight, but he wasn't about to question his good fortune. The truth was, he didn't want to talk about New Krypton. If he couldn't erase the four years he'd spent away, he wanted to bury them firmly and deeply in the past, where they belonged.

He closed the book in his hand and placed it on the coffee table before pulling Lois into his arms. She slipped her arms around his neck as he drew her closer to him. Their lips met and he closed his eyes, savoring a feeling he was once certain he'd never experience again. How had he managed to go four years without kissing her? He should have had an easier time giving up breathing. She sighed softly and he wrapped his arms more tightly around her waist. Reclining back against the couch he brought her with him so she was lying on top of him. His hands trailed up

and down her sides, marveling at the way her small, lean body fit against his and how her denim-clad legs tangled with his.

She broke off the kiss to murmur, "I love you," against his lips

"I love you," he replied breathlessly. He cradled the back of her head with one hand and kissed her again. Her lips were soft and pliant against his, parting as their tongues met and the kiss deepened. He groaned as her hands slipped under the hem of his t-shirt, but once again, his entire body tensed as her fingers brushed over one of the scars.

He tore his lips away from hers and turned away, exhaling in a breathless gasp. "I'm sorry," he whispered before kissing her again.

This time she withdrew from him. "Are you okay?" she asked, looking down at him with concern evident in her eyes.

"Yeah," he breathed as he kissed her again. Clark sat up, gathered her in his arms, and rose to his feet.

"Someone's feeling better," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Almost super," he confirmed. He couldn't fly or even float, but he was stronger than an ordinary man again. Carrying his wife up the stairs wouldn't require any effort at all. The look in her eyes told him that she knew that he'd picked her up to prove that he wasn't weak or fragile and he didn't need protecting. He was strong again. Lois put her head on his shoulder as he carried her to the bedroom.

She was high above the farm when she heard his voice, anxiousness clear in its timber and pitch. Once again, the mumbled words were too difficult to decipher, but she knew it was another nightmare; just like last night. She zipped in through the open window, landing and immediately spinning out of the suit. Within the span of a heartbeat, she was lying in bed beside him, wrapping her arms around his body.

"It's all right, Clark," she murmured softly. "It's just a dream, you're all right."

He woke with a start, his heart thundering in an irregular rhythm. His chest rose and fell with each shallow gasp. "Oh God, Lois," he whispered breathlessly.

"You're okay. You're home. Everything is okay," she soothed.

He turned around to pull her into his arms. His skin was flushed with warmth and the heat radiated off his body. For a long moment, he simply held her tightly. She could hear the rapid beat of his heart and his breath on her skin. He lowered his head to kiss her shoulder. "Lois," he whispered her name breathlessly.

"I'm here," she said.

His lips found hers and he kissed her fiercely. His body seemed to tense with desperate need. "Please, help me forget," he murmured. Her husband looked at her. His eyes weren't darkened with passion. They were haunted.

"Honey..." she began, but he kissed her again. He tore his lips from hers to trail kisses along her jaw, down her

neck, and over her collarbone. They'd made love only hours before, but he touched her as though he hadn't in years.

And didn't expect to, ever again.

Something inside her told her that she should stop this. That they needed to talk about whatever it was that was plaguing his nights, making it impossible for him to sleep. But the part of her that needed him so desperately, that wanted so badly to be joined with him, to move with him, was overpowering.

She had been denied the comfort of his embrace for too long. She'd had so many nightmares of her own, when all she'd wanted was to feel his arms around her, his body entwined with hers. It was too hard. She couldn't be strong any more, not when she craved his touch so badly.

Maybe she could help him forget his pain in their frantic coupling.

Perhaps they could both forget.

Clark stood outside his son's bedroom. The door was ajar, and he peeked in, watching his son still sleeping as the early morning light filtered in through the windows. Jon looked just like his father had when he was little. He never thought that would be so important to him. After all, he didn't look like his mom and dad, but he loved them as much as possible. So what was it about this blood tie that resonated so strongly within him? Maybe it was because he'd spent so much of his adolescence peering closely at strangers, trying to find some hint of familiarity that would suggest that he did belong somewhere, that even if he was a freak, at least he wasn't alone.

He could do something for Jon his own parents had never been fully able to do. He could reassure his son that he wasn't a freak, that there was nothing wrong with him, and there was no reason to ever be afraid of his powers.

"Morning, son," his father said softly, startling him.

"Hi, Dad," Clark whispered.

"I've got something for you," Jonathan said with a smile as he motioned for Clark to follow him.

Stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans, Clark followed his father down the stairs. From the top shelf of the hallway closet, Jonathan pulled down a tiny baseball mitt, barely the size of Clark's hand. Clark couldn't help but smile.

"I bought this a little more than a week ago. It was going to be a surprise," Jonathan explained. "But you should give it to Jon."

"Dad..." Clark started to protest.

"A boy should get his first baseball mitt from his father," Jonathan replied firmly. "I'm so glad you came home in time."

Clark nodded in understanding. He didn't quite remember his first baseball mitt, but he did remember the one his father gave him when he was six and just starting T-ball. He remembered how his dad showed him how to oil the mitt and how to put a ball in the webbing and wrap it with twine so that it would take on the right shape. He

remembered playing catch with his dad at twilight from the first warm day in the spring all the way through the fall. As they tossed around an old, scuffed up baseball, he could tell his dad anything. He remembered the smell of the leather and the snap of his old, beat-up mitt. He remembered when it got so that no matter how hard his dad threw, his hand didn't hurt at all. And he remembered when he got so strong he could throw the ball clear across the wheat fields.

Jonathan reached up to the closet shelf one more time and pulled down Clark's old glove, a baseball still nestled against the webbing. "That ball won't do for now. You'll need something that isn't quite so hard," he said as he handed Clark a soft little T-ball instead.

Clark smiled. "Thanks, Dad," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Jonathan placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "Anytime, son."

Clark swallowed roughly and cleared his throat. "I think it's time," he began. "To have that press conference."

His father frowned slightly. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I am. I can't hide here forever."

"All right, then. We'll call Perry. I'm sure he can set this up."

"Let's see if he can arrange it for tomorrow," Clark added. "I want to have one more day when it's just the five of us. I want to play catch with my son tonight, not answer a bunch of questions."

Jonathan nodded in understanding. "Okay," he agreed.

The sound of Jon crying was the only thing that could get her attention faster than a cry for help. Her body grew tense at the first sound of him bawling, and she looked up from her revised book tour schedule. She scanned through the walls of the farmhouse and easily spotted him in the field by the duck pond, with his dad. Jon wasn't hurt—that she realized immediately—but Clark wore a grim expression as he carried his son back toward the house.

She tried not to get too anxious. If she seemed nervous, Clark would think she was questioning his parenting skills. So she remained at the kitchen table and tried to focus on the paperwork, even though that was a feat beyond her ken. Her heart beat just a little faster as the screen door opened and Clark walked in, still carrying Jon. He turned around in his father's arms and reached for her. Clark set Jon gently down on his feet and the little boy ran toward his mother.

Lois tried to ignore Jon's tears, knowing that if she seemed too concerned, he'd just become more distressed. "Did you play catch with Daddy?" she asked.

"I don't wanna play catch," Jon pouted. "I wanna catch frogs." Clark set his jaw in consternation, but said nothing.

"Well, we can't catch frogs now. It's time to get cleaned up for dinner." She took his little hand as she stood up, and led him toward the bathroom.

Jon continued to whimper, but he calmed down as she helped him wash his hands and face. They returned to the kitchen to find Martha and Clark setting the table. Dinner passed without incident and once Jon had had his bath and

his story and had gone to sleep, Lois joined her husband out on the porch.

"I shouldn't have pushed him," Clark murmured as soon as she opened the screen door to step outside. He stared out at the fields and didn't turn around to look at her. In his hands, he held a little baseball mitt. He turned it over and played with the laces. She came to stand close to him, feeling the warmth radiating off his body.

"He was just being cranky. He is a three-year-old, after all," she replied simply.

Clark sighed. "I just wanted so badly to do this with him and yesterday went so well. I just got so frustrated."

She put her hand on his arm. "Clark..."

He pulled away, his posture tensing. "I didn't," he said.

"Didn't what?" she asked, thoroughly confused.

"I didn't lose my temper, I didn't yell at him."

She blinked a few times, wondering where this had come from. "I know you didn't," she replied.

"What, were you keeping an eye on us? Not sure I can handle Jon by myself?" he challenged.

"Clark, you're not making any sense," she countered, a harsh note creeping into her voice. "Of course I trust you, and the reason I know you didn't yell at him is because I know you, not because I'm hovering about, making sure you're doing everything the same way I would."

He sighed again. "I'm sorry," he said resignedly. He dragged a hand through his hair and she noticed that it was trembling. She reached out and took his hand, holding it loosely in hers. She felt it tremble for a moment before he tensed it and forced it to stop shaking.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine," he replied, pulling his hand away.

She frowned, furrowing her brow, and pursing her lips. "Your hand, it's shaking..."

"It's been that way for a while," he admitted. "It's just nerves." He flexed his fist a few times before dropping his hand by his side.

"Maybe you should talk to Bernie about it," she ventured.

"He already knows," Clark confirmed. She wasn't sure whether to be relieved that he'd told Bernie, or to be hurt that he hadn't thought to tell her. Maybe he'd told Bernie about the nightmares, too. She wondered if she could badger that information out of the absent-minded scientist before deciding against it. Ethically, she knew Bernie couldn't say a word, and her going behind Clark's back wasn't going to do anything to help build up the trust in their relationship. Although, until he'd accused her of practically spying on him, she hadn't really thought that they had any trust issues.

"Look, I'm sorry for snapping at you," Clark said at last. He sounded weary; like this had become rote to him, like he'd grown used to apologizing for his behavior, but she couldn't fathom why. "I guess I just expected today to go differently."

"You worried about the press conference tomorrow?" she asked gently.

He pulled a face. “Let’s just say I’m not looking forward to it.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she decided to push, just a little bit. Like she was worrying a loose tooth with her tongue, she couldn’t help but prod. “Anything you want to talk about?”

“No,” he replied and he looked away. He turned his attention to the graying paint on the porch railing, where it had started to flake and peel from the hot, humid summer weather. He started to chip away at the paint in little bits with his fingernail. She’d been meaning to repaint that for Martha and Jonathan. It was a simple task made simpler with superpowers, but over the last week or so, she’d completely forgotten. And who could blame her?

“Clark...” she began.

“Can we please just drop it?” he demanded.

She bristled. “When you’re happy, you don’t want to talk and when you’re upset, you don’t want to talk. You ask me not to push, but you’re shutting me out,” she retorted.

“Dammit, I can’t do this on your time table!” he exclaimed harshly. “I can’t be a perfect father and husband, and all-around stand-up guy right now, okay? You don’t think I know that I’m screwing up? But I have to find my own way to fix this, not yours.”

Tears flooded her eyes as she swallowed around the stone lodged in her throat. “I’m sorry,” she choked out reflexively. She didn’t want to back down and let him retreat again like a wounded animal, but more than that, she couldn’t bear to fight with him. Not after everything they’d been through. She sniffed, trying hard not to cry, but a single tear slipped down her face and she raised her hand to wipe it away.

“Oh, Lois,” he murmured softly, before pulling her into his arms. “I’m so sorry. Honey, please, don’t cry.”

But she couldn’t help it. She sobbed uncontrollably against his chest, feeling all the hurt that had been welling up over the last few days finally burst through the dam.

“What have I done?” he whispered, making her cling to him even more tightly. He stroked her hair as he held her close. She stopped crying, but for the life of her, she couldn’t let go of him. Lois wanted to keep holding on to him, hoping that maybe, if she stayed with him, if she stood by him, he might realize that she would always be there for him.

“I love you,” she whispered against his neck.

“I love you so much,” he responded, his voice hoarse.

“Please believe that I never wanted to make you cry. I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know.”

“Judas priest, son, you are a sight for sore eyes!” Perry exclaimed as he pulled Clark into an enthusiastic bear hug. He clapped the younger man heartily on the back.

“It’s good to see you, too, chief,” Clark replied, hugging his editor and friend. “Come on in.” He gestured toward the screen door and the two men walked into the farmhouse from the porch.

“So, I, uh, take it Superman isn’t back yet?” Perry drawled.

Clark gave him a wry grin as he shook his head. It was so odd to have Perry in on the secret, but the other man behaved so naturally and casually about the whole thing. He must have had plenty of time and experience getting used to knowing about him and Lois. “I can float and even fly a short distance, but my powers aren’t completely back yet,” Clark explained.

Perry nodded knowingly. “Well, maybe that’s not such a bad thing.” Clark felt his body tense as he bristled involuntarily. Off what must have been Clark’s very defensive posture, the older man continued, “I just mean that this is a mandatory vacation – a chance to spend some time with your family before going back to the craziness of both of your jobs.” Perry’s gentle explanation mollified him. He shouldn’t have immediately assumed that his editor had meant that Lois had done such a good job replacing him that the world didn’t need him anymore. Why did it always seem like he was jumping to the wrong conclusions? It was like the wiring in his brain had been completely short-circuited and he didn’t think like Clark Kent anymore.

He heard footsteps on the porch. “Lois is back with Jimmy,” he announced. No sooner had the screen door opened than his young friend was hugging him fiercely.

“Clark!” Jimmy shouted joyfully. “I can’t believe you’re back! I mean, I knew you were coming back but... oh man, it’s good to see you!”

Clark released his friend and smiled. “I know exactly what you mean,” he said. His second night back, Lois had explained that she’d told Jimmy as well as Perry. He’d been a bit surprised at first, but it made perfect sense; she’d needed help with Clark’s cover and Jimmy deserved to know the truth. Lois walked in through the doorway, dressed casually in a t-shirt and jeans. She smiled at the assembled group.

“The press conference is in a few hours,” she said. “Clark’s been working on the rough outline of what he wants to tell everyone, but the press is going to have a ton of questions.” He avoided his wife’s gaze. He’d read the story that she and Perry and Jimmy had come up with about him being kidnapped by one of the factions of Kryptonians and last night, he’d refused her help in fleshing out the details. In the past, this was exactly the sort of thing they would have done together. Protecting his secret had been infinitely easier once she was in on it and he no longer had to lie to her.

“Take only a few questions,” Perry instructed. “And limit the subjects to only things you’re comfortable discussing. You can flesh out more in the Planet interview later.”

Clark bit his lip. “About the Planet interview,” he began. “I don’t plan to give a tell-all. It’ll be too hard to keep Kal El and Clark separate without inventing some elaborate story out of whole cloth. It’s not like what happened on New Krypton is publicly known and needs to

be explained. I'll just tell everyone I'd rather not discuss the details." His sudden attack of conscience about misleading the press was very convenient. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the worried look on Lois's face. Dammit, couldn't she see that the over-protectiveness was suffocating him?

"We won't ask for more than you're willing to give," Perry assured him. "I'll do the interview and write up personally so you don't have to worry about slipping up."

Clark nodded. "Thanks, Chief." He forced himself to smile as he looked at Perry, Lois, and Jimmy. "Well, let's figure out where the holes in my story are."

From the doorway, she watched as Clark straightened his tie. He'd picked out the most subdued tie he owned – yellow with diagonal blue stripes. It wasn't his style at all. In fact, Lois thought the tie was a present from Ellen the last Christmas he'd been home; it was perfectly elegant and tasteful, but it was boring. It wasn't Clark. The collar of his white dress shirt was a touch too loose, yet he still stuck his finger under the collar, as though it were too constricting around his neck. In the last week or so, he'd regained most of the lost weight, but he was still about ten pounds lighter than she'd remembered. His body was still well-muscled and incredibly defined, just a bit leaner, especially at the waist, where his pants sat too loosely. He was physically beautiful, but scarred, and she was more and more certain the same was true mentally and emotionally. He pulled on his pinstriped navy blue suit jacket and turned toward her.

"Do I look okay?" he asked.

She walked toward him. "Gorgeous," she replied as she kissed him. He placed his hands on her arms, keeping her from getting too close, from pulling him into her embrace.

"We need to get going," he explained softly.

"Right," she agreed, making a point of checking her watch. She picked up her gray suit jacket and her purse. His parents and Jon had already left in the older pickup, planning to beat the media frenzy. Rachel Harris was on her way to the farm; with all the press that had descended on the sleepy town, Clark was being provided a police escort.

On their way out the door, Lois grabbed the keys to the truck and handed them to Clark. In the past, she might have done all the driving, but these days, she was trying to ensure that Clark felt as in control as possible. Her husband was strong and she wanted him to realize that she knew that.

They rode in silence behind Rachel's cruiser toward Smallville High School. The gymnasium was the only place in town big enough to accommodate the gathered press. He parked the truck not far from the gym's entrance and walked around to open the door for her. "Thanks," she murmured. Lois stepped down onto the loose gravel of the parking lot and offered her hand to her husband. He took her hand and smiled down at her.

Together, they looked at the throng of reporters waiting for them. A loud cacophony of shutters going off assailed them. "You're going to be amazing," she whispered so

softly only he would be able to hear her. He squeezed her hand gently and they followed Rachel into the gymnasium that suddenly seemed like a lion's den.

Half the town was present, along with hundreds of reporters from both world-renowned and obscure outlets. Camera flashes continued to go off as the audience murmured in waves. She could pick out the voices of people who'd known Clark his whole life, wondering and whispering in disbelief – as though they were coming face to face with a ghost. They made their way to the podium that had been set up for him. A group of folding chairs had been set up beside the stand, facing out into the wooden bleachers. They stopped next to the empty chairs beside the mayor's. Clark turned to kiss her cheek. "Tell me I can do this," he whispered.

"I know you can," she replied confidently.

Lois and Rachel sat down as Clark stepped up to the bank of microphones. Trying to look over the irritating camera flashes, her gaze fell on the panels of achievements painted on the gym wall above the bleachers. Among the league championships and state tournament appearances, she found his name:

Clark J. Kent – Scholar Athlete of the Year, 1984 – Football & Baseball

She smiled wistfully, wishing she'd had the chance to know him when he was that young – when he was still just an innocent farmboy, who'd yet to see the wonders and the perils of the world.

"Thank you all for coming," he began and she turned to face him, captivated by the sober, earnest expression on his face. "Let me begin by saying how good it is to be home among friends and family. There were times during the last four years and three months when I despaired of ever seeing the places and the people I love again." The emotions resonated strongly in his voice, but at no point did he stumble or falter, even as he brought tears to her eyes in the brief, muted allusion to his fears.

It was twilight when they returned to the farmhouse. Clark parked the newer truck and walked over to where his father had stopped the old pickup. He eased his dozing son out of his car seat and carried him into the house. Jon felt so small in his arms – innocent and helpless, he needed his parents' guidance, protection, and love. They were halfway up the stairs when Jon started to mumble softly.

"We're home, buddy," Clark said softly.

Jon opened his eyes and looked up at Clark. "Daddy, can we play catch?" the little boy asked plaintively.

Clark smiled. "Sure," he replied. "But we have to change out of our good clothes or Grandma will get mad at us for getting them all dirty." He put Jon back down on his feet in his room and helped his son change into something he could get dirty.

Clark loosened his tie as he made his way back to his room. He suddenly felt lighthearted, despite the grueling press conference he'd endured that afternoon. He'd been firm with the lines he wouldn't cross and questions he

wouldn't entertain. It was almost like being the First Minister again – controlling the questioners and the flow of the conversation. He unbuttoned his shirt and threw it in the laundry hamper and changed into an old pair of basketball shorts. He was rummaging around in the drawers for a t-shirt when he heard the sound of the doorknob turning and Jon's voice calling for him. "Daddy?"

"Jon, no!" Clark said more forcefully than he intended to. Jon looked up at him from the doorway, tears welling up in his big brown eyes.

Clark shook his head, heartbroken. "Oh, no, buddy, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you." 'Idiot,' he cursed himself mentally. He'd been so preoccupied with worrying about how the scars on his chest and back would frighten Jon that he hadn't bothered to think about how being bellowed at by a large man would terrify him. He knelt in front of his crying son and pulled the little boy into his arms. Jon buried his head against his father's bare chest and continued to cry. Clark stroked his son's hair. "Shhh, it's okay," he whispered. "Daddy's sorry. I shouldn't have yelled. You didn't do anything wrong, buddy."

Jon eventually stopped crying. He looked up at his father with tear-filled eyes. Clark kissed the top of his son's head. "That's my boy," he said with a smile.

Silently Jon looked back down at Clark's chest and put his small hand against the scar that cut across his body. Mercifully, Clark did a much better job of not flinching than he typically did when Lois touched him. "What's that?" Jon asked innocently. He pushed on the scar with his tiny index finger. Clark placed his much larger hand over Jon's, but didn't move his son's hand away.

"I got hurt when I was away," he explained simply.

"You got an owie?" Jon asked, frowning.

Clark nodded. "Yes, I got an owie," he agreed. "But it doesn't hurt anymore, so why don't we go play catch?"

"Okay," Jon replied.

Clark sighed with relief as he grabbed the t-shirt he'd been looking for and pulled it on before following his son downstairs. He had to stop screwing up, he thought to himself. Kids needed stability. They needed parents they could count on – not basket cases constantly set on edge.

She was still half asleep, but she felt Clark start to struggle and immediately let him go. She figured that in his nightmares, he felt trapped and confined. Though he hadn't said word one about his injuries, she had to assume he'd been held captive when he received them.

"No! No! Let me go!" he cried out. Clark started to say something she couldn't understand and she figured it had to be Kryptonian. There was a strangled pitch to his voice.

"Clark, it's okay, you're home," she whispered soothingly. Some nights, it was enough to settle him back to sleep. Tonight was not one of those nights. He moved fitfully and continued to speak in harsh, anxious tones. Hesitating for a moment, she decided to wake him. She sat up and touched his shoulder, shaking it gently. "Honey, wake..."

Before she could finish the thought, he spun around, swinging a clenched fist that connected hard with her jaw. She barely heard the 'pop' as she stilled, completely shocked. Clark sat up immediately, a look of sheer horror frozen on his face and etched in his wide eyes. His mouth hung slack open. She lifted a hand to her jaw, unhurt, but stunned.

"Oh God," he croaked as he scrambled off the bed. Stumbling, he backed up against the wall and huddled there, crouching low to the floor. "Oh God, no," he muttered, drawing his knees up against his chest. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry..." he repeated, his head down, his body rocking back and forth slightly. Lois stood up swiftly and was beside him in an instant. She looked down at where he gripped his knees tightly. The knuckles on his right hand were a dark purple. She X-rayed his hand and watched as the broken bones quickly began to heal.

Lois reached out slowly to place her hand on his arm. "Don't touch me!" he yelled, burying his head against his knees. "Please, Lois, stay away from me," he whispered. "It's not safe."

"Honey, I'm fine," she soothed. "I'm not hurt, I promise. But you are. Please let me look at your hand." He didn't resist as she gingerly took his hand in both of hers and X-rayed it. The broken knuckles had healed completely and even the bruise began to fade. She breathed a sigh of relief that her invulnerable jaw hadn't done permanent damage to his hand. Tentatively, she reached out to run her fingers through his soft, dark hair.

"I'm fine," she whispered again. "Please, let's just go back to bed."

His body went rigid before he stood up and walked away from her. She bit back a sigh. Whatever she'd done, it was the exact wrong thing. Again. There was a soft knock at the door.

"Lois? Clark? Is everything all right?" her father-in-law asked through the door. Finding her robe, she covered up before opening the door a crack.

"Everything's fine," she assured a concerned-looking Jonathan. "I'm sorry we woke you."

Jonathan didn't seem mollified. "You're sure?"

"We'll be fine," Lois said. Jonathan nodded, somewhat grim-faced, before withdrawing. She closed the door and turned back toward her husband. At some point, he'd found his sleep shorts and pulled them on. He stood in the corner, staring out the window, his arms crossed defensively over his chest.

"What kind of man hits a woman?" he demanded. Clark turned to look at her, his expression stormy. "What kind of man hits the woman he loves?"

"Clark, you didn't do anything wrong," she said. He shot her a look that warned her not to patronize him. "You were completely asleep. You didn't do it on purpose."

"So what? If you hadn't been invulnerable you would have been just as dead, regardless of whether it was intentional," he said harshly.

“Please don’t do this to yourself,” she whispered tearfully. “I’m fine, I swear to you. You didn’t hurt me.”

Without bothering to respond, he grabbed his pillow off the bed and started for the door. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“To sleep in the den,” he replied, still not looking at her.

“I won’t sleep here without you,” she said stubbornly, but her voice and her bravado both failed her. “I can’t sleep without you,” she admitted, choking back a sob.

“I guess that means neither one of us will be sleeping tonight, then,” he said, his tone almost cold. The door closed with a soft ‘click’ behind him.

With tears streaming down her face, she spun into the suit and flew out the window. She couldn’t stay there; their fight hung thickly in the air, consuming all the oxygen, leaving her unable to breathe.

He dropped the pillow in the den but couldn’t even stand the thought of **of?** trying to sleep. When Lois wasn’t there, when she was out on a patrol and she wasn’t there to wake him or soothe him into a more peaceful sleep, the nightmares would progress – spiraling into the bleakest oblivion. Dressed in only his sleep shorts, he went out to the porch, but didn’t stop there. He walked out into the freshly-mowed field. The dew felt cool on his bare feet and the cut blades of Kentucky bluegrass stuck to his skin as he walked toward the stream on the edge of the Kent property.

Despondent, he sat down in the grass at the bank of the small stream and listened to the gurgle of the slow-moving water, swirling in the creek’s currents and eddies. Clark looked up at the brilliant canopy of stars overhead and sought out New Krypton for the first time since he’d returned home. There were so many things he hated about that planet. He hated what it had cost him, what it had taken away from him. But when he’d been there, he’d had a purpose, clear as day. He knew what he had to do and he knew what was at stake. Most of all, he knew what he wanted most—what he needed so desperately—depended on him doing his job. Now, he had to relearn how to be a good man—if that was even possible—and he was also supposed to figure out how to be a good husband and father when he wasn’t even sure how to be a good person.

On all fronts, he was failing miserably. A good father wouldn’t have yelled at his toddler son for no reason. And no decent man would ever lay a hand on a woman in anger. Even though he’d probably been more physically injured by the incident than she had, he mused wryly, it didn’t matter. He’d introduced violence into their marriage, something he’d never even been afraid of doing.

He’d become everything he hated.

Every day, the darkness seemed to take more and more of him, until it seemed like there was nothing good left. Tears welled up in his eyes and he savagely rubbed them away. He looked down at his now completely-healed hand. It probably should have hurt terribly at the time. Half asleep, he’d heard the crack of bones, but he hadn’t felt a thing in his hand because the pain of having his still

thundering heart torn from his chest had been overpowering. In his mind, he could still see the stunned look on her face, her slender hand slowly seeking out the spot where she’d been hit by the clenched and angry fist of her husband – the man who was supposed to protect and take care of her. Instead, she now had to worry about what sort of brutal, vicious animal was lying beside her in the bed they shared. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about what would have happened if she’d been vulnerable. The blow would have killed her; there was no doubt of it in his mind. He might not have been at full strength yet, but that was only a day or so off and he was already far more powerful than an ordinary man. The punch would have pulverized vulnerable flesh and bone. It didn’t matter that in his mind, it had been a feverish, dehydrated, hundred-and-forty-five-pound husk of a man throwing a pathetically weak punch at Nor before collapsing in a pitiful, boneless heap on the dirty basement floor of some anonymous prison. In reality, he’d hit his wife – the woman he loved more than anything in the universe, whose love had kept him alive when he was that weak and frightened prisoner.

Fresh tears flooded his eyes and slipped down his cheeks. How could he have done that to her? He fought the shuddering sob that built up inside him as he sat alone in the damp grass.

She landed so softly that he didn’t hear her. “Clark?” she whispered as she dropped to her knees beside him. He looked up, his vision still blurred by tears. Despite the mask, he could tell she’d been crying, too. Slowly, with shaking hands, she took the mask off. “Please don’t be mad at me for coming here,” she whispered.

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as he stroked her hair. He shouldn’t have done it. He couldn’t be trusted with her. But he couldn’t help himself, either. Clark closed his eyes and breathed deeply the smell of her skin, as warm and fragrant as the summer night’s breeze. “I was never mad at you,” he whispered. “You have to know that. I’m mad at myself, at what I did to you.”

“Oh, Clark,” she murmured against his neck, but he couldn’t let her forgive him. Not yet.

“I let that place turn me into a monster,” he confessed. “And if I were a decent man, I’d just walk away before I hurt you. But I’m weak. I don’t know how to live without you and I’m too afraid to try.”

She withdrew from his embrace to frame his face with her hands. For a long moment, she seemed to study him. “When I look at you, I see all of this pain and anger that I’ve never seen before. But more than any of that, I see you. I see a good man. I see the man I love. I see a man who’s so strong that he makes the people around him stronger. I see the man who loved me so much he gave me all the courage I needed. I love you, Clark Jerome Kent. And I love you, Superman. And I love you, Kal El. I love all of you. Everything you are. Everything you ever were. Everything you will ever be.” She closed the distance between them and kissed him. He gave in to her. He gave in to his

overwhelming need for her. He held her so tightly, not sure he'd ever be able to let her go.

It was wrong.

Not more than an hour ago, he'd hit her. If he'd been a sane man, he'd be half a world away by now. Or at least turning himself over to the police. How could she forgive him? How could she stand to be so close to him? He couldn't understand it. She sighed softly and he just about fell to pieces in her arms. He needed her so badly. Her hands buried themselves in his hair and he shivered at the pleasant sensation. Deftly, he detached her cape, his hands moving without the conscious consent of his mind. He spread the cape out on the soft grass before laying her down on it.

She looked up at him, her arms still looped around his neck. "We're going to be okay, aren't we?" she whispered softly.

God, he hoped so. "Yeah," he said, his voice hoarse. He brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "We're going to be okay."

Before dawn, she let him fly them back into the house. He hated to admit it, but it took all of his power and concentration to make the short trip. It didn't matter, though. He needed to do it. To prove to himself that he could still be the man who loved Lois Lane and would take care of her. She looked at him like she trusted him. Like she wasn't afraid of him. He needed that. More than anything in the world, he needed her faith in him.

He laid her down on the bed, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "God, I am so in love with you," he whispered. He lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms. They'd already made love twice that night. And just hours before, he'd sworn he'd never touch her again, afraid that he would do something terrible.

"I love you," she said softly as she leaned in to kiss him. He groaned as he rolled onto his back, feeling her slight weight settle on top of him. His hands wandered her smooth, warm skin, settling at the small of her back. Her body seemed so little, and he could almost span her waist with just his two hands. It felt so good to hold her. Just having her near was a balm to his wounded soul. He hoped that he could convey, with his hands and lips and body worshipping hers, just how much he loved and cherished her. She was everything to him.

Slowly, she opened her eyes to find him propped up on his elbow, watching her. He smiled slightly, seemingly embarrassed about having gotten caught, but she understood the impulse. Every night since he'd returned home, she'd stayed awake to do the same.

"Do you forgive me?" he asked earnestly, looking deeply in her eyes.

"I do," she replied.

Clark frowned slightly. "Why?" he asked. "I don't...I don't understand."

She reached up to touch his face. "If I'd thought you did it on purpose, I wouldn't have," she admitted. "But you didn't mean to hit me, Clark. You were still asleep. I know you. I know you would never, ever lay a hand on me."

"But I did," he insisted. "Even though I didn't mean to, I still hurt you."

"I think my jaw did more damage to your hand than the other way around," she replied.

"I saw the look on your face," he said. "I saw the way you reached up to touch the spot where I hit you."

"You caught me by surprise. I was startled, but I promise you, you didn't hurt me." As strange as it may have seemed, she needed to assure him that the normal rules didn't apply to them. But how would she have reacted, what would she have done if they were just two ordinary people and he'd hit her in the throes of a nightmare? A man Clark's size swinging the way he had could have done serious damage to an ordinary woman. She didn't want to think about it anymore. Her husband wasn't a violent man, even though he didn't seem so sure. God, what had happened to him on that damn planet? What had the Kryptonians done to her gentle, sweet, loving partner? She wrapped her arm around him, placing her head against his chest.

His words from earlier still rang in her ears. He'd called himself a monster. What had he meant by that? It wasn't just what was done to him that plagued him. It was what he had done. And she knew that that could be so much worse. A thousand terrible thoughts flashed through her mind – of terrible choices he might have had to make and the awful consequences of each of them. She bit her lip, trying to summon all of her courage. "You have to do something for me," Lois began. "You have to talk to someone. It doesn't matter if it isn't me. Please. There's something that's tearing you apart inside; you can't hide that. The longer you keep something that awful, that hurtful, locked up, the worse it's going to get."

"I don't know if I can," he whispered.

"Think about it, please?" she pleaded with him.

"Okay," he acquiesced. "I'll think about it."

Looking up at him, she could see the grim, almost stormy expression on his face. His body was stiff, almost frozen, as though her touching him was making him uncomfortable. "Tell me what to do," she said in a soft whisper. "I want to be what you need me to be, but I don't know what that is, and I feel like I keep getting it wrong."

His arm came around her, his posture easing only the tiniest fraction. "Sometimes, the dreams seem so vivid, it's hard to believe they're not real. Sometimes, it seems like I'm still there. When I wake up and you're not here, it throws me. I need you," he whispered. "So badly."

"I'm here," she said softly. "I'll always be here."

"I'm sorry," he replied, his voice thin. "God, I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," Lois soothed.

"Don't give up on me," he whispered. "Please."

"Never," she said, holding him just a little bit tighter.

“Everything okay, son?” his father asked, looking up from the tea kettle.

“I don’t know,” Clark confessed as he sat down at the kitchen table.

“So what happened?” Jonathan asked as he placed a cup of tea in front of Clark and sat down at the table. The older man took a sip from his mug as he patiently waited for his son to respond.

“It was just a dream,” he demurred. But he started to feel that annoying, nagging sensation he used to get as a kid when he lied to his parents. The holding back was making him anxious, uneasy. Lies of omission were still lies, after all. Clark bit back a sigh, weighing whether to tell his father the truth. He opened his mouth and started to speak before he could second guess himself. “I hit Lois,” he said flatly. Concern flitted across his father’s face, but the older man said nothing. “I was still asleep...”

“And you hit her, in the middle of the nightmare?” Jonathan asked gently.

“Yeah,” Clark admitted. He waited for condemnation from his father. For the reprobation he truly deserved.

“Clark, it was an accident. It wasn’t your fault.” Jonathan’s tone was sincere, but how could Clark interpret his words as anything other than meaningless and empty platitudes?

“Dad, she could have been killed!” he exclaimed in disbelief.

“She seemed perfectly all right to me,” Jonathan replied matter-of-factly.

Clark pushed his chair back from the table and stood up, too anxious to remain in his seat. “That’s not the point,” he said. “If she wasn’t invulnerable...”

“But she is. That makes everything different.”

Clark stood behind the chair and gripped its wooden back tightly with both hands. “No it doesn’t. I hit my wife,” he bit the words out angrily. He heard the wood groan under his fingers and eased his grip a fraction. “I’m no better than the lowlife scumbags I used to haul off to the police.”

“Did you mean to hit her?” his father asked. Clark knew exactly where he was going with this.

“No, but...”

“Did you do it because you were mad at her? Did you do it to try to control her?”

“Of course not, Dad,” he replied, exasperated.

“Then you’re nothing like those other men. You were asleep, son. I’m guessing you were having a pretty bad nightmare and you reacted to it.”

“That doesn’t excuse what I did,” Clark insisted.

“It does,” his father said, just as stubbornly. “You’re not a violent man, or a controlling man. You don’t have a mean streak or a bad temper. You did something, accidentally and unintentionally, in your sleep. No one was hurt and Lois isn’t in any danger from you.”

Letting his chin fall until it touched his chest, Clark looked downward, avoiding the understanding and patient

look on the older man’s face. “I just can’t stop thinking about what could have happened. I could have killed her,” he choked out, barely fighting off a sob. “I can see it in my mind, this hideous image that won’t go away. It just keeps replaying over and over, like I’m stuck in this loop in my own head and I can’t get out of it. I can’t make it stop. Dad, what’s happening to me?” He whispered the question, the admission of helplessness. Clark found himself being hugged tightly by his father. He wanted so desperately to be a little boy again, when his dad’s powerful arms and strong embrace made him feel like nothing could ever harm him, no matter how frightening the world seemed. No matter how much Clark’s strange and sometimes awful abilities managed to terrify him.

Now, his father could offer love and support, but Clark knew the man who’d taught him so much, who’d showed Clark what it meant to be a good man, could not lead him out of the darkness. He couldn’t fight off Clark’s demons. “We are all here for you,” Jonathan said. “And we always will be. But maybe, we can’t offer you everything you need. Maybe you should talk to someone who’ll understand better than we can.”

Clark’s body went tense as he stepped back. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Lois said the same thing.”

“Well, you married a pretty smart girl,” Jonathan replied.

“Dad, this isn’t a joke,” Clark said gravely.

“Of course it isn’t,” Jonathan agreed. “But Lois isn’t offering you some thoughtless advice. I have watched that young woman wrestle with troubles that would have beaten any ordinary person. That certainly would have been too much for me. And I know how hard it was for her to realize that sometimes being strong means knowing when you can’t do something on your own. It took a lot of really awful things before she finally went to a therapist, but it helped. It helped in a way Martha and I couldn’t. She faced the things that scared her the most and the memories she wanted to forget the most. She became a better reporter, a better hero, and a better mother for it. That strength was always inside her. She just needed some help finding it.”

“I don’t know, Dad,” Clark replied wearily. He knew exactly what it was that scared him about talking to someone else – that when the floodgates opened up, he wouldn’t be able to close them again. That he’d get swept up by his anger, his helplessness, his frustrations, regrets, and his rage. That the good he could still cling to would get washed away and only the bitterness and fear would remain. But how could those concerns outweigh what he felt at that moment? How could they compare to the desperate and penetrating fear that if something didn’t change, he could seriously hurt someone he loved?

He was so engrossed in it he didn’t notice her enter the room, superhearing notwithstanding. “What do you think?” she asked from just inside the doorway to the den.

He looked up from the book and smiled faintly. “It’s amazing,” he said. “Everything you saw, everything you must have gone through. I wish I could have been here for you.” There was a sadness in his eyes as he spoke, a regret she knew he felt deeply.

She sat down beside him on the couch and took his hand. “Just like I wish I could have been there for you, on New Krypton. I haven’t exactly been fair,” she started with trepidation. “I keep pestering you to talk to someone and I haven’t told you the whole of what happened in Kinwara. The things that I couldn’t write about. I never told you what sent me running to Dr. Friskin.”

“It was right after that doctor died, wasn’t it?” he asked.

She hadn’t told him that, but he managed to glean it from the timing of her columns and the few things she’d said about therapy. “I see those investigating skills aren’t rusty,” she said with a ghost of a smile. “It was right after Ingrid died. I blamed myself. She was killed after I left her to rescue Dr. Arnault. She didn’t just die. She suffered. And I hadn’t been able to stop it. I caught her killers and I almost murdered them, Clark.” Lois watched as he tried not to wince. “I wanted to. So badly. And it wasn’t the first time. There was something ugly and dark inside of me and I couldn’t live with it anymore.” Lois held his gaze as she spoke, trying to be brave enough not to turn away. “I was so afraid of what I was becoming, I couldn’t even hold our son. So I finally got help. It was hard and it was painful to admit that I couldn’t handle things on my own. But I had to do it, because Jon needed me to be there for him. And because I made a promise to you to take care of this world while you were gone. I wasn’t going to break that promise. Even if it meant having to get someone else’s help to keep it.”

He shook his head. “And what if that isn’t how it works for me? I spent years not talking about this stuff. I don’t see how talking about it now will make any difference.”

He was suddenly startled by the sound of one of the trucks coming up the long drive. It had to be his mother. The sound of the truck itself wasn’t surprising, it was all the attendant noise – camera shutters, unfamiliar voices, running footsteps. His jaw was grimly set as he crossed the room and headed out toward the porch. He made his way down the steps just as his mother pulled the truck up to the house. The reporters that had been swarming the pick up quickly turned their attention on him. Still frowning, he took the grocery bags from the truck, throwing a few mumbled ‘no comments’ over his shoulder. He held his free hand up to block the camera lenses.

“I’m not giving any interviews and you’re trespassing on private property,” he grumbled.

“Come on, Kent, give us something,” one of the reporters yelled.

“You’re the most famous man in the world, everyone wants to hear your story!”

He said nothing as he followed his mother into the farmhouse. Barely stopping to put down the shopping bags, he picked up the phone and plugged it back in. They’d left

the phone off the hook all day, knowing the press would be hounding him otherwise. Clark dialed the sheriff’s office. “Rachel, I thought there was supposed to be an officer here keeping people off the property,” he bit out harshly. “Yeah, well there are reporters swarming the farmhouse.”

“Clark, it’s okay,” his mother said.

Clark hung up the phone. “No, it isn’t,” he replied. “I made it perfectly clear that I’m not giving any interviews and they’re here like...a plague of locusts or something. And don’t start with the whole ‘you were a reporter once, too,’ thing. It’s not the same.”

“I know it isn’t,” she replied.

He ran his hand through his hair. “I just don’t know how things are supposed to go back to normal when I feel like I’m living in a fishbowl,” he said in frustration.

“It’ll pass,” Martha assured him. “Just give it time.”

“Patience isn’t really one of my virtues anymore,” he said humorlessly.

In the background, his wife had started putting the groceries away. “Lois, just leave them, I’ll get them in a minute,” he said, more sharply than he’d intended.

“The ice cream will melt,” she said flatly. It struck him that he’d run out on what should have been an important conversation with his wife in order to yell at some journalists. He closed his eyes, trying to fight off a headache. It wasn’t working.

Nothing these days was.

Lois lay awake, unable to sleep. It didn’t seem to matter what she did; Clark still refused to speak to her or anyone else about what was troubling him. She could tell he was at war with himself. As though he hadn’t been fighting long enough already, she thought darkly. Every day, there was new reason to hope – glimmers of the old Clark. But every day, there was anger and hostility and shattered nerves.

Clark had drifted to sleep with a large arm draped over her lean waist. He’d pulled her close to him, instinctively, almost possessively – a sentiment that might have caused Lois Lane to bristle ten years ago. But she understood that with Clark, it wasn’t an issue of power and control, it was about belonging. To him, it was just as important that he belonged to her. They fit together. Maybe it was because that was the way it was supposed to be, preplanned and foreordained. Or maybe it was just because they were two people who’d grown to love and understand one another in a way that no one else did.

She studied him intently as he lay in silent repose, a look of tranquility on his face. The corners of his mouth were turned upward in the faintest hint of a smile and she hoped that his dreams would stay pleasant, even though they often didn’t. She’d come to understand it as a simple fact that he slept better after they made love. And she was aware, on some level, of the pathology of their changing relationship. It wasn’t enough. The moments of peace he could find were nothing more than a temporary respite and certainly not time enough to begin to heal. Yet it seemed she could offer him no more. He wouldn’t talk to her, he

wouldn't tell her what had happened, and he never, ever told her about the dreams that caused him to wake with a start, his heart thundering so loudly she could hear nothing else.

Perhaps she should have pushed a little harder. Maybe if she were more insistent, he'd open up. But what he craved was that sense of calm, of contentment, not a chance to reopen old wounds. So he pretended, with single-minded zeal, that his troubles would go away if he just ignored them long enough. She was an accomplice, she knew, and just as guilty in his self-delusion as he. Yet she could deny him nothing, especially not anything that could give him even a few precious moments of happiness. She knew it must have been a fact entirely peculiar to Clark, that while he made love in order to push his troubles out of his mind, he was still focused entirely on her. He knew exactly how to make her pulse race and her breath catch in her throat. He knew every sensitive spot and could destroy all semblance of coherent thought in her with a single touch or a single kiss. In the depths of his despair, he seemed to want nothing more than to show her how much he loved and needed her.

Nonetheless, she should have confronted the issue. When he reached for her in the middle of the night, she should have insisted that they talk. Lois knew that she wouldn't have ever needed to ask him to stop. If she simply didn't respond to his gentle ministrations, he would have instantly asked her what was wrong. So the prudent thing to do would have been to force herself to change the way her body responded to him; the ability to control her heart rate and breathing was a handy side effect of the powers. But she hadn't yet found that sort of resolve. She'd spent so long wanting nothing more than to be with him again. When he held her, she still felt like she never wanted him to let her go again, so how could she be the one to push him away? It was a character flaw and she knew it, but if she loved him just a little too fiercely, and wanted him just a little too badly, was that really the worst thing in the world? Weren't there worse things you could say about someone than 'she adores her husband'?

Lois knew, deep down, that that wasn't the question. It wasn't about how much she loved Clark, it was about whether she had the courage to help him see the problem, and to show him that he didn't have to face it alone.

"Lois, can you give me a hand with this?" Jonathan called from the barn. He spoke barely above a conversational tone, but Lois heard him easily from the den. Clark and Jon had headed out almost an hour earlier to catch bugs or frogs or turtles from the pond. She could have sworn that her little boy was more at home in the mud than anywhere else. Despite all the difficulties they were going through, it made her so happy to see Clark and Jon connecting and sharing something that was uniquely theirs. Closing her laptop, she got up to help her father-in-law.

"What's up?" she asked as she pushed open the barn door. She stopped suddenly as she saw the sleek, oblong capsule that had brought Clark back to her.

"Given all the reporters who've been snooping around here, I wanted to make sure we hid this properly," Jonathan explained.

She walked around the small ship, letting her fingers brush over the burnished metal surface. The capsule suddenly opened. Lois stepped back, regarding the ship curiously. She peered inside at the cramped space where her husband had slept through his months-long journey. A compartment near the nose of the craft caught her attention. Lois looked at her father-in-law, who merely shrugged, as if to suggest she open it. She gingerly opened the compartment to find Clark's small overnight bag and an unfamiliar metal box. She removed the box and opened it. Inside were several globes, smaller than the one Clark had discovered years ago containing the messages from his birth parents. A brief flash of disappointment surged through her when she touched the surface of one of the globes and nothing happened. These were Clark's, she reminded herself. They were probably deeply personal. It would be up to him to decide whether or not to share with her what was on them.

"I'm sure Clark will want these," she said as she closed the lid to the box, suddenly wondering why he'd left them in the capsule for so long. Perhaps he'd forgotten about them. Reluctantly, she placed the box and the overnight bag down near the door to the barn.

"Let's get this capsule buried," Jonathan suggested. Lois nodded. With another quick glance at the box that undoubtedly held countless secrets and perhaps some much needed insights into what Clark had gone through, she lifted the small space ship easily and carried it around to the back of the barn. She buried it deep enough to keep nosy reporters or curious neighbors or whatever horrible entity that would eventually rise up to replace Bureau 39 from ever finding it. It felt strange to cover up and hide this strange artifact that had kept Clark safe, guiding him home across the galaxies.

Wiping the dust from her hands on her jeans, she regarded her handiwork for a moment, x-raying the ground to make sure the capsule was still there. "Come on, I think Martha left some lemonade for us in the fridge." Her father-in-law's voice interrupted her ruminations. Lois smiled faintly and followed him to the barn to retrieve Clark's belongings before heading back to the house.

Upstairs, she took more care than was necessary to place the metal box on the dresser. She stared at it for a long moment, tempted once again to open it. It didn't matter how many of her questions would have been answered by the contents of the box, she told herself, she couldn't open it. She sat down on the bed, still staring at the box, now across the room.

Lois nearly leapt out of her skin when the bedroom door opened. "You startled me," she said with a nervous smile.

"Everything all right?" Clark asked, seemingly puzzled.

"Yeah," she replied. "Jonathan and I, um, buried the capsule." She nodded toward the box on the dresser. "I

found the box inside. I figured it was something you would want.”

He was oddly silent for a long moment. “Thanks,” he mumbled absently. He showed no interest in the box, barely acknowledging it was there. “Jon and Dad are downstairs.” He gestured toward the door.

Lois nodded. “Let’s join them.”

After Jon had gone to bed, he sat in his old tree house for hours, listening to the cicadas. It had been days since the press conference. Since he’d hit Lois. He’d put off actually doing something about it. But he didn’t know how much longer he could keep going like this. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep assuring his parents or his wife that he was strongly considering going to speak to someone.

He closed his eyes and just listened, until he could hear the heartbeats of sleeping hummingbirds, and the sounds of water striders walking on the pond. When he was a kid, it had been one of his favorite sounds in the world because no one else was able to hear it. It was a soft, even ‘thump,’ as the tiny appendages of the insects made contact with the water, never breaking the surface tension. He could even hear the rustle of the microscopic hairs on their legs as they moved across the water. Like the water striders, he could hear the worms as they burrowed in the earth, and could feel the charged ion particles in the air before a lightning strike. He could smell the rain when it was still miles and miles away. The world worked in ways that only he could experience and that had been a source of comfort to him for years when he was younger. But now, those sensations brought him no happiness. Instead of being able to connect to the world he once knew, all he could do was replay in his head, over and over, the way his homecoming should have gone. He should have crossed the fields in long, purposeful strides toward the farmhouse, healthy, happy, and strong. He should have been able to sweep his wife up in his arms, spinning her around easily as he held her close. He should have been there for her when their first child was born. He should have been the involved and anxious dad-to-be of happy stereotypes.

But nothing was the way it was supposed to be.

It kept coming back to the same thing. He’d hit his wife. The violence of New Krypton had followed him home. The picture-perfect return that he’d been thinking of for four years—it didn’t happen that way. And all the relief and happiness that he and his family were supposed to feel—why was there so much hurt and confusion and anger?

Why was it so damn hard to have the only thing that he’d wanted for four years?

He’d made his son cry. Repeatedly. He’d snapped at his mother. He’d ignored his father’s advice. He’d alienated his friends. And the way he’d treated Lois...

He had no interest in reliving what had happened on that damned, desolate rock. But if it was what he needed to do in order to protect his family, how could he not? Clark sighed, his head throbbing. He shouldn’t have felt headaches any longer. Without a thought, he shot up into

the night’s sky, feeling the wind against his skin. Floating high above the ground, he tried to think about something, anything other than how badly he’d failed. It was almost surprising to him how natural flying felt. He’d expected it would have taken longer to readjust, but even though his powers had only fully returned a few days before, it was almost as if he’d never lost them.

His thoughts started to drift back toward all the “what ifs” that had plagued him almost since the moment he returned. But worrying over the past wasn’t going to change anything. It wasn’t going to get him back the four years with his family that he’d lost. It wasn’t going to help him figure how to put his life back together. He drifted upward, not a part of the Earth. Not a part of the stars...

After a long while, he flew into his bedroom window to find Lois already in bed. She had probably been sleeping, but she was awake by the time he landed. “Hey,” she said softly.

“I’m going to call Dr. Friskin tomorrow,” he said. He watched as emotions seemed to war within her. Relief finally seemed to win.

She nodded wordlessly and stretched out her hand to him. He crossed the room and took her hand in his. As he stretched out beside her, he told himself he was doing the right thing. He couldn’t keep living like this. And he couldn’t live without his wife and family. Something had to give. Something had to change.

“I love you,” she whispered as she placed her head on his shoulder.

He dropped a kiss on the crown of her hair and pulled her closer. “I love you, too,” he replied.

“Dr. Friskin?” he asked as he paced nervously in his parents’ den.

“Yes?” He vaguely recognized the good doctor’s voice, though they hadn’t spoken in years. He’d called her direct number, something she’d given to Ultrawoman in order to protect the superhero’s privacy.

“It’s Superman,” he said, anxiously waiting for her response. There was a long pause before she responded.

“It’s good to hear from you, Superman,” she said. “I hadn’t realized that you’d returned.”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. Why was this so difficult? “Well, the, uh, war ended and I wanted to get back as quickly as I could...”

“Of course,” she replied reassuringly. “What can I do for you?”

“I, uh, understand you have some expertise in dealing with war experiences...” he trailed off, trying to find words to finish the thought.

“I can rearrange my schedule to meet whenever is convenient for you, Superman,” Dr. Friskin responded.

His heart pounded a little more rapidly, his mouth suddenly dry. Just the thought of actually having to speak to the therapist was driving his anxiety level to dizzying heights. “Tomorrow?” he managed. “Is tomorrow okay?”

"Of course," she replied. "I imagine after hours would be preferable. Does seven work for you?"

"It does," he said, waiting until he could hang up the phone to exhale a shaky breath. 'Most powerful being in the universe? Yeah right,' he thought.

He had less than half an hour before he was supposed to be at Dr. Friskin's office. It would take him only a minute to get there, though he'd have to avoid the crowded flight paths and well-watched skies over Metropolis if he wanted to keep Superman's return quiet for now. He sat on the bed, his old costume in his hands. It didn't seem right. It didn't seem right to even hold this anymore. He wasn't Superman. He couldn't even remember what it meant to be Superman. Putting the costume on would have made him an even bigger fraud. It wasn't like he had much of a choice, though. It was Superman, not Clark Kent, who had an appointment with Dr. Friskin.

God, how was he going to do this? How was he going to just spill his guts, rattling off all the things that were haunting him like they were items on a grocery shopping list?

And how the hell was he going to keep Superman and Clark Kent separate?

How was he going to explain all the things going horribly awry in his personal life when Superman didn't have a personal life? He was getting another headache. The Man of Steel wasn't supposed to suffer from migraines.

There was a knock at the door. He turned around as his wife entered the room. "You okay?" she asked.

"You know what it's like when you really don't want to do something?" he asked, almost rhetorically.

"Yeah," she said softly.

"I don't even know what I'm going to say to her," he continued.

"Just take it one session at a time," Lois replied. "You don't have to try to fix everything today."

He laughed humorlessly as he stood up. "Maybe this isn't the best idea..."

"Clark, please," she begged him, placing her hands on his.

His heart broke at the plaintive tone in her voice and the haunted look in her eyes. God, he was such a coward. Why, given all he'd put her through, was he thinking of backing out now? He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It's just the nerves talking. I should get going." He changed quickly, putting on the suit, but putting on yet another disguise on top of it. Only Dr. Friskin was supposed to know that Superman was back, after all. He pressed down on the fake goatee, pulled on a baseball cap, and dark sunglasses. "I'll be back in a while."

Lois took his hand again and squeezed it gently. "I love you," she said simply.

"I love you," he replied.

With no small degree of trepidation, he lifted off the ground and flew out the window, heading back to Metropolis for the first time in more than four years. He had

to fly higher than usual to avoid being spotted, but there was no mistaking the city as he approached it. Even at sixty thousand feet, Metropolis made its mark. The island of New Troy's countless skyscrapers jutted out, creating a tableau that had been burned into his memory long ago. He dropped into the alley behind the tree-lined street where Dr.

Friskin's office was. He kept his head down, hoping the disguise would work well enough to keep anyone from noticing him. Clark made his way to her office, waiting impatiently for the elevator in the mostly empty building. He ducked into the men's room down the hall from her office. Checking to make sure the floor was deserted, he spun into the suit, trying to ignore the feeling of nostalgia the familiar action brought. His heart pounding in his chest, he knocked on the door to Dr. Friskin's office.

"Superman," Dr. Friskin greeted him warmly. Clark entered her office, uncrossing his arms as he did in order to shake her outstretched hand. He'd unconsciously gone into defensive Superman posture, but was forced to abandon it immediately. You weren't supposed to be aloof and distant in a shrink's office, were you? "Have a seat," Dr. Friskin said as she gestured toward the almost clichéd psychiatrist's leather couch.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me," Clark said, keeping his Superman tone.

"My pleasure," Dr. Friskin said with a smile as she pulled out a notepad and pen. "It's good to see you back."

"It's good to be back," he replied earnestly, stretching out on the couch.

"Superman is back on Earth, but I'm guessing all is not yet right with the world?"

He sighed. "Not exactly."

"Trouble readjusting?"

"Something like that."

"Tell me what you'd like us to work on."

"I don't sleep well," he said flatly.

"Are you having nightmares?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "Mostly reliving stuff that happened."

"Anything else? Changes in mood?"

He tried not to snort. "Yeah. I get angry a lot easier than I used to."

"What else?"

"I don't know," he said, fitfully playing with the edges of his cape.

"Superman, your hand is shaking." He could hear the concern in her voice.

"It's been like that for a few years," he said, clenching his hands into fists to make the trembling stop. "It comes and goes."

"I think we have enough to get started. Why don't we begin with the circumstances of your departure? It seemed rather sudden."

"It was," Clark admitted. "I found out about the whole thing just a few days before I had to go."

"So I take it that it was a surprise."

"More like a shock. For a long time, I thought I was the only survivor of Krypton. Then one day, these people showed up, claiming to be Kryptonians, in need of my help." He could hear the sound of Dr. Friskin's pen scratching on the notepad.

"People are often asking you for help. You're someone people are used to depending on."

"True, but it's usually not a bunch of people from a long-dead planet asking me to be their leader and help them avert a civil war."

"And how did this make you feel?"

Clark smiled wryly at the good doctor's use of the line that psychiatrists had made famous. "To be honest, confused, surprised, and...a little scared."

"Entirely reasonable," Dr. Friskin confirmed. "I imagine that having to depart in such a hurry forced you to leave a great many things in your life unsettled."

He recognized the opportunity Dr. Friskin was creating for him to open up. Unsurprisingly, he found himself reluctant to take it. "Yeah," he admitted. "I mean, yes. I wasn't expecting to just drop everything one day and run off and possibly never return."

"So did you believe that you weren't going to return to Earth?" There was more scratching as Dr. Friskin continued to take notes.

He sighed again. "I knew that I was going to do everything I could to come back. This is my home. But I also knew that on New Krypton, I wouldn't have any powers. I'd be as vulnerable as any human being and that world was in the middle of a civil war. There was more than a passing possibility that I wasn't going to come back."

"I see." He could hear the frown in Dr. Friskin's voice. "So you were forced to confront your own mortality as well as leave behind the place you thought of as home and a job that you've told me before that you enjoy very much. Does that sum it up?"

He turned his gaze away from the fascinating pattern of speckles in the ceiling tiles to look at Dr. Friskin. She continued looking down at her notepad, deep in thought. So much for hoping her expression would give him a clue as to what she was expecting him to say. Why wasn't telepathy one of his powers? "Well..." he began, letting his voice trail off.

"What about people?" she asked.

"People?" he repeated.

"Yes, the people in your life that you had to leave behind."

"Oh." He bit back yet another sigh. He realized he was fidgeting with the edges of his cape and immediately dropped it. He folded his hands over his stomach, willing the nervous ticks to go away.

"This isn't something you're comfortable talking about, is it?"

"No," he admitted reluctantly.

"Why is that?"

He struggled to formulate a response in his head, but everything he thought of sounded stupid. "I don't talk about

the people I care about," he said simply. "It's too dangerous. If the criminal element knew the people I was closest to, they'd try to use them to get to me."

"Well, Superman, anything you say in here, stays in here. Everything you tell me is in the strictest confidence. Now you said there are people whom you care for. Would you care to tell me a little about them?"

He looked up at the ceiling again, studiously avoiding eye contact. "No," he admitted. "Not now, anyway," he amended.

"All right," she replied. He was almost stunned by the fact that she let the issue drop.

She started to write again and he resisted the temptation to X-ray the pad to figure out what she was writing. She scratched away at the notepad for what seemed like an eternity. "Correct me if I'm mistaken, but I believe you haven't returned to duty, is that right?" she asked after a long while.

"That's right."

After yet another long pause, she continued. "If it is at all possible, I'd like you to hold off on going back to work for the time being."

Her statement was hardly surprising. Even he knew he was in no condition to go back to being Superman. But it still stung to hear her say it out loud. "All right," he replied, trying not to sound too dejected. "It seems like Ultrawoman has everything under control."

"Good. And I'd like us to speak no less than twice a week, at least at the outset."

"Okay," he heard himself agreeing, though he wasn't sure he could handle the idea of two or more sessions a week on the shrink's couch.

Dr. Friskin finally stopped writing and looked up at him. "We have a lot of ground to cover, but I think it is important for you to know that you're not the first person who has had difficulty adjusting to regular life after a long exposure to traumatic events. Members of my profession love labeling things. They take natural, ordinary, human responses and give them names like post traumatic stress disorder because the shorthand is a useful way of thinking of a grouping of symptoms. Unfortunately, it makes patients think that there is something 'wrong' with them, that their responses aren't normal.

"If you're having difficulty adjusting back to your own life, it's not because there's something wrong with you, Superman. In fact, if you weren't having difficulty, that would be more troubling. Our brains have developed ways of responding to trauma; unfortunately, these responses aren't entirely healthy in the long run. They're absolutely normal, but they aren't good coping strategies. It's just like what happens when the body goes into shock – it's a temporary coping mechanism that can have serious negative consequences if it is not treated. Unfortunately, our brains are no better than our bodies at dealing with overwhelming trauma. Just like we have to treat shock, we have to treat the psychological shock and come up with better long term strategies for dealing with difficult or

painful events. Next time, I want to start talking about what happened up there so we'll have a better idea of how you can deal with those events."

He tried to let the words sink in. Her reaction hadn't been all that different from Tao Scion's. His physician and old friend had often told him that the brain's mechanisms for surviving trauma, the very things that kept you alive, weren't something you wanted turned on the rest of the time. When the trauma was over, those mechanisms were highly destructive. But sadly, there didn't seem to be any sort of magic switch to turn him back into "regular" Clark. He sighed as he stood up, trying to project the Superman persona even though he felt decidedly un-heroic. He didn't know what he was expecting, perhaps that some sort of burden would have been lifted. But all he felt was...numb.

"Thank you, Dr. Friskin," he said.

"Is the same time on Thursday all right?" she asked.

Clark nodded curtly before gesturing toward the fire escape. "Would you mind if I used the window?"

"Not at all," she replied. "I'll see you Thursday."

He nodded again in silent acquiescence before darting out the window. Clark started for Kansas but abruptly changed course. He'd been back for two weeks and had barely ever left the farm. Now that he could fly again, why shouldn't he see some of the things that he'd missed all these years? This world had once been his to explore, after all. He turned sharply southward, heading toward the Amazon, to a place so warm, wet, and heavy with life that it was the antithesis of New Krypton.

Scanning the house, he was surprised to find his bedroom empty. Perhaps she was on a patrol. He looked more closely and found her in the den, curled up in the corner of the couch with a book. He landed on the back porch, shrouded in darkness. Opening the door quietly so as not to wake his sleeping parents or his son, he made his way to the one lit room in the farmhouse.

He knew that she must have heard him approach, but she didn't look up from her book until he spoke. "Hey," he said softly.

She closed the book and looked at him, her expression inscrutable. "Hey," she replied, just as quietly. "How'd it go?"

"Okay, I guess," he replied.

She looked at her watch, seemingly puzzled. "Were you there this whole time?"

"No," he admitted. "I just needed some space, to think."

Lois nodded in understanding. He didn't know why he'd expected her to push more on the issue. To demand to know where he'd been. Perhaps it was because for the past four years, he'd constantly had to provide an accounting of where he was and with whom and when to the seemingly hundreds of people who always needed to know even the tiniest details of his life.

"I'm going to head to bed," he said.

"I'll be there after I finish my patrol," she responded.

He started for the doorway once more. "I know it's hard," she said, causing him to pause. "The first few times I talked to Dr. Friskin, I wasn't sure it helped much. But it got better."

He nodded and walked out the door.

Lois spun into the suit as she flew high over the farm. He'd been gone for hours, but she knew that he would want space. She certainly had when she first started speaking to Dr. Friskin. The last thing she would have wanted after those emotionally draining sessions was to re-rehash all the things she'd had to talk about. But he'd almost seemed like he'd expected her to be mad at him.

She found herself guessing a lot more these days as she tried to figure out his moods. But that shouldn't have surprised her. The man she was living with—the one who'd come back to her—was so different from the man she'd said goodbye to four years earlier. He was still Clark Kent. But in some ways, he'd become like a stranger to her. He didn't have her husband's patience. Or his sense of humor. He was closed off when the man she'd married trusted her completely.

Lois knew she couldn't expect everything to go back to being the way it was when he left. Time hadn't, in fact, stood still while he was away, even though it should have. She knew that he wasn't the only one who was different. The last four years had had a profound impact on her, too. But there they both were, expecting the other to behave just as they would have four years ago. Neither one seemed to understand the ways in which the other had changed. And she knew it would take time.

But knowing it would take time didn't make her any less impatient. She wanted that easy sense of partnership back. She wanted the marriage they'd hoped for.

Lois headed toward the bright lights of Metropolis in the distance. She was almost hoping to bust up some crimes tonight. Getting some of the ne'er-do-wells off the streets of her beloved city would make her feel better.

"All right, Superman, why don't we start with your experiences on New Krypton?"

"Just jumping straight in, huh?" Clark asked with a hint of bemusement in his voice. He sat on the leather couch, neatly gathering his cape as he leaned back.

"Well, I was never one for beating around the proverbial bush." Dr. Friskin uncapped her pen and set it to that familiar pad of paper.

"Where should I start?"

"Well, if there are any particular events that stood out in your mind as being more significant or traumatic than others..."

"Why don't we leave those until a little later?" he asked uneasily.

"That's fine, we can come back to them."

"How about I start at the beginning?" he offered.

"That seems as good a place as any," she replied warmly.

He began with an explanation of New Krypton's unusual political arrangements and how and why he'd found himself at the head of that arrangement. "It wasn't something I was prepared to do. I've never wanted to...rule... over people," he concluded.

"Hmm..." Dr. Friskin frowned, seemingly deep in thought. "You've never considered that with your strength, you could affect political change in the world?"

"No," Clark replied emphatically.

"Why is that? Why is Superman so non-partisan, so apolitical?"

"I can't let myself seem like...I'm taking sides. There's plenty for me to do without getting into that sort of mess. Besides, I can't do my job effectively if people don't trust me."

"Trust is very important to you, isn't it?"

"It's everything. If people don't trust me to do the right thing, to make the right decisions, I'm nothing more than a monster. These powers mean I have to work that much harder to earn people's trust. If they're afraid of me, what good am I?"

"So your experience on New Krypton was doubly frustrating, being without your powers and being asked to engage in an inherently divisive undertaking?"

"Right. Most of the time, I felt like I was in over my head."

"But not all the time?" she asked, turning the question around on him.

"No. There were a couple of times when it felt like the experiences I'd gained here were actually useful. There was an evacuation of a settlement that had been attacked. It was a lot like any other humanitarian disaster I'd faced, so I just tried to do what I would have done in other circumstances. I wasn't able to deal with it as effectively as I could have with my powers, though."

"How important are your powers? Do they define you?"

Clark sighed. "No. I mean, I'm not just the powers, but they are a big part of who I am. Being without them made me feel like I was missing part of who I was. It's like, if I were an artist, and I'd lost my sight, I wouldn't be able to do things that used to be a big part of who I was. Or if I were a musician or a carpenter and I'd lost the ability to use my hands. My powers are the same way. There's more to me than the powers, but without them...I wasn't the same."

"Let's stop for now," Dr. Friskin said. "But I'd like to see you back here soon."

"All right," he agreed as he sat up. "Monday night?"

"That will be fine."

"Thank you, Dr. Friskin. For taking the time to help me. I know you must be busy."

"It's my pleasure, Superman," she assured him. "I'll see you on Monday night."

The metal box had been left untouched since the day she brought it in from the capsule. It just sat there, practically taunting her. Secretly whispering, *I know what you want to know. All you have to do is open me.* Lois Lane hated

secrets. She hated thinking that something big, something monumental was being kept from her. It was why she was so good at being an investigative reporter. Of course, that had been ages ago. She didn't go undercover anymore. She didn't do stakeouts or sting operations. She hadn't picked a lock in years. Though Ultrawoman had kicked down more than a few doors.

She ran her fingers lightly over the box's lid. God, how she wanted to open it. She wanted to figure out how to activate those little globes. She couldn't know for certain what sort of information would be on them, but she knew it would help her understand what Clark was going through better. She sighed, remembering how Clark had accused her of spying on him when he was with Jon to make sure he wasn't going to have a meltdown. The trust in their relationship was somehow so fragile now. She wasn't going to break it.

She was about to leave the room when the window was opened from the other side. Clark stepped into the room, dressed as Superman. Something about the sight of him in the suit still took her breath away. He was still the world's purest symbol of hope. He was, in every conceivable way, her hero.

"Hey," he said quietly, his tone so unlike the one Superman used.

"Hi," she replied. "Everything go okay?"

"I guess." His tone was non-committal. He drew in a deep breath. "I don't think this is going to work," he said flatly.

She looked at him, puzzled. Lois couldn't read the expression on his face and it frustrated her. She used to know her husband so well. "I can't tell Dr. Friskin what's wrong unless I tell her about us."

It made sense. Granted, the way he worded it made it sound to her like what was wrong was them. "So tell her," she replied.

"Tell her what, our secret?" he asked skeptically.

"You don't have to tell her everything," she replied.

"If I tell her about my invulnerable wife, she'll know it's you and from there...she's smart enough, she'll probably put it all together."

"I know." Lois knew it was certainly possible, but Dr. Friskin already had more than enough information to destroy Ultrawoman, if that was what she intended to do. Of course, nothing the good doctor had ever done even hinted at the possibility that she would betray Ultrawoman's confidence. If running this risk was what it took for Clark to get the help he needed, so be it.

"I don't want to do this," he confessed. She walked across the room and pulled him into her arms.

"I know, sweetheart," she whispered.

"I just wish there were another way," he murmured as he held her tightly. Lois closed her eyes and hugged him just a little tighter.

<<...I know there's a lot going on in your life right now, but the book's official release date is next week...>>

Lois frowned as she held the phone against her ear. She didn't really want to speak to her editor, but she could only avoid the other woman's calls for so long before it would be considered a breach of her contract. "Can't we push it back?" she asked, exasperated.

<<Are you kidding? The media buzz around you will probably double the first week's sales.>>

Lois scowled severely even though the other woman obviously couldn't see her expression. "Are you honestly telling me to use my husband's ordeal to sell a few more books?"

<<No, of course not.>> Joan seemed to be backtracking from her initial position, which didn't surprise Lois in the slightest. <<You don't have to say a word about Clark, you don't need to answer any questions about him.>>

"That's condition number one for any interviews or panels or talk shows or whatever. My family is absolutely off limits," Lois replied emphatically.

She could hear her editor sigh on the other end of the line. But Joan really had no choice but to agree. <<We'll make that clear.>> Lois didn't much care if she got a reputation as a prima donna guest on the morning talk show circuit. She had an obligation to promote the book. She did not have an obligation to provide fodder for the tabloids.

"I'd still prefer to push the release back a few weeks..."

<<Lois, I wish we could, but the books have already shipped. Sellers are going to go nuts if we make them sit on the inventory any longer.>>

She looked up as Clark walked into the kitchen and sat down beside her at the table. Lois put her hand over the receiver. "I'm trying to see if they'll push back the book release," she told him.

He gave her a puzzled look. "You don't have to do that on my account," he said.

"Are you sure? It's hectic enough around here without one of us actively going out and looking for other reporters."

"It'll be fine," he replied. "Besides, at least one of us should probably be drawing a paycheck." He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table.

Lois tried not to react, not sure how he would feel about the fact that even if she did nothing to promote the book, she wouldn't really have to work for a good long time; Lois Lane the columnist and author made a lot more money than Lois Lane the investigative reporter had. He'd been subtly and sometimes not so subtly measuring her accomplishments while he was gone, probably comparing them to his own. She took her hand off the mouth piece of the phone; this still felt like a bad idea to her, but she wasn't sure she had much by way of alternatives. "All right, Joan, let me know what next week's schedule looks like."

She made note of the morning shows she was supposed to do, along with the radio spots and the book signings. Even though she'd be able to fly herself to all of these events—under the guise of Lois Lane being difficult and preferring to make her own travel arrangements—it would

still take up so much time that she would have preferred to spend at home.

"So what's it like?" he asked after she hung up the phone. "All the book tours and being on the other side of interviews?"

"It's not really for me," she admitted with a shrug. "You were always much better about interviews as Superman. Trust me, the press likes you a lot more than it likes Ultrawoman."

He shook his head. "I doubt that."

"That's because you haven't tried interviewing me," she said with a slight smile.

"Was it tough to give up investigating?"

"Honestly, it was the least of my concerns," she admitted. "I knew I needed help with the baby and I missed you so much. Moving out here made sense. Even if Smallville didn't need any investigative journalists."

He looked at her with haunted eyes. "I'm sorry I wasn't here for you," he said.

She took his hand in hers. "I know," she whispered. "But it wasn't your fault."

Clark turned his gaze downward toward the surface of the table. "I abandoned you. And I abandoned him."

"If you hadn't left, we wouldn't have gotten married that night. We would never have had Jon. According to Bernie, we might never have had children," she said, remembering how the scientist had explained to her that it was probable that the only reason she'd been able to become pregnant with Clark's child was because she'd had his powers.

Even though he didn't look up she could see him frown. "He told me that, too." Clark looked back up at her, his mouth set in a thin, hard line and his brow knitted. "Are you saying you think all of this happened for a reason?"

She shook her head. "No," she admitted. "I've seen too much—too many awful things that couldn't possibly be justified—to believe that things happen for a reason. But even if we could change the past and give ourselves the lives we thought we should have had, we couldn't do it without giving up things we'd rather die than lose. I just think you can't always untangle the good from the bad."

Clark dreaded going to the therapist the way other people dreaded going to the dentist. He lay on the couch, feeling ridiculous in his cape and tights. He now only wore them to go the shrink, which made him feel even more like an imposter—a fake superhero who didn't even fill out the suit very well. Taking a deep breath, he tried to figure out how he should begin. "You asked me about the people I left behind and I said I didn't want to talk about them," he began. "But I'm not sure this is going to work if I don't, so here goes. There are people here who've been part of my life ever since I arrived on Earth. They're my family," he began. "...And then there's my wife."

More scratching. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at Dr. Friskin. "I hadn't realized you'd gotten married since we last spoke. Congratulations."

Clark nodded. "Thanks."

"So I take it the reason you don't talk about your wife, don't wear a wedding band, is because you want to protect her?"

He should have known that one was coming so soon. He tried to think of a way to respond quickly. His first thought was to lie blatantly. Lying to a shrink wasn't like perjury. So maybe it wasn't so bad. Then again, Superman wasn't supposed to lie and it wasn't as though he had to protect his secret. Dr. Friskin had already had plenty of opportunities to divulge information about either him or Lois and had done no such thing. And would this therapy thing actually work if he wasn't honest? So maybe he could just leave out some specifics. "My wife is invulnerable," he said at long last.

"I see," Dr. Friskin replied.

"It's more to protect our privacy," he added. "The more people think that Superman is just a set of powers in a suit who spends all of his time doing rescues, the easier that is."

"And so you had to leave your wife behind?"

"Yes," he replied.

"How did she react to your decision to go?"

"It wasn't just my decision," he replied. Lois's words from what seemed like a thousand lifetimes ago: 'If you have to go, I will be here. I will wait as long as it takes and I will be here when you come home to me.' And she had done that. She'd waited through years, without a single word from him, or a shred of evidence to let her know he was all right. Without reason to hope, she'd kept hoping nonetheless. "If she'd asked me to stay, I think I would have. It wasn't exactly her blessing, but I went with her acceptance."

"And how are things between the two of you now?"

"It's complicated," he began.

"It always is."

"I love her more than anything. Sometimes the only thing that kept me going was the hope that I might be able to come back and be with her. I thought that as soon as I got back here, everything would be fine. And it isn't and I don't know how to fix that."

"You're taking the first step, Superman," Dr. Friskin assured him. It felt so odd to have her calling him that when he'd dropped the Superman façade long ago.

"That's largely my wife's doing. She practically begged me to talk to someone."

"Am I right in assuming that you saw some terrible things during that war?" Dr. Friskin asked, still scrawling on the notepad. He could feel her gaze and he found himself wanting to shrink away.

"Yeah," he admitted. "It was awful."

"Then your wife couldn't have given you better advice. You said your relationship with her now is complicated; what did you mean by that?"

Clark sighed and closed his eyes. For a long moment, he remained silent and still, just listening to his heartbeat and trying to slow it down. "I guess I expected to just pick things up as though nothing had happened. But everything

is so different now. We're both so different. I'm always misinterpreting things, things I never would have gotten wrong before. But it's like we're not in synch anymore. And I can't help feeling like..." he trailed off.

"Like what?"

"I've always known that she's the most capable person in the world, but I guess I was just kind of humbled by everything she'd done while I was away. I knew she missed me, but it was like she didn't really need me. Not the way I needed her. I was barely holding it together for four years and here she is, trying to work me back into her life, when she was doing just fine without me."

"Have you talked to her about this?"

"Sort of," he replied. "I mean, she always tells me how much she needs me and how badly she missed me. And that she needed help to get through the last four years. But it's hard not to feel like I don't measure up."

"To her expectations, or yours?" Dr. Friskin prodded gently.

Huh. He should have expected the analytical jujitsu. "I don't know, both, I guess," he ventured.

"Well, how much have you told her about your experiences?"

He shrugged. "Practically nothing," he admitted.

"So why do you think you'd be falling short of her expectations?"

And there it was. The submission hold. The diminutive therapist was out to make him cry uncle. "Because I'm a basket case," he admitted bitterly. "I can't sleep because the nightmares are so bad. And when she asks me what's wrong, I yell at her. I'm always in a bad mood. I'm always spoiling for a fight. And this isn't me."

"How is she handling this change in your behavior?"

"She's trying to be patient. I know that. But she also asks me to talk to her, to tell her what's wrong and I don't know how to do that."

"Why?"

It was the simplest question in the world and yet, the damndest. Why? Why couldn't he talk to his wife?

"Because it was bad enough living through it once. And if I tell her what happened, I won't have to worry about not living up to her expectations. We'll both *know* that I didn't measure up."

"You're it, Daddy!" Jon squealed as he tagged his father and turned around to quickly run the other way. Clark chased after his giggling son through the tall grass. The light was fading as day descended into twilight. He scooped his little boy up in his arms and Jon laughed in delight.

"The tickle monster's got you!" Clark exclaimed as he tickled Jon. His son squirmed and laughed as Clark carried him back toward the farmhouse. Lois was waiting for them on the porch, a contented smile on her face.

"Ready to go to bed, little man?" she asked.

"I'm not sleepy," Jon protested, even as he yawned.

"Come on, let's go brush our teeth," Clark announced, carrying Jon into the house. He helped his son get ready for

bed, happy to have a role in Jon's nightly rituals. When Lois came in to read Jon's bedtime story, he hung back in the doorway. The bedtime story was still a mother-son bonding experience, but he no longer felt the need to retreat from it. The story finished, both Clark and Lois tucked Jon in.

"I love you. Goodnight, sweetheart," Lois said softly as she kissed her son's forehead.

"Goodnight, buddy, I love you." Clark bent down to kiss his son goodnight.

"Goodnight Mommy, goodnight Daddy. I love you." Jon murmured sleepily.

Clark followed his wife out of the room, turning off the lights and closing the door softly.

"You're it," she said, swatting him playfully on the arm. Clark regarded her curiously. Had she just 'tagged' him?

As if to answer, she raced to the other end of the hallway in a burst of superspeed. "Last one to the Pacific is a rotten egg," she declared.

"Lois, you can't be serious," he said as he shook his head.

"I'm serious about kicking your butt. Don't tell me you forgot what a race is," she taunted him mischievously. She seemed surprised when, in a burst of speed of his own, he caught her at the end of the hallway and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed his wife, enjoying the moment of contentment.

"You're it," he said with a slight grin before racing out the door and rocketing into the night's sky with her close behind him. Flying westward toward the setting sun for no reason except the pure joy of it was an exhilarating experience. He watched as she dove toward the water below, plunging headfirst into the bracing waves of the Pacific. Clark followed her, feeling the cold water sluice over him as he careened through the ocean, dodging a pod of startled dolphins. She surfaced and hovered over the water, smiling almost impishly at him. He drifted lazily up toward her, invigorated by the crisp water and the feel of the breeze over his wet skin.

He was almost at the same altitude she was when she suddenly took off again. He could do nothing but follow her as they traced the familiar features of a planet he'd spent so much of his youth exploring. He chased her across the painted sky over expansive deserts and through the sunrise over mountains half a world away from home. Clark stilled for a moment in the Arctic Circle, awed by the early demonstration of the Northern Lights over an otherwise desolate landscape. The swirls and streams of green, blue, and red light never failed to capture his imagination, no matter how many times he'd seen it. Lois paused as well, hovering not too far from where he was; but he couldn't tell if she was watching the lights or him.

It was evening in the South Pacific when he overtook her. From the corner of his eye, he could see Lois flying just below and slightly behind him, her face set in a contented smile that matched what he felt. He swooped down suddenly, catching her in his arms. They spun around

in a dizzying circle from her momentum and slowed to drift aimlessly, high above the Earth.

"You caught me," she murmured before he kissed her again.

She sighed softly and it was almost his undoing. He felt them drop a few feet, but she slowed their descent and floated them back upwards. "Actually, I think you caught me," he replied, his voice husky. "You always do."

"And I always will," she promised. Lois took his hand in hers. "Come with me," she whispered. He nodded and allowed her to lead the way. They flew over the deep blue waters wordlessly, hand in hand. He could see the last rays of light as the sun disappeared behind the curve of the Earth. They finally descended over an atoll near Micronesia. There were thousands of uninhabited little islands scattered like crumbs throughout the Pacific. Places inaccessible to everyone except the two of them. He scanned the island Lois had selected, secluded and peaceful.

As they floated down to the beach, he watched as she suddenly lit the hundreds of candles strewn over the beach. They landed softly in the sand, in a small clearing amidst the sea of flickering and dancing lights. A blanket had been spread across the ground. A curious picnic basket sat nearby, as though it wasn't remarkably out of place here, hundreds of miles from anything resembling civilization.

He smiled at her, his heart feeling lighter than it had in years. "Are you trying to seduce me, Ms. Lane?" he asked as he removed her mask.

She gave him a wicked grin as she leaned in to kiss him. "You better believe it," she whispered against his lips. Lois wrapped her arms around his neck as his hands settled on her waist. The expression in her eyes suddenly softened. "I thought it would be a nice surprise, you know, a way to celebrate all those anniversaries and birthdays we didn't get to share with each other." Her tone was almost wistful.

"I didn't get you a present," he said sadly.

"Yes, you did," she whispered, her voice unsteady. "You came home to me."

He caressed her cheek and kissed her again, feeling almost intoxicated by the sensation. In the background, small waves crashed on the beach, but the sound faded into oblivion. All he could hear was her heartbeat and the soft sigh that escaped her lips as he broke off the kiss. "I love you," he said in a harsh whisper, his voice thick with emotion. They fell to their knees on the blanket, still in each others' arms.

Lois stared up at the dark canopy, strewn with glittering stars, overhead. The moon was slung low in the sky, its light reflected on the water. Her beloved slept beside her, their bodies covered only by his cape. A soft breeze stirred, extinguishing some of the candles. Only a few continued to flicker and burn. She listened to the sound of his breathing, steady and even. As if of its own volition, her hand reached out to stroke his dark hair. He murmured something she couldn't quite make out, but the tone of his voice told her that her gentle ministrations soothed him.

Her heart nearly burst in her chest with love for the man lying beside her, so peaceful, so seemingly content in silent repose. She wished for the power to freeze this moment, exactly as it was. She wanted him to know nothing but this kind of easy, drowsing, redolent happiness. The sort of bliss that wrapped around you like a warm blanket.

But tomorrow night she had her first promotional engagement for her book. And no matter how much she wanted to, they couldn't keep flying away from the rising sun, trying to keep the night from ending.

Even though it was fleeting, even though the dawn would overtake them soon enough, she had desperately needed this night with her husband. She sensed that he'd needed it, too. For just one night, there was no one to rescue. No ghosts to fight. No haunted memories or cruel reminders of what they'd lost. Leaning closer to him, she gently brushed her lips first against his temple, then his neck, then his shoulder. She closed her eyes and settled beside her husband, allowing herself to drift peacefully into sleep.

Whatever patience motherhood had taught Lois, it didn't transfer easily to the ordeal of sitting through makeup for TV interviews. The makeup artist's repeated praises for how great Lois's skin was didn't seem to diminish her desire to glob on copious amounts of the studio-grade foundation and powder.

There was a sharp knock on the dressing room door. "Five minutes, Ms. Lane," someone shouted from the other side.

One of the techs checked the volume on the microphone clipped to her suit jacket. "All set," he announced.

"Perfect!" the makeup artist announced.

She was hustled from the dressing room to the waiting area backstage. She could hear the news program's hosts as they rattled off the highlights of her professional biography. "...author of the bestseller 'World Full of Heroes' and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, the Daily Planet's Lois Lane."

Lois walked across the stage to her seat between the program's two hosts. "Thanks for having me," she said as she shook hands with the hosts. Dave Kiley and Maura Madison were fairly well regarded, as TV news program hosts went. They had a reputation for playing up controversies for ratings bumps, but who in their business didn't? Besides, her book was hardly controversial, at least not by the standards of political sex and embezzlement scandals. So long as they stayed on topic, the interview would be a nice promo for her book's release the following day.

She sat down at the table. A copy of her book was propped up in front of her. The lights aimed on her probably would have been blinding, had her eyes been sensitive to that sort of thing.

"Thanks for joining us, Lois," Maura Madison said with the sort of generated warmth that TV personalities seemed to conjure whenever necessary.

"My pleasure," Lois replied with a smile.

"So your new book, 'The Shade of a Bitterwood Tree,' comes out tomorrow?" Dave Kiley began.

"It does." She nodded and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I've been working on it pretty much since I returned from my last trip to Kinwara."

"I got my advance copy a week ago," Dave said. "For all of you at home, it's just so insightful, and you should go out and buy it immediately."

"But I'm sure you know that what we're all dying to hear about now is that husband of yours, the elusive Clark Kent."

Lois tried to keep her expression neutral, knowing that she'd probably failed to keep the anger from flashing across her eyes. "Clark's doing fine, but I'm sure he appreciates your concern," she said evenly. "And getting back to Kinwara..."

"Come on, Lois," Maura said in her irritatingly cheerful voice. "Dave's right and it is an amazing book, so we've done our job in giving it a plug on the show; now let's get down to the real news...your husband reappears, practically out of thin air, after four years. He tells us nothing about the Kryptonians or their supposed war. I mean, does he know when Superman is coming back? People are dying to know. They'd be hanging on his every word, if he would just tell us something!"

"I'm here to talk about the book, about what we can learn from Kinwara, and how we can prevent tragedies like it in the future. My family is off limits. I believe my agent made that perfectly clear to your producers." Lois could hear the edge in her own voice.

"You're a journalist," Dave interjected as though she needed the reminder. "You'd be doing the same thing in our position."

She blinked hard, taken aback by the comment. "No, I wouldn't," she countered. "Have you stopped to ask yourselves what the social value of this line of questioning is? There's no public right to know, no political or social issues at stake. You're just trying to manipulate...no, you know what? We're done." She stood up abruptly, unclipping her microphone and dropping it on the table. Lois turned and walked off stage without so much as a single look back at the hosts or the cameras. She could hear Joan—somewhere in the bowels of the studio—screaming bloody murder at someone, hopefully one of the show's producers.

What a fantastic way to begin her book tour.

Clark watched the television in stony silence, his jaw clamped shut. "Turn it off, please," he said through clenched teeth. His father wordlessly lifted the remote and turned the program off.

"I can't believe the nerve of those people..." his mother began.

"I can," Clark replied. "I'm just another story to them. But now that story is all about how I'm hiding behind my wife." He got up and walked out of the den.

It was like a car wreck, Lois thought bleakly as she opened up yet another browser page and loaded another newspaper website. Her fiasco of an interview was everywhere and people couldn't help but gawk, stare, and comment. The commentariat seemed evenly divided among those who thought she was a hypocrite, those who thought her interviewers were unprofessional – likely because their competitive instincts had led them to seek out a potential vulnerability in an opponent—and those who were just happy to use the entire drama as a springboard to talk about Clark.

Lois put her laptop down on the couch and picked up the remote. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she dared to turn on the television. Almost cringing, she pushed the 'power' button.

"Lois Lane is a big girl and a cutthroat competitor. It's disingenuous and downright hypocritical for her to hide from questions. If she can't stand the heat, she should stay out of the kitchen..." She scowled at the television. She'd never been able to stand Michael Woods, the political columnist from that third-rate rag of a paper, the Metropolis Star. Lois's more spotlight-hungry colleagues were gathered around a table on one of those morning news programs on LNN, happily picking over her like a carcass.

She was almost surprised to see Diane Herr from the Tribune also scowling at Woods. "Look, we're not talking about a politician who parades around his family as a demonstration of his values and then uses them for cover when he's caught in an affair. Lane has never exploited her family for her career. She's a serious journalist..."

"Whose personal life is a serious story as far as the rest of the world is concerned," Bruce Bennett of LNN interrupted. "I'm sorry, but she doesn't get to duck that because she finds it inconvenient. This is just the sort of prima-donna behavior..."

"That's outrageously sexist, and you know it!" Herr cut him off. "If Lois were a man, protecting his wife from this kind of unwanted publicity, you'd all be lined up behind him."

Dear God, make it stop, she thought wearily to herself. She turned off the television. This wasn't over. It wasn't anywhere close to being over. She had book signings today in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

He was in a particularly foul mood as he knocked on Dr. Friskin's door. Lois's interview the night before was still weighing heavily on his mind. With that one stupid line of questioning, he'd been transformed into Lois Lane's pampered and protected poodle—too afraid to show his face in public, constantly hiding from harsh questions and even his own shadow. Of course, none of that had anything to do with Superman, so he was going to have to pretend he was in a bad mood for all the ordinary reasons he was in a bad mood these days.

They exchanged the usual pleasantries as he entered her office, but he could feel his stomach twisting itself in knots.

He'd dodged and evaded the tough stuff for about as long as was possible. There was nothing left to talk about except the stuff he really didn't want to talk about. He took his place on the leather couch and stared straight up at the ceiling. It took a moment for him to tune out the sounds of the city, but he managed to focus.

"Now, we've dealt with a great many things, but we've studiously avoided certain subjects and we have some very large gaps in the story you've told me. I think it's time to start filling those in, don't you?"

His shrink was an evil mind reader. "Am I supposed to answer that honestly?" He sighed.

"We don't have to get through it all today, but it would help if we could get started," she explained patiently.

Clark closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. "I wasn't anywhere near the fighting most of the time," he began. "I had armies and generals to handle the actual combat. But I gave orders that got good, decent people killed. And sometimes, I found myself in the middle of the fight. I watched people die in battle. People I couldn't help. People who had counted on me to lead them. You'd think that after a thousand condolence letters, they'd get easier to write. I saw my cities destroyed and innocent civilians slaughtered. I tried to help but there was almost nothing I could do. My efforts were like a joke. If I'd had my powers..."

"Do you consider the efforts of firefighters and police officers to be a joke?" she asked.

"Of course not," he practically spat, offended by the suggestion.

"Isn't that because you don't hold them to the same standards that you hold yourself?"

"Yeah, but..." he began lamely.

"It's not their fault they're not all powerful, just like it wasn't your fault that you weren't all powerful. So why are you trying to compare what you were able to do there to what you could have done here?"

"I don't know; I guess I'm just not used to having those normal limitations. I have to hand it to you," he said to his therapist with a wry grin. "I don't know how people go through their whole lives like that. Four years of aches and pains and the constant specter of mortality were more than enough for me."

"You mentioned the 'specter of mortality,' was your life ever in danger?"

"Yeah," he admitted with a weak nod of his head. "I was wounded in an early battle, not long after I got there. The wound was minor, but there was a lot of house-to-house fighting. A lot of casualties. A lot of them civilian." He told her about the first battle at Terian. He told her about the first time he'd shot someone. Clark had only wounded the rebel, but it had shocked him nonetheless.

"I was naïve to think I could have anything to do with that war without becoming violent myself," he said bitterly. Clark drew in a shaky breath. "It's hard to hate what you've done without hating who you are." He repeated the words he'd heard so long ago. Words that still haunted him.

He was out on the porch, leaning against the rail, when she descended toward the farmhouse. “How’d the book signing go?” he asked.

She stopped on the step and looked up at him. “Fine,” she said before spinning back into her regular clothes. It could have been a lot worse. At the signings, she’d had a lot more power to simply state she wasn’t going to engage a particular line of questioning and move on. There had been massive crowds at both bookstores, but she knew a large percentage of those present were only there to witness the next evolution in the budding controversy.

“Did you see the papers?” he asked, his brow furrowed. It was an odd question; he knew that she had seen the headlines and stories already. As if it had been possible to avoid them.

“We just have to ignore it,” she said with a shrug.

Clark snorted. “I guess that seems logical from your standpoint. You’re not the one they’re making out to be a damn china doll.”

“No, I’m the one they’re calling a diva, junkyard dog, and hypocrite all in the same breath.” Why on Earth was she rising to the bait? Her brain kicked and screamed and yelled at her to stop.

He stood up straight, his posture stiff. “Lois, don’t you get it?” His voice took on a tight, strained quality. “I’m finished in this business. Who’s ever going to take me seriously again?”

“These people are idiots, Clark,” she said. “They have the attention span of gnats and, in a week, they’ll move on and forget all about this.”

“Who’s going to allow Clark Kent, alien abductee, to interview them? How do I go on a stakeout when the entire country knows who I am? And who in their right mind is going to let me stop a hostage situation when I can’t even stop my own hands from shaking?” he demanded angrily. “But I guess it doesn’t matter, since you can take care of all that stuff now. You certainly don’t seem to need my help.”

“Don’t you dare,” she whispered. She was near tears, but the tone of her voice was a warning. “Don’t call me a liar, Clark Kent. You know that I couldn’t count the number of nights I cried myself to sleep because I needed you. Because I was lost and afraid and I couldn’t figure out how to make things work without you here.”

The muscles in his neck twitched and flexed as he clenched his jaw tightly. His hands were balled up in fists by his sides, something he did when he was desperately trying to control the tremor. He looked away from her. “A reporter is all I ever wanted to be. What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life?”

“You have to give this time,” she insisted. “You’ve been home a few weeks.”

“Sure. Time fixes everything,” he replied sarcastically with a shake of his head. “You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“Because you won’t tell me!” she snapped, blinking back hot tears. “I can’t do this. I’m not going to engage you

in a knockdown, drag-out fight every time you get pissed off about something.” She walked past him into the farmhouse, trying to slow her thundering heart.

After checking in on Jon, she flew out almost immediately for a patrol. She’d only done a few sweeps over Metropolis, however, when she found herself floating over his old apartment. Lois dropped down onto the balcony and let herself in, changing back into her regular clothes. She rarely came here anymore, even though she’d bought the place a few years ago when Clark’s landlord had sold the building to a developer who’d turned all the units into condos. Everything in here belonged to Clark. Everything was marked permanently with his impression. His game ball. Pictures of him and his parents. Odd little statuettes, curios, and knickknacks from every place imaginable.

Lois walked to the mantle and picked up a picture of the two of them together. God, they looked so young. And happy. She touched the cool glass over her husband’s image. He smiled at her like nothing in the world could trouble him. Replacing the frame on the mantle, she stepped back and sat down on the couch. Her eyes closed as she thought about the fight she’d just had with Clark. A lump formed in her throat, making it hard to breathe. She bit her lip to stop it from trembling as she drew her legs up onto the couch. Curled up rather pitifully, she finally allowed the sob to escape her lips. In the empty apartment, in the place where ages ago, they’d planned their bright and hope-filled future together, she cried.

God, he was an idiot, he thought as he sat miserably at the end of the bed. He looked down at his hands, wondering what on Earth made him take his anger out on Lois. Why did he feel the need to test the limits of her now-superhuman patience? He hadn’t said it outright, but there was no need to. In no uncertain terms, he’d blamed her for his situation. As though she’d had a good alternative to explain his absence over the last four years. What had he wanted her to say, that he’d just skipped town? That he’d run out on her? That would have worked out well for him, especially after it became obvious she was pregnant. And what possessed him to portray her incredible efforts to provide the best life for their son as some sort of conspiracy against him?

He’d picked a fight with her because he was too afraid to fight back against the ones who were actually leveling criticism against him. Because he really had no defense against the charge that he didn’t want to talk to the media. Because he knew that unlike the unforgiving public, Lois would pull her punches.

He was the worst kind of coward.

Clark stood up and crossed the room to the dresser. Hesitating for a moment, he opened the lid to the metal chest and looked at the collection of small globes inside. He picked up the first globe and activated it, watching silently as the images of his parents and their firstborn child burst

into life in front of him. Each time he'd viewed the recordings before, he'd been awed by how his birth parents had persevered in the face of the certain death of their planet. They had saved Kryptonian civilization along with several million lives, including his own. They did it knowing they wouldn't live to see the results of their efforts. Now, as he watched the two people so obviously in love with each other, who so obviously adored their infant daughter, he wondered how they'd survived—how their marriage had survived—not only the death of their little girl, but the literal end of their world. Why were they so strong? Why was their relationship so strong that it could endure the sort of heartbreak that put everything he'd suffered through in stark perspective?

He felt the sharp sting of regret. His birth parents looked so young, so happy, as they doted on their daughter. He wished he could have known them. He wished he could have spared them the devastating loss and heartache they had suffered in the last years of their too-short lives. And yet, how could he even contemplate the idle notion of alleviating the pain of others when he was causing his own wife and family so much misery?

"Thank you for seeing me on short notice, Dr. Friskin," Superman said somewhat grimly as he entered the psychiatrist's office. Clark usually dreaded his regularly scheduled appointments, so making extra ones really wasn't on the list of things he wanted to do. Lois was halfway across the country, signing books or doing a radio show or another panel discussion at a college; he couldn't remember which. They hadn't spoken since the night before.

"It's no trouble at all," Dr. Friskin assured him as she ushered him inside. "What seems to be the problem?"

Clark sat down on the edge of the couch, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "I think my marriage is falling apart," he said. Clark paused; it wasn't like his relationship with his wife was fraying at the seams of its own accord. This was definitely his doing. "No. I think I'm destroying my marriage," he corrected.

"You said before that you didn't speak to your wife about the last four years. Is that to blame for your current problems?"

He wanted to deny it. "Yes," he heard himself say.

"So you're concerned that your relationship with your wife is being irreparably damaged because you have been withholding information from her. And you believe that providing that information to her would also irreparably damage your relationship. Is that right?"

The proverbial rock and a hard place, he thought glumly. "Yeah. So what do I do?" he asked rather helplessly as he looked down at the carpet.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that for you," Dr. Friskin replied. "But you should ask yourself how you imagine your relationship with your wife developing, given the fact that you haven't told her about something you think would cause her to see you very differently."

Clark could feel his features forming a frown. "You're asking me why I think it's okay to build a marriage on a lie, aren't you?"

Dr. Friskin shook her head. "No, I'm suggesting you reflect on how you and your wife have changed over the last few years and how those changes might affect your relationship going forward. Your relationship has been on hold, even though your lives haven't been. It probably isn't possible to pick up where your marriage left off, as though the last four years never happened."

"I hate lying to my wife," he said simply. "And I hate myself for getting mad at her for not understanding what I've been through when it's my fault for not telling her. I know I have to talk to her, I just don't know how."

"And we can work on that," Dr. Friskin replied gently. "It might not be necessary—or even helpful—for you to discuss every last detail with her, but you both need a frame of reference to understand each other."

"You make it sound simple."

"It most certainly isn't. The anger and anxiety you're experiencing and the nightmares suggest that you need to think a great deal about your own frame of reference and how you might better understand what you went through."

"So I guess we'll be spending a lot of time together, then?"

"Well, unless you'd consider group therapy..." she ventured.

It was out of the question. "Absolutely not," he replied forcefully.

"Well then, since you're already here, why don't we get back to what happened on New Krypton?"

Silence reigned over the room for a long while as she took her careful, detailed notes. She tried to keep her expression one of detached calm, though it was difficult. The mental images of reverse hangings, beatings, and mock executions that he described were chilling and the way he told it only exacerbated that fact. She watched as he fought to describe things he had so clearly been working tirelessly to repress. But the only emotion he ever displayed was anger. After a long, pregnant pause, he finally continued.

"I controlled nothing. I couldn't even choose to sit down or stand up. I was never allowed to sleep longer than a few minutes unless they beat me unconscious. Nor seemed to take a lot of pleasure in proving to me that I was only alive because he hadn't yet decided to kill me. That there wasn't anything I had that he couldn't take away from me. Eventually it worked. At some point, I stopped being a man."

"You felt emasculated?" she ventured.

He snorted derisively. "If you're looking for some deep-seated misogyny, it isn't there. Most of the strongest figures in my life have been women. I didn't feel emasculated. I felt like I was less than a person. I was like some pathetic animal, cowering in a corner, waiting to be put out of its misery."

His response illuminated the profound effect the experience had had on him. He wasn't nursing superficial wounds to a sensitive male ego. As she'd surmised from his recounting of events, he'd experienced carefully crafted and executed, full-scale deindividuation and dehumanization. She made a note to ask him about those strong figures in his life that he'd mentioned. Who were they? What part did they play? "How did you deal with that feeling?" she asked.

"I didn't," he said. "I wanted to die. The day I left, I'd promised my wife I was going to come home. But sometimes the only thing I could think about was how much I wanted it all to end."

"But you did come home, Superman. You survived, and not many people would have been able to do that."

She watched as he shook his head. "Plenty of people have been through a lot worse and dealt with it better than I did. You hear stories about people who spend months and years in concentration camps and POW camps. I barely survived a few weeks..."

It was a different twist on survivor guilt, but the effect on him was the same. He compared himself unfavorably to those he believed had fared worse than he had. "You shouldn't be quick to underestimate the effects of solitary confinement. Most people who endure such prolonged trauma don't suffer alone. Prisoners help each other keep their sense of humanity. Isolation is the torturer's force multiplier and often has even more of a dehumanizing effect than physical abuse or deprivation," she explained. "What you've described to me ranks right up there with the worst I've ever studied. These techniques were designed to push every last person beyond the breaking point—to shatter the human psyche. It takes a remarkably resilient person to come through such an ordeal with their sense of self intact."

"I don't feel remarkably resilient," he said grimly.

"I won't claim to know what you've been through, Superman. But in my experience, when people deal with these issues, things get better. Not all at once, and it isn't always a smooth journey, but things improve. In the mean time, I think you should start to think about things you feel like you can tell your wife, things that will help her understand your experiences. You've been apart without contact for four years and she'll want to understand what's been happening in your life."

"All right," he said, his tone one of resignation. Superman gathered up his cape as he stood. "Thank you for your help, Dr. Friskin."

She rose from her chair and followed him as he headed toward the window. "Of course. I'll see you again Wednesday," she responded.

The little boy's breathing, deep and even, was the only sound in the otherwise silent room. Clark watched his son sleep, watched the rise and fall of his small chest. He wanted to be a good father. More than anything else, he wanted to be there for his boy. He'd been going to therapy for weeks now, painfully chronicling the history of his

physical and mental torment on New Krypton. At Dr. Friskin's encouragement, they'd progressed to various forms of cognitive therapy, trying to train his body and mind not to overreact to every stimulus. He was meditating again. Not too deeply or for too long. It wasn't as though he knew how to achieve the sort of meditation that would completely separate him from his emotions or memories, but he didn't want to push it anyway. The one thing he wasn't doing was talking to his wife about any of it.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see his mother approaching. She silently handed him a cup of coffee. "Good morning," she whispered.

"Morning," he replied softly before taking a sip. It was still before dawn and he had a full day ahead of him, helping his father prepare for the harvest. Clark had told Perry that he intended to stay in Kansas through the busy fall season to help around the farm. After that, he'd think about going back to Metropolis and the Planet. The farmhouse was too small for three generations of Kents and Smallville was suddenly too small of a town. There wasn't even the hope of peaceful anonymity here. Besides, it would be good for him and Lois to find a place of their own. A house where they could raise their son. It would be good to do that before Jon started nursery school the following year.

As the royalty checks rolled in from Lois's book, it became clearer and clearer that they wouldn't have trouble affording a house. He'd been a bit stunned to learn just how well she was doing financially. She'd tried to demur, saying that her first book had sold well in part because of her connection to Superman and that she'd just invested the revenues prudently. But as absurd as it may have been, he was kind of bothered by it. He didn't begrudge his wife her success, but what did he bring to the relationship these days? They weren't equal partners financially. She was shouldering all the superhero burdens, and she still took the lead in parenting. What did she need him for?

"Is Lois still out?" his mother asked.

He nodded. "She's finishing up putting out the wildfires in California. Is Dad up?"

"His back's still bothering him," Martha responded.

Clark frowned. His parents were getting too old to run this whole farm. "Tell him to take it easy; I'll milk the cows." He didn't want to take over the farm, but at least this season, he could do the heavy lifting around here. Then they could figure out a more long term solution.

From across the cornfields, she could see her husband stacking bales of hay. He moved with easy grace, his t-shirt stretched tightly across the broad muscles of his back and shoulders. He may have been a superhuman figure from a world billions of miles away, but he was still her farmboy.

He looked up as she approached. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"The fires are all contained. The firefighters and National Guard are mopping up," she replied. "I reek of smoke, though. I'm going to run up and take a shower."

After cleaning up, she went downstairs to find her husband taking his boots off as he came into the house.

“All done?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “It’s good to feel productive again.”

She walked toward the kitchen, intending to prepare a pot of tea. “Perry called last night. He wants to talk to you about coming back to the Planet.”

“And do what? Be the Planet’s mascot?”

“It’ll just take some time to work things out,” she replied, trying to sound hopeful. She put the tea kettle on the stove and removed a couple of mugs from the cupboard.

“I’ve been home for months,” he said curtly as he sat down at the kitchen table.

“This is complicated for everyone...” she began.

“How complicated is it? I’m not the first man to come home from war. I fought. I got wounded. It’s happened to plenty of people before me and they managed to go back to their lives just fine.”

“Those aren’t battle scars on your back,” she said as she turned back around to look at him. Lois had thrown down the gauntlet. It was a step she’d been avoiding since he’d returned home. She watched as his posture stiffened. He was preparing to shut her out. “Something happened to you out there, something you can’t forget no matter how hard you try. Something that keeps you from sleeping at night. That keeps you from talking to me. I’m not stupid, Clark. Whatever you think you’re protecting me from, it’s not working.”

He stood up, backing away from the table. “I was ambushed and shot,” he said, his voice betraying nothing. “I was taken prisoner by Nor. He held me for six weeks and four days. And he tortured me for every moment of it. He strung me up. He starved me. He beat me unconscious because it amused him. If Ching and a commander named Talan hadn’t found me, Nor would have killed me. There. Now you know.”

Each word cut her deeply. She said nothing, stunned not by the particulars, but by the fact that he’d told her anything at all. For so long, he’d kept her completely in the dark. It didn’t matter how much it hurt, how his torment was now something she could imagine. She would find a way to be strong for him, to shoulder whatever part of the burden he’d let her take up.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I’m sorry for everything you went through. I’m sorry you went through it alone.”

“It’s over,” he said. “I try not to think about it.”

The sharp whistle of the tea kettle shattered the fragile silence that had settled between them. Without saying another word, he turned and walked out of the kitchen. Numbly, she watched him go, ignoring the shriek of steam rising up behind her. She wiped away a tear. And then another.

“I told my wife,” he said flatly, staring straight up at the ceiling.

“What did you tell her?” his shrink asked.

“I told her about what Nor did to me,” Clark replied.

“How did she react?”

He grunted. “I didn’t wait around to find out.”

“What made you decide that now was the time to tell her?”

“I don’t know. I just...I couldn’t...” He fidgeted with his cape and tried to keep his hands from trembling. “I guess I realized that what I was doing wasn’t working anymore. I could keep hiding the truth from her, but it was exhausting. It was hard telling you, but I got through it. I figured it was time to at least try.”

“Was it difficult telling her?”

Clark laughed humorlessly. “Yeah,” he admitted. “She looked...hurt, when I told her. Ever since I got back, she’d been asking me to tell her what happened. And when I did...she didn’t want to know. She was better off not knowing.”

“Was that her judgment, or yours?”

He dropped his cape and dragged a hand through his hair, sighing. “I don’t know. Maybe it was mine. I’d hoped that I’d feel...relieved...unburdened...something. But I felt so numb.”

“I imagine you felt numb because you could tell her the facts, but you couldn’t allow yourself to re-experience the emotions that those events created. Does that sound right?”

He closed his eyes and nodded. “Why isn’t this getting easier?”

“It takes time, Superman. I wish I had a better answer, but it takes time. You’ve taken an important step, but there’s still more to be done.”

He landed on the porch, changing back into his normal clothes. It was getting darker earlier now and the nights were getting crisper. He opened the door and walked into the farmhouse.

“Hi, honey,” his mother said from the kitchen. She came out to meet him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Hi, Mom,” he replied. “Lois home?”

“She’s on a patrol,” Martha said quietly. In the living room, Clark could hear his father and his son playing a game of Chutes and Ladders. He wondered if the twinge of disappointment he felt was the same feeling she’d had early in their relationship when he was constantly leaving her in the lurch. He was thankful that she was carrying the burden of his responsibilities, even though it pained him to feel so inadequate, so incapable of doing what had once come naturally to him.

“It’s almost Jon’s bedtime,” he said.

“Do you want to do the honors?” his mother asked. He silently prayed that this would go well. Some nights when Lois wasn’t home, Jon would go to bed without any problems. And sometimes the disruption to his nightly ritual turned into an ordeal.

Clark made his way to the living room. “Hey, buddy,” he said.

“Hi, Daddy!” Jon exclaimed. He stood up and ran to his father.

Clark scooped the little pajama-clad boy up in his arms. Jon wrapped his arms around his father's neck and Clark returned his son's hug. "Ready for bed?" Clark asked as he kissed the crown of Jon's hair.

"Okay," Jon acquiesced. So far, so good, Clark thought with a quick thanks to whatever deities could claim a role in Jon's good mood.

Father and son made their way upstairs and Clark helped Jon brush his teeth and prepare for bed. Jon picked out a book and hopped onto the bed, waiting for his father to tuck him in. "Where's Mommy?" he asked innocently.

"Mommy's working," Clark replied.

"Do you work, Daddy?" Jon asked.

Clark could feel his expression settling into a wry grin. "I help Grandpa with the farm. But I used to be a writer, like Mommy."

"Mommy's books don't have any pictures," Jon said, his tone one of disappointment.

"No, they don't," Clark agreed. "How about tomorrow, you and I write a story? And we'll even draw pictures."

Jon's face lit up in a smile. "Yeah," he said excitedly.

"All right. Let's read *Curious George*, now." Jon let his father pull the covers up around him and settled in to listen to the story. The little boy yawned and could barely keep his eyes open for the whole story. Not long after Clark had finished reading to him about the adventures of the mischievous little monkey, Jon was fast asleep.

Clark stood up silently and whispered, "Goodnight, little guy. I love you." He shut off the light and quietly pulled the door closed behind him. He made his way back downstairs to the den. His parents were enjoying a cup of tea and watching the evening news together. They both looked up and favored him with a smile as he entered the room. He wondered if he and Lois would ever get back to being as comfortable together as his parents were.

"Jon asleep?" his father asked.

"Yeah. Teeth brushed, tucked in, story read," Clark replied.

His mother regarded him with a sympathetic expression. "Is everything all right, honey?"

"Yeah, Mom, everything's fine," he said, knowing he didn't sound convincing. "I'm just going to go for a walk. Clear my head." Clark turned and walked out of the room and out onto the porch. He looked up at the clear autumn night's sky. Countless stars were scattered across the heavens, glittering brightly. He stared up at the dark swirls of constellations. Shooting stars streaked across the sky.

He walked lazily to the edge of his parents' property, following the length of fence that demarcated the boundary of the farm. He tapped in a few loose nails holding up the wooden slats. The corn stalks were almost as tall as he was, the wheat was just about ready to be harvested, and pumpkins had grown fat on the vines. The crops would keep him and his father busy for the next few weeks. He hoped the work would help keep his mind occupied with something other than dark thoughts about New Krypton. Looking up, he saw the familiar sight of his wife

descending from the heavens. She touched down softly in the path near the wheat fields.

"Hey," she said quietly.

"Hey," he replied. "Everything okay?"

She nodded. "Metropolis was pretty quiet."

Clark extended a hand toward his wife. She spun out of her suit and into old, worn-out jeans and sweater. She took his outstretched hand. They walked silently along the edge of the farm. Even though she was just as impervious to the cold as he was, he pulled her closer at the first hint of a cool autumn breeze, draping his arm across her shoulders. "I love you," he said quietly.

"I love you," she whispered in response.

He stopped, reached out to caress her cheek, and kissed her. She let him pull her into his arms and tucked her head under his chin. Clark kissed the crown of her hair and closed his eyes. Listening to the sound of her heartbeat soothed him and calmed his troubled nerves. It shouldn't have been like this. They should have had some time together as newlyweds, time to get used to being married, time to figure out what that meant for them, before having a world full of troubles dropped on them. But instead, he was trying to figure out how to be a husband and a father at the same time. He was trying to figure out his marriage at the same time that he was trying to figure out how to fit into a world that had changed over the last four years. He was trying to figure out his place in Lois's life, given how much she'd changed. Why couldn't they just slow the world to a stop, make it wait for them a little while, until they got things figured out?

Lois awoke suddenly; she tried to focus on the sound that roused her, the voice that she knew better than any other in the world. She strained to make out the words, but they were completely unintelligible. "Clark?" she whispered, uncertain whether he was awake. His back was to her, physically keeping her at bay. She touched his shoulder. He continued to murmur, repeating the same words in a mantra she couldn't understand. "Sweetheart?"

"Baroth et nias di ...baroth et nias di...baroth..."

Lois wrapped her arm around him, pulling him closer to her. She realized that he was trembling, his voice high and agitated, almost shrill. "Baroth et nias di...nias...nias...nias..."

"Shhh, sweetheart, it's all right," she whispered. She felt him struggle, his arms thrashing, his body contorting as he tried to break free. Lois held him a little tighter, afraid that he still did not know his own strength and in this odd nightmare halfway between waking and sleeping, that he'd lash out. In these nightmares, in these horrible dreams, when he'd flail and fight, she would hold him. Physically invulnerable, he could do her no harm. Eventually, he'd give in, realizing that he was home and safe, and he'd fall asleep again.

"Clark...Clark, it's okay. Honey, it's okay..." Her voice grew slightly louder. He stilled in her embrace.

"Lois?" he breathed her name, a question that made her believe that he was afraid she wasn't really there. He placed his hand on top of hers, holding it against his bare chest.

"I'm here, honey, I'm here. You're okay." She stroked his hair. He fell silent and for a long moment neither said anything.

"What does it mean?" she asked at last.

"What?"

"What you were saying before. It was in Kryptonian, wasn't it? It was something like Bar oth..."

"Baroth et nias di," he replied flatly.

"That's it," she responded. "What does it mean?"

He paused. "I'll never tell you."

She felt the knife twist in her chest. Tears pricked at her eyes. She couldn't even begin to think about what he meant. She would have wondered what could have made him say that, what could have made him shut her out like that, but she was too stunned by the fact that all of the air had been drawn out of the room and she was unable to even take a simple breath. "Clark?" she managed at last, her voice breaking.

"No, that's what it means," he explained, his voice wavering. "It means 'I'll never tell you.'"

A shuddering breath escaped her. She hugged him more tightly, wishing he would turn around so she could look into his eyes. "Wh...why?" she asked. "Who were you talking to?"

She felt him sigh. "When Nor...held me prisoner, I'd sort of fade in and out of consciousness. I was delirious, I guess. I'd start speaking in English...he wanted to know what I was saying. He was just taunting me, I guess."

"Do you remember what you were saying? What it was you wouldn't tell him?"

"It was your name," he confessed. "I must have been saying it over and over again. He asked me what it meant, what it was I kept repeating. He'd say your name and it sounded...wrong. He had no right. He had no right to say it. I wouldn't tell him. I couldn't. I couldn't let him know about you."

She closed her eyes, feeling a tear slip down her cheek. She took a deep breath, hoping that she could hide the fact that she was crying. "He tried to make you tell him, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Clark admitted reluctantly. He continued to hold her hand against his chest, but he didn't turn around. She felt him trace his thumb against the skin on the back of her hand. He wasn't going to let her in, but he wasn't going to let her go, either. He held onto her, like he held onto the thread of their relationship, desperately hoping it wouldn't fray or break.

"I'm trying to figure out where I fit in in my own life," he said quietly from his usual perch on the couch. "I'm not doing my job. Ultrawoman's taking care of that. I'm trying to make things right with my wife, but I don't really even know what that means..."

Dr. Friskin frowned; she couldn't help him discover any particular insights in this area unless she knew more about his relationship than he'd cared to share until this point.

There were certain things she'd surmised about him from what he'd told her—it was highly unlikely that his invincible wife was anyone but Ultrawoman, which explained why she had taken his departure so hard. But he was so reluctant to say any more than was absolutely necessary. "What was your marriage like before you left?"

She watched as he folded his hands over his stomach and sighed. "It was perfect. For one night, it was absolutely perfect. And perfectly awful."

Dr. Friskin nodded to herself in silent understanding. "So your leaving sped up your plans to get married?"

"Not exactly," he said with another sigh. "We'd been planning to get married for a while, but things kept getting in the way."

Like a meddling sociopathic billionaire and his fiancée losing her memory. The parallel lines of two lives merged into one. "Superman..."

"Why don't we cut the pretense?" he asked as he sat up.

"Clark..." she began again. He nodded in acknowledgment. "You've had a lot more to get used to than just having Lois take over your job, haven't you?"

"I should have been here for her," he said, his voice a harsh whisper. "I shouldn't have left her alone."

"Your son was born nine months after you left. I take it you didn't know..."

"I didn't know," he agreed.

"You didn't have a routine in your marriage to return to, so being a husband and father are both new to you, right?"

"Yeah."

She pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose from where they'd slipped to as she leaned over her notepad. "So of course these roles are going to be difficult to adjust to. You're jumping into family life midstream, so to speak, and all under the uncomfortable eye of the press and public. I want to talk more about your family as we go forward. If you'd be comfortable with it and if Lois agrees, I'd like to talk to both of you together, too. But I also want you to remember that you are making progress. You've started talking to your wife about your experiences. You've recognized the impact that your time on New Krypton has had on your family life. I want you to take a little time to pursue the things that interested you, that were an important part of your identity before you left."

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, as you forge new identities as a husband and father, it will be easier to reintegrate yourself if you can assert identities that are familiar and comfortable for you."

"I was a reporter before. I can't do that now. I was Superman before. And we both know it's better for everyone if I don't try taking that up again for a while."

Dr. Friskin pressed her lips together in a thin frown. It was truly unfortunate that so many aspects of his previous life had changed to the point of being unrecognizable. The roles he had been comfortable in before either didn't exist

or were no longer things he could adopt easily. “Well, even if you can’t be an investigative reporter right now, what about writing? You are a very talented writer, Clark.”

“Thanks,” he said absently. “I’m just not sure what to write about.”

“You can write for catharsis. Or write for escape. Or to refocus your energies on something that was always important to you. Or to discover a new passion. Whatever is most comfortable for you.”

He nodded silently and closed his eyes. “I’ll try,” he said earnestly. He stood up swiftly, his cape rustling behind him as he moved. “Thank you, Dr. Friskin.”

“Of course. And you know that everything you say here remains in the strictest confidence.”

A ghost of a smile—one that didn’t reach his eyes—briefly crossed his expression. “I know,” he responded. “I’ll see you in a few days?”

“Would you prefer to come as you’re currently dressed...” She glanced up and down at his colorful regalia. “Or ... ?”

“I’ll probably draw less attention to myself as Clark, although maybe not that much less,” he said, his tone so different from the one Superman adopted. It was remarkable, she thought idly. He really did use very different inflection and mannerisms in his two personas. He walked toward the window and gently lifted off the ground, floating with seemingly effortless grace out into the evening’s sky.

Her fingers flew over the keyboard, tapping out the letters, words, and sentences to form her next column. Seven hundred and fifty words. That was all she got to try to inform, to persuade, to start a conversation. Assuming she had something relevant to say. She was supposed to be pithy and erudite and insightful. Yet she couldn’t think of anything worth writing about. She looked down at what she’d typed out:

I have no idea what to write about and Perry’s going to kill me.

She quickly deleted the text with a sigh. Lois stretched her legs out on the couch, her computer balanced on her lap. The whole house was quiet. Jonathan and Martha were asleep. So was her little boy. Clark hadn’t yet returned, but it wasn’t that uncommon for him to stay out after his appointments with Dr. Friskin. She knew he needed the time to clear his head. Lord knew she’d needed it too, when she was in his position.

The porch step squeaked, letting her know that he’d come home. She looked through the walls to see him entering the farmhouse. He walked in slowly, his shoulders slumping. Lois’s heart sank; she hoped he was just tired – reliving the worst experiences of your life had a way of exhausting you, even when you had superhuman endurance. He walked into the den.

“She knows,” he said flatly.

“You told Dr. Friskin?” she ventured, unsure how to read his lack of emotion.

“More or less,” he replied with a shrug. “I’m sorry; I should have talked to you about it first.”

Lois shook her head. “If it helps you work through things, I don’t mind at all.”

“She wants to talk to both of us...together...” he continued unenthusiastically.

“Are you okay with that?”

She watched him sigh and, out of the corner of her eye, saw his hand begin to tremble. “I’m holding what’s left of me together with a prayer and scotch tape,” he said, a waver in his voice. “There’s still stuff I can’t deal with yet because I’m afraid I’m going to fall apart.”

Closing her laptop and setting it aside, she stood up. “I know,” she whispered. “I mean...I don’t know exactly what you’re going through...but I know what it’s like to be so afraid of what you’re feeling that it’s easier to pretend you don’t feel anything.” Lois stepped around the couch and walked toward where he was standing, still hanging around the doorway to the room. “I love you. And I will be here, no matter what.”

Clark closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. Her eyes shut, she hugged him tightly. “I love you,” he whispered in response. “So much.”

“There’s something I want to show you,” he heard himself say. The thought had been rolling around in his head for hours. He’d been flying around, trying to figure out what to say to her. His outburst earlier that week hung around his neck like a millstone, but he wasn’t about to revisit that. He took her hand and led her up to their room.

Clark let her hand slip from his as he crossed the room to open the metal box sitting on the dresser. He picked up the first of the globes. He watched as she bit her lip slightly. “Is it another message from your birth parents?”

“Not exactly,” he replied. “More like a home movie.” Clark activated the globe and watched as the image of his parents appeared before him, larger than life.

“They look so young,” he heard her murmur, echoing his own thought. She exhaled sharply at the sight of his birth mother, lifting the tiny baby into her arms. “That isn’t you...”

“My sister, Keir El,” he confirmed. Off her questioning look, he shook his head sadly.

“What happened?” she whispered.

“She died a few years before I was born. Cancer.” He bit out the word harshly. “She was six.” Incongruously, the images of his impossibly happy parents continued to play in front of him.

<<Your mother loves you very much.>>

“What did she say?” Lois whispered almost reverently.

His birth mother had of course been speaking Kryptonian. He activated the globe’s translation program. “She said, ‘Your mother loves you.’”

Jor El smiled at his tiny daughter. <<As does your father.>> This time, the image of his birth father spoke

English, as he had on the globe that had accompanied his son to Earth. Lois quietly walked toward him and wrapped her arm around his waist, still watching the image of his parents. He draped his arm across her shoulders, holding her close. For a long while, they watched the captured moments of happiness silently.

"I met their closest friend. He was a physician who saved my life when I was a baby. Tao Scion loved my family and kept their memory alive. I learned so much about them from him. Most of the time, I hated everything about New Krypton, but learning about my parents and my sister...it helped." He closed his eyes and swallowed roughly. "It helped make sense of why I was there, what I was trying to do. My parents gave their lives to save that world. My father was the one who realized Krypton was dying. He and my mother designed the technology that saved the millions of people who escaped to New Krypton. They sent me to Earth instead because their enemies had tried to kill me. They knew they couldn't keep me safe, so they sent me here. And they gave up their own seats on the last shuttle to New Krypton so that others could take their place."

Eventually, the image faded to black. By the end of that first globe, his older sister had started walking and talking. His birth parents couldn't have seemed more pleased.

"Thank you for showing me this," Lois whispered.

"You know that if I'd had any way of knowing you were pregnant, I wouldn't have left," he explained.

"I know, sweetheart," she replied, leaning closer to him.

"But knowing what I did then, I think I did the right thing. I think I owed it to my parents."

"They would have been so proud of you," his wife whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

He let it go, not sure how to respond.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you," he replied. "More than you can imagine."

He kissed the crown of her hair, wondering what she would think about him if she knew the full story, if she knew what had happened on New Krypton. She'd sent off her idealistic husband, so naively certain he could do good. She was fully aware that it wasn't the same man who'd returned to her so many years later. But could she imagine just how different he was? And if she could, could she accept that man?

"Lois, what can I do for you?" Dr. Friskin asked warmly as she opened the door to her office.

Lois stepped into the office and waited for the doctor to close the door. "Clark mentioned that you wanted to speak to both of us," she began.

"That's right," Dr. Friskin replied without missing a beat. If she'd been surprised to learn that Lois Lane and Clark Kent were also Ultrawoman and Superman, nothing she did betrayed that fact.

Lois hesitated for a moment, trying to figure out how to proceed. "I'm not sure he's ready to do that. But until he is...if you think it would help him to talk about anything I told you during our sessions, you have my permission."

"That's helpful, thank you," the older woman responded.

Lois wanted so desperately to ask if Clark was doing better. His showing her the globe seemed like progress, but now that she knew something of what had happened to him, all she seemed to do was fret over how he was coping with it. But she'd come here knowing this conversation would be a one way affair. Dr. Friskin would never betray Clark's confidence and for that, Lois was incalculably grateful.

Dr. Friskin regarded her with a sympathetic smile as she sat down in her large wingback chair. "How have you been handling this transition?"

Out of habit—even though it had been quite a while since she'd been here—she sat down on the leather couch. "It's a lot harder than I thought it would be," Lois admitted as she folded her hands. "I spent four years and three months dreaming about his homecoming. I don't think I gave much thought to how hard it would be for all of us to readjust."

"That's perfectly understandable," Dr. Friskin replied, giving what Lois now recognized was one of those verbal encouragements shrinks used to keep their patients talking.

"It's just that...I've told him about everything—what I went through, what it was like without him. I'm not trying to compare scars, but I don't think he understands how hard it was. I'm trying to be patient, but I was never very good at it..." She could hear her voice waver.

"Don't sell yourself short, Lois. This isn't an easy set of circumstances. And part of the reason I want to work with both of you together is so we can try to address both of your concerns. Clark isn't the only one adjusting to a dramatic change."

"I know," Lois said. She hadn't anticipated this brief visit turning into a therapy session, but it felt good to talk to Dr. Friskin again. "I want to be supportive, but..." she trailed off, not sure how to finish. "I've never wanted anything more than I wanted him to come home. I always just assumed that when he came back, everything would be easier. In some ways, it's harder. It's a horrible thing to say, and I don't want you to think I'm anything but profoundly thankful that he's home..."

"I understand. And what you're going through is difficult, but it's not surprising. Emotionally, we can't prepare ourselves for a readjustment like this. When he was gone, you focused on your hope that he would come home, and it helped you do everything you needed to do. You couldn't simultaneously do that and worry about what the transition would be like when he returned. It would have been too much."

Lois sighed. As usual, her shrink made perfect sense. "We worked together for years before he left. We talked about things and argued about things and solved problems as a team. I just figured our marriage would be the same. I can see that it's hard for him to deal with what happened and I don't know what to do because it doesn't seem like he wants my help."

“You’ve both taken important steps, here,” Dr. Friskin counseled gently. “And I know you remember what it was like in his position, when you didn’t want the people you cared about to know what you were experiencing. You came out of your ordeal in Kinwara stronger than you were when it began. You learned to recognize your limits, even if you didn’t want to accept them. This, too, is going to take a lot of effort, but I think there’s a lot we can do together.”

“Thank you, Dr. Friskin.”

Dr. Friskin smiled. “I like to think of helping you and Clark as my own little good deed.”

Lois shook her head knowingly. “It’s a lot more than that. I wouldn’t have been able to carry on, to do Clark’s job, without you.”

“So who should the story be about?” Clark asked as he set the crayons down on the kitchen table.

“A dinosaur!” Jon said excitedly.

Clark pulled out a chair to sit next to his son. He looked down to watch as Jon swung his little legs back and forth, his feet nowhere near the ground. “A big dinosaur?”

“No, just a little one,” Jon replied. “And his doggy.”

“The dinosaur has a doggy?”

Jon nodded seriously. “The doggy has spots.” He took out a blue crayon and started scribbling on the paper.

Clark smiled. “What color are the doggy’s spots?”

“Purple,” Jon said without looking up.

“How about the dinosaur? What color is he?”

“Green,” Jon replied as he took out the green crayon and started coloring with that, too.

“What are the dinosaur and the doggy going to do?”

“Catch frogs!” It was getting a little too cold for them to traipse around in the pond now, but that didn’t stop them from writing a story about a doggy and a dinosaur who caught frogs. They spent the afternoon at the kitchen table, with Jon drawing with his crayons and happily explaining them to his father. While the pictures were only decipherable to the little boy, by dinner time, they had a whole story book of dinosaur adventures.

Clark heard the truck slowly pull up on the gravel driveway. A moment later, the door to the porch opened and his father and Lois entered the kitchen.

“Hey there,” Lois said with an easy smile. “What are my two favorite guys up to?”

“Mommy, we wrote a story!” Jon exclaimed as he hopped off his chair and carried the stapled stack of papers to his mother. He presented them to her, a beaming smile on his little face.

She scooped him up in her arms, still grinning. “Why don’t you tell me the story?”

Clark turned to his father as Lois and Jon made their way to living room. “Everything all set for the Corn Festival?”

His father nodded. “I’ll be manning the grill again this year. But I think they still need some help with the husk off. Are you planning on going?”

Clark dragged a hand through his hair. “I guess.”

“Well, if you can help out, give Gus a call.”

“All right, Dad,” he replied noncommittally as he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He wanted to beg off the entire thing. He couldn’t stand crowds and with superhearing, there was no way to ignore the fact that everyone would be talking about him. Sure, it had been months, but there just wasn’t enough good gossip in such a small town to displace him as a key topic of conversation. Of course, if he’d just been more of a regular presence, people would have gotten used to having him back. As it was, his rare appearances always set the gossip mavens chattering.

Well, the only way to end that was to start acting like everything was normal. Maybe if he quit hiding like a man afraid of his own shadow, he’d relearn how to navigate life in a town where everyone seemed to know everything about everyone. The more mysterious he seemed, the more people wanted to talk. Perhaps it was time to take away the mystique that had shrouded Clark Kent since his return. His heart pounding, his mouth dry, his palms sweating, he made his way to the kitchen to call Gus and see how he could help out.

The air was crisp and clear, the weather perfect for the first day of the Corn Festival. The whole town seemed to be out for the biggest event of the year. He tried not to be distracted by the swirl of activity that surrounded them. The sounds of laughter and shouting, carnival barking, and amusement park style rides put him more on edge than he’d expected. He held Jon’s little hand, mindful not to hold on too tightly. His son smiled up at his father, his face sticky with the pink cotton candy that he held proudly in his free hand.

“Daddy, can we ride the merry go round?” he asked.

“Let’s go see your mommy, first,” Clark replied. He worried that mixing all the cotton candy, caramel apples, and popcorn with rides that went ‘round in circles would make Jon sick. He probably shouldn’t have indulged Jon’s every request for the junk food, but it was still easier to give in than to be the strict parent.

Lois was at the stall set up for the Smallville Book Corner, signing copies of her book. Later, she was going to have a talk for high school students about service and activism. From a distance, Clark watched as she smiled and chatted with an excited young woman, holding on tightly to a copy of Lois’s book. The book signing was technically over, but a few people remained in a small group, speaking to Smallville’s most famous author.

“Hi, Mommy!” Jon shouted as they approached the bookstore’s stall. He tugged his father forward and they made their way toward Lois. She smiled so openly, so joyfully at the sight of her son. Clark let Jon’s hand go and the little boy ran to his mother. Lois picked him up easily, sweeping him into a big hug. He watched, happiness stirring up inside him, as Lois laughed at having a cotton-candied kiss pressed against her cheek.

He strolled toward them, his spirits buoyed by the sight of his young family. His wife favored him with a smile, which he couldn't help but return. "Hey there," she said as he approached.

"Hey, Mr. Kent!" a teenager girl exclaimed. The small group turned its attention toward him. He tried not to flinch at the presence of so many people with their eyes on him.

"Hi," he replied with a small nod and a tight-lipped smile.

"Are you working the Husk Off?" Lois asked.

"Yeah, I have to go judge round one in a little bit."

"Well, we'll go find Grandma and Grandpa and meet you there," Lois said simply. "Thanks guys," she said, turning to the group still gathered at the stall.

"So how did it go?"

Clark tugged at his tie. He hated wearing these things. Being 'Clark' seemed somehow as strange as being Superman. "Fine," he replied. "I mean, there was a lot of talk, you know, people whispering about being surprised to see me. Whether I was thinner than I was before I left. Wondering what had happened to me. A lot of speculation. But mostly, they were circumspect about it. To my face, it was just a lot of 'great to see you, Clark,' 'glad you made it,' sort of comments."

Dr. Friskin proceeded with her usual routine of scratching out notes. "How did the crowds and the attention make you feel?"

"Like I was in a fishbowl," he admitted. "I still don't like being around so many people. Not really sure how I'm going to adapt to living in Metropolis again."

"Have you decided to move back?"

"I think so," he replied. "I mean, nothing definite yet. But I want to get my life back. Lois and I started talking about it. We need to find our own place."

"Of course."

"We both love this city. It'll be easier for her work and for Ultrawoman." He was still trying to get used to having someone else in on the secret. Talking so casually about Lois being Ultrawoman was so unnatural.

"What about you?"

"I've tried to start writing," he replied as he sat up. He took an envelope out of his jacket pocket. "I couldn't really figure out what to write about. But you mentioned before that I should try to figure out what bothered me most about New Krypton and what I hoped to get out of our sessions." He stood up to hand his therapist the envelope. She took the envelope and put it under her notebook.

"Good," she said. "We can talk about this at our next session. Have you given any thought to having Lois at some of our meetings?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose as he retook his seat. "Yeah. I want her to come, but...there are still things I haven't worked out yet..."

"Have you started talking to her about your experiences?"

"Sort of," he replied. "I told her about my birth family. My parents sent me here as a baby to protect me. They died when Krypton was destroyed. I was found by the Kents. They adopted me and raised me. But I started developing my powers when I was about eight or nine." He told her what it was like growing up, not knowing if he was a Russian or a Martian. He told her how terribly afraid he was of the strange things he could do. He told her about secretly searching out for others who were like him. Hoping to find some evidence that he wasn't completely alone in the world. That if he was a freak, at least he wasn't the only one.

"I knew I was different, but I didn't know I was from another planet until after I moved to Metropolis and created Superman. My parents had included a globe in my spaceship; it had the last messages my parents ever recorded on it. It just sort of turned on one day, and played the messages. I didn't know there were other survivors until Ching and Zara arrived here four years ago asking for my help. While I was on New Krypton, I met my parents' closest friend. He gave me the recordings he had of my family. I showed the first one to Lois."

"That's great," Dr. Friskin said warmly. "This is a big step, Clark."

He felt his mouth twist into a wry imitation of a smile. "It feels more like a stall tactic," he replied.

"Clark, you've said yourself that your experiences on New Krypton were varied. There were certainly many bad ones, but there were good ones as well. Those experiences were part of your life for four years. Lois will want to know about them and it can be a good thing for you to share them. You don't need to think of this as a stall tactic. Letting her in, even if it is by sharing the seemingly innocuous events, can help you reconnect."

He closed his eyes and nodded, trying to let the words sink in. Maybe she was right. Maybe he should try. "We've gone on more than an hour," he said as he looked at his watch.

"I guess we have," Dr. Friskin agreed. "I'll see you in a few days, then."

"Thank you," he said as he stood to leave.

"Of course, Clark," she replied with a warm smile. She stood to see him to the door.

She sat back down at her desk as soon as he was gone and took the single page out of the envelope he had handed her.

I was raised to be an honorable man. To always do the right thing. To take care of the people I love. To protect and help those who were weaker than I. To be faithful to the things that mattered to me. It wasn't hard to do these things before. I honestly believed that I was a good man – that I'd been tested and had proven it to be true. But I had no idea what it meant to be tested.

That place broke me.

I was supposed to protect people. Instead, two of my bodyguards died to keep me safe. My officers allowed more

than a thousand people to be slaughtered because they hid vital information from me, thinking I was too weak to deal with it. I turned my back on the people who'd stood by me. I was cruel to those who'd shown me nothing but kindness. I broke faith. I wanted nothing more than to end another man's life, preferably with my own bare hands. I prayed for death, knowing its sweet release would mean breaking the most important promise I'd ever made. I even tried to kill the good that was left in me, to go numb to everyone else's pain so that breaking my oaths and dying on that damned, desolate rock would be easier.

I killed a man.

I had told myself that I could never do such a thing. I was absolutely convinced of that fact. And yet, I was the one who killed the leader of the rebellion. I shot him in battle. I was already wounded and he was about to kill me. It was easy for everyone to dismiss the possibility that I killed him out of rage or a desire for revenge for what he did to me.

I used to be someone people could depend on. I used to be confident in the fact that I could be a powerful force for good in the lives of others. I want these things back. I want to be someone people can trust. I want to stop living in my own nightmares. I want to believe that I didn't kill the good inside me that day along with Nor. That when I shot him in that corridor, I didn't also destroy Superman.

How do you cause that kind of violence, and then go back to being a person again? How can I raise my son, live with my family, go back to being someone who helps people, after something like that?

And that was it.

That was the big secret he'd been keeping. Bigger than his dual identities. Bigger than what Nor had done to him. It was what he had done to Nor. Clark Kent, Superman, had taken another life. That fact was tearing him apart. It was a dark truth he couldn't vocalize. But he could write it down. He'd put his confession on paper, perhaps because he'd been afraid to see the reaction it would create. She felt like she understood better why he was so fixated on Superman's unimpeachable moral character.

Superman would never kill a person. But Kal El had had no choice. To Clark Kent, there was no real distinction among the three personalities. To a certain degree, that was good. He wasn't using alter egos to dissociate. His persona, complex though it was, was well integrated. But that integration relied on his remarkable powers. He could live a life of greater moral clarity because his powers obliterated certain gray areas. He held himself to such high standards because those standards made it possible for people to accept and welcome Superman. And though it would have been impossible for an ordinary man to maintain such moral absolutes, Clark Kent thrived on that kind of clarity. The starkness of good and evil in the world he occupied made him comfortable. To be all powerful and to lurk in the muddled, confusing gray zones would have been intolerable for him. And yet, for four years, he'd had to live in a world of moral relativism, waging and sometimes personally

fighting a war –witnessing violence he was not only powerless to stop, but violence for which he felt responsible. He may have been without his powers, but it was obvious that that hadn't changed his moral frame of reference. The absolutes didn't disappear quite as easily as his invulnerability.

She folded up the note and put it back into the envelope. With deft movements, she spun the dial, unlocking the safe under her desk and opened its weighty metal door. She placed the envelope and her notes inside, where she kept everything relating to Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Ordinary secrets were a burden enough. These confidences were of life and death importance. It made her job more difficult, not being able to consult with colleagues – it wasn't as though she could properly discuss this case by simply eliminating identifying information. But that was a burden she'd knowingly undertaken when Ultrawoman became her patient years ago.

She closed the safe and locked it firmly, checking the handle twice.

"Jon's asleep," she said as she walked into the den.

Clark put down the newspaper. "It's a great column," he said.

"Thanks," she replied with a slight smile. "I might have to spend some more time in Metropolis to cover the story, though." She'd only hit the tip of the iceberg, it seemed, in uncovering racial profiling by lawyers in the city's criminal courts. "Maybe you and Jon should come?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "I did promise Perry I'd come in at some point." She joined him on the couch, curling up next to him as his arm came around her shoulders.

He picked up the folded newspaper. "This almost makes me nostalgic for New Krypton's courts," he said, taking the very first step of starting a conversation about that place without prodding.

"Oh yeah?" she asked after pausing for a beat, obviously surprised by his choice of topic.

"It took months to convict Nor of treason. Testifying against him was one of the hardest things I had to do. But I had an amazing lawyer who prosecuted the case."

"So you captured Nor?" she ventured hesitantly.

He smiled wryly. "I didn't. Commander Talan did."

"Commander Talan...he was the one who rescued you, with Ching, right?"

Clark chuckled softly as he kissed the top of her head. "Not he. She," he corrected, remembering how he'd made the exact same mistake the first time the inimitable commander had been mentioned to him. His mood sobered considerably. "She was probably the best officer in the history of the Kryptonian Forces. She saved my life at least a half dozen times. She captured Nor and ended the war."

"I'm glad to know there were good people who helped you."

"There were," he agreed. "They're a good people. They were trying to scrape out a life for themselves in the most inhospitable place you could imagine. I know Zara and

Ching seemed... cold, when you met them. But they really did everything to put their people ahead of themselves.”

“Are they okay?” she asked.

He’d almost forgotten just how much she didn’t know, how much he’d been keeping from her. “They are. They’re together. Ching took my place when I abdicated.” It was the first time in a long time that he’d smiled while remembering New Krypton.

“You made sure of that, didn’t you?” she asked.

“I told the Council I wouldn’t abdicate to anyone besides Ching,” he admitted.

Lois looked up at him and touched his face. He dipped his head down to kiss her. “You are a good man, Clark,” she said. “I love you so much.”

“I love you,” he whispered, his eyes closed, his forehead touching hers. “No matter what, please believe that.”

“You know that I do,” she replied, her voice thick with emotion.

“I want you to watch the recordings on the other globes. I think it might help.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. He hugged her a little bit tighter.

A breathless sigh escaped her lips as he slowly withdrew from the kiss. In the darkness, she lay in his arms, spent from passion, knowing sleep would come soon. She turned onto her side, his powerful body molding itself to hers. He took her hand in his, knotting their fingers together. Lois felt him press his lips to her shoulder.

Their intimacy tonight was more than physical. For the first time since he’d returned, he’d truly opened up to her about what New Krypton had been like. It was more than a relief to know that there had been people there who had helped him and supported him.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” She could feel his breath on her neck and it sent a delightful shiver down her spine.

“For telling me about New Krypton. I know it must be hard.”

“It is,” he admitted. “It seems like it would be easier to just forget sometimes. But not all of it was bad.”

“Good or bad, you know there isn’t anything you can’t tell me, right?” He was silent for too long. “Clark?” she ventured hesitantly.

“The things that happened to me there, I’m not proud of the way I reacted to them. I should have been better. I should have done better,” he replied.

She lifted his hand to her lips. “You survived, you came home to me. Whatever else happened, we’ll get through it together.”

She picked up the final globe, wondering what images, what messages, it held in store for her. She’d spent the better part of the day watching these recordings, while the rest of her family was at the Corn Festival. Through the hours of captured memories, it was almost like she knew Clark’s birth parents and their dearest friend, the physician

who had made these recordings. They may have been Kryptonians, but they were still so recognizably human. She could tell how much they loved each other. How much they loved their children. The penultimate globe had captured her husband’s first days. What should have been a time of unalloyed happiness for the House of El was tainted by the bitterness of a rapidly dying planet and haunted by the ghost of a beloved daughter lost years before.

The globe was warm to the touch. It glowed softly as it activated.

“Good tidings, my friend. The First Ministers, Enza, Lok Sim, Commander Talan, and I wanted to take this final opportunity to wish you well and thank you.” It was a message from Tao Scion. He had aged from the earlier images of him with Jor El and Lara, his hair now snow white. Smile lines gathered at the corners of his bright blue eyes. He warmly called Clark “young man,” and repeated something Lois had always known. With tears glistening in his eyes, he whispered: “Your mother and father would be so proud of the man you have become and what you have done for their people. It was the greatest honor of my life to see my friends’ son all grown up. You will be missed, my young friend, but I am so happy to know that you are returning to the family and friends you love so much. Thank you and may fortune be with you all the days of your life.” The old physician disappeared as the message ended. As soon as it did, another began.

“Hello, Clark.” The sight of Zara, fondly greeting Clark caught Lois completely by surprise. Ching stood beside her, but Lois barely recognized him. He was smiling. It was a good thing the globe could float under its own power because she let go of it, her hands dropping listlessly by her sides.

“We wanted to thank you again for all that you have done for our world,” Ching said as he took Zara’s hand. They were both dressed in black robes over simple black uniforms, cloaked in an almost regal air. “You saved our civilization and brought peace to our people. We owe you a debt we could not begin to repay, but please know that you have this world’s everlasting gratitude and love.”

Lois felt her lips turn upward in a smile. The Ching she had met briefly more than four years ago had been dour and unyielding. He hadn’t seemed particularly impressed with Clark at the time and he’d made no attempts to hide his disdain. The man in the image before her, profoundly moved by gratefulness, was someone else entirely. It shouldn’t have surprised her. Her husband had that effect on people.

“And Lois, if you are watching this...” Zara began. “We want you to know how grateful we are for everything you have sacrificed. I know it is no consolation for the many years we deprived you of your husband’s company, but he was the greatest leader New Krypton could have hoped for. We are humbled to have served with him and honored to call him our beloved friend.”

“Several times during this war, I almost lost Zara,” Ching said soberly, with a quick glance at the woman he

loved. “I didn’t fully appreciate what we were asking you to risk and sacrifice. I think that I do, now. I’m sorry for everything that you must have endured. You and Clark have both given up so much in the service of perfect strangers. Not many people would have done that. Your sacrifices were not in vain. New Krypton is at peace because of you two. Thank you.” As he concluded, Ching bowed his head solemnly, his eyes closed.

Lois wiped an errant tear from her cheek. These people loved her husband and it lifted her heart to know that. It surprised her to see the warmth that radiated from their voices and their smiles. Ching and Zara had seemed so aloof and distant when she had met them. They spoke only of duty and responsibility.

It seemed strange to watch these messages without Clark. He had assured her that he wanted her to watch them; but she wondered about the fact that Ching and Zara’s message was directed to her, and yet he’d never said a word about it. She knew it was difficult for Clark to watch these recordings, but he’d never so much as mentioned the fact that his friends on that world had recorded these personal farewells.

The next recording was of a young man and woman, dressed in the same sort of black uniforms as Ching and Zara. She wondered if they were military, or if all Kryptonians wore the same, simple clothing. The woman wore a peculiar metal brace on her right arm, holding it stiffly at a sharp right angle. They were visible only from about the waist up, but the young woman appeared to be sitting in a wheelchair. A scar on her forehead, though fading, bore witness to what must have been a terribly wide and deep gash. Lois wondered how she’d received such awful injuries. The man next to her looked like a powerful, towering figure, even when seated. But his eyes were so gentle. He smiled almost shyly.

“Farewell, sir,” the woman began. “It has been a true honor and privilege to serve your administration. Thank you so much for what you have done for our world. And for Lok Sim, Thia, and me.”

“We truly cannot thank you enough,” the young man said softly as he glanced at the woman beside him, his eyes betraying his quiet adoration. “We can raise Thia in a world at peace because of you. We wish you all the best in your life, sir. May fortune be with you.”

Thia must have been their child. She wondered what role this young couple played in the life of Kal El. They had clearly worked for her husband, but in what capacity? She supposed it didn’t matter. They regarded their former leader with the same quiet admiration and gratitude that Ching and Zara had expressed. She was almost surprised to see that New Krypton, a world she hated for taking her husband away, would be the home of people this gracious.

The image faded away and another appeared. She felt her jaw go slack at the sight of the woman in front of her, whose piercing gray eyes held Lois’s gaze from across a distance of billions of miles. “Good tidings, sir,” the woman said, her voice clear. Her blonde hair was pulled back

simply. Her face was, of course, devoid of makeup—Kryptonians would never have had time for something as superficial and silly as that—which meant that she woke up every morning that breathtakingly beautiful. The prominent cheekbones, the flawless skin, the slim, straight bridge of her nose, the defined and elegant line of her jaw. She wore the same black uniform the others had worn. She had to be Commander Talan: the last person Tao Scion had mentioned in the litany of those who’d recorded these farewell messages.

But that didn’t make any sense. The commander who’d saved Clark’s life? Who had captured Nor and dragged him to justice? Lois had expected Brunhilda the Warrior Woman, with burly arms and a Viking helmet. Or the female version of Patton, wizened and grim, and chomping on a cigar.

Not Heidi Klum meets Wonder Woman.

She spoke of honor and sacrifice and profound gratitude, but Lois scarcely heard a word of it. For the briefest of moments, she saw a flash of emotion in the woman’s otherwise dispassionate expression. Her perfectly shaped brows arched upward, gathering closer together in a look of pure anguish. Her eyes were full of loss. Though Lois couldn’t imagine looking less like the woman staring at her, in one sense, it was like peering into a mirror. She’d seen that expression before. On her own face. On the morning Clark had left.

It was the look of a woman saying goodbye to the man she loved.

All the air had been sucked out of the room. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t draw a single breath. Her legs threatened to buckle underneath her and she stumbled, vision blurred by burning tears, running away.

She fled. She raced from the room in uncoordinated, flailing steps. Trying to hold back a sob until she had at least crossed the threshold. As though crying in front of that woman—even though she was no more than recorded image—was an ignominy she could not bear. Lois raced out of the farmhouse and shot up into the sky. She coughed and choked as she was overwhelmed by the tears coursing down her face and the sobs that shook her body violently.

Commander Talan had loved Clark.

She knew it. All the way down to the marrow in her bones, she was absolutely sure of it. Her stomach tied itself in knots. Had Clark known? Oh God. Had he? He’d claimed he wasn’t proud of how what he’d done on New Krypton. She closed her eyes, remembering the things he’d said. And suddenly, she couldn’t get the image of the woman out of her head. It wasn’t just Commander Talan. It became impossible for her to see anything besides her husband in the other woman’s embrace. Her slender, elegant figure entwined with Clark’s powerful frame, providing him comfort when there was no one else there for him.

The tears did nothing to blot out the terrible images, the products of an overactive imagination and fears she could

scarcely believe she was entertaining. Her Clark would never have betrayed her. It wasn't in him to do so.

But what he'd been through, what he'd suffered...how could anyone have been expected to endure that? How could anyone have carried that burden alone? Her skin grew clammy. The bile crept up in her throat. She was going to be sick. Lois doubled over in what was nothing less than physical agony.

She was contemplating the worst betrayal she could imagine. And yet...

Even if it was true, even if he had sought comfort from another woman, she would forgive him. If the torment he'd suffered meant that the crushing sense of loneliness had grown too burdensome, if the ache to feel the warmth of a heart beating against yours had been too great, and the need to prove to yourself that the human touch could convey something other than pain and cruelty had overwhelmed him, she would find a way to understand. Lois Lane, who would never tolerate infidelity, who would never play the long-suffering wife, was already prepared to forgive him.

But that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

How could she even contemplate forgiveness?

How could she not?

Clark carried his sleeping son up the loose gravel driveway to the farmhouse, with Grandma and Grandpa following them up the path. It had taken all three days of the Corn Festival's sugared treats, rides, and games to finally wear the little boy out. Tucked in his small arms was the stuffed elephant his daddy had won for him in the test of strength.

Just shy of the porch, he stopped and frowned as his hearing kicked in. He could make out the faint sounds of muffled crying coming from upstairs. Clark turned to his father. "Can you take Jon?" he asked quietly. His father said nothing and merely stretched out his arms to receive his little grandson. Clark saw his parents exchange a look of concern, but he was already turning to head inside.

He hated the thought of his wife crying. He rushed up the stairs, feeling the wrenching pain in his gut. Trying to calm himself down, he knocked softly on the door. "Lois? Is everything okay?" The soft sounds of weeping had stopped, but she said nothing. He eased the door open.

"Lois?" he whispered again.

She was sitting in the darkened room, on just the very corner of the foot of the bed, a large mug held between her hands. He could smell the oolong tea. Years ago, before he'd left, she'd taken to drinking it when she didn't feel well. His wife turned slowly to look at him. Her eyes were red, but he'd already known that they would be.

"Honey, what's wrong?" he asked.

He watched as she swallowed roughly, a look of deep pain etched in her expression. For a long moment, she said nothing. Her eyes pleaded with him, silently begging him for some sort of reassurance, but how could he give that to her when he didn't know what was wrong? "Commander

Talan," she began, her voice shaking. "Who was she to you?"

His eyes narrowed as he stared at her in disbelief. "What?" he asked, not sure he'd heard her correctly, his excellent hearing notwithstanding.

"I...I saw the message she left you..."

"What message?" he heard himself demand.

"On the globe..."

He rushed to the dresser, where the large metal box still sat. Beside it was another globe. He snatched it up, holding it tightly in his fist. "Where did you get this? Where did you find this?" he pressed, agitation creeping into his voice.

"It was with the others," she snapped. He could hear the pain and anger mingling in her tone. She didn't like his thinly shrouded accusation, but then again, he didn't like hers, either.

He glanced back at the container and counted the globes inside. There were seven—the seven globes Tao Scion had given him.

But there was room for an eighth.

Idiot! He hadn't noticed this extraneous little globe, which must have been slipped in with the others before he left. "What did she say?" he asked through gritted teeth. He turned away from her, unable to look at her, his whole body tensed.

"She's a beautiful woman," his wife whispered sadly. "You had to have noticed."

The words seemed to grate on his nerves; the hairs on the back of his neck pricked upwards. He closed his eyes, trying to will his heart to stop thundering out of rhythm. "She didn't just save my life," he said softly. "She delivered me from hell. I'd appreciate it if you didn't turn her into some sort of cheap home wrecker."

"Did you love her?" He would have heard the heartbreak in her voice had it not been blotted out by the roar of his own rage.

"It wasn't like that!" he shouted as he turned around suddenly. "You think I betrayed you, don't you? Don't you?!" he practically spat out the words.

A single tear fell from her eye. "I don't know what to believe," she whispered as she stared down into the mug in her hands, unwilling to make eye contact with him. "You were so upset about what happened there. You couldn't tell me about it. And I saw that message and I knew that she loved you. I know what you went through would have broken anyone. If something happened between you and her..." Lois looked up at him with fresh tears in her eyes.

"I never touched her!" he snapped. She flinched at the severity of his tone. He watched as a shiver caused her body to shake; he couldn't tell if it was relief or fear that seized her. His wife looked away from him.

"She was my friend," he said, more harshly than he'd intended. "I don't know what you think you saw, but she never showed me anything other than friendship and support. The reason I'm alive, the only reason I even resemble a human being, is her." He could hear the tremor

in his voice. Holding the globe tightly in his shaking hand, he walked out of the room.

He took off into the evening sky, with no plan of where to go or what he intended to do. His head swam, dizzy with anger. His heart still thundered from the argument. No, it wasn't an argument. An argument could be civilized. This was a fight. It couldn't have lasted more than a few minutes, but as the entire drama played itself out in his mind, it seemed to drag on – a long interminable, painful affair. And when it finished, it would just restart again, from the beginning. No matter how many times the accusations and shouted retorts replayed themselves, it didn't occur to him to wonder why, when facing his wife's accusations, he'd had to defend Talan's honor before defending his own.

He flew north, to the frigid arctic tundra—to a place where he could be as alone as he felt. He landed on a massive, silent glacier, drifting imperceptibly through the icy waters. Activating the globe, he immediately found the message from Talan and played it.

Seated at her desk, her uniform immaculate, her posture perfect, the general commander gazed clear-eyed directly at her audience. "Good tidings, sir. I wish I could say it was with unqualified happiness that I record this message. I know that despite having an entire world at your beck and call for four years, the only thing that you ever wanted was to return home to the people you love. More than anyone I have ever known, you deserve to be happy, so I am tremendously pleased to see you begin the journey that will take you back to your family." The corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly, but it was a sad smile. "But I hope that you will forgive me some small measure of sadness in preparing this farewell, knowing I will never see you again, my dear friend."

For one raw and hurried fraction of a second, her anguish shone through, deep and inconsolable. "You will be missed, sir. Not only by those of us who could count among the greatest privileges of our lives your friendship, but by people who never even met you. I have spoken to so many people who felt compelled to share with me the stories of how you changed their lives. How a letter from you brought comfort to a grieving family. How seeing you rescue the lost and the injured showed them how much you cared for every man, woman, and child in this world. How knowing that you fought and bled and nearly died to protect them gave them strength to keep fighting.

"We will miss your compassion, your strength, and most of all, your grace. I have never known anyone who bore the weight of their responsibilities so heavily, and yet administered authority with so light a touch as yours. You brought humanity to the dehumanizing business of war. You believed that we could be better than what we had become. And you made us want to try." Her gray eyes glimmered a little more brightly than they did before. Her voice was just a little softer, her tone almost imperceptibly more hesitant.

"It seems almost absurd to try to thank you for what you have done for us. There are no words that can express the depth of my gratitude. We asked too much of you and selflessly, you offered everything you were. I hope...more than anything I have ever wanted before, I hope that going home gives you back what this world has taken from you. I saw how much it pained you to be away from your wife. I hope she can forgive us for the pain we must have caused her as well. I wish you both all the happiness life has to offer, and I promise you this: If there is anything in my power to do to protect this world, to safeguard the priceless gifts of life and peace bestowed upon it through the grace of the Houses of Lo and El, I will do it. We have taken too much from your family, both on Earth and on Krypton, to ever risk squandering it again.

"Goodbye, sir. Safe journey. And may fortune be with you and those you love all the days of your lives." She set her lips in thin, straight line, as though she was trying to check her emotions for just a little while longer, but there was nothing harsh or severe in her expression. The look in her eyes was too wounded, too haunted for that.

He watched it in the original Kryptonian and then again in English, just to make sure the globe's translation program hadn't made some sort of mistake. It was a remarkable piece of technology, but there was always a small possibility of error. But in this case, every idiom, every phrase, every nuance was translated perfectly. Even the tone and inflection were accurately conveyed.

Numbly, he deactivated the globe. The message was thoughtful, gracious, and heartfelt. There was nothing untoward or inappropriate about it. And if he hadn't had superpowers, he doubted he would have been able to read that briefest flash of emotion that crossed her face. If he'd seen it, Lois would have, too. But that one tiny glimmer of sentiment didn't mean that Talan had loved him. She was his friend; was it that hard to believe that she might show the slightest hint of sadness at his departure?

Of course, he knew Talan. He knew how practiced her stoic demeanor was. Even a tiny show of emotion was exceedingly rare for her. But Lois wasn't privy to these things. She had no way of knowing just how emotionally closed off the commander was. He sighed, reluctant to think about whether there was anything to his wife's suspicions. But his mind wasn't going to let him get away that easily. He couldn't keep a thought in his head unless it was about the message on the globe. Had Talan really felt something other than friendship for him? He hoped not. Clark could still remember what it was like to love someone you were sure could never love you back. Of course, Lois had eventually come around. He would have hated being responsible for his friend feeling the way he had.

He remembered the day in the outer settlement, when Talan had raced off to intercept the would-be assassins that Nor had sent after him and Zara. She'd been pinned down below the ridge by enemy fire and a badly injured ankle. After he'd rushed to her aid, she'd become uncharacteristically upset with him, going so far as to

chastise him. Something had been troubling her and she'd refused to talk to him about it. Whatever it was, it seemed like it continued to bother her until the time he'd departed. He wasn't so arrogant as to think that he was what had been preoccupying her thoughts, but if she did have strong feelings for him, it would explain why she wouldn't talk to him about what was bothering her.

It was plausible, but that didn't mean it was true. Even if it was, what exactly was he supposed to do? The harsh arctic wind whipped up around him. He wasn't accomplishing anything here. All he was doing was hiding from his wife. With a despondent sigh, he took off and headed south toward home.

Hesitantly, he opened the bedroom door. The room was dark. He could see the silhouette of his wife, her back to him as she lay on the bed. "You are the only woman I've ever loved," he said, his voice no more than a soft whisper. "From the moment I met you, you're the only woman I've ever wanted to be with. There's never been anyone else and there never will be."

She rolled over to look at him. Even in the darkness, he could see the glimmer of tears in her eyes. "Clark," she whispered, choking back a sob.

He crossed the room to lie down beside her. Gathering her into his arms, he could feel her body shudder. "I'm sorry I yelled," he said softly as he stroked her hair.

"I shouldn't have assumed. I should have known you never would have done that to me. I'm sorry," she murmured.

"But I did betray you," he said. He felt her body go rigid in his arms. "When Nor held me captive, when he was torturing me, I gave up. I wanted to die. I'd made a promise to you that I'd do everything I could to come home to you, but I prayed for death." His voice cracked and broke. First one tear, and then another and another, fell from his eyes. "I'm sorry," he sobbed. "God, Lois, I'm so sorry." He felt her arms around him tighten.

"Oh, Clark," she cried out his name between sobs. He could feel her tears wetting the front of his shirt where she'd buried her head against his chest. Beneath the muscle and bone, his heart was breaking.

"I tried to be strong," he confessed miserably. "I couldn't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

"Shhh...it's all right. It's all right," she murmured. She began to stir, lifting her head from his chest. Her lips found his and she kissed him desperately.

He could taste her tears. Between sobs, he tried to catch his breath. She framed his face between her hands. Clark placed one hand on top of hers and turned to drop a kiss on her palm. He felt her thumb brush a tear away from his cheek. Their eyes met and he held her gaze. He expected to see anger there, but there wasn't any. Instead, he nearly drowned in the depth of her anguish.

"I love you," she whispered fiercely. "God, I love you so much. Please, don't ever leave me again."

"Never," he promised. "I love you, Lois. I love you." He kissed her again, holding her body so close to his he could feel her heartbeat. Her small hands began to unbutton his shirt. She parted the shirttails to place her head against his bare chest. It almost pained him to do so, but he let go of her long enough to shrug out of the old denim shirt. She cast off her own sweater. Between their tears, they slowly undressed each other, needing to feel the comfort of warm skin against skin. He buried his head against her shoulder, inhaling deeply her sweet scent. His lips brushed against the soft hollow at base of her neck.

She ran her hands through his hair and breathlessly whispered, "I need you, Clark."

"Make love with me," he murmured as he lifted his head to look at her. She caressed his face and kissed his lips. His guilt and his grief bubbled so closely to the surface. He hated the things that he'd told her. They were like a poison, a black and seeping cancer, which had festered in his body for too long. And though he felt the brief, sweet release that came with his confession, he wondered how they could go on with such a terrible truth looming over them like a shroud. He needed her. He needed her to soothe away the pain and the sadness and the regrets that haunted him in the darkness. He needed her to bind up the wounds of his soul. He needed to lose himself in her. He needed to find in her a reason to keep hoping, to keep believing that they'd be all right.

She stroked his hair and listened to the steady beating of his heart. His head was pillowed on her chest, his arms wrapped around her body. "I love you," she whispered.

"Can you ever forgive me?" he asked plaintively.

Fresh tears sprang to her eyes. "There's nothing to forgive. You did nothing wrong. I know that I can't understand what he did to you. What you had to endure. But you survived. You came home to me. And I saw how you touched the lives of the people around you. How much they loved and respected you. You did something for them no one else could. You are a good man. The best man I have ever known."

She felt his body shudder as he sobbed. In the darkness, she cried with him, holding on to him just as tightly as he clung to her.

"Is everything all right?" her mother-in-law asked as soon as she stepped into the kitchen. Martha handed her a cup of coffee.

Lois gratefully took the hot mug and took a long sip as she tried to gather her thoughts. "Everything's fine," she replied. "I'm sorry about the yelling last night. We shouldn't have had that argument in the house." Lois followed the older woman to the kitchen table, where they both sat down.

Martha placed a reassuring hand on top of Lois's. "Don't worry about it. Jonathan and I both just want to make sure you two are all right," she said.

Lois sighed. "We're okay."

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah,” Lois replied with a hesitant nod. “It was just a misunderstanding. Mostly.”

Martha favored her with a sympathetic smile. “Is it anything you want to talk about?”

She fumbled for the words. “I would, but...”

“It’s all right, you don’t have to say anything.”

Lois bit back another sigh. “We’re talking about what happened. And I am so glad that he’s opening up, but I’m afraid things are going to get worse before they get better. I feel like I know now why it was so hard for him to tell me anything. Dr. Friskin knows about us. She wants to talk to both of us. I think it might help.”

Martha nodded in quiet understanding. “If there’s anything Jonathan and I can do to help, just let us know.”

“Thank you,” Lois replied.

He squeezed her hand a little tighter as he knocked softly on the door. Having Lois with him usually made everything more bearable. This time, it seemed even harder. What else could he expect, though, given how much he was dreading the conversation they were about to have? Dr. Friskin opened the door and greeted them with her usual warmth.

The furniture in the office had been rearranged so the doctor’s wingback chair faced a pair of armchairs, situated close to one another. He sat down and automatically reached for Lois’s hand, silently pleased to realize that she’d done the exact same thing. Taking her smaller hand in his, he drew strength from the simple contact. She was still here, she was going to do this with him. It was two super-powered beings against one diminutive shrink; surely their odds weren’t that bad.

“I’m very glad to see both of you here,” Dr. Friskin began. “But I believe there was something very specific that precipitated this session, is that right?”

Clark drew in a deep, shaky breath. His pulse pounded loudly in his ears and he swallowed around the boulder that had wedged itself in his windpipe. He closed his eyes and exhaled just as unsteadily. “We had an argument...”

He and Lois took turns explaining what had transpired, not interrupting each other so much as taking over for one another when each found it too difficult to continue. Dr. Friskin listened thoughtfully, nodding occasionally, but letting them speak freely.

Silence reigned for a long while among them until Dr. Friskin finally spoke. “Lois, what about the message led you to believe that Clark may have had an intimate relationship with the commander?”

He heard her sigh. “Clark mentioned Commander Talan twice before,” she began with a harsh edge to her tone as she said Talan’s name. “She’d saved his life and captured Nor, so I knew she was someone he respected, maybe even admired. But her message...it wasn’t anything she was saying. I mean, I’m not even sure what it was she said, but there was just this look in her eyes. I knew she loved him. I didn’t want to believe it, but one of the few things Clark

would tell me about New Krypton was that he was ashamed of what he’d done there.” Clark watched his wife out of the corner of his eye, but said nothing. Her eyes were flooded with tears. He bit his lip.

“So you thought that perhaps he’d been unfaithful?”

The question was a harsh one, regardless of how gently it had been put.

“I didn’t know what to believe,” she said with a sad shake of her head. He could hear the tears in her voice. “He was so upset about what had happened there. But I had no idea what that meant. I didn’t want to believe it, but I was afraid. And I couldn’t stop thinking that maybe...”

“How did you feel about that?”

“Awful. Like I’d been ripped in two,” she admitted. Her hand slipped from his and she brushed away a tear. He set his jaw grimly. This wasn’t much easier to hear the second time around. “But I...” she trailed off, her voice seemingly failing her. “I already knew I was going to forgive him.”

His breath left him in a ragged sigh. She’d thought pretty much the worst of his behavior. She’d imagined the ultimate betrayal. She believed he’d wronged her in the one way he hadn’t. And yet she was saying now that she would have forgiven him. Just like that. Maybe it was that simple. But maybe it was easier for her to offer forgiveness now that she knew the truth.

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

Clark turned to face his wife, but she dropped her gaze to her lap. “It would have been completely different if we’d been together and I’d thought he’d been unfaithful. But we were apart for four years and I knew he’d been through hell. And I knew I wasn’t there for him when he needed me the most. If something had happened...” An awkward silence settled over all three of them.

“Clark, do you understand why Lois thought something might have happened between you and the commander?”

He felt his jaw clench as he nodded abruptly. “I know that I haven’t told her much about New Krypton, leaving her to guess at what I meant when I said I wasn’t proud of what I’d done there. But I’m not shutting her out because I don’t want to talk to my wife. Talking about these things is like re-living them. And there’s only so much I can handle. To know that she thought I could have done that to her...” he trailed off, not sure how to finish the thought.

“I didn’t want to confront him about it. I knew it was going to lead to a fight,” Lois said miserably. “But I’d just watched the message when everyone came home. I didn’t manage to pull myself together. Clark saw me crying. He asked me what was wrong. I didn’t know what else to say.”

“And how did you respond when Lois asked you what had happened?”

“Not well,” he admitted with a bemused, humorless laugh. “It hurt like hell. I never...I...Lois was right that she wasn’t there when I was at my worst. I relied on Talan...I talked to her about things I would have talked to Lois about. She was my friend when I needed one badly. I needed my wife. And she wasn’t there. And that was my fault. I decided to leave. I thought I could do what the Kryptonians

needed me to do.” He lifted his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose as he blinked back tears. “But I never...I couldn’t have...” The blinking didn’t work. A tear slipped down his face and he swiped it away with the back of his hand. “Nor took everything from me. My position, my supporters, my desire to keep breathing.” He turned to look at his wife, the anguish in her expression mirroring what he felt. “But he couldn’t take away you. I loved you. I will always love you. That was all that was left of me.”

Fresh tears fell from his wife’s eyes as she fumbled to take his hand once again. She held tightly, like she was afraid to let him go. “Clark,” she whispered sadly. The room was painfully crowded, but he didn’t think this would be that much easier if his therapist wasn’t there.

He closed his eyes and dragged his trembling hand through his hair. His mouth was dry and his throat raw, but he had to keep going, because if he didn’t say this now, he had no idea when he’d get the courage to do so. “I was never tempted, but I thought about it. Not because I wanted to be with someone else, but because I wanted to die. I thought about being unfaithful because so long as there was something good left in me, I couldn’t just give up and die on that damn rock.” He knew it didn’t make sense. He was confessing to having considered something so terrible, right after describing how angry he’d been because his wife had thought he might have actually done it.

He could hear his wife weeping openly. “Would you like me to give you a few minutes?” he heard Dr. Friskin ask softly.

“Yes,” Lois managed, her voice a strangled whisper. “Please.”

He still hadn’t opened his eyes. The door closed behind the therapist with a soft ‘click.’ Before he knew what had happened, he was on his feet, pulling his wife into his arms. Her body shook with powerful sobs as he held her tightly. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, over and over again.

“Please,” she murmured. “Please, don’t let me go.”

“Never,” he gritted out before being choked by the emotions building up in his chest.

Dr. Friskin had been gone for quite a while, but Lois still didn’t feel like she could pull herself together. Her husband’s words had obliterated her. She was trying to pick up the tiny, fragile shards, but there wasn’t enough left of her. All the pieces, they didn’t add up. There was a giant, gaping hole where her heart had been. Failing miserably in her attempts to wipe away the tears, she tried to at least calm her breathing.

“I’m sorry,” Clark whispered mournfully.

“Me too,” she replied. Her voice was barely audible, a pathetic sound that squeaked past the lump in her throat.

He tilted her chin up and their teary eyes met. “Can you forgive me?”

She nodded miserably before throwing her arms around his neck and closing the distance between them. She held him tightly, running one hand through his dark, thick hair. “I love you,” she whispered. “I always will.”

His head fell to her shoulder. “I love you,” he said softly. “I love you.” After a long moment, he withdrew, seemingly reluctantly. Off her hesitant nod, Clark crossed the room and opened the door. Dr. Friskin followed him back in a few seconds later.

“Are you okay?” she asked the both of them. Lois nodded mutely. They retook their seats and she took Clark’s hand once again. Their fingers interlaced. “Clark, it took tremendous strength to do what you just did. There is no weakness in it. The frailties you saw in yourself, the things that you regret, these are human and ordinary and they were the responses of a man who’d suffered the extraordinary. And I want you to consider the fact that Lois has told you that in the same moment she thought the worst, she was already preparing herself to forgive it.”

“I know,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“Lois, it hurts you to know that Clark endured these things, doesn’t it?”

“Of course,” she whispered harshly.

“But you still want to be involved. Why?”

“Because maybe it’ll help. Because it hurts so much more to think that Clark’s going through this alone.”

“I know that perspective is next to impossible to obtain when trying to work through something like this, but Clark, I want you to really think about what Lois is telling you. Lois knows that this won’t be easy, she knows that this process is going to hurt. And that she’s going to have to let it. But she wants to be a part of it anyway because of how much she cares about you. Only the two of you can decide how you want to proceed, but you have someone who loves you and is committed to supporting you. I think that’s exactly what you need. If you’re both willing, I’d like to meet again next week.”

She looked at her husband with trepidation. He hesitated for a moment before nodding slowly. “We’ll do it,” he said.

They parted ways after the session was over, he to return to the farm, she to fly a patrol. Tomorrow, he would help his father finish the last of the work for the fall harvest and she would fly commercial with Jon back to Metropolis. Clark and Jon would have the week to explore Metropolis together while she worked on her article.

She was suddenly very thankful for the mask, which did a decent job of hiding the fact that she’d been crying. The long conversation they’d just had with Dr. Friskin was weighing heavily on her mind and though she wasn’t deluded enough to believe that it was over, she needed a few moments’ reprieve. No, she and Clark still had a tremendous amount to talk about, but she wasn’t sure how they were going to get through it. Hearing him say again how he’d given up when Nor held him prisoner tore her apart. As had his most recent confession, that he had considered infidelity...it shouldn’t have been so shocking, especially given that she’d thought that very same thing. But to hear how and why he’d considered it. Her stomach turned.

Lois blinked back fresh tears as she made her first sweep over Suicide Slum. She needed some crime to fight. Or a bridge to hold up. Or a kitten to rescue from a tree. Anything to take her mind off it.

Clark's jaw clenched as he waited for the elevator to make its way to the newsroom. Jon tugged at his hand and he looked down at his son and tried to smile. "Where are we going, Daddy?" Jon asked.

"We're going to Mommy's work. Uncle Perry and Uncle Jimmy work here, too." The elevator doors slid open and for the first time in four and a half years, he was greeted by the sight of a place that was once home to him. The bustle and din of the newsroom seemed to come to an immediate halt as their arrival was noticed.

"Hey, Clark's here!" someone shouted. All eyes turned to him and he found himself frozen to the floor. He saw Eduardo, Rick in Sports, Stephanie the Society columnist and other familiar faces in a crowd that now included so many that were new to him.

"Son, it's so good to see you back here!" Perry shouted from the doorway to his office. The familiar voice cut through the haze that surrounded his brain. Lois appeared behind the old editor and smiled at him, helping him finally shake free of his near stupor.

"How are my guys?" she asked as she crossed the bullpen toward them.

"Hi, Mommy!" Jon shouted excitedly. Clark felt his son's hand slip from his as the little boy ran toward his mother. Lois met him with outstretched arms, drawing him into her embrace. She picked him up and carried him back toward Clark, favoring her husband with a chaste peck on the cheek. Clark placed a hand gently on her shoulder, wondering if she knew that he drew strength from her presence. With Jon settled on her hip, she took Clark's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. She smiled at him—a silent gesture of support. She knew that this was hell for him. The well-meaning questions, the attention of large groups of people—he hated these things. But it wasn't like he could hide from the newsroom forever. The first of his colleagues bounded over to shake his hand and clap him on the shoulder, as though to convince themselves that it really was Clark Kent, after an absence from the newsroom that had stretched out for years.

Lois and Jon disappeared and he did his best to chat casually with all of the well wishers. Most of them were colleagues and even friends, but a few were new faces, people who had joined the Planet since he'd last worked here. Eduardo and Carl were sharing an amusing anecdote about something that had happened while he was away, but he couldn't quite focus on it. The other men were laughing so hard they had to take turns telling the story, but Clark was fixated on the layout of the newsroom. The desks had all been moved around. There were no nameplates announcing that this space belonged to Lois Lane or Clark Kent. He couldn't see any of her stuff or his stuff anywhere. Her Superman coffee mug. His hand-carved penholder

made of Turkish rosewood. But why should these things have been there? Lane and Kent hadn't been working in the newsroom for years. The Daily Planet had moved on with half of its top investigative reporting team missing in action and the other half working as a columnist based in Kansas.

Glancing surreptitiously over the top of his glasses, he spotted Lois and Jon in Perry's office, playing with the knickknacks on Uncle Perry's desk. She'd given him space because she knew he needed it. After the fiasco with her book tour, she knew he couldn't stand looking like he was hiding behind his wife. He wanted the world to look at him and see an ordinary man, not a curiosity and not a nervous, jumpy shadow of a human being. Clark tried to turn his attention back to his colleagues. He hoped he was smiling and not grimacing as he accepted the well wishes of those around him.

It felt like hours had passed, but he knew it was barely twenty minutes before Perry came looking for him. "All right, that's enough, we've got a paper to get out, don't we?" the old editor grumbled as he dragged Clark to the conference room.

Perry clapped him on the shoulder as he laughed. "Son, you don't know how happy I am to see you in this newsroom. The place wasn't the same without you."

"Perry, I'm not sure it makes sense for me to come back to the Planet," he began hesitantly as he buried his hands in his pockets. He leaned against the door and stared at the floor, trying to tune out the sounds of his colleagues still speaking about him.

"I know things are going to be different," Perry replied as he sat down on the corner of the conference room table. "But that doesn't mean the paper isn't itching to get you back."

He shook his head; he'd had all of these arguments with himself before. "I can't go back to being an investigative reporter."

"What about editing? Mike Burns is thinking of retiring. The Planet is going to need a new managing editor, someone to manage the assignment process and help develop new talent."

Clark felt his shoulders shrug. "I don't know, Chief..."

"I know it's a lot to think about, but if Mike leaves, it won't be for months. Please at least consider the job."

He didn't really want to be an editor. He wanted to be a writer. But what if that wasn't an option for him anymore? He had to do *something*. That still didn't mean this was the right choice. Lois worked much more closely with Perry, but Mike Burns was technically responsible for the Planet's editorial content. Even if it was mostly in name only, could he actually be Lois's boss? What would that do to their relationship? "All right," he replied noncommittally. "I'll think about it."

Perry grinned. "So how is everything going?"

Clark sighed as he wondered where exactly to begin. "I'm trying to make up for an awful lot of lost time. It isn't easy."

"I can't even imagine, son," Perry replied with a rueful shake of his head.

"Maybe things will feel more normal when we're back in Metropolis permanently." He said it more to convince himself than Perry.

"Establishing a routine couldn't hurt," Perry agreed. "How long are you and Lois planning on staying in town this trip?"

"Probably about a week. She doesn't think it'll take much longer than that to do the follow up on her column."

"If you need anything at all, you let me know, understand?"

"Sure thing, Chief. And thanks."

"Don't be a stranger, son."

Clark smiled faintly before exiting the conference room to find his wife and son.

The elevator doors closed and he let out a long, deep sigh. She watched as he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. Jon was fast asleep in his father's arms.

"My parents want to have dinner with us tonight," she said flatly. She could see him wince. After all he'd lived through, he suddenly looked like there wasn't anywhere he wanted to be less. "I'm sure I can get out of it," she added off his pained expression.

"No, I've been home for months. I can't keep this up forever," he said.

"Jimmy said he's around this week if we need a babysitter," she said. "I don't think Jon's idea of a good time involves going to Chez Josephine with my parents." In truth, she wasn't really looking forward to this either. Clark didn't need her mother's passive aggressiveness or her father's complete lack of social skills. Her family's dysfunctions were better kept at a distance, but he was right, they couldn't avoid her parents forever.

Outside the Planet, she hailed a cab and they rode in silence back to Clark's apartment. It was so surreal to be back at this place with both her husband and her son. For years, she'd held on to the apartment as a tangible link to Clark. She remembered the first time she'd fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder on his couch. They'd planned their future together here. Their son was born here.

Clark carried their sleeping little boy into the bedroom and returned silently to the living room. He favored her with a lopsided smile, his hands in the pockets of his slacks. He looked like he did seven years ago, when he was a wide-eyed, hopeful young reporter, looking for a job. She wondered how she could have ever believed him to be a 'hack from nowheresville.'

Lois stepped toward him, reaching out to wrap her arms around his waist. He engulfed her in a warm embrace and she placed her head against his chest, feeling his heart beat under the firm muscle. "I love you," he whispered as he pressed a kiss against her hair.

"I love you," she said. She felt him sigh, knowing he was thinking the same thing she was. "I'll call my parents."

"I'll call Jimmy," he replied.

"Hey, CK! Hey, little J!" she heard Jimmy call out cheerfully from the front hall. Lois finished putting on her earrings and walked back out into the living room.

"Hi, Unca Jimmy!" Jon shouted.

Jimmy hoisted the little boy up in his arms. "Man, you're getting big!" Jon grinned in response.

"Come on, let's go get your PJs on," Lois said. "Then you can play with Uncle Jimmy." Reluctantly, her little boy stretched out his arms and let his mother gather him up. She carried him back into the bedroom, but could still hear her husband and Jimmy talking in the living room.

"When I offered to babysit, I figured you'd be taking Lois out for a night on the town, not dinner with your in-laws."

"Tell me about it, Jim." She couldn't help the half smile that turned up the corner of her mouth at her husband's response. A romantic evening with her husband just didn't seem to be in the cards. She helped Jon into his Scooby Doo pajamas and he dashed back out into the living room. Lois picked up her purse and overcoat and followed suit.

"You look great, Lois," Jimmy said. For appearance's sake, she put her coat on over the long, sleeveless navy blue dress she was wearing.

"Thank you, Jimmy," she said as she gave her young friend a hug. "He should be in bed by eight."

"No problem," Jimmy assured her. "We're gonna have fun, aren't we, buddy?" He leaned down to give Jon a high five.

"Yeah!" Jon exclaimed.

Clark dropped to his knee. "Be good for Uncle Jimmy; I love you," he said as he hugged Jon and kissed the top of his son's head.

"Love you, sweetie," Lois said. "If you're a good boy, Grandma and Grandpa will take you to the zoo tomorrow." She kissed Jon goodnight.

Jon kept smiling. "I love you, Mommy. I love you, Daddy."

"Have fun, you guys!" Jimmy said.

Clark held the door open for her, and placed his hand on the small of her back as she walked through the doorway. He pulled the door closed and she kissed his cheek. "Thank you for doing this," she said quietly. She brushed away a tiny speck of lint from his topcoat. He wore a gray suit with a light blue shirt and silk navy blue tie with tiny white polka dots. It was elegant and tasteful and the tie couldn't possibly have been less like Clark's style. Or at least what his style was years ago. She couldn't believe she was missing the gecko lizards, wild colors, and strange geometric patterns of his ties of old.

The muted ties were just one of the myriad things she needed to adjust to. Her husband's smile didn't come as easily as it used to. He was quieter, less trusting of those around him. His patience wore thin faster and he was quicker to anger. He treated laughter as though it was rationed; carefully measuring and dispensing it as

necessary. Clark squeezed her hand gently, bringing her thoughts back to the moment. She could see the love in his dark brown eyes. Some things hadn't changed.

He hailed a cab, holding the door open for her. She gave the cabbie the address for the restaurant. Still holding hands, they rode to Chez Josephine's in silence. She took a deep breath, hoping everything would go all right. Stealing a glance at her husband, she could see his jaw grimly set; he wasn't looking forward to this.

The maitre d' welcomed them graciously and offered to show them to Dr. Lane's table. The restaurant wasn't too crowded, which wasn't surprising, given it was a Tuesday night. Clark held her hand tighter as heads turned to look at them. They could both hear the whispers as patrons asked their companions whether that was Clark Kent, famous alien abductee and his wife, the bestselling author, Lois Lane. She stared straight ahead, ignoring the softly murmured questions her superhearing couldn't avoid picking up. The maitre d' led them to a quiet corner of the restaurant, where her parents were studiously ignoring each other. Her father took a sip of his scotch. The warm flicker of candlelight and the soft sounds of Bach's Goldberg Variations in the background did nothing to thaw the icy air surrounding her parents.

Her mother stood as she saw them approach, smiling a bit too brightly. Sam Lane stood as well and stretched out his hand to Clark. "Welcome home, son," he said. He grabbed Clark's shoulder as he shook his son-in-law's hand.

"Thanks," Clark replied.

Lois hugged her mother and then her father. "Hello, Mother, Daddy," she said.

Clark kissed Ellen on the cheek. "It's good to see you, Ellen," he said.

They took their seats and were presented with the menus immediately. Lois was grateful for something to hide behind. "The filet here is excellent," her father offered. The small talk at the table seemed to be extracted from all four parties by force.

"We're glad you finally made it to Metropolis," Ellen said. Her mother's passive aggressiveness was out in full force.

"The trip home was pretty rough," Clark said as he took a sip of his water.

"Of course, the loss of bone density, orthostatic imbalance, the drop in blood pressure," Sam Lane offered. "I'm impressed you've recovered as quickly as you have."

Clark gave his father-in-law a tight-lipped nod in response. Lois kept studying her menu, even though the entrees were unlikely to change. It surprised her how easily Clark dodged her parents' questions. Before, he'd always been a terrible liar.

The waiter returned to take their orders. Lois changed the subject to her parents' plan to take Jon to the zoo the following day.

"I can't wait to see my sweet little grandson," Ellen gushed. "Honey, you really should bring him to visit us more often. What about Christmas this year?"

Lois inhaled sharply. "We really want to spend this Christmas at the farm," she began. "We'll be back in the city again, soon." The appetizers arrived and Lois was thankful for the distraction her salad provided.

"So it must be quite an adjustment, having the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood dropped on you all at once," her mother said unsuitably.

Lois heard the clatter of Clark's fork hitting his plate. "Clark is nothing but an excellent husband and father," she cut in, hoping to divert this conversation before it could crash and burn.

"I didn't mean to suggest he wasn't..." her mother began somewhat lamely.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lois could see Clark frown grimly. He was holding his right fist against his thigh; she knew he was trying to keep it from trembling. "Your daughter and grandson are more important than anything in the world to me," he said. "But I have no intention of sitting here and justifying myself all evening." The muscle in his jaw jumped and twitched as he set his mouth in a thin, hard line.

Ellen's eyes narrowed. "Whether you intended to or not, you left my daughter alone and pregnant. She spent four years raising your son without you."

"I would have done anything to be here with them," Clark said, his tone harsh but quiet. "You have no idea what I went through to come home."

"Let's all just settle down," Sam interjected.

His ex-wife shot him a murderous look. "Don't patronize me, Sam," Ellen snapped.

Clark looked like he was formulating a response, but he suddenly grew ashen, his jaw falling to hang loosely, as he heard the same thing she did. A call for help.

"What is it?" her father asked, frowning.

"My phone, it's on vibrate," Lois replied hastily. She picked up her purse and pulled out her phone, pretending to answer it. She looked back up at her parents and Clark. "It's Jimmy, I'm going to take this." She stood up and walked away from the table toward the restaurant's entrance.

Clark stood up, dropping his linen napkin on the table. "Excuse me," he said and turned away without waiting for acknowledgement from his in-laws. He followed his wife toward the doors and caught up to her just outside the restaurant. He reached for her hand.

"I'll be back soon," she said, turning around.

"Lois..."

"Please, Clark, just let me take care of this," she pleaded.

"I can't just do nothing!" he said forcefully.

"That's exactly what you have to do," she said. "Until you're ready to come back, you have to let me do this."

He grimaced, not sure what he'd expected. He wasn't Superman. She was Ultrawoman. This was squarely in her

jurisdiction, not his. But the sound of that call for help tore through him. He'd sheltered himself from it for so long, he'd forgotten what it was like. Someone needed help and he wasn't going to do anything about it. He was going to let someone else fight his battles for him. Like he'd been doing for quite some time now. His heart thundered. His mouth went dry. He hadn't known what else to do, but follow Lois out.

"The sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back," his wife continued. She was anxious to go; he could hear it in her tone and see it in the way she kept glancing over her shoulder. Now it was Lois who raced off to the rescue on instinct. "I'm sorry, I'll be back as soon as I can," she said plaintively, and she disappeared.

He closed his eyes, his heart still hammering against his ribs, his breaths still shallow, his hand still trembling. Clark exhaled slowly, trying to calm himself. God, he hated feeling so useless! There was nothing left to do but go back inside to his probably bewildered in-laws. Turning around, he walked back into the restaurant.

"Everything all right?" Sam asked as he approached the table.

"Fine," Clark replied crisply, taking his seat. "Jon was just having trouble going to sleep." For close to twenty minutes, the trio sat mostly in awkward silence as they ate. Sam made a few abortive attempts at conversation, finding himself abruptly cut off by Ellen. Lois's sea bass sat untouched on her plate. Clark couldn't help glancing over every minute or so, alternately wishing she'd return and fuming that he'd been left here to deal with this alone.

Finally, his wife returned, walking briskly back to the table. Composed, smiling, she was the picture of understated elegance.

"Jon get to sleep okay?" Clark asked as he held her gaze.

"Yeah," she replied without missing a beat. "Once I'd read 'Hop on Pop,' to him."

"How did you read him a book from here?" her father asked quizzically.

Lois merely arched a brow. "Do you really think I don't have that story memorized at this point?"

The remainder of dinner passed uneventfully, but as far as Clark was concerned, the evening couldn't have ended soon enough. When they'd finally said their goodbyes, it felt like a lead weight had been removed from around his neck. But instead of relief, all he felt was exhaustion. He hailed a cab, thankful to be able to go home at last. They rode back to his apartment in silence. He knew that he had no right to be angry with his wife. Leaving him to cover for her, she'd done nothing to him that he hadn't done to her hundreds of times in the past. And by carrying the burden of being the superhero, she was giving him the space he needed to deal with his issues with a clear conscience. So where was the resentment coming from? He sighed. God, why didn't anything make sense anymore? Why couldn't he figure out what was going on in his own head?

Her warm hand covered his, and squeezed gently. Normally, he would have interlaced their fingers. Instead, he did nothing. Clark just sat there dumbly, not sure what to do, how to explain what was wrong. He just wanted to be right with her, right with this world, again.

The cab pulled up to his apartment and he pulled out a few bills to pay the driver. He followed his wife up the stairs to the door, struck by the surreal feeling of being back at his old apartment – a place that had changed so little in the last four and a half years, despite the fact that nothing else in his life seemed to have stayed the same.

Jimmy looked up at them from his spot on the couch as they entered the apartment. "How was dinner?" he asked softly.

Lois rolled her eyes. "About what you'd expect from my parents," she said. "How was Jon?" Clark took her overcoat and hung it along with his own in the hallway closet.

"He was great," Jimmy said as he stood up and gathered his jacket. "We had a blast playing with Legos. Whenever you need a babysitter, you let me know."

"That won't put a cramp in your social life?" Lois asked.

"Are you kidding? I'm sure Jon's a babe magnet. You've got to let me take him to the park," Jimmy replied with a wink.

Lois shook her head. "You are not using my son to pick up women, Jimmy."

"Just kidding, Lois," Jimmy said, holding his hands up in surrender. He pulled on his jacket as he headed toward the door. "Have a great night, guys."

Clark took off his tie, thankful to be rid of the damn thing, and undid the top button of his shirt.

"You okay?" his wife asked quietly.

"I'm fine," he answered. She looked slightly startled and he realized his tone was more abrupt than he'd intended.

"I'm sorry about tonight," she said, slipping out of her heels.

"It wasn't your fault," he replied half-heartedly as he draped his suit jacket over a chair.

She removed her pearl earrings. He didn't recognize them and wondered idly if she'd gotten them during their long separation. Lois stepped toward him and he pulled her into his arms, running one hand up and down her back. "How was the rescue?" he asked.

"It was a pretty bad car accident, but nothing life threatening. Everyone should be fine," she replied.

"That's good," he said absently. "The best kind of rescues, right?"

"Yeah," she said. "You miss it, don't you?"

He stepped back. "Of course I do. Being Superman gave me purpose."

"I know. It's part of who you are."

"Were," he corrected.

She shook her head. "It's still part of you; I can see that."

“You’ve been Ultrawoman longer than I was Superman. I’m not sure people actually expect him to come back anymore. I wonder if people miss him.”

“Of course they do. I do.” Her voice was small, almost fragile.

He frowned. “Do you?”

“He’s part of who you are, what makes you, you. I know you wanted me to fall in love with the ordinary man, but I love all of you, farm boy and superhero.”

He laughed humorlessly as he shook his head. “I can’t believe how hung up I was on that. It seems kind of pointless now that you’re the one in tights.”

“I never wanted to take this away from you,” she said.

“Yeah, well, nothing’s really turned out the way we thought it would, has it?”

“Clark...”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m proud of what you’ve done, but what am I supposed to do? What purpose do I serve?” He could hear the frustration in his voice.

She reached out to take his hand but he kept his hands stubbornly buried in his pockets. “The world’s always going to need Superman...”

“It didn’t for more than four years,” he retorted.

“Dammit, not again!” he yelled. She got that distant look on her face as they both heard another cry for help. His own timing had once been this bad, he knew that, but poetic justice was still hell.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Just go,” he replied flatly. In a blur, she darted out the window and disappeared. Clark made his way to the couch and flopped down. Closing his eyes, he sighed heavily. What had happened to his life?

“It’s strange to be here, talking to you about Clark,” Lois confessed as she sat down on the couch. Her follow up on the scandal in the city courts was progressing slowly, in no small part because of her own preoccupations. Which meant that talking to her shrink was probably in order.

“That’s perfectly understandable,” Dr. Friskin replied. “This sort of doctor-patient relationship, where all three of us work together, but we hold individual sessions as well, is difficult to navigate. But why don’t we start with you telling me what’s bothering you?”

Lying back on the couch, she stared up at the ceiling tiles. Lois hated how her shrink made things sound so simple. She exhaled as she tried to collect her thoughts. “I’ve been trying so hard for so long to keep everything together. To keep moving forward because it was the only thing I could think to do to keep from falling apart. When I saw that message on the globe, I just couldn’t keep it up anymore. It’s like I came apart at the seams. And it doesn’t seem to matter that nothing happened. Four years ago, I never would have doubted Clark. Four years ago, he never would have blown up about it.”

“I know it’s an uncomfortable topic to revisit,” Dr. Friskin began. “But why do you think you reacted the way you did to the message?”

Uncomfortable was an understatement. Lois sighed.

“Clark is a very attractive man. For as long as I’ve known him, women have practically thrown themselves at him. Even before we were seeing each other, it bothered me. When I was dumb enough to think he was just some naïve hayseed, I was afraid he was going to fall for some honeypot trap and compromise a story. But he quickly became the best friend I’ve ever had and I started to worry I was going to lose him. I wouldn’t let myself consider a relationship with him, but I got jealous every time any woman showed any interest in him.”

“And when you and Clark started dating?”

“I learned I could trust him, completely. Well, it wasn’t that simple; when I figured out he was Superman, it took me a long time to get over that. I mean, how could Clark, someone who was so scrupulously honest about everything, lie about something like that?”

“It wasn’t as though he had much of a choice though, was it?”

“No,” Lois agreed. “He didn’t. But he still should have told me before he proposed!” Her gaze turned from the ceiling to her shrink. Dr. Friskin was nodding sympathetically.

Dr. Friskin scratched away at her notepad. “You’re probably right about that. But you did eventually forgive him.”

“I did,” Lois admitted. She was tempted to play with the edges of her cape, like she always did when she talked to her therapist about uncomfortable subjects, but she realized that she was here as herself, and not the superhero. It made her feel strangely more vulnerable. “And I had to trust him more than I’d ever thought I could trust someone. Women flirted shamelessly with Superman and that wasn’t going to change just because Clark Kent and Lois Lane were in a relationship. But he deserved my trust. He proved that, over and over again.”

Dr. Friskin stared down at her notes. “But this message was different. How?”

“I got used to women lusting after Clark. Don’t get me wrong, I still strongly disliked just about every woman who ever showed any interest in him, but I realized that no matter how much attention women paid to him, infidelity just wasn’t part of who Clark was. But this was different. The woman in that message wasn’t flirting with my husband. She was trying to hide how she felt about him. The thing is, you can’t hide the fact that you’re saying goodbye to the man you love from another woman who’s done the same thing.” She felt tears prick at her eyes. Dammit, she was so tired of crying over this.

“Whom do you think she was trying to hide her feelings from?”

She closed her eyes and wondered why she hadn’t put those simple dots together from the very beginning. “From Clark,” she said at last. It made perfect sense. Commander Talan would never have known that someone other than Clark was going to watch that message. “He had no idea

how she felt about him and she intended to keep it that way.”

“Did you believe Clark when he told you his relationship with her was strictly platonic?”

“I did,” Lois said. “And he told me about what Nor had done to him. He told me about wanting to die. And in here, he told me about ‘us’ being the only thing left of him, the only thing Nor couldn’t take away from him. And I realized, I’d been questioning the one thing that to him, was absolutely certain. How could I do that to him?” She wiped away the solitary tear that spilled over and rolled down her cheek.

“You made a mistake, an understandable one, at that,” Dr. Friskin counseled sympathetically. “But it’s important that Clark knows that you know that.”

Lois sighed heavily. “I feel like...It’s almost like I’m not allowed to make mistakes, though. I’m not saying my husband is fragile, but after all he’s been through, he deserves someone he can depend on, someone who’ll know the right thing to say, the right thing to do.”

“You’re not always going to have the right answers, or know just what to do. It isn’t possible,” Dr. Friskin said. “But you are going to have to accept that spending four years completely isolated from one another, in rather unusual circumstances, means that making assumptions and taking ordinary things as given, become quite hazardous.”

“I know we’re not the same people we were four years ago, and we’re trying to get back there, but we can’t. And it’s like every time I see something that isn’t the same, that isn’t going to work the way it used to, it scares me. I know he still loves me, but I guess I’m afraid that I might not be able to make him happy anymore. What if he needs more than I can be? What if he’s keeping things from me because he knows I’m not strong enough to face them?”

“Do you believe that’s true?”

Lois closed her eyes and shook her head slowly, not sure what to say. “He shouldn’t have to bear this burden alone. I’m his wife; I’m supposed to be able to help him. I know that what I went through was nothing compared to what he dealt with, but after four years, I was exhausted. I don’t know where I’m supposed to get the strength to handle this.”

“I wish there was an easy answer to this,” Dr. Friskin replied as she removed her glasses. “But first, you need to stop selling yourself short. What you did while Clark was gone was tremendous and it would have exhausted anyone. There is no shame in that. I think you’re right that neither one of you is the person they were before. But I think you’re jumping to conclusions by assuming that Clark has been reluctant to open up because he perceives shortcomings in you. Are there any other reasons why he might possibly be reluctant?”

“I know it’s difficult for him to talk about the things that happened...” she began.

“He’s told a great deal of it to me,” Dr. Friskin countered. Lois frowned severely. What was her shrink

trying to do, make her jealous? “Why do you think it might be easier for him to talk to me than you?”

“Because you’re a professional?”

“Why was it that you could talk to me and not your own friends or family?” As usual, the good doctor answered a question with a question.

“Because I wouldn’t have been disappointing you if you saw me fall apart,” she said flatly as the epiphany broke over her suddenly. “I wouldn’t have been letting you down.”

“Can you imagine from Clark’s perspective how the last four years look to him? How he’s come home to find that his wife is, professionally, as successful as possible? That she’s admirably taken over a role he was once uniquely qualified to fill? That she’s established a parenting routine that didn’t depend on him?”

“But he saved a whole planet without the benefit of powers!” Lois exclaimed. “And since when was a marriage a competition?”

“I agree, it shouldn’t be one,” Dr. Friskin replied. “But you yourself were quick to dismiss your own accomplishments, Lois. I think that, while you and Clark approach problems differently and bring different life experiences to every issue, you’re really not that different from one another. Neither one of you wants to let the other down, but we can’t hide the things that bother us from the ones we love for very long. The old saying, ‘communication is the key to a successful marriage,’ there’s a reason why it’s a cliché.”

“Okay, into bed,” she announced as she lifted her son up and deposited him on the bed. He scrambled under the covers and situated himself on the bed, waiting expectantly for his story. “What do you want us to read tonight?” she asked.

“I want Daddy to read the one about the dinosaurs!” Jon exclaimed. Clark felt the corners of his mouth turn up into a smile as he walked from the doorway toward the bed. He picked up the book they had written and drawn together about Tyrannosaurus Max and Doggy and sat down beside the bed. They read the story, punctuated by Jon’s explanations of all of the drawings. They finished the story and he and Lois kissed their little boy goodnight. He flipped off the light as they retreated silently from the room.

“A few months ago, I was afraid I’d never get to do that with him,” he admitted quietly.

She took his hand as they walked down the hallway of the farmhouse back toward their bedroom. “He adores you,” she said with a simple smile. “And I think you’re better at reading stories than I am.”

“I had a little bit of practice, reading with my lawyer’s niece, Thia”

“That was your lawyer, in the wheelchair?” She stopped walking and turned to face him. Off what he assumed was his confused expression, she continued. “She left you a message, on the globe.”

“I didn’t watch the other messages,” he said.

"There was one from Zara and Ching, and one from Tao Scion, too," she said. "They all wanted to thank you."

He merely nodded and was silent for a long moment.

"Watch them with me?" he asked at last.

She smiled. "Of course."

Back in the bedroom, he found the globe and activated it. He joined his wife on the bed, putting his arm around her as they sat facing the globe's projected images. Clark glanced at Lois out of the corner of his eye. He could see her smiling as she watched the message from Lok Sim and Enza. Standing up, he stopped the globe just as the message from the young couple was ending.

"Was she injured during the war?"

He nodded tersely. "There was an attack on the main colony. She was evacuating her niece's school. Enza got all of the children out and stayed behind to keep the rebels from following. She lost her right leg in a grenade blast and probably would have died had her husband not found her."

"That's awful," Lois said softly.

"She never felt sorry for herself. She seemed to know how lucky she was just to be alive. Enza lost her entire family. When her brother and his wife were killed at the beginning of the war, she adopted their daughter. Thia was a year old. She was seven when I left."

Lois stood up and walked toward him, slipping her hand in his. "They seem like wonderful people."

"They are," he agreed. "They're the reason I'm hopeful for New Krypton's future." Clark turned his attention back to the globe's images. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the anxiousness settling on Lois's face. He skipped over the next message, knowing she was probably in no hurry to watch it again. "I've already seen this one," he said. He had no idea what else was on the globe, but there were other recordings.

The scene that unfolded before them was a familiar one to him. It was strange to do so, but he watched himself walk down the aisle in a crowded Council chamber, Zara on his arm, both of them dressed in the somber black uniforms of the First Ministers. From this perspective, it wasn't hard to imagine he was watching someone else.

Shai stood at the front of the Council. In his loud, booming voice, he announced the First Minister. "Esteemed members of the High Council of Guardians, I present to you Kal El, son of the union of the Houses of Lo and El. Minister Par Excellence, Defender of our Civilization, Commander of the Armies of New Krypton, Servant of the People, and Guardian of a Sacred Trust." He'd almost forgotten how embarrassing all of the pomp and circumstance was.

"When was this?" his wife asked, her eyes transfixed on the image.

"Exodus Day," he said. "The anniversary of when the colonists left Krypton." He wondered whether it was Tao Scion's idea to include this recording on the globe, or if Zara had had a hand in it.

They remained silent, watching as he gave his speech.

"We have overcome tremendous difficulties, especially in these last few years. Through the blood and the tears of this planet's children, we have won our survival, but every day, we must earn that survival. We must be worthy of the life we've been given. We must learn to rise above our fear and hatred, to embrace forgiveness and compassion. We cannot build a future for this world on mistrust. So I am asking you, on this most somber of days, to remember not just what we have sacrificed, but what we believe. Look inside yourselves and ask, why do we deserve to survive? Why are we a people worth saving?"

It was so odd to listen to his own voice, delivering the words in English, even though he'd done no such thing. But the words were exactly the ones he would have used, the speech pattern mimicked his perfectly. It required no effort to imagine himself giving the speech just as it played out here. His short remarks were quickly wrapped up and the audience rose to its feet to deliver thunderous applause. Had his speech really been that well-received? All he could remember of that day was the dryness of his throat and his preoccupation with whether he could keep his hand from shaking while he delivered his speech.

Lois squeezed his hand gently. He looked at her and smiled. "Wow," she said. "I knew, intellectually, that you were their leader, but watching you, seeing how they responded to you... I was so afraid that they took you for granted, that they weren't grateful enough for what you did for them, what you were willing to sacrifice for them."

The image faded and was replaced by yet another ceremony. It was the very last one he attended on New Krypton. Again, he saw himself walking down a long path to the front of the colony's largest gathering hall. He watched as Zara placed a medal around his neck and as Ching thanked him graciously for his service. And then, almost as one, the entire audience fell to its knees before him. He could see the discomfort on his own face as he asked them all to stand. With just a few words, he'd made his last public statement and said his goodbyes. Hours after that ceremony had taken place, he'd left New Krypton for Earth.

He could see Lois silently brushing away tears. "I wasn't a hero," he said flatly, short-circuiting whatever thoughts she might have been having to the contrary. "That was for them. They needed their leaders to be heroic."

"These people loved you. They were thankful for what you did for them. And it wasn't just your friends. All of those people who couldn't have known you, they knew what you did."

He looked away as he dropped her hand and crossed his arms over his chest. Her words made him angry. There were few things worse than undeserved praise. "I should have done more. I could have ended it a lot sooner."

"Clark..."

"I'm sorry, but you can't understand. You can't know what it was like."

She stared at him, defiance burning in her eyes. "You think I don't know how awful it is to have people call you a

hero when you feel like a failure? You think I don't know what it's like to have a medal you didn't deserve hung around your neck? You think I don't know what it's like to be absolutely certain you're about to be uncovered as a fraud? I know that those ceremonies were for them, not you."

"Then why does this mean so much to you?" he said as he gestured toward the image.

"We lost things in the fires of war. Things we're never going to get back," she said soberly. "We made choices between bad and worse and we have to live with the consequences. But those ceremonies, they were about the things we sacrificed for. About recognizing that there's still something good to build upon."

He looked away again, knowing she was doing the best she could to understand him, but how could she when there was so much about what had happened that she didn't know?

They flew side by side over Hobbs Bay, slowing down as they approached the docks and skyscrapers of Metropolis. The island was so crowded with immense buildings, jammed close together all the way to the water's edge, as though they were elbowing and jostling and fighting one another for space. Their second appointment with Dr. Friskin was in a few minutes and she could feel a nervousness approaching dread settle in the pit of her stomach. She knew these sessions were necessary and she hoped that they would help Clark, but if the previous one had been any indication, they were going to be anything but easy.

<<Please, somebody, help me!>>

Lois stopped short, her head snapping toward the source of the cry. It sounded like a young boy. All of a sudden, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Clark drop suddenly. He tumbled downward and like a bullet, she tore through the sky, intercepting his fall.

She flew them back upwards, terrified by the fact that he seemed unconscious. His heart was racing, thundering totally out of rhythm. "Clark!" she shouted.

He gasped as he opened his eyes, wide with fear. Clark gripped onto her tightly with both hands, his pulse still frantic and uneven. "Honey, are you okay?" she asked.

"I have to go," he said breathlessly. "Someone needs me."

"Clark, please, go to Dr. Friskin's office, I'll meet you there," she said, hearing the agitation creep into her own voice.

"I need to go," he said, more urgently this time. She could tell that he was trying to project confidence, trying to cover up the quiver in his voice and the shaking of his fist. Her husband pulled away from her.

"Listen to me, please," she pleaded. "I can handle this, but I need you to go to Dr. Friskin's." Lois glanced back toward the source of the cry for help.

"I'm not a child, don't tell me what to do," he said angrily.

"I'm not treating you like a child, but until you're sure you're ready to go back to being Superman, you have to let me do this."

<<Please, help!>>

She didn't have time. Without another moment's hesitation, she bolted toward the anguished cry. It killed her to leave Clark like that, but there was a life at stake.

The sound of the second hand of the desktop clock, ticking incessantly, echoed loudly in his skull. He stared straight ahead, his jaw grimly set, his arms folded across his chest. Dr. Friskin sat in her wingback chair, with a patient smile on her face. After what seemed like an eternity, the door behind him opened and his wife entered the office.

"I'm sorry for keeping you," she said as she sat down in the armchair beside Clark's.

"Is everything all right? Clark mentioned there was a call for help," Dr. Friskin asked.

"Yeah, everything's fine," she replied distractedly. His wife crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap.

"But this brings a rather critical question to the forefront for us. Clark, you seemed rather agitated when you arrived; I take it you're not comfortable with remaining on the sidelines while Lois maintains the role of Ultrawoman."

"I'd like to feel useful again," he admitted. "There's something I can do to help people, something other people can't. And I'm not doing it right now. People are suffering because I'm not doing my job." Clark flexed his trembling fist, willing it to stop.

"Do you feel ready to go back to being Superman?"

He closed his eyes. "No," he said simply. "I heard a cry for help and I blacked out. I fell out of the sky like a rock."

Dr. Friskin removed her glasses as she leaned forward. "What happened?"

"We heard a cry for help on the way here. It was a boy. He was young. And then, nothing. I heard Lois yelling my name. She was flying us back upward."

"Can you think of why the sound of the cry for help caused you to black out?"

He gripped both armrests, his entire body tensing like a coil. "There was an attack on a distant settlement by Nor's forces. It wasn't a military target, just a civilian outpost at a mining facility. The rebels massacred the population and leveled the settlement. It was a bloodbath."

Clark looked up at the ceiling, trying not to let his mind's eye get flooded with the horrible images of that day. "I was helping evacuate a collapsed building. There were only a handful of survivors. One was a little boy. He was crying for help. It took forever to get him free. I cursed and begged and would have traded my soul in that moment for my powers so I could have gotten to him faster. I finally got the rubble out of the way. He was clinging to the dead body of his father. He'd died sheltering his son."

"I picked the boy up. He was crying hysterically. He wanted his father. I kept telling him it was going to be all right. It was a stupid thing to say. I knew it wasn't going to be all right. It was never going to be all right. The boy was

alive, but I'd failed him. I didn't prevent the attack. I didn't save his father.

He blinked away tears, knowing that his voice was wavering. "By the time we'd finished evacuating the survivors from the building, it was almost dusk. Fires were still smoldering and ashes fell to the ground like snow. The smoke and the late afternoon sun turned the sky the color of blood. I helped soldiers stack the dead like cordwood because they hadn't had time to create a clearing on the ground large enough to lay all the bodies out properly.

"It was cold. The wind stung like needles against exposed skin and the chill seeped into your bones and buried itself there so it seemed like there was nothing you could do to leech it out and ever be warm again. Even the gusting wind couldn't get rid of the stench of death that hung over the settlement like a pall.

"I heard that call for help today and it was like being back in Silban, surrounded by smoke and ash and dead bodies. I was helpless. I couldn't do anything. All these powers, and I couldn't even stay conscious."

"But you want to go back to being Superman?"

"Of course I do," he said.

"So that will be our goal to work toward. But progress in this area may not come quickly," his therapist explained gently.

"I know," Clark replied.

"Until you're ready to go back, how are you planning to deal with this sort of incident?"

"I don't know. But I don't think I can move back to Metropolis if I keep hearing calls for help that I'm not going to answer."

"Lois, how do you feel about this?" Dr. Friskin asked.

Clark turned to look at his wife. There were tears glimmering in her eyes. "I knew it was going to be hard for Clark, but I was so afraid today. I want to support him in this. If we don't move back to Metropolis for a while, that's fine."

"Have the two of you discussed your plans?"

"Not really," Lois replied. "We were talking about coming back to the city, but I don't want this to be harder for Clark than it has to be."

"Lois, are you planning to continue being Ultrawoman when Superman returns?"

She ducked her head. "We haven't talked about that, either," she admitted.

"Clark, have you given this any thought?"

He bit his lip. "I'm fine with whatever Lois wants to do."

Lois turned to face him, concern etched into her expression. "These are your powers, I was just borrowing them. You wouldn't feel like I was taking something away from you?"

"I'm not going to take Ultrawoman away from the world," he said quietly.

"To hell with the world, Clark, what about you?" she asked, the earnestness of her tone taking the sharp edge off her words.

He shook his head slowly. He'd already resigned himself to this. There was no other way. "Could you ignore cries for help just to make me feel better?"

Lois arched a brow, and he knew she wasn't following him. "But if I didn't have your powers, I wouldn't hear them."

"We can't transfer the powers back," he said decisively.

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? Bernie did it while I was in labor, it's not a problem."

Clark stood up swiftly. "I mean you can't give up the powers," he said, his tone emphatic.

"Why?" she asked as she too, rose to her feet.

"I would have killed you that night!" he said agitatedly. "If you hadn't been invulnerable, I would have pulverized you. I still have nightmares like that all the time."

"But it won't be that way forever..." she countered.

"That's a load of crap and you know it!" he said harshly. "Just one time, Lois, that's all it'll take. I have one more nightmare like that and you'll die. I won't take that chance. I will not sleep in the same bed as you if you're not invulnerable. But that's your choice."

"Let's calm down," Dr. Friskin said soothingly, but Clark didn't care to listen to her.

Lois shook her head in amazement as she stepped back. "I can't believe you're saying this."

"Don't patronize me!" he said. He could feel his face growing hot, his heart thundered in his ears. "I know I'm irrational, I'm angry, I don't think straight, but I'm right about this and you know it."

"Clark, Lois, please sit back down so we can discuss this calmly," Dr. Friskin repeated herself, her tone still even and tranquil. His breaths came in shallow rapid gasps. Slowly backing up, he retook his seat and stared straight ahead. "I think you both need to consider this carefully. You've both raised very valid concerns, but you haven't really communicated those concerns to each other. Lois, how do you feel about continuing to keep Clark's powers?" Dr. Friskin put her glasses back on.

"The first time I became Ultrawoman, I wasn't ready for it. I wanted to get his powers back to him, because Superman is what he was born to be. I got used to the powers this time. Ultrawoman's part of my life and I'm okay with that. I like being able to help, but I don't want to do it if it's taking something away from Clark."

"Clark, you want Lois to keep the powers?"

"It's not about what I want," he said. "It's about her safety. I had a nightmare and I threw a punch at her. If she hadn't been invulnerable, I would have killed her."

"So you'd expect to sleep in separate beds if she gave up the powers?"

He frowned grimly. "It's not what I want, but yes."

Dr. Friskin pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "I take it this bothers you, Lois?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her shake her head. "Of course it does. I love my husband; I expect to share a bed with him." Her voice wavered as she spoke.

"And how do you feel about Clark's concerns?"

Clark turned to look directly at his wife. She looked down to avoid his gaze. “I understand why he feels that way.”

His tension eased ever so slightly. At least she was listening to him. Silence settled over the room as Dr. Friskin scratched away at her notepad. Finally, she looked up. “Lois, I want you to take some time to think about what keeping the powers will mean and whether you feel like you’re willing to do that. This is a momentous decision, and you shouldn’t take it lightly. I don’t think I need to tell you what a burden being Ultrawoman is and how it can’t be something that you commit to if you don’t feel emotionally able to handle that burden.”

“I know,” she replied.

Clark sighed. He hated the thought of burdening Lois with this if it wasn’t what she wanted. But what choice did they have? He knew he was right. He couldn’t risk her life on the hopes that for the next fifty years, he’d never again have another bad nightmare. If she didn’t want the responsibility of being Ultrawoman, he would respect that. But there was no way in hell he’d risk her life for that. If he had to spend the rest of their married life sleeping apart from her, so be it.

With thoughts of the previous night’s session with Dr. Friskin fresh in her mind, she slipped quietly into the farmhouse. She couldn’t get out of her head the vivid mental image her husband had painted of a gruesome attack and the frustratingly heartbreaking rescue effort that had followed. It took no work on the part of her imagination to see in her mind’s eye, her husband in the bombed out wreckage of a building, comforting a crying child in the face of a reality too terrible to be put in words. Clark’s strength, in no small part, was his deep and endless capacity to be moved to ease the suffering of others. No matter how much hurt he saw—and he internalized damn near all of it—he couldn’t stop helping. She loved that about him, but she also knew it was tearing him apart now.

Seeing him fall from the sky like a stone had stopped her heart from beating. She’d raced to catch him, terrified and fearing the worst. What could have possibly felled Superman like that? And when she’d seen the haunted look in his eyes, she knew there was nothing physically wrong with him. He was being pulled back to the ground not by gravity, but by the weight of specters that still tormented him. He’d bared his soul to Dr. Friskin—she knew that he wouldn’t have told his wife what had caused the blackout if there’d been any way to avoid it—she was just a bystander to that confession. It struck her in that moment, just how much they didn’t know about each other anymore. There were things she should have known about her husband—things both basic and transcendent—that she just didn’t comprehend.

And then he’d dropped a bombshell on her. He was still terrified of physically hurting her. Her husband truly believed that if she wasn’t invulnerable, he would kill her one night in an agitated fit in the throes of a nightmare. She

wanted to believe that the fear was without cause, but at least a few nights each week, she found herself having to wake him from the night terrors that seized his sleep. And there were nights when he wouldn’t wake and she’d have to restrain him to keep him from physically lashing out. There was no way she could do that without the powers. Thinking of her husband as a danger to her was making her sick to her stomach. Her insides were turning themselves into knots. Clark was the best man she knew. He’d die before he hurt her. But he didn’t control his dreams. They controlled him. When she’d refused to listen to him yesterday, all she was doing was dismissing his very real fears.

Floating a few inches above the steps, she ascended the staircase and made her way to the bathroom. Peeling off the suit, she turned on the taps, letting the water run until it was scalding. She stepped into the shower and let the hot water stream over her. It ran over her invulnerable body in rivulets, rejuvenating muscles weary with something other than physical exhaustion. She washed off the soot and ash, scouring it away methodically. Closing her eyes, she turned her face upward toward the spray of the shower head. A long while later, she finally shut off the water and stepped out, wrapping herself in one towel and using another to dry her short hair. The smell of smoke, which had clung to her skin, was replaced by the scent of lavender and she felt clean again. Wearing only the towel, and carrying the dirty suit in one hand, she walked quietly down the hallway to the bedroom. The whole house was silent, save for the sounds of deep breathing only hearing like hers would notice.

Lois slipped into the bedroom and closed the door behind her, not bothering to turn on the lights. Her husband slept peacefully, blissfully oblivious to the waking world. She quietly put the suit, still reeking of smoke, in the hamper in the closet, away from where Jon might accidentally stumble across it. Crossing the room silently, she stood in front of the dresser, trying to rub away the tension in the muscles of her neck. Her fingers brushed against the silver chain still hanging around her neck. She began to fumble for the clasp to the metal strand that held both her engagement and wedding rings. After stripping away the suit, this was the final step in the transformation back into a regular person – a married woman and mother, not a distant superhero of epic proportions, with no personal life to speak of.

Her husband’s strong, warm hands covered hers, and he gently lowered her arms back to her sides. He massaged her shoulders, drawing the faintest of sighs from her. She closed her eyes and relaxed into his touch. A shiver ran down her spine as he pressed his lips to her neck. His hands skimmed over her shoulders and down her arms as he kissed a path up to her ear, before capturing the soft lobe between his lips and sucking on it gently. The most delightful charge of electricity spread over her skin everywhere he touched her. She exhaled a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding in, feeling the way her body shuddered at the exquisite sensations his touch could evoke.

Hooking one finger over the top of her towel, he gave it a gentle tug, causing it to unwind and fall softly to the floor. His fingers delicately lifted the chain and unfastened the clasp. He deftly caught the two small rings and dropped the chain on the dresser. She turned around to face him and he took her hand in his much larger one. His thumb slowly traced the length of each of her fingers before he replaced the rings where they belonged. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the rings he had just placed there.

“Thank you for bringing it back to me,” she whispered.

His thumb traced the nicked and scratched little gold band. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep it safer,” he said softly.

Lois shook her head slightly. “What you went through, it’s amazing you were able to hold on to it.” In depths of his eyes, a profound sadness seemed to settle. He looked away from her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She placed her hand on his cheek, gently turning his head so he was facing her again.

“When Nor captured me, the chain broke. I lost the ring,” he confessed. “I didn’t get it back until after I was rescued.”

“Who found it?” she heard herself ask.

He looked down. He didn’t have to say it. She felt terrible, senseless tears pricking at her eyes. “Talan found it at the site where we were ambushed. She said it was how they knew where to start searching. This ring saved my life,” he said.

Damn him. Damn him for making her irrational emotionality seem so...irrational. She knew she had no reason to be upset. Hell, she had every reason to thank the gods, the fates, and even—or perhaps especially—Talan for sending him home to her. But she couldn’t do it. God help her, of all the things she felt in that moment, there just wasn’t room for gratitude in the confused, chaotic squall of her emotions. Her husband’s eyes locked hers in a deep and steady gaze. He touched her cheek and she slipped her arms around his neck, closing the distance between them. She buried her face against his neck, breathing in the clean smell of his warm skin. He held her tightly in the darkness, one hand moving in soothing circles against the small of her back.

His arm looped around her waist as he pulled her closer to him. She felt his lips brush against her shoulder. Lois placed her hand on top of his, interlacing their fingers. “What if I can’t do this?” he asked, his voice nothing more than a whisper, but the words hung over them in the silence of the dark and still room. “What if I’m never ready to be Superman again?”

Lois screwed her eyes shut. He was reaching out to her; he was making the effort to talk about his fears and their future. And here she was, her thoughts fixated on the past. Her mind was full to the brim with nothing but what he’d said earlier that night. About losing the ring. And about who had found it. How could she care about that? She needed to bury those confused and half-formed thoughts. He needed her now. She turned around in his arms to look

in his eyes. The pain she saw there pierced straight through her. “I honestly do believe you will be Superman again,” she said. “But no matter what you decide, I’ll be here.”

Clark shook his head. “How do I live with these powers if I don’t use them? And if you don’t want to keep being Ultrawoman...”

“I haven’t decided to give it up,” she responded. “But if you want me to...”

“I don’t,” he interrupted. “When you got the powers, we both thought it would be temporary, but if you’re willing to keep being Ultrawoman, I want you to. The both of us can do a lot more than either of us can do alone.”

She felt the corners of her mouth turn downward in a frown. “You’re sure?”

“I am,” he said. “But I don’t want you to feel like you have to do this. It has to be your choice.”

How could it be her choice? He’d made perfectly clear that he wouldn’t live with her if she didn’t have their powers. At least not in the sense of having an ordinary marriage. They could live under one roof, but not sleep in the same bed. He would be condemning her to a lifetime of sleeping without him. Just like she had for the last four years. Now that she finally had him back, now that she could fall asleep every night to the sound of his heartbeat, and feel his arms around her, how could she give that up again? “I can’t keep the powers and not be Ultrawoman,” she said. “And you’ve made pretty clear your feelings about me going back to being an ordinary person.”

“Lois, if that’s what you want...”

“How can it be what I want? How can I choose to give this up?” she asked as she touched his arm. “I just got you back.”

“It’s not like I’m going to leave,” he interjected.

“I want a real marriage, Clark. I don’t want my husband to be afraid to touch me, to worry constantly that he’s going to hurt me. It starts with where we sleep and it’s just going to get worse. You’ll push me away because you’re afraid of what you’ll do to me.”

Clark shook his head, a pained look on his face. “I’m not going to shut you out,” he said, but she could tell from his tone that he hadn’t even convinced himself of that. But she knew he had a point. The nightmares continued and he physically lashed out in his sleep. He could very well hurt or even kill an ordinary person when he thrashed and fought the demons that haunted his nights.

She closed her eyes. No matter what he said, she didn’t really have a choice. She would have to keep being Ultrawoman. With him back home, she could do this. Lois placed her head on his chest and listened to the steady thump of his heartbeat. “I’ll keep doing it. I’ll stay Ultrawoman, but you have to tell me if you change your mind.”

Lois felt her husband press his lips to the crown of her hair. “Okay,” he whispered quietly.

It was a beautiful night, cold and dark under a clear and cloudless sky. She could smell hickory burning in a distant fireplace. The scent mingled with the smell of cold. Jon had already been tucked in and down below in the farmhouse she could see him sleeping peacefully. Despite the tranquility, she was disquiet, her mind racing. Clark still wasn't home from his appointment with Dr. Friskin. For the last two weeks, they'd been working on relaxation techniques, trying to find ways to keep his anxiety from spiraling out of control. Lois knew the brutal irony of his situation was tearing him apart. Superman spent his whole life with one ear listening for signs of distress. His instinctive response was to go whenever and wherever someone needed him. And now, the sound of a panicked cry was enough to bring his world to a standstill. To shut him down.

She worried that maybe he'd heard another call for help, but she couldn't follow him around to make sure everything was all right. He hated being treated like he wasn't capable. And now, more than ever, he wasn't going to tolerate it. All she could do was hope everything was okay.

But that wasn't the only thing that was bothering her and she knew it. As much as she wanted to move forward with her life, her thoughts kept coming back to how much time they'd spent apart and how much it was that she didn't know about her husband any more. The story of how he'd rescued that little boy still haunted her. It was strange how hearing about that one event made what he went through on New Krypton suddenly seem more real. He may have been a political leader, but he hadn't been distant from the fighting and the death that war brought. How much more frustrating must it have been for him, knowing all the good that Superman could have done there, knowing how much more he could have accomplished if he'd only had his powers. For months, she'd been frustrated by the fact that she knew so little of what had happened in his life over the last four years. Now, the floodgates had been broken. The dam had been breached and she was being drowned in the chaotic and painful and messy details of all of it.

It was almost two weeks ago now that he'd told her about losing her ring. It was the last thing in the world she'd expected to hear. Clark was larger and more powerful than life. He was a force of nature. And yet, despite his promise, despite doing everything in his power, he'd lost the ring when he was captured. She knew that if there were any way any human being could have held onto it under those circumstances, Clark would have done so. But Clark had never been subject to human limitations. He was a man who'd crossed the galaxy, not once, but twice, to be with her. He'd stopped fires and floods and held up bridges with his bare hands and plucked falling planes from the sky.

She wasn't angry with him for not being able to hold onto the ring. But it reminded her in a cold and cruel way just how vulnerable he'd been up there. And she hadn't been there to help him. When he'd needed her the most, when he'd had the least protection against a hostile world, she wasn't there for him.

And someone else had been.

Someone else had found the ring and kept it safe. Someone else had found him and brought him back when hope was all but lost. Someone else had moved heaven and earth to protect him.

Her arms outstretched above her head, she flew straight up, high into the night's sky. With ease, she found the dim little star closest to New Krypton's weak sun, itself too faint to be seen from Earth. It had been so long since she'd come up here to do this. She'd had no reason to. Clark had come home to her, which meant she no longer had to preoccupy herself with wondering what was happening on that distant little planet, so far away from this one. But tonight, she needed to be here, as close as she could get to New Krypton. She flew up to the edge of the atmosphere, where the frigid air was stretched as thin as could be.

Her hand went instinctively to the chain around her neck, where she wore her wedding rings when she was in the suit. She fingered the rings absently. "I don't really know how to do this," she said, her eyes toward the heavens. "I don't know you. I'm kinda glad that I don't. I know that I don't have the right to hate you, even though I really want to. I mean, your only real crime was having good taste in men, but I hate comparing myself to you. I hate coming up short when I do. I know you loved him. And I'm so glad that you're a hell of a lot more noble than I am, because I would have fought for him. It wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference that he had someone else to go home to. I would have tried. I would have begged him to stay. I would have done anything to convince him that he would have been happier with me.

"So thank you. Thank you for saving his life. Thank you for pretending you didn't love him. Thank you for thinking about his happiness more than your own. Thank you for being the friend he needed when I couldn't. I know it's small and petty of me, but I can't bring myself to like you. But you cannot imagine how much I respect you. Or how grateful I am to you. My family is together. My son will grow up knowing his father. I'm happy. Because of you.

"So I'm going to stop obsessing over you. And I'm going to stop bursting into tears every time he mentions your name. Or at least, I'm going to try. I'm going to stop turning you into the 'other woman' in my head, because it diminishes both of us when I do. And since I'm being honest, I'll admit there is one good thing about knowing you fell in love with him. He respects you so much, admires the things you stood for, because he stands for them, too. So if you fell in love with him, that means that no matter what he says or thinks about what happened on New Krypton, he was still the good and decent person I married.

"Goodbye, Commander Talan. Thank you for sending my husband home to me." She tucked the rings back under the collar of her suit and drifted back down toward the quiet little farmhouse, where a thin wisp of smoke rose from the chimney, welcoming her back to the warmth of home.

He tried to relax on the therapist's couch, but while this room was sometimes a sanctuary, it was also often an emotional torture chamber. They were making progress, he knew that. Before he'd started coming here, he couldn't talk to Lois about anything on New Krypton. Before he'd started coming here, he couldn't get around his own pain and grief to even begin to understand the things she went through while he was gone. They still had so much further to go, and the day when he could be Superman again seemed so far away—perhaps unattainably far away—but it felt good, sometimes, to say aloud the things that were bothering him.

"You've made a lot of great progress these last few weeks, Clark," Dr. Friskin said as she looked up from her notes. "I know that sometimes, it doesn't feel that way, but you and Lois are communicating with each other about the things that concern you. You've pinpointed some of the incidences on New Krypton that are having the most pronounced effect on your everyday life and we've started addressing them. Except for one."

Clark inhaled sharply. He knew that was coming. For weeks, their sessions had been dominated first by his arguments with Lois and then by his blackout after hearing a call for help. Those problems had been breathing down his neck, screaming for their immediate attention, but they weren't an excuse any more.

"I want us to talk about the note you gave me several weeks ago. About what happened with Nor," Dr. Friskin said gently.

"What do you want to know?" he asked flatly, his obdurate response the last remaining defense he had.

"Why don't we start with how it happened?" she replied, totally ignoring his stubborn tone.

With a sigh and the reflexive tensing and un-tensing of his fist, he closed his eyes and recounted the last battle for New Krypton. He told her about how Nor's supporters had effectively shut down the main colony and had attacked in a desperate attempt to free their leader. He and Talan had been evacuating civilian shelters, he explained, when Nor had shot him in the arm. With rebels bearing down on their position, he'd taken the last ditch chance, knowing that Nor cared more about killing his rival than terrorizing the civilians. He'd drawn Nor's fire, giving the civilians time to flee. Shot once more in the back, he'd fallen in a deserted corridor. As Nor approached, to bask in triumph over his defeated nemesis, Clark had used his last moment of consciousness to kill the other man.

"I don't remember what was going on in my own head," he admitted. "I'm pretty sure I thought I was going to die. I don't know if I killed him so he wouldn't be a threat, or if I did it out of vengeance. I don't remember it."

"But you think you acted out of malice?"

He closed his eyes and nodded. "When Nor was captured a year earlier, I was adamant about going to see him. I wanted him dead. I confronted him and all I felt was rage. At the things he took from me. At the weakness he

found in me. I hit him and I think I would have killed him with my bare hands had Talan not stopped me."

"She stopped you?"

"She grabbed me and held me back," he explained.

Dr. Friskin arched a brow. "Was she physically capable of restraining you?"

He looked down. "No," he admitted.

"So you allowed yourself to be stopped?" she prodded.

"Yes." He continued his monosyllabic responses.

"That has to count for something, doesn't it?"

"What if she hadn't been there? I have no idea what I would have done. And I can't help but think that maybe..." he trailed off, letting an awkward silence settle over the office.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe I should have killed him then. Maybe I shouldn't have let her stop me." He looked up, expecting to see a look of horror on Dr. Friskin's face, but there was nothing there but the thoughtful, empathetic expression she always wore.

"To prevent the deaths of all of the people who were killed in that last attack?" she asked, drilling right to the heart of his darkest thoughts.

He nodded silently. It took him a moment to find his voice. "Six hundred and seventy-one people died because of that attack. None of them had to."

"If only you'd been clairvoyant."

Clark narrowed his eyes and felt his features settle into a harsh scowl. "Is that supposed to be funny?" he asked.

"No," she replied simply. "But the obvious question here, Clark, is how could you have possibly known what was going to happen? Nor had been captured and by your own descriptions, the war had been over for a year before that last attack. You brought a violent, deranged killer to justice. You confronted him despite the costs to yourself in order to make sure he never harmed anyone again. And you did it by cleaving to a system of justice and laws that you believed were worth defending. Given what you knew, what was your alternative?"

He looked down at his hands, trying to keep his right hand from trembling. "I don't know," he admitted. "But those people shouldn't have died."

"I agree completely with that. But the fault for their deaths lies with Nor and the people who planned the attack. Not with you. As the leader of New Krypton, what would you have been doing to their civilization if you'd made yourself above the law? If you'd killed an enemy who posed no conceivable threat to anyone, out of a desire for vengeance? You weren't just a man or even a soldier on New Krypton. You had a responsibility to uphold and defend its laws, didn't you?"

"Yeah." His voice was a harsh whisper. She had a point. And he had no comeback.

She had the confirmation she'd been waiting for. While it had been worrying at her thoughts since he'd first given her the note, she now knew for certain that there were

indeed two sets of major obstacles to him regaining his sense of self. One was emotional. The other was ethical. He was still working through the trauma of New Krypton and all that entailed. And he hadn't begun to address the fact of Nor's death. She remembered how much Lois had been torn apart by her desire for vengeance growing out of what she'd seen in Kinwara. It was what had driven the young woman to the brink and had led her to seek help.

The circumstances of the two cases were dramatically different, and it was those differences that had probably spared Lois from having to deal with the consequences of killing. She was never without her powers and on some level, no matter how angry or shocked she was by what she saw, she was always aware of that fact. She was able to escape into the moral absolutes that Ultrawoman made possible. She had never killed because there was always another way. And because Ultrawoman meant too much to too many people to risk her destruction. Moreover, Ultrawoman was constantly measuring herself against Superman's example and finding fault even where none existed. She had been desperate to meet the standard he set and Dr. Friskin now understood why. By keeping Superman alive in his ethics, by always acting as though she were merely a stand in, Lois had been fighting her own fear that she was replacing her husband. That his leaving was permanent.

But in the end, she had grown completely into the role of Ultrawoman. She had found her own unique way of approaching problems, and she'd succeeded admirably. Even if she'd undertaken the role assuming it was temporary, Dr. Friskin imagined the younger woman would actually find it more difficult than expected to give up the task, assuming that was what she wanted to do.

Which led her back to her patients' most recently revealed difficulties. Prior to their last session, she had been completely unaware of the fact that Clark was physically lashing out in his sleep. She knew he was having nightmares, but he'd never talked about physically acting them out, or that he'd hit Lois. She realized what a fortunate thing indeed it was that Lois had his powers. The young woman was obviously in no danger, but she was going to call her anyway. Their session had not provided anything remotely resembling an opportune time to discuss the matter. The very next appointment she'd had with Clark alone, she'd broached the topic of him hitting his wife in his sleep. Not only was he genuinely troubled by it, she was almost stunned by the depths of his anguish. She believed that his actions had been completely unconscious. There was nothing in his character—despite all he had been through—that suggested he would be violent toward his loved ones. Even though Lois was in no physical danger, she still wanted to make sure everything was all right. And she could provide some useful advice for how to address the night terrors.

Much as it bothered her, though, she had to agree with Clark when it came to the issue of Lois retaining the powers. If his night terrors were as bad as they appeared to

be, there really was no way to be sure that they wouldn't recur. Even if he went years without such an episode, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't return one night. And one night would be all it would take for something terrible to happen. No matter how much trouble he was having trusting his instincts these days, on this particular issue, she thought he was spot on. For them to sleep in the same space with Lois vulnerable would have been courting disaster.

"Son, calm down," his father said gently.

"It hasn't been that long since the accident; she could have been called away to another emergency," his mother added, but it didn't stop him from pacing.

He turned on the television in the den yet again and started flipping through the channels. But there was nothing. No earthquake, no mudslide, no oil spill that would have called her attention after she'd finished helping out at the commuter train derailment just outside of San Francisco. There was nothing. He growled in frustration before dropping the remote on the couch.

"I'm going to go look for her," Clark said at last.

"I'm sure she's fine," his mother said. She stepped in between him and the door and put a reassuring hand on his arm. "Give her a little time."

His parents had been up for hours with him in the den, silently watching the gruesome images of the accident on the news. They looked so very tired, both on their third cup of coffee. Ultrawoman had left the scene of the accident almost an hour ago. The camera crews were stationed far away from the carnage, but even at a distance, he could see her anguish. Now, they kept repeating the same image of her tearing open one of the cars in search of survivors. She seemed so powerful, but he knew what was going through her head in that moment, she was begging and praying and bargaining with deities she didn't believe in, hoping that she wasn't too late. That the power she had wasn't just a colossal joke, that she could help.

He couldn't help but rage against his own feeling of impotence. God, what was wrong with him? Why was he just sitting here, doing nothing? "What if she needs me?" he asked, hearing his own voice crack. He looked first to his mother and then his father. Neither said a word. "What could she possibly need you for, Kent?" he thought to himself uncharitably.

Without another word, he spun into the suit and flew out of the farmhouse. He started westward, wondering if she was still somewhere near the accident site. If she wasn't, well, he really had no idea where he'd look. She could literally be anywhere in the world. Within minutes, he was flying high over the accident site. The burned, shredded detritus of the train cars were a gruesome spectacle. The victims had all been evacuated, but the site was still surrounded by emergency crews and accident investigators. But no Lois. He would have been able to pick up her heartbeat if she was there.

He tried the city itself, wondering if some minor crisis in San Francisco had attracted her attention, but there

wasn't an accident or crime demanding her attention there. Oakland was quiet, too. Maybe she'd decided to do a patrol of Metropolis. Putting on a burst of speed, he headed toward the city he'd once thought of as home. He swept over Metropolis much the way he had years ago, when an evening patrol was part of his daily ritual. When Superman being in the sky was part of everything being right in the world. He wasn't up here tonight for the benefit of the city's residents, though. He wouldn't be rescuing cats from trees or attending neighborhood watch meetings, or breaking up muggings. Much as it had for the last four years, Metropolis would get by tonight without him. But he had to find her. He had to know she was okay.

She sat at the kitchen table, her mug of tea held between both hands. Taking a long sip, she tried to close her eyes again, hoping the images wouldn't be there this time, hoping to hear something other than the groan of weakened metal and the strangled cries for help. The hot tea soothed her raw throat, but she couldn't help the shiver that ran through her body.

There had been so much blood.

Another cup of tea, she thought to herself as she finished the first mug and stood to walk back into the kitchen. Another cup of tea and she'd be ready to go home. She really needed to get back home. She knew that Clark didn't sleep well when she wasn't there. Pouring more water into her cup, she stared down at it until it came to a boil. Absently, she tugged on the string to the tea bag as it steeped. She sat back down at the table, gathering up her cape as she did. She'd taken off the mask, but remained in the costume, not having seen the point in changing. Raising the mug to her lips again, she was startled by the familiar sound of a sudden breeze coming from the bedroom. There was the thud of boots and then her husband came rushing into the living room.

"Are you okay?" she asked, leaving the mug on the table as she stood up.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," he said as he gathered her into his arms.

Lois wrapped her arms around his waist and allowed him to enfold her in his embrace. For a long moment, neither said anything, but eventually, he pulled back slightly and tilted her chin up to look at her. A frown marred his features. "You've been crying," he said softly.

She nodded and said nothing. Actually, she hadn't cried yet, but she'd been doing a pretty miserable job of fighting tears. A ragged breath escaped her lips. His hand slipped into her hair as he held her close. She buried her face against his shoulder. "It's all right," he crooned, as he stroked her hair. "It's all right."

Tears stung at her eyes and her grip on him tightened. "It was awful," she admitted, giving voice to the thought that had been haunting her for hours now.

He kissed the top of her head. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "Please, just don't let me go," she whispered.

Her husband held her even more tightly. "Never," he promised. In the strong circle of his embrace, she was finally overcome by her tears. Clark let her cry and true to his word, he never let her go. She let her world fall apart, knowing he would hold the pieces together. He gathered her up in his arms. Cradling her against his broad chest, he carried her to the couch. For a long while, he held her silently, her sobs the only sounds in the apartment. He'd held her on this same couch when she'd been the target of some crazed criminal or other. Even before she'd known he was the most powerful being in the world, she'd felt so safe in his arms. Now, invulnerable though she might have been, she still needed him just as much. More so, really.

Eventually, she looked up at him through teary eyes. "Why didn't you come home?" he asked, a plaintive look on his face.

Lois didn't know what to say. "I just needed some time to think," she replied.

"This is supposed to be a two way street, isn't it? You want me to open up to you, but you have to do the same."

"I know, I'm sorry," she said. "I just needed to figure out what was going on in my head."

"I was worried," he said insistently. "I used to come to you after rescues like that. I figured you'd do the same. I..." he trailed off, his voice thick with emotion.

She reached up to touch his face. "I'm sorry," Lois repeated. "The way you feel about being Superman...I didn't know if you'd want to talk about something like this."

Clark turned away from her, closing his eyes. Her hand slipped from his cheek. "I'm not made of glass," he said. "If you can't open up to me, if you don't trust me..."

"This isn't about trust," she interrupted. "You know that I trust you."

He shifted her off his lap and stood up. She felt so very bereft, her body instantly missing his. "But you won't let me in. You can't protect me from this kind of stuff."

Lois stifled a sigh of exasperation. "I'm not trying to shut you out, Clark." 'Liar,' her mind countered immediately. 'You've been so worried about being the strong one, about not letting him see the things that weigh you down, that scare you.' That wasn't fair, some other part of her brain countered. He'd been dealing with too much. And this cut too close to home. Besides, it wasn't like she was going to keep this all bottled up permanently, she just needed time to process it first. 'Whatever, that's a rationalization and you know it,' her mind retorted. She was getting nowhere with this stupid fight in her own head.

"You would have come to me," he said, his tone carried a deep and angry accusation. "Four years ago, if something was bothering you, you would have come to me." He dragged a hand through his hair, tousling it out of the 'Superman' style and making him look like Clark. He'd told her how much he hated wearing the suit now that he

wasn't Superman, but he wasn't about to go flying around without it.

"I know," she heard herself admit quietly as she rose from the sofa. She took both of his hands in hers. "I'm sorry," she said again, apologizing for the third time. "This is new for me, too. Dr. Friskin is the only person I ever really talked to about stuff like this. But you're right; this is something we should be able to talk about. Together."

His hand slipped from hers and he touched her cheek gently before pulling her back into his arms. She tucked her head under his chin and listened to the steady thump of his heart. "You don't know how much I need you," he whispered, the words rumbling deep in his chest. "You're the reason I'm alive. You're the only reason I came home, the reason I kept fighting when I wanted to die. I know that you love me. I don't know that you need me."

"Clark," his name escaped her lips in a strangled cry and she found herself putting space between them so she could look up at her husband. She expected to see that accusatory glare in his eyes but found only pain. "How can you say that?" she asked, her words devoid of any venom.

"Because you never expect me to be there for you, anymore. You learned how to get along without me. And you're good at it."

She backed away from him. "That's a load of crap," she began.

"Come on, Lois, the seven figure bank account, the Kerths, the Pulitzer, the damn Nobel Prize!"

She felt her eyes narrow as she glared at him. "Haven't we already had this fight?" she asked acidly.

He shook his head ruefully. "I can't just be the guy you take care of for the next fifty years. I can't just be part of your life because you like having me around. Or because Jon ought to have a decent relationship with his father."

"How dare you, Clark?" she demanded angrily. "Do you ever listen to me? How many times do I have to tell you how hard it was?"

"I listen," he said quietly. "I've heard every word. But they're words. I see you and I see someone who thinks she needs her husband, but who's gotten pretty good at taking care of everything herself. Someone who certainly doesn't act like she needs anyone."

"I don't know what you want me to do," she confessed, tears stinging her eyes, her voice quivering with emotion.

"I want you to be the Lois Lane who wasn't just head over heels in love with Clark Kent, but who needed him, too. As much as he needed her." He folded his arms across his chest and looked down at the floor.

"I still am," she said.

He shook his head but didn't look up. "I don't feel it," he said. He looked up at last and met her gaze with wounded eyes. "I don't feel it," he repeated.

The tears turned to anger, stiffening her resolve and pushing the hesitation out of her voice. "Did you come here to compare scars? To figure out who needs whom more? To figure out which one of us is more screwed up after four years of pain? You want bragging rights, Clark, they're

yours. But I can't do this." She shook her head and started for the window, to the freedom that flight would provide. She needed air. Their fight had long ago burned up all the oxygen in his apartment.

He was an idiot. A completely incorrigible fool. Clark stared miserably out the window of his old apartment. Across the street, the neon light of the diner buzzed and flickered, just like it had all those years ago when he'd lived here. The city sounded just like it had then, too. Another couple in a nearby apartment building was arguing. Two more were making love. A few televisions blared infomercials as they kept the insomniacs company.

He hadn't come here to start a fight. For the love of God, he hadn't come here spoiling for an argument. But that didn't change two very basic facts. He desperately wanted Lois to depend on him again. And he was in no condition to be dependable. For a few moments, while he held her, it almost seemed like he could be that solid and reassuring figure in her life again. She'd cried in his arms. And for the first time in a long time, those tears had been for her, not for him. For the first time in a long time, he wasn't to blame for the hurt she felt. But then he'd gone and made it about himself.

Dear God, what was wrong with him? Why did all the misery in the world have to be about him? What sort of deranged narcissist was he? And he'd picked one of her rare moments of vulnerability to initiate this particular butting of heads. Because while he could count on her to pull her punches, he'd resorted to taking cheap shots.

Sighing morosely, he turned away from the window. There'd been a time when things were reversed. When he'd fought fair and she hadn't. That wasn't entirely accurate, and he knew it. Sure, Lois Lane had a no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners approach to the world, but once you earned her friendship and her respect, she'd be the first person to jump in the way and take one on the chin for you. And when she loved you? Hell, he would have given her hundred to one odds in her favor over anyone on the planet, with or without superpowers, if she was fighting for someone she loved. So how had he repaid her? By waiting until she was up against the ropes to throw a couple of sucker punches.

She was hurting. She'd needed him. And he'd thrown it in her face. How could he expect her to turn to him, to lean on him, when he turned everything into some incoherent rant about what he wanted and what he needed and why he felt so damned threatened?

Now, she was God-knew-where, not just dealing with the horrors of the night's accident, but his asinine behavior, too. She'd had enough to deal with and he'd just gone and made it worse. No wonder she'd come here instead of going home. No wonder she'd sought space. With another despondent sigh, he turned off the lights and left for home.

As he descended toward the farmhouse, he was surprised to hear four heartbeats. His parents were soundly sleeping, as was his son, their hearts beating slowly and

steadily in the deep and peaceful slumber that was the unique haven of good and innocent people. But Lois was awake. Scanning the house, he found her in the doorway of Jon's room, watching their son sleep. This was where she found her peace these days. This was the refuge she sought from a world that sought to line up all its malice and hatred and viciousness against her. One petite little superhero versus all the evil and pain that humanity and nature and dumb luck combined could muster.

She'd learned to stand up to all of it on her own because he'd given her no choice. As much as he claimed to need her, as much as he'd always claimed that she came first in his life, he'd abandoned her here to save some distant planet he hadn't even known existed. He'd fought and nearly died for perfect strangers, but he'd left her to fend for their family alone. And he was mad at her for it. Changing back into his own clothes, thankful to be rid of the mockery that was the suit, he walked silently down the hallway toward her. She turned around at the sound of his footsteps, pulling the door to Jon's room closed behind her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as their eyes met. "I'm an idiot." As though that explained everything.

She nodded in agreement. "I'm not going to argue with that." Ouch. The fact that he deserved it didn't take the sting out of the comment. "I'm not a liar, Clark Kent." He tried not to wince. When she used his full name like that, grinding out each name separately, he knew, clear as day, that she was pissed at him. "When I tell you that I need you, it's not because I'm trying to make you feel good. It's because it's the God's honest truth."

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry."

He watched her sigh. "But you're right," she said. "I told you about everything that happened while you were gone, but now, I feel like I can't burden you with Ultrawoman, it isn't fair to you."

He shook his head. "I shouldn't have made you take over my job."

"I was the one who decided to do this," she said mulishly. "It was my choice. And it was the right one. I'm glad I became Ultrawoman. Even when it hurt like hell. Even when I was sure I couldn't handle it."

Clark put a hand on his wife's shoulder. "I couldn't be more proud of what you've done. Everything you've done. And I was a total jackass tonight. I didn't mean what I said."

"You were hurt. And you had a right to be. I spent four years constantly asking myself 'what would Clark do?' 'How would Clark handle this?' It's time I started asking you those questions. This has always been a partnership, regardless of which one of us was wearing the tights. I will do better," she promised. "But you have to tell me if it's too much, if I'm putting too much pressure on you."

"I will," he said, not sure if he meant it, but now that it was out in the open, there wasn't much he could do about it. For her, he would try. "Can you forgive me?"

"You're forgiven. Lunkhead."

He merely shook his head. He deserved a hell of a lot worse. "Come on, let's go to bed," she said, offering him her hand.

He took her hand and pulled her close, kissing her temple. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she replied simply.

"I'll see you in a little while," he said with a gentle squeeze of her hand. She stood on her toes to kiss him goodbye. Her husband touched her cheek before slowly withdrawing. With one last backward glance, he floated out through the bedroom window. A sharp, cold breeze swirled in his wake. Out of habit, she closed the window, though the chill had no effect on her. Staring out the closed window at the darkened sky, she bit back a sigh. She knew how hard these sessions could be on him. Just a few days before, she'd spoken to the therapist over the phone. It had been an uncomfortable conversation to say the least, and while Dr. Friskin had more tact than any one person should be possessed of, there was no easy way to ask someone if they felt physically endangered by their husband.

Lois had felt herself bristle on Clark's behalf, but she knew that Dr. Friskin was acting on less than perfect information. All she'd heard of the story was that one night, during a nightmare, Clark had struck her and now was afraid of doing it again. Trying to calm herself down, Lois explained that while Clark was far bigger than she was, she gave up nothing to him in terms of strength or invulnerability. With their powers, neither one of them would have been physically capable of hurting the other. She told her therapist about that night. About how much Clark's actions had shocked and shamed him. About how, since his invulnerability had been returning slowly, he was the one who'd been injured, not her. And she assured her shrink that Clark had been in the deepest of sleeps when it happened. He hadn't meant to hit her. He certainly hadn't thought she was the one he was hitting.

But while her end of the conversation had been an impassioned defense of her husband, Lois knew that both he and Dr. Friskin were right. If they were to share a bed, she had to keep the powers. It was as simple as that. Clark was not in control over his nightmares and there was no way to guarantee he ever would be.

Her arguments with Clark had had one beneficial side effect – she'd finally gotten clarity on whether she wanted to continue being Ultrawoman. She may have undertaken the role assuming it was only temporary, but it was now part of who she was. Despite all the pain and the misery, the countless times she'd gotten there too late, she didn't regret any of it. She didn't want to give it up.

Even if the issue of Clark's nightmares hadn't arisen, she was now sure that she would have wanted to continue as Ultrawoman. There was yet another reason why she couldn't relinquish the powers, too. Assuming she and Clark wanted more children, she would probably have to keep the powers. Bernie hadn't believed that she would have been able to carry Clark's child otherwise.

They hadn't discussed the possibility of another child. Of course, she and Clark had never really talked about having kids at all. Before their wedding, she'd always assumed it was something they would talk about when the time came. Life, as it turned out, had had different plans for them. She didn't regret the way things turned out; how could she? They had a wonderful, beautiful, perfect son. And yeah, she was wistful for the things they'd missed. They'd never had a honeymoon. Or weekends when you barely left the bed. They'd missed out on being newlyweds and Clark had missed out on so much of the joy of being a new parent.

Even though she'd never given much thought to motherhood before her pregnancy, being a parent was the most important thing she'd ever done. And for her part, she didn't want Jon to be an only child. She wanted him to have a little brother or sister. It was something she hadn't talked about with Clark; it was still too soon. They needed more time just to get used to being a family. And Clark needed to settle some of the questions in his own life first – where they would live, what he wanted to do, whether to bring back Superman. They had enough on their minds without thinking about having another baby.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'Don't think about Silban. Don't think about Terian. Just don't think about New Krypton,' he thought to himself. Clark exhaled slowly and centered his thoughts, just like Ching had taught him years ago. He let his mind go blank and the sirens faded away. After a long moment, he opened his eyes again. It wasn't cold. He wasn't in the pit of a collapsed building searching for survivors. It was just the warm, friendly confines of his therapist's office. His pulse thundered in his ears. Bile burned in his dry throat, bitter and harsh.

"Everything all right?" Dr. Friskin asked, the concern evident in her voice.

"Just police sirens," he replied absently. He could feel his heart rate returning to normal. His palms were still sweating.

"You're doing very well, Clark," she said. "I know it's hard for you to listen to them and not rush off to help, but you need to be able to control your reactions before you can resume being Superman, and you're getting there." He nodded, trying to find the logic in not helping so that he could help.

"Why don't we take a minute and then come back to talking about New Krypton?" his therapist offered.

Just what he wanted. He sighed with a slight nod. It wasn't like he had much of a choice.

Clark looked up at the darkening sky. A soft flurry of snow fell from the thick blanket of clouds, most of the flakes melting before they hit the ground. His wife descended slowly toward the farm. "You're late," he said with a half smile.

"Pile up on the interstate," she replied. "Some folks are going to be spending Thanksgiving in the emergency room."

His lips turned downward in a frown. "You okay?" he asked.

Lois spun out of the suit. "I'm fine. Nothing too serious," she said. "Come on, it smells good in there." She nodded toward the farmhouse before taking his hand in hers.

He held the door open for her, feeling the warmth of the household wash over them. "Dinner's ready!" his mother called out from the kitchen. His father carried the turkey to the dining room table and placed it in the center of the impressive spread.

"We should take pictures," Lois announced before disappearing, in search of the camera, he assumed.

"Everything looks amazing, Mom," Clark said. Her best china had made its way out of the hutch and onto the table. He remembered getting scolded as a little boy for sneaking into the cabinets to find what his mother kept hidden in there, dismayed to find nothing but old plates.

"Well, it was certainly good to have you back in the kitchen to help out," she said. He could see unshed tears shining brightly in her eyes. God, how he missed this. It was all too surreal, mashing potatoes and checking on the pies in his mother's kitchen, like he had done for so many years as a boy. For four long years, this day came and went, without pause, without any reflection, with nothing more than nostalgia for years gone by and all the things he had to be thankful for, left behind on Earth. He looked at his son. Their first Thanksgiving together. Lois had returned and was already snapping pictures.

Behind him, Martha placed the green bean casserole on the table. "That's everything," she announced. She helped her grandson into his chair as they all took their seats around the table. Martha sat down between Jonathan and Clark and placed her hand on her son's. "Clark, honey, you can't imagine how blessed we feel to have you back home. This is the best Thanksgiving I've ever had."

"Hear, hear," Jonathan replied.

"Yeah, hear, hear!" Jon echoed his grandfather with a giggle and a grin. Repeating things that adults said, especially when he didn't know what they meant, was one of Jon's new favorite pastimes.

"Son, it's so good to have you here. It's good to feel like a whole family, again," his father said gruffly.

"It's good to be back," Clark said simply. "I can't tell you all how much this means to me. All I wanted for four years was to come home and see you all again. I have the most wonderful family a guy could ask for. I don't say it enough, but I am so thankful for all of you." Across the table, he could see his wife smiling tremulously at him.

Lois cleared her throat. "I'm thankful for each and every one of you. Martha and Jonathan, I couldn't have gotten through the last four years without you. And you, little man, you are the best little boy a mother could ask for." She smiled at her son and tousled his hair. She looked across the

table and her gaze locked with Clark's. "I love you so much," she whispered. "Thank you for finding me. Thank you for coming home to me. To us."

"Is there anything you want to say 'thank you' for, Jon?" his grandfather asked him.

"Grandma and ice cream," Jon declared. Clark couldn't help the smile that spread across his face.

Jonathan laughed and kissed his wife's cheek. "I think Grandma's pretty great, too."

"Grandpa, can I cut the turkey?" Jon asked. He stood up on his chair to get a better look at the large bird.

Jonathan chuckled. "It's a pretty big knife, but why don't you help your Daddy do it?" Jonathan turned over the knife and serving fork to his son. "Do the honors?" he asked.

Clark smiled at his father. "Sure," he replied.

He took the serving implements from his father and stood behind his son. "Do you want to help me?" he asked. Jon nodded in excitement. Jon still stood on his chair, his father leaning over him. "Remember, you never touch knives by yourself, understand?" he cautioned. "Always get a grownup to help."

Clark put his hand over Jon's on the knife handle and let his little boy 'help' carve the first slice of turkey. "Okay, look up at Mommy," he instructed. Jon gave his mother his best smile.

"Say 'happy Thanksgiving,'" she said as she focused the camera.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Jon exclaimed.

Clark carved the oversized bird and served everyone. Dishes of homemade sides made their way around the table and conversation turned toward the simple and everyday subjects about the yields from the year's harvest and plans for Christmas. Everything was perfect; his family was together, everyone was safe and happy. Here in the quiet of Smallville, civil wars, disasters, and his own troubles were far from his mind. His mother was right, it was the best Thanksgiving he'd ever had.

"You know what turkey does to me," he whispered in her ear as he stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She felt a delightful shiver make its way down her spine. The bedroom door closed with a soft 'click' behind them.

"Turkey? I thought it was pasta." She tilted her head, giving him better access as his lips trailed down her neck.

"Whatever," he murmured against her skin.

She suppressed a sigh, wondering why it was that she was expected to think clearly when he was doing such wonderful things to her. "Well, nothing's gonna happen unless one of us goes to the drugstore."

"Again?" he asked, his tone surprised.

"Uh huh," she said, turning around in his arms.

"Stevenson's is closed and given that it's Thanksgiving..."

"I never go there anyway," he replied.

She smiled knowingly at him. "Embarrassed?"

"Mr. Stevenson has owned that drugstore since I was a kid. I used to go there on Fridays when I got my allowance and drink chocolate milkshakes all afternoon."

"You're a married man, Clark. I'm pretty sure he knows you're having sex," Lois said archly.

He shook his head with a smile. "I know," he admitted, pausing for a moment as he seemed to collect his thoughts. "We haven't talked about...I mean...we never talked about kids before. I wasn't sure we'd even be able to have kids together. I didn't think about...protection before we were married."

"I did," she said. "I started taking the pill a few months before we got married. I figured it was the responsible thing to do. With everything that was going on, I guess I didn't think about whether they'd still work with super metabolism."

His expression suddenly became one of concern; anxiety etched itself deeply into his features. "But you weren't...unhappy...when you found out you were pregnant?"

"Of course I was happy," she assured him, taking his hands in hers. "Okay, for the first few minutes or so, I was terrified, but I loved our son from the moment I knew about him. I know I wasn't exactly rushing to become a parent, and I didn't even know if I'd be any good at motherhood, but Jon is the most important thing in the world to me. He always has been."

"I know," Clark said, but she could see the relief in his eyes. "And you are an amazing mother. I know the time isn't right, but...do you want to have more kids...someday?" She had been putting off this conversation, knowing it was too soon to be thinking about more children, but he seemed so hopeful. And her answer wasn't going to disappoint him.

"Yeah," she said, looking down at their linked hands. "I think so. At least one more...when the time is right."

She looked up and met his eyes. He smiled at her. "Me too," he said softly. "But until then..."

"Go," she said, placing a hand on his chest.

"Be back in a few," he replied with a grin.

She stretched lazily in her husband's arms, placing her head against his chest. Lois felt him press his lips to her hair. "So you want more kids, huh?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," Lois replied. "I want Jon to have a little brother or sister."

"So do I," he said. "Being different, I felt so...lonely growing up. Jon will have both of us, he'll have parents who know what he's going through, but I always wanted a brother or sister. Finding out that I had one, that she died and I never knew her..." he trailed off sadly.

She touched his cheek and he looked down to meet her gaze. Lois smiled at him, hoping to convey that she understood. "No matter what, Jon will grow up happy," she said. "He has a family that loves him more than anything. And he has two superpowered parents to look after him and keep him out of trouble."

“If he’s anything like his mother, he’ll need us,” he joked.

“Hey!” She nudged him playfully in the ribs.

Clark grinned. “I can’t figure out how your parents managed.”

“I was a good kid. Straight As, chess club, tennis, piano lessons.”

“Right, the breaking and entering, hot wiring cars, and going undercover as a lounge singer in a mob bar all came later.”

Lois jabbed her husband with one accusatory finger, not even noticing that she poked him in the middle of the scar on the center of his chest. “Look, Kent, just because you were the world’s biggest Boy Scout, doesn’t mean the rest of us had to always color inside the lines.”

He captured her hand and raised it to his lips. “I love that you don’t color inside the lines. I love that you draw your own lines.”

“Damn right, I do,” she said as she kissed him softly.

He stroked her hair as he held her close to his chest. “So how is this going to work? If we move back to Metropolis and I go back to being Superman...”

“Well, whoever is with Jon is off-duty, no rescues. And if we get pregnant again... Ultrawoman has to go on sabbatical.” The moment the words crossed her lips, she worried about what they meant. Would it be too much pressure for him? Was she making things worse by worrying if it was going to be too much pressure for him?

“How did that work last time?”

She shrugged. “I just disappeared for six months. People asked questions, but not too many. I think they just figured she was needed on New Krypton.”

“Now you’re doing it,” he said with a grin.

“What?” she asked, puzzled.

“Referring to yourself in the third person.”

“Well, I guess the tights and cape aren’t the only way I started taking after you.”

He laughed and she could feel it rumble in his chest. “Trust me, you bring your very own style to being a superhero.”

She lifted her head to kiss him again. “Yeah, but I had a great teacher.”

The very first snow of the season in Metropolis was starting to dust the ground. With less than a week to go, it seemed like the city might have a white Christmas this year. They strolled hand in hand through Planet Square, amid the tourists and shoppers. The lampposts were wrapped in twinkling white Christmas lights and garlands. All around them, people seemed to be in a better mood than usual, even with the shopping stress and the crowds. It felt like the holidays in the city and she wondered why she was never able to feel the magic of it before she met Clark.

“What time is your appointment?” she asked.

“Seven,” he replied. “Plenty of time to finish shopping for my folks and your folks.”

“It’s nice to have your apartment to store all the presents in.”

“Mm hmm,” he replied absently as he pulled her closer and draped his arm around her shoulder. “I missed Christmas.”

“I missed having you around for Christmas,” she said. “It’s not the same without you.”

He stopped walking and smiled at her. She couldn’t help but grin in response to the snowflakes that flecked his glasses and his hair and shoulders. Lois stood on her toes to kiss her husband. “Come on, we need to get to the electronics store before it closes.”

She started forward but he held her back. “Look,” he said simply as he pointed up at the news ticker scrolling across one of the brightly lit skyscrapers.

Massive Tsunami Hits Indonesia

“I have to go,” she said.

“I know,” he replied. She kissed him quickly before darting off toward the nearest alley. A moment later, a sonic boom echoed through the skies of Metropolis as its resident heroine took off to help those who needed her most.

<<Ultrawoman arrived on the scene several hours ago, we’re told, but the devastation here is total, much more than even a superhero can address...>>

Clark stood up and began to pace in his boss’s office. He’d gone to the Planet as soon as she’d left, not knowing what else to do. “Perry, I have to go,” he announced.

“Now hold on a second, son. Your doctor clear you to go back on duty?”

“It’s not like I’m injured. She needs my help. They need my help!” He started for the door.

“Clark, if you’re not ready to do this, you’ll only be making matters worse for yourself.”

He spun around on his heel. “If I don’t do this, innocent people will die. People I can save.” With that, he pulled open the door and strode across the bullpen toward the stairwell. For the second time that evening, a sonic boom reverberated overhead.

“Commander Coleman,” Ultrawoman said as she put on the headset.

“It’s just Sara now; I’m not here with the military,” Dr. Coleman replied. “Our ETA is nine hours, but it’ll be another 48 before we can get any real supplies in the area.” Sara Coleman had been the commanding surgeon on the Navy’s humanitarian mission to Kinwara after the war ended there. No one could run a massive disaster relief effort like Dr. Coleman, which was why Lois wasn’t surprised to hear she was on her way.

She crossed her arms as she surveyed the scene from the makeshift command post the local emergency crews had established. “I need help with the coordination – government, UN, NGOs, everyone. I’m just running around doing what I can, no plan.”

“We can help with that. I’ll be your in country contact for the UN and I’ll coordinate everyone else who needs to

contact you. We'll keep this channel on the radio open exclusively for you. I've been on the phone with Jakarta; they want you in Banda Aceh first, the flooding there is the worst."

"I'm on my way." Lois took off for the coastal city. Within moments, she was flying over it. Her heart leapt up in her throat at the sight of the destruction. Where there were once roads and homes and mosques, there was now just mud and filthy water. She could hear the anguished cries for help and dove down toward the source. For now, she was just going to try to get people to higher ground. Then she could figure out what to do about the floodwaters.

She scanned the thick mud, looking desperately for survivors. With bile creeping up in her throat, she realized the dead would have to wait. The sight of a house, on the verge of collapse caught her attention. A half dozen people — most of them children—were huddled on the roof, holding on, though it was only a matter of time before the flimsy building was going to give way. She swooped down, preparing to pick up the smallest of the children first.

<<Ultrawoman, the dams in Jakarta are threatening to break, we need your help now!>>

"I've got my hands full at the moment," Lois replied through gritted teeth as she flew with crying children in her arms. She couldn't abandon these people and yet, if she didn't go, thousands more would likely die. "Dammit," she cursed under her breath.

<<Belay my last, Ultrawoman. Looks like things are under control here.>>

She didn't have a chance to think about why the radio operator was calling her off, she was just grateful to know that her attention was no longer being distracted. For now, she needed to get people to higher ground as quickly as possible.

With a brilliant swirl of color, he landed next to the group of rescue workers. "Superman!" they exclaimed, wearing identical expressions of shock and amazement. He folded his arms across his chest, his heart thundering like a scared rabbit's. He tried to breathe deeply, to not let the chaos and noise sweep him away. 'Stay in control,' he thought to himself. 'People need you, get it together.' He half expected to be met with angry recriminations and questions about where he was and what had taken him so long, but no one spoke. They all seemed too stunned.

He swallowed around the boulder in his throat. It didn't mean a damn thing that he wasn't ready to do this. People needed him. "Just tell me what I can do," he said.

A hot shower.

Clean clothes.

A bed.

A good meal.

She could have rattled off a litany of all the things she desperately craved, but the people trapped here were a hell of a lot worse off than she was. And the rescue workers had been going just as long as she had without decent food or

sleep and none of them were invulnerable. On the first night, she'd heard that Clark had arrived in Jakarta. For the last few days, they'd never even been on the same island. She'd heard his voice on the radio as he gave terse orders and provided status reports, but she'd had no contact with him. It terrified her, knowing he was out there, knowing what he was experiencing because she was going through it, too. Was he ready? She was certain he wasn't. So what was he doing to himself? How was he going to cope with it? She wanted to be angry with him for being so damn stubborn, but what else could she expect from him? He was still the man she married. The man who couldn't stand idly by while others suffered. Besides, she didn't have time to be angry with him. The task before her—before both of them—was beyond daunting.

The death toll was climbing steadily, but it would have been much worse without the two of them, she knew that. There was still hope of finding survivors and so long as that hope was there, however slim, she would keep looking. Her uniform was torn and caked in mud and she was on her third radio, the floodwaters having shorted out the first two, but she had to keep working. In collapsed buildings and flooded streets, she scanned for heartbeats, for breathing, for muffled cries for help. Blocking out all other sounds, she focused only on the telltale proof of life.

She swept the area, but there was nothing. If there was anyone here she could have saved, she'd already saved them. With a rueful shake of her head, she started back for the regional command post.

<<Ultrawoman, Superman, we need you both in Padang. Now.>>

She started southward, knowing she would see her husband in just a few brief moments. The anxiety built up inside her as she wondered what horrible tableau would greet them there. What was so bad in Padang that would pull both of them from other hard-hit areas of the country?

Mudslides.

She looked on in horror as entire hillsides gave way, taking trees and homes and roads with them. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the red and blue of his suit as he flew in from the south. He stopped in mid flight, just like her. They hovered for the briefest of moments before swooping down toward the collapsing earth. She dove down to grab those who'd been swept up as he carved a channel to divert the mud flow. If she hadn't known what he'd been through, how the last four and a half years were weighing him down, she never would have assumed the time out of uniform had had any effect on him. He knew what to do and he did it. Without hesitating, without questions, he did what needed to be done.

For hours, they worked, zipping past each other, and trading monosyllabic instructions. Starting at opposite ends of the hill, they built a retaining wall to hold back further slides. When they finally met in the middle, she saw her husband up close for the first time in three days. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair disheveled, and his face rough with

stubble. His suit was covered in mud and his cape tattered. But he was, by every measure, the iconic hero.

“There’s nothing more we can do here. Let’s go back to searching for survivors,” he said. She nodded, but said nothing, setting out immediately to sweep the area for the injured and the stranded. She worked for hours, coordinating her efforts with local rescue crews, but there were few survivors. Eventually, she knew it was time to give up. She scanned the city for Clark.

Her heart broke when she saw him. He was carrying the lifeless body of a child. In his powerful arms, held against his broad chest, the body seemed tiny, but he held it with such care. He delivered the child to the arms of his sobbing father. The man crumpled to the ground as he held his son. Dejectedly, Clark turned and walked away, his shoulders drooping, his expression crestfallen. She watched as a sigh shuddered through his large body. In an instant, she was beside him, pulling him into her arms. He dropped his head to her shoulder and allowed her to hold him. His arms came around her, holding her tightly. She felt his chest rise and fall with each deep, labored breath.

“I’m here, it’s all right,” she whispered.

“Oh God,” he cried out. “There are so many bodies.”

She closed her eyes and held him more tightly, wishing desperately there was something she could do to protect him from this.

The sun was rising.

It was their fourth day in Indonesia.

The fourth dawn after three days and three nights of endless searching and digging and building.

With each passing hour the chance of finding additional survivors grew dimmer and dimmer.

The sun was rising.

It was Christmas Eve.

Like a frightened child, he clung to Lois, his eyes screwed tightly shut. He drew in one deep, shaky breath after another. ‘Just keep breathing,’ he told himself. He needed to get from one moment to the next. That was all. That was all he could handle at the moment. One breath at a time. Oblivious to the small crowd they were attracting, he didn’t notice the sound of camera shutters snapping or the hushed whispers.

“It’s all right,” she whispered again.

He wanted so badly to kiss her, to tell her he loved her, but he knew he couldn’t. So he settled for holding her so tightly he could feel her heart beat against his chest.

“Let’s get you home,” she said so softly no one besides him could have heard it.

“No,” he replied, his tone firmer than he’d expected. “We still have work to do.”

“I can handle the rest,” she assured him.

“I’m not leaving without you,” he said stubbornly. He felt her sigh.

“Okay,” she acquiesced as she withdrew from their embrace. “Coordinate with the rescue workers, they’re

going to need help getting supplies to the survivors and evacuating the injured.”

Damn her. She’d said it aloud, knowing he wouldn’t want their first appearance together to involve a public fight. She was going to bear the burden of searching for survivors while he was supposed to turn himself into a human ferry. He opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. “People are going to die pretty damn quickly if they can’t get the relief operation running,” she said firmly.

She was right. He knew—intellectually at least—that she was right. Neither of the two tasks was more important than the other, but one was infinitely more difficult. He should have been thankful that she was there to shoulder the more arduous responsibility. He certainly wasn’t psychologically prepared for it. As he’d been searching through collapsed homes, he could have sworn he was back in Silban. It didn’t matter that Indonesia was hot and muggy and up to its ears in mud and dirty water, he might as well have been in the barren, frozen wasteland of New Krypton’s most remote settlement. He’d shivered as though he were actually cold and could feel the stinging wind on his skin, even though the air here was tranquil and still. He’d found himself starting sentences in Kryptonian as he fumbled to comfort the terrified survivors. His hands trembled as he worked and it took every ounce of strength and willpower he had to force the shaking to subside enough to let him do his job.

The images of death began to blur together until he couldn’t tell which were memories from years ago and what was happening right in front of him. More than a few times, he’d had to pause to remind himself to breathe. The images kept threatening to overwhelm him, to knock him down and pin him to the ground like some hapless insect. Though every single second was precious, he’d had to stop for several minutes to clear his mind and center his thoughts. Meditating—even for just a few minutes—was the only way he could keep going.

At long last, he nodded dumbly before taking off to find the head of the UN operation. Dozens of local, regional, and international organizations had already descended on the scene and though their help was invaluable, they seemed to add to the chaos and disorganization on the ground.

‘You can do this, Kent, you spent four years barking orders. This, you can handle,’ he tried to convince himself. But his thoughts kept drifting back to his wife. ‘Please, let her find survivors,’ he whispered to any force or deity who cared to listen, praying for a Christmas miracle.

Jimmy closed the door behind him as he entered the office. “It’s obscene, chief,” he announced, surprised by the resolution in his own voice. He slammed the mockup of the front page down on Perry’s desk. The offending picture, a voyeuristic piece of tabloid garbage, stared up at him, tauntingly.

“It’s news, son,” his editor corrected him.

Wherever Jimmy's spine of steel had come from, it looked like it was here to stay, at least for now. He gritted his teeth as he folded his arms across his chest. "It's my two best friends, going through hell to help other people and the rest of the world gawking slack-jawed at their pain," he bit out each word, trying not to shout in anger. He glared down at the image of Lois and Clark, in torn and dirty uniforms, wrapped in each other's arms. He'd had to take intrusive pictures before, jamming himself into someone's private anguish to broadcast it to the world, but he'd always been able to justify it by telling himself that the story needed to be told. The world had to know what was going on, even if that meant putting someone else's agony under a magnifying glass so it could be dissected by the public. There was nothing of that in this picture. It embarrassed the hell out of him just to look at it, like he was invaded his dearest friends' privacy in a moment when they most needed it. "You have hundreds of other serviceable shots to run on the front page."

"Even if we don't run it, every other paper in the world is going to front it. You know that," Perry said, his tone gentler than Jimmy expected given the younger man's unsolicited outburst.

"That's bull and it's a sorry excuse to do this to them," he retorted.

"Jimmy, I have to run this picture because I believe narratives matter. You know how much I care about them, but if we don't run this picture, if we don't tell the story of how strong they are, of how their invulnerability does nothing to protect them from this kind of pain, we let the tabloids make up whatever they want to go along with this image. We let them turn it into something tawdry or some display of weakness. I won't do that to my friends. I owe them better."

Jimmy shook his head, knowing he'd lost the fight. "Fine," he said curtly.

"Now get the hell out of my office, son. I've got a newspaper to run and I can't let this staff think that my journalists are free to barge in here and yell at their editor-in-chief whenever they don't like a decision."

Stung, Jimmy retreated from the office. He hated this. After all Lois and Clark had been through, it still seemed to him like they were getting punished for being good people.

"It'll be dawn at home in a few hours," she whispered to him as they left the UN's makeshift command post. "We're going home."

"There's still more we can do here," he countered as he flexed his fist to keep it from trembling.

"We haven't eaten or slept in five days. Even we can't go on indefinitely. They're getting fresh rescue forces and you're going to spend your first Christmas in five years with your family," she said, her tone indicating that she wasn't going to put up with an argument. "I'll let Dr. Coleman know we're going and tell her we'll check in in a few days."

He gave in, too exhausted to fight with his wife. His nerves were shot, his body already well past its breaking point. "Let's go," he heard himself say. They took off flying eastward. Once clear of the massive archipelago of Indonesia, she dove into the cool, clear waters of the South Pacific. He followed her, letting the saltwater clean away the mud and the dirt, wishing it could wipe his mind clean just as easily. She veered off course, back toward that island they'd visited a few weeks after he'd returned home. It felt like it had been decades, not a few short months since the last time they'd seen this place.

It was quiet and calm in the middle of the night. The waters lapped gently at the soft sand beach and a slight breeze rustled the palms. She landed on the same stretch of beach where they'd once spent an entire evening making love. He touched down just beside her, wondering what had brought her back to this place. Pulling the mask off, she practically threw herself into his embrace. He felt her body shudder and his arms tightened around her instinctively. He may have been a broken, confused, cheap copy of the man he'd once been, but the primal need to protect her, to give her whatever comfort he could, was just as powerful as it had ever been. Whatever strength he had, it was hers to take.

Her body shook with sobs as she cried. Her tears brought all the walls he'd built up around his own heart crumbling and crashing down. Tears stung at his own eyes before spilling over to fall down his cheeks. "Oh God, Lois." He choked out the words between sobs. Her arms tightened around his waist as she buried her face against his chest. He dropped his head to press his lips against her hair, inhaling the clean tang of sea salt as he did so. He brought his hands up to frame her face, tilting her chin up so he could pepper her with tiny kisses—on her forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks, the bridge of her nose, her chin, and finally, her lips.

All he wanted to do was reassure her; to let her know that he was there, that despite the last few months, he could be there for her. But as his lips met hers, his own need for her crashed down over him. He kissed her desperately, hungrily. Her lips parted beneath his as his tongue sought entry to her mouth. The exhaustion that had seeped into his bones seemed to suddenly disappear. He felt nothing except his own terrible longing to be with her. To find solace in her.

"Clark," she whispered his name breathlessly.

"Help me forget," he said softly. "Just for a little while, help me forget." Her arms snaked their way up around his neck as they fell to their knees on the warm sand.

"I love you," she whispered.

"God, Lois, I love you so much," he groaned before kissing her again.

She slipped her hand into his as they lifted off, leaving the safe harbor of their secluded island for home. It was still dark in the Pacific, but it would be morning soon on the farm and Jon would be sneaking downstairs to see what

Santa Claus left him under the tree. He hadn't seen his son in almost a week and he missed his little boy fiercely. All he wanted to do was go to Jon's room and watch him sleep.

So many children had died from the tidal wave and the ensuing mudslides and floods. So many families had been ripped to tatters by the haphazard cruelty of nature. He couldn't imagine the crushing pain those parents felt, the depth of anguish they suffered. Frankly, he didn't want to. He wanted to go home to his son.

They descended on the farmhouse just as the first rays of light began to peek over the horizon. The sky was a deep purple and the stars were fading from sight. He desperately needed a shower and a shave and some clean clothes. Then he could put on a smile and join his family around the Christmas tree. Still holding hands, they slipped quietly into the farmhouse, finding his parents already awake and sitting around the kitchen table.

"Thank goodness you're both okay," his mother said as she hugged first him and then Lois.

"I'm sorry we couldn't call, we've been going nonstop and there wasn't anywhere we could make a private call," Lois explained.

"Don't you dare apologize," Martha replied. "Dr. Friskin called. She's in the Virgin Islands, but she left a number. She wanted you both to call her as soon as possible. She said it didn't matter what time."

"Is Jon all right?" Clark asked anxiously.

"He's upset," his father replied as he stood up. "We told him you had to go away for work, but he doesn't understand why."

"But he'll be so glad you're home for Christmas," Martha added. "We went to Wichita to finish your Christmas shopping; we figured you never got the chance."

"Did Jon get to see Santa?"

"He did," Jonathan confirmed. "He asked for a train set."

"Which we got at the hobby shop."

"We can't thank you enough," Lois replied with a weary smile.

"You don't need to thank us," Martha said. "We're family; we take care of each other."

His parents were amazing, he knew that. He was also starting to understand how all three of them had worked together while he was gone. Clark glanced down at himself; he was, of course, still a complete mess. "We should get out of these suits and get cleaned up before Jon wakes up," he said.

"Breakfast and coffee will be waiting for you when you're done," his mother said. "Merry Christmas, you two."

"Merry Christmas," Clark replied.

He felt the smile tugging up the corners of his mouth as he watched his son unwrap his Christmas presents. Santa Claus had been good to his little boy. His new train set, sled, and building blocks came along with a big stuffed dinosaur, and a stack of new books to read with Mom and Dad. The Superman Action Playset from Grandma Ellen

and Grandpa Sam had been sent un-ironically, but Clark couldn't help the way his mouth twisted into a grimace as his son tore off the wrapping paper and proudly held up his new toy.

Jon was somewhat less excited about the sweaters and socks he received, but he held them up dutifully as his mother took pictures of their first Christmas all together as a family. More than once, his eyes caught Lois's and he could see the wistfulness there as she watched her son enjoy Christmas, oblivious to the emotional storms that had swept his parents up for the last week. There was sadness in her smile, but just like him, she was doing her best to enjoy what was supposed to be a cherished tradition and a chance to make happy, long lasting memories.

When all the presents were unwrapped, Clark helped his mother clean up the wrapping paper and boxes that littered the living room. His mother had said nothing about it, but he could tell that making Christmas magical for her grandson, all the while worrying about her son and daughter-in-law, had been exhausting. But it wasn't like this experience could have been new to her. Clark's parents had soldiered on in both his and Lois's absences, giving Jon the needed sense of family and stability when his own parents couldn't. It wasn't fair, what they were asked to do, the responsibilities they had to shoulder to allow him and Lois to carry on, but they never complained. They never even suggested that all the active grand-parenting was anything resembling a burden.

"Daddy?" Jon called as Clark finished picking up the stray bits of ribbon and paper.

"What is it, buddy?" he asked as he dropped to his knee beside his son.

Jon looked at him, his brown eyes wide and worried.

"Are you going to go away again?"

Clark bit back a sigh, feeling the sharp pang of regret in his chest. He pulled his son into his arms. "Like when I went away before you were born?" Jon nodded. "No, I'm not going to go away again," he assured his little boy.

"So how come you and Mommy were gone? I missed you."

Clark kissed the top of his son's head. "Sometimes Mommy and I have to go places for work, but we will always come back."

Jon regarded his father seriously, his brown eyes wide. "Promise?"

The plaintive look on his son's face shredded Clark's heart to ribbons. He hated having caused Jon so much pain in his young life. "I promise," he said.

Jon nodded silently. "Can we go play with my new train now?"

"Of course."

With the living room floor cleared once again, he helped his little boy set up the train tracks and link the cars together. They plugged in the set and he watched as his son sat in rapt attention, following the train as it looped around the circular track. Jon grinned at the sound of the train's whistle. Watching his son play with his toys, he could

almost forget the last week of horror. He could almost forget the fact that he'd brought back Superman without any thought whatsoever about how he was planning to resume being the superhero. He still needed to give his therapist a call. It was easy to tell himself he was putting it off because no one needed to have their Christmas morning interrupted, but Lois had already made clear that she intended to speak to Dr. Friskin soon.

Lois came to sit beside him on the ground and handed him one of the cups of coffee she was holding. "Thanks," he said as he turned his head to kiss her softly.

She touched his cheek, her hand warm against his skin. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," he replied. In the face of everything they'd been through, all the things they'd seen, the words almost rang hollow. But he needed them more than ever. He needed to believe in the things that were so clear and obvious to him when he was a boy. He needed to believe that his family could see him through anything. That hope was born on the longest, darkest, coldest night of the year. That compassion and decency and kindness were more than just things you wished for. He looked down, noticing that his hand was trembling. His wife knotted her fingers through his and gave his hand a gentle squeeze, ending the tremors.

"We need to talk to Dr. Friskin," she said. He said nothing but merely nodded.

"Dr. Friskin, we're so sorry to bother you today," Lois said with a quick glance around their surroundings. The beach was much more secluded than she would have imagined. The warm sand and the clear waters were oddly reminiscent of the island where she and her husband had spent the earliest hours of this Christmas morning.

"Nonsense," Dr. Friskin replied with a smile. "I'm Jewish; in Metropolis, we always went out for Chinese and a movie on Christmas. This year, my sister and I decided to go to the beach. I wanted to make sure both of you were properly debriefed after this last week. That means we need to talk about it now, not later." It was so odd to see their normally prim therapist dressed in a light linen shirt and khaki slacks, rolled up at the hems. Her practically trademarked horn-rimmed glasses had been traded in for sunglasses.

Jon had been put down for his nap not fifteen minutes earlier. Lois wasn't sure they'd be back by the time he woke up, but even though every second they spent away from him—especially on Christmas—was difficult, she knew that both she and Clark needed this. All morning, her warm, happy family gathering was silently interrupted by the unwanted and unbidden thoughts of the last week. They both needed to make sense of what had happened. And more than anything Clark needed to figure out where to go from here.

Superman was back.

That bell couldn't be unrung.

"Clark, Lois, if you don't mind the more relaxed atmosphere around here, we can find a place to talk."

Still holding hands, she and Clark began to follow their therapist down the shoreline.

"He's completely zonked out," she said with a slight smile.

"Christmas overload," Clark replied as he watched his son sleep. His new presents were stacked up in his room, sans the train, which was still assembled on the living room floor. "Come on, I'll fix you my extra special hot chocolate," he said as he draped his arm around his wife's shoulders.

They walked silently down the stairs, careful not to wake the sleeping members of the household. It didn't make sense that all of this had happened in just one day. Christmas had begun in one of the most awful disasters he'd ever seen. Only hours later, he'd found himself opening presents with his family, spending his very first Christmas with his young son. Horror and simple joy, guilt and nostalgia, all fought with each other to dominate his thoughts of the day.

In the kitchen, he heated the milk and melted the chocolate, going over in his mind what he'd discussed with Dr. Friskin that afternoon. Unsurprisingly, they'd found no easy answers. Superman was back. It hadn't been planned, and if he'd tried to get his therapist's consent to the idea beforehand, he knew she would have told him he wasn't ready. She'd told him how reckless his decision was, but there was nothing he could do now. He needed to find a way to be the man in the red, blue, and yellow suit again.

He finished fixing two mugs of hot chocolate and carried them back to the living room, where he found his wife gazing at the twinkling Christmas tree. She held a small ornament between her fingers. It was a picture frame, with a photo of their son as a baby. There were so many new ornaments on the tree, along with the God's eyes, clothespin reindeer, and fish hook ornaments he'd made as a child. New memories had been formed in his absence. Four Christmases had passed without him. Their traditions had grown and changed, subtly and slowly, he imagined. But things were nonetheless different.

"Hey," Lois whispered as she turned to smile at him. She took the mug he held out to her.

"Merry Christmas, honey," he said.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," she replied. It was after midnight. Christmas was technically over. But just like the first Christmas they'd spent together, when he'd pretended his flight home to Kansas had been cancelled, he didn't want the evening to end.

He put his arm around her shoulder and they continued admiring the tree in silence. The house smelled like pine and gingerbread, just like it had when he was a boy, when Christmas was the most exciting time of the year. She snuggled into his embrace with a contented sigh. It was late and they were both still exhausted from the last week's

efforts, but he could tell that like him, she wanted the night to last just a little while longer.

Tomorrow, he would have to deal with the return of Superman—with the headlines he had been ignoring and the speculation that was no doubt swirling around. Tomorrow, he could figure out *how* to go back to being Superman. Would he start patrolling? Where? How often? Would he hold another press conference? It didn't seem like he could avoid it.

Just thinking about it all was causing his heart to race. His palms started to sweat and he could feel his throat going dry, like he'd just swallowed sand. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep, shaky breath, trying to calm his frayed nerves.

"You okay?" Lois asked him. He could hear the concern in her voice. She took the half finished mug of hot chocolate from his hands and put it on the coffee table.

"Yeah," he lied.

"Come on, we both need some sleep," she said, taking his hand and leading him toward the staircase. She was right; he was exhausted. All he wanted to do was to crawl into bed and fall asleep in his wife's arms.

"...no, no, no, please..."

The anguished pitch of his voice was clear, even though he spoke in a mere whisper. She bolted upright in bed, scanning the room. Her heart broke at the sight of him, cowering in a corner. Naked, his arms were wrapped around his knees, his head bowed, his body rocking back and forth. She could hear his heart thundering out of rhythm. His breaths came in shallow gasps.

In an instant, she was beside him, wrapping her arms around her husband. His skin was clammy with a cold sweat. "It's all right, Clark, you're home."

His head snapped up and she could see the stark terror in his eyes. His shoulders heaved with each labored breath. "Lois," he whispered her name with such desperation it made her heart ache.

She caressed his cheek as she pulled him into her arms. Damn it. Damn Mother Nature and her obnoxious sense of timing. Damn his own inability to listen to reason and wait until he was ready to go back to being Superman. Damn it all to hell, she thought darkly. She should have found him as soon as he'd shown up in Indonesia and demanded he go home. It wouldn't have worked. In fact, it probably would have backfired. Besides, a part of her had to admit that she'd needed him more than once out there. He'd saved thousands of lives. All those people were still alive now because of what he'd done.

And here he was, suffering in the darkness, bearing the cost he knew he would have to shoulder for the decision he made. He'd put on the suit and flown into hell, knowing the consequences.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she whispered.

"No," he said flatly. "I just want to go back to sleep." Clark stood up stiffly and returned to the bed.

She lay down beside her husband and let him pull her into his embrace. "I knew this was going to happen," he said softly, confirming her own thoughts. "I can't do this. I'm a complete basket case. I can't help anyone like this."

"We'll take it slowly," she told him.

"Superman can't just disappear again," he retorted.

"No, but you can ease back into it. You don't have to come back full-time just yet."

"I'm tired of feeling like I need someone to hold my hand," he said bitterly.

"I know," she replied, not knowing what to say. "I know it's hard and it isn't fair. I hate that this happened. I hate how awful it was. I can't stop thinking about what we saw, either. But it doesn't make you weak, Clark. It makes you human."

"I'm sorry to bother you again so soon," Clark said as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. He'd stood on this same quiet stretch of beach with his therapist just the day before. How much of her well-deserved vacation was he planning on monopolizing, anyway?

"Please, don't think anything of it; I'm glad you came," Dr. Friskin replied as she placed a hand on his arm. "I take it you're having some difficulties with what you went through over the last week?"

"Yeah," he admitted. He removed his trembling hand from his pocket and dragged it through his hair. He stared angrily at his shaking fingers, silently demanding that they stop. His offending digits did no such thing. Flexing his fist open and closed, he finally brought the tremors under control.

"Clark?" she prodded gently and he realized how long he'd remained mute.

"I'm sorry," he said, giving himself a mental shake. Clark exhaled slowly. "I didn't go to Indonesia thinking I was ready to handle it. I promise you, I'm not that dumb. But I weighed the options. If I didn't go, thousands of people were going to die. Lives were going to be destroyed. I didn't have the luxury of telling myself that other people would be able to handle it until I was ready to come back. I didn't have a choice."

"I understand why you felt that way," Dr. Friskin replied as they started to walk along the shore. The sun, though dipping toward the distant horizon, still warmed the sand and the gentle breeze that moved the air. It was an idyllic afternoon and he could see why she'd decided to spend her vacation here. It only made him feel that much worse about his seemingly constant intrusions.

"But you don't agree," he replied. It was a statement, not a question.

"I can't make that decision for you. I know that in my professional opinion, it would have been good for you to wait a little longer before creating so much stress in your life. But I also know you; and I know how much stress you're under when you're not helping. You weighed those competing stressors and you made a decision. Now we need to figure out how to move forward given that decision."

He frowned and nodded, deep in thought. “Hmph.” It all sounded so logical when she put it that way.

“I know it’s not as easy as I make it sound,” she continued. “If it was, I imagine you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I had nightmares again last night,” he said with a sigh. “It was Silban and Indonesia all mixed together. I couldn’t even keep them straight. I just want to forget about all this, but now I have to deal with the press, bringing Superman back, figuring out when and where to patrol and how to do it without turning into a quivering mess.”

“This gives us a place to start,” his therapist replied. “We need to figure out how often you’re comfortable patrolling and what sort of rescues you feel capable of handling.”

“Have you seen the papers?” he asked.

“I have,” she replied.

He grunted. It angered him that the stupid tabloids plagued his thoughts the same way that the disaster had. How could he even care about something this idiotic? The banner headline of *The National Whisperer* of all things stuck out the most. “Long Lost Lovers Reunited At Last!” it had proclaimed obscenely — oblivious to the context, to the death and destruction that had surrounded the two spandex clad figures clinched in an all too intimate embrace. The image of himself in his wife’s arms was burned into his brain. His eyes were shut firmly, lines of pain carved deep in his features. With one hand, she’d cradled his head to her shoulder. The mask obscured most of her face, but the corners of her mouth were turned downward, her lips slightly parted. He could see the anguish there, could almost feel it radiating from the photograph.

As appalled as he was by the tabloids’ speculation into the superheroes’ love life, he knew it existed because of his inability to control his emotions. Other papers had skipped the tackier allegations and had gone straight for his throat.

“First Rescue Back Too Much For Superman?”

“Man Of Steel’s Heartbreaking Return”

“Superman Overwhelmed By Tragedy”

The Daily Planet, of course, had portrayed the scene in the kindest possible light. “The Price of Heroism” its headline read. But though Perry had tried to spin the story as one of strength, there was more truth in the rag journalism — even ironically, *The National Whisperer* — than Clark cared to admit.

“It hurts you, doesn’t it? The speculation about your reaction?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Of course it does.”

“Because you hold yourself responsible for what happened at Silban.”

“The tsunami was an act of nature. Silban was the result of malice,” he countered.

“But it affected you more than other tragedies, manmade or natural,” his therapist prodded gently.

Clark stepped in front of his therapist. “Silban happened because my generals hid information from me. They thought I was too weak to deal with it. They hid the

intelligence that would have allowed us to stop it. Over twelve hundred people died. Because people saw weakness in me. Don’t tell me that wasn’t my fault.”

“You know that I’m going to. Clark, you blame yourself because doing so means that you had some semblance of control over the events. Because if you had some control, then there’s something you can do differently next time to prevent the same outcome. We need that sense of control, because without it, we feel lost. But not everything in life is within our power to control. You can’t be responsible for Nor’s actions. Or the actions of his followers. Or even your own generals.”

“I am responsible for the weakness they saw in me,” he replied stubbornly. “I may not have killed those people, but their blood is still on my hands.”

“Between Silban and the attempt to break Nor out of prison, you’re blaming yourself for the deaths of almost two thousand people. None of that is justifiable. You said your generals withheld information from you because they thought you were weak. But you didn’t govern alone, did you? Did they share the information with your co-First Minister?”

“No,” he confirmed.

“Was it because they also thought she was weak?”

He shook his head. Of course that wasn’t the case. Zara was the best leader New Krypton could have asked for.

“So could it possibly be that those generals just failed to do their jobs?”

Clark shrugged. “I suppose.” After the attack they’d figured out that the generals had been encouraged in their decisions by Alon, the highest-placed saboteur in the government. Whatever the officers’ initial thinking had been in concealing the information, it had been nurtured by the malice of one of Rae Et’s few trusted confidantes, someone they’d believed to be a good leader and a man with New Krypton’s best interests at heart.

“I can tell you over and over again that trying to blame yourself for what happened is natural, but incredibly counterproductive and unjustifiable. But my saying it isn’t terribly meaningful, if you don’t believe it.”

He nodded, tightlipped. “I know,” he said quietly.

“I understand this isn’t easy. It’s not like there’s a switch you can flip to change the way you think and feel, but every time you find yourself trying to take the blame for what happened, you need to derail the thought. You need to remind yourself that you did everything you could.”

The words made sense—at least, on an intellectual level they did. That didn’t make what she was suggesting any easier. How could she possibly understand? She hadn’t been there. She hadn’t seen the things he’d seen. She hadn’t borne the responsibility of leading a world at war like an albatross around her neck.

He pushed open the massive window over the bullpen and flew down to the newsroom floor. The last time he’d flown through that window, he was leaving his wife and his parents and his entire life on this planet. It was four and a

half years ago. It felt like an eternity. A sea of camera flashes blinded him momentarily as he touched down behind the bank of microphones that had been set up. Perry grinned as he gripped Clark's hand and shook it heartily, his other hand clapping the younger man on the shoulder. The din of reporters whispering amongst themselves grew to a deafening roar to his sensitive ears. He should have been accustomed to the crowds after being the political leader of an entire planet, but the newsroom seemed to be spinning. Dizzily, he tried to focus, but the air around him was thick and oxygen-less. The world seemed to wobble, but he managed at last to draw in a long, deep breath.

"You've got this, son," his old editor-in-chief whispered softly as he released Clark's hand.

Perry smiled as he approached the microphone bank. "Let me be the first to say, 'welcome back, Superman!' You were missed, but we are all awfully glad to see you back here on Earth, son." He looked back over his shoulder at Clark. "I understand you'd like to say a few words."

Clearing his throat, Clark stepped up to the microphones. "Good afternoon," he said, a little too softly. He scanned the audience until his eyes met Lois's. She smiled ever so slightly at him, silently offering her strength. Clark stood up just a little bit straighter. He could do this. So long as she was still there with him, he could do this. "Thank you all for coming. I know my return has come as a surprise and that you probably have a number of questions. Please know that I came back as soon as I was able. The war on New Krypton is over; that world is at peace. Earth is my home and I cannot begin to tell all of you how happy I was to be able to return. Both Ultrawoman and I will continue our work here. One or the other of us may have to return to New Krypton temporarily, but this is where we belong. I am more proud of the work I've done here than anything else I've accomplished in my life. I look forward to continuing that work.

"But lest there be any misunderstanding, the tragedy in Indonesia must not be overshadowed by this. The people there need your help. I intend to return and do what I can, but there are hundreds of thousands who are hungry and have no food. Who are thirsty and have no clean water to drink. Who are tired and have no homes to go to. Please, give what you can. Wonderful organizations like UNICEF and the Red Cross are working to bring hope to the victims of this disaster, but they cannot do so without your support.

"I need to return to Indonesia, but I will take a few questions." Before he'd even finished his sentence, a roar of questions erupted from the gathered journalists.

"Superman! What happened on New Krypton? Did you have to fight in the war?"

"Can you guarantee you're back for good, Superman?" the reporter for LNN shouted.

"Are you ready for duty, Superman?" came another voice. He thought it belonged to the Metropolis correspondent for the Washington Post.

"I am," he replied, trying to sound confident.

"What about that picture of you and Ultrawoman? You looked pretty shaken up." He didn't recognize the woman who'd shouted the question.

He felt his jaw clench, but he knew he was still under the press's spotlight. Superman couldn't be seen losing his temper so shortly after appearing to fall apart at a major rescue. His throat was dry, yet he managed to swallow around the rough-edged lump that had formed there. "I've seen more death and suffering in my life than any human being ever should. And yes, it still affects me. I imagine it always will. But I believe it is my responsibility to do what I can here to ease that suffering. I am fully prepared to do that." He knew it was a lie, but he hoped it sounded convincing. He tried not to think too much about telling such a bald-faced fabrication while in the suit. Drawing in another deep breath, he tried to slow his thundering heart and gather his thoughts. "You saw me at the sight of one of the worst disasters I've ever experienced. People will read into that photograph whatever they will. But I'm asking you to look past the foreground of that picture to see all the people who were suffering around us. Who had lost their homes and families and friends. Let's try to remember that that's where our attention belongs." He could hear his voice waver on the last words, his paper-thin resolve crumpling in his tight, shaking grip.

"So what is your relationship with Ultrawoman?" That couldn't have been anyone besides the Dirt Digger's Jerry Schultz. The man's voice had always sounded like nails on a blackboard to Clark. He tried not to grimace in response.

"I asked her to do my job while I was away. I left that responsibility in her hands because there is no one I trust or respect more. It is my honor to work beside her. And to call her my friend. I'm afraid I need to go. Thank you for your time."

Lois smiled tremulously as she watched her husband float up off the newsroom floor on his way toward the window. The last time she'd watched him do this, he'd stared past her, pretending he didn't love her. He'd had to do it so that they could keep their composure, but it had shattered her heart. Back then, she would have given anything just to *know* this moment was coming – the day he was going to fly back into the newsroom, announcing his return. This day wasn't the way she'd imagined it all those years ago. He was still the majestic hero, able to take her breath away with the easy grace of his powerful movements, the way his cape billowed behind him. But he wasn't here in triumph. And his voice wavered when he spoke.

He was still a hero. But he wasn't as innocent as he'd once been. He wasn't as naïve. Neither was she. Like Perry had said, heroism had exacted a toll from each of them. The weight of the world wasn't as easily born on either of their shoulders.

"Lois?"

The sound of the managing editor's voice startled her out of her ruminations. Looking around, she could see the

crowds of journalists from other news agencies slowly filing out of the bullpen. Finally, she found Mike Burns. “Hi Mike,” she said.

He grinned at her. “Editorial board meeting to discuss the Planet’s reaction to the big news,” the middle-aged editor said as he gestured toward the conference room. “You’ve got the pen on this one, Lois.”

There’d been some back and forth among the paper’s senior editors over who should write this particular piece. It wasn’t typically the job of a columnist, but Perry had made perfectly clear who he wanted handling the editorial. That meant that Lois would be writing, not under her own byline, but as the voice of the entire Daily Planet. If the rest of the editorial staff knew she was going to be writing about her husband, they probably would have pushed hard against it. As it was, people still wondered about the relationship between Lois and Superman, though the photo of him and Ultrawoman seemed—ironically—to have displaced that particular form of gossip. She knew that Clark didn’t like feeling as though he was hiding behind his wife, but the rest of the world wouldn’t know that he was the one she was writing about. Nor would they even know she was the editorial’s author. Before telling her he expected her to handle the assignment, Perry had stated that she was his best writer and that it was important for the Planet to take a bold position to not just defend Superman but to remind the paper’s readers and the wider public that Superman was right; the focus needed to remain on the victims of the tsunami.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” she said as she caught sight of Perry. She approached the old editor-in-chief and quietly pulled him away from the remaining journalists, still milling around the newsroom.

“Perry, I need a favor,” she said. “Ultrawoman should do an ad to try to raise some money for the victims. Can you see about getting it put together and getting the networks to run it?”

Perry nodded. “I’ll have the PR department start working on it right away.”

“Thanks,” she said softly.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “You all right, darlin’?”

“Yeah, I just want to get this meeting done with quickly,” she said as she nodded toward the conference room.

He frowned. “Do you want me to get someone else to write the editorial?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s fine,” she demurred. “Clark’s on his way back to Indonesia. I think maybe... it might be easier... I don’t want him to have to deal with that alone for too long.”

Surveying the landscape around him, it was hard not to be overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the destruction. The village he stood in had been completely leveled. It was all just flotsam and waterlogged wood and the detritus of ruined lives.

“Superman, we’re so grateful to have you here.” He smiled and nodded, tightlipped. In their few interactions, he’d learned quickly that Dr. Coleman had an almost preternatural talent for running a huge, messy, complicated relief mission. She was calm and focused and that made his job a hell of a lot easier. Standing behind a card table she used as a desk with her radio clipped to the waistband of her jeans, she looked down at the maps and supply lists and situation reports spread out in front of her.

“Just let me know where I can be the most help,” he said.

“We have supplies we need to deliver...” she began.

“Just let me know what and where,” he said.

“Actually, it would be more of a help if you could clear some of the major roads.” She pointed at the major arteries connecting the larger population centers. “We’ll need them open to keep operations running.”

“All right, he said. “Tell me where to start.” If he could keep his focus and think about doing simple things like moving boulders and redirecting channels of mud, he could keep himself from going catatonic.

It was hard not to fidget with her mask as she stared straight at the camera. The public service announcement was going to be simple. She’d written the script for it herself and the logistics had been pulled together quickly. A blank screen behind her in the newsroom served as the backdrop. It wasn’t the most dramatic of productions, but it was important to get the message out as quickly as possible. As quickly as possible, however, apparently meant doing this damn thing over and over again.

“Okay, Ultrawoman, take it from the top in five... four... three...” the director counted ‘two’ and ‘one’ on his fingers silently before pointing at her. She looked straight ahead at the monitor, displaying her lines.

“The holiday season is about more than gifts and parties,” she began. “During this time of year, in the cold of winter, we’re reminded of the fact that the warmth in our lives is the product of human kindness and compassion. This year, the people of Indonesia need your help. Hundreds of thousands of victims of last week’s tsunami are still without homes, food, clothing, and medical attention. Relief agencies are working around the clock to help them, but they can’t do it without your assistance. Please, give whatever you can. More information on how to donate can be found at the web address on the bottom of your screen. Thank you. And happy holidays.”

“All right, we’ve got it,” the director said with a smile as he removed his headphones. “Great job, Ultrawoman. We’ll get this cut and to the networks as soon as we can.”

She gave him a faint smile. “Thanks,” she said. Lois was anxious to get away. She wanted to get back into the field, back to the real work that only a superhero could do. Over the last four and a half years, however, she’d learned that the power of her celebrity could be almost as beneficial as her superstrength and invulnerability. A superhero could

draw a lot more attention to her pet cause than an ordinary reporter could.

Over the years, she'd come to use her fame more often than Clark ever had. She knew he found the whole business a bit unseemly and bewildering. He was, despite the peculiar extracurricular activities he engaged in, a very private person. But while Ultrawoman steered clear of partisan politics, she was far more comfortable in the bully pulpit than her husband had ever been.

"I have to go," she said to no one in particular before lifting off for the massive windows above the newsroom floor.

Superman is Right. Do Not Forget Indonesia

The editorial page of this newspaper has always been full-throated in its support of Superman. This moment is no different. Yet even as we welcome the Man of Steel back to Metropolis with joy and enthusiasm we are mindful of the fact that he was absolutely correct in reminding people that we cannot let our attention be diverted from Indonesia.

The harrowing and heroic images of rescues in the first hours and days after the tsunami have largely been replaced by ones of heartbreak and sadness as rescue work transitioned into recovery and rebuilding. Even as rescue crews from every corner of the planet answered the call for help, the world's work in Indonesia is only beginning. Without sustained assistance in access to food, medicine, clean water, and sanitation, the many hundreds of thousands of survivors of the worst natural disaster in decades may still succumb to the tsunami's lasting, devastating effects.

As is so often the case, children have been hardest hit by this tragedy. Orphaned or separated from their families, they struggle to survive without their natural protectors and caretakers. The world's focus must remain on caring for the most vulnerable victims of the tsunami, who are especially likely to succumb to disease and malnutrition in the aftermath of a disaster. These children are also often the targets of traffickers, who would exploit their precarious situations to inflict unspeakable crimes on the innocent, compounding the misery of a natural disaster with entirely manmade viciousness.

The call has come from every organization responding to this tragedy. Please give and give as generously as you can. The images of heroic rescues, not just by superheroes and trained professionals, but also by ordinary Indonesians, struggling to help their families, their neighbors, their friends, and perfect strangers, have moved the entire world. These feelings of compassion and sympathy must be converted into concrete action and there is no simpler or more effective way to do so than to open your wallet to one of the many reputable agencies and charities at work in Indonesia. In this season of giving, please remember those who have lost everything and are struggling each day to simply find enough to eat and who wait for days, despite terrible pain from traumatic injuries, for the necessary and lifesaving medical attention that only foreign volunteer medical staff are capable of providing.

Much has been made of the timing and nature of Superman's return. In the opinion of this editorial board, it was nothing short of a miracle. We have full faith that Superman's prolonged absence was justified by the crisis on the planet that was once his home. He has made clear through not just words, but deeds, that he now considers Earth to be where he belongs. His arrival at the moment he was needed most was an answer to the desperate prayers and pleas of so many people.

Many other news sources have paid a great deal of attention to the Man of Steel's own reaction to the suffering he encountered in Indonesia. Speculation followed that Superman was not up to the challenge of a full-blown disaster like the one he faced—that perhaps what he had seen in his absence during a civil war had somehow rendered him unfit to return to duty. We could not disagree more. While this may be dismissed as knee jerk cheerleading, it is an undeniable fact that Superman performed not only heroically, but with an unparalleled technical skill and professionalism in Indonesia – providing assistance that no ordinary rescuers would have been able to, regardless of their equipment or training. That he and Ultrawoman were seen momentarily overcome by grief does nothing to alter this truth.

Aid workers, volunteer doctors, and rescuers all around them, too, were overwhelmed by the pain and tragedy they faced. Their reactions, however, drew no derogatory speculation, perhaps because they are not famous, but also because we understand their pain to be human. We have wrongly grown to expect our superheroes to be above ordinary emotions. They may not be from this world, but the compassion they extend to others is the very essence of humanity. Superman's seemingly endless capacity to care for others is as much a superpower as flight. But the physical invulnerability that earned him the nickname "the Man of Steel" does not extend to emotional invulnerability. After all of these years and so many countless rescues, he still feels the pain of ordinary people and is moved to ease that pain. It must be a tremendous burden for him.

But it is no less than a blessing for the rest of us.

Martha folded up the editorial that some of the more cynical and disreputable cable news pundits had already dismissed as "the Daily Planet's love letter to Superman." Ironically, it was indeed a message written from Lois Lane to the man she loved, but it wasn't merely a personal missive; Lois wrote it on behalf of most of the world's population to the hero they had all come to believe in. He would need that support, not just from the people who loved him personally, but from the millions upon millions of strangers who cheered for him and looked up to him. For the most part, the editorial was very well received. The fact that Lois was its author was not public knowledge. In fact, it had been the managing editor, Mike Burns, who had taken to the Sunday morning news programs to discuss the Planet's unabashed support for the Man of Steel's return. Of course, that didn't change the fact for Martha Kent that her daughter-in-law remained at the vanguard of not just

protecting Superman, but protecting everything he stood for and represented. Not for the first time, Martha thanked whatever twist or turn of fate had brought Lois Lane storming into her boy's life.

She looked up at the sound of footsteps behind her. Clark walked into the den, carrying two cups of tea. He held one out to her as he sat down on the sofa beside her. "Have you seen Lois's editorial?" she asked.

Clark merely nodded with a faint smile, but the look in his eyes told her how much it had meant to him.

"She's right, you know," Martha continued.

"She usually is," her son agreed. "She's amazing. She's beyond amazing."

"She is. And so are you. Otherwise, how could she love you so much?"

Clark shook his head, in that slight, bemused way of his before taking a sip of tea.

"I know you think I'm biased because I'm your mother, but from the moment we found you, we knew we were raising an extraordinary person."

"Was it because you found me in a spaceship?" he asked.

She swatted her son's jean-clad leg. "You were the answer to our prayers, but it didn't take us long to figure out you were so much more than that. It had nothing to do with your powers. Even when you were a little boy, you had the biggest heart of anyone I'd ever met. Your father and I both knew that in raising you, we were doing something more important than anything we could have imagined. And we couldn't be more proud of the man you've become." She took one of his large hands in hers, wistfully remembering her son as a baby – when he could wrap his entire chubby little fist around just one of her fingers.

He smiled at her. "I love you, Mom," he said.

"I love you, too, sweetie."

It was strange to feel the cold, but not its biting sting. For years, vulnerability meant that he experienced the frigid chill just like any other person. And he'd spent weeks as Nor's prisoner, ill and exposed to the elements, feeling a cold that seeped its way into every cell of his being, burrowing deeply until it seemed like he could feel nothing else.

Now, he could feel the snow on his hands, could distinguish the sensation from heat. Yet neither one could harm him. His fingers weren't numb and red. They didn't tingle and ache with stiffness. The cold was there, but it couldn't hurt him. He pulled the rope on his son's sled as the boy squealed in delight. Glancing back, he could see that his son's cheeks had turned ruddy, his little nose was red.

"All right, buddy, time to go inside," Clark announced.

"No, Daddy. I wanna keep sledding," Jon pouted.

Clark stopped pulling the sled forward. "It's getting cold and it'll be dark out soon," he said. "We have to go inside now."

"No, Daddy, I don't want to!" Jon replied.

Clark sighed inwardly. He could dig a city out of mud and lead a civilization into war, but he couldn't win an argument with his pre-schooler. His pulse had started thundering and he willed it to slow. He needed to calm himself down. "Jon," he began, keeping his voice even and firm. "It's too cold, we have to go inside."

"No!"

Sighing again, Clark picked up his son and carried both the little boy and the sled back toward the house. Jon cried loudly, but Clark merely set his jaw grimly and continued carrying his son back up the hill to the farmhouse. It had been six months. He wasn't new to parenting any more. He couldn't claim that Jon was still getting used to having a father. By this point, he needed to be able to handle this sort of stuff. But he still couldn't keep his son from throwing a tantrum. True, Jon rarely misbehaved, but when he did, Clark had no better strategy than waiting his son out.

Jon's cries became a rather pathetic whimper and his teeth began to chatter. Peering over the top of his glasses, Clark used a surreptitious dart of heat vision to warm his little boy up. Resolutely, he continued to trudge toward the house. The sky had grown gray and a sharp, gusting wind sliced through the air. At long last, he made his way up the porch steps, leaving the sled behind. He stomped on the mat, knocking most of the packed snow off his boots, before opening the door.

He placed Jon on the ground as the door closed behind them. Jon immediately started running toward the stairs, tracking snow across the hardwood floor as he ran. "Jon!" Clark called after him.

Jon ran headlong into his grandfather and would have fallen to the ground had Jonathan not caught his grandson in his large arms. "Where are you off to?" Jonathan asked with false sternness as he hoisted Jon up in his arms. Jon said nothing and buried his face in his grandfather's shoulder.

Having taken off his coat and boots, Clark walked toward his father. "Sorry, Dad," he said ruefully as he looked back at the trail of slush and snow. "I'll get this cleaned up."

"Jon, you know we don't run inside the house with our boots on," Jonathan said, his mild tone taking the sting out of the chastisement. "It makes the floors messy."

"Okay, Grandpa," Jon replied sullenly. He rubbed at his red nose with one mitten-covered hand.

"Good. Let's go make some hot chocolate for us and Daddy."

Clark grabbed a mop and began cleaning up the floor. He felt an irrational twinge of irritation and jealousy at the fact that his father could calm Jon down without even trying. From the kitchen, he could hear grandfather and grandson chatting happily. He didn't bother to peer through the wall, he knew what he would see on the other side – his father carefully warming the milk for hot chocolate while Jon sat at the table, telling his grandfather about the really, really big hill he'd sledded down.

A lifetime ago, he'd had the luxury of being a patient man. The demands of New Krypton had robbed him of that. But it didn't matter to Jon that there was a perfectly good reason why his father didn't have the temperament he'd once possessed. It angered Clark to know that the man he'd been five years ago would have been a much better father than the man he was now. "Whatever happened to getting wiser as you got older?" he wondered bitterly.

He finished cleaning up and put away the mop. Walking toward the window that looked out onto the porch, he stared out at the tracks he and Jon had left in the snow, the only disturbances in the pure white landscape stretched out as far as an ordinary person could see. The trees, barren and leafless, were nonetheless draped in the wet snow that clung even to the thinnest branches. The gray of their trunks stood out in stark contrast to the snow in the pale moonlight. Fat new flakes had started to fall and soon, the footprints that father and son had left would be filled up and wiped clean from the fields.

"Hey, handsome." He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, wondering how his wife had managed to sneak up on him. Standing behind him, she slipped her arms around him, placing her head against his shoulder. He held her hand against the thick flannel shirt stretched across his chest.

"Hey," he replied softly, brushing his thumb against her gold wedding band and engagement ring.

"Did you guys have fun?"

"Yeah," he said, without elaboration. He was tired of repeating the same well-worn line about his personal frustrations. With some reluctance, he slipped out of her arms and turned to face her. "I've got an appointment. I'm going to fly a patrol afterward, so I'll be a bit late."

Clark could see her hesitate for a moment and then open her mouth as if to speak. He knew she was going to ask if he wanted her to go with him, but thought better of it. Instead, she merely nodded, clearly aware that the last thing his fragile ego needed was a conversation about whether he was well enough to fly a routine patrol without adult supervision. "Okay," she said at last. "Be careful."

He gave her a weak smile before heading toward the kitchen, where Jon was dropping a handful of tiny marshmallows into his hot chocolate. "Daddy has to go out for a little while," he said as his son looked up at him. Jon frowned, said nothing, and turned back to his marshmallows.

Clark bit back a pained sigh and turned to walk upstairs. He knew there was really no reasoning with an upset almost four year old and he had no right to be angry with Lois for wondering, silently, if he was up to patrolling on his own. Hell, it was only a few weeks ago that a cry for help had caused him to do an admirable impression of a rock trying to fly. He'd blacked out, mid-flight, falling toward the earth as though he had no powers at all. And his emotions—raw and overwhelming—had been exposed for all the world to gawk at in Indonesia. The speculation as to his mental state had been unkind, but it hadn't been inapt.

As he launched himself into the air, heading east toward Metropolis, he realized that he was a man craving redemption, but didn't really know from whom he was seeking it. His wife? His son? The entire planet? Didn't they all have cause to be upset with him? Weren't they all entitled to more than he'd been able to give? And now, he was being pulled in so many different directions, trying to make amends to each of them. Failing miserably just as often as not.

It was late when he finally slipped into the bedroom. She woke with the sound of the window creaking open. Cold air flooded into the room, but of course, it didn't bother her. Lois sat up, letting the bed sheets fall away from her body. In the darkness, her husband smiled at her, still dressed as the iconic, larger-than-life hero. She pushed away the bedclothes to stand up and cross the room toward him. He drew her into his arms, his cape falling around to cover her. With nimble fingers, she undressed him slowly, welcoming him home the way he had done on so many occasions in the last few months. She'd never been one to keep the home fires burning while a big strong protector man fought the frightening world outside, but this—taking care of each other—seemed right to her. Maybe it wasn't how they had envisioned things when they'd first started imagining their future together, but even if Superman had only been back a few weeks, sharing this responsibility, just like they had shared their work at the Planet, felt natural.

His cape fell away from their entwined bodies as they moved slowly toward the bed. Her husband's hands moved deftly, but his kisses were soft, patient, unhurried. There was none of the frenetic need that characterized their lovemaking when his spirit was troubled. He smiled at her contentedly and she saw a glimmer of something in his expression that hadn't been there in years – something that had once belonged to the man she'd agreed to marry so long ago.

During the many months of their sometimes frustrating engagement, when her rather disastrous prior experiences and his, well, lack of prior experiences had convinced them to wait until their wedding night, she'd often thought about what sort of lover Clark would be. Of course, she knew that he would be thoughtful, considerate, attentive to her every desire and need. But would he be hesitant? Confident? Would he be just as collected and controlled as the public Clark Kent was? Or did those hints of passion she could feel simmering just beneath the surface portend of things to come? Despite the sometimes torturous waiting game they'd played, she hadn't been above using their engagement to, well...investigate her soon-to-be husband. She knew how to drive him to distraction. And how to drive him crazy. She knew the exact places where his invulnerable body was somehow ticklish to her touch. Every tiny scrap of information and evidence was carefully constructed to create a picture in her mind of who her beloved would be, once the business suit and the spandex one were both off.

As he threaded one hand through her hair and gathered her close against the hard, muscled curve of his body, she realized that this was exactly how she'd imagined making love with Clark would be all those years ago. It shocked her to realize that this was the first time they'd made love without the specters of fears or regrets or pain—past, present, and future—haunting them.

Their wedding night had been a tearful and defiant goodbye. His homecoming, too, was a fierce and unbending message shouted to the gods and the fates that their painful and seemingly unending separation had done nothing to diminish their love. But even all of these months since his return, sex was never just about something as simple and uncomplicated as loving someone with everything you were.

In his arms now, she felt nothing but love. No fear of loss. No desperate need to find solace. No secret fear that his homecoming had all been imagined, driving her to prove he was truly home. No defiance aimed at a universe conspiring to keep them apart. It was an unfamiliar contentment that washed over her, sinking in deep and then dissolving with everything else that resembled a coherent thought as her husband did the most wonderful things to her.

When she did finally regain some recognition of the world around her—the softness of the pillow under her head, the sound of the grandfather clock on the landing halfway up the staircase, ticking steadily, the weight of her husband's body on top of hers, the evenness of his breathing—she felt a smile turn up the corners of her mouth. Her heavy lidded eyes opened just the slightest bit so she could look at her beloved, as he lifted his head and gently caressed her cheek.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you," he replied. Even in the tone of his voice, she could hear a profound change in his outlook, from just a few hours ago. He'd left here dour and frustrated. Now, he sounded hopeful and even happy.

"Good patrol?" she ventured.

"You know me too well," he said with a smile. "It's snowing in Metropolis. I saved a car from skidding through the guardrails on Mount Truman. The driver was pretty shaken so I picked up his car and flew them home. His kids thought it was pretty cool."

She grinned at her husband—a full-blown, uninhibited smile. His happiness was infectious. It always was. That simple fact made the rarity of his good moods these days even more acute. He rolled onto his back and drew her into his arms. She placed her head on his chest, feeling his heart beat under firm muscle and scarred skin.

"I stopped by the Planet and talked to Perry between patrols. He wants me to come back as the assistant managing editor and take over for Mike when he retires."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I'd talk it over with you."

"You know I'll support you no matter what you want to do," she said.

"Well, you've pretty much been supporting all of us. I think it's time I start pulling my weight."

"That's not what I meant," she replied.

"I know," he assured her. "But we've always known that our life, our future is in Metropolis, not a little farm in Kansas. I'm so glad you came here to be with my folks and take care of Jon. And I needed to be here to start getting better, but I feel like I've been hiding the last few months. With Superman back, there's no good reason to stay away from Metropolis, except that I'm scared."

"Do you want to be an editor?"

"I think I want to give it a try. I can't be a reporter anymore. At least not now. Maybe in a few years, I'll be able to go back to it; being at the Planet will at least keep that possibility open. And no more stakeouts means more time with Jon."

He'd given this a great deal of thought, she could tell. "It sounds like your mind is made up," she said at last.

"Maybe," he said. "I don't want to do this unless you want to, too."

She drew her fingers up and down the length of his arm, over the hard curve of muscle and soft skin. A thought suddenly occurred to her. "Have you talked to Dr. Friskin about this?"

"Yeah," he said. "She thought it was a good idea—at least, going to work part-time. She doesn't think I'm ready for two full-time jobs yet, and she's probably right. But she seemed to think that some semblance of a routine, being a gainfully employed, respectable adult again would probably be good for me. What do you think?"

She tried to hide her hesitance. So much had changed in just the last few weeks, but maybe if they took this slowly, making concrete progress back toward normal life would help him. "I think we should talk to your parents. And Perry," she said.

"Perry, we're taking a heck of a risk on your boy," Walter muttered as he walked the paper's editor-in-chief through the lobby toward the elevator. Sitting several floors above the newsroom, the well-appointed offices and corridors of the executive suites could only be identified as belonging to a news corporation—as opposed to a bank or law firm—because the walls were decorated with framed copies of the paper's most famous and storied front pages from over two hundred years of history. Here, the men in expensive suits fretted over financial concerns that those in the bullpen, convinced they were doing "God's Work" as part of the Fourth Estate couldn't have been bothered with. Up here, journalism was a business, not a calling. As the paper's general counsel, Walter was much happier when Perry was in his world and the 'suits,' as Perry not-so-secretly referred to the board members, were in theirs.

Perry guffawed, taking offense, as Walter knew he would. "Clark Kent is a damn fine reporter—one of the best journalists who's ever worked for this paper. He's been loyal to the Planet and he deserves its loyalty in return."

“The board isn’t going to undermine you, or second guess your decision, but you have to know that we’re concerned.” Walter attempted to smooth the editor’s obviously ruffled feathers. “Kent has no experience as an editor. He’s got, what, a few months to learn the ropes and take over for the paper’s number-two man? And he wants to start part-time?”

“I make the personnel decisions on my staff,” the other man replied obstinately. “I had it written into my contract.”

“We know that, Perry...”

“And I’m as right about this as I was when I hired that young reporter... you remember the one, barely twenty-one and busting her tail to get her masters while working as a night research assistant here. The one with the shelves full of awards, who’s broken damn near every big story of the last ten years, and might I add, has made this paper buckets of money.”

Walter smiled as Perry turned smug. “And the board’s afraid that this is a favor to that reporter.”

Perry’s smirk turned into a scowl. “This has nothing to do with Lois. Clark’s earned this. He’s the only reporter I’ve had here who could ever give Lois a run for her money. I know what it takes to be a good editor, and the boy’s got it in spades.”

“We’re all hoping you’re right,” Walter replied. “We’re on the same team, here.”

Perry stared at him and jabbed the elevator call button. “Yeah, well, why don’t you go back to worrying about the bottom line and I’ll get back to running the paper.”

Walter held up his hands in defeat. He’d been asked by the board to voice its concerns to the editor and as far as he was concerned, he’d done his job.

Clark held Jon’s hand as the three of them walked down Bessolo Boulevard toward the Daily Planet. Jon was fascinated by the towering skyscrapers that loomed over them. Even in the cold of winter, the streets were packed with residents and tourists alike. Bessolo had once been an old Indian trail that cut across the long island of New Troy at a diagonal, from the northwest corner to the southeast one. Once paved a hundred years ago, it instantly became the city’s main thoroughfare, but in more recent decades, its largest source of traffic headaches. At some point while he’d been gone, large sections of the boulevard around the city’s main squares had been blocked off to vehicular traffic, creating immense pedestrian plazas.

All the people walking through the streets—stopping to take pictures or hurrying off to a big meeting—captivated Jon’s attention. Clark couldn’t imagine what it was like for a little boy about to turn four, trying to take in everything that Metropolis had to offer with his wide brown eyes. He himself had been twenty-seven when he first arrived in the city, by way of five other continents, dozens of countries, and major cities, and absolutely nothing had compared to Metropolis.

Sam and Ellen were meeting them just a few blocks from the Planet to take Jon to the children’s museum while

he and Lois had a chance to talk to Perry and later, begin the first phases of house hunting. He was still trying to convince himself that they were ready to do this—that this was the best way for them to make progress. They needed to get back to something resembling normalcy. He longed to feel productive, needed. Metropolis had never failed to make him feel both.

“Look, Daddy!” Jon exclaimed as he pointed with his little index finger to a giant television screen over the LNN headquarters building. On the screen was footage from Superman’s dramatic intervention in a high-speed chase the previous afternoon. Clark picked Jon up in his arms to let his son get a better look as they watched Superman safely stop the car and pull the fleeing suspect out before he or anyone else could get hurt. Out of the corner of his eye, Clark could see Lois smiling at them.

“Daddy, Superman caught the bad guy,” Jon announced.

“Yes, he did,” Clark agreed.

Jon frowned slightly as he continued to watch the superhero’s exploits. “Does Superman live in Metropolis?”

Clark blinked, momentarily unsure what to say. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “He helps here a lot, but I don’t know if he lives here or if he flies somewhere else when he’s done helping.”

“Maybe he lives on the moon,” Jon said.

Clark smiled. “Maybe,” he concurred.

Clark kept carrying Jon in his arms as they walked the half block remaining to the coffee shop where they were going to meet his in-laws. He was thankful that Sam and Ellen were capable of being civil around each other for Jon’s sake. He figured they were both so anxious to spend time with their grandson that they managed to behave like grownups. His mother- and father-in-law were already waiting for them when they arrived at the coffee shop. They exchanged hellos and Ellen and Sam both exclaimed at how big Jon had gotten since the last time they saw him a few months ago and asked him what he wanted for his rapidly-approaching fourth birthday.

Extracting a promise from their son to be good, Clark and Lois left for their meeting with Perry. Clark had already started hammering out the details of the job with his old editor, but as they tried to fumble for the contours of what his work relationship with his wife would entail, it quickly became clear that Lois’s input was necessary.

His wife slipped her hand into his as they made the familiar walk toward the Planet. His thoughts couldn’t help but drift toward the days and months when this had been their routine. They would talk about wedding plans and stop for coffee on their way to the office, Lois getting all the more worked up as the big day approached. Truth be told, he, too, had been beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed by the insane level of detail involved, but he’d managed to keep his cool. Besides, if he’d started to stress out over it, he wouldn’t have had any fun watching his soon-to-be-wife going about a million miles an hour as she tried to nail down every variable and detail—as though she’d been planning some giant military operation, instead of just a

wedding. Of course, it was every horrible, villainous attempt to thwart their first wedding that led to her almost paranoid level of planning. Who else but them had to worry about evil sociopaths trying to break up their happy day?

Juxtaposing that time with the present made him feel like he was in some sort of mid-century absurdist play. He shook his head. Their lives had to be lived in order to be believed. As they approached the building, Clark let go of his wife's hand and followed her through the revolving doors. They waited for the elevator in the lobby and he couldn't help but think that this was it. A conscious step forward. Time to be an ordinary guy with a job again.

As they gathered in the editor's office, he could still hear the whispers of the Planet's reporting staff from the bullpen. The consensus in the gossip world was that Clark Kent was definitely returning to the paper, but they still didn't know in what capacity. Rumors that the Lane and Kent investigating team was about to be reassembled had started to swirl. How he wished that were the case. But in the real world, not the world of water cooler gossip and speculation, it just wasn't possible. Both of them had too high a profile now to work as serious investigators.

If it were only a question of being a world-famous reporter, he could have switched to covering the national political or security beats, but the problem wasn't that he was renowned for his work, it was that he himself had been one of the biggest stories of the last year, despite his own attempts to keep a low profile. Staying out of the limelight and being a top reporter on a national beat were mutually exclusive and he wasn't about to let his personal and professional lives get mashed up and mixed together into some sort of twisted and dysfunctional puree.

"Son, I sure am looking forward to officially welcoming you back to the Planet, so let's get this stuff squared away," Perry drawled as he sat on the corner of his desk, facing what was once his top reporting team. "I don't give a damn about appearance of nepotism issues; there's no question that you two are the best in the business. But I think you need to really think about how this new arrangement is going to affect your relationship. You two are dynamite as a team, but I don't need to tell you that the relationship between an editor and a reporter is very different."

"That's why I don't want Lois reporting to me," Clark said definitively. Still, he glanced at his wife sitting in the chair beside his out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge her reaction. Her expression gave nothing away.

"I think that's wise," Perry replied. "If and when you take over for Mike Burns, Lois will officially report to me. But that still leaves the editorial board. Day-to-day control of the board is in the hands of the managing editor. As a senior columnist, Lois sits on that board and I think it would be bad for the paper's integrity for me to go about interjecting myself into the day-to-day affairs of the editorial board whenever you two disagree."

"Perry..." Lois began.

Perry cut her off. "Don't try to tell me you won't disagree about the paper's editorial positions. Half the

reason you two are such a great team is that you have no problem fighting it out when you disagree." Would that his editor knew the half of it, Clark thought ruefully.

"But we have at least six months before Mike retires, which means you have six months to figure this out. Until then, Clark will be an assistant managing editor for the A Section and you two will be equal members of the editorial board, free to fight like cats and dogs if that's what suits you. For the sake of peace in my newsroom, I hope you keep it civil."

"Perry," Lois began impatiently. "Clark and I worked together before. Remember? You took out billboards? The ones that made it impossible for us to go undercover until the damn things came down?"

"You're right, darlin'," Perry replied. "I'm just worried because this won't be a partnership, at least not the way you remember it. I don't want this change ruining your working relationship. Or worse."

"We take your point. I'll admit it would be strange to work for Clark. Or for him to work for me. But with neither one of us supervising the other, I think we can avoid those problems."

"I agree," Clark added. "I don't want to be Lois's boss. But we're professionals, Chief. We're not going to turn your newsroom into a three-ring circus."

"You can relax, Perry; this is a good thing," Lois assured her editor.

Perry grinned. "I know. I just...I'm nervous," he admitted uncharacteristically. "Having you back, son—having both of you back in this newsroom—makes me happier than a hundred previously unreleased songs from the King would."

Clark laughed and glanced at his wife, who smilingly shook her head. The longer he spent in this office, with the familiar din of the bullpen in the background, the easier it was to tell himself that this was a good thing. The familiarity of the Planet—it felt like home. And he could see the way it energized Lois just to be in this building, close to the tangible parts—the bricks and mortar and printing presses—of the paper she loved.

"So now we get down to the brass tacks and talk about a start date," Perry said.

"We still need to find a place," Lois replied.

"The Planet will cover your moving expenses, including rent in the city until you find someplace you like," Perry assured them. Clark wondered silently at the concession and what Perry had had to do to wrangle it out of the board.

"We need a little bit of time to figure this out," Clark said. Suddenly, returning to the Planet became concrete to him. It wasn't just a wish any more. They really needed to start planning and Perry wasn't leaving months of house hunting as a viable excuse for dragging this out.

"Of course. Why don't we talk in a few days?" Perry replied.

"Okay, Chief," Clark responded.

All three stood up and Perry extended his hand to Clark. "Welcome back to the Planet, son," he said.

Clark shook his once and future boss's hand and followed his wife back into the bullpen. He placed his hand on the small of her back, a gesture meant to reassure himself as much as her. They were greeted immediately by Jimmy who bounded over with a grin to meet them. He may have been older and more mature than he was when Clark left, but he was still Jimmy.

"That meeting had better have been about who gets better office space," Jimmy said with a grin.

"Shhh, Jimmy," Lois chastised him quietly. "We aren't quite ready to announce our return just yet."

"My lips are sealed," Jimmy replied, holding his hands up apologetically. He turned to Clark. "Now when do I get to spend some time with the little man so you can finally take your wife on a real date?"

Clark smiled at his thoughtful young friend. "How's tomorrow night sound?"

"Great, I'll take him to the movies and out for pizza—don't worry Lois, strictly G-rated fare."

"Oh, can you take him to see that dog movie? I've really been dreading having to see it," Lois replied with a grateful sigh.

"Sure thing," Jimmy replied. They said their goodbyes and slipped out of the bullpen with a few waves to their colleagues, eager to avoid having to stay and answer questions about their plans. There would be time for that soon enough.

Once outside the Planet, Clark checked his watch. "What time are we supposed to meet the realtor?" he asked.

"We have almost an hour," Lois replied.

"A whole hour to ourselves, huh?" he asked. Suddenly a silent alarm from a bank halfway across town caught their attention.

"You had to go and jinx it, didn't you?" his wife asked him ruefully.

Instinctively, he started for his tie, but hesitated. Was she expecting to keep taking the lead on things like this? Were they going to work out a schedule? Or a grid?

"You can handle this," she assured him. He gave her a quick appreciative kiss before ducking into an alley. Superman was back, after all.

He took off and quickly located the source of the alarm – the First Mercantile Bank of Metropolis. Clark could tell from the first scan that this was an amateur job – two gunmen, one facing the hostages, the other grabbing money from the cash drawers. But they were in direct line of sight from the door and so close together that he would have no problem disarming both of them before either knew what had happened. Not waiting for a good situation to potentially deteriorate, he burst through the doors, depriving both robbers of their weapons and the free use of their hands before they could react. With the two perpetrators bound and their guns destroyed, he began frogmarching them out of the bank. Their former hostages slowly rose to their feet. One of the bank's employees started to applaud. The others joined her. Soon everyone was loudly clapping and cheering for him.

"Welcome back, Superman!" one man yelled out.

"Thanks, Superman!" several others called.

He tried to contain his smile. This is why he'd gotten into the cape and tights business in the first place. Outside, the Metropolis PD was happy to relieve him of his charges. A couple of officers read the robbers their rights and replaced the extension cords he'd used to bind them with proper handcuffs. The police hadn't even had time to establish a perimeter before he'd defused the situation and a crowd had started to form.

"Way to go, Superman." He looked up at the sound of her voice and found his wife in the crowd, smiling at him.

"Thanks, Ms. Lane," he replied. The crowd seemed to turn as one to look at the woman the Man of Steel was talking to.

"Do you have a quote for the Daily Planet?" she shouted.

"It's good to be back," he said with a smile. With that, he took off, ostensibly to go wherever the caped hero was needed. In reality, he landed in a nearby alley and changed back into his regular clothes. As the crowd started to dissolve, Lois found him.

She took his hand as they started to walk. "You missed all the excitement," she teased.

"I usually do," he said with a wink.

"Were you calling for help, or returning a video?"

"Have I used the Cheese of the Month excuse yet?"

"Oh yeah," she replied. "It didn't go over very well, as I recall."

"Yeah, that was a bad one." He pulled her closer and let his hand slip from hers so he could drape his arm around her shoulders. Clark smiled to himself. Happy. Content. At peace.

"What about the one on the Upper West Side?" she called out from the bathroom as she put her earrings in.

"The high-rise?" he shouted back.

"No, the brownstone," she replied. She walked into the bedroom to find her husband straightening his tie. The apartment was quiet – after much pleading and cajoling, they'd given Jon permission to spend not just the day but the night at his Uncle Jimmy's. She'd been somewhat surprised by Clark's desire to stay in Metropolis for their night out. Obviously, they could have gone anywhere in the world just as easily, but it was starting to get clearer and clearer to her how much he loved this city. Unlike her, he would always consider himself a farm kid at heart, but Metropolis really was like nowhere else and living here – whether for a few years or a lifetime—seemed to spoil you for anywhere else. He'd surprised her with tickets to the jazz orchestra at Washington Center, but how he'd gotten such good seats on such short notice remained a mystery.

"It was all right," he replied at last.

"But not great?" she ventured.

He did up the buttons on the cuffs of his shirt and put on his watch. "The house was fine. But with no yard and that far from the park..."

"I know," she agreed. "Jon should have somewhere he can play outside. I asked Robert to show us a few places in Parkside Hill." His reaction, which he did an admirable job of covering up, let her know he wasn't thrilled by the prospect of more house hunting tomorrow. It wasn't as though they had much choice. A house wasn't going to find itself.

He turned to pick up his jacket from where it lay across the bed. "We should get going," he said as he pulled on his suit jacket. "Our reservation is for six thirty."

Clark started to turn toward the living room, but paused for a moment and turned to look at her appreciatively. He smiled as he held his hand out to her and pulled her close to him. He kissed her cheek. "You look amazing," he said.

Lois smiled in response. "So do you," she said. She was finally starting to get used to his subdued ties. Yes, she missed her husband's peculiar sense of whimsy, but she knew this sartorial change was the last thing she should concern herself with. She could keep cataloguing all the things that were different about him, or she could be grateful that he was—in every way that mattered—still the man she loved.

He pulled their overcoats out of the hall closet and helped her into hers. After two days of what seemed like trying to plan their entire future, she was looking forward to a quiet evening with her shockingly gorgeous and wonderful husband even more than she had expected. Hand in hand, they left the apartment.

"How are you, Clark?" Dr. Friskin greeted him warmly.

"Great, thanks," he replied, realizing he was about as upbeat as he could remember being.

"You seem to be in excellent spirits," his therapist commented.

He sat down on the couch as Dr. Friskin took her place in her wingback chair. "I think being in Metropolis has made me remember how much I want to go back to the Planet. I've had a few really good rescues, too."

Dr. Friskin nodded and looked down at her notepad. "I hope you're still easing into things."

"I am," he assured her. "Just a few patrols a day. Lois is still tackling the really big problems."

"That's good," his therapist said as she continued taking notes. "Steady progress is our goal. What about your other profession?"

"We talked to Perry about my coming back to the Planet as an editor, starting on a part-time basis. I still don't know if editing is what I want to do, but I want to be back at the Planet. I want to be a journalist. If this is the best way for me to do that, then I'll start as an editor."

"That seems like a very smart approach," Dr. Friskin said as she looked up from her notes. "But it's a big change from the way you've been thinking in the past. What do you think brought about this change?"

He thought over her question for a long moment. "A week or so ago, when I first talked to you about going back to work, I'd taken Jon out sledding. He got angry when it

was time to come home and he started to sulk. I beat myself up about it, because I usually do. I was thinking about it on the way here. And I realized, I actually have a pretty good relationship with my son. We read bedtime stories together. We build snowmen. We play with dinosaurs. So what if he was grumpy one afternoon because it was getting too cold to stay outside? It was like a light going off in my head. I was letting the perfect become the enemy of the good. Not everything is going to be perfect with a four-year-old. How could it be? But Jon's a good kid. He knows I love him. And yeah, I'm still figuring things out, but I'm not a bad father.

"I realized I'd been doing the same thing in everything else in my life. I can't go back to my dream job. But that doesn't mean I can't have a good one. Not every rescue goes perfectly, but Superman can do a lot to help people. I have to stop making perfection my goal. I can't do it. Figuring that out has been liberating."

Dr. Friskin took off her glasses. "Clark, it's wonderful to hear you say that."

Both of them woke at the first wail of the siren. He looked up, momentarily disoriented. Hearing a siren out here in Smallville in the middle of the night was practically unheard of. It took a second to get his bearings and to realize they were in Metropolis. Lois was already getting up. She touched his shoulder. "I'll take care of it," she whispered. She leaned over to kiss him before standing up and spinning into the suit. In a blur, she was gone, leaving the curtains to rustle in her wake.

He stared up at the ceiling for a long moment before turning to look at the pillow beside him, where his wife had lain just moments before. Her side of the bed was still warm. He looked through the wall to see that Jon was still sleeping peacefully in the living room. 'Everything is fine,' he told himself. 'Go back to sleep.' Closing his eyes, he tried to will himself to fall back to sleep. But for a long time, sleep eluded him. He wondered what was keeping his wife so long.

Eventually, he drifted off. But his sleep didn't remain peaceful for long. He found himself running in the North Housing Compound of the main colony on New Krypton. The scorched, acrid stench of laser rifle fire rose up behind him. He could hear his boots echoing loudly on the metal floor.

He couldn't remember which way to go; which of the twists and turns would get him out of the rat maze. He didn't even know who was chasing him, but he wasn't about to try to figure that out. Clark thought he was putting distance between himself and his pursuer. The other set of footfalls seemed to fade in the background. He made a sharp right turn. A dead end greeted him at the end of the hall.

Dammit.

He turned on his heel to find Nor standing in front of him. Out of instinct, he raised his weapon and fired. He watched the shot hit Nor in the gut, but the other man didn't

fall to the ground. Instead, he gave Clark a feral grin as he raised his hands from the wound in his stomach.

"You didn't think you could rid yourself of me that easily, did you?" Nor demanded with a hollow laugh.

Clark heard a gasp behind him and quickly turned around. Lois was standing there, her face ashen, her features settled in a look of shock. He dropped the weapon in his hand with a loud clatter.

He sat bolt upright with a start, his heart still beating the wild, uneven rhythm of a hunted animal's. He drew in a deep lungful of air. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lois stepping into the bedroom from the balcony.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," she apologized.

"It's fine," he said, feeling his chest rise and fall with each heavy, labored breath.

She spun back out of the suit and rejoined him in the bed. "Is everything all right?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," he replied halfheartedly, trying to push the images from his dream out of his mind. "How'd everything go?"

"Warehouse fire," she replied as she curled up next to him. "No one was hurt."

He put his arm around her and pulled her closer.

"Good," he said distractedly.

Clark could still hear his heart thundering in his ears. His wife lifted her head from his chest. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked. Apparently she could still hear and feel it, too.

"It was just a dream," he assured her as he pressed his lips to her forehead. If only he knew how to convince himself of that fact. "Let's go back to sleep."

"Mom, Dad, you didn't have to come all the way out here," Clark protested as he opened the door to his apartment. His parents weren't supposed to head out to Metropolis for at least a day or two so they could avoid the worst of the packing and unpacking chaos. Only a few minutes earlier, Lois had called to let him know they'd asked her to bring them out sooner and that they were on their way.

"Of course we did," his mother replied. His parents followed him inside to the almost completely bare living space. All of his possessions had been boxed up and were ready to be moved into the apartment the Planet had rented them. He hadn't lived in this place for almost five years now, but it seemed so strange to be giving it up. They'd put the apartment on the market and given the gradual gentrification of the neighborhood since he'd first moved here so many years ago, the realtor didn't think they'd have any trouble moving it. He reminded himself that was a good thing.

Jon looked up at them from his coloring books on the floor. "Daddy, why do we have to move?" he asked for what Clark imagined was the hundredth time.

Clark knelt down beside his son. "Mommy and Daddy are going to go work with Uncle Perry and Uncle Jimmy, so we have to be in Metropolis," he explained gently.

"But I like living with Grandma and Grandpa," Jon protested as he turned back to scribbling with his green crayon.

"I know," Clark replied. "I do, too. But they'll come visit all the time. And we'll go to the zoo and the park and the museum with them."

Jon was silent for a long moment, furiously coloring the page with his crayon. He finally looked up with tears glimmering in his eyes. "What if I don't like it here?"

Clark's heart broke. "You're scared of moving, right?" he asked softly. Jon merely nodded. "So am I," Clark admitted.

Jon frowned at him. "Then why do we have to?"

"Sometimes doing what scares us is part of growing up. But I promise that your mommy and I want us to move here because we think it's the best thing for our family. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy," Jon agreed with a nod.

Clark smiled at his son. "That's my boy," he said as he hugged Jon. "Why don't you show Grandma and Grandpa what you've drawn?"

Jon stood up to take his drawings to his grandparents. Clark watched as his son explained the pictures of dinosaurs and rockets. This was a dramatic change for his son, he knew that. But he also knew that they couldn't stay in Smallville forever. Better to do this now, before Jon started preschool, than to tear him away from new friends and a new school and make him start that process all over again.

In just a few days, he'd be starting back up at the Planet. They had a few days to get settled into the apartment and celebrate Jon's birthday before that. A few mornings a week, Jon would go to the Planet's daycare while both his parents worked. Other than editorial board meetings, though, there were few things that required Lois to be in the office, which meant she'd be able to spend much of her time with Jon, helping him cope with the change in his routine.

He heard the movers coming up the stairs and stood up to let them in. He pulled the door open just as the man on the other side started to knock.

"Hey, you're pretty quick, buddy." The mover's shirt identified him as "Matt." His Bakerline accent identified him as a Metropolis local.

"Come on in. Everything's all boxed up," Clark said as he stepped aside. The trio of movers marched in and began surveying the scene.

"Why don't we take Jon over to the new place?" his father offered as he took his grandson's hand.

"That'd be great," Clark replied. "Lois should already be there." Clark leaned down to hug his son. "Be good for Grandma and Grandpa, okay?"

"Okay," Jon replied. "Bye, Daddy."

"See you soon, little man. I love you," he said as he tousled his son's hair. As his parents left with Jon, he turned his attention to supervising the movers. He would have much preferred to do this himself, but there were still appearances to keep up. Superman couldn't very well be

seen flying Clark Kent's furniture across town and unlike Lois, he had the sense to hate driving in Metropolis, so it was better to leave that to professional movers.

It didn't take them long to haul everything he owned—all the collected memorabilia from his travels around the world—into the truck. He signed the paperwork and told the movers he'd meet them at the new apartment. As he closed the door behind them, he took one last look around the now completely barren loft. After years of wandering the planet, staying in hostels and monasteries and yurts, this had been his first real apartment. The place where he'd started his life in Metropolis.

On the couch, just over there in the middle of the living room, Lois had fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder for the first time. By the kitchen, under the influence of that pheromone compound, she'd done the dance of the seven veils, nearly undoing the Man of Steel's super willpower. He looked over his shoulder at the doorway. Lois had picked the locks on his door he couldn't remember how many times. On the steps leading down from the entry, she'd convinced him not to go when he was sure that he couldn't stay in Metropolis and keep hurting her because of Superman.

He did a quick sweep to make sure the place was truly empty – it wouldn't do to leave a pair of boots or one of his spare capes somewhere for a potential buyer or realtor to find. With a sigh, he flicked off the light switch. He didn't know what he was expecting, but somehow...it just...it should have been more. Turning off the lights on such a huge part of his life shouldn't have seemed like such a small, inconsequential thing. But there were no maudlin violins to mark the occasion, no poignant voice-over narration. He pulled the door open and with a last glance over his shoulder, walked out.

Lois finished unpacking the last of Clark's things. It may have been temporary, but she had no interest in living in this place with a bunch of half-packed boxes stacked everywhere. The three bedroom apartment in one of the city's newest high rises, just blocks from the Planet, had a remarkable view of Metropolis's iconic skylines, but had that sterile, modern look about it, promising to exorcise anything resembling character that its occupants tried to introduce. What the place lacked in charm, though, it made up for in utility. By comparison to Clark's place or her old apartment, it was immense. The third bedroom was perfect as an office and would make it easy for her to continue working from home. That morning, she'd flown back to Kansas and gathered all of their belongings there as well. Everything they owned was now in this apartment. But it didn't feel like home. That, she hoped, would come when they found their own place.

She made her way to one of the large picture windows in the living room. It was a cold, gray February day, but her city was still beautiful. The familiar contours of the city's skyline—albeit from a new angle—stretched out before her. The corner unit gave them an expansive view of the West

River and most of midtown. She could pick out the Planet Building, the brand-new glass behemoth that was the Newtime Tower, and Washington Center where it met the southern edge of the park. She pulled a face as her eyes passed over the Lexcorp Building. 'Why wouldn't they just rename the damn thing?' she wondered.

The sound of the front door opening behind her caused her to turn around. Clark walked in, followed by his parents. "Everyone ready to go?" Jonathan called out.

Jon came running out of his room, apparently having woken up from his nap. "Grandma! Grandpa!" he shouted.

"How's our birthday boy?" Martha exclaimed.

"I'm four today!" Jon declared proudly.

"That you are," Lois replied. "We have a birthday surprise for you." Her son's eyes lit up. She turned to Clark, silently letting him know he should be the one to share the surprise. It was another first she felt so blessed to be experiencing – Jon's first birthday since Clark's return. After all these months, she didn't think Jon remembered what it was like before his father came home. But she knew that for Clark, it was a never-ending battle to prove to himself he was a good dad. She never doubted that he was. Her husband was a wonderful father. Nothing mattered to him more than their little boy – making sure he was a happy, healthy little four-year-old.

"We're going to the Natural History Museum," he said. "They have really, really big dinosaurs there."

"Yay!" Jon cheered loudly. She couldn't help but smile in response. Perhaps her son wouldn't have too tough a time getting used to Metropolis.

"Clark! We're going to be late!" she exclaimed as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She felt his lips trailing down the length of her neck toward her shoulder.

"Perry'll understand," he murmured.

"The hell he will," she replied as she spun around.

"I'll make Jon his breakfast," he said as he took a step back, conceding defeat.

She grabbed him by his striped tie and pulled him back toward her, kissing him hard. She felt him smile against her lips. "You excited to be going back?" she asked as they parted.

"Excited. Scared. Anxious," he said.

"You'll knock 'em dead," she replied. "You did the first time."

"I had help the first time."

"You didn't need me to be a great reporter, Clark."

"No. But I needed you to be the best."

She straightened the lapels of his suit jacket. "You still are. And you'll be an amazing editor." With another quick kiss, she walked out of the bedroom; it was time to make sure the other man in her life got the first day of his new routine off to a good start, too.

"Today was a big day for you," Dr. Friskin said simply as he sat down on the couch in her office.

“It was,” he agreed.

“So how was your first day as the new assistant managing editor of the Daily Planet?”

He sighed, unsure where to begin – the outsized welcome back he’d received? The sense of getting thrown into the deep end on day one? The wistful feeling that spread over him when he looked at the bullpen where his and Lois’s desks had once been? Or the realization that had hit him halfway through the day that if Kal El could run a planet and wage a war, surely Clark Kent could manage the A Section of a newspaper? The old Clark was terrible at giving orders and had no experience managing a staff, but four years as First Minister had made it second nature. “It was good,” he said simply.

“And how are you making the transition back to Metropolis?”

“It’s been...a little bumpy. Jon misses having his grandparents around. He wasn’t too excited about going to daycare this morning. But I checked on him around lunch. He was making new friends.”

“So things are going fairly well, then?”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“And how are things with Lois?”

“Good,” he replied, but he paused and frowned.

“Actually great. She’s been amazing through all of this...”

“But?”

“How did Dr. Friskin know there was a ‘but’ there?” he wondered. “But I’m still having the nightmares. And I still don’t know how to talk to her about them.”

“So she doesn’t yet know about Nor?”

He let the word ‘yet’ roll around in his mind. Obviously, his therapist expected him to come clean to his wife. “No, she doesn’t,” he confessed at last.

“But that is what the nightmares are about, isn’t it?”

Did they teach telepathy to shrinks? “Yeah. It’s always the same these days.”

“And I think that’s significant. You’ve made considerable progress on other fronts, but this issue continues to trouble you.”

He pushed up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “It’s not an ‘issue,’” he responded, more testily than he’d intended. “I killed a man. I’m not sure I’m supposed to get over that.”

Lois finished tucking Jon in and turned off the lights. She pulled the door closed behind her silently. “He’s asleep,” she said quietly to her husband, who was sitting on the couch in the living room, engrossed in the article he was editing. “I’m going to fly a patrol,” she added. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Be careful,” he said without looking up.

She smiled wistfully at the bizarre normalcy of their relationship. Spinning into the suit, she pushed open the balcony door, letting in a sharp gust of cold air. She took off over the West River before arching around to begin her first sweep of the city.

It wasn’t a quiet night, exactly, but it was routine. A mugging. An attempted assault. A couple of minor car accidents. She managed to keep herself busy for several hours, picking up petty criminals and defusing tense situations before tempers could get out of control. So much for crime going down when it was cold outside.

As the night wore on, it got quieter and she let her thoughts turn inward. Clark’s birthday was in a few days. She still didn’t know what to get him. What did you get a man who’d once ruled a planet? His parents were going to come into town on Saturday for dinner, along with Perry and Jimmy. Afterwards, she wanted to fly with him to all of their favorite places—the slopes of Kilimanjaro, the ruins of Ephesus, the painted desert, that tiny island that was too small to be named that only they knew about.

A sudden, sharp cry shook her out of her ruminations. She was flying over Parkside Hill, one of New Troy’s toniest neighborhoods. Zeroing in on the source, she swooped down to the brownstone near the corner of Sullivan Lane. With a quick scan of the house, she found the cause for the cry. An elderly woman was crumpled at the foot of the large staircase, her cane far from reach. Another scan confirmed the woman’s hip was broken.

Before forcing the door open, Lois knocked loudly. “Ma’am, it’s Ultrawoman,” she began. “I’m going to come in.” The deadbolt gave way easily, and she stepped into the dilapidated house, a crumbling shadow of its former glory. Cobwebs covered the stately crown molding. Water stains appeared in large splotches over the once elegant fleur-de-lis wallpapering. Slats in the wainscoting had popped loose and were now jutting out away from the walls. In the darkness, she made her way to the frail woman, struggling to sit up.

“Ultrawoman!” the woman exclaimed. “Oh, thank goodness you heard me.”

“Yes, I’m here,” Lois assured her as she took the woman’s hand. “You’re **Y**our hip looks broken and I don’t think I should move you like this. I’m going to call an ambulance for you.”

She scanned the house and found the phone in the kitchen. With a promise to come back, she left to call for help. Knowing it would be a few minutes before the ambulance would arrive, she tried to figure out what would help make her charge more comfortable. She searched the cabinets for a clean glass, again shocked to see how a once-great house had fallen into a state of disrepair. Several of the cabinet doors were falling off their hinges. Inside several of the cupboards, she was greeted by daddy longlegs, silverfish, and other of Metropolis’s less than savory denizens. The elderly woman seemed to live here alone and Lois imagined she didn’t have the ability to maintain such a large residence. Glad to find the faucets still working, she poured the woman a glass of water.

“Ma’am, the ambulance is on its way,” Lois said. “Can I bring you anything else?”

“Oh no, I’m just so thankful that you came. I don’t know what I would have done. My son keeps telling me to

move out of this old house, but I can't. If I do, they'll tear it down."

"Do you want me to call your son for you?" Lois asked. "I can have him meet us at the hospital."

"He's in Cleveland," she said with a sad smile.

"Once the ambulance arrives, I can go get him and bring him here. But I won't leave until you're in good hands."

"Thank you, dear."

Within minutes, the telltale sound of sirens let them know the ambulance had arrived. Ultrawoman let the paramedics in and called the elderly woman's son, preparing to pick him up and bring him to the hospital. "I'll meet you at MetroGen," she called out to the paramedics as they prepared to wheel the stretcher out.

Ten minutes later, she was landing at the hospital with a distraught, middle-aged man as her passenger. They made their way to admitting, drawing a number of puzzled looks. "I need to see Mrs. Crowninshield, she was just brought in," her son said anxiously to the admitting nurse. They followed the nurse's directions down the hallway to the private room.

"Mom, are you okay?" he asked.

The elderly woman looked up from her bed and smiled. "I'm fine, Peter," she assured him. "Thanks to Ultrawoman."

"Mrs. Crowninshield, I'd be happy to secure your house for you," Ultrawoman said.

"Mom, I wish you would just get rid of that place, it's a deathtrap," Peter complained.

"If I move out, the city will tear it down," his mother replied.

"It should be condemned, Mom," her son insisted.

There was a knock behind them. Lois turned around to see a doctor standing in the hallway, a chart in his hand.

"Mrs. Crowninshield, I'm Dr. Hoffman."

"I should be going," Lois said.

"Thank you again, Ultrawoman," Peter Crowninshield said gratefully.

With a simple nod, Lois departed.

"I don't like it as the lede," Clark said, red pencil tucked behind his ear. He leaned over the conference room table to look at the mockups.

"What do you think if we move this up, and cut these two paragraphs here?" Mike said as he drew in his edits on the proofs.

"That's better," Clark agreed. "And if we move this sidebar to the inside page, we'll free up two more column inches."

"You really have a knack for this," Mike said as he stood up straight, clapping Clark on the shoulder.

"Thanks," Clark replied with a smile. The sudden sound of distant sirens drew his attention. Lois was at home with Jon, which meant he was on duty. He glanced at his watch, trying to come up with an excuse. "Sorry, I've got to return a call."

"No problem, we're pretty much set for tomorrow," Mike said. "And twenty minutes ahead of schedule. See you Monday, Clark."

"Thanks, Mike," Clark said as he headed out of the conference room. So far in his new job, so good.

The rocking of the hammock soothed him, even as he slowly drifted back to consciousness. He felt the warmth of Lois's body pressed against his, her hand over his heart. As he opened his eyes, he found her smiling at him. "Happy birthday, old man," she said impishly. "How does thirty-five feel?"

"Pretty good," he said with a contented sigh. He pressed his lips against her forehead. The ocean breeze stirred around them and the rising sun had started to warm the sand and the air. "Thanks for a really great birthday."

She lifted her head to kiss him. "Here's to many more."

"Mmm hmm," he said as he smiled against her lips.

"Your parents are taking Jon to the aquarium this morning, but we should probably head back home soon."

He stretched his arms lazily overhead, causing the hammock to sway even more. "Okay," he whispered softly. As nice as this was, and he couldn't exactly think of things he'd rather do than spend time with his wife, he was eager to spend the afternoon with his family.

Lois LANed her latest column to Perry before standing up from her desk. It was strange, having her own office, so close to the bullpen and yet secluded from it. She generally kept the door open, not wanting to lose the energetic feel of the newsroom by cloistering herself off from it. Clark occupied the office next to hers. It was nice to be so close to him. Over the few weeks they'd been back at work, they'd developed the habit of talking to one another in soft whispers, knowing the other was perfectly capable of hearing them. But this time, she walked to his office, smiling when she found him engrossed in his work.

"I've got to run out for a bit," she said. "You free for lunch?"

"Sure," he said, looking up from the article on his desk. "I'll see you when you get back."

She headed for the stairwell that led to the Planet's roof. Taking off slowly to avoid the telltale 'boom' that signaled the presence of one of the city's resident superheroes, she flew toward the Upper East Side. Close to MetroGen, she touched down outside a rather upscale nursing home. Inside, she was directed to the right room.

She knocked on the open door. "Mrs. Crowninshield?" she asked softly.

The elderly woman looked up from her book. "Ultrawoman! What brings you here?" Mrs. Crowninshield asked with a delighted smile.

"I just wanted to make sure you were all right. Your son mentioned that he wasn't going to be able to stay long. I wanted to see if there was anything you needed."

“Oh, I’ll be fine,” the older woman replied. “I certainly don’t want to be taking up any more of your time; I know how busy you must be.”

Lois smiled as she walked into the room and sat down in the chair against the wall. “It’s really no trouble at all,” she said. “But I was worried about whether your house is safe. Do you have someplace you can go once you’re discharged?”

“Peter’s right,” Mrs. Crowninshield replied. “I should get rid of the house, but it’ll cost more to tear it down than it’s worth and renovating it would take years.”

Lois knew the older woman was right. Renovating that property would require a major investment from any developer and it would be years before there was any payoff for it. The house might languish on the market for years. A thought suddenly occurred to her. It wasn’t why she’d come here, but perhaps she could help solve Mrs. Crowninshield’s problem while tackling one of her own.

“Mrs. Crowninshield, I think I know someone who might be interested in buying the house. Would you be willing to talk to them about it?”

“Of course, but like I said, I don’t think I could sell it for very much. Certainly not enough to pay for an apartment.”

“I think you might be wrong about that,” Lois replied. Renovating may have been prohibitively expensive for anyone else, but she and her husband didn’t exactly have that problem. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

She said her goodbyes and headed back to the Planet. Originally, she’d planned on sticking close by the office for lunch, but wondered how difficult it would be to convince her husband to make a detour to Parkside Hill.

“So what are we doing here?” Clark asked as he walked down the tree-lined street with his wife.

“Do you remember what a dump your place was when you rented it?” she asked, seemingly changing the subject.

He laughed. ‘Dump’ was an understatement. His apartment had been falling apart—held together with some Elmer’s glue and masking tape—when he’d found it.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Why?”

They turned the corner onto Sullivan Lane. “How do you feel about another fixer-upper?” she asked, stopping in front of a stately brownstone near the end of the street.

Puzzled, he looked at her, waiting for confirmation that she meant the building behind her. She simply nodded. There was no ‘For Sale’ sign out front, but often times, the city’s most elegant homes didn’t need to broadcast their availability. “We can afford this?” he asked.

“It’s a complete wreck on the inside,” she explained. “It needs a gut renovation. The elderly woman who lives here fell and broke her hip the other night. It isn’t safe for her to keep living here. We can pay her more than twice what it’s worth.”

“She’s willing to sell it?”

“Her son has been trying to convince her to get rid of the house for years. She told Ultrawoman she would, if she

could afford to sell a house the city would promptly condemn.”

He mulled the thought over in his head for a moment. Was it possible that they could have such good luck? Although hadn’t they had more than enough bad luck to make up for this? In the grand scheme of things, just to keep the cosmic balance, didn’t they need a really, really great break to go their way? Wasn’t that the way the law of averages worked? “You sure you want to deal with a gut renovation?” he asked, still trying to gauge how his wife felt about this place.

“Your father and I built the addition to the farmhouse. It was actually fun. Since it’ll all be interior work, we can do it as quickly as we want,” she said. Her tone was neutral, but he could already tell that she was in love with this idea.

“Let’s talk to her about it,” he replied simply, pleased by the smile it elicited from his wife.

Standing at the top of the stoop, Lois used the key she’d borrowed from Mrs. Crowninshield to open the door. It gave with a loud creak. She smiled over her shoulder at her husband as if to say ‘this is it.’ Since telling him about this idea the other day, she’d only grown more excited about it. “The ground floor is a separate residence now,” she explained as they walked past the immense staircase and the living room. Just beyond that was the formal dining room. Her eyes scanned the dilapidated rooms and the dust-covered chandelier.

“I know it’s not much to look at,” she mused as they walked into the spacious kitchen and its eating area, but in her head she was already thinking of the things they could do with this place.

“But it has a lot of potential,” her husband replied, echoing her thoughts. They backtracked to the staircase and explored the bedrooms on the next floor up. The scuffed and splintered hardwood floors, like almost everything else about the house, spoke in mere whispers about the house’s once glorious past.

“I wonder what’s up there?” Clark mused as he looked up the staircase to the top floor of the building.

“One way to find out,” Lois replied as she started up the staircase, knowing that thanks to their X-ray vision, that wasn’t exactly true. Of course, exploring up close was much more fun than just peering in from a distance. She climbed the stairs, surprised to find that they opened up into a tremendous, two-storey library. The built-in shelves that lined the walls were filled with ancient, leather-bound volumes. Old brass-railed rolling ladders were positioned along the tall bookcases. A spiral staircase led to a small loft on the northern side of the library. Its windows looked out onto Sullivan Lane. There was a marble fireplace on the opposite end of the library, so tall she could stand up inside it. She turned in a slow circle, taking it all in.

“Wow,” her husband whispered as he came to stand behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I love this place. I love the library; the rest of the house is just a bonus.”

“What’s this?” he asked as he headed for the door hidden by the surrounding bookshelves. She followed her husband into the small, round room on the other side. It must have been a little annex to the library. The annex’s walls were also lined with bookshelves. A large round table dominated the space. One of the former owners probably used this to house his or her collection of favorite volumes – a quiet little corner, a sanctuary within this castle of a house. The windows looked out onto the small yard behind the house. If they moved quickly enough they could use the window as easy egress for departures and arrivals in the suits.

“This would make a pretty good secret closet,” she mused. “Plenty of room for capes and boots.”

“We could hide the door behind another bookcase,” he said.

“So what do you think?” she asked.

“I think we should make an offer,” he said with a smile.

Excitedly, she took his hand and stood on her toes to kiss him. “Me too.”

Jonathan frowned as he looked at the farm’s books. “We can lease out the fields this season,” he said. He reached for the ledger on the far corner of the coffee table and grimaced in pain.

Martha leapt up to grab it for him. “Jonathan, be careful,” she said. He rubbed the small of his back, trying to soothe the seizing muscles.

“Whatever we’re going to do, we should do it soon. The planting season is about to start,” he managed.

“Wayne said his boys were hoping to buy up more land,” Martha suggested gently.

“Do you really want to give up the farm?” her husband asked.

“It’s been our whole lives,” she began. “But maybe it’s time we retire. If we sell the fields, we’ll have plenty of money to cover our expenses.”

“I don’t know, Martha. It’s already so quiet around here. If we stop running the farm, it’s only going to seem worse.”

“This old house had a lot more life in it just a little while ago,” she agreed. “It’s been hard to adjust. But you can’t keep going like this with your back.”

“So I guess we don’t have much of a choice...”

Jonathan’s lament was interrupted by the sound of the porch door opening. “Mom, Dad?” they heard Clark call out.

He entered the den, grinning broadly. “We found a place,” he said. “We started the paperwork to buy the house this morning.”

“Clark, that’s wonderful!” Martha exclaimed as she stood up.

“That’s great news, son, congratulations,” Jonathan said. He started to stand, but reached for the armrest of the sofa as he grimaced in pain. Before he knew it, Clark was at his side.

“Dad, are you okay?”

“It’s just my back,” he said through gritted teeth.

Clark helped him ease back down onto the couch.

“Have you seen the doctor?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. “He told me to take it easy.”

“What about the planting season?” Clark asked. “You can’t work like this, Dad.”

“We’ll lease out the fields this year or hire more help. It’ll be fine,” Jonathan assured his boy.

“You sure you don’t want me to come back and help?” Clark asked.

“You have your life in Metropolis, son. That’s where your focus needs to be. We’ll be all right.” Martha shot him a quick glare, but he avoided making eye contact with her. His boy was happy; he didn’t need to worry about this.

“All right, we need someone to take the lead on the renewal of the strategic arms reduction treaty,” Mike said as he paced the length of the conference room floor.

“Yeah, that one’s a non-starter,” Lois whispered under her breath. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Clark smile in response to the pun only he could hear.

“No volunteers?” Mike ventured with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s not that we don’t think it’s important, Mike, but it’s a pretty byzantine topic for the editorial page.”

“And that’s exactly why we need to write about it. Our readers need to know that keeping loose nukes out of the hands of terrorists and keeping old ones from creating ecological catastrophes is a big deal.” The rest of the editorial staff put their collective heads down as though they’d been rebuked by the teacher.

“I’ll take it,” Clark said.

“Teacher’s pet,” Lois muttered almost silently. She endured the gentle elbow she got in the ribs in response.

“Do you have time?” Mike asked.

“The mockups of the A Section are already in Layout and I’ve been following the situation pretty closely. You’ll have my draft in a couple of hours.”

She smiled, not at her husband’s apple-polishing tendency, but at the fact that he was writing again. He’d taken to the job as editor even better than she’d hoped. There was something about the way he worked, the way he handled himself around this job, that surprised her. He managed his staff and their work with a familiarity that could only have come from his experiences on New Krypton.

She was proud of her husband. Hell, she was always proud of her husband, but this was different. This wasn’t an example of him using one of his many gifts to do good. From the depths of his anguish, from the heart of the darkest despair, he had risen up to build his life again.

He amazed her.

They walked through the main floor of the house, just as rundown as it had been when Lois had first seen it. But it was different now. It was theirs. “Mrs. Crowninshield’s son said she found a new apartment. Someplace nice and safe and low maintenance.”

“That’s great,” Clark replied.

"I can't believe we own a house," she said, shaking her head in wonderment. It was all theirs. They'd gotten a good offer on his old apartment and it looked like it was going to come through. Things were really falling into place.

"I know," he replied as he draped an arm across her shoulders.

"We've got our work cut out for us, though," she mused.

"We can do it," he said as he squeezed her shoulders.

"We can do anything we want with this place."

"Do you think this place is too big for just the three of us?" she asked.

He smiled as he kissed her temple. "Is that your subtle way of saying we should start thinking about having another baby?"

She laughed warmly. "Not quite yet," she said. "But with the downstairs apartment, it's six bedrooms, six bathrooms and a library bigger than my old apartment and yours combined. That's a lot of space."

He frowned, deep in thought. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"What if we asked your parents to move in with us?"

She watched as he put his hands in his pockets. "That could be a great idea," he said after a long moment.

"They've been having some trouble with the farm since Dad's back started bothering him."

"And Jon really misses them," she added.

"I think they miss him, too."

She nodded in agreement. She knew how close Jon and his grandparents had become. "And with your parents here, if there's a big emergency, we'll both be able to respond."

"That's true," he said with a thoughtful nod.

"But do you think your parents will want to live in the city?"

"I don't know. But I think you're right. I think we should ask," he replied.

He awoke with a start, his heart still pounding. The space in the bed next to him was empty, which meant Lois was still on her patrol. Things were getting better, but the nightmares persisted. So did his somewhat jumpy reactions to sudden, loud noises. He'd been using the meditative techniques he'd learned on New Krypton to try and center his thoughts and regain his equilibrium. It was still a struggle, but he was muddling through.

He didn't want to talk to Lois about it. He could feel the difference in the way she regarded him these days. She had faith in him again. She wasn't constantly asking him if he was okay and assuming he wasn't. He didn't want her to know how hard it still was.

With a sigh, he fell back against the pillows, wondering if it was ever going to get easier. It had to. He couldn't keep this up. Clark couldn't keep pretending that nothing was bothering him. He hated lying to his wife. He hated keeping things from her.

At least he was managing to keep things together most of the time. It was usually only in his sleep, when he

couldn't keep his mind occupied and his thoughts focused on other things, that New Krypton still had its hold on him. During the day, he was his own man. At night, that place still dominated him.

They touched down just shy of the porch and rushed toward the door to avoid the rain. "Mom, Dad?" her husband called out as they walked into the farmhouse.

"Hey, kids!" Martha exclaimed as she came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands dry on a dishtowel. Jonathan followed behind her. "Everything okay? You sounded kind of anxious on the phone, sweetie," she said to Clark as she hugged her son and daughter-in-law.

"Everything's great," Clark replied as he slipped his hand into Lois's. "But there is something we want to talk to you about." Clark gestured for them to gather around the kitchen table. He glanced at his wife and smiled.

"We know how much you both love the farm," Lois continued as she sat down.

"But it must be getting harder to run it now," Clark said.

"We're managing," Jonathan replied. "Wayne's boys are handling the planting this year. They've leased out the land."

"All of it?" Clark asked somewhat incredulously.

Jonathan merely nodded.

Lois could see Clark set his lips in a thin hard line. "The new house is enormous," he said. "It won't be ready for a while, but we're wondering if you would want to come live with us."

"It would be great to have you there," Lois added.

"Son, we'll be all right," Jonathan began, but Martha placed a hand on his arm.

"We don't want to be an imposition on you two; we know you're just starting your life together."

"Martha, you wouldn't be an imposition," Lois replied. "We understand if you'd rather have the peace and quiet now that the farmhouse isn't quite so packed..."

Her mother-in-law smiled as she shook her head. "Believe me, it's too quiet around here. We miss having all of you with us."

"Then please think about it," Lois replied. "There's a separate apartment on the ground floor of the house; it would be perfect. Martha, there's even room there for an art studio or a dark room." That elicited smiles from Clark's parents.

"And there's no reason to sell the farmhouse," Clark added. "We could still come out here for holidays. And we'll fly you back whenever you like."

Jonathan nodded thoughtfully as he patted his wife's hand where it still rested on his arm. "We'll think about," he said.

"Congratulations on the house, Clark," Dr. Friskin said warmly.

"Thanks," he replied with a smile. "We're really excited about it, but it needs a lot of work. We've been so busy we haven't even started yet."

“And work is still going well?”

“Yeah. I still miss being a reporter. I think I always will. But it’s good work. I still get to help get the truth published, to make sure people are informed about the world. I get to work with Lois again. Whenever I need a second opinion on whether to run with a story or what to lead with, she’s right in the office next door.”

“So you’re happy,” Dr. Friskin said.

“I am,” he agreed. After a long pause, he added, “mostly.”

“You’re still having the nightmares, aren’t you?”

“Some nights,” he admitted. “It’s not that bad, though.”

“Have they decreased in intensity?” He shook his head.

“Frequency?” Clark shook his head again. “But you’re coping?”

“I’m trying to get used to the new normal for us,” he said.

“Are they affecting your life besides your sleep?”

He frowned as he tried to figure out what to say.

“Sometimes. Lois and I alternate patrols, but when we hear something on the news, some emergency, she still takes most of the tough ones. Fatality accidents. The worst fires. That sort of thing.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Frustrated sometimes. But mostly? Relieved. I don’t mean to burden her with the hardest calls, but we both know she’s still better able to handle them than I am. I’m not sure when that’s going to change. Or if it ever will.”

“So what do you think, Martha?” Jonathan asked as he picked at his vegetables.

“I love Metropolis,” she said. “You know that. But you’ve never been nearly as excited about it.”

“I’m not a fan of the rat race,” he agreed. “But it would be nice to be close to the kids, and to be able to spend time with Jon.”

“And without a farm to run, there isn’t much for us to do here,” his wife said.

“Metropolis has all your favorite museums and galleries...”

She put her hand on top of his, smiling to herself when he interlaced their fingers and squeezed gently. “Jonathan, you know I’ll be happy there, but will you?”

“If I’m with you, I’ll be happy,” he assured her.

“Easy,” she whispered. “We’re almost there.” Clark looked down at the street below, barely illuminated by the street lamps. They touched down gently with their pallets of limestone and granite. The project had taken them across half the planet, looking for just the right materials. It was morning in the Mediterranean when they’d taken delivery of rosewood and cedar in Turkey and stone for the countertops and floors in Italy. The time difference meant that they could bring it all back here without people wondering why the city’s resident superheroes had gone into the construction business. Everything was moved at

night, quietly so as to not disturb the neighbors with their massive efforts.

He was thrilled at the progress they were making and impressed at what Lois had picked up about renovating from her work with his dad on the addition to the farmhouse. She found inspiration for the interior from all sorts of sources and secretly, nothing made him happier than catering to his wife’s decorative whims. Granted, she seemed less enthused than he was to read about all the latest techniques in plumbing and electrical work, but the easy give and take of partnership extended even into this new field.

His parents had agreed to the idea of moving to Metropolis the week before and were staying in the apartment at night with Jon while he and Lois worked on the renovations. The work was all done at superspeed, but they couldn’t make caulk or paint dry any faster, so it still took some time. And it wasn’t as though superpowers made Lois any faster at picking out floorings or fixtures.

They worked methodically, room by room to turn the old, rundown brownstone into a home. As he placed the load of limestone in the entry, he looked around at their handiwork, still unfinished, but in his mind’s eye, he could see what was unfolding before them. With their hands and no small amount of superpowers, they were building a life together. Once all the materials were inside and off the street, he began the task of laying the tile in the downstairs bathrooms. It took mere seconds to complete. He heard footsteps behind him as his wife approached. Like him, she’d changed out of the uniform and into a t-shirt and jeans she didn’t mind getting paint and spackle and grout on. She wrapped her arms around him from behind and hugged him tightly.

“Nice work,” she declared, her simple compliment filling him with an almost primitive pride. Like work on the farm, doing something with his hands—making something solid and tangible and real—gave him a satisfaction nothing else could really duplicate. Here, there was a new sense of worth. What he hadn’t provided his family with for those four years, he could provide them with now – a permanent home, a sense of stability, an easy and familiar comfort in the knowledge that he would be there for them, tomorrow and beyond. He felt almost like the father and husband he’d always hoped he would be.

“Thanks,” he whispered softly.

“The kitchen tiles and counters are in,” she replied, surprising him with the speed of her work. He wondered how it was that she managed to keep surprising him. Shouldn’t he have figured out to always expect the unexpected with Lois Lane? He turned around to pull her into his arms.

“Come on,” she whispered. “It’s late.”

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“No,” she replied with a mischievous glint in her eye. She kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear, “race you home,” before darting out, leaving him at a distinct disadvantage because he had to lock up. But he didn’t mind.

His wife had a tendency to be rather magnanimous in victory, he thought idly with a self-satisfied smile.

Lois took the elevator to the Planet's daycare center. Even with her in-laws living with them now, she did want Jon to spend at least a few mornings a week with other kids his age. He'd made friends at daycare and was always eager to go on Tuesdays and Thursdays to play with them. She stepped off the elevator and walked into the controlled chaos of Daily Tots.

As soon as she entered the room, Jon looked up from his blocks, his eyes lighting up. "Mommy!" he exclaimed as he ran toward her.

"Hey there, kiddo!" she said with a grin as she picked her little boy up and spun him around. "How was your day?"

"Fun!" he said. "We got stickers." He pointed to the Superman sticker on his elbow.

"Wow," she said. "Are you ready to go see Grandpa for lunch?" Jon nodded enthusiastically. Jonathan had planned to spend the afternoon with his grandson while Martha and Lois worked on the in-law apartment in the new house. Things were taking shape quickly. More quickly than she could have imagined. It was thrilling to see Clark so clearly in his element. He may have been a wordsmith, but she could see the satisfaction in his expression as they finished each task and each room. This was tangible proof of progress in their lives. They were building a future together.

She dropped Jon off with her father-in-law and she and Martha made their way to Parkside Hill. "It's still a mess," Lois apologized as she opened the door. Her in-laws hadn't seen the interior of the house since they'd started renovations in earnest.

"Oh my," Martha whispered. "I can't believe how much you've done with the place."

Lois scanned the entryway to the house. The hardwood floors had been laid and the crown moldings installed. The wainscoting and wallpaper would follow shortly. "Yeah, but we still need to furnish all of it." She flicked on the lights, which seemed to get Clark's attention. He came bounding down the stairs, a smile on his face.

"Hey, Mom, hey, sweetheart," he said.

"Hi, honey," Lois replied as she gave her husband a quick kiss. "I wanted to show your mother the apartment."

"I just laid the floors in there," Clark said.

"We'll float," Lois said with a shrug.

She showed the apartment, still under construction, to Martha. They floated somewhat awkwardly through the living room and the kitchen, the bedroom and the parlor that Martha had planned to turn into an art studio. "It looks wonderful," Martha said.

"You ready to go pick out paint and wallpaper?" Lois asked.

"Absolutely," her mother-in-law replied.

They traveled the old fashioned way—by cab—through the streets of Metropolis. "I'm so glad that you're all

adapting to the move so well," Martha said with a smile as they waited in traffic.

"So am I. Honestly, Martha, I wasn't sure it would be this easy. But Clark likes his new job and I love being back at the Planet. I know Jon missed you two when we first came out here, but he's so happy now that you're with us."

"We love being with you. All three of you," Martha said.

"It hasn't been hard on Jonathan?" Lois asked.

"He's adjusting," Martha said. "He's started volunteering as a docent at the National Historical Society. I think he really likes being surrounded by so many other Civil War history buffs."

The cab finally reached their destination and Lois paid the driver. "That's great," she said as she shut the taxi door. She hesitated for a moment before saying anything. "Clark's still having the nightmares. He never wants to talk about them."

"And you're worried..." Martha began.

"Of course I am. It's like we've shifted into neutral. We're literally building our life together and most of the time, everything is great. But it hurts, to see him wake up in the middle of the night, this hunted look in his eye, and know that he doesn't want to let me in."

"Have you talked to him about it?"

"I've tried. But I'm afraid to push too hard. He tells me everything is fine and I know how much it bothers him to feel like he's constantly being second-guessed."

"I wish I knew what to tell you, honey," Martha said. "I know how stubborn he can be. But he knows that you're there for him. He knows that you love and support him."

Lois nodded unenthusiastically. "I just wish there was more I could do for him."

By the time they'd returned to the brownstone, Clark had finished installing the wainscoting and hanging the wallpaper on the first floor. Lois marveled at how different the place looked; it was almost inhabitable. Her husband came down the stairs, fresh paint speckled on his jeans.

"You finished painting, too?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "Just waiting for it to dry."

"That sounds exciting," she said with a smirk.

"Well, I was also editing the piece on campaign finance reform," he added as he kissed her on the cheek. "Hey, Mom, how was the shopping?"

"Great," she replied.

"I'm going to install the light fixtures, then we can meet Jon and Dad for dinner," he said as he gestured over his shoulder with the screwdriver in his hand. He dashed up the stairs at superspeed.

"Will this take long?" Martha asked. By the time she'd finished the sentence, he'd returned. "Guess not," Martha said with laughter in her voice.

"Come on, let's go," Clark replied with a smile.

Clark stretched his arms out as he swooped over the south side of the city. The air was growing warmer, which meant more people outside and more crimes. Summer was still months away, so the worst of it was still in the future, but the early spring's thaw had ended the slowdown that winter invariably brought to life in the city. Of course, Metropolis in winter was still going a million miles an hour faster than just about anywhere else.

Lois intended to use their powers to good effect this weekend as they furnished the new house. He wanted to get a few highly visible patrols in before then. The sound of gunshots stopped him dead, turning his blood to ice. He lost altitude, but quickly halted his descent. There was a scream and the squeal of tires, bringing him painfully back to the present. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. 'Find the source of the scream. Move. Go faster. Time's running out.' His rational mind knew what to do. His body was paralyzed.

'Dammit, Kent, move!' his mind screamed at him.

He heard a sonic boom as Lois rocketed across the sky. She dove down toward the scene of the shooting, not five hundred yards south of where he was suspended in the sky. It was enough to shake him out of his stupor. He followed her down to the street. She'd already gathered up the victim in her arms. He was just a kid.

"The shooter drove down Hobbs Street," she yelled tersely to him before taking off.

She was telling him to give chase. Get the bad guy. He could do this. What choice did he have? He couldn't let some cold-blooded thug get away just to shoot someone again tomorrow. Clark took off in pursuit, quickly finding the speeding car as it dodged and weaved its way through traffic. He dropped down low behind the car, grabbing its bumper and pulling it to a halt. The smell of burning rubber filled the air. He ignored the sounds of screaming tires and the driver's gunning of the engine. With a burst of speed, he pulled the driver—cursing loudly and flailing his limbs—out of the car.

Ignoring the insults and screams of his unwilling passenger, Clark carried him, grim-faced, to the nearest police precinct and dumped him in the custody of Metropolis's finest. He felt dizzy, his head swimming as he slowly flew back to the apartment. The place was silent. His parents and Jon were asleep. He beat his wife home, but only by a minute or two.

"Is the victim okay?" he asked her immediately as she entered the bedroom.

"He had a collapsed lung, but he's stable now," she said. "The shooter?"

"He's in custody," Clark said tersely.

She nodded in silent understanding. "You okay?" she asked after a long moment.

"I'm fine," he said. It was a lie. They both knew it.

"Come here," she whispered as she pulled him into her arms. He went willingly, his head dropping to her shoulder. Clark closed his eyes and breathed deeply the scent of her skin. He let the sound of her heartbeat, slow and steady,

calm him. For a long while, neither one moved or said a word. They merely held each other in the darkness.

"That's it," Clark said as he tightened the last screw on the chandelier. He floated back down to the ground and flicked on the light switch, testing it out. He grinned at his handiwork and put his arm around Lois's shoulders when she came to stand next to him.

"Nice job," she said.

Clark scanned the room, admiring the way everything had come together. "You too," he replied.

"Well, between you and your father, I had good teachers. Just don't expect all this working around the house to translate into an ability to cook," she warned him.

"Don't worry," he replied as he kissed her. "I didn't marry you for your skills in the kitchen."

She nudged him playfully in the ribs before taking his hand. They walked through the entire house—mostly furnished now—trying to take in the knowledge that this was really theirs. The massive staircase, the expansive master suite, the formal dining room.

"What are we going to do with all this space?" she wondered aloud as she walked through the master bedroom. Her walk-in closet was bigger than what often passed for a bedroom in this town. "I got so used to living in a shoebox apartment in this city."

"The suite in the First Ministers' residence on New Krypton was actually bigger than this," Clark said. She was surprised to hear him share something about New Krypton unsolicited.

"Oh yeah?" she asked with an arched brow and an amused smile. "So this is a step down for you?"

He stepped behind her and pulled her into his arms.

"Well, it had separate bedrooms and bathrooms," he said.

"Plus the secured conference room and communications center. Trust me, this is much nicer." He dropped his head to kiss her shoulder first and then her neck...her ear... She felt a delightful shiver run through her spine. 'How did he manage to do that to her?' she wondered idly. But she was resolved; she wanted to see the whole house. They could come back to this room later. She was counting on it.

"Come on," she whispered, as she took his hand.

"Do you want to christen another room first?" he asked, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes.

She smiled at him and tugged him out of the room.

"Maybe a little later," she said.

Finding themselves on the top floor, they explored their library slowly, drinking in everything. The hundreds of leather-bound volumes they'd managed to preserve—plus all of her books and all of his. The large, wingback chairs in front of the immense fireplace. The wrought-iron spiral staircase, the cedar bookshelves that lined all the walls, the palace-sized Oriental rug covering the hardwood floor. The desks in two corners of the library, bearing their computers were a concession to modernity in an otherwise rather timeless space. Around the room, Clark's knickknacks and curios from his worldly travels dotted the shelves. A statue

of a goddess here, a hand-carved elephant there, a mother-of-pearl inlaid keepsake box on yet another shelf. One area was reserved for their collective awards—more than a half dozen Kerths between them, plus a few Merriwethers and the framed certificate of her Pulitzer Prize.

She walked past their trophy shelf over to the false wall, pulling out the copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* that covered the door's hidden latch. She released the catch and the bookshelf swung open, leading to their hidden closet. Suits and boots lined the walls. All of Clark's globes, now totaling nine, were displayed on shelves, the cabinets below them housing the awards and medals from their various knightings and her Nobel Prize. She disarmed the closet's silent alarm so she could walk through it slowly. These two rooms—this library and its annex—contained within them the evidence of their professional careers and their success. But their hard work, their struggles and accomplishments, couldn't be reduced to shiny award statuettes and medals. The life they'd built was about the things they'd done, the lives they'd affected, the love they shared.

In the other room, she could hear Clark putting kindling in the fireplace. The faint smell of smoke drew her back out into the library. She smiled when she saw the roaring fire, nurtured by his attention. He stood up gracefully and picked up the bottle of champagne and the flutes that were sitting on the small table between the wingback chairs. 'Where had that come from?' she wondered idly. Clark chilled the champagne and poured it into the flutes, extending one to her.

"Welcome home, Ms. Lane," he said with a soft smile.

"Welcome home, Mr. Kent," she responded, clinking her glass against his. She took a small sip before kissing her husband. He tasted like champagne. She sighed contently against his lips and let him pull her into his arms as he sat down on one of the wingback chairs. Curled up in her husband's lap, she watched the fire burn, filling the room with a soft warmth.

He pressed his lips against her temple. "I love you," he whispered. "So much."

"I love you, too," she replied.

"Daddy, is it a big house?" Jon asked as he looked up at his father. "Like Grandma and Grandpa's house?"

Clark looked down at his son and smiled. Jon held both of his parents' hands as they walked along Sullivan Lane. Grandma and Grandpa were following closely behind. "Yes, it is," Clark replied.

He pointed out the house to his son. "It's this one," he said and watched as Jon ran up the stoop, his father bounding up behind him. Clark unlocked the door and Jon rushed inside.

"Careful," Lois called in after him.

Jon began to explore the whole house. "Wow!" he exclaimed.

He ran back out of the kitchen and up the stairs. "Is this room mine?" he shouted. Smiling, Clark climbed the stairs to find his little boy.

Jon was jumping on the bed in his room. "Yay!" he shouted. Clark caught him mid-bounce.

"We're not supposed to jump on the bed, little man. Even in the new house," he said. All of Jon's toys and books had been moved into the new room and it didn't seem like his son was having any trouble getting used to the place.

"Okay, Daddy," Jon replied.

"All right, let's go find Mommy and Grandma and Grandpa," Clark said as he gave his son a piggyback ride downstairs. On the main floor, he opened the door leading to the interior staircase to the ground floor apartment.

"Oh my goodness, Lois, it's amazing!" Martha exclaimed as she rushed out of the art studio. Clark smiled, pleased to see his parents so happy with the apartment.

"Lois, you guys did a terrific job," Jonathan added as he looked around the living room.

"Come on, I want you to see the garden," Lois said proudly.

She led her in-laws to the kitchen and opened the French doors that led out to the yard. She pointed to the small garden patch. "We planted tomatoes, zucchini, basil, and squash," she said. "Well, Clark planted them. He's the one with the green thumb. By the summer, we should have some great vegetables."

"You two have really outdone yourselves," Jonathan said with a laugh.

"And the bedroom and the kitchen have a southern exposure," Lois explained. "So you'll get plenty of light."

"Honey, we love it, we really do," Martha assured her.

"Mommy, I love it, too!" Jon declared, still hanging on to his father's neck.

"That's wonderful, sweetie," she said with a smile.

"Mommy, can we get a puppy?"

"Not so fast, little man. This is a big enough change for us right now and I don't want to potty train a puppy with all these new carpets."

"Can I have a brother?"

Clark met his wife's gaze, suddenly bewildered. He could see the surprise in her expression and knew it mirrored his own. "Uhh..." he began incoherently. He put Jon back down on his feet and knelt beside his son. "Your mommy and I want you to have a little brother or sister one day. But right now lots of things are changing."

"Maybe for my birthday next year?" Jon said with a hopeful look on his face. Clark couldn't help but smile. He tousled his little boy's hair and kissed his forehead.

He padded silently through the house, running his hand along the banister he'd built and walking down the stairs he'd installed. His wife and son were both sound asleep, as were his parents. The house was still and he was alone with his thoughts. He couldn't wrap his mind around the directions his life had taken. From dungeons and dank holes in the ground to a mansion of a townhouse in Parkside Hill. Was the human mind even capable of reconciling these disparate realities?

Lois had already flown a patrol over the city just a short while ago, but that didn't mean there weren't other parts of the world that could use some attention. He made his way back upstairs to the library annex. With a quick spin into the suit, he took off, careful not to speed up until he was well clear of the house.

After a quick patrol in Houston, he flew back over the city he called home – stopping to help when he was needed, simply enjoying the scenery when he wasn't. As always, the city's bright lights were his inspiration. Its skyscrapers were his playground. The stars only he could see his companions. Even late at night, the city had a pulse—a rhythm like a heartbeat, steady and pervasive.

Clark flew a slow loop over Hobbs Bay before turning northward again toward the Upper West Side and then Parkside Hill. It was only an hour or so before sunrise when he slipped back into the house. He walked across the oversized master bedroom to the bed and climbed in beside his sleeping wife. She curled up next to him almost as though by instinct and he couldn't tell whether she was still asleep until she murmured, “busy night?”

“Sort of,” he whispered as he kissed the top of her head. “I figured I'd fly a patrol. It's probably good for people to see a lot of Superman around here.”

“Couldn't sleep, huh?”

He chuckled softly. “Nope.”

“Everything okay out there?” she asked softly.

“Nothing major,” he replied.

“That's good,” she said drowsily.

“Mmm hmm,” he replied. It had felt good to be helpful. To have people happy to receive his assistance, but not surprised by his presence. It had been but a few months since his less than triumphant return and already, his hanging around Metropolis had become ordinary, commonplace even. He couldn't quite put his finger on why, but it was like he was happy to be taken for granted for once.

The soft, steady sounds of her breathing let him know that his wife had fallen asleep. Her head on his chest, her expression content, she brought a smile to his lips. “Goodnight, sweetheart,” he whispered. Clark closed his eyes, knowing the sound of her heartbeat would soon lull him to sleep.

Jonathan held the cab door open for his wife. A gentle spring breeze moved the warm evening air. Martha took his outstretched hand, smiling as she stepped out of the taxi. “Thank you, dear,” she said. “And thank you for a wonderful evening.”

“My pleasure,” he said with a smile. Martha took his arm as they walked back to the house. It had been Clark's idea to get the theater tickets for their anniversary. They'd gone to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Washington Center. He'd liked the play well enough, but much more, he'd enjoyed seeing the look of wonder on Martha's face at the sets and costumes and the pageantry of it all. Over coffee and tiramisu at a nearby Italian restaurant, she'd

raved about the production. And he'd loved her enthusiasm. It had been a wonderful evening.

He opened the door and turned on the lights. The weeks and months had made the apartment feel like home. On occasion, he still missed the farm and the quiet of a Kansas night. But Metropolis had its advantages, even for him. His family was here, of course, and the Historical Society kept him busy a few days a week.

He closed the door behind them and pulled Martha into his arms. “Happy anniversary, sweetheart,” he said.

“Happy anniversary,” she replied.

“What do you think about the story on the State Senate scandal?” Clark asked as he stood up straighter. He looked down at his wife as he put his hand on the back of her chair. She stared silently at the mockup on her desk, apparently deep in thought.

“It's got to go above the fold, but I think the pay-to-play allegations in defense procurement should be your lead story,” she said at last.

He frowned as he looked down at the layout board. She was right. It didn't surprise him; after all, she was usually right. “I agree,” he said at last. “I'll have Jerry re-work this with the procurement scandal as the headliner.” He reached across her desk to grab the mockup board when the distant sound of sirens caused them both to still. Clark could hear the distinct sounds of the different sirens used by police cars, ambulances and fire trucks. Whatever it was, it was big.

Lois stood up swiftly. “Meet me there,” she said as she gave him a quick kiss and rushed off toward the stairwell. He didn't even have time to respond before she'd gone. He shook himself mentally before jogging toward Layout. With terse instructions, he gave the designers their marching orders and took off in pursuit of his wife.

In the sky, he silently cursed to himself. Half of Fifth Avenue was closed today for a street fair. Traffic was jammed up everywhere and the emergency vehicles were stuck in the clogged intersections, far north of the accident, which he'd pinpointed in the Dutch Tunnel—near the Financial District, downtown. He slowed down as he approached the tunnel and flew in cautiously. From the noise and chaos, whatever had happened in there was an unholy wreck. There was no smell of leaking fuel, though, which meant there was no immediate fire hazard. Deep in the tunnel, he spotted Lois, working to free the injured. He flew in to join her.

“Unholy wreck” had been an understatement. A delivery truck had turned on its side, blocking both lanes of traffic and colliding with at least three other vehicles, including a passenger van. A number of cars behind the initial wreck had slammed into the mess, only adding to the damage and confusion. Thankfully, the delivery truck had been carrying nothing more hazardous than magazines, but the accident itself had seriously injured a number of people based on Clark's very quick initial assessment.

The sound of weakened metal groaning echoed in the tunnel as Lois tore into a damaged car like it was made of paper. Drivers far behind the accident, unaware of what had happened, were still laying into their horns. The sound was driving him crazy. He looked up from where he'd just pried the door off a sedan to see Lois floating slowly overhead, an injured man in her arms. He pulled the driver out of the sedan, not conscious, but she was still breathing. Beth Israel was the nearest hospital, he told himself, mentally orienting himself to the grid of the city he knew so well. With extra caution, he carried the woman through the darkened tunnel, toward the welcoming light of day.

Once outside the claustrophobic confines of the underground passageway, he rose up in the air, quickly locating the hospital and flying his charge directly there. He dropped the woman off in the emergency bay with a promise to return. There were at least a few dozen others injured, he'd surmised from his first pass at the accident.

The emergency vehicles still hadn't arrived at the tunnel exit by the time he'd returned, though the sirens did sound closer than they were before. Lois had disappeared once again into the tunnel to find other injured motorists and he followed suit. Once the most critical cases were taken to the hospital, though, he was going to turn his energies toward getting the backed up cars out of the way so that rescuers would have an easier time approaching.

They each made several more trips to the hospital before the emergency crews finally arrived on the scene. Clark turned his attention to moving cars and wrecked debris out of the way so the rescue workers could do their jobs. <<Superman, give me a hand, please?>> he heard Lois whisper from within the tunnel. He rushed inside to find Lois leaning into an SUV. A very pregnant woman lay across the backseat, well into labor.

"Everything okay?" Clark asked.

"Yeah, but we're going to be a while," Lois replied. "That's good, Diane, keep breathing. Just like that, deep breaths in, cleansing breaths out." She turned back to Clark. "Can you get the rest of the injured out?"

"Of course," he replied, trying to keep his Superman voice. Clearing out the cars would have to wait. He and Lois had already evacuated the seriously injured, but he turned to getting the less serious cases out of the tunnel to the waiting paramedics just beyond the exit. Once the injured were cleared, he created a path through the remaining crushed cars to let those who were physically fine but trapped in the tunnel get out.

A few minutes later, he returned to the SUV and tried to calm the pregnant woman's husband down as he paced in the tiny space between his car and the others wedged in the tunnel.

"We were in Jersey," the man muttered. "Her water broke. We have a birth plan!"

"Everything's going to be fine, sir," Clark replied. "Your wife is in very good hands."

"But this isn't in our birth plan!" He stopped pacing and reached into the open window to the backseat of the SUV

and took his wife's hand. He started to mimic his wife's breathing pattern.

"One more big push," Lois instructed the woman.

The first sound of a baby crying filled the tunnel. Lois detached her cape to wrap up the tiny infant. Clark watched as she smiled at the helpless little child in her arms. It took no effort on his part to imagine her holding Jon like that. Or to imagine her holding their future son or daughter. Though she hadn't said anything about it in months, he knew it was what she wanted. When she thought he wasn't paying attention, he would see her pause and look at babies wistfully. He could hear it in the reverence in her voice when she talked about what Jon was like when he was a newborn—the smell of his hair. The softness of his skin. The warmth of his smile. Another baby was what he wanted, too. But suddenly, seeing the very maternal side of Lois Lane, infant in arms, he wondered if he was really ready for that. Or if he'd ever be ready. The feeling hit him hard in the gut, causing his muscles to clench in response. The cold knot in the pit of his stomach seemed to grow and tighten. The suddenness of the realization blindsided him. Why hadn't he been able to see that it wasn't a matter of when they'd be ready for another child but *if* he'd ever be ready for it?

"Congratulations, mom and dad, it's a girl," Lois announced as she handed the child to her mother. Clark quickly wrapped an arm around her husband as his knees buckled.

"Whoa there, big guy," Superman said.

"Thanks," the man said with a nervous shake of his head. He steadied himself against the car and looked down at his wife and daughter. "She's beautiful," he whispered in quiet awe.

"She is," Lois replied. "This may not have been in your birth plan, but you'll have a wonderful story to tell your little girl."

Clark couldn't help but return his wife's smile. For a fraction of a moment, the doubts subsided. The nagging sense that the future was too big and imposing for him to deal with retreated and gave him leave to think about the present. "I'm going to get some paramedics in here to take a look at your wife and daughter," he said, though the man was so engrossed in admiring his child, Clark didn't believe he'd heard a word of it.

But as soon as the paramedics were tending to the happy family, the gnawing sense of doubt intruded once more. He'd cryptically informed Ultrawoman that he was needed elsewhere; assuming she would figure out that he was going to get the story into tomorrow morning's paper, which meant he needed to interrupt the staff in Layout. Lois had stayed behind to help with the cleanup of the accident. They both knew it would be much faster having a super-powered being to clear the bent and twisted wrecks from inside the confines of the tunnel.

After giving a few quotes to the gathered news media outside the accident site, he returned to the Planet. One of the paper's city beat reporters, whom he'd spoken to

minutes before as Superman, was calling in the story. Clark hoped to make it home in time for dinner before his appointment with Dr. Friskin that evening, but he knew that wouldn't be the case. With a quick call to his parents to let them know he would be late, he returned to the pressing matter of getting the paper to bed.

"Busy day, Clark?" Dr. Friskin asked as she ushered him into her office. He must have looked as haggard as he felt, he realized, for her to have noticed so immediately.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Congratulations to you and Lois, it seems like your efforts today averted what could have been a catastrophe."

"Thanks," he replied with a terse nod. When his therapist said nothing in response, he could tell it was the cue to elaborate. "The accident in the tunnel was a mess. It took a long time to clear out." He sat down on the leather couch as Dr. Friskin took her usual place in her chair, crossing her legs and balancing her notebook on her lap.

"Did you have any difficulties dealing with it?"

"No. Yes. Sort of," he replied unhelpfully. With a sigh, he continued. "The rescues went okay. It was kind of chaotic, but once we'd assessed the situation, it wasn't hard to figure out what to do. Lois and I triaged the situation on the ground and evacuated the most badly injured. The street fair on Fifth Avenue and traffic meant it was a long time before rescue crews were able to get there. By that time, we'd already evacuated all the serious injuries."

"So what made today difficult?" she prodded gently.

"Lois delivered a baby at the accident site," he said as he tried to gauge his shrink's reaction. "I know she's done it before and I've done it before, but something about it just... I don't know why, but I was terrified."

"Did everything turn out all right?"

He gave a jerking nod in response. "The mother and the baby were fine. Heck, the biggest concern was the father possibly fainting."

"But you were frightened by what happened?"

"No. I don't know. I wasn't frightened, exactly, by what happened. Like I said, we've both done this before. It was more our reactions. How natural it was for Lois. How unnatural it felt for me."

"Do you feel that Lois is more parental than you are?"

Clark shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Sometimes," he confessed. "I know she's been at it a lot longer than I have, and she was actually a parent to a newborn and I wasn't, but it's more than that. I know she wants another child. I do, too. And we both said we weren't ready to take that step, but I think she is and I know I'm not."

Dr. Friskin scratched away at the pad. She was silent for a long moment as she frowned down at her notes. "Why do you think that is?"

"It would be easy to say that it's the move, the new job, the new routine. We've been in Metropolis less than six months, but things with work are going better than expected. With my parents living with us, Jon is really happy. We don't worry about childcare or having to have

strangers watch our son. Even being Superman has gotten better. But this is different."

"How?" she asked simply. Would that he knew how to answer her question.

He sighed in frustration. "I don't know. I just know that when I saw her today, holding a baby was like the most natural thing in the world for her and somehow, the idea of having another child terrified me." He hung his head, shamefaced with the admission. "You know that Jon wasn't planned. But he is the best thing that's ever happened to me. And I know how lucky we are to have him. The man I was when Jon was conceived was a good person. Jon deserves to have a good father and I try every day to be that. Choosing to have another child is different..." he drifted off, not sure what he was trying to say.

"And you wonder what business a man who has taken life has in creating life?"

He was pole-axed by her comment. She was right, of course. And in so few words, she'd sliced straight to the heart of the issue. "Yeah," he stammered ineloquently. "I do."

"Clark, for all intents and purposes, you function extraordinarily well for someone who has gone through what you have. You've succeeded beyond any expert's wildest hopes or predictions. But there's a difference between the ability to live in the world and the ability to live with yourself."

What she was saying made sense, but it only served to depress him further. If all the progress he made was just for show, if it was just about playing the roles he was expected to play, what hope was there for him to ever feel like himself again?

Dr. Friskin folded her hands over her notepad. "Did you take philosophy in college?" she asked.

He shook his head for a moment, puzzled by the non-sequitur, before answering. "Sure."

"Do you remember the thought experiment about the railroad tracks and the looming train?"

"Yeah," he replied, recalling to memory the hypothetical his freshman philosophy professor had posed about a runaway train, barreling down on ten innocent people standing on a railroad track. He asked the students to choose whether to let the train hit the people or divert it to another track, where it would only hit one person. He recalled the professor asking the question a hundred different ways – what if there were fifty people on the first track? What if the one person on the second track were a criminal? What if it was someone you knew?

"I'm guessing you never gave the question much thought?" she asked insightfully. Why would he have needed to? He would have been able to easily save all the people – no need for an internal struggle about human beings as ends not means or whether the number of lives saved mattered in determining the greater good. The questions simply didn't apply to him.

"What about on New Krypton? Any parallels there between the decisions you faced and that analogy?"

“I don’t know, maybe,” he replied with a shrug, stiffly resisting her line of questioning.

“You told me a while ago that you regretted not killing Nor when you initially had the chance. Now, even though you know intellectually that killing him was the only reasonable thing you could have done, you continue to beat yourself up over it.”

“Look, it was Nor on one track and seven hundred innocent people on the other, I chose,” he said forcefully. “Nor lived. They didn’t, because I didn’t have the guts to kill him at the time. And in the end, it didn’t matter because I had to kill him anyway. Both times, I chose who lived and who died. I took life; I’m living with the consequences of that. I just wish I didn’t have to make my family live with them.”

“You didn’t make that choice, Clark. The other track was empty when you let Nor live. There was no one standing on it. No one in immediate peril. You had the ability to take another man’s life and you chose not to. You spared the life of a man you believed to be a monster because you didn’t believe it was your right to take human life. He had different opinions. He was responsible for the deaths of those people. Not you. And when he shot you and forced you to choose whether to die or to kill him, that was on his head as well. You never had to think about these messy questions of ethics before because they don’t apply to Superman. But they did apply to Kal El. And you cannot hold a mortal man to the standards of a demigod.”

“I’m not a God,” he responded. “And I should have been able to uphold the values I’d lived by my entire life.”

Dr. Friskin took off her glasses. “Clark, you’ve said that you’re living with the consequences of your actions, but you’re not. You’re trying to hide those actions. To pretend they never occurred because they don’t fit with who you want to be. That isn’t unreasonable, but it also isn’t healthy. I can’t tell you how to get right with yourself, but I can tell you that until you do, it will find ways, some obvious, some insidious, to infect your life and keep you from being happy. It will also force you to continue hiding significant things from your wife and that isn’t healthy in a marriage.”

For hours, he flew over the city in pointless circles, quietly fuming over his session with the therapist. In a foul mood, he’d broken up a gang fight and hauled a drunk out of his car before he could ram it into a telephone pole. He knew Lois would be wondering where he was; he’d missed dinner and missed putting Jon to bed. In all honesty, he was still out here, flying around on a warm, early summer night because he didn’t know what else to do and he was too afraid to go home.

He didn’t want to talk about what had happened that day. He didn’t want to face even the remote possibility that Lois would want to talk about delivering the baby. What it had been like. What it would be like for them to have another child. He didn’t want her to notice his current lack of enthusiasm for the subject and he wasn’t sure which would be worse, having her think he didn’t want another

child or having her realize that the possibility scared the hell out of him.

The sound of distant gunfire in tinny pops that echoed loudly startled him. ‘Dammit,’ he cursed silently to himself as he turned toward the source of the gunfire. In the vacant alley beside a bodega in Suicide Slum, he found the gunman, holding his pistol to the head of a trembling man whispering apologetically in Cantonese. From the smell of the fried food and the nearby overturned bicycle, it wasn’t hard to deduce that the thug had decided to hold up a delivery man on his way home from a long night for his tip money. Delivery guys like him could be counted on to carry a lot of cash and given the fact that many of them were undocumented, to be afraid to go to the police.

The robber cocked the hammer on his pistol as he held it against the other man’s temple. “I know you’ve got more money than that!” he shouted, obviously looking for another way to impress his anger on the man, since the three rounds he’d put in a nearby brick wall hadn’t done the trick.

Feeling his body shake with rage, Clark dropped down behind the gunman and pulled the pistol from his hand, crushing the weapon as he did so. With his other hand, he grabbed the thug by the collar and hoisted the surprised man into the air, letting his feet dangle comically as he struggled to get out of the Man of Steel’s formidable grasp.

“You think you’re a God?” Clark demanded through gritted teeth and a tightly clenched jaw, subconsciously echoing his therapist’s comments earlier that evening. “You think you have the right to go around terrifying people? To decide who lives and who dies?” He could hear the fibers in the man’s shirt tearing as he kept him aloft by his clothing alone. He reached into the criminal’s windbreaker and pulled out the thick stack of ones and fives, surrounded by a rubber band, and handed them back to the deliveryman. The struggling felon cursed Superman loudly, but the target of his insults was completely deaf to the criminal’s fulminations. He wasn’t the only one unable to get the Man of Steel’s attention, though. Clark didn’t bother to check the victim’s condition and barely heard his rapidly repeated words of thanks.

Grabbing the robber’s arm somewhat roughly, Clark ignored his protestations and dumped him off at the nearest police station. He realized belatedly that he needed to go back and find the victim to try to get him to cooperate with the police. By the time he returned to the alley in Suicide Slum, however, the deliveryman was long gone. Now, all the police would be able to get the gunman for was the illegal weapon and the shots fired.

Shaking his head at his stupid error and trying desperately to calm his still-racing heart, he finally turned toward home. He landed in the annex behind the library and changed out of the suit. Padding softly down the stairs, he turned first to his son’s room. He found Jon fast asleep in bed. Walking quietly into the room, he kissed the top of his son’s head.

“I love you,” he whispered and looked down at his little boy, noticing for the first time that his vision was blurred by a film of tears. He had to do better.

Jon deserved better.

He silently retreated from the room without waking the little boy. Turning to his own bedroom, he was disappointed to find it empty. All he wanted to do was crawl in bed and have his wife wrap her arms around him. Scanning the house, he located Lois at the kitchen table, staring at the screen of her laptop.

He quickly dismissed the idea of going to bed and waiting until morning. This couldn’t wait. The longer he delayed it, the more likely it was that he’d chicken out. With his heart pounding in his ears, and a giant boulder lodged in his dry and scratchy throat, he walked downstairs.

Lois glared at the entirely subpar paragraphs on her screen, blithely staring back at her, taunting her with their mediocrity. God, she hated writing about campaign finance reform. The sound of footsteps on the staircase interrupted her foul ruminations. She watched as her husband, dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, walked into the kitchen. She was angry at him. Frankly, she was pissed off. She had been giving him as much space as any woman could give her husband and he seemed intent on keeping her in the dark as long as possible—his overly-long patrols, his quickness to dismiss her concerns when he had a nightmare or reacted badly to an emergency, his irritating adoption of her habit to drown oneself in work to avoid dealing with problems.

She didn’t mind making excuses for him at work or with Jon when Superman was needed. Hell, she expected him to do the same for her. It was part of the deal, part of their life together and it always would be. But when Jon had to go to bed that night without seeing his father all day—for no discernible reason as far as she could tell—it annoyed her.

He’d made real progress, of that there was no doubt, but months ago, they’d hit an impasse. There was something else he was keeping from her. Something immense. And just like his hiding Superman from her when they’d started dating, this one issue was growing to fill every void and was busy crowding out the good in their lives.

She turned her withering stare from her computer to her husband, prepared at long last to let him know exactly how she felt. To let him know her patience had finally run out.

And then she saw the look on his face.

He was pale, his expression drawn and his eyes red from crying. Wordlessly, he sat down across from her at the table and looked downward. She closed her laptop. For a long moment, neither said anything. His elbows on his knees, he stared down at his folded hands. She remained across from him, not sure if he wanted her to close the distance between them or if he needed the space. She fidgeted restlessly, one thumb absently stroking the skin on the back of her other hand between her thumb and forefinger. The sensation could only do so much to calm her nerves. What was wrong? Why wasn’t he talking to her? Before she could ask, he finally started to speak.

“I’m going to tell you something I don’t want to.

Because once I do, you’ll look at me differently, and things between us will never be the same. Every cell in my body is telling me not to do this, to just bury it and forget it and move on. But I can’t.” He turned his eyes upward and she could see that they were bright with unshed tears. A ragged sigh escaped his lips, his shoulders shuddering.

“Nor’s followers broke him out of prison just after he was sentenced. They shut down the main colony and killed hundreds of people in fires and explosions that were just meant to be distractions. I was evacuating civilians from the shelters. I’ll never know if it was just bad luck or fate or...” he dragged a shaking hand through his hair and dropped his chin to his chest, his gaze fixing itself on the floor. “Nor was trying to escape through the same corridors. He saw me and shot me in the arm. I tried to draw his fire from the civilians by running down another hallway. He followed and shot me again in the back.” His voice was flat and lifeless, an unaffected monotone.

“He must have thought I was dying. He stood over me to gloat and I shot him. I killed him.” Leaning forward, he tented his fingers in front of himself and finally raised his eyes to look at her. “Lois, I killed a man,” he whispered. The ghost of that bastard haunted her husband’s eyes. She could see straight through to the shattered fragments of his soul, the pieces he’d been determinedly holding together.

Standing swiftly, she moved to the other side of the table. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him close to her breast, wanting desperately for him to know the depth and ferocity of her love. Her heart beat roughly against her ribs, thundering loudly in her ears, overwhelmed by its need to protect him. Screwing her eyes shut tightly, she stroked his hair.

“Please,” he whispered, his arms tightening around her waist. “Please.” She felt him trembling in her arms and her own body absorbed the shiver. It rippled through her, seizing muscle and bone, eating away at her soul, wrapping its icy hand around her heart, threatening to hollow her out. To leave her brittle and insubstantial and frozen. But she had to absorb as much of this pain as she could. She had to let it wash over her and engulf her. She had to let it fill her lungs and race through her veins. She had to draw the poison out of him. He’d borne it silently for so long.

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” she murmured. “You did the right thing. You came home to me. I love you. I love you.” Lois repeated the words, a furtive prayer offered in the quiet and desperate hope that what connected them was the same thing that could heal them. She repeated them because it was all she could do to keep from cursing that monster Nor and everything he’d done to Clark. Everything he’d taken from her beloved. That tiny little benediction was the only shield she had against the white hot point of rage that lay poised to pierce her soul.

She rocked gently, her body swaying with him in her arms. Their breaths came as heaving, labored sighs, drawn shakily in and shuddered out in unison. “Oh God, Lois,” he sobbed.

"It's all right, I'm here, I'll always be here," she said, reaffirming the most sacred vow she had ever made.
'I will love you 'til the end.'

He stroked her hair as he stared up at the ceiling above their bed. The feel of her body pressed against his side had never felt so wonderful before. Maybe because this was so unexpected. Every different way he'd played this conversation out in his head, he'd imagined her pushing him away, making space, letting a physical gulf open up between them to match the emotional rift he'd created. But he felt the warmth of her skin. Her small hand covered his heart, her touch a balm to his wounded soul.

Clark swallowed roughly around the boulder in his throat. It felt like he'd been talking for hours, and he probably had been. Dawn was still some ways off, but neither one of them was going to sleep tonight. The words didn't want to form in his mouth, but he didn't know how else to ease the vise-like grip around his chest. "I know it doesn't make any sense," he began. "But after Nor was dead, all I could do was blame myself...for not killing him sooner. Those people didn't have to die, Lois. Which means they're dead because of me."

He felt her hand slip from his chest as she propped herself up on her elbow. He'd known this was coming. She couldn't stand to be touching him now. Trying to brace himself for it, he couldn't help but feel terribly bereft. This couldn't have turned out any other way. No matter how much she loved him, no matter the depths of her patience in dealing with his troubles, he couldn't have expected her to be okay with this. He closed his eyes and fought the tears that were forming there.

She touched his cheek, a gentle caress that startled him. Opening his eyes, he was equally surprised by her expression, by the depth of the love and the sadness he saw there. He placed his hand on top of hers, turning his head to drop a kiss in her palm. "You know that isn't true," she insisted. "Nor and his men are the only ones responsible. You spared his life when he didn't deserve it because it was the right thing to do. And because you don't have a vicious or vindictive cell in your entire body. You can't let him make you regret the best part of who you are."

His wife pressed her lips gently against his. Closing his eyes, he pulled her closer to him, relishing the feel of her body against his. He listened to her heartbeat, steady and strong. She withdrew ever so slightly. "You are Clark Kent," she whispered. "You are the man I love. And the best man I have ever met. Never doubt that."

Her words pierced his heart. "How can you know that?" he asked, his voice a harsh whisper.

She put her head on his chest and he brought his arm around her. Lois took his hand in hers. "Because I know you better than I know myself. And because I know what it's like to be terrified by how much you can hate another person. I know how hard it was for me; I know it must be so much worse for you."

"I was awful to the people who cared about me," he admitted. "I wouldn't let anyone help me. I was consumed by my anger."

"Clark, the people of that world loved you. They were thankful for everything you did for them."

"I let that place change me," he insisted.

"Yes, it changed you. But the important things—the things that made me fall in love with you—are the same. I love you with everything I am, Clark Jerome Kent. I love you, Superman. I love you, Kal El. That's never going to change."

He knew what she was trying to tell him, but how could he believe it? "When you first fell in love with Superman, I know it wasn't because of the cape and the flying. You loved what he stood for. But I can't be what he was. For the last six months, I've been pretending. Pretending I'm still him. Pretending I didn't destroy everything that was important to him."

"My God, you are such a lunkhead, sometimes," she said, smacking him in the face with a verbal two-by-four. "If you'd killed Nor out of vengeance, that would have destroyed Superman. When it was you or him, you didn't just kill Nor to save your own life, you did it to protect a people you'd risked everything for. That is what Superman is all about. Yes, he doesn't kill, because he has a choice. You didn't. You did what needed to be done. You ended a war. You came home to be a son to your parents, a husband to your wife, and a father to your son."

He closed his eyes. She was right about that. Killing Nor was the only reason he'd survived and returned home to the family he loved. And though it had taken him months to realize it, he knew that the people he loved and needed, needed him, too. But as much as Lois loved him, as much as her natural, instinctive response to seeing him hurt was to surround him with love, could he expect her to shoulder this burden forever? Could he let the ghosts haunting his soul become her ghosts, too?

"Lois, how can I make you live with this?" he asked, his heart breaking.

"I am going to love you for the rest of my life," she responded in a fierce whisper. "It'll be a hell of a lot easier for both of us, if you just let me."

He looked down at her as he touched her cheek gently. Her eyes were brimming with tears. "I love you," he said softly.

"I love you," she replied. "Now kiss me, and hold me, and just be my husband."

Clark knew better than to argue with his wife. He did as he was told, closing his eyes, afraid to accept her forgiveness, but knowing he wasn't going to survive without it.

"I told her everything," Clark said bluntly as soon as Dr. Friskin had closed the door.

"Everything?" his therapist echoed.

"Everything," he confirmed as he sat down on the couch. "I told her about killing Nor. About feeling guilty

over not having done it sooner. I told her how I still have nightmares about it. I told her how ashamed I feel when Jon looks at me and I can tell he's thinking that when he grows up and becomes a man, he's supposed to be like his father." He exhaled a shaky breath and looked downward at the carpet. Clark held his right hand clenched in a tight fist, his left hand wrapped around it to keep it from trembling.

"How did she react?"

He could already feel the familiar sting of tears in his eyes. "She told me she loved me," he said, his voice barely a whisper. It felt wrong to talk to someone else about what had happened between him and his wife. But for almost a year, he'd needed his therapist to help him make sense of most of what was in his head. "She just held me and listened, and promised we'd get through this together," he said with a wistful smile.

"That wasn't what you were expecting, was it?" Dr. Friskin asked gently.

"Not really, but I think I should have expected it. Lois's first reaction to trouble is to protect the people she loves. I should have known she would do that. But in the long run..." he trailed off.

"In the long run?"

"How can this be fair to her? Or to Jon? I know she signed up for being married to Superman. And for better or worse and all of that. But she didn't marry a killer."

"Is that how you see yourself?"

"Why did his shrink have to respond to every question with a question?" he wondered darkly to himself. "Is it the one word I'd use to define myself? No. But is it part of who I am? How can it not be? How can a human being take a life and not be forever changed by it?"

"Clark, I want you to close your eyes for a moment," she said. Dr. Friskin stared at him expectantly until he complied. "Now imagine yourself in that corridor, the day you shot Nor. You can hear the sound of his footsteps as he runs. You know that he's armed."

Clark swallowed roughly. He didn't like where this was going. His heart rate sped up and all the deep breathing exercises in the world couldn't slow it down. Despite himself, he could hear the loud echo of footfalls on the metal flooring of the corridor. He could taste the bile in his throat and feel the sting in the old scar that cut across his arm. His hands balled themselves into fists as he waited in anticipation for the fiery, searing pain of the shot he knew was about to hit him in the back."

"There's nowhere to run, Clark," Dr. Friskin said.

"Why are you doing this?" he gritted out angrily, his eyes still screwed shut.

"The hallway is a dead end. But instead of you running away from Nor, it's Lois." His heart slammed against his ribcage. His eyes snapped open and he leapt to his feet, glaring at his therapist.

"Enough," he growled.

"What would you want her to do?" Dr. Friskin asked calmly. "In your position, what should she have done?"

Clark turned around and started to walk toward the door. He'd been through more than enough torture for one lifetime. "It isn't the same," he said without bothering to turn around.

"It's exactly the same, Clark," Dr. Friskin countered, her tone still mild. "You would have wanted her to do anything to save her own life and come back to you. Isn't it possible she wants the same thing?"

"You can't know what she's thinking," Clark replied stubbornly. The door—and freedom—was just a few feet in front of him. He should have completed his retreat, but his legs refused to cooperate. His entire body was paralyzed. With fear? Anger? Shame? He didn't know.

"I spoke to her this morning," Dr. Friskin replied. He could hear her stand up from her chair. "She feels awful about what you've been through. And she's afraid of how this has affected you. But she told me she loves you just the same. This hasn't changed her feelings for you." Clark wanted to protest that that was a violation of their confidence, but of course, it wasn't. The three of them had decided that Lois should keep talking to Dr. Friskin if she felt like she needed to. It made things complicated for the therapist, but they didn't really have a choice. There was no one else qualified to help them through this.

"She feels that way now," Clark said dejectedly as he turned to face Dr. Friskin. "But does she really want to wake up every morning lying next to a killer?"

"You still haven't answered my question, Clark. How would you feel if it had been her instead of you? Would you love her any less?"

"Of course not," he bit out.

"You would have wanted her to save her own life. You would have been thankful that she survived. You would have supported her and tried to understand what she went through."

He closed his eyes and nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose as a headache began to form behind his eyes.

"Yes," he whispered.

"She wants to do the same. And she desperately wants you to let her," Dr. Friskin said sympathetically. "For almost a year now, you've let your fear of how she would react to this knowledge eat away at you. But instead of running from you, she wants to be there for you."

"I need her so much," he confessed.

"And you have to accept that she needs you, too. I know that what I've done today was cruel, and I do apologize for it. I just didn't know any other way to make you confront this fact."

He nodded weakly and dragged a trembling hand through his hair. Dr. Friskin was trying to keep him from retreating further, from jeopardizing the one thing that gave him a shot at getting back to real life again. But was she right? Was Lois's love for him strong enough to survive even this?

Mentally indulging the good doctor, he turned the question around on himself. If their roles were reversed, would it have had any impact on his feelings for Lois?

Of course it wouldn't have.

She sighed as she dropped her notepad on her desk and spun the dial on her safe. Clark wasn't the only one whose equilibrium had been disturbed by today's session. She'd crossed a line, she knew that. But it wasn't as though she'd had much of a choice. Dr. Friskin didn't like aversion therapy as a treatment for PTSD and she knew that continually re-experiencing past trauma on a deep level often made things worse, but she'd needed Clark to try to understand the situation from his wife's perspective and all of her previous attempts had failed. She'd run out of ideas and was left with an axe where a scalpel was called for.

In the most basic sense, it seemed to have been effective. But it had taken its toll on Clark. It may have also taken a toll on their relationship as doctor and patient. It took none of her well-trained powers of perception and intuition to know that these sessions were often extremely difficult for him. That confronting his ethical limitations tended to challenge the very core of who he thought himself to be.

And then there was the fact that they were treading into an area in which she herself brought unwelcome baggage. In a perfect world, therapists would have perfectly healthy, well-adjusted lives that introduced no complications into their therapeutic relationships. Of course, the world wasn't perfect.

It had been six years since Joseph had died.

It had been quick and unexpected and amazingly merciless. The cancer had cut him down so quickly they'd never come to terms with it. And even though she had been there with him through the short months of his illness, even though she was with him when he'd died, she hadn't really been able to say goodbye. What she remembered most about those days was the irony of it. A doctor, married to another doctor, helpless in the face of an illness that originally presented as nothing more than a stomach ache.

Many ambitious, successful professionals dealt with grief by burying themselves in work. For her, that hadn't been an option. At the time, she'd been in no condition to try to help others through their problems. So she'd taken almost a full year off from her practice.

She'd had twenty wonderful years with Joseph. But she'd needed to find a way to keep that from coloring her view of all of her patients. Not all of them had marriages that could be saved. Not all of them needed to hear that their biggest problem was complacency and that they were guilty of taking the important things for granted. She couldn't project her own hurt onto her patients.

And so it was that the affection that she'd developed for these two patients was becoming more and more of a liability to their therapeutic relationship. She had to stop seeing herself and her husband in Lois and Clark. Because their problems were uniquely theirs. And though her own life experience often made her a better therapist, she couldn't illuminate this particular path in front of them. They would need to discover the way themselves.

She put away her notes and locked the safe. They had made real progress. Of that she was sure. She only hoped that she could continue to be the therapist they needed her to be. Though they'd come remarkably far, she didn't think Clark was ready to put therapy behind him completely. And she knew that trying to rebuild the trust they'd developed with a new therapist would be a discouraging setback, if not downright impossible, given his dual identities.

Dr. Friskin picked up the phone and dialed her sister's number. She couldn't talk to anyone about her patients, but at least she could reconnect with the family she still had.

His heart thundered in her ears, waking her from a deep sleep. 'How on earth could a heart beat that quickly without bursting?' she wondered fearfully. "Honey, it's all right," she soothed as she wrapped her arms around him. "I'm here," she whispered, pressing her lips to his shoulder.

"No!" he shouted. She flinched slightly, telling herself he wasn't reacting to her, but the dream. His body went rigid in her arms and she felt him shudder. He turned around to look at her.

"I'm sorry," he murmured apologetically as he caressed her cheek.

"Don't be," she whispered. "It's all right." But it wasn't. Now that she knew what he was dreaming of, she knew just why he wasn't at peace. How much longer would this haunt him? Would it always be this way? Was he doomed to relive that particular horror night after night for the rest of his life?

He pulled her into his arms, enfolding her in his strong embrace. She could feel his heart pound under the firm muscle. Silently, he kissed the crown of her hair. Not for the first time, she wished there was something she could do to lessen his pain.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked softly.

"No," he replied. "It was just the same dream."

She closed her eyes. "I love you. You know that, right?" she whispered.

"I know," he replied roughly. "I love you so much."

Just hearing the pain in his voice, it took all the strength she possessed not to cry. Just like it had the night before, when he'd told her about almost dying in another woman's arms. Thank God she'd made her peace with Commander Talan months ago, because if she'd been trying to balance her own jealousy with his anguish, it would have been her undoing.

But this couldn't be about her feelings. It had to be about his. For as long as he needed her to be the strong one, she'd have to find a way to endure.

"Mike, we're going to miss you around here," Perry said as he clapped his second-in-command on the shoulder.

Mike Burns lifted his glass of champagne to his boss. "The Planet's in excellent hands, Chief. Your new managing editor is the best I've ever seen."

"He's got big shoes to fill, but he seems up to the task," Perry replied. He looked down from the elevator landing at

the party assembled in Mike's honor in the bullpen. Clark was smiling as he talked to Jimmy and a few of the junior reporters who'd joined the Planet in the years while Clark was away. In his absence, he'd been a legend to them. Since his return, he'd become a mentor. During the last six months Clark had shown he was more than ready to take on the substantial task before him. Perry even thought the responsibility had been good for the younger man.

Jimmy laughed at something Clark said, but his new Managing Editor could barely muster a smile. As much as the serious, no-nonsense Mr. Kent kept the Planet functioning like a well-oiled machine, Perry missed the strangely worldly innocence of the wide-eyed man who'd walked into his office so many years ago. Clark's eyes lit up and Perry followed the other man's gaze, already knowing what it was that had captured Clark's attention. The younger man finally smiled, a smile that reached his eyes and made him stand up a little straighter. Lois approached her husband and slipped her arm around him. He kissed her ever so briefly, the smile never leaving his face.

He'd known almost from the moment he'd assigned Clark to work with Lois on the Prometheus investigation, that Clark Kent would be good for his star reporter. He'd connected emotionally to his very first piece on the razing of an older theater and Perry could see it in his style that the young rookie could soften some of Lois's rougher edges without ever causing her to lose her edge. And he'd known that Lois could teach the green young reporter more than just about anyone about how to be an amazing journalist. But there was no way he could have known how much Clark would come to depend on Lois. How she would unknowingly help him become the world's greatest hero. How she would take up that burden in his absence and share it with him when he returned.

Together, they were something he'd never seen before and never expected to again. Having them working side by side in his newsroom warmed the old editor's heart. He'd always expected to one day hand the Planet over to Lois, but now it was Clark who was being groomed to take the reins. Well, that day was still a ways off, Perry mused to himself. He had no interest in retirement and in the intervening years, they'd figure out which of the two of them wanted the job.

He'd fretted over whether their relationship would be strained or damaged by their new positions, but even though they weren't officially partners any more, they still worked together, exchanging ideas and feedback. It made their work better and their relationship seemed as strong as ever. It amazed him what they'd been through. What their relationship had survived. And they somehow seemed even stronger for it.

"The paper's been put to bed, Chief," Clark announced as he walked across the deserted bullpen toward his boss's office. Perry appeared in the doorway.

"Good work, son," Perry said gruffly. The older man surveyed the newsroom, the domain he ruled over. "It's getting late; you should get home and enjoy your last weekend of complete freedom."

"Thanks," Clark replied with a weak smile.

Perry started back toward his office, but paused and turned back around. "You've been doing a hell of a job," he said. "I couldn't be prouder of you."

Clark merely shrugged. He'd only been working full-time again for a few weeks to transition into Mike Burns's job. Beginning Monday, he would be the new Managing Editor at the Daily Planet. "I spent years running a planet, Chief. It shouldn't be that hard to help you run the Planet."

Perry laughed. "Have a good weekend, Clark."

"You too, Chief," Clark responded.

Clark woke with a start and looked around the darkened bedroom, somewhat surprised to find himself alone. He tuned in his hearing and picked up two heartbeats in Jon's room.

He also heard his wife's voice.

Fly me to the moon

And let me play among the stars

She crooned softly. Unable to help himself, he got up and quietly padded toward his son's room. He found Lois sitting next to Jon's bed, singing him a lullaby. Jon's heavy-lidded eyes closed and within moments, he was asleep. Lois kept singing, making sure her little boy was truly soundly sleeping. He smiled wistfully as he watched them. Eventually, she stood without making a sound and extended her hand to him as they quietly retreated from the room. He kissed the crown of her hair and started back toward their bedroom.

"Did he have a nightmare?" he whispered. She merely nodded. He wished, not for the first time, that his dreams didn't make him a heavier sleeper than she was. It was awful to know that his little boy couldn't come to Mommy and Daddy's room at night when he had a nightmare because his father was practically a loaded weapon when he slept. Thankfully, Lois was so in tune with Jon that on the unusual occasions when he had a nightmare, she was generally awake before he was and she was there to soothe him back to sleep.

They got back into bed and he pulled her into his arms, as if by instinct. For a long moment, neither said a word. "You okay?" she whispered at long last.

He sighed and thought about her question. "Yeah," he responded eventually. "I am. Work is good. Better than I thought it would be. I like it a lot more than I thought I would. And it's a relief, having you know everything. Not having to hide. I just wish..."

"That you could snap out of it? Be completely and finally free of that place?"

She really did know him too well. "Yeah," he agreed. "Every time it feels like the hard part is over, there's something else."

Lois took his hand and interlaced their fingers. “It’s hard,” she said. “I wish it weren’t. I wish I knew what to do. How to make it easier for you.”

“You’re amazing. Lois, I wouldn’t have survived this without you. You’re the only reason I can keep going.”

“I love you,” she said. “And I swear to you, no matter how bad it seems, that isn’t going to change. I’m not going anywhere. Yes, it’s hard for me, too, but I’ve lived without you. And I don’t ever want to know what that’s like again.”

He closed his eyes. He was hurting her. Not by being with her, but by assuming her love wasn’t strong enough to endure this. “I’ve let you down,” he said.

“Honey...” she began, but he had to finish.

“I need to have more faith in you. I need to have the faith in ‘us’ that you have. Every step of the way, you’ve supported me, you’ve taken care of me. And I’m still always so afraid that the next thing, the next problem is going to be one too many. It isn’t fair to you. You’ve loved me more than any man could ever hope to be loved. Thank you.”

She kissed him. It was a soft, lingering kiss at first. But as she threaded her hand through his hair and he rolled onto his back, letting her slight weight settle on top of him, he deepened the kiss. Her tongue met his and she sucked gently on his lower lip. He groaned breathlessly.

“Make love with me, Clark,” she whispered.
She didn’t even have to ask.

“I’m glad you decided to come in,” Dr. Friskin said as she held the door open. “I know a lot has happened since the last time we sat down to talk.” She closed the door behind them. Lois sat down on the leather couch.

“How have you been?” Dr. Friskin asked simply.

Lois bit back a sigh. “I know why it was so hard for him. I know that what he had to do was something he could never have imagined. That taking a life goes against everything Superman stands for.” She interlaced her fingers. “I want him to know he did the right thing. That I love him even more now than I did on the day I married him. That he’s a wonderful father and husband. And that I’m proud of him.”

“But surely this is taking its toll?” Dr. Friskin ventured.

“It hasn’t been easy,” Lois admitted. Just the thought of the emotional wringer she’d been hauled through repeatedly brought stinging tears to her eyes.

“And?”

“Honestly? It’s exhausting,” she confessed, her voice breaking on the words. “I’m trying to be strong, I swear.” She wiped away the tears that brimmed up and spilled over. “I can do this. I can be what he needs me to be. But not twenty-four hours a day. I can’t be afraid around him. I can’t have doubts. I just ...” A sob shuddered through her body.

Dr. Friskin handed her a tissue. “It’s all right, Lois. You don’t have to play the superhero around the clock. You need to allow yourself to feel whatever it is you’re feeling.”

“But he’s so afraid that he’s becoming a burden. I can’t let him think that. I can’t be a basket case around my husband.”

“Lois, you have to be honest with him, the same way that you want him to be honest with you. But it’s perfectly understandable if you need some more private space to deal with this. You have to take time for yourself to do that. Whether that means coming here and venting whatever’s bothering you, or finding another way to experience these emotions. But you can’t just bottle them up.”

“So I’m not an awful wife if I have a good, long, hard cry?”

Dr. Friskin smiled and shook her head. “Not in the least,” she assured her.

“Help!”

Lois stopped instantly mid-flight and turned toward the cry for help. She rocketed across the sky toward Chinatown, focusing on the source. She zeroed in on a young woman, running desperately from a trio of men. Her clothing was torn and tears streamed down her face. Ultrawoman dropped down between the woman and her pursuers.

“This isn’t your concern,” the young man she’d pegged as the ring leader said with a sneer. He was gutsy. Not very bright, but gutsy. She wondered if he was just the head of one of the local Asian gangs or if he was plugged into something more serious. At the moment, it didn’t matter.

“Actually, yeah it is,” she said.

“You don’t want problems with us,” he retorted as he stepped toward her. “She belongs to us.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Lois said, her temper flaring. Nothing in the world made her angrier than people who wanted to make someone else feel less worthy just because they were born the ‘wrong’ color, or the ‘wrong’ gender, or in the ‘wrong’ place to the ‘wrong’ people. Behind her, the girl was sobbing.

One of the punk’s two silent goons sneered as he cracked his knuckles. Lois stepped forward. “Do you think you’re scaring me?” she said.

“You should be scared,” big mouth retorted.

In a blur, Lois grabbed all three of the punks. She turned back to the young woman. “Don’t go anywhere,” she pleaded. Ultrawoman flew the three cretins to the closest police station, promising to explain to the cops what was going on when she got back.

Bare seconds later, she was back on the stretch of darkened street in the heart of Chinatown. The young woman had tried to run away, but Lois had no difficulty picking up on her heartbeat. It sounded like a frightened rabbit’s. “It’s okay,” Lois said softly as she approached the girl, hiding in an alley. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

The girl finally looked up at Lois, her eyes filled with tears. “Please help,” she said, her accent thick and hard to decipher. Lois didn’t think she spoke much English at all.

“It’s okay. I’m going to take you to help, all right?” She wasn’t sure the girl understood, but she didn’t resist when

Ultrawoman picked her up and started to fly her to the hospital. When the girl was safely in the admitting department, Lois headed back to the police department. They'd want to send a detective down to talk to the victim.

Her reporter's intuition may have been rusty, but she knew there was something going on here. It wasn't a simple assault. It wasn't even just local gang violence. Those three punks were willing to stand up to Ultrawoman when they should have been running scared. That meant they were either remarkably stupid, which was possible, or they had an organization so powerful backing them, that they didn't think they needed to be afraid.

"Lane, what are you doing here?" Henderson drawled as he stood up from his chair in the hospital waiting room. "This isn't your beat any more."

"Old habits, Bill," she replied with a shrug. She handed him one of the two cups of coffee she was carrying. "I heard about the attack; wanted to see if you guys knew anything."

"You're covering petty assaults now?" he asked suspiciously as he took a sip of his coffee. He smiled. Probably because she remembered that he liked his coffee black. They both sat down on the hard, uncomfortable chairs.

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Are you claiming this is a petty assault?"

Henderson shrugged diffidently. "It might be. What makes you think it wasn't?"

"The perps," she said. "Ultrawoman didn't seem to think they were ordinary street thugs. Thought they might be connected to something bigger."

"Like the Triads?" he asked.

She tried not to show too much interest. "Is that your theory?"

"One of them," he replied. "The punks aren't talking, unsurprisingly. About an hour ago, some slick \$600 an hour lawyer shows up, claims he's representing all three of them."

"They didn't seem like white shoe law firm clients," Lois replied.

"No kidding," Henderson said.

"If this goes deeper, Ultrawoman's going to want to help," Lois offered.

"Well, send her my way," Henderson said. That was exactly what Lois wanted to hear.

"Thanks, Bill," she replied as she stood up and walked out of the waiting room.

"All right," Clark said as he worked his way through the agenda for his third ever weekly staff meeting. "Where are we on the trade negotiations piece?" he asked.

"Treasury's giving us the runaround on an official statement, but they're going to sign the deal tomorrow," Mark Butler, the trade and economics beat reporter, said.

"Fine, write it without the statement, and be prepared for a last minute re-write," Clark said.

"You got it, boss," Mark replied. He tapped his notebook a few times with his pencil before standing up and walking out of the conference room.

Clark looked down at the next item on his agenda. "What about the Navy's screw-up in the peacekeeping mission in West Timor?" The series of blunders had resulted in one of the Navy's floating hospitals being sent to a conflict zone without the proper complement of protection and under-resourced and staffed for its mission. He and Lois had had to spend the better part of a day ferrying in personnel and supplies to the ship. It had been a colossal, unnecessary waste of time that could have been avoided had there been better planning at the top.

The Planet's defense correspondent chimed in. "The Pentagon can't get its story straight. First it was an unclear request from the U.N., then it was a series of technical mistakes. Now it's the ground commander's fault," she said, her voice dripping with contempt. "Maybe if the job of Assistant Secretary for Stability Operations wasn't still vacant after six months, they'd actually know what they were doing over there."

Clark frowned. The government not being terribly forthcoming with information wasn't an excuse for a vague and uninformative front page for tomorrow's paper. "Do we have anything else on the hold up in the Senate of Commander Coleman's confirmation?"

"I'll have the write up on your desk in an hour," Lois said, startling him.

He looked up, puzzled by the self-satisfied grin she wore. "You're working on this?" he asked.

"A source has gotten confirmation on the senator who's put the secret hold on the nomination. You'll have the exclusive for tomorrow morning's edition."

He blinked several times. "Are you sure this'll stay quiet until tomorrow morning?"

"No one else's D.C. correspondents are even close," she replied triumphantly.

"Okay, then," he said. "That's all I've got. Let's get to work, everyone." His staff stood up and shuffled out of the conference room. Lois lingered behind, walking toward the head of the table where he was still seated.

"So who is it?" he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"What, you can't wait an hour?" she asked with a smirk. She sat down on the table and crossed her legs. He couldn't help his eyes wandering southward toward her long, perfect legs. God, he loved the skirt she was wearing. It wasn't particularly short, but when she crossed her legs like that, it hitched up just a little bit farther. Clark finally managed to look back up at her eyes. The expectant expression on her face puzzled him. She'd asked him a question, hadn't she?

"Huh?" he said inarticulately.

She shook her head and grabbed his tie as she leaned closer to kiss him. Her skin smelled like vanilla and she tasted like coffee. He felt her smile against his lips. "You seem a bit distracted," she said.

"Are you trying to get me to forget about your story?"

“It’s Senator Martin,” she said. “He’s been holding up a bunch of confirmations – judges, ambassadors, deputy assistant secretaries of whatever until he can get Congress to pay for a transit museum in East Nowheresville.”

“You’re kidding?” he asked.

“Nope,” she replied. “But now that people are going to be able to blame him for screwing up a humanitarian military mission, he’s likely to quietly release the hold.”

“But you’re not going to let him get away that easily.”

“Not on your life.”

“Your interest in this wouldn’t have anything to do with Ultrawoman’s friendship with Commander Coleman, would it?”

“The longer you keep me here, the later my story is going to be,” she demurred. He knew his wife thought the world of Sarah Coleman after the Navy doctor’s work in Kinwara and last Christmas in Indonesia.

He kissed her again. “Do you really want to leave?” Clark asked.

“Maybe not. But they’re starting to talk out there.”

He could hear the gossip, too. Groaning, he stood up and kissed her one last time. “To be continued later,” he promised her.

She slipped off the table and smoothed out her skirt. “Oh, and I’m working on something else. If it pans out, it’ll be big.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a columnist?”

She shrugged. “I’m not going to turn down good stories just because I’m getting paid to complain about politics now.”

“Lois, do you have to pick a fight with the Triads?” he asked under his breath. He stared at his computer, pretending to work, but every time Lois got one of these ideas, he got knots in his stomach. It was almost like the old days, back before she was invulnerable.

“I’ll be careful,” he heard her whisper from her office. “Ultrawoman will go after them; I’ll keep Lois Lane, Clark Kent and the entire family away from this. Are you going to help me?”

He shook his head. “Have I ever been able to say ‘no’ to you?”

She was packing up her files in her office. “I’ve got some leads I want to check out. It won’t take long,” he could hear the excitement in her voice, even though she was trying to control it. “I’ll see you at home. I’ll bring the research. You pick up the Chinese.”

“Cantonese?”

“How about Szechuan?”

Clark smiled. “Anything for you.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you, too,” he replied.

“Hold onto my hand,” Clark said gently as Jon tried to run out ahead of his father.

“Okay, Daddy,” Jon replied.

They came to the intersection just across the street from the park and waited for the ‘walk’ light to illuminate. “Look both ways, right?”

Jon nodded as he looked in both directions and cautiously stepped out into the crosswalk with his father. They entered the park just north of a playground, near a big patch of open grass where teenagers were playing Frisbee. Clark handed his son his tiny baseball mitt and backed up a few paces.

A year ago, they’d done this for the very first time. He was amazed at how much bigger Jon was now. He was still learning, but he was more coordinated, too. Able to throw the ball farther. Braver and more excited to explore his environment. And he was always asking questions.

They’d gone to the Centennial Park Zoo the week before. In the penguin exhibit, Jon had frowned as he stared at the strange birds, some of which were taller than he was. “Daddy, is a penguin a bird or a duck?” he’d asked.

Clark had smiled to himself and suppressed a laugh. “What do you mean?” he’d asked his little boy.

“They swim like ducks, but they look like birds,” Jon had declared.

Clark sat down on the bench in front of the penguin exhibit and lifted his son up to sit right next to him. He explained what it meant to say something was a bird. How they had feathers and eggs, and how some of them swam while others flew and yet others, like the chickens on Grandma and Grandpa’s farm, just walked around on the ground. As Jon listened and nodded and asked questions, it was like getting an amazing view into how his little boy thought. How he tried to make rational sense of everything that went on around him. How so much of the world was still new to him.

In just about a week, Jon was going to start nursery school. At home, with his parents, he wasn’t just listening to stories any more, he was learning to read some of the words himself. And with tremendous pride, just the day before, he’d declared that J-O-N spelled Jon.

As they enjoyed their game of catch on a warm Sunday evening at the end of summer, Clark realized that while he’d missed so much in those four years, he’d been there for so many of the milestones in his son’s young life this past year. And, in an odd sort of way, he was thrilled by the fact that his son had come to take him for granted. Jon expected his father to be around – to read stories with him and take him to the park or the museum, to play dinosaurs with him and make sure he brushed his teeth.

Jon knew that his daddy loved him and would take care of him. To Jon Kent, it was a simple fact. To Clark Kent, it meant the world.

Police Raid Prostitution and Sweatshop Rings in Chinatown

By Lois Lane

Superman, Ultrawoman and the Metropolis Police Department launched a series of coordinated raids against seven massage parlors and four garment manufacturers in

the Chinatown section of Metropolis. Dozens of arrests were made and immigration authorities are currently attempting to ascertain the status of numerous individuals detained in the raids. According to Police Chief Kelly Raymond, recent immigrants—most of them suspected to be undocumented—were being forced to work in dangerous, hazardous conditions which violated not only state and federal workplace regulations, but numerous criminal laws. “Individuals of all ages, including children, were forced to work more than sixteen hours a day, six or seven days a week in conditions not seen in this city since the Four Square Shirtwaist Factory Fire almost a hundred years ago. Young women who had come to the U.S. in hopes of working as nannies or waitresses were forced into prostitution,” Chief Raymond stated. The Police Department has issued no comment as to whether it believes that these operations were part of a larger criminal enterprise....”

Clark dropped the paper on his desk. She really was something else. The dismantling of Intergang years ago – in which Lois had played no small role – had left a vacuum in terms of organized crime in the city. The Triads had apparently tried to fill it. But attempting to do so under the noses of two superheroes and the best investigative reporter in the world seemed dumber and dumber in hindsight. Metropolis must have been too tempting a target to abandon, even if the criminals were playing pretty deep odds on this turf.

Wordlessly, Lois walked into his office and sat down in one of the two chairs across from his desk. She picked up his brass nameplate and fidgeted restlessly with it.

“Great work,” he said.

“So why do I feel so lousy?” she asked.

He frowned sadly. “Because even though we stopped it, these guys spent months making hundreds of people’s lives a living hell.”

“You know, it’s self-centered of me, but part of it is this anger at their temerity. How dare they come into our city and try to do this to the people we protect? Who did they think they were? Why did they think they could get away with it?”

He sighed. “Because they preyed on the margins of society. Illegal immigrants, runaways, people outside the system. They figured no one would notice. No one cared enough about these people to fight back.”

“And who knows what’s going to happen to the victims now,” she mused ruefully.

“Commissioner Raymond said the Feds were considering helping the victims get status if they assisted with the investigations and prosecutions.”

“Have the Feds already taken this out of the DA’s hands?” she asked. Her maudlin mood cleared for a moment and he could see the investigative gears turning as her eyes lit up. “

“The U.S. Attorney’s got it out for the Triads. His Organized Crime section thinks this goes all the way back

to Hong Kong. Drugs, counterfeiting, extortion, sex slavery, the whole sordid mess.”

She gave him a half smile. “Looks like those sources haven’t dried up on you.”

Clark shrugged in response. “Perry wants to meet with us tomorrow to talk about an ongoing series.”

“But you have concerns?”

He nodded. “This is going to get more and more dangerous. And not for the two of us.”

“I know,” she agreed. “But who do we give this story to? Who doesn’t have a family to protect? Or who wouldn’t worry for their own safety? And it’s not like we can just let this go and pretend it never happened.”

“You’re right,” he said as he lifted his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew there were sources who wouldn’t talk to Superman or Ultrawoman, but might talk to Lois Lane or Clark Kent. Frankly, it was still more likely that they would talk to Lois – even a year later and all his assiduous attempts at avoiding the spotlight, his profile was a little too high. “We should talk to my folks,” he said. Although he knew how they would respond. His mother would tell him that she wasn’t going to let gangsters and thugs intimidate him out of doing his job out of a concern for her safety or his father’s. But what about Jon? To an extent, his parents had assumed the risk by supporting him in becoming Superman. Jon hadn’t. If it started to get dangerous, they would have to get Jon and his parents, and her parents, too, out of town. He hated the thought, but hard choices were hardly new to him.

“There is no choice here,” his mother said firmly as she looked across the kitchen table at him. “You two have to go after these people.”

“You said yourself that they’re the biggest threat to this city,” his father agreed.

“But we can’t ignore how dangerous this is,” Lois countered.

“You’ve always taken care of us before, we trust that you’ll do it again,” Jonathan replied.

“And if it does get dangerous, it’s not that hard for us to leave the city,” Martha said matter-of-factly as she sipped her tea. “Do you have any good leads yet?”

Clark hesitated as he tried to figure out how to respond. “Honestly, the less you know about this, the safer you’ll be,” Lois said, obviating any need for him to say anything. He was thankful that she was taking the exact same position he was.

“We understand,” his father replied with a nod.

“We’re sorry you have to worry about stuff like this,” Clark said, his hands wrapped around his mug of tea.

“Don’t be,” his mother said as she reached across the table to give his hand a gentle squeeze. “You two have a job to do, and we will support you any way we can.”

“You always have,” Lois said with a smile.

Clark floated high overhead and listened in silence as yet another young woman told Lois—in broken English—

about being promised a job as a nanny in America and then finding herself forced to work in a brothel. The story, like all the others, sickened him. But even though the young woman was afraid, she was giving them confirmation about the identities of the men responsible for their situation. So far, they'd gathered information on just the low-level guys – the street thugs, the smugglers, the pimps, and sweatshop managers. Normally, the Feds would try to 'flip' the little fish in order to get the big guys, but the Triads were a ruthless organization with reach deep within the prisons. The low-level guys were afraid to talk and they didn't believe the police could protect them. Others were true believers and knew that after a stretch in prison, they would be rewarded for their silence.

He listened as Lois tried to convince the young woman to talk to the police. Her response was typical – she was afraid of retribution, convinced that the Triads would make an example of her. She was also afraid that her status as an undocumented immigrant meant immediate deportation. But his wife was a rather convincing negotiator. Delivering a promise that Ultrawoman or Superman would escort the woman to speak with the police, she managed to coax out her acquiescence.

They were already spending a great deal of time helping the police keep their potential witnesses safely out of harm's way. Even though he'd only been the managing editor for a few months, he was already on an alternative schedule. On Perry's orders, he was working with Lois on the investigation much of the time. A few long minutes passed before Lois and the young woman walked out of the parking structure.

His wife looked up in the sky and made eye contact with him. With an almost imperceptible nod, she let him know it was time for him to make his appearance. He floated down from the sky and landed softly in front of them. The young woman looked at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. He introduced himself in Cantonese and got her permission to take her to the regional FBI office.

"You've done a hell of a job, Lois," Dave Brewer, the Special Agent in Charge, said as he looked up from his desk. Unlike most of the Feds Lois had met, Brewer was a meticulous dresser. His cuff links and banker-collared shirts made him look more like a high-priced lawyer or stock broker than a cop. His tie and suspenders always matched. And it didn't matter what time of day or night it was, his sleeves were never rolled up. His collar button was never undone.

She smiled silently to herself. Brewer was a tough guy to impress. "But we're still nailing the minnows," she said.

"And you won't be happy until you've nabbed a shark."

"Neither will you," she retorted as she leaned back in her chair. He shrugged, but didn't disagree. "Any hope of flipping anyone?"

"Nah, the punks won't talk," he replied. "But with this affidavit, we can probably broaden our surveillance net. But don't ask me for details."

"I know. The less you tell me, the lower the chance that a defense attorney is going to claim the investigation was tainted."

"I'm taking no chances with this one," Brewer said.

"I get it," she assured him. "I've got a few more leads..." she started.

Brewer practically jumped out of his oversized chair. "Don't!" he shouted. "Don't tell me what you're doing. Don't tell me what you're up to. I don't want to know."

Lois held up her hands in surrender. "My lips are sealed," she assured him. "I know you don't want anyone to think you can't do your own investigative work."

He smirked. "More like I don't want to catch the flak from whatever sort of trouble you manage to find."

She stood up and started for the door. "I'll see you around, Dave."

"Stay safe, Lois," Brewer replied.

Lois nodded and walked out of the agent's office.

Clark stared at the hand-drawn chart they'd spread across his desk in the library. He didn't like doing so much of this work at home, but it was still safer than leaving the research from the investigation at the office. Lois stood behind him, her hand on his shoulder.

"By now, the FBI should have wire taps on the pimp, smuggler, and the sweatshop manager that are still out on the street," she said.

"Which means they'll lead him to Huang, Johnny Tai, and whoever 'the Dragon,' is," Clark added.

"But they're clearly not the brains or the power in this operation," Lois said.

"Though they are one step closer to whoever's at the top."

She sighed. "This is taking forever," his wife said.

Clark placed his hand on hers. "It's only been a few weeks," he said gently.

"And we've closed all the brothels and the sweatshops, but we haven't managed to get anyone off the streets besides the low-level punks."

"This probably goes all the way back to Hong Kong, which means outside the Feds' jurisdiction," Clark said, half to himself.

"But not outside ours."

Clark frowned. "That's assuming the Chinese government is willing to prosecute."

"We're getting ahead of ourselves," she said softly.

He nodded in agreement. "We need to focus on going up the chain as far as we can. We'll worry about the rest when it comes up."

The sound of a heartbeat, rapid and uneven, caused her to slow down, but she didn't dare stop. Someone was waiting for her. She shifted the bag of groceries she was carrying as she scanned the area. There was a young kid in the bushes, just between where she was and her own

brownstone. The streetlights overhead had been broken, bathing the sidewalk in darkness.

She was walking into an ambush.

Lois kept walking. There was nothing the kid could do to hurt her, which meant that this was a chance to find out more about their targets. Besides, if she avoided him, she'd just be drawing more attention to herself. Pretending to be engrossed in searching for her keys, she allowed herself to be attacked from behind. The cold blade of a knife was suddenly pressed against her throat. The grocery bag fell from her hands, sending produce, bread, and eggs tumbling to the ground.

She could have easily broken his grip, but not if she wanted to keep her secret identity secret. The shallow sound of his breathing and his frantic pulse let her know that he was nervous. More nervous than she was, it seemed. But every cell in her body screamed out against just standing docilely in her captor's grip. She tried to act the way a frightened woman would react to being assaulted just steps from her home. Lois grabbed the arm wrapped around her neck, but didn't pull very hard.

"Don't freaking scream, or I'll kill you," her captor whispered harshly. "Stay the hell out of Chinatown, lady. Unless you want something to happen to them." He dropped a manila envelope on the sidewalk in front of her and gave her a hard shove forward, before turning to run away. She stopped to pick up the envelope, her heart leaping up in her throat as she opened it to find a set of grainy photographs.

Of her mother and Jon.

They were walking together in the park, smiling and unaware of the eyes, full of malice, focused on them as they enjoyed their afternoon.

Lois's blood turned to ice in her veins. She couldn't continue this investigation and keep constant vigil over her family. Her hands gripped the edges of the photos tightly. In an instant, she spun into the suit and took off into the night's sky to follow her attacker, trying to keep her anger in check as she followed the punk around the block and watched as he jumped on a motorcycle and took off toward Chinatown. He finally parked in an alley behind a dim sum place that she and Clark had already figured out was a money laundering front for the drug trade the Triads engaged in. She got a good enough look at her attacker's face, taking mental note of his height and build so she could pick him out of a lineup.

Her attacker sought out an older man in a dark suit, sitting in a poorly lit corner of the restaurant. They started to speak in Cantonese, which meant she wouldn't be able to eavesdrop. Reluctantly, she started back for home. There was nothing more she could do here and she needed to know that Jon and her family were safe.

The color drained from Clark's face as he looked at the photographs. "They had to have been taken yesterday," Lois said softly. "When my mother picked Jon up from nursery school."

"We need to get them all out of the city," Clark said definitively.

"I know," she agreed. Lois sat down next to him at the kitchen table and reached out to take his hand. He interlaced their fingers, still staring at the pictures. A tense frown marred his features. "The guy who attacked me went into the Golden Palace. He talked to this guy," she said as she picked up the legal pad on the table and sketched both her attacker and the older man.

Clark stared at the picture she handed him. "Ultrawoman should take this to the FBI. Tell them she followed the attacker," he said.

"I'll do it now," she said. "Can you get our parents out of town?" She'd managed to keep the fact of Ultrawoman's identity from her parents largely by never having her parents meet Ultrawoman. She doubted she could keep her parents from recognizing the superhero was their daughter if they actually met and interacted with her.

"Yeah, but I don't think Smallville is safe enough," he said, his voice gravelly. "The people who're doing this won't have any trouble finding the farm."

"I know," she agreed.

He dropped the drawing on top of the photographs. "Call your parents. Tell them to expect Superman in an hour."

"Where are you going to take them?" she asked.

"I'll figure it out," he said. "Somewhere out of the way. If they don't have time to pack, we can get their stuff to them later."

"Okay," she replied reluctantly. She wanted them to talk this out, but she felt the same urgency he did. They didn't have time. Lois knew her parents would freak out. Actually, her father would try to brush aside the risk to himself and complain about the inconvenience, while her mother would angrily demand to know why she was doing something so dangerous that would put her family in jeopardy. Bracing herself for the uncomfortable phone calls she was about to make, Lois stood up, kissed her husband, and headed toward the living room.

Clark dropped his father off in front of the cabin on the large, placid lake near Watertown, far upstate near the Canadian border. He handed his father a large stack of bills, warning him not to use credit cards for any reason. He promised to return shortly with his mother and son. He'd already taken Lois's parents out of the city – Ellen would be enjoying a long vacation in the Caribbean, while Sam had indicated his preference for some quiet fishing in the Catskills. He intended to check in on them frequently and hoped that he and Lois would be able to wrap up the investigation quickly. The situation was putting everyone on edge, including his usually unflappable father.

He wasn't looking forward to having to fly with Jon. How exactly was an excited little four-year-old supposed to remain quiet about flying with Superman? Thankfully, with the summer vacation season over, the area was largely depopulated. There was a small general store about a mile

and a half down the road from the cabin, but aside from stocking up on provisions, avoiding other people shouldn't have been an issue.

Lois rubbed at her eyes as she stared at her computer's screen. She barely noticed as Clark entered her office, carrying two mugs of coffee. Neither one of them had slept much in the last week and it was finally taking its toll. She hated being away from Jon. She'd flown over the cabin a few times and had even seen her in-laws, but she hadn't hugged her little boy in days and it was driving her crazy. She talked to him every night on the pre-paid cell phones their paranoia had driven them to buy. And every night, when he plaintively asked when he would see his mommy and daddy again, she promised it wouldn't be too much longer.

"Have you already done a sweep?" she asked softly. The newsroom was deserted, but she still spoke in hushed tones.

"Yeah," he said as he sat down on the corner of her desk. "It was quiet." Ever since the first raids, the Triads' business had gone underground. The sweatshops and massage parlors were closed. Hundreds of undocumented workers were being processed by the Feds – some would be sent back home. Others, whose testimony was necessary to get indictments and convictions, were receiving at least temporary status. That didn't mean the Triads had given up. There were still drug, prostitution, and counterfeit goods rings in Metropolis that had to be connected to the powerful Asian crime syndicate. From their own surveillance, they knew the Feds had bugged and tapped the phones at the Golden Palace and other establishments owned or frequented by suspected Triad leaders. It seemed like the Triads had realized it as well. Nothing interesting had happened at any of the locations for days.

"I think I'm going to do some snooping around," she said, not sure where she would start looking or even if it was a worthwhile endeavor.

"It's late," Clark ventured.

She glanced at her watch. It was after one in the morning. "I know. I won't be too long," she promised.

"Be careful," he said as he leaned down to kiss her. She knew he'd been unnerved by the 'attack' on her outside their house the week before. It didn't matter that she was invulnerable, he still worried.

"I will," she said.

"I think I'm going to do a quick flyby over the cabin, check on your folks, too," he said. The house was too quiet. It was enormous and empty and devoid of life. She hated sleeping in it at night, knowing she should have been able to hear the heartbeats of her son and her in-laws, hearing nothing but silence instead. Maybe that was why she and Clark hadn't slept at all the last week.

It was a few hours later when Lois finally returned to the brownstone. She slipped into the library's annex and spun out of the suit before heading down to the bedroom—

the only room in the house with a light on. Clark was sitting up in the bed, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He looked up at her with a weary smile and set the papers on the nightstand. "Anything?" he asked hopefully.

She started to peel off her clothes as she walked toward the bed. "I followed a couple of their foot soldiers to a warehouse near Hobbs Bay. They had a large shipment of heroin coming in. Somehow their smoke detectors went off," she said with a bit of a smirk. "You know the water in those sprinkler pipes has often been standing for years. It's like sludge, really. The cops and firefighters showed up and found probably about three million dollars worth of totally ruined drugs."

Lois slipped into the bed next to her husband. He shook his head. "That's my girl," he said.

She smiled in response and kissed Clark. "What I don't get is why they'd risk moving that big a shipment of drugs now. They have to know that the Feds are all over them."

"Most of their operations in town have been shut down," he said as he pulled her closer to him. "I'm not sure how long they can keep functioning here without some cash flow."

"It still seems like a really stupid thing to do," she replied. "Gutsy, but stupid."

"But they were well outside Chinatown," Clark said.

"That's true," she conceded. "And it isn't like there was anyone high profile at the warehouse. The cops only busted a couple of street punks."

"So they took a calculated risk," Clark said.

"And it didn't pay off. But we can't keep treating this like a war of attrition."

"I know," he said as he kissed her temple. "We have to solve this."

Lois nodded in silent agreement. "I miss Jon," she said at last.

"So do I," he responded. He stretched out to turn out the light and pulled her into his arms.

"You think it's easy convincing guys to give up a good deal in Hong Kong to come here?" Johnny shouted angrily. "I've got no soldiers left. The damn FBI has picked them all up. When you have no one left to work in your business, you have no business, get it?"

Dragon leaned back in his chair, silently watching the younger man pace and rant in the cheap hotel room. It wasn't that he didn't share Johnny's anger, it was simply that he knew that undirected rage would accomplish nothing. Dragon had been sent to Metropolis two years ago as a Vanguard, hoping to establish here a whole new front of operations for the Triads, something to rival Hong Kong or Macau. He'd been under constant scrutiny, always aware that his every move was being considered and evaluated. Hong Kong had initially kept him on a tight leash. Eventually, the restrictions on his activities had eased and careful supervision was eventually replaced with a tacit agreement between him and the higher-ups. If he continued to succeed, he would be rewarded with increasing

autonomy and a larger share of the profits. If he failed... well, failure was an outcome too unpleasant to contemplate. By any measure, he'd been successful. He'd diversified operations and had spread the Triads' reach beyond Chinatown to all of Metropolis's underworld.

All that had changed barely a month ago. Now he was under fierce pressure to salvage what was left of the organization's operations. But with all of their muscle behind bars, their most lucrative operations shut down, and their legitimate business fronts under constant surveillance by law enforcement, he lacked anything remotely resembling the resources necessary to complete the task. They couldn't even sell pirated DVDs on a street corner in Chinatown anymore without finding themselves surrounded by a half-dozen cops. It wasn't just the Feds; the Metropolis Police Department was making it perfectly clear that the Triads were not welcome. They'd received no small amount of help from the city's two resident superheroes. In just the last few months, it seemed like Superman and Ultrawoman had nothing better to do than personally make his life a living hell. They also had more than enough trouble from the damn reporters from the Daily Planet.

Now, instead of surveying his domain from his well-appointed office, he was somewhere in suburban New Jersey, at a nondescript hotel off the Turnpike. They'd changed rental cars more than once and had taken a long, circuitous route to nowhere in particular, just to have this conversation. Dragon silently willed the other man to sit still for a moment. The constant movement was distracting him. As much as the theatrical pacing served no purpose, Johnny was right. The young man was a Red Pole – a street leader of the organization. The Triads kept him hungry—never rewarding him too extravagantly for his successes. If he intended to make it in the organization, he couldn't be seen as being responsible for the failure of the Metropolis operations.

With last week's heroin shipment being interdicted by the police, they were out of money. The Feds' noose was tightening around their necks. And his attempts to intimidate the reporters into dropping their investigation had been equally fruitless. Lane and Kent had apparently sent their families out of the city. Without sufficient foot soldiers to search them out, they'd lost their best form of leverage. Attempts to kill the reporters themselves had also borne no results. He wasn't sure how Superman and Ultrawoman could possibly have time to disrupt all of his operations and keep those two reporters out of danger.

He dragged a finger across the scar that ran down his cheek. It had been a long while since he'd been in a fight. Dragon had people to do that for him these days. Or at least he did, until the police arrested all of them. He now faced the real possibility of a long prison sentence or perhaps much worse from his own superiors if the losses in the Metropolis operations couldn't be stanchd.

Clark hovered over the dingy motel, listening intently to the tense conversation between the two gangsters. Just as

he'd suspected, their cash flow problem was thoroughly disrupting operations. But it also seemed like they weren't going to get much higher into the organization than the Dragon. Most of the crimes the FBI had jurisdiction over were linked directly to him. Any additional illegal activity by higher-ups was carried out well beyond the water's edge, which meant the Feds couldn't prosecute.

But from the nervous way that the Dragon and Johnny were conversing, the Triads would probably cut their losses and quit Metropolis entirely if the Feds cracked down hard. Maybe he and Lois couldn't destroy the Triad organization outright, but perhaps they could drive them out of Metropolis.

It was a start, wasn't it?

Maybe it wasn't, though. Maybe they were just playing a giant game of whack-a-mole. They could destroy the gang's Metropolis operations, but what would stop them from just moving their resources to prey on another city? With a sigh, Clark turned to head back to Metropolis. What he'd learned wouldn't help the Feds prosecute – Johnny and the Dragon hadn't said anything they didn't already know, and the last thing he and Ultrawoman needed was to give the defense lawyers fodder for the argument that he and Lois were just an extension of official law enforcement, making it almost impossible for them to do anything without a warrant. But the conversation had confirmed some of his suspicions. He wanted to talk to Lois about it first, but he expected to recommend to the U.S. Attorney that they go forward with the arrests of the heads of the Metropolis chapter of the Triads.

"No, Mommy, I don't want you to go!" Jon screamed, refusing to release his grip on his mother. His arms were wrapped around her neck and his head buried against her shoulder. She ran a soothing hand up and down his back and swayed gently from side to side.

"Honey, Daddy and I have to go," Lois said gently. It broke Martha's heart to watch the scene unfold. And from looking at Clark's face, she could tell it was breaking his heart, too. She was grateful for the solid, reassuring presence of Jonathan's arm around her shoulders. He stood silently beside her as they watched their son and daughter-in-law as they said their goodbyes. In the last two weeks, this was just their third visit up to the cabin. They'd only stayed for a few hours each time, knowing that the Triads were trying to keep an eye on them and would notice if they were away from home for too long. Jon started to cry, fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Buddy, we'll see you really soon, okay?" Clark said softly. "Be a good boy for Grandma and Grandpa."

"I wanna go home!" Jon shouted.

Lois kissed the crown of his hair. "That's not the way we behave," she said calmly. "We don't yell like that. I know you want to go home, but it'll just be little while longer. We need you to be a good boy, okay?" Jon's cries subsided into quiet whimpers. "That's my guy," Lois said

softly. She was finally able to extricate herself from Jon's grip. Lois set him down gently on his feet.

Clark leaned down to give his son a kiss. "I love you," he said as he tousled his little boy's hair. "We'll see you soon."

"You said you wouldn't go away anymore," Jon pouted. He stepped behind his grandfather, hiding from his parents.

The words seemed to pierce Clark's heart. Martha could see the pain in his expression. "We'll see you in a few days," Clark said. He looked at her, his eyes wounded. Martha hugged her boy. "Bye, Mom," he said softly.

"Bye, son," she said. "We love you."

Jonathan put his hand on Clark's shoulder. "Take care, boy," he said.

Lois hugged both Martha and Jonathan. "Thank you for taking such good care of him," she said.

"Honey, you don't have to thank us," Martha said.

"We'll see you soon," Jonathan added. "Take care."

Perry stood up stiffly from his desk and looked across the bullpen to the side-by-side offices where the lights still burned this late at night. He'd tried to shoo the two of them home earlier, but he knew how Lois felt—when you were used to the happy sounds of a child's laughter in your home, having it so quiet and still was painful. These days, with no one at all to go home to, he knew how that felt. But Perry imagined it was still even more difficult for them, being so unfathomably powerful and still unable to keep their son safe except by sending him away.

He was getting too old for this sort of stuff. But though his body was no longer as willing to endure long nights, constant stress, and an awful diet, investigative journalism was not just in his blood, it was seared into every cell in his body. Having his two star reporters working together again on a major investigation put a spring back into his step, at least metaphorically speaking. It also meant that he had to make do with his now-indispensable right-hand man only undertaking his managing editor role on a part-time basis. Of course, a part-time Clark Kent was worth ten full-time editors, but the new arrangement had brought into stark relief just how much Perry relied on the younger man these days.

Rolling down and re-buttoning his sleeves, Perry grabbed his suit jacket from the coat rack behind his desk and pulled it on before pulling the cord on his desk lamp, bathing the office in darkness. He walked out into the newsroom and crossed the bullpen to Lois and Clark's offices. As usual, they were both in her office, Clark perched on one corner of her desk. They looked up as he approached.

"I just wanted to say goodnight, you two," he said.

"Goodnight, Perry," Lois replied.

"Goodnight, Chief," Clark said. They both looked absolutely bone-tired to him, laying bare the lie that they were invincible. Though they were physically impervious to harm, they couldn't keep working at this rate forever.

"Try to get some rest, huh?" he added, wondering if he was wasting his breath.

"We think there's a light at the end of the tunnel," Lois replied with a tired smile.

He nodded, trying not to show too much premature enthusiasm. "You're doing a damn fine job," he said. "I'll see you two in the morning." With that, he turned and walked back across the bullpen toward the elevator bank.

"You seem tired, Clark," his shrink said sympathetically.

"I haven't been sleeping much," he replied as he sat down on the couch.

"Nightmares?" she asked, sitting down in her own chair.

He shook his head with a bemused grin. "Actually, no. I haven't been sleeping enough to have nightmares. Lois and I have been working on an investigation. It's been stressful," he said cautiously, having decided he wouldn't impart any more information than the good doctor truly needed.

"I'm glad you've been able to go back to work, but it won't help to run yourself into the ground," she cautioned. It wasn't anything he hadn't heard before. But it wasn't as though he'd had a choice.

"I know," he replied. "And Lois and I both know we can't keep this pace up indefinitely. But we have to finish this investigation." Clark sighed, trying to figure out how to explain what he meant. "It's been tough and frustrating, but in a way, I feel grounded, like I'm doing something really meaningful again."

"You haven't felt that way until now?"

"Sort of. I mean, personally, there's so much in my life that's important, more important than I could have ever imagined. But I guess I've been feeling like...an imposter. Like I was playing these roles without really knowing what I was doing. I was pretending to be Superman, pretending to be an editor. I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. For someone to realize that I don't belong here."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"Most of the time, I'm just overwhelmed by what we're working on, but there are moments when it's like I never left. I'm working with Lois the way we used to. I don't know, maybe that's the tradeoff. There's all this extra stress and pressure and I'm not sure I can handle it. But I used to thrive on this stuff."

He didn't tell her about the way that being away from Jon was eating away at him and breaking Lois's heart every day. He didn't tell her how much he worried about his little boy, or how he actively avoided sleep because he was afraid of having nightmares about Jon getting hurt. Or how he would sneak out in the middle of the night when he should have been patrolling to check in on his son and just watch him sleep for a few, brief minutes.

The sound of his heartbeat was like a balm to her troubled soul. She floated high over the cabin, cloaked by the darkness of night, unnoticed in the quiet forest. Lois

watched her son sleep, dressed in his Spongebob Squarepants pajamas and tucked securely into bed in the cozy cabin. Her in-laws, too, were soundly sleeping inside. If they were perturbed by the danger that had sent them to this secluded mountain retreat, there were no outward signs of it. When she spoke to them each night, they were always in good spirits and assured her that they were doing well and that Jon was enjoying their adventures in the woods.

It was almost over, she told herself. The Feds were planning to move against the highest ranking members of the Triads they were going to be able to nail. It wasn't the perfect clean sweep they'd been hoping for, but it would go a long way in stamping out organized crime in Metropolis once again. First it was Lex Luthor, then it was Intergang. Now it was the Triads.

It didn't seem to matter how hard she or Clark or the police worked to get rid of the mobsters and racketeers, someone always seemed to be waiting in the wings to fill the criminal void in the city. She wasn't sure what they'd have to do to finally convince the less-than-savory element of society that Metropolis just wasn't their town.

With a reluctant sigh, Lois turned back toward home and slowly flew away, taking great care not to create the tell-tale sonic boom that might cause people to wonder if either test rockets or superheroes were deployed to the area.

"I got it, Johnny!" The voice came across the phone before Johnny could open his eyes. He'd been changing phones every few days. Next to no one had this number. Those who did knew better than to call unless it was important.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he sat up in bed. "You sure it's real?"

"Dude, I don't know, it looks real to me."

"Yeah, well, we'll have to test it," Johnny mused aloud.

"How?" came the brain-dead reply.

"Not now. Give me some time," Johnny snapped.

"So what do I do with it?"

Johnny rolled his eyes. Every half-witted soldier he had was locked up or back in Hong Kong. There was no way the Triad organization could hope to survive with the nothing but the dregs carrying out operations here. "Get it locked up. You know the Feds are all over me." He hung up quickly, not waiting for a reply. Falling back against the bed, he stared up at his water-stained ceiling.

The bosses in Hong Kong had made the situation eminently clear. They had a problem in the Metropolis operations. Two problems, really. And Hong Kong expected the operation in Metropolis to deal with the problem itself or it would find itself cut out of the Triads' organization entirely. That would have been a guaranteed death sentence. Johnny sighed and closed his eyes. He needed a plan.

Jon looked up at his grandmother from his cookies and milk. "I miss Mommy and Daddy," he announced, not for the first time.

Martha smiled sadly at him. "I know," she said. "I miss them, too."

Her little grandson frowned, his brow furrowed. "I want to go back to school. I want to go home."

"We'll go home soon, sweetheart," Martha said as she gently tousled his hair. Clark and Lois seemed optimistic about finishing the investigation in the next few days, but the end couldn't come soon enough as far as their little boy was concerned. They spoke to him every night on the phone, reading him stories and tucking him in from far away, but he still missed his parents. Martha understood why the kids felt like they needed to keep their distance until the mobsters were off the street, but that didn't make it any easier for Jon.

"Daddy promised he wouldn't go away anymore," Jon pouted. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him swinging his feet anxiously under the table.

"Mommy and Daddy aren't going anywhere," Martha promised him. "And our little vacation will be over soon. Now why don't you help me make dinner for us and your grandpa?"

"Okay, Grandma," Jon said without any enthusiasm.

Lois looked at her husband with a grin before spinning into her suit. He was already dressed as Superman and waiting for her. The Feds were planning to move today against the leaders of the Metropolis Triads who were still walking around freely and the superheroes had offered their help to make sure things went smoothly.

More than anything, Lois wanted to be done with this entire thing so they could get Jon back and get their lives back to normal. They flew out of the library annex and downtown to the federal plaza where David Brewer and his team were waiting for them. It was just before four in the morning, the FBI's favorite time to conduct an arrest. Their targets were almost always at home, unarmed, and sleeping. Tired, disoriented arrestees generally made for safer missions.

Superman and Ultrawoman touched down in front of the special agent in charge, who wore the distinctive FBI raid jacket. Brewer smiled at them. "I'm riding with the first team to Mayberry Street to pick up the Dragon. Anne's leading the second team's raid on Johnny Tai's place."

"I'll follow you," Superman said.

"You sure you don't want to ride shotgun?" Brewer joked.

Clark managed a small smile. "I think I'll be able to find my own way."

"And I'll back up Agent Bradley's team," Lois said referring to Brewer's second-in-command.

"Sounds like we have a game plan," Brewer said. "Let's move, people," he called out to his team. The agents finished loading into the oversized black SUVs and the two motorcades set out on their way.

The takedown itself was anti-climactic. In the oldest part of Chinatown, the Feds knocked on the door of Johnny Tai's dingy apartment. He tried to flee down the fire escape.

Ultrawoman caught him and frog-marched him into the waiting hands of the federal agents.

As Clark Kent jogged over toward the Feds, Lois assumed that his takedown had been just as uneventful. Anne Bradley gave him a few quotes before he turned to interview Ultrawoman. Lois played along for appearance's sake before excusing herself, claiming she was needed elsewhere.

Soaring high in the sky, she did a barrel roll, immensely relieved to be done with the investigation. The Feds had in custody the highest ranking members of the Triads in the city. The gang's Metropolis operations had already collapsed and taking down the heads of the local chapter meant that any attempts to resurrect the crime syndicate would take a long time, if it ever happened.

All of that was well and good, but what really interested Lois was the fact that she could finally get her family back together under one roof. Things could go back to normal.

"To Lois Lane and Clark Kent," Perry announced as he raised his champagne glass in the middle of the newsroom. Around him were enlarged mockups of the half-dozen banner headline stories they'd filed over the last month on the dizzying fall of the Metropolis chapter of the Triads. "Still the best damn investigators in the business!"

"To Lois and Clark!" came the reply from the rest of their colleagues, gathered around them in the bullpen. For a few brief minutes, the work in the newsroom had come to a halt to celebrate the occasion. Clark smiled at his wife who was leaning against a currently unoccupied desk. This was exactly how it was supposed to be: Superman and Ultrawoman got the bad guys, Lane and Kent got the big story. Metropolis was safer, his family was all happily back at home, and the stories they'd nabbed would probably land them at least nominations for the Merriwethers and Kerths this year.

"I can't believe you were at the raids," Ralph said, a note of jealousy in his voice. "I never get tips like that." He shook his head dejectedly and walked away, unaware of the smirk he'd elicited from Lois.

"You guys did a hell of a job," Eduardo said with admiration. "I don't know how you do it."

"We don't sleep much," Lois said with a wink.

"All right, that's enough lollygagging around. Don't y'all have work to do?" Perry bellowed.

Grumbling, the reporters dispersed, back to their phones and desks and wherever they went to go talk to sources. The short-lived party came to an abrupt end and the newsroom was once again humming with the sounds of journalism in action.

Lois stood up straight and closed the distance between them. She patted his chest as he wrapped an arm around her waist. "Hey," he said softly with a smile.

"Hey, yourself," she teased. "Are you going to be ready to go soon?"

"I need another half hour with Layout," he said. "Meet you at home?"

"Nah, I'll wait for you," she said as she gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Up we go, kiddo!" Clark announced as he lifted Jon onto his shoulders. "Time for a bath."

"I can take a bath by myself," Jon said as he reached up toward the ceiling.

Clark started up the steps. "That's my boy," he said. "How about I just stay in the bathroom to get the towels ready?"

"Okay, Daddy," Jon agreed. "Then can we read 'The Giving Tree?'"

"Sure," Clark replied. He lowered Jon to the ground and opened the bathroom door.

Jon dashed into the bathroom and took off his socks. "Daddy, do I have school tomorrow?"

"Nope, tomorrow's Saturday, remember?"

"I want to go to school," Jon said, his voice muffled by the sweater he'd pulled up over his head.

"Well, how about we get up early and watch cartoons?"

Jon grinned as he finally extricated himself from his sweater. "Okay!" he said excitedly. Clark found himself smiling in response, probably as excited as his little boy about getting to spend the day together. He had the entire weekend off and he intended to spend it making sure his son knew how much his parents loved him and wanted him to be happy.

"You seem to be in better spirits, Clark," Dr. Friskin said as she looked up from her notes. Her patient smiled in response.

"Things have been a lot easier since the investigation ended. We've been keeping a close watch over Chinatown, but it's been quiet. No signs of the Triads," he explained.

"Being apart from your son was difficult, wasn't it?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah," he replied. "Jon didn't understand why he and his grandparents had to leave the city and we didn't want to scare him. All he knew was that his parents weren't around and I know he's afraid of that. When we were gone around Christmas, it upset him. I hated feeling like being Superman was putting him at risk. But it was Lane and Kent, not Superman or Ultrawoman, who brought the Triads' attention to our family. We did what we had to in order to stop some of the worst crime in the city and we had to trust that we could keep the people we love safe."

"It doesn't sound that different from what you had to do on New Krypton," she ventured.

He grunted. "Believe me, it's a hell of a lot easier with superpowers."

"So would you say you're comfortable with being Superman?"

Clark frowned and chewed his lip. "I guess so," he answered. "It's still strange, sometimes. I still wonder if being Superman will ever be as natural as it was before I left. But it is like instinct again. It's something I have to do. And I have to find the way to make it work."

She could hear the determination in his voice. It was good to hear him so dedicated to finding the balance in his life and pursuing the things he was passionate about. If there was one thing she'd learned from working with him, it was that Clark Kent needed to help others. His crisis of confidence in his ability to do good had been nothing less than an assault on who he was as a person.

He glanced at his watch. "We've gone longer than an hour," he said.

"And you said you had plans with Jon this evening?"

The comment elicited a smile from her patient. "I promised him we'd go to the bookstore. They're having a "Sword in the Stone" puppet show."

Dr. Friskin smiled in response. "That sounds like fun." The change from just a week ago was striking. His spirits were much higher and he even seemed relaxed. He'd been back on Earth for just over a year and he'd made such tremendous progress in that time, but especially since the end of this investigation. And even though the last month had been difficult for him, he'd been handling it admirably. She didn't worry that he was going to be overwhelmed or that stress was more than he could handle. He'd shown that even in a high pressure situation, he was able to do what needed to be done.

When he'd first come to see her, so terrified of the way that war had changed him, it had been hard for her to imagine him making this much progress in just a year. In less than nine months, he'd returned to the very top of his field professionally. Not just that, from the way he described handling his new responsibilities, he was actually using the good experiences he'd had on New Krypton to make him a better editor. Despite his initial panic over striking Lois in his sleep and his inability to talk to her for months about what New Krypton had been like, his marriage was strong and he had a family that supported him. He'd gone back to his superhero duties and of course, the world was better for it.

"I've been thinking," he began. "I think maybe I'm ready to cut back from weekly sessions. Maybe we can meet every other week instead?"

"I was just about to suggest the very same thing," she replied.

Lois opened the door to the bedroom to find Clark in bed, reviewing a story, as had been his habit lately. He often brought work home with him and turned back to it after his final patrol of the evening. It gave him the flexibility to leave the Planet early enough to have dinner with his family most nights, even though he often checked back into the Planet over the VPN to approve any last-minute changes to the paper's layout before it was put to bed.

They took turns patrolling the city and he usually used the time after Jon had gone to bed while she was out to get a head start on the morning's work. He'd always been hardworking before, but since returning to full-time work at the Planet, he'd displayed a disciplined efficiency that was

impressive, even for a Superman. It fit in rather well with the less carefree Clark Kent who'd returned from New Krypton more than a year ago. But though she wouldn't have wished for the changes in his temperament or habits, she'd learned to incorporate them into what she knew and what she loved about her husband.

He wasn't the same man that she'd married. But that didn't mean she loved him any less.

She somehow loved him even more.

She loved him because despite all of the brutality and viciousness that world had visited upon him, despite everything it had stolen from him, despite the story of cruelty that it had written into his flesh, he was at his core, still as caring and compassionate as he had ever been. His enemies on New Krypton had tried to strip him of everything that made him a good man. They had failed. He was Clark Kent. And so long as he was alive, so long as there was breath in his body, he would be the very definition of humanity and decency.

"What's up?" he asked with a smile, letting her know that he'd caught her staring.

"Nothing," she said with a slight shake of her head. "Everything was quiet."

He put his work on the nightstand and turned down the blankets on her side of the bed. She climbed in beside him, letting him draw her into his arms. As she placed her head on his chest, she felt him kiss the crown of her hair. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you," she replied.

He exhaled deeply as he tuned out the rest of the world. Shutting down his senses was even harder with powers than it had been on New Krypton. The sights, sounds, and even smells of Metropolis were always there, even if they were in the background. It all blended together in the crazy cacophony that made the city, the city - the distant sounds of horns blaring on Fifth Avenue, the drip of a neighbor's leaky faucet, the flapping of pigeon wings in the park. Down the hall, Jon was sleeping soundly. The television in his parents' apartment downstairs was turned to the news. The smell of hot dogs and pretzels from a street vendor and the exhaust of an idling delivery truck mixed together and wafted through an open window somewhere in the house. But the room surrounding him and the wider city somehow managed to slip away as he sank deeper and deeper into his meditative state. Soon, the only sound he could hear was his own heartbeat, slow and steady.

His entire body relaxed and the stress and tension leached out of his tired muscles. The rescue had gone as well as possible, but it had still been tough. It was still always so hard on him to deal with the youngest victims. The attending physician at MetroGen had assured him that the little boy would recover, despite the horrifying injuries the car accident had caused. Now, he had to concentrate on pushing all of that from his mind. He had to center himself. A wave of calm seemed to wash slowly over him as his mind cleared.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when the sound of the door opening startled him out of his meditative state. Clark always made sure not to fall too deeply into meditation – the deeper forms of meditation provided additional benefits, but they also meant that he would be completely disconnected from the world and from the people who might need him. That wasn't a tradeoff he was willing to make.

"Hey," he said quietly, his eyes still closed. He would have known her heartbeat anywhere.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you," she said softly.

Clark opened his eyes and smiled up at her from where he was sitting on the floor of the bedroom. "You're not disturbing me," he assured her. "Come here."

She crossed the room, kicking off her heels, and took his hand. Lois sat down to face him. "Close your eyes," he instructed. "Just relax."

"I'm not really the meditating type," Lois protested gently.

"Trust me," he said. He held both of her hands in his and listened as she breathed deeply and slowly. In and out. In and out. Her heart slowed down, just like his. Soon, their pulses were beating in rhythm. He let himself slide back into a light meditative state, aware of nothing except their joined hands, the sounds of her heartbeat and her breathing. His world shrank down to nothing except Lois. He was content. He was at peace.

They had never done this together before. He had never shared it with her. He wondered why.

Clark finally allowed himself to return to the waking world. Lois's eyes were still closed, her expression totally open and unguarded. Without opening her eyes, she smiled at him. She'd probably noticed the change in his breathing and heart rate. He gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

"You learned that from the Kryptonians?" she asked as she opened her eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "It took a long time, but after I finally got the hang of it, it helped a lot. Dr. Friskin recommended I keep doing it. It helps me focus, especially when I'm feeling stressed out."

"Rough day?" she asked.

"Tough rescue," he confirmed. "The kid's going to be okay, but the accident was awful."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He shrugged. "It happens," he said with a calm acceptance that he didn't actually feel.

"Doesn't make it any easier," she said.

"No, it doesn't," he replied.

"Anything I can do to help?" she asked.

Clark smiled at her. "You already have." He leaned forward and kissed his wife. The kiss started off softly, but he couldn't help but deepen it. His tongue sought entry to her mouth as he leaned forward. Moaning, she framed his face with her hands and he pulled her into his arms.

"I love you," she whispered breathlessly.

"I love you," he replied. He stood up, bringing her with him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her hands through his hair. Gasping, he broke off the kiss and fumbled to get rid of her suit jacket. She grasped the front of his shirt, pulling the sides apart and causing at least a few of the buttons to pop off his shirt and fly in various directions.

He laughed as he kissed her again. "I really like this shirt, you know," he said as he stumbled backward toward the bed.

"I'll sew the buttons back on later," she murmured against his lips as she grabbed the edges of the shirt and pushed them down over his shoulders.

He let the shirt fall to the floor and looked back over his shoulder at where it landed in a formless puddle. "You? Sew?"

She seized the soft lobe of his ear between her lips and sucked gently, causing him to inhale sharply. "Fine, you'll sew them on later," she said. "Now shut up and kiss me."

His brain wrapped in a gauzy haze of passion, he did as commanded, trying to rid her of her blouse as they fumbled toward the bed. His knees buckled slightly as he backed into the mattress. Letting gravity do its work, he fell on to the bed, taking Lois with him.

Clark couldn't help himself. Using superspeed, he got rid of the rest of their clothing. "Cheater," Lois teased.

He kissed his way down the soft skin of her neck. "I promise, we won't do everything that fast," he replied with a grin. One of the greatest things about superpowers, he mused idly to himself, was the fact that they could spend the entire night making love.

So they did.

Lois yawned as she stretched lazily in her husband's arms. "Sleepy?" he teased her gently.

"You wore me out," she replied.

"Me?" he asked, a note of mock surprise in his voice.

"Yes, you," she said as she traced her fingers in absent patterns across the skin of his chest.

"As I recall, you're the one who wore me out," her husband insisted as he held her securely against his body. He tilted her chin up and captured her lips with his. This kiss, too, quickly turned passionate.

"Don't tell me you're not satisfied," Lois said breathlessly as she broke off the kiss.

"Oh, I'm very satisfied," he replied. Clark lifted her hand where it lay against his chest and interlaced their fingers. "I love you, Lois Lane."

"I love you, Clark Kent," she said as she gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

He stroked her hair as he looked up at the ceiling. "There's something we haven't really talked about in a while," he began. She wondered what was bothering him.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," he assured her. "Everything's wonderful. And we kept saying that when things were more settled, when we were ready, we'd talk about..."

She smiled to herself. “Having another baby?” she finished for him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think we’re ready. Or at least, we’re ready to start thinking about it. I mean, I am, if you are.”

They’d had perfectly good reasons not to think about having a baby for the last year. But their work and their lives had settled down considerably. Superman was back in the sky. Clark Kent was back on the Planet’s masthead. Jon was in nursery school and their family was happily under one roof in their dream house. “I am,” she agreed.

“So, should we talk about it?” he ventured hopefully.

“Actually, I don’t think talking is the most productive thing we can be doing about this,” she said as she caressed his cheek and kissed his lips.

He sighed in satisfaction as he pulled her into his arms. She could feel him smile against her lips. Her heart started to pound in a rapid, uneven staccato. The thought of not just making love, but making life with Clark, sent shivers through her body. She loved this man with everything she was. And she wanted nothing more than to bring another child into the world with him.

Jiang Jai He stepped off his plane and walked across the tarmac toward the airport’s international terminal from the private runway. Despite the fact that it was almost one in the morning, he still wore his sunglasses and his hand-stitched suit looked freshly pressed. It was windy, but not terribly cold for early October in this part of the world. His three bodyguards formed a protective barrier around him as they walked into the building.

The customs area was practically deserted. Under the sickly yellow fluorescent lights, only one customs booth was open. Jiang gingerly removed his sunglasses and handed his passport over to the bored-looking customs official.

“What is the purpose of your visit, sir?” the disinterested woman asked him flatly.

“Business,” Jiang replied.

“How long will you be in the United States?”

“Not long,” Jiang smiled to himself. “Perhaps two weeks. Perhaps a little longer.”

The customs agent obviously didn’t care about his answers. “Enjoy your stay in America,” she said without any enthusiasm. She stamped his passport with a bit too much force and pushed it back toward him.

Jiang took the passport and replaced it in his jacket pocket. One of his bodyguards peeled off from the others to collect his bags. Jiang walked through the deserted terminal to where a limousine was waiting for him. Another mute bodyguard held the door open as Jiang climbed in.

His associate was already waiting inside. Hsiao Chen sat with his hands folded serenely on one knee. “Welcome to Metropolis, Mr. Jiang,” he said. Hsiao was Jiang’s advance man. An indispensable sort of character, but though Hsiao certainly knew that, he didn’t act that way. He was quiet, calm, and effective. He was also brutally efficient.

“I take it you’ve acquired what we came here for?” Jiang asked impatiently.

“Metropolis Central Bus Depot. Locker number 643,” Hsiao said with a placid smile. “One of my men picked it up yesterday.”

Jiang said nothing in response. He would consider this phase of the operation complete when he could hold the item in question. Examine it for himself.

He knotted his fingers through Lois’s as they walked just a few steps behind Jon down the cobblestone path. The trees overhead blazed with color and the leaves that had already fallen provided their little boy with almost endless amusement. He stomped on them to make them crunch and he kicked his way through little piles, sending the colorful leaves flying.

The air wasn’t cold yet, but it was crisp. The clean tang of autumn could be tasted on the breeze. Centennial Park wasn’t the wilderness by any stretch of the imagination, but the large cluster of trees at its heart and its expansive meadows were a welcome refuge from the bustle of the city. The park wasn’t quiet exactly, but its energy was different from the buzz that constantly surrounded midtown Metropolis. Around them, other young families were enjoying the early evening. On a nearby playground, kids Jon’s age played on the swings and the teeter totters. A field in the Sheep’s Meadow was hosting a pickup game of soccer.

Jon made his way to the top of the hill that looked down on the valley that was home to the Park’s large reservoir. He turned around and looked at his parents with a bright grin. “Daddy, are there frogs in the lake?”

Clark couldn’t help but smile back. “I don’t know, buddy. Why don’t we find out?” he asked.

Lois let his hand slip from hers. She gave him a small half smile and nodded toward Jon, quietly giving him permission to go off and play like a kid with their little boy. He kissed her softly in a silent thank you before jogging ahead to catch up to Jon.

Jon stretched up for his father’s hand even before Clark reached him. With a grin, Clark took Jon’s hand and led him toward the reservoir. With a glance over his shoulder, he saw Lois take a seat on a bench along the path, near the water’s edge. She smiled and waved at them and he encouraged Jon to wave back.

“Hi, Mommy!” Jon said. “We’re going frog hunting!”

Clark could see Lois smile in response. “Good luck!” she declared. Clark wasn’t sure if there would still be any frogs around here. The early fall hadn’t been that cold, but he imagined most of the frogs would have already started to hibernate. Even if there weren’t any frogs around, it was a good chance for Jon to start learning what animals did in the winter.

It amazed him how much Jon absorbed from the world around him. His little boy soaked up information about everything and he was always asking questions. Helping Jon figure out how things worked and why was one of the

most fun things about being a dad. Jon's eyes grew wide as he craned his neck, trying to scan the murky waters for his favorite amphibians. He frowned slightly, unaware that his father was cheating by X-raying through the cloudy pond water. If there were any frogs in there, Clark wasn't above a little surreptitious use of his powers to help his son find them.

Lois smiled as she watched the two men in her life play along the banks of the reservoir. She loved seeing her family so happy, especially after the tension that had marked their lives only weeks ago. Having to be separated from Jon, knowing someone was out there, trying to target him, had been just about the hardest thing she'd ever done. Given all that she'd been through in the last five years, that was saying a lot.

For now, she just wanted to enjoy moments like this one. In a short while they might be welcoming a brand new member to their family. It would be an exciting new adventure for them and she was thrilled by the prospect of getting to share the experience with Clark. Watching her husband and her son play together, she couldn't help but feel wistful; for all the fun they were having now, there was so much they hadn't been able to share together in the first few years of Jon's life.

Would it be bittersweet for Clark? Being there for the sonograms and preparing the nursery? She knew it was something he was looking forward to, something he wouldn't trade for anything in the world. But would it make him feel guilty about having missed all of these things with Jon?

Then there was how Jon was going to handle the changes that having a new brother or sister would bring. Sure, he'd asked for a little brother for his birthday, but how would he really react to no longer being an only child? Would he be jealous of the baby? Would he resent having to share his parents' attention?

Lois shook her head with slight bemusement. Up until a few days ago, they hadn't even been thinking about having another child. Well, she'd been thinking about it, but they hadn't been talking about it. And they certainly hadn't been taking the concrete steps toward having another child. Even though the idea of having another baby had frequently been in her mind for the last few months, it was only in the last few days that she found her gaze lingering on strollers and babies wherever she saw them throughout the city. It was amazing how she'd never noticed how many little kids there were in Metropolis. At night, it was the glamorous and sophisticated world of the glitterati. But by day, her hometown revolved around all things baby. Mommy and Me Yoga. Jogging stroller caravans down Fifth Avenue. Play groups in every bit of green space the island had to offer. High-end designer baby stores and Montessori schools and organic baby foods from community-sponsored agriculture were all just a few of the uniquely Metropolitan takes on parenthood.

She wondered what pregnancy would be like this time around, without the pain and confusion of Clark's absence, without constantly worrying about his safety, knowing that he would be there with her through every moment of it. Clark had assured her that he would be fine taking over as the city's only superhero if they got pregnant. It had been difficult the first time around, knowing Ultrawoman was needed and not using her powers to help. This time, she hoped that the assurance that Superman was in the sky would be enough to assuage the guilt that would invariably come from not using her powers to help others.

She watched as her husband and son played on the edge of the reservoir. As best she could tell, they weren't actually catching anything. Dusk settled on the park and father and son soon gave up their quest. Jon came running back toward his mother.

"Mommy, Daddy says all the frogs are sleeping," he announced with some consternation.

"Yeah, it's probably too cold for them now," she agreed.

"How come people don't sleep all winter?" Jon asked.

"Because we have coats and hats and mittens to keep us warm," she replied as he scrambled up onto the park bench next to her. "Besides, if we slept through the winter, we wouldn't be able to go sledding or make snowmen."

"Or have Christmas," Jon added.

"That's right," she said.

Clark came to sit down on the bench, lifting Jon up so that the little boy could sit in his lap. "You guys ready to go home?" he asked.

"What do you think, buddy? Is it dinner time?" Lois asked.

"Yeah, I'm hungry," Jon said. He hopped down off the bench and reached up for her hand.

Jiang knotted the belt of his silk robe and grabbed the remote control from the mahogany stand next to his bed. He pushed the button to open the curtains across the suite's bedroom, letting a cascade of sunlight drench the room. He padded across the plush carpet to the wet bar in the next room and opened the exterior door to the safe next to the small refrigerator. Punching in his code, he opened the little door and delicately removed what was inside. It was only last night that he'd seen it for the first time. In the intervening hours, he'd dreamed about it. He held the glowing green crystal in his hand, impressed by how small, how light it was. It barely filled the palm of his hand and yet it could destroy the most powerful beings in the universe. Its edges were jagged, its shape was unimpressive, but it was more powerful than anything he could imagine. It wasn't the same shade, but he hoped that like jade, this green stone would prove to be auspicious for him. He looked up from the Kryptonite at his associate. Hsiao stood, ever at the ready, his hands folded in front of him.

"You're certain it's real?" Jiang pressed him.

“I had it chemically analyzed. It is a perfect match for the meteorite described in the notes from LexLab and those belonging to Rollie Vale, the scientist who used a piece of it to power his cyborg. Even short-term exposure should have promising results.”

Jiang frowned as he considered Hsiao’s plan. “Why a newspaper?”

“Superman and Ultrawoman have peculiarly close ties to the Daily Planet and to a number of its employees. If we threaten the newspaper’s headquarters, I’m certain they will respond.”

Staring out at the skyline of Metropolis from his midtown suite, an odd feeling of pity and admiration mingled within him. The city was like an old woman whose beauty had not quite yet faded. The enchantment of her youth could still be imagined. But Metropolis was tired. A relic of the past. The future lay far to the east. In ambitious cities the size of which put this one to shame. China had a dozen cities larger than Metropolis. All of them still growing. Soon, another dozen would eclipse the size of the once-great center of American power. “Both of them?”

“There is no way to guarantee it, sir. But the Daily Planet is the optimal target for this mission. Even if only of them responds, once incapacitated, they will become bait to lure in the other.”

Jiang allowed himself a smile. “A second explosion.”

“Deadlier than the first,” Hsiao confirmed.

“When do you intend to carry it out?”

“The last day of the month, sir.”

A familiar frown settled on Jiang’s face. That was more than two weeks away. “Why wait?”

“An American holiday called Halloween. Some frivolousness involving children and costumes. The newspaper will be having an event for the employees’ children.”

Jiang shook his head slightly. He had not misjudged Hsiao. The other man was the most brutally efficient individual in Jiang’s employ. “The more innocent the victims, the more likely that Superman and Ultrawoman will both make an appearance.”

Hsiao said nothing. With the slightest enigmatic smile, he bowed his head modestly and slipped out of the room.

Her breath was warm against his chest. He listened to the soft, steady beat of her heart and marveled at how small she was, lying in his arms. It amazed him that he was still capable of feeling something as simple and pure as contentment. He had figured the ability to entertain such emotions had been stripped away from him in one of the countless dungeons he’d inhabited. Or on the battlefields of that distant planet. Yet despite all he’d been through, holding her reaffirmed something primitive and elemental about his humanity. He had been given incredible strength, not to destroy things, but to cherish the things that mattered most to him. He could hold his wife and make her feel loved. And in the small circle of her arms, he too felt loved. And even protected. As powerful as he may have been, he

needed her protection. He needed the comfort of knowing that no matter what, she was always going to be standing right next to him. For all that had happened in the last five years, it was the one thing he was absolutely certain of.

Despite what he’d seen, what he’d been through, what he’d done, he could still be a good man. Because Lois Lane believed in him. Because Lois Lane would never give up on him.

She mumbled something incomprehensible—he thought it might have been ‘is it time to get up?’—against his chest. He dropped a kiss on the crown of her hair. “Sleep, sweetheart,” he whispered in response.

“Love you, Clark,” she murmured.

“I love you, too,” he replied.

“Have you decided what you want to be for Halloween?” Lois asked as she took Jon’s hand, leading him out of his nursery school.

“A cowboy,” he declared.

“That sounds like a good idea.” They descended the steps to the busy sidewalk.

“Or maybe a astronaut.”

Lois couldn’t help but smile. “Grandma’s going to help you make your costume today after Mommy goes back to work.” They carefully navigated the sidewalk, avoiding joggers and dog walkers and dozens of people it seemed who were pushing strollers. Even in this most residential of Metropolis’s neighborhoods, the city thrummed with energy.

“Do I get to go trick or treating?”

“Mmm hmm. There’s going to be a very special party for you and the other kids at Mommy and Daddy’s work. You’ll get to go trick or treating there.”

“Will Uncle Perry and Uncle Jimmy have good candy?”

Lois stopped and leaned down to give her son a conspiratorial wink. “Uncle Perry always has the best candy,” she informed him. Jon’s face lit up with a bright grin.

“How come Grandma’s going to make my costume? How come we aren’t going to buy one in the store?”

Oh, if she could only explain it to him, she thought with an inward smile. “Trust me on this, little man,” Lois began. “No one in the world is better at making costumes than your grandma.”

Jon frowned, as though he could tell his mother was trying to impart some important information to him, but he couldn’t figure out what it was. “Okay, Mommy,” he said at last. Happy that her son’s faith in her was still as strong as ever, she led him the rest of the way home.

Jonathan draped his arm across his wife’s slim shoulders as they walked the path wending its way over the park’s small hills and through groves of brightly colored trees. A cold breeze stirred the branches, causing a rain shower of colorful leaves to fall all around them. He looked up at the riot of oranges, reds, and yellows, wondering if

this was one of the things that gave his wife inspiration to paint.

They walked over the little wooden footbridge that spanned a creek, gurgling and bubbling its way through the nadir of the valley formed by the small hills on either side. He could almost forget for a moment that they were still in Metropolis. “You know,” he began wistfully. “I can’t really remember ever spending an autumn being so unproductive.”

“You’re not unproductive!” Martha exclaimed. “You just finished helping the Historical Society put together its new exhibit on the state’s abolitionist movements.”

Jonathan stopped and turned to face her, taking her hands in his. “I mean I don’t wake up before sunrise every day anymore to milk the cows or feed the chickens. I’m not stacking bales of hay.”

“And thank goodness for that,” Martha interrupted. He smiled at her. “And my hands have gotten soft.”

She gave his hands a gentle squeeze. “It’s not the worst thing in the world,” she said quietly. “But you miss the farm.”

Jonathan sighed. “I miss being able to run the farm. Even if we were in Kansas, I still wouldn’t be able to be a farmer. And it’s all I really ever knew how to be.”

“That isn’t true,” Martha replied, shaking her head. “You’re a wonderful husband. An amazing father. And the best grandfather a little boy could ask for.”

“Thank you,” he said as he pulled her closer and kissed her temple.

“I think we still have autumns in our autumn years so we learn to enjoy them. When did you ever have time in the middle of the afternoon to just walk with your wife through the trees and enjoy their colors? Or traipse around in a pumpkin patch for hours with your grandson to pick out the very biggest and best one the two of you could find? Or laugh gently at city folks who go apple picking because it’s as close to real manual labor as most of them will ever get?”

Jonathan chuckled softly. Maybe Martha was right. Maybe he’d worked hard all those autumns before this one so he could enjoy the ones to come. But he knew it would take more time to get used to this. He shook his head mentally. He had a wonderful wife and family and all the time in the world to let Jon beat him at checkers and to take Thai cooking classes with Martha. To swap books with Harry at the Historical Society. To drive up to the Catskills with his son and go fishing. To read Lois’s columns before anyone else in the world had the chance. There were tougher things in the world for a man to get used to, he realized.

The reporters and editors filed out of the conference room at the end of the weekly meeting. It didn’t matter that every conceivable surface at the Planet had bowls of candy corn and miniature double chocolate fudge crunch bars on them or that the interns were all dressed like zombies and cheerleaders—there was still work to be done. Clark

followed his wife toward the door but stopped suddenly when the sound of sirens cut through the city’s usual din.

Lois turned immediately to look at him. He realized he was already reaching for his tie. “Did you forget your edits to the dock strike piece?” She asked without missing a beat.

She was still a lifesaver. He hadn’t even begun to think of one of his lame excuses. “You know what? I did.” He started to ease his way past the other editors and journalists toward the door.

“I swear, he’d forget his head if it wasn’t attached...” he could hear Lois say as he dodged his way through the work of the decorations committee toward the stairwell. God, he loved his wife.

“Be back in time for the party,” he heard her whisper.

“I will,” he responded almost silently.

“What’s this?” Jimmy asked as the delivery crew pushed past him on their way out of the elevator.

“Uh, piñatas,” one of the two guys carrying a tremendous box yelled over his shoulder.

Because the newsroom didn’t already have enough candy in it, Jimmy thought to himself. He frowned as he watched the two pairs of delivery guys struggle with their loads. Those boxes looked awfully large for piñatas. He shrugged. It wasn’t exactly out of the ordinary for Perry to splurge on parties, especially for the employees’ kids. Every year, he dragged the biggest tree the newsroom could hold onto the bullpen floor.

Ralph swaggered over toward him, dressed—as best Jimmy could guess—as Don Johnson during Miami Vice. “What are you supposed to be? A real journalist?” Ralph sneered.

Jimmy looked down at the camera bag slung over his shoulder. He’d just returned from shooting the dock workers’ latest union meeting. Without a word, he stepped around the office bottom feeder. He had photos to sift through.

“Hey, can’t you take a joke?” Ralph yelled. “Come on, where’s your Halloween spirit?”

Jimmy ignored him and made his way to the graphics department.

“The first one goes in the supply room, all the way in the back,” Sid gritted out. He didn’t know what was in these boxes and he didn’t want to know, but he was being paid pretty damn well to follow a very specific set of instructions.

“What about this one?” one of the guys carrying the other box said.

“Goes one floor down. In the storage room.” Sid heard the other guys groan. Tough. They were being paid enough not to complain. Sid looked at the guy holding up the other end of the box, sweating profusely. What was his name again? Patrick? Benjamin? It didn’t really matter, Sid thought with a mental shrug. They slowly made their way to the supply closet.

“Careful,” Sid cautioned as they lowered the box to the ground. He’d been specifically warned against dropping it.

“What the hell is in this thing?” Pat or Ben or whoever he was, said as he wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

“We’re not getting paid to care,” Sid grunted. “Now get out of here.”

The other guy shrugged and left the storage room. Sid pulled his box cutter from his pocket and tore into the box. Pulling away the cardboard, he let out a low whistle. No wonder it was so heavy. Whatever the damn thing was, it looked like it was made of lead.

“Set the computer clock on the first box for thirty-five minutes and the clock on the second for thirty minutes. Do you understand?” The little Asian man in the fancy suit had repeated those instructions to him at least a dozen times. It had annoyed him at the time, but now, he was kind of glad the other man had done so. He felt beads of perspiration forming on his brow. What exactly was it that he’d agreed to do? He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. There wasn’t much sense in dwelling on it now. He set the clock as he was instructed and watched as it started to silently count backward immediately. Feeling his heart pounding in his throat, he stood back up and started for the stairwell. It would only take half a minute to program the other clock, but he was pretty damn sure that he didn’t want to be around when either one got to zero.

“Just how much candy did you eat?” Lois asked as she looked at her little boy.

He proudly held up his empty plastic pumpkin pail. “All of it,” he announced.

Lois shook her head. What kind of preschool were they running, exactly? She was going to have a serious talk with Jon’s teacher about setting boundaries for four-year-olds. Lois knelt beside her son in the Planet’s entrance. “All right, cowboy, time for Uncle Perry’s party. But no eating any more candy. You have to save it for later.” She straightened his brown cowboy hat and his red neckerchief. Martha had, of course, done a terrific job with his costume—from his fringed vest to his ‘Sheriff Jon’ badge. Taking his hand again, she walked with him toward the elevators.

Inside the elevator car, she let Jon push the button for the newsroom floor, helping him reach it since it was still just a bit too high for him. “Hold that elevator!” she heard a familiar voice call out. She held down the “Door Open” button and her husband slipped into the crowded car.

“Daddy!” Jon exclaimed as his father picked him up.

“Howdy Pard’ner,” Clark replied with a grin. They reached the newsroom floor and shuffled their way past the other passengers toward the wildly decorated bullpen. Fake spider webs were hung from every overhang and doorway. Purple, orange, and black streamers criss-crossed the ceilings and wrapped themselves around all the pillars. A giant banner declaring “Happy Halloween” greeted them even before they reached the bullpen floor. Vampires and ghouls and fairy princesses ran all around them, having

possessed the newsroom for an afternoon of mischief. Clark smiled as he maneuvered to kiss Lois’s cheek.

“Did you find your notes?” she asked cryptically.

“Of course,” he said, still grinning. “Everything’s fine.” Holding Jon up with one arm, he slipped his free hand into hers. “I heard there’s a caramel apple station,” he said to his son.

“No more sweets for him right now. He’s already had a bucket of candy,” Lois cautioned.

“But Mommy, you said apples are good for us,” Jon protested.

She shook her head ruefully, remembering being a kid and trying to use that logic herself. She wondered if Clark had ever tried the same. She remembered the first time they’d gone to Smallville, not long after they’d been made partners. He’d spoken wistfully about the caramel apples Wayne Irig and his wife had given out every Halloween, expecting her to make a snide comment about country bumpkins and their Halloween traditions. Instead, she’d told him that she loved caramel apples. He’d seemed pleasantly surprised by the comment. She marveled at the fact that they’d actually had that conversation, somewhere approaching a hundred lifetimes ago. It was almost impossible to remember a time when she didn’t know things like the fact that they both loved caramel apples. Or that he secretly flew around in the night rescuing cats in trees and damsels in distress.

Hsiao monitored his two little devices from the rundown walk-up about a few blocks west of Planet Square. Here, he was well outside the potential blast zone, but close enough to feel like he had control over his operation. The built-in cameras on both bombs let him see the surrounding area and would give him the advanced warning he’d need in the event someone accidentally stumbled upon them before they could explode. The little remote detonator he held loosely in his hands was his failsafe. If the cameras revealed that someone discovered the bombs before the first could go off, he could simply blow one of them up from here.

As the timers counted down, he tried to imagine the scene that would have been unfolding. Unbeknownst to the many party-goers, the lead shielding on the devices was about to open, ensuring maximum exposure to Kryptonite for Ultrawoman and Superman. The bombs themselves were nothing special – some high-grade explosives and Kryptonite, of course – but they were placed near load-bearing walls in order to ensure significant structural damage.

The first bomb wasn’t designed to kill the innocent bystanders, just to cause panic and ensure the widespread presence of Kryptonite for the second explosion. He could envision in his mind the two heroes trying to evacuate the building, their strength failing them. The second explosion was the one designed to end their existence. It had both a greater quantity of Kryptonite and a larger payload of explosives.

Hsiao watched the closed circuit television in silence. It would only be a few more minutes.

Her son tugged on her hand as they waited for his turn to get his face painted. “Mommy, I don’t feel so good,” Jon whimpered.

Probably from eating all that candy, she mused silently to herself. “Does your tummy hurt?” she asked as she knelt beside him. Lois frowned, noticing his face was flushed with color. She touched his forehead. He was burning up. From across the newsroom, Clark was standing beside them in an instant. She swore he must have moved with superspeed.

“Is he okay?” Clark asked, concern evident in his voice.

Lois stood up and felt the room start to sway and spin. A sudden dizziness set over her. One look at her husband told her that he felt it, too. “Get Jon out of here,” he barked. She wanted to demand that he come with them, too, but he’d already started for the stairwell.

Damn him.

Lois didn’t have time to properly curse her husband’s obstinate behavior. Swiftly, she lifted her son in her arms. She felt weaker than she should have, but it wasn’t going to stop her from getting him out of the building faster than humanly possible. Running toward the other stairwell, she could hear the shouts from the newsroom as people registered their surprise at Superman’s sudden appearance.

Jon gripped her arm tightly and moaned as she ran down the steps. He leaned over her shoulder and retched, but she didn’t slow down. She breathed heavily and her head swam. After what seemed like an eternity, she finally threw open the door to the lobby. She rushed out into Planet Square, still carrying Jon in her arms. Scanning the area, she frantically sorted through her options. She could find a way to change and fly Jon out of there, but she didn’t know if she’d actually be able to stay airborne. She could try a cab, looking for the fastest way to get the most distance between them and the Kryptonite.

Suddenly, she caught sight of the two most wonderful people in the world. A block away from the Planet, her in-laws were approaching. She ran, carrying her son, to meet them.

“Are we too late?” Martha asked. “Did we miss all the excitement?” Her mother-in-law’s smile died when she finally got a good look at the two of them.

“Get Jon as far away from the Daily Planet as possible. Get him to Dr. Klein,” Lois instructed as she handed her son to her father-in-law, oblivious to Jonathan’s bad back.

“Lois, are you okay?” Jonathan shouted as she started back toward the building.

She stopped for the barest of moments, feeling beads of sweat pour down her face. “I have to go back for Clark,” she said breathlessly. Frightened children and their parents were already starting to pour out of the Planet building. She had no choice but to detour briefly to the alley behind the paper to change into the suit. From the alley, she rocketed upward.

Controlling her flight was harder than it should have been. Her body moved like she was trying to swim through mud. And she couldn’t help feeling like she was about to throw up. But there was no way in hell she was going to leave Clark behind.

They’d had the conversation about this scenario. He’d made her promise that if somehow, it came down to protecting him or Jon, she wouldn’t hesitate for a second before making the choice to save their son. She’d extracted the same promise from him. But Jon was on his way to the one man best suited to take care of him at this moment. She wasn’t going to leave her husband to face down death alone.

Not this time.

It took him no time at all to find the bomb, but he was dismayed when his x-ray vision, fuzzy though it was, confirmed the presence of a second explosive. He tried to get a feel for the design of the weapons, knowing his X-ray vision was unlikely to work the closer he got. Each one consisted of a few canisters of liquid explosives, attached to a pair of triggering mechanisms. Tied into both triggers were shards of Kryptonite. In both bombs, the Kryptonite couldn’t be extracted without detonating the bombs. Both bombs had bases made of lead, probably to make them too heavy for him to try hurling them into the stratosphere in his weakened state. And both were built with thin, retractable lead shields, which he surmised had been included to keep him from noticing them before they were scheduled to go off. He also noticed the cameras on the explosives, guaranteed to give the bomber a ringside seat to the action. Since the bomber had shielded the Kryptonite in the devices, he had clearly wanted to make sure that Superman and Ultrawoman didn’t know about their presence until it was too late. Not wanting to alert the bomber to the fact that he’d gotten a head start, he didn’t approach either weapon until he’d figured out what he was going to do.

He was about to start with the first of the bombs when he noticed a tiny radio receiver attached to the top of each device. It had to be for a remote detonator, he realized. If he managed to defuse one of the bombs, he was sure his bomber would simply blow the other one. From his vantage point on the newsroom floor, however, his x-ray vision gave him direct line of site to both receivers. Despite the dizziness and the nausea, he would have to concentrate hard to keep both his x-ray vision and laser vision functioning long enough to burn through the interior walls and destroy each receiver before his bomber could realize what had happened. If he missed, he could accidentally set off one of the bombs.

Clark didn’t have the luxury of worrying about that possibility. The timers were busy counting down and the building had not yet been evacuated. He idly imagined the Planet and its insurers wouldn’t mind the holes he was about to put in the building’s interior walls and floors, compared to the mess the bombs were likely to make.

Forcing his double vision to come back into focus, he stared down at the bomb on the lower level, through layers of pipes and wood and tile that stubbornly resisted his x-ray vision. He focused on the receiver and held his laser vision steady for as long as it took to destroy the receiver in a puff of smoke.

He didn't have time to celebrate its destruction. Somewhere nearby, the bomber was going to have noticed that. Clark immediately focused through the wall separating the storage room from the bullpen floor to destroy the other receiver. His laser vision grew weaker, sputtering and fading, and the overwhelming fear that he might not succeed crashed over him. It felt like an eternity passed in the fraction of a second it actually took him to turn the other receiver into a small bit of fried electronics and a melted antenna.

He grabbed his head in pain from the effort. If his life depended on it, he wouldn't have been able to see through a piece of paper at that moment. But he didn't have time. The bombs were still armed, still ticking away.

Hsiao cursed as he stood up. They'd gotten there too soon. His monitor informed him that both radio receivers were dead. He squeezed the trigger on the first device repeatedly. Nothing happened. He tried the second device as well. Nothing. The camera signal was still functioning and both bombs were still sitting alone, unnoticed in their quiet, tucked-away locations.

But Hsiao didn't believe in bad luck. It was no coincidence that the signals had gone out. He wasn't willing to dismiss the unfortunate occurrence as interference from lead in the bombs or a downed power-line somewhere or a more powerful signal from one of Planet Square's TV stations, jamming his connection to the bomb.

Someone had been alerted to the presence of the bombs. Someone who had the ability to incapacitate both receivers at the same time without tipping him off to their presence. Frantically, he cut the signal from one of his monitors and flipped through the local news channels.

Nothing.

The third time through, however, he saw it. From shaky video that was probably taken from a traffic helicopter, LNN was showing a steady stream of people pouring out of the Planet building. There was a chance that Superman or Ultrawoman would actually be able to disarm both bombs before they could kill them. He buttoned up his suit coat over the pistol he carried at his side. Plan B was both simpler and messier than Plan A. Should the bombs have failed to kill the two superheroes, he was going to have to shoot them. He could only hope they'd been sufficiently weakened by the Kryptonite.

His margin for error was rapidly vanishing.

Clark started with the one on the lower level. Its timer left him less of a cushion. Just entering the supply space where it was waiting nearly knocked him to the ground. A

wave of pain washed over him and his vision blurred. He felt his skin burn hotter and hotter the closer he got. Dropping to his knees, he reached for the device. With thick fingers, he ripped the face off the timing device and pulled out the correct wire, killing the main timer. As expected, the backup timer started to count down in its place. He coughed violently, feeling as though his lungs blistered and shriveled with each shakily drawn breath. His body crying out pitifully against the continued exertion, he fumbled with the second timer. After what seemed like an eternity, he disarmed it, too.

He fell forward onto his hands and knees. Behind the timing systems, the tiny chunks of Kryptonite gave off a sickly glow. He grabbed the thin lead lining that had at one point covered the bomb and ripped it away from the device, bloodying his hands as he worked. He felt the searing pain as he continued to rip the metal apart; his blood made his hands sticky and slowed him down. At long last, he worked off a large enough piece to wrap around the chunks of Kryptonite. His hands seemed to catch fire as he gathered the little shards into the lead and wrapped it up tightly.

The radiating, pulsing waves of pain subsided, but the fever and aches that wracked his entire body remained. He exhaled hard, each labored breath demanding more of him than he thought he could give. Clark tried to stand, but he fell to the floor. On his hands and knees, he crawled out of the supply room, leaving a bloody trail.

He dragged himself out of the supply closet and started for the stairwell.

Lois cursed fate silently. There was a Kryptonite-laced bomb in the newsroom. She had two minutes to disarm it. She didn't know where Clark was. And the floors above the newsroom had been slow to start evacuating, even though someone had pulled the fire alarm. They probably thought it was a drill, she thought bitterly. She burst through the window on the top floor of the building, hardly able to control her flight. "Everyone out of the building," she shouted. "Take the stairs, get out now. This isn't a drill."

Startled employees in the Planet's executive offices stared at her for a moment, before remembering how to respond. "Come on, folks, let's go," she shouted again. She had to repeat the process on the next two floors down. Each time, risking that she wouldn't actually be able to fly down, but might instead finally drop like a rock out of the sky, no longer free to flout the laws of gravity. Her x-ray vision grew so weak she could barely see through the thin interior walls of the building, and even doing that caused her headache to worsen. A quick search of the newsroom confirmed that it had been evacuated. No scared little kids hiding in the bathrooms. No oblivious reporters trying to track down a source. There was still no sign of her husband.

Her patience was gone. To hell with the bomb. She had to find Clark.

From the stairwell, she could hear shouting. "Let him through, let him through," someone called out. She figured someone must have been injured in the rush to get out of

the building. Still operating at far less than full capacity, she had to do whatever she could to make sure no one got trampled to death in the evacuation. She wrenched open the door to find Clark on the other side, struggling to make his way up the stairs, against the tide of people. ‘Idiot,’ she thought darkly to herself. Why hadn’t she figured she should have looked for him there?

She managed to catch him before he could fall on the landing, but she staggered under his weight. Dragging him into the newsroom and away from the press of people was her only choice, even though it meant getting closer to the Kryptonite.

He tried to stand, but his legs were useless. His entire body refused to cooperate. The momentary relief he’d felt when he’d gotten the Kryptonite chunks wrapped up was gone. His proximity to the second bomb meant a whole new wave of pain. He realized who he was leaning on and cursed silently.

“Jon?”

Clark could hear her labored breaths. “He’s with your parents. We have to get you out of here,” she gritted out.

“There’s another bomb,” he managed weakly. He knew they hadn’t finished evacuating the building. People were still trying to get out.

“There isn’t enough time,” she countered, her voice threatening to break on the words.

Which was precisely why she shouldn’t have been there. “Go,” he slurred. “Jon should have at least one parent.”

“I’m not leaving you,” she replied obstinately, but he could feel her crumpling under his weight.

He’d been past the breaking point of his body before. Past the point where he could stand or even take a real breath. He’d existed in the sliver of space between life and death before. The place too small for even the will to live to exist.

And this was not it.

Leaning one bloodied hand on the wall, he straightened himself up. “Then we do this together,” he declared.

They stumbled and staggered into the storage room, toward the source of their burning pain and waiting death. He sank to his knees in front of the bomb and grabbed for the lead shielding. His body shook as a coughing fit seized his frame. “Same as the other one,” he managed hoarsely. “Green wire first. Then the blue one in the backup...”

She tore apart the timing mechanism and did as he instructed, shutting off the bomb with less than half a minute to spare. A palpable sense of relief washed over him, even as the Kryptonite continued to poison his body. She grabbed the piece of lead shielding he’d been trying to rip apart and tore it off in her hands. He gathered all the Kryptonite fragments directly in his bloodied hands and dropped them in the lead, hearing himself cry out from the burning pain. He fell over completely; only the retreating of the waves of agony from the Kryptonite signaled to him that she’d succeeded in getting it surrounded by the lead.

“Come on,” she said, staggering to her feet. He tried to stand, but only made it as far as his hands and knees. Lois grabbed his arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. She struggled for a long moment, but finally managed to get him to his feet. He wondered idly why she was in so much better shape than he was. Thankfully, she probably hadn’t been exposed as long to the Kryptonite. He shuffled forward with only the smallest of steps. There was no way in hell that they were going to get down the stairs like this. She had to practically drag him to the elevator. Even the half-dozen steps up from the newsroom floor to the elevator banks was the equivalent of climbing a mountain. His entire body screamed out in agony from the effort.

Finally reaching their destination, she staggered forward and smashed the “Down” button with the flat palm of her hand. He collapsed against the wall, sinking down to the floor. For a long moment, it was all he could do to keep breathing. Sweat poured down his face in rivers. His suit was spattered in the blood that still flowed from the wounds on his hands. In the distance, he could hear police sirens. Seemingly ages ago, as he’d told Perry to evacuate, he’d warned the older man to keep the police and emergency crews, as well as everyone else, as far away from the building as possible. But with the bombs now defused, he really hoped that they’d get some help soon. He wasn’t sure how much further Lois would be able to carry him.

The chime of the door told him it was time to drag himself up from the ground. Lois helped him into the elevator, struggling with the exertion needed to move his much larger frame. He tried to be as helpful as he could, which wasn’t saying very much at the moment. Once in the elevator, he collapsed again.

Lois leaned against the elevator wall as the doors slid closed, trying to regain her strength. The nausea had subsided, but she still felt weak and feverish. But compared to Clark, she was running on all cylinders. He was pale and his skin had felt clammy to the touch. His hands were an awful, bloody mess. The cuts were superficial, but the burns looked terribly painful. She hoped time and enough sunlight would allow them to heal. She wondered if it was the relative lengths of their exposure to the Kryptonite that had rendered him so much worse off. But he’d told her before that his first experience with Kryptonite had been, by far, the worst. It had almost immediately knocked him unconscious. Feverish and ill, it had taken him the better part of a day just to get to human normal and several more days passed before his powers returned.

The elevator seemed to take an eternity in traveling the few floors between the newsroom and the lobby, but finally, the car stopped and the doors slid open. She summoned whatever strength she had, which was pretty much just the strength she’d had as an ordinary person, to help Clark back to his feet. He leaned heavily on her, one arm draped over her shoulders and they dragged themselves toward the revolving doors. God, he was heavy, she thought to herself as he stumbled forward. The swaying of his

movements nearly caused her to lose her balance. It wasn't that much further now.

From the other side of the glass doors, she could see paramedics breaking through the security cordon the bomb squad had established. They were wheeling a gurney toward the two of them. Thank God, she thought to herself. She needed to get her husband to STAR Labs and to Bernie. He was the only person who would really know what to do. She pushed open the doors and helped her husband limp out of the Daily Planet building. She could see the not-insubstantial crowd staring at the two bruised and battered superheroes.

The crowd that had formed outside the security cordon parted, but it wasn't for the medics. Near another set of barricades, a single figure – a slight-looking Asian man in a suit strode purposefully toward them, the pistol he held straight in front of him made rather clear what that purpose was. She heard the sounds of screaming; people yelling out, "he's got a gun!" and "get down!"

She heard herself yell, "no!" as she tried to push Clark out of the gunman's line of fire. She heard a pair of shots. The sound of broken glass. And then she felt the white-hot pain tear through the flesh of her leg. Lois fell to the ground, taking Clark unceremoniously with her. There was another gun shot. It sounded different from the first two.

Suddenly, at least a dozen emergency rescue workers were lifting the two of them onto gurneys. "STAR Labs," she managed to murmur, or at least she thought. The pain lancinating through her muscles managed to crowd out most of her other thoughts.

Bernie Klein had not gone into science for this.

He searched frantically through the lab's supply closets, trying to find anything that would be useful in treating his little patient. He'd already called most of the practicing physicians he knew, cajoling them into bringing him things like pulse ox monitors and IV bags, all the while refusing to explain why. Throughout the lab's hallways, he knew he was drawing curious stares from his colleagues and subordinates, but he didn't care. He raced up and down the medical research facilities, wondering why the hell it was so hard to find a damn child-sized blood pressure cuff around here.

Bernie cursed the pager on his belt that had just started to buzz. He grabbed it and deciphered its code.

Damn it.

He'd been expecting this. Jon being exposed to Kryptonite, even briefly, had meant there was a good chance both his parents were going to show up in rather worse shape. It looked like paramedics were bringing both of them in. And the GSW abbreviation in the message meant at least one of them had been shot. Terrific, that meant he had to learn to be a surgeon in about five minutes.

Bernie jogged breathlessly back to the top-secret medical lab where he treated his three patients. He swiped his ID, underwent the retinal scan and entered his PIN, the door finally sliding open to grant him entry. Within the

larger secured lab, he'd placed Jon in one of the small exam rooms. From their places sitting beside the little boy's bed, Jon's grandparents leapt to their feet as soon as he entered.

"Dr. Klein..." Jon's grandmother started.

Bernie glanced at the bed, where Jon lay sleeping. "Superman and Ultrawoman are being brought in," he said tersely. "I'm afraid their conditions are worse than Jon's."

The Kents' expressions grew even more ashen. He knew they were terrified for their grandson, but though the little boy was very sick, his condition had stabilized. Bernie now had to figure out how to prepare an operating theater in the lab without the right supplies or the right personnel. "Stay here with Jon," he instructed. "I'll try to update you on their conditions as soon as I can, but for now, the best thing you can do is be with your grandson."

Bernie pulled the door closed behind him and grabbed the nearest phone on the wall. He dialed a number he normally would have been loathe to call. "Get me Dr. Millard. It's an emergency," he said impatiently into the receiver, wondering why the only trauma surgeon he knew was a woman he'd dated in medical school who could no longer stand him. "It's Bernie Klein," he said as she picked up the line. "Don't hang up," he felt the need to add. "I've got incoming trauma patients to STAR Labs. Get here as soon as you can. And bring a couple of units of O negative." Of course, she'd demanded to know why on earth trauma patients were being directed to a research lab, but he didn't have time to explain. "You'll see why when you get here," he said testily. "Just hurry."

He slammed down the phone and made his way back to the supply closets to ransack them for the tools he'd need. He grabbed whatever he could – surgical tubing, lavages and gauze, packages of sterilized instruments – nothing fancy, certainly nothing any decent hospital would have. He was stuck with a couple of different scalpels and pickups and some packets of sutures and nothing more than local anesthetic. He'd have to make do. With his armful of supplies, he returned to the lab, struggling to disarm the door without dropping everything.

Finally dumping his "surgical supplies" on an exam tray, he dragged it and a powerful lamp over toward one of the exam tables. He was going to have to conscript at least a few of the paramedics into acting as his scrub nurses. He hoped Abby would hurry the hell up and get there soon.

The sound of sirens wailing outside told him the medics had beaten her there. Reception had already been informed to let the medics all the way through the facility to where he was. Within moments, there was a pounding at the door. He swung it open as two gurneys were wheeled into the lab.

"Female GSW, male... frankly doc, we don't know what the hell is wrong with Superman or why he's bleeding, or why Ultrawoman was wounded by a gunshot," the lead paramedic said, baffled.

"All of you," Bernie shouted to the five medics who were crowding his lab. "Get clean gloves, gimme a hand."

Lois was at least conscious, but the blood soaking through the bandages around her leg made it pretty damn

clear where she'd been shot. "Please, see if he's okay," she demanded, her voice shaking.

"Get her on the exam table," he told the medics before swiveling to see the other patient.

"Dr. Klein." He heard Superman call his name weakly.

"Superman, are you all right?" Bernie said breathlessly as he leaned over his friend, trying to determine the source of the blood on his uniform.

"Superficial cuts on his hands, along with partial blister burns," one of the paramedics nearest to Clark said. "No other visible injuries. But he's burning up and his pulse is almost two hundred."

"Get the wounds washed with distilled water, dress the burns, bandage his hands, and monitor him," Bernie instructed tersely, figuring there was at least the possibility of traces of Kryptonite in the wounds.

The medics had transferred Lois to the exam table in the intervening thirty seconds and were cutting away the boot and leg of her uniform. "Exit wound?" Bernie asked.

"No sir," one of the medics replied.

Of course not. Why on earth would anything be easy today? It looked like he had to go fishing for a bullet. He really needed whole blood, but the only transfusion-grade blood products he could get from the lab were plasma. Where the hell was Abby? He shouted to a paramedic to start the transfusion of plasma while he tried to gauge the damage the bullet had done from the blood loss. Another medic gave her a shot of lidocaine not far from the entry wound. It would hardly be enough to take the edge off the pain from a gunshot wound. He tried to be delicate as he examined the injury. She wasn't losing blood quickly enough to have been hit in the femoral or any other major artery, which was the first lucky break these two seemed to have gotten today.

He reached for the pickups he was going to have to use to find the bullet. One of the medics took her hand while another braced her leg, far from the site of the wound. "You're not going to crush my hand, are you?" the medic holding Ultrawoman's hand asked nervously.

"Right now, I couldn't crush a bug," she confessed.

Willing his hands to remain steady and still, Bernie braced himself. "Lo... Ultrawoman," he began, almost screwing up royally. "This is going to hurt like hell."

"What the hell is going on here?" a familiar voice boomed from behind him. Confound that woman, he thought to himself as he dropped the pickups on the exam tray.

"Shut up and give me a hand, okay, Abby?" he said testily.

"Good lord, Bernie," Abby Millard muttered under her breath as she pushed him aside. She pulled on a pair of surgical gloves and picked up the forceps he'd dropped. With deft hands, she quickly found and extracted the bullet and began suturing the wound. All the while, Lois tried not to scream through gritted teeth. He'd been relegated to the role of scrub nurse, but Bernie Klein, certified lab rat, was

glad not to be the one digging around in the quadriceps muscles of a superhero, looking for a little piece of lead.

Abby stepped away from the table. "Keep the wound as clean as you can," she instructed. "God, Bernie, Civil War field hospitals were better than this."

"This isn't a hospital, Abby," he responded impatiently. "It's a lab. I had to improvise. I need to check on the other patient," he said, looking for the easiest way to get out of the room.

He found Clark in another of the small exam rooms, fully conscious, but looking like hell. The medic who'd taken to caring for the superhero stood up as Bernie entered the room. "Give us a few minutes," Bernie instructed the paramedic, who merely nodded and left, closing the door behind him. "How are..." Bernie began to ask.

"Lois?" Clark interrupted immediately.

"Will be fine," Bernie said. "The bullet is out, the wound has been closed. No powers yet, but I think they'll come back."

"How can you be sure?" Clark demanded.

"I have a theory," Bernie explained. "But first, I need to examine you."

"What about Jon?"

"He's stable," Bernie replied. "He was pretty sick when he got here, but his temperature has come back down and he's sleeping comfortably. I'm going to check his blood work in minute, but I don't think there's any Kryptonite in his system." He could see the relief settle on the other man's face.

"When can I see him?" Clark asked.

"When we're done here." He went through Clark's vitals; they were still nowhere near normal for him, but they were better than they had been when he'd arrived. "How do your hands feel?"

"Like I was digging through shredded metal for shards of Kryptonite, Bernie," Clark replied darkly. His foul mood lifted, if only slightly. "They still hurt, but not as much as before," he amended. "Now can I see my son?"

"Let me get the paramedics and Dr. Millard out of here, then I'll take you to see Jon and Lois."

Clark tried to stand up and practically fell out of bed, forcing Bernie to catch him before he could tumble to the floor. "Stay in bed," Bernie commanded, not thinking about the oddity of giving the most powerful man in the world direct orders. Resignedly, Clark lay back down. With a weary sigh, Bernie left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

Bernie managed to get rid of the paramedics easily. None of them seemed particularly comfortable in that lab, performing surgery on superheroes. He turned back toward Abby, who was scribbling down post-op instructions. "Thank you," he managed, somehow.

She handed him the folded instructions. "Next time, leave surgery to the surgeons, Bernie," she said before walking out of the lab. Confound that woman, he thought to himself again. His lab back in some semblance of order—excepting the three very unusual patients—he exhaled

deeply, relieved to have gotten through this particular crisis. He checked Lois's IV drip and the sterile dressing around her wound before drawing some blood. He ran her blood through the spectrometer and found the results from Jon's tests.

No Kryptonite present.

He closed his eyes, relieved. The remaining tests would take at least a day to complete, but then he'd know for sure whether his theory made sense. Bernie crossed the lab to knock softly on the door to Jon's room. The Kents looked up at him, a mixture of nerves and hopeful expectations in their expressions. "They're going to be fine," Bernie said. "But they could use a few changes of clothes, stuff to make them comfortable because I'm going to want them to stay for at least another day or so."

"I'll go," Clark's father said, his voice rough. He stood slowly from his chair.

"Do you have the results from Jon's tests?" Clark's mother asked.

Bernie nodded with a slight smile. "The tests look good. He'll probably feel better by morning."

Dressed in sweats and an old t-shirt, with gauze wrapped around his hands, turning them into useless paddles, Clark sat beside his son's bed, gazing down at his little boy through a film of tears. In a split second, Jon had almost been taken from him. If the bombs had been configured just a little differently, if they'd been any slower to react, those explosives could have cost him everything he held dear in life. In the other little room, Lois lay sleeping under the fog of pain killers. Her body no longer invulnerable either to the drugs or the bullet that had torn through flesh and blood. What on earth had possessed her to run back into the building after him? He knew the answer of course. She'd run back into a waiting nuclear detonation for him once. She wouldn't have been Lois Lane otherwise.

They both could have easily died, leaving Jon orphaned. There was a strange, ironic symmetry to that. Just like his own parents, he and Lois loved Jon far more than they loved their own lives. And just like his own parents, they'd had to face down death to protect other people. But unlike Jor El and Lara, he and Lois had won their fight with death. They'd survived. He knew that was something they couldn't take for granted.

Stiffly, he stood up and leaned down to kiss his son's forehead. He slipped out of the room quietly, finding Bernie waiting for him on the other side. Clark tried to fold his arms across his chest, his bandaged hands making it impossible. So he stood with his hands awkwardly by his side. The doctor looked nervous, his complexion devoid of any color. "What's up?" Clark asked.

"Lois's blood work," Bernie began.

"What's wrong? Is she okay?" Clark interrupted anxiously.

"She's pregnant," Bernie said simply.

Clark could feel his heart leap into his throat. He tried to say something but the only sound he could produce was a strangled "huh?"

"I figured you didn't know," Bernie continued. "From her hormone levels, it's likely Lois didn't know either. I doubt she's more than a few weeks along."

The entire room started to spin and Clark leaned against the wall, knowing that without its support, he was likely to fall down. His eyes grew wide and he struggled to breathe. "The Kryptonite...the baby..." he managed to gasp. This wasn't happening. Not to them. Not now. How completely awful could their timing be?

"Clark," Bernie began, grabbing Clark's arm to steady him. "Lois is doing really well; she's healing faster than any normal human being should, which means we have reason to be hopeful. But it'll be a while before we know how, if at all, the Kryptonite exposure might have affected the pregnancy."

Did she know? Could she have known? *Should* she have known? The thoughts swirled around in his head in a confusing storm of recriminations. Had she run back into that building knowing that it wasn't just her life at stake? Had she risked the pregnancy they'd both wanted so badly in order to protect him? What if the baby wasn't okay? What if...He felt his body sway as he staggered forward, only Bernie's presence kept him from collapsing to the floor.

Bernie said something incomprehensible. The words were incapable of penetrating through the thick fog around Clark's mind. He stumbled and fell into the chair Bernie was guiding him to. There, he sat and stared blankly ahead, his eyes seeing nothing.

The inside of her mouth felt like it was stuffed full of cotton balls. "Clark?" she managed to croak despite the gummy sensation of a dry tongue and a parched throat.

"It's Bernie, Lois. I'm here," she heard Dr. Klein say.

Lois blinked her eyes open to find her doctor pouring her a cup of water. She reached out to receive it from him. An IV needle stuck out of the back of her hand. Well, she didn't need to see that to know that she was still vulnerable. Her leg burned and throbbed with a pulsing ache.

"How are you feeling?" Bernie asked.

"Trust me on this, don't get shot," she said. "But I'm okay. How's Jon? How's Clark?"

"They're both fine," Bernie assured her. "Clark is awake and alert. His hands are still healing, but he should be good as new in a day or so. Jon's asleep. Rehydration therapy, some sunlight, and little rest are all he needs."

"Thank God," she breathed.

Bernie started to cut through the bandage that was wrapped around her leg. "I want to change your dressing and see how you're healing." She craned her neck to get a look at the site of her gunshot wound. It was bright red and swollen and a bunch of jagged-looking stitches held the puffy, discolored skin together. "Lois, this is amazing," Bernie said.

“Really?” she replied, wondering if they were looking at the same mess.

“Your body looks like it’s about a week into the healing process and we performed surgery maybe eight hours ago. I imagine your skin will push the stitches out by tomorrow.”

“That’s good to hear. So does this mean my powers aren’t gone forever?”

“No normal person could heal this fast. You’ll be super again before you know it,” he assured her. “But I’m afraid I’ve had to take you off your pain medication.”

Which explained why her leg hurt so much. She sensed his nervousness and it made her uncomfortable. “Not exactly what a gunshot victim wants to hear, Bernie,” she tried to joke.

“Given the nature of your injury, the benefits far outweighed the risks. And frankly, we weren’t aware of the risks at the time...”

“What risks?” she demanded. “Bernie, what are you talking about? What’s wrong?”

He gulped visibly and she could see the beads of perspiration on his forehead. “You’re pregnant,” he blurted out inelegantly. “I took you off the narcotic painkillers as soon as I figured it out, which was a few hours ago. Such a short exposure is unlikely to result in harm, especially this early in a pregnancy, but better safe...”

“Pregnant?” she could scarcely whisper the word. “God, Bernie, the Kryptonite...” she could hear her voice break as she spoke, tears flooding her eyes. What had she done?

“Lois, we don’t know that the Kryptonite had any effect. You’re healing faster than Clark is, which I assume means you were exposed for a significantly shorter period of time than he was.”

“I have to know. How do we find out? What kind of tests can you run?”

He shook his head ruefully. “It’s too early to tell,” he said. “We have to wait until you’re further along. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise I’ll be jeopardizing the baby even more, right?”

Her physician regarded her with sorrowful eyes. “Lois, it’s too early for an amniocentesis. There’s nothing I can do until then.”

She closed her eyes, feeling tears slip down her cheeks. “Does Clark know?” she whispered.

“I told him a little while ago,” Bernie admitted.

“That’s why he isn’t here, isn’t it?” she asked softly. She fell back against the pillows, suddenly lacking the strength to even sit up. “He must hate me.”

“He was terrified for you. And I think he’s in shock. But he doesn’t hate you. You know that. He’s been sitting with Jon. I’ll let him know you’re awake.” With that, her awkward physician retreated from the room. Lois stared up at the ceiling through tear-filled eyes. She’d had no choice, she told herself, trying to stiffen her spine. She hadn’t known she was pregnant. She hadn’t even missed a period yet. There’s no way she could have known.

Except that they’d been trying for a baby.

For about three weeks, another part of her mind countered. But the last time, they hadn’t needed three weeks. One night was all it had taken. She knew that Clark had once feared that they wouldn’t be able to have children. Apparently fertility was not one of their problems, she thought somewhat darkly to herself.

But what else could she have done? She couldn’t have left Clark to die in that building alone, too weakened from the first bomb to defuse the second before it could kill him. Given what she’d known at the time, she had done the only thing she could have. She’d gone after her husband because he’d needed her. Because the people evacuating out of that building had needed her.

What if she had known? What would she have done? Would she have chosen to save Clark, to risk jeopardizing the baby’s health for his life? What mattered more to her, the husband who was her entire world, or the potential life they’d created together? She closed her eyes, tossing her head to let the tears seep into her pillow as she sobbed quietly.

The sound of her crying muffled his footsteps as he entered the room. “Lois?” she heard him say her name with such sadness in his voice.

“Clark?” she cried out.

“I’m here,” he said as he rushed to kneel beside her bed.

She reached out for him before realizing that the bandages prevented her from even holding his hand. He kissed her forehead and she reached out to touch his face. She felt the moisture on his cheeks and realized that she wasn’t the only one crying. He turned his face to drop a kiss against the palm of her hand. “Are you okay?” he whispered hoarsely.

“I’m so scared,” she confessed miserably.

“So am I,” he admitted.

Her husband pulled a chair up next to her bed and for a long while, they sat in silence. She let her hand rest on his forearm, above the bandages covering his hand. She wondered if his hands still hurt. He’d been exposed to the Kryptonite far longer than she had, and her leg still ached and throbbed. He cleared his throat softly, causing her to raise her eyes from his hands to look at his face.

“Did you know?” he murmured. There was only one thing he could have been talking about.

“Of course not,” she replied in a harsh whisper. “Do you think I would have kept that from you?”

Her response caused him to hang his head. Her mouth twisted into a frown. This wasn’t supposed to be about making each other feel bad. They weren’t keeping score on some sadistic ledger. But his question had hurt at least as much as the Kryptonite had.

“No,” he admitted. “I just...” He tried to run his hand through his hair, the bandages preventing him from doing so. He growled in frustration. “I’m sorry,” he said at last.

But she could hear it in his voice. He was holding back. He was thinking the same thing she was – that she’d put the pregnancy in terrible risk. That she could still miscarry.

That their child could be born with awful medical problems. That the baby could suffer because of what she'd done.

And it would be months before they could know. Months of unspoken fears sitting heavy in the air between them. Poisoning everything they touched.

His doctor finished cutting through the dressing on his right hand. Clark let the torn bandages fall away and started to flex his fingers. He looked down at his hand. The burns had healed to nothing more than bright redness on his palms. The cuts were almost completely closed. Bernie moved swiftly to his left hand and removed those bandages as well. It had been less than twenty-four hours and he was almost completely healed. A far cry from any of his recoveries on New Krypton. He held still long enough for Bernie to apply a sterile ointment to his palms and dress them with much smaller, less cumbersome bandages.

Bernie stepped back and shook his head. "Just keep them clean and dry. By the afternoon, your hands will be fine. I wish I could patent your body's healing process."

Done with his physical exam, Clark pulled his t-shirt on over his head. The previous night, not being able to pick up a glass of water, or brush his own teeth, or hold his son's hand, had driven him crazy. Getting out of Bernie's lab could not come soon enough as far as he was concerned.

"Is Jon awake yet?"

"Let's go find out," Bernie replied. Clark followed him into Jon's small room.

His little boy lay in the bed, his eyes closed. Clark couldn't help himself. "Jon?" he whispered quietly. "Jon," he repeated, his voice still soft and low.

His son finally opened his eyes and blinked as he looked around his unfamiliar surroundings. "Daddy? Where are we?" he asked.

"We're in Dr. Bernie's office," Clark explained with a quick half-glance at the doctor. "You weren't feeling well, so we had to come here."

"Where's Mommy?" Jon asked.

Clark sat down in the chair next to Jon's bed. "Mommy got hurt. But she's going to be okay."

Jon's eyes grew wide. Clearly, his father's words had not mollified him. "I want to see Mommy," he insisted.

Bernie stepped forward, pulling the stethoscope out of his lab coat pocket. "Tell you what, sport," he began. "I just want to make sure you're doing okay, then we'll go see your mommy. How does that sound?"

"Okay, Dr. Bernie," Jon replied somewhat warily.

Mercifully, Bernie made the exam as quick and painless as possible, taking Jon's temperature and other vitals in just a few minutes. He'd told Clark earlier that because Jon's first blood test had been clean, there would be no more need for needles or anything else to frighten the boy.

When Bernie had finished, Clark helped Jon out of the bed. He was still nowhere near full human strength, but at least he could lift his son up. Jon looked at the bandages on his father's hands. "Daddy, did you get hurt, too?"

"It's just a little owie," Clark assured his son. Holding Jon's hand, he led the little boy to his mother's room.

Lois turned toward the door and smiled at them as they entered the room. His wife's eyes were bleary and she looked more tired than he could ever remember seeing her. Perhaps the Kryptonite had taken more out of her than he'd originally thought. "Hi, sweetheart," she said to her son as she reached her hand out to him. Jon wriggled free from his father to run to his mother.

"Careful," Clark cautioned. Jon ran up to her bedside. Clark could see Lois wince as she shifted in order to kiss the top of her son's head. She touched his face gently.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked.

"I'm okay, Mommy," Jon replied. "Daddy said you got hurt."

"I'll be fine," she assured him.

"When can we go home?"

"Well, you and your daddy can go home now," Bernie began. "But your mommy needs to stay here a little longer to rest."

Jon frowned at his doctor. "Why can't she rest at home?"

"Dr. Bernie has to take care of her still," Clark told his son. "Tell you what, why don't we go get some breakfast and let Mommy rest for a little while. Then we'll come back and see her, okay?"

"I'm not hungry," Jon protested.

Lois stroked his hair. "If you don't eat, you won't get big and strong," she told him gently. "Go eat breakfast with Daddy. I'm going to take a little nap and then I'll see you when you get back. Okay?"

"Okay," Jon acquiesced.

"That's my boy," Lois said. She kissed his forehead. Clark placed a hand on Jon's shoulder as he leaned down to kiss his wife.

"We'll be back soon," he said softly.

"Lois, I don't like having this stuff in the office," Perry muttered into the phone as he stared at the two misshapen lead blobs sitting on his desk.

"I know, but we don't really want it at STAR Labs until the three of us are gone," came Lois's reply.

"Won't the police be looking for it?" he asked.

"The scuttlebutt is that the Kryptonite was destroyed. Bill Henderson is doing what he can to spread that message lest some other maniac decide that they want to kill us."

He nodded to himself, glad to hear that problem, at least, had been taken care of. "Have they ID'd the shooter yet?"

He heard her sigh on the other end. "No," she replied. "And I doubt they will. But I'd bet my job at the Planet that he was with the Triads."

"Well, he's certainly not going to tell us anything," Perry replied ruefully.

"He died?" she asked.

"A little after three this morning," he confirmed.

"I know I'm not supposed to want people dead..." she began.

"He tried to kill your son. No one would blame you if you danced on his grave, honey," Perry said firmly.

"Yeah, well, it might be a while before I can manage that."

"How's the leg?"

"Dr. Klein thinks I should be able to walk on it by tonight," she replied, much to Perry's relief.

"Take all the time you need in getting back to work," he said.

"What exactly are you planning to tell people?" she asked.

"I'll figure something out," he said with a mental shrug. "Don't worry at all about it. We'll hold down the fort while you two take care of yourselves and your family."

"Thank you, Perry," she replied.

"You don't have to thank me, darlin,'" he said gruffly.

"But the Planet and I should be thanking you for keeping the building from getting blown up again."

"We must have saved the company a fortune in jacked-up insurance premiums," she said.

Perry laughed in response. "Tell me about it. Get well soon, honey. I'll talk to you again tomorrow."

"Thanks, Perry," she replied. With that, he hung up the phone. He hoped it was just the exhaustion and the pain from the gunshot wound that had made her sound so down on the phone. He couldn't begin to wonder at the panic she and Clark must have felt, knowing that Jon had been in danger, under both of their watchful gazes, in a place where he should have been safe.

Lois peeled away the bandage covering her thigh. Her leg still hurt, but it was now nothing more than a dull ache, like an old muscle pull. It didn't feel the way a day-old gunshot wound, untreated by painkillers, should. She thought she could detect the slightest puffiness, but her skin was no longer discolored and the wound had closed completely. No scars. No bruises. The stitches fell apart and fell out of her skin as soon as she touched them, her body having healed completely. She flexed the muscle a few times. It was still tender, but before getting Clark's powers, she'd felt worse after a long, hard run.

Spying the change of clothes that had been left for her, she decided to test out her leg. Carefully, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and planted her feet on the cold ground. She stood up, feeling distinctly sore, but walking across the room to grab the sweats that had been left for her wasn't particularly difficult. She sat down to get dressed and was relieved to find that her in-laws had been thoughtful enough to bring her good, thick socks. The cold lab floor wasn't particularly pleasant on her bare feet.

Properly dressed, she reached for the door to her room. Bernie had upped the security to this lab so that no one except him was allowed in it, he'd assured them. They were free to walk around here without worrying about bumping into any absent-minded scientists or daring truth-seekers

trying to figure out what had happened to Superman and Ultrawoman. Pulling the door open, she was startled by Bernie's presence just on the other side. "Wow, looks like someone's feeling better," he exclaimed.

"Yeah, I feel a lot better than I thought I would," she said. "Not feeling terribly super, though."

"The powers will come back quickly," he told her.

"You sound pretty sure about that," she replied.

"I've got a theory," he said.

She narrowed her eyes. "You've been saying that a lot lately."

"You didn't feel as bad around the Kryptonite as Clark did, did you? Dizzy, nauseated, weaker than normal, but it didn't make you want to curl up and die, did it?"

She frowned, wondering how Bernie had figured it out. "Like I said, he was exposed a lot longer than I was."

"But the first time he was exposed to Kryptonite, it had totally incapacitated him. It drained you of your powers and made you feel sick, but I don't think it can kill you. Or Jon."

A palpable sensation of relief rushed over her. She hoped desperately that Bernie was right and that Kryptonite wouldn't have the same effect on her son as it did her husband. "Why?" she asked simply.

"Kryptonite is harmless to ordinary humans. It only affects what makes Kryptonians different from Earth humans."

"Which is what?" she asked, her inquisitive impulses going into overdrive.

Bernie rushed over to the whiteboard on the wall. "Do you know what mitochondria are?" he asked.

She strained to remember something that must have had to do with biochemistry, which she had last studied in high school. "Part of a cell, right?"

"Right," Bernie replied enthusiastically. "They turn sugar into energy. Without them, we couldn't live."

She shook her head, not following his logic. "And what does this have to do with Jon and me being less vulnerable to Kryptonite?"

"Mitochondria have their own DNA separate from the rest of the cell. If I did a regular DNA test on Clark, it would come back normal, because his DNA is pretty much like anyone else's. But if I tried to do a mitochondrial DNA test on him, it wouldn't work because he doesn't have mitochondria."

"He doesn't?" she asked, still trying to figure out where Bernie was going with this.

"He has something else." Bernie drew a large circle on the board, with a number of little jelly bean-shaped things inside it. "This is a normal human cell," he said. He drew another circle, this time coloring in the jelly bean-shaped things with the marker. "This is one of Clark's cells. Instead of mitochondria, he's got what I call Kryptochondria. They can turn both sunlight and glucose into energy. It's how Clark's powers work and why the sun recharges them. They're also destroyed by Kryptonite radiation, along with

the DNA that creates them in the little plasmid rings floating around in Clark's cells."

"So Jon's cells don't look like either one, then?" she ventured.

"That's right!" Bernie exclaimed excitedly as he drew yet another circle, this one with some white and some darkened jelly beans. "Jon inherited mitochondria from you and Kryptochondria from Clark. Just like Clark, you and Jon, if exposed to Kryptonite long enough, could have all of your Kryptochondria destroyed. That would kill Clark. But it would only permanently remove your powers or Jon's."

She stared at the oddly spotted circles on Bernie's whiteboard. They were starting to make a bizarre sort of sense to her. "So the worst thing Kryptonite could do to Jon is permanently take away his powers?"

"Precisely," Bernie said.

"So I have the dark beans...the Kryptochondria, too? How?"

Bernie shrugged. "That's what I can't figure out. Apparently, when they're excited by a massive electrical current, the Kryptochondria in Clark's body can 'jump' to another person he's touching. Not enough of them move to cause him any harm, but once in the new person, they multiply and enter every cell, resulting in a complete copy of Clark's powers. I'm even less sure how they manage to all jump back with a reverse course of electricity."

She drew in a deep breath, vacillating over whether to ask Bernie the question that had been bothering her since he started on this convoluted explanation. Finally, she just decided to go ahead and ask. There was a good chance that there was little he could tell her, but not knowing was killing her. "So if your theory is right, does it tell us anything about my pregnancy?"

He scratched at his chin. "It might," he said, infuriatingly. "I have to caveat this by saying that for obvious reasons, we've never exposed a pregnant woman to Kryptonite before. We don't know what sort of effect, if any, it might have on the development of a normal pregnancy. In terms of what kind of effect it might have on Clark's child, we know that the amount of damage done to your body by the Kryptonite was limited. You retained some level of Clark's powers, even if it just meant accelerated healing. That means your body was probably still protecting the pregnancy. It's also possible that the fetus's Kryptochondria might have been destroyed, leaving the pregnancy perfectly normal."

Her leg was starting to cramp up from the effort of standing. Finding a desk chair, she pulled it closer to Bernie's whiteboard and sat down. The mindless task gave her a few moments to try to digest what her doctor was telling her. "So you think this baby might not develop Clark's powers?"

"It's hard to say at this point. We'll be able to tell more later on in the pregnancy, but we'll have to transfer your powers back to Clark in order to do an amnio."

"And that's months from now?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Bernie nodded. "I'm afraid so," he said. Her spirits deflated just a little. She was thankful to know that Jon was protected against the worst effects of Kryptonite. But another child was growing inside her, one she'd already exposed to extraordinary danger. How was she supposed to spend months not knowing the extent of the harm she might have already caused?

Clark stared down into his half-drunk mug of tea, not really expecting the leaves to hold the secrets to his future. He started to lower his glasses to reheat the now-cold tea before remembering that his heat vision still didn't work. The man who'd tried to kill an entire newsroom full of children—inadvertently including the child of the city's two superheroes—was dead. He found, oddly, that he didn't care. The man's death brought him neither joy nor sadness. Certainly not the conflicted feelings Nor's death had brought him. As far as Clark was concerned, the bomber's shooting by one of Metropolis's Finest was an entirely fitting end to that monster's existence. He hoped the young cop who'd had to shoot him wouldn't feel nearly as tortured as he himself had when he'd killed Nor. The Triads—and he had no doubt it was the Triads—were still out there, but how could he think about anything besides his family right now?

"You okay, son?" his father asked from across the table.

"Yeah," he replied absently without looking up.

"Jon should be up from his nap soon. You want us to come with the two of you back to STAR Labs?"

He shook his head. "You guys should get some rest," he said, knowing his parents had been up most of the night. An uncomfortable silence descended upon them. He fidgeted restlessly; his thoughts wouldn't leave him in peace.

"Lois is pregnant," he said at last, if for no other reason than to replace the quiet tension with some other form of awkward discomfort. He heard his father sigh.

"Is she okay?"

Clark shrugged, unsure what to say. "It's too soon to tell."

"How far along?"

He laughed humorlessly. "Can't be more than a few weeks," he said. "Dr. Klein found out before we did."

"Lois is a strong woman, but..."

"But a baby is a baby, Dad," Clark interrupted. "Even our baby will be as helpless and defenseless as any other and Lois ran headlong into the jaws of death..."

"Without having any idea she was pregnant," his father interrupted in turn, his tone taking on an unusually stern edge. "And she did it to save your life."

Letting his chin sink to his chest, Clark dragged a trembling hand through his hair. "I know," he whispered, shamefacedly.

"What I was going to say," Jonathan continued, "is that she's strong, but she's going to need you. As bad as you think this is for you, it's worse for her. Your mother and I tried to have children. She miscarried three times. It tore her apart. And even though she knew it wasn't rational, she

blamed herself. She beat herself up over the fact that her body couldn't do what it was supposed to do. If, God forbid, something goes wrong with the pregnancy, you know Lois is going to blame herself. How is she supposed to get through that if she thinks you blame her, too?"

"I know she isn't to blame," he said softly. "I know she had no choice..."

Jonathan stood up, picking up his mug as he did. "Then quit sitting at this table, go hold your wife's hand, and be the husband you promised you would be in your wedding vows."

"Lois?" Bernie asked hesitantly as he knocked on the doorframe.

"What's up?" she replied, looking up from repacking her one small bag.

"I'm guessing you were planning on taking another hiatus during the pregnancy to keep people from linking Ultrawoman and Lois Lane..." he started, delicately leaving out the risks that might come from a pregnant Ultrawoman being exposed again to Kryptonite. But he hadn't needed to say anything. It was all she'd been thinking about for hours.

"Yeah," she said. "I guess we'll have to come up with some reason why Ultrawoman is needed elsewhere." Truthfully, she didn't think she had it in her. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to think about anything other than all the horrible, terrifying possibilities that were currently parading through her head.

"Well, I was thinking, maybe this injury provides us with an opportunity..." Bernie continued explaining his plan. He really was a genius. "What do you think?" he asked hesitantly.

She sighed, relieved to have this burden removed from her shoulders. "I think it's brilliant," she replied.

"Mommy!" Jon yelled as he ran into her room.

"Careful," Clark cautioned gently. But he watched as Lois smiled and scooped up her son. She held him close, kissing the crown of his hair and letting her cheek rest against his head. She closed her eyes and he knew that she was letting the nearness of her son soak in, relying on it to give her strength.

"Mommy, are you all better now?" Jon asked.

"Yes, I'm all better," she said. There was no trace of a limp in her gait and she carried Jon like he wasn't a physical burden. He could see it in the easy way she moved; she might not have had her powers back fully yet, but she had more than just ordinary strength. Clark hoped silently—desperately—that that fact spoke good things for the pregnancy, too. He crossed the room toward them, his wife turning to kiss him quickly, as though by instinct instead of conscious thought.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Hey," he replied, placing a hand on her arm. "You okay?"

She nodded silently. "You?"

"Tired," he admitted.

"Dr. Bernie said we could take you home," Jon declared happily.

"I know," Lois replied, her expression brightening.

"Let's go home."

Clark grabbed the bag his parents had brought for her and followed his wife and son out of the room. Jon fell asleep in his mother's arms on the taxi ride back to Parkside Hill. Bernie had told them to expect Jon's energy levels to be a little low for a few days as his body recovered. Clark watched in silence as Lois stroked her son's hair and kissed his temple.

The cab pulled up in front of their brownstone and she carried their still sleeping son up to his room. Leaving her bag in their room, he followed her to Jon's room and stood silently in the doorway as she sat next to Jon's bed and watched him sleep. He could feel her withdrawing from him. A rift was opening between them and so far he'd done nothing to bridge it. Long minutes passed before she finally stood up and walked toward him.

"My powers are back," she said simply. "But I'm not sure I want people to know that. I'm going to have Perry put out a statement."

Clark frowned. "What are you going to tell people?"

"People know Ultrawoman is injured; there's no getting around that. But they don't know how badly. If they think I need additional treatment... Treatment I can't get on Earth..."

"That'll explain Ultrawoman's absence," he finished.

"Exactly. And if everyone sees a Lois Lane who's perfectly fine and an Ultrawoman they know is injured, they'll be less likely to connect us."

"That's a great plan," he said.

"It was Bernie's idea," she replied.

"Need any help figuring out what you want to say?" he asked.

"I think I've got it worked out," she replied.

"Okay," he said softly, with a slight nod, trying to tamp down a vague sense of disappointment.

Broadcast on pretty much every network and news station that evening, Perry White read a short statement from Ultrawoman. Clark watched silently in the crowd of other reporters milling around the newsroom bullpen.

The old editor cleared his throat as he stared out at the gathered press from behind the bank of microphones. "I'm going to quote Ultrawoman's statement directly," he explained. Perry looked down at the statement in his hands. "As you all know, I received a gunshot wound yesterday after Superman and I were exposed to Kryptonite. He is recovering very well at the moment, but I have developed a condition that will require continued medical treatment..." The statement was entirely true.

"...as you also know, Kryptonian physiology and that of Earth humans differs..." Again, true, Clark thought to himself.

"...My doctor here at STAR Labs has done a heroic job, but the physicians on New Krypton have a better

understanding of Kryptonian physiology than any Earth doctor possibly could..." Nothing she'd said yet was a lie.

"...because my condition could place me or others in danger, I need to be treated by those people who have the best understanding of my physiology..." He shook his head in amazement at her deft sleight of hand; she'd only intimated that her physiology was Kryptonian.

"...for that reason I will be taking a leave of absence to get the medical treatment I need. I will return to duty as soon as I am able. Thank you."

Without explicitly saying it, she'd clearly implied that her injury the previous day meant that she would need to travel to New Krypton for some unspecified period to receive medical treatment. It was an entirely reasonable outcome from yesterday's events and he knew exactly why everyone would believe it was what she was saying, even though she'd said no such thing.

"I don't have any further information, so taking questions is probably a waste of time. I will let you all get to filing your stories," Perry said gruffly before stepping away from the microphone bank. The camera crews cut their live feeds and reporters, practically in unison, pulled out cell phones and started calling in their notes. Clark allowed himself to fade quietly into the background. He was no longer a reporter, expected to cover a story like this. Instead, he was supposed to start reworking the A Section for tomorrow, since he knew they were going to lead with this story. In reality, though, he'd already had an idea of what was coming and had begun the process of reorganizing and prioritizing the next day's top pieces. He returned to his office, wanting to get this done as soon as possible.

He lay in bed staring up at the ceiling, having given up on the book on his nightstand after having read the same paragraph seven times without a single word sinking in. The house was quiet, but not in the way he was used to. He should have been able to hear his son's heartbeat or heard his parents as they went through their nightly routine, watching the evening news together. Instead, there was nothing except the occasional passing car on Sullivan Lane below. Physically, he felt fine—not super—but fine. It meant that his powers should return soon, he realized, but despite having spent four years without them, going two days as an ordinary man was an extraordinarily frustrating endeavor. He hated the limitations. He hated feeling like something that was his was missing. He hated the thick wool that seemed to have surrounded each of his senses.

The sound of footsteps on the staircase coming down from the library caused him to sit up. A moment later, his wife appeared in the doorway. "Hi," she said softly.

"Hey," he replied.

She entered the room quietly and crossed the floor to the bathroom. A few seconds later, she returned and wordlessly slipped into bed beside him.

He shook his head slightly with a lopsided smile. "That press release was brilliant. I can't believe how you managed

to squirm your way out of that without lying. You should have been a lawyer," he said, hoping to shake off the uneasiness that had settled over them.

"I resent that," she replied before falling quiet again.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said simply. "I just sent my column to Perry. How are you feeling?"

"Better," he said. "I think my powers will be back tomorrow."

She nodded but said nothing. Clark put his arm around her and she let him draw her closer. He kissed her temple. "I love you," he said.

"I love you," she replied. She took his hand in hers and traced the length of each of his fingers with her thumb.

"You scared the hell out of me yesterday," she whispered.

"Ditto," he replied. Lois placed her head on his chest and he enfolded her in his embrace.

"You know why I had to do it," she said, her breath warm against his skin.

"I know," he confirmed. "I talked to Bernie about his theory," he continued. "It makes sense. And if the baby doesn't develop my powers..."

"Clark, I can't do this," she said as she sat up. He could hear the tears in her voice. "I can't try to think through this logically. I am so terrified..."

"I know," he whispered earnestly.

"I don't think you do," she countered as she placed her hand over her heart. "There's nothing in here right now except fear. I'm afraid. There's no room for anything else." A single tear slipped down her cheek. She reached up to brush it away, but his hand was already there. He caressed her cheek and pulled her back into his arms, feeling his heart break.

She sobbed quietly as he held her, stroking her hair and pressing his lips against her temple. "It's all right," he crooned softly.

"No, it isn't," came her muffled response. Lois lifted her head from his chest. "Clark, don't tell me it's okay. We don't know that yet."

He swallowed roughly. "I know," he managed. "But I'm here and I promise you I will be, no matter what." She'd made and kept that same vow to him. For four and a half years, she'd waited for him. She'd taken care of the world when he couldn't and she'd raised their son when he hadn't even known the child existed. He'd bared every dark and terrible secret of his soul to her and she was still there.

It was damn well past time for him to be there for her.

As he lay awake that night, beyond tired, but unable to sleep, he couldn't think about anything besides the woman in his arms. He'd misjudged things pretty badly that day. When he'd left to go to the press conference, she was already busy working on her next column. He'd asked if she was really up for working at the moment and she'd insisted that she needed to do it. She'd been simply falling back into a pattern that she must have perfected over the course of four and a half years—holding it all together and

projecting an image of strength so resolute, so unshakable, that she fooled everyone. But it was an exhausting effort and it wasn't one she could have been expected to keep up indefinitely. So in the safe confines of this room, she'd had every right to believe that she shouldn't have had to keep going.

The haunted look in her eyes had terrified him. She was more afraid than he'd ever remembered seeing her. Even the glimpse he'd gotten of her expression as she'd raced out of the Planet carrying their ill son paled in comparison to this. Then, she'd been overwhelmed, just as he had, by the knowledge that she had to save Jon. Whatever fear had come with knowing he was in danger was secondary to the primitive need to keep him safe. Now, there was nothing she could do except wait. There was nothing that either Ultrawoman's strength or Lois Lane's stubborn brilliance could do to alleviate the situation. And instead of her strength and borderline insane fearlessness being assets, she was left to wonder if they'd caused her to risk her pregnancy, to threaten the tiny little cluster of cells in her body that were growing and dividing and becoming a baby.

He'd told her it was going to be okay, but the words had rung hollow to them both. He had no way of knowing that. Assuming she didn't miscarry in the next few days, which Dr. Klein had quietly warned them both was still a real possibility, it would be months before they would know anything. Once he'd moved past his initial shock, he realized his father was right – that he was letting his own fear push him away from her. Though he'd hoped it would help to talk to her about it, it had taken only a moment to realize the simple impossibility of that. She was in no condition to talk to him about what they should have done or could have done. So it didn't matter in the least that he desperately needed to know what she was thinking or what she felt they should do if things went badly – if the pregnancy became unviable, if the fetus was developing with the sorts of medical problems that would make life extremely painful, or impossible...

He still shuddered at the thought. Clark wanted his wife to assure him that they would do the right thing. That if they had to make such a terrible decision they would know what the right thing was. But for now, she needed him to be the strong one for a change. Heaven help him, he was going to try.

And yet, how could he help but wonder if she'd been more careful, if she hadn't been so quick to put herself in danger...

He needed to short circuit the thought before it could squeeze out the rest of the chaos and confusion in his head. Better to deal with the jumbled mess of anxiety he was already feeling than to entertain nothing but some half-baked notion that he could hold her responsible for this. Like it would make any difference. Like their pregnancy would somehow miraculously turn out all right if he could lay the blame for this problem at her feet. He tried to do what he knew his therapist would tell him to do. To reverse their roles. If she'd been in the building, fighting death to

defuse a bomb, no force in heaven or earth would have kept him from going to her aid.

But did she have some extra responsibility to be careful? To think before throwing herself in danger? One of Jon's parents was already facing the real possibility of death; should she have added to that the chance their son might have been orphaned?

As soon as he asked himself the question, he knew the answer. She had weighed the risks and she'd known that two of them were far more likely to have been able to stop the bomber than just one, especially if she hadn't been feeling the effects of the Kryptonite as strongly as he had. She hadn't viewed it as risking the chance that both of Jon's parents would be killed. She'd taken the chance to make sure both had survived.

She'd saved his life.

She'd done it before. And in the past, it hadn't exactly been difficult to muster up the appropriate degree of gratitude in response. So why was it now?

Because although the question was meaningless and entirely academic, he couldn't help but wonder what she would have done if she'd known she was pregnant. Under the best of circumstances—which these were not—he would have been afraid to ask. The fear she felt now, if she had to endure the question—which could never sound like anything other than an accusation—how would she possibly be able to believe that he would be there for her if he asked her something like that?

So he asked himself.

What would he have done? If she'd been pregnant and the pregnancy was risking her life, and she'd been unable to make the choice for herself, what would he have done? Would he have chosen the pregnancy?

Or would he have chosen his wife?

He closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath, hoping the labored rise and fall of his chest didn't disturb her sleep. The question gnawed away at him. He loved his wife so much. The thought of losing her, of letting her die when there was something he could do to prevent it...

He would choose Lois.

So how could he be angry with her just because he was afraid she might do the same and choose him?

Clark bit back a sigh and swallowed around the boulder lodged in his throat, praying he'd never actually face that situation. What they were dealing with now was more than challenge enough.

The LNN anchor was busy quizzing the latest medical expert willing to pontificate on Ultrawoman's condition. This one, a somber-looking, bearded professor from Iowa, suggested that perhaps Ultrawoman's invulnerability had returned before surgeons could extract the bullet. A bullet left in a superhuman body might be crushed to pieces that could then enter her bloodstream. When pressed as to whether that would be dangerous for a superhero, he merely shrugged. "That's probably why she wants to see a Kryptonian doctor – someone who would actually have a

clue.” Huh, it was actually one of the more sensible theories she’d heard.

Lois lifted the remote and turned off the television. She needed to get ready for work. In the bathroom, she could hear her husband going through his morning routine, albeit in a more pedestrian fashion than usual. As he made his way out of the walk-in closet, knotting his tie, she noticed a number of tiny nicks on his face.

“Trouble shaving?” she asked.

“My skin isn’t exactly invulnerable, but it did a number on the razor,” he explained.

“That’s a good sign,” she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed absentmindedly. He straightened his tie and grabbed his suit coat. “You sure you want to go in today?”

Lois bit back a sigh. She didn’t blame him for wondering if she was ready to go right back to work. “Life doesn’t stop just because we get scared,” she said. “Besides, seeing the contrast between a wounded Ultrawoman and a perfectly fine Lois Lane will make people less likely to connect us.”

He nodded silently, letting her know he supported her, though she doubted he agreed with her. “I guess we’re driving in?”

She honestly didn’t feel up for it and she knew how much her husband hated driving in the city. “I don’t want to fight the traffic. Let’s take a cab,” she said as she turned toward the bathroom. “I’ll be out in a second.” A moment later, she returned dressed and ready to go. She was so thankful to have Martha and Jonathan with them. Jon would be staying home again from nursery school today. By getting him out of the Planet so quickly, she’d managed to shield him from the chaos of the evacuation, but he’d still seemed more tired than usual the previous night and she wanted to keep him under the watchful eyes of his family for another day.

Jiang stepped off his plane in an even fouler mood than when he’d left for Metropolis. He had quit the U.S. before Hsiao had even died. Word of the other man’s death on the surgical table reached him while he was over the Pacific. Normally, the death of an associate who’d failed in his task would not have been considered cause for too much concern, but Hsiao had been the best operative in Jiang’s employ. His failure to kill the superheroes meant there was no one left in his operation he trusted to try to press the Metropolis front. Even with Ultrawoman temporarily removed from the picture, Superman was more than enough trouble to contend with. For now, the Triads were in full scale retreat from Metropolis. He didn’t doubt that a rival organization would capitalize on the situation. Or at least try to.

No organized crime syndicate since Lex Luthor’s empire had been able to gain much of a foothold in Metropolis before being systematically dismantled. Luthor’s downfall led to the collapse of his worldwide operations. Or at least the non-legitimate ones. With minor

branding changes, his legitimate businesses continued along just fine, returning nice profits to their shareholders and playing along with the capitalist game. The destruction of Intergang’s Metropolis branch had led to the total implosion of that entity. The Triads were not going to risk the same fate. Metropolis may have glittered, but it was far from the only gleaming jewel in the world. Salvaging the Metropolis operations would have undoubtedly earned him a larger share of control in the enterprise. Now, if he wasn’t assassinated by one of his rivals, smelling blood in the water, he could expect to be systematically squeezed out of the inner circle.

There was always early retirement. Stripped of his connections and influence, he’d be sent somewhere idyllic and pleasant, to spend the rest of his days under guard and suspicion that he might try to use what he knew about the organization to benefit its enemies. So long as he kept his mouth shut, though, it would be pleasant enough. It would be a far gentler end than most outsiders would have suspected for a fallen mob boss. But things were changing. In order for the organization to operate successfully on every continent and across every business imaginable, it didn’t just need discipline, it also need harmony. Chaos, in the form of a putsch against the leadership or a drawn-out battle for control, would likely result in the empire splintering into pieces. Better to force the losers out to Macau or Dubai, where they would live out their lives quietly, under constant watch, than to encourage those who feared they were losing a battle for control to try to preempt their rivals.

He buttoned his suit coat as he crossed the tarmac at Hong Kong’s international airport, wondering if this was the last time he would see this city. With the sunlight having faded, the lights of the city twinkled brightly. If he left this place, it probably wouldn’t be on his own plane. And he wouldn’t be choosing who escorted him.

Lois sat in her office, staring blankly at her monitor. The column she wrote last night would run in tomorrow’s edition. The editors were already done with it and it would be another few days before her column was scheduled to run again, so there was really nothing she needed to do in the office. She’d written about the bomb attempt – about the fact that the newsroom had been full of children at the time, indicating just how coldly immoral the bomber must have been. And about the fact that it had been clearly designed to kill Ultrawoman and Superman – the other victims were probably nothing but collateral damage as far as the would-be killer had been concerned. If this was an act of terrorism—deliberately targeting the innocent in order to force Ultrawoman and Superman to change their behavior—she boldly predicted its failure.

Writing it had been nothing short of mental torture. She wasn’t expected to be objective about the issue since her own family was ostensibly in the newsroom and could have been victims of the bombing. But how could she detangle the story from the personal hell she’d endured in following

her husband back into the welcoming arms of death, getting shot just at the moment when she'd believed they were safe, finding out just the extent of the risk she'd taken?

Now, she could do nothing but wait in the purgatory of her own making. The months, she knew, were going to pass agonizingly slowly. And while Clark had been supportive, it frightened her to realize that she didn't know if he was just dutifully doing what he thought would be expected of him. There had been a distance in his eyes, and in his voice, no matter what he said to comfort her. Was he simply struggling in that silent, heroic way of his, trying to be the husband he thought he should be, all while the seeds of resentment were quietly taking root in his soul? Was he wondering how he could love a woman who would risk the life of his unborn child? Had he already decided he couldn't?

Next door, she could hear him stand up from his desk. He walked over from his adjacent office to hers. "I'm going to go," he said as he made the little flying gesture they used with his hand.

"You're back?" she asked hopefully.

"I'm back," he replied. Relieved, she felt herself smile. The smile he gave in response didn't reach his eyes. "I'll be back soon," he said before walking away. With her x-ray vision, she followed him to the stairwell where he changed into the suit and flew up to the roof to take off. The night before, he'd promised her he would always be there for her. And she didn't doubt it. But what if everything wasn't okay? What if her actions had cost them the baby? Would he ever be able to forgive her? He would stay with her—for Jon's sake and because the man was biologically incapable of breaking a vow. But would they grow apart? Would they become strangers to each other? Would resentment fester inside him, building every day they spent together? She shuddered at the thought.

This morning, she'd hoped the office would be a refuge, a place where the comfort of her routine could help keep her mind from lingering on the things she couldn't control. But this place was like a prison today. She stood up and crossed the newsroom to Perry's office. She knocked lightly on the door before pushing it open. "Chief?"

Perry stood up and walked to the door to usher her inside. "Honey, what can I do for you?" he asked, the concern evident in his voice.

"I'm sorry, I think I'm going to head home early," she said apologetically.

Her editor frowned as he placed a hand on her arm. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," she lied. "I just want to spend some time with Jon."

"Of course," Perry replied with a nod. "Take all the time you need."

"I'm sure everything will be better tomorrow," she said, knowing how unconvincing she sounded.

"Give me a holler if you need anything, you understand?" Perry said with his typical paternal sternness.

"I will," she said. "Thank you, Perry."

"Just take care of yourself and your little boy," Perry replied.

She smiled faintly in response and walked out of the office.

"Hey Chief, are Lois and Clark okay?" Jimmy asked as he pulled the door to his boss's office shut behind him.

Perry looked up from the mockup on his desk, frowning. "Son, they were both almost killed yesterday. Moreover, Jon could have been killed. It makes sense that they're acting a little off."

Jimmy leaned against the closed door, folding his arms across his chest. "Yeah, but Ultrawoman announcing that she's leaving, what's that about?"

His boss shrugged. "She told me the same thing she told you—that she'd explain it to us in a few days."

"But you can't tell me you aren't wondering what's going on," Jimmy said incredulously as he pushed off the door frame and started pacing. "I mean, honestly, and I'm saying this with all the respect in the world for the guy, of the two of them, I would have expected Clark to be the one to need a break after what happened yesterday, not Lois. I mean, yeah, he's been back as Superman for a while, but you know he must have been through some pretty messed up stuff on New Krypton. And I know she was shot, but Lois looks fine today..."

"Jimmy, this is nothing but henpecked gossip," Perry cut him off irritably, but Jimmy kept walking a tight circle in the small open space in the middle of the editor's office.

"But maybe Jon isn't okay," he mused aloud. "I mean, he's just a little kid; maybe he can't recover from the Kryptonite as fast as they can. I could definitely see Lois giving up Ultrawoman to take care of him."

"Son," Perry warned him sternly. "We can hash out a hundred theories, but there ain't no sense to it. Lois will tell us when she's ready. Until then, just do what I do, back 'em up, one thousand percent. Got it?"

Jimmy nodded grudgingly. He knew the old editor had a point. But that didn't make short circuiting the flow of baseless speculation in his head any easier. He wanted to know what was going on with his friends.

She finished reading him his story even though he'd fallen asleep a few pages before. Lois wondered if, even as he'd drifted off, he still knew that she was there with him, if he could hear his mother's voice in his sleep, promising that the story had a happy ending. She quietly closed the book and left it on the bedside table before turning off the lights and slipping out of the room. It was still early, but she was tired. And with this being a Friday night and Clark having to patrol alone, it would likely be a while before he'd be able to come home. She walked silently to the large master bedroom and lay down, fully clothed, on top of the bed. Lois curled up on her side, staring out the window, through the barren tree branches onto the quiet tableau of Sullivan Lane.

Wistfully, she'd tried to do the math in her head. They had probably conceived around two weeks ago. Knowing she could never be exactly sure, she wondered when it was. Was it that night they'd both come home from cleaning up after a couple of shrimping trawlers that had collided off the Louisiana coast? They'd swum through the Gulf, but returned home salty, briny messes, somehow still inexplicably smelling vaguely of bait. Peeling off their costumes in the bathroom, and laughing at their predicament, he'd suggested innocuously enough that they share the shower. They'd ended up staying in that shower a lot longer than was merely necessary to get cleaned up.

Or maybe it was the following night, when they'd watched the rain fall onto the darkened street from the loft in the library. Even though Bernie had told her it was unlikely to have any effect, she'd forgone the wine because she wasn't taking any chances. Lying together in a tangle of limbs on the large leather couch, she'd almost been lulled to sleep by the sound of fat raindrops falling steadily against the large windows. But her husband's hands and lips and quietly whispered declarations of love instead kept her far more pleasantly occupied.

Or maybe it was that Sunday morning, when his parents had taken Jon to the Children's Museum. They'd intended to read the paper in bed together. Somehow the newspaper had been abandoned even before they'd worked their way through the A Section.

Any one of those moments could have led to conception. Any one of those moments could have been the beginning of the pregnancy that she was now so very afraid for. Each had been a happy memory. A special moment with her husband. Each would have been a perfect way for their love to lead to new life. And yet, she was now wondering why they'd decided *at that moment* to start trying for a baby. If they'd waited another month or so...

But life didn't work that way. And she could never wish away the pregnancy that was now at the center of so much heartache. Besides, she tried to tell herself, Bernie had reminded them that there was a good chance that everything was fine. She had to find a way to believe that. To remind herself that there was reason to be hopeful. She felt a film of tears blur her vision and then spill over. She lifted her hand to brush away the tears rolling down her cheeks as she cried quietly.

"Lois?" she heard her husband call her name, his voice rising up in pitch. "Honey?"

She sat up and saw him in the doorway, a look of anguish on his face. In an instant, he was holding her, wrapping himself around her and pulling her close. She buried her face against his chest and sobbed.

"Lois, please talk to me," he whispered. "You're scaring me."

"Clark," she managed to sob his name. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to tell him how afraid she was, but the words wouldn't come, they were crowded out by the tears.

"Honey, I'm here," he whispered as he gently ran one hand up and down her back. She felt him press his lips against her temple. "I love you," he said as he tilted her chin up to look into her eyes. "You know that, don't you?"

Lois bit her lip and nodded. "I just don't know if you can forgive me," she whispered softly.

She heard him inhale sharply. His arms tightened around her. "There is nothing to forgive," he said. "You did nothing wrong. And you saved my life," he whispered fiercely. "And I am so sorry I made you think otherwise."

Fresh tears came and she was helpless to fight them. But he continued to hold her while she cried. After a long while, after the sobs had finally abated, he spoke. "I know that you're afraid. I am, too," he confessed. "But we have to take care of each other. Please, let me in. Let me try to help."

She wanted to do what he was asking of her, but she didn't even know how. Eventually, the tears subsided. She looked up at him from where she'd buried her head against his chest, noticing the wet marks where her tears had soaked his shirt. He caressed her cheek and captured her lips in a soft, sweet, lingering kiss.

As he broke off the kiss, she could see him studying her intently, his expression earnest, as he tried to hold her gaze. Why did she want nothing more in that moment than to hide from him? He wouldn't let her. His hand on her cheek, he tilted her face up gently. "Please listen to me," he began quietly. "Because I need you to understand this. I am still your husband – the guy who's dumb in love with you. Who knows that this relationship is the best thing that's ever happened to him. And who still can't stand to see you cry." He brushed away an errant tear from her cheek with his thumb. She turned into the contact and placed her hand on top of his, holding it close to her skin. She needed to feel the warmth not just of his words but his touch.

"I'm not asking you not to cry; I know you have to. But I am begging you to let me be there for you like you've always been there for me. You told me once that you were sure of two things – that we loved each other as much as any two people could love each other, and that the world was better for it. I know that you were right. I know that this love has saved both of our lives and it will get us through this. No matter what happens—no matter what—I will be here and we will get through it together."

She closed her eyes, feeling fresh tears well up in her eyes. "Clark," she whispered his name softly, hopefully, like a prayer. His lips descended to cover hers. She needed this – the safe harbor of his arms, the familiar sweetness of his kiss, the rough beating of his heart in his chest. She breathed in the scent of him. The mingled fragrance of sandalwood and soap smelled like home.

He withdrew slightly. "I love you," he whispered inches from her lips. "I always have. I always will."

Sleep eluded both of them for a long while that night. In the darkened room, they'd merely held each other while it seemed like the world around them turned to dust. When

he'd returned to the Planet that afternoon to find the note she'd left on his desk, telling him she'd left early, it had only reaffirmed his belief that her going back to work so soon was a mistake. He'd gently asked if she felt up to going into the office, but he'd already known how she was going to respond. When things were bad, she worked harder. When her problems weren't things she could control, she focused on the things that were under her power. It was just how Lois Lane ticked.

Bernie had told him just how important it was for her to avoid unnecessary stress in the coming days, but the scientist himself knew what a tall order that was. Either Lois worked and dealt with the stresses of her profession, or she didn't and was left with nothing to distract her from the awfulness of their current situation, of waiting and hoping, unable to do anything.

And it didn't seem to matter what he'd told her the night before, his own confusion and fear had clouded his ability to be the supportive husband she needed right now. In truth, if he'd held back, it was because he'd had little choice – his own emotions were so raw, so close to the surface. Trying to be calm, to keep some semblance of control over them was the only safeguard he'd had against the worries that were terrorizing him, too. But that couldn't excuse the fact that he'd badly misjudged the depth of her fears. He'd known she was hurting. He'd known she was scared. But last night, he'd seen something he'd previously believed was impossible—Lois Lane paralyzed by fear.

She looked up at him from within the circle of his embrace, reminding him that she was still awake, still suffocating on the silence, just like he was. "You know this was not your fault, right?" he asked quietly. "No matter what, you can't blame yourself. You did what you had to do. To save everyone in that building. To save my life. I wouldn't have even made it to the second bomb without you. It would have gone off. It would have killed me and dozens of other people. Thank you for saving my life. For giving me the chance to live my life with our little family."

Tears glimmered in her eyes as she nodded silently. He touched her cheek and tilted her face up slightly to allow him to capture her lips in a soft, bittersweet kiss. "I love you," he whispered. He'd said it more than a few times that night, but he was going to say it as many times as it took to make sure she understood that the depth and the intensity of that love couldn't be diminished. Not by this. Not by anything that heaven or earth could devise to test them.

He took her hand as they walked down the hallway a few steps behind their physician. "I love you," he whispered almost silently, squeezing her hand three times, once to punctuate each word.

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze in return. "I love you, too," she whispered. He could hear her heart thundering in the otherwise silent hallway. Actually, his own pulse was racing, too. The sounds mingled together like rapid, staccato Tommy-gun fire. He'd tried to reduce the anxiety on her, but the last few days had been nothing short

of a living hell. The waiting had been intolerable from minute one and it had just gotten worse and worse. Mercifully, she'd suffered none of the symptoms Bernie had warned her might indicate a miscarriage.

They followed the doctor, turning sharply down one corridor and then another as they finally arrived at his secured lab. Bernie completed the complicated voodoo necessary to disarm the door and usher them through the lab space and into his office. He gestured to a couple of chairs on the opposite side of his extremely messy desk. "Lois, I know you said you've had no unusual symptoms, which is very good, but obviously since your physiology doesn't work like other people's, I still want you to take another pregnancy test here. It'll just take a few minutes, then we can take care of your physical. I take it you both feel fine after the Kryptonite exposure, no lingering side effects?"

"I'm fine," she said simply.

"We both are," Clark echoed.

"Okay, then," Bernie said, seemingly somewhat flustered. "Uh, Lois, I think you know where the little girls' room is?"

"I can find it," she assured the scientist. Wordlessly, she stood up and walked out of the office.

"How are you holding up, Clark?" Bernie asked him.

Clark sighed, trying to figure out where to begin. "I'll be better when we have some answers," he said at last.

Bernie's expression twisted into a slight grimace. "How has Lois been?"

"Honestly, I've never seen her this afraid before.

Besides being with Jon, there's nothing she's interested in. All she does is wait and I know it'll be months still before we know anything."

Bernie nodded. "Has she thought about talking to a professional?"

"She already has," Clark replied. She'd gone to see Dr. Friskin the previous night, but hadn't said a word about it after returning home. "I mean, I think it'll be an ongoing process for both of us, especially if...well if the news we get isn't good. But Bernie, I don't know how we're supposed to keep this up for months. And I don't know what I'm supposed to do. She's pulling away from me and I don't know if I should give her space, or if I should try to get her to talk to me."

Bernie nodded sympathetically. "You know the interpersonal stuff isn't my strong suit. But I do know that if you don't find some way to get back to something resembling a routine, waiting out the next few months will be even harder. Try to live your lives as normally as you can."

"Is there anything she should avoid, things that could put her or the baby in danger?" Clark asked anxiously.

Bernie frowned. "Not really. With her body invulnerable again, she isn't susceptible to the usual things – alcohol, caffeine, smoking, medications. I know she avoided them anyway when she was pregnant with Jon, but they shouldn't be an issue."

Clark nodded, thankful for at least that piece of good news. “What about us...I mean, is there anything we should avoid doing...” he fumbled.

“Oh! You mean sex?” Bernie exclaimed with little tact as realization dawned on him. “No. There’s absolutely nothing to worry about,” he said confidently.

“Good,” Clark said with a sigh. “That’s good. I mean, I know it’s kind of a silly thing to worry about since she’s invulnerable, but...”

“But you’re worried about your wife and the pregnancy. That’s perfectly normal, Clark,” Bernie reassured him. As they hadn’t made love in days, he knew the concern may have been entirely academic, but at least he had one less thing to trouble him.

He heard Lois’s footsteps in the corridor. A moment later, she entered the office. “I’ll go run the test,” Bernie said as he stood up. She retook the seat next to her husband’s and they sat in silence.

“I hate waiting,” Lois said with a wry grimace.

He reached out to take her hand. “Me too,” he agreed quietly. In reality, it was only a few minutes before Bernie returned.

“The pregnancy test is positive,” he announced, to Clark’s great relief. He heard his wife exhale a deep breath. “Lois, let’s do a quick physical and then we can talk about the timing for an ultrasound and an amniocentesis.

In the exam room, Clark sat mutely while Bernie completed the simple check-up. He felt his features settle into a dour frown as the irony of their situation—the sheer magnitude of which was usually reserved for Greek tragedies—weighed heavily on him. This was her first prenatal exam. Ever since he’d returned from New Krypton, he’d cursed himself for missing moments like this one in her pregnancy with Jon. He would have given damn near anything to have been there with her. Now, he was fulfilling a vow he’d made to himself, to never miss a moment like this one in their second child’s life. But he’d taken for granted that this was going to be a happy occasion in their lives. He was going to hold her hand and she would smile at him and they would marvel in contented silence at the fact that her body was nurturing the new life they’d created.

Instead, a pall had been draped over them as obscene feelings of fear and despair rudely intruded into what should have been unalloyed happiness. He was terrified that Lois was going to start shutting him out, like he’d done to her for the better part of the last year. But this was not poetic justice. She didn’t deserve to have this pain heaped upon everything she’d already endured. And whatever his crimes were, surely this was more punishment than was just. Of course, looming in the background was the paralyzing fear that the biggest victim of this tragedy of errors was going to be their innocent child.

“Everything looks good,” Bernie said. Clark let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding in. “We can schedule the first ultrasound for two weeks from now. We should be able to hear the heartbeat by then. If you’re trying to listen for it yourselves and you can’t hear it, don’t worry

about it. At that stage, it’s hard to pick it out from other sounds if you don’t know exactly what you’re looking for. The amniocentesis will have to wait several more months.”

“Will transferring my powers back to Clark for the amnio put the baby at risk?” Lois asked anxiously. God, he hadn’t even thought of that, Clark realized morosely.

“No,” Bernie replied. “While I think that having Clark’s powers keeps your body from recognizing the baby as foreign, we can complete the amnio in just a few minutes, too quickly for your immune system to start creating antibodies that might harm the pregnancy.”

“You’re sure?” Lois pressed the doctor.

“I’m positive,” Bernie confirmed with a quick nod. Clark couldn’t tell if she was truly mollified by Dr. Klein’s response or if she just couldn’t deal with yet another risk that wouldn’t become clear to them for many weeks. “I’ll give you a couple of minutes and then we can take care of the scheduling,” Bernie said before exiting the exam room.

Lois changed out of the exam gown and back into her clothing silently. “Are you okay?” he asked softly.

“I’m fine,” she said curtly.

He tried not to flinch but keeping up the stoic mask was taking its toll on him. “I’m sorry,” she said softly off what he assumed was his wounded expression. She reached her hand out to him. He interlaced their fingers.

“It’s all right,” he assured her as he kissed her temple.

“Let’s just get this over with and go home,” she said, the weary plea evident in her tone. But things weren’t going to be any better when they got home. He knew that already. He couldn’t wish that fact away. They would go home and wait in painful, awkward silence for his parents to come home with Jon. They would pretend around their son that nothing was wrong, even though the effort was often exhausting. And when he’d gone to bed, they would go back to the agonizing quiet, straining, despite themselves, to listen for a heartbeat they both prayed desperately would be there, even though it would still be a few weeks at the earliest before they would be able to hear it.

“I know Lois promised she’d tell you what was going on,” he began as he pulled the door to Perry’s office shut behind him. His mouth was suddenly dry and he really didn’t want to have this conversation, but they owed their friends the truth. “We needed a few days for Dr. Klein to confirm it,” he said in a quiet tone. He looked up at Perry and Jimmy, who were watching him expectantly. Clark swallowed roughly as he found his voice. “Lois is pregnant,” he finished.

He watched as a grin spread across Jimmy’s face and then died just as suddenly. “Oh, man, the Kryptonite,” he whispered.

It didn’t matter that he’d already had these same thoughts; sharing them with his friends only seemed to make it hurt worse. “Yeah,” he said simply, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Perry looked at him, his expression ashen. “Is she all right, son?” he asked.

With a sigh, he fumbled to continue. “Dr. Klein says Lois is fine, but it’s too soon to know about the pregnancy...what kind of effect the Kryptonite had...” he trailed off, not knowing how to finish. The three men stood awkwardly in the middle of the office for a long, uncomfortable moment.

“Whatever we can do to help, son, if you two need to take some time off...” Perry began.

Clark shook his head. “Thanks, Chief, but the waiting is hard enough even when we keep ourselves busy. If we didn’t have the Planet, I think it would be worse.”

Perry nodded in understanding. “All right, but you let us know if there’s anything we can do for you, understood?”

“Thanks,” Clark replied. He turned toward the door.

“Clark?” Jimmy called from behind him. Clark stopped and looked over his shoulder at his friend. “Tell Lois we love her,” Jimmy said. With a ghost of smile, Clark nodded and left the room.

“Martha, how do I do this?” Lois whispered quietly as she looked pleadingly at her mother-in-law sitting across the kitchen table from her. In the background, she could hear the sound of her son’s heartbeat as he slept in the otherwise quiet house. “How do I keep going, spending every minute of every day worrying that I’m going to lose our baby?”

Martha looked up from the mug of herbal tea and reached out to give Lois’s hand a gentle squeeze. “You hope for the best,” she began softly. “You find yourself making a lot of bargains with fate. You try to live your life, and you remember how much your family loves you. How we will always be here for you. No matter what happens.”

“I’m shutting Clark out,” she confessed softly. “I don’t mean to do it, I swear, but I don’t know how to talk to him about this. Every time I try, it’s like I can’t even breathe. And I fall apart.”

“If you find it too hard to talk to any of us, you always have Dr. Friskin,” Martha responded.

“Thank goodness,” Lois breathed. “But there’s only so much anyone can do right now. Nothing is going to make the next few months pass by any faster.”

“That’s why you just have to accept that this is one of those things you can’t control,” her mother-in-law said.

“I hate things I don’t control,” Lois replied flatly.

Martha gave her a sympathetic smile. “I know,” she said.

Lois frowned as she stared down at the bottom of her mug. “I’m hurting Clark by not talking to him about this, aren’t I?”

“He’s worried about you,” the older woman said gently. “You know he loves you more than anything.”

“But how can he not be thinking that I might have killed his child?” Lois whispered tearfully.

“Honey, you know he doesn’t think that!” Martha replied, squeezing the younger woman’s hand tightly. “All of us are so grateful for you saving his life. You know that. A strong marriage can survive a lot of things. Even losing

pregnancies. But it won’t survive if the two of you stop talking to each other. Be there for each other. It is the only thing that can make this easier.”

Nodding, she tried to recognize the wisdom of the other woman’s words, but the dark and unwelcome thoughts that were with her constantly wouldn’t let her. She exhaled shakily, as though the burdens she was carrying were forcing the breath from her body. “I know he consoles himself with the fact that I didn’t know about the pregnancy,” she began, wondering if she actually had the strength to complete the confession, and wondering whether it would be cruel to Martha to do so. “And if I had known, obviously, I would have thought about the risks, but if you ask me if I could have left my husband to die alone in that building, I couldn’t say yes,” she admitted. She’d brought one child into the world without him. Shamefully, she was pretty damn sure she couldn’t do it again. Avoiding her mother-in-law’s gaze, she kept her eyes fixed on the table. What did the other woman think of her, listening to her daughter-in-law weighing the life of her son against that of her unborn grandchild?

“If you’re expecting me to be mad at you for loving my son that much, I’m not,” Martha said gently. “Never forget that you are the best thing that has ever happened to Clark.”

She looked up at the sound of knocking on the frame to her office door. “You got a minute?” her husband asked softly.

“Sure,” she replied.

He pulled the door closed behind him as he entered the office, dropping into one of the chairs across from her desk. “I know we’ve been putting it off...but we should probably figure out what we want to do about Thanksgiving,” he said. She thought she saw him tense slightly, probably because he knew she wasn’t exactly thrilled about this topic of conversation. On the scale of injustices they were currently battling, it barely registered, but having to go through the ordeal of worrying about this pregnancy during the holiday season filled her with some additional amount of dread. She hadn’t even realized it was possible to feel worse about their situation until she’d sat down to figure out the dates of her appointments with Bernie.

The holidays meant dealing with her parents. It meant yet another year of doing her damndest to make sure her issues didn’t spoil Jon’s Christmas. It meant there was going to be no way to avoid the rampant speculation of the newsroom when she didn’t partake in the eggnog or cider at the staff holiday party.

“With everyone here, it probably makes sense to stay in Metropolis...unless you don’t want to deal with it...we could go back to the farm...”

She sighed. “If we go to Kansas my parents will think we’re actively avoiding them and pitch a fit.”

“Let’s not worry about your parents or mine for that matter,” he said firmly. “Right now, just worrying about us—you, Jon, and me—is about all I can handle.”

As much as she wanted to take her little family somewhere quiet and secluded and pretend that all of their problems and the world's problems and whatever else was going to be heaped on their plates didn't exist, she couldn't. "What do you want to do?" she asked.

"Whatever you want," he replied unhelpfully.

She frowned. "What's our alternative, just skip Thanksgiving?"

"If you want to..."

"We can't just hide from this," she said. "And at some point, we're going to have to tell my parents we're pregnant."

His mouth twisted into a frown. "They're highly educated medical professionals; can't we wait until they figure it out?" he asked.

She would have been thinking the same thing in his place. "I didn't exactly handle it well when I told them I was pregnant with Jon. In fact, we didn't talk for months afterward. I'm not sure my mother has really forgiven me for pretty much excluding her from my entire pregnancy. But I know that having them know is going to make things harder, not easier. Especially if something goes wrong..."

Lois had never told him about the fight she'd had with her parents when they'd learned she was pregnant. It was one of those difficult moments she saw no particular need to relive. Concern etched deep in his expression, he leaned forward in his chair and rested his chin on his folded hands. "We have our first ultrasound next week. Bernie told us if we could hear the heartbeat then, that would be a really good sign. Why don't we wait until after that appointment to tell them?"

She nodded in silent agreement. "And if we decide to have Thanksgiving here in Metropolis, Mom and I can take care of all the cooking and the hosting," he assured her. He was gladly accepting every burden she'd allow him to take on his shoulders, all so that she wouldn't have to struggle with them. It was sweet. And thoughtful. And so very much like the Clark she'd married. He was hurting—just as she was—but he was figuring out how to get past his own pain in order to take care of her.

"So we'll just take it one step at a time, then?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said quietly, knowing it sounded easier than it actually would be.

He stood up and stepped around her desk toward her, extending his hands to take hers. He pulled her into his arms. "I love you," he whispered.

She closed her eyes and hugged him more tightly. "I love you, too," she replied.

He stood beside the exam table, nervously holding her hand while Bernie adjusted the equipment. "Okay, Lois, I've inserted the transducer," her physician announced as he turned on the monitor. Over the sound of his own thundering heartbeat and Lois's, Clark strained to listen for the sound they'd been waited through desperate weeks to hear.

Lois craned her neck to try to see the monitors, but he imagined that it looked mostly like a fuzzy, black and white blur to her, too. Bernie stared intently at the image and slowly, a wide grin spread across his face. "There it is," he said, pointing to a small, barely discernible shape on the monitor. "The fetal pole length looks good. About five and a half millimeters – exactly what it should be. And that's the heartbeat, 102 beats per minute. Steady and strong."

Over the din of the ultrasound machine and all the distant noises in the background, he listened to the faint fluttering sound, training his hearing to pick it out of the jumble. Now that he knew it, he would be able to hear it all the time. He felt relief wash over him in waves and he smiled for the first time in weeks. Clark looked at his wife through a film of tears. She squeezed his hand tightly as she smiled tremulously at him, her own eyes bright with unshed tears. "That's our baby," he whispered reverently.

"Our baby," she repeated, her tone soft.

Bernie removed the transducer and turned off the monitor. He smiled as he stood up from his stool. "Lois, Clark, everything looks perfect," he said happily. "We still have to do the amnio and I want to monitor the development closely, but the fetus is exactly where it should be in terms of development at this point. The heartbeat is strong; that's exactly what we were hoping to find out today."

"Thank you, Bernie," Lois said tearfully.

"Yes, thank you," Clark repeated, hearing the earnestness in his own voice.

"Of course," he said with a small nod. "I'll just give you a couple of minutes."

As Bernie Klein left the exam room, Clark leaned down to gently press his lips to his wife's forehead.

"Thank God," she whispered as she closed her eyes. He could feel her shudder as she exhaled. He knew exactly how she felt. Though they weren't out of the woods, the intolerable knot in his gut had eased. Now familiar with the sound, he sought out the baby's heartbeat, fully intending to keep his ear trained on that wonderful rhythm all the time.

He realized just what those damn Kryptonite bombs had deprived them of. They should have found out about the pregnancy together. They should have been able to share their excitement. These appointments should have been happy occasions. And even though they had good news, it would still be months before they could even hope to have something approximating peace of mind. He was going to be here with her for every moment—good and bad—but it wasn't going to be enough to make this pregnancy an easy or happy time for them. The thought filled him with a profound sadness. Even the greatest joys in their lives seemed qualified.

Reluctantly, he let her hand go as she got up off the exam table. She changed her clothes and immediately sought out his embrace. He was only too happy to pull her into his arms. "I love you," he whispered. "So much."

"I love you, too," she replied softly.

He let his hand slip between their bodies to rest against her still-flat abdomen. “And I love you,” he said quietly, closing his tear-filled eyes to focus on the baby’s heartbeat. ‘Please,’ he thought silently to himself. ‘Please, little one, be as strong as your mother. Get through this all right.’

She had never thought she would happily welcome morning sickness. As she washed her face and brushed her teeth, yet again, she mentally latched onto another piece of evidence to assure her that the pregnancy was proceeding the way it was supposed to. Hearing the baby’s heartbeat on the ultrasound two days earlier had lifted a tremendous millstone from around her neck. Now, it was like she could barely concentrate on anything other than that wonderful sound.

When she’d been pregnant with Jon, they’d had no reason to do an early ultrasound and it was about a week later in the pregnancy that she’d first heard her son’s heartbeat without the assistance of any medical equipment. Even though she knew what to listen for, just that one week had made a tremendous difference. The baby’s heartbeat had been harder to pick out that much earlier, but now, she always had one ear tuned to it, quietly reassuring her that any child of hers and Clark’s would be strong.

As had been the case with her pregnancy with Jon, her morning sickness seemed to have no ability to tell time. It didn’t matter that it was earlier evening, or that her parents would be over soon. Thank God Martha and Clark were handling dinner. At least one thing would go off flawlessly tonight. She knew her parents would be thrilled—about the only thing that ever got them to act civilly around each other these days was the opportunity to spend time with their grandson. Having another grandchild to dote on and play with might actually force her parents to start liking one another. But how exactly was she supposed to keep up the charade of pretending everything was wonderful while she was still seized in terror’s vise-like grip?

She could tell them the truth—that her doctor was worried about the pregnancy. But how would she explain what was wrong? She couldn’t exactly just make things up as she went with her parents. They both knew a hell of a lot more about medicine than she did. Which left her wondering how she was going to pull this off. She supposed she could tell them she’d been slightly hurt during the bomb scare at the Planet—which had the added benefit of not being a lie—but she fully expected her father to want to look at her medical records.

There was no solution to this nasty little problem as far as she could see and she’d been going around in circles for hours. It looked like she was just going to have to put on an act, pretend that there was absolutely nothing to worry about. Then they could repeat the standard line that while they were telling their parents, they wanted to wait a while longer before letting everyone else know. She sighed, wondering where she was going to find the wherewithal to get through the evening.

“Crab cake, Ellen?” Clark asked with a smile as he brought the tray of hors d’oeuvres over to the coffee table in the living room.

“No, thank you, Clark,” his mother-in-law replied somewhat impatiently.

“You should try the quiches,” Martha suggested as she sat down next to Ellen on the sofa.

“I’m fine, really,” Ellen insisted.

“They’re quite good,” Sam supplied from his armchair.

“Are you stalling?” Ellen asked abruptly.

His mother looked puzzled. “Stalling?” she asked.

“Honestly, Ellen, the roast just needs a few more minutes,” Clark said as he sat down on the sofa opposite his mother-in-law.

“And Lois should be back down from putting Jon to bed in a minute,” Jonathan added.

“No, I mean all of this,” Ellen said with a wave of her arms. “You asked us to come here because you said you have news and all we’ve talked about are the appetizers and the weather. I’m assuming whatever it is it’s bad news...”

“It’s not bad news, Mother,” Lois interrupted as she came down the stairs. She walked into the living room to sit down beside her husband. She took his hand and he interlaced their fingers, squeezing her hand gently. “We’re pregnant,” she finished simply.

“That’s terrific news, Princess!” Sam exclaimed.

Ellen raised a hand to her lips. “How far along are you?” she asked. He could see the laugh lines around her eyes, showing that she was genuinely pleased.

“Seven weeks,” Lois replied. “We found out a few weeks ago.”

“Another grandchild,” Ellen said. “This is wonderful.”

“It is,” Lois agreed. He could hear her heartbeat speed up. Even an hour ago, she hadn’t been sure what she was going to tell them about their concerns, but they’d both known that trying to pretend that there was nothing to be worried about wasn’t possible. “We’re both really happy, but you should know—and don’t start panicking, Mother—that my doctor is a little concerned about the pregnancy.”

Sam’s brow furrowed as his genuinely pleased expression turned into a dour frown. “What’s wrong?” he asked immediately.

“So far, nothing,” Clark assured his in-laws. “Our last appointment was good. The baby’s heartbeat was strong.”

“But if your doctor is doing an ultrasound at seven weeks, it means he’s probably worried about something,” Sam insisted.

Lois drew in a deep breath. “We found out about the pregnancy right after the bomb scare at the Planet,” she said. He knew she was bracing herself for the coming slew of chastisements and warnings from her mother about going around courting trouble.

“After the evacuation, Lois wasn’t feeling well, so we went to the doctor. That’s how we found out about the pregnancy,” Clark hurried to add.

“So he was concerned that the stress you’ve been putting yourself under could have harmed the pregnancy?” Ellen asked pointedly.

“Possibly,” Lois answered. “But like Clark said, the ultrasound was good. Everything looks fine, so far. My doctor just wants to monitor the pregnancy very closely.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed as he frowned. “How good is this guy with high-risk pregnancies?”

“Daddy, he’s a terrific doctor. There’s no one I’d trust more.”

“We just wanted to tell you this so you’d understand why we’re...preoccupied,” Clark tried to explain, giving Lois’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“Just tell us you’ll start being more careful,” Ellen insisted.

“Mother, I would never put Jon or this baby in any danger,” Lois replied emphatically.

“What about the bomb at the Planet the other day?” Ellen exclaimed. “Are you going to try to claim that wasn’t related to your deciding to take on all the world’s organized crime on your own?”

“We got Jon out of the building immediately, and no, we weren’t the targets of that attack,” Lois replied, her tone a bit testy. While Lois and Clark hadn’t been the principal targets, Clark mused, he assumed the bomber would have been glad to kill the both of them, along with Superman and Ultrawoman. “And believe me, no one is taking this baby’s health or safety more seriously than I am, Mother.”

“Martha, I think that roast should be just about ready,” Jonathan interjected gently, obviously trying to defuse the budding tension.

“Yes,” his mother agreed. “Why don’t we all sit down at the table?” she suggested with a smile.

“And Dad, why don’t you give me a hand in the kitchen?” Clark said, knowing he could leave his mother to keep the peace in the interim.

“Sure thing, son,” Jonathan said as he stood up.

“I’m just worried about my grandchild,” her mother said emphatically as she sat down at the dining room table.

“You’re a mother; you can’t take the kinds of risks you did when you had no one depending on you.”

“I’m well aware of the fact that I’m a parent,” Lois replied more sharply than she intended. Her mother had a way of immediately setting her on edge. Now she didn’t even have to try; Lois already felt like she was balancing on the razor-thin line separating sanity from oblivion. She didn’t need any help from her mother to go teetering off the brink. “And nothing comes before my family.”

“Ellen, you know stress isn’t good for Lois’s condition,” Sam interjected as he negotiated a seat at the table a safe distance from his ex-wife.

“Since when did you give a damn about parenting?” Ellen snapped.

“This is my grandchild, too,” Sam countered angrily, standing up just as soon as he’d sat down.

“Please,” Martha interrupted gently but urgently.

“Everyone here wants what’s best for the baby. But right now, the kids are going through an incredibly difficult time and I think the best thing for all four of us to do is support them.”

Her parents said nothing in response and for that, Lois was grateful. She listened in on what was going on in the kitchen, thankful to hear her husband and father-in-law preparing to bring everything into the dining room, sparing them any more than a few awkward moments of silence.

The doorway to the kitchen opened and Clark stepped through, carrying the roast with potholders he didn’t really need. His father followed, carrying the salad and potatoes. “Dinner is served,” Clark announced cheerfully, though Lois knew full well he would have had one ear tuned to what was going on in the dining room before they entered. He took to carving the roast as soon as it was on the table.

“It looks wonderful,” Lois said, in admiration of her husband and mother-in-law’s prowess in the kitchen. Though it hadn’t been billed as such, she knew the dinner was a dress rehearsal for the upcoming holiday-proof from Martha and Clark that they would be able to handle every detail and that it wasn’t something she would need to worry about, aside from surviving the attendant family drama that always seemed to accompany holidays with the Lanes.

“I’m looking forward to what these two whip up next week for Thanksgiving,” Jonathan said with a smile as he passed the salad to Ellen.

“Lucy called,” Clark said, looking up from the roast. “She said she’ll definitely be here.”

“Well, unless she cancels,” Ellen retorted. Lois bit back a sigh.

“She’s already bought her plane ticket,” Clark assured his mother-in-law as he finished serving everyone.

They ate in relative silence, save for a few complimentary comments about the tenderness of the roast and the flavoring of the potatoes. “At least tell me you’re going to cut back on your hours this time and not go running off to some war-torn hellhole to chase a story after the baby’s born,” her mother said at last, cutting through the awkward, yet tolerable silence that had descended on the room. Lois heard her fork clatter against her plate as it fell from her hand.

She took a sip from her glass of water, for no other reason than to keep from giving some snap response without thinking. “Mother, I am going to do whatever is in the best interests of this child,” Lois said at last, exerting whatever super will-power she possessed to keep her voice calm and even. “If that means I need to take more time off from work, then I will.”

“You know, that might be convincing to someone who didn’t know you better, but it’s like running after trouble is in your blood. Goodness knows, you didn’t get it from my side of the family...” Ellen continued. Lois tried to remind herself that appetite or not, she needed to eat.

“Ellen, there is nothing more important to Lois or to me than the well-being of this family,” Clark said firmly. She

silently thanked him for interjecting into the argument. Nothing good was going to come from it.

Her mother gave an exaggerated sigh. “I just wish you didn’t have to go around saving the world all the time. Can’t you leave that to someone else for a while?”

Knowing the irony was entirely lost on her mother, Lois bit her tongue. “Believe me, Mother, that is exactly what I intend to do.”

She pulled the bedroom door closed behind her. “Ugh, thank God that’s over,” Lois groaned as she let her husband pull her into his arms.

“It wasn’t that bad,” he said softly as he kissed her temple. “And besides, that was the hard part. Now it’s out of the way.”

“Are you always this cheerfully optimistic?” she muttered against his chest. She felt him hug her more tightly.

“No,” he confessed softly. “I’m not. In fact, for most of the last five years, I’ve been a pretty pessimistic guy.” He tilted her chin up so he could look into her eyes. “But you have always had faith in me. I survived hell, a war, a trip through light years of space, all of it because you loved me. That’s how I know we’re going to be okay.”

The look in his eyes—obscured though it was by his glasses—was so earnest. His lips parted ever so slightly and she took that as her invitation. She stood on her toes to kiss him, wrapping her arms around his neck as she did so. He held her tightly against his body and deepened the kiss, his tongue insisting entry to her mouth. She felt her pulse quicken and her breathing grew harsh. He broke off the kiss and she could feel the sigh shuddering through his body. His heart pounded, rough and uneven, beneath the firm muscles of his chest. He caressed her cheek gently with one hand and she closed her eyes. She turned to drop a kiss in the palm of his hand. “We haven’t made love in weeks,” he whispered, the longing clear in his voice.

As though she could have been oblivious to that fact. It wasn’t desire that overwhelmed her, that focused all of her heightened senses on him or that filled her memory with nothing but the thought of his hands on her body, his arms wrapping themselves protectively around her. Desire could be sublimated. Chastened, it could be held at bay by reason or intellect. What she felt was a fearsome and consuming need. Her eyes still closed, she confessed, “I’ve been afraid.”

“For the baby?” he asked.

She shook her head silently, terrified to open her eyes, filled with dread at the thought of what she might see in his expression. “Honey...” he began. She could hear the heartbreak in his voice.

“This has been so hard for both of us,” she began, trying to find that tiny scrap of courage she hoped she still possessed. Drawing in a deep breath, she finally opened her eyes. He deserved to hear this face to face. “I didn’t know if you were angry, or hurt...because of what I did. I know that you will always be here for me, I just didn’t know if you

wanted to...” she looked away, her former resolve not to shrink away from this fading into oblivion.

But he wouldn’t let her. His hand on her cheek, he turned her head gently so she was still facing him. The look in his eyes was unmistakable. She had seen it too many times in the last year and a half to misjudge it. He was hurt. But he was also fiercely determined. “I am not here out of obligation,” he said, his voice a rough whisper. “I love you more than anything in this world. And nothing can change that. Please, don’t ever doubt that.”

“I love you,” she whispered in response. “So much.”

He kissed her again and this time, she had no doubts as to where this was leading. She needed this. She needed him as much as she’d ever had in the past. As he gently floated them off the ground and toward the bed, she fumbled to deprive him of his shirt and the rest of his completely superfluous clothing. She needed to feel the warmth of his skin, the strength of his arms as they held her close, the pounding of his heart.

He let the last of her clothing fall to the floor and he lowered her to the waiting bed. Her small hands roamed his body with an almost feverish intensity. Though he hated how much she was hurting, he felt some small measure of relief in knowing that she seemed to need this as much as he did. How had they let themselves drift so far apart? How had they let that gulf open up between them? And it didn’t seem to matter what he’d told her, she’d still been afraid of losing his love. It hurt more than he could stand, but he couldn’t think about that now. Now, he had to focus on *showing* her that his love was enduring, unending, unchanging.

He kissed her fiercely, still trying to keep some modicum of control over the squall of emotions raging inside him. But the moisture he felt on his cheek told he wasn’t the only one warring with his feelings. He lifted his hand to brush away the tears from her face with the pad of his thumb. “Oh Lois,” he breathed her name softly.

She bit her lip and smiled bravely at him, giving him a quick, jerking nod. “Happy tears,” she assured him. He knew it wasn’t as simple as that.

“You’re sure?” he asked hesitantly.

She placed her hand on top of his. “I’m sure,” she said. She kissed him, burying her hands in his hair, sending a shiver down the length of his spine.

“I love you,” she whispered as their lips parted.

“Oh God, Lois, I love you so much,” he breathed against her skin as he trailed soft, open-mouthed kisses down her jaw, her throat, the hollow at the base of her neck. How had he gone weeks without this? The rough beat of her pulse quickened. Heaven help him, he was never going to let her go another minute wondering whether his love for her was as strong as he’d professed.

Later, as she lay in his arms, her fingers trailing up and down the length of his forearm, he pressed a kiss to the crown of her hair, feeling tears sting at his eyes. “A year ago, I would have been useless at defusing those bombs.

And I wouldn't have been able to deal with any of this. I am a better man because you love me. Please, let me be there for you the way you've always been there for me," he whispered.

"Clark," she said his name so softly he wouldn't have been able to hear it if he'd been an ordinary man. He felt a sob shudder through her body and he hugged her tighter.

"I'm here," he whispered. "I always will be."

"Clark! It's so good to see you!" Lucy exclaimed as he opened the door.

"Hey, Luce," he said warmly as he pulled his sister-in-law into a hug. "How was your flight?"

"Ugh, you know what traveling this time of year is like," she said as she stepped back. She peered into the entryway of the house. "This place is amazing," she said.

Clark smiled as he stepped out into the cold to grab her bags. "Let me take these upstairs for you," he said, carrying her suitcase and carry-on inside. "There's hot coffee and tea," he said as he pushed the front door closed. His father came out of the kitchen to welcome their latest arrival.

"Hi Lucy, it's good to have you here," Jonathan said.

"Thanks," she replied enthusiastically. "I'm so glad that I finally get to see the new house and see everyone together."

Clark made his way up the stairs to one of the guest bedrooms and dropped off his sister-in-law's luggage. Heading back downstairs, he intercepted his son just as the little boy darted out of the kitchen.

"Hey, Daddy!" Jon exclaimed.

Clark lifted Jon up in his arms. "Come on, buddy, Aunt Lucy's here to see you."

He carried Jon into the living room and watched as Lucy's eyes lit up on seeing her nephew. "There's my little guy!" she said.

"Hi, Aunt Lucy," Jon said as his father set him down on his feet.

"Go give Aunt Lucy a hug," Clark instructed gently.

Lucy picked the little boy up. "My goodness, you're getting big!" she announced, still smiling.

"I'm in nursery school now," Jon declared.

"Wow," Lucy replied.

"Lucy, coffee or tea?" Clark asked.

"Do you have any orange pekoe?" she asked hesitantly.

He grinned. "You came to the right place," he assured her. He still had Metropolis's widest selection of teas outside of the tea houses in Chinatown. Clark made his way to the kitchen to get tea for his father and Lucy. The wonderful smells of a roasting turkey with stuffing and candied yams filled the expansive kitchen.

"Hi, honey," his mother said as she looked up from the top oven, which she'd opened to remove the green bean casserole.

"Let me get that for you, Mom," he said as he grabbed the casserole dish barehanded and placed it on a kitchen towel on the counter.

"Thanks, sweetheart," she replied. Smiling, he noticed that her glasses had fogged up from the heat of the oven. He'd been following all of her recipes to the letter that morning, knowing how important it was to her to have Thanksgiving always turn out perfectly. He hoped that having a super-powered sous chef in the kitchen meant that she didn't have to worry nearly as much.

He filled a couple of mugs and boiled the water with his heat vision before dropping in the tea bags. "I'll be back to mash the potatoes in just a minute," he promised her as he put his hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. He picked up the steeping mugs of tea and carried them back out to the living room.

Jon was sitting on the couch next to his aunt, showing her his artwork from school. Lucy listened in rapt attention as Jon described each crayon-scribbled drawing. She favored her brother-in-law with a smile as he handed her a cup of orange pekoe tea. "Here you go, Dad," Clark said as he handed his father his more traditional cup of Earl Grey.

"Thanks, son," Jonathan said.

"Lucy, do you need anything else?" Clark asked. "I'm just going to go let Lois know you're here."

"Is she busy working?" Lucy asked.

"Always a likely possibility with her," Clark replied.

"Tell me about it," Lucy said with a wry grin.

Clark retreated back upstairs to find his wife. A quick scan placed her in the master bathroom, brushing her teeth yet again. His mouth twisted into a frown. He'd hoped that being super-powered would have made pregnancy easier on his wife, but apparently in the first trimester, that wasn't the case.

She stepped out of the bathroom, shaking her head, and smiled balefully at him. "Why am I not invulnerable to morning sickness?" she asked, echoing his own thoughts.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said as he pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Is that Lucy downstairs?" she asked.

He nodded. "She just got here a minute ago," he said.

"Are you going to tell her right away?"

"Yeah. If she thinks I'm holding out on her, she'll kill me," she replied.

Clark winked at his wife. "That's not very likely," he said.

"How's the cooking?"

"Mom and I are holding our own against the turkey. And you'll have to judge which is better, her pumpkin or my apple pie."

"That's my all-American boy," she said with a smile as she stood on her toes to kiss him.

He withdrew from the kiss with a contented sigh. "Come on, they're waiting for us downstairs," he said quietly as he took her hand.

Lucy grinned as she looked up at them coming down the stairs. "Lois!" she exclaimed. "Wow, I can't believe how long it's been!" She jumped up from her seat on the couch to run over to them.

“Hey, Luce,” Lois said as she hugged her kid sister. “It’s good to see you.”

“This house is amazing,” Lucy replied. “How much does a columnist make, exactly?”

“Work has been treating us pretty well,” Lois demurred, knowing she couldn’t really explain what a fixer-upper this place had been months earlier. “Come on, let me give you the tour,” Lois said.

“So was Jon okay after the whole bomb scare at the paper?” Lucy asked as she followed her sister up the stairs.

“He’s fine,” Lois assured her. “He doesn’t even know what happened.” She led her sister through the house, pointing out the guest room where Clark had dropped off her bags and ending the tour in their impressive library.

“Wow, this place is so you,” Lucy said as she turned to take in the immensity of the library.

“Actually, it’s pretty much equally Clark and me,” Lois said. “Most of the little knick knacks are his, from all the weird places he’s been,” she explained with a smile.

“He’s a great guy,” Lucy said. “I mean, I’d be tempted to call you lucky, but I’m guessing that four and a half years of raising Jon by yourself, not knowing where Clark was or if he was okay, probably makes you feel otherwise.”

“I am lucky,” Lois said softly. “And he is the best man I’ve ever known. Despite the hell we’ve both been through, I wouldn’t trade a minute of my life with him for anything.” Lois heard the gravelly tone in her voice as she struggled to keep her equilibrium. She tried to nonchalantly brush away the tear that threatened to slip down her cheek.

“Sis, are you okay?” Lucy asked.

Lois gave her a quick, jerking nod in response. “Yeah,” she whispered.

“Hey, I’m your kid sister. I’ve known you most of your life. You can’t fool me,” Lucy said gently.

Lois replied with a wry half smile. “You’re a real pain in the butt, you know that?”

“I know,” Lucy replied as she stepped forward to hug her sister. “Are things between you and Clark okay?”

“Yeah,” Lois whispered. “We’re going to have a baby.”

Lucy stepped back. “This is great news, right? I mean, you guys do want to have another baby?” she asked hesitantly.

“We do,” Lois assured her. “We were trying to get pregnant. But we found out the day of the bomb threat against the Planet.” She repeated the same story they’d told her parents, watching Lucy’s complexion grow ashen.

“So when will you know?” Lucy asked.

“We still have to wait almost two months before the amnio, but that should be a good indicator...”

“But not perfect?” Lucy ventured.

Lois shook her head. “I’m not sure we’ll really be certain until the baby’s born.”

“I really think she’s going to be okay,” Lucy replied firmly.

Lois couldn’t help but smile at her eternally optimistic little sister. “How do you know it’s a girl?”

Lucy shrugged. “Wishful thinking,” she admitted.

“You really want a niece?”

“Yeah. Well, that and Lane women are tough. There’s no way my sister’s little girl could be anything but a fighter.”

Lois hugged her sister again. “I hope you’re right,” she whispered.

“About it being a girl?” Lucy asked.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Lois responded. “I just want my baby to be okay,” she whispered. She felt Lucy hug her more tightly.

“Lois, I’m glad your table seats ten because otherwise, I figure you would have stuck Jon, Lucy, and me at a kids’ table,” Jimmy joked as he placed the yams on the table.

“Well, we could still put some trays in the rec room if you three would rather watch cartoons,” Lois replied.

“Very funny, Sis,” Lucy said as she helped her nephew into his chair.

“Lois, Clark, I just wanted to thank you both for having all of us over for Thanksgiving,” Perry announced.

“I had nothing to do with this,” Lois declared. “All the credit goes to Martha and Clark.”

“I helped smash the potatoes!” Jon exclaimed.

“You sure did, Buddy,” his father replied with a grin as he put the green bean casserole down on the already crowded table.

“So James, how’s the photography business?” Sam said as he took his seat next to the younger man.

“It’s going really well, sir,” Jimmy replied.

“That was your picture of Superman delivering food to that soup kitchen on the front page of today’s paper, wasn’t it?” Ellen asked.

Jimmy smiled modestly. “Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“That was a really great photo,” Lucy chimed in.

“Thanks!” Jimmy said. Lois thought she could see the young man blushing slightly. Her mother-in-law entered from the kitchen, carrying the rolls, just as Clark passed her to go and get the turkey.

“Red or white?” her father-in-law asked with a wink as he stepped around the table to where she was sitting, holding up two bottles of sparkling grape juice. Between her pregnancy and her mother’s alcoholism, sparkling juice had become the drink of choice for family occasions.

“Hmmm...white,” she decided. Jonathan smiled and filled her wine glass.

Clark returned, carrying the enormous turkey. “That’s some bird,” Perry said with a chuckle. Clark placed the turkey in its spot of honor in the center of the table.

“Jon, are you going to help me cut the turkey again?” he asked his son.

“Yeah!” Jon replied with an enthusiastic grin. Clark stood behind his son’s chair and allowed the little boy to ‘help’ him carve the turkey. The homemade sides were passed around the table as everyone continued to exchange happy small talk. Though her family could often be a source of stress, everyone seemed to be getting along

terrifically. Even her parents weren't fighting. And this year, that was something to be thankful for.

Clark finished carving the turkey and returned to the empty seat next to hers. Still standing behind his chair, he lifted his glass. "I just wanted to say how thankful I am to have the people I care about all under one roof, here to celebrate Thanksgiving with us. It's been a pretty big year for us," he said as he looked at her with a smile. "Moving back to the city, a new house, a new job for me, and a new school for Jon. Mom, Dad, I hope it's been a new adventure for you, too. It's wonderful to have you all here, and to share in your love, friendship, and support – the things that haven't changed. The things we've depended on as we've gone through all of these transitions. So thank you all for celebrating with us."

"Well said, Clark," Sam replied as he lifted his glass. The rest of their guests did likewise and clinked glasses with everyone they could reach around the large table. Clark sat down beside her and immediately reached for her hand. She knotted her fingers through his and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

"I love you," she whispered almost silently.

"Love you, too," he said softly in response.

Lois pushed the door to the kitchen open and followed Lucy in. She felt somewhat ridiculous, carrying nothing more than a few glasses while everyone else did the heavy lifting, but if she was to play the part of an ordinary woman with a high-risk pregnancy for her family, that meant some degree of pretending.

"Those pies were amazing," Lucy declared, stacking the plates on the counter. "You definitely lucked out in the mother-in-law department."

"Actually, Clark baked the apple pie," Lois said as she set the glasses down in the sink.

Her kid sister started loading the dishes into the dishwasher. "He's gorgeous and he bakes? He can't be for real."

Lois smiled. "He's one of a kind," she said as she washed the glasses in the sink. "I'm glad you made it out here."

"Me too," Lucy agreed. "I'm actually having a lot of fun. And Mom and Dad are behaving like they can stand to be in the same room with each other."

"The trick is Jon. They'll pretend to get along, just so they can spend time with him."

"That's it, I'm bringing your kid along with me every time I visit our parents," Lucy replied.

"That's what I do," Lois admitted.

"You know, I think I'd forgotten just how cute Jimmy is," Lucy said nonchalantly as she finished loading the dishwasher.

"Are you asking me to set you up?"

Lucy looked up at her with a smirk as she closed the dishwasher door. "Please, Sis, I can get my own dates."

The kitchen door opened behind them and Clark entered, carrying the rest of the plates from dessert. "What

kind of trouble are the Lane women causing in here?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Finishing the first wave of dishes," Lois announced as she placed the last of the glasses on the draining board.

Placing the dishes on the counter, Clark stepped behind her to wrap his arms around her and pull her away from the sink. He kissed her cheek and whispered, "I'll take care of it."

She smiled and placed her hands on his arms. "I'm pregnant, not completely incapable."

"You are the most capable person I know," he replied. "And right now, you are making a little person, which is way cooler than anything I can do. So why don't you let me finish the dishes? You and Lucy can go catch up."

Lois turned her head to look over her shoulder and kiss her husband. "You're wonderful, you know that?"

"Ditto," he replied. "Now go relax. Both of you."

"Thanks, Clark," Lucy said. Lois stepped out of his embrace reluctantly and followed her younger sister back into the living room.

"You sure there are no more like him?" Lucy asked.

"Yep. Definitely one of a kind," Lois replied.

Lucy shook her head. "What a shame."

He watched as his wife closed the bedroom door and turned back to face him, smiling slightly as she shook her head. "I have no idea how you and Martha pulled that off," she said.

"We made Superman do all the hard work," he said as he pulled her into his arms.

"Poor guy, he never seems to get a day off," she replied.

"He doesn't mind," Clark said. "I hear he goes home every night to this brilliant, amazingly hot wife that he's crazy in love with."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," he breathed as he lowered his head to cover her lips with his own. She sighed as the kiss ended.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For reminding me of all the things I have to be thankful for. Our family. Our friends. You. I don't know how it is that you manage to be strong enough for both of us, every single day."

"We take care of each other; that's what 'for better or worse' is all about," he said softly. The truth was, the last month had been brutally hard on him as well. He knew he was probably only keeping everything together because he had to. Lois needed him; nothing else mattered. Clark threaded his fingers through her hair as he held her close. He closed his eyes and focused on the sound of the baby's heartbeat. Over the last week and a half it had grown clearer and more distinct—easier to pick out over the din of everyday sounds. Everything was going to be okay, he told himself. He knew it was going to be okay because it had to be. Because he couldn't imagine how much it would devastate Lois if things weren't all right. Because he didn't want to think about how it would hollow him out, too. Clark pressed his lips against Lois's temple, silently

praying to the fates or deities that might hold some sway over how their lives turned out.

“I love you,” she whispered quietly as she began to slowly undo the buttons of his shirt. Her hands felt warm against his roughly scarred skin. But it was like she didn’t even notice the strange and ugly marks that marred his body. There was no way for him to deny what her touch so clearly conveyed—she loved him. All of him. Even the parts of himself he thought unlovable.

And he loved her just as deeply. Just as completely. “I love you, too,” he replied. The words were inadequate; they could never fully embody the magnitude of his feelings. Which meant he was just going to have to show her how much he loved her, he thought as he framed her face between his hands and kissed her thoroughly.

He shivered, trying to remember the last time he’d felt so cold. His whole body was frozen, as though the chill had leeching straight into his bones, taking root there and branching out into every cell and fiber of his body. The air on New Krypton had been this cold. No longer impervious, he’d felt its awful sting so many times. In Nor’s dungeon, on the campaign to liberate Terian, in the charred remnants of Silban.

Suddenly, he was standing amidst the wreckage of that leveled city, breathing in the smoke and soot and ash. To his astonishment, Nor appeared through the curtain of smoke and started swaggering toward him, every bit the bloated, jaundiced corpse he’d been when Clark had seen him last in the morgue, his gut torn wide open by the wound Clark had inflicted at point blank range. “You couldn’t protect these people,” Nor gloated. “What makes you think you can protect them?” Nor looked past him and Clark spun quickly to see Lois standing in front of Jon, trying to shield their young son despite the fact that she was somehow now extremely pregnant, her abdomen large and full with the life her body was creating. The fear in her eyes was unmistakable.

“Lois!” he shouted her name, but as he tried to run toward her, he was pulled back by the shackles that now bound his arms and legs to the ground. Nor stepped around him easily as he bore down on Clark’s family.

“No!” he yelled, struggling against the chains that bound him. He suddenly found himself bolt upright in bed, his heart hammering in his chest.

“Clark? Honey?” He felt Lois place her hand on his shoulder. He exhaled shakily. “Are you okay?”

“It was just a dream,” he murmured.

“Everything’s all right,” she said as she sat up to wrap her arms around him. He allowed her to pull him into her embrace. The sound of her heartbeat and the baby’s soothed him. They lay back down, still wrapped in one another’s arms.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too,” she said. “We’re okay. You know that. All of us, Jon, the baby, your parents, you, me. We’re all okay.”

“I know,” he said softly. Clark placed his hand against her abdomen, which still showed no signs of her pregnancy. He wanted some assurance that he would be able to keep his child safe, but he knew there was no such thing. For all his abilities, he couldn’t guarantee the future would be bright and shiny and perfect. But he could do everything in his not-inconsiderable power to protect the people he loved. And yet, he wondered if the dream was a portent of more troubled nights to come. Over the last few months, the nightmares had grown less frequent, though truth be told, he was never really free of them.

“I know you’ve done all of the emotional heavy lifting in this relationship for a long time now,” she began. “But I am still here for you. It’s like you said, we have to take care of each other.”

“We do,” he agreed in a quiet whisper. He didn’t expect to get much sleep for the remainder of the night, but at least he could hold his wife, and marvel at the little life they’d created, that was growing every day in her body. As he had on so many other nights over the last few weeks, he prayed that their child would be strong. Strong enough to deal with such a rocky start in life. Strong enough to endure the seemingly endless series of trials and tribulations that seemed to follow their family.

He jogged down the stairs from the library, where he’d supposedly been holed up working on some big layout disaster at the Planet. Lois’s cover for him had been brilliant, as always. No one wanted to hear about the difficulties in physically putting together a newspaper or why it was going to take several hours, which gave him all the time he needed to deal with the enormous pile-up on the interstate in Nebraska. A blizzard had made the roads practically impassable. The forty-car pileup that resulted finished that job. Rescue crews were themselves hamstrung by the weather, which meant more work for him.

Now that he was home again, the house seemed much quieter than it should have. He found his wife in the living room, a mug of tea held between her hands. “How’d it go?” she asked.

He shrugged. “No fatalities, thankfully. It was a pretty big mess, though. Where is everyone?”

She leaned forward to put her mug on the coffee table. “Lucy and Jimmy took Jon to see the Nutcracker. My mother decided to brave the crowds and go shopping, and your mother—because she’s a saint—agreed to go with her. I think your dad is in the apartment downstairs, taking a nap.”

Clark smiled as he sat down next to his wife and pulled her into his arms. “So we have the whole place to ourselves, then, huh?” he asked as he pressed his lips against the soft skin of her neck, just below her ear. He felt her shiver as a low moan escaped her lips.

“Are you still going to be attracted to me when I’m as big as a house?” she asked softly.

“You’d better believe it,” he whispered against her skin. “And I can’t wait to fly all over the planet to get you

Chinese food in the middle of the night, or samosas from India, or Belgian chocolate.” He pulled the soft lobe of her ear into his mouth and sucked gently on it.

“Oh yeah?” she said breathlessly.

“And I want to paint the nursery with bunnies or teddy bears or ducklings or whatever cute baby animals you want and spend the entirety of our rather substantial salaries on all that ridiculous baby stuff everyone claims you need. And read every parenting book ever written.” He caressed her cheek and turned her face gently so he could kiss her. He felt her smile against his lips.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you,” he replied, realizing this was the first time they’d talked about the baby without the specter of their fears haunting the conversation. For a moment, they were simply two people in love, joyfully expecting a new baby. This everyday happiness was, for them, hard-fought and even harder won. And despite the contentment he felt now, he knew how quickly things could change—not the way he felt about his wife, or the way she felt about him. Those things were enduring, even if everything else around them seemed to shift as though it were on a foundation of sand. Months ago, that knowledge would have only made him bitter. But he was trying to grab hold of every good moment in life, unwilling to let them slip by him, only to be lost. They needed all of those good moments as they struggled to get through the bad ones. He looked up and quickly scanned the house and the street outside, all the while tuning in his superhearing. She placed her hand on his.

“What is it?” she asked, frowning.

He smiled. “I just wanted to make sure no one was going to see me do this,” he said as he swept her into his arms and flew her upstairs to their bedroom.

For the second night in a row, he woke with a terrible start, wondering how the hell Nor had managed to worm his way back into his subconscious. The space next to him in bed this time was empty, though. The bathroom light was on. He fell back against the pillows and listened to the innocuous sounds of the faucet running, the light switch being flicked off, and the bathroom door opening again.

“Sorry for waking you,” Lois whispered as she lay down in bed next to him.

He drew her into his arms. “Don’t worry about it. You okay?”

She sighed. “Three forty a.m. is technically morning, so the morning sickness is at least more accurate today.”

Clark pressed his lips to the crown of her hair and remained quiet for a long moment. “I think I need to talk to Dr. Friskin,” he said at last.

“Did you have another nightmare?” his wife asked.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Same as last night. It’s kind of unnerving.”

“I’ll bet,” she agreed as she placed her head on his shoulder. “Is it anything you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a mental shrug, still staring up at the ceiling, letting the pleasant feeling of his wife’s body curled up next to his fill him with a sense of peace. “I don’t know why they’re starting again now, or what they mean. Except that...you know...we’re both afraid for the baby, and I guess I’ve just started associating pretty much everything I’m afraid of with Nor.”

“I wish I knew how to help,” she whispered wistfully.

He hugged her just a little tighter. “You already have,” he said. “Lois, you’re the only reason I still function in the world. And if it weren’t for you, I never would have gotten the nerve to talk to Dr. Friskin in the first place. This is just one more thing to work through,” he said, not sure if he was trying to convince her or himself.

“So of course the minute we start feeling better about the baby, when we start thinking everything might be okay, I start having these nightmares again...” he paced the length of his therapist’s office and turned on his heel to do it again.

“And why do you think that is?” Dr. Friskin asked, still calmly sitting in her chair, a stark counterpoint to his frenetic pacing.

Clark dragged his hand through his hair and sighed. “I don’t know,” he said, exasperated. “Maybe it’s because I’m not facing the things I should be dealing with...”

“Such as?”

“The bomber...the one who almost killed Lois and me and nearly blew up the Planet. He’s dead, but I haven’t done anything to figure out how to stop the people who sent him. He had to have been connected to the Triads. But I just told myself that I have my family to worry about. And when the cops said the trail was cold, I figured the masterminds were outside our jurisdiction. There was nothing we could do.”

“And so now you’re worried that they’ll harm others in the future if you don’t stop them. You’re worried they’ll manage to do the same thing Nor did.”

“I am,” he admitted, the realization dawning on him. “There’s something else, too...the cop that shot the bomber...yeah, I thanked him for saving our lives, but I haven’t done anything else. I haven’t checked to make sure he’s okay.”

“And you feel responsible; not only because he killed someone to save your life, but because you understand what he’s probably going through.”

Clark stopped pacing and turned to face his therapist, burying his hands in his pockets as he did so. “Yeah,” he agreed.

“So what do you want to do?”

“I’m going to start by going and talking to that cop. Then, if the Metropolis PD can’t help me with the Triads, I’m going to go straight to the Chinese government.”

He pulled open the glass door to the diner, anticipating the jingle of the bell hooked onto the top of the doorframe. The few souls inside all looked up as he entered and

expressions of shock registered on all faces except one—the man who'd kept his head down, ignoring the newcomer. The scene could have been lifted straight from the old Edward Hopper painting, but instead of a gray flannel suit, the man in the corner as far away from the other patrons as possible, wearing a look of quiet desperation, was dressed in the familiar blue uniform of Metropolis's Finest.

The young officer finally looked up as Superman moved to take the stool next to him. "The watch commander at the two-two told me I could find you here. How have you been?" Clark asked simply.

"Okay, I guess," the other man said with a shrug.

The middle-aged waitress wandered over and silently refilled the officer's coffee cup. "What can I get you, honey?" she asked nonchalantly. He could tell she called all of her customers—from the old World War II veterans who wore their pins and medals with pride, to the little boys with skinned knees who probably chased their sisters through the diner—by some term of endearment or other. He wondered if she was even really paying attention to who he was.

"Coffee, sugar and cream," he said. "Thanks...Judy," he said as he read the plastic nametag on her pale pink uniform. She smiled at him before turning and walking off to get his coffee. Being treated like an ordinary person while in uniform was kind of refreshing, he realized. Overhead, an old fluorescent light tube buzzed as its light faded, clearly fighting its impending demise. From the kitchen, the lingering scents of grilled cheese sandwiches and fries wafted into the eating area, the greasy comfort food that like a siren's song drew people here. Some were lonely, some were bored, some were insomniacs, some drove taxis or walked the beat in the middle of the night. Others were just hungry at two in the morning on a Tuesday night. If only Superman could manage to have a favorite coffee shop. Of course, the moment people realized he came here, it would turn into a circus.

"So what brings you here...besides the coffee?" Officer Dawson asked. He finally looked at Clark as he spoke. He had a look of weariness on his face that no man that young should ever have worn. The ghost of the thousand-yard-stare shaded his expression. Kyle Dawson could still function in the world. He still put on his uniform every day and went to work, but Clark knew the young man was haunted. And he cursed himself for not stepping up and doing anything about it any earlier.

"I wanted to see how you're doing. I'm not sure I really thanked you enough for what you did. You saved my life and Ultrawoman's. And probably the lives of a lot of other people." He took a sip of his coffee, still piping hot and probably sweeter than most people could stand.

"Yeah, but I still feel pretty crappy about it. I spent four years in the Marines. Singing cadences every day about how many people we were going to kill and how blood makes the grass grow. You never really buy into any of that stuff. I never fired my weapon except on the range to qualify. Three months on the beat, and I've already killed

someone. You know they've got me riding a desk now." He drained the coffee cup and put it back down on the counter.

"It can take a while to come to grips with something like this," Clark replied earnestly. "Believe me, I know," he added in a soft tone.

The young man looked at him, puzzled. He opened his mouth as though to speak but said nothing. Clark knew he was wondering whether the Man of Steel was admitting to turning into a vigilante.

"I led a people at war for years," he clarified. "You see things and do things...you make choices between bad and worse, just like you had to."

"Does it ever get any easier?" Officer Dawson asked quietly.

"Making those kinds of decisions? Not really," Clark replied, knowing he was disappointing the younger man. "But you can find a way to live with them."

The younger man fixed him with a penetrating stare, his eyes boring into Clark. "How?" He could hear the desperation in the young cop's voice.

"You learn to get perspective. The man you shot had just tried to murder a building full of children. He was going to kill Ultrawoman. And he was going to kill me. Every life she and I save, from now until the end of our time here, will be because of you. That's the part you have to remember."

The young police officer nodded, his mouth slightly agape, as though he couldn't really process what Superman was saying. "Let me tell you one more thing," Clark began. "I'm not you, and I don't know what it's been like for you, but the only way I ever came to terms with the things that were bothering me, was to talk to someone."

"You mean like a shrink," Officer Dawson asked derisively.

"Yeah, I mean a trained professional," Clark corrected. "Someone who could help me make sense of what happened, help me see what I did and what I had to do from a more objective viewpoint." He finished his cup of coffee and stood up. "If you want to talk to me, just contact Lois Lane or Clark Kent at the Daily Planet; they'll know how to get a hold of me." He reached under his cape to pull out a few bills to pay for the coffee.

"It's on the house, Superman," Judy said. "I insist."

"I wasn't sure you'd recognized me," he deadpanned. The waitress merely grinned and shook her head. With another jingle, the door opened again and the caped hero walked out.

"The dead gunman was identified as Hsiao Chen, a Chinese national and resident of Macau," Superman explained patiently to the Special Administrative Region's Chief of Police, Wan Xiang.

"Superman, we appreciate your concern in this matter, but you fail to realize just how delicate the relationship between Beijing and our police department is," the middle-aged officer responded testily from behind his large desk.

He wore a hand-tailored wool suit instead of the typical polyester police uniform.

"Sir, I don't think you do understand my concern," Clark replied in clipped Cantonese as he folded his arms across his chest. "When an assassin tries to blow up a building full of children, I take it personally. When he tries to murder my friends, I take it personally. And when he does it all in an attempt to kill me, I take it personally."

Wan stood up slowly. "And what exactly do you want us to do? You have provided us with no evidence to tie this man to any other parties under my jurisdiction or otherwise."

"That's because the American authorities and I aren't authorized to investigate here and your own police don't seem terribly interested in taking on the case."

"So you expect me to just let you trample on our jurisdiction and sovereignty and do whatever you want here?" Chief Wan waved his arms dramatically to punctuate his statement.

"No sir, what I want is to have cooperation in the investigation and prosecution between the authorities in Macau and Metropolis, with no one's sovereignty or dignity getting trampled in the process."

"We're not dealing with ordinary street criminals here," the police chief replied haughtily.

Clark's eyes narrowed. "I'm well aware of that," he said. "But I also know that Macau has been trying to shed its reputation as a haven for organized crime. I've seen enough of how the Triads operated in Metropolis to help bring down the organization here, as well."

Wan shook his head. "Do you really think you can go from city to city, shutting down every organized crime syndicate you come across?"

"No," Superman admitted. "But I do believe that I can make people realize that obtaining Kryptonite and using innocent children as bait to try to kill me will end very badly for them." The cold edge to his voice left no doubt about his position on the subject. "If you change your position, you know how to contact me." With that, Superman strode out of the room.

She kept tuning in her hearing for some evidence that her husband was nearby – she strained so she wouldn't miss the sounds of shuffling papers in his office, or his voice as he chatted with colleagues, or the unmistakable rhythm of his heartbeat. But he wasn't in the building. She knew that already. He'd missed the morning staff meeting after being gone all night. He'd told her he expected to be gone a while, so it wasn't time to start panicking yet, but she couldn't help but check her watch every few moments. In just a couple of hours, they were supposed to go to Jon's nursery school for the holiday play. He wouldn't miss Jon's play.

Lois sighed as she stared at the story on her monitor. With Perry at some conference in Washington, D.C. and Clark pre-occupied with his other profession, she was left to edit the front page stories for tomorrow's paper. But even

though the subject of the state short-changing Metropolis's public schools out of hundreds of millions of dollars a year was usually something she could get worked up about, she was finding it difficult to focus on anything. Much less work.

She looked at the little clock in the lower right-hand corner of her computer screen again just as she heard the telltale "whoosh" and the thumping of boots on the floor. She smiled to herself. He was back. A few moments later, he was walking into her office, smoothing his tie.

"Sorry I missed the staff meeting this morning," he apologized as he walked across her office to stand behind her desk. She swiveled around in her chair to face him, looking up at him just as he leaned down to give her a kiss.

"Yeah, well with both you and Perry out, I declared a coup and instituted martial law," she joked.

"How's that working out for you?" he asked as he sat down on the edge of her desk.

"I'm having his office measured for new drapes this evening."

"But only after Jon's play, right?"

"Of course," she replied with mock indignation, eliciting a smile from him. "How was everything?" she asked as she placed her hand on his knee.

"Okay," he replied, covering her hand with his. "The Feds aren't exactly happy with having the Chinese take the lead on this, but it's better than the stonewalling they were getting in the past."

"Still not getting much cooperation?" she asked.

"No, the Chinese are going after the Triads, but they've made it perfectly clear to Dave Brewer who's in charge," he said, referring to the Type A special agent in charge of the Metropolis field office's investigation into the criminal syndicate.

"So Superman has to mediate the clash?" He nodded. "I wish I could help," she offered.

"Last I heard, the Chinese government didn't like Ultrawoman all that much," he replied with a lopsided grin, referencing her efforts to diplomatically strong-arm the Chinese into helping end the war in Kinwara.

"Come on, that was years ago," she scoffed. "They should be over it by now."

"Well, if you really want to, you can try explaining that to them. But I'm going to go do some work, you know, justify my paycheck and all." He stood up and kissed her once again.

"Love you," she whispered close to his lips.

"Love you, too," he replied softly.

"Will you be ready to go in two hours?"

"They don't call me 'Superman' for nothing," he assured her quietly before turning to leave her office.

"Mommy, mommy, did you like my play?" Jon asked as he rushed toward his parents and grandparents in the audience, swishing awkwardly from side to side as he tried to run in his foam and felt costume.

“We loved your play!” Lois exclaimed as she knelt down to hug her little snowflake.

“You were an awesome snowflake, buddy,” Clark declared. Jon jumped up to give his dad a high five.

“Are you ready to go get pizza now?” his grandpa asked.

“Yeah!” Jon agreed with a beaming smile. Once Jon was freed from his costume, they left the nursery school and piled into the latest of Lois’s beloved Jeeps. All around them, the city had donned her finest for the season – twinkling lights hung on the branches of every tree, red ribbons and garlands were wrapped around every lamppost, and the signs in the store windows wished Metropolitans happy holidays. There was no snow yet, but it didn’t stop Jon from starting to sing ‘Frosty the Snowman’ exuberantly and loudly as his mother drove down the East Side Drive to their favorite pizza place.

Since Thanksgiving, Lois had been trying to apply a more Zen-like thinking to the holidays. Instead of focusing on the stress and anxiety they tended to bring, she was content this year to not try to make everything perfect. Last year, all of their holiday plans were laid to waste by the tsunami in Indonesia. In the four years prior to that, Christmas had been a source of sadness and loneliness for her, as it only served to intensify the pain surrounding Clark’s absence. So this year, she was going to focus on the simple things. She was going to take her parents up on the offer to take Jon to see Santa. She’d already done most of her shopping on-line this year, allowing her to avoid the chaos and insanity of Metropolis’s stores. Jon, who was practically an irrepressibly happy child, was going to be content because he was going to get to play with his presents with his parents and grandparents. They would spend time with their family, and if he could find some time between the investigation in China and all of his holiday superhero duties, she might even find time to enjoy a quiet evening with her husband.

She tried not to let her thoughts be dominated by the date marked on her calendar, more than a month away, when they were scheduled for the amniocentesis. Lois had peppered Bernie with questions about the procedure—its safety and reliability—after reading everything she could find on it. He’d assured her that returning her invulnerability to her after the amnio would immediately eliminate the most significant risk factors—infection and a failure of the puncture site to heal. She couldn’t stand the idea that she might be doing something else to put the baby in danger, but Bernie had soberly reminded her that if something were wrong, learning that earlier on in the pregnancy increased the likelihood of success through interventionist medicine. She and Clark were being asked to play a numbers game with their child’s health and it left her feeling ill.

But now wasn’t the time for those thoughts. Now, she needed to concentrate on the traffic and get everyone safely to Giovanni’s. Then the usual spirited arguments over pepperonis versus peppers could ensue. A light drizzle

started to fall, illuminated by all of the city’s bright lights. She flipped on the windshield wipers and slowed down slightly. It was cold outside – that peculiar damp, deep-in-the-bones sort of cold that made forty degrees and rainy feel much colder than twenty degrees and snowing, for some reason. She almost missed that feeling. Being invulnerable to the cold dulled the pleasure of sitting in a nice, warm car, safely cocooned away from the elements. A taxi cut her off, quickly filling the void she’d allowed to form between her and the car in front of her. Lois bit her tongue to keep the usual stream of invectives from pouring out. It was amazing what living with a four-year-old and your in-laws could do to remove the most colorful parts of your vocabulary, she mused silently.

She wondered if the Lois Lane of ten years ago would even recognize her current self:

Deeply in love, married, expecting her second child.

Super-powered, still confident, but stripped of that cocky bravado that served as armor against feeling like you had to constantly prove yourself.

No longer absorbed with work to the complete exclusion of everything else. Not complacent, but perhaps content.

She’d known greater joy and sorrow, greater loss and satisfaction than her younger self could have ever dreamed possible. And oddly enough, those feelings had nothing to do with all the fancy prizes she had collected and which sat barely noticed in the library at home. Would she have been able to believe that winning a Pulitzer didn’t even factor into the ten greatest moments in her life? That hearing her son say the word “daddy” for the first time would shatter her composure and reduce her to tears? Or that she would one day love a man so much that she would have traded every professional success she’d ever known just to see him smile at her again? Could she have ever fathomed what it would be like to be the most physically powerful being in the universe? Or to be invulnerable and still scared to death the way she had been for the last few months?

In thirty-four years, she’d done more living than most people could manage with a hundred lifetimes. But what was important to her had never been clearer. She wanted her children to be happy and safe. She wanted her husband to know he’d never face another fight alone. She wanted to leave things just a little better than she found them. Perhaps the old Lois Lane would have thought she’d grown soft. Or maybe her younger self would have been able to recognize that it wasn’t how hard she fought that had changed, but what she fought for.

“It’s got to be Jiang Jai He,” Agent Brewer said as he dropped the thick file on his desk and continued pacing restlessly behind his chair. “He’s got his fingers in all the right pies and he was in Metropolis during the weeks before the attack.”

“But our evidence is all circumstantial,” Superman interjected, folding his arms across his chest.

“Because the Chinese keep tying our hands behind our backs, **period**” Brewer stopped pacing and gripped the back of his chair with both hands, leaning forward against it. “You know Wan isn’t interested in what Jiang did here. He’s looking for a way to nail Jiang to the wall in Macau. There’s no way in hell Wan is going to lose this case to either Beijing or Metropolis. Extraditing him here is capitulating to the West. Letting Beijing get its mitts on this one cuts the legs out from under Wan’s argument that the Special Administrative Region is more effective and efficient than the central government.”

Clark frowned. “And so that leaves the FBI what, playing sidekick to the Macau police? Along for the ride, barely tolerated, and definitely not calling the shots.”

“Exactly. And I’m pretty sure you’d agree with me on not wanting to be a sidekick,” Brewer said with a wry grin. “What really burns me is that Macau didn’t even think this guy was worth going after. I can get the bastard charged with two hundred and forty-three counts of attempted murder for hire, attempted arson, witness tampering, terrorism, plus I know if we can really open the case, we can connect him to the drugs, the human trafficking, and the forced prostitution rings. Jiang would spend his natural life plus nine hundred years in the pen. Wan will get him on what, six counts of racketeering and extortion, tops?”

“I’ll find something else,” Clark replied firmly. “I’ll serve it up on a silver platter to Wan if I have to, but Jiang is never going to breathe free air again. Not as long as I’m alive.”

Dave Brewer nodded soberly. “I forget sometimes that this is personal for you.”

Clark felt a muscle in his jaw twitch as he clenched his teeth. “Yeah,” he gritted out.

“How is she doing?” Brewer asked, surprising him. It took Clark a split second to realize that the agent was talking about Ultrawoman.

“She’s okay,” he said finally.

Brewer gave him a tight lipped nod. “She’s going to make it back to duty?”

“Yeah,” Clark replied, keeping his answers terse. The image of his wife being shot tended to replay in his mind, filling him with dread and making it harder for him to control his emotions.

“Well, if you get the chance to talk to her, tell her the Feds wish her a speedy recovery.”

“I will,” Clark promised.

“She means a lot to you, doesn’t she?” Brewer asked.

Clark could feel his features settling into a wistful smile. “She’s the only person on this planet who really gets me,” he said.

The little envelope in the icon tray in the bottom right corner of her screen told her she had a new email. She clicked on it and smiled when she saw the address. He was still in Hong Kong, as far as she knew, investigating the Triads, so the message must have come from his Blackberry.

Mom and Dad are watching Jon. Meet me at The Island Hotel? No need to bring a thing.

Fortunately for them, there was an Island Hotel in Metropolis that served as a codeword for their little island in the South Pacific. It may have been paranoia on their part, but they were both loath to put anything in writing that might seem to suggest they weren’t just two ordinary people. She looked at her watch. It was almost seven in Metropolis, which meant it was late morning in the South Pacific. That close to the equator, there was no difference between summer and winter, which meant the sands on the beach would be warm, the island sun-drenched, the waters inviting. She wondered what he meant by “no need to bring a thing.” Perhaps he was extending a clothing-optional invitation. The thought made her smile. Clicking the ‘Reply’ button, she quickly typed “see you soon” and sent it along. Giving her column one last, quick read-through, she LAN’ed it to the editors and shut down her computer.

From the stairwell, she made her way to the Planet’s roof. This time of year, it was already dark out, which meant she didn’t have to worry much about someone noticing Ultrawoman heading west through the evening sky. As she passed into the parts of the world where it was still daylight, she stayed high above the ground and away from well-traveled flight paths. As far as everyone was concerned, Ultrawoman was still off on New Krypton, receiving medical treatment. It wouldn’t do for her to be spotted flying around Earth.

She finally descended onto the beach of their little island. A slight breeze stirred the palms away from the water’s edge, where the thick growth of vegetation hung like a curtain, blocking the other part of the island from view. Just inland from where the water gently lapped at the shore, a table had been set. Long, tapered candles flickered, their light reflected in the empty glasses sitting on the white tablecloth. An overnight bag sat on one of the two chairs. She opened it to find a white bathing suit and a dark blue sarong – far more appropriate attire for the beach than either the Ultrawoman costume or her business suit, she had to admit. She changed into the bikini and tied the sarong around her waist.

Her husband emerged from the jungle, carrying a platter of fruits she didn’t doubt he’d picked right here on the island. The breeze rustled the light, short-sleeved linen shirt he wore, unbuttoned at the collar. He grinned at her, looking relaxed and happy.

“You’ve been busy,” she said as she admired his handiwork. A picnic basket sat next to the table he’d set. Not far away, he’d strung a hammock between two tall palm trees.

“I was hoping to have everything ready by the time you got here,” he said as he set the fruit down next to the picnic basket. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “Glad you could make it,” he whispered.

“I wouldn’t have passed up this invitation for the world,” she murmured.

Holding her hands, he stepped back and smiled, his gaze admiring. “You look amazing,” he said.

She smirked at him. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Do you really think I’m going to be less attracted to you when you’re showing?” he asked with an earnest frown.

Lois shook her head. “No,” she replied simply. “You are way too perfect for that. What did I call you once? Mr. Always Right?”

He smiled and kissed her again. “I’m anything but perfect,” he confessed. “I’m just a guy who’s crazy about his wife. His partner. The best friend he’s ever had. The mother of his children.” Each sentence was punctuated by a kiss.

“She’s just as crazy about you,” she replied, her voice thick with emotion. She let him enfold her in his embrace. Her eyes closed, she listened to the steady thump of his heart and the sounds of tiny waves breaking on the shore. The sun climbed higher in the sky, beating down on the sand and warming her skin. Slowly, she started to unbutton his shirt.

“You don’t want to have dinner first?” he asked.

“I figured we could start with dessert,” she replied as she stood on her toes to kiss him.

He started to pull back. “Well, I picked some great coconuts and passion fruit,” he teased.

She hooked her fingers through the belt loops of his khaki shorts and pulled him back toward her. As he kissed her, she could feel him smile against her lips. “Oh, you mean this kind of dessert,” he whispered breathlessly.

Lois tried to give him a smart-alecky response, but her witty rejoinder dissolved into an unintelligible moan as he captured the soft lobe of her ear between his lips and sucked gently on it. She felt his warm hands skim over her back in search of the tie to her bathing suit top. They sank to their knees in the soft sand, the picnic dinner he’d carefully prepared forgotten for a while. Her entire world shrank down to the man who held her so securely in his arms. Whose hands and lips and body worshipped hers so perfectly. Who loved her with every breath he took.

Her legs stretched out in front of her, she stared out at the water, where moonlight reflected on the rippling waves in the distance. Looking down at her husband, she smiled. His head in her lap, he gazed up at her as she ran her fingers gently through his hair. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you,” he replied softly.

Beside them, the small fire in the pit they’d made out of stones found all over the island crackled and burned warmly. In a few short hours, they’d have to return to Metropolis. Martha and Jonathan would be bringing Jon home from the ice skating rink in Centennial Park and he’d expect his mommy and daddy to be home, waiting for him with hot chocolate and little marshmallows.

She was looking forward to being back in the brownstone, waiting for Jon and her in-laws to come home. To decorating the Christmas tree all together. But she was

going to savor these hours with her husband. This little island never failed to act as their safe harbor, a place to recharge their batteries. A place where they could simply love each other and not worry about anything else. If only for a little while.

“I can’t believe I’m back here so soon!” Lucy exclaimed as Lois opened the door and pulled her younger sister into a hug.

“We’re really happy to have you, Luce,” Lois assured her. “Come on in.”

“I always loved Metropolis at Christmas,” Lucy said with a twinkle in her eye. “The city is like magic.”

“But with a touch of country charm,” Clark said with a wink as he walked over from the living room with a plate of still warm gingerbread men. He gave Lucy a one-armed hug before offering her a cookie and taking her bag from her.

“Clark, it’s so good to see you again,” Lucy exclaimed.

“It’s good to have you back here, too,” he said with a smile. “I’ll take this to your room,” he said, gesturing toward the bag.

Lois took the plate of cookies from him and gave him a quick kiss as he turned toward the stairs. “There’s hot apple cider, too,” Lois informed her kid sister.

Lucy grinned in response. “You guys really know how to do Christmas.”

“It’s a Kent thing,” Lois responded. “Mainly, I just try to keep up.”

Lucy’s eyes narrowed as she regarded her sister quizzically. “Are you telling me you don’t love Christmas?”

“I do now,” Lois replied, eliciting a smile from Lucy. She opened the hallway closet door so Lucy could hang up her overcoat and led her sister into the living room, where the stately pine tree stood waiting to be decorated and dressed up.

“I love the smell of pine needles,” Lucy said with another wistful smile. “How’d you find such a great tree in the city?” she asked.

Lois shrugged. “Jonathan and Clark picked it out,” she said, not going into further details as to where they picked it out. She started to open the cardboard boxes marked “Ornaments” that were scattered around the living room. “Are you going to come with us to the Planet’s holiday party tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Lucy agreed enthusiastically. Lois smiled inwardly, wondering if what had brought Lucy back to Metropolis for the second time in just over a month was the chance to see a certain photojournalist she’d recently declared was ‘cute.’ Lucy had been talking about moving back to the city for the last few years, but as was always the case with her kid sister, Lois knew better to believe she’d follow through with her plans until she actually did so. But to be fair, Lucy had finished school and was working a steady job. She may have lacked her older sister’s ambition, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t happy.

“Aunt Lucy! Aunt Lucy! Aunt Lucy!” Jon exclaimed as he raced out of the kitchen toward his aunt.

Lucy scooped up her nephew, swinging him around playfully. “Hey, little guy, what’s up?” she asked.

“Look at what I made,” Jon announced proudly, holding up his candy cane reindeer ornament, made with brown pipe cleaner and plastic googly eyes.

“That’s so cool!” Lucy exclaimed. “Are you going to put it on the tree?”

Jon nodded. “Grandma helped me make it,” he explained.

“Grandma’s really good at art, isn’t she?” Lois asked her little boy.

Jon grinned and nodded again. “She said we can paint tomorrow,” he said excitedly. Lucy replaced the little boy on his feet. “Mommy, can I have a cookie?” he asked sweetly.

“Just one,” Lois said with the mock sternness of a parent who loved to indulge her little boy. “You don’t want to spoil your dinner.”

“So who’s ready to decorate a tree?” Clark asked, the infectious enthusiasm clear in his voice, as he entered the living room.

“We are,” Jonathan called out loudly as he and Martha appeared from the kitchen, carrying a tray of mugs of hot apple cider.

“Lucy, it’s so good to have you here,” Martha said warmly. She hugged the younger woman and Jonathan handed her a mug of cider.

“Thank you,” Lucy replied graciously. “I guess I just couldn’t get over how wonderful holidays are with the Kents, so I had to come back,” she admitted.

“You know you’re always welcome here,” Clark said.

“Thanks,” Lucy smiled. Lois wasn’t sure if the touch of color in her cheeks was simply from the cold outside or if her kid sister was slightly embarrassed at just how warm and attentive a welcome she received from the Kents.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!” Perry exclaimed from the elevator bank platform. In his bright red suit and polyester beard, he looked very much the part of a department store Santa. But to the children of the Planet staff, it was pure magic.

“Santa!” little kids yelled out as they raced toward jolly ol’ Saint Nick. Perry handed out candy canes to his admiring fans and listened intently as they explained what they wanted for Christmas. From the middle of the bullpen, Lois watched as Jon stood in the crowd of children, holding up his hand and waiting to be called on, like he’d been taught in nursery school.

“Hello there, Jon, what do you want for Christmas?” Perry asked heartily.

“How do you know my name, Santa?” Jon asked.

“I know all little boys and girls,” Santa replied. “And I know you’ve been a good little boy this year.”

Lois smiled as Jon nodded vigorously in agreement.

“So, Lois, no holiday cheer for you?”

Her smile quickly dissolved into a scowl as she turned toward the source of that familiar voice.

Ralph.

In his plaid shirt and novelty Christmas tie with blinking lights, which read “Have you been naughty or nice?” he looked every bit the part of the office creep. He held up a cup of the alcoholic eggnog.

“I’m driving,” she said curtly and turned to walk away.

“Hey, Lois, wait!” She had no idea why she turned around to look at him again. He grinned as he pointed up at the mistletoe hanging overhead.

Clark appeared suddenly, stepping between them. She swore he must have moved with superspeed because she had no idea where he’d come from. “Ralph, knock it off,” he said tersely.

“Or what, Kent, you’re going to pound me?” Ralph asked with a nervous laugh.

“No,” Clark replied. “I just won’t stop Lois from beating the tar out of you.”

Ralph smiled awkwardly and tried to laugh again. “You guys are funny, you know that? That’s why I like kidding around with you so much.” Even as he spoke, he backed away from them uncomfortably.

“My hero,” Lois whispered as she put her hand on her husband’s chest. He smiled as he pointed up at the mistletoe she was still standing under. Obliging, she stood on her toes to kiss him. “Are you always going to come rushing in to save the day?” she asked.

“Hey, I really was saving Ralph from you,” he joked.

“Oh, that has to stop,” Lois declared angrily as she started to cross the bullpen.

“What?” Clark asked. She pointed at Ralph’s latest target, her kid sister. From this distance, no ordinary person would have been able to hear Ralph’s crass comments, but Lois, of course, was no ordinary person and she’d be damned if she was going to let Ralph talk to Lucy like that. Before she could cross the room and throw Ralph in a hammerlock, though, Lucy was throwing her eggnog in his face.

Lois smiled triumphantly, proud of her kid sister, as she felt her husband tug on her hand. She let him pull her into his arms. “Nobody messes with the Lane women,” he said with a soft chuckle.

“Damn right,” she agreed. Turning slightly, she watched as Jimmy brought Lucy another cup of eggnog, his expression a beaming and enthusiastic smile.

Clark stepped behind her, his arms still wrapped around her. She felt him kiss her shoulder. “Can you believe that next Christmas, we’ll have another little person in our family?” he asked wistfully.

“I know,” she whispered, putting her hands on top of his. “It’s kind of amazing.”

“It’s completely amazing,” he confirmed. In recent weeks, he’d never really let his doubts creep into their conversations about the baby, but she knew they were still there. He worried, just like she did, that everything might not be okay. But he treated the pregnancy like it wouldn’t

be able to resist the power of his positive thinking. Or maybe he was just hoping the results of their amniocentesis would be a Christmas miracle.

He showed up literally out of the blue one day, saved dozens of lives, the entire space program, and stunned the world. He prevented the destruction of all life on Earth. He fought crime, natural disasters, and the basest of all human instincts.

And then one day, he left us just as abruptly as he'd showed up.

He made us believe a man could fly, but when we thought he'd deserted us, we believed he'd exposed his own feet of clay. For years, the most quixotic of us hoped against hope that he'd come back. But frankly, for the majority of humanity, his role transformed rather quickly from the hero we depended on to a historic icon we remembered nostalgically. Superman had always appealed to the better angels of our nature. But with him always there to save us, we lost our sense of urgency. Heroism, it seemed, was the realm of the superhuman. Not for us mere mortals to dabble in. And when he left, we complained with a bitter sense of entitlement about being abandoned.

So when he reappeared, at the darkest hour of our despair, when for millions of people, all sense of hope was lost, the shock was somehow even greater than our first glimpse of the flying man who could lift a space shuttle into orbit. He was even more remarkable than that – after years of having to lead people into war on his own world, he kept his word and came back when we needed him most. The toll it took on him was obvious. The photograph seen 'round the world of an extraordinarily vulnerable man enduring the grief that only death on an epic scale can create, showed that the Man of Steel had a heart as breakable as anyone else's.

This superhuman superhero from an alien world has done more than anyone we can think of to teach the world what it means to be human. He embodies the best of what each of us wishes we were – someone who keeps his word, no matter the cost, who is moved to fight suffering wherever he finds it, who extends his compassion and protection to the least among us, with no expectation of reward.

Over the course of the last year, he has reminded us how he made us believe in miracles in the first place. It wasn't the flying or the bending of steel bars. It was the crazy, inexplicable example of a man with great power, who only used that power to help others.

It is this one simple fact that made Superman Time Magazine's Man of the Year.

Dr. Friskin dropped the magazine on her desk. It was a heck of a testament to the amazing work he'd done over the past year. If the rest of the world had any idea what he'd overcome in order to once again be the hero they all needed, it would have humbled them even more.

And yet sadly, she knew the distinction meant nothing to Clark. He couldn't have cared less about the praise and

plaudits, especially now. He was fixated—consumed even—by his concerns about Lois, their pregnancy, and bringing to justice the people who'd put his family in danger. The near-bombing of the Planet threatened to derail so much of the progress he'd made. And from a distance, Dr. Friskin watched him in the constant struggle against his fears and anxieties. She wished the world were fair—that life would provide good people with only good things, but she knew it wasn't how things worked. Some people faced more than their share of adversity. Some were truly crushed by the weight of their troubles.

But Clark Kent and Lois Lane were two of the most resilient people she'd ever met. If anyone were going to get through this ordeal and come out on the other side stronger, it was the two of them. Of course, she wished they didn't have to go through the ordeal at all, but life rarely cared about people's wishes.

She looked up hopefully, expectantly, as Bernie opened the door and entered his office. His eyes were down as he read the lab report, which meant she couldn't see his expression. Clark gave her hand a gentle squeeze. She glanced at him briefly and tried to smile, but expected that it came out more like a grimace. Still looking down at the paperwork, Bernie bumped into the corner of his desk. He looked up.

His face was ashen.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The pregnancy isn't viable."

The words tore through her. Her skin was suddenly hot and she couldn't hear anything except the dull thud of her own pounding heart and a strange ringing in her ears. She felt Clark's hand slip from hers. Her head snapped to the side and she watched as he got out of the chair next to hers and backed away slowly. Burning tears rolled down her cheeks and her breath was ripped out of her lungs. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

Lois looked dumbly at Bernie, who was still talking—or at least his lips were moving, but she couldn't hear a thing. "No!" she heard herself yell.

She sat bolt upright in the darkness and an instant later, felt her husband's large, heavy arms surround her in a cocoon of warmth. "Lois? Honey, are you okay?" he whispered in the darkness.

She nodded wordlessly and lay back down in his embrace. They hadn't even done the amnio yet; it was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. They wouldn't have the results for another week after that. The thought of the wait they were still facing was pure torture.

"I hate not knowing," she whispered as she lay in his arms.

"I know," he replied, running a soothing hand up and down her back. Her heart was still pounding from the nightmare and it felt like she couldn't catch her breath. And no matter how tightly her husband held her, her skin was still ice cold, still prickled by gooseflesh. Clark kissed her forehead and she tilted her chin up to seek out and capture his lips with her own.

She kissed him fiercely, needing the reassurance of just how wrong her dream had been. No matter what happened, Clark was going to be there with her. She knew that. He would never abandon her. He couldn't. "Make love with me," she whispered against his lips. "Please."

He kissed her urgently in response and into the early hours of the morning, provided more than adequate proof of just how much he loved her.

He tried not to grip his wife's hand too tightly now that she was without her powers, but watching as Bernie stuck the enormous needle into the small bump of her abdomen was making him ill with fear. Lois's eyes were closed and he could see the slight lines of tension crease her face, but she was remarkably stoic about the discomfort he knew she had to be undergoing.

"That's it," Bernie declared. "Lois, you okay?"

"Yeah," she said quietly. He placed the alcohol swab and a pad of gauze over the puncture site and gestured for Clark to hold it there as Bernie dealt with the sample he'd taken. Two minutes later, he returned to the small examining room.

"All right, let's get your powers back, Lois," he announced. Bernie turned the Tesla coil toward them and fired it up. Clark felt the warm, strange surge of electricity rushing through his body. A moment later, it was gone. He lifted the gauze and alcohol swab which still lay on Lois's stomach. The needle mark was completely gone. Lois sat up slowly.

"That's better," she announced with a tremulous smile. Now the waiting game began.

"I'll run the tests myself," Bernie said. "I think I'll have the results in a week or ten days; it just depends on how fast your amnio cells replicate."

"Then let them know I told them to hurry up," Lois joked half-heartedly. Bernie smiled before leaving to allow her to change back into her clothes.

The next week was going to be impossible to get through, Clark thought ruefully to himself. Most of the newsroom had already decided for itself that Lois was pregnant. She'd only gained enough weight to start showing in the last few weeks, but Lois Lane never gained weight. She had way too much discipline to put on holiday pounds, as far as her co-workers were concerned. So the newsroom swirled with gossip about why the parents-to-be weren't proudly shouting their good news, even when Lois was far enough along to be showing.

He knew he wasn't helping matters given the fact that his overprotective tendencies had gone into overdrive. The incident with Ralph at the holiday party was just one example of it. He knew that his wife was more than capable of taking care of herself. Heck, she didn't need superpowers to deal with someone like Ralph, but he couldn't help himself. He'd spent too much time in his own head, worrying himself sick over whether he could protect his family. Lois was tolerating the big protector man act better than he'd expected, but he knew it still annoyed her. She'd

told him that she understood he wasn't trying to make her feel weak or helpless, and he figured she had to know that this was about his issues, not some belief that she wasn't capable of taking care of herself.

Fully dressed, she grabbed her overcoat from the chair in the corner. She reached out her hand to take his and he knotted their fingers together, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. It was back to the office for now. Back to pretending there was nothing going on and hoping—probably in vain—that their colleagues wouldn't notice the tension that gripped them both.

Lois stared at the clock in the corner of her monitor. How was it still Tuesday morning? The amnio yesterday felt like it had taken place a million lifetimes ago. And she was supposed to get through another week like this? That was seven million lifetimes. She didn't have seven million lifetimes to wait on the knife's edge. She wanted the answers now. Her half-written column stared at her accusingly. No, that wasn't fair, half-written was far too generous. She had a few sentences. And nothing to tie them together. There was a theme, sort of, but no point to her writing. She let out an exasperated sigh.

"You okay?" She heard the concern in her husband's voice as she looked up to find him standing in her doorway. He toed the door closed behind him and walked around her desk to stand behind her. He kneaded the tense muscles in her shoulders gently.

"No," she confessed miserably. "There's nothing I can do to make the waiting any easier. I'm even starting to think of asking Dr. Klein if STAR Labs has any promising theories on time travel," she cracked a humorless joke.

"We just have to keep ourselves busy." Clark repeated the advice they'd been given over and over by Dr. Klein, Dr. Friskin, and his parents. With the holidays over, though, it wasn't exactly an easy task. She wished she could add patrols when her mind refused to focus on anything besides the amnio results, but she no longer had that option.

"The layout for tomorrow is coming together pretty smoothly," he began. "I've got to go to Macau for a few hours, but I should be back around one. Let's go have lunch, spend the afternoon with Jon, and then I can put the paper to bed from home."

"You sure you can take the afternoon off?" she asked, wondering to herself why she wasn't jumping at the chance to spend time with her family.

He leaned over and kissed her cheek before whispering in her ear. "I'll let you in on a little secret; I've got these superpowers that make editing and laying out a newspaper a hell of a lot easier than it would be for an ordinary guy."

She felt a smile spread across her face in spite of herself. There was no doubting that her husband worked hard, but it really did take the investigation into the Triads, his regular Superman duties, and a full-time, high stress job like being the Managing Editor of the World's Greatest Newspaper to really occupy his considerable talents. And he always managed to find the time to save the world, play

with his son, spend time with his family, and of course, make his wife feel like the most loved person in the world. It was definitely a good thing that the two of them only needed a few hours of sleep a night.

But while she usually needed all twenty-one hours of the day they used to produce the world's best newspaper, rescue cats from trees, avert natural disasters, fight crime, kiss boo-boos, read bedtime stories, and spend quality time with one another, superpowers were now more of a curse than anything else. She heard cries for help she couldn't answer and she drove herself nuts trying to do everything at normal human speed so that she didn't race through the day, only to find herself with too much time to kill and not enough to do. Clark was still as busy as he'd ever been—busier even, thanks to having to pick up the slack for her and conduct the investigation into the Triads on his own. She hated that she envied that fact. She could have really used some bad guys to fight. Or a beached whale to rescue. Anything to help take her mind off the interminable waiting.

"See you soon?" he asked hopefully.

Lois stood up to give him a hug. "Be careful," she whispered.

He kissed the crown of her hair. "Always," he assured her.

Superman hovered high above the blinding lights of Macau in the dark of night. The city was trying to give Metropolis a run for its money as a place that never slept. Beneath him, in a dingy all-night noodle shop, Jiang Jai He sat huddled in a vinyl booth, surrounded by men he didn't seem too pleased to be dining with. The Triads had put the squeeze on Jiang, at once both swiftly cutting him out of the organization and also threatening him with all manner of creative tortures in the event that his activities were linked back to the rest of the syndicate. Even if Clark did nothing more, there was a decent chance the Triads themselves would simply kill Jiang, deciding he was too dangerous a loose end to leave twisting in the wind.

But though the very sight of the man made his blood boil, his job was to bring him to justice, not to take pleasure in vengeance.

His son had almost died. His wife had nearly been killed. Their unborn child was still in danger. A whole building full of innocent children were exposed to mortal risk because of the bastard sitting in that hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Clark felt his hands ball themselves up into tight fists. The muscles in his arms twitched in their tense state.

Down below, Jiang was sweating uncomfortably under the scrutiny of his confederates. Clark could hear the other man's heart pounding and the shallow breaths that escaped his lungs in gasps. Good. Jiang deserved to be afraid. He deserved to spend every moment from this one until he was finally behind bars, looking over his shoulder, too terrified to sleep, afraid to breathe too loudly for fear of drawing more attention from his former organization.

Jiang was never going to lead them back to the rest of the Triad organization—that much was crystal clear. But it didn't matter. Even if the Triads continued in their enterprises completely untouched by Jiang's downfall, Clark was going to make damn sure the bastard got exactly what was coming to him. And Jiang's demise wasn't going to be quiet and uneventful. It was going to be a message to every other piece of human scum who even dreamed about getting his hands on a piece of Kryptonite or using little kids as bait for Superman.

This particular late-night rendezvous was proving to be fruitless, but that just meant he had to come back. He had to keep leading this double life – in Metropolis, in the light of day, he was the caring and attentive husband and father, the solid and dependable editor, the cheerful and approachable super hero. Here, he loomed in the shadows, watching and listening for anything that could help the Macau police ensure that Jiang never saw the world from the right side of the prison bars again.

In official meetings, he badgered and pleaded with the Macau police to cooperate with American authorities. He mediated information exchanges among the mutually suspicious parties, and he dutifully followed every lead Wan's investigators asked him to chase down. But on his own time, often when he should have been patrolling Metropolis, he was merely following and watching Jiang. Exercising a superhuman self-control just to keep from swooping down and tearing the bastard limb from limb.

'Lois would never forgive you,' he cautioned himself. 'Not now, not after all you've been through together. Not after all you've worked through.'

He growled as he turned onto his other side, still not able to find a comfortable position, which made no sense, since he was impervious to discomfort. But he wasn't going to sleep tonight, he knew that already.

"Can't sleep, either?" she whispered.

"Sorry," he replied ruefully as he rolled onto his side to look at his wife. "I'm keeping you awake, aren't I?"

In the darkness, she shook her head. "No, it's still the waiting on the amnio results that's keeping me awake," she replied matter-of-factly. "Clark, what if the results aren't good? What if our baby isn't okay? What if I've..."

"Shhh," he whispered insistently as he pulled her into his arms. She buried her head against his chest and let him encircle her in his embrace. He felt her sob and tears stung at his own eyes. God, he hated it when she cried. Clark stroked her hair and searched desperately for something to say. He wanted to tell her it was going to be okay, but he didn't know that, and she wouldn't believe him. So for a long while, he just held her.

His entire body tensed at the distant sound of gunshots. Lois went still in his arms. "Go," she whispered breathlessly.

"I'm not leaving you," he replied.

"Go," she repeated, placing her hand on his chest, creating a small but real space between them.

“Lois...” he started to refuse again.

She shook her head, her eyes still brimming with tears, but her voice was steady. “Someone else needs you even more than I do.”

He looked at her helplessly. Opening his mouth to speak, he couldn’t think of a damn thing to say. Finally, he threw back the bedclothes and stood up. He looked at his wife, suddenly so small, so fragile, so alone, lying there in their bed. Every instinct he possessed was telling him to gather her in his arms and hold her until the tears subsided, until she fell asleep, until everything was right in their world again.

She gave him a teary, tremulous smile, screwing up her courage. “Just come back to me,” she whispered.

Clark nodded, unable to speak, and reluctantly spun into the suit and flew out the window, hating himself even as he did. As he cleared the house, he could hear her crying softly. The sound was muffled, as though she was crying into her pillow. His heart crumbled to dust as he kept going, leaving her when she needed him. Much like he had so many years ago.

Miriam Friskin looked up from her notepad at the glum man sitting across from her, his shoulders slumped in resignation, his head bowed, his face a study in anguish.

“I’m sorry, I think you asked a question,” Clark said as he finally looked up.

“I just asked how you were,” Dr. Friskin replied with a sympathetic smile.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to keep doing this. It’s only been three days since the amnio and it feels like hell. Between investigating the Triads, picking up the slack as Superman, and having a regular job, I barely have enough time to be a husband or father. And when I’m not thinking about ripping the guy who did this to us apart, I’m completely obsessing over what we’re going to do if we get bad news. I’m trying not to let Lois see me like this. I know you want me to stop hiding things from her, but you have no idea how much it’s scaring me to see her like this. To see her so...fragile. Lois Lane isn’t fragile. She is the single fiercest, most determined human being in creation and now every time I look at her, I see fear in her eyes. It isn’t natural. It isn’t right.” His voice was agitated, but his face had grown even paler as he spoke.

Dr. Friskin nodded as she tried to take in the entirety of his sudden burst of emotion. “It sounds like you’ve been keeping all of this bottled up,” she observed.

“I’m trying to stay positive around Lois,” he said. “The ultrasound results were really good and we can hear the baby’s heartbeat, so I guess I’ve been trying to convince the both of us that everything’s going to be okay. I know she needs me to be strong for a change.”

“And the Triads?” she prodded as gently as she could.

He shook his head. “I’m not really going to rip the guy apart. But I am going to make sure he spends the rest of his natural life locked in some dark, dank little pit, courtesy of the state.”

Clark walked back his hyperbole convincingly enough. She didn’t think he was a danger to anyone else, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t worried about him. “I’m glad that you came here. Even if you feel like you can’t talk about these things with Lois at the moment, I think it is important that you do talk to someone.”

“I know it’s not your job to tell me what’s right and wrong,” he began. “And I don’t want to hide things from her, but wouldn’t it be worse for me to burden her with this right now?”

“I think you’re probably right that she’s depending on you a lot more than usual right now,” She replied. “But being strong and not being afraid aren’t the same thing. Lois probably knows that better than anyone.”

He nodded silently. “It’s just a few more days,” he said. Dr. Friskin couldn’t tell if the comment was for her benefit or if he was trying to reassure himself. “If everything’s okay, then all of this doesn’t matter. And if it isn’t...” He swallowed hard, a look of pain in his eyes. She knew he wasn’t going to finish the sentiment. She wouldn’t have known how, either.

She stared straight ahead, unable to focus on a thing, even when it was her own husband talking. Stephanie, the society columnist, was tapping her pencil annoyingly on her notepad. Ralph’s nose hairs wheezed and whistled with every breath he took. Even Jimmy’s diligent note taking was driving her nuts. Finally, she turned and looked at her husband, wondering why it was he could concentrate on his work. But she knew the answer. He concentrated because he had to. Because at least one of them had to keep functioning.

“Anything from Treasury on the report they’re supposed to produce regarding the free trade agreement with Brazil?” Clark asked.

“Not yet, boss,” Mark Butler replied. “But the unofficial word is that it’s going to be a lot of boilerplate—new market opportunities, synergies from trade with a dynamic, emerging economy—the usual stuff.”

She tuned back out and focused her hearing instead on the baby’s heartbeat. Lois didn’t even know why she bothered coming into work this week. She was beyond useless. Her columns had practically needed complete re-writes by the editors. She hoped Bernie was right in terms of his timing. If he were, that meant they only needed to get through an agonizingly painful weekend and they’d finally have the results. The time couldn’t pass quickly enough.

The meeting must have ended because the reporters and editors around her gathered their belongings and shuffled out of the conference room. Slowly she started to follow them, as though she was passing through a dense fog, completely disoriented and lost. Clark was hanging back, waiting for her. Discreetly, Jimmy pulled the door shut behind him as he left the conference room, leaving them alone. Her husband reached out to caress her cheek and pull her into his arms.

“You okay?” he asked.

“No,” she murmured. She felt like hell. Hell, she looked like hell, too. But that’s what going over a week without sleep could do to you. Even if you were superpowered. Her eyes were darkly circled and half the time red from crying.

She felt him drop a kiss on the top of her head. “I love you,” he whispered.

“Love you, too,” she murmured against his chest.

There was a sudden, sharp rap at the door. “Clark? Lois?” It was Jimmy’s voice. God, that kid had terrible timing. But she knew he wouldn’t be bothering them if it weren’t important. She felt Clark withdraw from her as he stepped back and opened the door.

“I’m sorry, but it’s Dr. Klein on the phone. He said you’d want to talk to him,” Jimmy apologized.

“We’ll take it in here,” Clark replied. The door closed with a soft click. Lois tried to brush away the tears that had started to spill down her cheeks. She’d completely given up on eye makeup – all the crying just tended to turn her into a raccoon. Her heart leapt up into her throat and she was grateful when Clark reached for the phone the second it started to ring.

“Bernie, what is it?” he asked impatiently. She listened to other end of the conversation.

<<I’ve got the test results. Why don’t you come by the lab...>> the scientist started.

“We’ll be right there,” Clark interrupted him. He hung up and reached for her hand. His eyes held a question, silently asking her if she was ready to do this. She nodded wordlessly as she took his hand and they left the conference room for the stairwell.

The bitter taste of bile burned her throat as she took a seat in the scientist’s office. God, why did this have to remind her so much of her nightmares? The clock on his wall ticked irritatingly, but the span between each second felt like an hour. As much as the sound was driving her nuts, she kept staring at it, demanding silently that it tick faster, that things go back to normal, that this time-dilating hell they’d been transported to dissolve and leave them back in the real world. The door closed behind them and Bernie stepped around his desk to take a seat. Her stomach twisted itself in a knot and she wondered how she was going to keep from retching. “Lois, your amniotic cells replicated faster than I expected...” he began. Damn him, she thought to herself, why couldn’t he get past the science and just tell them what they needed to hear? Maybe it was bad news, maybe he was trying to figure out how to break their hearts, maybe he was trying to soften the blow. Fresh tears sprang to her eyes and Clark gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

“All of the tests came back normal,” Bernie replied. “Except for the fact that the amniotic cells have both mitochondria and kryptochondria.”

“That means the baby’s okay?” Clark asked, his voice taking on an anxious pitch.

“It’s the absolute best sign we could hope for,” Bernie replied. “I found no evidence of lingering or long-term effects from the Kryptonite exposure.”

Her breath escaped her in a shuddering sob. “Thank you, Bernie,” she whispered tearfully before completely succumbing to her emotions. She buried her face in her hands and wept. After a long moment, she felt Clark’s arms come around her and she realized he must have been kneeling beside her chair. He kissed her temple and held her silently. Her heart was still pounding, her body still wracked by sobs, but she could breathe. For the first time in months, it felt like she could breathe again.

“I, uh, I’ll give you two a few minutes,” Bernie said awkwardly, standing and shuffling around his desk.

Clark looked up at the nervous scientist and nodded as he bit his lip, not really trusting himself to speak. “Thank you, Bernie,” he managed hoarsely at last. Bernie gave him a tight-lipped smile and retreated from the office.

He framed Lois’s face between his hands and gently turned her chin up. Her eyes glistened and he could see the anguish and grief as they worked their way out of her soul. He kissed her lips softly, tasting the salt of her tears. “I love you,” he whispered roughly.

“I love you,” she replied almost silently, closing her tear-filled eyes once again.

He kissed her forehead and tuned his hearing in to her heartbeat and the baby’s. For a long while, he just listened to two of his favorite sounds in the world, letting them soothe his dark and troubled soul. “She’s going to be okay,” he whispered. “You’ve taken care of her, you’ve protected her. She’s going to be okay,” he repeated.

A lingering sob shivered through her body as she stood up and let him wrap his arms around her. He stroked her hair, rocking her body gently from side to side. It was his turn now to do for his family what she had been doing for them all along. Every invulnerable cell in his body served only those two simple purposes – loving his wife and children and keeping them safe. After a long while, he stood up straight, feeling the amazing relief that came with having the heavy millstone he’d carried around his neck cut loose. His heart was truly light, and he didn’t need force of will to try to be upbeat and positive around his wife. He no longer had to repeat empty platitudes in the hope that sheer wishful thinking would see them through this crisis. She lifted her head from where it had rested on his shoulder and sought his lips, kissing him sweetly. As the kiss ended, he leaned forward, his forehead touching hers. He gave her a wobbly smile and felt his heart skip a beat as she smiled in response. Tears—this time of joy—pricked at his eyes. God, how he loved this woman.

He heard footsteps in the hallway again. “That’s Bernie,” he said as he cleared his throat softly.

Lois stepped back and tried to brush away the trails of tears that stained her cheeks. “I guess we should pull ourselves together,” she said unevenly. A tiny hiccup

escaped her lips and she smiled as color rose up in her cheeks.

He laughed. Heaven help him, for the first time in months, he truly laughed. And once he started, he couldn't stop.

"Clark!" she yelled at him with a playful smack to the arm. "What's so funny?" she demanded, but she'd already started laughing as well. He pulled her back into his arms and they laughed together, dragging themselves across the entire emotional spectrum in the last five minutes of soul-obliterating insanity. He lowered his head to drop a kiss on her shoulder.

With a slight knock, the door opened. "Are you two okay?" Bernie asked, the concern evident in his voice.

Clark looked up, unable to stop smiling. "We're fine," he assured the doctor.

"We are," Lois confirmed with a nod.

Bernie regarded them with a look of confusion. "Oh, okay, good. Good," he stammered. "I uh, I realized I'd forgotten to congratulate you," he said with a half smile. "Mom, Dad, it's a girl."

"A girl," Clark murmured in wonderment. His words of a few minutes before had already indicated that he'd started thinking of the baby as a girl, but now that he had confirmation...wow. 'Wow' didn't even begin to describe it. He grinned like an idiot as he squeezed Lois's shoulders. "We're going to have a little girl," he whispered. He could already see his daughter in his mind's eye. Wide, luminous brown eyes, ringlets of soft, raven dark hair, and a mischievous streak a mile wide, her tiny chin jutting out in stubborn defiance, just like her mother's did. His heart swelled until he thought it might burst in his chest. How could one body, even large and invulnerable like his, be expected to contain emotions this immense? He didn't know and it didn't matter, because he was soon wrapped up in a feeling of contentment and bliss so powerful he had to just let it carry him wherever it wanted to. He wasn't in control of his emotions anymore and he was thankful he didn't have to be.

They stepped out of STAR Labs and into the sharp wind of a cold, early February day. "Yes, Mom, everything is fine... the baby is great, Lois is great, I'm great." Clark held his cell phone to his ear as he assured his mother that they had nothing but good news. "Bernie said she's doing just fine. Yes...it's a girl," he said proudly. "I know, we're thrilled. Mom, we'll see you when you guys get home... love you, too. Bye."

As he hung up the phone, he smiled at her and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Home?" he asked simply. Apparently he'd had the same thought she'd had – there was no way they'd get any work done today. She wanted the chance to simply share her relief with him. To be happy and content and at peace for a little while. Surely the world could wait a day for them?

She nodded. "I want to fly with you," she said softly. "The way we used to." The smile that reached his eyes told

her he understood what she meant. He disappeared into a nearby alley and returned in the suit. Picking her up in his arms, he cradled her securely against his chest and took off for home.

He flew more slowly than he needed to; she imagined he was savoring the flight just as she was. It soothed her soul to hang onto him as they passed all the familiar sights that made Metropolis home. She took in the city's heroic skyline, forever reaching toward the heavens, a bold statement of progress, and industry, and an eye always firmly fixed on the future. And its quiet, stately, terra cotta brownstones on tree-lined streets that spoke of an elegant and refined Metropolis. They flew over the massive expanse of Centennial Park, dressed in the white gowns of winter, her trees barren and gray.

At last, he descended on Sullivan Lane and flew them through the window to the annex to their library. Her husband set her gently on her feet, but she didn't let him go. Pulling him closer, she continued to draw comfort from his solid, reassuring presence. For months now, he'd been her anchor, keeping her tethered to the world when fear had threatened to sweep her away. With the burden of her anxieties having been lifted, she could finally appreciate just how much she'd relied on his strength. She never would have survived this if he hadn't been strong enough for both of them. He kissed her softly and she could feel him smile against her lips. "I love you," he said.

"I love you," she whispered breathlessly as she closed her eyes and tucked her head under his chin.

"I would have been thrilled if the baby were a boy," he began. "But I'm really, really excited it's a girl. I know I'm not supposed to care, I mean, all that really matters is our baby's healthy. But it'll be really nice to have a little girl."

She stepped back so she could smile at him. "She already has her daddy wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?"

"You know it," he admitted as he sank to his knees. He kissed the slight swell of her abdomen and let his head rest against her body. Her arms came up to wrap around him, holding him close. Her heart filled with love for the both of them—for the husband she couldn't live without and the tiny little life they'd created that was growing inside her. She ran her fingers through his thick, dark hair and thanked whatever fates were involved in making sure their child was all right. They were going to be okay. All of them.

He stood up and swiftly swept her into his arms. Looking deeply into her eyes, he declared, "I want to make love with you."

Her pulse raced. She caressed his cheek and whispered softly, breathlessly, "please." She could already imagine the feeling of his hands and his lips on her body. The familiar excitement and tension of anticipation built deep inside her. She wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon showing her husband how much she loved him. She wanted to make love with him without the specters of fear and grief haunting them. She wanted to find with him that all too rare sense of uncomplicated joy.

Clark carried her to their bedroom and laid her down reverently on the soft mattress. With exquisite care, he undressed her slowly, lavishing every inch of newly exposed skin with worshipful attention. His languid, unhurried movements conveyed that he too, intended to savor the afternoon, to spend it completely wrapped up in her. As he stared down at her with passion darkened-eyes, she reached up to carefully trace the beautiful features of his face. Her thumb brushed the outline of his lips. He caught her hand in his and kissed the tip of each of her fingers. Turning her hand, he kissed the soft skin on the inside of her wrist, sending a shiver through her. He rained a trail of kisses across her arm, her shoulder, the hollow at the base of her neck, and down her body, as his lips paid silent homage to her.

He joined with her in that most primitive and perfect and eternal way. As their bodies moved as one, they found in each other that sense of rightness, of belonging, of a deeper and more permanent connectedness, that only being together brought them. She captured and held her husband's gaze in a moment so intimate it stunned her. Making love with him was about so much more than bringing each other pleasure—though she had to admit with a self-satisfied smile, he was quite the expert in that area—it was a powerful reaffirmation of the love that bound them together. Each time they made love was a renewal of the vows they'd made to one another.

He would always put her happiness above his own.

She would love him, and only him, until the end of time.

He would stand shoulder to shoulder with her and face down whatever life could throw at them.

She would ensure that he would never again walk through life alone.

Conscious thought fled her and she could focus only on the remarkable things her husband was doing to her. She cried out his name in a sob, a prayer, a joyful exclamation of a love that could not be contained.

"Lois...I...love...you..." he whispered harshly. Her arms wrapped around him even tighter. No matter how close he was, it wasn't close enough. Her name escaped his lips in a breathless cry and he collapsed next to her on the bed, immediately pulling her back into his arms. His powerful chest rose and fell with heavy, labored breaths and she could hear his heart still pounding out a furious rhythm. But as he curved his body protectively around hers, she could feel his contentment. His pulse and his breathing finally slowed and she heard him sigh softly.

"You're amazing, you know that, Ms. Lane?" he asked as he kissed her shoulder.

"Ditto, Mr. Kent," she replied as she stretched lazily, letting her legs tangle with his.

Clark pulled on a pair of sweat pants as he turned back to look at his sleeping wife, his heart bursting with tenderness. Even as she lay there, dozing contentedly, her body was nurturing and sustaining their child. Talk about impressive multitasking, he thought to himself with a smile.

He heard her sigh as her lips turned up in a small smile. She shifted slightly, causing the sheets to fall away from her body. It didn't matter how many times he'd seen her like this, or the fact that he was as familiar with her body as he was with his own, just seeing her was intoxicating. God, she was beautiful. He couldn't help but drink in the sight of her. 'I've touched her there. I've felt her pulse race under my lips. I know just how to make her sigh. And shiver. And moan. And cry out my name,' he thought to himself, the sentiment suffused with a certain possessiveness. But the feeling had nothing to do with domination. How could he even think himself above her when she owned him completely—body and soul?

He shook his head wistfully. While he could have spent the rest of the afternoon and evening just watching her sleep peacefully, he had a paper to put to bed. He tugged a t-shirt over his head and found his cell phone, dialing Perry's number as he retreated silently from the bedroom. Clark closed the door softly as he stepped out into the hallway.

"Hi, Perry," he said as his boss answered the phone.

"You two all right, son?" came the gruff reply.

Clark smiled. "Yeah, everything's fine. Dr. Klein said the test results look great. And it's a girl."

He heard Perry laugh heartily. "That's wonderful news!"

"I know, we're over the moon," Clark replied.

"I'll bet. So I don't suppose I'll see either one of you in here for the rest of the day."

"Lois is asleep," he began. "It was a pretty emotional morning and I figure I should let her rest, but I'll come back in."

"Don't you dare," Perry replied. "Stay at home with your wife. Celebrate. Just be happy. There will be a whole 'nother paper to put out on Monday."

"Thanks, Perry," Clark said gratefully. "We both appreciate it."

"Have a good weekend, son," Perry said. "Tell Lois we love her. And by the way, when you two do come back next week, I'm expecting you to be your old selves again."

Clark grimaced. Of course, there was no way Perry wasn't going to notice the marked drop off in the quality of their work that week. "I'm sorry; I know we were pretty much useless around the office this week."

"It's entirely understandable, given the stress you were under. Just try to take the weekend and relax. Get your focus back."

"Of course, Chief," Clark promised his boss, before saying his goodbyes. He hung up the phone and looked down at his watch, or where his watch would have been, had he been wearing one. He looked through the bedroom wall at the clock on the nightstand. Just after three. It was almost time to pick up Jon. Grandpa Sam and Grandma Ellen had taken him to the Natural History Museum as an early birthday present. The museum was his little boy's favorite and Clark imagined Jon was going to come home bursting with excitement to tell stories about the dinosaur

bones and the huge whale that hung over the Hall of Aquatic Life.

He tuned in his hearing – his mother was sculpting something in her studio. He could hear his father's heartbeat as well. They were definitely home earlier than he'd expected. But hearing his mother's voice on the phone, how thrilled and relieved she was, he wasn't terribly surprised. Clark made his way down the stairs and knocked on their door. "Mom? Dad?"

His father opened the door almost immediately, grinning from ear to ear. "Boy, are we ever happy for the two of you," Jonathan said as he pulled his son into a fierce hug.

"Thanks, Dad," Clark replied. As soon as he'd stepped back, his mother was flinging her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

"Honey, we're so relieved!" his mother exclaimed. "How's Lois? Is she okay?"

"She's fine, Mom," he assured her. "Just a little tired, it's been a rough week for us."

"We know," Martha replied.

"Thank you both, for being so understanding, for helping out with Jon," he said, knowing the words were inadequate.

"Honey, it was no big deal," his mother replied casually, gesturing with the towel she'd used to clean the sculpting clay from her hands. "You know how much we love to spend time with Jon."

He smiled. "Speaking of the little guy, I should go pick him up."

"Why don't you take your father, too? We can order Chinese for dinner and once Jon's in bed, we can talk about his birthday party."

"Sounds good," Clark said with a genuine grin. Now that Jon was in nursery school, he was going to have a real party with other kids, complete with pizza and ice cream and games. He couldn't help but feel guilty about the fact that during the last week of their tortuous wait in limbo, they'd been too distracted to make sure that Jon got sufficient quality—not just quantity—time with his parents. They'd still taken the time to play with him, to eat all together as a family and to go through Jon's nightly bedtime ritual together, but half the time, he and Lois had been a million miles away. And while he was only (almost) five years old, Jon had to have noticed how distant and distracted his parents were.

Jon was going to get the sort of parental doting and indulgence every little boy was entitled to the week of his fifth birthday. And while they hadn't been able to deliver on his request for a little brother for his birthday, by the summer, he would have a little sister. He would get to be a big brother. Jon would know what it was like to have a sibling who loved him and looked up to him, who was always going to be a part of his life. It was a relationship fate had cruelly denied Clark when his older sister had died years before he was born. And while he'd always had his parents, he'd always known somehow that the bond

between siblings was different. He saw it between Lois and Lucy. Even though the two sisters were diametric opposites in temperament, there was a visceral connection between them. There was nothing Lois wouldn't have done to protect her kid sister.

"I'm just gonna run up and change," Clark said. "Dad, will you be ready to go in a few?"

"Just let me grab my coat," Jonathan replied.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze as they both stared expectantly at the elevator doors, waiting for them to open onto the newsroom floor. "So how do you want to go about telling people?" he asked.

"This will be easier than you think," she said. Clark tended to believe her, since she was the one who'd done this before. As the elevator chimed and the doors slid open, they stepped out onto the landing and headed down into the bullpen. "Coffee?" she asked.

"Sure, thanks," he replied.

Lois made her way toward the coffee station, where Stephanie, the society columnist, was brewing a fresh pot. He watched as she poured herself a cup from the orange-handled 'decaf' pot.

"I thought you drank the real stuff?" Stephanie asked with an arched brow.

"Well, sure, before I was pregnant, but you know caffeine isn't great for the baby," Lois replied nonchalantly as she added creamer to her coffee.

Clark shook his head as he watched the paper's professional gossip's jaw land somewhere near her expensive Italian stilettos. "So you are pregnant?" Stephanie stammered.

"Of course," Lois replied as though she were surprised by the other woman's reaction. "Did you think I gained ten pounds for no reason?"

"No, I mean...you just never said anything to anyone... did you?" Clark had to stifle a grin as he watched the society columnist suffer an existential freak-out. Her business was knowing other people's business and Lois had just employed the first defense against gossip mongering: treat the gossip like it wasn't gossip.

"Well, our doctor was a little concerned, but we got great news at the checkup on Friday," Lois explained calmly. Clark couldn't even begin to fathom how she could talk about the last few months as though they hadn't been a form of long, drawn-out torture.

"So you two must be thrilled," Stephanie said, recovering nicely to try to pry more information from Lois.

"Ecstatic," Lois replied. "I mean, Clark is just basically on cloud nine. And it's so cute how he's gotten wrapped up in baby books and paint samples for the nursery." Lois leaned over and grabbed the pot of regular coffee which had finished brewing, but which Stephanie seemed to have forgotten about. She poured a cup of coffee and added the full-fat cream and three sugars he liked. She mixed it with the stirrer from her own cup before tossing the little bit of plastic into the trash can. "I'll see you later," she said

casually as she picked up the two cups of coffee. When her back was turned to the other woman she smiled smugly at her husband. She walked over toward him and handed him his coffee.

“Taken care of,” she declared.

“That’s it?” he asked, impressed by the simplicity of her plan.

She shrugged and took a sip of her coffee. “Sure, you tell the biggest gossip in a newsroom something and you don’t even have to bother telling anyone else. By lunch, the entire paper, including the printing operations and the executive board, will know.”

“Lois! Clark! My office, now!” Perry’s voice boomed as he called his two top journalists into his office. Lois smiled inwardly. She couldn’t really recall Perry having done this since the two of them were partners, investigating hot stories, what felt like centuries ago. Her husband followed a step behind as they made their way to the editor-in-chief’s office. During the morning staff meeting, it had been nothing but words of congratulations and slaps on the back for Clark. Stephanie was even better at spreading gossip than Lois had thought.

She could feel the eyes of their colleagues on them as they crossed the bullpen to Perry’s office. Lois figured Clark had to notice it, too, but he stared straight ahead as though he was completely unaware. He held the door to the editor’s office open for her, letting his hand come to rest on the small of her back as she walked into the office in front of him.

Perry grinned from ear to ear. “Congratulations, you two,” he said heartily as he stepped around his desk.

“Thanks, Chief,” she replied as her editor pulled her into a warm hug.

Perry turned to clap Clark on the shoulder and vigorously shake his hand. “I couldn’t be happier for the two of you. Alice and I always wanted a girl, but ah, well...” He looked away for a moment, as though the nostalgia had derailed his train of thought. “Anyway, this is just great news. Speaking of news...”

“We know, Perry, we have a paper to put out,” she finished the thought for her editor.

“That’s my girl,” Perry replied with a wink. “You two having any luck with the authorities in China?”

“The list of suspects has been narrowed to one,” Clark explained. “And I think the authorities in Macau are really hoping to coordinate the arrest with Superman – it’ll be good PR for them. But with what they’ve got so far, I doubt they could keep the guy in jail for more than five years.” She watched as her husband’s jaw clenched.

“What about trying to murder a building full of people?”

“Macau isn’t exactly looking to turn Jiang over to foreign powers. Unless some elements of those crimes were committed in Macau, he won’t be charged there for them.”

“Judas Priest,” Perry muttered. “But if anyone can nail this piece of garbage to the wall, it’s the two of you.”

“We hope so, Chief,” Lois replied.

“Lois, what can I do for you?” Dave Brewer asked as he held open the door to his office.

“I’ve been talking to Superman,” she began as she took a seat across from the Special Agent in Charge’s desk. “He mentioned the authorities in Macau don’t have much to work with, at least not in their jurisdiction.”

Brewer unbuttoned his suit jacket as he sat down at his desk. “They’ve got Jiang under a pretty tight surveillance ring, but they’re not likely to turn up anything new. The guy has been completely frozen out. The Triads wouldn’t even spit on him if he were on fire.” He picked up a pencil from his blotter and began twirling it absently.

She smiled at the unusually colorful expression from the staid agent. “The first major organized crime story I covered, the prosecutor told me the trick was to find the broadest, most expansive law you could, and then cram your case into it somehow.”

Brewer nodded thoughtfully. “That’s the general theory behind RICO prosecutions. In organized crime cases, the Feds build up as broad of a conspiracy as the evidence will bear and then hook everything into a mail or wire fraud charge. You ride its coattails all the way to a conviction.”

“So what are the broadest laws that could possibly apply in this case?”

He merely shrugged in response. “I’m the wrong guy to ask. I’m not an expert in Macau law.”

“But what about transnational crimes? Something he could have done in Macau that could be linked to the attempted bombing.”

Brewer kept twirling the pencil. “There’s money laundering, bribery maybe, trafficking in persons, terror.... Lane, you’re a genius,” he said abruptly as he threw the pencil into the FBI mug on his desk and practically leaped out of his chair.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Terrorism financing. That police chief, Wan, was going on about how strict their terrorism financing laws are.”

“And you can get a terrorism financing charge to stick?”

“The U.S. Attorney certainly can. The bombing was a deliberate attack against innocent civilians for the purpose of intimidation and of course, to kill Superman and Ultrawoman. They might not be governmental actors, but the message was pretty clear – the Triads were telling the government not to mess with them and they decided to use innocent civilians as their medium of communication. The money to fund the attack, to buy the Kryptonite, I’m betting dollars to donuts it passed through Macau at some point, even if it was just a correspondent bank somewhere. I’ll call the Assistant U.S. Attorney. If we coordinate with Macau, we can have Jiang indicted on terrorism charges here in New Troy. We’ll defer prosecution, assuming he’s indicted and convicted on charges of terrorism financing in Macau.”

“Macau gets the glory; the FBI does most of the heavy lifting.”

“So long as Jiang spends the rest of his life in prison, I couldn’t care less whether it’s in Macau, Metropolis, or on Mars,” Brewer replied with a grin.

“Dave, has anyone ever told you you’re way too competent to be a government employee?”

“Lois, has anyone ever told you you’re way too useful to be a reporter?” he retorted.

“You know, I was happier before I knew what a spider web chart was,” she complained as she turned the page sideways in an attempt to make more sense of it. All of the shell companies and intermediary banks with their complicated relationships of transactions – money flowing in and out at mind-numbing intervals and in obscene amounts – were making her head hurt. Lois heard her husband chuckle softly.

He dropped down next to her on the couch and picked up a carton of lo mein noodles. “Yeah, well, we need to learn how to figure them out if we’re actually going to get the charges brought against Jiang.”

“Isn’t this why the Feds have forensic accountants?” she asked between bites of steamed dumplings.

“Trust me, with the amount of data they’re looking at, they need the help.”

“So they asked for Superman’s assistance, of course.”

“And he brought it to his good friends, Lois Lane and Clark Kent.” He deftly grabbed a piece of shrimp with his chopsticks and offered it to her.

He really did know where all the best food in the world was, she thought with a dreamy smile. “I really like you flying all over the world to bring me whatever I want. Even if I could do it for myself.”

“Guess I’m just making up for lost opportunities,” he said wistfully as he placed the carton back on the coffee table and leaned back against the couch. She hadn’t meant the comment to be an indictment and she felt awful that he took it that way. Clark draped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. He caressed her cheek. “Hey, I’m really happy that I get to be here with you, to be a part of this. Of course I regret missing out on this stuff when you were pregnant with Jon, but I know I can’t dwell on that. What we have is amazing. And just because I missed the beginning doesn’t mean I can’t do my best to be a good father to him now.”

“You are an amazing father,” she replied. “And Jon and, well...junior here, are the luckiest little kids on the planet.”

He pulled a face. “Come on, you have to do better than that,” he said flatly.

“Sally?”

He shook his head.

“Susie?”

Again, he signaled his disapproval with a dismissive shake of his head.

“Flopsy? Mopsy? Moe?”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous,” Clark chided.

“All right, Mr. World’s Best Dad, you pick a name,” she retorted.

Her husband frowned, apparently deep in thought. “Elizabeth,” he suggested at last.

It was a perfectly fine name. Nothing ridiculous or overly trendy. “Not bad,” she replied with a shrug.

“But not doing it for you, huh?” he asked. “Okay, how about Katherine? No awful teasing nicknames. Keeps the family tradition of alliteration alive,” he said with a wink.

“Is that important to you?” she asked, trying to gauge how this negotiation between them was going to proceed over the next five months.

He shook his head with a smile. “No. Doesn’t mean I don’t like the sound of Katherine Kent, though.”

“Or Katie?” she offered.

“Exactly, the name works for a little girl, or an all-grown-up and sophisticated ‘Kate.’”

“Hmm...” she let the thought roll around in her mind as she leaned closer to her husband, letting her head rest on his chest. She felt him press a kiss against her hair.

“Was it tough for you, picking out Jon’s name?” he asked softly.

“Only because I really didn’t want to do it...it was something we were supposed to do together. I didn’t want to pick something you wouldn’t have been happy with. So I waited as long as I could. Naming him after your father was always a possibility, but I didn’t settle on it until after he was born. Now, I couldn’t imagine calling him anything else. Would you have picked a different name for him?”

“Wow, huh. I don’t think I’ve ever even really thought about it. He’s always been ‘Jon’ to me,” Clark replied. “I’m not sure I would have picked his middle name. Naming him after myself seems a bit egotistical. But Clark is also Mom’s maiden name, so it’s kind of like he’s named after her, too. But the fact that you wanted to give him my name means a lot to me.”

“Nah, I was naming him after your mother, too. ‘Clark’ just seemed like a better option than calling him ‘Martha,’” she teased.

“Hey!” Taking advantage of the fact that his arms were already wrapped around her, he started tickling her sides.

Lois couldn’t stop laughing. Between gasps for breath she shouted, “no fair.” How was it that her invulnerable body was ticklish, anyway?

Finally, he relented. She swatted him playfully on the chest as she repositioned herself to get comfortable, leaning against his shoulder. “Okay, your turn. And no more characters from Peter Cottontail.”

Lois hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should give voice to the idea that had been swirling in her mind since they’d learned the baby was a girl. How would he take it? Would he be touched? Would he find the thought too painful? “What about Keira?” she asked after a long moment.

She looked up to see the various expressions flit across his face, like he himself wasn’t sure what to make of it. She could tell he wasn’t sold on the idea, but there was a softness in his eyes. “You mean after my sister,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” she replied softly. She could feel the rise and fall of his chest as he took in a deep breath and she wished she could just take it back.

“Can I think about it?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied. “I mean, we’ve got another five months, longer even. We could just call her ‘Baby Girl Kent’ until we come up with something,” she joked.

“No,” he said firmly. “It has to be ‘Baby Girl Lane Kent.’ She has to have your name as her middle name.”

“Oh yeah?” Lois replied with a half smile.

“Yeah. I’m putting my foot down on this,” he said with mock sternness. “Is it okay if I put my foot down on this?” he asked teasingly.

“Sure, I mean, since I unilaterally picked Jon’s whole name, I guess you can pick her middle name.”

“Good,” he said definitively as he tilted her chin up with one crooked finger and kissed her tenderly.

His body curled around Lois’s as they lay down in bed. His hand came to rest against the swell of her abdomen, still fairly small, but definitely noticeable. The way her body was changing, the slow, but steady progression as their daughter grew bigger, amazed him. He stroked her soft, smooth skin, and closed his eyes, once again imagining what it would be like to hold his daughter, to be there when she was born.

A sudden fluttering under his hand caused his heart to stop. He felt Lois place her hand on top of his. “Did you feel that?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he managed, his mouth dry. “She kicked! She’s moving!” The sensation was incredibly faint to him, and he wasn’t sure how much he really felt the flutter, as opposed to picking up the sound of it. He doubted he would have been able to feel it if he were an ordinary person. Just days ago, they were wondering if their baby was going to be all right. Now, she’d decided to make her presence known ever so clearly to Mom and Dad.

Lois looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“Completely amazing,” he agreed. “Has she been moving a lot?” he asked.

“This is the first time I’ve felt it, too. It’s a little earlier than it was with Jon,” she explained as she turned around to face him. He caressed her cheek and kissed her lips softly.

She smiled at him. “This is exactly how I imagined it would be for us, getting to experience all of this together, seeing how happy, how excited it makes you.”

“Me too,” he said, his voice a soft whisper. After the long, nightmarish experience of the first half of this pregnancy, they were finally getting to experience all the things that he’d yearned for, the things he’d missed with Jon. And it no longer took any effort to smile and act happy, now that it wasn’t an act, now that there wasn’t an intolerable knot of worry in his gut. They could just enjoy this and not worry about when the other shoe would inevitably drop.

“Did they have it?” she asked expectantly as he walked through the door.

He held up the paper bag with a triumphant smile and pulled out the colorful hardcover. “Before You Were Born,” the title declared over a picture of a smiling baby growing inside a pregnant woman’s belly.

“Was it any good?” she asked as he handed it to her.

“I found it riveting,” he said with a grin.

She took the book and flipped through it, reading it at super speed, smiling at the silly watercolor illustrations as she did. Lois looked up at her husband. “Are you ready to do this?” she asked.

“Definitely,” he replied. He took her hand and followed her up the stairs to their son’s room.

“Jon, sweetie?” she called as she pushed open the door to his room. Jon looked up from where he was playing with all the new dinosaurs he’d gotten for his birthday on the carpet.

“We have something very exciting to tell you,” Clark said as he sat down on the bed. Jon rushed over and allowed his father to pull him into his lap. Lois sat down next to both of them.

“You’re going to be a big brother,” she began. Her little boy’s eyes lit up. “In the summer time, we’re going to have a new baby girl.”

“Are you sure it’s a girl?” he asked warily.

“We’re very sure,” Clark said as he kissed the top of his son’s head. “Your baby sister is growing inside Mommy’s tummy.”

“Babies grow in tummies?” Jon asked as he regarded first his mother and then his father curiously.

“Well, there’s a special place in a mommy’s body, next to her tummy called a womb, where a baby can grow,” Lois said as she placed her hand on her expanding abdomen. “My womb is getting bigger because your sister is growing in there. When she’s big enough and strong enough, she’ll come out and you’ll have a little sister.”

“Did I come from there, too?” he asked.

“You sure did,” she said. “And we got you a very special book all about it.” They sat together and read the silly picture book about how babies developed and what they were doing while they were growing and getting bigger inside their mommies’ bodies. When they’d finished, Jon looked up at her, his features settling into a look of consternation.

“How come the baby’s a girl?” he asked.

“Well, that’s just how it works,” Clark said simply. “Some babies are boys and some babies are girls.”

“I guess that’s okay,” Jon conceded at last. “Mommy and Grandma are girls and I like them.”

“Me too, buddy,” Clark replied with a laugh.

“The U.S. Attorney is ready to indict Jiang,” Brewer said triumphantly as he jogged down the steps of the federal courthouse. The gloom of the gray, drizzly morning had lingered into the early afternoon of the cold, mid-March day.

“And then Wan will move in and arrest him on the racketeering and terrorism financing charges?” Superman asked as he turned to walk with the agent down to the sidewalk.

Dave Brewer nodded and grinned. “And he wanted me to pass along his thanks to Lane and Kent for helping his guys make the final link between the accounts in Macau, Hong Kong, and Dubai to the Kryptonite purchase.

“I’ll relay the message,” Clark replied. It had taken them weeks of begging and cajoling every disreputable source they’d ever had to figure out where and how Johnny Tai, the Triads’ most notorious street enforcer in Metropolis, had initially procured the Kryptonite. Between that and ‘Superman’s’ unraveling of the complex web of accounts used to funnel money for the transaction, Macau had gotten everything it needed to put together the terrorism financing charges. “When does Wan plan on moving against Jiang?”

“He didn’t say, but he did mention that he wants to talk to you,” Brewer replied. He made his way to the small lunch kiosk in the tidy little park next the courthouse. Their presence—or rather Superman’s presence—started to attract the notice of the park’s few visitors. Lawyers in suits, cops, and tourists turned to look curiously at them. Brewer seemed oblivious to it all as he ordered and paid for his salad.

“I’ll stop by when it’s not two in the morning his time,” Clark said.

“Thanks, Superman. And thanks for all of your help with this case,” the agent replied as they started walking toward the federal building adjacent to the courthouse, where his office was located.

“I feel like I should be thanking you,” Clark said.

“Tell me about the look on Jiang’s face when you finally pick him up,” Brewer replied. “That’ll be all the thanks I need.”

He hovered over Jiang’s latest apartment—the man had started moving weekly—staring down grimly at his target. Jiang tossed fitfully in his bed, seized in the grip of a nightmare, it seemed. Clark felt no sympathy for him. He deserved to have his nights haunted. But Clark knew that what plagued the other man wasn’t remorse for the many lives he’d ruined. It was nothing more than fear. Jiang Jai He had an overdeveloped sense of self-preservation. It was about the only trait he shared in common with anything else that had a spine.

Clark wanted to fly through the window, shatter the glass and startle the bastard awake. He wanted the man to know what a real nightmare was. He wanted to see his eyes go white with horror, to smell the acid sting of fear on his skin. His hand started to tremble and he flexed and un-flexed his fist in a vain attempt to make it stop. His heart was thundering, his mouth had gone dry, his body tense with righteous fury. Soon, the only sound he could hear was his own pulse beating an insistent rhythm, like a war drum, in his ears.

He tried to shake himself out of his fugue state. He’d known this kind of hatred before. It had almost destroyed his life. It had torn him to shreds, leaving barely a scrap of his humanity intact. From those tattered remnants, he’d been forced to put himself back together. It was a task that had very nearly defeated him. And now, when everything was going right in his life, when he had every reason to be happy and hopeful, he was entertaining these destructive fantasies of an almost holy vengeance.

Clark had to get out of there. He took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then repeated the actions a few more times. Forcing his heart rate to slow, he flew away.

He walked through the deserted corridors, his boots thudding dully against the cold, hard metal floors. He turned a corner and saw nothing but another long, empty hallway in front of him. The doors were all closed, the emptiness of the place reinforced by the way his every step echoed loudly.

“Kal El!”

He turned around at the sound of his name. Well, not his name, exactly, but what his birth parents had once named him, and what another world had once called him for more than four long years. But he was on that world again, wasn’t he? These corridors were the familiar maze of the main colony.

Nor stood at the other end of the hallway, his arms folded across his chest, a smug smile etched into his expression. He dropped his arms and sauntered coolly toward his hated adversary. “Why is it that you still haven’t figured out how to get out of this place?” Nor asked disdainfully. “I know that you aren’t terribly intelligent, but by the fates, Kal El, it’s been years.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Clark growled.

“I belong here. This is the corner of your mind you relegated me to. The question is, what are you doing here? You have everything you’ve ever asked for, everything you’ve ever wanted, and you still keep finding your way back to this place. It’s pathetic, really.”

Clark seized Nor’s shirt in both fists, shaking him violently. “You’re dead. I killed you. You don’t exist anymore!” Clark yelled in the other man’s face.

Nor chuckled as he shook his head. “It’s amazing how simple you really are. I exist because you can’t let go of me. You run away, but you can’t help yourself. You come back here, time and again, looking for... I don’t know, abuse, self-loathing, something equally ridiculous.”

Clark shoved him away, disgusted by his words. Filled with a terrible dread that Nor might be right.

No, wait.

Nor wasn’t right.

He was dead.

Cold, bloated, lying in a morgue with a hole ripped in his gut.

By now, rotting somewhere in an unmarked grave. Un-mourned. Remembered only with fear, hatred, and loathing.

“I killed you because I had to,” Clark spat. “You were a threat to every man, woman, and child on that planet.”

“How very noble of you, Kal El. It couldn’t possibly have been your craven desire to survive that made you pull the trigger. It was your duty.” Nor’s voice dripped with bitter sarcasm.

Clark turned away from him and stared at the ground. “I wanted to live,” he admitted. “I love my family. I love my life.” He turned back around on his heel and stepped toward Nor, forcing the other man to back up. “But I would have died to stop you. If that’s what it took, I would have given up everything to make sure you never harmed another soul.”

“And so it must be with this Jiang fellow. You don’t really want to kill him, do you? You’re just doing your duty. Oh, but I forgot, you don’t need to kill him. You just want to. You’ve developed a taste for blood, haven’t you, Kal El? I loved my life. Enough to fight for it. And you took it from me.”

“I had no choice!” Clark yelled.

“Then why does it plague you? If you had no choice, why are you still haunted by me? You may have killed me, but you clearly can’t let me go.” Nor turned and started to walk away.

Clark rushed to follow him and then stopped suddenly, realizing he was just proving Nor’s point.

“Clark? Honey?”

The sound of Lois’s voice cut through the fog of his dream. He opened his eyes to the darkness and realized he was in bed, safe in his home, an eternity away from New Krypton. Clark rolled over to look at his wife. “You okay?” she asked. The concern was evident in her voice.

“Yeah,” he whispered, but he could taste the lie. “No. No, I’m not,” he confessed.

“Another nightmare?” she asked, gently encouraging him to talk about it.

“Sort of,” he replied. “Not like the usual. But it was still about Nor. Or maybe it wasn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nor was in it. Just taunting me about the fact that I can’t get over killing him. That I can’t...” He sighed, trying to make sense of it all in his head. But it didn’t make any sense. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep trying to wall off the different parts of my life from each other. When I’m with you, I feel like I’m me. Like I’m the guy I’ve been trying to be this whole time. But with Jiang...I spend so much time just thinking about what he did to us, what he could have done...and all I feel is rage. I spend a lot of my patrols just following him...and it’s so easy to imagine tearing him apart. I killed someone once...and it almost destroyed me. Now I want to do it again.”

“You would never hurt someone unless you had no choice,” she insisted as she reached out to touch his face.

“No, Nor was right...”

“Nor?” she asked incredulously. “Nor was a raving psychotic from the way you described him.”

He shook his head. “Not the real Nor. The one in my dream. How can I even be thinking of doing to someone else what I did to Nor?”

“Because he threatened your family. He could have killed us all,” she said simply. “It’s only because of you that he didn’t. Killing Nor still bothers you because no matter how awful he was, it goes against everything you are to hurt someone else. That’s why I know you won’t hurt Jiang. Even if that means you have to recuse yourself from the rest of this and let the police do their own work, then that’s what you’ll do.”

“Isn’t that just running away?”

“Clark, you have done everything superhumanly possible to make sure this guy never hurts anyone else again. You’ve done your job. You don’t have to do the rest. Let someone else handle it – someone whose family wasn’t nearly murdered by the bastard.”

He shrugged. “It still feels wrong; like I’m taking the coward’s way out.”

“Honey, you are the strongest person I know. And that has nothing to do with how much you can bench press. I would never have made it through these last few months if it hadn’t been for you. And I know it was just as hard for you as it was for me, but you pretended it wasn’t. Because you knew I needed you to. It’s because of you that Jiang will be spending the rest of his life behind bars. Who cares if you’re not the one who arrests him? Though personally, I wouldn’t believe for a second you were dangerous to him. You’ve had every chance to hurt him and you’ve never done it. Because you’re better than that. Because you still know what you believe in. And you know those things are worth fighting for. Especially when it’s hard.”

He opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t think of anything to say except, “I hope you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right; I’m always right,” she replied matter-of-factly.

Jiang looked behind himself nervously. He changed his habits, his patterns, his routes. He never ate in the same restaurants, shopped in the same stores, or set anything resembling a routine. Without friends, with his access to funds gone, he moved from one cheap flophouse to another. And yet he saw the police everywhere he went. Not just the smart looking young men and women in crisp blue uniforms, but in the eyes of dozens of strangers who seemed to follow him as he passed: a homeless man on a bench, a banker at a café who couldn’t put down his mobile phone, a young couple walking in the park.

He found a rundown looking little laundry and dropped off the sack of clothes – the only possessions he had left in the world. Everything else—his home, his hand-tailored suits, his cars and his wine cellar, his watches and cufflinks, his season tickets to the opera—had been abandoned along with a life of power and privilege he was never going to return to.

Jiang knew it was nothing more than a matter of time. He’d failed to kill Superman. In the process, his man had

seriously wounded Ultrawoman. Neither of these things boded well for Jiang. The last thing any man needed was an angry, vengeful superhero stalking him like a newborn foal.

There was no way to know whether Superman intended to kill him or merely apprehend him. At times, Jiang just wanted to turn himself in and confess everything. The constant looking over his shoulder, the acid that ate away at his stomach from all the worrying, the chronic insomnia all made him believe prison was a better alternative to this mocking perversion of ‘freedom’ that he currently enjoyed.

But he knew that if he meekly turned himself in, the Triads would think that he was trying to cooperate with the authorities. He wouldn’t last two hours in a holding cell. Before anyone could even bother to figure out whether he was a threat, he would be dead. That was how expansive the organization’s connections in the prison system were.

He hurried away from the laundry and ducked into a dingy noodle shop. His stomach growled painfully. His already lean frame had been grown thinner still since returning home to China cloaked in dismal failure. He was usually too nervous to eat and he only dared venture out when the hunger threatened to drive him insane. Dressed in cheap polyester pants and a worn cotton shirt, he looked like a pathetic day laborer. No one would notice him here. Perhaps if he were truly lucky, the whole world would forget he’d ever existed.

“I still think I need to do this,” he said as he paced in his therapist’s office.

“Why do you think that is?” she asked him from where she sat patiently in her chair, her tranquility a stark counterpoint to his agitated state.

Clark sighed. “I don’t know. To prove that I’m really me, I guess. Not the guy I was afraid of turning into.”

“And you think arresting Jiang will give you that proof?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You’ve been following his movements very carefully, haven’t you?”

He stopped pacing and turned to face Dr. Friskin, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “The Macau police have him under constant surveillance. But yeah, sometimes I follow him, too. Just to make sure he isn’t going to run.”

“And in all of that time you’ve been following him, you’ve never taken the opportunity to harm him. Isn’t that proof enough?” she asked. He wished it were that simple.

“But I think about it,” he replied. “And I keep thinking about it until I force myself to leave.”

“So you think if you got close enough to arrest him, you might actually take the opportunity?”

Clark dragged a hand through his hair and sighed again. “No. I mean, that’s what I want to prove. That I am in control. That I’m not some half-crazed guy with superpowers who might snap at any moment.”

“And if you allow the local authorities to complete the arrest without you, you think you’ll lose the ability to prove that?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe I’ll spend the rest of my life wondering.”

“That situation would be unacceptable to you, wouldn’t it?”

Clark nodded silently. “I need to prove to myself that I can get past killing Nor, that it didn’t turn me into a danger to other people.”

Dr. Friskin removed her glasses and looked up from her notepad. “Personally, Clark, I don’t think you are a danger to other people. You’ve had plenty of opportunities to harm this man and you’ve never taken them. But I’m not the one who needs to be convinced.”

“You know how I feel about this,” she said as she looked up at him from her desk.

“I know,” he replied quietly as he closed the door behind him. “Lois, I need to do this.”

“And I don’t understand why,” she said stubbornly.

He sighed, sticking his hands in his pockets. “I don’t think I can explain it.”

Lois stood up and walked around her desk toward him. “Just be careful.” She straightened his tie and let her hands rest on the lapels of his suit jacket.

Clark placed his hands on top of hers. “You’re not going to try to stop me?”

“I could, but we’d probably tear apart the newsroom and not accomplish anything. I think you’re being a lunthead, but you’re my lunthead, which means I support you. Even if I don’t agree with you.”

“Thank you. I think,” he said with a weak chuckle.

“Do you want me to go with you?” she asked. “I mean, I’ll stay out of the spotlight, just fly overhead or something.”

He shook his head.

“You need to do this alone, right?”

“No,” he said. “Not alone. I couldn’t do any of this without you. But I have to know I can trust myself, even when you’re not there to keep things from getting out of hand.”

She didn’t understand. She didn’t think she could understand. Lois knew he would never harm Jiang, no matter how despicable that execrable piece of garbage was. But she didn’t know why he needed the emotional pummeling that would doubtlessly come from having to arrest him, from having to control his reactions and check his anger at a man that he had every right to wish were dead.

“Superman, we appreciate your assistance with this arrest,” Commissioner Wan said politely as he pulled on a bulletproof vest marked “POLICE” in Portuguese in bright yellow letters and Chinese characters. “We’re concerned Jiang may resort to...desperate measures when cornered.”

“I understand, Commissioner,” Clark replied, his arms folded across his chest. “And I will let your officers take the lead unless it appears they need my help.”

“Thank you, Superman. I’m sure the operation will proceed without incident, but it never hurts to have a little insurance,” Wan said with a smile as he holstered a weapon Clark was sure he probably hadn’t carried in twenty years. Clark followed the other man out of his large, wood-paneled office. A half dozen senior police officers and investigators were waiting for them in the lobby. They crowded into the elevator and made their way to the subterranean basement where dozens of additional officers were piling into police vans and cruisers.

Undercover agents throughout the Special Administrative Region had been keeping a quiet, steady eye on Jiang’s every movement. They placed him in a cheap motel several miles away from the police headquarters. In the dark of night, the small caravan of police vehicles quietly slipped out of the garage – no flashing lights or wailing sirens to alert the sleeping residents of Macau to their movements.

Superman followed them, flying high overhead. The vans finally slowed as they surrounded the dirty, rundown hotel. Police officers quietly made their way out of the vehicles and manned every possible entrance and exit to the building. With his x-ray vision, Clark watched from above as the cops hurried into the building, securing the stairwells and shutting off the elevator. The night receptionist began to voice his alarm, but a few terse words from one of the officers, supported by all of the large automatic weapons being brandished, seemed to silence him quickly.

Clark found Jiang’s room easily and using the radio Wan had given him, relayed the man’s position to the police commissioner. Jiang had apparently dozed off in the beaten up, threadbare upholstered chair in his room. He faced the door, slumped over to one side. On the table beside him was a bottle of cheap gin, half empty. Clark wondered briefly if the man had taken to drinking to calm his nerves.

But the thought fled his mind instantly. Though he slept, Jiang held a revolver loosely in one hand. The weapon hung precariously from his fingers and looked as though it might fall to the floor at any second. “He’s got a gun,” Clark said curtly. “I repeat, Jiang is armed.”

<<My men can handle it,>> came the reply. In the hallway, the police were slowly approaching the door, their weapons drawn.

“No,” Clark said emphatically. “Someone’s liable to get shot. Let me take care of this.”

<<Superman, we have the situation under control,>> Wan said testily.

“I will not have anyone’s blood on my hands because I didn’t act.” Clark bit out the words forcefully. His heart thundering in his chest, his blood racing through his veins, he darted toward Jiang’s window in a blur. Before the man was even awake, Clark had wrenched the pistol from his hand and crushed it into a tiny hunk of useless metal. The shattering of glass had forced the police to react. They burst through the door, splintering it and knocking it off its hinges.

Clark grabbed Jiang with both hands and kept himself interposed between the piece of garbage and the dozen or so adrenaline-driven police officers who stood ready to shoot the bastard if necessary. He stared at Jiang, seeing the look of fear he’d known would be on the other man’s face. His eyes were wide with horror; the acidic stench of fear rose from his skin as he trembled in Superman’s grasp. Clark could hear Jiang’s heartbeat, thundering like a frightened rabbit’s.

“Pu...please...” the man whimpered pathetically.

Clark fought against the burning need to tighten his grip on the other man, knowing that if he did, he’d snap Jiang’s arms like matchsticks. His jaw clenched rigidly, he stared at Jiang with all the hatred he’d ever felt in his life. His skin burned with the roiling, seething emotions that swirled inside him. The piece of garbage held in his grip had very nearly destroyed everything that Clark held dear. But now, in the grasp of the most powerful being in the universe, Jiang was less than harmless.

A flick of his wrists.

A dart of his heat vision.

A tightening of his grip.

Any of these things would have been sufficient to end Jiang’s existence.

And to end Clark’s.

‘I am Clark Kent,’ he said silently to himself, repeating the beginnings of the mantra he’d said over and over again when he’d been Nor’s prisoner, the silent affirmation that he had no intention of meekly surrendering to the darkened night. ‘I have a mother and a father and a wife and children who love me dearly. I will not die because they need me.’

In his mind, he could see Nor. He could see his sadistic smile and hear the cruelty drip from his voice. He looked into the other man’s eyes, devoid of any light of humanity, of any sense of compassion or empathy. He remembered what it was like to cower at the sound of Nor’s footsteps. To pray for death to bring an end to his pain. To shiver like an animal and wonder just how much more abuse his body was prepared to endure.

‘I destroyed you,’ he thought to himself. ‘I survived, not you. And I will not live my life in your shadow. You have no hold on me anymore, Nor.’

He let Jiang go and the other man, whether out of fear or disbelief, collapsed to the floor. Clark stepped away and allowed the police to haul Jiang off the floor and bind him with cuffs. A half-dozen men wrestled the slender, broken man back to his feet and frog-marched him into the hallway, though Jiang’s legs wobbled and buckled as he walked. With just a single look of disgust at the pitiful shell of a man who’d almost destroyed Clark’s world, he turned and flew out the window.

Landing beside the commissioner’s car, he walked over to Wan. “It’s done,” he said curtly before taking off and flying back toward home. Back toward a place that made sense to him and to the people who would take care of him.

“Excuse me,” Lois said as she stood up perhaps a bit too swiftly for a woman six months pregnant. No one said a thing, but she could feel everyone’s eyes following her as she left the conference room. Whatever, they could all just assume it was a pregnant lady thing. She headed toward the sound of his heartbeat, coming from the stairwell.

She forced herself not to run until she was out of sight, away from the curious looks of her colleagues. But once she was inside the stairwell, she literally flew up to meet him. Lois threw her arms around him and felt him embrace her just as tightly. He kissed her temple and for a long moment, they merely held each other.

“You okay?” she asked softly.

“Fine,” he said. As his heartbeat returned to normal, she withdrew reluctantly so she could take a good look at him. He gave her a weak, half smile as she regarded him curiously. “We arrested Jiang, pretty much without incident. Nothing happened. No one got hurt.”

“And you...”

He nodded his head slowly. “I was okay,” he said. She could tell he was holding back.

“Really?” she pressed.

“I flew in and disarmed him and yeah, I felt this overwhelming hatred for the guy, just like I have every time I’ve seen him. But I knew what I needed to do. He has to face justice, not vengeance.”

She put her hand on his chest and straightened his tie. “I’m proud of you,” she said softly.

Her husband hugged her once again. “I know this didn’t make any sense, but I’m glad I did it. I needed to know. I needed to be sure I could trust myself. I couldn’t go the rest of my life not knowing.”

“You should have just asked me,” she replied against his chest. “I know you. Better than you know yourself. You are the most fundamentally good and honest and decent man in the world. And I am so lucky to have you in my life.”

“I’m the lucky one,” he said softly. “Thank you. For having faith in me. For never giving up on me. For loving me so much more than any guy could ever hope to be loved.”

“You with me here, son?” Perry asked.

Clark shook his head and looked back at his boss.

“Sorry, Chief,” he mumbled sheepishly. Perry had realized that Clark Kent had fallen hard for Lois Lane pretty much from minute one. And now, almost nine years later, the young man still had it just as bad. Across the bullpen, Lois stood talking to her new research assistant, with one hand resting on the small of her back, and her abdomen protruding prominently, bearing testament to the fact that she was now seven full months along. Seemingly mesmerized, Clark apparently couldn’t help but stare.

“It’s amazing how even the most gorgeous woman in the world is more beautiful when she’s the mother of your children,” Perry said with a wistful smile. The sheepish

look on the younger man’s face told him he was right on the money.

Clark coughed slightly. “Yeah, Chief,” he confessed, the color rising in his expression. Perry clapped him hard on the back, surprisingly causing him to lose his balance a bit. Clark stepped forward and regained his footing.

“Now, you can stare at your wife like a love-struck puppy all you want on your time, Kent. But we’ve got a paper to put to bed, son,” Perry said with a good-natured smile as they turned back to the mock-up of the next day’s front page.

“Sorry, Perry,” Clark said, his tone chastened.

Perry laughed heartily, thrilled that after all they’d been through, his two top journalists were still just as much in love with each other as they’d ever been.

“So what do you think, Jon, is this a good color for the nursery?” Lois asked as she handed her little boy a cheery yellow paint sample chip.

He held the strip in his hands and looked at it for a long moment before nodding thoughtfully. “I like yellow,” he declared at last. Lois smiled as she took back the sample from him. They’d decided to let Jon take as big a role as he wanted in helping them get ready for the baby and that included decorating the nursery. The trip to the cavernous home improvement store to get decorating ideas was the first step in getting the baby’s new room ready. She hoped that they could finish the task of picking out the paint color and wall decorations quickly and avoid losing the five-year-old’s attention. Of course, the next stop was the baby section of the giant toy store in Planet Square, which meant he and Daddy could go pick out a toy while she figured out what they actually needed to buy in terms of furniture. Thankfully, for the sake of her sanity, most of Jon’s old baby furniture – the crib and rocking chair and changing table – were still in the attic of the farmhouse and would do just nicely.

“Hey honey, what do you think of these borders?” Clark asked as he wandered back toward them, his nose in a book of nursery-themed wallpaper samples. The presence of animals – farm animals, circus animals, jungle animals – dominated the selections. Lois took the proffered book from her husband and turned the pages slowly with Jon.

“That one,” Jon announced as he pointed at a pattern of teddy bears. “Little kids like teddy bears.”

Lois shared a proud and knowing smile with her husband. With the impending arrival of a new baby, Jon had decided to show all the ways in which he was ‘grown up’ and not a ‘little kid.’ He started taking showers instead of baths and indicated that he didn’t want any help. He was picking out his own clothes for nursery school (with an occasional intervention from Mommy or Daddy because galoshes weren’t appropriate when it was going to be warm and sunny) and tying his own shoes. She knew it was natural for him to assert some independence, but it was hard to imagine where the time had gone. Lois hadn’t yet begun to think of him as anything besides ‘her baby’ even as he

was growing up. He was going to start kindergarten in the fall, and for the next fifteen or twenty years, carry a backpack with him wherever he went.

“Teddy bears sound good to me,” Clark said.

“Teddy bears it is, then,” she replied.

He handed his young friend a beer and picked up his cue stick. “Whose turn is it to break?” Clark asked as he circled the pool table in the rec room. They rarely used the room if there wasn’t company over; it was a big space, great for entertaining, but not a room they used much as a family.

“Yours,” Jimmy replied as he leaned back against the bar, his beer in hand.

Clark fished the billiard balls out of the net pockets and re-racked them to begin a new game. “So Lucy will be in town next week,” he said as he lined up his shot.

“I know,” Jimmy replied. “She told me about her interview with the PR department of that insurance company.”

Clark broke, knocking two of the striped balls into the pockets.

“How do I know you’re not cheating?” Jimmy asked jokingly.

“If I were cheating, there wouldn’t be any balls left on the table,” Clark said with a grin.

“I think she’s really serious, about moving back to Metropolis,” Jimmy said as Clark sank another ball.

“It seems like it,” Clark agreed. “She’s pretty excited about this interview.”

“I think maybe she wants us to be serious, too,” Jimmy said, his tone somewhat hesitant.

Clark lined up the 12 ball against a corner pocket and carefully took his shot. But as soon as he’d made contact with the cue ball, he knew he’d missed. The 12 ball rolled slowly toward its intended target, hitting both bumpers at the corners of the pocket and gently rolling away. His consolation was that he’d left Jimmy with a particularly difficult shot to get the three ball into a side pocket. “Is that what you want, too?” he asked, following up on his young friend’s comment.

Jimmy leaned over the table to exam the particularly unhelpful angles of the shot he had to line up. He surprised Clark by banking the ball off the bumper just next to the side pocket. It rolled back toward the middle of the table, striking another solid ball and causing it to roll into the opposite side pocket. “I don’t know, I think so. I mean, I’m not a kid anymore. I got serious about my job; I should probably get serious about my personal life, too. It’s just that...How do you know? I mean, how do you know someone is the person you want to spend the rest of your life with?”

As Jimmy rounded the table, trying to find his next shot, Clark thought about his answer. “I knew right away. Like two seconds after I met Lois, I was in love with her. It took her two years to get to the same place. I don’t think one of

us was right and the other wrong. We each needed to figure it out for ourselves.”

Without another shot worth taking, Jimmy settled for playing defensive pool and positioned the cue ball to make Clark’s turn as difficult as possible. “I’m not sure I’m there yet,” Jimmy said as he picked up his beer.

“No one said you have to be,” Clark replied simply. “When you know, you know. You won’t have to wonder. She’ll make you want to be a better man. And being with her will make that possible.”

Jimmy grinned. “No wonder you convinced Lois to marry you.”

Clark gave him a wry smile. “It took a couple of tries. Just be honest with Lucy about how you feel.” He lined up the cue ball, striking it to cause just the right amount of sidespin to curve around the cluster of solid billiard balls in the middle of the table. He managed to tap the nine ball into the far corner pocket. He smiled as he looked at his bemused opponent. “Do I have to warn you about what’ll happen if you hurt Superman’s kid sister?”

Jimmy shook his head. “Sorry, Clark, but I’m not afraid of you. Lois, on the other hand...”

Clark laughed. “That’s probably wise,” he said.

“You guys did an amazing job,” she said as she admired her husband and father-in-law’s handiwork. The room was a cheerful yellow, much like Jon’s room had been when he was a baby. The white rocking chair and crib looked perfect in their new surroundings.

Clark turned around and smiled at her as he wiped his hands on his paint-speckled jeans. “Thanks,” he said.

“Well, this was much easier than building a nursery from scratch,” Jonathan chimed in with a smile.

“It’s still much appreciated,” Lois replied, placing her hand against her stomach where the baby was kicking vigorously.

“Lemonade and oatmeal raisin cookies for the conquering heroes,” Martha declared from the doorway, where she stood, smiling and holding a tray.

“Mom, you’re still the best,” Clark said with a grin as helped himself.

“I want cookies!” Jon shouted from the hallway. He ran into the room, wearing his Superman cape. Their little boy was taking a stronger interest in Metropolis’s resident superhero and just the prior week had proudly declared that when he grew up, he was going to be a superhero, too. It was an announcement that led to a lot of suppressed smiles and knowing looks exchanged among the four adult residents of the household. If their little boy only knew...

“So what do you think of the baby’s room?” his grandmother asked him as she handed him a freshly baked cookie.

“It’s okay for a girl’s room,” Jon announced.

“Just okay?” his mother scoffed.

“It’s a baby’s room,” Jon complained. “Babies don’t have any good toys.”

“Well, babies have to play with soft toys, like teddy bears, when they’re little,” Clark said patiently. “When she’s bigger, you can play together with big kid toys.”

“And you can be the one to teach her how,” Lois added. “She’s going to need her big brother’s help.” She moved her hand as the baby decided to kick another spot. It didn’t hurt in the least, but as she moved, Lois couldn’t help but think of all the conversations she’d had with Jon as he’d wondered what the baby was doing in there. Was she smiling? Sucking her thumb? Was she afraid of the dark? Did she need to sleep? Despite his misgivings about having a sister, he was completely fascinated by her.

“Is she kicking?” Martha asked.

Lois nodded. “Sweetie, do you want to feel her kick?” she asked her little boy.

“Doesn’t it hurt when she kicks you?” Jon asked.

“No, honey, it doesn’t hurt,” Lois assured him. “Come here and feel it.”

Jon put his hand on his mother’s stomach. He’d felt the baby kick before, but as the pregnancy progressed her little girl’s movements were more pronounced. Jon leaned close to his mother’s stomach and whispered, “Hey, stop kicking Mommy. It’s not very nice.”

Lois couldn’t help but smile and she heard her husband chuckle. “She’s just restless,” she told her little boy. “She probably can’t wait to come out and meet you.”

“How much longer?” Jon asked.

“Almost two months,” his father told him gently.

Jon patted his mother’s stomach. “You’re taking an awfully long time in there,” he said, causing all the adults in the room to laugh.

Clark took the hand his wife outstretched toward him and knotted his fingers through hers. He walked with her on the cobblestone pathway through the park toward the fountain. He’d proposed to her there. And she’d proposed back on the same spot. The day was mild, the breeze welcome and pleasant on his skin. The blossoms on the trees showered little petals upon them as they walked slowly under the canopy they created. The late afternoon sunlight dappled the ground, the rays filtered by the tree branches.

“I love you,” he whispered quietly.

She squeezed his hand gently. “I love you,” she replied.

There were times when he still couldn’t imagine how they’d gotten to this place. How could one man live through so much joy and sorrow? So much exhilaration and so much tragedy? It didn’t make any sense, really. But then, theirs had always been lives less ordinary.

Six years ago to the day, they’d married. In the darkened newsroom, with only his parents as witnesses and a confused editor presiding, they’d exchanged heartfelt vows, holding at bay the tears they’d been fighting so bravely. It was a chaotic and confusing swirl of emotions that swept him up that night. How could he possibly love this one person so much? And after finding her, how could he possibly think about leaving her?

They’d made love that night with a fierce and defiant passion. And their son had been conceived. But before he could find out, before he could bask in the joyous news that he was going to be a father, he’d turned and walked away from the only parents he’d ever known, the only woman he’d ever loved, and the only home he’d ever had.

After years of hopelessness, after having thoroughly and completely given in, the way home was illuminated before him. He’d crawled and clawed his way across the galaxy to get back to his wife. To restart the life he’d cherished. And amidst the anger and violence that had consumed him for so long, that life almost turned to ashes.

But the stubborn woman who now held his hand had refused to give up on him. She’d pulled him back from the brink of darkness and helped him find his way once more.

It would only be mere weeks before their lives drastically changed yet again. Soon, he’d be able to look into his daughter’s eyes, instead of just imagining them. He’d be able to marvel at how small she was, be fascinated by her tiny fingers and toes. He would hold her while she slept and soothe her when she cried. And be there to see her first smile. Her first steps. Her first words.

He would be the father his little girl deserved.

It still pained him that he’d missed all these parts of Jon’s life. It hadn’t been fair to his son. Or to Lois. But it had been the hand they were dealt. Even if control over time had been among his powers, he couldn’t have undone and fixed those mistakes without undoing the very circumstances that had led to his son being conceived. It was like Lois had told him, you couldn’t untangle the good from the bad, sometimes.

She slowed down and then stopped right in front of the fountain. He took both of her hands in his and leaned forward to press his lips to her forehead. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Mr. Kent,” she said softly.

“I intend to hold you to that, Ms. Lane,” he said. “I am going to spend every day of my life trying to make you happy.”

“You make me happy every minute of every day we’re together,” she replied.

“Ditto,” he whispered.

“Martha? Is Clark still handling those wildfires in California?” Lois asked as her mother-in-law opened the door to the apartment.

“I think so,” Martha replied, still drying her hands on a dishtowel. “I know it’s his night to cook, but I don’t mind getting started on dinner, or we can order in...” Martha began as she stepped aside to let her daughter-in-law enter.

Lois smiled. “It’s not that,” she began, placing her hand on her abdomen. In her other hand, she held her overnight bag. “It’s time.”

Martha gave her a slightly puzzled look. “Time? Oh! Time!” she exclaimed. “Jonathan, come quick! It’s time!”

“Time for what...” her father-in-law began as he approached them. “Oh!” He echoed his wife’s startled reaction. “But the baby isn’t due for weeks!”

“Well, apparently she’s impatient,” Lois said, feeling yet another contraction.

“Do you need to fly? Or should we drive? What should we do, dear?” Martha asked.

Lois smiled, trying to be the calm one. “We can drive,” she said. “Or, well, one of you has to drive.”

“I’ll get the car keys,” Martha said.

“I’ll get Jon,” Jonathan replied. Her in-laws eased past her, through the doorway, and up the stairs to the main house.

“And I’ll...just wait here,” Lois added with a bemused smile.

Clark scanned the entire house as he approached, frowning when he found it empty. Sure, he was late for dinner, but was that reason enough to just abandon a guy for the night? He landed in the library and headed downstairs, figuring someone might have left him a note. At the base of the stairwell, he spun back into the t-shirt and jeans he’d been wearing before the fire had caught his attention on the afternoon news. He dug his hands into his pockets, finding his cell phone.

His cell phone!

He flipped it open, cringing to find that he’d missed seventeen calls. He hit the voicemail button and waited for it to connect.

<<Clark, honey, Lois is in labor...>>> his mother’s first few words were enough to send him back into the suit and rocketing toward STAR Labs. There was no way in hell he was going to let her down like this twice. He was going to be there. He was going to hold her hand. He was going to welcome their daughter into the world.

A few seconds later, Superman landed outside the lab and rushed through security. He made his way to Dr. Klein’s lab, dialing his father’s cell phone number as he walked swiftly through the corridors.

“I’m here,” he said simply when his father picked up.

His father must have moved with super speed because he was there to greet Clark as he reached the door to Bernie’s lab. His father let him into the normally secured lab and once inside, Clark spun back into his own clothes.

“She’s over here,” Jonathan said, leading the way to the space that Bernie had converted into a delivery room.

“All right, Lois, keep breathing,” Bernie coaxed. Lois looked up as he approached and smiled at him.

“Thank God you’re here,” she breathed.

He rushed to take her outstretched hand. “Wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” he said, feeling tears blur his vision.

“Lois, how are you doing?” Bernie asked.

“Good,” she said simply. “Trust me, superpowered is the only way to do this.”

“I can imagine,” Bernie deadpanned. “Okay, you’re fully dilated and effaced, it’s time to start pushing.”

Lois nodded somberly. Of all the deliveries Clark had witnessed, this was the most surreal. He’d never imagined

what it would be like to see an invulnerable woman go through labor. He kept holding his wife’s hand, as much for his benefit as for hers.

His mother hovered nearby, obviously knowing she’d be needed soon. For now, all she could do was wait. He felt Lois give his hand a squeeze as she concentrated. The contractions were close together now. It wouldn’t be much longer.

He listened as she exhaled a long, deep, slow breath. “Oh wow!” she exclaimed.

“Another contraction?” Clark asked.

“Yes,” Bernie replied. “You’re almost there, Lois.”

She pushed again, her eyes closing as she concentrated. “Come on, sweetheart,” he said softly.

“The head’s crowning!” Bernie declared. Moments later, Clark could hear the sounds of a baby crying.

His baby.

His daughter was crying.

Tears flooded his eyes.

“My, she is beautiful. Why don’t you give me a hand here, Dad?” Bernie asked as he held up the little girl.

Clark rushed to take the towel from his mother’s hand and held it up to wrap his daughter in. “Okay, let’s cut the umbilical cord,” Bernie announced. He clamped the cord and let Clark cut it. Clark took his daughter fully into his arms and rocked her gently to soothe her crying. His vision blurred by a film of unshed tears, he stared lovingly at his little girl. She continued crying, wriggling her little arms and legs, her tiny, perfect fingers and toes.

“Lois, we’re almost done,” he heard Bernie say.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Clark whispered, unable to help the giant grin that spread across his face. “Your daddy loves you so much. So does your mommy.” Her cries slowly subsided to soft whimpers.

He carried his daughter to the head of the bed. “Your little girl,” he whispered to Lois.

“She’s so beautiful,” Lois said tearfully.

He nodded and the first tear slipped down his cheek. Clark let his wife take their daughter into her arms. He leaned down to kiss Lois’s forehead. “Thank you,” he whispered. He watched as tears slipped down her cheeks as she looked down at their baby.

“You were right,” he said softly. “She looks like a ‘Keira.’ Keira Lane Kent.”

As his wife and daughter lay sleeping, both enjoying a well-deserved rest, he slipped out of the lab and floated high into the atmosphere, to the place where the sky was stretched thin. He stared up into the darkness, not knowing which way to look. New Krypton was still easy enough to find, but the planet that had once existed, that had given that little barren space rock its name, could no longer grace any star chart or be seen by any superhuman eye.

“I don’t know what to say,” he began truthfully.

“‘Thank you’ has never been adequate. But I think I understand more now about what mattered most to you. How you found the courage to keep fighting. And how

much was taken away from you. You never got to see either of your children grow up. You knew more of sorrow and heartache than any person ever should. I wish you could meet both of your grandchildren. I think I know how happy that would have made you. But I can promise you I will take care of them. I will protect them. And when they're old enough to understand, I'll tell them about you. Because they need to know where they come from. How brave their grandparents were. And how a good person can change the world."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you," he said softly from the doorway.

She smiled at her husband. "You're not disturbing us," she said. "Come inside." Lois looked back down at her daughter as she nursed contentedly. It was a deeply intimate experience and one she'd always wanted to share with Clark. He sat down in the chair beside her bed and watched silently. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the look of awe on his face as he admired his baby girl. The thin wisps of brown hair on her head, her tiny little pink ears, the impossibly small nails at the ends of her perfect fingers.

Keira stopped nursing and Lois readjusted the loose-fitting hospital gown she was still wearing and lifted her baby onto her shoulder to burp her gently. "That's my girl," she whispered quietly as she lowered Keira back down to cradle her in her arms. Within mere moments, their baby was fast asleep.

"I still can't believe she's finally here," Clark said.

"It was a pretty long nine months," Lois replied, trying not to think too much about how difficult the first half of the pregnancy had been on both of them.

Clark smiled at her, his eyes suspiciously bright. "She looks like you," he said softly.

"She has my ears," Lois replied. "But she has your eyes."

"She's perfect," he said reverently.

"She's our kid, she couldn't be anything else," Lois said as she smiled at her husband. For a long while, they simply sat in silence and watched their daughter sleep.

They looked up at the sound of a soft knock at the door. "Hello?" Lois heard her mother-in-law's voice.

Clark crossed the room and opened the door. Jon ran inside, followed by his grandparents, the teddy bear he'd had since he was a baby tucked under one arm. He stopped suddenly and simply stared at his mother and the little baby in her arms. "She's so small," he said quietly.

"Yep," Clark said. "You were that small once, too."

"Really?" Jon looked at his father with wide eyes.

"Really," Lois confirmed.

"Come here," Clark said, motioning for his son to join him at Lois's bedside. Jon stood silently beside the edge of the bed and peered at his little sister.

"She sleeps a lot, doesn't she?" Jon whispered. Lois saw her husband smile.

"Yeah," he agreed as he put a hand on his little boy's shoulder. "Babies sleep a lot, so they can grow and get bigger."

Jon looked up at his father and held up his bear. "I brought her my bear. It's a pretty good toy for a baby."

"It is," Clark confirmed as he gently took the offered teddy bear. "You're going to be a great big brother."

"Mmm hmmm," Jon agreed with a serious nod of his head. "I'm going to help Mommy and Daddy take care of you," he told his sister proudly, eliciting another smile from Lois.

He was awake even before his daughter started crying. The change in her heart rate from peaceful sleep to the distress of an empty tummy or wet diaper was enough to bring him back to the waking world. By the time she'd started to cry, he was in her room, gently lifting her out of her crib. It was definitely the diaper, he realized. After just a week and a half, he was an expert in diaper changing and swiftly dealt with the source of his little girl's discomfort.

Holding her in his arms, he paced the nursery slowly, hoping to rock her gently back to sleep. "That's my girl," he whispered. But instead of falling back into a deep slumber, she stared up at her father with wide, brown, inquisitive eyes.

"I love you, sweetheart," he whispered as he bent to softly kiss the top of her head. "Your mommy and I are going to take good care of you. You are going to be a happy, healthy little girl. I wish I could say that all your problems in life will be as simple as the ones we can fix with a bottle or a new diaper. But I promise we will be here for you no matter what."

He walked over to the window with Keira silently lying in his arms. He stared up at the night's sky, completely free of stars because the bright lights of Metropolis, even at two thirty in the morning, made the light of the stars impossible to see to the ordinary human eye. "It's a big, crazy, confusing, amazing world out there," he whispered. "And none of it is going to be foreign to you. You'll see the world in a way other people can't. It's the most incredible thing I can imagine. And I can't wait to share it with you. But being different like we are means you'll have to be brave, too. You will see a lot of amazing things in the world, and a lot of things that are going to break your heart. We won't be able to protect you from all of them. But you will always be loved. And you will never be alone."

She'd fallen back to sleep in his arms, her tiny chest rising and falling with each deep breath. "I guess that's all way too much to be worrying about for now," he admitted with a soft chuckle. "You are, after all, only ten days old." Carefully, he laid her back down in her crib, letting his fingers brush over the soft down of her hair. Clark leaned down and kissed the top of her head gently. "Good night, honey," he whispered. "I love you."

Almost four years later...

She completed the loop around Centennial Park, more than six miles in all, her feet hitting the pavement in an even rhythm. She made sure to stay on Patch's good side—the Kent family's border collie didn't like having anyone in her blind spot. Anyone that is, except Clark. She was Jon and Keira's dog, technically, but though she herded the Kent children around the house, it was usually at Clark's feet that she could be found.

It was because of Patch that Lois had taken up running again. Six months ago, the kids had started begging for a dog. They'd gone to the pound and found the skinny border collie with only one eye – the other had been a casualty of cancer. The kids had insisted on taking her home, and oddly, calling her Patch. She had a sweet, gentle disposition, but too much energy to be cooped up in the house all day long. So even though the exercise couldn't strengthen her heart or tone her muscles, Lois ran each morning, just to tire the dog out.

They made their way back to Sullivan Lane, Patch always at Lois's side, letting her master set the pace. She waved at their neighbor, the elderly Mr. Silverstein, as he picked up the morning paper, then followed Patch up the steps to the brownstone's door. She opened the door to the smells of bacon and eggs and coffee, and the sounds of the kids, chasing each other through the living room. Lois headed upstairs to shower and dress quickly. In the mornings, weekday or weekend, the house was chaos. Her runs, while principally for Patch's benefit, were also a time for her to enjoy some silence. She made her way back downstairs and into the middle of a feud between her two children.

"No fair!" Keira cried out. "Daddy! Jon took my bear!"

"You got orange juice all over him!" Jon protested in response.

Jon dodged his mother as he came running into the foyer. Keira found herself getting scooped up by Lois as she tried to chase her much bigger brother. "Jon, give me the bear," she said. "I'm going to give him a bath and then he'll be all clean again, okay?" she told her pouting daughter.

With an exaggerated sigh, Jon turned over the bear. "Good," Lois declared. "Now let's go see what Daddy's making for breakfast."

In the kitchen, Clark finished spooning the scrambled eggs onto six plates as his mother poured the coffee. His tie was tucked in between the buttons of his shirt to keep it out of the stove and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. Even though it was Saturday, Clark was heading into the office for the morning. He grinned at her as she walked into the kitchen and she couldn't help but see in him the eager, optimistic farm boy he'd been so many years ago. "Hey honey, how was your run?" he asked.

"Good," she said as she picked up two of the plates he'd prepared and kissed him quickly. She started setting the table for breakfast.

<<...Maryland Senate Candidate, former Navy Captain and Assistant Defense Secretary Sarah Coleman, has taken

a commanding early lead in statewide polls....>> Martha turned off the television as she put the juice and coffee on the table. "Kids, Jonathan, breakfast is ready!" she called.

The kids ran into the kitchen and scrambled into their seats. Patch followed them in, her front right paw wrapped in an ace bandage that was unraveling and trailing behind her. She shook off the bandage and headed straight for her water bowl, then promptly settled under the table, right next to Clark's chair. Lois wasn't sure why exactly it was that Patch had taken to Clark so thoroughly. After all, she was the one who usually fed and walked Patch. But maybe their dog, who'd had it pretty rough as a puppy – first being abandoned, then nearly dying from cancer – recognized that life had been tough on Clark, too.

He sat down in his chair and broke off a little piece of bacon, surreptitiously feeding it to the dog. Lois glared at him, but he merely shrugged and smiled. Forget her previous theory, it had to be the bacon.

"Did Patch have a boo-boo?" she asked her younger child.

Keira nodded solemnly. "But she's all better now." Lois wondered if part of her daughter's attachment to Patch came from the fact that she was a more amusing patient than her teddy bears and stuffed dogs.

"What time are your reservations tonight?" Lois's father-in-law asked.

"Eight o'clock," Clark replied.

"Daddy, I wanna go, too," Keira declared.

"Eight o'clock is your bedtime, young lady," Clark said with mock sternness.

"Can I go to the park today with Ryan?" Jon asked as he looked up from his eggs.

"By yourselves?" Lois asked, arching a brow.

"No, his mom's gonna go, too," Jon replied.

"Okay, just be home in time for dinner," she responded. They finished breakfast and Jon helped his parents clear the table.

"Stay out of trouble," Clark said as he tousled his son's hair.

"I will," Jon replied as he grabbed his Metropolis Monarchs baseball cap from the counter and pulled it down over his shaggy brown hair. "Bye Mom, bye Dad, bye Grandma, bye Grandpa," he shouted out a string of goodbyes and dashed out of the kitchen.

"Bye, sweetie!" Lois called out after her son. She turned to see her husband untucking his tie from between his shirt buttons and rolling his sleeves back down.

"I've gotta go," he said. "But I'll be home early."

He left unsaid their silent understanding—that his early return was still, as always, contingent on no one needing Superman. Since she was taking Keira out that morning, it meant Clark was on duty. Lois kissed him quickly. "Have a good day," she said.

Clark picked Keira up from her chair and spun her around in his arms. She giggled with joy. "Faster, Daddy!" she shouted. He twirled around once more before putting her back down on her feet.

“Okay, that’s enough,” he said. “We don’t want to get dizzy.” He bent down to kiss the top of his little girl’s head. “Be good, sweetheart. I love you.”

“Love you too,” Keira said as she stretched her arms out, pleading for one more hug. Clark dropped to his knee and hugged his daughter. That little girl with her wide, brown eyes had the Man of Steel completely at her beck and call. She kissed his cheek. “Have fun at work, Daddy.”

“You too, kiddo. Be nice to Patch.” Clark grinned at Lois as he stood up. “Happy anniversary,” he said as he grabbed his suit coat from the back of his chair at the kitchen table. “Bye, Mom, Dad.”

“Bye, son!” Jonathan called out as he started to unfold the morning’s paper.

“Bye, honey!” Martha added.

Jon Kent was stealthy. He was agile, strong, and sneaky. From limb to limb, he climbed fluidly and gracefully into the elm tree. From here, he would totally be able to nail Ryan’s older brother with a water balloon. The younger boys had hidden their flag in the woods just north of the Sheep’s Meadow. Ryan and Timmy were off trying to find the other team’s flag, which left Jon to protect their flag. He crawled out further onto the branch, trying to get a clear shot at the opening he knew the other team would have to come through. Small branches and twigs poked at him as he levered himself into a seated position, but he ignored them. They didn’t even hurt because he was so focused. Just like a ninja. Or a sniper.

Steadying himself with one hand wrapped around the thin branch, he reached for the bag of water balloons tied to one of the belt loops on his shorts with a piece of string. He couldn’t quite open the cinch tie on the bag with just one hand, though, so he was forced to let go of the branch in order to find his ammunition. As he pulled out a slippery water balloon, he got a glimpse of the rocky ground far beneath him.

‘Don’t be a baby. Don’t get scared,’ he told himself silently. Holding the water balloon gently in one hand, he reached for the branch again.

But his hand slipped.

The water balloon fell from his other hand and wobbled its way to the ground, hitting with a squishy ‘woosh’ as it burst on the hard-packed dirt. He shuddered, imagining hitting the ground himself, and suddenly, he lost his balance. He tried to grip onto the branch, but he hadn’t accounted for the fact that the thin branch was going to sway and bend under his weight. The world beneath him started to spin. He closed his eyes, feeling his heart thunder in his chest. Falling from up here was going to hurt an awful lot. It would be at least as bad as when Jason Rodgers broke his arm after falling off the top of the backstop at the baseball diamond. Jon tried to inch his way back toward the trunk, but it only caused the branch to sway more. And as his foot hit a fork in the branch he hadn’t remembered, his leg slipped and his body swung all the way around under the branch. He couldn’t hold on and he fell, like in slow

motion, like it was in the movies. He tried to scream, but he wasn’t sure if he made any sound.

Suddenly, there was a loud thud. And he’d stopped falling. But it didn’t hurt. He opened his eyes and looked up. Above him, the green, leafy branches of the tree swayed with a slight breeze. Oh no! Maybe he was paralyzed! He’d seen it on TV – kids who’d dived into a shallow swimming pool and had broken their necks! They said they hadn’t felt any pain because they didn’t feel anything at all.

Terrified, he wiggled his toes. Nope, they still wiggled, at least, it felt like they wiggled. He lifted his head up and stared down at his sneakers. ‘You dope!’ he thought to himself. If he could lift his head up, he wasn’t paralyzed. Experimentally, he stood up. Nothing hurt. He looked down at his legs. Not even any scratches.

Maybe the spot where he’d landed had been unusually soft. He turned around and looked down at the ground that had been beneath him. A sharp, jagged gray edge of rock jutted out of the dirt, just where his head had been. Jon lifted his fingers gingerly to the back of his head. No bump, no bleeding. It didn’t even hurt at all. He should have busted his head open on that rock. But it hadn’t hurt at all.

Why?

He’d gotten hurt plenty of times before. For all of last summer, his knees had been perpetually scraped. Every time another scratch or wound from sliding on the baseball diamond or falling off his bike had scabbed over, he’d managed to get another one. But he couldn’t remember getting hurt in the last few months.

But it had been winter.

Sure, he’d still played outside, but when you fell down in a snowball fight, you just got cold and wet. You didn’t get a skinned knee or a broken arm. Jon looked around at the woods surrounding him. In the brush, he found a broken green glass bottle. He tried to brush the dirt off the broken edge of it before pressing the sharp point against the tip of one finger. He didn’t press very hard at first, but no matter how much pressure he applied, the glass didn’t cut him. It didn’t even hurt! He gave his hand a sharp, sudden poke with the broken edge of glass. Still, nothing happened.

Jon dropped the broken bottle and backed slowly away from it. He nearly tripped backward over the boulder that was behind him. Turning toward it, he tried another experiment. He kicked the large rock as hard as he could, shuddering, expecting pain to radiate from his toes. But it didn’t hurt.

This didn’t make any sense.

He was invulnerable.

He was invincible.

He was... Super.

Jon ran home as fast as he could, his heart thumping, his feet pounding on the concrete. His uncoordinated limbs flailed awkwardly as he dashed up the steps and burst into the townhouse. It didn’t make sense. How could he be super? Maybe what had happened in the park was a fluke. He ran into the laundry room and found a safety pin in the

cabinet with Grandma's sewing kit. He jabbed it as hard as he could into his thumb, tensing as he expected it to hurt. But it didn't. It wasn't a fluke. He realized he was biting his tongue, but that didn't hurt either.

How could he be super?

Unless...his parents were super.

But he'd seen pictures of his mom when she was pregnant with him. Maybe he'd been switched at birth. But that didn't make any sense either. Unless there were Kryptonian families on Earth. Did Superman or Ultrawoman have any kids? He went into the living room, searching for the picture albums. The house was quiet – Mom and Grandma were going to take Keira to the library and Grandpa was probably playing checkers with his friend Harry. He pulled the picture albums off the bookshelves, and started flipping furiously through them. There were pictures of his grandparents and his mom when she was pregnant. Then pictures of her and him when he was born. She was in a bed, holding him. He looked really small. Was that really him? He remembered Grandpa telling him he'd been born in Dad's old apartment. Which meant he couldn't have been switched in a hospital.

There were more pictures of him when he was a baby. Pictures of him with Grandma and Grandpa on their farm. And when he was bigger, pictures of him and Dad. So he probably wasn't switched at birth with a Kryptonian baby.

Which meant...one of his parents had to be Kryptonian. But if he already knew that Mom really was his mom, that could only mean that Dad...wasn't really his dad.

That meant Superman had to be his dad.

His parents didn't know it yet, but he knew where babies came from. Sure, they weren't supposed to talk about that in school until he was in fifth grade, but the older kids on the playground had been more than happy to share the information to a bunch of incredulous third graders. It was gross. He didn't want to think of his mom and dad doing *that*. And they had to have done it at least twice.

Ew.

Thinking about his mom doing *that* with someone else was even grosser.

But how else could he be invincible?

Leaving the photo albums in a pile on the living room floor, he ran to the rec room and turned on the computer. He had research to do. He just hoped he could finish it before anyone else got home. Jon opened a search engine and typed in his mom's name and 'Superman.' The boy's jaw hung open as he saw how many hits the search returned. His mouth twisted into a frown at a picture of his Mom from a long time ago, kissing Superman. He heard the front door open and he leapt up from the computer, running out of the rec room.

"Jon, are you okay?" his mother asked as she rushed into the house. "Ryan's mom said you ran off from the park. You know you're not supposed to be home by yourself."

Mom walked over to him and looked him over, brushing his hair out of his face. Jon scowled and looked away. "Leave me alone!" he shouted as he shrugged her off.

"Jonathan Clark Kent!" his mother scolded. "What has gotten into you?"

"I got books!" his little sister exclaimed, holding up a stack of picture books. Grandma put a hand on her shoulder and kept Keira from running into the foyer.

"I know Dad's not my real dad," he said. "I know what you did!" Jon saw a look of surprise on his mother's face. He turned and bolted up the stairs to his room.

"Jon!" his mother shouted after him but he slammed his door. He would have thought that finding out he was invincible, a superhero in the making, would have been totally cool. Instead, hot tears stung his eyes and he tried not to sob.

Lois picked up the phone in the kitchen and speed dialed her husband. "Clark, come home now," she said tersely.

<<What's going on? Are the kids okay?>>

"We've got to have a talk with Jon."

<<The birds and the bees? Aren't they supposed to have that talk next year in school?>>

"Not that talk. The other talk."

<<Ah. Be right there.>>

She heard a sonic boom a few seconds later as her husband returned home. From upstairs, she could hear him descend from the library. She met him on the second floor, just outside Jon's room. She could hear her little boy crying and it broke her heart.

Lois took her husband's arm and led him toward their room. "I don't know what happened but Jon ran away from the park and came home. He scared Ryan's mother half to death."

"He came home by himself?" Clark asked.

She nodded. "When I got home, he was angry. He claimed he knew you weren't his father and that he 'knew what I did.'"

Clark's mouth twisted into a frown. "So something probably happened in the park and he realized he's not like other kids."

"And he thinks Superman is his father. He left the computer on in the rec room. He was looking at an old photo from when you stopped the Nightfall asteroid."

"That picture of you kissing me before I took off?" he asked. Lois nodded silently. Her husband sighed as he dragged a hand through his hair. "Well, we knew this was going to happen sooner or later."

"You think he's ready to handle the secret?" Lois asked.

"He's a smart kid. I think he'll get it." He'd been about Jon's age himself when his powers had started manifesting. Ever since he'd returned from New Krypton, he'd thought about how this day would go – how would he tell his own son about who he was, what sort of powers he was going to develop, his Kryptonian heritage.

“Well let’s go. Jon’s hurting. He needs his parents.” She took his hand and squeezed it gently.

“Jon?” Clark rapped softly on the door as he pushed it open. Jon was lying face down on the bed. He didn’t look up or acknowledge his parents. Clark looked at the bare wall next to the bed, where Jon’s Superman poster had once hung. It was now in a pile of pieces on the ground.

“Honey?” Lois ventured gently. “Honey, we need to talk to you. What happened today in the park?”

“I fell out of a tree,” Jon said flatly, his voice muffled by his pillow. “I didn’t get hurt. I know Dad isn’t my real father. He can’t be.”

Clark stepped across the room toward the bed and put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “I am your father,” he said. “And I know you’re not like other kids. You’re ‘super.’ So are we.”

Jon sat up and looked at his parents, his eyes red from crying, but his little brow was knitted in consternation. “What do you mean?”

“What we’re going to tell you is the biggest secret we have. And we haven’t told you yet because we needed to keep you and your sister safe. But it’s time you knew.” Clark looked over his shoulder, making sure the door behind them was closed. He glanced at his wife, who nodded slightly. In unison, they spun into their suits. When they came to a stop, fully decked out in superhero regalia, they smiled at the look of shock on their little boy’s face.

“You’re...you...so I’m...” he stuttered, his eyes wide.

“Your mom and I are Ultrawoman and Superman,” Clark said calmly. “You are our son. And you’re developing the same powers we have.”

Jon’s mouth hung open. He simply stared at his parents in their brightly colored uniforms. Clark waited with bated breath to see how his son would react. “So I’m going to be a superhero, too? Way cool,” he whispered.

Lois smiled. “Now, you need to know how important it is to keep this a secret. The only other people who know this are Grandma and Grandpa. Even your Grandma Ellen and Grandpa Sam don’t know. You can’t tell anyone, not your friends, not your teachers. Not Keira. The more people who know this, the more dangerous it is for the people in our family who aren’t super, like Grandma, Grandpa, and your little sister.”

“So are you both from Krypton?” Jon asked. “When did you come to Earth? When can I start flying?” The questions came out with rapid fire speed, causing Clark to grin. Everyone told him that Jon looked like his dad, but in his inquisitiveness, he was a lot more like his mother.

“No, I’m from Earth; I was born in Metropolis, just like you,” Lois began. “Grandpa Sam and Grandma Ellen are just regular people and I didn’t even have these powers before I became Ultrawoman...” Lois began.

They took turns filling Jon in on how Clark learned he was from Krypton, how he never told anyone about his powers, and how Lois eventually got her husband’s powers

and became a superhero, too. It took over an hour to answer their little boy’s questions.

“Is there anything else you want to know?” Clark asked at last.

“Can we go flying?” Jon asked with a grin.

“Okay, but just a short one,” Clark said. “Your mother and I have a date tonight and I still have to get the newspaper out.”

Clark set his keys down on his dresser, admiring his wife as she walked ahead of him into their bedroom and toward the stereo. It was just like her to remember that before their first date, he’d admitted to having envisioned her wearing a deep burgundy dress. The one she wore now accentuated her narrow waist and the soft curve of her hips. The slit on one side gave him only a tantalizing glimpse of her gorgeously long legs. The spaghetti straps and V-back of the dress did nothing to obscure her slim, elegant shoulders or her soft, honey-colored skin. He ached to touch her, knowing that her skin would be smooth and warm under his fingers.

He dropped his jacket on the chair, his tie following immediately after, never taking his eyes off her. She slipped out of her heels. As soon as they’d walked into the restaurant, the eyes of every man in the room turned to Lois. Many did nothing to hide the fact that they were admiring her as she walked by. A few seemed to have the dopey, wistful look on their faces that Clark knew had to have been on his face the first time he saw her. It was funny, but all of the appreciative gazes didn’t bother him in the slightest, and he knew it was because all night, the only man Lois had looked at was him. He was almost giddy with the knowledge that she was indeed the most gorgeous woman any man had ever laid eyes on, and the only one she seemed to notice was him. He only hoped that he had been able to be somewhat discreet about it, instead of wearing a self-satisfied grin the entire evening.

Clark didn’t know how she did it. Thirteen years after he’d met her, after ten years of marriage and six years since his return, she continued to take his breath away every time she walked into a room. Every time she smiled at him, he felt his heart rate kick up a notch. Every time she looked at him with a glint of mischief in those dark eyes, his whole body would be flushed with warmth. The slight sway of her hips when she walked was hypnotic. The smell of her skin could intoxicate him.

The soft strains of music began to fill the room as she padded barefoot back toward him, an almost shy smile on her face. “Dance with me,” she whispered as he pulled her into his arms. She slipped one hand into his as he looped the other arm around her delicate waist.

He took her hand and placed it against his heart and held it there as they gently swayed to the music. She placed her head against his chest and he leaned down to kiss the crown of her hair. “I love you,” he whispered almost breathlessly in her ear.

"I love you," she murmured against his chest. He floated them gently off the ground, eliciting a slight, satisfied sigh from her. She looked up at him and he took the invitation to kiss her. Her lips parted under his and she freed her hands to loop them around his neck and tangle her fingers in his hair.

His hands settled on either side of her waist as he held her tightly against his body. His lips trailed soft kisses down her neck and toward one shoulder. His hands searched for the zipper at the back of her dress, his fingers fumbling, to no avail. He growled in frustration. "How am I supposed to get you out of this thing?" he asked.

"Can't you just find the zipper with your vision gizmo?" she asked, an impish grin on her face.

"Believe me, I've x-rayed through the dress, but that wasn't what I was looking for," he replied.

"Clark!" She gave him a playful swat on the chest. She kissed him again before reaching for the tiny clasp at the top of the zipper. His hands covered hers as he began to unzip the dress. It fell away from her shoulders, spilling toward the ground. Lois turned her attention to the buttons on his shirt, slowly undoing them and exposing a ribbon of skin. She trailed kisses down his neck and over his chest, across the newly revealed skin. She grasped the shirttails and untucked them, pushing the sides of the shirt down over his shoulder and bunching them up on his arms.

No wonder she'd asked him to wear that French cuffed shirt and the fancy cufflinks, he thought idly to himself. His arms were now essentially stuck as he couldn't get his hands out of the sleeves with the cufflinks still in. "Aren't you going to help me out of this?" he asked.

"You're the strongest man in the world, aren't you?" she asked.

"Well, I could just rip through the shirt, but I think you'd get mad at me."

"Well then, I guess you're stuck," she replied as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body against his. Her bare skin against his chest sent jolts of electricity through him, like it always did. She kissed him thoroughly. With renewed enthusiasm, he managed to wriggle his way out of the shirtsleeves, damaging neither the shirt nor the cufflinks.

"How did you do that?" she asked in a mock pout as he wrapped his arms around her, his hands trailing languidly down the smooth skin of her back.

"Same way I can tear my shirt open without popping off the buttons. I should show you that sometime."

"And here I thought you liked sewing the buttons back onto your shirts after I'm done ravishing you."

He chuckled before kissing her again. His eyes still closed, he whispered, "do you have any idea how much I love you?" He felt her place her hand against his cheek.

"As much as I love you," she replied.

Their lips met again as he floated them up higher and then reclined on his back, his wife lying securely on top of him. He reached up to caress her cheek. She turned to drop

a kiss in the palm of his hand. "Happy anniversary, sweetheart," he murmured.

"Happy anniversary," she whispered. He could see the tears shining brightly in her eyes, but knew they were tears of happiness. They had cried together far too many times for him not to know the difference.

He opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't form the words. How could he begin to explain? How could he describe what she meant to him? What she'd given to him? She'd brought into the world their two wonderful children. She'd graced him with her endless patience and support, and he could scarcely describe the importance of all of the nights she'd held him and held his world together. She'd given him the love that had so clearly saved his life on many occasions. And how could he begin to apologize for four agonizingly long years of lonely nights? She'd made clear in no uncertain terms that she sought no apology. She never blamed him for the hurt they'd endured during their separation, but even more humbling was the fact that she never blamed him for the hurt he'd caused her when he returned. Their pain hadn't ended when they were reunited. She had endured more than any person should have been asked to, and in the end, she was the one responsible for the fact that they were still together. He had only survived because the power of her love was so much stronger than the power of his fear.

"What is it?" she asked softly, reminding him that after all of these years, there was nothing he could hide from her.

"I just wanted to say thank you," he began, as he trailed kisses from the corner of her mouth along the line of her jaw and up to her ear. "For marrying me. For giving me two beautiful children. For loving our son enough for both of us when I couldn't be here. For taking care of my parents. For never losing faith in me. For never letting me forget that there isn't anything I can't tell you. For loving me more than any man could ever hope to be loved." He felt moisture on his cheek. He turned to look at her and brushed a tear from her face.

"How do you do it?" she murmured. "How do you make me fall in love with you all over again every day?" She kissed him as he floated them back down to the bed. Silently, he discarded the rest of their clothing. They made love, as they had countless times before, two people who knew one another better than they knew themselves. In a way though, it almost felt like the first time. She never ceased to fascinate him, her quietly whispered declarations of love never failed to quicken his pulse. Being with her allowed him, just for a moment, to feel connected to something far bigger, more permanent, than himself. He loved her. Not just for that instant, or even for all the days of the rest of his life. He loved her eternally. That love would survive long after they were both gone. Even when the light in the world had dimmed, his love for her wouldn't.

Hours later, as she lay peacefully in his arms, he found contentment in watching her sleep, knowing he was exactly where he was supposed to be. When he was with her, he

was home. He had crossed the universe, not once but twice, to find her. His journey had taken him down long and lonely roads, places of impenetrable darkness, and he'd stumbled more than once. But he had someone to lift him up. He would never walk alone again. The path in front of him wasn't just his, it was theirs. Whatever lay ahead, they would discover together. Eventually, sleep claimed him, too.

THE END